

REFLECTION

I use light as my material to process the medium of perception.

I believe that feeling, perceiving is a sensual act, an emotional act – and that is the important thing. That is what is processed.

James Turrell¹

Light Sensitive Material: Works from the Verghis Collection is but one selection of works from a larger collection owned by the London based Australian collector Rachel Verghis.

The artists in this exhibition include Shoufay Derz, Shaun Gladwell, Petrina Hicks, David Knight, Rosemary Laing, Vanila Netto, Michael Riley, Julie Rrap, Hossein Valamanesh (all working in photography), Hayden Fowler, Shaun Gladwell, Grant Stevens (all represented by digital works), Jonathan Jones (a single fluorescent work) and Newell Harry (a single neon work).

This essay reflects on the work of five of the artists represented in the Verghis Collection: Petrina Hicks, Jonathan Jones, Hayden Fowler, Shaun Gladwell and Vanila Netto.

Petrina Hicks' *Shenae and Jade* is one of two works by Hicks in the Verghis collection. It is an image by turn both beautiful and extremely unsettling. Hicks works primarily in portraiture, but her work is heightened by surreal/science fictional undertones that give it an eerie quality. A strong element in Hicks' work is also the relationship between humans and the animal kingdom.

In *Shenae and Jade* we immediately ask the question why is the budgerigar in the girl's mouth? The image recalls a lion tamer placing his head in the lion's mouth, but in Hicks' world the roles are reversed and now it is the animal in danger of decapitation. And yet there is lyrical tenderness in the image, with the girl, her eyes closed, passively accepting almost nurturing the bird as if to protect it from danger.

Hicks' use of photography takes the conventions of beauty as presented in the world of advertising and publicity only to subvert them by the use of almost imperceptible digital interventions.

Also included in *Light Sensitive Material* is another Hicks portrait *Lauren (eyes closed)* which places the subject, an albino, in a non-landscape reminiscent of George Lucas' 1971 science fiction/horror movie *THX1138*. The image has a quality of ideal beauty but one bleached of colour and emotion.

In much of Hicks' work there is an emotional detachment that isolates the artist from her subject and which makes us observers rather than participants in the static drama she presents.

Jonathan Jones' *white poles* is a fluorescent light work that draws on the artist's indigenous heritage, recent art history, ideas of landscape and notions of community.

Jones, of Kamilaroi/Wiradjuri heritage, is best known for his public art light works which use repetition in part to recall indigenous tribal markings. His best known public sculpture is the 2006 installation he made for the foyer of the WESTPAC Bank in Sydney which gloriously fills the space with light.

The material of choice Jones uses to create these ultra cool images of beauty is the humble white fluorescent tube. Unlike the specially made coloured fluorescent tubes used by the American artist Dan Flavin, Jones' tubes are more democratic and can be bought in any lighting store.

white poles directly references

Jackson Pollock's once controversial Blue Poles in the National Gallery of Australia, yet by its random installation (there is no set way to display the work) it also references the ideas of chance as espoused by the composer John Cage.

In her essay for Jones' 2003 exhibition *lumination*, Hetti Perkins writes about the early colonists standing on the shores of Port Jackson watching the Cadigal people night fishing, with the fires in their canoes mirrored in the harbour's black waters. Jones' works can be traced back in a poetic way to these beginnings and his 2003 work made from extension cords and incandescent household light bulbs, *68 Fletcher, Bondi, 20:20, 9.6.03*, recalls another night view, that of the Bondi headland from 68 Fletcher Street, Bondi at 8.20pm on 9 June 2003.

Jones has written about the problems associated with the idea of community and its relationship to the individual. In 2003 he wrote: *The notion of a community in many ways is an impossibility, as there is no group of people who are exactly the same constituting a community. Therefore, all communities can be broken down to individuals. The individual by itself is a further impossibility, as all individuals are products of their community and must relate to the powers of each other.*²

The fluorescent lights in *white poles* with their identical form, their ubiquitous presence in every Australian household and their random placement beautifully illustrate the dilemma of the community and the individual as perceived by Jones.



