

Unladylike Acts



RECENT ACQUISITIONS FROM THE
CRUTHERS COLLECTION OF WOMEN'S ART

LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY

29 August - 5 December 2020



Nancy Borlase, *Muriel*, c 1990, oil on canvas, 35 x 25 cm. © the artist.



Madison Bycroft, *(Un)ladylike acts for every lady lacking (a gift to the king)* (video still), 2013, single-channel HD digital video, colour and sound, duration: 3.58 minutes, looped, edition 1 of 3. © courtesy of the artist

UNLADYLIKE ACTS: Recent Acquisitions from the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art

The title of this exhibition is taken from Madison Bycroft's video work, *(Un)ladylike acts for a lady lacking (a gift to the king)*, 2013. Bycroft suggested the title may have been inspired by the artist's reading of the work of French philosopher Georges Bataille.¹ The florid and somewhat antiquated language alludes to societal expectations of 'correct' behaviour based on gender, and to hierarchies of power whereby a lady, in a gesture of subservience, presents a gift to the king. Given that the video is now residing within a university public art collection, it is intriguing to consider who represents the 'lady', who is the 'king' and what is the gift.

Bycroft's video loops through a range of scenic landscapes shot primarily at sites along the west coast of North America between San Francisco and Portland, and also Iceland - destinations visited during art residencies. In each shot, a road or path divides a rural landscape and the artist appears crouching, as if ready to bolt, before moving swiftly to the centre of the path or road and squatting to urinate. As Bycroft states:

As the enactment is repeated it becomes a ritual; a kind of performance tool for pushing up against boundaries drawn by others, and finding ways to be and act freely and politically within a patriarchal, anthropocentric context.²

Bycroft draws upon Bataille's understanding of the ways in which idealised bodies are constrained and managed. Bataille's critique is founded on his notion of 'base materialism' and informed by his engagement with art history, ethnography and philosophy.³ Bataille advocated recognising, and investigating, the dark and untrammelled bodies that necessarily ooze and excrete bodily fluids. He asserted that focusing on intellect alone betrays the powerful, and often deconstructive, operations of the body and base drivers that lead to transformation – an unbecoming of the ideal.

Human life entails, in fact, the rage of seeing oneself as a back and forth movement from refuse to the ideal, and from the ideal to refuse...⁴

Bataille, in defying the surrealist's core group led by André Breton, argued that they were too tame, too sanitised and that the power of dream states, human desires – particularly sexuality – and the seamy underside of human behaviour were too regulated and curtailed.

From Bataille's perspective, this rendered the movement less powerful and indeed less valid as a means by which to transgress. Through the pages of *Documents* magazine, a dissident surrealist review which was published from 1929 - 1931 and largely edited by Bataille, images and text combined in often playful, critical, and surprising junctions between word and image. Bataille's anti-idealist sentiment saw him challenge the tenets of society – government, the church and leading art movements – within the pages of the magazine.

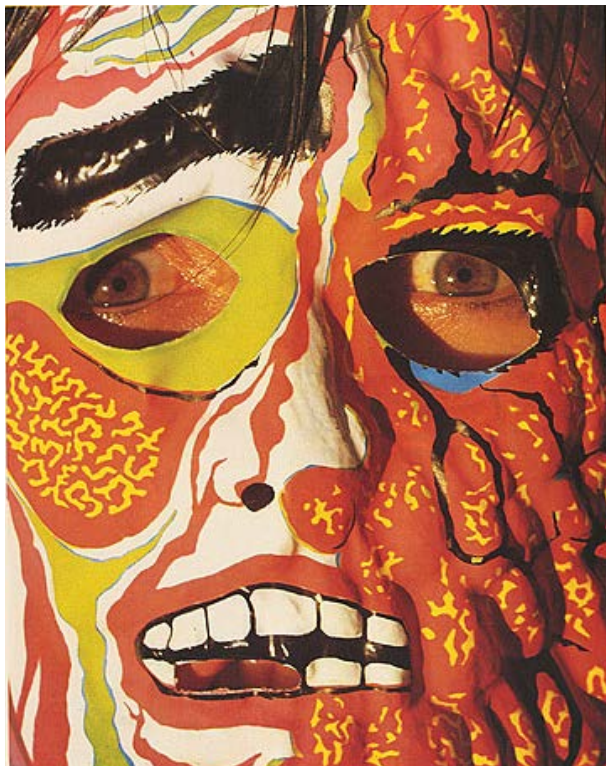
In reference to the surrealist, silent film made by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, *An Andalusian Dog*, 1923, Bataille wrote:

