

Her Letters: Shifting perspectives in the global age of anxiety

**Group exhibition with Aylie McDowall, Laurel McKenzie and Rose Rigley
Curated by Christina Arum Sok**

Exhibition Dates: 11 - 30 March 2016

Opening Night: Friday, 11 March, 7:00 - 9:00 PM

Open House: Saturday, 12 March 2016, 11:00 AM - 7:00 PM

Her Letters: Perspectives from 3 women artists

An essay by Christina Arum Sok

The global age of anxiety refers to our world today, wrought with social, political and environmental issues that cause anxiety on personal and collective levels. There is much need for healing, reflection and consciousness in our world, as humanity needs to unplug from technology and the hectic pace of the conveyor belt lifestyle to recenter and heal. The basic human need to connect back with nature and the world around us will calm the modern anxiety and provide renewed perspectives on life.

The practice of women artists in contemporary art is diverse in medium, subject matter and purpose, yet there remains something to be said for the sensibility of the female. Moving beyond the stereotypical constructs that a feminist lens questions and problematizes, Her Letters celebrates the place and spirit of women. Women have naturally held the maternal role, instinctively close to Mother Nature, and intuitively connected to a spirituality that guides her feminine aura and sensibility.

Women are natural figures of rebirth, healing and nurturing. The three women artists exhibited in Her Letters are from the Tropical North Queensland region of Australia, where there is a strong connection to nature and the indigenous roots. Their practice holds a sacred place as they go beyond formal investigations in art and delve into their own spiritual and inner space. These women are not exploring techniques in paintings or pushing formal boundaries, but rather using the artistic medium to be an expression of a female psyche.

Aylie McDowall is sensitive and conscious of the natural world around her, embracing her intimate relationship with nature in her practice as she directly incorporates found elements from nature into her works. Her art is not preconceived, but an organic result of the flow of her brush, pen or pencil. Her practice is spontaneous and extremely meditative as she sees her artistic practice as a way for her to connect to her spirit. McDowall had been told by a man who sees past lives that she was once a Japanese male calligrapher who taught

calligraphy to Samurai wives. This has given her the confidence, inspiration and sensitivity to connect with her inner self and dig deep to be guided by her true spirit. McDowall relates the artistic process to a journey to open her third eye, and this has allowed her to see energy, her prana or life force.

The two works, X IS THE POINT THE POINT X and + IS THE POINT THE POINT +, McDowall presents is an expression of her prana. When she shuts her eyes, she sees her energy, which she recognises to be her prana; by focusing on this shape, she is able to relax and become more one with the Universe. Through this focusing and visualisation, we see a type of personal healing taking place, as McDowall allows herself to unplug from worldly stresses and takes on a spiritual connection with her artistic practice. She believes other people would also be able to see their own prana if they open themselves up to the possibility. Similar to how yoga and meditation practice allows people to physically experience the opening up of their spiritual side and experience tranquility, McDowall's art is also lending itself to this sensitivity, being aware of our inner nature and calling to quieten our minds and connect with nature and the Universe. McDowall's femininity comes across strongly and poignantly, as her identity as a woman, her spirituality at one with nature, her tribal background comes together to inform a practice very much guided by her heart and soul.

Rethinking the representation of women and their role, Laurel McKenzie presents Dress-ups, an installation work that speaks of female identity construction. Her practice is well thought out and extensively researched, as she acknowledges the role that art has played in the objectification of women. Her work investigates the persistence of stereotypes in the representation of women in contemporary visual culture. Directly in dialogue with feminist artistic practice of the past, where certain materials and processes that were traditionally associated with 'women's work', McKenzie re-evaluates material and process for their efficacy in empowering women and how new considerations may reinvigorate feminist concerns in contemporary practice. In this work, she presents a series of prototype calico dresses that are doll-sized but of real adult proportions. The popular female dresses of each decade spanning 10 decades have been recreated. Through these dresses the shifting social conditions and values that have determined the prescribed female identities of the times, and subsequent influences that have caused shifts and changes, can be charted.

These 100 calico dresses are not in its finished state but rather works in progress, prototypes, that could develop in one way or another, showing the susceptibility of the woman's position by outside influences. Overlaying the wall of dresses slung in chronological order by decade is a collage of projected images that consist of painted flesh

— the parts of paintings depicting nude women by male artists from the Western canon of art history. This juxtaposition of cloth and flesh questions the Western ideals of beauty, specific to women's beauty, which is more often than not subject to shifting values and societal pressures. This overlay of flesh suggests a superimposition of skin or forced values and perspectives on the outside of the dresses, a visual representation of the female body. The dresses signify the different layers women are forced to wear in each time period, as beauty is moulded to stereotypes. While clothing is typically supposed to conceal the wearer, here, McKenzie exposes the flesh magnifying the absurd parameters of 'feminine' beauty, and by projecting various images in a collage, she counters these ideals by fragmenting, distorting and shifting perspectives, which allows all of us to re-visit the place for women and the construction of the female identity. We are no longer clothed in a stereotypical lens, but allowed to evolve beyond the constraints of idealised feminine beauty.