Shaun Gladwell, *Self-Portrait Spinning (Invalides)*, 2001, type-c print, 40.5 x 52cm, edition 5 of 5. Photo: Josh Raymond. Image courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Collection Rachel Verghis.

Hayden Fowler's *Goat Odyssey* is one of three works by Fowler included in *Light Sensitive Material* and continues Fowler's interest in the relationship between humans and animals/nature. *Goat Odyssey* has two goats existing in a post apocalyptic landscape.

Humans, when they appear in Fowler's works, are dressed as if they are *noble savages* who have stepped out of an 18th century concept of Romantic Primitivism. In this concept man is perceived as being intrinsically good, living in and at harmony with nature. Yet Fowler's *noble savages* are incarcerated in a post Orwellian industrial landscape. Similarly his animals, his goats, lambs, horses and deer easily pictured in a Classical arcadian landscape by Poussin are imprisoned in a world of rotating blades and Skinner boxes emitting electronic beeps.

Arcadia has never looked bleaker. Yet the relationship between humans

and animals appears idyllic, it seems tender and caring but is it a relationship born out of harmony or the Stockholm Syndrome in which the hostage shows signs of loyalty to the hostage-taker?

Fowler's 2005 work *White Australia* also included in this exhibition, presents a world where white rats are trapped in an eerie green-lit landscape conditioned to respond to an electronic sound, or are they spelling out a secret code? This work more than any other most clearly demonstrates Fowler's vision of his Brave New World.

Shaun Gladwell's *Self-Portrait Spinning (Invalides)* is one of two photographs by Gladwell in the Verghis collection. Both works were made in Paris and include his ubiquitous skateboarder, spinning, in one image, in front of the Invalides with Napoleon's tomb looming in the background and in the other at the Bastille, site of the new Paris Opera House.



Vanila Netto, *Mini-Flex Super-Comfort*, 2003-4, digital print on aluminium, 75 x 93cm, edition 1 of 5. Image courtesy the artist and BREENSPACE Sydney and Arc One Gallery Melbourne. Collection Rachel Verghis.

object, participating but remaining emotionally detached.

Gladwell's work in the principally male world of skateboarding and BMX biking operates with the same emotional aesthetic detachment.

In his best known work *Storm Sequence*, also included in the exhibition, a lone skateboarder moves in slowed-down time against a grey seascape with a looming storm closing in, sea spray covering the camera lens. The drama inherent in this work recalls 19th century Romantic painting at its best resonating with the *Sturm und Drang* of a Turner storm painting or Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*.

Vanila Netto's *Mini-Flex Super-Comfort* is one of three works by the artist in the Verghis Collection. Born in Brazil, Netto arrived in Australia in 1987. Netto's work looks back to the roots of modernism in architecture and design and in particular to Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe.

In recent years contemporary design has become the *new black* of the visual arts and Netto uses *faux* design and architecture to comment on the world in which we live.

Netto also has an ironic sense of humour and the titles she gives her works read like a statement made by Le Corbusier: *Little Red Rugged Rocking Roof, Normal distraction from good conversation part 3, Detergent cells, Milestone frontier: Brancusi emasculated here and The Magnanimous Beige Wrap*.

Her work also looks at ideas of excessive consumption and waste production in contemporary society. In Netto's work architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's mantra less is more takes on a new chilling meaning given we now live in an age where global

warming is a reality and not merely *An Inconvenient Truth*.

The works in *Light Sensitive Material: Works from the Verghis Collection* demonstrate how vital and relevant contemporary Australian art is and how artists continue to address important issues including the relationship between humans and nature, the urban environment, design, architecture, global warming and ideas of community.

