

WITH HER FEET OFF THE GROUND

BARBARA BRUGOLA | CLARE RAE
KAWITA VATANAJYANKUR | HEIDI YARDLEY
CURATED BY SIMONE HINE



27 February - 29 March 2015

Suspended, Engulfed, Concealed and Entangled

These four words provide an adequate means through which to describe the female form as it is presented in each of the photographs, videos and painting in this exhibition. Taken in isolation, each of these adjectives carry negative connotations. This is perhaps the product of a desire for certainty and clear sight. Likewise, an appeal to the sovereignty of the individual brings with it the desire to be free of ties that inevitably lead to compromise. But, as lived experience would tell us, the world is messy as well as uncertain. Therefore, much can be gained from finding different ways to imagine oneself, suspended, engulfed, concealed and entangled.

With Her Feet off the Ground

Solid ground is an elusive idea, floating somewhere beneath the space occupied by the women that populate the images in this exhibition. Each figure occupies a liminal space that seems precarious and transitory.

The work appeals to a corporeal self that knows what it is like to balance on one foot, to hold on tight, to feel submersed and to fall. We are given little explanation as to why the women are in these situations, or why they perform a particular action. As such, the works suggest a physiological state where the corporeal effect of the situation is given precedence. In this way, the works focus on the state of being suspended, engulfed, concealed and entangled, rather than the cause and effect of such liminal states.

Aligning Oneself with the Subject through Touch

Kawita Vatanajyankur hangs high above a soft bed of laundry. A clothes peg pinches her foot, suggesting her body had once been attached to the line. Her torn nightgown moves on the breeze, an invisible force that threatens to dislodge her precarious position.

The Robes is one of Vatanajyankur's gentler works, yet the intensity of the work's affect is not dampened. I am still able to feel the rope against her hand as though it is my own, as a slowly remembered sensation that grows with the time spent with the work. The sensation extends to the heavy feeling on the chest as she bares the weight of her body on such a thin line. Her feet are the site of tension as her toes hold on tightly to the rope. Intermittently, this feeling is disrupted as her grip loosens and she falls, disappearing into the pile of cloth below. This cloth ensures a soft landing, which takes emphasis away from the potential pain of impact, leaving the viewer to oscillate between feelings of tension and release.

Caught in the Gesture

Because *The Robes* depicts several takes of the same action, we are reminded of the sense of endurance that resides over many of Vatanajyankur's works. The repeated viewing of slightly different versions of the scene positions the action as a perpetual process, rather than a single definitive event. The moment is cut short. No sooner has she fallen than she is back and again suspended on the rope. Vatanajyankur is perpetually in a precarious state, which manifests itself temporally as she is caught within a cycle of holding on and falling. Likewise, Clare Rae's photographs often rely on a feeling of being caught within a gesture.

Relying on the camera's ability to suspend motion, Rae places herself in precarious situations that may only last a few seconds, but exist perpetually through time by virtue of the medium itself. *Untitled # 6 (Testing)* provides an example of the fleeting moment, as Rae holds onto to a picture rail, the tension in her arms is clearly visible. The pose is made all the more precarious by the positioning of her feet. With the soles facing upward, the position requires her to support her weight, not only for the duration of the photograph, but as she gets in and out of position. With such a small area for her fingers to grip, it is hard not to think of her falling and the awkwardness of such a landing. But such thoughts lay outside the frame and all Rae allows us to see is the single moment.

Cutting the Body

Rae's *Untitled #5 (Desire and the Other)* is part of a series of photographs where the artist's body is obscured by ordinary domestic objects and spaces. In this case, a wardrobe cuts her body in half between the waist and hip. This is of course a metaphorical cutting of the body, produced by the angle at which Rae allows her body to be viewed.

Linda Nochlin aligns the literal and metaphorical fragmentation of the body with the very essence of Modernity in her text *The Body in Pieces*. Here, Nochlin asserts that there were two opposing notions of photography at the time of its inception. Firstly, that photography framed the constant flow of modern life in a way that was almost arbitrary, capturing whatever happened to fall within the frame at the time the photograph was taken. Secondly, and in contrast, photography was understood as creating a deliberate crop that is the product of the artist's intent. In so doing, the crop draws attention to the device as a modern medium.

Rae's photographs clearly align themselves with the second conception of photography, relying on precise framing that occurs both spatially and temporally. I have mentioned Nochlin's argument because she suggests that an interplay between the two notions of photography is evident in the paintings of Manet. Such an idea indicates two things. Firstly, that the framing of photography can be transcribed across mediums, and secondly, that two seemingly opposing ideas can be maintained within a single work. So, while Rae's photograph *Untitled #5 (Desire and the Other)* may appeal to the deliberate cut of photography, it also appeals to another cut that is central to the development of Modern art: the cut of Collage.

The cut of the photographic frame in *Untitled #5 (Desire and the Other)* is central to the work. The unconventional square format places further emphasis on the particularity of the cut. The frame of the image is then echoed by a second cut that is made in the pictorial plane by the cupboard, as it runs parallel to the photographic frame, cutting the body in half. I draw the connection to collage because the cut, which is produced within the pictorial plane, is so harsh and directed at the central subject that it seems more akin to the cut of collage than to any photographic technique. By echoing the cut of the frame within the pictorial plane, Rae draws attention to both the frame of the image and the cut of the body as conditions of photography.

Painting the Cut

The subject of Heidi Yardley's *Severance* seems to shift and change depending on which aspect one chooses to focus upon. At first glance the picture appears to be a collage. The portrait of a woman's face is placed crudely over an image of a river, in a manner reminiscent of John Stezaker's collages, which often utilise headshots of actors and actresses as well as landscape postcards. But if we look again, *Severance* is not a collage at all.

