

DEL KATHRYN BARTON

THE HIGHWAY IS A DISCO

ARTWORK LABELS

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Del Kathryn Barton: The Highway is a Disco

This exhibition reveals the artist's imaginative and deeply sensuous artistic realm where ornately decorated species – human, animal and mixture of both – are rendered in seductive line and colour.

This exhibition is a survey of new and recent work by the two-time Archibald Prize winner that reveals the breadth of Barton's practice. In this display, paintings and drawings for which she is best known sit alongside collage, sculpture, textiles and film unified by the artist's exuberant and psychedelic aesthetic.

In this series of seventy-five montages that combine digital collage with handpainted details, Barton creates post-human visions in which women's bodies are both human and plant. The Dadaists used collage to access the Freudian domain of the unconscious mind, and the great Dada artist Hannah Höch was a key proponent of photomontage in her exploration of the role of women in a changing world. Like the Surrealists, Barton uses collage as a method to critique the illusion of a defined and orderly world, in favour of absurdity. The visual delirium of these works induces a kind of hallucinatory experience in which new creatures seem possible.

It is widely understood that flowers symbolise female sexuality: their physical resemblance to women's genitalia is coupled with an associative significance in their blooming, which invokes the creation of new life in birth. The history of floral representation strongly binds femininity and flowers, from the Greek nymph Chloris and her Roman counterpart Flora, who oversaw spring and flowers, to Sigmund Freud who was very clear on the matter: 'Blossoms and flowers represent the female genitals, or more particularly, virginity. Do not forget that the blossoms are really the genitals of the plants'.

inside another land

2017

synthetic polymer paint on inkjet print

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

untitled self-portrait (feeding Arella)

2006

inkjet print

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

The maternal figure is a crucial presence in Barton's works. This self-portrait of the artist breastfeeding her daughter, surrounded by the crocheted creations of her grandmother, is a riotous and colourful celebration of the matrilineal bond. In contrast to traditional works in which the breastfeeding woman is depicted as an asexual Mary, Mother of God, here the the mother figure is joyous and sensual.

briefly turned into dreams

2016

synthetic polymer paint, silk (dupion), synthetic thread
and inkjet print on canvas, painted wood, glass

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

briefly turned into dreams

2017

synthetic polymer paint on wall

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

you're not a bit ashamed

2017

synthetic polymer paint and ink on paper

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

to speak of anger, I will take care

2017

synthetic polymer paint and ink on paper

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

of pink planets

2014

synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on canvas

Collection of Boris Tasic, Sydney

In this work a creature with the head of a wallaby and the tail of a snake looks as though it might suckle from one of the woman's five breasts. The breast is a dual organ, both of pleasure and sustenance, and multiple breasts suggest abundant life energy. Symbolically, the multi-breasted woman recalls the mythological icon Artemis of Ephesus, goddess of the wilderness, the hunt, wild animals and fertility. In some interpretations of the iconography, the nodes on Artemis's chest are said to be the testes of bulls sacrificed to her. This fluidity of gender, human and animal forms is a strong current in Barton's art.

come home to me

2014–17

gouache and ink on hot pressed paper

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

The flexibility of language is revealed in *come home to me*. Barton loves language but at the same time questions its ability to communicate. The floating words are a strategy for awakening us to the various, infinite and slippery meaning of words. Like poetry, Barton's fiercely non-didactic texts are open to diverse understandings. There is no wrong or right interpretation of these texts. Without dictating the associations these words create in each of our minds, Barton evokes sensual delights and pleasures of the flesh.

pressure to the need

2013

synthetic polymer paint, fibre-tipped pen, and gouache
on canvas

Collection of Josh Ackman and Marion Anrys, Melbourne

sing blood-wings sing

2017

synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on canvas

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

i want to love you

2016

synthetic polymer paint and beads on canvas

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

i am flesh again

2008

fibre-tipped pen and watercolour on hot pressed paper

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Gift of the artist through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation 2010. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

2010.014.001-62

up in this

2012

bronze, granite

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

i can grow you more, drunk on its own nectar

2017

bronze, granite

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

the stars eat your body

2009

photogravure

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

openly song

2014

synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

girl as sorcery figure

2005

synthetic polymer paint, gouache, watercolour, fibre-tipped pen, brush and ink on canvas

