



# Flesh after Fifty

CHANGING IMAGES OF OLDER WOMEN IN ART

Fun to do something different and out of my comfort zone

Recently separated and I am focusing on my joy of who  
I have become and where I want to go

I WANT MORE OF THE TRUTH TO BE OUT IN THE OPEN  
- HERE IS ONE MORE LITTLE BUT POTENT STEP

I am intrigued by our cultural embarrassment of being  
naked, and the complicated relationship with our bodies

This is a present to myself and sign of new beginnings  
as I embrace menopause and becoming older

I feel it is important for the general public to know that many women of all  
ages have had mastectomies, and not all women have reconstructions,  
we are all beautiful

FREE AT LAST

I hate the invisibility of older women that society demands  
- I'm grateful for my body

I want to thank my body for caring for me in this life time,  
even though it is old now

OLDER WOMEN ARE JUST PEOPLE

Helping to promote wellness and positive images  
for older women

I CAN BE FEARLESS

# Flesh after Fifty

CHANGING IMAGES OF OLDER WOMEN IN ART

# Foreword

## Jane Scott



**We live in a society swamped with images, where high value is placed on physical appearance and an association between attractiveness and youth, particularly for women. *Flesh after Fifty* exposes and challenges negative stereotypes of ageing while celebrating positive images of older women through art.**

Promoting change in attitudes about what constitutes a healthy body image is at the core of this exhibition. Older women are in need of the opportunity to celebrate their bodies and young women are in desperate need of positive images of mature women to alleviate the fear and misgivings they have about ageing.

Artists have long painted, sculpted and photographed the female form. Historically, much of this art has been made by men, for the male gaze, with an emphasis on women as objects of beauty whose worth is determined by that gaze. Developments in society and politics, reflected in fashion and popular imagery, have wrought remarkable changes over the last century to the roles and representation of women. Yet, too little of this has filtered through to older women. Images of women over the age of forty or fifty, particularly naked, are almost absent. *Flesh after Fifty* is challenging and changing this.

Featuring some of Australia's best contemporary artists, this exhibition presents more than 500 paintings, photographs, videos, drawings and sculptures of women over the age of fifty, exploring a wide diversity of related issues and celebrating older women and their bodies.

*Flesh after Fifty* would not have been possible without major financial support from Creative Victoria along with Principle Partner, the Royal Women's Hospital, and our supporters, the Bowness Family Foundation, Abbotsford Convent and The University of Melbourne. I also thank individual donors to the project through the Women's Foundation.

This exhibition and the associated series of events and public programs would not have been possible without our extraordinary team of dedicated volunteers, consultants, coordinators, Ambassadors and staff, all of whom have embraced this project and made it happen.

**Jane Scott**

Lead Curator and Program Manager

**Message from the Parliamentary Secretary  
for Creative Industries**  
**Harriet Shing MP**



***Flesh after Fifty* is a powerful project that celebrates women over fifty and shines a light on the health and wellbeing matters they face right across Victoria – and beyond.**

With Australia's ageing population, this project is timely in its mission to create conversations, challenge stereotypes and transform misconceptions and old attitudes about ageing bodies. After working with participants in regional and metropolitan areas, the result is a unique and joyful celebration that will appeal to community members of all ages.

The Victorian Government is proud to support *Flesh after Fifty* which is a terrific example of the powerful role art can play in bringing people together to share their stories, opening us up to new perspectives and addressing challenges we face as a society.

Congratulations to the participants and artists involved and I urge you all to engage with the many events and discussions surrounding this wonderful exhibition.

**Harriet Shing MP**

Parliamentary Secretary for Creative Industries

# Health message

## Martha Hickey





**Our population is ageing and women over fifty will soon be the largest sector of society. Older women make a vital contribution to families, workplaces and communities. Almost half the Australian paid workforce and two thirds of voluntary workers are women, mostly over fifty. Maintaining their health and wellbeing benefits the whole community and is essential for our society and economy. However, older women often face discrimination due to both gender and age, with wide-ranging negative consequences including self-image.**

*Flesh after Fifty* is challenging and changing views of older women in new and innovative ways through an engagement with the arts. The exhibition will explore many aspects of what it means to be a mature woman, celebrating diversity and recognising the beauty and strength that comes with ageing. The project will build confidence, knowledge, sense of identity and empowerment.

It will also stimulate a new narrative about older women, presenting the reality of their bodies with respect, humour, warmth, and challenging negative assumptions and attitudes. Most images of women's bodies in the contemporary media are distorted and digitally transformed. Beauty is strongly equated with youth and there are few positive images of older women or their bodies. *Flesh after Fifty* will question these assumptions and engage our imagination to create experiences that can be shared across communities.

There is growing evidence that engagement with the arts brings benefits to participants, artists and audiences. The Australian National Arts and Health Framework recognises the powerful effects of arts engagement on physical and mental health. The arts provide an outlet for recreation and relaxation, self-reflection and enjoyment. For people with mental illness, arts programs can improve confidence, self-esteem and hope for the future.<sup>1</sup>

For older adults, engagement with art improves mood and promotes positive images of ageing.<sup>2</sup> Like regular physical activity, regular participation in the arts enhances health and wellbeing, increases happiness and resilience, and improves quality of life.<sup>3</sup> The arts can help to build new relationships, reduce loneliness and isolation, and increase social support<sup>3</sup>. *Flesh after Fifty* is creating new opportunities for artists and for older women to participate in the arts, bringing a sense of belonging and increasing tolerance, trust and respect.<sup>1,3</sup>

Most importantly, the arts shape cultural norms and attitudes related to gender and gender equality. Achieving health equity for older women means changing negative views about ageing and recognising the strength and beauty of older bodies. *Flesh after Fifty* will shift the narrative of ageing away from concepts of 'loss' to recognising the 'gains' of age, including experience, confidence and growth. The project uses artworks to give new meaning and relevance to all older women. It will provoke discussion and reflection about what it means to be a woman over fifty, challenging assumptions about youthfulness and beauty. By bringing together artists and communities, *Flesh after Fifty* will present new and positive messages to enhance health and wellbeing for older women and to support and guide younger women as they too age.

#### **Martha Hickey,**

BA (Hons), MSc (Clin Psych), MBChB, FRCOG, FRANZCOG, MD,

Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology,  
University of Melbourne and the Royal Women's  
Hospital

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3. C. Davies, M. Pescud, J. Anwar-McHenry, P. Wright, 'Arts, public health and the National Arts and Health Framework: a lexicon for health professionals', *Aust N Z J Public Health*. 2016;40(4):304-306.

# Something happens to flesh after fifty ...

The title of this exhibition comes from a quote by the renowned American photo-journalist, Eve Arnold (1912-2012), who photographed Hollywood star Joan Crawford on several occasions. The first, in 1956, was on assignment for the *Woman's Home Companion* magazine, part of the publicity campaign for *Autumn Leaves*, a film in which Crawford (then in her early fifties) played a spinster wooed by a man many years her junior. Arnold recalled: 'The first time I met Joan Crawford she took off her clothes, stood in front of me nude and insisted I photograph her', adding, 'sadly, something happens to flesh after fifty.'

Two decades into the twenty-first century, it wouldn't be unreasonable to imagine that this comment from Arnold – who also reportedly advised that one should never reveal one's true age – is a reflection of a time long since passed. A time when an unmarried woman in her fifties, like Crawford's character in the film, was assumed to be lonely and living a small and unfulfilled life. And a time long since passed when women were judged and valued according to their looks. While attitudes have shifted dramatically in the past sixty years, in the context of images of older women in the public realm however, little appears to have changed. When they are visible at all, images of women over fifty typically reflect well-worn stereotypes that position age as the opposite of youth rather than part of a continuum.

Initiated by Professor Martha Hickey, a gynaecologist who specialises in menopause and healthy ageing, this project began with the aim of stimulating conversations that would confront the fears and challenge the misunderstandings about what it means to experience menopause which she often witnessed in her work. Ruth Maddison had done just this in her series of documentary photographs, *Women Over Sixty*, 1990-91, made in response to experiencing early menopause at the age of forty-three – in her words, being 'struck down'. Meeting and talking to women in their sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties, Maddison discovered that while menopause signified an end in relation to reproductive capacity, it also heralded the possibility of new beginnings. In a similar way, Peter Wegner's drawings of female centenarians document the reality that for some, life after menopause is very long and very rich. These images also show just what happens to flesh and skin, as it sags and wrinkles, a visible trace of the years that have passed and experiences long forgotten.

Patrick Pound's search for photographs from Australia and beyond, purchased over the internet, highlighted the fact that even in the private world of the family photo album, images of older women's bodies (with the exception of pornography) are hard to find. Penny Byrne takes this idea further in her installation, fashioning an ironic new garment – a cloak of invisibility – which, depending on the attitude and experience of the individual, can be worn with reluctance, loathing or a liberating sense of freedom. *Stone the Crows*, a collage by Deborah Kelly that is re-presented here in the form of a printed banner, confronts the pressure many women

feel to fight the ageing process. Maintaining the superficial appearance of youth through cosmetic subterfuge, they actively work to avoid becoming invisible. Constructing an immersive installation of mirrors and photographs that captures the familiar expressions and gestures of intimate friends, Megan Evans encourages the viewer to look beyond the image that is reflected, both in the mirror and by contemporary society.

Not surprisingly, the naked female body features prominently in the exhibition. *500 Strong*, a major project by Ponch Hawkes, documented 422 women over the age of fifty in a series of five hundred photographs. Naked, adopting various poses and sometimes disguising their faces with objects that hold personal and symbolic meaning, the women present an extraordinary diversity of physical form which runs counter to preconceived notions of what a post-fifty female body looks like. It is this variation that makes Greg Taylor's porcelain sculptures of vulvas, modelled on women of various ages, so interesting, as well as the fact that we rarely see such straightforward and intimate representations of women's bodies. While the process of being looked at and photographed naked was straightforward for some, for others it represented what Hawkes has described as bravery, a bold step towards self-awareness and acceptance, and rebellion, taking a personal stand against prevailing conventions of female behaviour and representation. Where Hawkes's and Taylor's projects celebrate the physical diversity of mature female bodies, Catherine Bell and Cathy Staughton's collaborative work addresses the negative associations that are often applied to physical difference. Subverting a familiar story, they offer an alternative which is inclusive and empowering. Janina Green's expressively hand-coloured photographs depict naked older women in a more abstract way, highlighting the strength and solidity of their bodies.

