

# Alone

curated by Penny Cousineau-Levine



nightgowns by the subjects of *Belle de Jour* is an almost masochistic constraint of their own agency, or at the very least ambivalence with regard to feminism's hard-won freedoms. Three more recent works by Portolese seem to force the uncertainty of those subjects to its logical conclusion, and to a very loaded choice—the retreat into childhood of the young woman shown surrounded by stuffed toys in *The Puppet Master*, or the frustrated longing, denial and even torturing of the body hinted at in *Hush* and *On the Rivington Wishing*, made in 2005. Yet *The Puppet Master* may also be understood to signal protest against the childlike roles still decreed as the ideal for women, fraudulent selves that, as Stroh's works propose, may turn destructive if allowed to consume the woman who inhabits them. As she lifts herself off the floor of the forest, the woman in Portolese's *Hush* is in danger of dislodging the covering that has been placed on her face. Perhaps she rises up from a state of entrapment induced by attempts to mask and control the transgressive female body.

→ The wrapped portraits of Dawit Petros read as mummies or cocoons, but ones from which, unlike Greenslade's boys in their bedrooms, the inhabitants may never surface. One thinks of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, whose central character vows he will not leave the depths of a Harlem underground room until he can return to American life and be truly seen. Literally effaced, Petros's personages disallow skin colour or gender as possible indicators of identity. In a 2005 series entitled *Passage*, conceived as a response to the artist's move to the United States from Canada, these enshrouded portraits are grouped together with photographs of landscapes and glass vitrines. Perceiving the body "both as container and contained,"<sup>9</sup> Petros writes that the image of a glass tank full of water, into which has been blown drops of colour, is "a way to externalize this split via a display that reveals the external physical structure as well as the internal contents." It also summons up memories of the pernicious American "one-drop" theory of race. Petros's guiding premise for these triptychs was "display as both site of possibility and site of restraint," a characterization that could describe many of the spaces of self-invention and railing against control portrayed in this exhibit. Petros relates this work to the poem "Rungate Rungate" by African-American writer Robert Hayden, from which the title of the three images shown



MARISA PORTOLESE on the rivington, 2005, c-print, 76.2 x 101.6 cm.

here, *Some Go Weeping and Some Rejoicing*, is taken. The photographer says that the "seeming oppositional duality framed in [a] landscape" of snow that "both hides and reveals" mirrors for him the poem's description of slaves running from bondage and "their simultaneous feelings of exhilaration at the prospect of freedom and absolute terror at being captured." It is instructive to ponder the thought-provoking works included in *Alone* with Hayden's poignant literary image in mind.