

THE CHARGED OBJECT

soft sculpture and the aesthetics of touch

Margarita Sampson

Michelle Cawthorn

Yarrenyty Arltere

Brett Alexander

Paula Do Prado

Anne Graham

Nicole Monks

John Brooks

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Catalogue Texts:

Feeling the Charged Object

“The object feels. This is the great discovery that Claes Oldenburg has introduced to Modern Art. Oldenburg intertwines the organic and inorganic in his sculpture, conjoining human feeling and the physical properties of objects. These new feel-ing objects, presented as art, can no longer be understood as detached and impersonal rather, they have been imbued with sensuality and sexuality.”¹

When artists began to use soft materials such as fur, fabrics, plastics and fibres in their sculptures, it was no longer about rendering a truth to nature through our visual senses. These non-traditional sculptural materials are often found in our domestic environment, like the clothes we wear, knitted, felted and sewn. Woven linens are used in our daily rituals of feasting, gathering and dressing. We touch them, sleep in them, they protect us from the elements, define our identities, our cultures, interacting with our bodies. They are from the animals we farm, we share our homes and environment with. They are familiar to us, globally recognisable, are charged with memory and history.

The Charged Object exhibition explores how this fundamental shift in thinking about sculpture and the anti-form artists of the 1960's have informed contemporary works in soft sculpture, with a particular focus on works employing traditional textile techniques such as knitting, sewing, felting, beading, embellishing and appliqué. Historically linked to the feminine and craft based activities, these techniques are being reinterpreted through contemporary installations, sculpture, performance and screen based media.

Brett Alexander is an artist and lecturer in Three Dimensional Studies at the University of Newcastle, who employs the technique of French knitting in his installations, to challenge the feminisation of textiles, embedding ideas of sexual identity and the masculine. Growing up, Alexander found that French or spool knitting was the only form of textile technique deemed 'acceptable for boys'. Using this as a conceptual framework for his installations, he combines familiar materials with the unfamiliar. In *Hang up...pink is for?*, a pink baby's blanket is covered with a multitude of knitted leggings which encase the non gendered thong (of the foot variety). Hanging limply from a coat hook, we are reminded that the gendered nature of our fashions and textiles, begins early and Alexander's memories of childhood are imbued in the found and handmade fabrics.

Sculptures made of soft materials have a visceral quality that has a connection to the body. They express this relationship between the materiality of the work and the body, “both in the way the viewer’s body is engaged by materials and how the materials themselves can be used as bodily metaphors”.² In Alexanders’ installation of rubber latex hoods, *My wife doesn’t do kink*, we feel the human form through its invisibility. This provocative work is charged with sexual potency and we feel the body through these works. Brett Alexander often injects the masculine into these knitted installations. The associations and symbolic intensity of the hooded mask, create an environment and dialogue for these ghostly headed forms. Claes Oldenburg refers to this connection to the body as a ‘bodily thingness’.

John Brooks’s large installation of handwoven pieces, with embedded faux fur and video projection *Transgenesis* becomes a body to inhabit, an immersive experience for the audience to walk into. Exploring “the prediction and manipulation of the future through fictional narrative”, Brooks creates a portal for us to witness his blue furry bipeds navigate alternative realities.³ With references to horror and science fiction tropes, the narrative with crude editing qualities, confuses the future and past. These once human beings have been altered through evolution and a fictitious disease “which may have been the result of mental delusion, extra-terrestrial interference, biological warfare, an undiscovered insect or chemical trails, creating conflicting world views for sufferers and medical professionals.”⁴ Once immersed, it feels like you are wearing Brooks’s sculpture. This haptic experience is performative, which is then reflected in the video projection which is projected onto the sculpture itself.

Sheemu is a work by artist Nicole Monks who has both Aboriginal and European heritage. Made from wool and feathers, this sculpture is also worn as a performative piece. In the double video projection, the dichotomous *Sheemu* is animated through the body. Trapped in two opposite worlds, the rural woolshed of post-colonial Australia and the Australian bush, *Sheemu* appears to be half sheep and half emu. The sheep is “one of the most potent vernacular symbols of Australia”, an introduced species, playing a key role in the bush mythology of white Australian art, while the emu, a native species, inhabits the stories of country.⁵ *Sheemu* appears alone in the grating mechanised noise of the woolshed on one side of the projection, yet shares the bush with sounds of other birds and animals, on the other. Both tactile materials, the wool and feathers share a past, charged with historical narratives and mythology.

Anne Grahams' coat, felted from the dog hair collected by her artist friends, is an object to protect the body. Felting is the ancient practice of rubbing wool and other fibres with soap to fuse the fibres together, creating a strong and durable fabric "As well as being a source of warmth and insulation, felt absorbs dirt, dust, fat, water and sound and is therefore quickly integrated into its environment".⁶ Grahams' materials are 'highly enigmatic, tactile and mnemonically charged', which is reflected in her interest in German artist, Joseph Bueys.⁷ A lecturer and artist living in the Blue Mountains, Grahams' research focuses on identity and space. In the photographic portrait, *Eugenia* symbolically wears her trusted canine coat while Atom sits protecting at her feet. This coat is the outcome of community, the body and the ritual of our daily lives.