Life-size sculptures by Niki Koutouzis provide an intimate encounter with the body, the technique of wax resist casting emphasising the tactile reality of skin, its flexibility and resilience, and the flesh it encases. Working with their trademark medium and technique of icing and cake decoration, the Hotham Street Ladies have created a large pair of breasts that sag and drape from the rafters, pooling onto the floor in a humorous amplification of the effects of gravity on the body. And nearby, a giant pubis sprouts a mass of grey pubic hair which has been

piped with an oversized cake-decorating nozzle, breaking the ice and prompting conversations about what happens to our bodies as we age.

The female form is the basis of *Mater* by Sam Jinks, the realism of which prompts us to identify with the figure who appears to be one of us. Surveying historical representations of older women in the search for a positive contemporary image, Jinks looked to the symbolism of ancient mythology, creating a figure that reflects the positive accumulations of age, rather than incremental 'losses' of youth. Symbolism is also important in the work of Maree Clarke, who draws on the traditional cultural practices of her Indigenous heritage, presenting a series of portraits that welcome viewers to country, as well as reflecting the strength and wisdom that comes with age, seen here in images of mothers and daughters.

The artists in this exhibition show us that something does indeed happen to flesh after fifty. But rather than being a state deserving of pity, as Eve Arnold perceived it, they acknowledge and celebrate ageing female bodies simply as they are.

### **Kirsty Grant**

# Catherine Bell & Cathy Staughton

Catherine Bell and Cathy Staughton – ‘The Two Cathies’ – met in 2009 at Arts Project Australia in Melbourne and since that time, have acted as each other’s muse, providing creative inspiration for their individual art practices, as well as becoming artistic collaborators. *The Artist and the Mermaid* is their second short film project and again, they have chosen to produce a silent film with captions providing key elements of dialogue interspersed between black and white time-lapse footage. This genre is significant as, ‘for a brief time in history ... [it] provided an inclusive experience for the Deaf and hard of hearing who could fully participate in this popular cultural form as equal members of the audience.’\* The film is simultaneously a documentary, recording a shared artist residency undertaken at Venus Bay in early 2020, and a performative work of art in which both artists adopt various roles. As the model for a series of portraits (displayed alongside the film), Bell plays a mermaid that has been discovered on the beach, and, in a clever intertwining of fantasy and reality, Staughton’s character, just like Staughton herself, is an artist.

The mermaid, a familiar mythological creature, provides a vehicle through which Bell and Staughton explore ideas about the ageing female body and bodily difference. Typically depicted as young women whose beauty is powerful and alluring, mermaids must give up their distinctive anatomy to leave the ocean and live on land as they often do in traditional tales after falling in love with a human. The friendship that develops between Bell and Staughton’s characters subverts this tradition however, as the artist sees beyond superficial physical differences and, identifying a unique individual worthy of being represented, records her appearance in several images. The confident execution and striking colour of Staughton’s paintings stands in stark contrast to the black and white film and together, they provoke questions about diversity – of shape, size, age, ability and so on – which in turn encourage us to challenge many familiar negative stereotypes.

\* Unless otherwise noted, all artist page quotes are from statements supplied by the artists.



Catherine Bell, *The Artist and the Mermaid* 2020, film title  
silent film  
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne



Catherine Bell, *The Artist and the Mermaid* 2020, film still  
silent film  
Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne



Catherine Staughton, *Catherine Bell Lady Fishe Sea Sand Beach* 2020  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
Courtesy of the artist and Arts Project Australia





# Maree Clarke

Both as an artist and as a curator, Mutti Mutti/Wemba Wemba/Boon Wurrung woman, Maree Clarke explores and celebrates the depth and richness of her Indigenous heritage. Working across a diverse range of media, her focus revives the traditional practices of southeast Australian Aboriginal people – their ceremonies, rituals and languages – through innovation and contemporary art-making. As Clarke declares, her work is ‘about regenerating cultural practices, making people aware of our culture and that we are still really strong in our culture, identity and knowledge. We haven’t lost anything – some of these practices have just been dormant for a while.’<sup>1</sup> Balancing ancient tradition with contemporary art practice, she seamlessly merges twenty-first century technologies, with traditional materials including possum skins, kangaroo teeth and river reeds, to create works of art which reclaim Indigenous culture and invite reflection and intercultural understanding.

Super-sized river reed necklaces are among the many innovations in Clarke’s work. She has adapted the nineteenth-century necklaces of her ancestors, traditionally given to travellers passing through Country as a symbol of welcome, safe passage and friendship, to create necklaces which, in their extraordinary length ‘reflect(s) the scale of the loss of our knowledge of cultural practices.’<sup>2</sup> Clarke and her family collect the reeds from the Maribyrnong River, boiling and cleaning them before dyeing and decorating them with an array of local bird feathers. Most recently she has experimented with glass ‘river reeds’ – delicate beads that replicate the reeds – which are strung together in a similar process. An extra flourish added to the glass necklaces are hand blown seed pods, filled with red, yellow or black ochre sourced from ancient ochre pits from Country well known to the artist.

In this exhibition Clarke presents portraits of her extended family. Boon Wurrung Elder N’arweet Carolyn Briggs, adorned in recent renditions of a possum skin cloak and an oversized river reed necklace and N’Arweet’s daughter, Caroline Briggs Martin, who sits wearing an intricately designed glass ‘reed’ necklace, offset with yellow ochre seed pods. These images of Boon Wurrung women resplendent in cultural body wear symbolise the open hand of welcome to all who embrace the Ancestral knowledge and traditional culture of their people.

1 Maree Clarke quoted in Myles Russell-Cook, ‘Artists Maree Clark and Lyn-Al Young’s unique collaboration celebrates their Indigenous heritage’, *Vogue Australia*, December 2019.

2 Ibid.

# Megan Evans

In a statement about *Reflection*, the installation she has created for this exhibition, Megan Evans quotes David Bowie who said, 'Ageing is an extraordinary process where you become the person you always should have been.' Turning traditional notions about growing older on their head, Bowie ignores the negatives that are so often associated with age and acknowledges the development of individuality, confidence, perspective and a way of being in the world that only comes with the experience of years. Echoing this sentiment, Evans celebrates being a woman over fifty and, choosing to disregard what contemporary society tells her about beauty only being associated with a youthful ideal, encourages an expanded understanding and appreciation that encompasses the reality of faces and bodies which, in her words, show 'the lines and shades of experience and a life lived.'

A field of mirrors, suspended, standing on tables and lying on the floor, involves the viewer as a participant in this work, capturing reflected glimpses of faces and bodies which morph and shift as they move by. Echoing these fleeting images are two videos and a large-scale projection that Evans has constructed from a vast series of photographs of close friends (over the age of fifty). Stitched together to create composite 'portraits', multiple stills present familiar expressions and gestures that are beyond self-consciousness, a reflection of reality untrammelled by personal or societal expectations, just as we appear to those who know us best. For Evans, these images allow 'the beauty I see in my loved friends to show.' The speed with which the years pass – seemingly moving faster as we age – is represented by an image of a woman running at dusk with the city in the background. This larger than life image appears in the darkened room as a curtain, dividing the space between what we see in the mirrors, and what others see depicted in the videos. The blurred image describes the speed with which life passes – from sixteen to sixty in a flash.



Megan Evans, *Dark glass #1* 2020, film still  
HD video  
Courtesy of the artist



# Penny Byrne

At first glance, Penny Byrne's sculptures appear safe and polite, small-scale figurines similar to those your grandmother might collect, single figures or sometimes groups, a little bit kitsch, and often dressed in romanticised historical garb. Look more closely however, and what you see are quietly subversive sculptures where the familiar original has been modified in a way that radically shifts its meaning, no longer superficial decoration but works of art with something to say. As an experienced conservator of ceramics, Byrne has an intimate knowledge of porcelain, the material she has chosen as one of her primary mediums. Highly conversant with its particular qualities and skilled at its repair, she uses her professional expertise to remodel these found forms, presenting her take on contemporary social issues and the state of international politics that is simultaneously provocative, humorous and thought-provoking.

In her installation, Byrne presents two museum plinths, complete with labels which describe and catalogue the objects they display. Standing on the plinth labelled 'Woman under Fifty' is a tall vintage figurine in the form of an idealised young shepherdess. The adjacent plinth, labelled 'Woman Over Fifty', however, is empty. If we follow the thread suggested by the title of Byrne's installation, she is in fact there, but simply hidden by the 'cloak of invisibility' that often shrouds older women. This familiar experience is echoed in the songs that play through attached headphones, 'Invisible' by Alison Moyet and Annie Lennox's 'Keep Young and Beautiful', which advises women that 'it's your duty to be beautiful ... if you want to be loved.' As Byrne describes it, the cloak of invisibility is something that 'is worn reluctantly by many women, with abject horror by others, and still others ... with a sense of release and freedom. For some the Cloak creeps up slowly, in increments of disconnect and indifference. Whilst for others it hits like a lightning bolt - the realisation that society now perceives them as being without agency, invisible, discarded, worth less, worthless. Yet others are unaware they are wearing it at all. Many queer women may not have garnered the benefits of the visible power of heteronormative agency bestowed unknowingly by society, and continue about their merry ways unencumbered.'

Penny Byrne, *The Cloak of Invisibility* 2020  
two vintage ceramic figurines, Invisibility Cloak, two white plinths,  
audio sound track, two sets of headphones  
Courtesy of the artist, photo Mark Ashkanasy

# Janina Green

The tradition of life drawing, with its focus on the depiction of the human form and understanding of the anatomical structure of the body, was a key component of Janina Green's training as an art and craft teacher during the early 1960s. It was the expressive potential of the nude however, rather than its accurate representation, that she found most compelling and within a broad-ranging practice that traverses questions of identity, feminism (and femininity), domesticity and gender politics, this has become a characteristic feature of her photographic images of the female body. As Sofia Ahlberg has written, 'Whether artist, lover, friend, or mother, Green's woman in the nude exudes conviction, purpose and strength.'<sup>1</sup>

In this series of photographs made using a Linhoff 5 x 4 camera and black and white film, Green records the mass and volume of two older female bodies. They have a very physical presence, which she likens to the weight and solidity of a Henry Moore sculpture – curvaceous and sometimes angular, fleshy and lean, hard bone covered with soft skin, which is wrinkled and occasionally taut. These bodies also express a sense of authority that speaks of experience, confidence and knowledge. Not content to restrict herself to the confines of the image captured through the lens of the camera alone, Green disrupts the subtle tonality of the prints with photographic dyes which are 'splashed around' on the surface. This delicate colouration suggests the nuanced pigmentation of human skin – the soft blush of a warm cheek, the purple tinge of a fresh bruise that eventually fades to green. Working with the image in a similarly expressive mode, she also fragments the female form through a process of collage that focusses attention on its component parts and the surface of the skin, presenting the body as a site of positive transformation and evolution.

