

oiled and covered and never mentioned
EXHIBITION DATES: 23 MARCH TO 1 APRIL 2022



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Skye Malu Baker, Cade Burgess, Wandi Cao and Claudia Saballa Hobbs
Curated by Cade Burgess



Wandi Cao playing with balloon.

Bunny: a selection of poems by Selima Hill, presents a recollection of the author's adolescence, spent growing up in London in the 1950's. Within the memories of the predatory lodger, time spent in a hospital ward, and the relentless echo of shame, Hill presents a subjective account of some of the cyclical narratives frequently encountered within feminism.

Hosted in the physical space of the George Paton Gallery, *oiled and covered and never mentioned* examines a poignant poem selected from *Bunny*, 'PRAWNS DE JO'. The exhibition presents multidisciplinary artwork in response to the poem, while paying homage to the rich history of the institution in establishing and developing some of Melbourne's most significant feminist exhibitions and projects in the 1970's.

This exhibition contains references to nudity and sexual assault that some viewers may find upsetting; viewer discretion is advised.

oiled and covered and never mentioned is held on the unceded lands of the Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri people of the East Kulin Nation. The creative team extends their respect to ancestors and Elders past, present and emerging.

GEORGE PATON GALLERY Level 2, Union House, The University of Melbourne
11am-5pm Monday to Friday | umsu.unimelb.edu.au/gallery | gpg@unimelb.edu.au



Photograph from *Digging my toes into your carpet* (2022)
Photography series by Cade Burgess

And what's the use: An essay on the intertwining of poetry, image and object **Written by Isabella Imperatore**

'Oiled and covered and never mentioned,' a line from Selima Hill's poem 'PRAWNS DE JO' is as evocative as it is elusive. The poem exists within a collection of works entitled *Bunny*, where Hill recounts memories of her adolescence spent with a predatory lodger (who is assumed to be her father). Her memories are not quite memories as such, she evokes sensations and fragments of moments suspended in time but never allows the reader the full picture. Hill never says anything explicitly; *Bunny* is not a horrifying account of child abuse, rather it is slow and suggestive. She paints a picture using words, but their true meaning is perhaps better understood between the lines.

Curator and artist Cade Burgess has realised the potential of poetry in physical form in the exhibition *oiled and covered and never mentioned*, showing at the George Paton Gallery from 23rd March – 1st April 2022. Burgess invited three emerging artists to respond to the poem alongside her, the results are a testament to the interpretive nature of Hill's writing. Themes of shame, uncleanliness, power, identity and womanhood are at the forefront of this exploration.

Wandi Cao critiques the customs of her Chinese heritage in her installation *Gender Reveal Party* (2022). As a female Chinese artist based in Sydney, Cao's practice explores female identity through mundane household objects which become installations and performances. *Gender Reveal Party* (2022) is comprised of one large orange balloon filled with smaller orange balloons with the Chinese character for 'she' and 'he' drawn onto the balloons. As the installation is time based, the balloons are sure to change form over the course of the exhibition and their deflation is likely to resonate with the female body. On the closing night Wandi will pop the larger balloon, which gives birth to the smaller balloons inside, connected by an umbilical cord of red ribbon. The performance not only mimics the physical act of birth but references the frivolity of gender reveal parties in Western traditions.

In China, especially in rural areas, sons are preferred over daughters. Statistics show a gender imbalance in the Chinese population, deriving from the *One Child Policy* and families favouring males

over females to ensure the family lineage. As a result of this disparity, China has made it illegal for families to find out the gender of their baby. Cao reflects on the dichotomies between Western and Eastern reactions to 'gender' and societal expectations that are bestowed on them.

At the core of *Gender Reveal Party* (2022) is the questioning of female worth and identity. Becoming a mother is deeply romanticised in both Western and Eastern traditions and women are taught their duties from a young age. In China women wear the title of 'mother' like badges of honour but often lose aspects of their own identity in the process, prioritising their husbands and children before themselves. Cao reveals the humour in this sentiment when she explains 'girls are not preferred but 30 million single men want to marry someone to have 'their' baby.' A society that favours men but denies the bodies in which they were created.