Margarita Sampson is an artist who works predominantly in soft sculpture. In her *Anemone Incursions* series of chairs we are aware of the tension between the organic and inorganic. The gilded frames of the chairs, a status from Western canons of art history are colonised by these soft tactile, furry forms that are spreading, breeding and slowly taking over the space. The materials Sampson selects are so alluring that the desire to touch is almost unbearable. We become aware of the body, but there is no space for the body to exist. Our desire to touch and feel the material is also challenged by the implied authority of the cultural space in which we encounter these objects. With titles such as *Pussy Galore* and *Baby Jane*, Sampson brings our attention to popular culture and the environmental impacts of our generation.

Michelle Cawthorn is an artist who works across multiple mediums and her three piece installation is mnemonically charged with ideas of family and the personal. *Boy* is a large, round, air-filled assemblage made from the old clothes worn by her sons and husband. With various sized protrusions, the growing body and the memories attached to these are mirrored in the wall piece *Girly bits*. While *Boy* speaks of the masculine, *Girly Bits* with her shiny pink and red is grounded in the feminine and domestic spaces. The protrusions from *Girly Bits* speak more of old age rather than the youthful, gangly awkwardness of *Boy*. *Pussy*, the soft assemblage hanging amongst the others, completes the family and with the black faux fur, we feel the sensation that comes from the haptic relationship with the animals that form our family unit.

The doll is a symbol often used in art, particularly popular with the Surrealists, who embedded elements of soft materials in their work. As a symbol of beauty, innocence and self-identity, dolls can represent the complexities of humanity. In their plastic and soft nature we identify our desires, hopes and fears.

Sometimes used as effigies or in cultural rituals, dolls are steeped in meaning. Paula do Prados' primitive forms connect us to stories of identity and self. Paula does not identify her work as dolls, rather she refers to them as assemblages and in her series of masks they become effigies and deities.

Strongly influenced by her European and Afro-Uruguayan heritage, she uses fabric as a metaphor for skin and embellishes with intricate beading, coupled with elements of appliqué, pom-poms and paint. A fusion of traditional textile techniques with painting, these works explore the politics of experience in connection to race, gender and cultural identity.

The Yarrenyty Altere artists create their soft sculptures and animations in a town camp in the Lapinta Valley in Alice Springs. Marlene Rubuntja, Dulcie Sharpe, Trudy Inkamala, Rhonda Sharpe, Roxanne Perick and Dulcie Raggett tell their stories through these dolls as they take on personalities and identities in the animations. Using old blankets which they dye using natural and found objects such as leaves, dirt and metals, these works are imbued with their country.

“These films and soft sculptures tell stories that are important to us. Our work is important to us. Having a localized art centre is crucial as it cannot be underestimated how marginalized Aboriginal people in Alice Springs can often be. The art enterprise has given us opportunity for increased pride and self-confidence; healing from grief and trauma; strong role modelling; improved governance, decision making and engagement; improved financial and living skills; improved economic access and employment; improved social inclusion. It is our place, our work, our future. We hope that you are able to sit and watch our films”. From the Yarrenyty Arltere artists.

It is through these soft materials that we can feel the objects, we recognise ourselves through the haptic nature of these forms. It is not just the awe of the material or craftsmanship that moves us with soft sculpture, it is our relationship to the materials with their mnemonic qualities that engage us.

Felicity Martin 2016

Magic Soft Hard Desire

As a young child I would sometimes make my own dolls or dolls clothes. I'd ask my mum for any fabric or buttons I could use and then I'd sit quietly for hours hand stitching. Many people refer to my soft sculptural figures as dolls. These to me are not dolls, I just don't see them that way. I've always worked with cloth in some way shape or form even when I predominantly painted. When I made the first of these works I didn't know what to call them - and I'm still not sure; soft sculpture, cloth figures, fabric sculpture, stuffed forms, soft assemblages - but definitely not dolls. I never intended to make three dimensional forms in cloth, I was experimenting with painting mask like faces directly onto cloth inspired by Afro-Uruguayan carnival body painting and costumes. I had cut the faces out and was trying to make a wearable mask but had cut the shape too small for my head so I ended up stuffing them. Once I had made a head it just led to making the rest of the body. I was excited by the new 'accidental' development of my work into three dimensions. I felt a sense of comfort working in this way, combining familiar and basic textile techniques with painting and modelling the body. I've never worked with or used patterns, templates or made a detailed pre-plan of a work. I like to just get into the flow of working with the materials at hand and sort of problem solve as I go to see what eventuates.

