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@northartnz | staff@northart.co.nz | (09) 480 9633 | www.northart.co.nz



| Beyond Femininity |  
Embodiment & the Female Experience

By Mirabelle Field and Tamar Torrance

Hope Nobilo, *Mother of Me*, watercolour and gouache on paper, recycled frame, 2021

*Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men* - Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, 1994

When we first began planning this exhibition, we came up with two curatorial themes based on our interests and what we felt was currently under-examined recent exhibitions in Aotearoa. The themes were: figurative art created by female artists, and contemporary art that explored elements of surrealism to engender a sensory reaction in the viewer. In discussing collaborative visions for the show, we eventually decided upon an amalgamation of our two initial ideas. *Beyond Femininity* presents works created by contemporary female-identifying artists that explore the diverse and unique experience of being a woman. In this, we chose artists whose practice moved away from the idealised and otherwise reductive representations of femininity as it appears across traditional art history, in order to foreground and express more faithful depictions of female experience. Consequently, themes of embodiment, sexuality, intimacy, and identity feature prominently. This exhibition can be seen to examine the female experience through a phenomenological lens, emphasizing sensations of embodiment and the immanent sensory experience of existing with (or indeed, *as*) a human body.

While the mind-body hierarchy has been present throughout the history of Western philosophy, in the wake of René Descartes' tautology '*cogito, ergo sum; I think, therefore I am*', this dualism came to dominate conceptions of the mind and body for centuries. Within this framework, the body was understood as belonging to the inferior realm of corporeality, while the mind - tasked with making sense of the world through rational thought - transcended. Where the body was seen as pandering to baser impulses - an instrument to be directed and controlled - the mind was assigned the role of active navigator, the instigator and indeed arbiter of self-awareness and experience.

Although not only is this dualism a fallacy in and of itself, but problematically, it has come to parallel and map onto similarly unproductive binaries. For example, the Mind | **Body** divide has been understood as mirroring the division between:

Male | **Female**  
Ideal | **Material**  
Subject | **Object**

Masculinity | **Femininity**  
Transcendence | **Immanence**  
Rationality | **Emotionality**

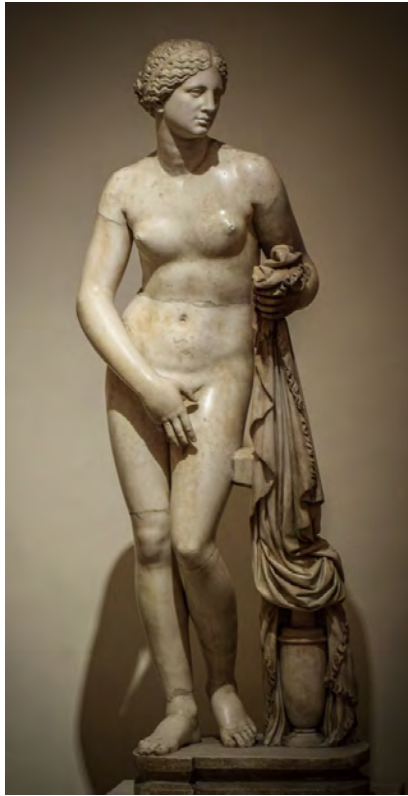
With the understanding that these binaries correspond with one another, it becomes apparent that women occupy the right-hand side of this opposition pertaining the baser realm of corporeality. As a consequence, women have been seen as enmeshed in their bodily existence - and as such, it should be noted, sequestered from the realm of rationality (reserved for the higher-order intellect of *mankind*). Within these dualistic parameters, the female body becomes synonymous with the immanent and material, an object without agency, passively existing to be acted *on*, by - presumably - the male subject.

