

THE WALLS ART SPACE

ANASTASIA BOOTH, CAROLYN CRAIG, KRISTIAN FRACCHIA, MARISA GEORGIU, DONNA MALONE, CAITY REYNOLDS, TYZA STEWART, LYNDEN STONE, HENRI VAN NOORDENBURG
SOLITARY VICE [ONLINE]

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SOLITARY VICE: WE SEE YOU

The word vice has powerful connotations – for some of us the word ripples with anticipatory pleasure. For others, vice symbolises a direct line to the devil. Pestilence. Depravity. Fire and brimstone. Vice proper, has traditionally related to those most ancient of human temptations – drugs, prostitution and gambling. Vices, which in the eyes of the church and state, demean the individual and weaken the moral code of organised society. That’s the theory anyway.

All formal definitions swell with the suggestion of evil and wickedness, supernatural words the hand wringers bandy about so willingly because they go so well with their bibles – or Qurans, or Tanakh’s or whatever kind of holy text is on the go, mechanisms of control, knitted together as perfectly as plaid twin sets and pearls.

But, of course, none of this restriction or doom declaring ever seems to work because vice is a seductive muse. At the height of prohibition in America a visit from the Vice Squad not only gave you street cred but cultural cache. Vice has always had glamour, the degradation and glamour go hand in hand, especially in creative arenas where artists of all forms have turned the dissolution of their minds and bodies into a kind of sport. History is splattered with a litany of artists whose personal lives were train wrecks but whose works exploded with the kind of ferocious debauched spirit which, more often than not, caught up with them. Toulouse Lautrec wandering through Montmartre to paint his salon girls and prostitutes, walking cane filled with absinthe and dead at thirty-six. Hemingway staring down the barrel before his final shot. Jean-Michel Basquiat’s infamous 100 bags of heroin a day. His friend describing the ‘beautiful bubbling red white foam coming out of his mouth’ in his final moments. Because vice also means, to be gripped, to be held. Locked in place. The pressure of whatever is held by the vice, turned and squeezed, until it breaks.

Perhaps the old adage of live fast, die young, leave a good corpse is so 20th century. Perhaps self-destructive dissolution is not so original a point anymore. At least, that’s what the work in Solitary Vice gets me thinking. Here, the contemplation of self and notions of vice have turned inward, not to revel in wilful annihilation or nihilism, but in order to reach back out into the world.

Lead artist and organiser Lynden Stone confirms this intent. ‘This group comes together under the theme of self-examination. All of us, in some way, use ourselves (our image, our body, or representations of our body, in performative and sculptural ways) in our artmaking. Several of us engage in self-portraiture as either a direct self-narrative or as a metaphoric narrative of a more universal story.’ Solitary Vice features the work of nine artists: Anastasia Booth, Carolyn Craig, Kristian Fracchia, Marisa Georgiou, Donna Malone, Caity Reynolds, Tyza Stewart, Lynden Stone and Henri van Noordenburg. Here, the highly self-reflexive practice of each contributor is fused with reconfigured notions of vice. Vice is not about the kinds of acts that might get you arrested, divorced or kicked out of church but directly linked to the act of practice itself, either, ‘the guilty, introverted pleasure of being able to withdraw from the mundane to make art ... making art to please oneself or to satisfy a creative desire in an intellectual onanistic way.’ Above all, ‘this open read of Solitary Vice lends itself to a variety of interpretations by artists and viewers.’

This is why Solitary Vice feels so *now*. The contemplations that infuse these works are quiet, considered, deeply felt. They reach out into the external via the internal, the macro through the micro, not as dirty laundry confessions or as items of shock value but as calls to action, pleas for stillness, requests for permission, lamentations and homages to who we are and where we find ourselves.

Kristian Fracchia's singular work, 'Untitled', is taken from a drawing series he began in 2014 when he felt compelled to examine his position to pornography particularly the treatment of, and representation of women. Having emerged, not unscathed, from an all-boys Catholic school, Kristian was struggling to reconcile his inner self and his developing Buddhist philosophies with the overt and hyper-masculinities he'd experienced daily and watched play out on screens. 'I used myself as a point of discussion,' he tells me, mimicking the processes of pornographic channels, placing himself under surveillance in his room, photographing himself naked, excited and exposed. Then in what could be seen as an act of reclamation he creates a drawing from the images taken, holding still the moment, highlighting the rawness, attempting to take down the barrier of indifference most people place between themselves and the pornographic material they might be consuming. In 'Untitled', Kristian's shadow self looms large in a dynamic play between light and dark and, in poignant reference to the subject matter, all the grey area in-between. It's as if his body is dissolving into its shadow and then the shadow into the room, in a shivering collapse of boundaries.