If Buñuel himself, after the filming of the slit-open eye, remained sick for a week (he, moreover, had to film the scene of the asses' cadavers in a pestilential atmosphere), how then can one not see to what extent horror becomes fascinating, and how it alone is brutal enough to break everything that stifles?⁵

Each of the artists represented in *Unladylike Acts* speak with the authority of those who have defied the constant demands upon women to be complicit, compliant, and conform to the expectations of others. That is, to act in a discreet and ladylike manner.

In *Self portrait*, 1987, Maria Kozic represents herself looking through a 'day of the dead' mask that is a gruesome, if highly stylised, illustration of a face distorted by decomposing flesh.⁶ Her eyes are enlarged and alert behind the mask, adding to the theatricality of the image. Kozic is an artist who effortlessly moves between genres and art forms, shifting in scale and quantity dependent upon her artistic intentions: for example, *Maria Kozic is BITCH*⁷ and Kozic was the artist responsible for releasing the towering, inflatable *Blue Boy* upon the metropolises of Sydney and New York.⁸

Kozic's use of the mask is also likely to allude to the Australian shock horror feature film *Body Melt*, which was directed by Philip Brophy in 1983 and for which she oversaw the effusive and excessive special effects as production designer. The face mask bears many similarities to the extreme effects that characterised the gory demise of mutated human characters in the film as they variously expand, explode and ooze. The film is one of many successful outcomes



Maria Kozic, *Self portrait*, 1987, screenprint, image: 60.8 x 47.9 cm, sheet: 77.4 x 56.9 cm.
© courtesy of the artist

of Kozic and Brophy's collaboration across film, music and video projects. As Brophy says of the *Bitch* music video:

For Maria's track *Bitch*, she imagined herself as the archetypal figure so scorned and disdained by those who generally view women as forever somehow stepping out of their place. Maria's lyrics condense a lifetime of hearing these taunts, from her family, her school, and the professional art world in which she would ultimately reside. But rather than bemoan things, Maria - like her artwork - is a celebration of fuck-you attitude combined with self-mocking theatricality.⁹

Conflation of the mask with her sense of self, in this portrait, suggests that this image may be an accurate representation of Kozic, challenging the standard metaphor of the mask as concealing a true self beneath. Indeed, it is a nod to the heterogeneous public selves presented by artists via their work, and the irreconcilable nature of a single identity's many parts.

Traces of performance

Bell climb, Chora, Pigeon House Mountain, 2005, is a large and weighty sculpture that is built from a hollow clay form. It specifically refers to Toni Warburton's experience of, and familiarity with, this geological feature in Morton National Park, NSW on the traditional land of the Yuin people.¹⁰ The work was created while the artist was in the gold-mining town of Hill End, New South Wales, from blank clay forms that were thrown by Lino Alvarez.¹¹ The artist worked the clay membrane to define forms that alluded to rocks, plants, and atmospheric effects - specific details of the site that she recalled from her repeated walking of the mountain trail.

Pigeon House Mountain is a geological remnant from ancient times and the site is imbued with connections to many indigenous histories. In more recent colonial history the site was named 'Pigeon House Mountain' by Lieutenant (and later Captain) James Cook during his 1770 voyage along the east coast of the continent. The sandstone outcrop is also known by the Aboriginal words 'Didthul' and 'Balgun' and is recognised as a sacred place that features in many ancestral stories.¹²



Toni Warburton, *Bell climb, Chora, Pigeon House Mountain*, 2005, hand-painted ceramic, approx. 66 cm diameter, 62 cm high. © courtesy of the artist.
Photography: Greg Piper

