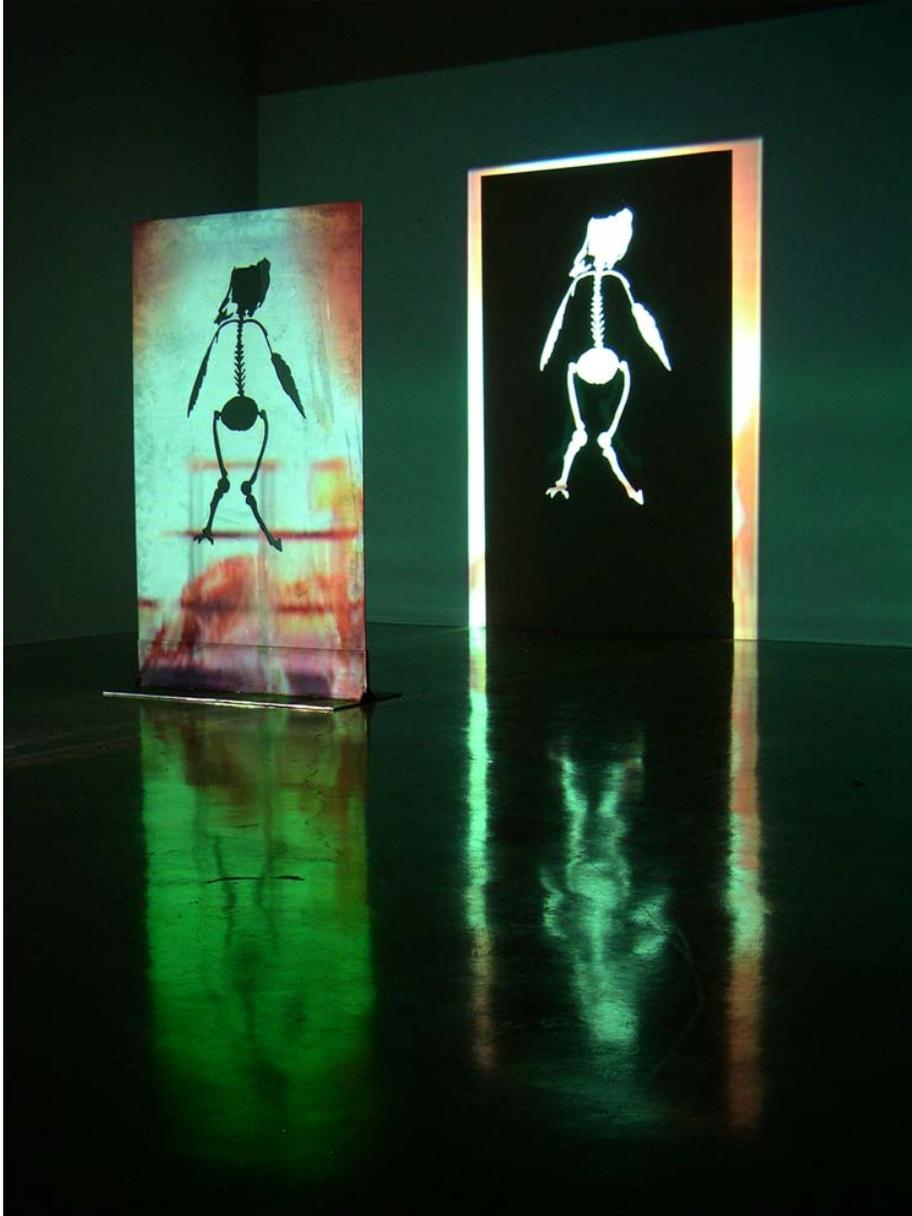


# Princess Mysteries



DEBORAH FORBES 2003-05

Questions asked by Joanne Marion, Curator of Art, Medicine Hat Museum and Art Gallery for the pamphlet accompanying *Princess Mysteries*, MHMAG December 2003 – January 2004:

*Who are the 'princesses' and what does your particular selection of little girls allow you to address?*

The three 'princesses' I am using are the Infanta Margarita from the 17<sup>th</sup> century painting by Diego de Silva Velasquez; tabloid images of the murdered child beauty pageant princess, JonBenet Ramsay; and the Kandahar girl - a little Muslim girl from a news photo from the war in Afghanistan. I have been working with the Infanta Margarita since 1999 and have previously completed two bodies of work with her at the centres (*Infanta Project: Series I and II*).



