



**FAILING, FALLING, FLYING**

REBECCA ANN HOBBS

# I'M WALKING BACKWARDS FOR CHRISTMAS

PETER SHAND

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## *I'm walking backwards for Christmas Across the Irish Sea*

A prevalent contemporary concern suggests artists create productive disturbances to accepted or assumed structures or understandings. Jan Hoet writes that artists “provoke society by offering it *absurd solutions* and not misusing art as a decorative practice ... they generate an undercurrent for creative upheavals that both question the limits of freedom and generate new, self-determined potentials out of such attitudes.”<sup>1</sup> The absurd is vital to the hopefulness inherent in this claim of an open-ended significance for art.

The classic twentieth century consideration of the absurd is Albert Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*. The condition Camus observed is the misalignment of human aspiration toward infinity and the finite nature of actual human experience. A consequence of that misalignment is that the world we inhabit and experience is indifferent to us as subjects, is unintelligible and, thereby, fundamentally meaningless. In this regard, the absurd is a condition that's present neither in us alone nor in the world as it stands but in the misregistration that results from the fact of that presence together. Hence, a feeling for the absurd is directly linked to an existential problem, which causes Camus to posit the radical and liberating task of facing that problem directly. In light of this, our futility and mortality can come to be viewed as enabling freedom and revolt against our inherent state.

Following on from this, an increased indeterminacy of art is occasioned by our engagement with or recognition of the absurdity of our situation. Absurd actions take on an independent existence that have nothing to do with their goals. Bas Jan Ader riding his bicycle into an Amsterdam canal, for example, is the sort of bathetic slapstick that both amuses and draws attention to a shared existential condition. The activity is essentially meaningless or at least it serves no singly declared purpose. This does not inhibit the speculative construction of potential meaning, of course, but in so engaging with the idea or record of the event we must be aware of the contingency or partiality of our ideas even at the very moment we utter them. Indeed, what the simple pratfall reveals is our inability to know precisely, to articulate exactly what it might mean.



*Wait*, 2009, 90 x 90 cm inkjet print

Such remarks point to the productive instability of contemporary art. I suspect that they're also helpful in an introduction of Rebecca Ann Hobbs' work to a New Zealand audience. This exhibition, *Failing, Falling, Flying* brings together a selection of photographs and moving image works drawn from the past decade. They range in examples from suites undertaken in Melbourne "Suck Roar" 2001 – 2002; California, where Hobbs<sup>2</sup> undertook graduate study at CalArts in 2003 – 2005, "Couple Physics" and "Western"; and since moving to Auckland in 2007, "Up with the Fall, Down on the Diagonal" and "To do".

*I'm walking backwards for Christmas*  
*It's the only thing for me*

In *Smash*, the kinetic force of Fiona striking the melon must surely pitch her forward, which, because she seems only to have one leg, anticipates a moment of imbalance and either a mad flailing to try to maintain an upright posture else her being carried forward and falling to the ground. The imputed consequence of her action is that it's inextricable from failure or the risk of failure. We smirk; we hold our breath. In *Spin* the fall looks already to have occurred (though the title means we can't entirely be sure Tim isn't spinning on the spot). Still, he seems to tumble backward down the zigzagging stairway, his misfortune and the risk of injury painfully apparent. We laugh; we wince.

This type of humour seems to confirm Charles Baudelaire's suggestion that "laughter comes from the idea of one's *own* superiority"<sup>3</sup>—our amusement derives from Fiona's prior and future misfortune or from Tim's pratfall. It's the type of position that renders all those home video television shows so uncomfortable. Laughter, here, is a symptom of failure. We're only laughing at others' expense, as if, in that comic relief, confirming: "Look at me, I'm not falling. I would never be so silly or suffer such misfortune." Only we are and we do, of course. So, to the extent that these works do disassemble the physical comedy of a given situation, there's a different pitch to them. We can recognise ourselves in them, witness in them our own vulnerabilities to our own failings.<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein, a complementary comedic strain in the works is a gentle ribaldry, a stylisation of the dirty joke. Works such as *Complex Social Groups*, *A Pseudofemale Fish* or *90 Degrees* seem almost to rely on an adolescent humour. Hobbs dances with the wolfhound in an echo of a romantic couple; the visual punning of the fish Hobbs holds up, an action of deflected self-exposure; the simple gag of Adam looking up Jennifer's skirt. These poke fun at and undo sexual mores or puritanical restraint. Think of the *double entendre* or innocent smuttiness of shows



*Photoshoot, 2005, 100 x 100 cm lightjet print*

such as *Kath 'n' Kim* or *Gavin & Stacey*. It's a warm, light-hearted attitude to sex, one that reflects back at us our own peccadilloes or repressions.

