

The Old Birrego School, 1996

Photograph: Sue Foley

SLIDE 1

Hi, my name is Sarah McEwan and I'm an artist, musician and artist-curator. My partner Vic and I run a small arts organisation called the Cad Factory.

We live 30km from Narrandera in an old school house that was built in 1886 to service the local children who lived on near-by properties.

In 2007 we bought this run-down school house in Birrego with no idea of how our lives would unfold, just knowing we wanted a new adventure.



The Cad Factory, Handley St Marrickville, 2009

Photograph: Alex Wisser

SLIDE 2

Before moving permanently to Birrego in August 2010, Vic and I lived in this warehouse space in the inner west of Sydney. From 2004 – 2010 the Cad Factory operated in two different Marrickville warehouses that were considered 'illegal' due to the fact we held gigs and exhibitions without any planning permissions from council. We were motivated to do this because we were part of a community of people who were dedicated to underground culture.



The Cad Factory Studio

Photograph: Ross Waldron

SLIDE 3

After five years of building in Birrego, and years of no running water, we created our third Cad Factory space, a beautiful world class recording studio, along with accommodation for visiting artists and a house for Vic, our daughter Holly and myself.



The Cad Factory Studio

Photograph: Ross Waldron

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This regional move and our development into a charitable, incorporated association is significant for Vic and I who started the Cad Factory as an antidote to what we didn't like about the art world or the music world, or perhaps just the world in general – so there could be a safe space for people to go and be themselves as artists or audience, with no other goal than supporting people to develop and present the work they were making amongst a kind community.

To date, over our 13 years, the Cad Factory has worked with over 1200 artists to an audience of over 70000 people.



Minister Troy Grant with Regional Fellowship Recipients Sarah McEwan, Dave Burraston and Lee Pemberton

Photograph: Alex Wisser

SLIDE 5

Tonight, I wanted to share with you very briefly, a little bit about my Create NSW Regional Fellowship.

At the end of 2016, I was one of three artists to receive the fellowship. Here I am with sound artist Dave Burraston and dancer/choreographer Lee Pemberton, along with Minister Troy Grant, who implemented this regional focused funding for Create NSW. Sadly, the current arts minister, cut all regional programs including this fellowship and the young regional scholarships for artists under 25.



All the things I never said, 2015

Wagga Wagga Art Gallery

Photograph: Drew Halyday

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Back in 2016, I really wanted to receive the fellowship so I could continue my exploration of women's lives throughout Western history and visual imagery of bodies that challenged traditional portraiture and self-portraiture. I wanted to build on from this 2015 exhibition called *All the things I never said*. This installation is actually a giant self-portrait where thoughts and feelings take centre stage.

