

Are we there yet?

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A momentous symposium took place at the University of Western Australia (UWA) last October, playfully-politically titled 'Are We There Yet?', with the tagline 'Women's Art Symposium'. 'Momentous' might seem too eager an endorsement, but for someone such as myself – a man, not particularly well versed in the history of feminist art (in Australia, or elsewhere) – this two-day symposium was a revelation. Organised by the Cruthers Art Foundation (CAF) in association with UWA and The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art (CCWA, an entity which belongs to the UWA Art Collection, and jointly managed by CAF and UWA), the symposium was held in conjunction with a major CCWA-related exhibition, *Look. Look Again*, at UWA's charming Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, and accompanied by a significant publication, *Into The Light: The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art*.

The line-up of speakers was impressive, drawing on a mix of curators, academics and artists from around Australia, and with a keynote address from Catherine Morris, Curator at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, New York. Morris's presence was significant – due in part to her accessible, informative style as a speaker, and her willingness to engage from the floor (as many others did) with the papers from fellow speakers. Her significance was also simply due to the fact that she was the lone international voice at this symposium, and more so one representing the kind of institution which Australia lacks but to which the CCWA (and related CAF) in essence aspires and, even without its own dedicated space, remains this country's closest equivalent.

In this light, it was interesting to hear the ways in which Morris, through her curatorial program at the Sackler Centre, conceived and met with the challenges of a dedicated feminist art space, given that ten years ago, she admits, before she worked at the Centre (established in 2007), she was 'more convinced about the obsolescence of feminisms'. There have indeed been all-women shows during Morris's time there: the 2011 *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958-68* exhibition, for example, as a reflection of her curatorial strategy in exploring feminism's contribution to broader movements such as postmodernism. But the Centre is not averse to showing the work of men, either to contextualise the work of



Sera Waters, *Self in Stitches*, 2012, handmade clay beads, lace, string, hand-dyed linen, cotton, beads, sequins, approx 70 x 55cm; Cruthers Collection of Women's Art; showing in the CCWA solo exhibition *Dark Portraits: Sera Waters*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth, 8 February to 20 April 2013.

women artists, as with its *Rachel Kneebone: Regarding Rodin* exhibition, 2012, or vice versa, as with Matthew Buckingham's 2012 installation, *The Spirit and the Letter*, in homage to the 18th century novelist Mary Wollstonecraft. For Morris, the challenge remains to move away from binaries in recognising the generational shifts within/towards concepts of feminism, the mutability of gender in contemporary societies, and 'the need to program with a nimble voice'.

It's quite acceptable these days for men to use the term 'feminist' for themselves, just as men may feel more compelled, and accepted, in joining women in Reclaim The Night marches. Witness the massive, broadly public street demonstration along Sydney Road, Melbourne, which took place less than a month before this symposium in response to the rape and murder of Irish expatriate Melbourne Jill Meagher. Does this cross-gender unity suggest 'we are there'? – 'we' as a society

rather than 'as women', mobilised by outrage at such a random, heinous act of male brutality? And how does this show of unity, and related violence/violation, manifest in the world of art?

Elvis Richardson's presentation at the symposium would suggest violations against women artists, however subtle or overt, continue apace, but not unchecked, particularly through her cyber guise as 'The Countess', a blog which she has been running for some years now in which she acts as 'the auditor', collating statistics on Australian art exhibitions, contemporary art spaces/galleries, and related publications which show percentages of male and female artist representation. The varying figures over time were not encouraging and one could feel Richardson's sense of frustration and fatigue – in the sheer labour of maintaining the 'count' amidst the demands of her own busy life – as a mother/artist/educator – and with its baldly grim conclusions. I have to admit to sinking down in my seat a little when one of her graphs showed percentages for a number of art publications, with *Art Monthly* rating a 'zero' in terms of its coverage of female artists, and during my editorship no less. On raising the matter with Richardson during the break, I discovered that this related to just one issue (in 2008), and that coverage of group shows (including male and female artists) weren't part of the count, nor was the gender of an article's author but which is in fact part of my considerations as editor, as indeed is the gender balance of artists whose work appears on our covers. I also offered, by way of defence, that the magazine was

perhaps the first 'mainstream' arts publication to run an article about her blog: Melissa Miles's article 'Whose art counts?', the lead article in our October 2009 issue.