In this sculpture, Warburton has condensed differing measures of time - geological, mythic and personal. She uses words from local Aboriginal peoples to mark the steps that have been trod for thousands of years, tracing the path up the mountainside:

Walking threads in a continuum of people, ancestors, land and culture.
Dhurga and Dharawal.¹³

Performative and ritualised walking on the land is central to Warburton's process, and thus her inclusion of the word, *Chora*, in the title. She uses the Greek term as defined by Plato to describe the void from which all things become, but also a place or locus with which one is familiar.¹⁴ *Bell climb, Chora, Pigeon House Mountain* becomes a tangible form upon which the artist can "stage memories of places that elide into veils of other places".¹⁵ It triggers a re-presentation of memories and snatches of past experiences. The form becomes a platform upon which Warburton replays memories of places, and indeed invites the viewer to do the same.

Sarah Contos' *Elephant* and *Heavily weighted performance instinct* both date from 2014, and are from a body of work that was created in response to her travel and residencies abroad.¹⁶ In *Elephant*, a ceramic form is the scaffolding upon which hang strips of fabric threaded with gold-coloured and large, hand-made earthenware beads which contrast with bright yellow smiley emoji beads. Multiple memories and histories are embedded within these objects, even as they become part of Contos' personal narrative and artistic practice.

Heavily weighted performance instincts is a textile-based assemblage which hangs from a bar decorated with carved wooden phalluses.¹⁷ The work consists of a strange amalgam of materials, and their associated histories, to pull in and out of focus. Indeed, the title of the work alludes to internal tensions as we recognise various elements that clash and jostle in this one work. Contos has had theatrical training and has a well-honed sense of framing and staging. She utilises a photograph of Australian-born opera superstar Dame Joan Sutherland to create a mask which begins to disassemble and unravel. This body of work follows on from Contos' reactivation of found album covers that began in 2010 and continued in her *Souvenir* series, 2011. Drawing upon disparate



image above: Toni Warburton, *Bell climb, Chora, Pigeon House Mountain* (detail), 2005, hand-painted ceramic, approx. 66cm diameter, 62 cm high. © courtesy of the artist.
Photography: Greg Piper

image right: Sarah Contos, *Heavily weighted performance instincts*, 2014, screenprint, oil and collage on linen, bleached velveteen, kanga (printed cloth purchased in Nakuru, Kenya, 2013), leather, Jingle Cones (purchased in Gallup, New Mexico, USA, 2013), carved wood (purchased in Bali, Indonesia, 2013) glazed earthenware, chain, elastic, beads and thread, 140 x 120 cm. © courtesy of the artist.

influences, from pop culture to Greek mythology, she merged history and fiction in the creation of modern gods and deities. *Heavily weighted performance instincts* is a predominantly sepia-toned work that elicits Carl Jung's instinct of 'reflection' in the form of nostalgia in a similar way to her album covers.¹⁸

Nancy Borlase (1914 - 2006) painted portraits of women which are devoid of sentimentality. Borlase was a practicing artist and an art critic whose reviews were published in the early 1970s.¹⁹ In the 1990s, and in her late seventies, Borlase began a series of portraits of women who lived in retirement homes. This practice was likely to have been driven by a sense of empathy, and was a consciously egalitarian decision to represent individuals who were not necessarily acknowledged as 'leaders' or public figures of note. Borlase recognised that the bodies of these individuals bore evidence of the strength and hard work that had sustained generations of families. Loosely and expertly painted, they detail recognisable characteristics and focus on the sitter without the visual distraction of furniture or background detail. In *Muriel* we see a seated, full-length figure, hunched-over and cradling a mug in her lap. Her weight rests forward and she counter-balances on the balls of her bare feet.

