Performing Textiles

POTTER MUSEUM OF ART

Foreword
Kelly Gellatly

The Ian Potter Museum of Art is delighted to present *Performing Textiles*, an exhibition featuring new work by students from the Victorian College of the Arts' (VCA) Honours in Fine Arts (Visual Art) program. An exhibition first for the Museum, Performing Textiles is a collaboration between the Potter and the University's Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, based on a competitive process that saw ten student artists selected to develop new work in response to a curatorial theme exploring the interconnection between textiles and performance in contemporary art. The exhibition also provided an important mentorship opportunity for the students to develop new works in and for a public museum context, and equally, key professional development in terms of the delivery of artists' talks, interviews and live performances. However, as the works and writing in this publication attest, as a project, *Performing Textiles* extended well beyond the tentative first steps of a new pedagogical initiative, resulting in a confident, brave and exciting exhibition that investigated the intersections of fabric, fashion, materiality and the body from bold new perspectives. We have been thrilled with the response the exhibition has received from within the University community and beyond and hope the professional development opportunity that the project has provided for exhibiting artists Jack Coventry, Ceardai Demelza, Hannah Gartside, Carla Milentis, Kiah Pullens, Scotty So, Tina Stefanou, Bronte Stolz, Jennifer Valender and Hayley van Ree bodes well for bright and rewarding exhibiting careers.

Performing Textiles has been curated by a powerhouse team from the Potter and VCA: Dr Cate Consandine, Senior Lecturer / Honours Coordinator and Katie Lee, Lecturer in Honours at VCA Art; and Dr Kyla McFarlane, Curator of Academic Programs (Research) and Brad Rusbridge, Assistant Curator at the Ian Potter Museum of Art and I thank them warmly for their dedication to the project and their collective work on the exhibition and this publication. Thanks is also due to Associate Professor Kate Daw, Head of the School of Art at VCA and West Space Director Amelia Wallin for their generous speeches on the opening night and to Amelia Wallin for making her talk available for inclusion in this catalogue. This publication also includes new writing by Dr Tessa Laird and Dr Edward Colless and I thank them for their insightful contributions. Thanks and acknowledgement is also due to the entire Potter team for their involvement in mentoring the students in all aspects of exhibition making and presentation, and to the Potter's Curatorial Manager Jacqueline Doughty and Dr David Sequeira, Director, Margaret Lawrence Gallery for their roles on the selection committee.

This project would not have been possible without the support of a Victorian College of the Arts Foundation Engagement Grant from the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music and the involvement of Peter Jopling AM QC, Andy Zhang and Calvin Huang who generously supported the Potter's 2019 *Inside Out* program, of which this exhibition is part. Finally, I wish to extend heartfelt congratulations to the ten exhibiting artists and express appreciation to all of the students who participated in the selection process.

Kelly Gellatly is the Director of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.

Hayley van Ree, *We are data (Cora Novoa radio edit remix)* 2019 (performance view)
digitally printed poly-cotton curtain, engraved Perspex, bench seat, stretch velvet, 280 × 220 × 220 cm

Introduction
Cate Consandine

Sparks fly when a specialisation in any field meets the surprisingly fluid resonances offered by an interdisciplinary context. In the visual arts, new forms have emerged amid conventional classifications, disciplines or genres such as painting, photography or sculpture. These have become pivotal, if not central, to contemporary art practice and our ability to reimagine what we know about art.

As a curatorial endeavour, the *Performing Textiles* exhibition created an opportunity for Honours in Fine Arts at the VCA to come together with the Ian Potter Museum of Art to converse and collaborate, and to work across cultures between art school and museum. This collaboration in turn motivated students to explore dynamic ways of working between the disciplines of textile and performance.

Performing Textiles investigates the interwoven roles of fabric, fashion and the body – as both material force and form. Exploratory and experimental, each work in the exhibition bends the categories of artistic production.

Shifting in relation to other works, a painting by Bronte Stolz collapses into its velvet surface. Hayley van Ree's performing body becomes a sculpture, then a virtual avatar. Tina Stephanou adorns a horse to fashion an instrument. Other animals are choreographed within the exhibition's landscape. Stitched together by Hannah Gartside, a shirt leaps forward, propelled by air and leopard print fabric. Performing, too, are Kiah Pullen's photographic prints, revealing images that slide between skin and drape. In a series of photographic acts, *The Goddess Dandelion* is conjured by Ceardai Demelza from readymade materials. Jack Coventry brings the sonic resonance of an acousmatic voice. Disembodied, it passes through each visitor. A pile of dirt lies close by, here Carla Milentis buries a shoe and a purse to puncture and accessorise life's tragic residue. Performers move in strange ways. Under Jennifer Valender's direction they bob and poke their tongues out while singing The Smiths' song *Ask*. Scotty So slides through the museum, performing in drag, drawing every other work into the backdrop of his show.

Folding in and out of myriad propositions, these works shift through a constellation of materials, ideas, movements and systems of thought, bringing new interpretations to the forces and forms that shape *Performing Textiles*.

Dr Cate Consandine is Senior Lecturer / Coordinator Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) (Visual Art) at the Victorian College of the Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne.

Performing Textiles opening address, Friday 16 August 2019
Amelia Wallin

I was born on Cadigal land belonging to the people of the Eora nation, so-called Sydney. I now live and work on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nations. My ancestry is English and Swedish settlers, who colonised North America and Australia. I acknowledge the privilege this ancestry affords me, namely the ability to move between lands and borders which is not granted to all people. As we meet here this evening on the shared lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, as well as any First Peoples here this evening.

I would like to congratulate the curators and all the participating artists in *Performing Textiles*. I am going to offer some remarks on this particular exhibition, as well as some personal reflections on exhibition-making more broadly.

At what moment does an artwork become an exhibition? The moment that it is encountered by a public it changes form to become the collective experience that we call an exhibition. This moment of publicness can occur in a multitude of contexts, either through the hands of the self-organised artist, or the hands of the curator.

Let's remember that this publicness can also happen in private spaces. There is a rich history of self-organised artistic activity taking place in private spaces: the club, the studio, the home. In Melbourne alone, artist-run spaces that sit between the public and private can be encountered in shopfronts, living rooms, studios, windows, office spaces, mailboxes. These socially orientated spaces of artistic production exist as alternatives to official structures. Throughout your practice, your exhibition-making may move between self-organised or institutional, the social and the sanctioned.

Tonight, we are encountering *Performing Textiles* in the museum, which is arguably the most public mode of exhibition-making. The museum is a different experience from the artist-run or self-organised space, and different again from a contemporary art space. Exhibiting in the museum, you encounter layers of institutional politics, informed by collecting practices, standardised modes of display and conservation, textual mediation, and of course the subterranean labour that threads each of these practices together.

Distinct from the museum are the spaces for contemporary art, which increasingly occupy post-industrial sites – breweries, factories, and in the case of West Space's future home at Collingwood Arts Precinct: a disused technical school. Ultimately, institutions are defined by their position: priorities, location, budgets, and blind spots.

And where does the artist fit within this? As you continue to make and exhibit, I would urge you to think about the containers which hold and contextualise your work – whose land do they occupy? Who are the people who come through that space? What are the layers of social and material history of the site, and what is

its cultural significance? Whether you are presenting an existing work, or delivering a commission, I advocate for taking charge of your work's context. Then you can choose to work with or against it.

