
**New
Deities:
art and
the cult of
celebrity**

Fifteen minutes
by David Malouf

When Milton, in *Lycidas*, tells us that “Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise / To scorn delights and live laborious days”, this Fame he is writing of, the reputation that depends on hard work and the sacrifice of ordinary pleasures, is the one means Man has of salvaging from Time, the destructive element – that is, from decay and oblivion – some part of what once was living, our own way of securing a place inhuman remembrance where deeds, words, a name, might have a continuing existence beyond the grave.

Time and Remembrance or Memory – these are the opposing forces in the human story. The paradox is that Man, subject as he is to the universal destructiveness of Time, is also the fragile repository of the one thing that outlasts it, that collective memory in which those among the dead who have been examples of a particular excellence, Helen for beauty, Solomon or Solon or Socrates for wisdom, Achilles, Hector, Alexander, Napoleon, and among artists, Homer, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Mozart, remain as close to us as any among the living.

In the 30th of his Third Book of *Odes*, Horace makes the astonishing claim that breath, the vital spirit in us that sustains life but is extinguished in death, can, through the agency of words, be the means to a continuing life-beyond-death; that breath, weak as it is against every sort of accident and what Shakespeare calls “the wrackful siege of battering days”, may be more enduring in the end than brass or stone:

*Exegi monumentum aere perennius
regalique situ pyramidum altius,
quod non imber edax, non Aquilo impotens
possit diruere aut innumerabilis
annorum series et fuga temporum
non omnis moriar, multa que pars mei
vitabit Libitinam; usque ego postera
crescam laude recens...*

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Each week at the supermarket check-out counter, shoppers are faced with an array of glossy celebrity magazines, with names like *Who*, *New Weekly* and *Famous*. Waiting in the queue, it is often tempting to reach out and flick through the pages, just to keep abreast of celebrity news, or to buy the magazines to take home and read in private. What is it about these magazines that are so appealing? Is it the content or is it the pictures and episodic nature of the publication?

Magazines are in fact adult comic books; lots of pictures and not much text. Ephemeral images of celebrities are accompanied by a simple photo caption, often fabricated to make sense of what is going on in the photo or to create an alternative interpretation of the imagery. They are publications that merely 'construct' and present 'cartoon-like characters' whom society has elevated to hero status.

In the accompanying essay, *Fifteen Minutes*, David Malouf compares old-fashioned fame, built upon reputation and established over time, with contemporary fame gained in an instant. Malouf calls this version of fame, celebrity. Celebrities are the new deities – 'sacred monsters' or demi-gods of a modern society where celebrity worship is the new religion. Malouf believes that celebrities are mythologised; they become idols that play out a 'tragi-pathetic public show' for a world hungry for meaning.

This obsession with fame is represented in *New Deities: art and the cult of celebrity* as eight contemporary artists explore notions of the celebrity with particular reference to the mass media and the internet.