Ultimately, Cao's work wrestles with the idea of possession, compromise, and the loss of identity. Through these themes, Wandi Cao and Selima Hill share a poignant dialogue that questions the adequacy of women.

*Because she was ashamed of even thinking about it,
And should never have been his daughter in the first place;
Because she was ugly
And he was magnificent
And she was the scum of the earth*

The colour blue is frequently referenced throughout *Bunny*: 'electric blue pyjamas,' 'skin tight lapis lazuli,' 'the china blue of the early afternoon' and 'ferocious ultramarine.' Whilst blue is an evocative colour by nature, Hill peppers her writing with these differing though specific shades of blue that seep through our subconscious. It reminds me of the way in which films can sometimes have a very distinct tonal pallet (think *Twilight*) and how these colours can instantly transport someone to a precise time, place, or mood. The poems have a blue filter that creates a sombreness, emphasising the burden within her life.

Artist Skye Malu Baker experiments with the powerful pigment in her cyanotypes (a photographic process that produces cyan-blue prints) entitled *Sprinkled with salt, grown in the dark* (2022). Baker started exploring the photographic technique as a stand-in for printing during lockdown, printing scans of drawings and found items onto clear acetate to replace the traditional negative. The result is a haunting collage of fragments, touch, and light or as Baker aptly labels it – 'ghost imagery'. Baker's work blurs the lines between photography, print and sculpture. The prints are hung on oxidized steel supports and installed at right angles so both the front and back of the work is visible, an example of how photography can be transported from the realm of image to object. On this thought, Hill does something similar with her writing to the opposite effect, as she frequently references physical objects in order to conjure imagery. There is something to be said for the way the physical and imaginary worlds intersect through these mediums.

The chemical process of cyanotype creates a sense of texture akin to faded jeans, granting the work an adolescent quality that speaks to the poem. The subject matter is fleeting, it cannot be entirely grasped rather it has an impermanence that resembles the act of remembering, of trying to summon an image in your head that has been obscured over time. Baker reflects on *Bunny* and how 'words and images seem to tumble over one another in an effort to be given air' and this quality can be seen in the way the cyanotypes feature repeated patterns that have been printed over one another.

Baker likens Hill's poem to a form of release, as if the act of writing is also a cleansing experience, ridding herself of the trauma. With this in mind, Baker's work can also be read as a form of purging.

The mixture of imagery, words, patterns, and objects that materialize in the cyanotypes are an extension of this literal and metaphorical cleansing. The idea of *trace* therefore becomes an important concept when considering the work of both Baker and Hill. *Trace* holds an interesting space within the landscape of sexual abuse. There are physical traces such as bruises and marks on the body as well as figurative traces such as memory and the lingering effects of trauma. Trace has also existed within photographic discourse from its inception, by using an analogue practice such as cyanotype, Baker continues this conversation through a contemporary lens.

The work of Claudia Saballa Hobbs is inspired by the medium of poetry itself. Her two part installation *Two in the bush is better than three in the palm* (2022) explores the self-regulating rhythms one uses when reading poetry or prose. Firstly, a photograph has been split into 6 parts, each mounted on wooden board, sitting upright on the ground and supported by wooden legs. As the audience moves around the physical space of the gallery different parts of the image are revealed. This idea of fragmentation and rhythm aligns with the experience of reading poetry. The installation of the photograph emulates the way in which Hill's poems can be disjointed; the space between each segment of imagery can be understood as a new line in the poem. As with poetry and writing in general, one's eye moves down the page as they read, you never see the full page at once. Similarly, the fragmentation of the image forces the viewer to consider each piece individually instead of all at once. It is as if each segment is a piece of the puzzle that reveals the bigger picture.