The point of Hobbs' work is that the humour found here is not superior. Baudelaire described that superior aspect as the truly "satanic idea" of laughter insofar as it revealed the desire for elevation or removal from the world by those who laughed. He was, of course, himself playing with laughter (like death, like pain in childbirth) as a consequence of the Fall—these all-too-human experiences that are the consequence of humanity's knowing compact with the Serpent. He posits laughter as a point of collision between two infinities: the absolute Being of whom man has an inkling and the beasts. This is why his laughter derives from humanity's double debasement (physical and moral); why it necessarily assumes that failure in one denotes the superiority of another. Hobbs, in contradistinction, points to the shared social experience of humour; that even if we're amused by misfortune it's as much self-deprecatory as it is privileged by not being us.

There is, then, a shared sense of the inevitability, perhaps immanence, of falls or failings, just as there's the shared sense of the inevitability, perhaps promise, of flights—of ecstasy, delight or fancy. I think it pertinent, then, that Hobbs' work is devoid of irony, that it's consciously generous and sincere. It's part of how irony operates that it requires an assumed position of privilege in order to get the joke. For her, that reflects on the habit of some modes of practice to require understanding of structural codes in order for the work to be made or responded to. While hers is not the practice of an *idiot savant* (she seems to me acutely aware of the operation of those codes), she's seeking to open out her work so that engagement with it is not predicated on that kind of restricted, superior operation of educated tastes.

Achille Bonito Oliva draws a similar distinction between comedy and irony, the humour of the inferior and the superior, of the servant and the aristocrat, of the worldly and the introspective. He suggests that ironic, superior or aristocratic humour depends on an annihilation of reality and is thereby cynical, privileged and solitary. Conversely, for the servant, comedy always stems from his commerce with the world and from the system of relations that he must establish with it in order to survive. It is, in that sense, a pragmatic humour set in minimum distance to reality. Whereas princely happiness is self-referential and self-pleasing (and essentially onanistic), humour below stairs is more social; indeed, it depends on the presence of a witness to ratify its status.

Although he doesn't note the absurd explicitly, there's an echo of the conjunction of a subject and its indifferent environment in Oliva's ideas on comedy, irony and laughter. Similarly, Hobbs' work conveys a dagginess, earthiness and pragmatism that's similar to the servant's comedy. Her distinction to this position, though, is considerable inasmuch as Oliva's servant "has no time to speculate on his own identity and asks himself no questions as regards being and appearance."<sup>5</sup> Hobbs is no dissembler; she



*High*, 2006, 50 x 50 cm lightjet print

doesn't change the appearance of her work simply to suit circumstance. It is, in fact, decidedly questioning; any disconnection is just so, it's not an issue of aloofness as much as the recognition of the world's indifference.

*I've tried walking sideways  
And walking to the front*

The compositional formality of Hobbs' photographs affects a conscious distancing both of and within the work. It's absolutely clear that these are not chance encounters but structured, highly composed presentations. A consistent feature is Hobbs' concern to reveal the operation of the lens, to expose the apparatus as part of the engagement with the work.

She returns, constantly, to a highly schematised pictorial conceit of successive planes. The majority of her compositions are explicitly frontal in relation to the subject's disposition and are composed so as to emphasise a series of pictorial planes in the fore-, middle- and background. In a number of works the far distance is blockaded, by architectural or natural features (*Flight Using the Mouth, A Pseudofemale Fish, 90 Degrees*) or darkness (*Vomit, Tethered Horse*). Diagonals tend to occur across a pictorial plane (*Fix, High, Wait*) though where they do establish depth they're invariably oblique and broken into zigzag forms that, again, push the composition forward rather than establish clear depth (*Drunk Power Poles, Bbbounce, Go*). These continually reinforce the flat plane of the photographic object, drawing attention back to the surface of the work as a presentation rather than alluding to or creating the illusion of a representation.

