

Marie Antoinette through the Notebook

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The carts rumbled through the cobbled streets, drums rolled, and the bloodthirsty tricoteuse clicked their knitting needles notching up a tally of the falling heads – the mob brutality in the 1958 film *A Tale of Two Cities* and the later television series *The Scarlet Pimpernel* made a shocking impression on me as a young girl and I developed a life-long fear and fascination with France and the Revolution and the creation and destruction of identity. This interest in French history resulted in a PhD on Surrealist female identity and body imaging. Later, it led me to a three month Australia Council for the Arts residency in a Paris studio to research Marie Antoinette, who fits the Surrealist mould of a fragmented and headless woman.

When exploring the National Archives in Paris I came across the *Garde-robe des atours de la reine; Gazette pour l'année 1782*¹, a faded and stained notebook with roughly glued swatches of fabric, which was presented to Marie Antoinette to choose her day's attire. The notebook became the conduit to Marie Antoinette's life and the places and people of the French Revolution. Fabric patterns and their traces emanate meaning. A bit of tacky red glue seems like dried blood. The pretty cursive French script describing the garment could so easily have written a death warrant. The reference to "Paris mud", a new colour made fashionable by Marie Antoinette and Rose Bertin, her "Minister of Fashion"², and the teetering pouf hairstyles, became part of the propaganda which brought her downfall. And the stains – so many stains.

With my limited French vocabulary, the visual language of objects and their sensory essence became more pronounced. Christine Battersby, who wrote exploring the realms of female identity, suggests that there is a "need to register how 'object' and 'subject' belong together and change together" and discusses Theodor Adorno's writing, in which he compares the forgotten differences, 'the eternal' to 'the lace trimmings on a dress'³. It is the essence of the eternal, the suffering and heroism and an understanding of the human condition that I sought through the notebook.

Fabrics can also be a talisman of association. Barnave, an admirer of Marie Antoinette, went to the guillotine with a snippet from one of her dresses in his pocket⁴. The patterns on the fabrics in the notebook, and the decorative patterns on objects associated with Marie Antoinette, weave a spell like that in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where a woman is caught up psychologically in the pattern⁵. It is widely acknowledged that Marie Antoinette's fashions – the patterns and objects and body imaging – contributed to her fate⁶. An autobiography of the time by Madame de la Tour du Pin, subtitled *Laughing and Dancing our Way to the Precipice*⁷, discusses the various events which led to the catastrophic fall of the naive aristocracy. The fashions and fabrics were central to the story.

In the tradition of the decorative French printed cottons, the *Toile de Jouy*, and the heavily loaded poufs – the works in this exhibition are narrative based as there is a story to tell. The linocutting process mimics the art of engraving, the shearing of heads and the carving of a bloody history. The stitching evokes Marie Antoinette's pricking of the pages to choose her attire and also a furtive letter she wrote from prison in which the message was pricked with a pin onto a sliver of tissue.

While logically there should be a sense of unease in Marie Antoinette's fragmented and headless images and in the interspersed vignettes in the works portraying the vilification and propaganda of the time, the *coulisse* and the decorative beading and appliqué aim to create a spirit of wholeness, harmony and aesthetic beauty. The work looks past the obvious generalisations of class divide, vilification and misquotes, such as "Let them eat cake", to explore the disparity between the portrayal of a prominent person and his or her true self.

The works are sympathetic to Marie Antoinette, whom most accounts reveal to be a loving mother, a kind and thoughtful person and a generous patron of the arts, and to her partner Louis XVI, a gentle man who loved tinkering with mechanical things and who was willing to loosen and compromise his power for the people.

Places where Marie Antoinette lived are central to the work – the Tuileries and Versailles, palaces and scenes of revolutionary riots; the site of the Temple, where the family was incarcerated; and the Conciergerie, where Marie Antoinette was imprisoned before heading off to the guillotine. I lingered in these places, seeking the essence of the woman and her imprisonment via the remaining objects and patterns – the turrets and thick stone walls, the barred windows and heavy one-way doors and the despairingly high, spiked courtyard walls.

The studio was a short walk to the Musée Carnavalet, a large old rambling mansion now containing an extensive display of Revolution artifacts. Personal belongings of Marie Antoinette and her family – toys, locks of hair, fans and snippets of patterned fabric – spoke of the past and found their way into my work. Fragments of Louis XVI's waistcoat, crafted into small *papillon* (butterfly) pincushions by the nuns of Neuilly, are now recreated and re-embroidered in my work *Épingles Papillons – Le Conciergerie*. Objects belonging to the revolutionaries – the bonnet rouge, propaganda pamphlets, paintings and the pattern on Robespierre's plate – are layered into the work.