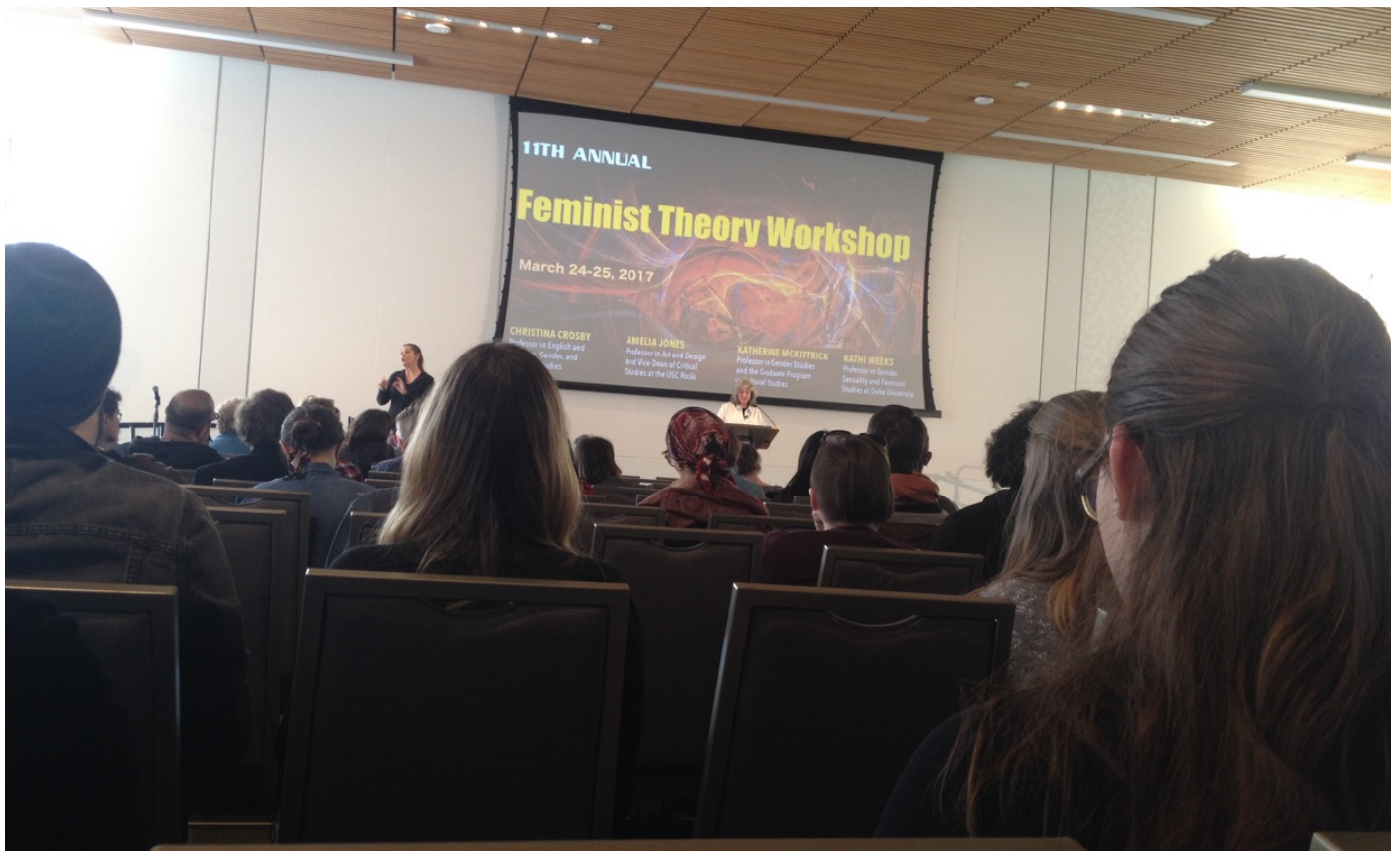


Duke University

Photograph: Vic McEwan

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To do that, I wanted to spend two weeks at Duke University in Durham North Carolina with Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, who is a world leader in making philosophy accountable to difference by challenging key concepts through a feminist perspective. In March 2017 I made the trip over.



Feminist Theory Workshop, Duke University

Photograph: Sarah McEwan

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While I was at Duke, I attended the Feminist Theory Workshop, an annual event that brings together leading feminist scholars to discuss their current research.



Women's Centre for Creative Work

Photograph: Sarah McEwan

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In April 2018, I went to the Women's Centre for Creative Work in LA, a place that cultivates LA's feminist creative communities and practices. It also builds on from the legacy of Judy Chicago, Sheila de Bretteville and Arlene Raven who in 1973 founded the Women's Building in LA, a place for feminist communities, that also contained the first independent school for women artists, that challenged head on, the patriarchal history of art.



Bundanon Trust

Photograph: Sarah McEwan

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To consolidate all of my research from these trips and the artworks I had been making, I undertook a residency at the very beautiful Bundanon Trust.



Her Riot recording in the Cad Factory Studio

Photograph: Sarah McEwan

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As well as working towards my visual arts practice, I also wanted to explore my music practice. I have been spending time in our studio with long term collaborators Drew Thomason and Vic McEwan.



Her Riot recording in the Cad Factory Studio

Photograph: Sarah McEwan

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Together we recorded a number of songs I have written for my Her Riot project, a counter-band of sorts, that has been my antidote to the years of sexist comments and actions I experienced being a drummer and playing in various bands.