And we see this across history - across culture, institutions, social structures, and across disciplines: literature, performing arts, philosophy, theology, and of course, the visual arts. Indeed, the trope of the female body as the object - all flesh and no substance - on display for the viewing subject, proliferates the canon of Western art. Simply look to the genre of the reclining nude or the adored *pudica* pose, dating at early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC with the *Aphrodite of Knidos* sculpture. Supine and alluring, the fleshy female body has occupied a plethora of lavish settings, disposed and surrounded by other earthly delights. When her gaze is not directed outward in invitation, it is averted, allowing the viewer - here turned voyeur - to explore her figure unobstructed and unobjected. The taste for women rendered passive and readily available to the male gaze is palpable. And on the occasion when women are not being sexualized and objectified in Western art history, it is when they have risen to the transcendental status of the divine, as we see in the manifold iterations of the *Assumption of the Virgin* narrative.



Paul Gauguin, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, oil on burlap, 1892





Praxiteles, *Aphrodite of Knidos*, marble, 4<sup>th</sup> century



Titian, *Assumption of the Virgin*, oil on panel, 1515-1518

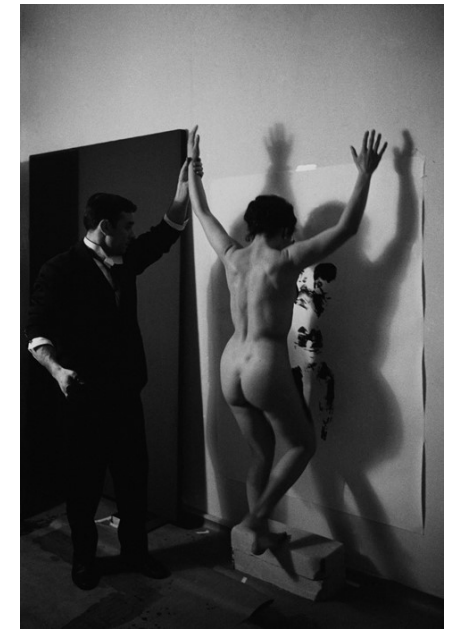
Not only does this visual language speak to traditions of representing the female body in terms of masculine idealization, but it also reveals the hierarchy of representation as it was cast by the dominant class, within which heterosexual, white, gender essentialist preferences became the 'norm', the default. It was only recently – give or take the last hundred years or so – that this trope began to meet any significant opposition. Indeed, in the 1950-70s, contemporary artists were still failing to avoid the objectification of women. In Man Ray's *Le Violon d'Ingres*, the female subject becomes a literal object, painted so as to imitate the waist of a violin. That the woman has been reduced quite literally to an instrument for the male artist's ingenuity – his *muse* – is not a standalone occurrence. Take Yves Klein painting his female models who he called his "living paintbrushes" to create his celebrated *Anthropometry of the Blue Period* (ANT 82) (1960).