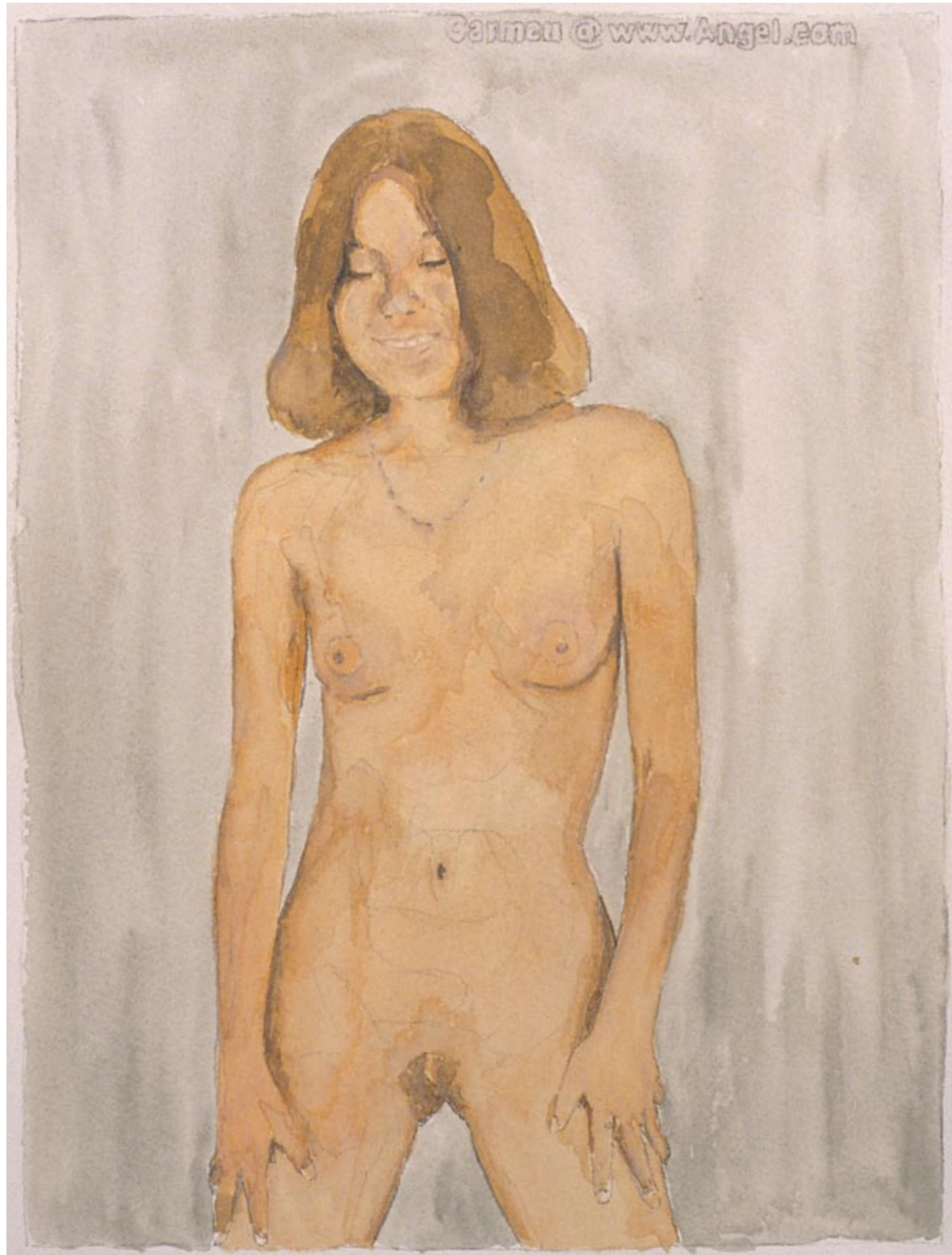
The exhibition touches on a range of issues related to the allure and zealous devotion to celebrities. While organised religion may appear to be in decline, celebrity worship continues to gain momentum. Pop culture and the mass media, at times seemingly a single entity, appears to have a life of its own, growing and forming in response to the images that feed the machine. Even the banal act of a celebrity drinking coffee or buying groceries is considered news worthy. It seems that society has an insatiable appetite for these images, which are the stock in trade of a growing industry eager to feed the consumer. CATHERINE WOLFHAGEN 2007

Emily Hunt and Raquel Welch use magazine images as the material for their work. Their collaborative collage is reminiscent of 15th century religious paintings, where pictures populated with characters set in imaginary landscapes act out stories from the Bible. Hunt and Welch create imaginary interiors populated with collaged celebrities who appear to be boldly confronting the camera lens. Their work explores emotional responses to stars and celebrities via a series of episodic images, and like serial episodes the viewer can look forward to the next disaster or calamity to befall the famous. Hunt and Welch's work also brings into sharp focus the banality and sense of the ridiculous that is inherent in the representation of celebrity identities in the mass media.

Paul Wigley's larger than life celebrity portraits are inspired by the slick airbrushed images that appear in the 'glossies'. The covers of fashion magazines are no longer adorned by anonymous faces but now exclusively feature celebrities whom consumers instantly recognise through constant exposure. This awareness is a clever marketing device; with recognition comes familiarity and trust. The celebrity airbrushed surfaces of Wigley's paintings lend the portraits a softness and friendliness even though their appearance is distorted by way of positive to negative inversion. The sheer size of the paintings represents a 'greatness' that seemingly demands respect and adulation from the viewer.

