

NATALYA HUGHES: MAKING SENSE OF IMAGES

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QAGOMA blog

Bronwyn Mitchell interview with Natalya Hughes, Posted 25 November 2019

MEET NATALYA HUGHES

In the leafy suburb of Tarragindi in Brisbane's inner south, Natalya Hughes's studio is filled with large-scale paintings in progress, vintage fabrics and an enviable bookshelf of art and design tomes. Works of feminist scholarship sit alongside a treasure trove of decorative arts books, including volumes on Japonisme, William Morris and pattern libraries of Italian ceramic tiles.



Natalya Hughes, Australia b.1977 / *Woman III* 2018–19 / Synthetic polymer paint on polyester / Courtesy: The artist and Milani Gallery / Photograph: Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer

'Historically, decorative art has had quite a negative association in fine art — something that's feminised as cheap and debased', says Hughes. 'But for me it's a very important part of a language by which I address certain things.' An interest in decorative form and materials, and in the body, are consistent themes in her practice. Her love of pattern and decoration stems from childhood; encouraged by her mother, she was an avid collector of fabric remnants. 'As a kid I renovated and decorated the doll house and made new bedspreads for the furniture. Or I was constantly sewing for Barbie.'

Hughes grew up in the small New South Wales town of Macksville, between Coffs Harbour and Kempsey, before moving to Brisbane to study visual art at QUT. Eight years later, she relocated to Sydney to start a PhD and also spent some time in Melbourne. She returned to Brisbane in December 2018 to teach visual art at the Queensland College of Art.

As an academic, Hughes's artistic practice is part of a broader research career. Many of her paintings begin in response to existing art historical images. She is drawn to the

decorative aesthetic — of *ukiyo-e* (Japanese woodblock prints), the costume designs of Léon Bakst and the drawings of late nineteenth-century English illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, for example — and decoration has become the vehicle by which she moves between the abstract and the figurative. More recent works are influenced by the abstract expressionist paintings of Willem de Kooning and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, but here Hughes says she was primarily interested in ‘the representation of women’s bodies as a site of experimentation’.

WILLEM DE KOONING



Willem de Kooning, The Netherlands/United States 1904–97 / *Woman V* 1952–53 / Oil and charcoal on canvas / 154.5 x 114.5cm / Purchased 1974 / Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra / © The Willem de Kooning Foundation, New York/ARS/Copyright Agency, 2019



Natalya Hughes, Australia b.1977 / *Woman V* 2018–19 / Synthetic polymer paint on polyester / Courtesy: The artist and Milani Gallery / Photograph: Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer

'I was never enthralled by that thick, expressionist painting style in the same way that other people seem to be; I've always been a very flat, neat painter', she says. 'I was drawn to [de Kooning and Kirchner] not because they have a decorative aesthetic . . . [but] because I wondered what would happen if I brought that aesthetic to [the same subject]. Those artists would be loath to have me do that, I'm sure', she adds. "'Decorative" was probably flung around as an insult in de Kooning's time.'

Across her practice, Hughes is interested in the language by which she negotiates a particular, less celebrated, feminine body — one that is difficult, marginalised or in some way grotesque. She brings her own unique and decorative language to her 'Woman' series, which echoes de Kooning's landmark series of the same name, and she is both intrigued and bothered by the way de Kooning sometimes spoke about the women in his paintings. 'Lots of people are apologetic for him, but he'd say things like "I like to put *it* at the centre". What is *it*?' she asks.

I was teaching photography in Sydney, and students consistently presented truncated images of women, usually naked, no arms, no head, black and white, high contrast, sort of Edward Weston-ish. And I'd say, 'Well, what's it about?' 'The female form', they would respond, and I'd say, 'Which female?'

Hughes would continue to interrogate her students' decision to use specific female bodies (generally young, athletic and white) with which to explore form. 'I think it comes from certain modernist practices and I find it incredibly problematic. I wanted to respond to that in my work by exploring some of these questions. What is this female form you keep talking about? And actual human women, where do they fit?'

It is obvious that Hughes is driven by questions, and her works are thoughtful and considered attempts at answering them. Many of her previous works grew out of what she describes as a sticking point. 'I don't feel inspiration is the thing that prompts me', she says.

Rather, I get curious about something and think, I really must sort that out. So then I read about it, and there's a lot of iteration and development of an idea before I start the work. I want to understand something, and I do that by taking it apart and trying to re-articulate it. That's just how I make sense of images.

