

REA BURTON THE FARM



The Farm speaks to a New Zealand that might never have existed, but which is affectively insisted upon by vested interests. It's a pastiche (as much as all painting in contemporary conditions of sign-saturation is pastiche) of the gothic/pastoral which, through reference to Terry Richardson, speaks to the lechery of certain economic relations on which New Zealand's prosperity has historically been made.

New Zealand gothic, New Zealand pastoral.

To what extent are these euphemisms for a specific brand of antipodean sexuality? Stemming perhaps from a repressed (latent) eroticism inherent to agricultural/farming practices, repressed maybe for being superfluous affective charges in what's essentially the wholesome generator of this country's signature capital. By 'wholesome' is of course meant a code of conduct relative to gross national profit, behaviours which passively endorse those abstracted transactional values underpinning a mechanic 'milking' of the land for all its natural (profitable) sustenance. 'Wholesome' being the cornerstone of nationalism, in as much as citizens are expected to conduct themselves in alignment with 'best practice' as per the economic objectives of the country's leadership, objectives which in turn are globalised and subsequently (and commonly) experienced as arbitrary and imposing.

A culture-war.

And what is that war over? The fat of the land.

A ritual harvest which disrupts the seasonal wheel of patterned (and sustainable) consumption and imposes violent efficiencies to gather produce en masse, even outside its bio-spherically designated appearances.. The right to massive consumption, the right to culling and neutering (see Burton's goat castration) where market forces see fit. Burton renders these mechanical violences as internal to the pastoral even while the pastoral polices its own aesthetic borders with Jane Campion, with Peter Jackson, with number-eight-wire and dusky prairies shot in high resolution for the overseas traveller. Through these paintings the pastoral emerges as a gloss over necropolitics, as a hyper-real sheen disguising the impending ruin wrought by consumption-as-contagion.

In this way these paintings speculate on a cancelled future which has already seen concerns for sustainable farming explore alternatives like micro-livestock (bugs), which would bring the rural sector (as it exists now) to a close, forcing its workers to up-skill or languish in financial obscurity. This of course would not happen without a fundamental shift in our national identity, which currently

orbits the pastoral with a fetishising malaise, doing so not simply by assembling affects of nature-as-currency but also by imbuing the capital that flows across pastoral economies with specific sexed and gendered characteristics, establishing templates for 'kiwi' genders and rural eroticisms: the farmer's wife as homely and fair, the milk-maiden, the virility of the farmer himself as the central nucleus of this order of gendered labor etc.

Burton explores this in blending herself into Terry Richardson's iconic *Barnyard Slut*, in conjunction with the other works (which again pointedly include a castration scene) illustrating this socialising of the rural as erotic, utopian even; not utopian in the living but in the pitch, the affective gilding by which pastoral economies package themselves as nationally desirable or at the very least essential.

Among other things these works channel a discomfort around the position of art itself in relation to the pastoral economies of agriculture and livestock, least of those discomforts being the culturally fetishised partitioning of the pastoral/provincial and the urban, and within this distribution the mundane daily violences of farming which distantly supply the economic ground for metropolitan mobilities. Even while the labours of the farm bind city workers to these sites in totalising ways, psychic chasms are dug between the realms of farm and city which cannot be crossed without massive transcendent effort and despite the global nervous system of media valorising (flaunting) the pleasure of the urban versus the abject (and abjectly romanticised) rural.

In light of this Burton as *Barnyard Slut* also depicts a (guilty) funnelling of economic resources from the farm into the seemingly bottomless maws of the creative classes, an extraction which vampirizes the pastoral in as much as the metropole denies the rural any of its benefits (such as an alleged class-mobility), which the urban exclusively affords those proficient in its performative demands. A failure or refusal to perform in the metropole is of course associated with philistinism, which places Art outside itself, its externality reinforced by the 'sluttish' extractions of the educated and/or informed. It's a surreal graphic of real economic situations and cultural violences, speaking to the formation of classes tethered to specific labours and environments, and a militancy inherent to 'high-brow' cultural consumption that stakes a tribalist claim to affluent urbanity (while necessarily alienating the labour on which it stands).

There of course exist parallels between rural beasts of burden and extractions from workers themselves, parallels which don't just cross over from cow to farmer but extend beyond the aesthetically militated perimeter of the pastoral into the affluent mobility of city and everything in-between. It's a graphic descriptor of labour extractions widely, Burton's painting in which she's transmogrified as a literal cow-girl riffing on our animality as workers, with just a hint of sexuality. This playful resonance of sex is presumably Burton's comment on the fetishisation of certain labours over others, perhaps performing a guilty defacing of herself as artist for inhabiting a stratified cultural sector.

Beyond art, pastorally upheld labour includes rugby which ties into New Zealand-ness as much as, and potentially more than, dairy farming, and definitely makes a more overt pitch regarding a specifically 'kiwi' virility. Between rugby and dairy-farming the grizzled male stands tall, surveying the land; both treading greened (painted) pastures, both flexing their given rights to insemination of readily available females, both carrying the nationalistic jouissance of our proud exports and generating subject-hood from economic utility. Rugby athletes, our other beasts of burden carrying nationhood where our sustainable farming practice falls short of Tourism NZ's mostly fabricated portraiture. Perhaps we should be milking them instead.

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