I researched the 'princess' in fairy tales, myth, legends and folktales trying to find the earliest version of each story as well as versions and adaptations occurring in different cultural traditions. The 'princess' in myth and legend is usually "as beautiful as she is good," is often very clever, and is able to make her way through numerous trials and tests to ultimately take her rightful and exalted place as a powerful and full human being. She is sometimes saved by the prince, sometimes saves the prince, sometimes assists the prince in an essential way but usually makes it through the trials on the merit of her own wits. This idea of 'princess' is a cross-cultural, cross-historical theme. It exists at the same time, in fact, as females have been kept in positions of arrested power. How do these two positions exist together? Why do our stories tell us one thing and our actions show another?

Interestingly, in 20<sup>th</sup> century movies and television, portrayals of princesses have been as much weaker characters than in historical fairy tale and myth - more needy of external rescue, much more dependent on physical beauty and an innocuous kind of goodness. In a century in which women have been working to regain their power, one has to ask why our stories would work to erode this? I had also been reading an early 20<sup>th</sup> century criminology textbook, *System der Kriminalistik*, in which the author, Hans Gross, gives importance in an investigation not to the lie, but the "motive for the lie." (Gross, 1904)

When I started to work with the Infanta, it was with an iconic image of 'princess' that has endured and influenced for 350 years. It continues into the present in Disney movies and even the disquieting world of child beauty pageants. Early in my work with the Infanta, I would see JonBenet Ramsay's face projected onto the face of the Infanta and I knew that eventually they would have to merge in some way.



Jon Benet meets the Infanta

Durafilm transparency

47" x 36"



### **JonBenet meets the Infanta**

Durafilm transparency     47" x 36"

Installation shot; Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre, Medicine Hat, Alberta. November 2005.

(Relationship of transparency to wall)



The Kandahar girl came more recently; as soon as I saw that news photo, I knew that she was the third sister princess.

I used the fire images with just a suggestion of the steel farthingale from *Infanta Project; Series II* as a backdrop to integrate the *Kandahar Princess* with one of her sisters.

I had been reading Azar Nafisi's, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and in doing so was starting to contemplate the similarities rather than differences between girls in Islamic countries and girls growing up in the West.



Transparency relationship to wall



Kandahar Princess Durafilm transparency  
47' x 24" 2004

*What is the importance of the girls' costume in determining identity - and the shifting/changing of those costumes by you?*

On a regular basis over many years I have asked five year olds to draw a princess. Most often they will draw a girl with long hair and a long pouffy dress. The dress, more often than not, resembles the farthingaled dress of the Infanta Margarita. The princess costume is an icon. When an icon enters the collective unconscious of a culture and sticks, it does so for reasons. The princess has been Disneyfied, entrenched in the ritual costuming of Halloween, has made its way into christening dresses, first communion dresses, flower girl dresses, party dresses, child beauty