This is made explicit in the video *Tumbleweeds*, where the figures lying on the ground roll left to right across the pictorial plane—always on the transversals as opposed to the orthogonals. Such choreography of the work heightens an apprehension of its planar conceptualisation. The rolling bodies positioned at distinct intervals in the flat landscape create a series of clear horizontal vectors that at once play with the in/out depth of field of the *mise-en-scène* and draw attention back to the flat plane of the screen on which it's seen.

That consciousness of decision-making is heightened at the moments Hobbs chooses explicitly to refer to the camera as apparatus. The inclusion of the cord for the remote shutter (*Complex Social Groups, A Pseudofemale Fish, Vomit*), for example, draws attention the activity being undertaken, makes plain the staging of the event. It's also a feature of works where the operation of the camera rather than the technical machinery is made explicit. Compositional exactitude is a reflection of this inasmuch as it points to an awareness of methodology that redoubles attention to the constructed nature of the works. A simple example is the inversion of the island in *Over Easy*.

A more complex iteration of this point is in the complete, singular encircling of Madou in *Ab-round*. Here, Hobbs' concern to reveal the operation of the camera is apparent in her attentiveness to composition and is extended by the medium-paced, even movement of the apparatus around him. Crucially, there's no attempt to make whole that circle, to seal the looping in a way that would alternatively discombobulate or amaze by having no beginning or end. Rather, the clear tracking of the dolly around the figure draws attention not only to him but more so to the camera's use and purpose—as a tool of recording.

One of the consequences of Hobbs' stylistic precision is that it reminds you of an established pair of similes: the camera as weapon or phallus. In either case, there's a deliberate exposure of that concern in Hobbs' practice. In *Ab-round*, Madou's at the bull's-eye of a stalking apparatus. The range of inferences concomitant with that form of gaze shift beyond voyeurism (his containment in the aural world of Burning Spear's "Travelling" makes him seem unaware of the encircling device) to desire or threat of violence—either of which would wrest him from the reverie of his condition into some form of tussle.

A more explicit example, as the title makes plain, is *Photoshoot*. Here, Mario falls back onto the air-bed lain on the desert ground in a gentle parody of the unlucky recipient of a gunslinger's attention. More than echo the hundreds of contrived falls of the Western, however, Hobbs has simplified the composition and revealed any artifice so carefully hidden in the photograph's most obvious referent. This is no narrative, Mario elicits no sympathy, there's no conflict resolved or consequence dependent on this event. He simply falls back onto the mattress laid out to cushion this very fall.

The flatness couldn't be further from Yves Klein's famous photomontage, *Leap into the Void*, 1960. In this work, Klein leaps from the eaves of a building into a street. The world seems oblivious to his action (the cyclist on the other side of the road is unaware of the artist's daring and sails calmly on) suggesting the fortuitousness that the event should be captured. Klein's expression, of bliss it seems, might be taken for the joy of Icarus moments before his foolhardiness undoes his father's handiwork and he plummets to the ground. What the work doesn't reveal are the mats or tarp held by instructors at the judo school he attended that cushioned Klein's fall or the many practice leaps that were made into the lead-up to this one.

Hobbs' practice sets out consciously to display the constructs of its own making. She's not representing falls or failings, slapstick or comedy events but presenting them. Hence the importance placed on revealing the lens and its operation. It's a revelation that renders ambiguous the image's relationships to subject, artist, viewer or projector. In each situation, the specificity of the presentation indicates that the camera is the causative factor.



*Smash*, 2003, 50 x 50 cm lightjet print

*But people just look at me  
And say: "It's a publicity stunt"*

Sisyphus, former King of Corinth, was condemned to the Abode of the Accursed. There he was fated to spend eternity rolling a massive boulder up a mountain that, on reaching the summit, would always tumble back down the base of the slope whence he would follow it and recommence his allotted task over and over and over again. The brutality of his sentence is underscored by Homer when describing Odysseus' vision of ghosts seen during his journey to the Underworld.<sup>6</sup> In this narrative, the punishments of the condemned (Ixion, Tantalus, Sisyphus and others) all register inescapable, perpetual despair; all appear as futile, excessive punishments that satisfy the cruel hearts of the gods.

