

The Devoted Eye

14 January – 8 February 2025
114 Commonwealth Street, Sydney

The Devoted Eye reveals shifting shadows lacquered in paint, gentle contemplations on stitched edges, and glimpses of limbs that twist themselves in charcoal, ceramic and embroidery. The exhibition celebrates the practices of nine artists, Karen Black, Jennifer Brady, Solomon Kammer, Deborah Kelly, Charles Levi, Shannon McCulloch, Riley Payne, Todd Robinson and Elle Wickens as they invite us to devote our gaze to the seen and unseen in their practices.

The female figures of Karen Black's ceramic sculptures stretch their limbs and ooze across the ground as if summoned from Black's canvases. Inspired by faces that appear in the blossom of the *Dracula Simia*, more commonly known as the Monkey Orchid, the dribble of glaze down the forehead of *Wild, Kind* forms a nose above parted lips, drawing us to another face that appears in the curve of her knee. Black's figures fold into themselves, with splayed hands gripping elongated limbs and concaved heads that open into floral forms, each with a different expression, unique like the bloom of each *Dracula Simia*.

Deborah Kelly's collages stitch history, mythologies, and identities with found images and figures half-glimpsed, unfolding from and disappearing into trees. New details in her work emerge with each glance – the careful wrap of a manicured hand around an aged tree trunk in *The Erl King*, the puff of a cigarette lingering in the bionic hand of *A Maria*, or moth wings adorning the ankles of the bare breasted *Fire Fae* like the light-footed god Hermes.

Disembodied and elusive, we catch fleeting moments of the self and the other. The stretched suede of Elle Wickens' works become extensions of the body. Pores of suede breathe as a resin egg nestles into its embrace like pearls caressing a warm neck. Shadows and light peek through the tender thresholds of hair to reveal the curve of an ear. As the curtain of the body, hair is alive and dead in the same moment; it is grown and cut without pain, shifting against the shoulders, ears, lips, and brows of ourselves and others.

Reminiscent of warm breath under bed sheets, or of eyes peeking from beneath blankets as fingers clutch stitched edges, Jennifer Brady's works explore quiet intimacies and contemplations. Carefully stitched, each stroke intentional but barely perceptible, the phrases "un ravel again", "stitch it closed", "react repair compare dispair", are fractured and misspelt, obscured against aged textiles. Mattress protectors, barely touched by bare skin or seen in bedroom light now become sites of communal reflection. Created to be hidden, these objects become fragmented moments of thought and feeling as their edges are mended and their surfaces are infused with Brady's soft, whispered meditations.

Once pressed against warm flesh, filled with keys and wallets, and fingers tucked into pockets, Todd Robinson's vintage Helmut Lang trousers are immortalised in cast bronze. Heavy and cool to the touch, no longer able to become distressed, be patched or drink up raindrops and spilled coffee, we appreciate the unnoticed folds of fabric and stitched seams that sit against our skin. These trousers become abstract sculptures, hinting at the bodies that were once beneath them.

Slipping between the figure and textile, the inverted busts of Charles Levi are imbued with layers of coded narratives and queer identities. Arms extend from headless and faceless bodies, holding powerful poses while fingertips gently extend and curve into the shadow of wrists. The rhythmic pull of thread and grip of a needle between fingers created these works, existing as self-referential heralds, between costume, figure and fabric.

Busts without heads, clothes without flesh, locks of hair without a cheek to rest on, we catch glimpses of bodies that shift in shadow and light. Solomon Kammer's charcoal drawings *Cost of goods* and *Wastage* are placed in familiar settings, charged with a sense of unease as partially obscured figures and faces dissolve into anonymity. Unflinching, these works confront the role of the body in healthcare systems that are laced with gender bias and capitalist imperatives, asking us to consider at what point do we become goods, how are we valued, and when could we be considered waste? Rooted in Kammer's own complex medical experiences, these works explore how a judgmental gaze is formed from preconceived conceptions and misconceptions: we are judged, and we judge in return.

Paused on a single snapshot, manipulated, edited, discoloured, and redacted, the poor image runs rampant in the 21st Century. Shannon McCulloch questions the veracity of the image and its ability to be simultaneously truthful and deceptive, sometimes in the same moment. Mimicking Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath*, McCulloch's *Held*

and *Holding the Image* are lifted from an episode of *Crime Stoppers*, depicting disembodied portraits on printed pages held by anonymous arms. Here, portraiture can be used to shame; to invite a judgmental or watchful gaze and, in a split second, we can recognise power in a suit and tie, authority in a uniform, and hilarity in the police investigation of a swan.

Riley Payne's hyperrealist paintings draw from the overwhelming proliferation of images in our daily lives, transforming them into spaces for contemplation. His work invites viewers to slow down and engage with the tensions and contradictions within his compositions. Borrowing recognisable imagery, Payne creates a sense of slippery subjectivity, encouraging audiences to bring their own interpretations. Each composition is meticulously crafted, such as the juxtaposition of a monochromatic eye with the vivid overlay of a solar-graphic, revealing a "devoted eye" for both the use and replication of images. Payne's work is an invitation to pause, reflect, and appreciate the beauty and complexity of the everyday.

The nine artists in *The Devoted Eye* each separately direct our gaze to the slipping boundaries between experience, consumption, materiality and the self, yet collectively create powerful narratives, expressing body and identity in all its vulnerability.

By Rose Dolenec Hannan