In 'Left Behind in Lithgow' artist Carolyn Craig's companion pieces are a response to the corrective services decision not to evacuate maximum-security prisoners in Lithgow during the recent bushfire crisis. As a previous inmate the deep sense of relief she felt driving out of the fire zone was complicated by the knowledge that inmates remained inside aware of the encroaching fire but unable to escape it, an dystopian world within mirrored by the apocalyptic world we see in the film, bereft of life, scarred, the scorched trees fading in and out of the choked atmosphere and disappearing into each other in the two channel feed. Capturing the footage reminded Carolyn of riding in prison trucks. 'The deprivation of a sight line – is a profound experience. Of never seeing the horizon – of not having the choice.' In the portrait the ash collected from the charred remains of the fires and incorporated into the print symbolises the mark incarceration leaves. Carolyn's stance might be ordered, compliant but her chin jutting upwards contains a fraction of her humanity and defiance. 'The act of using carbon dust from burnt remnants made me feel the bodily act of non-constitution that the inmates body exists within.' The portrait is a deliberate replica of the images of inmates sometimes tacked to cell doors so prison officers can quickly match numbers to faces during wing musters when bodies are herded like cattle. 'I am this image inside my body now and I carry it with me. It is the scaffolding of my social shame.'

Henri van Noordenburg draws with a knife – that's the kind of line you want printed on t-shirts but it's a complicated, sometimes frustrating technical process that has taken him ten years to master and he's still learning. The three works offered in Solitary Vice are part of an ongoing series involving variations on a process. Initially Henri would photograph himself naked in a series of poses, now he prefers to use a photographer so he can better settle into the particular emotional and physical state he wants. Before he does the shoot, Henri will look at disaster footage. His image is then laid into a black background produced as digital print and Henri picks up his knife, led by the body, the mood of the body determines the rest. In each of the images, a lone male figure is marooned in a ravaged or post apocalyptic landscape, caught in a quiet moment of anguish or contemplation, before, after or during an implied disaster. The works are striking in their capacity to convey human vulnerability, and failing, the subtlety of skin tones against the unforgiving black and white of rubble and rock. The power of these images is like a gut punch – we feel for the planet we have lost but for Henri there are multiple messages operating here related to belonging, migration and sexuality, and always this relationship between the internal and the external, between individual pain and collective responsibility. 'I am placing myself in landscapes I have never experienced,' Henry tells me, and I can sense how much he dreads these visions of our world, he has conjured out of the darkness, ever becoming real.

Lynden Stone's collection of paintings featured in Solitary Vice breathes some welcome comic relief into the exhibition pool – all are from a series the 'The Artist's Collection' and 'arise from an imagined

life as a collector of the unusual and mundane.' Her titles which read like whispered mock confessions or jokes, 'The Artist's Collection of Sex Secrets' or Tissues or New Year's Resolutions (a juicer and a cobweb) or Broken Promises (a collection of empty gin bottles) highlight the playfulness she brings to her practice – the unabashed and unapologetic way she revels in solitude, particularly time spent alone in her studio which she describes as 'delicious' and 'indulgent' despite the wafts of guilt she professes to having which after the viewing the work, one can't buy into too seriously – we know where all this detritus comes from – hours spent. The experience of listening to Ecstatic Sniff, the audio recording of Lynden rattling around in her studio bottles (possibly gin) clanking and her ecstatically sniffing what? Her flatus? Is both hilarious and squirm inducing, the build-up to orgasmic release we're privy to with the various, very into it, sniffs.

Solitary Vice also features works in which representations of the self are metaphoric, conjuring without face or skin, like walking into someone's empty home, the objects the artists have inhabited, collected or made become them and we take a guilty pleasure in making them ours. Tyza Stewart explores gender identity through an art practice based in continual self-portraiture, 'to make space for understanding gender in terms of dynamic specificity, rather than static categories such as male and female.' In their poem, 'Between Wormy Dirt and Starry Sky' all physicality has segued into the words where the artist brings to life the deceptively simple act of walking by a river alone. Written in bleach running down a sheath of black cotton the sensorial power of the title runs through the text with itchy grass seeds, jetty wood, blue blankets, knees and feet. The title also mirrors their intent, from earth to sky, from self to universe, from the physical to the larger whole which occurs as the poem unfolds, lifting us off the mortal coil and into the void. Tyza considers all their works to be self-portraits – drawn from very particular personal experiences but functioning deliberately in a non-specific way. 'They are spaces for a body, that a viewer can project their own body into.' The beauty of this work is that by end, the body we have inhabited seems to have dissolved altogether, drifting up, into outer space.

The reactions to Anastasia Booth's work are likely to be as varied as our solitary fantasies – the bright shock of the transparent red jelly dildo acting as a trigger, calling the eye, demanding it but then, as we watch, all the manly power and agency drains away. Some viewers will laugh, perhaps a little nervously while others will likely feel compelled to put the poor thing to better use. For me, there is something vaguely hypnotic and erotic about 'Towards (Dis)Satisfaction', the phallus squirming around in the grease, looking for a home, denied action, denied result, a kind of aching, chugging foreplay that never reaches the station. For Anastasia the work is less about the singular masturbatory act but the absurdity of the ritual and a tongue in cheek reference to the impotence of masturbation and what some could perceive as the selfish, unworthy pursuit of self-pleasure.

