

Past Lives

Clothing as material culture informs our subjectivity and our place within society. Eliza-Jane Gilchrist's deep engagement with the physicality of clothing strives to communicate personal narrative and a wider cultural meaning through the materiality and transformation of her chosen medium.

Managing to avoid the fetishism that can haunt such works, Gilchrist's practice is an enquiry into the absent body. Drawing on the spatial and sculptural elements of clothing, the works inhabit not just their physical site in the gallery but our psyches as well, to conceptualise the uncanny and psychological portent of what is past, missing or far away. As a recent immigrant herself, the artist works through her personal experience, to communicate experiences common to us all.

By carefully selecting and appropriating used garments, specific bodily elements such as hands and feet, fingerprints and vertebrae articulate individuality, yet speak to a wider, communal sense of what it is to be human. Our frailties and strengths are foregrounded in Gilchrist's sculptures through the application of personal attention and processes. For example, cutting and sewing is used to connect disparate parts of a whole, whilst embroidery is utilised as a means to emphasise layers of identity.

Sophie Woodward, in her essay *Aesthetics of the Self*¹ articulates a theory of agency derived from clothing and, more specifically, the wearing of clothes. The textures, forms and smells of fabric arouse feelings and emotions that are unconsciously carried with us over time. The specificity of clothing allows us to create our identities and sense of self, through the agency of the garments and how well they *fit*, literally and metaphorically.

Clothing also mediates our experiences with others and our external environment. Selfhood is externalised by the choices we make every day when we dress, and is in turn fed back to us through our chosen *skin* for each day. Blending the material and the social domains of the clothed body, cultural narrative and meaning is in constant dialogue in these works.

The aesthetic and sensual properties of the materials are heightened by Gilchrist's sense of the theatrical. Sentimentality is dispersed through mechanical and lighting effects, creating what the artist describes as "tableaux"². Through Gilchrist's harnessing of this technology, these works are imbued with an autonomy and agency perhaps beyond the human. Perhaps this process allows the works to elicit a transformed self, beyond the limitations of everyday life.

Donna Haraway, in her groundbreaking *cyborg manifesto*³, uses the same part human/part machine metaphor, to argue for a new way of thinking about difference and identity in our current post-capitalist society. Long-held binaries such as nature/culture, natural/artificial and human/animal are critiqued, with an alternative model of blurring and hybridity proposed.

However, the contradictory nature of the hybrid is made coherent in Gilchrist's works through the emphasis on soft and fluid forms. In spite of her multivalent approach to technique the hand-made quality throughout the works provides consistency. Humble gestures engage in dialogue with each other, and the audience. A conversation that is ongoing, enacting a site for new subjectivities to emerge.

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Endnotes:

1. Sophie Woodward, "Looking Good: Feeling Right - Aesthetics of the Self," in *Clothing as Material Culture* (Oxford, N.Y.: Berg, 2005).

2. Gilchrist, E.J., *Skins and Bones*, exh.cat. (The Stockroom, Kyneton. 2012)

3. Haraway, D., "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", published in her book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London, Free Association, 1991).