



HERE & NOW 20

PERFECTLY QUEER

LAWRENCE WILSON ART GALLERY

29 August - 5 December 2020





“Being an artist and being queer was a very lonely situation,” he said... He was consumed with a loneliness that made him feel like he was the only homosexual in Australia.

ABC1's *Talking Heads*: 'From loneliness to iconic status: Jeffrey Smart reflects on his formative years', 03.07.2008

Image: Jeffrey Smart, *Ponte Testaccio*, 1970, oil on linen, 56.3 x 90.3 cm, The University of Western Australia Art Collection, University Senate Grant, 1977

Jo Darbyshire, *Downunder* (detail), 2020, installation with 13 artworks and vinyl, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist

HERE&NOW20: PERFECTLY QUEER

HERE&NOW20: Perfectly Queer first developed in the archives of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA), a room packed with dusty cardboard boxes that house decades of all but forgotten information on artists, exhibitions and Western Australian art history. As I dug through this archival graveyard, I stumbled across the catalogue for *Queer in the West* (1996), an exhibition curated by Ricardo Peach. Featuring gay and lesbian artists from Western Australia, the exhibition critiqued the draconian *Law Reform (Decriminalization of Sodomy) Act 1989*, a piece of legislation that prohibited the “encouragement or promotion of homosexual behaviour” in public spaces, which included the display of queer artworks.¹ Prior to this, it was illegal for sexual acts to take place privately between two people of the same sex, and despite this small win, it remained one of the strictest gay law reform acts in Australia until it was finally overturned in 2002.

Queer in the West occurred during the global AIDS crisis, a time that saw queer visibility peak in cultural institutions despite the increased public scrutiny of queer communities who were widely perceived as the source of HIV/AIDS.² Although it was illegal to exhibit queer artwork during this period, *Queer in the West* was not the only queer exhibition to take place during the Act; additional exhibitions included *Skin: An Exhibition of Contemporary Western Australian Gay and Lesbian Art*, PICA (1993), a controversial Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective, *Mapplethorpe*, Art Gallery of Western Australia (1995), and *Queer'dom*, PICA (1999). Since the law was overturned almost 20 years ago in the *Acts Amendment (Lesbian and Gay Law Reform) Act 2002*, and the exhibition of queer artworks made legal, there have been only a handful of exhibitions at major institutions in Western Australia that explicitly feature the work of queer artists.³

The term queer is used as a means to resist the oppression and erasure of sexual and gendered minorities while also celebrating difference. Queerness can also be characterised by its rejection of the institution and the mainstream but without the level of public support that cultural institutions attract, the work of queer artists still remains marginalised. This marginalisation remains a risk even when queer artists are represented by such institutions. In a recent

review of the blockbuster exhibition *Keith Haring | Jean-Michel Basquiat: Crossing Lines* at the National Gallery of Victoria, Marcus O'Donnell notes that there was barely any mention of Haring's homosexuality, which the artist himself acknowledged as a major influence. As O'Donnell points out, “...if this exhibition had failed to recognise the importance to Basquiat's work of his experience of being a young, black man, in the same way it has ignored Haring's gayness, it would have been condemned.”⁴

The artists in this exhibition are part of a shared lineage that traces acts of queer resistance in the community. Through this historical legacy, these artists draw on the past and present as well as their own lived experiences of queerness to navigate through the world. The intergenerational dialogues that traverse the artists' works offer insights that not only span time and memory but also extend beyond age, gender and sexuality. These artists have created artworks that reflect on what it means to be queer, and utilised the works to dismantle dominant heteronormative and genderist narratives, to explore the significance of kinship and desire and to offer a version of history that positions themselves at its centre.

Very much aware of this legacy, Jo Darbyshire has consistently advocated for stronger representation throughout her decades-long practice. Darbyshire, whose work was featured in *Queer in the West*, is also known for her 2003 curated project, *The Gay Museum*. Held at the Western Australian Museum, *The Gay Museum* sought to rectify the absence of any visible queerness within the State's Collection. Through artistic intervention, Darbyshire reinterpreted materials from various departments, such as anthropology, history and biology, to emphasise the rich history of queer culture in Western Australia.⁵

In *HERE&NOW20: Perfectly Queer*, Darbyshire has selected 13 artworks created by canonical 20th century Australian artists, including William Dobell, Sidney Nolan and Janet Cumber-Stewart, in the University of Western Australia Art Collection and the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. In her installation, Darbyshire illuminates conservative attitudes held by cultural institutions (especially during a time when being queer was illegal in Australia, notably



Andrew Nicholls, *The Four Seasons (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter)* (detail), 2019-2020, archival ink pen on watercolour paper, 114 x 140cm each. Courtesy of the artist. The development of this work was supported by a residency at Grey Projects, Singapore



Janet Carter, *Drawn From Life* (detail), 2020, visual diaries, pen, pencil and charcoal on paper, single channel videos. Courtesy of the artist

most of these works were acquired prior to 2002), which led to the erasure and separation of the artists' sexuality from their history. Quotes from articles by historians and art critics that allude to an artist's queerness accompany each work. Through her intervention into these collections, Darbyshire provides us with a more holistic understanding of these artists and their work, along with highlighting the assumptions of heteronormativity.