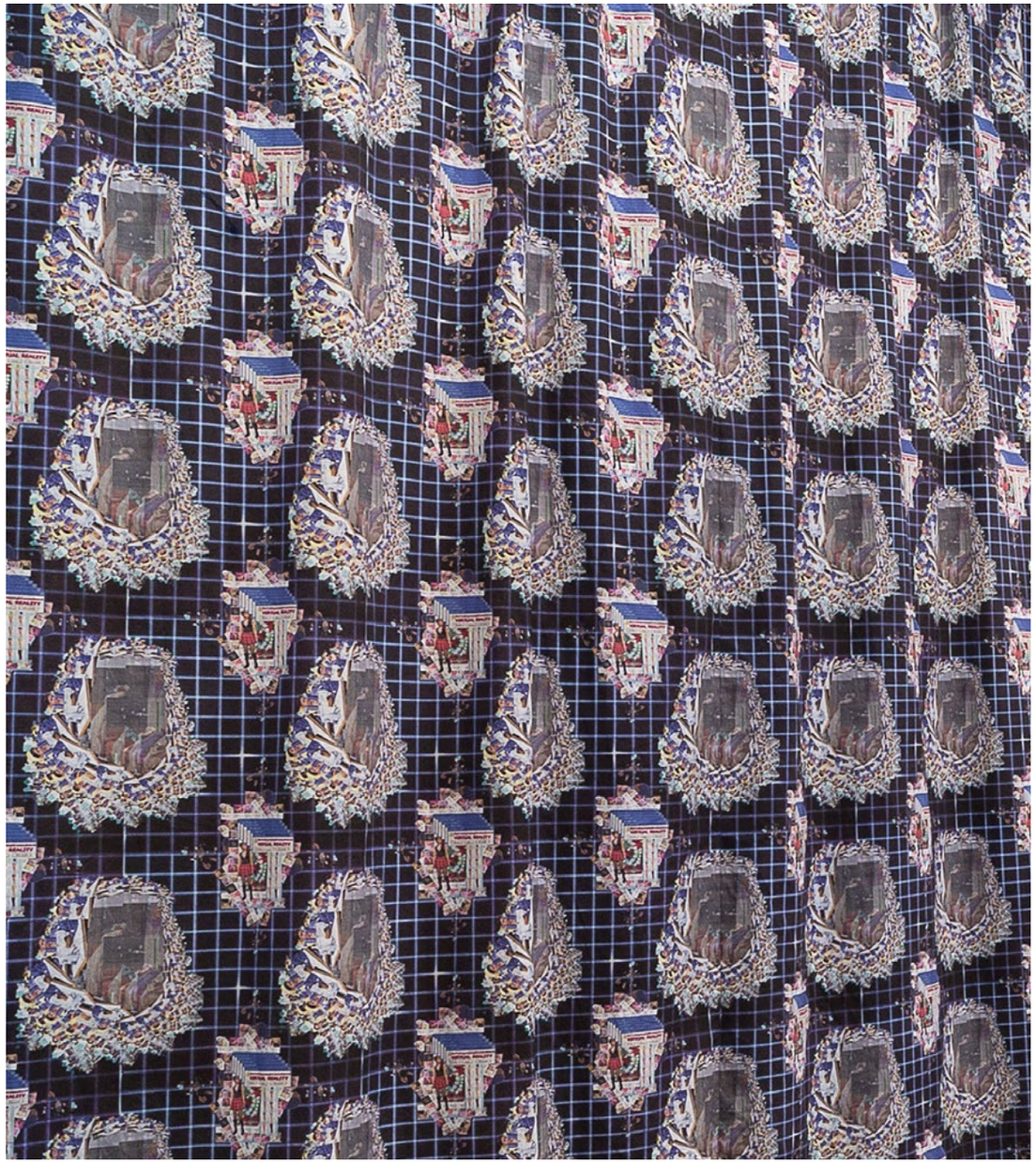
Turning back to the exhibition which surrounds us, we witness strategies of performance that are a subtle subversion of the museum experience. Even though performance is increasingly finding its way into museum programs and gallery spaces, it remains a radical encounter. Liveness remains a risk. Textiles too were also once a radical inclusion in the contemporary art museum. Contemporary textile artists gleaned materials, patterns, and colour schemes from the decorative arts, in recuperation of forms and techniques historically discredited on the basis of their 'femininity' and their 'primitivism'.

The strategies across each work ensure that the audience experience is different at each encounter. Jennifer Valender's performance *Shyness is nice* displays the shy body, the reluctant body. They sing and sway, tongues protruding and eyes covered, resisting the spectacle of performance in the museum. Textiles, costume, fabric and sound are used to signify the presence and absence of bodies across each work. The body is evoked through costume and air in Hannah Gartside's *Fall/Winter 1986*. The body is obscured in Kiah Pullens's large-scale photographs *We're all hiding some spectator behind the curtain*. The body is disguised in Ceardai Demelza's *The Goddess Dandelion*, adorned in found and made objects. The museum protocols of preservation and display are dangerously disrupted by Carla Milentis's *It would be hard to climb a willow tree* – signifiers of femininity emerge from the rubble, forcing us to contemplate the epidemic of violence against women. Almost obscenely close to this work is Bronte Stolz's *demeaning the body*. Its delicate, absorptive quality only viewable from certain angles. There is the reveal of the artist's body as prop or material in Hayley van Ree's *We are data (Cora Novoa radio edit remix)*, and the cold realisation of the human element behind the technology of our screens and our garments. There is an intimate enclosing of the audience's body in Jack Coventry's *Terwit Terwoo* where sound and story generate a sense of active listening. Sound is also a signifier of movement in Tina Stefanou's *Horse Power* – the camera at eye level, an intimate experience of the horses. Each movement gives rise to sound, while the viewer's body is motionless and transfixed. Sound is denied us in Scotty So's performance *As she floats* – played through AirPods inaudible to the audience, it positions the performer on a higher plane, in communication with what we can't hear.

In closing, I would like to turn to the radical poet and educator Fred Moten's writing on study. 'Study emerges as the collective practice of revision, in which those who study do not improve but improvise, do not develop but regenerate and degenerate.'

As artists and curators I hope we can continue to interrogate contexts, to improvise, regenerate, and to meet expectations with abandon.

Amelia Wallin is Director of West Space, Melbourne.



Hayley van Ree, *We are data (Cora Novoa radio edit remix)* 2019 (detail)
digitally printed poly-cotton curtain, engraved Perspex, bench seat, stretch velvet, 280 × 220 × 220 cm

The Bling of Life
Tessa Laird

To write about textiles seems a natural proposition, since there is a built-in relationship between *text* and *textile*, indeed it is woven into the very fabric of English and some other European languages, from the Latin *texere*, to weave. The warp and woof of fibres create webs with which we cover our nakedness. Similarly, you might say we weave with words to cover our silence. Here, then, is a weaving, of threads of words within the bounded parameters – not of a loom – but of a rectangular screen, my fingers skimming over the keys like a shuttle of wool through taught fibres. The word fabric is from the Latin *faber*, to fashion, indicating fabrication or construction, whether that be a book, a dress, or a house. We are all, after all, world-makers.

Sometimes, the word we use for textiles is the even more primordial material, which comes from *mater*: mother, the source of all *matter*. Writing about textiles reminds me that words matter, and words make matter *matter.* Words like taffeta, organza, drill, twill, all have a texture, on the tongue and the teeth, as well as to the touch. They have histories, too. Worsted. Chiffon. Hessian. Buckram. Seersucker. Fabric and language are *prima materia* – first materials. The first fabrics were animal skins, and the first peoples of this Country wrapped themselves in elaborately constructed possum skin cloaks (and still do).[1]

Language and clothing are both markers of culture, that invisible substance which supposedly sets humans apart from animals. Except that, animals have languages too, listen to Jack Coventry's *Terwit Terwoo*! Or rather, Coventry's sound work demonstrates how humans re-fashion animal language, making it human again. Similarly, we re-fashion animal skins into extra skins for the human to play-act at becoming-animal, just look at Hannah Gartside's *Fall/Winter 1986*: billowing blouses covered in animal patterns.

'Look for patterns!' Yvette Grant tells students at the VCA who must make sense of their materials, their fabrication, through words.[2] Funnily enough, pattern derives originally from *pater*, father, and you can imagine patterns scattered like seeds over the feminine principal of material, matter, *matrix* or womb. I question my desire for playing these Latinate word games, deracinated settler colonial that I am, given that roots and language have very different meanings and sources in this Country. I am attempting to find connective threads between speaking and thinking in the patriarchal, settler colonial language, since these threads, woven together, create the very fabric of the culture we find ourselves enmeshed in. Such a cultural fabric is a performing textile, to be sure, capable by turns of wrapping, protecting, decorating, hiding, and all-out smothering. Perhaps it's time to fray some knots.[3]

And so, as I walk through *Performing Textiles*, I am also looking for patterns, for originary sources, including patterns of language, and patterns of animality. Perhaps this is a side-effect of working alongside these artists in The Stables which, in their former role as the Victoria Police Mounted Branch stables, once housed real horses, like the ones in Tina Stefanou's single-channel video *Horse Power*. The Stables is a heritage listed building and maintains many of the architectural details of its former life, including iron rings in the walls for attaching to a horse's bridle. By contrast, Stefanou's retired equines are free in rolling fields, and bedecked with much more glamorous attire: woven networks of bells and keys. They have become carnivalesque creatures, bearing the noisy garb of fools and jesters. Stefanou, whose *prima materia* is voice, rejuvenates her tired co-composers with sound. She walks among them singing, while they trot and shake their jingling cargo.