1. Dr Sofia Ahlberg, *Blush: Janina Green Photographs 1988-2010*, M.33, Melbourne, 2011, unpaginated



# Hotham Street Ladies

The Hotham Street Ladies is a group of four women – Cassandra Chilton, Molly O’Shaughnessy, Sarah Parkes and Caroline Price – who once shared a run-down house in Hotham Street, Collingwood. They collaborate on immersive and experiential works of art which address traditionally ‘feminine’ themes including domesticity, craft and the female body, but which utilise deliberate ‘strategies of parody, humour and wicked delight’ to critique and question commonly held ideas and attitudes. Their unique medium and technique, icing and cake decoration, plays on stereotypes of the feminine – as we imagine apron-wearing housewives baking in pastel-coloured 1950s kitchens – and in its range of colours, from flesh pink to blood red, luscious textures and familiar sweet smell (and taste), speaks of what they describe as ‘deliciousness, celebration, excess and consumption.’

Armed with this arsenal of positive associations, the Hotham Street Ladies’ installation confronts the ageing female body head on, presenting dramatically over-sized breasts and a pair of bent, spread legs. Responding to the semi-industrial scale of the Abbotsford Convent laundry, giant breasts hang from high beams, sagging onto the floor as ‘multiple icing pours [create] a sugary topography of wrinkles, folds, cracks and creases that ... set afloat two intricately piped nipples.’ Beside them, a vast pubis complete with a grizzled thatch of pubic hair – long, grey and untamed – echoes the enormous 1966 sculpture, *Hon: a Cathedral* – a collaboration between Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt. One of the very earliest participatory artworks, *Hon*, a Swedish word which translates as ‘she’, invited visitors to enter a miniature theme-park (complete with milk-bar, mini-cinema and children’s slide) by walking through the vagina of an enormous reclining pregnant body. In *Unbridled Abundance: Pink Bits ‘n’ Saggy Tits*, the private becomes public, the personal becomes political, and exaggerated to the extent that it can no longer be ignored. In a material that is delicious, reality is transformed, becoming humorous and something that can be talked about, no longer as daunting as it might have once seemed.

Hotham Street Ladies, *Nipple Study for Unbridled Abundance: Pink Bits ‘n’ Saggy Tits* 2020  
Royal icing, food colour  
Courtesy of the artists, photo Mark Ashkanasy







# Deborah Kelly

As a school student during the 1970s, Deborah Kelly's primary exposure to the history of (European) art was through the printed page and since that time she has collected discarded reference books obsessively. Finding them at garage sales, in charity shops and sometimes on the side of the road, Kelly has amassed an extensive archive which provides inspiration (and provocation) for her art, as well as the physical material she uses to create exquisitely detailed collages. Continuing the tradition of early twentieth-century artists who combined photographic reproductions and other printed material to make new images with pungent commentary, Kelly's politically motivated work explores structures and expressions of power in the contemporary contexts of race, sexuality, gender and religion.

Originally produced as modestly-scaled paper collages, *Fertility Cult* and *Stone the Crows* have been re-presented for this exhibition in the form of large fabric banners which magnify the glorious colours and halftones of their commercial printing origins and draw on methods of advertising, commanding attention and addressing a broad audience. Kelly's focus is the dichotomy between the lived experience of most women and their representation, what she describes as 'a looked-at image' that is scrutinised and assessed by the 'gaze of external observers, and their internalised deputies.' A classical marble sculpture of a female head, crumbling but partially restored and being held together, or possibly taunted, by the manicured hands that surround it, ascends from (or depends upon) a profusion of eggs. Presenting a stark contrast between age and the universal symbol of fertility, Kelly highlights the loss that comes with menopause and the attendant devaluing of women that often occurs. In *Stone the Crows* Kelly focusses on the energy, time and money directed towards the maintenance of youthful beauty (and the appearance of ongoing fertility) within conventional femininity, as painted lips and nails, and shapely stockings in heels add to the ornamentation (or camouflage) of a mature, four-eyed female face. As Kelly has said, 'These works speak to that effort, to the penalties for failure, to the aspiration and desperation that fuel the Beauty Industry and its glittering, fragrant, hairless enticements to be *Younger, Longer.*'

Deborah Kelly, *Fertility Cult* 2020  
paper collage, printed on linen  
Courtesy of the artist

# Sam Jinks

Meticulously modelled and then carefully crafted in materials including silicon, resin, fibreglass and latex, sometimes with additions of human hair, Sam Jinks' sculptures are startlingly lifelike. This verisimilitude can be disconcerting and despite the subtle manipulations of scale – his figures are typically smaller than reality – in his sculptures of the human form it also establishes an immediate connection between the viewer and the work of art. Recognising something of our physical selves in Jinks' work, by association we also perceive shared experiences, frailties and imaginings, taking part in an intimate encounter with an object that transcends its inanimate state and speaks clearly to a collective sense of humanity. As Jinks explains, 'the language of sculpture which I work within embraces the fact we are all a combination of hard bones, stringy muscles and tendons, and soft fatty tissue surrounded by a layer of tough yet supple skin. This formula is something we share with almost every organism on the planet.'

Surveying the history of Western sculpture, Jinks identified familiar female archetypes: the beautiful young woman, the fecund, nurturing mother and the crone, an extreme caricature of old age with various interpretations, sometimes malevolent and sometimes wise, but always wizened and ugly. Against a twenty-first century backdrop where cosmetic surgery and airbrushed magazine images create an idealised distortion of the face and body, and social media feeds the desire for unattainable physical perfection, he sought to create a contemporary symbol for the ageing female that is not about the distortion or loss of the ideal of youth. Starting with early sculptural forms such as the Venus of Willendorf, Jinks also looked to mythology and symbols of worship in ancient cultures, and the resulting sculpture, *Mater*, makes reference to statues of Cybele, an Anatolian mother goddess (also later worshipped in Greece and Rome). Her body speaks of a life lived but one that is far from over – there is flesh, some wrinkles, but also muscle and strength – and her imposing scale declares her power and authority.

Sam Jinks, *Mater* 2020 (clay work in progress)  
silicone, pigment, resin, hair, 24K gold  
Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf, photo Mark Ashkanasy



# Niki Koutouzis

Niki Koutouzis makes sculptures that are life-size and life-like. In an intimate process, she works closely with her models to find a pose that can be held for the fifty or so minutes it takes to make a cast, applying various layers to the body (including a fine, seaweed-based material, followed by plaster), which register a detailed imprint of lines in the skin, curves and creases in the flesh. Supported by a sturdy resin lining, the final wax cast, tactile, delicate and translucent, is coloured in a way that echoes the subtle tonal variations and pigmentation of human skin.

For Koutouzis, producing these works is a political act of reclaiming a space for the bodies of real women in art. Expressing their beauty, vulnerability, strength and resilience, she celebrates the reality of ordinary bodies which are far removed from the idealised way in which the naked female is typically portrayed. Interested in capturing a physical impression of real people at a particular moment in time, she has worked with three women – her mother and two friends – to produce this suite of sculptures. Each of these women has worked throughout their lives and the physical limitations they have as a result of their labours are reflected in the way they move, sit and recline. It is this history, a history of everyday female lives, which is captured in the sculptures. Despite each model's active participation in the posing and casting process, the end result, so expressive of each individual and revealing of the physical body, was confronting. While such reactions are the result of factors specific to each person and their own experiences, they also reflect the invisibility of older women's bodies in contemporary society, and our lack of familiarity with presentations of the female body of any age that don't conform to a particular shape and size. Presenting these women in what she describes as 'intimate states of comfort and absorption', Koutouzis challenges conventional ideals of physical beauty, and invites us to expand our thinking about bodies and age.

Niki Koutouzis, *Social Contract Act III 2020* (detail)  
wax, resin, found bed sheets  
Courtesy of the artist, photo Mark Ashkanasy





Elsie Warren, 'past 70'

I left school when I was fifteen. I worked in factories and as a shop assistant and doing other people's housework until I was past 50. I joined the hydrotherapy group about six years ago. I've got arthritis in my knees and I need to keep exercising. I love the group. We have a lot of fun.

Once your family goes it's a void for a couple of years. I felt a bit dull and frustrated for a while but when I joined the group my life became more social.

You have to make the most of your life. I do courses at the Council of Adult Education This year I'm doing decorative framing and motor mechanics.



# Ruth Maddison

At the age of 43, Ruth Maddison went into early menopause. As she described it, 'I went into shock. One of the worst things was this feeling that I was carrying an embarrassing secret.' Part of a generation of women who demanded more control over their bodies, and not content to suffer in silence, she sought out information: 'I read books, made appointments at health centres, went to good seminars and bad workshops – decided I wasn't interested in hormonal replacement therapy and hardly wore tights or a woollen jumper once during that winter.'

She also sought out women who had already experienced the challenges and the liberation of menopause, 'women who [had] ... forgotten quite what it was like, because they're enthusiastically getting on with life.' A photographer with a keen interest in people, human nature and relationships, Maddison documented these women in a series simply titled *Women Over Sixty*, where black and white images (sometimes hand-coloured) sit alongside short statements from the subjects describing their passions and attitudes to life as an 'older' woman. The photographs are direct and straightforward, and there is an easy familiarity and obvious rapport between the artist and her subjects. Speaking of shared female experience, the statements are similarly honest and revealing. From Lola McHarg, who learnt to tap dance for her sixtieth birthday, to Beth Coldicutt, aged 77, who doesn't believe in having a day off from working on her property, and the *Box Hill Over 90s Club*, who see themselves as role models for people in their eighties, these women present diverse and positive examples for post-menopausal women of all ages. Several years after the onset of menopause Maddison was able to write that '[it] is a relatively short-term obsession. Not that it seems short when one is in the thick of it. It is intense. Personally, I wouldn't want it any other way.'

