

**SIMON
LEE**

Art Monthly
K. Noble, 'Josephine Pryde at Chisenhale Gallery'
July - August 2011

Art

MONTHLY

JULY-AUGUST 2011 | No 348 | UK £4.40 US\$7.40

Christine Borland

Interviewed by Rosie Lesso

Hepworth's Legacy

Christopher Townsend

Adolf Loos: The Anti-Architect

Joseph Masheck

54th Venice Biennale

Anna Dezeuze • Klara Kemp-Welch



SIMON
LEE

Josephine Pryde

Chisenhale Gallery London 26 May to 10 July

Josephine Pryde's solo exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery is a commentary on teenage pregnancy. Wrapped around one corner of the gallery is a series of photographs titled

| Reviews | Exhibitions |

It's Not My Body, I-XV, 2011: desert landscapes overlaid with low-resolution MRI scans of fetuses at various stages of development. Each work also features highly saturated tones of blue, orange, red, pink and yellow, creating a Hollywood sunset vibe, the pleasure of which is at odds with the sense of alienation fostered by the barren landscape of the desert which implies a sense of hostility between the bodies pictured (the scans also feature the mother's womb, spine and other anatomical elements). Opposite hangs *Conception, I-XI, 2011*, a number of highly staged images of teenage girls reacting to a positive pregnancy test: big sad eyes, forlorn gazing and lip biting – sometimes captured while the subject is still clutching the plastic spatula with its chemical detector – that could easily form a 'real-life' story in any teen magazine. The title of the show, 'Embryos and Estate Agents: L'Art de Vivre', is also curious. 'Estate' might refer to a plot of land or a dead person's property. In conjunction with 'L'Art de Vivre' ('the art of living') and in juxtaposition to these two bodies of work 'Estate' can be read negatively and vice versa, as the body becomes a site of disturbance.

While looking at the work I couldn't help thinking about my teenage years. The girls (the ones I knew about) who got pregnant at my school were from a diverse range of social backgrounds and family histories. None of those pregnancies was planned; we had all undertaken the same form of sex-education (at an all-girls school) that involved stretching condoms onto bananas, learning names and symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases and watching blurry videos about intercourse and childbirth. Quite frankly, we could have done with something much more in-depth, earlier on in life, that dealt with the complicated messy emotions that sex involves and why you might want, or not want, to experience it, rather than focusing purely upon the – implicitly – negative end results. Which brings me back to Pryde's images. The beautifully shot photographs of girls asked by Pryde to pose for the camera, performing their reaction to pregnancy, put forth a form of contrived emotion that is pure surface, while the hyper-real colour abstracting the deserts-cum-fetuses makes anything remotely human look positively alien. To me, this – coupled with the title's emphasis on property ownership in reference to one's body – brought back the sense of worry I felt at school, where sex was inevitably coupled with fear.

I have seen a number of artworks during the past month that deal with the subject of motherhood, among them Mary Kelly's seminal *Post Partum Document, 1973-79*, and Tracey Emin's film *How It Feels, 1996*. Kelly created a set of rules according to which she might document the development of her child, measuring the changes in his habits through inspections of soiled nappy liners and recordings of his sounds and behaviour. Emin's video chronicles what happened to her when she fell unexpectedly pregnant, having been told earlier in her life that this would be very unlikely due to the effects

Josephine Pryde
Conception 2011

of a sexually transmitted disease she had contracted. The male doctor she saw informed her that she would make a great mother and refused to sign the abortion papers, which forced the artist to undergo a traumatic, late-stage termination. Each of these works deals with a highly personal experience, yet one that most women would identify with in some way. I cannot say that Pryde's works do the same. Of course art is not meant to just document experience (and neither of these do merely that), but Pryde's exhibition is on the one hand trying too hard to mimic reality (the girls) and, on the other, trying too hard to abstract it (the landscapes).

The recent trailer for the film *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn, Part 1*, which has been developed from the teen vampire series, depicts the consummation of the marriage between a vampire and a teenage girl, culminating with a photograph of the girl looking mournfully in a mirror, revealing her pregnant stomach. This is an age-old saga with a twist, yet the message is the same: do something 'bad' and you will pay for it. Pryde's intentions may have been to question the choices one makes over one's body, yet for me these images – the staged glossy feel of the girls and the aestheticised interior/exterior clash of the landscapes – put forth a similar negative message. ■

KATHY NOBLE is a writer and curator at Tate Modern.