



PERFORMING PRESENCE

Works from the
Redland Art Gallery Collection

Redland Art Gallery, Cleveland

9 February – 25 March 2025

ADMISSION FREE



REDLAND ART
GALLERY

PERFORMING PRESENCE

Performing Presence brings together a selection of artworks from the Redland Art Gallery Collection that take the human subject as their central form. This focus on the human body, combined with strategic framing, props and aesthetic techniques, centralises corporeal lived experience within social and political contexts. This includes an emphasis on works that incorporate the artist's body, or a proxy for the artist, as a site to assert their presence as social and political subjects.

These artists draw on histories of representation in the visual arts and popular culture and use these as malleable frameworks which can be redefined and reimagined. Techniques of revealing and concealing the subject are employed in many of the artworks in *Performing Presence*, allowing multiple perspectives and states of being to be held within a single image.

The first artwork visible on approach to the exhibition is a small black and white photograph by William Yang: *The Closet* (2015). This work depicts the upper right shoulder blade of a male, with a still image of a male chest projected onto it. Handwritten text fills the bottom half of the image, a trace of the artist's hand as he recalls the moment when the photograph was taken.

The text reads:

"When I was a student in Brisbane in the late sixties, I did a series of photographs of projections on the male body. I hardly knew what I was doing photographically and the sub plot of suppressed desire was something I dare not think about. Art was the subterfuge, the legitimising of my action. I was almost physically sick with excitement as I took the pictures.

Since then I have never been able to repeat that feeling of intense excitement nor do I want to. I really don't want to go back there.

"The Closet," William Yang 2015"

The projection covers the body, whilst simultaneously revealing the body by casting light upon it. Like a shadow, the projection creates form without a solid presence. These layers of imagery speak to an elusive intimacy between three bodies: the body photographed, the projected body and the body of the photographer behind the camera. The relationship between the three bodies visually evokes a sense of "supressed desire", as they occupy the same space but never touch: a seductive intimacy that remains unfulfilled.

