

Marilyn Monroe at Australia's Bendigo Art Gallery

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Global Research, April 26, 2016

Region: [Oceania, USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

There she was, being drooled over in a provincial Australian town with mesmeric effect, a cipher of life's choices rather than a substantive being; a motif more than person. We were told on arriving at the Bendigo Art Gallery that the Marilyn Monroe Exhibition was packed till 3.30 in the afternoon.[1] Only then would be able to have a peek at what were, essentially, her items.

The rural Australian town of Bendigo is, in its own way, a creation of image. It was crafted from gold discoveries, cutting adventures into the despoiled earth, and the commodity plunderers that made Australia grand and degraded. The city's neo-gothic structures poke towards the skies with purpose. The city itself seeps full of sunshine, and from the summit, one can see the most beautiful array of vegetation in Rosalind Park. In it are figures of commemoration: to Australia's distant ill-thought out wars; to quartz kings who cut and dug the earth.

Bendigo Art Gallery and Twentieth Century Fox present Marilyn Monroe



At the entrance to the leafy glory that is Rosalind Park spies a huge Gulliver-like figure. It is on that scale as we, Lilliputian fools, gaze at to ponder. This is Seward Johnson's eight-metre *Forever Marilyn*, her William Travilla white dress billowing from the grate in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), and her lipstick smile crafted on with manufactured detail.[2] "She's got knickers on," marvelled a couple in unison, stealing a glance under the huge creation.

This is Marilyn Monroe as stressed fabrication, tortured image and a permanent project of envisaging. She is there to be used, and the good people of Bendigo in Australia have been capitalising. In a rather stately museum, the knickknacks of her life are displayed. There are timelines for the chronologically challenged. There are re-runs of films, shots, cuts, and "Happy Birthday Mr President."

The visitors go straight for the Marilyn they want. On the issue of suicide, narratives are running wild, few sympathetic to the coroner's view that barbiturates were to blame. "Kennedy," suggests one visitor drawing on the old Margolis-Buskin version, "was about to spill the beans" - hence the need to do away with her in the bedroom of her home in Brentwood, Los Angeles in August 1962. She does not say which Kennedy, though the less

than holy brothers Jack and Bobby were certainly keen on the actress.

The saints of old were the heroines and heroes of a controlled divinity factory known as the Catholic Church. Relics were everywhere: the sixteenth finger of St. John the Baptist; a soiled bit of earth from some lost detail regarding the wounds of Jesus. The Cult of saints with their miracles was the cult of pre-modern celebrity.

In the modern, falsely desecularised world, those without moorings seek their stability in other forms. The spirit world shall always have its spokespeople. Escapist manna is everywhere, and the Hollywood starlet is as good as any. The rudder shall be found, the ground shall be struck, and the hourglass figure with lips and voice shall fill the need.

Monroe's image, crafted by the media, stylised by fashion industries, inflated, deflated and mauled by theorists and active dream merchants, made her stimulating candy, eye-stopping idol and ambitious business woman. She has even fallen to the speculative stratagems of Gloria Steinem, who insisted on the inevitable theme of victimhood. (Famous as one becomes, one a victim remains.) Sociologists in turn have attacked this babbling. What would Steinem know, counters Graham McCann, whose accused Steinem of unnecessary "pop psychology"?

McCann is happy to do just that, suggesting that Marilyn had the sort of intelligence that would have deterred her from perishing to an overdose. How he knows about what his clever subject ever thought is never obvious. This ignores the obvious point that intelligent people have made it a habit to do away with their lives for good reason. The black dog of depression, the pressures of a tyrant, or just a sense of being fed up, have all had their fair share.

A line from LaWanda Walters in *Ploughshares*, which remains insightfully banal, has some value. "I didn't know much about Marilyn/Monroe the day she died. I'd heard her name." Many had, as they do the modern celebrity who wafts in like a purchased deodoriser, or who manages to be a stand-in excuse for life's own difficulties. This is Marilyn as medium, escape and retreat, a point amplified by the magazine supplements in the exhibition, with such featured publications as *Modern Screen's* "Marilyn Monroe's Life as a Divorcee", *Foto Parade* ("Is Sex Your Escape?") and *Photoplay*.

There are some poignant images in this collection, though most show her as subordinated to the medium and the marshalling dictates of the photographer. Prior to the rot setting in, there are the raw images of Monroe with her "first boyfriend" Lester Bolender, aged 5. Then come fresh images of a young woman – before Hollywood seeps into her veins and screws with her mind.

Richard Avedon's shots from 1958 indicate how MM had made the big show only to be something, or someone else. In these carefully staged shots, she is everybody else but Marilyn, photographed as Clara Bow, Lillian Russell, Jean Harlow and Theda Bara.

A snippet of inner life might be gleaned from books in her collection, though these are hardly conclusive. She left behind a copy of F. Matthias Alexander's *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (originally published in 1910), a forerunner to the self-help testaments that have become a modern pop staple.

Astronomer Harlow Shapley's *Of Stars and Men* (1959) is a touching possession that outlines

the human aim, told from a child's perspective, to find its role in the universe. In Shapley's own words, it "was written to tell in simple language what man is and where he is in the universe of atoms, protoplasms, stars and galaxies." [3]

Even the exhibition captions provide a sense of the elusive Marilyn. This is despite an admission that, "The definitive truth about the life, loves and personal motivations of Marilyn Monroe will perhaps never be revealed."

Hence the pure sadism and voyeurism here: Monroe in a dress (or selected dresses) that women can adore with admiring fancy and men can remove with lust-driven eyes; Monroe in a role that is a prison before the camera and a prison after the photoshoot.

Marilyn Monroe at the Bendigo Art Gallery runs from March 5 to July 10, 2016.

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Notes:

[1] http://www.bendigoartgallery.com.au/Exhibitions/Current_Exhibitions/Bendigo_Art_Gallery_and_Twentieth_Century_Fox_present_Marilyn_Monroe

[2] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-02/supersized-marilyn-monroe-statue-arrives-in-bendigo/7133668>

[3] <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B04EFDC1030E033A2575AC2A9629C946591D6CF>

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