Richard Perram
Director
Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

Hossein Valamanesh
Nesting
2005
digital print on watercolour paper
113.5 x 135cm

Jonathan Jones
white poles
2003
fluorescent tubes and fittings
dimensions variable

LIST OF WORKS

David Knight
Ada #0118
2007
photographic print
119 x 148cm

David Knight
Alyssa #6577
2006
digital print
141 x 103.5cm

Grant Stevens
In the Beyond
2008
digital video, 7:33

Hayden Fowler
White Australia
2005
digital video, 24:52 loop

Hayden Fowler
Goat Odyssey
2006
digital video, 16:9 format, sound, colour, single channel, 15:10 loop

Hayden Fowler
Hunger
2007
digital video, 4:3 format, no sound, black and white, dual channel, 15:40 loop

Hossein Valamanesh
Nesting
2005
digital print on watercolour paper
113.5 x 135cm

Jonathan Jones
white poles
2003
fluorescent tubes and fittings
dimensions variable

Julie Rrap
Camouflage #4 (Eiko)
2000
type-c colour photograph
125 x 125cm

Michael Riley
Untitled (Split wing)
from *cloud*
2000
chromogenic pigment print
119 x 169cm

Newell Harry
Beginnings and Endings/Endings and Beginnings
2008
neon (Helvetica, snow white)
10 x 330cm

Petrina Hicks
Lauren (eyes closed)
2003
lightjet print
152 x 127cm

Petrina Hicks
Shenae and Jade
2005
lightjet print
142 x 134cm

Rosemary Laing & Stephen Birch
between a rock and a place with no fish, a collaboration with Stephen Birch
from the series *one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape*
2003
type-c photographs
4 panels: 93 x 158cm each

Shaun Gladwell
Self-Portrait Spinning (Invalides)
2001
type-c print
40.5 x 52cm

Shaun Gladwell
Self-Portrait Spinning (Bastille)
2001
type-c print
40.5 x 52cm

Shaun Gladwell
Storm Sequence
2000
digital video, SD, 4:3 format, stereo, 8:40 loop

Shoufay Derz
Radii Heart (340/360)
2004
Lamda print, face mounted on acrylic
80 x 80cm

Vanila Netto
Little Red Rugged Rocking Roof
2004
digital print on aluminium
72 x 99cm

Vanila Netto
Mini-Flex Super-Comfort
2003-2004
digital print on aluminium
75 x 93cm

Vanila Netto
Normal distraction from good conversation part 3
2002
digital print
85 x 100cm



LIGHT SENSITIVE MATERIAL: WORKS FROM THE VERGHIS COLLECTION NEW SOUTH WALES REGIONAL TOUR

BRAG
bathurst regional art gallery

Museums & Galleries NSW

¹ James Turrell, in *James Turrell: Licht als Material: Ein Gespräch von Frauke Tomczak, Kunstforum International* 121 (1993)

² Jonathan Jones, in *Jonathan Jones (2003) catalogue essay for his exhibition at Gallery Barry Keldouls*

³ David Harvey, *Paris: Capital of Modernity*. New York: Routledge (2003)

FOREWORD

Light Sensitive Material: Works from the Verghis Collection is a vibrant selection from the private collection of Rachel Verghis, one of Australia's youngest collectors and benefactors of contemporary art. Rachel's enthusiasm and passion for supporting emerging artists and her recognition of the importance of public access to high quality art, has resulted in the generous long term loan of the works in this exhibition to Bathurst Regional Art Gallery and its subsequent New South Wales regional tour.

Curated by Richard Perram, Director of Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, the exhibition brings together twenty-one works from fourteen emerging and mid-career Australian artists who are united in their integral use of light through photography, digital media or sculpture. The selection presents a fascinating snapshot of Australian contemporary art from the last decade.

Museums & Galleries NSW is delighted to be touring *Light Sensitive Material: Works from the Verghis Collection* to eight regional galleries throughout New South Wales, bringing innovative and thought-provoking works to new and broad audiences around the state. I would like to thank Rachel Verghis for her sincere dedication and contribution to the arts and cultural sector, without which this exhibition and regional tour would not have been made possible, and to Richard Perram and the staff of Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, who have worked tirelessly to produce an engaging exhibition and associated resources.