Ruth Maddison, *Elsie Warren, past 70*, from the series *Women Over Sixty* 1990-91  
pigment print  
Courtesy of the artist

# Patrick Pound

Using found photographs to tell stories, Patrick Pound starts with a particular idea but the final shape of the narrative is never something he can predict. Searching the internet for snapshots of women over the age of fifty (where flesh was visible) which have been extracted from family albums – intimate and personal mirrors of everyday life that reflect universal experiences – various themes and categories emerged. After wading through the inevitable pornography he describes as ‘the default position of the internet’, Pound’s first realisation, that there weren’t many such images to be found, was telling in itself. Rarely living up to the ideal of the female body, perhaps older women avoid being photographed, at least with their bodies exposed, or no longer appeal as subjects to those behind the camera.

In the images he did find, some women, typically wearing bathers, are depicted beside public sculptures of the female nude and, in a reversal of the concept of art imitating life, adopt the same pose. Whether the sculpture is classical or modern in style, it is inevitably a reflection of the ideal, and in their playful pastiche the subjects willingly present themselves for observation and comparison. Whether this is positive (in terms of the ideal) or not, these women appear to welcome the scrutinising gaze, and are both confident and empowered. A second group he found was images of mothers and daughters at the beach, a place where the lack of clothing covering the body and other signifiers of social position and status put everyone on the same level. Facial features and other physical characteristics clearly indicate shared biology, but what is also on display in these photographs of a familial version of before and after, is the passage of time and the effects of age on the body. Another marker of life experience which Pound identified in many photographs was scarring on the stomach. Pound observed that, ‘Whether comparing themselves to sculptural models, their relatives; relaxing in the sun or regarding themselves in the mirror and projecting their images, each of these women seem comfortable in their skin.’ But of course, as he reminds us: ‘Photographs are sink-holes for conjecture.’

Patrick Pound, *Bodily Records* 2020 (detail)  
found photograph  
Courtesy of the artist, Station Gallery, Melbourne and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney



# Greg Taylor

It was as an artistic failure that inspired Greg Taylor to embark on the creation of a new work of art, an installation of a series of porcelain sculptures, each revealing a carefully detailed and exposed vulva. Having modelled a female torso in clay, Taylor fired it in his kiln, only to find that it had shattered during the process. The one surviving fragment that remained intact was the vulva and inspired by the beauty and sculptural presence of the form isolated in this way, he pondered the possibility of a new work, cautiously considering the appropriateness of a male artist engaging with such a subject. When the first iteration of the resulting series, *Cunts ... and Other Conversations*, 2001–10 was first shown at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, it quickly became one of the most loved works on display – as well as one of the most loathed. Dividing opinions, it was as challenging and confronting for its title – the slang terminology regarded as offensive and pejorative by some, and reclaimed as a symbol of female power by others – as it was for its subject matter.

Working with models from the age of eighteen to seventy-eight, Taylor sculpted his portraits in clay and then made a plaster mould, before casting the final pieces in porcelain. From a distance there is a uniformity to the works which are displayed on the wall in a long row, but close up they reveal a startling diversity that mirrors the physical and psychological individuality of the people who line up to look at them. Continuing a theme within the depiction of the female body that includes Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting, *The Origin of the World*, Taylor's work simply tells it like it is and, depending on the viewer's outlook, presents either a bold provocation or a joyful celebration.

Greg Taylor, *Cunts ... and Other Conversations*, 2001–10  
porcelain, 40 of 153 pieces  
Courtesy of the artist, photo Mark Ashkanasy





# Peter Wegner

Peter Wegner's recent paintings depict his friend and model, Fiona, who he has painted continuously over the past decade, and extend his interest in the human condition. As Wegner has explained, 'Portrait painting and painting from the nude requires a conversation of respectful collaboration' and the warm rapport, built on what he describes as a foundation of honesty and trust between the artist and his sitter is clearly evident here. Monumental and visceral, these paintings are intimate depictions of the female body, a celebration of skin and flesh, of flexibility and resilience. Here, subtle variations of colour and tone, and the varied textures of the surface – from the smooth, silky sheen of stretch marks, to the painterly representation of experienced and capable hands – describe the particular features of an individual, but also manage to express characteristics which are universal.

In the *Centenarians* series, Wegner turned his attention to subjects aged one hundred years or more. Inspired by his own Aunt Rita who, at 104 was still living independently as she had always done, Wegner sought out subjects of both sexes, but found that of the four thousand or so centenarians who were living in Australia at the time, eighty percent of them were female. His sensitive pencil drawings focus on faces and hands, tracing the lines of experience and wisdom. Fascinated by the factors that had enabled these people to live such long lives, Wegner found the process of drawing them inspiring, both in terms of art and of living. Gleaning advice along the way, a favourite tip was from the well-known Melbourne art dealer, Joan McClelland, who recommended making sure your brain is 'stretched' all the time, along with indulging in a bit of whiskey and cream.

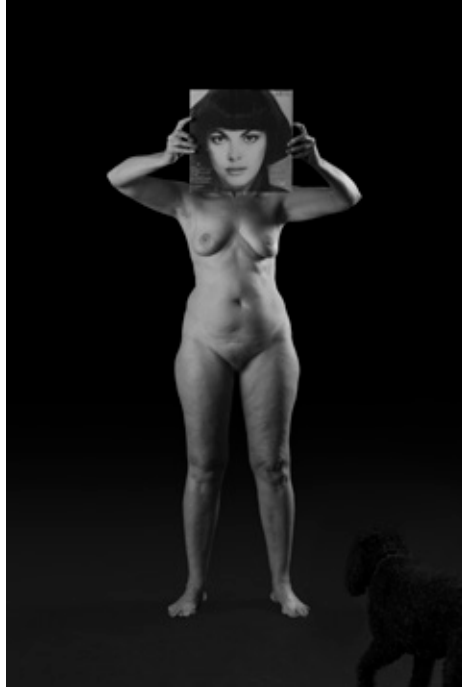
Peter Wegner, *Woman Resting* 2019  
oil and wax on canvas  
Courtesy of the artist and Australian Galleries, photo Mark Ashkanasy

# 500 Strong Ponch Hawkes



Ponch Hawkes, *500 Strong* 2019-20 (detail)  
digital prints on cotton rag paper  
Courtesy of the artist





# How many are you up to?

Somebody said if you are looking for images of naked older women on the internet you are only two clicks away from 'granny porn'. So I went looking. Actually, the very first link is *Naked older women, 78,792 videos, "old women fuck with young guy."*

You can't find images of totally naked older women on the internet, only pictures of women partially naked in bits of underwear. However, there are lots of images of a clothed Helen Mirren, standing in for the universal mature woman. Basically, pictures of older women as people don't exist on the internet except as granny porn.

What does that say about the representation of post-menopausal women – they don't exist as worthy photographic subjects? They can only be valuable as objects of sexual fantasy?

The fact is we don't know what the bodies of older women actually look like. I suspect that our image of what we ought to look like is stuck at our twenty-eight-year-old selves – and this is a hopeless, dead-end, unwinnable comparison. It follows then that we don't know what other women look like either; we have nothing to illuminate the normal course of ageing.

Several participants in the *500 Strong* project mentioned they hadn't been naked in front of their husbands for years. For others, nakedness was a normal part of their childhood and growing up. Some arrived with several ideas for poses and face coverings. Others asked, "What am I doing here?" or said, "I can't believe I *am* here". Some gained courage by coming with a gang of girlfriends. Other women came carefully made-up even though they would be covering their faces.

There was a strong thread among the participants of "It is something I ought to be able to do" and "It's something I *should* do" – women putting aside notions of modesty and body hatred for an important cause. A number saw it as the next brave step toward the second half of their lives.

I call it being a part of making history. A rebellious act.

We made a welcoming foyer space – tea and biscuits and the studio had privacy, soft lighting and music.

Another photographer asked me how I went about it, "Do you look at their bodies?" I found myself answering that I never look at the women's bodies to begin with, they don't need to be further scrutinised in terms of their appearance. I tried to be sensitive and down to earth. I tried to get some sense of them and to inject a notion of play and possibility.

We encountered some negativity towards *500 Strong*. Some people just couldn't see the point of investigating this topic of older women naked: "Why would you bother?" and, "There is something weird about women covering their faces. If you are going to do it, why would you hide your face?" The answer is all women encounter constant comment on their appearance. In a digital age, nobody needs to be the subject of hate trolling or lose their job for daring to take their clothes off.

When I arrived home after shooting portraits of more than forty women in a weekend my partner frequently said, "I can't believe it, you have just put in two twelve-hour days, yet you don't seem tired – rather quite euphoric."

Participants had incredible stories to tell, about their mothers or mothering, abuse, bodily functions, hilarious menopausal encounters – self-deprecating, and sometimes tragic. A commentary that was always full of bravery and courage.

Flesh after Fifty/500 Strong, the best commission I ever had.

## Ponch Hawkes

Thanks to my colleagues Jodie Hutchinson and Jane Scott who worked on every shoot. Sue Broadway for Excel brilliance.

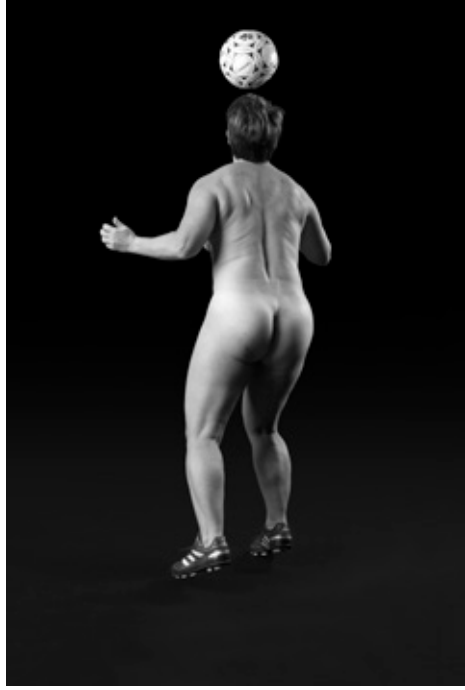
Lucy Hawkes for photographic post-production and advice.