Sisyphus is Camus' absurd hero not because he succumbs to his disproportionate penalty but because he reflects upon it, comes to know the extent of his fate and, thereby, gain lucidity. He accepts his situation wholly, clearly—without irony, without an expectation of exterior meaning, without superiority to the demands of the task. The opportunity for clarity becomes available in the return, the period that balances every laborious exertion, when all the exhaustive effort comes to nought as the rock just tumbles back down the slope. Camus determines that the repeated hour when Sisyphus follows the boulder, trudging back to the foot of the mountain, serves as a breathing space, a period as sure and as unremitting as the torture. An hour, he says, of consciousness. Against the will of the punishing gods, Sisyphus is thus able to attain knowledge of the whole extent of his condition, which, in its very absurdity, offers him the chance of scornful victory.

In its way, the myth serves as a prescient metaphor for art making. If, as for Hobbs, the making is somehow unconscious, repetitive, driven, the pauses either side (prior: the establishing of conditions for the making of the work; subsequent: the consideration of the results, their implications, their potentialities) afford the same opportunities for lucidity and insight. This, after all, is what underpins the precision of her work's absurdist character—these are not merely quirky or kooky photographs, the artist has considerable clarity of the simplistically didactic meaning for art she's refuting. As noted with respect to Oliva, hers is not the comedy of the unquestioning servant even if it might share its proximity to the world. This does not render it wholly contained in the manner of the aristocrat, though. Rather, she deploys self-referentiality to signal the ambiguities of her images, to intervene in an understood system of both performative and art events.

"Creation," Camus remarked, "is the great mime."<sup>7</sup> Hobbs' dumbshows similarly examine and enrich the finite world of human experience. Hers are works not concerned with a desire to explain or solve but, their failing, falling and flying openly



*Fix*, 2009, 90 x 90 cm inkjet print

acknowledged, to experience and describe. She embraces, it seems to me, the charming, the generous and the silly,<sup>8</sup> embraces the unruly possibilities of the absurd. What this does for a practice is that it signals, very clearly, a renunciation of the closed circuit of declamatory or singular thought.

Inasmuch as Hobbs' work seems to be akin to a repeated attempt to get closer to her subjects, to connect with them, it's a practice of continual failure. The distancing mechanisms of the camera or image construction maintain a coolness, a restraint, a formality that simultaneously heightens the off-kilter absurdity of her work. This renders them teetering on the verge of catastrophe, as if were she to succeed in her attempt it would be akin to Sisyphus' rock being secured at the summit—she'd be stuffed.

Like Sisyphus looking back over his shoulder at the falling rock, glancing back over his life, the suites of unrelated actions presented in these photographs and video works remind us of the wholly human character of all that is human. And this is where our attempts are invaluable to us. What might Icarus have said? "Look at me, dad! I'm flying! Flying!"

*So I'm walking backwards for Christmas  
To prove that I love you.<sup>9</sup>*

1. Jan Hoet, Forward to *Ad Absurdum: Energies of the Absurd from Modernism Till Today*, Marta Herford and Städtische Galerie Nordhorn, 2008, pp. 12–17; p. 14–15.
2. This isn't an example of essayist's formality, the artist is known to her friends as Hobbs or Hobbsy, not by her Christian name.
3. Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter" (1855), *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (Trans. and Ed. Jonathan Mayne), Phaidon, London, 1964, pp. 147–165; p. 152.
4. Conversely, I can't help but think that even if the stuntman's fall in *High* might elicit a laugh, any catastrophe that befell the workmen in *Fix* wouldn't be amusing in the slightest. This, I suspect, is partly because they are not complicit in the deliberate staging of these scenarios. Any harm to them is simply a tragic chance occurrence, rather than an idea purposefully presented.
5. Achile Bonita Oliva, *The Ideology of the Traitor: Art, Manner and Mannerism* (1976), Electa, Milan, 1987; p. 102.
6. Homer, *The Odyssey* (Trans. Robert Fagles): Viking, New York, 1996, Book 11, ll.681 fol.
7. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Hamish Hamilton, London, 1955; p. 78.
8. See Dave Hickey "Frivolity and Uncion" (*Art issues*, Spring 1996) "So, I'll tell you what I would like. I would like some bad-acting and wrong-thinking. I would like to see some art that is courageously silly and frivolous, that cannot be construed as anything else." *Air Guitar*, Art issues Press, Los Angeles, 1997, pp. 199 – 209; p. 209.
9. Imperfectly remembered lyrics of Spike Milligan's "I'm walking backwards for Christmas", 1956.



