

Jacqui Stockdale



Story NUR SHKEMBI

Photography MIA MALA MCDONALD

MELBOURNE-BASED ARTIST JACQUI STOCKDALE WORKS ACROSS PHOTOGRAPHY, DRAWING, PAINTING, COLLAGE AND PERFORMANCE TO EXPLORE THE DISPARATE AND OVERLOOKED HISTORIES OF AUSTRALIA. THROUGH ARCHETYPAL CHARACTERS, SYMBOLISM AND CAREFULLY RESEARCHED THEATRICAL SETTINGS, COSTUMES, AND PROPS INCLUDING LIVE ANIMALS, STOCKDALE FOCUSES HER LENS ON THE FEMALE NARRATIVES OF THE PAST IN THE HOPE OF SHEDDING SOME LIGHT ON THE FRAUGHT ISSUES OF AUSTRALIA AS A NATION IN THE PRESENT.

Your recent photographic series 'Ghost Hoovanah' (2018) speaks to the history of migration through a complex system of symbols and visual cues such as masks, props and costumes. What are the issues that have driven these works for you personally?

This series revolves around the impact of colonisation, migration and the dualities surrounding these issues. I wanted to bring live horses into my work, so I wound back the clock and imagined how the first sighting of a horse would appear to an Indigenous Australian in 1788. Varied accounts from my research include an apparition, a 'dog with hooves', or as I imagine they may have appeared as strange and threatening as their European riders, who were described as 'white ghosts'.

There is a striking visual duality in the diptych *Duel of the Mount*.

In this work, two sets of horse and rider mirror each other – one light, one dark. My aim was to symbolise opposing forces that are needed to form an equilibrium, as in the concept of yin yang. I see the horse in Australian historical context is a symbol of dualities; in this case, conquest and beauty.

The masks for both horse and rider were inspired by the hoods designed for racehorses that cover the head, with holes for the eyes. They are similar to the masks that the Mexican wrestlers of Lucha Libre wear, and also evocative of superheroes.

What's the significance of the painted background throughout this series?

The human/animal subjects are depicted in front of a seven-metre hand-painted scene of two hills. The location was formerly part of the Chinese precinct in Bendigo, Victoria known as 'Die Gum San', meaning 'Land of Wealth and Promise'. I used this as the background for the whole series to represent a land which had been tampered with, yet ironically a land of wealth and promise.

The symbol of the horse seems to traverse vast conceptual terrain – from being a harbinger of despair to a carrier of hope. The horse, and later in the series the mule, inspired broader ideas about the rider and the pilgrimage. For example, *The New Pilgrim* depicts a young woman on a mule, riding away from the viewer. It's based on the life story of a woman named K'nyaw from the Karen State Refugee Community in Bendigo. I was intent on creating a positive image of a refugee who has ownership over her destiny.

You're well known for your fantastical imagery, humour and play, however there are many serious political and feminist undertones apparent in your work. How much of your practice is dedicated to aesthetic pleasure or play, and how much is geared towards addressing social or political concerns?

Both aspects are equally important in my work. The playfulness is part of my nature; I was born the Year of the Monkey! I grew up in a family that experienced a considerable amount of trauma and I think the way we dealt with it was through humour. To me, the physical act of making art is playful and allows the unexpected to arise. This happens when shuffling paper from the studio floor looking for the right piece for a collage, or when directing a model, saying 'wear this and let's see what happens'. Masks and props can be portals to the other side. They can help show us ways of being in the world that we find hard to describe. They also help transcend the mood of the sitter.

The political is often what lies underneath the work. For me the political, feminist or humanist concerns are informed by the radio, films, books and the people around me. For example, I walk along Merri Creek in Preston and wonder what the original name was before European invasion. I am moved by *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Secret River*, *Top of the Lake*. I am reading *First Australians*, told from the perspective of Australia's first people (I wish this was a compulsory text in every school). I've read *True History of the Kelly Gang* by Peter Carey which informed a whole body of work, 'The Boho' (2018).

I'm interested in place – not necessarily my family or ancestry but 'the forming of a nation', a continuously morphing Australia connected to a big complex global mass.

Your ability to transition between mediums such as painting, collage, photography and the 'theatre' of staged images is a unique artistic synthesis. Can you share some of the creative processes used in the series you're currently working on?

I'm cutting up and reconstructing everything at the moment. 'All the Rivers Run' is a new body of large-scale collages made from old photographs, paintings, canvas backdrops, hand-dyed fabric. The river is metaphor for the elements in this work that flow from one to another. In *Black Water* (2019) I made a collage out of body parts cut from a test print of *The New Pilgrim*. Half-way through I recognised the character as an Aboriginal girl, Mathinna, who was abandoned by her adopted mother and eventually drowned in a river.



02

"I'm making a horse the size of Phar Lap. The rider is the pregnant mother of Ned Kelly, Ellen Kelly."



03



Characterisation plays such a strong role in your works. You have recently started working with sound to bring your characters to life?

Yes, I'm manifesting a major body of work that combines many aspects of my practice and some new explorations including large sound-activated sculptures (I like to call them 'effigies') and a suite of painted portraits. This new work is called 'The Long Shot' and extends my fascination with nineteenth-century narratives, focusing on the matrilineal aspect of bushrangers from Victoria (where I grew up). But I'm also very curious about the Indigenous presence at that time and plan to create some haunting new characters. Right now, I'm making a big horse the size of Phar Lap. The fictitious rider will mimic the mother of Ned Kelly, Ellen Kelly, pregnant – Ellen gave birth twelve times. The show will open as a 'see it while you live because you'll be dead for a long time' sort of affair, meaning it will be hyped in side-show theatrics as the works

comes alive before your eyes. To heighten the theatrics, I'm excited to be collaborating with a gang of fine musicians including Zulya Komalova of *Children of the Underground* and *Bush Gothic*.

Female artists in Australia are still desperately underrepresented in collections and exhibitions nationally. How do you maintain your motivation and focus as an artist in this persistently male-dominated industry?

Female artists are definitely under-represented globally in comparison to male artists, so to retain motivation and focus over a long period of time is a challenge. I make it a habit to surround myself with many dynamic female artists – there are a lot out there. The art world is actually filled with female curators, dealers, advisors, directors; in fact most of the people I deal with in the arts are female. Conversations, connections and collaborations are important ways to motivate me to keep going.

I offer mentoring to female artists and I give talks to schools – I get a lot back from that. I think the upcoming generation of female artists will have different challenges to deal with. ■

jacquistockdale.com

[@jacquistockdale](https://www.instagram.com/jacquistockdale)

EXHIBITION

The Long Shot
February 2020
Linden New Art, Melbourne

01 *Beauty and the Bogan*, 2011, paper collage, 76 x 56 cm

02 *Black Water*, 2019, from 'All the Rivers Run', photo paper, hand dyed fabric, elements of artwork by artist Lara Merrett, Epson ink, glitter, canvas, 140 x 100 cm

04 *The New Pilgrim*, 2018, from 'Ghost Hoovannah', C Type Print, 130 x 100 cm

Courtesy the artist, Olsen Gallery, Sydney and This Is No Fantasy, Melbourne