I am not a touchy feely sprinkle fairy dust kind of person. I hate glitter and I don't believe in unicorns, but making these cloth figures felt magical. It felt as if these forms were making themselves, revealing themselves to me through my hands as my fingers manipulated cloth and thread. It was more than just being in 'the zone' whilst making or finally resolving an artwork, it felt like I'd tapped into something deeply spiritual. In my art practice I move backwards and forwards between working in different media whether it be self portraiture, mono prints, text or cloth depending on whatever idea I'm trying to express, but its really cloth that I preference. I think cloth can be magic. It is like no other material; all sensory, universal, contemporary and ancient, tactile, malleable and versatile, it can hold time within its warp and weft trapping a stain or by creating a void where wear has erased a piece of its puzzle. It is this ability of cloth to absorb and document time and narrative that makes it such a compelling material to work with. I like that it slows me down. I like that it is a labour and time intensive process to work with cloth - there's a ritual to it. To source, gather, cut, stitch, piece, fill, attach, unpick, detach, re-stitch.

The narrative of the making is exposed in the final work - transparent and visible. I like that there is an honesty in the material and the techniques the material dictates.

Something in that combination of the materiality of cloth, time and process connects me to childhood, culture and identity. Its those connections that I want to communicate in the work, to activate or energise the work with a sense of narrative. Perhaps its a function of my being a migrant and never fully Australian that I feel a need to create my own space/place through art. Underlying that is an intense desire to belong and feel a sense of connection to my Afro-Uruguayan and European heritage. I think back on series of works I've made like the Orixá figures representing African Yoruba religion deities and I am struck by how confronting they feel to me now. Part celebratory, part cartoonish, they're initial decorative countenance is disrupted by their wide eyed accusatory stares coming from multiple heads and black faces. More recently I've been making soft masks and relics based on illustrations of traditional African figures and carvings. Translating these forms that would have traditionally been made from hard materials like wood into cloth hasn't softened their confrontational stares. There's a curious tension between the tactility of the soft form almost cushion like and the decorative but hard facial features. In the process of re-tracing and attempting to rehearse elements of a culture I should feel connected to but with which really I have no connection with, I have only made material my own conflicted feelings of desire, fear, attraction, repulsion and uncertainty.

More and more I am becoming interested in the concept of cloth as a skin, as a mask or veil, another layer or other self. Its still very common in Uruguay to associate Afro-Uruguayan culture and certain religions of African origin such as Candomblé, Santería and Umbanda with superstition and witchcraft. Cloth plays such a strong role in many of the superstitions that have been passed down in my own family. One in particular is the advice of my grandmother to wear a red piece of cloth or string around my wrist to protect myself against the envy of others, or failing this to wear a bit of red always as part of my everyday dress. Most would say these ideas and practices are only as powerful as we allow them to be in our minds. I am curious though as to how these snippets of memories and experiences are transplanted into the art object and transform into a visual language that reflects both past and present. The colour red has always featured significantly in my work, in different textures such as the smooth shiny surface of ribbon, the lustre of red beading or a velvety red paint surface. Its only really now after building up a few series of work predominant-

Its only really now after building up a few series of work predominantly in soft sculpture and cloth that I am able to step back and see the possible connections between what at the time I thought were quite distinct and different bodies of work.

Its in this moment of reflection in my eighth year of professional practice as an artist (i.e. mid career limbo freefall) that I can better articulate my experience in working with soft materials and their connection to my history and process. I am so excited to be part of the exhibition "The Charged Object". I hope it generates interest, questions and dialogue. And to all my fellow lovers of fabric as medium, ceramics is having its time in the contemporary art spotlight and textiles will one day too.

Paula do Prado. February 2016.

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2. Rachel May Walker(2010), "Material Matters, Louise Bourgeois and the Question of Materiality", dissertation submitted for Special Degree of B.A Honours in History of Art on Academia.edu website [https:// www.academia.edu/5815224/ Material_Matters_Louise_Bourgeois_and_the_Question_of_Materiality](https://www.academia.edu/5815224/Material_Matters_Louise_Bourgeois_and_the_Question_of_Materiality), pg 6
3. John Brooks (2016) artist statement
4. Ibid
5. Ward, Lucina (2009), "Soft Sculpture", published in conjunction with the exhibition 'Soft sculpture', National Gallery of Australia, 24 April-12 July 2009, National Gallery Australia pg 4
6. Ibid
7. Donna Brett (2015) "Anne Graham, Mnemonic Objects." Craft Arts International 93: 66-67.









1. Nicole Monks *Sheemu Series*, photograph
2. Yarrenyty Arltere artists *Policeman and Little Dingi, Little Dingi*, video still 2012, photo by Adrian Warburton
3. Michelle Cawthorn *Boy* old shirts and textiles
4. Brett Alexander *@odds* french knitted textile and thongs
5. Margarita Sampson *Anemone Incursions: Pussy Galore*, altered and gilded chair, textile photo. John McRae
6. Paula do Prado *Miss Rio Negro*, acrylic, gesso, linen, cotton, couching, pom, pom, poly il