Caity Reynolds is feeling stuck, ground down by the unforgiving Catherine wheel of collapsing financial circumstances, health issues, trauma and self-doubt. The paralysing stasis which results when every action seems to negate another. The painting she had planned on doing for Solitary Vice is unfinished, so she tells us about it. She oscillates between action and indecision, between making a painting and staring at it, so she takes pictures of herself doing both and shows us. This wilful exposure of the gap between expectation and incapacity is confessional, intimate and revealing. It is also painfully honest. In 'Parable of Self Doubt' Caity lays it all bare in an interplay of words and images, capturing the accelerating anxieties and complexities of 21st century life for a young female artist – manifold, elusive and often hard to grasp. 'Sometimes,' she says, 'that means exposing parts of myself in a wholly uncomfortable fashion ... the only people who seem to find the vulnerability in my practice as vulgar are white men, generally straight, I see that as a positive result.'

The titles of Donna Malone's self-portraits collected under the banner of 'Humiliation' read like a countdown of self-flagellation – emotions we all go through, though perhaps not as keenly or as thoroughly as she does in order to produce art: mortification, shame, loss of face, anguish, affront,

discomfiture, dishonour, disgrace, discredit. Donna makes these works, sometimes in one sitting, sometimes over the course of months, by sitting down alone with a mirror examining the effect these feelings have on her features. 'I held and documented my big feelings by drawing on paper for the duration of the visual and emotional self-examination.' The cumulative force of viewing these drawings provokes a deep sense of empathy. Her face caught in all manner of distortions but her gaze, searching us out, unwavering. Donna suggests she is having an 'ever-evolving conversation with the drawings' a conversation we are overhearing but cannot calm down. The effect is both moving and unsettling. 'I have drawn them as a way to steady myself and find my way back to a sense of equilibrium. The drawings themselves have also become a form of solitary vice – something that is mine alone, a secret resource to hold off the terror and impossibility of making my way through the world.'

Marisa Georgiou's work 'cultivating reciprocity (a message for the arts ecology)' is a fitting close out for this essay embodying, as it does, messages of both self-reflection and collective inclusion. The only work in Solitary Vice which directly involves other people, Marisa has had to adapt her approach due to the rapidly developing Covid-19 crisis. Before stage four restrictions hit five artists participated in a group therapy session led by Buddhist somatic psychotherapist and insight meditation teacher, Mary McIntyre. The artists were asked to distil a two-hour long session into a single string of words that would encapsulate their feelings about the local arts ecology and their place within it – the resulting phrases read like psalms or mantras: how fickle is the mind of culture, find pleasure, grounded in purpose, artists are human animals silently asking the void and I've got your back. The lines were subsequently workshoped by Mary and Marisa and recorded in Mary's home as a collection of artist Koans. A Koan is a paradoxical anecdote or riddle without a solution, used in Zen Buddhism to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning. Marisa told me the most challenging aspect of the process was, 'how to create a short meditation that could speak universally whilst staying true to the individuality of each statement.' Marisa's process lead creative ethos has evolved out of a need to reconnect to ideas of artistic wellness after her and a collaborator took on huge temporary artwork project contracts with local government. What had seemed like a dream gig at first had left them exhausted and creatively taxed. The emphasis on care and connection in this work might seem fey to some, and I have to admit the chaos craving punk in me took a while to settle in, but my inner mohawk's gone pretty grey now anyway and the prospect of the world ending is not as badass as we thought it might be, it's just lonely and debilitating.

That's the thing about the uncanny timing of this exhibition, now we've all been forced into solitude and contracted liberty, we're collectively running the gamut of emotions, recollections, self-examinations, indulgences or stasis represented here. Spending more time than we'd probably care to, staring at our reflections, caught in the hallway mirrors we walk past a hundred times a day, ghosted on all our screens, stolen by our online avatars travelling further than we do now. So, do yourself a favour. Take on the cues. Feel the sharp edge of the knife and carve yourself into a new universe. Walk along a river until you disappear. Rub the burnt ash of your past, or someone forgotten, all over your body. Have the courage to look into your unadorned face. Film yourself naked. Collect your own smells. Lie flat on your back and wait for the sound of the bell. Feel the texture of your insides and do not turn away, because who knows, when we emerge from this mandatory detention, we might think about doing the world a little differently.

— [SALLY BREEN](#), 2020

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GOLDCOAST.

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THE WALLS acknowledge the YUGAMBEH people, the traditional owners of the land on which we operate, and pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples on the Gold Coast today.

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