Man Ray, *Untitled (Reclining Nude)*, solarized gelatin silver print, 1931



Man Ray, *Le Violon d'Ingres*, gelatin silver print, 1924

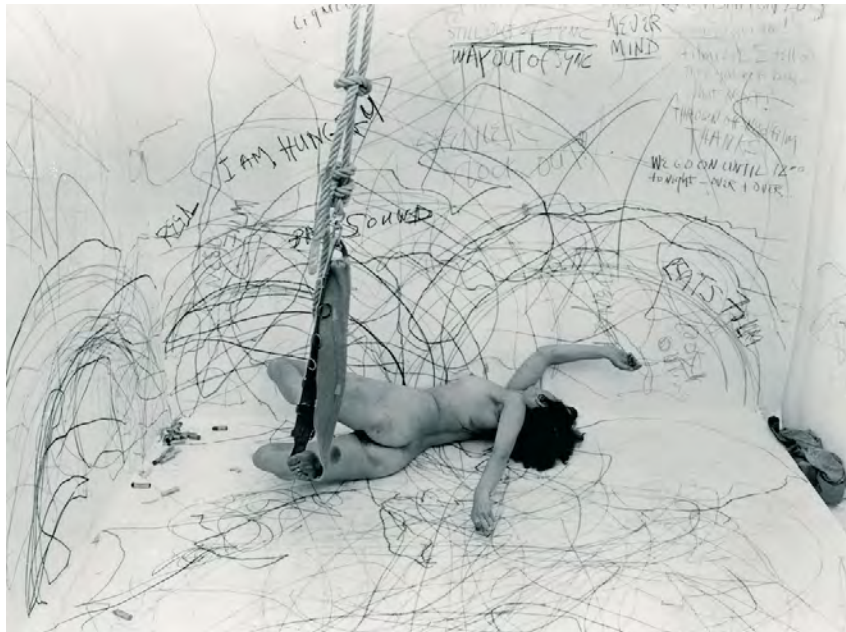


Yves Klein, *Anthropometry of the Blue Period*, 1960

When depictions of womanhood have acknowledged the realities of the physical female body, these realities have been considered transgressive, gross, inappropriate. As such, the idealised female body has dominated conceptions and depictions of women and femininity; while the actual lived experience of women has been disregarded as less appealing, less acceptable (and certainly less inviting). For centuries, this tradition taught women that the appetites of male observers were to be adhered and conformed to at the expense of their own experience; ensuring that the phenomenological reality of being a woman, the actual lived experience, remained censored.

In order to challenge this, women were tasked with deconstructing the relationship between these traditions of thought and female subjectivity, identity, and lived experience. One of the most important ways in which this cultural ideology has been confronted in recent years was through the creation of diverse representations of womanhood in the visual arts.

Attempts have been made to shatter these idealistic illusions throughout the history of feminist thought, but perhaps the most notable attacks occurred during the late 1900's, as Second Wave Feminism began to rock the proverbial boat. Women artists challenged dualistic assumptions by confronting their own corporeality and placing the female body back into artistic creation on their own terms.



Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, performance, 1973-76

In this way, the body became a vehicle of expression and creation, as seen in performance works of Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Marina Abramović, and Yoko Ono (to name a mere few), or it could be placed at the forefront of artistic depictions in an uncensored, unidealized and unapologetic manner, exemplified by the self-portraits of Jenny Saville, Renee Cox, and Tracey Emin. In the portraiture of Marlene Dumas, notions of female intimacy, sexuality, deformity, race, are thrown into the air and redefined entirely. Alternatively, in the photographic images of Zanele Muholi, the female body is captured in moments of seclusion; intimate, tender depictions which speak to the collective lived experiences of their subjects while at the same time conserve their privacy.



Zanele Muholi, *Flesh II*, gelatin silver print on paper, 2005





Jenny Saville, *Plan*, oil on canvas, 1993

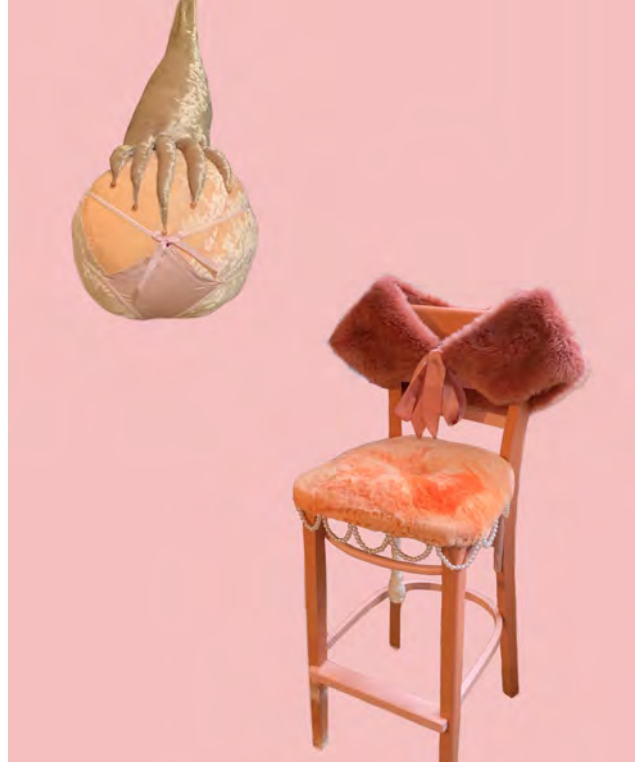
A discussion on female representation would, of course, not be complete without a nod to Louise Bourgeois, whose remarkably diverse practice has been exploring themes of domesticity, sexuality, the uncanny and unconscious through the female body for decades. Provoking and unnervingly personal, these artists exist within a lineage of women – far too many to cover here - who have been breaking away from, and forcefully subverting reductive traditions of female representations. At last the complex physical realities of the female experience were being brought into female representation, ensuring that the diverse nature of womanhood came to be expressed and emphasized.

