



AUTHENTIC DETERMINATION

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN
THE CRUTHERS COLLECTION OF WOMEN'S ART
AND BRIGID NOONE

Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

5 May – 18 August 2018

Brigid Noone in conversation with Gemma Weston

GW: In the exhibition blurb for *Authentic Determination*, you refer to the idea of the artist as a ‘whole being’. Could you elaborate on what that term means to you?

BN: I’ve been reflecting on the question, or maybe the conundrum, of how artists live, how they see themselves, and how they speak about who they are and what they do, especially after having met a number of artists, particularly similar peers from interstate who often manage to be in a lot of different roles. The last few years there’s been attempts to name these people who do multiple things, the ‘slashie’ – for example artist ‘slash’ curator, or curator ‘slash’ publisher – and this broader discussion about what that means for artists or arts-workers has echoed my own personal grappling with this, particularly the tension between being an artist and a curator, and also running Fontanelle¹. I’ve been thinking I should be less worried about categories – but often you do have to have an easy label for yourself so you can say who you are in a short bio!

Connected to that is trying to find a way in which the personal aspects of your life - relationships, family, the experiences that drive us, how we survive - can also sit comfortably within that framework. So I’m interested in finding a way that an eclectic ‘whole being’, which isn’t an easily branded thing, can be articulated, when there might be a lot of pressure to say “I’m an (insert thing here)”. Maybe I also have an envy of artists who have these singular, studio-based practices, who are artists first and foremost and who can separate that more cleanly from other aspects of their lives.

There’s an interesting tension there, because often that privilege of being an artist able to create something ‘universal’ and beyond the self is only afforded to some people, white men specifically, with everyone supposedly ‘other’ to this operating from the specific categories of their identities. Also in terms of labour, it’s often women who are asked to consider how different ‘roles’ or modes of work interact in their lives – I’m thinking about motherhood, domestic labour, so on. I’ve been reflecting on how those things play out in the Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art, especially in terms of self portraiture - how the Cruthers family interpreted that as quite an expanded genre, looking at works that described the artists’ family or friends, and beyond that, things either literally in their immediate field of vision or even works that express an ‘interiority’ as

an extension of the self portrait. For me this connects to your idea of the artist as a ‘whole being’ but also speaks to an extension of artistic vision into biography that isn’t made equally for all artists.

I think there’s a heightened awareness maybe (for women) of being compromised in a sense, that there’s always a consciousness of how their contributions are interpreted socially. Because of that I think women have a particular capability to inhabit multiple positions, and perhaps also to think beyond individual need. I’m talking from my experience now, but I do see a greater proportion of women contributing to artist run spaces, or giving a lot of volunteer time, or who seem driven towards collective contribution. Speaking personally as well, to be able to identify this as a trend means that I also might want to choose to do something quite different for myself soon! I think lately I’ve been going through a process of ‘disenchanting’ from my more ‘utopian’ ideals about art, and one of those things is the collective, the idea of a space of comfortable, universal ‘belonging’. I remember when I was in a housing co-op, which was this utopian idea of everyone contributing, but the reality is that it still does come down to a few really functional people shouldering the work. Or in terms of Fontanelle, for example, I often think of that as a collective but Ben² and I are running it and other people absorb it, or become a part of it in other ways. So I have to question my own desire for the collective, and its relationship to ego.

There are always power structures and hierarchies within the collective – except maybe the consensus meeting model that was popular in second wave feminism, but that dynamic just seems fraught in its own way, individual egos negotiating for hours until a decision can be reached.

Exactly. How can everyone be on the same page? It’s incredibly difficult, democracy is difficult and imperfect. But I think often when people reflect on a process of collaboration what they remember is the points of friction, because those are the points that growth comes from. And there’s a dreamy idea of equitable parts but the clash is part of the process too, it’s important. I think what I’m on is a path to embrace that difficulty, and those challenges and in a sense, having tried to embrace the idea of working collectively for so long, to find a way to articulate again what I want and how I can work best as an individual.

I think your selection of artists from the collection speaks to this tension – there are artists who are describing, whilst not necessarily the collective, at least their position within particular networks. But then there are also these statements of self determination, to go back to the title, or of ‘taking-up-space’, or of quite individual and private formal languages.