Delving into personal narrative, and exploring the ideas of memory and intergenerational connection, Rose Rigley constructs an interactive installation, *I wrote a letter to my love...* This work was inspired by 12 letters a child sent to his late grandparents. These letters were simple musings of a young child about 'charming nothings' but what it gave insight to was much more powerful, as it signifies the close bond between a child and his now deceased grandparents. For Rigley, these letters give insights on loss, the emotions that are indescribable, and how the loss of loved ones and the bond that exists in memory are such a natural and rudimentary part of who we are as individuals. Rigley touches on the raw emotions that are part of human nature and nurtures free expression of these emotions in an act of healing and reconciliation. As part of the interactive element of this project, Rigley asks the public to send in hand-written letters that are written to 'lost' loved ones. Through these letters Rigley is able to communicate the universal experience of loss and also able to trace the patterns in the way we deal with loss, gaining a greater perspective on what it means to lose – whether by death or other circumstances.

The aesthetics of Rigley's installation is whimsical and feminine, encompassing feelings of nostalgia and the innocence of childhood. The emotion of longing and remembering loss can be closely associated with the inner child within all of us; Rigley's practice fosters these feelings as sensitively as a mother would care for her child. The waxy coat on the white desk is reminiscent of being on a cloud, as if sitting at the desk transports you into another dimension where you can be at one with the spirits of your loved ones, allowing us to escape our reality for a moment to be drawn into a spiritual world. It is through Rigley's interactive installation that we as the audience are able to partake and remember our loved

ones through a process of reflection, communication, imagination and ultimately, healing. Though each letter is individual and personal, we are able to witness a collective sharing of memory and together find peace within ourselves as we express all the remaining thoughts and feelings that linger before those loved ones we have lost. For a moment, we are able to reconnect and find a moment of contemplation as we sit at this desk filled with letters to lost loved ones.

By exploring aspects of spirituality and the shifting role of women in society, we begin to re-contextualise the female voice and understand the value and deep-rooted emotions that are unavoidably female. The works in *Her Letters* are a platform for shared human understanding, mutual respect, consciousness and a spiritual pursuit of reconciliation. The artistic practices of these women artists transcend the physical dimension, where it is not art for art's sake, but we see a sensitive expression that acts as a tool for the healing of humankind as well as an outlet for shared experience and understanding. These women's practices become a way to communicate a message of being connected to oneself as well as others and the Universe. Their works are feminine, as they embrace their femininity in their choice of subject matter, context, spirituality, aesthetic and expression.

About the Artists

Laurel McKenzie (Australia) has exhibited widely over a four-decade timespan, with solo exhibitions, numerous group exhibitions within Australia and internationally. Her work is represented in public and private collections in Australia and overseas. Using mixed media and installation, she creates work with a feminist focus. A current PhD candidate at James Cook University, she is conducting practice-led research which investigates the persistence of stereotypes in the representation of women in contemporary visual art and popular culture. Her practice acknowledges the role that art has played in the objectification of women and employs mediated representations of women as critique. Objectifying imagery is deployed back on itself, underlining to undermine.

Rose Rigley (Australia) uses assemblage, mixed media, encaustic and artist books to explore the human condition and its relationship with the environment. Rigley's work has a particular emphasis on memory, on finding narratives in the ordinary and mundane, and on seeking the universal in the personal. Rigley has studied at the Centre of Book Arts, New York, and undertook mentorships with West End Studio, (Brisbane), and Editions Tremblay, (Cairns). In 2010 Rigley co-founded artist-run-initiative Knock Knock, which has established a program of curated exhibitions and community engagement events aimed at creating a

dialogue about contemporary practice in the region. Rigley was awarded an Australia Council for the Arts ArtStart Grant in 2014/15 and won the 2015 Queensland Regional Arts Awards Wayne Kratzmann Acquisitive Prize. She currently teaches in the Visual Art department at TAFE North, (Cairns Campus).

Aylie McDowall (Australia) has a Bachelor (honours) in Fashion Design from RMIT. She now lives in North Queensland. She is the founder of Pattern By Design, an innovative design company specialising in digital print fashion and lifestyle products. She is the Vice President of the Cairns Art Society.