

Legion

Justine Khamara

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by Lily Hibberd

Messin' with the medium

Photography these days is as self-assured as any other high art form; the overwhelming beauty of the large format print is undeniable and purists rarely admit to messing with it. The digital age however has presented some big challenges to art photography; serious, collectable artists are reluctant to confess to enhancing or altering their work via software programs, even though most are forced to at some point. The introduction of Photoshop has nonetheless allowed artists to 'collage' to their heart's content, engaging in the playful pastiche of multiple images that can be stretched, blended and melded together with ease. Mostly this is done to great effect, the resulting work being a coherent, seamless integration of pictorial references, as in the work of Jeff Wall. Melbourne artist Justine Khamara does the opposite, literally taking scissors to the work. For a number of years she has been taking photos, printing and cutting them up, then rearranging the parts in amusing, sometimes ridiculous, sequences or scenarios. Khamara's practice steps away from a pure approach, being both ironic and playful; posing an important challenge to photography in its lack of deference for unadulterated formal status.

In this most recent work, *Legion*, Khamara has cut out hundreds of photos of the same subject and glued them together, to create new forms that wittily combine Eastern religious symbolism and American popular culture. In *Double V* a series of arms are arranged into two splays, reminiscent of the Hindu god Ganesh¹; one with the hands making the 'V' for victory sign, the other making the action of 'v' for 'up yours'. Another piece in the show, *Legion*, is comprised of at least 80 photos of a man's head, each taken from a slightly different angle to form an incredibly complete sphere with the illusion of three-dimensionality (that also looks like a giant afro-mandala). In another layer of humour the work obliquely refers to the first wave of the New Age movement in the 1960s that saw the West adopt aspects of the East they found palatable. This was most prominent in the immersion into psychedelic experiments and Eastern religion by rock stars like Bob Dylan and the Beatles, via their infamous



Above: Justine Khamara
Double V, 2005 (detail)
i) *Hollow victory*
30 x 15 cm each (approx)
Photographs adhesive tape & pasteboard
Image courtesy the artist

flirtation with the Indian mystic Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Founder of TM, or the Transcendental Meditation movement). Whether she's meditating or not, Khamara is having a lot of fun with these images, as doubtless did the designers (with or without LSD) in creating collaged, psychedelic album covers such as *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* of 1967 and Jimi Hendrix's Album, *Axis: Bold as Love* from 1968 – so obviously derivative of images of Ganesh.²

Collage is an art practice with Modernist traditions, used by Braque, Picasso and Ernst to rework notions of representation. A few artists today have continued the practice, not to be old hat but as a continued exploration of the language and use of found imagery. Australian contemporary artists Elizabeth Gower and David Noonan are distinct yet notable examples of this approach, and it is significant that they have both worked as painters, as



Khamara also studied painting at the Victorian College of the Arts. Coming from outside the field of photography allows these artists to at once employ the medium and deconstruct it, without regard for loss of purity (a hard thing to relinquish for someone trained in any medium). Yet Khamara's work distinguishes itself from these methodologies because the subject, the medium and the process are equal parts of a greater structure – just like the greatest symbol of New Age mysticism, the pyramid. OM.

<notes>

¹ A note for later: Ganesh is the only god to be associated with the primordial sacred sound AUM or OM.

² A more recent reference to this reference is *Bodhisattva Vow* from the Beastie Boys album *Ill Communication* (1994).

*Above: Justine Khamara
Legion, 2005
110 cm diameter
Photographs adhesive tape & pasteboard
Image courtesy the artist*