In the 1990s Darbyshire lectured at Curtin University and among her students was Andrew Nicholls. Influenced by Darbyshire, Nicholls began to explore queer subjectivity, eventually leading to *Queer'dom*, an exhibition he co-curated at PICA in 1999. In *Queer'dom*, Nicholls sought to expose the contradictory definitions of the word "queer", and to describe a term that by its nature is beyond definition.⁶

For *HERE&NOW20: Perfectly Queer*, Nicholls has created four large-scale drawings in his signature camp aesthetic that depict the changing of the seasons. Based on 18th century Meissen porcelain figurines, each drawing depicts a group of nude male models made up of Nicholls' friends from different generations (predominantly – though not all – queer-identifying, and predominantly from the local arts community). Each model is immersed in flamboyant opulence and surrounded by a rich utopian garden of delicate flowers, exotic birds and buzzing insects. In employing a cornucopia of tropes and clichés associated with the European decorative arts, along with his own personal references, Nicholls has crafted a world that embraces homoerotic desire and queer intimacy while exposing the constructed nature of sexuality and gender. In his essay for Nicholls' 2019 solo exhibition *Hyperkulturemia* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, curator Dr Robert Cook describes Nicholls' investigation into queer representation as a "foundation" to younger artists; queer artists from previous generations remain still relatively unknown, a history waiting to be brought to light through projects like Darbyshire's.⁷

Benjamin Bannan, an artist who belongs to this younger generation, draws on shared queer histories in his towering artwork *Salvation Rainbow*. The work stands as a testament to the legacy of Perth's Order of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group that belongs

to a worldwide collective of queer nuns who employ serious parody to satirise the Roman Catholic Church, while offering outreach, support and protest on behalf of their communities.⁸ The Sisters were prominent in Western Australia during the AIDS epidemic and were pivotal in bringing the AIDS memorial quilt west in 1993 and 2005, and campaigning for the repair of the Western Australian AIDS Memorial.

As part of his process, Bannan undertook research into the Sisters' informal archive, establishing intergenerational relationships that ensure the passing down of local queer histories. In *Salvation Rainbow*, Bannan has retraced the Sisters' *Rainbow Habit* into a series of simplified 1:1 scale garment patterns that have been etched into aluminium, creating a plaque to the scale of an early-Renaissance altarpiece.⁹ In doing so, Bannan memorialises the physicality of the Perth Sisters and their contributions to serious political and social engagement that may have otherwise been forgotten.

Religious iconography also extends into Colin Smith's installation *Bloodletting*, which merges the Catholic Church's confessional booth with a quasi-doctor's waiting room. In the work, Smith references the historical practice of bloodletting, a procedure whereby a physician would use leeches to draw blood from a patient in order to cure an illness, as an analogy for the progression of his transition. Throughout the process of his transition, Smith has come to equate the relationship he has with his endocrinologist with that of a worshipper and a God. Inside Smith's confessional lies a medical green hip chair surrounded by a suite of red monochromatic paintings laden with black clay leeches. The visceral paintings document aspects of the surrounding installation, combining the religious with the medical and seeking to defy feelings of shame and guilt. Accompanying the installation is a prayer Smith wrote that illustrates the relationship between the flesh and spirit that was in response to Galatians 5:16-26. Using the prayer as a trope to comment on the narrative of the alignment of the trans body and soul, Smith presents a secular insight into a holistic way of being.



Brontë Jones, *Wet Ride Scrub Daddy (Part 1)* (detail), 2020, Two-channel video, 9 minutes. Courtesy of the artist

Nathan Beard's work also deals with feelings of shame and guilt, especially those associated with performing acts of "authentic" cultural expression. For Beard the anxiety surrounding these acts is fuelled by the Western perspective that deems flourishes of the hand and limp wrists as effeminate or queer. The gestures are also linked to certain Asian stereotypes that persist within parts of the queer community, which view the behaviour as undesirable and coded with inferiority. Modelling his sculptures on hand signals from Lakhon nai performances, Buddhist statues and the traditional Thai greeting, the wai, Beard has problematised this notion by casting his own hands and imitating these gestures.¹⁰ Each sculpture is limply resting and has been manicured with a set of acrylic fake nails adorned with camp embellishments such as miniature Thai fish sauce bottles and Swarovski crystals. Beard's playful and uncanny sculptures relish in their excessive use of kitsch as a means for combating racial stereotypes that often border on either fetish or repulsion. Alongside his use of artificial materials, Beard also proudly expresses his Thai cultural heritage through casts of the Buddha's hand fruit and camp garlands made from monks' robes, creating sincere monuments to these gestures.

