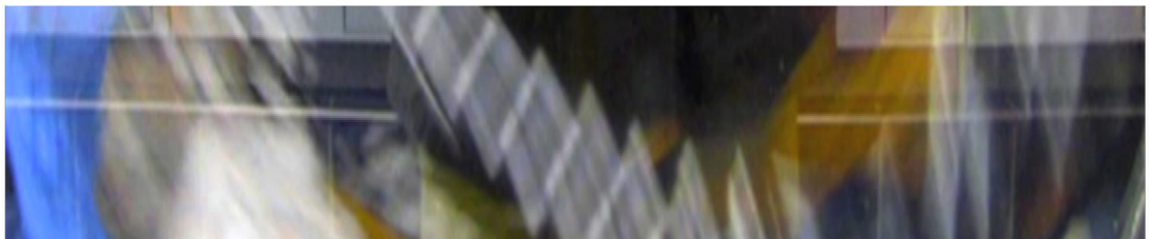




# c u r r e n t



## Exhibition Catalogue

Courtney Coombs  
Tor Maclean  
Leena Riethmuller  
Dominic Reidy

Camille Serisier  
Sancintya Simpson  
Tyza Stewart  
Bindii Thorogood



**current**

**an exhibition about feminism**

**Curated by Lisa Bryan-Brown**



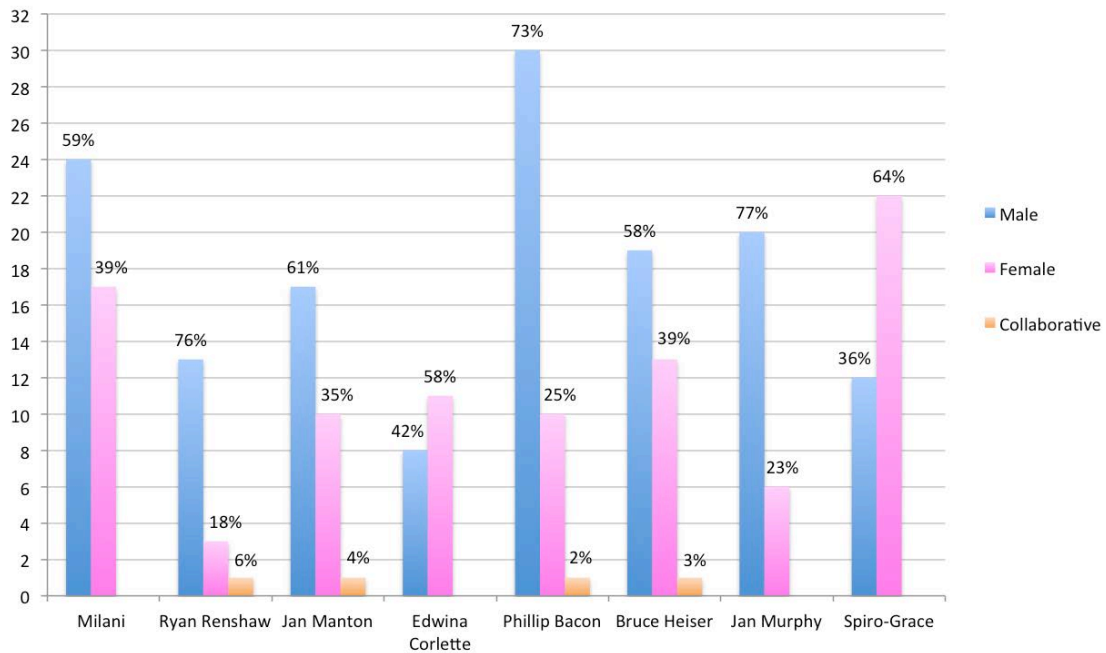
Sancintya Simpson *Indramati/Durga*

## Currency: Curating Current

Feminism: few 'isms' have remained so actively contentious for such a long time. As a movement it has seen women make extraordinary progress in many respects, especially in western societies, progress feminists past and present can be proud of. However many of the core drivers of feminism remain pertinent equality issues, even in 2012. Western women are still fighting to achieve equal pay for equal work, navigate the 'family versus career' battle, assert their right to govern their own bodies, and are struggling to break glass-ceilings in almost all fields<sup>1</sup>. All the while their sisters in cultures that have been less than receptive to the progress of feminism still fight to attain far more basic human rights, like voting and education<sup>2</sup>. Despite the irrefutable validity of these motivations, feminism has garnered a stereotypically radicalised image and fewer people are confident identifying as feminists, a 2008 poll by The Daily Beast revealing that only a mere 14% of the thousand surveyed identified as feminists<sup>3</sup>. A devastating statistic, it is contrasted by the slightly more encouraging 58% of respondents in the same poll who professed to believe men and women to be equal, the concept that forms the cornerstone of feminist philosophy. The gap between these two figures implies that working toward reducing the stigma surrounding the label 'feminist' is one of many challenges that contemporary feminist activists face to ensure that a strong culture of feminist community persists.

Brisbane certainly has an active feminist community, and within the art scene the ARI *Level* deserves a lot of credit as an emerging arts space that foregrounds feminist issues and female artists. In visual art a divide between the success of male and females prevails, with the graph over the page comparing Brisbane's commercially represented artists by sex<sup>4</sup>. Unfortunately statistics like these are typical of galleries world wide, which is why initiatives like *Level* are so important for helping to build the careers of female artists and asserting the importance of feminism within artistic discourse. *Current* was conceived from a similar curatorial ethos, aiming to initiate dialogue about contemporary feminism and explore the legacy of earlier feminist progress. Exhibiting new works by eight Brisbane artists, *Current* investigates the relationship between local feminist art production and the wider feminist movement.