Grant Stevens uses the medium of film and cinema to create his paradoxical take on movie stars. In *Danger Zone* his subtle re-editing of a small portion of the film *Top Gun* has surprising results. Within the context of the film the portion he has sliced and diced is a poignant romantic moment between Tom Cruise and Kelly McGillis. This encounter between the two main protagonists is looped at the point before each character is about to deliver their lines. The viewer becomes eternally trapped in a cinematic moment that moves from drama to farce – its poignancy both nauseating and hilariously funny.





Jonathan Nichols, *Naked girl in front of drop screen* 2002, Watercolour on paper, 38 x 28cm
Image courtesy of the Artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne & Kaliman Gallery, Sydney



Monika Tichacek, *Lineage of the Divine #11* 2002, Production still, DVD, 21:30 minutes, 4:3, stereo
Commissioned by Performance Space, Sydney, 2002
Image courtesy of the Artist, Sherman Galleries, Sydney and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne



Monika Tichacek, *Lineage of the Divine #9* 2002, Production still, DVD, 21:30 minutes, 4:3, stereo Commissioned by Performance Space, Sydney, 2002
Image courtesy of the Artist, Sherman Galleries, Sydney and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne



Grant Stevens, *Danger Zone* 2003, Digital video, 19.5 sec, infinite loop.
Image courtesy of the Artist and Gallery Barry Keldouli, Sydney



Tiffany Winterbottom, *Girls night in photoshoot 1* 2007, Digital print, 160 x 120cm *Girls night in photoshoot 2* 2007, Digital print, 160 x 120cm
Image courtesy of the Artist and Bett Gallery Hobart



Paul Wrigley, *Paris* 2007, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 152.9 x 86.5cm
Courtesy of the Artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney

Fifteen minutes
by David Malouf cont...

Which James Michie, in a good modern version, renders as:

*More durable than bronze, higher than Pharaoh's
Pyramids is the monument I have made,
A shape that angry wind or hungry rain
Cannot demolish, nor the innumerable
Ranks of the years that march in centuries.
I shall not wholly die; some part of me
Will cheat the goddess of death...
My reputation shall keep green and growing.*
Shakespeare is just one of many later poets who takes up the claim. In *Sonnet 55*:

*Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme: and again in *Sonnet 18*:
So long as men can breathe and eyes can see
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

What once had life in the poet's mouth may, through the medium of the poem, quicken and become breath in the mouths of generations to come. This is the Fame Milton had in mind. The one form of immortality we mortals can aspire to. But Milton's *Lycidas* couplet is broken in fact by a parenthesis:

*Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
(That last infirmity of a noble mind)
To scorn delights and live laborious days.*

The concern with Fame, the desire for it, is a weakness, even in the noblest of us. Since Fame can neither be guaranteed nor forced, work must exist for its own sake and have its own value, irrespective of the garlands it might win. Fame is too unpredictable, has its own way of choosing what will be saved out of the wastes of Time. It is, as Bacon puts it, "like a river, that bareth up things light and swollen, and drowns things weighty and solid". Not always, of course; but it is useful to be reminded that much that deserves to be remembered is not, and has to wait as El Greco did, and Bach, to be recognised and recovered, and that it is not always the best that Memory picks up and passes on. This is what Herostratus understood when he battered his way into the house of fame by setting fire to the Temple of Diana at Ephesus, gambling that the fame of that building, as one of the Seven Wonders, would be enduring enough to ensure equal fame to the man who was willing to defy all the laws of men and the gods and destroy it.

Does anyone these days think of Fame in such large and ponderous terms? "Why should I care for posterity?" Gore Vidal asks with his typical sardonic playfulness. "What did posterity ever do for me?" Fame, as Milton might have thought of it, depends on a particular view of time – time with a grand sweep that marches, as Michie's Horace puts it, "in centuries". Only when Time is accorded real weight and measure can Memory, which opposes it, be taken with an equal seriousness. Only in a world that takes "gravely" the fact of our inevitable extinction can what stands against it, the survival in the minds of men of a reputation or fame that outlasts death, be an object of serious pursuit. This is time as it was computed by the number of days it took to get from one place on the map to another. Travelling time, that depended on people's experience of space. Memory, Reputation, Fame, also worked slowly; it, too, was dependent on space. On the time it took, in a slow-moving world, for word of mouth to travel and establish itself.