Muriel's posture is echoed in Penny Bovell's large drawing, *Dream I*, 1980. Bovell rubbed graphite over her naked body and then lay upon the paper to provide a body print, with the tooth of the quality art paper holding the loose graphite. The drawing was produced in response to a dream that occurred as the artist slept within her newly painted and inhabited squat in a warehouse in Wapping, London.²⁰ Inspired to write down dreams on the basis of her engagement with psychoanalysis via reading Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, the text is a word-for-word transcription of her diary entry. The work is also informed by feminist art practices and conceptual art as experienced during her time in London (1979 - 1983).²¹

Toni Warburton's explanation of the significance of the medium of drawing resonates with Bovell's practice:

A drawing can be like a score for instrumentation, a notation for performance in another medium.²²

Bovell's drawing is a transcription of a dream, in which the defining characteristics were sound and an oppressive sense of the aberrant, made into tangible form and marked by the bodily trace of the dreamer/artist. Influenced by her work with performers from the Laban Dance School, the drawing is documentation of the ephemeral act as she pressed her body upon the page. The body print and associated words combine in a homage to the creative source that was Bovell and her dream. It is also a visual record of the seepage between Bovell's conscious and unconscious worlds.

Collective engagements

Kate Just knitted the self-portrait *In my skin*, while in Krems, Austria during a three-month residency in 2011. The work was in response to her encounter with the 'Venus of Willendorf', a Palaeolithic figurine dated c 25000 BCE. In knitting her self-portrait, Just responded to conjecture that the figurine may have been a very early self-portrait by an ancient female textile maker. She was conscious that she was engaging in a long-standing tradition of makers (mostly women) who worked together to create fabric for themselves and their families. In the creation of this work, part of her PhD, the artist interrogated contemporary and gendered understandings of skin – such that male skin is associated with strength and impenetrability and female skin is seen as containing the fluidity and amorphous 'nature' of females.²³ *In my skin* exists as the artist's skin, a life-size presentation of her body as crafted by her own hands. Embedded within the knitted stitches is the experience of working with the local community of makers in Austria, and of her various engagements during the residency. The loose threads, passages of varying tensions and uneven stitches speak of the experience of making, just as they speak of the scars and wear experienced by living human bodies. This art object exists as a skin that has been cast aside, yet some aspect of the artist seems to linger and remain embedded in the work.

The artists in this exhibition actively refute essentialising notions of femaleness and femininity, and the limitations of binary understandings of gender, to offer different ways of representing a diverse range of experiences. Without question or need for justification, these contemporary artists present their creative output for display in the public realm and in doing so determine that they as