Looking at the subject matter of the photograph, the work features a naked woman floating in a small body of water amongst sand dunes. The woman is nearly submerged in the water with only her ear and breasts peeking above the surface. While the woman doesn't look as if they are drowning or struggling, they don't necessarily appear to be peacefully floating either. There is a heaviness, a sense of sedation counterintuitive to the weightlessness one usually associates with water. Hill also uses the motif of water in her poems, at times the water is a means of escape and other times it is a pool of darkness that drowns her.

*Sedated and grubby like snow
That's falling apart,
She shouldn't be doing this here
When the lights are out
And the blue of the hall
Is the black of a swollen river*

In the second half of the installation, Saballa Hobbs presents a video that depicts a tranquil sunset scene and a passing boat, while a stranger wanders in and out of the frame. This video work speaks to the mechanics of reading and viewing art, where the unknown man; aware of filming taking place exhibits an consciousness and hesitancy when moving around the deck, unsure if he blocks Saballa Hobbs' shot. When walking around the physical space of an art gallery there is a self – awareness that runs parallel to the experience of viewing the art – making sure not to stand in people's way, not touching the work, not being too loud etc. Again, the act of reading shares similar qualities in the way one straddles the imaginative and the real; like being immersed in a good book and then snapped back into reality when your phone rings. The video work ultimately sits on the threshold of cognizance.

Burgess interprets the poem on a personal level; the themes of the poem run parallel to her own experience of abuse. Her work almost seems like a conversation with the poem rather than a response to it, as both bodies of work try to navigate the reality of living in the wake of trauma.

Burgess' response takes the form of a series of 35mm photographs, three paintings and a poem. In the photographic series, Burgess revisits places that she religiously avoided in fear of running into her

abuser, thus reclaiming these spaces in the process. It's as if with each photograph she figuratively and literally captures these sites of trauma through an almost ritualistic exercise. Each time the shutter closes another tie is severed. The subject matter of these photographs (statues, buildings, nature) echoes the way Hill's memories are signposted by physical objects...

*The cot,
The charred muslin,
The endless procession of leggy inquisitive flies,
The orange buzz of the eclectic fire,
And how she's sit for hours squeezing oranges.*

Hill and Burgess both use this pictorial language to emphasise physicality of memory and trauma. Burgess' works on canvas stray from this subversive dialogue as they are purposely confrontational. The work *A little bit of trauma to keep things spicy* (2021), references a text message the artist sent to a friend, utilising dark humour as a coping mechanism to make light of the damage. This work is paired with another canvas in which the artist has named her attacker and then covered their name with black paint. While Burgess appears to be calling out her attacker and labelling her experience as trauma, there seems to be an air of self-consciousness and doubt. By covering their name in paint is she trying to erase her abuser or protect them? When Hill refers to her abuser as the 'lodger' instead of her father, is she trying to erase him or protect him? This sense of shame is the epitome of *oiled and covered and never mentioned*. These tensions are the thread that weaves both Hill and Burgess into the larger narrative of trauma and assault.

Oiled and covered and never mentioned reads between the lines, showcasing artwork that reveals the artists personal relationship with Selima Hill's poetry. Each work exhibited unravels a new layer of meaning, commenting not only on the nature of abuse but the shared female experience.

*And now he's gone she does it all the time
And now he's gone her time is like an aeroplane

Where anytime you want her you can find her
Making the most of the sky by discovering blue.*

References

Collins, Sophie. *Small White Monkeys*. London: Book Works, 2017.
Hill, Selima. *Bunny*. High Green: Bloodaxe Books, 2001.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Skye Malu Baker

Skye Malu Baker is a painter and object maker currently based in Naarm Melbourne. Influenced by fragments of cultural histories, the temporal slipperiness of the autobiographical and the active properties of the technologies and materials with which she collaborates, her practice is curious about unstable, inconsistent narratives, and their potential to make way for the poetic and unsayable. She completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) at Victoria Collage of the Arts in 2020, and has since showed at galleries including Caves, Lon and Kings ARI.

