



Ethlyn, 2005

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# Yvonne Todd: Creamy Psychology

## About the Artist

Yvonne Todd was born in 1973, in Takapuna, Auckland. She studied commercial photography at Unitec in the mid-1990s, and completed her BFA at Elam School of Fine Arts in 2001. Her final-year Elam submission, *Asthma & Eczema*, won her the inaugural Walters Prize in 2002. Her work has been showcased in numerous exhibitions, nationally and internationally, including *Mixed-Up Childhood* (2005), *High Tide* (2006), *Unnerved* (2010), the 2010 Sydney Biennale, and the 2014 Edinburgh Festival.

## About the Exhibition

Yvonne Todd makes portraits, landscapes, and still lifes using the language of commercial photography. She is known for creating portraits of female characters who seem to suffer from some malaise, explicit or implicit. Sourced from reality, literature, and her imagination, Todd's cast includes tragic heiresses, modest Christians, anorexics, and cosmeticians. Todd's portraits are highly styled, using make-up, wigs, costumes, even false teeth. Todd is interested "in the way costumes are tied to history, the way they carry character and narrative connotations". She scours the Internet to purchase costumes (some previously owned by celebrities, including Whitney Houston and Liza Minnelli).

Todd uses professional and non-professional models, including family, friends, and herself. Sometimes she photographs people as they really are; for instance, the uniformed cosmeticians in *Bellevue* and the vegans (including herself) in *Ethical Minorities (Vegans)*. Todd often creates series where similar types are presented in a similar format.

Todd works from ideas that she collects in her visual diary. She shoots in a studio with a large-format camera, before digital post-production. Her images recreate the looks and effects of commercial studio portraits and product shots. Commercial photography has evolved to convey slick mainstream messages but instead of creating a sense of perfection, Todd's images are always off kilter. Her still lifes look like catalogue shots for unlikely things: scrunchies, inhalers, driftwood. "I'm interested in turning the objects I photograph into useless, meaningless merchandise and presenting them as if they belong in advertisements or product catalogues."

Todd's works mix fantasy and reality, drawing on experiences from her formative years. While they reflect the realities of growing-up in the suburbs, they also contain elements of escapism, with nods to the pulp fiction of Jacqueline Susann, the teen fiction of *Sweet Valley High*, and the high style of TV soap operas like *Dynasty*. Todd's work exemplifies the suburban gothic, a genre concerned with strangeness lurking behind benign suburban façades. This genre is associated with films like *The Stepford Wives* and *Blue Velvet*, with Gregory Crewdson's photography, and with Virginia Andrews's novel *Flowers in the Attic*.

*Creamy Psychology* contains over 150 Todd photographs and two videos. It also includes vintage designer gowns from her collection (which feature in her photographs), her sketchbooks, and work by other artists she admires, including Diane Arbus and Bernd and Hilla Becher.

## Further Information

Visit the City Gallery website for exhibition information  
<http://citygallery.org.nz/exhibitions/yvonne-todd-creamy-psychology>

Read the exhibition catalogue  
*Yvonne Todd: Creamy Psychology* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014).

Read about the exhibition in *Art News New Zealand*  
<http://www.artnews.co.nz/summer-2014-profile/>

## Key Terms

**Portrait:** a picture of a person.

**Landscape:** a picture of a place.

**Still life:** a picture of things.

**Psychology:** the study of the human mind and its functions; a person's mental characteristics or attitude.

**Constructed Photography:** the practice of fabricating or constructing the subject of a photograph, as opposed to candid or documentary photography. Constructed photography often emphasises artifice: lighting, staging, and styling.

## Related Photographers

**Diane Arbus** (USA, 1923 – 71) is known for her black-and-white shots of outcasts and misfits. She utilised photography's ability to reveal the gap "between what you want people to know about you and what you can't help people knowing about you". Two Arbus photographs are included in the exhibition, as part of a selection of work by other photographers Todd admires.

**Peter Peryer** (New Zealand, b.1941) made his name in the 1970s with his moody, psychologically loaded portraits.

**Cindy Sherman** (USA, b.1954) photographs herself with wigs, costumes, make-up, prosthetics, and props to create characters. Her images show the influence of movies, television, magazines, and art history.

**Tomoko Sawada** (Japan, b.1977) creates characters using costume, make-up, and digital manipulation. She explores Japanese stereotypes, incarnating herself as multiple schoolgirls or multiple potential wives.

## Cross-Curricular Activities

### Sets and Subsets

*Social Studies, Maths, and Visual Art*

Todd often creates series with similar characters, sometimes surveying members of distinctive groups. Taking your class as a set, think about the many subsets that exist within it. Find out which groups people identify with: the clubs, teams, and tribes they belong to, their likes and dislikes, and issues that are important to them. Can you find any unexpected common ground between them? Discuss how it feels to be included or excluded from a group. Record the subsets of your class. Research how a designer might show this information in an appealing way. Create interesting infographics to present your data, in either drawn or constructed form. Check out this website for inspiration:  
<http://www.handmadevisuals.com/>

### Still-Life Portrait

*Visual Art and English*

Choose three objects that a person could wear or carry. Take a photograph of these props, thinking about how composition and lighting affect the mood of your picture. Give your photograph to three classmates and ask them to describe the person the objects might belong to. Display your photograph alongside the descriptions.

### Secret Life of Minor Characters

*Visual Art and English*

Yvonne Todd's portraits are often inspired by minor characters in novels. Choose a favourite novel and flesh out one of the minor characters by constructing a portrait photograph of them, using props and costume to describe their personality.