

Acknowledgements

Erik Mark Sandberg is a guest of RMIT University through the School of Art international Artist in Residence Program—iAIR. The School acknowledges and welcomes Erik as a professional artist within the School community.

iAIR is global in attitude, action and presence—connecting people through art and generating opportunities for creative experimentation, cross-cultural dialogue and international mobility. iAIR gratefully acknowledges and recognizes the support of the Vice-Chancellor and President of RMIT, Professor Margaret Gardner AO; the Pro Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President, Professor Colin Fudge; and the Head of the School of Art, Professor Elizabeth Grierson.

For further information about iAIR, please contact Coordinator Andrew Tetzlaff or visit www.rmit.edu.au/art/iair.

Right
Sky With Leopard Tee and Boots, 2011
Ink, acrylic, airbrush, and oil on canvas
122 x 244 cm

PROJECT SPACE/SPARE ROOM

BUILDING 94: 23-27 CARDIGAN STREET, CARLTON

Supported by
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Managed by the RMIT School of Art

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PROJECT SPACE/SPARE ROOM



The New Pretty

ERIK MARK SANDBERG [USA]

Curated by JAZMINA CININAS

FRIDAY 19 AUGUST TO THURSDAY 8 SEPTEMBER 2011

OPENING THURSDAY 18 AUGUST 5-7PM

FLOOR TALK THURSDAY 18 AUGUST 4-4.30PM



The New Pretty

Freak shows reached the height of their popularity in the wake of Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, marketing themselves as pseudo-intellectual forums in which those who conformed to statistically verifiable norms could observe, discuss and feel superior to, quantifiably deviant bodies. Hirsute celebrities such as Julia Pastrana, who was mercilessly billed as "The Ugliest Woman in the World", simultaneously reinforced and disrupted social and biological hierarchies, igniting anxiety over *Homo sapien* 'purity' and serving as mirrors of our worst fears for our own humanity should the integrity of our bodies be somehow violated.¹

Earlier centuries had a different understanding of 'monstrous' humans. In an age of miracles and discovery, the novel and the exotic were viewed as demonstrations of divine wit and inventiveness, with wild men and hairy woman embodying the rejection of worldly conceits and the excesses of civilization. The Early Modern Era produced a culture in which the unusually hairy Gonsalvus² family were able to find favour as 'marvels' in the royal courts of sixteenth-century Europe with influential scholars such as Ulysee Aldrovandi, who produced several works on paper and woodblock illustrations of the family from life, contributing to an elitist, *highbrow* arena for the exhibition of hirsute individuals.

Our current, 'enlightened' times are rather more ambivalent towards the exceptionally hairy, evident in the glut of depilatory products on the market, never mind the proliferation of

Brazilian waxing salons. Yet the over-enthusiastic hair follicles that curse Mexico's Aceves-Gomez family to be discriminated against in its local community simultaneously bestow the most coveted of contemporary commodities – fame. Immortalised by *Fox Television's Guinness World Records*, *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*, *Primetime Medical Mysteries* and the "Werewolves" episode of *CSI*, the Aceves family enjoy a level of celebrity aspired to by a generation raised on YouTube, reality television and Facebook, and who willingly forsake personal privacy in their quest for self-promotion.³

Much as nineteenth-century freak shows exploited anxieties surrounding the corruption of human-animal boundaries and hierarchies, Erik Mark Sandberg's shamelessly gauche portraits of hairy children embody contemporary paranoid of human corruption, both moral and physical. The grotesque hirsutism of Sandberg's subjects serves as a metaphor for the ostentation and exploitation inherent in contemporary consumer culture and the double-edged promise of overnight fame epitomised by his current home, Los Angeles. Inverting Early Modern readings of hirsutism as a rejection of worldly vanities, Sandberg's portraits and busts visibly manifest the wholesale absorption of rampant consumer culture by those most susceptible to the relentless bombardment of mass marketing - the young.

Sandberg describes his work as beginning with "observations of daily life, whether it's a story in the news, [or] some dysfunctional family I see walking through Kmart."⁴ Perverse scenarios are heightened and amplified to the point of the

grotesque, the nigh on radioactive palette forming an assault on the senses akin to the "constant rotting of fruit in the sun." His hairy adolescents were conceived of amidst alarmist news reports of tap water contaminated by prescription drugs, Raunch Culture fuelled promiscuity and schoolyard addictions to Flaming Hot Cheetos, while his nostalgic use of pop culture icons are autobiographical references to growing up with Wrestle Mania, GI Joe, He-Man and other manifestations of eighties materialism and idolatry. Sandberg's portraits capture the hairy "underbelly of glamour" and the superficial pressures to conform to unrealistic ideals of appearance endemic to "entertainment-fertilized" La La Land; the rampant hair follicles signifying not only the corruption of the afflicted individual, but also the society in which the young teens find themselves.

And yet Sandberg's subjects retain an irresistible charm, their shameless grotesqueness transcending conventional notions of attractiveness to create their own, defiant beauty. There is a poignant self-consciousness in the children's expressions and poses, emblematic of lives lived in the public domain by those most vulnerable to exploitation. Sandberg's hairy children possess an unexpected innocence that belies their disturbing disfigurements, while the latter is what makes them marvelous in the original sense of the word. Emerging from a culture that preaches tolerance of difference yet sets impossible ideals of youth and beauty, and routinely witnesses anorexics starve themselves in the midst of an obesity epidemic while addictions to steroids, Botox and cosmetic surgery give rise to grotesque parodies of former selves, Sandberg's fabulous

contemporary Pastranas form a perversely appealing vanguard that heralds *The New Pretty*.

Jazmina Cininas

¹ See C. LaCom, (2008) "Ideological Aporia: When Victorian England's Hairy Woman Met God and Darwin," *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 4, (2). <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue42/lacom.htm>, accessed 7 June 2009. Pastrana has been the subject of numerous books, articles, book chapters, plays and artworks. After her death, her manager-husband had her embalmed and continued to exhibit her profitably for a further twenty years. Pastrana's remains are currently held in the Oslo Forensic Institute.

² The family are also known by the alternative spellings Gonsalus and Gonzalez. For a comprehensive biography of their lives and times see M. Weisner-Hanks (2009), *The Marvellous Hairy Girls: The Gonzales Sisters and Their Worlds*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

³ For further details of the Aceves-Gomez family, see C. Bouchardeau, J.Quinones & L. Viddy (2007), *Real-Life 'Werewolves'*, <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=2258069&page=1> Sept. 12, viewed 24 June 2008.

⁴ Artist statement sent in email correspondence with the author, August 2010. All following quotations are likewise artist statements provided to the author, between August 2010 and July 2011.

Left to Right
Boy With Sunset, 2011
Oil, airbrush, resin, glitter, silk-screen on panel
61 x 48 cm

Hannah Black in March, 2011
Acrylic, oil, airbrush, and urethane clear on panel
61 x 48 cm

Hannah Black in March, 2011
Acrylic, oil, airbrush, and urethane clear on panel
61 x 48 cm

Girl with Summer Fever (Yellow), 2011
Silcast II, airbrush, and automotive clear coat
47 x 35.5 x 23.5 cm, 11.3 kg

