

## *Presence*

Catalogue essay

When we are truly present, experiencing life in the here and now, we become vividly aware of our thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Our bodies, which are corporeally tied to place and time, are the touchstone for the ways we experience the world and communicate our place in it. The body becomes the point of departure; its dimensions and the space it occupies, the narratives it holds and how these unfold around it.

For the exhibition *Presence* the artists Felix Atkinson, Danny Jarratt, Angelique Joy, Ellen Sleeman-Taylor, and Henry Wolff evoke the queer or gender non-conforming body. Their collective reinterpretation of bodily presence allows for a tender consideration of how we perform gender and identity.

Since the emergence of queer theory during the 1990s, the concept of queerness has been understood as something that is ambiguous, beyond categorisation, and in constant formation.<sup>1</sup> But there is power in ambiguity. The ambiguity of alterity becomes a mode of resistance, a way of rejecting being pigeonholed and categorised.

*Presence* dissolves the boundaries of the physical spaces we embody. In doing so, it blurs the boundaries of categorical assumptions around gender.. This exhibition is not overtly about concealing nor making visible the queer body, for herein lies the temptation to tokenise or fetishize, it is more concerned with what it means to be present.

The sensually loose and emotionally charged brushstrokes in the paintings of Felix Atkinson capture moments of casual intimacy; a close embrace, sitting together to watch TV, the sharing of a morning coffee. In these works, life-size figures silently interact with each other against a background devoid of the usual signifiers of place and time. Bodies interact with one another in a way that is both sensual and vulnerable. Skin, hair colour, and gender become indistinguishable through the artists gestural brushstrokes and romantic palette. With no definite narrative defined, Felix allows space for the viewer to reflect on their own experiences.

Felix's ambiguous but emotional moments of connection between figures takes on a new sensitivity in our current isolation borne out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The innate human need for physical intimacy has never been more profoundly felt. In a time where isolation is the 'new norm', the body becomes pivotal for the way we engage with the corporeal, raising questions about the way we live, interact, and connect with one another.

Henry Wolff's moving image work *Sibling*, in which siblings Henry and Ingrid respond intuitively to each other's presence, support is enacted through physical metaphors. Responsive to the uncertainty of our times, the un-choreographed

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<sup>1</sup> By its definition, 'Queer' is a term that disrupts the normative and defies categorisation. In the context of this essay, 'queer' is used broadly to encompass the diversity of individual experiences.

sequence of gestures and movements become a metaphor for emotional and familial support between siblings who both identify outside of conventional gender norms. In Henry's words, "one of the most significant ways that we can negotiate adversity is through support, and particularly familial support. In one sense this pays tribute to that relationship but also fleshes out other considerations that crop up between the intersections of both of our lived experiences".<sup>2</sup>

Henry and Felix both use bodies as vessels of expression, creating a rich gestural visual language. The presence of the body is palpable and there is an intimacy that draws the viewer in, making both artist and viewer intently present. What then, does the absence of a body say about gendered experience?

In the photographic series *In the absence of me* by Angelique Joy, there is particular feeling that the room has been recently vacated, but left in its wake the impressions and traces of a bodily presence. A lingering sense of absence, as if a phantom from the past, embodies the scene. These traces, like the life-size carousel horse, conjure the nostalgia of childhood. This horse is painted blue in direct reference to formative childhood experiences of gender because 'girls should like pink and boys should like blue'. *In the absence of me* allows us to examine queer as an action rather than a fixed identity.

In the absence of a corporeal body, these markers of physical presence become heightened, further intensified by Angelique's subtle distortions through analogue and digital manipulations. By playing with perceptions of reality, Angelique creates the feeling that we are entering a dream-like state on the edges of the imagination. This body of work also speaks of visibility and the push/pull of binaries; between the real/not real, the male/female, and how the social forces that foster these binaries underscore our development from childhood. Angelique's often indiscernible manipulations have the effect of heightening our curiosity, and encourages us to view them as not only a disruption of reality but of normative spaces.

Equally, Danny Jarratt uses the digital realm to disrupt normative spaces. Danny's moving-image piece takes on the physical representation of Judith Butler's heteronormative matrix as an incandescent grid. The grid goes through a slow and hypnotic unravelling, digitally rendered it has a physicality we associate with bodily movement. The gradual unknitting of this highly structured network of lines alludes to the breakdown and reconstruction of normative spaces.

The soft blue, a calming colour, is agitated by being trapped in a constant state of flux. It is reminiscent of the 1995 Microsoft Windows 'Mystify' screensaver, an animated polygon of lines that bounce around the screen but are trapped in a perpetual loop. We watch and wait for the lines to converge into a single corner of the screen in a moment of completion, only to find that the algorithm resets.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Henry Wolff, 9 May 2020

Both Danny and artist Ellen Sleeman-Taylor invite viewers to consider the digital realm and how gendered experiences permeate the online world. Ellen's body of work is concerned with "how the nature/culture binary, linked by feminist philosophers and sociologists to the male/female binary, asserts itself in a digitised and hybridised world".<sup>3</sup> For Ellen, the body, as a harbourer of experience and sensation, is inextricably linked to the mind.

According to Ellen it is this link between the physical and the intangible that presents such a challenge when engaging with the online world; an issue that has never been more applicable.<sup>4</sup> With symbolic references from internet pop-culture to historical iconography, this body of work suggests a tension that is steeped in society's changing understandings and ideas around gender. Ellen creates something real from a seemingly unreal (online) space. Through an exploration of digital imagery, collage, and written text Ellen seeks alternative routes to understanding ourselves, both mind and body.

In this exhibition, the body becomes a vessel for negotiating spaces of visibility and presence. These artists engage with and create spaces that are often undefined and ambiguous. The spaces navigated by the body slip fluidly between the private and the public, blurring the boundaries between them.

"Art has the capacity to challenge those ideas in a really gentle way that is accessible to a lot of people to come to that story". – Angelique Joy<sup>5</sup>

*Presence* opens up the conversation of how culture, art, and queer identity coalesce to inform an individual and collective understanding unburdened by heteronormative narratives.

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She/Her

*\*An audio reading of the catalogue essay is available upon request.*

## References

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Jo Pugh, 'Soft Trees Break the Fall: Felix Atkinson', 2019, catalogue essay, Rubicon/ARI.

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<sup>3</sup> Artist Statement, Ellen Sleeman-Taylor, May 2020

<sup>4</sup> Artist Statement, *Flesh d'Lite*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Angelique Joy, 7 May 2020