Her Riot recording in the Cad Factory Studio

Photograph: Vic McEwan

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The Her Riot work I've developed during my fellowship will be part of an exhibition called *Political Women: Overlaps and Divergences*, that I'm co-curating in 2020 with Julie Montgarrett and Nicole Kelly, Program Director at the Women's Centre for Creative Work.

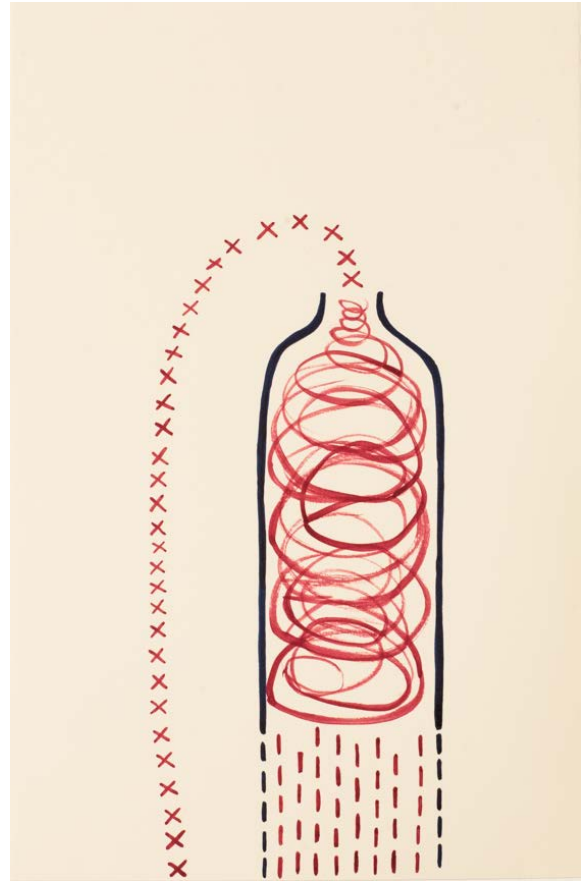


Feelings From Bodies Maquette

Photograph: Sarah McEwan

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I have also been working on developing another exhibition called *Feelings From Bodies* at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery opening from 9 February to 31 March 2019. The work brings together the voices of 50 anonymous survey participants who were asked what makes them feel hopeful, fearful, think of change, destruction and feminism. All of these intimate answers inform and create the artwork. These feelings are captured and contained in non-representational bodies/portraits that you can see and hear spanning across a large-scale installation within the main gallery space.



All the evils bound in a jar (Hesiod, c700BCE), 2018

26cm x 38cm (2 panels)

Ink on paper

Photograph: Vic McEwan

SLIDE 15

The major outcome for my fellowship though was presenting a solo exhibition at Western Plains Cultural Centre called *Unbind Me* from the 30 June – 2 September 2018. *Unbind Me* was my 'installation conversation' about key philosophers, poets, authors, historians, economists, activists and artists who have contributed to the world with their various beliefs over the last 2700 years. It is an 'installation conversation' because it is open, never ends, and can never be concluded.

The exhibition was presented in three parts; thinking about history; talking back to history; and honouring artist change makers. The exhibition was my version of feminist time travel, and I'm going to talk you through just a very small selection of artworks from the exhibition that created this feminist web through history. Hesiod was my starting point because 2700 years in the Iron Age he wrote the classic text *Work and Days*, that begins with the myth of Pandora – who was man's punishment for stealing fire from the Gods. Pandora unleashes ruin into a male utopia. It is here, that women begin to develop their bad reputation!