While Stefanou is interested in multispecies interactions and expanded notions of both composition and care, her costumed horses also reignite imagery of chain mail – that most combative of fabrics, a meshwork of metal. But what kind of battle might Stefanou be inciting these horses to fight with her, or on her behalf? It is, perhaps, the battle against age's invisibility, the slipping into silence and obscurity of the elderly of all species. Stefanou's horses, well past their prime, are garbed in what the ecofeminist philosopher Deborah Bird Rose called 'the bling of life', or 'shimmer'. It is a way of saying yes to life, even in old age and especially in the so-called Anthropocene, when, as Rose says, 'everything you love is being trashed'.[4]

There is much 'bling' on display in *Performing Textiles*, not least in Hannah Gartside's inclusion of electroplated high-heels at the base of her sculpture *Fall/Winter 1986*. Kiah Pullens's two wall-sized photographs made of two long panels each, *We're all hiding some spectator behind the curtain*, shimmer too, but here with indeterminacy as much as glamour. The subject matter of the left-hand print appears to be the detail of a human body: shoulders, arm or back, bisected by a deep blue sequined choker, with a fragment of hair and a string of pearls appearing in the top right corner (these pearls, oddly, reappear in the flesh in Carla Milentis's installation *It would be hard to climb a willow tree*). Each of Pullens's long panels is further segmented by a horizontal line running across the middle of the image. These gaps and slippages are part of the process of producing such large c-type prints by hand, and a deliberate choice by the artist to eschew coherence for suggestion. We are left wondering if we're looking at a male or female body; a back or a bicep; a still from a Hollywood film from the 1950s or a studio dress-up from last week. The right-hand print is even less clear; what seems to be a glass at its base warps off the table and into a tubular, serpentine form. This sinuous shape harks back to the sequins of the left-hand print, and they in turn conjure the scales of a snake, further proof that all fabrics find their ur-form in the animal kingdom. The photographs, too, with their blown-out pixels, approach something of a scaly surface – an indeterminate field of potential, from which shapes materialise depending on what you want, or hope, to see.

Ceardai Demelza
The Goddess Dandelion 2
2019, inkjet print
110 × 110 cm, edition 1/3

There is more serpentine bling to be had in Ceardai Demelza's *The Goddess Dandelion 1–5*; garishly coloured studio shots featuring a creature with a yellow head, green leaf-like limbs, and yellow cables for roots. Against a hot-pink backdrop, this multi-modal goddess performs essential tasks such as caging a leaf-blower and pouring a cup of tea. Shiny snakes entwine themselves around other props, including: a rake for sweeping leaves more effectively (and without the noise and pollution); a cage that houses the leaf-blower; and the goddess herself, in a love clinch. Cheap, mass-produced fabrics are enlisted here to perform in new and unexpected ways, telling stories that not only transcend gender stereotypes, but species boundaries. The humble dandelion might be experienced as a weed by some, but is here reimagined as a goddess, not a multi-armed Hindu deity, but a tentacular (if rather day-glo) Chthonian, an under-world entity that Donna Haraway would be happy to tangle with in her efforts to subvert the sky-god, 'prick tale' narrative of heroes. Haraway's tongue-in-cheek riposte to the human-centered Anthropocene is the Chthulucene, a kind of eco-feminist mud-wrestle spectacular, featuring cephalopods, spiders and worms,[5] or the 'Earth-bound' as Bruno Latour would put it.[6] I doubt Milentis had Latour in mind with her huge pile of earth, which bears the signs of a glamorous life in ruins: a wine glass, jewellery, fancy purse, and another pair of high heels peek out from the rubble. Rather than an earnest homage to the Earth Art of the seventies, *It would be hard to climb a willow tree* reads as some kind of parable of Gaian revenge – a planet in rebellion against her parasites. I like to imagine there are hundreds of happy, healthy worms wriggling around in this wreckage. As Darwin once noted, human civilisation would be impossible without the humble worm.[7] But I imagine they will also play a role in civilisation's decomposition.

Bronte Stolz, *demeaning the body* 2019 (detail), velvet, 140 × 515 cm

Coventry's *Terwit Terwoo* gives a new (old) meaning to the term 'Earth-bound', as his sound work, emanating from the space between three drops of fabric, narrates the story of Bladud the Wolf-King of England, a kind of British Icarus. In his youth, Bladud is banished for leprosy, and becomes a wild man, living with pigs. There he finds not only that rolling in mud cures his skin disease, but he learns the secrets of animal language. He returns in triumph to take the throne, but he has become vainglorious, his animal affinity leading him to think he can fly. Unlike Icarus who at least falls into the sea, Bladud literally hits a wall, not with a bang or a whimper, but an array of onomatopoeic sounds: 'woosh, awoooo, cackle, buzz, slither, croak, flapping, flap, flapped, neigh, bark, snap, yowl, clang, crinkle, creak, crack, thump, groan, rip, shriek, shrieking, belch, moaning, hacking, gargled, hack, gargle, hiccup, raspy, ringing, trickling, wail, yap, sniff, roar, purr, squeak'. Earth-bound, indeed.

Language is not something which humans possess and animals lack. As Brian Massumi puts it, 'Languaging is on a continuum, stretching all across the range of animality…' It is precisely humans' special abilities with literary language that can reintroduce them to their own 'animality', it is, according to Massumi, where human's 'take wing'.[8] This seems particularly appropriate to Bladud, who Coventry commemorates with a large white wing sewn onto the highest point of one of his fabric drops: Bladud is introduced to his ineffably animal voice at the same moment he also learns he cannot mimic a bird's flight. Nevertheless, under the duress of a fatal fall, he becomes-bird, if only vocally.

In *Fray: art + textile politics*, Julia Bryan-Wilson talks of the 'text embedded in textiles' as being 'a line that twists between illegible fibre and signifying utterance'.[9] Bladud's garbled onomatopoeia sits somewhere between the pure materiality of sound and an attempt to communicate a message. It's perhaps not by mistake that Coventry's title, and the little printed fabric birds sewn into one of the giant curtains, evoke Twitter: a space between the brazenly meaningless and the would-be meaningful. Bronte Stolz's *demeaning the body* also inhabits this space, particularly if we decouple demeaning to de-meaning. Stolz's painting or drawing methodology is simply 'sweeping fabric', literally by rubbing it up the wrong way. A blank velvet canvas becomes a reservoir of images that materialise temporarily. For now we see: a hand-shake; a toy soldier; a pair of high-heeled shoes;[10] a perfume bottle in the shape of a female torso. Do the shapes, their shadows, and their interrelationships matter? Or is it just the matter of the material itself that matters? Stolz's ur-fabric is fur, velvet as stand-in for animal plush. Never stroke a cat against the grain of its fur – that would be to go against nature, to swim upstream. Is that why Stolz's fabric is the colour of dead salmon? Or, perhaps it is puce, the colour of dried blood, named after the French word for flea. Although some catalogues show puce as a dark red-brown, others vision it as Stolz's deadening greyish-pink, the 'pinko-grey' of Caucasian skin, another space of indeterminacy.

Nowhere is fur-as-fabric, and clothing as a contemporary global capitalist update on animal skins more apparent than in Hannah Gartside's *Fall/Winter 1986*, a wall-size patchwork of mismatched leopard print scarves. Three blouses in similarly patterned fabrics have been sewn in a row into the central panel, hanging downwards, like butchered animal bodies, headless and hoof-less (or, more appropriately to leopard print, paw-less). Thanks to strategically placed fans, the hanging cloth billows and bulges, while the blouses are literally animated, filled with breath. This is how we classify animals – that which moves and breathes. Gartside's quilt is uncanny – it rewilds the gallery space and the fashion system to which it refers. Animal prints are always tasteless, always too much, and therefore, never out-of-style. They find their adherents in the Baroque, the Rococo, the camp and the kitsch; any time 'more' is not enough.

