

# Flesh after Fifty

## Changing images of older women in Art

**“We are aged by culture rather than our bodies”**

Margaret Gullette, 2004

### EDUCATION KIT

This resource is designed to be used, or adapted, for exhibition visitors, and for students in the creative arts, media, women’s studies, English, health and all allied areas.

### STUDENT PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. Begin by using your imagination. You may wish to close your eyes. You are standing on a busy street. A stranger approaches, it is an elderly man - describe him in detail to a partner, his appearance, his posture, his face, his attitude. Now do the same for an elderly woman. Discuss any differences between them, apart from gender.
2. Think about the power of words: what are five words commonly used to describe an elderly woman. Now five words to describe an elderly man? What factors might influence how you perceive older people?
3. A series of experiments by Princeton University psychologists revealed that it only takes a tenth of a second to form an impression of a stranger from their face. Further, judgements, based on facial appearance play a powerful role in how we treat others, and how we get treated. What pre-conceptions do you have about older people? For the next few days test yourself when you meet or see a new person - what assumptions do you make about them in those first seconds?
4. What was your family’s attitude to nudity growing up? How has this influenced your view? Was your family’s attitude related to religious, cultural or other beliefs?
5. In the exhibition catalogue co-curator Kirsty Grant quotes photographer Eve Arnold’s advice “never reveal your true age.” What age do you assume some women wish to remain? Which age do you consider being really really old? Give reasons for your answer.
6. What would a soundtrack of old age sound like?
7. What is your definition of beauty? Can the concept of beauty have multiple definitions? What is the difference between human beauty and beauty in art for example?
8. What is your definition of art? Do you think it’s possible that a work of art can change people’s attitudes to anything? How can art make a difference to changing

people’s perceptions? Give reasons for your answer. Can you think of any artwork that may have changed people’s views on war, the environment, politics or health? Can you think of an artwork on which you have based your understanding or knowledge of a particular historical event or story.

9. In his play *As you like it* Shakespeare listed “the seven ages of man: the helpless infant, the whining schoolboy, the emotional lover, the devoted soldier, the wise-judge, the old man still in control of his faculties and the extremely aged man returned to a state of helplessness. What are the seven ages of women? List them and then add all the relationships and roles the women you know have in their lives.

### FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Research and name some powerful mythical female characters and the powers they had. Before you visit the exhibition research these earlier representations of women on your phone and keep images as a reference point when you visit the exhibition: Venus of Willendorf, Magna Mater/Cybele, mermaids, sheela-na-gig/sheelaWiki, Kali.
2. Find out how much women and men currently spend on:
  - cosmetics: nationally and internationally
  - cosmetic surgery: nationally and internationally
3. What was the Abbotsford Convent before its current use?
4. Words to explore and understand before you visit the exhibition: labiaplasty, matriarchy, patriarchy, conservator, hyper-realism, pornography, foot binding, muse, the male gaze

### DISCUSSION STARTERS FOR YOUR EXHIBITION TOUR

#### Catherine Staughton and Catherine Bell

The video and paintings created by “the two Cathies” set up a series of powerful contrasts and meanings. The works subvert the traditional role of male painters and their portrayal of the female form. In the video the painter and mermaid inhabit a liminal space, a borderland linking sea and land, reality and imagination, rich with possibilities for intellectual and physical transformation. What qualities of the mermaid are expressed in the works? Why do you think the artists chose this mythical character? Consider dis/ability, multiculturalism,

environment, hybridity, metamorphosis, and social issues in your answer.

Mermaids are laden with meaning and symbolism across many cultures. Stories tell of mermaids leaving the ocean after falling in love with a mortal and having to renounce their essential self, their tail fins and their voice. In one tale every step taken on land is accompanied by searing pain. What are the ways women adapt, silence or change themselves living in a patriarchal society?

The mermaid is healed and nurtured by the artist and returns safely and happily to the sea. What is the significance of the artist taking on the mermaid's form and wearing her necklace in the last scene?

