
New Zealand's Pre-Raphaelite fetish: Sarah Ormsby at the High Street Project, Christchurch, 21 Oct – 08 November



and as we wind down the road
our shadows taller than our soul
there walks a lady we all know
who shines white light and wants to show
how everything [still] turns to gold

I can't actually confess to being this closeted Led Zeppelin fan. In fact I don't know the lyrics to this song, I doubt even if I've ever really heard the whole song out. I do though remember reading somewhere about Stevie Nicks and how her dress sense inspired the kiwi-sheila-bogan to spring to life. I think they quoted some of the sales numbers, but it didn't take long before I started to recognise that the tie-dyed tees and bogan-black, skintight and denim washes of erstwhile jeans mix-matched with sandals, cheap white sneakers, and mystic medallions, all owed a considerable appeal to the romance and nostalgia of what we could call, the b-list mysticism of Americana. These creped and fetid narratives of fortune-lost are probably at their most visible in that Led Zeppelin song "stairway to heaven". Now it's not that I'm even for one moment suggesting that Sarah Ormsby's paintings are anything like this. I don't think they are part of that same narrative, but I think it's worth pursuing, not for a line of descent or anything, but just because I think it could be amusing.

Borderline consists of two walls of paintings. One vertical series and another horizontal. We've recently just seen works by Ormsby at the *Fresh* gallery and I got really, really, excited at the ideas and notions of seriality that she was deploying at the time. Taking a simple rod like structure, Ormsby, laid out patterned narratives akin to a piano's key-board. It was possibly to count out structures of ascent, division or multiplication amongst her patterning of white, black, and green textures. Such mind games were kept so easily a toss by the beauty of the object's skein, their heavily imbued surfaces easily reflecting their environment, capturing and isolating our attention. Thus the surfaces were quickly drafted into narcissism's mirror, catching our curiosity in a



Left: Sarah Ormsby, *Borderline*, High Street Project, Christchurch.
Right: Stevie Nicks: "In this web that is my own, I begin again..."

moment of mesmerisation. This space became both one of inquisition and yet also became that solipsistic trap of detachment. As we puzzled the causes and notions of the serial that Ormsby had so patterned, their very surfaces encased our desire of knowledge. I think though if you're to follow such a line then its not so far off to that whole mystic line generated earlier. I mean how close can we get to something like this without becoming that mystically tie-died hippie and forget where we started - which if you remember was in a white gallery full of luscious high-end art objects. The painting this is all making me think of is that pre-Raphaelite icon of the kid looking into the water, even perhaps the one where the nymphs are about to drag the kid head over heels into those ever persistent lilies. I think its no surprise then that if Stevie Nicks sells so well in NZ then it's really obvious that the pre-Raphaelite show at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery will do exceptional sales as well.

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