Michael Rolfe
CEO
Museums & Galleries NSW



Jonathan Jones, *white poles*, 2003, fluorescent tubes and fittings, dimensions variable. Photo: Fiona Morrison. Image courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldouls. Collection Rachel Verghis.



Newell Harry, *Beginnings and Endings / Endings and Beginnings*, 2008, neon (Helvetica, snow white), 10 x 330cm, edition 2 of 5 + 2 APs. Image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney. Collection Rachel Verghis.



Hayden Fowler, *Goat Odyssey*, 2006, digital video, 16:9 format, sound, colour, single channel, 15:10 loop, edition 61 of 70. Image courtesy the artist. Collection Rachel Verghis.



Hossein Valamanesh, *Nesting*, 2005, digital print on watercolour paper, 113.5 x 135cm, edition 4 of 5. Image courtesy the artist and GRANTPIRRIE. Collection Rachel Verghis.

ABOUT MUSEUMS & GALLERIES NSW

Museums & Galleries NSW (M&G NSW) is the peak body supporting a dynamic mix of museums, galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres in both metropolitan and regional areas throughout the state. With focus primarily on the small to medium sector, M&G NSW generates services that improve program performance, capacity, sustainability and networking across the sector, and seeks to advocate and communicate the value of sector wide programs and activities to stakeholders and communities. Our values and influences centre on ensuring that galleries, museums and Aboriginal cultural centres are able to reflect, contest, involve and support their communities in a variety of ways.

As part of the National Exhibitions Touring Support Australia network, M&G NSW is committed to the delivery of best practice touring exhibitions of contemporary visual culture to remote and metropolitan communities throughout NSW and Australia. M&G NSW also offers in-kind touring support across areas such as crating and transport management, condition reporting and conservation, resource and program development, marketing, and OH&S and risk assessment.

Museums & Galleries NSW is assisted by the NSW Government through Arts NSW and by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF ART

Light Sensitive Material: Works from the Verghis Collection is an exhibition that considers the symbolic and literal use of light in art. From an art historical perspective, examining the use of light in art means asking two questions: the question of light as a condition of art and the question of light as a possibility for art.

Light is the condition of art as light is the condition of seeing, and without light there is no art. Yet, light as the condition of art is historical. Our understanding of light evolved with technological and scientific advancements and continues to shift with new findings. Medieval accounts of vision saw it as 'extramission'; the belief that light travelled out of the eye to touch the world and then return back. In this case, seeing was tactile. It meant touching the world, and the world touching the body through light. Seeing was doing and acting upon the world, and light was the agent of that doing. With the

Renaissance emerged a worldview that understood vision as light falling on the retina and entering the eye; 'intramission'. The concept of 'intramission' means that we humans are the receptors of the natural order of the world, and light is the means of delivering that order. This breakthrough Renaissance view of intramission led to the consideration of light as a possibility for art, revolutionising how we understand vision and art, and continues to be influential even today.

Emerging in the 17th century with Baroque art and in 18th century Romanticism comes the treatment of light not as a guarantor of scientifically ordered geometrical truths, but as divine, as disordering, as producing emotional drama through the contrast of light and dark. Exemplified by artists such as Caravaggio and English Romanticist John Constable, light in art becomes dramatic and intrusive, a means of

connecting to a world full of feeling and emotion.

This shift continues rapidly in 19th and 20th century Modernism. Urbanisation and industrialisation provide increasingly complex visual environments and an accelerated pace of life. The idea of change, flux and renewal became familiar experiences and the notion of vision transformed from a static and ordered concept into broken into fragments of sensation, removed from a stable world. Impressionist painting(s) dissolved light rays and completely did away with a fixed source of light. Instead, they constructed the viewing experience around an absence of unitary comprehension. Through a reimagining of light, painting becomes an impression of a moment, giving art a distinctive temporality of light and vision. Many Impressionist paintings demonstrate the failure of the eye, absorbing either too

much or too little light. Renowned Impressionist Claude Monet constantly painted effects of the overload of light reaching the eye, where the surface breaks down into shimmering abstractions.