Cade Burgess

Cade Burgess' artistic practise centres around the expression of her 'soft feminisms' and the exploration of the psychological trauma space, both shared and personal. Focusing on intimate processes of production, internal reflection and a quiet power, she conducts an examination of the trauma landscape, in order to manifest a therapeutic element in her practise.

Having completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Manchester School of Art in 2021, Cade is currently studying postgraduate curatorship at the University of Melbourne. She practises as an artist and curator on the stolen lands of the Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri people of the East Kulin Nation, and acknowledges that sovereignty was never ceded.

Wandi Cao

Artist. Based in Sydney.

Her art practice includes paintings, photography, installations, and documentation.

Wandi started to make artworks from 2015 during her undergraduate degree in economics. She went to study at the University of Melbourne as a postgraduate in on the Master of Art Curatorship course, during which she curated her first exhibition: Amplified, Redefined: Protest for Change at the George Paton Gallery in April 2018.

Her artwork explores feminism and focuses on female identity. Growing up in China, her artworks are inspired by and build upon personal experiences in the context of Chinese culture and society.

Wandi uses common objects from day to day life and transforms them into installations. Through the everydayness of the objects, she reflects on the elements and meanings of the construction of female identity. In her latest work, she uses party balloons to create a fake gender reveal party setup. She includes red ribbons which are believed to bring luck in traditional Chinese superstitions, as a metaphor for the female experience of marriage.

Anger is power. Anger is a reason.

Claudia Saballa Hobbs

Claudia Saballa Hobbs is a visual artist practicing on the unceded lands of the Boonwurrung and Wurundjeri peoples of the East Kulin Nation in Naarm, Melbourne.