Flying telescopes space and word of mouth can cover the planet now within seconds. Fame is instant. Instantly established, and since it is so much a matter of presence, of image, when it is no longer there to be seen, instantly lost. As a contemporary wit puts it: "He was immortal till he died". That is our version of Fame. We call it celebrity.

Celebrity belongs to the moment, to passing show, and is itself a manifestation of show. Only in so far as the celebrity object is there to be seen and recognised does it have value, since its value lies precisely in our need for something to be engaged and diverted by, something to look at, admire, envy and talk about; but only till something new and even more diverting swings into view.

That celebrity should have the capacity to make itself visible, a subject of interest, an occasion for talk, is the sole condition of its being – this, rather than any quality it might have that makes it unique and irreplaceable. It should seem to be unique, but only till its replacement appears. So far as its promoters the media are concerned, replaceability is part of the deal.

Immediately recognisable, immediately replaceable, that is the ideal, since in a world that is measured in nanoseconds, where in the average MTV clip the eye has to take in several dozen images in the space of a minute, our minds are trained to be impatient, our attention span is brief. Under these circumstances, as Andy Warhol quipped, 15 minutes of the public's attention is about as much as even the most appealing of us can hope for.

Newspapers, television channels, each day and day after day, have a bottomless hole to fill with what must, if it is to catch our attention and engage us, be more glittering, or more pathetic or outrageous than what we have already given ourselves up to, in a

faster-cut, more noisily insistent kaleidoscope of extravagant and teasing promises. We must be hungry for the next thing even while the present object is still being consumed. The appeal to our interest must never command so much loyalty or affection that the object of it cannot be replaced.

A celebrity, like the king in the sacred grove, is there to be worshipped and sacrificed – that is the condition of his (or her) claim. The celebrities we feel for most deeply, a Marilyn Monroe, a Callas, a Princess Di, are victims of the media's need to create and exploit them but also of our need to possess, love and in the end consume them. They are the sacred monsters of one more of the many substitute religions we have created (world sport is another) to replace older ones that for most people these days are dead. What is not dead, it seems, are the needs they served: for beings who will act out, on a superhuman scale, our aspirations to perfected human action (sport) or the splendours and miseries of both the spirit and the flesh; who will accommodate our desire to be participants in a spectacle that leads to a "death" on the sacrificial altar of our interest and love, a tragic-pathetic public show in which the beloved victim is consumed and extravagantly mourned before we pass on to the next diversion.

It is worth noting that none of the sacrificial victims is male and that no masculine figure ever plays this particular role in public mythology. Male idols, both sports stars and pop stars, are embodiments of raw physical energy, in the case of pop stars of sexual energy, sometimes transgressive (Elvis, Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Boy George). They may suffer affliction as Muhammad Ali has, but they are never conduits like their female counterparts for our sense of the tragic. The spectacle in their case is always heroic, or, in the case of pop stars perhaps, mock-heroic, and in affliction this aura of the heroic clings to them in the form of heroic endurance. If death comes to them, as in the Kennedy assassinations, what is in play is not tragedy but tragic irony, in the gap that has been revealed between the heroic aspiration to power, its achievement, and the unpredictability of events. When the hero's sexual energy ceases to be merely suggested, however blatantly, and gets out into the world of talk, as with Bill Clinton and, posthumously, with JFK, the focus is still the very masculine one of the relationship between sexuality and power; and even then it is the women involved who draw the most intense interest. Marilyn is a more evocative figure in the Kennedy saga than either JFK or Bobby, and the public's interest in the Bill Clinton affair was almost always Monica and her blue dress.

And the female icons make such different kinds of appeal that we need to discriminate.

Marilyn Monroe and Princess Di retain to the end a bruised quality of childish vulnerability that inspires protectiveness as well as pathos, and not only in men; disturbingly combined in Marilyn's case with a pouting, Lolita-like seductiveness that even as it plays up to us mocks our foolishness in being such an easy touch.