Connections to family are a consistent theme throughout Janet Carter's body of work, but while Nicholls' meticulous drawings realistically depict his broader community, Carter's quick and gestural drawings offer a personal insight into her relationship with her chosen family. Carter's work is driven by the need to find comfort in a growing health crisis. For Carter, the impact of the social distancing restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic recall the precautionary advice during the AIDS crisis. The limitations suddenly being placed on the physical intimacy between people reminds her of the messaging that demonised queer sex in the '80s and '90s. With government health advice requiring everyone to stay home, Carter found herself isolated from her chosen family, suddenly forcing her to connect with them through readily accessible digital technologies. Organising weekly catch-ups with five family members both online and in person (although 1.5 metres apart), Carter proceeded to draw each of these sessions using iPhone footage, Zoom meetings and screenshots she recorded to document the experiences and to reveal the domesticity

of her relationships during this period. Carter's work demonstrates the importance of intergenerational relationships in queer culture and how kinship is formed as a way for queer people to construct their own lineages.

Like Carter, Brontë Jones' idiosyncratic video work *Wet Ride Scrub Daddy* also employs the lo fi qualities of the iPhone camera to create a sense of intimacy. Resembling a love letter, the work explores desire between two "bike-loving-dyke-daddies" and is visualised through footage from cycling trips and sudsy, oily close-ups of a bike being washed.¹¹ Through recordings of her experiences and material possessions, Jones creates a network of images that, for her, resonates with the word "daddy," a term that she uses while rejecting binary gender constructs, highlighting the fluidity of queerness. Employing the optimistic looking Scrub Daddy sponge as a point of departure for this, Jones opens up a space to play with the word affectionately and affirmingly. Alongside these material representations, Jones narrates personal anecdotes of public interactions that affirmed and disrupted this nuanced expression of gender. In one, she tells the story of her partner who was violently attacked for being mistaken for a gay man; a "faggot". The attackers later realised their error, labelling her a "dyke". This story punctuates Jones' work creating a sense of discomfort and unease. While the protagonists identify within a fluid space in between, we are confronted with this outside need to classify bodies. It is here that the word "daddy" takes on its new meaning; it is more than an affectionate term to describe someone lovingly, it is affirming and understanding.

Lill Colgan's work examines how gender impacts their lived experiences. The work is informed by Colgan's time working in retail, an environment where the idea of gender is rigid and unforgiving. Made from a blouse that was gifted to them by a close friend, the work was then dyed by Colgan with ink from retail fashion security tags. Used as a means to prevent theft, these ink-filled tags are intended to rupture and stain a garment when someone attempts to steal it. Colgan's work compares this system of theft prevention to the experience of being a trans person in public space, often feeling like a deviant, stained spectacle.



Lill Colgan, *Soothing Systems* (detail), 2020, Morrison silk-crepe blouse, retail security tag ink, copper wire, and pins, 100 x 200cm. Courtesy of the artist

At the same time, the work also explores Colgan's experiences of femininity through the relationships they have with a close group of friends who are cis-women. These women have often gifted them clothing, an act of generosity that Colgan sees as opening up space for them in an imperfect world. Through the process of dyeing a blouse that has been lovingly passed on to them, Colgan presents a new way of thinking about experiences of transphobia. Colgan reconsiders these "stains", or experiences, as a bittersweet accumulation of memories that result from the patriarchal, Western capitalist world. Dyed onto the garment is a secret acronym that only Colgan knows the meaning of, a message of survival and a reminder not to reveal everything in a work that is so personal.

Together, these eight artists create a dialogue that reinforces the fact that queerness is fluid; it is unique to everyone. Through their work, they connect past histories as well as reframe their own lived experiences. While some artworks celebrate homoerotic desire and queer intimacy, others explore chosen families and ways of forming accepting communities. The public and private narratives of

transitioning are also explored, in addition to ways of transgressing the binary model of gender and creating a space for the artists to exist without being categorised. Several works disrupt abhorrent racist stereotypes and errors of historical representations, while others seek to remember the political actions of those who came before us. It is with this in mind that I reflect on *Queer in the West* and the other illegal exhibitions that took place during the 1990s. I think of how these artists risked everything by publicly displaying their artworks and because of them, we are able to have this exhibition today. Now it is no longer illegal and there is no excuse. I hope we don't have to wait another 20 years for an exhibition like this.

