

*Jenny Watson:  
Chronicles*

14 July - 3 September 2016

Exhibition  
Labels

# Jenny Watson

# CHRONICLES

14 July–3 September

A pioneering figure for women artists, Jenny Watson (1951–) is widely regarded, nationally and internationally, as one of the most eminent voices in contemporary art. For over four decades, Watson has set herself apart from the mainstream and redefined traditional perspectives of painting through her use of alternative techniques, non-traditional materials, and the inclusion of text.

Watson was the first woman to represent Australia in a solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1993 and she has exhibited throughout Australia, Germany, Belgium, Japan, New York, and Italy. Appointed an Adjunct Professor at Griffith University's Queensland College of Art in 2002, she is an active participant in the Brisbane art scene, contributing to the growth and development of many emerging artists.

Building on the 2005 'Material Evidence' exhibition at Griffith University Art Gallery, 'Jenny Watson: Chronicles' takes a thematic approach to Watson's practice, focusing on the prevalence of text throughout her career and the powerful role it has played in composing her highly personal narratives chronicling the interior life.

The works in this exhibition track Watson's career trajectory, from the earliest appearance of text in the 1970s, through the deliberate deskilling of her painterly style, to a new suite of works never before exhibited where text, painting, and objects interact.

Encompassing defining moments and palpable influences on Watson's practice—including conceptual art, literary archetypes, feminism, and punk subculture—these works exemplify an oeuvre that is often confrontational in theme and intent, but always intimately connected to the artist's innermost thoughts and contemplations.

*House Painting: Mont Albert (small version)*  
1976

Oil on canvas

Collection: Mordant Family Collection

*House Painting: Mont Albert (large version)*  
1976–77

Oil on canvas

Collection: Mordant Family Collection

In the mid-1970s, Watson produced a series of 'double paintings' of suburban houses in which she'd lived. The first painting is a realist impression taken from a small black & white photo overlaid with a grid and carefully transposed. The street address incorporated into the painted surface is the first use of text in Watson's work, and was inspired from watching the rolling credits over television shows.

The second, larger, painting is a scaled up version of the first, but made more abstract by the purposeful use of the grid and the gentle disintegration of detail.

In 2002, Watson commented:

It is interesting to look back now, to see that working with text and image continues to be what interests me, even though my work has taken various forms since.

Within this suburban idyll a new cultural force was taking effect during the 1950s – television.

Watson's family were early converts and her father's childhood love of silent films formed a clear 'Hollywood' idea of glamour through favourite movie stars like Rudolph Valentino, Lillian Gish, Mary Pickford and Marlene Deitrich. Watson has remained an avid enthusiast of film, television and glamour.

*A painted page: The Herald 21/11/79*  
1979–80

Oil on cotton duck

Collection: The artist. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery

*A painted page 5: The Sun Jezza will stay,  
Blues 1979–80*

Oil on cotton duck

Collection: The artist. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery



# *A painted page: Myers Christmas Catalogue* 1979

Oil on canvas

Collection: Gold Coast City Gallery. Acquired 1981. Judges Selection,  
1981 Gold Coast Art Prize

*A painted page: The Brisbane Telegraph*  
1980

Oil on cotton duck

Collection: The University of Queensland. Gift of Michael Eliadis through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2014

Over the summer of 1979–80 Watson made a series of paintings based on pages from newspapers, books and department store catalogues. The influences of pop, photorealism, and non-objective abstraction are apparent, although Watson's most important influence at the time was conceptual art, albeit inflected with postmodern irony.

These heavily impastoed oils use the gridded device of blank canvas previously seen in the 'house paintings'. Referencing a traditional technique of scaling up images which dates back to Renaissance fresco painting, here it is also used to refuse illusionistic space.