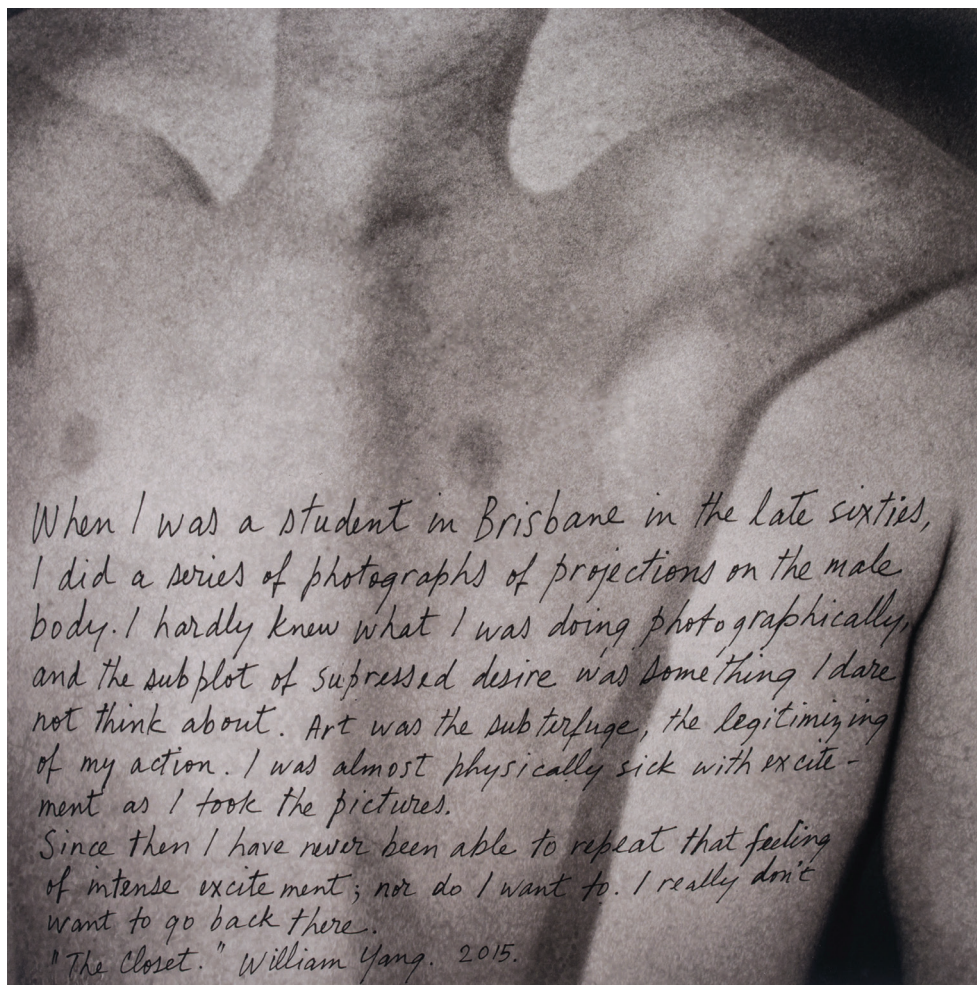


Image: William Yang, *The Closet*, 2015. Archival Pigment on Hahnemühle paper. Courtesy of the Artist. Redland Art Gallery Collection. Acquired in 2016 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

The close-up of the body focuses attention on the skin as a tactile surface, evoking the presence of the body as visceral and sensual. At the time, and implied in the title, Yang was careful to frame the bodies in ways that did not reveal the identity of his photographic subjects.¹ In concealing the readable or knowable identity of the photographic subject out of a sense of care, the image is opened up to a corporeal understanding of the body through a focus on the skin as a receptor for tactile sensation. The corporeal is further referred to in the text via reference to feeling physically sick with excitement: a bodily response to a social and political context.

Sugar (2011) and *Bubble Gum* (2011) are two large format photographs from the *Unorthodox Aphorisms* series by Yavuz Erkan, which also focus on skin as a site of tactile experience. The physical size of Yang's intimate photograph is akin to a private photo album, it feels like we are being let in on a secret. Erkan's work, and its large scale, captures our attention from a distance, yet it shares with Yang's work the revealing of an intimate moment, and similarly features this emphasis on the sensual tactility of skin. For Erkan, scale and framing are significant to creating a sense of each photograph as a fragment of a larger whole.²

In *Unorthodox Aphorisms*, Erkan employs subtle gestures to act as a counterpoint to dominant notions of masculinity. The photographs in this series document the exchange between the living body of the artist and everyday objects and substances that might be found within the home, such as a balloon, jelly, a cup of milk, a vase, bubble gum and sugar. The gentle natural light cast upon the body and objects suggests a domestic setting that confirms the feeling of privacy evoked by the gestures and materials.

Erkan's camera frames his body in close-up, directing attention to the skin as a site of corporeal and tactile sensation and exchange.

Writing about this effect, Francis E. Parker states that,

"Erkan reduces himself to being a texture in an encounter with another".³

In the photograph *Sugar*, the sheet of sugar that clings to the artist's back makes visible the sweat that coats his skin. The fluctuation in density gives the impression that the body may have laid down in this sugar. The more substantial drips that run through the sugar and down the back have bodily connotations. They are evocative and sensual, suggesting physical intimacy. The sickly-sweet sugar both attracts and repels.

The accompanying photograph, *Bubble Gum*, captures the moment just before the bubble bursts, a moment of expectation and climax. At this moment the bubble gum conceals the face as it reveals the breath that would otherwise be invisible. Sitting at the threshold of the internal and external body, the bubble reveals aspects of the body by concealing others. Speaking of his practice Erkan states:

"There is a certain degree of revealing and/or concealing in all of them as a whole, sometimes through scale, and other times via using literally the object".⁴

Gerwyn Davies articulates a similar technique of revealing and concealing the photographic subject, articulating this through the employment of a camp sensibility, which celebrates and emphasises artifice, as a strategy to disrupt normative modes of photographic portraiture, embedding a queer mode of representation across his practice.⁵