The captions in the video remind us of the brief precious period of access Deaf people had to movies in the age of silent films. How do Deaf people access films these days?

Staughton's portraits are immediate, energetic and highly coloured. How is the representation of the mermaid in the video enhanced by the paintings?

## Penny Byrne

Byrne is a skilled porcelain conservator who manipulates and reconfigures vintage ceramic figurines she collects to address social and political issues. She often repaints them and places in groups to make a particular point.

What qualities of femininity does the figure on the first plinth convey?

Who or what creates the cloak of invisibility Byrne suggests in this work and how is it used? Why might some women actively choose to wear this cloak? What are other ways women of any age make themselves 'invisible'?

In some cities people auditioning for symphony orchestras play behind a curtain hidden from the view of the selection panel. Why might this be so? Can you think of other jobs where it may be an advantage to have voice and appearance rendered gender neutral/invisible in the job interview process?

### ACTIVITY

Listen to the songs that accompany this work. For the next few days listen carefully to the lyrics of the songs you listen to and see what is being expressed about gender roles, physicality and relationships.

Collecting ceramic figurines was probably more popular last century than it is today. Do you or any of your relatives collect them? If so, analyse the gender roles expressed in their pose and appearance. Look at the notes below on Patrick Pound concerning collections. Why might people collect figurines? Why do people collect anything?

Find images of other works by Penny Byrne, especially those where she remodels her collected figurines. Look at the themes and ideas she develops doing this. Perhaps you have figures at home you would be allowed to work on exploring your own ideas.

## Maree Clarke

This work reminds us of the prior ownership of the country, Naarm, or Melbourne where this exhibition is located, the women who came before and on whose shoulders we stand. Narweet is a respected community elder, the oldest elder of the BoonerWurrung mob, and the artist's relative. How has Clarke conveyed Narweet's power in this photo?

What is Narweet communicating by wearing the possum cloak, and the white ochre used in mourning? Discuss the links she is making with creativity, heritage, ritual, politics and tradition.

Wearing the cloak connects Narweet with her ancestors as does the river reed necklace, also worn by her daughter Caroline. This was originally given to people passing through country as a sign of safe passage. However, the necklaces are oversized and extremely long. Why do you think Clarke has increased the scale so dramatically?

Who are the respected matriarchal elders in your community or family? Why are they respected? Clarke made both the cloak and the jewellery with her nieces and nephews to pass on these cultural practices. What traditions have the elders in your family passed onto you?

### ACTIVITY

Working with a partner locate other works in the exhibition which involve a very different type of cloak, and a very different type of necklace. Discuss the similarities and differences in meaning, and in each artist's intention.

Back at school research what the Indigenous people in your suburb called the area and find out their name and language group.

## Megan Evans

Megan Evans is another of the many multidisciplinary artists in this exhibition. She works in painting, drawing, photography, printmaking, video and installation. Past and current works address issues of colonisation, racism and reconciliation. Evans has had a long involvement in community arts working with people from diverse cultures and on projects ensuring access and inclusion. The works exhibited here are underpinned by these threads, weaving together the joys and challenges of ageing, the passage of time and our responsibility towards others.

Evans shows her friends animated by conversation, relaxed in a favourite environment. She took over 300 photos of each woman and then chose up to 20 to exhibit - how do you think she selected these, what was she looking for? Why did Evans make the projection so large?

In the notes below Wegner is quoted as saying that photography "removes the artist from any connection with the sitter." What do you think about this in regards to Evans' work.

We are all attracted by mirrors. In seeing these fragmented 'selfies' how does Evans subvert the idea of the 'truth' we

think we see when looking at our reflection? What does it suggest about the way we project ourselves to others?

In moving through the installation you bring it to life experiencing the work physically rather than viewing a fixed object. Is Evans creating a metaphor for our lives perhaps, the way we negotiate our path, the way we speed through life? Do you think you would have had a different response to this work if you had viewed it prior to lockdown? Give reasons for your answer.