Look, it’s just kind of an amazing thing to make a mark as an artist. But the (Cruthers) collection itself has a lot of those overlaps and intersections – when you look back through the collection, you see how women have been in the mix of all of the other complexities of their existence, making art and leaving these records of their networks, their lives, their dreams, their disappointments - it does form a kind of archive of these intersecting lives. I think as an artist you’re always archiving your life in some way, and those networks and influences can’t help but be embedded in the work: the people who you share a studio with, the people you choose to collaborate with, who your partner is, the people you’re related to and so on. You mentioned, or someone mentioned... actually I was talking to (artist) Kate Power about the works I’d chosen to borrow for the show, and she said ‘Oh, so you’re working with all the artists from *Major Tender*³ again’. And you know, I didn’t actually realise that!

So perhaps we can talk a bit about the artists from outside the collection that you’ve brought into the exhibition. What influenced that selection?

I think because the collection is so focused on painting and works on paper, and because I’m so focused on painting and colour and gesture, that I was just trying to think about representing a broader range of media that women are working in, and a kind of diversity of practice, bringing in photography and video, for example. So you have the complexity of experience represented in a complexity of approach to media and style.

But as you mentioned, you have also chosen to introduce a group of artists you’ve worked with previously in a number of capacities – with Kate Power in *Vote for me*, your curatorial collaboration in 2016, with Salote Tawale and Jodie Whalen in exhibitions at Fontanelle, with all three in *Major Tender*...

I honestly don’t think I was thinking consciously in terms of continuity with other projects! Although I do think there’s a parallel here between loving the work and loving the artists as people, there’s a pre-existing intimacy there.

So, I guess the elephant in the room here as well is our relationship outside of this ‘professional arrangement’, that I’ve also exhibited – as part of a kind of ‘collective’ too, with Andrew and Jamie⁴ – at Fontanelle, and I was the fourth artist in *Major Tender*! This means I have to acknowledge my work as an artist in some way, which I’ve previously tried to keep very compartmentalised from my role within the institution, because I interpret it as a conflict of interest and also like to pretend it’s a private activity, which it’s obviously not. But I like that this project forces me to confront the messiness of my multiple positions, too, of my life, and also that it feels like a continuation of the conversations we started to have in *Major Tender*.

I think maybe institutions do like to separate and clearly define these roles and relationships, and I can see why. But I also think that beneath the appearance of those very clearly defined parameters are always less clearly defined relationships, people who work next to each other for very long periods of time, who know each other very well. Those interpersonal relationships inform a lot of projects in the arts, often more so than inter-institutional ones. People get very uncomfortable about that, but I see it as a strength. There’s a lot of embedded trust and a kind of inside knowledge that creates an interesting play between more formal modes of research and a kind of instinctual response. There’s an intimacy, I think, which can produce different layers of knowing.

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1. Fontanelle is a gallery and artist-studio complex with locations in Bowden and Port Adelaide, South Australia.
 2. Brigid’s husband, artist Ben Leslie.
Major Tender was an exhibition presented at the former Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia in November 2016, which involved Noone working on collaborative artistic outcomes with four artists.
 4. Jamie Macchiusi, Andrew Varano and Gemma Weston presented *New Wage* at Fontanelle’s Bowden gallery in November 2013, an exhibition which reflected on the closure of OK Gallery, an artist-run-initiative/commercial gallery they ran between 2011 and 2013.



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Based in Adelaide, South Australia, Brigid Noone has expanded her painting practice into an experimental hybrid of artistic and curatorial processes, often incorporating the work of other artists into her wall paintings and installations or working collaboratively to produce co-authored exhibitions.

Authentic Determination sees Noone apply her unique methodology to the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. Noone opens a conversation between a selection of works from the collection, her own work and the work of her peers, considering how the complex life of the artist as a 'whole being' can be embodied in their work.

The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art (CCWA) is the only public collection focused specifically on women's art in Australia. The foundation of the CCWA was a substantial gift of artworks made to the University of Western Australia in 2007 by Sir James and Lady Sheila Cruthers. The Cruthers family began collecting women's art in the 1970s, focusing primarily on portraiture and self-portraiture and isolating key areas such as still life, abstraction, early post-modernism and second-wave feminism. The CCWA includes works from the 1890s to the present day in a variety of media and continues to expand through focused acquisition and generous donation, aiming to contribute to and challenge dialogues about Australian women's art through exhibition, teaching, research and publication.

The CCWA is a registered Deductible Gift Recipient and may receive donations of artworks through the Cultural Gifts Program, facilitated by the Australian Government's Department of Communication and the Arts.

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Cover image:

Jenny Watson, *Self Portrait (Light Fire Version) For Myself*, 1980, pastel and wash on paper, 56 x 76cm, CCWA T23.
Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia



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