**Artists represented in Brisbane commercial art galleries by sex**



With a focus on highlighting the broad range of feminisms active within the artistic community of Brisbane, the exhibition aligns with notions of a diverse multiplicity of feminisms. In their 2007 *Global Feminisms* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum curators Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly surveyed feminist art from around the world, displaying a transnational selection of works that looked past Euro-American centres to reveal the breadth of feminist art production internationally<sup>5</sup>. *Global Feminisms* profoundly influenced the practice of feminist curation, primarily through its utilisation of “relational analysis” that visually juxtaposed artworks in a way that encouraged multiple readings. Although this installation technique is not a particularly recent development in curatorial practice, its use within thematically feminist exhibitions is particularly effective for communicating the collective complexity of feminisms through non-linear display<sup>6</sup>. Relational installations create situations which often challenge viewers, encouraging them to reconsider initial readings of works and work groupings, and can combat essentialised interpretations of exhibitions.

Through the utilisation of a relational installation method, *Current* aims to demonstrate the broadness of feminist art practices as they occur even within this group of eight artists. Throughout the exhibition themes of gender, sexuality, femininity and masculinity, identity, the body, beauty, and history are each addressed from several perspectives by multiple

artists. The recurrence of these themes is emphasised through the exhibition's physical arrangement, sometimes to highlight similarities and sometimes to highlight differences. The artwork groupings are chosen to inform the readings of each work and heighten the viewing experience of the exhibition, as Jerry Saltz phrases it, "sometimes placing one work of art near another makes one and one equal three."<sup>7</sup>

### **The victors write history: Camille Serisier and Sancintya Simpson**

One series of artworks that has played a key role in determining the layout of the exhibition are **Camille Serisier's** *Last in Worst Dressed* series. Using her chosen medium of drawing as a metaphor for authorial construction, these eight works consider societies' historical narratives. Each work references symbolically persistent associations; the moon and nature as feminine, the sun as masculine, and death as the purview of goddesses. These associations, the product of myths from various ancient cultures, have been rendered redundant by post-modern theory, and Serisier cleverly subverts their symbolic meanings to comment on how the history of the world is recorded. The relationship between the photographs and the watercolours is key, with the watercolours representing a wholly authorially constructed reality, while the photographs (performative drawings) act as embodied enactments. In the photographs authorship masquerades as a collaborative effort between the artist, photographer and subject, much like history as actually influenced equally by all participants, though in fact the composition is completely controlled by Serisier, as similarly history is constructed from only one dominant perspective.