### ACTIVITIES

“Mirror, mirror on the wall” Evans suggests that when passing a mirror most people seek for imperfections. Sit down opposite a partner with your knees touching. Look into each other’s faces for 3 – 5 minutes. Tell your partner all the positive qualities you noted about them.

Take a series of photos of your partner on your phone and then select only 2 or 3 that best captures their personality. Discuss with them. Do they see themselves as you do?

Have you used the phone app where you can age yourself? Close your eyes and imagine your appearance as a much older person.

## Janina Green

What is going on here? Strong, sensual and confident Green’s voluptuous models seem at once familiar and yet wistfully self-contained. There is a calmness about them, but also a sense of mystery and fluidity. They are not fixed by a particular location or identity. The pastel surfaces of hand-painted colour accentuates different areas of each figure, highlighting flesh and body parts. This treatment contrasts vividly with the glossy ultra-slick, heightened colour digital images of so many contemporary photographs of women, particularly in advertising.

Like so many other works in this exhibition the very candid shots produced by Hawkes, Green and Maddison demonstrate a trust between artist and subject. How do you think artists achieve this with their subjects?

“We are aged by culture rather than our bodies” Margaret Gullette wrote in her book “Aged by Culture”, published 2004. Discuss what this means in relation to the women shown in Green’s photographs.

### ACTIVITY

How were these photos made? Walk around the exhibition with a partner and list all the different techniques and processes used by the photographers in the show.

## Hotham Street Ladies

Icing has traditionally been associated with the domestic sphere and ‘women’s work,’ particularly relating to nurturing others. Cakes are associated with celebration and anniversaries. Here icing is detached from its original function to create a delicious installation expressing the fecundity and ripeness of the female form. Why do you think the artists built an immersive installation? How might experiencing the work in this way impact on your response or understanding of it?

Smell is a very important part of the work. What are the ways women disguise their own smell? Who or what pressures them to do this?

The humour in this work links food, abundance, appetite and enjoyment. Yet for some women eating is linked with guilt and self-hatred. In her podcast *Ladies we have to talk* on 4/6/19 Yumi Stynes reported that 900,000 Australians, the majority of them women, have some form of eating disorder. Binge eating was the most common. Further, in a longitudinal study of 57,000 Australian women 78% of those surveyed who had a ‘healthy normal’ weight were unhappy with their size. What factors do you think might be driving this dissatisfaction? Who benefits from this?

Traditionally women have been seen as feeders and carers. But in what ways could society be seen to devour some women?

This group of 4 artists have worked together for many years. The ‘two Cathies’ also work together. What do you think some of the advantages and challenges would be of collaborating in this way?

## Ponch Hawkes

Over 450 women made appointments to be photographed by Hawkes for *500 Strong*. Many said they felt empowered being photographed nude, and proud of their bodies. Look at individual portraits. What do you think they were proud of?

The portraits also indicate that most women were having fun. What aspects of the photoshoot do you think they enjoyed? What are some of the advantages of being an older woman?

Why do you think some women decided to hide their faces?

Are these images pornographic? Give reasons for your answer.

The physical differences between the women in the photos reflect the greater diversity, particularly in regards to size, of the women now appearing on fashion runways, in commercial photo shoots and films. However, are there still some women not represented here? Who are they?

Many of the women photographed are part of a generation that had far greater access to education and to financial independence than their mothers. Access to contraception also allowed heterosexual women to make far greater choices about their lives. Which of these do you value more in your own life?

Will viewing these images alter the way you see your naked body next time you’re in front of a mirror?

## Sam Jinks

The development of synthetic materials and new technical processes in the 80s enabled Jinks to create these lifelike works which fascinate viewers with their attention to detail and the emotional power they express. Jinks had previously worked in film and said in an Irish

Times interview in 2019 "There's a language in film that's a lot easier than art. Art is hard, because you're trying to change someone's perception of the world. You're trying to move someone in some way." Do you agree?