Pineapple (2016) is a clear example of the way Davies exaggerates his form through spectacular and excessive costuming. The image depicts the artist in an exaggerated pineapple costume standing in front of a digitally composited scene that includes *The Big Pineapple* in Ballina. The sharp corners of the costume create a theatrical abstraction of both the roadside monument to



Image: Gerwyn Davies, *Tropics*, 2016. Photographic Print on paper. Courtesy of the Artist. Redland Art Gallery Collection. Acquired in 2016 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

a pineapple and of the form of the artist's body. The bright colour and slightly glossy material create a seductive surface. The two legs that pop out from the bottom of the costume create a disjuncture between the exaggerated costume and the bare human form that supports it. This disjuncture is repeated across many of the artist's photographs creating a performative presence that reveals and conceals the subject.

Tropics (2016), another work by Davies, depicts the artist wrapped in a store-bought, tropical themed, plastic tablecloth. The figure is extravagantly adorned with a surplus of colour and pattern, the face is covered and extended to give the impression of a tropical bird. Sitting atop a cooler box with empty beers cans littering the otherwise perfect scene, the work taps into masculine stereotypes, which are at once represented and also thwarted as two sides of the same coin.

These two photographs by Davies, *Pineapple* and *Tropics*, can be seen as part of his broader art practice, which has systematically employed a camp sensibility to disrupt normative modes of portraiture. Speaking of this tendency within his work, Davies states:

"To indulge in the production of camp is to be awake to the liberating potential of embellished performance, of being consumed by the surplus and radiance of certain material and in doing so, coming to rest behind a veil of representational extravagance that corrupts the classificatory capacity of the camera."⁶

Davies's highly constructed images embrace the spectacular effects of costuming, extending his form through colour, scale and the luminosity of materials, as a way of performing an exaggerated presence. However, while the costume extends the form into the realm of the spectacular, it also blends into the chosen context through a mirroring effect: a bird in the tropical environment or a pineapple person next

to a pineapple monument, for example. Davies extrapolates on this effect:

"Camp's visual, material, referential and performative excesses operate as misdirections that both entice and conceal. Behind the veil of its representational extravagance, camp creates a space for alternative identification and pleasures into which marginalised subjects make their dis/appearances."⁷

In her photograph *Venus* (2013), Petrina Hicks employs a proxy model and object to bring into question the cultural association of fertility with the female form. Drawing upon the Roman mythological figure of Venus, the goddess of love and fertility, Hicks uses the conch shell as a symbol of the female reproductive system.⁸ The model holds the conch shell in front of her face. This simple act replaces the face, as the site of readable identity, with a symbol of female reproduction. The violent gesture of self-erasure is muted by the soft colour palette and smooth flawless textures that are rendered in stark clarity.

As evident in *Venus*, and across her practice, Hicks employs techniques of commercial photography, including the use of consistent studio lighting and the use of the same model across photographic series. The reference to fashion photography in her work speaks to the way that images of the feminine are constructed and distributed within economic systems. The act of holding the shell in front of the face suggests the role of individuals in maintaining stereotypes and cultural norms. The unsettling disquiet within the image provides cause to rethink the legacy of the mythology it references.

Monica Rohan's *Head Up Shoulders Back* (2016) is painted in a photographic realist style. The central form depicts a doubled figure wrapped in an oversized flannelette shirt. The two figures are entwined within the fabric, creating a single form. The figures are scaled so that the one



Image: Monica Rohan, *Head up shoulders back*, 2016, Oil on Board. Courtesy of the Artist. Documented by Carl Warner. Redland Art Gallery Collection. Acquired in 2016 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

in the foreground appears to shrink into the background figure. Talking about her motivation for painting the figures in this way, Rohan states:

“Doubling and distorting the figures is a way to disconnect the imagery from reality a little bit, to nudge it into a different kind of reflection like a paradox, a situation that feels impossible to resolve.”⁹