*Bbbounce*, 2007, 50 x 50 cm lightjet print

EDUCATION

- 2005  
Master of Fine Arts, California Institute of the Arts,  
Valencia, Los Angeles, USA.  
2002  
Bachelor of Fine Arts, with honors, VCA,  
Melbourne, Australia.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2010  
*Ah-round*, Monte Vista, Los Angeles, USA.  
2009  
*To Do*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.  
*To Do*, Johnston Gallery, Perth, Australia.  
2007  
*Up With the Fall, Down on the Diagonal*, Stills,  
Sydney, Australia.  
*Up With the Fall, Down on the Diagonal*, Sutton,  
Melbourne, Australia.  
2006  
*Rebecca Ann Hobbs*, Johnston Gallery, Perth,  
Western Australia.  
2005  
*Photoshoot*, Clubs Projects Inc, Fitzroy, Melbourne,  
Australia.  
*Photoshoot*, Mint Gallery, California Institute of  
the Arts, Valencia, Los Angeles, USA.  
2003  
*Blizzard*, TCB Art. Inc, Melbourne, Australia.  
2002  
*Suck Roar*, Center for Contemporary Photography,  
Fitzroy, Melbourne, Australia.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS//SCREENINGS

- 2010  
*Hijacked 2: Australia/Germany*, Australian Centre  
for Photography, Sydney, Australia.  
2009  
*Photography Sell-out*, Gus Fisher,  
Auckland, New Zealand.  
*International Photography*, Gow Langsford,  
Auckland, New Zealand.  
2008  
*The MGA Collection: Quiet Earth*, Monash Gallery  
of Art, Melbourne, Australia.  
*Down to Earth*, Academy Gallery, Launceston,  
Tasmania, Australia.  
2007  
*Portal in a Storm*, rm103,  
Auckland, New Zealand.  
*Vertigo*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts,  
Perth, Australia.  
*Perfect For Every Occasion*, Heide Museum of  
Modern Art, Bulleen, Australia.

2006

- Royal Alumni*, Enjoy Public Art Gallery,  
Wellington, New Zealand.  
*Light Sensitive*, National Gallery of Victoria,  
Melbourne, Australia.  
*In Cold Light*, Centre for Contemporary  
Photography, Melbourne, Australia.  
2005  
*We Are All Animals*, La Trobe University Visual  
Arts Centre Gallery, Bendigo, Australia.  
*Awkward Silences*, Plimsoll Gallery, Tasmanian  
School of Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.  
*No Heroics Please*, Redcat Cinema,  
Los Angeles, USA.  
*Supersonic*, LA Design Center, Los Angeles, USA.  
*Shipping and Receiving*, The Armory, Pasadena,  
Los Angeles, USA.  
*Awkward Silences*, Linden – St Kilda Centre for  
Contemporary Arts, Melbourne, Australia.  
2004  
*Zeitgeist*, Australian Centre for Photography,  
Sydney, Australia.  
*Instinct*, Monash University Museum of Art,  
Caulfield, Melbourne, Australia.  
*Girls Who Wear Glasses*, Crazy Space, Santa  
Monica, Los Angeles, USA.  
2003  
*Prospect 1*, Contemporary Art Center of South  
Australia, Adelaide, Australia.  
*Royal Rumble*, Kings – Artist Run Space,  
Melbourne, Australia.  
*Lead Balloon*, Firstdraft Inc, Sydney, Australia.

PRESS//PUBLICATIONS//etc.

- 2010  
Mark McPherson, *Hijacked 2*, Big City Press,  
Perth, Australia.  
2009  
Mario Cresci, *Future Images*,  
Radu Stern Publisher, Italy.  
2007  
Wendy Walker, *Contemporary 2007 Annual*,  
Johnston Gallery, Perth, Australia.  
2006  
Jeff Khan, "Rebecca Ann Hobbs", *un Magazine* #6,  
Melbourne, Australia.  
2005  
Daniel Palmer, *Photogenic*, Centre For  
Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, Australia.  
2004  
Mario Garcia, "Momentos Kodak", *Celeste*, #15,  
Mexico.



*Tethered Horse*, 2004, 50 x 50 cm lightjet print  
[cover] *Flight Using the Mouth*, 2001, 50 x 50 cm inkjet print

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