Traditional collage, by which I mean the literal juxtaposition of materials upon one another, has a sculptural element that takes place on a picture plane, as images and textures are layered on top of each other. The cuts are literal, one can run their finger along the edge and feel the disjuncture between surfaces as they are manifested within the physical world. A

disjuncture between content is replicated in the disjuncture between formal components. Traditional collage maintains the separateness of the source material by containing multiple different surfaces in their original forms. In contrast, Yardley obliterates this formal separation of images by painting both images and the cut that separates them. This approach to *Severance* focuses upon the creation of a formal illusion of collage, which is a trompe l'oeil of sorts. *Severance* is a visual representation of collage where the cut, as well as its torn edges, are rendered faithfully in paint. But this is an approach that is fleeting, because the implied narrative of the woman and the river has a pull that is far stronger than the optical illusion that brings their juxtaposition into being.

Yardley's paintings rely heavily on the movement of each brushstroke transferring a sense of movement into the subject. As a result, skin is particularly sensual in her work, making the inferred sense of touch integral to an experience of the work. This is true of all of the works in this exhibition, but it is exacerbated in the painted image, because the trace of the artist's hand is evident in the surface of the painting. Furthermore, the muted palette that Yardley employs within her work creates a consistency across the surface of the canvas that suggests the image of the woman and river be read as one, providing a myriad of potential narratives. Many of which could be evoked by the four key words: suspended, engulfed, concealed and entangled.

Just when the possibilities appear to be exhausted, a small detail further complicates the picture plane. Giving cause to once again re-think the relationship between pictorial elements. This detail can be found at the base of the woman's neck, where the water in the river seems to be caught, disrupting the natural flow of the river. In this detail, the two picture planes collide and the cut becomes an illusion once again.

Each reading creates a tension in the work that is never resolved. Instead, these readings are layered upon one another, shifting and changing with the work.

The Body Engulfed

Barbara Brugola's *Lapse of View* reimagines Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), with two contemporary females as the protagonists.

Friedrich's painting is emblematic of Romantic visions of the landscape. The male protagonist stands alone, confidently casting his gaze across the landscape. He remains distinctly separate from the landscape upon which he gazes despite its enormity and the impending mist that engulfs the wide expanses just below his feet.

Both *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* and *Lapse of View* present the landscape as mysterious and unknowable, as mist conceals and engulfs vast expanses of the picture frame. However, where Friedrich's protagonist remains distinctly separate from the landscape, Brugola's protagonists are seen imbedded within it. They are engulfed by the mist that obscures their view, like the hair that rakes across their eyes and blows in a gentle breeze.

The solid ground upon which the wanderer assumes his stance can be contrasted with the multiple views of the landscape presented in *Lapse of View*. The landscape shifts and changes with each edit. The mist is seen in motion as it emerges and recedes. Furthermore, the landscape is presented in different orientations, often upside down when the female figure is absent. This creates an unusual feeling as the centre line, between the top and bottom channels, depicts the firm ground, but, due to the orientation of the footage, is surrounded, beneath and above, by sky. Even when the women are shown standing on the viewing platform in one channel, the combined effect of both channels is that the women appear to be floating amongst the mist and rock.

Continued overleaf

The Ground Suspended Across Mediums

The shifting ground that each artist in this exhibition traverses finds the perfect metaphor in the way meaning transfers across different mediums. Brugola uses video to reimagine an iconic painting. Yardley uses painting to confuse collage. Rae uses small performances to consider the nature of photography and collage. Vatanajyankur uses video as though it is photography. Here the formal components of the work echo the broader issues produced by the content.

From the Position of Writing

As I write this sentence, I am sitting on a tram. My daughter is asleep beside me. But this is now, in this moment. By the time this writing is printed and disseminated in the certainty of black and white, I will have sat alone at my desk in ideal conditions and I will have stood at the kitchen table typing sentences intermittently as I make dinner. This is the messy way in which life operates. In this exhibition I have tried to add something to our collective knowledge regarding women and art, and just as this small contribution will sit at the periphery of that knowledge, so has it been formed at the edge of my life. Weaving its way to the centre for the briefest of moments as I sit at my desk alone forming sentences.

I wonder if there is something particularly feminine about this way of working. History would tell us that it is. I am reminded at this point of Virginia Woolfe's seminal text from so long ago, *A Room of One's Own*. I wonder if the conditions that Woolfe so eloquently describes, and in so doing draws to our attention, are despite the incredible advances since the time that it was written, the same conditions that define the contemporary feminine experience.

The works in this exhibition depict women in precarious situations, floating above solid ground, engulfed by their surrounds. When I thought about the works that I wanted to exhibit and as the exhibition took form on the walls of the gallery, the overwhelming experience of this work was a sense of calm, indicating an ease with the various states of flux that comes from centuries of finding space for oneself in the gaps.

Simone Hine

Artwork details: Clockwise From Desk

Barbara Brugola (2012)

Lapse of View

Digital video projection, 3:19

Clare Rae (2013)

Untitled # 2 (Interact)

Archival Pigment Print, 50 x 60cm

Heidi Yardley (2013)

Severance

Oil on Linen, 97x71cm

Clare Rae (2007)

Untitled # 5 (Desire and the Other)

Archival Pigment Print, 50 x 50cm

Clare Rae (2010)

Untitled # 6 (Testing)

Archival Pigment Print, 50 x 60cm

Kawita Vatanajyankur (2014)

The Robes

Digital video, 4:03

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