The image of two introverted figures sits in opposition to the title, *Head Up Shoulders Back*, which evokes an expectation to be proud and to project confidence and authority. The wringing of hands also visible in the painting is an outward gesture that describes inner turmoil.¹⁰ The opposition between feeling emotions and the expectation to overcome them through processes of denial, distorts the figure in ways that make visible this internal conflict. Dislodged from physical reality, the figure is opened to possibilities that cannot be resolved into a single form or action. This sense of unresolve runs through many of the works in *Performing Presence*. These artists pose questions that disrupt commonly held assumptions as a method through which to open dialogue with the viewer. Rohan makes apparent the sense of unresolve through the specific possibilities that painting can achieve in depicting the fractured subject.

Keemon Williams’ pair of photographs, *Recovery* and *Acclimation*, are self-portraits taken during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of nationwide lockdowns, the artist lived with family in Baralaba. In the tradition of portrait photography, the artworks are documents of the artist during and after lockdown and are a record of a specific moment in time.

Recovery was shot by the artist’s sister in rural Baralaba. In contrast, *Acclimation* was photographed in the CBD of Meanjin/Brisbane by the artist’s neighbour. Both photographs are grounded in the here and now of the moment the photograph was taken. The different qualities and technical details of each image

reflects this process, taken by an amateur photographer with little preparation time. *Recovery* is slightly blurred, perhaps the camera’s inability to deal with the dust on the lens. *Acclimation* has a shudder visible on the buildings at the outer edge of the image. As physical traces of the haptic movement at the moment of inscription, these details imbue the works with markers of our current moment: the ubiquity of photographs and the rush to take them.

A further reference to contemporary uses of photography in these works is the addition of two inverted boomerangs placed across the artist’s face. Williams describes these as *twisted boomerangs* that wrap around his face like bandages covering his eyes.¹¹ The bandages speak to the need to pause at moments of transition and change.

Boomerangs are an important aspect of Williams’ broader artistic practice. Notably he casts his own boomerangs (in both ceramics and 3-D printed) and bases these moulds on commercially produced souvenir boomerangs, whilst adding text that re-orient’s our understanding of these objects. Williams comments on the boomerang as a complex cultural symbol that has been commodified across many contexts. The graphic style and placement of the boomerangs across Williams’ face in *Recovery* and *Acclimation* is reminiscent of digital stickers used to conceal identities on social media. Williams holds these two moments: the personal (as quotidian place-bound snapshots) and the political (as a criticism of colonial capitalism) together in the same work.

This series of photographs speaks to the tradition of portraiture in that it documents the subject at a particular moment in time. Williams does this with reservation. There is an ambiguity here that undermines the potential earnestness of portraiture, as he both reveals and conceals his own subjectivity, showing this



Image: Keemon Williams, *Recovery*, (Detail), 2021, Photographic Print on Matte Rag. Courtesy of the Artist. Documented by Carl Warner. Redland Art Gallery Collection. Acquired in 2024 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

to be embroiled within a larger and changing social context.

Like *Recovery* and *Acclimation*, the small canvas board by Tony Albert and Natalya Hughes, *Silent Conversations* (2020), was initiated during COVID-19 lockdowns. As a conversation between friends during lockdown, Albert and Hughes posted the canvas board to each other, adding to the composition as the work moved back and forth between them. Both artists share a long-term interest in decorative patterning, and this informs the background of the composition. Albert's appropriation of *Aboriginalia*¹² throughout his art practice, can be seen in this work via the reproduction of boomerangs and patterns in fabric designs. An image of Albert hanging atop an exercise ball, which is suspended via a chain, forms the central image of the artwork. This image references his 2020 video *You Wreck Me*.¹³ In this video Albert reimagined the Miley Cyrus song and film clip from 2013, *Wrecking Ball*.