*An Original Oil Painting (Black + White)*  
*(For Nick Cave) 1979*

Oil on canvas

Private Collection, Melbourne

# *An Original Oil Painting (Pink + Blue) 1979*

Oil on canvas

Collection: The artist

In 1977 Watson crossed paths with Nick Cave, who was dropping out of his studies just as Watson took up teaching at Caulfield Institute of Technology (now Monash University's Caulfield campus). Cave asked to borrow a painting for his band The Boys Next Door's concert at St Kilda's Crystal Ballroom. Watson brought *An Original Oil Painting (Black + White) (For Nick Cave) 1979* to the gig, where Cave held it aloft as a prop during the performance of "Let's Talk About Art". Watson then added the dedication to Cave to the work's title.

This painting is, as curator David Pestorius writes: "a work which mocks the exalted status of oil paint as a traditional sign of value and authenticity in art."

While conceptual art and feminism were the most visible influences on Watson's work during this era, just as crucial was the development of music, specifically punk and post-punk approaches to technique and convention.

These two works take Watson's conceptual project to its most reductive point and are transitional works in that they indicate the closing and opening of a chapter in Watson's practice.

Watson collaborated with John Nixon on the artist-run space Art Projects in Melbourne, and in a music group entitled Pink + Blue for Nixon's Anti Music project. From 1980-81, Nixon was Director of Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art, which led to Watson being based in Brisbane during this time. The binaries of black and white, dark and light, pink and blue, masculine and feminine echo this period of Watson's life.

*Australian artist of the 80's as a Lady and  
Ophelia 1984*

Oil on velvet

Collection: Roslyn Oxley and Tony Oxley, Sydney



A selection of archetypes appeared in Watson's work in the 1980s: Ophelia, Pandora and Alice—fragile and naïve adolescent women who wield power they cannot control.

Though it recalls the English Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* 1851-52, Watson's Ophelia seems hardly chaste; she is seductive, black-clad, and kohl-eyed.

Above Ophelia is an extract from Norman Mailer's 1979 biography of notoriously unrepentant murderer Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song*. The hyper-masculine, working-class bravado of the punk cult hero Gilmore, who demanded to be executed rather than languish on death row indefinitely, is at odds with the fragile, aristocratic Ophelia of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Driven mad by grief and her lover's rejection, the play's Ophelia is incoherent and has no sense of self. Her speech is dismissed as unintelligible: "Her speech is nothing."

## *The magic eggs* 1984–85

Oil, synthetic polymer paint, horse hair, glitter and ink on hessian

Collection: Roslyn Oxley and Tony Oxley, Sydney

*The magic eggs* 1984-85 tells a story of discovery and maternal protective impulse. The narrative is drawn from Watson's own experience of discovering a cache of eggs hidden by hens behind a hay stack where humans would not find them.

Hovering within a large ovoid, the Alice-like figure is at once a maternal figure but also one from whom the hens protect the eggs. Chicks have not emerged, so the eggs themselves are powerless, unfertilised, with hair and feathers stuck to them. As the text states, some are "old + bad."

# *Alice on a good day* 1987

Oil, gouache, synthetic polymer paint, silk cut outs and paper on canvas

Collection: Amit and David Holckner, Melbourne

# *The Hay Carter* 1989

Synthetic polymer paint, oil, gouache, collage and mixed media on hessian

Private collection, Brisbane

Although female figures dominate throughout Watson's practice, male figures are not absent. When manifested they often exhibit hyper-masculinity, such as this recollection of Watson's partner removing his shoes before helping her fetch hay in the rain. Transformed into a heroic subject, as if extracted from a nineteenth-century Barbizon-school painting of gleaners, his muscles bulge, but his large bare feet are strikingly vulnerable as they levitate in space.

A vase shape on the lower left recalls many works of this period featuring vessels. This figure would later reappear in a series of lithographs made with master printer John Loane at Viridian Press in 1990, as well as in Watson's 1993 Venice Biennale exhibition.

## *Boy with a blue guitar* 1992

Oil on taffeta with netting and sequins; synthetic polymer paint on stretcher

Collection: The artist. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

This delicate romantic portrait of a Hollywood-worthy love interest was included in Watson's 1993 Venice Biennale Australian Pavilion solo exhibition 'Jenny Watson: Paintings with Veils and False Tails' curated by Judy Annear.

