A REAL ALLEGORY

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A *Real Allegory* (2011) consists of two parts, *Part I, Male* and *Part II, Marlene*. Both are vast graphite and pencil drawings with a sculptural component. In *Part I, Male*, Fowler draws from a photographic still of the 1934 Pre-code film *The Search for Beauty*.[1] The scene features a locker room, which forms the backdrop of the piece. Onto the backdrop she collages sourced material alongside original images from the film. To the left of the drawing, Clark Gable is a boxer lying on the floor while the matador Manolete lays embalmed on a bed. In the background a man sits wearing a corset, representing Lon Chaney's depiction of a circus performer posing as an armless man in the 1927 horror film *The Unknown*. To the right sits the more recent figure of Daniel Craig as James Bond, mid torture, in *Casino Royale*.[2] In the centre foreground an anonymous male nude stands with arms raised, pirouetting on one foot. The image of the male nude is recreated as a bronze sculpture, which mirrors the drawn figure in every particular apart from the presence of a remaining column of armature projecting from the pelvis.

Part II, Marlene can be read as the 'female' part of the work. It is set in the room where the silent film star Fatty Arbuckle was arrested for the rape and murder of the actress Virginia Rappe. Large ornate wall panels dominate the upper portion of the room and the central foreground is filled with a pile of broken furniture. Both are reminders of the opulence and luxury of the original room, turned oppressive as the stage dressing of a crime scene. At first glance the impression is one of a moment in time, a particular scene from a film or story, but the image is in fact a composite assembly of borrowed material. This time, the striking figure of Marlene Dietrich rests her head on her elbow in the lower right corner of the imagined scene. Gazing down towards the floor, her calm despondency stands in opposition with the chaos that surrounds her. A nude model looks out from behind her, holding her position and waiting to be looked at. The motif of ballet appears once again with Margot Fonteyn in pas de deux, the arms of her just-visible male support behind her.[3] A female lies with her eyes closed in the bed, barely visible from under the plush silk and satin bedcovers. While she appears to rest peacefully, a gathering of large and foreboding cameras peer down at her.[4] On the floor beside the bed is a depiction of the actress Carole Landis. Fowler references the photograph gruesomely published by American newspapers on discovery of the body following her suicide.

A figure of Marlene Dietrich in painted plaster and slate forms the sculptural component to *Part II, Marlene*. In each case, the work's sculptural components are left rough and unfinished. The process of discovering their optimum angle is crucial to their effect, as they line up with their two-dimensional counterparts. Looking from the correct position, the viewer sees a succession of images, with the drawn image being repeated into the physical space of the viewer. The figures' characteristic properties can be more fully comprehended when perceived as forms in space, as if they have quite literally come to life. The sculptural components can be read as a physical extension of the drawn image into the viewer's surrounding space, a challenge to the viewer on how to experience the work.

They are, furthermore, an on-going experiment in the relationship between two-dimensional and three-dimensional practice, between drawing and sculpture, something also legible elsewhere in her works.

As with *Valentino's Funeral* (2009), Fowler brings together a collection of sourced images to form a kind of tableau. However, unlike *Valentino's Funeral*, the subject of *A Real Allegory* is not based on any particular narrative. Her piece is much more a reflection of her own unmitigated imagination fuelled by a personal archive of imagery. Fowler spends years building up a collection of found imagery. In this respect, that is, collecting and recording imagery, Fowler is an archivist artist. However, a sense of history is not a binding force. Rather, her archive of imagery exists to furnish the imagination with material to be borrowed and reimagined however she wishes. The manner in which she abstracts the material from their original context and places them in her work is akin to dreaming, or at least the way you remember your dreams: a frenetic, disparate amalgamation of extracts, brought together to create a rhythm and arrangement entirely your own. The process of gathering and collaging the images into the final composition is the result of purely instinctive visuality. This is, of course, how it should be given that at the heart of the work is an awareness and celebration of creative freedom.[5]

The work takes its name from Gustave Courbet's seminal work *The artist's studio, a real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life* (1854-5). Fowler was drawn to Courbet's daring, bringing together a series of disparate characters and moments in time into one staged composition which sees the artist at the centre. Fowler's work resonates with the thought processes of Courbet not simply in the representation of a large gathering of seemingly disparate people, but in their assertion of artistic freedom. It doesn't really matter if the gathering in Courbet's studio was ever actually real or not because essentially all artistic expression is allegorical.

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1 'Pre-Code' refers to the period between the introduction of the Hays Code in 1930 and the establishment of the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934. *The Search for Beauty* is a 1934 Pre-Code 'dramedy' film directed by Erle C. Kenton and starring Buster Crabbe and Ida Lupino.
2 Taken from Daniel Craig's debut as the fictional MI6 agent James Bond in *Casino Royale* (directed by Martin Campbell, 2006).
3 The two ballet figures are taken from archive footage of *Marguerite and Armand*, a piece choreographed especially for Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn by Sir Frederick Ashton.
4 In conversation the artist explained the experience she was intending to depict. She wanted a reminder of the presence of the camera and 'watchful' eye of the public in the life of these figures. Particularly, she wanted to demonstrate how this public curiosity remained and even became more heightened amid scandal and death.
5 The motif of artistic freedom is echoed in the use of footage from a Pre-Code film in *Part 1, Male*. Pre-Code cinema represents a time of great artistic fearlessness when filmmakers dared to test the limits of expression in their films prior to the enforcement of censorship.