Plato's Mother Knew the Game (Perictione 1, c425 - 300 BCE), 2017

35cm x 64cm

Acrylic paint on fabric

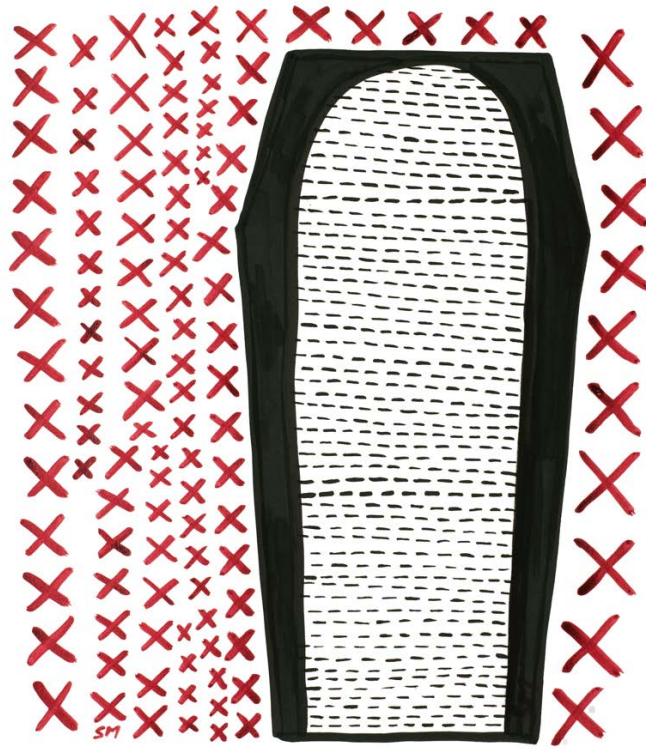
Photograph: Vic McEwan

SLIDE 16

Counter narratives to the dominate status quo, are not new, and I tried to track some of the push and pull between various ideologies using a feminist frame to highlight some of the radical social change we are all indebted to through people questioning the rules and what has always been thought and done.

I included Percitone as her text 2300 years ago is the first known account speaking about the double standards between the lives of women and men. She writes about the harsh realities of women's lives who are bound to men for their social, economic and self-identities.

Percitone was a member of the Pythagorean School in Sparta. Little is known about her and there are different speculations about her life, for example perhaps she is the mother of Plato. Very little remains in the archive of direct and confirmed writing by women in ancient times as their subjugated position was squarely in play.



Like everyone before, I will fall into the void of history, 2016

35cm x 42cm

Ink on paper

Photograph: Vic McEwan

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The imagery in *Unbind Me* is considering a reoccurring question in my practice - how do I create paintings as a feminist, given the historical legacy of painting that is tied to the philosophical principles I am critiquing? As a strategy, the portraits are headless and contain patterns of thoughts and feelings in, on and around a body who is placed in what Merleau-Ponty would call 'pure depth'. Pure-depth or darkness, in phenomenology, is a space to take a break from being yourself. I am curious to know if presenting self-identities through the thoughts and feelings we inhabit in our bodies using a non-representational language can alleviate some of the problematic history within painting.



The Female Trinity of Christine: Justice, Rectitude, Reason (Christine de Pizan, 1405), 2018
15cm x 25cm (4 panels)

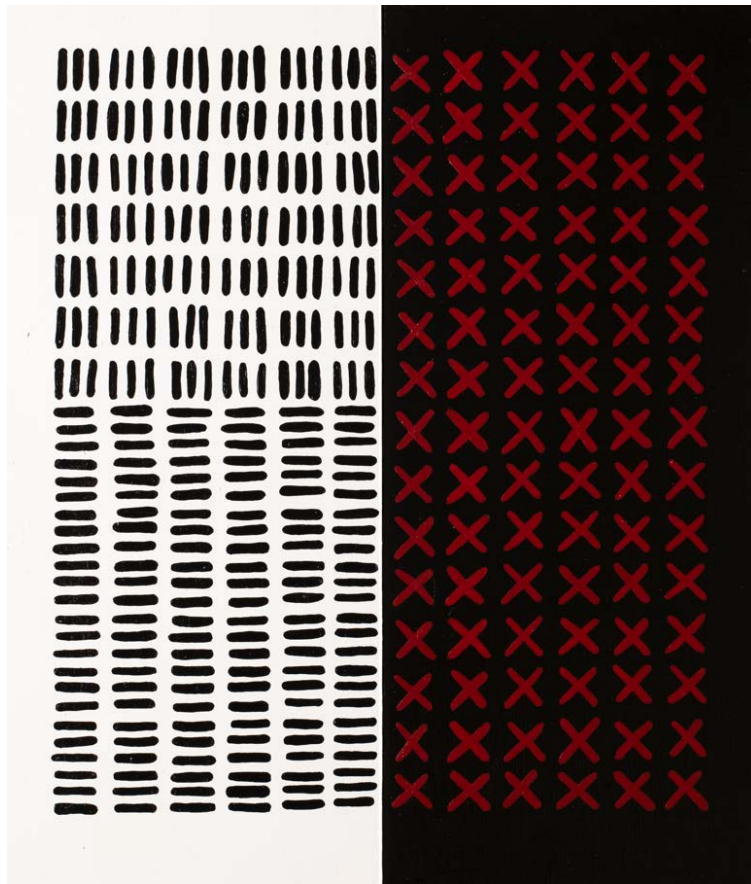
Ink, acrylic paint and ash on canvas board