Extra help from Liz Welch and Heather Gilmour.

Photographic printing, David Johns.

And Bobbie Hodge, chief spruiker.











# Flesh after Fifty



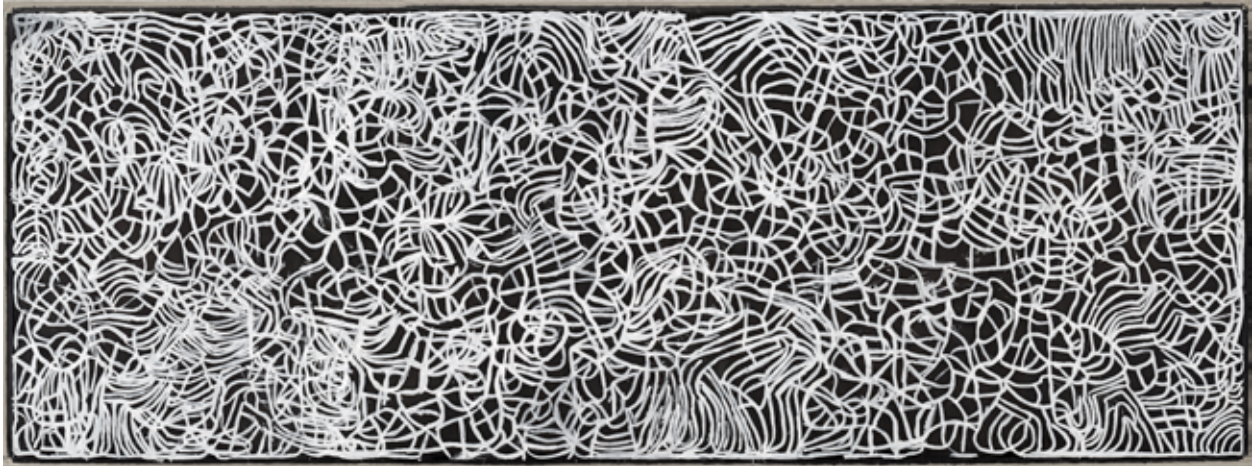
Art History and visual culture have been relentlessly ageist. Healthy living supplements in the daily press and lifestyle magazines are premised on youth, with references to ageing appearing as advertisements for anti-ageing creams. In the history of art, portrayals of the female nude are predominantly of young women with firm bodies, no saggy body parts.

Only in recent years have contemporary artists such as Lucien Freud and Jenny Saville broken the mould in presenting imperfect bodies, and on occasion bodies of older people: important stepping stones in collectively learning how to negotiate imagery of older people, especially the female nude. In the history of art, the dominant images of older people are of the ageing man, white hair and beard, venerable and wise. Rembrandt van Rijn's revered *Self-portrait at the age of 63*, 1669, painted only months before his death, has been described as serene, solemn, self-reflective, confident and self-assured.<sup>1</sup> Older women, including Albrecht Durer's *Portrait of the artist's mother at the age of 63*, 1514, also painted close to her death, are portrayed differently. Griselda Pollock has suggested that 'old women in art are there to terrify us as *memento mori*, juxtaposed as scary witches, hags, old bags to the soft fullness of the one moment of feminine desirability: youth'.<sup>2</sup>

But women artists have produced a number of respectful paintings of older women. These include Sofonisba Anguissola who in c.1610, at age 78, shows herself as a woman of letters. Mary Cassatt's image of an older woman, wearing glasses, earnestly perusing the daily paper in *Reading 'Le Figaro'* c. 1877-78, emanates respect, as does Hilda Rix Nicholas's *Monaro Pioneer*, c.1922-23. Her lined features and wrinkled hands speak of much hard work and life in the bush underscored by her sitting outside her farm house in a garden she doubtless cultivated. These images present each woman's face and body 'as a record of time lived, an embodiment of its history', while 'each mark and fold' is a 'register of experience'.<sup>3</sup> And Utopia artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye, whose magisterial *Anwerlarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)*, 1995, is arguably one of the nation's landmark works, only commenced painting when around eighty years of age.

Age and gender are linked though, and with consumer culture's focus on youth, the older female body within mainstream Art History is sadly invisible. Many women feel bad about ageing, and read their bodies anxiously for signs of decline and decay, and worse still, wrinkles.<sup>4</sup> But as Margaret Gullette pointed out, this is a culturally constructed condition: 'we are aged by culture rather than our bodies',<sup>5</sup> while Michelle Maegher argues that we need to disrupt the fictive invisibilities of old age.<sup>6</sup>





LEFT

Hilda Rix Nicholas, *Monaro Pioneer*, c.1922-23  
oil on canvas, 80.8 x 64.9 cm  
Gift of Mayne Nicholas Limited through the Art Gallery of South  
Australia Foundation 1996, Art Gallery of South Australia  
© Bronwyn Wright

ABOVE

Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Anwerlarr Anganenty (Big Yam Dreaming)* 1995  
synthetic polymer on canvas, 29.1 x 801.8cm  
National Gallery of Victoria  
Presented through the Art Foundation of Victoria by Donald and  
Janet Holt and family, Governors, 1995

Griselda Pollock has examined how portrayals of the eternally youthful female nude in classical sculpture, frequently interpreted as an icon of beauty, fail to take account of women's time in which the skin is a register of time and age. In her view the absence of positive images of older women is 'a radical lack in our repertoire of cultural representation'.<sup>7</sup>

There is currently a wider cultural turn towards addressing these subjects by feminist theorists such as Kathleen Woodward, who speaks of the masquerade of youth, while artists such as Melanie Manchot and Ella Dreyfus extend the idea that the personal is political to encompass the ageing body.<sup>8</sup> Manchot's series of photographs of her mother as a nude figure aim at countering the invisibility of old age, while her *Double Portrait - Mum and I*, 1997, presents the lineage of ageing as the artist observed: 'by looking at my mother's ageing body, I am also looking at myself, my own corporeality as well as my future'.<sup>9</sup> Ella Dreyfus's series *Age and consent*, 1999, portrays cropped views of women's deeply aged bodies: bodies many prefer to ignore, belonging to women she knew. She was concerned to counter how 'a loss of visibility often goes hand-in-hand with a loss of agency, and an eventual loss of identity'.<sup>10</sup> These images of older women by both artists are manifestly gestures of defiance.

Marilyn Monroe, who never reached old age, once famously said that: 'I want to grow old without face-lifts. They take the life out of the face, the character. I want to have the courage to be loyal to the face I've made. Sometimes I think it would be easier to avoid old age, to die young, but then you would never complete your life, would you? You'd never wholly know yourself'.<sup>11</sup> Alice Neel did reach old age, and decided to make her ageing body visible. At age 80, she painted her *Self-portrait*, 1980, as a riposte to the ageless nude as the object of the male gaze, and to the absence of the imagery of older women. Sitting defiantly and addressing the viewer head-on, despite the loss of a taut young body, her paint brush in her hand is her weapon of reply. According to Mary Garrard, it performs a gesture infused with irony in referencing male painters who portray the female nude as an expression of male virility. Neel's big toe parodies such overt displays of machismo. Garrard writes: 'as the foot arches up, the toe's erection sets the painting's curves into rhyme, pulling the lumpen shapes of a sagging, ageing body into the aesthetic harmonies of pure design'.<sup>12</sup> Neel's self-portrait rebukes Art History for its masculine and ageist biases.

Nineteenth-century women artists had to struggle to gain access to life drawing classes of the nude. Australian women achieved this at Melbourne's



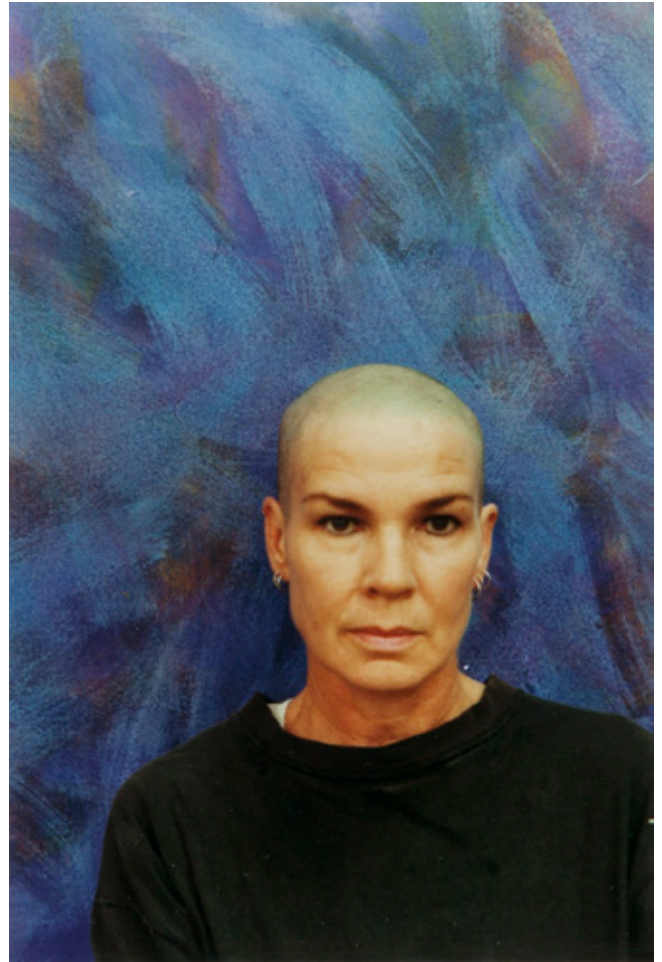
Alice Neel , *Self-Portrait*, 1980, oil on canvas  
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution,  
© Estate of Alice Neel, 1980



Arthur Boyd, *Figure on a chair*, 1973  
oil on canvas, 118.6 x 113.5 cm,  
Bundanon Trust Collection, Courtesy of Bundanon Trust

National Gallery School in 1885 (three years after the male students), ahead of their counterparts at the Royal Academy school in 1891, and even then, in the women's classes at the RA the model's genitals were covered.<sup>13</sup> Several decades on, and with more enlightened life drawing classes, numerous modern Australian women went on to portray the nude, including Dorrit Black in *Nude with cigarette*, 1930, Margaret Preston in *Nude 2*, c. 1925, and Elaine Haxton in *Dark nude*, 1961. On all occasions though, the subject, whether black or white, is a young woman. The only modern woman artist to break the mould was Joy Hester, who expressed anxiety about ageing in her lined and bony *A human being*, 1945, thought to be of her mother with whom she had a complex relationship; and in *Old Woman*, 1956, believed to be partly autobiographical in making reference to her own future decline due to Hodgkins disease.<sup>14</sup> The knowing smile and eyes, though, convey wisdom that comes with age.