While enmeshing women in their bodily existence had proved historically problematic – as it certainly paralleled and perpetuated female objectification – it became apparent that it is not women’s close associations to their bodies that are problematic, but rather the dualistic modes of thought which have habitually constrained understandings of the female body. Rather than spurning our bodies then, we simply needed (and continue to need) representation within which the female body is appropriately portrayed, representation that speaks to the phenomenological reality of being a woman, wherein we are not reduced to the status of passive object, but rather the active perceiving and experiencing subject. Here, the body becomes inseparable from sense of self and agency, revealing that there is no one standardized female experience – just as there is no one standardized female body.

Of course, representation of the female body by those that exist within (or rather, *as*) it is vital to the continuing elevation of women’s autonomy; and art has played a crucial role in communicating this, oftentimes entering into the realm of activism to penetrate cultural, social, and political discourses.

It is the legacy of these female artists and thinkers who challenged traditions of female representation that has enabled us to create *Beyond Femininity*. This exhibition speaks to and becomes a part of this feminist lineage through its diverse representation of female embodiment and self-expression. Today we are able to commemorate the female body through this lens in a multitude of ways, without this representation being defined by dualisms or confined to challenging the traditional male gaze.

*Beyond Femininity* presents a continuation of this discourse in the context of contemporary Aotearoa. Here, we have collated a wide range of female artists whose work challenges, expresses, and embodies the reality of the female experience. Visceral multitudes of female experience are represented throughout this exhibition and can be seen clearly in the diverse mediums, compositions, and techniques on display. Today, we embrace and celebrate representations of the female body, the female experience, through the female lens, and celebrate the work of all women, past, present, and future, who have challenged established hierarchies and made room for new forms of female expression.



Aimee Bartlett, *The Love Seat*, soft sculpture installation, 2021

### **Aimee Bartlett**

Bartlett's installation examines the female experience through the male gaze and the sensation of being looked upon, in reference to the heavily sexualised and romanticised traditional paintings of the reclining nude. *"Those beautiful women sprawled naked, surrounded by luxurious silks and beads and fur."*

Between the audience, the plump chair and the soft bodily sculpture that hangs above, this environment evokes discussion and interaction with the embodiment of the female sitter. By accepting the invitation to step into the space and sit on her chair, the viewer is enabled to embody her experience, through her environment. They are welcome to feel, to play and to recline. However, the soft bodily sculpture hangs just out of reach, restricts the senses of the viewer to sight alone. You may look at her, but you may not touch.



Rachael Burke, *Incubate I*, watercolour, acetate, found photographic imagery on paper, 2021

### **Rachael Burke**

Burke's artistic practice examines contemporary female identity and the nature of representation. This work seeks to challenge cultural depictions of women and the social construction of the female body by deconstructing beauty's sanctioned structures, such as youth and flawlessness, and redefining gender stereotypes of beauty, femininity and sexuality. When women are represented in popular culture, there is a continuing motif of desire and repulsion. These works seek to examine this re-occurring duality, to break two moulds: the demonisation of female sexuality in popular culture, and the notion of female sexuality as erotic commodity.

Here, the figure is deconstructed from images cut from woman's medical journals and beauty magazines and reconstructed out of discarded body parts. The female body is dismantled, dismembered, aggressed, turned inside out and recomposed. Disorientating us from our most familiar commodified referent – our own image.





