

Gina Czarnecki on Infected

New media artwork is hard to categorise, says artist Gina Czarnecki, particularly on a funding application form. Influenced by eugenic theory and an early career in animation, her films take the human figure as their starting point and fuse it with digital video and processing to comment on the inevitable crossroads between technology and the biological human body. Initially based in London, Czarnecki spent over a decade in Dundee before relocating with her partner to Melbourne. Having appeared at the Sundance Festival and Cannes as well as many other film festivals in Europe and the USA, a collection of her video works, *Infected*, is presented at AK05 by the Moving Image Centre and will appear at the Britomart Union Fish Building, running from March 3-13. She speaks to SAM EICHBLATT via email.

SAM EICHBLATT The theme of technology vs. biology has been explored in a variety of media throughout the last century, and before that (I'm a big Frankenstein fan), always seemingly with a negative bias – is the convergence of biology and technology necessarily a negative thing?

GINA CZARNECKI Definitely not. I see this as a necessary development and progress. In terms of technological development – which includes what is termed "genetic engineering" – it's not the capabilities or possibilities that are the problem, but the people who control what is developed and how this is used. In other words, the political and socio-economic forces driving research.

S.E You began your career as an animator in the late 1980s. What prompted the progression from that, to new media?

G.C I started as a painter and gradually became more interested in time – sequence and consequence. I was studying at Wimbledon School of Art and there were two people there who enabled me to push this further. One was a session lecturer, Steve Farrer, who came from the experimental film world. He gave me a 16mm Bolex and asked me to take it apart and put it back together. The latter never happened but I learnt much about the technicalities of film making and this inspired me to play with bi-packing, rotoscoping and processing techniques. I used the equipment at the London Film-Makers Co-op, where I later worked for a few years after leaving college.

The other significant person at Wimbledon was Richard Layzell, a performance artist who provided enormous encouragement for me to do something that excited me, rather than fulfil any obligation to the painting degree I was taking. I started doing painted or hand-drawn animations that had short narratives, and quickly learned that I wasn't particularly interested in story, but in creating spaces with image and sound.

The drawings were replaced with images sourced from live-action film-making. For example, high-contrast film of a woman running was b-packed through the camera/printer and became a flame figure running. Film-making was costly though, and as my 3 year consultancy at the London Film-makers Co-op was running out, I traded my film skills (cleaning film processors and occasional teaching) at various colleges for use of their video rostrums.

Video, however, had so many limits at that time. Analogue video meant that you couldn't just drop something like another frame or sequence in and shift the rest up – it all had to be redone. It was frustrating and low res.

In 1990 I decided to re-train and the choice was either to go to the National Film and Television School to pursue a career in more traditional animation, or to go to Duncan of Jordanstone College in Dundee – famous in the art world for setting up the PGDip course in electronic imaging. This was the first place of its kind in the UK that enabled artists to work with high-end technologies to create "media art".

For a number of reasons, I ended up in Dundee and signed myself up for computer animation. Symbolics systems fried my brains for six months – and I learnt I never wanted to do 3D computer animation again!

However, what did happen was that I discovered in digital video making all the benefits of film and video combined. It took a few years for the technology to reach a satisfying speed and quality. I've made work on a computer ever since.

S.E Does animation bear any relation to your work now?

G.C Yes, totally, but this depends on an understanding of what animation is – does it have to mean "hand-made"? Does it mean "frame by frame" or taking the word literally, as in "to animate" – to "breath life into"?

I re-animate and construct frame by frame, and in this frame by frame construction there are multitudes of layered manipulations. It's unfortunate that animation, or the term "animation", has been ghettoised to convey the hand-drawn or the cartoon when its potential is so much more.

S.E Is there a consistent element running through your animation and new media works?

G.C The consistent element is that I generally use the human form – usually naked to keep it pure and outside of any cultural/time/age reference. Also blackness or shapes in the dark areas. Another consistent element is in the creation of space between the sound/image and the audience's reading of the piece.

S.E Tell me about your series of video works, Infected, that appears in the AK05 festival.

G.C There are four large installation works in Humancraft (which is the new title for the exhibition). They range from a piece made in 1998, Versifier: Stages Elements Humans, to Infected, Silvers Alter and the new piece, Nascent.