Brent Harrison
Curator, *HERE&NOW20: Perfectly Queer*

1. "Outlaw Art" Review, ABC TV Perth, 4 November 1996, accessed 16 April 2020.
2. Nguyen, Tuan, *Queering Australian Museums: Management, Collections, Exhibitions, and Connections*, PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2018. Sydney Digital Thesis Open Access (4860), p.134.
3. Despite the seeming reluctance by institutions to engage with the practice of queer artists, a plethora of exhibitions have taken place at local Artist Run Initiatives (ARIs). These spaces have allowed artists to create a platform for themselves and their community while providing an opportunity to show risky and experimental works.
4. O'Donnell, Marcus, "Why did the NGV put Keith Haring back in the closet?," *The Conversation*, Jan 13, 2020.
5. *The Gay Museum: An exhibition exploring the history of lesbian and gay presence in Western Australia*, edited by Jo Darbyshire, Perth: Western Australian Museum, 2003. Exhibition catalogue, accessed July 11, 2020, <http://www.jodarbyshire.com/uploads/text-files/gay_museum_catalogue.pdf>.
6. Nicholls, Andrew, "Queer'dom," *The Westside Observer*, Sept 17, 1999.
7. *Hyperkulturemia*, edited by Dr. Robert Cook, Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2019. Exhibition catalogue, accessed July 11, 2020, <<https://artgallery.wa.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/wa-now-andrew-nicholls-hyperkulturemia>>.
8. Wilcox, Melissa M, *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody*, New York University Press, New York, 2018.
9. *Rainbow Habit* describes a set of six satin habits, each with a six-metre train in a singular colour of the original rainbow flag. It requires 12 Sisters to manifest in its entirety, collectively embodying a literal and symbolic rainbow flag.
10. Lakhon nai is a Thai performing art that originates from the royal court in Thailand.
11. Quote from a conversation with the artist, 11 July 2020.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people I have to thank for making this exhibition possible. Firstly to the artists; Benjamin Bannan, Nathan Beard, Janet Carter, Lill Colgan, Jo Darbyshire, Brontë Jones, Andrew Nicholls and Colin Smith, it has been an absolute privilege to work with each of you, your passion and drive in the face of uncertainty has been unwavering and for that I thank you for joining me on this journey. To the staff at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery; Kate Hamersley, Anthony Kelly, Lyle Branson, Pier Leach, Clare McFarlane, Janice Lally, Donna Greenwood, Connie Sze and the entire install team, it has been such a pleasure to work with you all through this and your professionalism and dedication has been insurmountable. I hope I get the chance again to work with you again in the future. I would also like to give a special mention to Megan Hyde who has been nothing short of exceptional throughout this entire process and to Ted Snell who I cannot thank enough for giving me the opportunity to curate this exhibition. It will not be forgotten. Thank you to Ricardo Peach and Mark Stewart who talked to me about *Queer in the West* and the other exhibitions that took place in Perth in the 1990s. Thank you to Amy Barrett-Lennard, Jeremy Smith, Andrew Varano and Simone Johnson from the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) for loaning material from the PICA archives and to Jo Darbyshire, Andrew Nicholls and the team at the State Library of Western Australia, for lending the exhibition catalogues, your generosity has helped to enrich this exhibition. Thank you so much to Charlotte Hickson, Dunja Rmandić, Miranda Johnson, Hilary Thurlow and Lisa Liebetrau for your support of me and this project and all the help you have provided along the way. I would also like to say thank you to my parents, Bev and Chris for their constant support and to my partner, Ethan Rouse Gerlach, you are perfect to me.

The artists and I would like to acknowledge the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, the Gadigal and Darug people of the Eora nation and the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong people of the Kulin nation, the traditional owners of the lands on which we live and work. We recognise their strength and resilience and pay respect to their elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded.

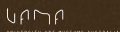
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Cover image: Benjamin Bannan, *Salvation Rainbow* (detail), 2020, etched aluminium and two-pack enamel, 180 x 320 x 5cm. Courtesy of the artist

Inside Cover images:

Nathan Beard, *Limp-wristed Gesture (i)* (detail), 2020, silicon, found objects, acrylic nails, Swarovski Elements, cotton, wax, Fenty Beauty, Tom Ford Beauty, nail polish, painted steel, installation size variable. Courtesy of the artist

Colin Smith, *Bloodletting* (detail), 2020, painted false walls (MDF, timber), oil paintings (oil on ply board), air-dry clay, enamel paint, gold foil alphabet stickers, gold foil contact sheeting, hip chair, muslin, metal curtain rods, fake tree, chairs, water cooling dispenser, clock, scrap paper bin, dimensions vary. Courtesy of the artist



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