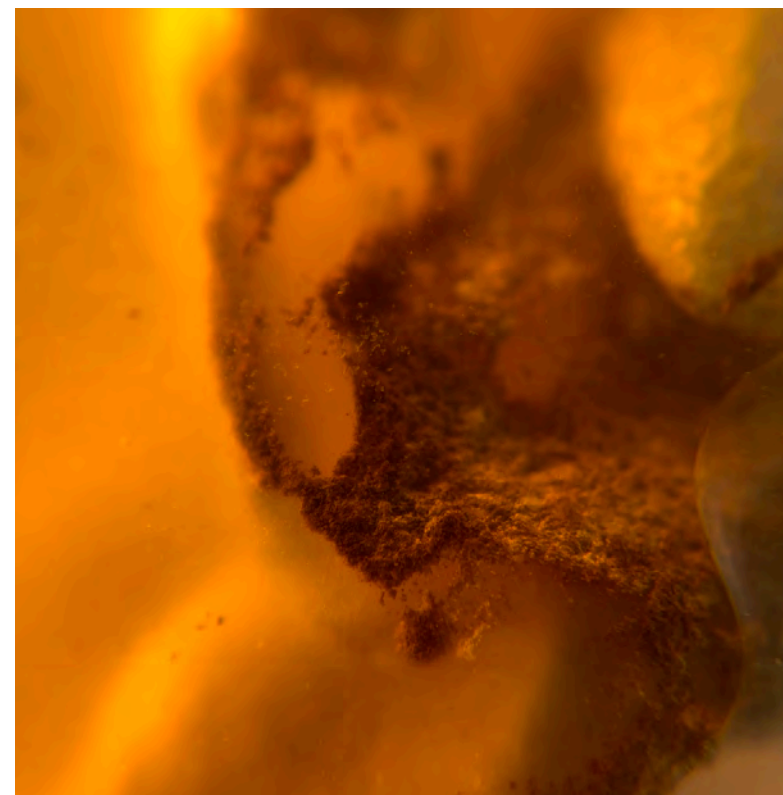
Tui Emma Gillies and Sulieti Fieme'a Burrows, *Fa'e mo 'ene ki'i ta'ahine*, tapa cloth, Indian ink, and umea-red earth from Falevai, 2021

### **Tui Emma Gillies and Sulieti Fieme'a Burrows**

These collaborative ngatu or tapa works by Sulieti Fieme'a Burrows and Tui Emma Gillies explore traditions of their Pacific Island heritage and political trends that shape their world as Polynesian women in Aotearoa.

In some images, the woman depicted resembles Tui, taking on self-referential quality. Through this, the artist seeks to uncover and understand different, (and at times dormant) aspects of her 'self', which she sees herself as entering into a visual conversation with. Together, Tui and Sulieti explore the magic of child creation, pregnancy and childbirth and the sacred experience of motherhood, to which Sulieti is the perfect complement, softening some of Tui's stronger statements and sharper observations. These images can be seen as a celebration of the female body, its gifts and undeniable power.

Additionally, not only do these works portray the female body, but the process of how tapa cloth – soaked and beaten – is itself a bodily process. In this way, the medium itself speaks to embodiment and enhances the subject matter.



Ariana Kahli Hill, *Untitled*, photograph, 2020

### **Ariana Kahli Hill**

*The Body in the Room* explores discomfort within the viewer, creating an object resembling a corpse-like thing.

*“I believe this work resonates with the concept of this show through intimacy as well as discomfort. Being able to be in the presence of a version of yourself is an intimacy very few get to experience. Although this intimacy is very personal for me, I believe this can be seen within the photographs creating a similar sense for the viewer.”*

*“As an artist who's female, putting my raw body on display was an uncomfortable and vulnerable decision I had to overcome in order to produce this work. I ultimately set out to create discomfort for others through the use of my work, but really I believe I've created a piece that is most distressing for myself.”*

