

Affinities

In 1978 the Japanese godfathers of electronic music, Yellow Magic Orchestra, released the song 'Firecracker'. It was an instant hit, filled with subtle geopolitics, transgressions of techno conventions, and an undeniably aspirational synth motif.

The song is also the namesake of both this exhibition and Georgia Spain's painting, *Flying out (firecracker)*, 2022. Spain had been thinking of artmaking as "flying out of one's comfort zone", with the song capturing "that sense of explosive and exuberant energy that occasionally overcomes me whilst painting". You can view this across her four-metre epic, where brushstrokes of harmonious chaos gesture toward a human crowd, but not to relay anything merely figurative—rather an intensity of collective feeling, and that such feeling is shared and possible.

Intensity in art is a very charming quality. YMO and Georgia Spain have it, in their equal attention to craft and concept, along with a certain attitude; a relentless curiosity that pushes through convention. They find good company alongside Hannah Gartside, Guruwuy Murrinyina, Justine Varga and Elizabeth Willing. These are all women artists, joined not by idea or form, but rather a sense of operating in the world of art; a shared necessity to create objects, images and feelings not encountered before.

Gartside, in her continual transformation of textiles, has crafted a scene of four feet meeting by stitching together 1950s stockings. As with all Gartside's work with cloth you can feel the delicacy, the appreciation for used material and its histories. By centering the garments, apart from human skin, we see the intricate role of cloth in our lives; mirrored in Gartside's own formal intricacy.

Pushing form also defines Justine Varga's images, where the artist eschews any traditional photographic image to show us how image itself is conjured. She manipulates photographic negatives—everything from exposure to enlarging, to inscribing film with nail polish—giving us pure abstraction. These images partly honour the magical thinking of photography, mixed with the irreverent act of touching the negative.

Abstracting a process to truly see that process is also a touchstone of Willing's sculpture, *Bolus*, 2023. Made of hand carved spotted gum, the sculpture, in the artist's words, is "an interpretation of the portable modular cattle gates used to contain, organise, and direct livestock". But Willing's gate is also intestinal, visually linking the 'gateway' of the human gut and the gates of food production, alluding to the (often horrifying) manipulation of the food we consume; a mutated gut responding to a mutated world.

Nature, however, gets a different glance in the stringybark paintings of Guruwuy Murrinyina, who explores the motif known in Yolŋu Matha language as Dhatam or water lilies. In flowing paintings created from natural earth pigments, the works also allude to the ancestral site Garrimala, an inland body of fresh water—which in turn links to another motif, the story of Witiŋ, the Rainbow Serpent. Murrinyina paints these shimmering odes from Northeast Arnhem Land (Miwatj).

Through these works enter five distinct voices, but they share a quality found in the most special art, where the works exist in excess of themselves, overflowing with feelings, ideas, stories and desires. Yet the right to this aesthetic intensity for women was never a historical given. As art critic Jennifer Higgin makes clear in *The Mirror and the Palette*, for hundreds of years women artists fought for the space and time to fulfill their curiosities and drives—it's a lineage that leads to exhibitions like *Flying out (firecracker)*.

While once there was a tendency to over-romanticise the creative impulses of the relentless artist, this has fallen away—not necessarily because it's untrue, but more likely because seriousness in purpose has historically been the purview of only white male artists, while also obscuring the lived conditions of artists' lives. And yet, we lose something when we lose this idea. These five artists all have a seriousness of purpose, what might be called attitude or even belief, each in their own studio or space, across the country, with vastly different lives, but realising their affinity through the impulse to create.

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