Compare the techniques that Jinks and Koutouzis have used to replicate bodies. How does the difference in their processes reflect both the intention of each artist and the meaning of each work?

Jinks' style is sometimes referred to as 'hyper-realism' ('beyond-true to life'). Again comparing with Koutouzis, which work is "more real?" Give reasons for your answer.

However, Jinks has been reported as being uncomfortable with the term Hyperreal and makes his work either smaller or much larger than life size to create a gap between the real and not real to "make a space for feeling and imagination to come through" as the Irish interviewer explained it. What is your emotional response to this work and what role does the scale play in your response?

## Deborah Kelly

Collage involves layering often disparate materials onto a single surface, which in turn creates a layering of ideas. Like Pound, Kelly employs found images, using their former role to create new work. However, collage making by hand is time-consuming and exacting. Kelly selects images from old books, cutting, positioning, and visually editing to give them a new aesthetic context and symbolic function.

Look at a single figure closely and identify any separate elements used in the collaged surface. What is being depicted by the use of these fragments or parts? What further meaning does it give to each woman in regards to her identity? What tensions or conversations does Kelly set up in these works by using these re-imagined elements?

Some of the imagery refers to the ways women enhance their ageing bodies by using cosmetics and other methods. Do cosmetics disguise or highlight ageing?

The fabric banners create bold public statements akin to the billboards used extensively in advertising. Why has Kelly used this format and what might she be advertising?

Following up the idea of invisibility explored in Byrne's work which women are generally absent from advertising?

## Niki Koutouzis

Koutouzis uses the bodies of her family and friends to explore the ageing body. Look at the surface detail of each work carefully. Have her body casts enhanced or diminished your view of each body? What is your emotional reaction?

How has Koutouzis managed to suggest the inner life of each sitter? What does this interchange between inner and outer worlds suggest about older people and their relationship to the world?

How would you describe your inner world? How has it changed since you were a child? Has it become more important as you get older?

### ACTIVITY

It is often suggested that our personal identity and roles in life are culturally determined, we are products of our society. These figures are adrift from any cultural references, we can only make assumptions about their socio-cultural and biological lives. Thoughts, feelings and desires seem to be more important. Working in pairs make an imaginative leap and create a short profile about two different women in 5–10 minutes, imagining their personality, life-style, likes and dislikes.

## Ruth Maddison

"I see an individual's life as being immensely rich, deep and complex, and everyone a mixture of ordinary and extraordinary". How has she combined these elements in her works?

In this series of portraits Maddison uses text, giving each woman a voice to express her thoughts about her life and ageing. Some photos have been hand-coloured which adds a painting-like texture to the images, enriching the background, texture, skin tones and clothing. This gives both a lively and nostalgic quality to the surfaces linking each woman with her past and present. These are very positive images of older women fully participating in life. As well as remaining physically active what other factors may have contributed to their longevity?

In the catalogue Grant refers to "New beginnings" after menopause in reference to these women. Germaine Greer also writes of a liberation after menopause. Why might this be the case for many women? Think deeply about your answer.

In 2006 Maddison stated "I came to photography untrained in any area of image making and ignorant of all art theory. I picked up a camera when I was 30 and discovered a way to pursue a passion." Deborah Kelly wrote in 2014 "I'm a very lucky artist. I didn't go to art school, so haven't learnt the limits of what art can do, or how, or with whom". Hawkes was also untrained having 'picked up a camera while she was working as a journalist. What might be the advantages in approaching art making in this way rather than undertaking formal study?

### ACTIVITY

What are some of the challenges each woman may face at her age. In pairs choose 3 – 5 photographs and discuss how you imagine each person would meet these challenges.

These women have lived over many decades - can you list some of the social, technological and political changes they have witnessed in their life?