Photograph: Vic McEwan

SLIDE 18

In going back now to my timeline, Christine de Pizan in 1405, pens the first feminist novel *The City of Ladies* that outlines building a metaphorical walled city for worthy and honourable women, to protect them from the words of male philosophers, religious leaders, poets and authors.

Being born into a scholarly family allowed de Pizan access to knowledge and privilege as she made a living writing for the French Court. However, this novel sprang from her research and reading of male writers where she was outraged at their mockery of women and their characteristics. She names and shames men of her era and in history who have been especially spitefully.



Did you know what you were doing? (René Descartes, 1637), 2017/18

60cm x 70cm

Acrylic paint and ash on canvas board

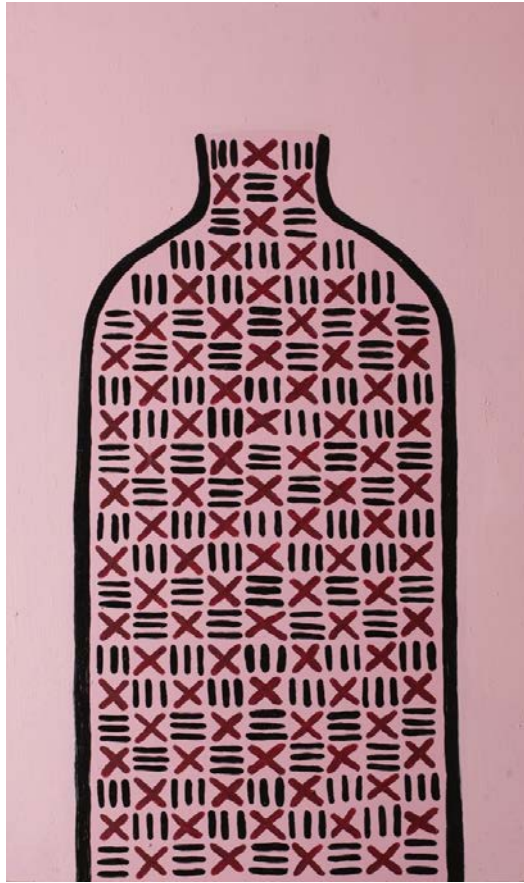
Photograph: Vic McEwan

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The world that de Pizan knew was very different to the world that Descartes knew 220 years later. There were enormous changes occurring in the Renaissance when Descartes was alive, such as the move from a feudal to capitalist system, from rural to urban living, the colonisation of 'new' lands to satisfy a hunger for profit, the development of the printing press that makes circulating text easier, new scientific ideas from Galileo about the world, and religious rupturing's through the Reformations.

Although the Renaissance is cited as the enlightenment out of the dark ages, it plunges women, the poor, non-Europeans and the non-human world into an even darker time. Through his maxim, *I think, I exist*, Descartes feeds into the hegemony of the Renaissance by stating that only things that can think (not feel) exist in the world. Animals do not think, and the Earth does not think; leading to a significant separation that fuels Eurocentric hierarchies through reinforcing binaries.

Women, along with nature and animals, were placed on the 'body' side of Descartes' mind/body binary, which continued to reinforce the subordinate 'biological' make up of women that had been believed since Ancient Greece. Man with a capital M continues to rule this era with their superior ability to think rationally.



