


The TOWN HALL GALLERY

Do I have to spell it out for you?

5 September – 25 October 2020

Harnessing the power of words in art

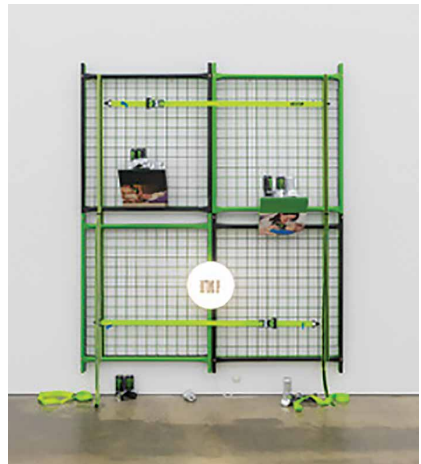
In a world over-saturated with information, many artists are turning to more didactic methods of communication. Some literally spell out their messages in text, while others use spoken language, revealing the cultural and political power of words as a means of resistance, a cultural artefact, a joke, a system of knowledge and a tool of sovereignty. 'Do I have to spell it out for you?' showcases artists who employ written or spoken word in their practice to highlight the cultural and political power of words.

Kenny Pittock employs the humour of puns and wordplay to playfully draw attention to serious global concerns. His series of life-like ceramic ice-creams evoke a warm nostalgia and longing for an innocent childhood Australian summer. On closer inspection it is apparent some of the ice-creams are sorrowfully melting and the text on the product packaging has been cheekily altered to feature more ominous brand names and flavours, such as an 'Apocalipso' in an 'Angry Orange' flavour. Pittock implores a sense of urgency to take action on climate change before these happy memories melt away completely. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pittock notes this series carries additional meaning, as the works also point out 'how in 2020 so much of our time and plans [have] melted away.'¹

Multi-disciplinary artist Benjamin Aitken injects words and slogans into his paintings and installations as a means of communicating personal narratives, social critique and humour. Like Pittock, many of Aitken's works are adorned with humorous pop culture references and connotations to communicate more serious social commentaries. More recently, Aitken creates caged 'shrines' – installations which draw reference from his experience

being baptised as an infant, juxtaposed with consumer products which act as visual metaphors for the artist's now-secular lifestyle.

Artist Shevaun Wright draws on her background as a lawyer to create artworks that explore gender, domestic violence and Indigenous rights. The artist explores the notion of the 'social contract', where a person's moral and political obligations are dependent upon an agreement among the people that form the society in which they live. Wright uses text in the entirety of her work *Contract for Breach* (2019), which appears in the form of a legally binding document.



The 'contract' features a series of clauses that humorously contradict each other, which bind the viewer unwittingly by simply reading it. The work draws attention to the ways in which words can be manipulated into a tool to both empower and disempower individuals and groups in society.

Claudia Nicholson's video, *All I have are dreams of you* (2017), features the artist's installation of a large *alfombra de aserrín* (sawdust carpet) dedicated to the late Tejano musician and Latinx icon Selena Quintanilla. Centrally located in the *alfombra* are lyrics from Quintanilla's song, *Dreaming of you*. The lyrics evoke a collective remembering by the Latinx community after Quintanilla's murder, which was a moment that highlighted the collective force of Latinx political strength in the United States of America. For Nicholson, these lyrics also communicate the sense of longing and distance which she feels towards her birth country, Colombia. Over the course of the video the lyrics slowly erode as they are danced across in a celebratory live event. The erosion of the lyrics becomes a symbolic gesture towards collective remembering and embodied memory in the Latinx diaspora.²



Also drawing on his cultural heritage, Christian Thompson breathes new life into his traditional language, Bidjara, in his video work *Berceuse* (2017). Accompanied by a haunting electronic backdrop, the artist sings a *berceuse* (a cradle song or lullaby) in Bidjara as an act of defiance of the language's official classification as 'extinct'. Whilst language is fundamentally a system of human communication, existing to be spoken or written by one party and understood by another, Thompson invites the audience to instead simply listen and experience the 'innate lyricism of language'³. The artist states the work is 'not about understanding, or exploring, or de-compartmentalising or going 'this means that' and 'that means this' – it's just a purely visceral, immersive experience'⁴.

Chun Yin Rainbow Chan also uses language and song in her work to reinstate power to an Indigenous culture. Her three-channel video work *Triune* (2020) forms part of Chan's larger body of research on village women's oral history and social rituals. The artist spent time with Weitou elders in Hong Kong, including her mother and aunts, to learn about their language, songs and customs. Set to a re-imagining of a Weitou New Year celebration song, the work presents three generations of Weitou women and the gesture of kneading as a symbol of care. On one screen, we see elderly women in the Lung Yeuk Tau, a village in Hong Kong's New Territories, kneading dough to make traditional desserts. On another screen, we see the hands of Chan's mother preparing glutinous rice flour for sweet dumplings. On the last screen, the artist's own hands are kneading dough. Drawing on her own nostalgic memories of making sweet dumplings with her mother and sisters throughout her childhood, this video work wishes to illuminate the invisible female labour in patriarchal societies.⁵

Nasim Nasr uses script from her native Iran in her art to examine the multiple meanings of words. *The Home, The Habit* (2017) is a series of photographs with the Farsi words *manzel* (home) and *adat* (habit) digitally drawn and laser etched into them. The conceptualisation of the series started with a passport photo of two female family members from her grandparents' 1950s photo album, which had the word *manzel* handwritten on the back. As the artist explains, 'this refers to the habit of man, in public, calling his wife – *manzel* (home), rather than by [her] name.'⁶ Depending on the cultural viewpoint, the use of the word in this context can either be seen as a term of endearment or an act of belittlement and ownership; highlighting how diverse interpretations of language can impact the way culture is viewed and understood.

