

**Kristin Headlam: Public Park**  
**Charles Nodrum Gallery, 2 – 20 March, 1999**



Melbourne's public parks have recently become a pilgrimage destination for wedding photographers as a detour between the church ceremony and the forthcoming reception. Laid put in a formal European tradition and frequently featuring an historic building, the gardens easily lend themselves to the romantic nature of wedding photography. The parties and couples are loosely posed in groups reminiscent of Watteau-esque *fêtes galantes* and outdoor conversation pieces by Gainsborough and Devis. The very pageantry of the event is a subconscious homage to the fairy tale wedding of the Princess of Wales. The resulting image is often one of nostalgia for (and pertinence to) a distant aristocratic past, for both the garden layout and wedding dresses stem from 19<sup>th</sup>-century designs suited to the tastes of a wealthy aristocratic elite.

Kristin Headlam's paintings do not strive to present formal wedding portraits but snapshots of the groups caught off-guard at informal moments. The reality pierces through an idyllic escapism of wedding photography, as the artist points to incongruities of the scene and invites viewers to question and discuss the traditional and the accepted. Headlam points out what the voyeuristic eye of a camera extracts most of all – the aesthetic and social anachronism of a wedding picture as an institution. She explores the roles played by the participants in this pageant and delves into the subconscious meaning of their part in the ritual.

Her paintings are not recorded statements but open-ended questions of visual experiences. Why does the bride appear so detached, mysterious, cold and unattainable, like an iceberg floating on the waves of voluminous skirts and clouds of tulle? Why do the bridesmaids shift the sexual focus onto themselves by the tactile sensuality of exposed shoulders and plunging necklines? Why is the groom rarely to be seen next to the bride outside the formal picture, and why is his gleaming leer at once triumphant and predatory? And why does the main erotic chemistry of the occasion take place not between the bride and the groom, but between the bride and the wedding photographer?

The current exhibition in itself is curiously, in a way, a marriage of the artist's two predominant genres - landscape and portraiture. The figures are drawn with a high degree of individual characterisation and psychological penetration. The garden landscapes, though now more fully lit and peopled, retain the mysterious and erotic appeal of the earlier series. Headlam draws parallels between the artifice of life and the artifice of nature. The traditional wedding photograph is compared to the layout of public parks – both strive for a high degree of informality, checked by human control. The nature's beauty – whether the gothic austerity of tree trunks or the rococo lushness of exuberant flowerbeds – complements flamboyant outfits of the wedding party. Its majestic silence creates a perfect backdrop for the characters of this play.