Pattern in fabric has a long and shall we say *chequered* history (well, what are puns if not patterns woven into language?). Stripes, spots and certain patterns have been treated with suspicion and even outright disdain in Western iconography. Striped or particoloured clothing has traditionally been reserved for those on the margins: beggars, prostitutes, harlequins and fools, prisoners, lepers, the list goes on. Art historian Michel Pastoureau suggests that a dislike for spots might be linked to a fear of disease, associated with 'the pustular, the scrofulous, the bubonic', and that as a result, demons were often depicted with spotted skins.[11] As for animals, 'Those with coats either striped (*tigridus*) or spotted (*maculosus*) are creatures to fear', including zebras who were assumed to be 'cruel and diabolic creatures' in the Middle Ages, and part of 'Satan's bestiary'.[12] Pastoureau notes, however, that social codes are capable of reversing themselves, such that fear can transmute into desire. Today, he says, stripes (and we might also include Gartside's leopard spots) can be seen as audacious and daring in the worlds of fashion and sport. In his enumeration of the ways stripes insinuate themselves into our contemporary lives, Pastoureau includes tents, sails, pavilions, banners, and flags, noting in particular that 'materials filled by wind' are often striped, and indeed, that striped fabric 'is never totally static; it inflates and deflates, comes to life, changes place, marks a *transitus*'.[13] I think again of Gartside's billowing spotty bodies, which mark more than the changing vagaries of contemporary fashion, rather they seem to chart the whole trajectory from animal skin to human fashion and back again, breathing in and out the contradictory story of attraction and repulsion, as well as pointing out the very *lack* of distinction between nature and culture.

Playing with language patterns is a way of performing with text, making words textile, if that was an adjective; fabric-like, a mode of fabrication.[14] Patterns, as every paranoiac knows, emerge wherever you look for them. Connective threads run through the disparate works of *Performing Textiles*: sex, art, fashion, mimesis and camouflage all shimmer. The 'bling of life' goes on, but as the Greek Fates, who are cosmic weavers, know too well, everything has a predetermined length, and this particular weaving has reached its end. Cut!

Dr Tessa Laird is an artist, writer, editor of *Art + Australia* Online and Lecturer in Critical and Theoretical Studies at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

1. See Amanda Reynolds in collaboration with Debra Couzens, Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm, *Wrapped in a possum skin cloak: the Tooloyn Koortakay collection in the National Museum of Australia*, The National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2005. Tiriki Onus, Head of the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne, has also done much towards the revitalisation of cloak making in Victoria.
2. Yvette Grant is the VCA's tireless Academic Skills specialist.
3. Julia Bryan-Wilson's *Fray: art + textile politics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2017, is a wonderful exploration of the politics enmeshed in textiles, through various textile-based art practices.
4. Deborah Bird Rose, 'Shimmer: when all you love is being trashed', in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan & Nils Bubandt (eds.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2017.
5. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2016.
6. Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: eight lectures on the new climatic regime*, Catherine Porter (trans.), Polity, Cambridge, UK, 2017.
7. Charles Darwin, *The formation of vegetable mould, through the action of worms, with observations on their habits*, Murray, London, 1904.
8. 'Language, taken to the literary limit of what it can do, gives the human all the more animal character.' Brian Massumi, 'Becoming Animal in the Literary Field', in *Animals, Animality and Literature*, Bruce Boehrer, Molly Hand, & Brian Massumi (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 2018, p. 280.
9. Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*, p. 8.
10. It is noteworthy that high-heeled shoes appear in three of the artworks that make up *Performing Textiles*. I can only wonder if Barb Bolt's famous 'Red Shoes' workshop has had a lasting imprint, or should that be footprint, on this year's Honours group? This exercise is discussed in Bolt's essay 'When is a Red Shoe not a Red Shoe? Conceptual Framing and the Consequences for the "Object" in Visual Research', in Anita Sinner, Rita L. Irwin & Jeff Adams (eds.), *Provoking the Field; International Perspectives on Visual Arts* PhDs in Education, Intellect Books, Bristol, 2019.
11. Michel Pastoureau, *The Devil's Cloth: A history of stripes and striped fabric*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001, p. 21.
12. Ibid, pp. 23-24.
13. Ibid p. 111.
14. Julia Bryan-Wilson suggests that textile can perform as a transitive verb – to *give texture*. She surmises that textiles can *give texture* to politics, and vice versa. *Fray*, p. 7.

Carla Milentis, *It would be hard to climb a willow tree* 2019 (detail)
shoes, carpet, dirt, rubble, clothing, jewellery, rubbish, 79 × 420 × 250 cm (irreg.)

Scotty So, *As she floats* 2019 (performance view)
synthetic holographic organza, performance, dimensions variable

The Thing
Edward Colless

I think you'll know this story, but let me tell it again keeping in mind that every act of storytelling is spinning a yarn from the threads of fate. Here goes. Ruling over a busy merchant town is an aristocratic ruler – known simply as the Emperor – who is said to be more interested in what he finds in his wardrobe than what goes on in his cabinet. Like the alleged 'mad' King Ludwig II of Bavaria, this Emperor is an enthusiast for art – at least the artifice of an expensive beauty embellishing the trappings of office – rather than politics or military muscle. It's a passion that gives him a reputation for vanity as well as for administrative vagueness.

With a monarch like this, the situation at court seems ripe for exploitation by anyone who can cater to the Emperor's conceit and one day two con-men arrive claiming to be weavers who can offer the Emperor an extraordinary suit. This is clothing made not just of an exceptionally fine textile but that also has a magical quality. They explain that the garment made from their precious material will be invisible to 'simpletons' or fools and, more importantly, to those fools who are 'unfit for office'. *Ah ha*, thinks the Emperor, *not only a new item for the wardrobe but also a way of discerning those cabinet ministers not capable of doing their jobs!* So the Emperor cheerfully delivers precious gold, silver and silk thread to these weavers, who discreetly pack it all away in their knapsacks and then set to work on their loom weaving … nothing.

When the Emperor visits their workshop, the weavers – now of service as tailors – delicately hold up the non-existent material for his opinion. 'The whole suit is as light as a cobweb,' they gush while fitting the Emperor, 'one might fancy one has nothing at all on when dressed in it; that, however, is the great virtue of this delicate cloth'. Sheer fabrication, we might add. *Uh oh*, thinks the Emperor who of course can't see the garments he's supposedly wearing. If it's invisible to him then perhaps he is the one 'unfit for office'. Rather than admit this, he carries on with the charade as do, of course, all his ministers and courtiers who likewise can't see any fabric but can't admit it for fear of losing their jobs. It's starting to sound like an impeachment scenario.

And so the day comes (after the con-men have courteously bid farewell and taken off with their hidden loot) for the Emperor, wearing the non-existent clothes, to parade ceremonially through the town streets with his official retinue. Like the courtiers, the townsfolk lining the streets are also seduced by the idea that it's their own stupidity or unfitness that stops them seeing the spectacular new royal outfit. They will not admit, even to themselves, that the Emperor is naked. Until a brash but innocent young boy shouts out that famous line, now the war cry of iconoclasts and whistleblowers: 'The Emperor has no clothes!' Suddenly, everyone – including the Emperor himself – sees the naked truth and understands the swindle they have been caught in. Yet, the story doesn't end on that rhetorical flourish of humbly realising they have been fooled; it goes on for another paragraph describing the display of a strange sort of courage and

obstinacy. Everyone but the boy has been hoodwinked; everyone in town knows, in a devastating irony, that they are all those very fools the weavers envisaged being 'unfit for office' – not because they couldn't see the magical textile but because of their collective disavowal of its non-existence. Despite near universal embarrassment, and amid the laughter and cat-calling, the stately procession continues. What we often don't notice at the end of the story is another bit of advice – in addition to the assertion that truth is supposedly simple and unadorned and seen by mere pointing – that the show must go on.

Hans Christian Andersen's famous fairy tale 'The Emperor's New Clothes' may have made a sly allusion to its contemporaneous nineteenth century Danish political context – the displacement of an aristocratic court with a meritocratic civil service, for instance – but the moral of the story is about art. And art, it declares, is two-faced. It's just the sort of con job that those weavers pull off: a seductive magic act believed by gullible spectators or those with a vested – so to speak – interest in the courtly world of art, and who don't want to appear stupid or 'unfit for office' in that intrigue-ridden and posturing court. But art is also, and paradoxically, the intrepid performance of that office: the merit of sovereignty enacted in, to use another famous formula, 'the willing suspension of disbelief'. In other words, the art in Andersen's fairy tale (and the artistry of it) involves both fitness (and take that word as the healthy ability to perform and being appropriately outfitted for the performance) as well as unfitness (by which we might mean literally 'unsuited': a performative display nakedly out of place, and out of the ordinary). Think of this double take also as envisioning the invisible labour of fashioning material – whether it's sweatshops in Bangladesh or the unseen labour of an artist in the studio or the study. Did you know that Karl Marx, almost like Hans Christian Andersen, explored weavers' working conditions in the opening pages of volume I of *Capital*? He argued, in an iconoclastic way, that the productive labour of the textile manufacturing industry must be recognised apart from its material embodiment in the textiles that go on the market. Or put another way, that invisible work – call it artistic in our case – deserves to be factored into the market value of the product, and not just as labour time. Ironically, the little boy in the fairy tale sees through the habituated and consensual blindness of the adults only because he cannot see the invisible labour behind an artefact. We might relish his innocent insight for its vengeance against shysters and pretentious elites, but one should champion that innocence with caution: that little boy is no friend of art.

