

# Watch This Space.

“Ending violence against women and children in Australia requires a new declaration that, as a society, we will not tolerate its existence in our personal lives, in our offices, factories or workshops, in our public spaces or places.”

Natasha Stott Despoja<sup>1</sup>

*The Furies* shout out to us both visually and viscerally; their bodies and their strength are palpably present in Kate Just’s giant banners on the façade of St. Kilda Town Hall. They confront and provoke us with their anger – clearly seen in their kicks, screams, punches, stares and clawing – writ large by their four metre height amidst a busy thoroughfare of cars, pedestrians, joggers, trams and buses. They won’t let you pass them by unnoticed, standing in for the many in our communities who have faced violence and fear, and not been so readily noticed.

Domestic and public violence in Melbourne and further afield has been prominent in our community recently in the cases of Jill Meagher, Tracy Connelly, Fiona Warzywoda and Luke Batty. All of them are victims of violence against women and families, yet there are many more. Women have traditionally borne the brunt of this violence and it is often female artists who dare to publicly express their personal responses of unspeakable distress, pain and anger. The women photographed for *The Furies* share this sense of anger and a desire to express it. Some of them have had a direct experience of family, sexual or domestic violence. In addition, a number of them are dealing with physical barriers of another sort; the pain of conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia or the physical experiences of pregnancy, deafness and ageing. Each body experiences material barriers that challenge society’s stereotypes, compounding a desire to push back, in the name of freedom and personal agency.

Just met these women through her local community. As part of the project, Just organised for the participants to work with a ‘Dangerous Dames Self Protection’ teacher who incorporates Hapkido techniques into his training. The women photographed in *The Furies* used these skills to find new levels of confidence and to unleash their fury at the camera. The resulting photographs picture them clad in all black, performing confronting physical actions and enmeshed within an ominous atmosphere of dark skies. The catch-cry of ‘the personal is political’ may well now be inverted to ‘the political is personal.’ Aghast at the seemingly impotent response by various tiers of government authority, each one of them chose to be part of this project out of a deep desire to take a personal stand against public and domestic violence.

So too, this project invokes the rage of the Ancient Greek Furies, deities of vengeance born of night or sky, who seek justice against those who had murdered their family members. Numbering many more than the classical tripartite, Just’s goddesses are equally fierce and

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<sup>1</sup> *A National Emergency* by Natasha Stott Despoja, in ‘Fury, Women Write about Sex, Power And Violence.’ Edited by Samantha Trenoweth, Published by Hardie Grant Books, Melbourne and London, 2015.

powerful. The classical façade of the St. Kilda Town Hall seems fitting for this context, yet these modern day caryatids are too busy to look back or seek retribution. They are activists. Here now, face on, they stand up as a site of strength and hope for a different future.

Standing up in public for what you believe in can be risky (especially at this kind of scale). There are those who seek to silence women's voices when their words articulate uncomfortable facts. Sarah Ahmed suggests we reclaim the figure of the feminist killjoy, give her a voice and let her expose experiences and actions that challenge our idea of a happy world.<sup>2</sup> Utilising anger as a feminist emotion is ripe, says Ahmed, "to develop a sense of rage about collective wrongs".<sup>3</sup> Persisting and resisting in this state of tension serves as a vehicle for personal expression and communicates directly to the public in a way that the evening news broadcast does not. *The Furies* dare us to acknowledge that getting angry is work worth doing.

*The Furies* also appear inside the gallery space of the St Kilda Town Hall. In *The Furies (Panorama)*, they are more intimately portrayed and are brought together in one image. A simple neon text, *Furious*, brings home the point. This series of works is paired with the results from Just's other recent public art projects, *HOPE* and *SAFE*, a series of knitted banners, photographs and book that saw her collaborate with a number of groups in Australia and the United Kingdom. Responding to violence against women and current media coverage of this issue, the community knitting circles and resulting banners, public walks and photographic works reference pivotal moments in feminist history in which collective action and craftwork were deployed to enact change. *HOPE* and *SAFE* invoke a utopian reimagining of women's safety and agency within the urban environment.

Just's unique blend of community art, feminist activism and contemporary critique is reflective of a resurgence in feminist art that is gaining momentum across the world. Some may feel challenged by this show of resistance, but in so doing they would miss the point about *The Furies*. Tucked away behind the turnstile entrance to the building, the banner of *Fury #1 (Kim)* takes a noticeably different stance than the active women at the front of the building. Visibly pregnant with a daughter that has since been born, she stands still and upright, staring straight ahead with her fists firmly clenched. This photograph was captured in a moment between poses, selected by the artist as a fitting final (or starting) point; a stop or pause that translates a message Just feels is at the heart of the issue: Enough!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Ahmed, 'Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)', in *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, Issue 8.3: Summer, 2010. Published by The Barnard Center for Research on Women.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> In conversation and email exchange with the artist