Versifier is a large nine metre wide screen with nine life-sized naked human forms. It is an installation that directly addressed the parallels I drew between digital photography and genetic engineering. The human forms are subtly changing yet retain the appearance of the authentic or untouched photograph. The viewer is confronted with this line-up of specimens that have an un-nerving and imposing presence. There is a sense of entrapment, but with an ambiguity as to who is caged. The bodies take on

an essence of divinity and allude to the vast reserves of unused potential that all of our bodies contain. It is a graphic statement about the similarities and differences between these people – of different sexes, nationalities, cultures – and us.

These people were all individually placed behind glass, and press against the glass as though they're trapped. All of the people are put together in this digital space and you, as the viewer, are not sure if they are aware of one another's presence but they seem to be aware of your presence and react accordingly.

All of them are digitally manipulated. For example, one woman grows 20% during the five minute cycle, while another loses body hair, and another's stomach bulge. But in the landscape of nine people, these manipulations are almost undetectable even though they are happening right in front of you. It's so easy to make monsters out of the figures or make something obvious, but what I really wanted to create is subtlety – you are aware something is changing and happening but you can't quite put your finger (or eye) on what.

In 1998 it was also very rare for people to be confronted with nude video images of non-eroticised males and females, particularly heterosexual men looking at the bodies of other men and women who weren't eroticised, or fetishised, just naked. This brought a reading to the piece which I hadn't anticipated so while this piece has been shown in traditional art galleries next to painted and photographic nudes, the video medium required special warnings before people entered because of the nude content – perhaps because they were too close to reality!

Infected started out as my intention to work with a contortionist to make a film/piece dealing with digital manipulation and the subtlety of what we perceive to be "authentic and real". Iona, the dancer in Infected, was incredible. She was extraordinary as a person, and in the way she could move and respond to what it was I needed. Her movements are to most, physically impossible. They were enhanced even more through digital contortion and further manipulation.

Another stream running through the piece is the transition from the raw and unmanipulated, to the analogue edit, and beyond that to the digital arena of field cutting, superimposition and fluctuating field renderings – what you could only really achieve with digital editing and compositing.

After I had made the first draft of this piece I met David Metcalfe of Forma. He enabled me to get funding to complete the piece and to pay the people involved. He also introduced me to Christian Fennesz – whose music and titles I totally loved. Christian did a soundtrack for Infected and has worked with me on the original composition in the new version of Infected. It was by pure chance of funding through the Arts Council England Capture Scheme that this got taken up by the dance world and after Iona started working for Wym Vanderkeybus.

Silvers Alter was my first piece to use interactivity. It was really a natural progression in terms of my inclusion of audience and viewers, and I also wanted to ask questions of the audience rather than to assume a position. I wanted to work with factual information presented as art and to ask that if we were able to gain information on an individual's genetics, would this influence our choices?

It is basically a multi-user interactive artwork which presents a stage for artificial evolution where human "control models" and their created offspring are the subjects for the audience to breed or terminate.

Nascent was originally funded in the UK by South East Dance and based on the success of *Infected*. South East Dance then discovered that I had moved to Australia and withdrew their funding, but Forma (my producers in the UK) fronted the money.

I came to Australia looking for performers, dancers or circus people to work with and through Katrina Sedgwick I was introduced to Garry Stewart and the Australian Dance Theatre. I initially was set to take *Infected* further using two dancers rather than one, where they would swap body parts, dance styles etc.

However, as I make the work in front of the screen, what emerges is something entirely different, even if it does still metaphorically bear some relationship to the funding application!

Nascent is the most laborious piece to date. I physically hand-made all the filters, and processed up to 60 different stages in each clip – it's so totally time consuming and unsustainable way of working unless other things come from this.

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S.E One thing I find interesting is that dance is one of the oldest and least "mediated" art forms, the human body being the only instrument in the performance. And you've combined it with something that is all about mediation and constructed images and a visual language. Was that a conscious decision?

G.C No, not consciously. Taking the human body away from art is what interests me – its machinations, visceral-ness and the pure energy of living systems. We can empathise with the human form so totally, and the rhythm of dance and music appeals at a far more subconscious and visceral level.

People can and do read manipulated and constructed images, as our understanding of visual language is so sophisticated. But I don't try to portray documents of dance on screen – I love seeing dance because of the energy of the performers and the intense chemistry – compared to being there, video could never do this. It does something else entirely, and takes it to a different space where the experience is through the mediation and observation, and using the images of dance and dancers as symbols or metaphors. For example, the dancers in *Nascent* form the vertebrae of a spine, which is something that gives the body structure and defines the health of all internal organs. Using the body of a dancer who is moving fast, it also appears like a frieze, frozen in time and fading out like smoke.