In *You Wreck Me*, Albert is pictured painted for ceremony, appropriating reductive representations that are often imposed on First Nations people. Atop the ball the artist is seen crashing through fake monuments of Captain Cook, which stand for actual monuments in Adelaide, Cairns and Sydney.¹⁴ The video was developed amidst a groundswell of Black Lives Matter protests. The video was not made as a direct response to specific protest-led and community-based removals of colonial monuments but rather is an expression of the artist's response to the general spirit of public debate at the time the video was made.¹⁵ Via a humorous parody of Cyrus's infamous music video, Albert overtly questions which figures and forms are given presence in public space as he (digitally) 'wrecks' enormous statues of Cook. Simultaneously, the work also reveals the liberating potential of popular media culture, which, though it saturates our lives, can also be bent to our own ends and made our own.

Dylan Mooney's *Blak Superheroes (Kaigani)* (2021) is an image of a character, Kaigani, taken from Mooney's graphic novel, which is currently in development, titled *Resistance*. The character is a proud queer indigenous man from Far North Queensland who fights for justice and the rights of LGBTQIA+ and First Nations communities.

Kaigani is pictured floating against a swirling rainbow background that resembles the pattern on the superhero suit he wears. Employing a comic book aesthetic, the possum skin coat that adorns the figure bears a resemblance to a superhero cape. The pose, floating with one leg raised, is a familiar comic book trope. This gesture often occurs at points of narrative climax, signifying transformation, resolve and an assertion of presence.

The lining of the possum skin coat, which is visible as it flares in the wind, speaks directly to community: "STILL HERE", "ALWAYS WAS", "BLAK + QUEER" and "THRIVING". A pin portraying the Australian Aboriginal flag secures the coat in place. These positive and affirmative statements of political protest and struggle ground the fantastical character within the LGBTQIA+ and First Nation communities that the character represents and fights to protect.

Majority Rule (Parliament) (2014) is a large-format black and white photograph by Michael Cook that investigates architecture as monument. The image depicts the entrance of Old Parliament House in Canberra, with the Australian Aboriginal flag flying from the single flagpole at the centre top of the image. The steps and forecourt are populated by the same indigenous man, whose form, walking, sitting and standing, is repeated multiple times. There is something uncanny about seeing multiple of the same person in a single photographic image, which speaks to the constructed nature of the scene.

Majority Rule (Parliament) is part of a larger series of photographs that seek to question the titular notion of 'majority rule', as a concept on



Image: Dylan Mooney, *Blak Superheros (Kaigani)*, (Detail), 2021. Digital Illustration on cotton paper. Courtesy of the Artist. Redland Art Gallery Collection. Acquired in 2021 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

which the democratic system is founded. Cook asks the question: what if statistical data was reversed and the Australian population was comprised of ninety-six percent indigenous people instead of four percent? He approaches this question by having multiple copies of the same person within each photograph in the series, visually demonstrating the power of numbers. The answer to this hypothetical question is partially answered by the replacement of the official, colonial, flag of Australia with that of the Australian Aboriginal flag atop parliament house.

Cook's use of black and white photography as a medium, retro costuming and the Old Parliament House as a backdrop, suggests the past. The elaborate mise-en-scène locates the artist's question in an imagined past, to ask what the present and future would look like, if the past has been different. Digital compositing is used to create a photographic scene that exists, not in lived experience, but as the imagined proposition: *what if?* As Sally Butler has written of this series:

"Pictures such as those in *Majority Rule* present ambiguous perspectives of time and place in order to disorientate conventional perceptions of historical and geopolitical order and to redirect the political imagination toward new associations."¹⁶

Majority Rule (Parliament) is an interesting counterpoint to many of the works in *Performing Presence* in that it takes the image of a person who is singular and unique and repeats them multiple times, turning them into a visual representation of a hypothetical statistical quandary. Cook integrates the central problem of statistics, as a practice that reduces the complexity of individuals to definable demographics, as a key theme in this series. This is a particularly pertinent critique at a time when statistical algorithms are integrated into all aspects of society via the ubiquity of networked technologies. The

reversal of colonisation is understood as a positive affirmation proposed by the work, however the photograph complicates this via the repetition of the singular figure. The viewer is left with an uneasy feeling, as this impossible scenario is played out visually, through the de-individualising logic of statistics. This unease is amplified by the recognition that the administration of statistics is a crucial part of the colonial project.