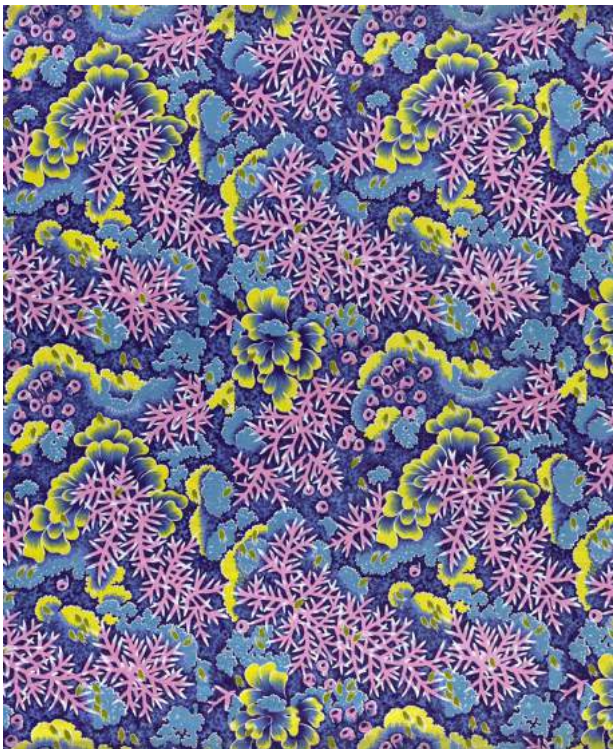
Hughes admits to being obsessive with a certain level of detail and precision in her paintings. The works she is least happy with are those in which she decided to pare back the decorative elements — 'There's nothing like a deadline to make me stop!' — but if paintings come back to the studio after an exhibition, she often over-paints or continues adding pattern. 'I'm not good at letting go when it comes to finishing work. A phrase that kept coming up when I was doing my PhD was *horror vacui*, the fear of blank space. I think that might be me. I end up covering things.'

GEORGES BRAQUE



Georges Braque, France 1882-1963 / *Hera and Themis* 1932 / Etching on light brown wove handmade paper / 36.7 x 30cm (plate) / Gift of Mrs Lillian Bosch 1972 / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art / © Georges Braque/ADAGP, Paris. Licensed by Viscopy

OLIVE ASHWORTH



Olive Ashworth, Australia 1915-2000 / *Textile length: Coral garden* c.1956, printed 1971 / Commercially printed cotton cloth / 126 x 110.2cm / Purchased 1996. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art / © Estate of Olive Ashworth

In addition to running workshops and artist activations in the Open Studio space, Hughes has also curated a selection of works from the QAGOMA Collection that reflect her interests in the decorative arts and the female body, including ceramics by First Nations artists in New Mexico and Central Australia, etchings by Georges Braque and Kara Walker and a textile length by Queensland designer Olive Ashworth.

It's been interesting to cut to the core of what my practice is and to tease out how my studio activities might function in the space. Because you can't include everything. Like lots of artists, I do different things at different moments — things like emailing are a big part of being an artist, and there's all kinds of studio ephemera that I knew wouldn't be making its way into an open studio.



Hughes often listens to art or comedy podcasts while she works, in between music and audiobooks. At the time of our conversation she's part way through *Anna Karenina*, read by Maggie Gyllenhaal — 'just the most beautiful audiobook!'

Podcasts and literature are helpful [to avoid] getting stuck in a particular mood, which I think is a bit of a studio habit. And, to be honest, much about painting is boring for me, like laying down flat colours — I might as well be painting a fence paling, which is when my assistant is amazing. I like to come back at the end, to have a say in all of it and make the initial image, but there are parts of the process where I just don't think I need to be there. I'm very sceptical of this way of thinking about art where the artist emotes their very being into the paint — why not outsource parts of it?

Hughes says she acutely remembers the headspace she was in while making each painting, however, recalling particular houses or partners, for example, or the period of time after her father died. 'I spend hours and hours with these things, so I don't think it's a matter of my emotions being translated into the work and the audience being at the receiving end of it, but, for me, they mark time — they mark moments in my life just because of the amount of artistic labour.'



Natalya Hughes, Australia b.1977 / *Woman IV* 2018–19 / Synthetic polymer paint on polyester / Courtesy: The artist and Milani Gallery

Musing on what might come next in her practice, Hughes thinks she's not yet finished with exploring de Kooning's nudes and is considering an installation element of the current project that would incorporate a mid-twentieth-century painting aesthetic with vintage textiles and furniture.

I have this image of part installation, part painting show, part 1950s sleek designed bachelor pad. I'm thinking through ways that I might realise that, spatially and with

sculpture, and I'm finding that really exciting, especially the idea of making furniture again.'¹

It would be hard to imagine a more fitting confluence of Hughes's diverse interests — may it come to fruition in the near future.

Bronwyn Mitchell is Assistant Editor. She spoke with Natalya Hughes in September 2019.