Perhaps the greatest shift in the understanding of images and the role of light in representation came with the invention and rise of photography in the late 19th century. The period of 1850 – 1900 in which photography became commercially viable and widespread in Europe, caused profound changes in the understanding of images and the understanding of light in art. For 19th century artistic sensibilities, photography's literal depiction of the world by-passed the poetics of human creativity and was regarded as a science rather than an art.

On the one hand photography was seen as superior to painting and drawing in its ability to capture light. Yet, on the other hand, the technical

superiority of photography was also seen as its step away from artistic subjectivity. Photography was 'nature's pencil' that drew by light alone, and that fossilized light in that process. For centuries painting had been about the depiction of light, but photography had now superseded this, and to some extent, rendered it obsolete. Painting had to define itself as something which photography was not.

Consequently, the rise of abstraction and Cubism can be seen as partly the result of the invention of photography. Cubism sought to fracture the image and in doing so fracture the light in the image. Abstract painting attempted to think about the properties of the image in non-representational terms. Their combined effects led to experimentation with the use of light in 20th century art. Conceptual art and installation used light as its subject matter. Examples such as

Dan Flavin's light installations and Bruce Nauman's experiments sought to materialize light and make it the content of their work. Light was on the pathway to be a material in and of itself. As physicists told us that light was both a wave and a particle, artists sought how to represent this paradox.

The work of Jonathan Jones and Newell Harry included in the exhibition similarly employ fluorescent and neon light tubing as the primary form of expression in their work, eradicating traditional depictions of light in art for the literal use of light as a primary material.

The most recent, and in many ways the most profound possibility of thinking about light in art occurred with the emergence of digital technology. Digital images are generated by digital flows of electricity mediated by programs. For the digital image, the computer does not distinguish between an image

obtained through the photographic lens, or a hand-drawn image created in a graphics package, since they are both made from pixels. An image taken by a digital camera is reduced to be just another graphic, decoupled from its indexical link to reality and communicated through the standard language of pixel composition. Digital technology thus makes it possible to create a representation of light that is completely removed from its natural sources. Digital images can also be artificially manipulated and easily reproduced, destabilising all previous traditions, practices and perceptions of art.

Hayden Fowler's works in the exhibition embrace the multiplicity of the digital medium by juxtaposing the natural (animals) in extremely unnatural environments, resulting in the projection of a new reality that does not distinguish between both worlds or debate which is a more 'real' representation.

Just what does this digital light illuminate? Impossible virtual worlds and interactive fantasies? In the same way the electric light globe opened up the night and made a 24/7 world possible, we may be witnessing the next great cultural evolution in light. Light is the only element in this new digital terrain. And artists, as demonstrated in this exhibition, are at the vanguard of experimenting with this dynamic new tool.

Dr Uros Cvoro

Dr Uros Cvoro is a lecturer of Art History/Theory at the Australian Catholic University in Sydney and contributes regularly to several local and international contemporary art publications including Art & Australia and Broadsheet.

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4 February 2012 - 18 March 2012

Moree Plains Gallery
26 March 2012 - 6 May 2012

Goulburn Regional Art Gallery
24 May 2012 - 1 July 2012

Hawkesbury Regional Gallery
13 July 2012 - 26 August 2012

The Glasshouse Regional Gallery
6 December 2012 - 20 January 2013

Tamworth Regional Gallery
1 February 2013 - 10 March 2013

Grafton Regional Gallery
27 March 2013 - 12 May 2013

Shoalhaven City Arts Centre
27 May 2013 - 14 July 2013

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