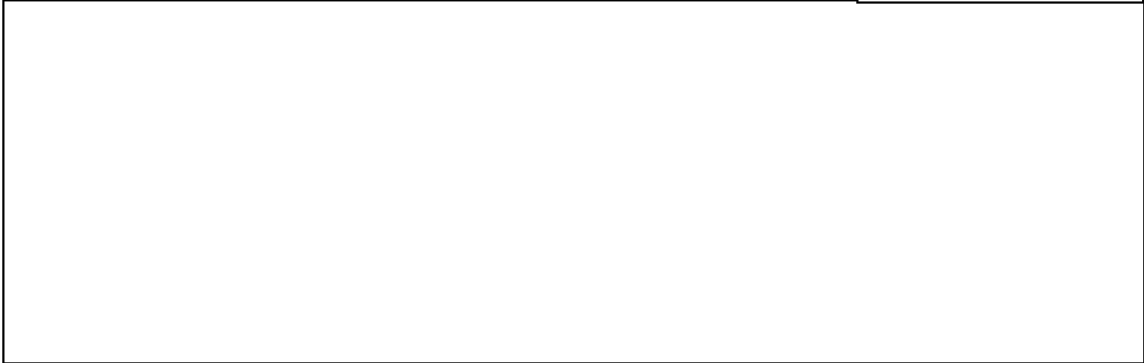
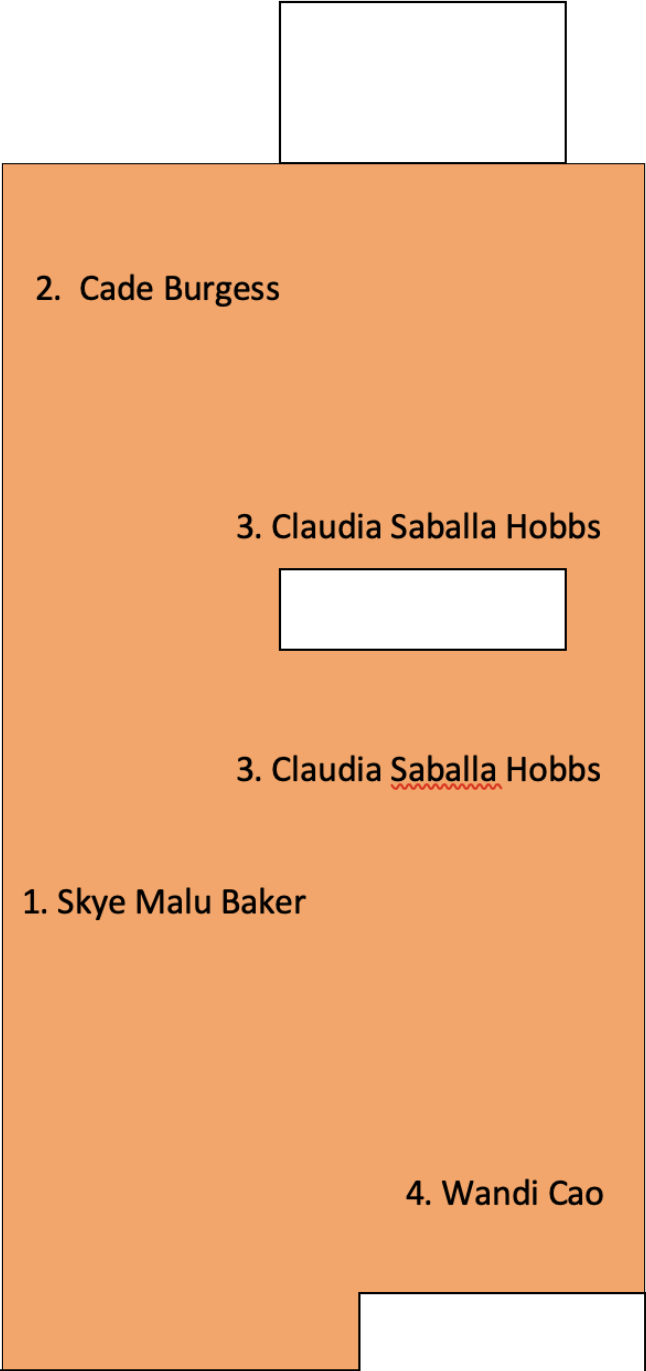
Saballa Hobbs is interested in how photographs convey versions of the past and the almost present. Working within the limitations of the photograph and beyond, she uses text and moving image to create visual pathways — allowing varied interpretations of convoluted inter-personal histories.

Saballa Hobbs graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts in 2021 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (Honours First Class). She has shown in multiple group settings both within the context of the University and elsewhere. Including at the George Paton Gallery, VCA Artspace, Blindside Gallery, and Woven Projects. Saballa Hobbs was the recipient of the Fiona Myer award in 2021.

GALLERY FLOOR PLAN

Corresponding artwork list below

*not to scale



LIST OF ARTIST'S WORKS

1. *Sprinkled with salt, grown in the dark* (2022)

Cyanotype print on paper, wax, food dye, oxidised steel, dimensions variable
Skye Malu Baker

2. *A little bit of trauma to keep things spicy* (2021)

Oil on Canvas, 25 × 25 cm
Cade Burgess

2. *A Summons* (2022)

Oil on canvas, linseed oil, 20 × 20 cm
Cade Burgess

2. *This is all for you* (2021)

Oil on canvas, 13 × 18 cm
Cade Burgess

2. *Digging my toes into your carpet* (2022)

Photography series, 10 × 15 cm
Cade Burgess

2. *Microbes* (2022)

Poem on paper, photograph, 38 × 57 cm
Cade Burgess

3. *Two in the bush is better than three in the palm* (2022)

Plywood, digital photographic print, glue, digital projection, wall, dimensions variable
Claudia Saballa Hobbs

4. *Gender Reveal Party* (2022)

Latex Balloons, Red Ribbons, dimensions variable
Wandi Cao