S.E What inspires you initially?

G.C I'm inspired by the need to communicate where language fails me. Beauty, complexity, the parallels between living systems, structures and organisations, the joy

of the journey and the anticipation of having that journey changed through new collaborations, new people, new possibilities.

S.E Is *Infected* a collaboration between yourself and the dancer? How does that work?

G.C That depends what you mean by collaboration. The piece could not be what it is without the dancer or the musician, so yes, it is a product of collaboration and interpretation. However, the brief was created by me, while the dancer responded to my motivations and was selected because of the idea I had in mind, and the music was made after the first stage of the piece was done.

I still maintain that this is a collaboration – just as in *Silvers Alter* which relied heavily on working with others, and then more intense collaboration with programmers and the Human Genome Mapping Project.

However, one of the most fundamental collaborations in this piece was with Dr Keith Skeene, who didn't have anything to do directly with the making of the piece, but was someone I met while making this. We shared long drunken conversations about wild ideas on genetics and life which totally inspired me, and kept me believing in what I was doing. Keith has now started an Artist in Residency scheme at his university department, and is collaborating with other artists on projects. This I consider to be a brilliant result and real collaboration, just as much as physically working with someone from the word Go on a joint project with equal input and authorships.

S.E Art has always manipulated the image of the human form, from stick figures on a cave wall, to Mannerism to Cubism – where do you fit into this tradition? Or maybe a better question would be: Do you fit into this tradition?

G.C For sure – but I wonder too if the stick figures were manipulations. I'm thinking now of looking at paintings before perspective – is it that people saw flat layers or that the technique of portraying these wasn't developed or that detail was redundant for the paintings purpose?

I also work with the idea that the human form is increasingly plastic and manipulable inside and out, and the questions of what is authentic or real are dependent entirely on context – just as is the notion of truth. Someone recently compared a sequence from *Nascent* to the futurist painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (Marcel Duchamp, 1912). My work is still referential, and whilst engaging with issues of technology, biology and contemporary issues, the visuals fit strongly into a tradition of fine /visual art.

S.E You moved from a seriously established art culture in the UK to Melbourne just over a year ago. Have you noticed any obvious differences between those artistic communities? What are they?

G.C I had better be careful on this one! In the UK I had a full time job that was generous in providing two days a week for my practice as an artist and researcher. Now, I solely concentrate on my work a couple of days a week when I have childcare.

I moved from Scotland which has a very small artistic community. Australia too has a relatively small artistic community, and networks are deep and long-standing. What I have noticed here is that people place a lot more emphasis on academic qualifications and perhaps this is why practitioners – artists who make stuff – seem to be far more theoretically knowledgeable about a far greater range of international practices.

One of the real parallels is in terms of classification and funding. "New media" for me has meant that which embraces anything which defies classification, as well as work made on computers and time-based developmental research work, so the "new media" category actually means far more than people just making digital videos or interactive works.

It seems that "new media" is taking a knocking because the technology which some think defines this practice has now become ubiquitous, but we're now at a position where many forward-thinking galleries have black-out, computers and plasma screens. Artists can sell DVDs – even though it doesn't compete with a solid-object for price.

Having said that, one thing I really notice, being the mother of two young kids, is that I have a very part-time involvement with any community, let alone any real in-depth social knowledge of artistic community.

S.E Infected was produced in 2001. What have you been doing since then? And what's on the cards for the future?

G.C I was pregnant with my first child when I started this, and edited with Saskia, now four, strapped to my chest. Since then I've got married, had another child, moved to the other side of the world, made four other pieces, had exhibitions and formed new collaborative relationships for current and future works.

The next projects are an interactive work based on the notion of "infection" that is to be done in residence at the State Library of Victoria exhibiting in September 05, and working on a new piece by Australian Dance Theatre. I'm also finally making the back-catalogue of print works that have been accumulating on my hard drive for years – I'd really like to exhibit these whilst in Australia.

On the personal side of things, we are still trying to apply for residency. We thought that if we have to apply under the Exceptional Talent Pathway, at least it would look fun on our CVs ... evicted from Australia for lack of exceptional talent. I've also registered to do a PhD with UTS Sydney but I need to find more time for that.