There's another story about a Danish court that's caught in a magical intrigue, and in which art catches out a monarch 'unfit for office'. I know I'm going on, but let me tell this one too. The morose ghost of Prince Hamlet's dead father, confronting his son on the family castle's turret, claims to have been murdered by his own brother (Hamlet's uncle), who now – having fooled everyone at court – sits illegitimately on the throne. Hamlet is charged with the duty to avenge his dead father by carrying out summary justice. But Shakespeare's Hamlet is a modern hero, and although haunted by the dead father he's not driven by archaic clan loyalties. He wants legal evidence before he acts – more than just the word of the father (he wouldn't last long in Trump's Whitehouse) – and so by cunning he instructs a group of travelling players to perform a masque for the court's entertainment

which will include a scene so much like the alleged crime that it will cause his uncle to betray himself by flinching. Hamlet poetically stews that 'the play's the thing/wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King' (Act 2, scene 2, 603-604), a threatening pronouncement almost as celebrated as that of the little boy's during the Emperor's ceremonial procession. The truth will be exposed like a news flash, like breaking news: here is the real thing, unveiled in an unrehearsed response to a rehearsed work of art. (One assumes this king to have a conscience: a thing fit for a king, but not for most of our contemporary politicians). This flash of guilty flesh will be as startling as seeing the Emperor naked. But there's more to this story than meets the eye. The play within the play is Hamlet's cunning art. He is a stage manager and ghost-writer. He is in this respect the very model of a Machiavellian prince: exemplary in an effortless but calculated deportment and costume, the art of which is the self-assured spectacle of his sovereignty. The trouble is that his own conflicted conscience – stirred by self-doubt and doses of melancholy – makes him lose the plot. He is no action-man. The equally wretched Ophelia (whom he spurns, then chases, then gaslights) diagnoses her lover's complaint, pronouncing that he too is 'unfit for office':

> O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
> The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword,
> Th' expectation and rose of the fair state,
> The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
> Th' observ'd of all observers, quite, quite down!
>
> (Act 3, scene 1, 150-154)

Weaving these two stories together to take up more than half a catalogue essay may seem flagrantly indulgent, but I dare say that if you had seen them in the exhibition you'd already be visualizing the performances of Hayley van Ree, Jennifer Valender and Scotty So embroidered within the helical filaments of the Emperor's and Hamlet's fate. If you didn't see these performances, let me help you picture them.

Hayley van Ree sits naked, resolutely silent and emphatically immobile on a plush velvet bench behind a lavish drape that resembles both a stage curtain and an ad hoc screen for a changing room. As rigidly transfixed as a shop mannequin, and staring blankly into the space ahead of her, she is clad only in a sign for clothing: a transparent and barely visible glass plate about the size of shoebox lid, held in front of her with the gesture of false modesty in a classical Venus, and on which is etched the ghostly stocklist label of a couture (if *prêt-a-porter*) garment, including its retail price. We need to know about fashion in order to picture that item: as much as we disavow it, to literally see this work we are courtiers of the couturier. This glass plaque is like a gallery label for an absent or invisible object; but – like the naked catwalk models parading for a fashion house at the end of Robert Altman's movie satirising Paris fashion week, *Prêt-a-porter* – this also ironically labels and commodifies the artist's body as display fashioned sufficiently, indeed exhaustively, by the label it wears. Nothing eludes this identification. The shop mannequin has no clothes? That nudity *is* a fashionable fabrication. The etched

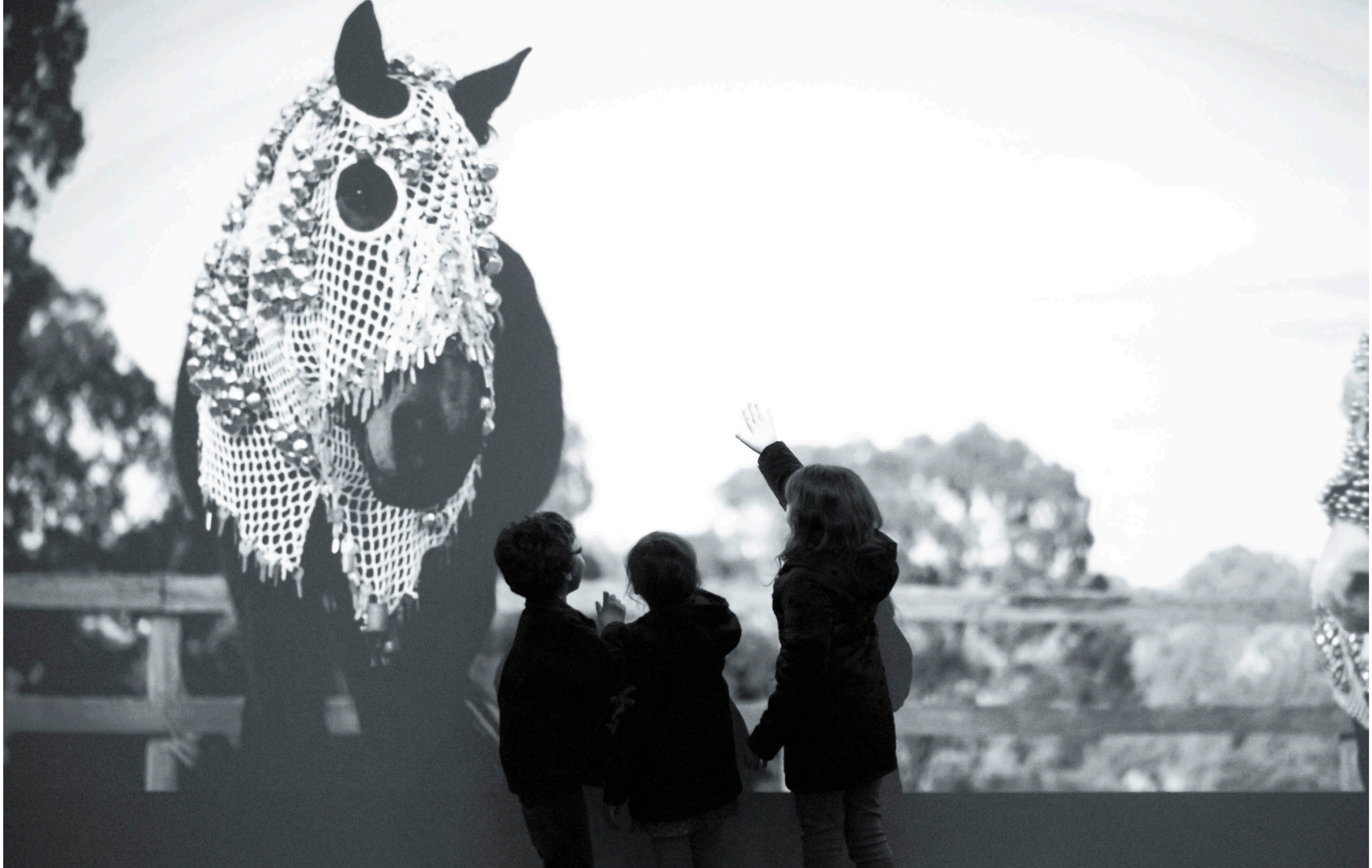
text on the label is as faintly visible as the glass itself, with the floating touch of a ghostly signature written by a finger on a frosted window pane. To read this message you have to concentrate up close, and flout the decorum invoked by the advisory warning outside the curtained zone: this exhibit contains nudity. You peer at that glass plate close up, uncomfortably or seductively close to the naked body just out of focus behind it. But just what is it that you're seeing? From one perspective the glass stands for absent clothing that dramatically highlights the naked body. But then, like the flip of an optical illusion when a duck turns into a rabbit, the body is dressed in an impenetrable, obdurate emblem of clothing: its brand name. You might say that this imaginary garment is both an ID badge – dangerously affixing its sharp edges against soft skin – and also a magical fabric 'as light as a cobweb'. The 'glass of fashion'.

