

# Political feminism

Courtney Coombs, *Brisbane*



Mish Meijers and Tricky Walsh, *Angry Ladies*, 2015,  
video still, 2:03 mins duration; image courtesy the artists

# Activist art in Australia in 2015

Recent discussions both in the art world and beyond have increased the profile and demystified the notion of feminism in the twenty-first century, and the term has once again become integrated into mainstream discussion internationally and in Australia. Now that pop music star Taylor Swift has declared herself a feminist,<sup>1</sup> you could be persuaded that the ‘f’ word has finally become socially acceptable. However, while many artists have adopted the feminist label across the country, it often feels like feminism has become a lifestyle choice rather than a political one. When the badge is so readily worn by many, society can be fooled into thinking that there is no more work to be done. With the ‘f’ word once again acceptable while the ‘p’ word (patriarchy) remains so passé, how are artists responding to the changed conditions but continued imposition of what bell hooks has described as the ‘imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’?<sup>2</sup>

When I first think of feminist activism, I imagine loud righteous anger. I think of works that explicitly and unapologetically tear strips off the heteronormative patriarchal structures that continue to form our society. I also think of artists who are operating outside of the traditionally expected zones of the art world. With ‘non-traditional’ modes of making, such as community-engaged practice, currently being coopted by the institutions such work often seeks to challenge, it is easy to imagine that there is no need or room left for critique. While many of those producing art from a feminist position now do so in a more polite fashion, this does not render it outside the terms of activism. Feminist critic Katy Deepwell defines activism as:

an active engagement with the life and political struggles of various communities or networks; as political action or protest taken over a social, cultural or political issue; as a focus on a certain social, political and cultural question in order to reveal broader political agendas at work; and activities designed to promote an alternative political agenda to that offered by mainstream politics and the *status quo*.<sup>3</sup>

It is useful to challenge the understanding of what can be defined as activist work and focus on practices that succeed in active critique within the white walls of the gallery. Doing so allows us to comprehend how works are subtly yet firmly posing ‘social, political and cultural question[s]’ in order to disrupt the dominant discourse(s).

The legacy of activist strategies from the feminist movements of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s lives on and can be seen to radiate from many artists’ works. For example, in 2015 a number of artists have advocated for change using their work

as their primary means of ‘protest’, and they have done so in a variety of intelligent and engaging ways. Primary concerns still include a response to patriarchal structures that continue to impact on and define women’s experience of the world, and the analysis of the construction of gender, sexuality, race and religion. Explored in this essay are five examples of Australian activist practices that address a diverse range of feminist issues in the political and social terrain.

Hobart-based Mish Meijers and Tricky Walsh have been collaborators for some ten years, producing work that responds to the ‘masculinist hetero-normativity’ of our society.<sup>4</sup> Their 2015 project ‘#dearministerforwomen’ is a work that is loud and proud of its feminist-ness. The installation contains video, performance, participation, objects, prints and a social media component, with content ranging from ‘football’ jerseys to a dart board with text that reads ‘MAD AS HELL’, to performance videos that respond directly to the (now past) appointment of Tony Abbott as the Minister for Women, via hysterical laughter performed in front of a sparkly ‘Wow!’ banner, and a group of ‘angry women’ running through a ‘DEAR MINISTER FOR WOMEN WE SAY NO’ banner on the football field. ‘#dearministerforwomen’ speaks directly to the absurdity of current patriarchal politics, and specifically of the former Prime Minister’s appointment as Minister for Women despite his continued sexist attitude towards women that is clearly personal and political.

Sydney-based Deborah Kelly’s large body of work critiques multiple injustices in Australian society, including issues of gender, sexuality, politics, religion, refugees and migrants. The artist’s 2012 series ‘The Miracles’ presents 37 photographic reconstructions of historic renaissance paintings depicting same-sex couples, different-sex couples, transgender and single-parent families whose children have been conceived through assisted reproductive technologies. By appropriating the structure and contexts of these religious artworks, ‘The Miracles’ challenges heteronormative, patriarchal and particularly religious constructions and constrictions of the family, presenting a more contemporary and holistic representation of modern-day familial possibilities.

Brisbane-based Tyza Stewart explores the construction (or perhaps deconstruction) of gender in a large body of self-portraiture work, depicting the artist in various states of undress from childhood to the present day. Using a combination of family photographs and memories, Stewart creates collaged digital images and paintings, presenting a seamlessly blended arrangement of traditionally understood ‘male’ and ‘female’ bodies in an attempt to express their ‘perfect’ self. At times confronting, Stewart’s broad body of ongoing works are visually beautiful, tender and intensely personal. The open-



Top:  
Deborah Kelly, *The Miracles*, 2012, installation view, Queensland Art Gallery /  
Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2012; photomontage on Canson Infinity Rag,  
in antique wooden tondo frames, dimensions variable; image courtesy the artist;  
photo: Alex Wisser



Bottom:  
Tyza Stewart, *Untitled*, 2014, oil on board, 16 x 12cm;  
image courtesy the artist and Heiser Gallery, Brisbane; photo: Sam Scoufos





Cigdem Aydemir, *Smile*, 2014, video still from three-channel video installation, HD video with sound, 15:30 mins duration each; image courtesy the artist; videography: John A. Douglas

ness of the work urges us to question, resist and redefine our understanding of gender.