Still, Richardson's presentation, whatever the basis of its data, is cause for all of us in art publishing/management or curatorial roles, to consider our own gender biases, and how we may circumvent an art world still fixated on the 'genius' of men.¹ Towards the end of her presentation, curator Jo Holder continued this thread, pointedly asking why public art spaces are not held accountable to the same Equal Employment Opportunity principles underwriting the government agencies which fund them.

While several papers took up the theme of the symposium through an analysis of the feminist art movement in Australia, including from those such as Holder, Jude Adams, and Catriona Moore who were part of its formative years; or as key contributors to its historiography such as Juliette Peers (including her iconoclastic essay in *Into the Light*, 'No Man's Land, or the king is dead, long live the queens'), and Caroline Jordan (who won me over with her particularly droll presentation based on the recent re-attribution to a man, Edward Close, of works wrongly attributed to colonial artist Sophia Campbell)², others were more broadly inscribed. In their historical reclamations, academics Anita Callaway (on early 20th century Australian female performance artists such as Annette Kellerman, aka 'The Diving Venus') and Melissa Bellanta (on female larrikinism) dovetailed nicely with the Cruthers Collection's underlying self-portraiture bent. The symposium also bridged generations, with Masters candidate Laura Castagnini (a previous curatorial intern at the Sackler Centre) discussing humour in the feminist artwork of her peers. At one point in her presentation, Castagnini appeared to unravel a scroll of text from under her dress, from between her legs, in step with her subject and a playful, perhaps youthful performative element matched by Peers's appearance for her presentations (and throughout the symposium,) in Victorian-style garb, looking somewhat like a suffragette.

Academic Georgina Downer was perhaps most akin to Morris in probing possible genderless takes on feminism(s), and in seeking to know how works which fall outside of recognised feminist contexts or avowed feminist intent, may still be considered as such. By extension, this makes me mindful of the tenuous conflation of 'feminism' with 'women's art'.

There were some downsides to the symposium, notably in the way it dealt with race. The Art Gallery of Western Australia's Curator of Indigenous Art Clo Bullen was the sole Indigenous speaker at the symposium, apart from the Noongar artist Dianne Jones who was in attendance and did speak during various question times from the floor. Bullen was part of a panel discussion

('Locating feminism: the F word in contemporary art', along with Odette Kelada and Leigh Robb, and moderated by Terri-ann White) in which she spoke about the irrelevance of feminism to her own strong matriarchal background, and to her role at the AGWA for which most of the work collected (suggesting an 80/20 ratio) was made by women, as well as her 'sorority' of Indigenous female curators (Hetti Perkins, Brenda L. Croft, Tina Baum, Francesca Cubillo, Nicci Cumpston, and Carly Lane, for example). When asked if she then felt the need to target male artists to 'balance' the collection, she laughed off the suggestion. And when asked by myself, one of the few men in attendance, whether she considered the fact that so-called 'women's work' (such as fibre-based art) was still poorly reflected in terms of market value, she stated that some Indigenous men also weave. The panel, despite the clarity of each panellist's separate introductory statements, represented one of those flat, disconnected moments to which I guess any forum is prone. The other weakness, raised by artist Anne Ferran, was that she was the only artist at the symposium given a platform to speak about their own work.

In many ways, the Cruthers Collection and its related Foundation have already moved beyond any binaries of sex. It was John Cruthers, son of the late Sheila Cruthers (the Collection's figurehead and driving force behind its focus on women's art), who first triggered her interest in art. And it is John who now drives the Foundation, who conceived and drove the symposium, and who indeed now drives the collection's future direction.³ Perhaps this may just mean that behind every dominant woman, there's an able man assisting in the wings; or that the journey, rather than the destination, is what ultimately counts in the end.

1. I am mindful here that the overall content in this very edition of *Art Monthly*, despite its fairly equal balance of female/male writers, partly reflects this fixation.

2. This re-attribution was of particular significance for Jordan, eventuating several years after her book *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artists and the Amateur Tradition* (2005); see also David Hansen, 'The Lady Vanishes (or An Adventure in connoisseurship)', *Art Monthly Australia*, July 2011, No. 241, pp. 46-49.

3. John was one of two men to speak at the symposium, along with Daniel Thomas who gave a poignant, first-hand account of the artist Grace Cossington Smith, and of the misconception that Australian women artists pre-feminism were always marginalised by their male peers (citing the careers of Margaret Preston and Margaret Lewers, among others).

'Are We There Yet, Women's Art Symposium' was held at the University of Western Australia, 20-21 October 2012. *Look. Look Again*, comprising 121 works from the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, was shown at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, 20 October to 15 December 2012: lwgallery.uwa.edu.au