Mothers Make Capitalism Work (Alfred Marshall, 1890), 2017/18

60cm x 107cm

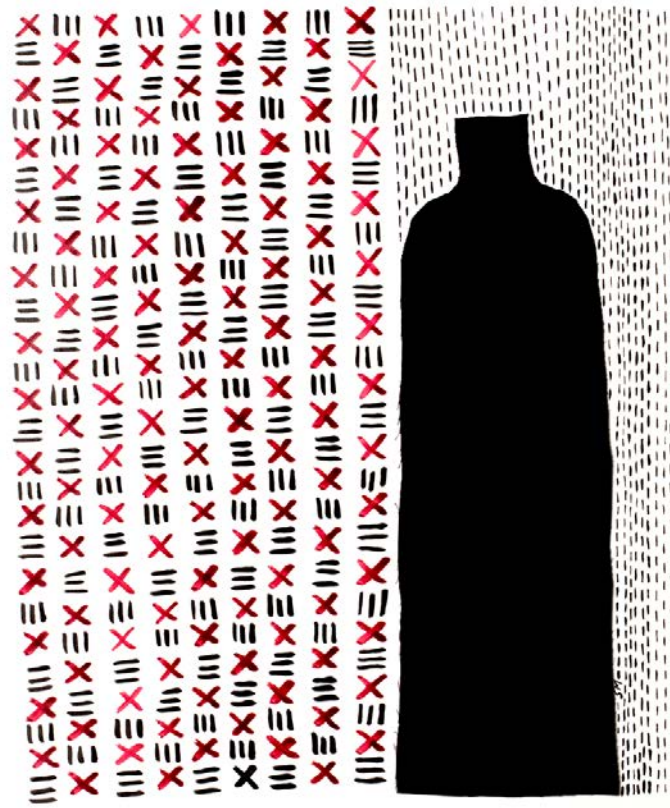
Acrylic paint and ash on canvas board

Photograph: Vic McEwan

SLIDE 20

In jumping now to the next dramatic change within the world, the Industrial Revolution, Alfred Marshall in 1890 writes what is considered to be the modern economics handbook. Marshall's ideas on what it took for people to succeed in a modern economy maintained the status quo. Marshall had a very middle class opinion on women's work; they should not work outside the home, but nurture, care and educate their children to be responsible members of society so they could grow into the next generation of citizens and workers. With the rise of capitalism a new family structure occurred – the nuclear family, where women stayed home and their labour became invisible as it was not linked to a monetary value.

In this time women began agitating for change, wanting access to education and the vote. Marshall maintained 'respectable' Victorian values and he did not advocate for women's education or voting rights.



