

Peer Curatorial Essay by Esther Dougherty

I have known Brigid Holt since 2015 and have followed her art career as a friend and colleague, and as an admirer. Her work has gone through a number of evolutions and in the last two years has achieved a level of focus and discipline that secures her longevity as a painter.

Holt has a strong footing in Brisbane's nightlife scene – she is connected to many venues in Fortitude Valley, as well as to Brisbane's independent music industry. When Holt began her nude studies her primary subject was herself and her male partner, also heavily connected to this world. Holt's first exhibition of her nude series was held at Barbara, a popular Fortitude Valley bar. Exhibiting her self-portraits and her partner's portraits, a collection of very candidly posed nudes, within this context and as an independent early-career painter was a rebellious act of vulnerability and asserted a contemporary recontextualisation of her style. Though much of her technique draws from virtuosic tradition, it is the context of her exhibitions, the community context she sits within as an artist and a young woman, and the lineage she continues with her nude studies transformed in her contexts that makes her work feel completely of the now, refreshingly honest and unaffected; a true artistic expression – not seeking to enter into Brisbane's existing visual arts communities on their terms but bringing *her* art into *her* community on *her* terms.

Holt's nude artworks are consistent in their strong use of line and their anonymous bodies – moving from sculptural to topographic studies of their form as she experiments with line and shading to express contour and weight. Three-dimensionality is rarely communicated through extremes of light, and a light source is often abstracted, especially in her painted line work. Foreground and background too is often distorted. Background is explored playfully, in juxtaposition to the scholarly body studies, with scribble and crosshatch motifs drawing eyes to the curves of waists, or nodding to the canvas's negative space. Her attack of the subject matter seems to fluctuate between the visible and invisible gesture, pairing bold charcoal movements with subtle gradients in shading.

Colour has begun to return to her art works. Moving away from charcoal back to oils and acrylics has seen her topographic monochrome line works evolve into mosaic style nude body studies with focus on line being flipped to a focus on a body's construction through plates of pastel colour.

Though her style is undeniably gifted, it is her treatment of subject that engages me most in her nude series'. She often engages new models via social media callouts, requesting her followers volunteer a nude "selfie" for her to paint. The currency of the nude "selfie" in modern dating culture as well as changing social attitudes to nudity, shifting attitudes to and classifications of pornography, the insight a nude "selfie" gives into a person's artistic and bodily sensibility, the historic value of the self portrait seemingly perverted by the immediacy of smart phone photography – the list is endless as to why this is fascinating work. Holt's transformation of the nude art object from low art or amateur art, into high art is highly contemporary. The relationship between the trained and untrained artist through their view to represent a nude body – to exhibit the nude body of the artist alongside the nude body of her audience, the amateur artist of the original self portrait transformed – it's a potent exchange.

Holt subverts a sexual gaze of her subject matter through the rejection of gendered posing. The reality of the body can be appreciated without connection to a wider narrative about that body – the headless studies of breasts and a stomach that typify this series are sexual in the way all bodies can be sexual, and those terms are not dictated by the artist, they are dictated by the subject. This is the power of her transforming people's nude "selfies" – the gaze is first and foremost the gaze of one's self, sexual and bodily on the subject's terms inherently. In a time where our understanding of gender and bodies is moving from generally defined to personally defined it is deeply insightful of Holt to have begun this series. It is obviously resonating with her audience as the demand for her to paint people's nude "selfies" is growing rapidly. I'm excited to see where her career takes her.