



George Watson

Filial

9 September - 8 October 2022

The Mirror

The mirror has made its way into the exhibit. Broken and pieced back together, it casts a fragmented image back to the viewer, refracting light in various directions via its surface of disjointed shards. The picture it produces is warped and disrupted. In this sense, it offers a more honest reflection back to the viewer than the appearance of perceived wholeness that a mirror typically provides. An image that is, of course, always inverted; a deception we are all too ready and willing to ignore, captivated as we are by our reflection.

The broken mirror is a regular feature of Watson's social media presence; a dresser mirror that was accidentally broken and then glued back together that she uses to take selfies on, as she plays up to, and with, the trope of the sad girl artist alone in her bedroom. Pouts, designer outfits, and disaffection cast back to the viewer in a distorted manner that unsettles their gaze. The mirror in her current show was intentionally broken, smashed with a hammer blow; its shards similarly pieced back together and fastened with glue to await the audience's gaze.

The Unnameable Feminine Thing

"I eat it for that reason; I eat it because it is blue."

There is something grotesque about Watson's work, something abject, an encounter with desire and femininity that unsettles the viewer. This is the point at which feminine desire perturbs any kind of given, apparently 'natural' order, any kind of coherent phallogocentric organisation of the social and of sense.

In her recent video work exhibited at Te Uru, *They are Cruel* (2022), we are presented with a domestic scene set in a deconstructed colonial villa. Walls once white, now blackened with soot and a broken window (here again, we return to the figure of broken glass) betray the occurrence of some horrific event, a traumatic encounter that remains unarticulated yet looms, inescapably, over the scene. A table has been set; amongst its various contents are honeycomb from her father's beehives oozing out over the table, and kumara, in an unnatural shade of blue.

Watson's work does not shy away from desire as something that troubles and is troubling, that interrupts and complicates, yet compels us. Something that is messy and entangles us with others, often in ways that are characterised as much by ambivalence — admixtures of love and hate, dominance and submission — as by any kind of redemptive sense of mutual love and understanding. Desire here is a disorganising force; a large heart adorned with smashed paua shell and layers of sticky glue and resin; a word, crudely written and rubbed out on a child's doll house, leaving behind a blurry smudge.

Katherine Mansfield

The figure of Katherine Mansfield and her writing continues to haunt Watson's work (for better or worse), both as a trace in the work itself and in the discourses that surround it, as a frame by which audiences and critics continue to interpret her work. Mansfield is a symptomatic figure here, a point of access into the "settler subconscious", as Watson terms it: the imaginary of the Pakeha settler, particularly that of the feminine subject, the woman on the frontier, the homesteader.

Her reading of Mansfield is, of course, critical on an aesthico-political level, but it is generous and generative. As a symptom, Mansfield's work betrays a broader disease of the postcolonial social body, but it is one Watson knows that she, in turn, is infected with and can't be rid of, at least, not quite yet. There is a study here of Mansfield's work and what it represents or embodies, yet Watson takes from Mansfield what she needs and repurposes it, twisting it like the disabused wrought iron gates Watson often references in her work, towards her own ends — fabricating both her work and way of being between worlds in the process.

Filial Love

While Watson's work critically explores the interplay and intersection of coloniality, gender, sexuality, and the familial, there is a constant displacement or sliding at play in her work between these figures. This *sliding* distinguishes her treatment of these themes from the rigid equivalence that we see in more didactic forms of contemporary cultural production around similar concerns. In one work from the suite of prints in the exhibition, a pair of disembodied hands tenderly holds a baby bunny rabbit, a gesture in which we see care, security, and power, and an implicit capacity for both love and violence.

In Watson's work, these structures take on a more particular and mutable significance as they are worked with and through in a manner characterised by dynamic tension, agonistic change, and self-undermining. They continually shift and change, as does her relationship with them. In the film work *Dean Street* (2022), Watson films herself in her bedroom, scrolling through Instagram: images of selfies, fashion shoots, and a pet hamster. At other times she holds up large shards of glass from her broken mirror to the camera. From outside the house she directs the eye of the camera into her bedroom through the large sash window or out to the boundaries of the villa demarcated through shadowy layers of white picket fence, toward the street beyond.

—

Richard B. Keys is a writer and psychoanalyst-in-training whose work operates at the intersection of the psychoanalytic clinic, the arts, and cultural theory. He is interested in the unique capacity of psychoanalysis as a mode of thought, writing, and speech that cuts across social, political, and psychic registers. His writing has been published by Stillpoint (USA), Counterfutures (NZ), Plates (US/NZ), Identities (MK), and &&& (US/DE), among other periodicals. He is based in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa New Zealand, where he operates a private clinical practice and sees patients both locally and internationally.

Envy6011, Level 2, 22 Garrett St, Te Aro, WGTN
exec@envy6011.net