



Greasy Spoon (2007) | lambda print | 50 x 75 cm, edition of 7; 85 x 130 cm, edition of 4 + artist's proof (AP)

the **PLASTICITY** of **PRETTY**

The surreal characters that inhabit Brian Walker's creations would be right at home in a dark fantasy-comedy film, like *Death Becomes Her* meets *The Addams Family*, but with a better makeover. Looking to peel away the façade, **SARAH JAYNE FELL** hunts down the Australian digital artist to uncover whether there are any meaty hidden layers below the surface of this bizarre realm of plastic fantastic, or if its extent is purely skin-deep.

The fantastical landscape of Brian Walker's surreal digital world is made up of picture-perfect female forms and dominant motifs from popular culture, drawing particularly on fashion, film and advertising. Every element is highly staged and pre-planned; not a detail is accidental, not a hair is misplaced.

The creator of this realm, Brian Walker, is a Sydney-based digital artist and photographer, art and photography teacher, and father of twin girls. He has worked in advertising and web design. Endowed with an explosive imagination and a lifelong passion for illustration, Brian delved into photography to fine-tune the rendition of his bizarre ideas into seamless existence. Discovering Photoshop while studying and then moving into digital art was his breakthrough: "It was the perfect answer to what I wanted to achieve through my drawing," Brian says. "I wanted implied reality in my ideas instead of lead pencil." The outcome is his current work, which shapeshifts from concept to immaculate final product via a meticulous process of sketching, making and acquiring props, consulting with hair and makeup artists, arranging the model and set for the shoot, and finally, post-production. "I am a stickler for details and am not satisfied until I feel that the work is as 'clean' and 'refined' as possible and that the elements are working well together," Brian elaborates. "The end result generally bears an uncanny resemblance to the original sketch."

The recurring combination of striking young female models and signifiers of mass media comprising Brian's *mise-en-scène* is no mistake. Mastering the art of the digital, he is able to perfectly manufacture his current preoccupation: an interrogation of reality within this technological age, particularly the way in which technology is used to mask or exaggerate reality with reference to the feminine form, most commonly in the media. Brian tells of the genesis of this preoccupation:

"Much of my current work stemmed from a conversation I had with a friend a while ago. He works in the print industry and was telling me how he was asked to retouch a model heavily to get her ready for print — right down to removing the creases from her elbows! I was entertained and astonished by the notion and as a result have been examining similar ideas of beauty and falsehood in my own work."

Brian's exploration into concepts of illusion versus reality in relation to beauty means his protagonists are not *just* pretty girls. In fact, the viewer is not really sure *what* they are — human, android, cyborg, or the latest model of Barbie. Though not all exactly pin-up girls, each woman clearly exudes a conventional sense of female beauty and sexuality. More central to each scene than this, however, is the surreal, often sinister quality that leaves the viewer thinking they may be dealing with a psychotic fembot that they'd rather not be left alone with!

Each doll-like character (some battery-operated) appears caught in the act — in freeze-frame quality — in the midst of some bizarre scenario, whether she's four-legged, in a leotard and practising her 'Learn to Dance' steps; eating noodles out of an eviscerated, topless human head-cum-ceramic measuring bowl; or grating away thick sections of her own plasticky flesh to reveal a hard, candy-coloured centre.

The notion of plasticity so strongly evoked in Brian's images is a prominent underlying theme in his work. On the surface, his protagonists themselves have a plastic quality — whether it's a Barbie-doll, blow-up doll or mannequin that they resemble. In this aspect, Brian has benefited from the digital medium in so successfully being able to reproduce this effect while maintaining a sense of hyperreality at the same time.

The plasticity, however, extends beyond the surface, as Brian's artistic objective reveals: "My work is all about the 'fakeness' of society and more specifically popular culture. It observes, contradicts and satirically evaluates the bizarre nature of people, fashion and melding cultures. Technology has given humans the opportunity to be more controlling over our appearance, and as a result I test the extremes and borderlines of what this means and could become."

Evidence of this metaphorical plasticity lies in the tiny and fastidious details found in Brian's creations. In 'Lipstuck' a pearl-adorned, princess-crowned young woman smears red lipstick on a metal plate fused into her bottom lip. The purpose of the plate is not clear. Is it an odd form of denture? The result of deformity? A postmodern accessory? On close scrutiny, the shiny plate is patterned with the trademark Louis Vuitton print. Something about the lip is positively purse-like. Instinctively, it seems this is a crucial part of Brian's oblique commentary about the ridiculous extent to which modern society will go in order to be fashionable and 'attractive' according to the current status quo — even more so since we've been able to use technology to attain this desire.

"The aim of my work is to use humour, wit and satire to look at everyday issues and ideas that arise," Brian explains. "Their aim is not to change the world, but to poke fun at the extremes of popular culture and how fascinating and entertaining everyday life can be. Take '50 Lashes' for example: The number of ads you see with mascaras promising you up to 500% more lashes! It's simply its own little parody."

While much of Brian's art relies on the digital medium, he warns that it's not a quick or easy solution (or replacement) for good art: "I do admit that I went through 'the filters' stage in the early years, something which many people fall into, over-using Photoshop filters just because they are there. The bottom line is that digital manipulation is a tool, and gimmicky techniques are no match for clever design and concept."

It's good to hear (in the age of everyman believing he is a mouse-click away from being an artist) that it's not as easy as all that. And that, in the era of the technological, art still retains an important place. For Brian Walker, art serves as commentary and as entertainment. It has the potential to make people think, to question their beliefs and behaviour, and while he isn't trying to change the world with his art, he certainly believes it serves a valuable role, now as much as ever: "Art now is a protagonist and an entertainer. Society has certainly changed over the years as has art, though its role is still the same even if its techniques are not. As a protagonist, it gets people thinking through any means it has. Being controversial today, for instance, is quite

different to achieving this a century or two ago. As an entertainer, art is there to make us think, laugh, cry and, in many cases, to pretty up a wall. So its significance and role is the same as it ever was, though technique and approach have changed over time."

It's undeniable that drawing the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art has become more than a little jaded; so much has been absorbed into mass consciousness and consumption that what prevails now over the high and the low is the pop. Brian Walker's art is a case in point: drawing on imagery and signs from mass, popular culture; using technological aids to fine-tune his craft; and indeed creating art that is appreciable to more than just the highbrow but which actually has wide, popular appeal. But just because it's pop, doesn't mean it's plastic. Brian Walker's art fits quite comfortably into the pages of pop culture (the magazine in your hand is proof), and his is not the first — and certainly won't be the last — to show that pop is not just a pretty face.

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Noodle Philosophy (2007) | lambda print | 50 x 75 cm, edition of 7; 85 x 130 cm, edition of 4 + AP



Lipstick (2007) | lambda print | 52 x 80 cm, edition of 7; 85 x 130 cm, edition of 5 + AP



Send and Receive (2008) | lambda print | 53 x 80 cm, edition of 7; 86 x 130 cm, edition of 5 + AP

