

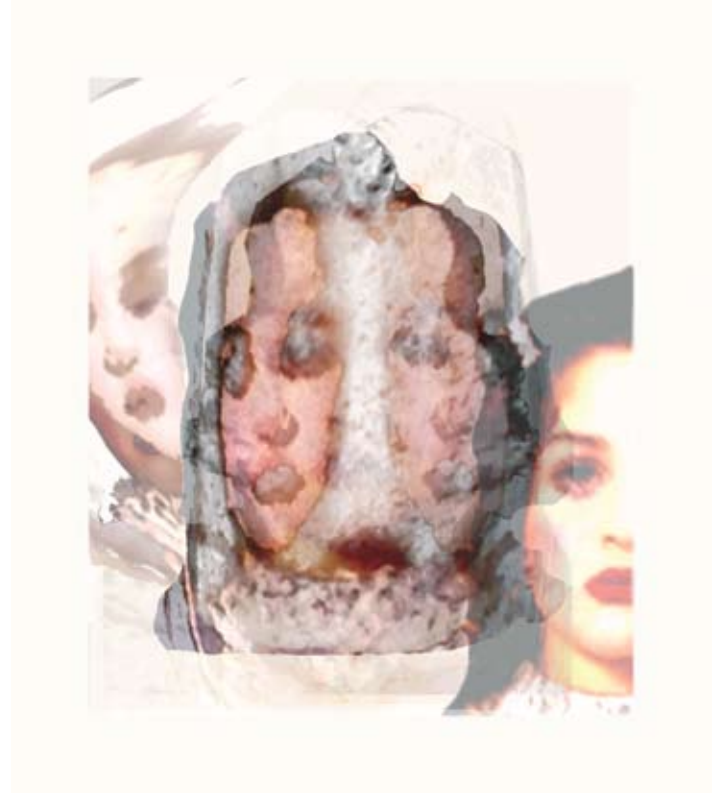
**Theima van Rensburg**

**Layers of Illusion**  
by Runette Kruger

*Identity is, for its part, a controversial phenomenon -*  
Schirmacher

The phantasm of identity haunts the fields of critical theory, philosophy, psychology, identity politics, retail, and the arts. The consuming (and consumable) need to pin down, contest, affirm, deny, construct, manipulate and control identity makes of us the analysts/analysants, destroyers/constructors, theorists/practitioners, the more or less skillful *artistes* of our own identities, as we hack and slash our way through the mine/mind-field of postmodern imperatives. The stakes around the notion/s of identity are high.

The body of work presented in *Layers of Illusion* gives form to the indistinct, without formulating it, makes up a hall of mirrors which reflect, in an act of simultaneous concealment and revealment, the uncanny aspects and nature of identity. The harder you stare, the less you see, and this is the crux of the feeling of unease around the ungraspable. Thelma van Rensburg addresses the question:



what is identity?

Identity comes fitted with an array of accoutrements: masks, roles, masquerades, substitutions, images. Identity becomes an image, a style or statement. But if identity is an image, what is it an image of? Baudrillard (online 1988) states: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself ... *To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't*" (emphasis added). The images presented here consist of floating shrinking torsos, hazy shrouded figures, mask-like faces and grotesque distortions, all seemingly of the same ghost child-woman in a repetition of 'persistent sameness' ... What can one 'make' of this? Is it, in Baudrillard's (ibid) categorisation:

1. The reflection of a basic reality (a sacrament)
2. A masking and perversion of a basic reality (evil)
3. A mask for the absence of a basic reality (sorcery)
4. A pure simulacrum, bearing no relation to any reality whatever (simulation).

Are the categories necessarily exclusionary?

"When the real is no longer what it used to be ... there is a proliferation of ... signs of reality ... of objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience ... a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production" (ibid). The repetition of the image in *Layers of Illusion* alludes to this obsessive reproduction, the spamming of a single signal – frantic abundance masking the lack of that which it broadcasts. Do the figures presented here *mask* feminine identity? Do they *distort* or *subvert* some other more 'real' identity in a fabrication of gender roles? Do they *reflect* expectation (societal or personal)? Does the distortion derive from the reflection or the reflected: is it inherent or imposed? For Baudrillard (ibid):

*All this is equally true, and the search for proof - indeed the objectivity of the fact - does not check this vertigo of interpretation ... the models come first, and their orbital ... circulation constitutes the genuine magnetic field of events ... All of the above is simultaneously true. This is the secret of a discourse that is no longer only ambiguous, as political discourses can be, but that conveys the impossibility of a determinate position of power.*



