

KATE JUST
Armoured, 2020
Dominik Mersch Gallery

Artist Statements about the work

The Arms of Mother (knitted and photograph)

These works (as well as *The Shield* and *Tools of Hope*, below) were produced during a 2012 Australia Council Residency in Barcelona, and later exhibited in *Louise Bourgeois and Australian Artists* in 2013 at Heide Museum of Modern Art. The works weave an account of the ways me and my recently adopted non-biological child imprint and bond with each other at skin level. *The Arms of Mother* comprises a shimmery pair of skin-toned knitted gloves with harnesses, bearing surgical stitching and the scar embroidered cursive scripts 'Hope' and 'Mother'. Also titled *The Arms of Mother* is photographic work featuring a close-up of my crossed arms wearing the gloves. The dual meaning of the word 'arms' in the title conjures a picture of a maternal haven. It also refers to a stockpile of defensive weaponry, reflecting my own experience as a mother of what is required for the role. Manifesting the recent changes to my bodily and familial fabric since my adopted child Harper arrived in our family, the stitches and scars sustain the indelible presence of my child in my world, and the hopefulness I hold for both our lives. However, the black surgical stitching above our names refers to a recent cut, as if the acts of both hoping and mothering involve physical or emotional risk as well as healing. These scarring details directly translate my own experience of loss, and pair this with the wish to love again. After the death of my (also adopted) brother Billy, friends and family expressed incredulity that I chose to foster many children and eventually adopt a child. I always gave the same answer, 'I have Hope.' Having recently adopted a second child, who is eleven years old (in 2020) this work rings true once again.

The Shield

The Shield is a cuirass of stingray skin with shoulder harnesses, matching the size of my four-year old Harper's torso exactly (figure 89). Conjuring the oceanic creature's whip-smart retaliation instincts, this glimmering sheath is also offered as fortification against emotional injury. This delicately beautiful relic of a once living creature is pinned to the wall, confirming sacrifice, in Harper's life and my own, as a necessary element of protection (of self or other). Like the knitting 'wands' in *The Tools of Hope*, this skin relic is offered as a metaphoric tool, imparting to my child(ren) my dual desire to protect them, 'while leaving them free to take on the world on their own terms.'

The Tools of Hope

The Tools of Hope, are three resin- modelled pairs of knitting needles held together with velvet ribbons that crisscross to form a Roman numeric script. Although they refer to the number fourteen, no symbolic significance lies in these archaic digits. Rather, the use of numbers continues my emphasis on reuniting the female body with language, rhythm and subjective power. As fetishistic tools enabling a calculated structure of knots and loops, the needles guard against further physical and emotional separation and promote future healing.

Protest/Fist

Protest is a feminist ready-made sculpture. While searching online for images of feminist fist(s) raised in resistance, I discovered this sex toy which replicates in latex the fist of the porn star Bella Donna. Now clinically contained within a mirrored box, this slippery, plastic looking life-like arm has been recast as an aesthetic symbol of contained female erotic power and resistance.

Postscript: A Burial Suit

I had found at last a use for them. Like a tailor, I cut out these portions of cutaneous tissue into a suit of clothes. I adjusted the front, the back, the arms, the legs, until it was a single sheath which could envelope me completely, head, feet, hands and all...This mantle of suppleness, beauty and warmth will lap me in its illusion for the long passage into eternity.¹

In the final stages of writing my PhD, I began work on a knitted, geranium-pink burial suit for myself. The suit was constructed from one rectangle of knitting at a time and was eventually stitched together to form one sheath. Referencing the wooden or clay format of an Egyptian sarcophagus, it is covered in pictures and texts of things, places, times and people who matter to me. These include runic letters, numbers, domestic objects, plaster strips, music notes, spider webs, body parts, tools of my trade, art works I have made, names and more. The text-laden outfit pictures skin as a rich tapestry, woven with multiple memories and narratives. There are also empty patches; some stories remain untold. Created at the end of a long period of focus and creative production, I believe I was casting a wish for myself for a fruitful journey to the next phase in my life. The suit was originally exhibited in two parts (the actual suit and the photograph of me in the suit in the year I made it), so I would always remember that moment in time.

Feminist Fan: Valie Export

Feminist Fan is a series of hand-knitted homages to self-portraits or artworks by feminist artists around the globe that I created between 2015-2017 including Sarah Lucas, Pussy Riot, Guerrilla Girls, Cindy Sherman, Lynda Benglis, Juliana Huxtable, Mithu Sen, Tracey Moffatt, Yoko Ono, Hannah Wilke and more. The title Feminist Fan emphasizes my reverence to these artists and feminism and each carefully stitched picture, featuring over 10,000 stitches and 80 hours work, constitutes a time-intensive act of devotion. I used the Instagram handle @katejustknits and constructed a love letter to each artist on social media for each work, signing off as a Feminist Fan. Here is what I wrote about Valie Export:

@katejustknits: 'Just completing some finishing embroidery on my next knitted 'Feminist Fan' work: VALIE EXPORT, Action Pants: Genital Panic, 1969. At age twenty-eight, Austrian artist Waltraud Hollinger changed her name to VALIE EXPORT, to announce she had arrived on the male dominated Viennese art scene. For her famous work provocatively titled *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, she walked into an experimental art-film house showing erotic films in Munich wearing crotchless pants, a tight leather jacket, and wildly teased bed head hair. Moving between the aisles of the theatre, she kept her exposed crotch at eye level with the male audience members, challenging them to deal with a real woman's body, as opposed to the objectifying images on the screen. Taking this casual snap against a dilapidated wall after the performance, the artist adds a few new and engaging elements. She's barefoot, slightly dirty, quietly unhinged, and pointing a gun.