Working with the subjects, each of whom are involved in *Current*, to achieve the photographs Serisier reflexively responds to the concept of the exhibition. *Circle and Moon* depicts Courtney Coombs, *Boat and Bright* Dominic Reidy, *Triangle and Owl* Tyza Stewart, and *Skull and Death* myself,



Camille Serisier *Boat and Bright*



Camille Serisier *Circle and Moon*



Camille Serisier *Skull and Death*

Lisa Bryan-Brown. On one level, for those who recognise the subjects, the images relate specifically to that person's practice and role in *Current*, however the subjects also operate generically as one 'every-man' figure and three 'every-women' figures. Serisier then translates the photographs into watercolour drawings, removing the figures from their images to varying degrees. By including the hands of the female subjects in the drawn works Serisier references revisionist practices, and the way women have had to fight retrospectively to receive recognition for the role they played in shaping history. Conversely, in *Boat and Bright* the figure is removed completely as the historical narrative can be assumed to be written from the male perspective. This leaves the image seeming strangely incomplete, as without the presence of any subject to activate the narrative the viewer is denied the full context, just as recorded histories are incomplete when they deny the identities of the women involved in shaping them.

Also utilising history is **Sancintya Simpson's** series *Women Past/Present*, eight glowing lightbox images that see the artist collaborate with strong women from her personal life to create these dual portraits. With a similar method to the quintessential feminist work *The Dinner Party*, by Judy Chicago, Simpson worked with women from her community to draw comparisons between influential women who have achieved established roles in a male-dominated historical narrative, and her friends and family.





Sancintya Simpson *Kate/Boudica*



Sancintya Simpson *Louise/Elizabeth I*

Representation was an important consideration: Simpson was interested in empowering the subjects by having them each author their own portrait, allowing them ownership of their own representation. Collaborating with her selection of eight women, Simpson worked closely with each subject to research and choose a figure they personally connected with, and then photographed each individual in a way that blended their image with that of their chosen figure.

Some truly important female figures shine through Simpson's portraits of her community. Her mother, Indarami, is paired with the Hindu goddess Durga, a fearless warrior who is simultaneously a maternal figure. Her friend Kate is paired with Boudica, a Celtic warrior responsible for leading her people in revolt against the Roman invaders. Through Louise shines the regal Queen Elizabeth I, Sarah glows with Buddhism's Green Tārā, Clare with the Roman goddess Diana, and Leanne with Egypt's Cleopatra VII. Hillary, a particularly active member of Brisbane's LGBTI and drag communities, chose the Queen of Sheba, an Ethiopian monarch consistently portrayed as hairy but feminine, and Eileen elected Zenobia, who she related to through regional heritage. The specificities of the relationship between each subject and their chosen figure is complex and understanding can only come through knowing each subject closely- in this way, Simpson's *Women Past/Present* becomes more than just a series of portraits but a social exercise in empowerment and bonding.

## Controlled Bodies: Courtney Coombs and Leena Riethmuller

**Courtney Coombs'** practice is rooted in an effort to make big statements through little gestures. For *Current*, her moving image installation *You don't go into mine, I don't go into yours* takes a brief cut from the iconic 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*. Patrick Swayze, as Johnny Castle, is instructing Jennifer Gray, who is best known by her character's nickname, Baby, in a dance lesson, and very forcefully informs her about dance space: "my dance space, this is your dance space." He pushes her into position, in an act of dominance. By isolating this moment, Coombs prompts the viewer to reconsider the relationship between Baby and Johnny. This element of the installation can also be read as a reference to Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, which argues for the importance of women possessing and inhabiting a space is theirs- in this scene, Johnny both determines and controls Baby's space.

Looping maddeningly on a small grey TV, Johnny puts Baby in her place over and over, while a second TV stares at the scene. Two frames alternate: Why don't you say what you mean / Instead of beating around the bush. This question informs the viewers' reading of Johnny's command, implying the cut is representative of a bigger issue present in their relationship. The two televisions stare each other down, like arguing lovers who've reached a stalemate. Johnny is loud and demanding while the text floats silently in empty space, its cry for honesty ignored. Poetically, Coombs' work contrasts the body language of a dominant male and submissive female against a determined and poignant statement.