Interestingly, Arthur Boyd, portrayed a key older woman in his life: his wife Yvonne in *Figure on a chair*, 1973. He shows her at age 53 in an English forest. It is a respectful and moving image, although she never felt comfortable with the resulting nude portrait. Perhaps she was uncomfortable with her own ageing, or she may have felt it was too intimate a view of their relationship.



Ann Newmarch, *Risking 50*, 1995  
type C photograph, 15.0 x 10.0cm  
Art Gallery of South Australia  
South Australian Government Grant 1995  
Courtesy of the artist

The symbolic date of ageing for women coincides with the passing of the reproductive years to menopause at around age fifty, an event Ann Newmarch addresses head-on in her photograph *Risking 50*, 1995. She has long explored how the personal is political in her work, and now showing herself with a shaven head and stripped of any overt feature of femininity, she contemplates the next phase of her life, the third age between 50 and 70 years. The title alludes to that shift to invisibility, but Newmarch in naming the risk of ageing is disrupting it, negating it by her force of persona in performing age otherwise. Anca Cristofovici has called such images speculative photographs.<sup>15</sup>



Ruth Tuck, *The Bathroom Mirror (Self-portrait)*, 1976  
 watercolour on paper, 44 x 54 cm  
 Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, Lawrence Wilson Gallery, University of Western Australia  
 Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

Ageing, says Julia Twigg, 'forces us to engage with physiology', something Ruth Tuck does in *The Bathroom Mirror (Self-portrait)*, 1976. In a moment of truth-telling, glasses on to see clearly, Tuck confronts her ageing visage, greying hair, wrinkles and all, in the mirror. Her agents of disguise, embellishment and masquerade, her make-up, sits on the shelf untouched, but rather than wistfully recalling the young self, she seems to be thinking of the challenges of life ahead. She is a mere 64, with a busy and productive life as an artist and art educator.

The fear of the loss of sexual activity for older women is a subject few address. All too frequently it is viewed as a taboo topic, while post-menopausal

bodies are imagined as post-sexual.<sup>16</sup> In *Sex and Death*, 2016, Ponch Hawkes shows two elderly nude people, a man and woman, about to embrace lovingly – arms open, faces glowing, on the way to making love. It feels natural, unstaged and ageless.

Artists are leading the way in disrupting the fictive invisibility of the older woman, and an increasing number of artworks are populating the visual field, broadening the concept of the nude to include a fuller spectrum of ages and life experiences, rather than the frozen moment of youth as the icon of beauty that has been all pervasive.

**Catherine Speck**  
 Professor of Art History, University of Adelaide



Ponch Hawkes, *Sex and Death* 2016, digital file  
 Still image from performance *Sex and Death*, Festival of Live Art, Arts House, Melbourne, March 2016  
 Concept: Samara Hersch, collaborating artists Ponch Hawkes and Bec Reid  
 Courtesy of the Artist

- 1 Herbert Covey, *Images of Older People in Western Art and Society*, Praeger, New York, 1991, 7.
- 2 Griselda Pollock, 'The grace of time: Narrativity, Sexuality and a Visual Encounter in the Virtual Feminist Museum', *Art History*, 26, 2, 2003, 20.
- 3 Pollock, 'The grace of time', 20.
- 4 Julia Twigg, 'The body, gender and age: Feminist insights in social gerontology', *Journal of Aging Studies*, 18, 2004, 61.
- 5 Twigg, 'The body, gender and age', 61
- 6 Michelle Meagher, 'Against the invisibility of old age: Cindy Sherman, Susy Lake and Martha Wilson', *Feminist Studies*, 40, 1, 2014, 103
- 7 Pollock, 'The grace of time', 193.
- 8 Julia Twigg, 'The body, gender and age', 61; Kathleen Woodward, *Ageing and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, Bloomington, 1991.
- 9 Melanie Manchot cited in Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-portraits*, Thames and Hudson, 1998, 198.
- 10 Jacqueline Milner, *Age and Consent*, Catalogue Essay, 1999: <https://elladreyfus.com/reviews-and-essays>
- 11 Cited in Graham McCann, *Marilyn Monroe*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, 80.
- 12 Mary Garrard, 'Alice Neel and Me', *Woman's Art Journal*, 27, 2, 2006, 6.
- 13 Janine Burke, *Australian Women Artists 1840-1949*, Greenhouse Publications, Richmond, Victoria, 1980, 28; Leigh Astbury, *City Bushmen: the Heidelberg School and the Rural Mythology*, Oxford University Press, 1985, 21-22.
- 14 Deborah Hart, *Joy Hester and Friends*, Craftsman House and the National Gallery of Australia, 2001, 38, 111.
- 15 Cited in Kathleen Woodward, 'Performing age, performing gender', *NWSA Journal*, 18, 1, 2006, 173.
- 16 Michelle Meagher, 'Art, ageing and the body', in Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin, *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, Routledge, 2015, 90.

# Over (being) represented

Flesh. Organic matter, the messy stuff that art history's convention of the female nude had so thoroughly denied in its aesthetising and idealisation of the female form. So much so that the embodiment of women remains mysterious and often the subject of taboo – at times to women themselves. Underpinning the works in this exhibition is an ongoing desire to understand and represent the material experience of womanhood, and the materiality of bodies. Bodies are depicted in ways that refuse integration, and eschew the resolved form of the nude.

Lynda Nead outlined the problematic nature of art's treatment of the female body: "The integrity of the female figure is guaranteed by the impenetrability of its framing contours; the boundaries of the female form have to seem inviolate for the image to offer the possibility of an undisturbing aesthetic experience."<sup>1</sup> Nead's contribution was to identify the particular status of the female nude as something completely constructed, outside the experience of women themselves, and yet exercising a profound influence over the way in which women are regarded. In *Flesh after Fifty*, artists correct this record – providing us with messy, porous, fleshy bodies, embracing the abject in reclaiming the often expressed and frequently misogynist views of women's bodies as always cycling between idealisation and disgust.

The representation of women and their bodies is fraught territory. Visual culture's role in reinforcing, if not determining, the status of women in society at large has politicised the field of representation such that a woman's body can rarely speak just for itself. Even the term representation denotes a sense of an archetypal form, the one that represents the many. To be able to represent oneself, and not be subject to stereotypes, assumptions and prejudice, lies at the heart of feminism. Elizabeth Grosz has written about a form of feminism that is "a movement about the liberation of the subject."<sup>2</sup> Grosz herself has proposed that a feminist text should do three things: make visible the patriarchal assumptions that govern the production and reception of texts; challenge the status of the author as one of authority; and finally attempt to move outside existing discursive space by producing something that was, until then "unthought."<sup>3</sup> For Grosz, uncertainty as to

the manner of representation was shadowed by a more fundamental question as to whether women should seek to represent themselves at all, when a dominant framing of identity was so grounded in "binary oppositions."

Art provides an opportunity to disrupt these binaries and explore modes of depiction and expression that stand outside conventional representations. Multiple modes of representation exist; women's bodies now appear in art as ways of amending the record, strategic acts of visual hijacking: designed to acknowledge the presence of women in the historical record as more than objects. For some artists the patriarchal form of the nude presents a starting point – and their project is one of disruption, exposing its contrived and artificial status. Other artists have found it necessary to find a distinct female visual language or counter languages that enable different forms of representation of the female body. Appropriation and disruption of pre-existing images destabilise conventional modes of representation, and techniques of collage enable images to appear that are uncanny, invoking familiar tropes but refusing conventional readings.

The category of women itself is contested, divided and volatile, unable to be reduced to a single image. Its status as the other has allowed all manner of forms to develop, some unrecognisable as women, or as about women. The female subject is mysterious, sometimes wild, sometimes trouble, and often difficult to capture. These images escape the tropes of art history. It is in the moments of disruption, the messiness in transitioning from one art historical period or movement to another, that we see aesthetic practices that persist alongside conventional art historical periods. Artists seek modes of expression that speak beyond the teleological progression of art history, appearing as if parallel texts; recognised more for their dissonance than conformity, lying outside formal movements, an avant-garde of the idiosyncratic, never quite coalescing into a movement. Many women artists seek to break free of the artworld altogether and speak directly to a wider audience in what Estella Conwill Májoso has described as a cycle of call, response, and release, that underpins political public art.<sup>4</sup> At times shouting at and from billboards, these works respond to commercial fantasies of women's bodies, challenge popular beliefs about the place of women in public life, and the art becomes a powerful contributor to public debate.

If we think about the representation of the female body as being an act of Grosz's liberation of the subject and reject the concept of the fixed and gendered

subject, then a range of possibilities opens up for art practices which engage with the politics of bodies. This is inevitable given the need to both redress existing disadvantage within dominant structures of power, and simultaneously to reframe the terms of the debate. Rather than enacting a linear trajectory, depictions of women's bodies follow multiple pathways – reacting to myths and misconceptions, disrupting reductive and demeaning caricatures, and revealing awe inspiring strengths and powers. With a greater awareness of the extent of women artists' contribution to both historical and contemporary art, audiences now gain insight into the multiple possibilities of what it is to be a woman. Artists choose to use a diversity of materials, mediums and content to speak of the experience of being a woman – from self-representation to text, from the absence of the body to the foregrounding of its flesh.

The fleshiness of the body, and its materiality, is rarely explored in images of women. It is as if gravity does not exist, skin stays taut and the corporeality of our bodies is denied. Not so in Jenny Saville's or Lucien Freud's abundant, larger than life, and seemingly other than female, bodies that appear in their paintings. These bodies remind us that we are all matter, matter that has a life of its own, drawn by gravity to fall flesh on flesh, and porous in ways that denies boundaries and allows the inside to seep outward. In Saville's paintings bodies overlay bodies, some merge, some fragment. Limbs and loins become one and the materiality of a body is inescapable. Not nudes, these are naked bodies, and heavy with toil, the toil of work – and the work of being a woman.