I am in the background - foreground/background/denial (Val Plumwood, 1993), 2016

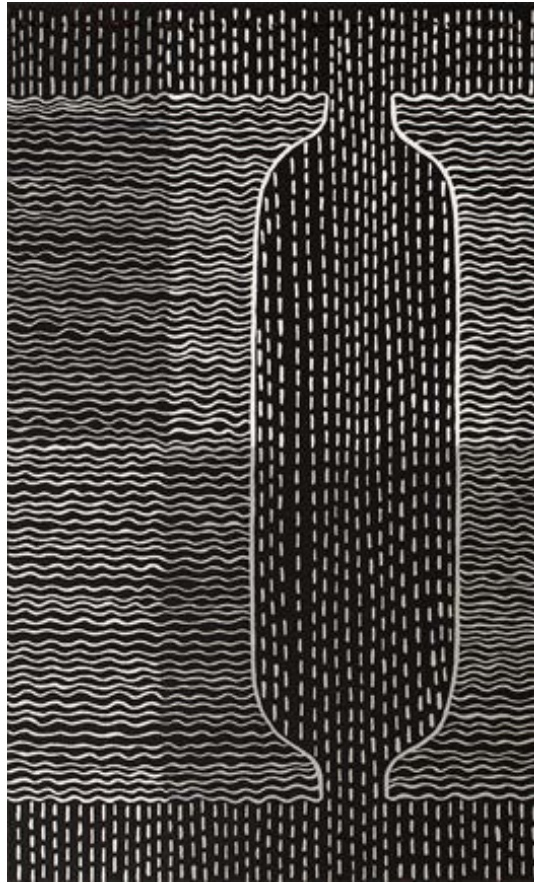
55cm x 65cm

Ink and fabric on paper

Photograph: Vic McEwan

SLIDE 21

I'm now jumping into our contemporary time with Val Plumwood, an Australian Environmental Philosopher who spent her life trying to return nature's soul back into the Western imagination. She is a key contemporary figure in outlining in great detail how the dominant side of the binary, aka man with a capital M, has had such a devastating and harmful effect on the world. She reminds us to resist the master story that keeps us in bondage and suggests we can shift this structure when we decolonise ourselves from the infinite tangles of the dualist stronghold and make a purposeful change in how we inhabit the Earth to remake the mould and explore different stories.



The past matters (Karen Barad, 2007), 2018

40cm x 70cm

Acrylic paint and ash on board

Photograph: Vic McEwan

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Karen Barad builds on from the work of Val Plumwood and expands the decolonising process more through her background as a physicist. In conducting experiments, she proves that the very building blocks of our world, matter, is never a settled matter. It is radically open, queer, forever transforming and its boundaries do not sit still. Like the work of many feminists, Barad's compelling analysis challenges the rigid hierarchies we have inherited from the Western master structures.



LEFT: lekta substance fate GOD power immanence incorporeal (Elizabeth Grosz, 2017), 2018
 30cm x 107cm
 Acrylic paint and ash on canvas board

RIGHT: I am incorporeal (Elizabeth Grosz, 2017), 2017/18
 40cm x 145cm
 Acrylic paint and ash on canvas board with fabric

Photograph: Vic McEwan

SLIDE 23

In thinking about Western history, and the time travel I've outlined in *Unbind Me*, what strikes me the most is how we create an abyss between ourselves and others. I am fascinated with how people either work to make the gap wider, usually for their own benefit or to feel special and affirm their status or as a way of demarcating their territory that you can't enter, while some people work to create bridges, to face the other as a friend and with openness.

In facing people as friends, instead of the historical practice of dividing, categorising and conquering, we are enacting what so many people call for – doing what is different from the past. This is what Elizabeth Grosz would call an *ontoethics* – where we live together, in this only world we have, in a way that matters.



Performative Opening with Julie Montgarrett and Ronnie Hazelton
Western Plains Cultural Centre, 30 June 2018

Photograph: Vic McEwan

SLIDE 24

In this final image you can see part 3 of the exhibition, honouring artist Truth Tellers. I have painted them as pillars, looking directly, and unflinchingly at history. All of the artists I have presented embody that Robert Kegan or Wakka Wakka Wulli Wulli woman Tjanara Goreng Goreng would call sacred leadership. Sacred leadership is at the opposite end of traditional Western rule, that is best summed up by the Ancient Greek maxim, *divide et impera*, that translates to divide and conquer. This political strategy of ruling is still used today to manipulate opinions to maintain power and control. It is a purposeful and willful act to divide groups of people into smaller pockets that do not pose a threat to whoever is in power. All you need to do is look at our media and hear the political rhetoric to see this in action in our contemporary lives.

Sacred leadership is much quieter and if you're not paying attention, you might miss it. This is because one of the fundamental qualities of sacred leadership is humility and letting go of the ego. By choosing to move beyond yourself, and to have your energy not impact negatively in the world, it allows for a kindness in dealing with other people.

The way I orientate myself in the world is through contemporary art and so I wanted to honour the artists that I know who are contributing to transformations through their artworks and the way they live their lives and the work they do for their communities.

In conclusion, I cannot express enough how this Create NSW Fellowships was career defining. I see very clearly how my deep exploration of practice during my fellowship will have a lasting legacy and shape my future directions. Having resources allowed me to think in a scale I previously had not gone to before. I was very aware during my fellowship to make the most of this incredible opportunity that I had.