

## The Wondering Project



Curated by Genevieve Memory  
Supported by the Women Of Note community choir

This collaborative community art project is both its own exhibition and part two of my solo show, *The Semiotics of the Dress*. I was commissioned to compose a celebratory choral work to mark the Women Of Note community choir's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and through this connection, the idea of a collaborative art project grew. Eleven choir members agreed to participate, each carefully reflecting on a key experience that related to their life as a woman. Some of these experiences featured a specific dress, but not all. Themes of hardship, resilience, joy, personal satisfaction, generosity and self-discovery emerged. It has been my privilege to curate this exhibition and it is my hope that the women involved feel justly proud of their contributions – thank you so much for sharing your stories.

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## The Semiotics of the Dress

Genevieve Memory

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Dudley House Bendigo

## The Semiotics of the Dress

I work in expanded practice and portraiture. My work is often interdisciplinary and intentionally blurs or critiques conventional boundaries and genres via the themes of identity and the mind. In my expanded painting practice, I use paint on readymade dresses and fabric to disrupt and reject conventional notions of the art object in the gallery setting. This subtly transgressive act is both perplexing and strangely alluring. By choosing to work with clothing, I also bring into play the concept of absence and presence: the absence of the wearer's body is made uncannily obvious through the presence of the item of clothing. In other words, the dresses I use stand in for the women themselves.

My dress-based body of work and research explores and critiques women's roles and identities through the sign, or semiotics, of the dress. 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.<sup>1</sup> If the clothing I wear says something about me to others, what does it say when I put on a dress? What does it mean to wear a dress in today's society: what are the semiotics of the dress?

As contemporary society moves away from strict binary ways of thinking to more spectrum-based ways, how do we read the wearing of the dress? Women, non-binary and other people who have participated in my previous art projects have revealed a vast array of opinions and emotions when it comes to their own dress-wearing practices. Their responses range from delight to apprehension and even fear. Some people hold feelings of ambivalence towards the dress. How can a person feel both attracted to and repelled by an item of clothing? The answer lies in the power of the sign of the dress.

Those who are wary of the dress read it as a historically and socially coded and gendered signifier for woman, functioning in much the same way as a uniform. When a woman puts on a dress, she marks herself as different from other non-dress wearers, from other non-women. Furthermore, as a sign of women's sameness, the dress has the power to override any cultural sensitivity towards or identification of diversity or difference, such as our own personal identifiers.

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<sup>1</sup> Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson, "Introduction: Body Dressing," *Body Dressing* (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2001), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, "Face the Facts: Gender Equality 2018," *Education* (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018), accessed 30 July 2019, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/education/fact-facts/face-facts/gender-equality-2018>.

Talking about sameness in today's 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. Why would there be a need to highlight discrimination or disadvantage for women as a group in Australia today? Because Australia is slipping globally in standards of equality for women with symptomatic evidence such as a widening pay gap since 2000, an increase in gendered violence towards women and older women being at greater risk of living below the poverty line.<sup>2</sup>

However, despite these unsettling realities, not all women are perturbed by this particular semiotic aspect of the dress. For some, the sign of the dress means practicality, freedom, individuality, empowerment, elegance, sensuality, playfulness, creativity and even artfulness. The sheen or fall of the fabric is bewitching and the ability to evoke memory is strong. Positive associations such as these have been expressed in journal entries by previous exhibition visitors, the following being a quote from one:

When I held the dress against me, I felt I could conquer all obstacles and be free.<sup>3</sup>

This exhibition seeks to both celebrate and critique the sign of the dress in its myriad interpretations and manifestations. I hope that you enjoy it.

Genevieve Memory

<sup>3</sup> Moya, exhibition visitor and participant in the artwork *Shopping for a dress*, *The Semiotics of the Dress*, Grey Street Gallery, Brisbane, March 2019.