Collection of Stephen and Jane Hains, Melbourne

the highway is a disco

2015

synthetic polymer paint and ink on paper

Private collection Basel, Switzerland

see ya mumma

2016

synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on canvas

Collection of Brooke Horne, Sydney

shiny

2014

synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on canvas

Collection of Kathleen McFarlane, Sydney

I'm going through changes

2016

synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on canvas

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

Fluttering hands appear frequently in Barton's works, often pawing at the surrounding organic matter or seeking to express some unknown significance. The hand gestures of Christian and Buddhist art carry specific meanings, and while they do not indicate explicit symbolism, the many hands of Barton's figures suggest a certain spiritual or sacred atmosphere. The hands do not signal us to take part in particular ceremonies, but to transport ourselves to a transcendent realm.

or fall again

2014

synthetic polymer paint, fibre-tipped pen and gouache
on canvas

Warson Collection, Melbourne

The tangled and lush floral decoration of Barton's paintings recreates the *millefleur* (1000 flowers) technique of late Middle Ages to early Renaissance tapestries, distinguished by a lack of uniform pattern. The medieval period is sometimes perceived as a time of pagan superstition when the mysteries of nature and humanity were still full of wonder and darkness, and the unknown and unexplained were revered. Barton's works evoke this period and direct viewers to a mysteriously interconnected world where spirit, psyche, natural cycles and the body are interconnected in intimate, unknowable relationships.

For kids

What parts of nature can you see in this painting? Flowers, wallabies, leaves? Do you ever walk in nature and look at the animals, insects and flowers like the person in this picture is doing? This person looks like they love being in nature. How does the outdoors make you feel?

'I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst.'

HÉLÈNE CIXOUS, THE LAUGH OF THE MEDUSA (1975)

In this new series of works, entitled *Volcanic Women*, Barton coaxes and melts women into and out of the Earth's larval core. Bodies flow from the ground, emerging as hot red lines of ink. These women erupt upward, as molten liquid bodies of agency. They display their genitals as though it is from their vaginas that the Earth's energy spills forth. Barton here celebrates the abundance and generative necessity of women's desire and sexual vigour. The suppression of women's sexuality by a culture of fear is melted away in these volcanic works.

volcanic women

2016

archival ink and synthetic polymer paint on paper

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

in the face of cosmic odds

2016

synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on
canvas

Collection of Andy Davey and Grant Galvin, Sydney

that is its nature

2013

synthetic polymer paint and gouache on canvas

Collection of Terry Wu, Melbourne

girl #8

2004

fibre-tipped pen, gouache, watercolour and synthetic
polymer paint on canvas

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Gift of ARTAND Australia 2015. Donated through the
Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

312.2015

is the energy

2014

synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

it was very light, may i be very light

2014

synthetic polymer paint and fibre-tipped pen on canvas

Private collection, Melbourne

at the foot of your love ...

2017

printed silk, Huon Pine (*Lagarostrobus franklinii*),
and bronze

Designer/manufacturer: Elan Construct Pty Ltd

Director: Boris Tasic

CAD & Machine Technologist: Jason Huang

CAD Technologist: Nat Campbell

Head Timber worker: Anthony Grima

Timber worker: Nick Fetahi

Apprentice: Emma Wilkinson

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3

This work was made by Barton as she prepared for her mother's death. The fabric represents a handkerchief for the tears of all children who mourn their mother's departure. The wooden conch shell is envisaged by the artist as a boat on which to sail into the darkness of eternity and 'the vast ocean of the collective-consciousness'. It celebrates home and place, since the Huon Pine tree, from which the work is made, is a precious and endangered timber of Australia, subject to decay.

'Mother of otherness
Eat me'

SYLVIA PLATH, 'POEMS FOR A BIRTHDAY' (1960)

Sylvia Plath's words open Barton's first short film, *RED*. The human maternal figure at the heart of this work (played by Cate Blanchett) is interchangeable with a red-back spider. Alongside Blanchett, Barton's daughter, Arella Plater, and actor Alex Russell portray the nuclear family, and Sydney Dance Company's Charmene Yap is the arching, writhing spider. The film explores women's desire and maternal experience.

In the realm of recent art history, the mother-spider recalls American sculptor Louise Bourgeois's massive, looming arachnids. Bourgeois is one of Barton's greatest influences and represented spiders in a renowned series begun in 1994 and continued until the end of her life in 2010. Like Plath and Bourgeois before her, in this work Barton has rendered the overwhelming complexities and contradictions of motherhood.

RED

2016

high resolution digital video, sound, 15 min

Executive Producers: Arndt Art Agency (A3); Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; Danielle and Daniel Besen, Besen Collection, Melbourne; Max and Monique Burger, Burger Collection, Hong Kong

Collection of the artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery and A3