Kate Just harnesses the power of words in her works to tackle significant social issues such as sexual harassment and

violence against women. Her two knitted banners in this exhibition, which spell the words HOPE and SAFE, were created by individuals and communities who were invited by the artist to join her in public spaces to knit together to create the works. Upon completion, the banners were taken by its creators out at night in a series of public walks, the large block letters directly expressing the group's wish to have 'hope' and to feel 'safe'. The project references and contributes to moments in feminist history in which collective action and craftwork were deployed to enact change.⁷



Whether it is an expression of personal identity, a political statement, a social criticism or a means to give a voice to those who are silenced or ignored, the artists in this exhibition have harnessed the power of words to strengthen the messages they wish to communicate through their art, to ensure their stories are heard.

- 1 Kenny Pittock, email correspondence, 30 July 2020.
- 2 Claudia Nicholson, email correspondence, 30 August 2020.
- 3 Patrick Carey, 'Christian Thompson's Ritual Intimacy exhibition charts the Australian artist's ongoing wanderlust', ABC Arts, posted 20 May 2018. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-20/christian-thompson-survey-exhibition-ritual-intimacy/9775640>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Chun Yun Rainbow Chan, email correspondence, 26 August 2020.
- 6 Claire Wilson, "'The Home, The Habit': looking West and East with Iranian-born artist Nasim Nasr - in conversation' Art Radar Journal, posted 5 June 2017. <https://artradarjournal.com/2017/06/05/the-home-the-habit-looking-west-and-east-with-iranian-born-artist-nasim-nasr-in-conversation/>
- 7 Kate Just, email correspondence, 10 August 2020.



TRYING TO LEAF THINGS BETTER THAN WE FOUND THEM

Cover:

Nasim NASR, *House, Habit* (2017), giclee archival digital print on 320gsm White Cotton Smooth, 100 x 80cm, image courtesy of the artist.

Centre spread:

Benjamin AITKEN, *Crusty Demon* (2020), temporary fencing, oil paint, pine, vinyl lettering, Perspex, miscellaneous tie-downs, LED lighting and carbonated energy drinks, 220 x 200cm, image courtesy of the artist and THIS IS NO FANTASY (Dianne Tanzer + Nicola Stein). Installation view at Neon Parc, photography by Simon Strong.

Claudia NICHOLSON, still from *All I have are dreams of you* (2017), single Channel HD Video, duration: 6:56. Videographer: Dara Gill. Performers: Kilia Tipa and Azahares de SLASA. Commissioned by Carriageworks for 2017 edition of The National: New Australian Art. Image courtesy of the artist.

Chun Yin Rainbow CHAN, still from *Triune* (2020), 3 channel video and audio, duration: 2:35, image courtesy of the artist, with thanks to Caritas Lung Yeuk Tau Community Development Project.

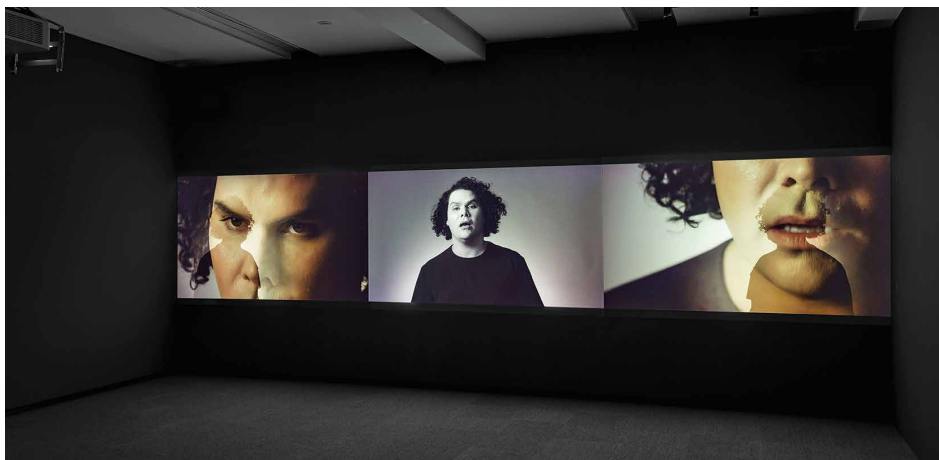
Above:

Kenny PITTOCK, *Trying to leaf things better than we found them* (2020), acrylic on paper, 42 x 42cm, image courtesy of the artist.

Back cover:

Christian THOMPSON, *Berceuse* (2017), installation view, *Ritual Intimacy*, Monash University Museum of Art, three-channel digital colour video, sound, 5.47 minutes, image courtesy of the artist and Messums London; Gallery Marcolini, Forlì; Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne; and Michael Reid Sydney and Berlin. Photography by Andrew Curtis.

Kate JUST, *SAFE* (2014), hand knitted builder's line and retroreflective silver thread, viscose, cotton, aluminium, steel, paint, 280 x 125 x 25cm, image courtesy of the artist and Finkelstein Gallery. Photography by Simon Strong. Collection: Wangaratta Art Gallery.



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