Courtney Coombs *You don't go into mine, I don't go into yours* (stills)



WHY DON'T YOU JUST SAY WHAT YOU MEAN



Leena Riethmuller *Decomposition (nails)* and *Decomposition (hair)* (stills)

In contrast to Baby's dominated figure, **Leena Riethmuller's** work sees the artist very much in control of her own body. Her two films *Decomposition (nails)* and *Decomposition (hair)* depict the processes through which she transforms her own bodily materials into ambiguous, formless powdered substance. With the trimmings from both her fingernails and head hair, Riethmuller dehydrates, burns, grinds, sifts and finally bottles the transformed substances, with scientific precision in a clinically white environment. The two canisters, the products of this exercise, are displayed like specimens on a stainless steel shelf. If it weren't for the video, their contents could be anything; flour and charcoal, chalk and dust. The powdered form and sealed container render the substances inoffensive, attractive even, removing them from their abject state as rejected bodily off-cuts.



It is this divide between the perception of bodily material as abject and repulsive when its original form is retained and it is recognisable as bodily material, yet hygienic and attractive when it's original form is lost and it enters a state of formlessness that is key. Through showing the process that transforms the material Riethmuller exposes this division of perception, heightening the divide through her sterile approach to the endeavour. Latex gloves and steel instruments prevent the material from coming into physical contact with the skin,

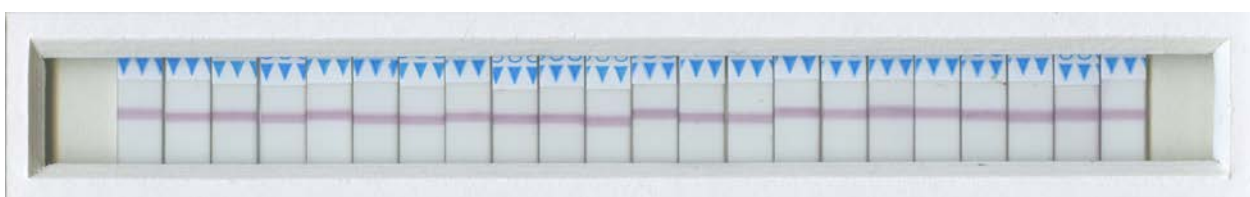
Leena Riethmuller *Decomposition (hair and nails)*

signifying their status as dirty and untouchable, which is again not the case while they are still attached to the body, hair and nails each being a part of almost every person's self grooming regime. By subjecting her bodily material to these state-changes, Riethmuller reveals the various states of acceptability these substances can occupy, critiquing notions of bodily hygiene and control.

### **Ambiguous Beauty: Tor Maclean and Bindii Thorogood**

Interested in moments that are easily missed, **Tor Maclean's** small scale works use everyday materials in an alchemic way. *Tuesday Morning* and *Wednesday* are luscious abstract works, rich in colour and texture. The swirling tones are unrecognisable for what they actually are, which is feminine beauty products. Moisturiser, eye-shadow and glittery lipgloss transform the surfaces they sit upon, staining and bleeding through. These works can be read in multiple ways; as a reflection upon the amorphous nature of femininity, a critique of societal pressure upon women to utilise these products, an exercise attempting to find the true form of the substances, or more simply an attempt by Maclean to turn these materials into something more beautiful and complex than a made-up face.

Even smaller and quieter is her third work, *The Thin Red Line*. Twenty-two negative pregnancy test strips align, creating a work that is both personal and political, poetically minimal, with a narrative steeped in urine. Like her other works, it raises more questions than it answers. Why would anyone have so many negative pregnancy tests? Was each read with relief or disappointment? The title implies a sense of defensiveness, but what against? The strips simultaneously stand as soldiers in modern women's battle for emancipation from the constant threat of an active reproductive system, and fallen comrades in a quest to conceive. The very existence of them as a product is a testament to the free-love era feminists, an underutilised symbol of women's jurisdiction over their own bodies.