In the corridor nearby, under Jennifer Valender's direction, ten anonymous figures in monochrome top to toe body-suits (outfits for use in motion-capture in cinema animation, designed specifically for erasing the particular human body they outline – the 'mould of form') spookily shuffle onto a staircase. They turn and strike gawky poses, as if assembling for a group photo of faceless and featureless gimps. Then, in an act of what seems to be coordinated self-mutilation, they each pinch the fabric in a spot where the face must be, stretch it out and with large tailor's scissors – and to the unnerving metallic swish of a guillotine blade – shear off the tip of the drawn out fabric. As the amputated cloth snaps back into place we see on each figure, with the flash of an indecent exposure, an open mouth as creepily obscene as a detachable organ on Mr Potatohead, out of which is slowly pulled a metre length of ribbon like a tapeworm being extracted from the gut. The action is reminiscent of Carolee Schneemann's famous performance *Interior Scroll* of 1975, during which, standing naked on a bare table, she pulled out a long ribbon that she had inserted in her vagina while reading the text: a letter to a critic about intuition and bodily processes, identified with female sexuality, as a source of artistic creation. Schneemann's gesture was meant as a triumphantly feminist flourish; but on this staircase, the sexuality, symbolism and politics are far more ambiguous. When these worm-like figures cut open their clothing chrysalis the image is like circumcision or the rupture of a membrane. The shears open a hole, not just for the banderole of a silent text but, after that, to allow the performers to stick their real tongues out like churlish children blowing a raspberry at the audience. The mouth is the only organ that is granted this liberty. In their body suits the performers remain effectively blind (they need to be guided onto and off the stairs) and non-gendered. Vision is displaced onto orality, but with a smothered voice. With their tongues poking they attempt to sing The Smiths' song, Ask, with its wistful plea for overcoming tongue-tied shyness in romance. They don't get very far with this. 'Shyness is nice' is the opening line. Their own tongue-tied murmuring sounds plaintive and pathetic, as if those tongues have in fact been pulled right out of their mouths.

Not speechless so much as mute, Scotty So sweeps in slow motion down this same staircase to almost float throughout the rooms of the exhibition in an ornately palatial white gown, that swishes and rustles its starched and stiffened trail a metre or two behind him. The effect is imperial and imperious (his eyes do not deign to meet his audience) – while also gravity-less or vaporous – as he silently mouths, as if in a private ritual or hypnotic trance, the words of a Chinese operatic diva playing into his Bluetooth earpiece from a mobile device wedged into his ceremonial fan. 'Th'observ'd of all observers', this fantasy figure and the subject of the opera whispering in his ear is the goddess Lady Chang'e, identified with the Chinese mid-autumn lunar festival. Her fairy tale, or at least one of them, goes like this. Chang'e and her husband Houyi were immortal monarchs in heaven, when the ten sons of another immortal, the Jade Emperor, decided to overthrow the cosmic order and turned themselves into suns to scorch the earth. Being (like Apollo) a great archer Houyi shot nine of them down, killing them and leaving in place the one we know. The Jade Emperor was not too happy about this, and his vengeance for the death of his children was to banish Huoyi and Chang'e from heaven. Down on earth and now mortal, Houyi undertakes an epic quest to find an elixir of immortality so he and Chang'e can return to heaven. He successfully wins this and secures it in a box, although for some unfathomable reason telling Chang'e not to open it. Bad move. Like Pandora with her box, Chang'e gives in to curiosity, opens the box and then in a panic about being discovered she swallows the potion. Transfigured, she floats up, leaving her earthbound lover behind, until landing on the moon, which becomes her eternal abode. While the design of Scotty So's outfit is modelled on the iconic swirls of Lady Chang'e's robes in mid-air, his performance is more what I imagine would be the routine of her lonely exile on the moon: drifting but captivated like a sleepwalker on a roof, plaintively whispering to her lost love. This Lady Chang'e is a ghost rather than a goddess and, as an emblem of art, she haunts the gallery.

The play's the thing, said Hamlet. That contrivance, that nondescript device, that show which – like my own storytelling and weaving of invisible texts – must go on.

Dr Edward Colless is Senior Lecturer in Art at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne and editor of *Art + Australia*.



Hannah Gartside utilises discarded, found and collected textiles to create installations, sculptures and costumes that explore feminism and material culture, and present ways of experiencing the profound sensuality and subjectivity of our relationship to the material world.

Hannah Gartside
born London 1987; lives and works Melbourne

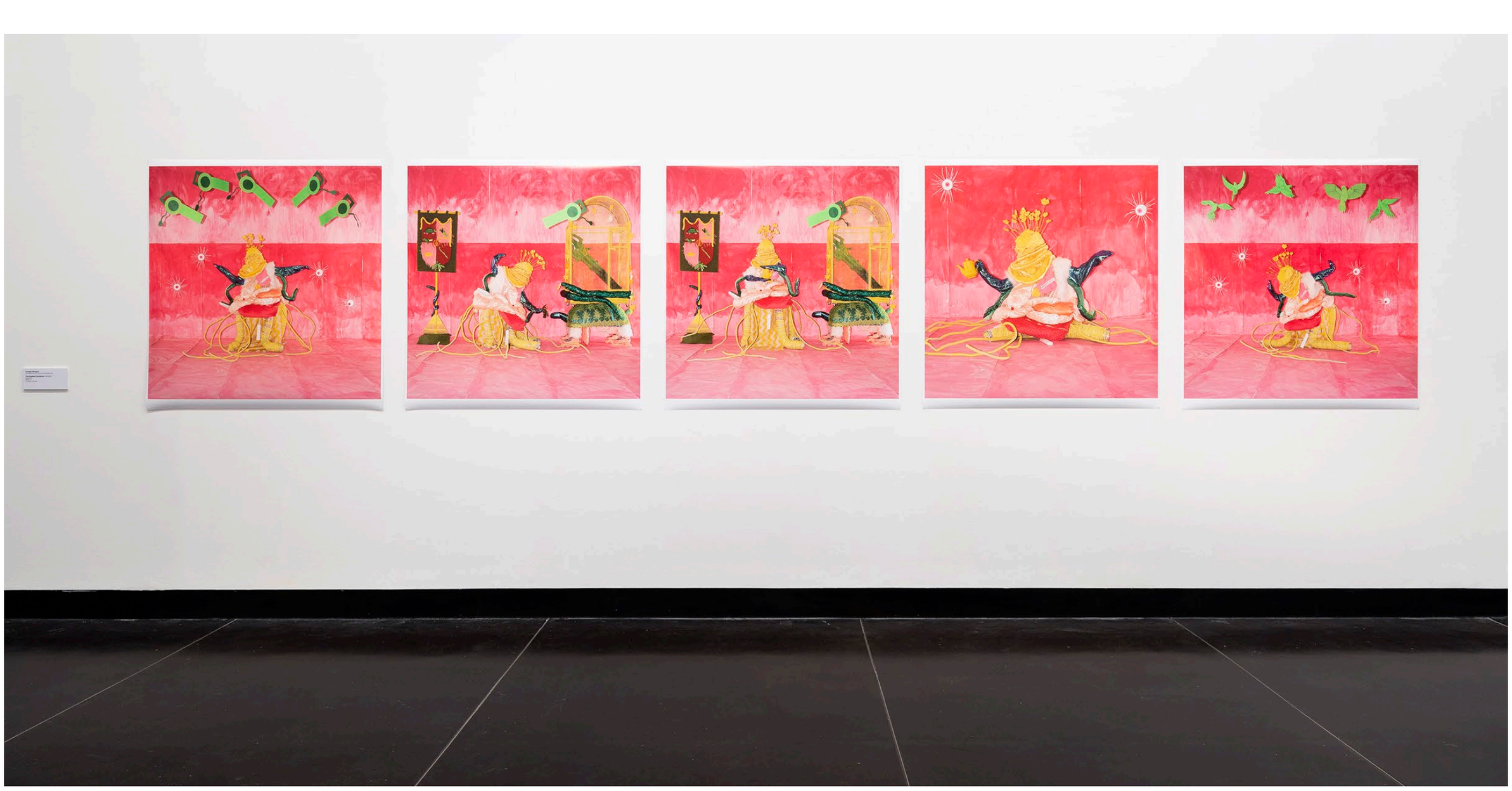
Fall/Winter 1986 2018
found scarves, blouses and necklaces; electroplated found shoes and bag; thread, fans
516 × 252 × 105 cm

My stories come from an eco-feminist perspective that focuses on the importance of myth when trying to understand world issues. While serious, the comical and absurd are always present in my work. Life-sized installations that resemble theatrical scenes composed through a collaging of found objects, soft sculpture, craft and paper culminate in a ‘painting’ that uses photography. All work is done in camera, not through digital manipulation. The resultant image plays with perceptions of the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’ as an echo of the concepts that inform the work.