Callas, on the other hand, is never anything but the mature woman. What she inspires, carried over perhaps from the roles she played – Medea, Violetta, Norma – is the awe we feel for a vessel of feminine suffering, the pathos we pour out for those who bear the full responsibility and weight of "experience", both, theirs and our own. It is worth pointing out that what we feel for these women, the interest we take in their story, has nothing to do with any distinction they have as performers, for example. Marilyn Monroe's talent as a comedienne, which was considerable, the fact that Callas was one of the great dramatic sopranos of the day, impeccable in her musical artistry and the passion she brought to every performance, though these talents might be what first brought them to the public eye, stand quite separate from the power they exert as figures of public spectacle.

It goes without saying that much of what drives the celebrity cult is commercial and cynical, and much of it – the love lives, as presented, of the stars: the conjunctions, break-ups, reunions of a Tom and Nicole and Penelope and Jennifer and Brad – is so trivial as to be immediately forgettable. But there are cases – Monroe, Callas, Princess Di – where we find ourselves confronted by a mystery that the media barely knows how to handle; as if like the sorcerer's apprentice, it had hit by accident on a formula that opens into a smoky region of the real and powerful, a place in us we thought we had left behind, or outgrown and forgotten.

There is something darker and more deeply hidden than we bargained for in the Monroe business, or the Callas or Princess Di business, that disturbs and keeps us, in both senses of the word, wondering, and puzzles and keeps some of our best writers writing; a mystery that may, like the need these figures appeal to, be in us rather than them, though it is through them, and in them, that we feel our way towards it.

Tiffany Winterbottom employs role-play in her work to explore the concept of self-celebrity culture. Using digital photography she deconstructs images found in popular culture and explores the stereotypes that lie within. Like a film director, Winterbottom sets up photo shoots with scenarios reminiscent of those found in celebrity and fashion magazines, the internet and on Reality TV. Many of the settings for these role-play images are domestic surroundings, dramatically changing the context she has referenced. The girls in her images are not glamorised; their blemishes have not been airbrushed away and this adds to the presumed authenticity of the imagery. Winterbottom successfully blurs the boundaries between real-life scenarios and those portrayed in the mass media. The privacy of her domestic space becomes a public stage for her self-directed temporary stardom.

The recent increase in internet access has enabled anyone with a digital camera to reach a large and varied audience. Over the last ten years we have seen the birth of 'cam girls', young teens and wannabe celebrities posting their images and camera diaries on the internet via MySpace and YouTube. Jonathan Nichols takes anonymous pictures from amateur sites and converts them into devotional, meticulously painted watercolours. Nichols explains that his appropriation of these internet images is purely for pragmatic purposes, providing him with ready subjects for his figurative paintings. The conversion from one medium to another, however, does create a shift in context and audience interpretation and may unwittingly produce imagery that appears to embrace the qualities of celebrity status. It also prompts the question of whether a celebrity can exist without an audience, whether that audience is looking at a computer screen or standing in a gallery space.

*The images by Monika Tichacek are stills, taken from her video performance work titled *Lineage of the Divine*, that explore issues of celebrity, physical perfection, cosmetic surgery and the pursuit of beauty. While on a residency in New York, Tichacek met the glamour celebrity Amanda Lepore who is best known for her complete physical remodelling via plastic surgery. In the stills from *Lineage of the Divine* this dream of physical perfection is highlighted by juxtaposing real and constructed realities. Set in a flesh coloured padded room, the sleeping beauty figure of Tichacek is tethered to the idea of female perfection-personified by Lepore – by a long length of blonde hair. Central to the performance are issues of beauty, love, desire and madness that combine to reveal an exaggerated pursuit of perfection. The series of stills represents an extremely compelling, yet nightmarish scenario.*

John Vella's artwork is representative of a huge bird nesting box. At the front of the box is a circular hole where viewers can peer in to the interior by kneeling on a church pew. When the viewer looks inside the dark box, a stream of projected light creates a halo behind a sign that reads 'Ricky Scalloues'. A sound track that references the long-running celebrity television show Parkinson plays in concert with the sound of chirping birds. The artwork, Ricky Scalloues, exists as both a shrine to a celebrated artist and a cynical take on Scalloues' stellar rise to stardom and celebrity status. John Vella has often employed the art of sarcasm and wit in his 2D and 3D work, and this piece serves to remind us that the rapid rise to fame and stardom brings with it adulation from viewers, admirers and those who languish fame themselves – a reality which is as prevalent (a phenomena) in the visual arts as it is in many other areas of our lives.

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