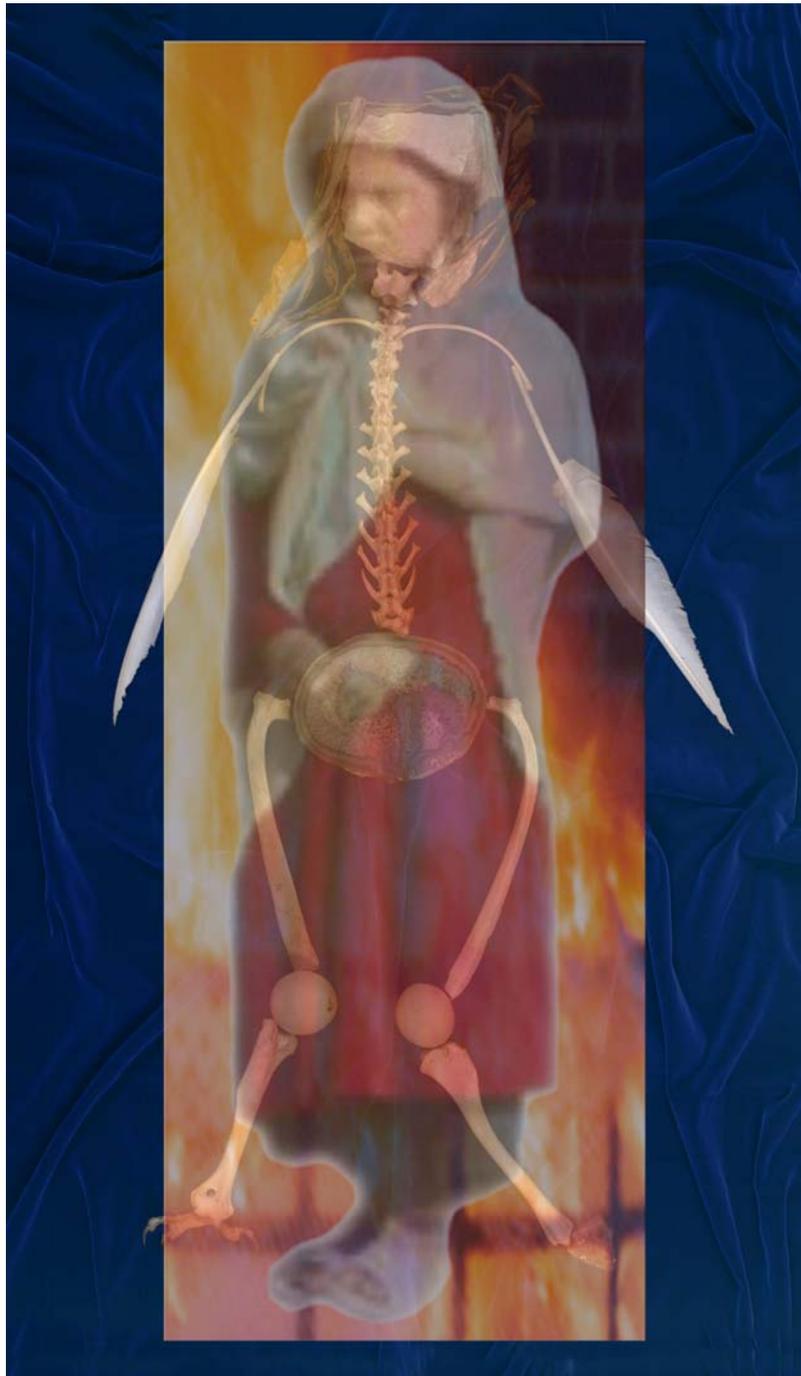
pageant gowns. Costume tells stories of its time. Why have we sworn allegiance to an archaic, restrictive princess dress for ceremonial purposes? Why is there a collective gasp of, “Ahhhhh,” when we see a little girl done up in this way? I, too, am enchanted with this image of power and innocence.



Infanta wears the Bird Dress      Durafilm transparency      47" x 36"      2004

Little girls in western and eastern cultures become “figment(s) of someone else’s imagination” (Nafisi 25). In the west we sell them girl toys that are pink, mauve and pretty, dress them as cupcakes for special occasions, and in extreme cases, market them as “preening baby geishas” (Paglia) in child beauty pageants.

In fundamentalist Islamic countries little girls are draped in yards of fabric to protect them from the “snakes and daggers of men’s gaze” (Nafisi). Before puberty they are often bagged entirely and live with severe restrictions of their freedoms.



Kandahar Princess and Little Princess Skeleton Durafilm transparency 47” x 30” 2005

These seem like two different kinds of societal behaviours but in both situations the result is “the confiscation of one individual’s life by another,” (Nafisi 33). In blurring the boundaries of the individual identities of the girls through the projections in

Princess Mysteries, I am attempting to investigate, in some manner, the general abduction of early female identity.