The Goddess Dandelion, a mythological character, part middle-aged woman, part snake, part dandelion, part electricity, uses her power to draw in and capture problematic leaf blowers. With the aid of her companion, the turtle-blader, she uses her magical healing powers to transform the leaf blowers into beautiful birds.

Ceardai Demelza
born Melbourne 1970; lives and works Melbourne

The Goddess Dandelion 4 2019
inkjet print
110 × 110 cm
edition 1/3



Ceardai Demelza
The Goddess Dandelion 1–5 2019
inkjet prints
110 × 110 cm (each)
edition 1/3

The seduction of the image pulls me deep into the frame, where an assemblage of organised colours lie. Connected by touch, these colours form still, surreal shapes. These are the proportions of inertia that surround my photographic process.

With a desire to distort reality, I play with the traditions of photography. While honouring traditional photographic techniques and languages, my work interlaces unconscious urges of pleasure, fulfillment and of fervour through an automative and intuitive process. Enhancing emotional states through the use of imagery, my photographic installations evolve through a delicate performance in complete darkness. Embodied printing techniques and fluid movements unfold as a darkroom dance, as I push the boundaries of the photographic medium, where elusive qualities are formed through the complex layering of historical and cultural imagery.

Kiah Pullens
born Melbourne 1990; lives and works Melbourne

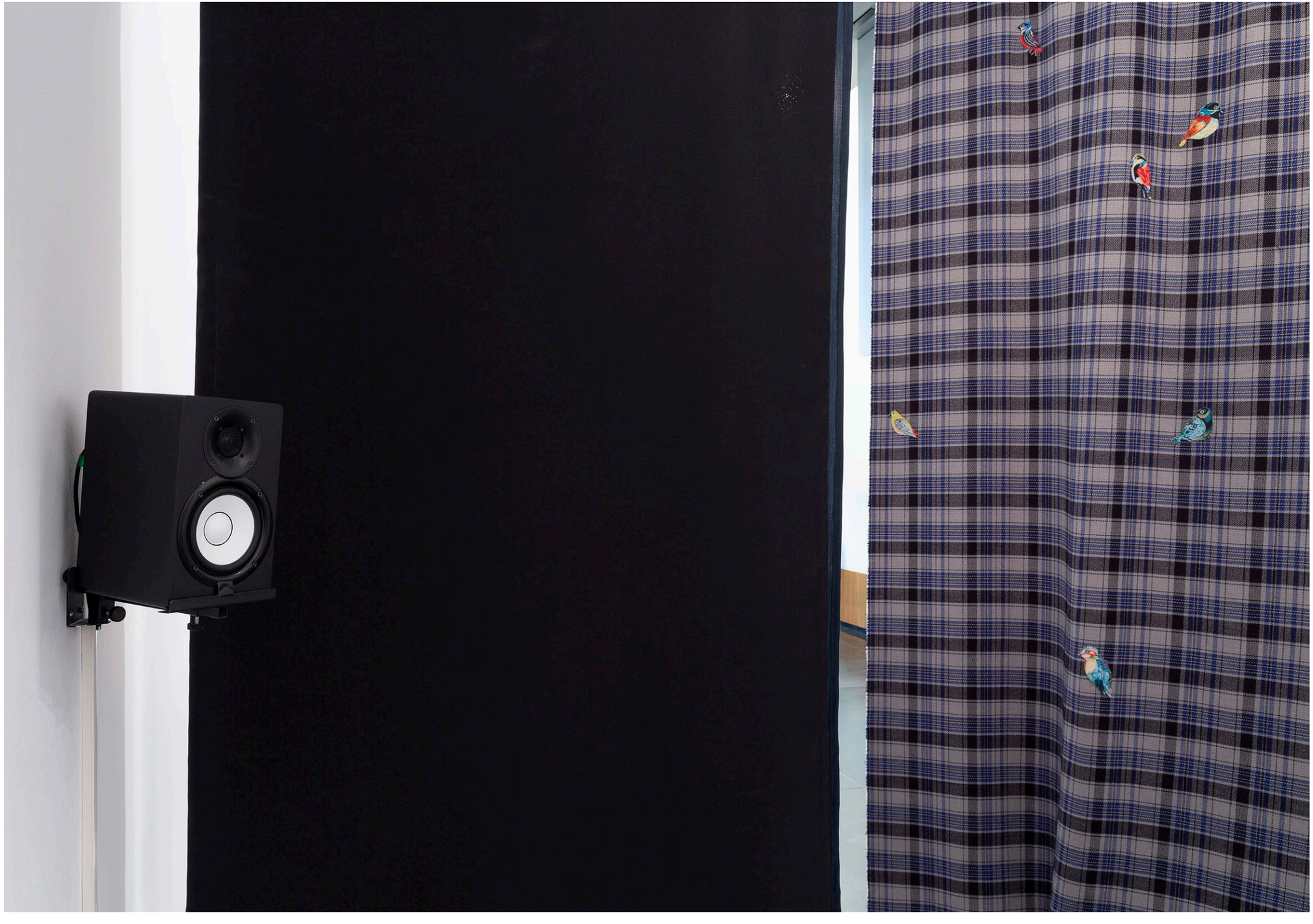
We're all hiding some spectator behind the curtain 2019
c-type photographs
4 panels, each 400 × 100 cm

In my mixed-media installations, films and conceptual artworks I approach a range of subjects in a multi-layered way; physically incorporating the viewer and holding firm to the idea of function following form. By applying a poetic and often metaphorical language to themes of time and memory, I am activating the tradition of memory art into a daily practice.

This personal follow-up and revival of a past tradition is important to me as an act of meditation. By contesting the division between the realm of memory and the realm of experience, I seek to generate tranquil poetic images and spaces that leave traces; balancing on the edge of recognition and alienation.

Jack Coventry
born Melbourne 1996; lives and works Melbourne

Terwit Terwoo 2019
two-channel sound, speakers, textile, wood, metal
duration 8 minutes 27 seconds, dimensions variable



Hayley van Ree practices both as an artist and a fashion stylist/designer – and for the artist these practices intermingle. Van Ree has created her most recent works whilst imagining living in a future entirely within a digital virtual reality through a conceptual lens of fashion. The artist considers the loss or re-creation of tactility and the vast possibilities of character construction that VR avatars could create. Van Ree uses her frustrations, observations, beliefs, hopes and fears of our current socio-political and technological state to inspire production. The artist uses these to cartographically make her own imagined future projections. Through these processes van Ree is continually finding interesting conceptual crossovers between technology, science, religion and (fashion) retail whilst drawing on the new understandings they create.