The images are disconcerting in their resistance to easy classification. Is this the key to their power? By making a spectacle of spectre, does it attempt to speak the unspeakable? What have 'we' made of female identity? Lyotard (online 1979) refers to Wittgenstein's *language games*, in a bid to 'identify' "the effects of different modes of discourse" wherein "the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put". Lyotard (ibid) states:

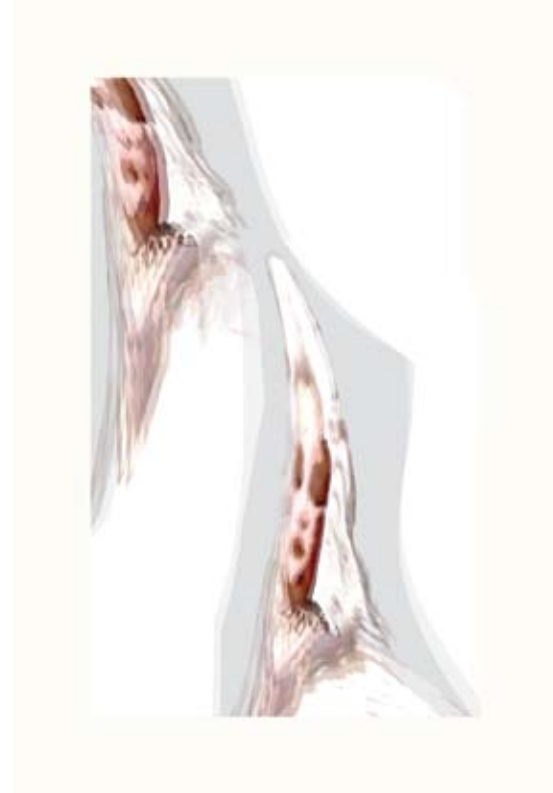
*It is useful to make the following three observations about language games. The first is that their rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players ... The second is that if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game, that a 'move' or utterance that does not satisfy the rules does not belong to the game they define ... [thirdly] every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' ... to speak is to fight.*

Is the artist willfully 'harassing the image' in a feminist appropriation of this well established patriarchal pastime? Van Rensburg seems to be excusing

herself from this Lyotardian 'agonistics of language', from the game (of forging identities), whilst putting in place a mask or masquerade of identities. The image then becomes shield. Such a deft 'unexpected move' resolves the Nietzschean master/slave impasse, which describes the "attachments of the oppressed as they rationalize and valorize their condition" (Heyes, online 2007). To engage in battle is to accede to the method and validity of the opponent. One becomes that which one opposes most vehemently.

Thus the images presented here can not serve as a resolution to gender identity conflict. They do not present a finite, nor an alternative, nor an ideal identity. They show that which is clearly there, clear to the point of obscurity. They might present/represent the imperative to wrest the labour of gender identity production from its current formulators (who are they?) or endlessly echo a given in the process of being given. As such they might stand for

*the conjunction of the system and its extreme alternative like two ends of a curved mirror, the 'vicious' curvature of a political space henceforth magnetized, circularized, reversabilized ... a torsion that is like the evil demon*



*of communication, the whole system, the infinity of capital folded back over its own surface: transfinite?*

The 'illusion' presented here is simultaneously (in the mode of the simulacra), that which it is and is not, an intermingling of discourses in a "circular, Moebian compulsion". (Baudrillard, online 1988).

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Sources:

Baudrillard, J. 1988. Simulacra and Simulations (online) in: Poster, M. (ed.) Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings. Available from: [http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard\\_simulacra.html](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_simulacra.html).

Heyes, C. 2007. Identity Politics (online). Available from: [http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity\\_politics/#4](http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity_politics/#4)

Lyotard, J-F. 1979. The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge (online). Available from: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/lyotard.htm>

Schirmacher, W. 1986. Mask, Role, and Identity (online). Available from: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/schirmacher/mask.html>

**Image: (page 3) UNREALITY, 2008**  
**Medium:** Digital print on Hahnemühle paper  
**Dimensions:** 45cm x 51cm  
**Edition:** 1 of 25

**Image: (page 6) FLEETING II, 2008**  
**Medium:** Digital print on Hahnemühle paper  
**Dimensions:** 34cm x 72cm  
**Edition:** 1 of 25

**Image: (page 9) DELUDED, 2008**  
**Medium:** Digital print on Hahnemühle paper  
**Dimensions:** 33cm x 51cm  
**Edition:** 1 of 25

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- ⊕ - Graskop
- ⊕ - Dullstroom
- ⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Irene - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Richmond
- ⊕ - Cape Town