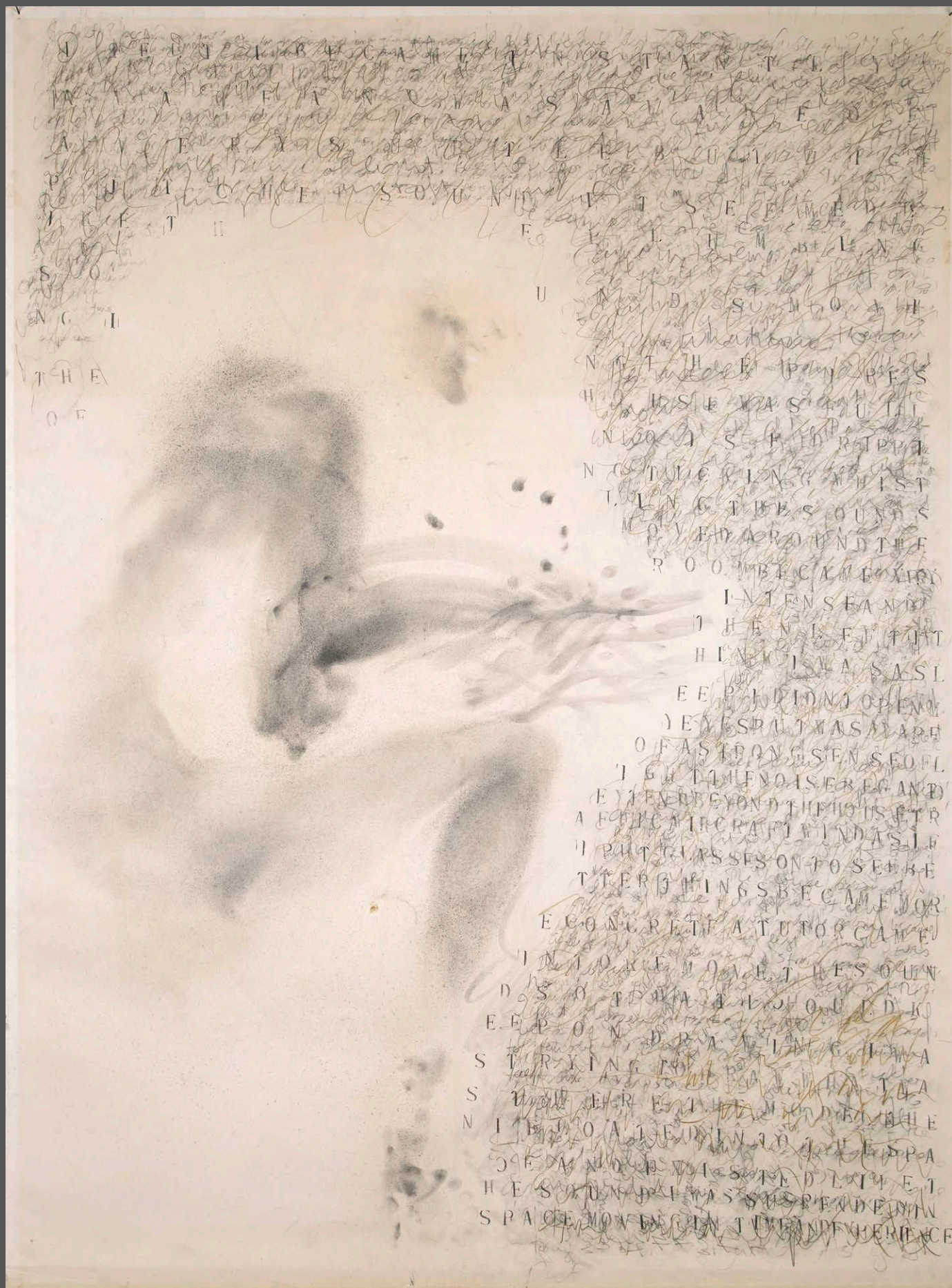
creators, and their work, are visible. As the Lawrence Wilson Gallery reopens it seems appropriate that these works, in their physicality and materiality, beckon members of the University community and public back to the gallery to engage with evocative and powerful objects that speak of our commitment to each other and to creativity.

And the gift? Perhaps the gift is these representations of particular bodies, not as fetishised or sexualised bodies, but as the source of creative acts. The art on display in this exhibition exists as evidence

of artists as dynamic and creative agents. In realising these pieces, they have actively negotiated structures of power and societal expectations that seek to manage and control; to push against prescribed roles; to live, bleed and seep beyond imposed structures and accepted orthodoxies.