Hayley van Ree
born Albury, New South Wales 1993; lives and works Melbourne

We are data (Cora Novoa radio edit remix) 2019
digitally printed poly-cotton curtain, engraved Perspex, bench seat, stretch velvet
280 × 220 × 220 cm

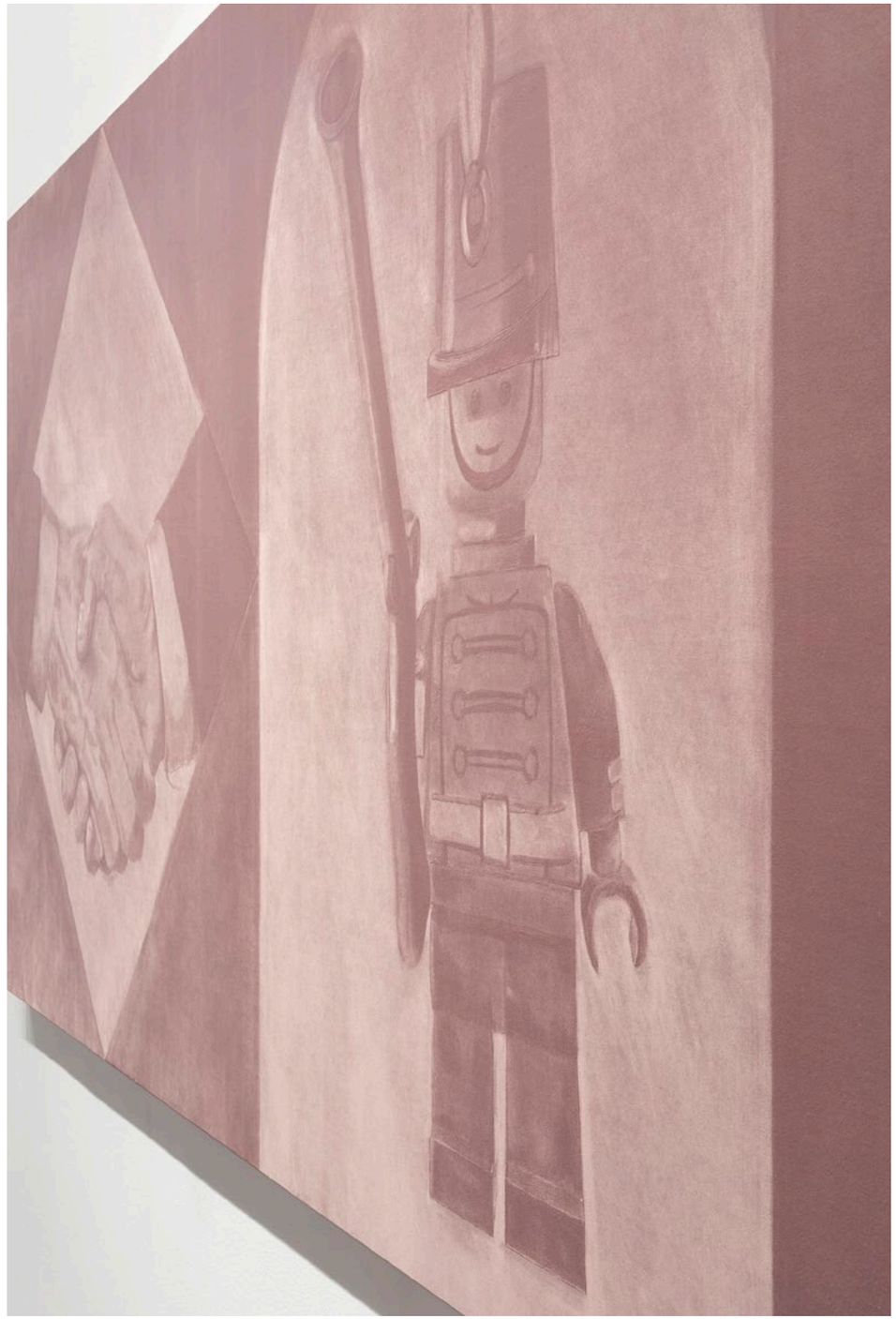
Hayley van Ree
It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism 2019
engraved glass, LED lights
51.5 × 230 × 10.2 cm

Bronte Stolz

Bronte Stolz is a visual artist operating predominantly within the expanded field of painting. His work revolves around objects in the world; recontextualised to unveil and recode cultural mythologies from contemporary life. Stolz is interested in organising new discourses that destabilise artefacts, revealing the plasticity of identity in favour of a new subjectivity. For Bronte, ideology is fundamental to the coding process of self, and worldview, which unconsciously determines notions of community and more significantly, alterity.

Bronte Stolz
born Adelaide 1991; lives and works Melbourne

demeaning the body 2019 (detail)
velvet
140 × 515 cm



Carla Milentis's multidisciplinary practice predominately exists within the realms of sculpture and installation, and incorporates found objects and base materials to explore a range of experiences through an autoethnographical language. The objects and materials that exist within her work reflect moments that are imbued with a sense of lust, longing, aspiration, failure and shame. These allusions to personal narrative are employed in order to discuss existing social, political and gender structures.

Carla Milentis
born Melbourne 1994; lives and works Melbourne

It would be hard to climb a willow tree 2019 (detail)
shoes, carpet, dirt, rubble, clothing, jewellery, rubbish
79 × 420 × 250 cm (irreg.)

She started to float into the sky because of the overdose.

Although he wanted to shoot her in order to prevent her from floating further, he could not bear to aim the arrow at her.

She kept on floating until she landed on the moon.

Scotty So
born Hong Kong 1995; lives and works Melbourne

As she floats 2019 (performance view)
synthetic holographic organza, performance
dimensions variable












Shyness is nice is a performance and video work that centres around the art of being tongue-tied. The performers, with faces and bodies concealed, draw strips of fabric from an incision at the mouth. With tongues protruding, the group form a choir to sing a rendition of *Ask* by The Smiths. The work is a playful response to social critique and performance anxiety.

Jennifer Valender
born Auckland, New Zealand 1985; lives and works Melbourne

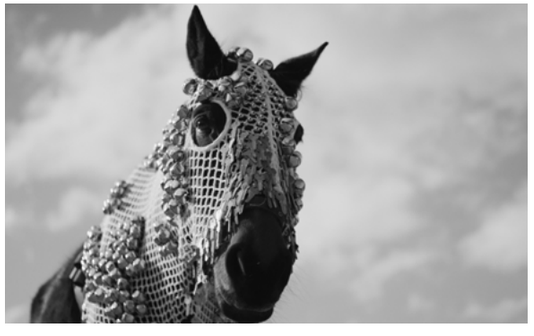
Shyness is nice 2019 (performance view)
performance
Performers: Skye Baker, April Chandler, Tim Downey, Madison Elrick, Remy Hoglin, Adam Kassar, Evelyn Pohl, Kate Stodart and Jennifer Valender
Technical support: Tim Dyer

Jennifer Valender
Shyness is nice 2019
single-channel HD video, colour
duration 4 minutes 45 seconds

I felt so alive when I was running, singing and filming Buster, Duke and Breeze – I was in the thick presence of story-making. It was physical and caring. It was listening with great attention to the subtlety and nuances of the horses and environment. My body was reactive to the smallest changes. The horses were calmer when I was grounded and restless when I was meek. The work transforms these big bodied friends into delicate resonating instruments/music-makers, who sensitively travel across the Victorian bush. *Horse Power* centres around labours of love, and the transference of information across time and places. The work draws a parallel to my grandmother and her fifty years of factory work as a widowed immigrant woman in Australia. Her body bares the scars, and inflammation of labour. The horses and my grandmother walk together, bodies of immense power and histories – transmitting goods and services for others. Both ignite the heart with empathy and awe for the great distances travelled.

Tina Stefanou
born Melbourne 1986; lives and works Melbourne

Horse Power 2019
single-channel HD video, black and white,
two-channel sound
duration 8 minutes 10 seconds
Horses: Buster Rhythm, Breeze and Duke
Cinematography: Andrew Kaineder
Sound: Joseph Franklin
Pattern Maker: Rioko Tega
Equine Specialist: Sacajawea
Equine Assistant: Sharon Rix



List of works in the exhibition

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All works courtesy of the artists

Performing Textiles

Published by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, on the occasion of the exhibition *Performing Textiles*, 17–18 August and 24–25 August 2019.

Performing Textiles is a collaboration between the Ian Potter Museum of Art and Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne.

Curated by Dr Cate Consandine, Senior Lecturer / Coordinator and Katie Lee, Lecturer, Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) (Visual Art) at VCA Art, with Dr Kyla McFarlane, Curator of Academic Programs (Research) and Brad Rusbridge, Assistant Curator, Ian Potter Museum of Art.

Performing Textiles selection committee: Dr Cate Consandine, Senior Lecturer / Coordinator, Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) (Visual Art) at VCA Art; Dr David Sequeira, Director, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCA; Jacqueline Doughty, Curatorial Manager, Ian Potter Museum of Art; and Dr Kyla McFarlane, Curator of Academic Programs (Research), Ian Potter Museum of Art.

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Exhibition opening and performance documentation by Gregory Lorenzutti: front cover, pp. 5–6, 7, 9, 27–28, 29, 35–36, 68, 69–70, 72, back cover

Front cover: Jennifer Valender, *Shyness is nice* 2019 (performance view), performance

Back cover: Scotty So, *As she floats* 2019 (performance view), synthetic holographic organza, performance, dimensions variable

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