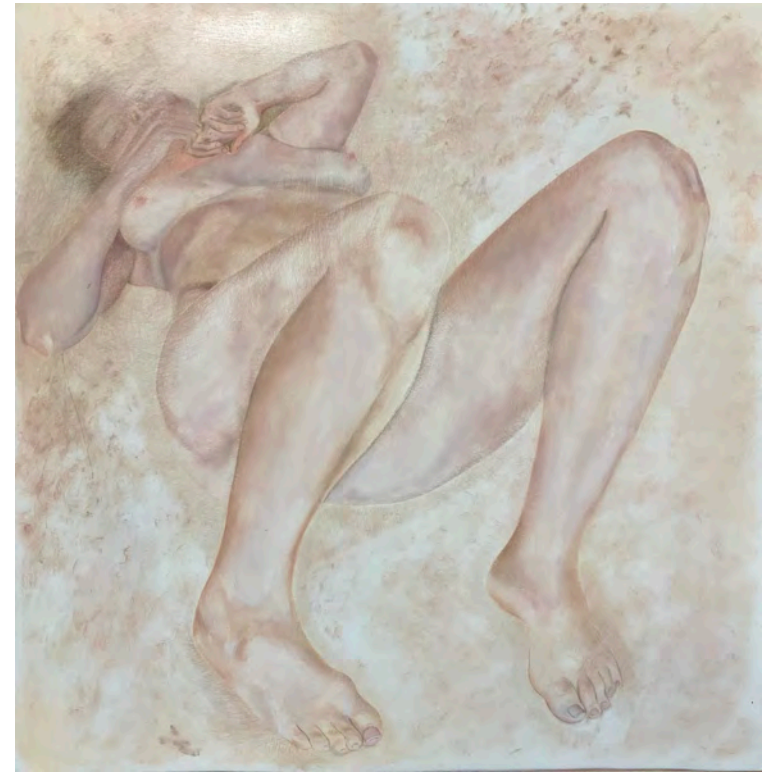


Thea Long, *Pour Beer*, photograph on foam board, 2019

### **Thea Long**

Inspired by the artist's growing background, 'Pour Beer' continues Long's interest in the malleable female role within different environments. Long navigates certain influences that affect women in society from a distinctly personal perspective, questioning how people's perception of gender varies across cultures, and the tolerance of gender diversity.

In these photographic works, Long comments on the changeability of audiences' association and perception of an otherwise commonplace substance - beer – depending on how this substance is presented. The artist notes, *"There is a big difference between pouring beer in a cup and pouring beer in someone's mouth."* This metaphor can be easily stretched across contexts as a means of questioning the subjectivity of perception under different circumstances. Certainly, the fluxing perceptions of gender identity and sexuality differ vastly across cultures, religions, and societies.



Jennifer Mason, *Grisaille #2*, oil on board, 2020

### **Jennifer Mason**

Mason's artistic practice foregrounds painted female figures that are not typical or idealised in order to invite a different type of viewing experience. These figures have been described as uncanny and preternatural, familiar but hard to place.

*"I always aim to have my life models attention focused inwards, in a relaxed state, so that their bodies become like heavy, comfortable containers. I hope that the viewer moves forward into that relaxed space and that this creates a sensual experience. I want the viewing to be intimate and seductive, tender and soft. My art endeavours to transform the body into a safe place for rest and restoration."*





Virginia Mau, *My Body My Temple I*, black and white photograph, framed, 2021

### Virginia Mau

These exhibition pieces are a continuation of Mau's 'My Body. My Temple' series. Here, the artist likens her body to a sacred temple within which she is free to explore her sexuality and develop a sense of self-intimacy untouched and uninfluenced by external tastes and preferences. Embracing her body, Mau seeks to become comfortable in her own skin, pursuing her authenticity from within and allowing it to manifest outwardly.

*"Recently, I attended a protest march against hate crimes towards the Asian community here in Aotearoa and globally. There was a strong message about the stigma against Asian females being portrayed as 'Exotic' and 'I'm not your fetish'. This really struck a chord with me, because I too have been on the receiving end of unwanted attention and comments from the opposite sex. Growing up as a woman, a woman of ethnic decent, but also a woman who was not afraid or ashamed to speak my mind and be confident in my sexuality, I have experienced misconception and commodification based on my looks. These works represent a reclamation of my own body, and the image of that body."*