A predecessor to Lynda Benglis and Sarah Lucas, Valie Export traded on arresting images such as this one, in which women artists wrench histories of female objectification back into their own hot little hands and demand the acknowledgment so often denied women artists. Valie Export- I see you and I feel your power! I'm your Feminist Fan!'

¹ Didier Anzieu, *L'épiderme nomade et la peau psychique*. (Paris: Apsygée, 1990). p. 26.

Feminist Fan: Carolee Schneemann

Since it was one of the earliest and hence, roughest, of my Feminist Fan series, I've created a second version of Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975. This work was a performance Schneemann created for an exhibition called *Women Here and Now* in East Hampton, New York. Schneemann approached the table seen here wrapped in two sheets and informed the audience she would read from her own book *Cezanne, She Was A Great Painter*. She dropped the sheets. Wearing an apron, she applied dark strokes of paint to her body. She read from the book while doing life model poses. Subsequently, she dropped the apron and withdrew a narrow scroll from her vagina, reading aloud from it. The text was later revealed to be a secret letter to an art historian who couldn't bear to look at her films. Having only ever seen the photographic documents of this work, I have no experience of the 'liveness' of Schneemann's layered performance. However the commingling of domestic, art historical, archaic and mythic elements in this work engender a commanding and pleasingly complicated image of womanhood. In this moment, Schneemann introduces into the feminist lexicon the idea that a woman's body is umbilically linked to her intellectual force. That's downright wonderful! Carolee Schneemann, I'm your feminist fan!

Feminist Fan in Japan (suited for action)

Feminist Fan in Japan (suited for action) comes from the exhibition *Feminist Fan in Japan and Friends*. It arose out of a two-month residency at Youkobo Art Space in Tokyo between January and February 2016. Operating as a self-proclaimed "Feminist Fan in Japan," I used my residency to connect with and pay tribute to six Japanese female artists of different generations in Japan via a curatorial project. The exhibition offered an intimate snapshot of the diversity, complexity, humour and seriousness of feminist practice in Tokyo and beyond.

Just's Feminist Fan in Japan Uniform consists of a pair of hot pink zip up coveralls adorned with a series of texts, patches and badges. The coveralls were sourced from a worker's uniform shop and resonated with me as the perfect item to describe my ongoing vision for feminism – fun and optimistic, but deeply conscious of the work still to be done. The accoutrements on the suit include cutesy references to the abundant emphasis on cute or 'kawaii' female culture in Japan including Hello Kitty, flowers, small animals, tiny geisha and female anime stars. Plastered with symbols of femininity, I embraced the place I was in. I also stitched onto the suit the names of all the female artists I met in Japan and messages of support I received on social media and during her residency for the curatorial project. My fandom, of Japan and feminism, extended to the artists I selected to show alongside me in Tokyo.

Clothes Portraits (self Portrait)

Clothes Portraits are an ongoing series of hand and machine sewn hanging textile works. Each portrait portrays an artist, usually for whom textiles and clothing form an important part of their work or self-expression. Constructed from donated collections of each artist's well-worn clothes, the portraits refer to clothing as a social fabric that bears the memories, experiences and identity of each wearer over time. Picturing mostly women or queer identifying people through their clothes, the works also consider the political significance of fashion in asserting a bodily presence, power or comfort in the world and in one's skin. The scale and hanging of the works reference banners, flags or quilts, emblematic stand-ins for each person. This portrait of me was the first work in the series. One day I was tossing old clothes I didn't want any more onto a pile on my bed, in preparation to take them to the op-shop. Looking at the pile of mostly black clothes, I had the sudden thought, they had a life still in them, and a story asking to be told. I liked the text 'Strong Art Scene' and the X and the zipper in an old shirt. I realised that layered on top of each other in a pile, the clothes were like a giant black armour or shield.

Me Too / How I Will Change / Not Okay

The neon signs in this exhibition were part of a project commissioned by RMIT Intersect in Melbourne in 2018. The project comprised an installation of new neon works inspired by the use of feminist hashtags in social media spaces to generate dialogue and attention about the current issue of sexual harassment and violence against women.

The neon text *Me Too* pays homage to social activist and community organiser Tarana Burke who coined the phrase 'Me Too' on Myspace in 2006. Burke started the campaign to support women of colour and their experiences of sexual abuse. Burke recounted that when she found herself unable to respond to a 13-year old girl who confided in her about sexual assault she wished she had simply said, 'Me too.' #MeToo went viral in October 2017 when, following public revelations of Harvey Weinstein's misconduct, actress Alyssa Milano encouraged women to tweet it to 'give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.' Me Too has been now been posted online millions of times, often with an accompanying personal story.

The hashtag How I Will Change was started by Journalist Benjamin Law to propose the ways men could become self reflective allies and change-makers in the Me Too era by acknowledging their privilege, supporting women or calling out other men on sexism and assault. Encouraging an allied and constructive male response to the millions of women who used the #MeToo to voice their experiences of sexual harassment or assault, Law asked men to consider their own complicit or potentially radical role in a patriarchal society by using the hashtag #HowIWillChange, which simultaneously reads as a question and a promise.

Not Okay was a hashtag formed in response to Donald Trump's dismissal of his hot mic tape documenting his 'pussy grab' as "locker room talk." In response, writer Kelly Oxford asked her followers to speak up about their first experiences of sexual assault using the hashtag #notokay. In doing so, Oxford refused to let women's stories of sexual assault be dismissed. A weekend went by. By Monday morning, she'd received more than 27 million tweets using the hashtag.

Floating as questions and statements which seem to circulate in relation to each other, these gently illuminated neon signs generate a reflective space that highlights the undercurrent of feminist dialogue and the powerful use of text emerging in social media spaces.