Tor Maclean *The Thin Red Line*



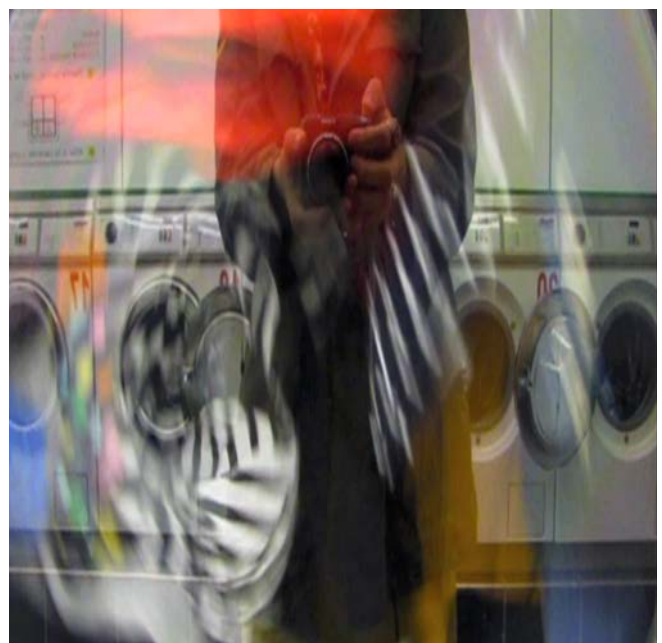
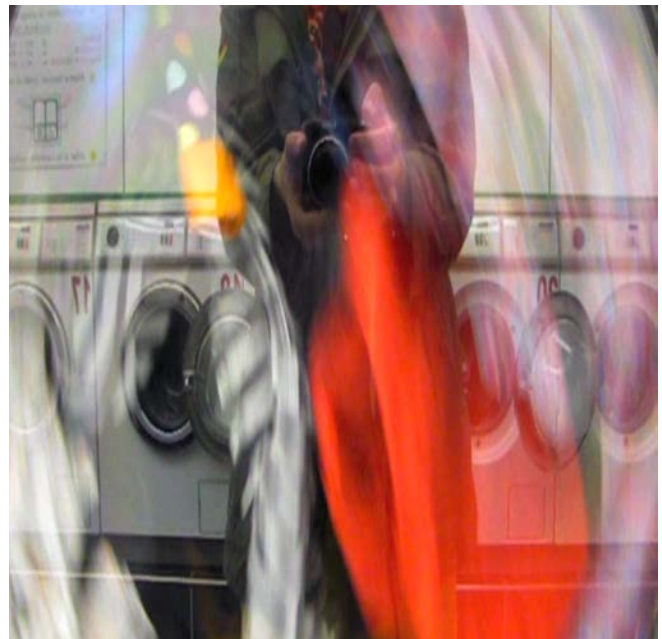
Tor Maclean *Tuesday Morning*



Tor Maclean *Wednesday*

**Bindii Thorogood** is also interested in serendipitous beauty that can be found in the everyday. Her film *Paris Laundromat*, shot while she was travelling Europe, is, like Maclean's work, able to be read in many ways. It is an instance of ready-made beauty, a captured moment of abstract colours tumbling and twirling behind the translucent reflection of the artist herself and rows of washers and dryers behind her. But thinking about the scenario being filmed, the work can also be considered as a much more political statement about the freedom domestic appliances afforded women.

Modernity and technological progress has always assisted the practical aspects of feminist progress, and appliances such as dishwashers, washing machines, fridges and vacuums are credited by material feminists as being the



Bindii Thorogood *Paris Laundromat* (stills)

catalysts that allowed women in 1950s to begin to organise as a movement. It also once would have been unthinkable for a young female to travel the world unchaperoned, something that is now commonplace and entirely unremarkable, made possible by the progress achieved through earlier feminist activism. However, even if the work is taken at face value as a beautiful abstraction, it's mesmerizing cyclic motion poses a challenge to the sexist notion of the 'genius male abstractionist' that persists through the canon of art history.

