Introduction to and contextualisation of the *Centenary* project

Centenary is a women's portraiture project celebrating four women working in the arts in Brisbane, all drawn from my circle of family and friends. The portraiture of the Austrian Symbolist painter Gustav Klimt, who died one hundred years ago, forms the framework for the project. I have long loved and been influenced by Klimt through his combination of figuration and abstraction, his influence of drawing, his combination of flat and tonal painting, of flat and spatial depth, and his portrayal of women.

The parameters of the project involved pairing the four women with selected Klimt portraits and then appropriating the poses and support dimensions for each. Some poses were reproduced faithfully, and others were referred to more loosely. I chose to appropriate works from the canon of historical painting as a way of reflecting on what I had learnt in my degree; to engage with a key influence on my work, Klimt; to open up a dialogue about painting's medium specificity; to explore what a portrait can be and what it cannot be; to critique women's roles and identities; to celebrate women working in the arts in Brisbane today; and to engage with the art theory subject of representation.

The project is a subtle reflection on what has changed and what has stayed the same for women over time. How do the dynamics change when it's a woman, instead of a man, painting portraits of other women? Do the poses from paintings that are over one hundred years old still have resonance today and how are they read? How does the wearing of dresses in portraits read today – do we even notice that the women are wearing dresses? What is the signification of the dress today?

Since 2016, my work with women's roles and identities has been focused around the signification of the dress as sign for 'woman' - consequently, it was an additional parameter of the project that each woman must wear a dress for their portrait sitting. 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. My preoccupation with the dress in particular is as a major 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, because in my Anglo-Australian culture, men do not wear dresses except in very specific circumstances. This specific reading of the dress has nothing to do with fashion, though it

may understandably be confused with it. Fashion cannot ever be completely be removed from the dress, however it is not my focus with this work. An analogy would be to try to separate nakedness from life drawing – nakedness is a requirement for life drawing, but life drawing is not about nakedness.

This year, I introduced the concept of 'labels' into my work. This allowed me to step away from the potentially subjective or emotional nature of the work and to be more objective. It also allows viewers and readers this same advantage. My work with dresses essentially critiques the *labelling* and consequent treatment of women by the wearing of the sign of the dress. The label of woman may be freely chosen, or it may be imposed by members of the body politic, but regardless, it is my contention that wearing the sign of the dress will mark the wearer as 'woman', whether it is the wearer's chosen identifier or not. In this way, the work is also relevant to those who identify as non-binary or other, if the sign of the dress is worn. Humans are essentially visual creatures, and clothing and dress constitute systems of signs that communicate like a language – the sign of the dress and its ensuing label of woman will override any alternate personal identifier that the wearer may have unless the wearer goes to the extent of making it known verbally that the case is otherwise. I suggest that the power of the sign of the dress as an identifier of sameness overrides any cultural sensitivity towards or identification of diversity or difference.

As we continue to dismantle traditional stereotypes and cultural practices around the binary system, I question what it means in today's society to wear a dress. If we make it a priority to deflate the importance of gender difference in everyday speech and behavior in order to allow diversity and inclusivity through gender-neutral terminology, how can we then highlight discrimination or disadvantage for women or men as a group on the basis of sameness *within* the binary system?

This project comes up against many philosophical and societal boundaries, and in this age of hypersensitivity to political correctness, I feel compelled to contextualise this work further. Firstly, I acknowledge that there are two organisational systems currently in place in my Anglo-Australian culture – the binary system and the gender spectrum. It is my contention that the gender spectrum cannot replace or override the binary system as the two systems concern different aspects of human categorization. Moreover, the binary system is still in use in my culture and around the world. My work on labels, women and dresses primarily comes from my experience of living in the binary system

and in which I continue to live. This can be difficult for younger viewers and readers in Australia, who have largely grown up living with the gender spectrum predominantly, to understand. It is important to accept that people continue to judge others and to label others according to the philosophical underpinnings of the binary system. It is also important to understand that in other parts of the world, the gender spectrum has not yet been seriously adopted or even adopted at all and that many women continue to live only in the binary system.

My philosophical view on life is one of egalitarianism, not feminism – I advocate respect for all people, regardless of sex, gender, cultural background, ability or age. The work that I am doing with dresses concerns those who identify as women, which is my personal identifier, but also those who wear the sign of the dress. This work comes from a place of personal experience, but I am interested in the wider experience of women. I am also interested in advocating for an improvement in the quality of life for those who identify as women across the globe. This work is relevant to all dress-wearers and to all who identify as women.

What this project did *not* explicitly cover in its scope was the motivation behind why those who are free make their own clothing choices choose to wear dresses, or the degree to which these wearers are aware of the sign value of the dress as signifier for woman. Some of these motivations came through in the interviews – for reasons of comfort and practicality, to gain the attention of others, to be identified as a unique individual and to feel connected to other women. This is an area that I would like to explore further in future work.

I have been privileged to know so many admirable and inspirational women during my time in the creative industries – this project introduces the reader to just a few.

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