

COMPLETE BURNING AWAY – NATASCHA STELLMACH

Notes to each work in the suite.

"Stellmach's works are totally engrossing and the entire show is indeed kind of magic." **The Australian, Ted Snell**

Australian artist Natascha Stellmach caused a media sensation in 2008 with the press release to her Berlin exhibition **Set me free**, in which she invited volunteers to join her in smoking the ashes of dead rock star Kurt Cobain. Stellmach never revealed how she obtained the ashes and held no interviews, instead her press release to 200 selected journalists ignited a media-hype that spread across 58 countries. Emotions were charged, sides were taken – for or against her – and questions were raised: Is it legal? Is it sacrilegious? Is it true? Is it art?

Stellmach subsequently spent two years working with the emotional avalanche – collecting, archiving, editing and working with the thousands of international responses from the public and media about the act of "smoking" the dead rockstar.

All this is interrogated and re-contextualised through a range of media. The title, *Complete Burning Away* is informed by the Sanskrit meaning of 'Nirvana', suggesting a state of mind that is free of attachment.

As an introduction to the project's history, a split-screen video, **Overture**, mashes up news broadcasts with user generated video responses sourced from online video sharing platforms.

The site-specific text work, **Whatever Happened to Painting?** envelopes visitors with 100 outrageous quotes from around the globe, naively painted by Stellmach across the gallery walls and coded according to tone: with red for angry, "Fuck art for letting this shit happen", blue for quizzical, "Only a razorblade lies between genius and madness. Who's to know which side this artist is on?" and yellow for supportive, "Questions about questions and like all good art to which there are no answers." The quotes, complete with author names or pseudonyms and their city, become a global commentary questioning the ethics and merits of Stellmach's project but only in relation to art.

Amongst this text a left-handed 1980s Stratocaster style guitar (referencing the pawn shop guitars that Cobain began with) is suspended from the ceiling. Painted black and battered, **Commodity** emphasizes the absurd nature of dead celebrity auction rankings and the associated commerce – and becomes a sacred relic.

Two hand-bound artist books highlight the public opinion in relation to the smoking of Nirvana's infamous leader. **"Rape Me"** – its title borrowed from a song Cobain wrote in 1991 – is bound in white calf leather with 300 pages of

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transcribed comments that are re-interpreted by Stellmach's students, friends and colleagues. Drawn on the whitewashed pages of Cobain's posthumously published diaries, it reinforces the artist's struggle between public and personal persona.

Another artist book, **Media Whore** is bound in red faux leather and resembles a bible. It illustrates across 440 pages of 'red-washed' news articles how the media used Stellmach's story and Cobain's image to sell products.

One 2-wall video installation, **Scream**, offers an intense sonic experience. The aforementioned guitar – suspended like a requiem bell – howls as it is played and repetitively thrashed against a wall by a hooded figure until it 'dies'.

*"The video **Scream** is a disturbing metaphor and easily associated with the image of the mythic artist hanging by a thread and beaten into a corner by the adoration of his public."*

The West Australian, Donal Fitzpatrick

Another 2-wall video installation, **Who will smoke the ashes of Kurt Cobain?** is an intimate play of monologues by six volunteers from Russia to Sweden who answered the call to smoke the ashes. They share their candid thoughts on suicide, death and commemoration and gradually the conversations overlap causing a Brechtian sense of rupture; reminding the viewer of their own self-reflection.

Cobain's early influences were punk. In the punk aesthetic, Stellmach created the **Threats**, a series of 'hate mails' that re-appropriate the most vitriolic comments she received to become bright pop works. Created from art magazine advertising, Stellmach lived with them and wore them for a period of weeks, in an act of transformation.

As a response to our desire for absolutes, the work-on-paper **Artist Statement** is a framed envelope with text imprinted onto a black wax seal and a message hidden inside.

A small silver case, **Gone**, sits reverentially in a spot-lit perspex vitrine and is on display without the infamous joint.

"Initially this project smelled like a weakly delivered act of fraud propositioned for dubious reasons. ... There is poetry here. There is razor sharp commentary here. These works expand and contract and will not be forgotten easily." **Marcus Canning, Artrage**