Lee Kinsella, Curator

1. Email communication with the artist, 30 March 2020.
2. Artist statement for *Gift to the King*, p. 2, UWA artist file.
3. Hollier, Denis, "Surrealism and its Discontents" in *Papers of Surrealism*, "The Use-Value of Documents", Issue 7, 2007, p. 11., <https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/files/63517391/surrealism_issue_7.pdf>, accessed 31 July 2020.
4. Georges Bataille, "The Big Toe" in George Bataille (trans Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr.), *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927 – 1939*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, pp. 20 – 21.
5. Georges Bataille, "Eye", in George Bataille (trans Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr.), *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927 – 1939*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986, p. 19, note 1.
6. This was one of a suite of prints commissioned from 25 Australian artists by the National Gallery of Australia to celebrate the Bicentennial year in 1988.
7. *Maria Kozic is BITCH*, 1990, billboard works installed in Sydney and Melbourne in which the artist exploited '50s film tropes of the woman/monstrous oversized creature out of control.
8. *Blue Boy* was installed on the rooftop of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney as part of the *Maria Kozic: The Birth of Blue Boy* exhibition, 30 October – 22 November 1992 and was presented as part of the SoHo Arts Festival on the rooftop of Cristinerose Gallery on West Broadway in 1996.
9. Quote from Philip Brophy's webpage, <<http://www.philipbrophy.com/projects/mariakozicmksound/infoV.html>>, accessed 27 July 2020.
10. <<https://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/things-to-do/walking-tracks/pigeon-house-mountain-didhul-walking-track>>, accessed 31 July 2020.
11. Email communication with the artist, 22 July 2020.
12. <<https://ictv.com.au/video/item/7323>>, accessed 30 July 2020.
13. Toni Warburton, PowerPoint presentation: "Walking in Limestone Country", artist talk presented at the National Gallery of Australia for the exhibition, *Transformations: The language of craft*, curated by Robert Bell, 11 November 2005 - 29 January 2006, p. 21; <<https://www.toniwarburton.com.au/artist-talks/>>, accessed 30 July 2020.
14. Conversation with the artist, 3 August 2020.
15. Toni Warburton, "Walking in Limestone Country", p. 24.
16. The works were exhibited in Sarah Contos' solo exhibition *Shadowboxing*, Gallery 9, Sydney, 2014.
17. Acquired by the artist in Bali, Indonesia. These objects were bought as bottle-openers, conversation with artist, 3 August 2020.
18. Carl Jung (1875-1961) was a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Jung identified five prominent groups of 'instincts': creativity, reflection, activity, sexuality and hunger. For discussion of his use of the term 'instinct' see C.G. Jung, "Instinct and the Unconscious. III" in *British Journal of Psychology*; Nov 1, 1919; 10, 1.
19. Art critic for *The Bulletin* and later the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the early 1970s.
20. Conversation with the artist, 20 July 2020.
21. Email communication with the artist, 5 August 2020. This work is one of a series of experimental drawings that marked a break from Bovell's previous, and more conventional, artistic practice.
22. Toni Warburton, "Walking in Limestone Country", p. 44.
23. Kate Just, Chapter 3, "Venus Was Her Name: Reimagining History Through an Unlikely Cross Lineage in Skin", pp. 70 – 125, PhD thesis, *The Texture of Her Skin: A Studio Project Excavating and Reweaving Visions of Female Subjectivity*, Monash University, July 2013, <<https://katejust.com/phd-texture-of-her-skin>>, accessed 22 July 2020.



Penny Bovell, *Dream I*, 1980, graphite and pencil on paper, 140 x 100 cm. © courtesy of the artist.

LIST OF WORKS

All works are from the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

Nancy Borlase

Muriel, c 1990, oil on canvas, 35 x 25 cm

Margery, c 1990, oil on canvas, 43 x 34 cm

Penny Bovell

Dream I, 1980, graphite and pencil on paper, 140 x 100 cm

Madison Bycroft

(Un)ladylike acts for every lady lacking (a gift to the king), 2013, single-channel HD digital video, colour and sound, duration: 3.58 minutes, looped, edition 1 of 3

Sarah Contos

Heavily weighted performance instincts, 2014, screenprint, oil and collage on linen, bleached velveteen, kanga (printed cloth purchased in Nakuru, Kenya, 2013), leather, Jingle Cones (purchased in Gallup, New Mexico, USA, 2013), carved wood (purchased in Bali, Indonesia, 2013) glazed earthenware, chain, elastic, beads and thread, 140 x 120 cm

Elephant, 2014, glazed earthenware, kanga (printed cloth purchased in Nakuru, Kenya 2013), leather, bleached velveteen, elastic, beads and thread, 45 x 20 x 20 cm

Kate Just

In my skin, 2011, hand and machine knitted acrylic yarn, 178 x 88 x 1 cm

Maria Kozić

Self portrait, 1987, screenprint, image: 60.8 x 47.9 cm, sheet: 77.4 x 56.9 cm

Toni Warburton

Bell climb, Chora, Pigeon House Mountain, 2005, hand-painted ceramic, approx. 66 cm diameter, 62 cm high

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I would like to acknowledge the Noongar people who remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of the land on which UWA stands.

Gemma Weston is responsible for this exhibition concept, and it has been my privilege to realise it as we reopen the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery after the COVID-19 lockdown.

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Signwriters: Peta Barwise and Jae Criddle

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Cover image: Kate Just, *In my skin* (detail), 2011, hand and machine knitted acrylic yarn, 178 x 88 x 1cm. © courtesy of the artist. Photography: Catherine Evans



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