



The Semiotics of the Dress

Genevieve Memory

5 – 16 March 2019

The Semiotics of the Dress

I work in expanded practice and portraiture. My work is often interdisciplinary and blurs or critiques conventional boundaries and genres through the themes of identity and the mind. Currently, my focus is on the ideas of human dignity and labelling practices, which I see as intertwined – people are often treated a certain way because of the labels they assign themselves or have been assigned by others, such as by organisations within the body politic.

I have been critiquing the label of 'woman' for some years and this exhibition, timed to coincide with International Women's Day 2019, represents a culmination of that body of work and associated research. The motif of the dress is used in both my expanded painting and portraiture practices to this end. In my expanded practice, I use readymade dresses, fabric and canvas to explore these ideas.

My dress-based body of work and research explores and critiques women's roles and identities through the sign of the dress. A reference to fabric and clothing, either literal or metaphorical, has proven to be a useful device as the work moves between personal, national and global in its focus.

Many theorists have discussed the way clothing and dress function as systems of signs or as a kind of language, among them Barthes, Eco, Hebdige, Entwistle and Wilson. As traditional stereotypes and cultural practices around the binary system are dismantled, we may reasonably question what it means to wear a dress in today's society: what are the semiotics of the dress?

I read the dress is as a major historically and socially coded and gendered signifier for woman, functioning in much the same way as a uniform. As I see it, when a woman puts on a dress, she marks herself as different from other non-dress wearers, from other non-women. Furthermore, I propose that the power of the sign of the dress, as a strong identifier of sameness, overrides any cultural sensitivity towards or identification of diversity or difference.

I propose that the language of clothes has the power to override our own personal identifying labels. This theory is easy to prove in the case of a school or professional uniform: this is the point of a uniform, to identify a group of people as similar or the same, as belonging to one group within the body politic and not as a collection of individuals. But can this theory be applied to free-choice clothing? Can our everyday clothing choices cancel out our chosen identifying labels? I believe that in the case of the dress, they can.

Talking about sameness in a climate of difference has become difficult both inside and outside the art institution. Deflating the importance of gender difference in everyday speech and behaviour in order to allow diversity and inclusivity through non-gender-specific terminology becomes problematic when there is a need to highlight discrimination or disadvantage for women or men as a group on the basis of sameness *within* the binary system. Yet, I insist that talk about it we must, especially in the case of women. Australia is slipping globally in standards of equality for women¹ and violence towards women is on the rise.²

If woman as subject has essentially fallen out of fashion in the art world in the transition from women's studies to gender studies to queer theory, can the Feminism brand continue to be effective in inciting positive change for women?³ Do we instead, as a culture, need to consider rebranding to something more levelling and inclusive, such as Egalitarianism - equity and equality for all people regardless of sex, gender, cultural background, ability or age?

It can be uncomfortable to talk about these difficult issues and taboos but change will only come if, as a society, we do. I hope you find this exhibition and the ideas within it to be a talking point in your professional and social circles.

Genevieve Memory

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission, "Face the Facts: Gender Equality 2018," *Education* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018), accessed 4 February 2019, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/education/fact-facts/face-facts/gender-equality-2018>.

² Department of Communities, *Not Now, Not Ever: Putting an End to Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland* (Queensland Government, 2015): 1, accessed 4 February 2019, <https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/resources/gateway/campaigns/end-violence/about/special-taskforce/dfv-report-vol-one.pdf>.

³ Anne Marsh, "Art and feminism: Generations and practice," *Artlink* 37, No.4 (December 2017): 12.



genevievememory.com.au

[@genevieve.memory](https://www.instagram.com/genevieve.memory)

Many thanks to the staff at Griffith University Queensland College of Art and my family, friends and colleagues for their support of this exhibition

GREY STREET GALLERY

 **Griffith** UNIVERSITY
Queensland College of Art