JonBenet and the Infanta go to Vegas in the Bird dress

Durafilm transparency

60" x 37"

2005



Infant and the Pink Tabloid Princess 47' x 36"

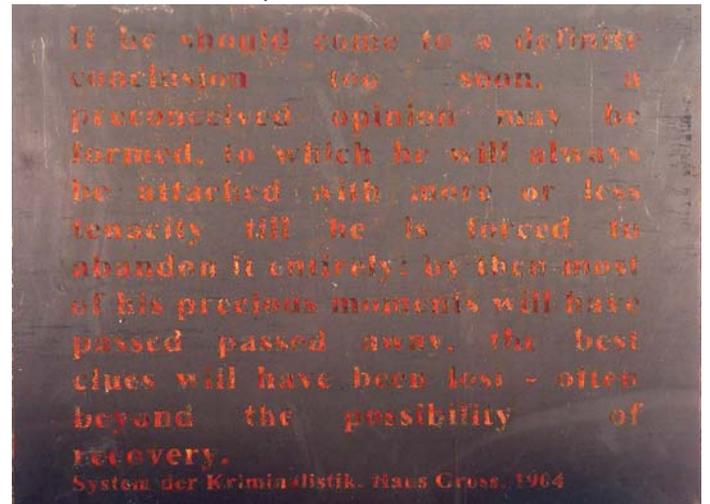
Durafilm Transparency

2005

What are some of the mysteries you refer to, both in the title and with the excerpts you have taken from the groundbreaking 1904 treatise on forensic investigation by Hans Gross, *System der Kriminalistik*?

In the *Infanta Project: Series I and II* the physical processes of time, transformation, decomposition, and alteration of matter ran alongside the historical and literary investigation of ideas. For these reasons I was entranced by Hans Gross' writing about criminal investigation in *System der Kriminalistik*, a late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> century criminal investigations textbook. The process he describes speaks so clearly to how I puzzle through my work. He writes of the investigation of physical evidence, conceptual matters, and the dangers of bias and presumptive conclusions. The quotations from Gross that I have used in the rusted steel text plaques in *Princess Mysteries*, address the condition of investigator/scientist/artist as observer; they entreat one to hold off coming to presumptive conclusions – to look not at the lie but to look at the “the motive for the lie.” By suspending my judgements and allowing myself to follow rather than lead investigations in my work, I end up working with the questions and ideas with which I need to work. The work is not a polemic.

The text in the rust-etched, raw steel text panels that lie on the floor beneath the projections are from *System der Kriminalistik*, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century criminal investigations handbook. The text panels are used to accentuate the process of the work as *investigation of evidence* and to help one to resist the temptation to presumptive conclusion.



Text panel  
2004                      rust etched raw steel                      18"x24"

A mystery is something that enshrouds itself. Sometimes a mystery remains unsolved because of a collective will to keep it a mystery.

Some of the *Princess Mysteries*: Why do we seek to control the life power of little girls? What is the role of ideology, religion, consumerism in raising little girls? Who or what determines these girls' identities: their parents, the political and economic realities of the times, the media? Why does the mystery run so deep? How are we all complicit in it?

In *Princess Mysteries*, the ‘mysteries’ allude to the investigation of the function of the idea of the ‘princess’ in contemporary culture, to the historical underpinnings, and also to the unsolved mystery of JonBenet’s death.

*Discuss the use of projected images, and the presence of the overhead projectors themselves - what does this new approach allow you to do which prints or physical layering does not? What implications do the media have on your subject, what interpretations do they suggest to you?*

The pieces in *Princess Mysteries* are literally projections (DVD and overhead). By using these means I am able to work with visual ideas that have fluidity and flexibility but that consist only of light. The images can be reconfigured in many ways and disappear when the machines go off. Figuratively, the images are projections of "someone else's imagination." (Nafisi).