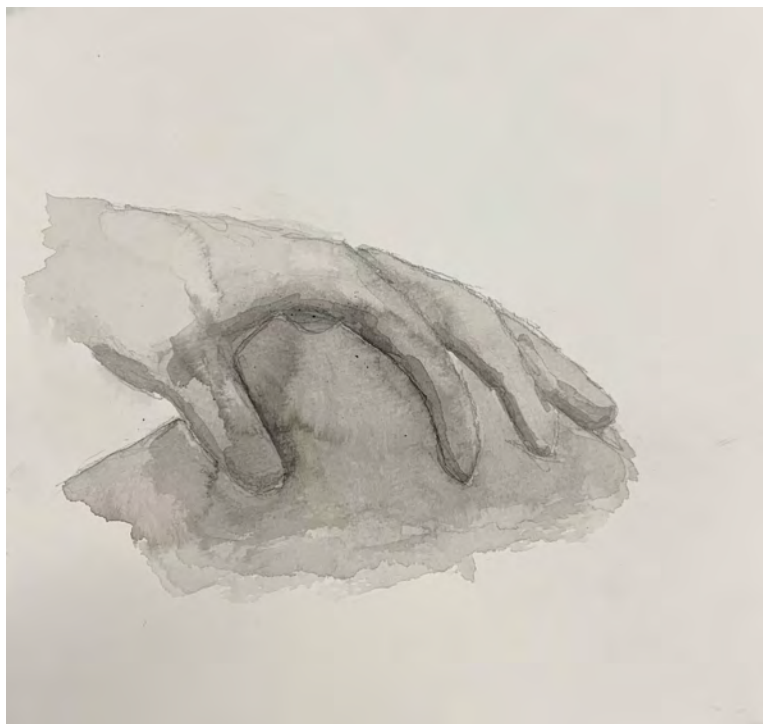


Hope Nobilo, *Whole* (detail), watercolour and gouache on paper, recycled frame, 2021

### Hope Nobilo

Nobilo's artistic practice utilises soft pinks and reds in combination with circular organic forms to display her perspective of the female body. She is interested in subverting the traditional representation and over-sexualisation of the female nude, foregrounding the female body in immanent corporeality. Through Nobilo's work, the physical nature of women's bodies is embraced, denoting viscera, hair, blood and flesh in a tender, perhaps intimate manner, her brushwork and compositions fluid and affective.

*"My work in its nature subverts traditional idealistic representations of the female body. I use my practice as a tool to reclaim ownership of my personal female experience. My aim is to normalise and empower myself to own my body hair, my sexuality, my body size and menstruation."*



Jessica Webb, *It Only Feels Good Now*, ink and pencil on mixed media paper, 2021

### Jessica Webb

Webb's artistic practice and research revolves around feminine sexuality, with 'the body' being at the forefront of her work. Webb explores the physical practicalities of female sexuality, pleasure, and intimacy, from a distinctly female perspective, confronting idealised traditions of female representation which have portrayed female sexuality through a myopic (and often sanitised) male lens.

*"This new series of artistic creation speaks to the topic of masturbation, a further exploration of the medium I used for the earlier 'Touch' series (2018) and a condensed version of my '365 days' work (2020). Exploring the shame I have felt around claiming pleasure for myself, after years of thinking it wasn't right to be doing it or that it was dirty to do so. This stigma often led to a lingering feeling of anguish straight after. In creating a daily series, this series becomes almost documentary of a 'performance'."*

### Thank you to the exhibiting artists:

Aimee Bartlett  
Rachael Burke  
Sulieti Fieme'a Burrows  
Tui Emma Gillies  
Ariana Kahli Hill  
Thea Long  
Jennifer Mason  
Virginia Mau  
Hope Nobilo  
Jessica Webb

### PUBLIC PROGRAMMES

#### Join us

#### Sunday 1 August, 2-4pm

Artist Symposium - an afternoon of critical discussion with the exhibiting artists.

#### Saturday 7 August 1-3pm

Artist Workshop - an exploration in watercolour with Hope Nobilo

Register for these events via [www.northart.co.nz](http://www.northart.co.nz)

### FURTHER READINGS

Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, 1994

Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 1985

Louise Levesque-Lopman, *Claiming Reality: Phenomenology and Women's Experience*, 1988

Luna Dolezal, *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*, 2015

Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin, *Art and Embodiment: Biological and Phenomenological Contributions to Understanding Beauty and the Aesthetic*, 2005.

Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power, and Other Essays*, 1988.

Hilary Robinson, *Feminism, Art, Theory: An Anthology 1968-2014*, 2015.