



THIS WILD SONG

1 September – 21 October

# Anonymous Was a Woman

By Sophia Cai

*I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.*

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929

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**In her pioneering essay of 1971, art historian Linda Nochlin opens with a perennial question that strikes at the very core of the canon of Western art: "Why have there been no great female artists?"<sup>1</sup> Nochlin recognised that while women have been creating art for as long as men, they have not historically achieved the same recognition due to a range of institutional and societal barriers such as social class, education and their domestic role in the home. In other words, art making operates within a wider social sphere, and it is these social and institutional factors that influence what art is created, shown, recognised, and recorded in the art history books.**

Nearly half a century later, gender representation and equality are still highly relevant. Recent statistics published by the Countess Report show that while approximately 74% of visual arts graduates are women (as of 2014), disproportionately it is their male colleagues who get shown more in major institutions, receive more media coverage, and win more major art prizes.<sup>2</sup> Notably women occupy less senior and leadership positions, the roles that invariably make these decisions. The Countess Report

is not alone in raising attention to these inequalities faced by female and non-binary artists, and many artist-run initiatives including the Women's Art Register and the Artist's Guild in Melbourne, and international activists such as the infamous Guerrilla Girls continue to highlight these topics while bringing attention to female artists and their work.

It is in this spirit of identifying, recognising and celebrating female artists that Melbourne-based artist Ilona Nelson first began *This Wild Song*. As a multi-platform project encompassing photographic portraits, interviews, exhibitions and events, *This Wild Song* celebrates a diversity of contemporary women artists working and living in Australia today. At the heart of *This Wild Song* is a focus on collaboration and female agency; Nelson works closely with each artist to create unique photographic portraits that are an "honest and true depiction of who the artist is as a person."<sup>3</sup> More than merely documenting the artist as an individual, the portraits also reflect a specific concept related to the artist's creative practice, resulting in intimate and highly individual depictions.

For this exhibition at Town Hall Gallery, Nelson has chosen 26 portraits to be shown alongside selected artworks by the portrayed artists. As a group show curated on a community network rather than a theme, the show is ostensibly varied and includes artists at different stages of their careers and working



across a range of mediums and practices. As *This Wild Song* is an ongoing project, with more portraits to come, works selected for this exhibition include portraits not previously shown in Melbourne. While there are visual and thematic links that can be drawn between some of the artists, as a whole the exhibition celebrates the plurality and diversity of the individual artists' practices, and provides a focus on authorship and self-determination.

Presenting Nelson's photographic portraits alongside each artist's own work paints a richer picture of both, while simultaneously asserting the artist's individual practice. Many pairings in the exhibition feature strong visual correlations between the artist's work and their portrait often explored through materiality or form. Hannah Gartside's portrait, depicting the artist draped in fabrics in front of a cloth wall echoes her soft sculpture made from a found nightgown in both colour and texture. Similarly, the colourful and fantastical

aspect of Kate Rhode's work is expressed through the artist's portrait and her dress. Nelson's portrait of Charlotte Watson likewise evokes a link through its materiality, with the surface and blackness of the velvet mimicking Watson's charcoal works.

A number of the portraits also feature the artist directly engaging with materials from their studio, emphasising a close relationship between the artist and their work. For instance, the portrait of Freya Jobbins sees the artist surrounded by the toys and dolls that she reassembles in her art practice. Cyrus Tang's portrait directly references her corresponding time-lapse photograph depicting a clay city in ruin. By having her hold the same ceramic buildings in her hand, Nelson's portrait of Cyrus offers a contemplative response to her photograph series. In a similar manner, Danica Chappell's portrait and her artwork both utilise photography to construct abstract spaces through layers of transparent materials.

These similarities offer a viewer an introspective view into the process of artistic deliberation and making.

In other instances, the pairing of the portrait with the artwork leads to some unexpected correlations and interpretations. One particularly striking portrait is of artist Michelle Hamer, who appears almost floating on her back, her body draped in bright orange safety barrier mesh. The significance of using the barrier mesh can be understood in relation to Hamer's art practice, which interprets urban environs and city scenes through hand-stitched tapestries as a commentary on everyday life and built environments. By picturing herself with the mesh tape that one can frequently find at construction sites, Hamer inserts herself into the visual landscape of her art practice.

Viewed as a whole, the most remarkable thing about *This Wild Song* is its emphasis on female-embodied presence. Portraiture is utilised as a means to give visibility to the 'who' behind the work, and also gives direct agency to the artist in how they are depicted, or chose to represent themselves. Themes

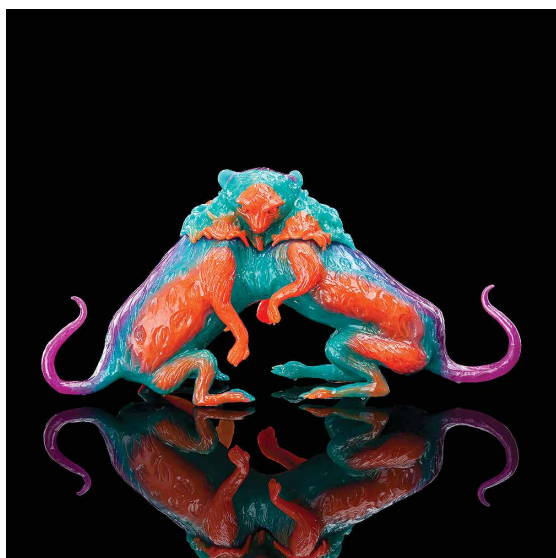
of identity and the self naturally emerge through this process, as seen for instance in the portrait of the late great Polixeni Papapetrou, which mirrors her artwork in its stylistic approach and imaginative execution.