The text elements in the artist's cursive, spidery handwriting are on fleshy pink panels, recalling the memory of Watson's mother making cake icing with cochineal, and the magical process of a few drops changing the white icing to pink. In these works the interactions, slippages, and spaces between the painted images and the texts became more pronounced. In the Venice catalogue, Annear describes this relationship between text and image as equivalent:

One is not higher than the other in this artist's picture of the world...Within these apparently ordinary and simple images and words, the complex psychodramas of life are played out.



## *Tied up* 1992–93

Synthetic polymer paint on polished cotton; synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection: The artist

Throughout the 1990s, Watson's work settled in to a format of painted image plus text panel. The panels are sometimes hung as a diptych, with the painted image on either side, or placed on the ground and leaned against the wall, pushing the text in to the viewer's space. Watson has described the domestic nature of many of her texts as "family scripts", memories and personal recollections which cover a broad range of subject matter and speaking positions—at different times private, descriptive, deadpan, or fantasy.

Confronting in its lack of finish, *Tied up* 1992–93 is one of a series of works featuring Watson's friends' addresses; places that were made available to her as 'safe houses' while travelling. The image could imply either a sinister event or a consensual encounter, depending on the interpretation of the looping green as rope or ribbon.

## *Love hurts* 1993–94

Oil and rabbit skin glue on damask; synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Private collection, Brisbane

*6pm* 1992

Oil on hessian; synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection: The artist

# *Microscopic* 2004

Synthetic polymer paint on printed cotton; synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection: The artist

A voyeuristic longing is seen in *Microscopic* 2004, with the aptly termed 'stage' of the microscope transformed into a dressage arena with horse and rider.

The precise discipline of dressage, where riders and horses are subjected to minute scrutiny, extreme grooming, and arduous training, is one that Watson has studied in parallel to her art practice for three decades.

# *Wild white horse* 1992

Oil on red Chinese velvet with horse tail; synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Collection: The artist

# *Between Dusseldorf and Cologne* 2009

Oil and synthetic polymer paint on cotton; synthetic polymer paint on canvas;  
plastic figurines and wood

Collection: The artist



## *Kind of a drag* 2008–09

Synthetic polymer paint, rabbit skin glue on Chinese cotton; silk pashmina

Collection: The artist

This relatively descriptive scene of a horse and rider as seen from a train window is given additional context by the accompanying text panel and small shelf of figures from a miniature train set. Curator Benedikt Stegmayer recently compared the relationship between these elements to that engendered by Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* 1965:

The three-dimensional object originates from within the reality and experience of the artist as well as the viewer, and produces a concrete relationship between the two. Sometimes these small objects have a discernible relationship to the other two elements, sometimes it is merely tangential, requiring us to fill in the gaps.

However, within Watson's practice the interaction between image, sculpture and text often acts to widen the associative possibilities, rather than clarifying what is being described, as happens in the case of Kosuth's chair.

Watson's preoccupation with travel has been explored recently by art historian Chris McAuliffe, who sees Watson's wide-ranging travel and the attendant rhythm of home and away as key to understanding her work.

# *The grass is always greener* 2016

Oil and synthetic polymer paint on French furnishing velvet; synthetic polymer paint on canvas; vintage kombi van on shelf

Collection: The artist

## *Girl in a blindfold* 2016

Oil and synthetic polymer paint on French furnishing velvet; synthetic polymer paint on canvas; vintage china dog on shelf

Collection: The artist

# *Palomino pony* 2016

Oil and synthetic polymer paint on French furnishing velvet; synthetic polymer paint on canvas; vintage ceramic rabbit on shelf

Collection: The artist

The three works in this room are the newest works in the exhibition and this is the first time they have been seen in public.

Using a luxurious furnishing fabric sourced in France, these works continue Watson's exploration of the interactions between painting, objects and written narratives.

# *The word made flesh* 2004

Oil on canvas

Griffith University Art Collection