Sydney-based Cigdem Aydemir's work reveals and represents her experience of being an Australian Muslim woman with Turkish heritage. The artist's 2014 work *Smile* critiques the threat of 'terror' associated with our Muslim women citizens. Depicting three moving images of an unassuming Muslim woman, the bodies on screen remain almost motionless, smiling for the camera for the work's 15-minute and 30-second duration. At first 'friendly', the smile fast becomes uncomfortable for the wearer, and uneasy for the viewer. By presenting these women, open and engaged with the audience, friendly and threat-free, Aydemir challenges Australian prejudice to those in Muslim attire. Women are often *told* to smile by random strangers who pass them on the street; *Smile* extends this conversation to include those twice-othered in our society.

Melbourne-based Eugenia Lim's *Yellow Peril* (2015) combines elements of moving image, 2D and 3D works to explore the artist's identity as an Australian woman of Chinese–Singaporean descent. In the single-channel video work, Lim inserts herself into the landscape of Ballarat's Sovereign Hill theme park in a gold Mao suit.<sup>5</sup> She wanders aimlessly down the streets of the recreated gold-rush town, observing and being observed. By weaving together seemingly unrelated images and objects – the 'Welcome Stranger' nugget, Ron Robertson-Swann's 1980 public sculpture *Vault* (known by

many as the 'Yellow Peril'), and images of Lim's own family – the artist sets out a subtle yet compelling narrative of gender and race in this country.

Identifying feminism as a political stance rather than a lifestyle choice can be an important distinction when unpacking the role of activism in contemporary art. Australian artists are active and engaged in their range of responses to the current political climate and current strategies. These include loud and proud challenges to various institutions, self-portraiture as a critique of assumptions relating to gender, sexuality and race, and narrative as a method for the facilitation of learning (or perhaps un-learning) life as we know it.

1. In a June/July 2015 cover story for *Maxim* magazine, the American pop singer says that 'feminism is probably the most important movement that you could embrace'; see [www.maxim.com/entertainment/music/article/taylor-swift-tops-2015-maxim-hot-100](http://www.maxim.com/entertainment/music/article/taylor-swift-tops-2015-maxim-hot-100), accessed 5 November 2015.

2. As defined by bell hooks in *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London, 2013, p. 4.

3. Katy Deepwell, 'Editorial', *N.paradoxa*, vol. 23, January 2009, p. 4; see [www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/vol23npara4editorial.pdf](http://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/vol23npara4editorial.pdf), accessed 5 November 2015.

4. As stated on <http://crossart.com.au/homel/index.php/current-show/275-dear-minister-for-women-tricky-walsh-and-mish-meijers>, accessed 5 November 2015.

5. Traditionally male attire worn by Chinese dignitaries.



Eugenia Lim, *Yellow Peril*, 2015, installation view, Bus Projects, Melbourne, 2015;  
left: *New Australians (Welcome Stranger, 1869/2015)*, digital print on mylar emergency  
blanket, 210 x 160cm; right: *New Australians (Yellow Peril, 1980/2015)*, digital print  
on mylar emergency blanket, 210 x 160cm; image courtesy the artist;  
photo: Zan Wimberley







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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Susan Best** is Professor of Art Theory and Director of the Fine Art Program at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University; she is the author of *Visualizing Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant-garde* (2011) and *Reparative Aesthetics: Witnessing in Contemporary Art Photography* (2016); **Kate Britton** is a Sydney-based writer and curator; she was director at Firstdraft in 2014–15, has worked with Underbelly Arts and Kaldor Public Art Projects, and is currently Assistant Curator of Performance and Live Art at Campbelltown Arts Centre; **Lisa Bryan-Brown** is an independent curator and freelance writer, and Curatorial and Collections Officer at Griffith University Art Collection, Brisbane; **Aileen Burns** is Executive Co-Director of the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane, together with Johan Lundh, and holds a Master of Arts in Modern Art: Critical and Curatorial Studies from Columbia University; **Courtney Coombs** is a Brisbane-based artist and founding Co-Director of the artist-run initiative and collective LEVEL; **Gabriella Coslovich** is a Melbourne arts journalist, former senior arts writer with *The Age* newspaper, and former editor of the National Gallery of Victoria's *Gallery* magazine; **Louise R. Mayhew** is a feminist art historian, casual academic and State Library of New South Wales Nancy Keesing Fellow; she completed her doctoral thesis on women-only collaboration in Australia in 2014; **Chloé Wolifson** writes about contemporary art and ideas for journals, websites, galleries, artists, auction houses and art fairs; in 2015 she curated the exhibition 'ANIMAL/MINERAL/PHYSICAL/SPIRITUAL' at The Bearded Tit in Sydney, and organised a series of panel discussions at Verge Gallery focused on creativity and lifelong learning.



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