### **Gender and identity: Dominic Reidy and Tyza Stewart**

Lampooning conceptual art practices, **Dominic Reidy's** installation *Failed Concept* deconstructs gender associations through materiality. What different materials signify, such as hard 'masculine' bricks and cement, and soft 'feminine' fabric and lint, the relationships between these materials, and the forms they take, are the content of the work. Reidy is interested in critiquing the typified notions of an 'ideal' male, which he does by taking masculine and phallic forms and making them seem slightly ridiculous by the addition of, in the case of *Failed Concept*, a small tuft of fluff and a spinning flag bearer, grounded by a cosmos-like sheet of lino floor offcut and pieces of bubble wrap. Reidy's installation highlights the silliness of prescribed gender characteristics, a theme which extends to his *False documentation of an imagined self-indulgent video performance* series.



Dominic Reidy *Hard* from *Failed Concept*

The four *Video Stills* which make up this series are, like his installation, meant to parody elements of artistic practice while commenting on performed masculinity. Each of the *Video Stills* depict a figure interacting with the fabric used in the installation. If these are understood as stills from a performance, it is unclear



Dominic Reidy *Video Still #2*



Dominic Reidy *Video Still #4*

what the subject is doing. In *Video Still #2* he appears to be playing golf with a flag, and in *#4* he is squatting, pants removed at some point, while *#1* and *#3* remain completely ambiguous. The performer, presumably the artist himself, always has his face covered by the purple spotted fabric, blinded in his own attempt to communicate profundity. Together, Reidy's installation and 'stills' operate as an absurd exercise in conceptual-parody, not dissimilar in affect to the societal prescription of gender characteristics.

While Reidy's faces are consistently hidden, **Tyza Stewart's** face can be found throughout the exhibition. Her practice of self-portraiture sees her reflect upon her adolescent questioning of heteronormative sexuality, sometimes depicting herself as a hybrid male-female figure, as in the two *Untitled (self)* works, and sometimes as a younger version of herself, as in *Untitled* and *14*. Interested in the way adolescents develop their sexuality, Stewart explores her own sexual identity in a way that can sometimes present challenging ideas for viewers who have little experience with ideas of transgendered and intersex identities, and specifically autoandrophillia.

Stewart's utilisation of shock value is undeniable, but its use is far from gratuitous. Rather it works as both a hook and a defence, at once humorous and deadly serious. The juxtaposition of the artist's feminine



Tyza Stewart 14



Tyza Stewart *Untitled (self)*

facial features against male anatomy positions the viewer to try and place the gender of the figure; female as the face suggests, or male like the body? But these binary categorisations don't fit, and Stewart's works become an argument for broader understanding of sexuality, one where any identity and orientation are valid.

### Lisa Bryan-Brown

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2. Amnesty International 2012, <<http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/women-s-rights/violence-against-women/violence-against-women-information>>.
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Tyza Stewart *Untitled (self)*

## Post-Faux Feminism: A Brief Reflection on Feminism Today

The women's movement both in Australia and overseas has enabled a cultural transformation of what it means to be a 'woman', a definition not based on biological determinism. Despite the successes of feminism I am concerned about the dissipation and displacement of feminist agendas due to tokenistic representations of equality. "I am not a feminist, but..." has become an idiom for a post-feminist discourse; one which is misleading women and masquerading as a new wave of female liberation. An anti-feminist backlash is reaching its pinnacle and impinging on women's rights. We need to reconsider the role of feminism in contemporary society. A feminist lens is of continued significance because its symbiotic relationship with culture offers a more nuanced interrogation of prevailing systems of gender that challenges sexism in modern society. Feminist criticism has the power to make change and alter societal perceptions and cultural practices. However, it is not without complexity.