## Patrick Pound

Pound spends countless hours searching the internet for old photos, buying many on eBay. In his collection of "orphaned found photographs", Pound is presenting images from past eras that were once personal and often intimate. The sitters are relaxed and confident being taken by their friend or family member. What are the ethics of showing them publicly?

Pound has said how people "gather their thoughts through things, and things hold and express ideas". He thinks that "all collections solve puzzles and that his collections are puzzles already solved." What puzzle is he solving with these works?

Look at the photos carefully and note the backgrounds. How do the poses of various subjects differ depending on the setting?

When we take photos on our phones we can easily change them to distort or enhance the subject matter. Are they any less authentic than the photos that Pound has gathered? Give reasons for your answer.

Women are often responsible for remembering family birthdays and anniversaries, they become the repositories for memories and marking time. Does your mother or grandmother keep a box of photos? If so, how often does she or your family look at them? Think about the photos you take today - how will you preserve them? Do you want to?

### ACTIVITY

Ask your parents or grandparents if you can look through their old photos and reflect further on some of the questions posed above.

## Greg Taylor

These works express a central paradox in women's lives. Many women hide so much physically and psychologically. Here is the core of women's sexual pleasure, the place that links her to her birth mother and the site of delivery should she have her own children. Yet through the ages women have hidden their bodies and their bodily functions - hiding bleeding, menopause, greying hair, disguising their smell, and altering their bodies by surgery, undergarments or shaving. Who or what determines these behaviours?

How do you think these works were made? What do you think motivated the women who collaborated with Taylor in this work?

In much the same way that Hawkes' work celebrates the range and variety of body types these casts also highlight the endless variety of the female body. Can you estimate the age of the women whose genitals appear?

The number of women undergoing non-medical Labiaplasty, cosmetic surgery to reduce or reshape the inner lips of the vagina, for aesthetic reasons rather than medical need, has increased significantly in recent years. Why might this be so?

Find an image of the work *Origin of the World* by Gustave Courbet, 1886, (46.0 X 55.0cm, Musee d'Orsay, Paris.) Confronting and voyeuristic it was not meant for public viewing, but a commission for a Turkish collector. The work has been celebrated as in keeping with Courbet's rejection of academic painting in his search for realism. Discuss this with reference to Taylor's series, considering pornography, anatomy, provocation. In separating these body parts from their owners have women been celebrated or objectified by these artists?

### ACTIVITY

List the slang words used to describe female genitalia. Then the words used to describe male genitalia. Add words you know in other languages. Do these words reveal any gender differences in their meanings or the ways they are used?

## Peter Wegner

Western art is full of images of female nudes painted by men. Many share common characteristics: women are often portrayed in seductive or inviting positions; depicted sleeping, bathing or dressing; or shown with their head turned away, eyes averted, all poses which are passive and loaded with erotic possibilities. Additionally, most are smooth skinned, hairless, without visible genitalia. Describe some of the differences in Wegner's portrait of Fyona.

Traditionally nudes were depicted in an ancient, mythological, religious, romantic or exotic setting. Why might this be so?

What does Fyona feel about her body?

Wegner estimates that this painting took up to 20 hours. He and Fyona met every week to complete the work. He believes that portraits painted from photographs "remove the artist from any connection with the sitter." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

In this age of selfies and instant photography, which can be digitally altered, distorted or improved, do you think Wegner's paintings and drawings are more authentic portraits than those created by a photographer? Discuss by referring to photographers in this exhibition.

### ACTIVITY

In her catalogue essay for this exhibition Catherine Speck writes about Wegner's drawings of the centenarians showing "lined features and wrinkled hands", seeing "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". Hands reflect ageing quite dramatically with their spots, lines and creases. Look at your own hands - what do they tell you about your life?

Look at the hands of someone close to your own age and then compare with someone much older. What do they reveal?

This kit was prepared by Merren Ricketson, 2021