Installation shot: Princess Mysteries projection

8' x 17'

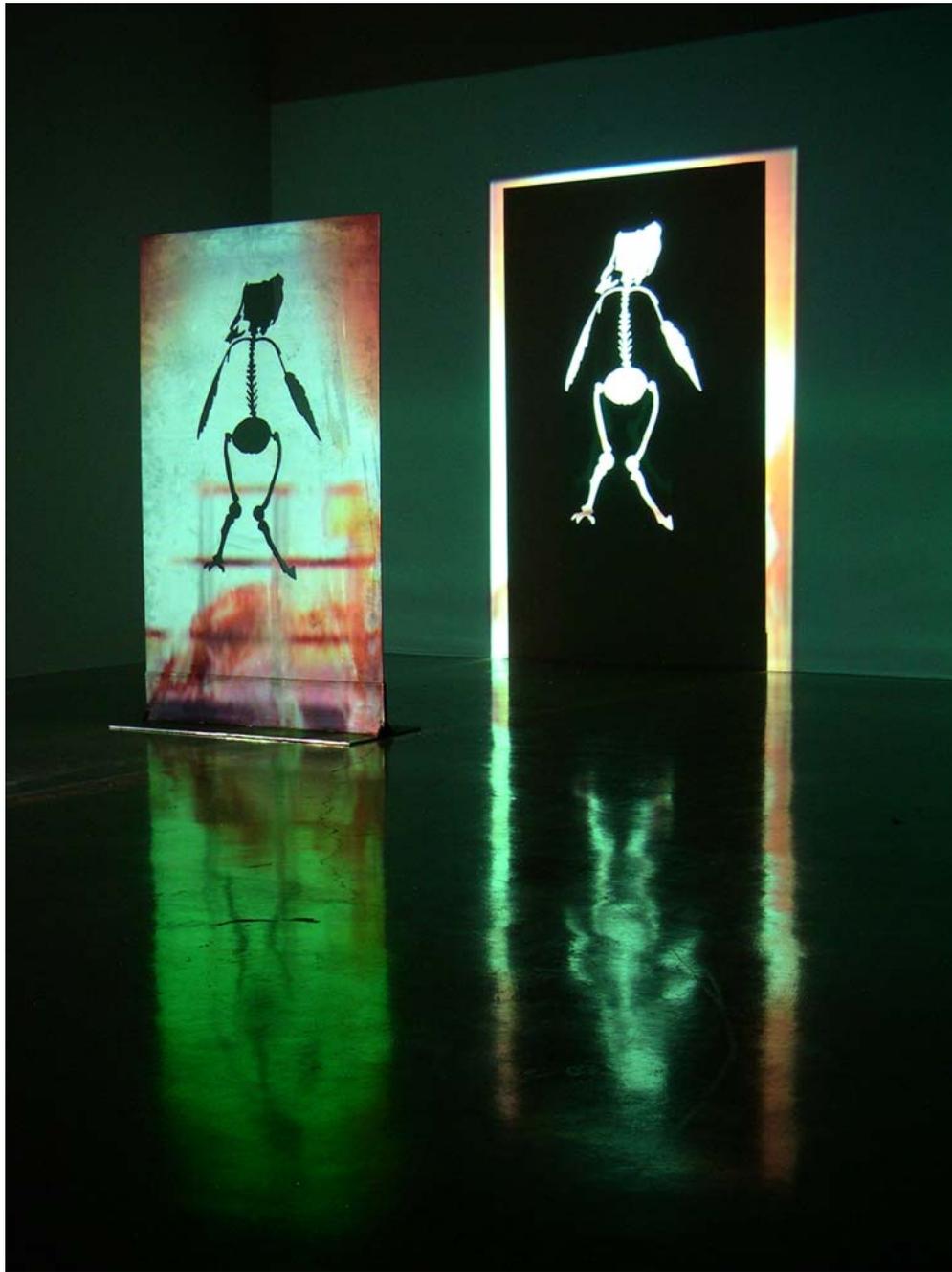
2004



Installation shot: Princess Mysteries projection 8' x 6.5' 2004

The projections endeavour to create layers of dialogue between past/present, physical evidence/metaphorical evidence, truth/lies and draw attention to the oblique layering, fusing and confusing we do with all of this in our minds.

The steel cut outs through which some of the projections are shown become generic templates for the *form* of identity; the projections become the *content*.



Installation shot; Raw steel with cutout Little Skeleton. DVD projection of fire from Infanta Project: Series II. Projection on wall behind. 6' x 3.5' 2004

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