As the bells of Notre Dame pealed, it was easy to visualise Marie Antoinette at mass in the cathedral, contemplating the ethereal soaring heights and rosace windows. The multifaceted kaleidoscope of filtered light, pungent incense, the booming organ and ethereal singing had probably changed little over the last 200 years. And the Basilique Saint-Denis where Marie Antoinette is finally resting with her 10 year-old-son's heart preserved in an engraved glass jar – words cannot fully describe these things and I rely on my art to convey the essence.

The hunt was an important part of eighteenth century life and *Fontainebleau* interweaves this history with a decorative frieze from Marie Antoinette's boudoir window. Rambouillet is a gothic hunting chateau bought by Louis XVI for his wife, of which she was claimed to have said: "*Comment pourrais-je vivre dans cette gothique crapaudière!*" (How could I live in such a gothic toadhouse!). While the chateau's interior is quite pokey, the surrounds are magnificent, with formal gardens and sweeping tree-lined parks. It is a place where brilliant summer sunshine is momentarily disrupted by wild storm deluges, where it is easy to drift into the life of 200 years earlier. *La Chasse, Rambouillet* weaves scenes from fabrics in the "toad house" into the hunt, while *La Chaumiere aux Coquillages* seeks the essence of the Rambouillet shell cottage which was built for Marie Antoinette's friend, the Princesse de Lamballe, whose head was paraded before her in her imprisonment.

I journeyed to Strasbourg to find the site of Marie Antoinette's remise, where she was handed over to the French, and where the 14-year-old princess was stripped naked, like Marcel Duchamp's sculpture *The Bride stripped bare...*, to remake her identity. All her belongings,

including her pet dog and the watch her mother had given her, were confiscated, while ominous Medea and Jason tapestries were an unfortunate backdrop for the betrothal⁸. At the L'île des Epis there is now only a street of that name and a heavily graffitied toilet block, a far cry from the pomp and ceremony for the pretty young princess on her way to becoming Dauphine of France.

Perhaps the most poignant memories that have worked their way into the work were at Marie Antoinette's Petit Trianon and Hameau (hamlet) at Versailles. Reclining under a giant chestnut tree I dreamed my way into the past, as the city and the 21st century gave way to the scents of freshly cut hay and rambling pastures. Ducks, herons and white swans languished in the summer heat and the sweet-sour aroma of farm animals drifted across the lake. The chatter of young children reading in the shade by the water's edge could have been Marie Antoinette's children Marie-Thérèse and Louis Charles. Through frequent visits across the three months, I experienced the changes of season – verdant blossom gave way to chestnuts bulleting down in an autumn storm. Like Mmes Moberley and Jourdain, who wrote of the ghosts of Versailles⁹, I sensed strongly that Marie Antoinette was near and still get goosebumps thinking of it.

Returning to Paris and overlooking the busy traffic and bustle of Concorde, the scene of the guillotine, I was reminded of W. H. Auden's comment on humanity where "even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course..." and "everything turns away quite leisurely from the disaster"¹⁰. But I could still smell the blood in the streets and sense the quiet dignity and terror of a mother who wrote "*Mes pauvres enfants; adieu, adieu!*" and who apologised to the executioner when she stood on his foot "I did not do it on purpose"¹¹.

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¹ Now printed in a facsimile *Gazette des Atours de Marie-Antoinette: Garde-robe des atours de la reine. Gazette pour l'année 1782*. Reunion des musées nationaux – Archives nationales, 2006.

² Thank you to Anne Bryant who assisted in translating the notebook.

³ Christine Battersby. *The Phenomenal Woman*. Routledge, New York, 1998.

⁴ Caroline Weber. *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution*. Picador, New York, 2006, p.239.

⁵ Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Virago, London, 1985.

⁶ Antonia Fraser. *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*. Phoenix, London, 2001; Weber. *op.cit.*

⁷ Henrietta-Lucy Dillon de la Tour du Pin Gouvernet. *Memoirs of Madame de la Tour du Pin: Laughing and Dancing Our Way to the Precipice*. Harvill Press, London, 1999.

⁸ I searched France unsuccessfully for these tapestries, and was stunned to find them when I visited the Queen's Apartment in Windsor Castle in June 2011. The Castle custodians seemed to be quite unaware of their provenance. The tapestries survived a fire at Windsor as they were attached to the wall by velcro and quickly removed.

⁹ <http://museumofhoaxes.com/versailles.html> (accessed 17/1/2012).

¹⁰ W. H. Auden. *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*. Faber & Faber, London, 1966, pp.123-4. *Musée des Beaux Arts*.

¹¹ Fraser. *op.cit.* p.526.