Performing Presence brings together works from the Redland Art Gallery Collection that include the human body as a central focus. Photographic conventions of portraiture are employed by artists across the exhibition as a site to disrupt dominant narratives and to present subjectivity as fluid and evolving. The conceptual underpinning of each work is unique and varied, but within this there is a shared sensibility that looks to new ways of engaging, representing and reimagining the body. Several artworks frame the body in ways that focus the eye onto small details, like skin as the site of tactile experience. Others employ techniques of concealing and revealing the subject, to reclaim image production and to assert presence. In this way, each artist in *Performing Presence* draws on their unique lived experience to present a version of subjecthood that challenges dominant methods of representation.

Performing Presence activates the Redland Art Gallery Collection, facilitating encounters, between artworks, viewers and the exhibition space, and creating new ways of understanding, interpreting and sharing the collection.

Simone Hine



Image: Michael Cook, *Majority Rules*, 2014. Inkjet print on paper. Courtesy of the Artist. Redland Art Gallery Collection. Acquired in 2014 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Endnotes

- 1 In conversation with William Yang, 9 December 2024.
- 2 In conversation with Yavuz Erkan, 16 January 2024.
- 3 Francis E. Parker, *Yavuz Erkan*, Queensland Centre for Photography Young Blood Editions, 2012. n.p.
- 4 In conversation with Yavuz Erkan, 16 January 2024.
- 5 Gerwyn Davies, *Dis/appearing Acts: Camp, Photographic Self-representation and Ambiguous Queer in/visibility*, PhD Doctorate Thesis, UNSW: Arts Design & Architecture, 2021. A seminal text on 'camp' in this sense is Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" (1964), which via its own exaggerated list of 58 'jottings' attempts to define the sensibility of camp. Across this varied list, exaggeration and artifice are touchstones.
- 6 Davies, 12.
- 7 Davies, 52–3.
- 8 In conversation with Petrina Hicks, 19 December 2024.
- 9 In conversation with Monica Rohan, 18 January 2025.
- 10 In conversation with Monica Rohan, 18 January 2025.
- 11 In conversation with Keemon Williams, 7 January 2025.
- 12 *Aboriginalia* is a term used to describe decorative objects that present images of Aboriginal history and/or people that offer skewed and sentimental perspectives. For a discussion of Albert's practice in relation to *Aboriginalia*, including an interview with Albert and an essay by Coby Edgar, see: <https://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/stories/tony-albert-uses-humour-to-render-visible-australias-history>
- 13 <https://www.sullivanstrumpf.com/exhibitions/you-wreck-me>
- 14 Helen McDonald, "Wrecking Culture" In *Crosscurrents in Australian First Nations and Non-Indigenous Art*, edited by Sarah Scott, Helen McDonald, and Caroline Jordan, Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies. Routledge, 2024. p.196.
- 15 Tony Albert, "Celebrated First Nations Artist Tony Albert on Optimism, 'Aboriginalia' and Miley Cyrus" *Broadsheet* 19 March, 2024: <https://www.broadsheet.com.au/sydney/art-and-design/article/celebrated-first-nations-artist-tony-albert-optimismaboriginalia-and-miley-cyrus>
- 16 Sally Butler, "Indigeneity" in *Visual Global Politics*, edited by Roland Bleiker, Routledge, 2018. p. 192.

REDLAND ART GALLERY, CLEVELAND

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9am – 2pm Sunday

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Image front: Keemon Williams, *Acclimation*, (Detail), 2021, Photographic Print on Matte Rag, 1200 x 810mm. Documented by Carl Warner. Redland Art Gallery Collection. Acquired in 2024 with Redland Art Gallery Acquisition Funds.

Redland Art Gallery acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands, waters and seas where we live and work. We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and future.

Redland Art Gallery is an initiative of Redland City Council, dedicated to the late Eddie Santagiuliana.

