

ANDREW NICHOLLS explores the work of an artist whose work encompasses ambitious concepts and an astonishing range of media.

HISTORICAL HYSTERIA

Thea Costantino has recently emerged as not only one of Western Australia's most celebrated young artists (winning the 2011 QANTAS Foundation Encouragement of Contemporary Australian Art Award and Artsource's prestigious Gunnery residency for 2012), but also one of the state's most intriguingly multifarious.

She has curated a number of exhibitions, published works of fiction, written a musical and coauthored innovative performed works as part of cross-disciplinary collective *Hold Your Horses* (most recently an ensemble choral rendering of Freud's infamous 'failed' case study of Dora, *The Soloists*, last year), alongside a solo practice that encompasses drawing, sculpture, photography and film.

This solo work is largely concerned with how we attempt to document, categorise and (thereby) 'understand' history, challenging the sense of security we take in 'knowing' the past by referencing and distorting materials drawn from archives and collections. Costantino has termed this approach the 'historiographic grotesque' — with an eye for the macabre, she highlights the gaps, misreadings and superstitions within such historical sources, a context in which ambiguity becomes a powerfully dissident notion.

Costantino is particularly known for her exquisitely rendered chalk and graphite drawings, which reproduce the style of antiquated photography but employ distortion and deletion to uncannily affect (a frequent motif in the series is the headless body, evoking Freudian castration anxiety and Lacanian lack, while others recall Charcot's infamous documentation of hysterics). More recent works have staged confrontations between science and the irrational. A collection of short stories published earlier this year, *Inheritance*, related darkly humorous narratives in which the structures of rational and empiricist society are threatened by uncanny phenomena. In one, the identity of a mysteriously preserved body becomes increasingly ambiguous, causing consternation for the museum that has claimed it; in another, the history of a village whose women succumb to possession is related by a male resident in the local archives; while in the last, a curator on the verge of a sociopathic breakdown plans to delete his museum's database. Her series of finely detailed miniature wax sculptures, meanwhile, recall early anatomical models, yet retain an ambiguous presence, often of indeterminate age and gender. These works allude to mass entertainment as much as they do the biology department or teaching hospital, suggestive of the waxwork museum or French Revolution death masks, and their flaunting of the grotesque for mass amusement and edification.

In 2009, Costantino was awarded the Galerie Düsseldorf/Curtin University Postgraduate Scholarship on the strength of her PhD work, allowing her to develop a solo exhibition for the gallery. Opening this August, *The Ancestors* will see her set aside the drawing that has dominated her practice over recent years, instead combining sculpture, costume, performance and photography. Turning her ghoulish sensibility toward Australian post-colonialism, Costantino will depict a series of elaborately costumed characters referencing colonial and Imperialist iconography. □

The Ancestors

Galerie Düsseldorf

26 August–23 September 2012

Perth



Top: Thea Costantino, *Portrait 1*, 2011, graphite and gesso on marine ply, 59 x 59cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Above: Thea Costantino, *Revenant (b)*, 2010, wax, hair and acrylic, 30 x 17 x 10 cm. Image courtesy the artist.