In shifting from two-dimensional forms of the nude in painting to the sculptural forms, or photographic renderings of older women's bodies, flesh comes into its own. Flesh is the material that many of the artists have worked with – Ponch Hawkes' *500 Strong* presenting us with photographic images of the reality of women's bodies – of the wonderfully diverse shapes, forms, and weight of women's bodies. Their profound presence frames the exhibition, grounding it in the lived experiences of women. In these portraits, it is all on display, and the structural mechanics of the body clear for us to see. Gravity is at play, a force denied by so many of the conventional representations of women we see in the media: so ridiculously svelte, so two-dimensional that the laws of physics seem not to exist. Some

works capture the wonder of the face that carries years of experiences. These are not faces presented to be judged, to be corrected, to be "made-up" as if our lives are fictional works – but to celebrate the imprint of life as it has been lived.

What of the bodies that have never been recorded – women removed from the archive – too old, too fleshy, too unruly. These bodies are marked by absence – a haunting, much like a Rachel Whiteread sculpture – the form that is not present; or a trace or indentation of a body that was once there. These are equally the silences in the historical record, the missing characters in the narratives of nations, and the all too conveniently overlooked women who do not conform to norms that are not of their making. These unseen bodies are called into sight in Patrick Pound's installation. Through an interrogation of the archive, he retrieves and reuses the past as a resource for the recreation of the present. His archival search focusses on otherwise inconsequential images of older women, images that are given meaning when presented alongside each other, mimicking the *500 Strong* women, their subjects never knowing what the fate of the photograph might be, let alone that it would travel through time.

In this exhibition the female body breaks free of its art historical boundaries, exploring the porosity between the inside and outside, between movements and genres, between species, and between one body and another. These artists also engage with different temporalities: inter-generational time, perpetuity and the inevitability of the life cycle. Embracing Elizabeth Grosz's standards for a feminist text the artworks in this exhibition seek to disrupt conventional perceptions of women's bodies, ask us as an audience to think the unthought and see the unseen, and, in so doing, reinvent conventional ways of knowing ourselves and our bodies.

### **Kate MacNeill**

Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts,  
The University of Melbourne

- 1 Lynda Nead, 'Framing and Freeing: Utopias of the Female Body', *Radical Philosophy* 60, Spring 1992, p. 13.
- 2 Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989, p. 97.
- 3 Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995, pp. 22-4.
- 4 Estella Conwill Májozo, "To Search for the Good and Make it Better", in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, edited by Suzanne Lacy, Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995, pp.88-93.

# Ages of the Artists / Artists of the Ages

The conventional corporate career models with prescriptive timelines transposed onto the decommodified labour of an artist's practice expose how age becomes a potent marker in career expectations and the artworld's perceptions of success. Definitions of art are constantly shifting, and the sense of impermanence lent by the term 'temporary' in 'contemporary art' represents the field's dominating condition. Contemporary art's impermanence is equally apparent on a material level: large installations are frequently destroyed following their exhibition in a museum, while ten-year-old art magazines reveal how many artists from their time are now forgotten and unfamiliar.

In the search for stories of resilient longevity in the artworld during the last decade, one will find there has been a proliferation of older women artists born before 1945 who are being recognised by influential international galleries, museums and biennales. For example, British artist Phyllida Barlow gained representation by the influential gallery Hauser & Wirth at the age of sixty-four, and at seventy-three, represented her country at the Venice Biennale.<sup>1</sup> In Australia, there was the recent National Gallery of Victoria solo exhibition by artist Helen Maudsley, born in 1927, whose own career was overshadowed by that of her husband, and Rosalie Gascoigne who, like Louise Bourgeois, famously had her first solo show in her fifties. Such stories have become more frequent as the artworld slowly begins to pay respect to the work of women artists.

In the context of career highlights and my predilection for counting gender representation in the arts, I compiled some data on Australia's national representation at the Venice Biennale. Australia established its presence as a national exhibitor at the Venice Biennale in 1954, and thirty-nine Australian artists have since exhibited there; 12 women (31%), 25 men (64%) and 2 collaborative male/female duos (5%). Of the thirty-nine exhibitors, four are Indigenous women and three Indigenous men (18%).

In the first three Australian exhibitions at the Venice Biennale (1954, 56, 58), all of the six represented artists were men. This period was followed by a

twenty-year gap before Australia re-engaged in the event in 1978, following the establishment of the Australia Council in 1975. From 1978 until 1988, when the first temporary Australian Pavilion opened within the Giardini, ten artists were exhibited – nine men and one woman, Rosalie Gascoigne in 1982. The following decade, between 1990-99, women made up half the total of eight artists; Jenny Watson was a solo female exhibitor in 1993, Judy Watson, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Emily Kngwarreye were presented as a group show in 1997, and the remaining three exhibitions were made up of two male solo shows and one male group (2 artists).

During the 2000s Lyndal Jones (2001) and Patricia Piccinini (2003) started the new century off well for women, signalling the start of a fairer trend in terms of gender distribution. Since 2001, the Australian Pavilion has exhibited seven women (six solo shows and one group exhibition), with an additional two women forming part of a collaborative duo (also in group shows) out of a total of fifteen artists. In summary, women made up 60% of the artists representing Australia at Venice during the last two decades. Over the last two decades however, 90% of the curators have been women, while women make up only 20% of the commissioners.

While a couple of the artists living today are not exclusively represented by a commercial gallery, most enjoy representation at a relatively narrow selection of commercial galleries. This is a fact discussed by John Kelly, who has critiqued the curatorial and commissioner independence in selecting artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale.<sup>2</sup>

Since we began collecting data in 2008, the basic argument of Countess has been the simple fact that as a profession, artists and the contemporary art-world consider formal art training to be essential to identifying as a professional artist. Female identifying artists make up 75% of graduates from tertiary degrees in visual and fine art.<sup>3</sup> The most common characteristic shared by most, but not all artists, who have represented Australia at the Venice Biennale is that they have a formal art degree.



Another fact we can gather from this data set is the age of the artists when they showed at Venice. We found that the majority of the twenty-one male artists (72%) who have been exhibited at the Australian Pavilion in Venice did so when they were in their 30s or early 40s, essentially launching their international art careers. In contrast, our data finds that only four of the women artists (33%) were in this same age bracket, while eight of the women artists (66%) were over fifty years old when they achieved this milestone. By comparison, only four (16%) of the male artists were over fifty.

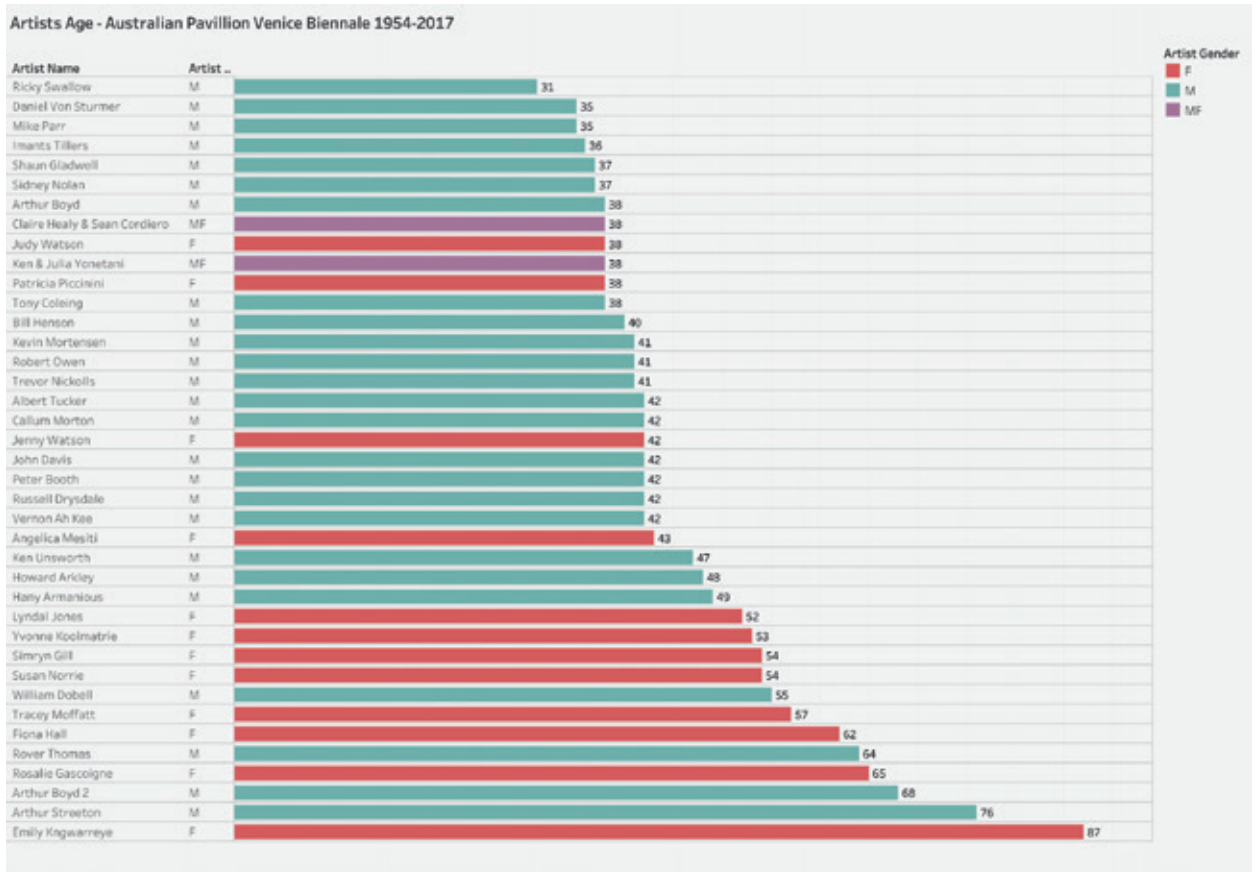
Long term data collected by Countess identifies that the largest cohort of exhibiting artists, particularly in museums and biennales are in their 40s, and this

sample shows on average a fifteen-year gap in age between male and female artists. Fifteen years is a measure of the extra weeks, months and years it takes for women to achieve the same milestones enjoyed by their male peers, who make up only 25% of the pool of professional artists.