*This Wild Song* is informed as much by the existing art community as it is an attempt to create new network and opportunities. It is imaginable that *This Wild Song* could continue as long as there are gender disparities, and it does so by highlighting the remarkable individual narratives and approaches of artists on their own terms. But the work in tackling representation should not rest on Nelson's shoulders, or for that matter, any individual effort or project. It is important to question the very structures and institutions that have created a narrative of art history that excludes as much as it includes. Let's keep our eyes open and pay attention, so that these names do not become anonymous in the history books written today.

**Sophia Cai is a Melbourne-based curator and arts writer with a particular research interest in Asian art history as well as contemporary craft.**



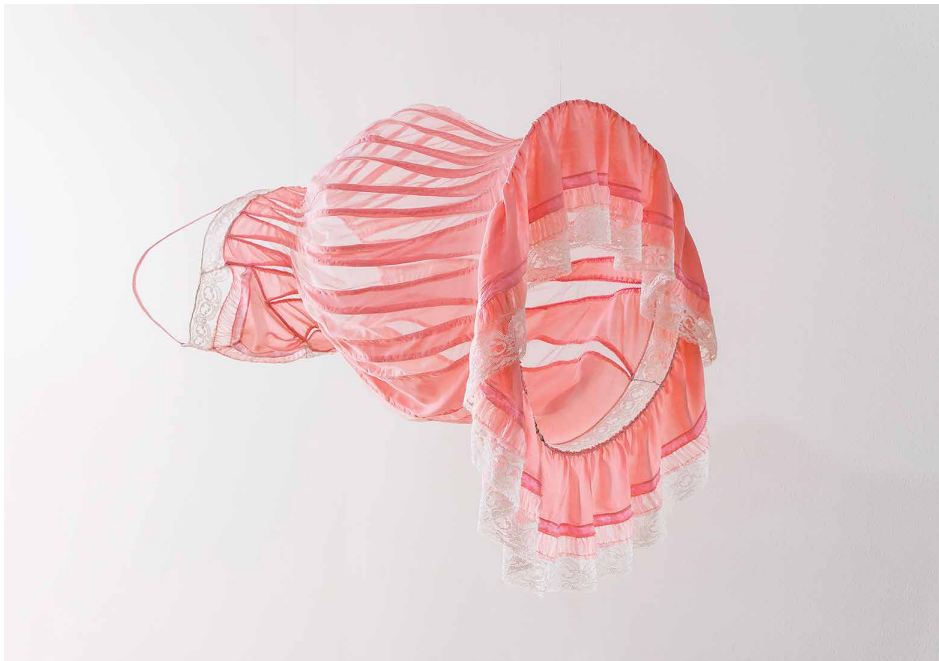
- 1 Linda Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Female Artists*, first published in ARTnews, January 1971
- 2 Elvis Richardson, *The Countess Report*, Last accessed 14 August 2018, <http://thecountessreport.com.au>
- 3 Excerpt from *This Wild Song* project statement, <https://thiswildsong.com.au/ilona-nelson-this-wild-song/>



*Cover, front and back:*  
 NELSON, Ilona, detail from *Hannah Gartside* (2017), inkjet print on Canson Platine paper mounted on Dibond, 100 x 140cm, © image courtesy of the artist.  
 GARTSIDE, Hannah, *Distended nightie in pink* (2018), found nightie, found fabric, milliner's wire, thread, 53 x 69 x 44cm, © image courtesy of the artist.

*Above, top to bottom:*  
 NELSON, Ilona, *Kate Rohde* (2018), inkjet print on Canson Platine paper mounted on Dibond, 100 x 140cm, © image courtesy of the artist.  
 ROHDE, Kate, *Mutant Kitten Vase* (2017), polyurethane resin, 32 x 60 x 16cm, © image courtesy of the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY.

*Centre spread, left to right:*  
 NELSON, Ilona, *Freya Jobbins* (2017), inkjet print on Canson Platine paper mounted on Dibond, 100 x 140cm, © image courtesy of the artist.  
 JOBBINS, Freya, *David's Mask* (2017), pigment print on cotton rag paper, 140 x 108cm, edition of 5, © image courtesy of the artist.



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**arten**

Town Hall Gallery would like to thank Ilona Nelson for her work in curating this *This Wild Song*, and Catherine Pyers for her work on the exhibition design.



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