My analysis is informed by Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism*<sup>1</sup>. McRobbie uses the term post-feminism to describe the demarcation and emergence of a new kind of politics, which appears vaguely feminist in its pro-woman stance, but repudiates the radicalism associated with feminism. McRobbie notes that popular culture has typecast feminism as being 'uncool' and out of date<sup>2</sup>. Despite this, I concur with McRobbie that feminism is not dead. It is a living ideology. Yet for feminists to continue to make advances in gender equality we need to be cognisant of this faux post-feminism that is operating in tandem with current feminist activism. McRobbie states that: "for feminism to be taken into account it has to be understood as having already passed away."<sup>3</sup> However, this overarching argument and analysis of the rejection of feminism detracts from the power and potentiality that feminism still holds as a lens through which to approach cultural production and critique.

The negativity of post-feminism that resonates in "I'm not a feminist, but..." is deflected by way of its very rejection of feminism, which impacts on the public's perception of modern feminism. The term 'choice' that is so frequently used today as a form of empowerment can also be understood as a linguistic device used to normalize post-feminist gender

anxiety and replace it with a neo-patriarchal regime that supports a sexist agenda based on consumerism and pseudo-economic independence. “The decline of feminism is offset by the rise of a style of consumer led capitalism which now incorporates women’s issues”<sup>4</sup>. There are emotional realities of holding feminist ideals in a patriarchal society that misappropriates feminism to maintain its status quo. I am concerned about ‘the life-plan’ and the compromises I might make to my feminism as part of this social contract. An indenture whereby I am educated, able to have a career, have sex, consume, be empowered but am simultaneously disempowered by the very strategies that appear to offer me power. As a young middleclass educated white woman I am aware that I am also to some degree complicit in its path of reflexive modernisation, a so-called feminist paradigm which ignores the many and varied desires, needs and goals of individual feminists locally as well as around the globe. These complexities point to the fact that, as movement and ideology, contemporary feminism is perhaps more accurately represented by the term feminisms.

As such, I recognise that my subjectivity and privilege influences and challenges research paradigms in gender studies. It is important to recognise that post-feminism also silences sexuality and race in order to preserve heteronormativity by maintaining rigid notions of masculinity and femininity. Unlearning our embedded sexual and racial assumptions is crucial to preventing further internalized homophobia and racism in Australian society and around the world. bell hooks, a prominent American black feminist writer, offers a positive move towards a suggested reconciliation and interaction between white and black feminists<sup>5</sup>. hooks attests that in academia, originally a site for the construction and production of ‘otherness’, that she was able to find a place where “I was not “other.” They did not meet me there in that space [in the margins]. They met me at the centre”. hooks goes on to further suggest that it is possible for white women to voluntarily “surrender the power to act as colonizers” and to think critically upon their dominance and centrality.

Reflecting on the works in *Current* exemplifies the diversity of perspectives and experiences that enables feminist criticism and feminism to have such continued relevance in today’s society. The art works highlight a multitude

of issues faced by women and men in contemporary Australian society; some of which are a consequence of this faux feminism intrusion. The artists interrogate sexuality, identity, race, class, ethnicity and cultural hybridity, the commodification of femininities and masculinities, and in doing so challenge the heteronormative paradigm. Without a trajectory of academic or activist feminism, 'other' women for the most part are stuck with diluted and commercialised feminist ideas, which limit female agency to baking, craft and good fashion sense.

Post-feminism compromises political integrity, and genuine solidarity amongst women across social, cultural, racial, sexual and gendered boundaries. At this juncture there is an opportunity to examine representations of gender, sexuality and race that have evolved out of this post-feminist culture and assert new forms of representation. One way of doing this is to harness individualism and from it create new forms of collective action. An explicitly feminist art exhibition such as *Current* exemplifies the potentiality and continued significance of feminism in contemporary society.

Briony Lipton

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2. Ibid, p. 35
3. Ibid, p. 12
4. Ibid, p. 40
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Tor Maclean	Sancintya Simpson
Leena Riethmuller	Tyza Stewart
Dominic Reidy	Bindii Thorogood

*Current* would not have been possible without you. Thank you.

**INSTEAD OF BEATING AROUND THE BUSH**

Courtney Coombs *You don't go into mine, I don't go into yours (still)*

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