### Elvis Richardson

Founder of Countess

- 1 <https://www.martagnyp.com/articles/miraculous-resurrections-the-contemporary-art-market-of-older-and-deceased-women-artists.php>
- 2 <https://dailyreview.com.au/roslyn-oxley9-gallery-and-its-33-year-winning-streak-of-artists-at-the-venice-biennale/35472/>
- 3 <https://countess.report/> and <http://thecountessreport.com.au/>



# List of works

## CATHERINE BELL

Australia, born 1969

*The Artist and the Mermaid* 2020

silent film

duration: 6 minutes

Courtesy of the artist  
and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

## CATHERINE STAUGHTON

Australia, born 1968

*Catherine Bell Lady Fishe Sea Rope*

*Stack Struck Sad Pick up Belt Cathy*

*Trip Tail Beach Sand* 2020

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

91.5 x 152.5 cm

*Catherine Bell Lady Fishe Sea Sand*

*Beach* 2020

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

76 x 101.5 cm

*Catherine Bell Lady Fishe Warm Water*

*Warm Fan Heatre Bathroom* 2020

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

101.5 x 76 cm

*Catherine Bell Lady Foot Fishe Sea*

*Sand Beach* 2020

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

91.5 x 152.5 cm

*Catherine Bell Sea Saltocea Sad Sand*

*Foot Fishe Lady* 2020

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

152.5 x 91.5 cm

*Poor Catherine No Bra Sad Crystell*

*Shell Star Foot Fish New Neck* 2020

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

91.5 x 152.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist

and Arts Project Australia

## PENNY BYRNE

Australia, born 1965

*"The Cloak of Invisibility"* 2020

two vintage ceramic figurines,  
Invisibility Cloak, two white plinths,  
audio sound track, two sets of  
headphones

dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

## MAREE CLARKE

Mutti Mutti/Wemba Wemba/

Boon Wurrung, born 1961

*Wrapped in Culture - Still Here 1:*

*N'arweet Carolyn Briggs* 2020

digital print on photographic paper

186 x 124 cm

*Wrapped in Culture - Still Here 2:*

*N'arweet Carolyn Briggs* 2020

digital print on photographic paper

186 x 124 cm

*Wrapped in Culture - Still Here 3:*

*Caroline Briggs Martin* 2020

digital print on photographic paper

186 x 124 cm

Courtesy of the artist

and Vivien Anderson Gallery,  
Melbourne

## MEGAN EVANS

Irish, Scottish, Welsh,

born on Wurundjeri land, 1957

*Dark glass #1* 2020

HD video

duration 5 minutes

*Dark glass #2* 2020

HD video

duration 5 minutes

*Through a glass darkly*

HD video

duration 7 minutes

*The Rush* 2020

digital print on display fabric

400 x 300 cm

Courtesy of the artist

## JANINA GREEN

born Germany 1944,

arrived Australia 1949

*Untitled No. 1* 2020

silver gelatine print hand tinted with  
photographic dyes

100 x 128 cm

*Untitled No. 2* 2020

silver gelatine print hand tinted with  
photographic dyes

100 x 128 cm

*Untitled No. 3* 2020

silver gelatine print hand tinted with  
photographic dyes

100 x 140 cm

Courtesy of the artist

and M.33 Melbourne

## PONCH HAWKES

Australia, born 1946

*500 Strong* 2019-20

digital prints on cotton rag paper

28 sheets: each sheet 61 x 151.6 cm

Courtesy of the artist

## HOTHAM STREET LADIES

established 2004

Cassandra Chilton,

Molly O'Shaughnessy, Sarah Parkes

and Caroline Price

*Unbridled Abundance:*

*Pink Bits 'n' Saggy Tits* 2020

Royal icing, food colour, aluminium

mesh, canvas, MDF

dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artists

## SAM JINKS

Australia, born 1973

*Mater* 2020

silicone, pigment, resin, hair, 24K gold

200 x 92 x 124 cm

Courtesy of the artist

and Sullivan + Strumpf

## DEBORAH KELLY

Australia, born 1962

*Fertility Cult* 2020  
paper collage, printed on linen  
345 x 145 cm

*Stone the Crows* 2020  
paper collage, printed on linen  
345 x 145 cm

*All Our Glory* 2020  
video loop  
duration: 3 minutes 11 seconds  
from documentation of the series  
*No Human Being Is Illegal (in all our glory)*. The video presents a selection of women and non-binary portrait subjects across generations:

Ruth DeSouza

Julia Featherstone

Kris Jepsen

Jinghuá Qian

Aku Kadogo

Ali Murphy-Oates, a Ngilyampaa

Wailwan woman

Simone O'Brien

Latai Funaki Taumoepeau

These portraits were produced collaboratively in public workshops over nine months, as a commission for the 2014 Biennale of Sydney, curated by Juliana Engberg. Now numbering 22, the original collaged portraits are part of the Wellcome Collection's permanent exhibition, *Being Human*, in London.

Courtesy of the artist and Finklestein Gallery, Melbourne

## NIKI KOUTOUZIS

born Greece 1985,  
arrived Australia 2014

*Social Contract Act I* 2020  
wax, resin, found couch  
100 x 150 x 130 cm

*Social Contract Act II* 2020  
wax, resin, found mattress  
90 x 180 x 110 cm

*Social Contract Act III* 2020  
wax, resin, found bed sheets  
70 x 190 x 90 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

## RUTH MADDISON

Australia, born 1945

Twenty-four prints from the *Women Over Sixty* series 1991/2019  
pigment prints scanned from original negative, unless otherwise noted

*Laura Thompson*

digitally coloured pigment print  
scanned from original negative

*Molly O'Sullivan*

*Pat Counihan*

*Peg Fitzgerald*

*Bebo Wood-Ingram*

*Beth Coldicutt*

*Bettina Woodburn*

*Box Hill Over 90s Club*

*Elsie Warren*

digitally enhanced pigment print  
scanned from original negative,  
oil paint

*Fleur Finnie*

*Hilda Cawood*

digitally coloured pigment print  
scanned from original negative

*Kathleen Langridge*

*and Margaret Walker*

*Kun Duk Yoon*

*Lola McHarg*

digitally enhanced pigment print  
scanned from original negative, oil  
paint and pencil

*Matilde Burgos and her daughter*

*Maritza*

*Mollie Dyer*

*Molly Hatfield*

*Northcote Hydrotherapy group 1*

digitally enhanced pigment print  
scanned from original negative,  
watercolour

*Northcote Hydrotherapy group 2*

digitally enhanced pigment print  
scanned from original negative,  
watercolour

*Phoebe Ahmen and Peg Cregan*

*Rosa Stone*

*Vera Nosedá and her granddaughter*

*Vera Nosedá*

*Vera Wojcik*

59.4 x 42.0 cm each sheet

Courtesy of the artist

## PATRICK POUND

born New Zealand 1962,  
arrived Australia 1989

*Bodily Records* 2020  
found photographs and photographs  
made from found negatives  
site specific

Courtesy of the artist,  
Station Gallery Melbourne  
and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

## GREG TAYLOR

Australia, born 1959

*Cunts ... and Other Conversations*  
2001-10

porcelain

40 of 153 pieces, each 8 x 4 cm

Courtesy of the artist

## PETER WEGNER

born New Zealand 1953,  
arrived Australia 1958

Fifteen drawings from  
*The Centenarians* series

*Lena Mitchell* 2014

*Edith Summers* 2015

*Hilda Heley* 2015

*Ida Flynn* 2015

*Joan Mc Clelland* 2015

*Marjorie Mitchell* 2015

*Jean Fairburn* 2016

*Lydia Bennett* 2016

*Sister Angela O'Donoghue* 2016

*Gwen Bendig* 2017

*Mim Edgan* 2018

*Mollie Jeffrey* 2018

*Alice Eastwood* 2019

*Mytrie Hooper* 2019

*Mavis Trigg* 2020

pencil and beeswax on paper  
64 x 46 cm each sheet

*The House Sitter* 2019

oil on canvas

154 x 154 cm

*Woman Resting* 2019

oil and wax on canvas

154 x 154 cm

Courtesy of the artist  
and Australian Galleries

# Acknowledgments

**Flesh after Fifty:  
Changing images of older  
women in Art**

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fleshafterfifty.com

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Abbotsford  
Convent.



John and  
Penny McBain

I HAD BEEN DOWN AFTER STOPPING  
HRT AND FELT SOMETHING NEEDS TO CHANGE

My body looks like a war zone, and I am one of thousands of  
+50 women with similar battle scars

## LOVE MY BODY

I had been married for nearly 50 years and nursed my husband for the last 5.  
In that time I lost myself - this is a good way to get back to the real me

For Mum who was beautiful despite her flaws and for  
my girls who are beautiful because of their flaws

BELIEVE IN EMBRACING THE BODY YOU HAVE,  
WHATEVER SHAPE & SIZE

It's nice for people to see the truth about the shape of the human figure

I want to experience what it feels like to be counted  
and see if it changes how I feel about my body

## MY BODY IS MY GREATEST STRENGTH

I google searched adjectives for old women and old men,  
I found 1000 mostly negative words to describe old women  
and only 8 to describe old men

## SAY YES TO NEW ADVENTURES

As an older woman I'd like to be represented  
in a positive and realistic way

We don't get to see real bodies - only airbrushed, curated images.  
It effects our self-esteem and erodes our wellbeing and power.  
And I want to face my own demons of self-image.

To promote fantastic wise knowledgeable ageing women

Comradeship with my Sisters

This project is a great way of showing we are not all  
photoshopped size 10. Ageing is inevitable and it's okay

At 53 and single I rarely show my body, and have negative feelings about it.  
I hope this project changes my attitude a bit

**NOT DEAD YET!**

I love art that makes an important statement

**I WANT TO CONTRIBUTE TO RECOGNISING DIVERSITY**

**I WANT TO DO STUFF I NEVER THOUGHT I COULD DO**

**I thought people needed to see what a double mastectomy  
and reconstruction actually looks like**

The strength, beauty and wear of an older woman's body  
should not be invisible or reviled

**Defying shyness and encouraging courage**

**HELL YEAH! Let's do it!**

Quotes from participants in *500 Strong*

FRONT & BACK COVER  
Ponch Hawkes, *500 Strong* 2019-20 (detail)  
Courtesy of the artist

