

THE WANDERING ROOM

HELENA SINCLAIR

*Material becoming the body,
the body becoming material*



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Material becoming the body, the body becoming material

Tahney Fosdike

Helena Sinclair's work exists at the edge of a boundary – or playfully sits either side. Seeing it, take note of your first feeling or instinct. Is the platter bristling with hair soothing with its delicate beauty, or discomforting with a grossness that's not quite gross? Does your reaction sit between the two, not at neutrality but an in-betweenness that depositions your body? Does its silly name undo you further?



Getting Goosebumps

A ceramist by training, Helena introduced external matter within her sculptural work during an Honours year at RMIT. She produced domestic items infused with or made from the otherwise voided, with a focus on hair along with other bodily matter and wasted physical material. Helena exhibits these pieces alongside new work of the same vein at her Wandering Room solo *Material becoming the body, the body becoming material*.

Each work straddles a line: one side presents beauty and desire, while the other imbues the uncanny, then the grotesque. Beyond this rests the abject, Helena's fixation and a notion defined, "That which disturbs the self, by provoking either disgust, fear, loathing or repulsion.... Our own bodily fluids are for the most part loathsome to us, but the intensity of that loathing owes precisely to the fact that they come from us."¹

¹ The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms

To put more plainly, you could stroke my hair and admire its beauty, but if this hair fell in your salad, you'd feel unsettled by the thought of consuming it, and forgo the meal once craved. Probing this, Helena doesn't posit the object as good or bad, but centres on the triggered psychological praxis laying beyond. A tense relationship with the taboo drives the work. Helena wants to step closer to what makes us cringe.

Hair as an entry point into the abject emerged from Helena's experience with trichotillomania- a condition of pulling out your hair when anxious. While society considers hair off the head yucky, Helena found the removal soothing in the privacy of home. This uneasy, minutiae distinction propelled her into studying beauty and disgust within wider public consciousness. While Helena acknowledges individual biases (beauty in the eye of the beholder), she argues society has a 'stronger line' with bodily matter. And by manipulating it, she has greater room to explore the various stops between beauty and the abject.

Psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror* (1982) helped Helena understand the desire to purify oneself by distancing the body from the abject. After studying Kristeva, Helena still wondered, "How did society collectively get these thoughts – where did ideas around 'dirty' accumulate?" Her thought process recalls anthropologist Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966) which enquired into society's relationship with – or more so, aversion to – dirt as 'matter out of place.' Douglas investigated rituals to understand unifying values separating the clean and unclean, and concluded striving for cleanliness as at the core of social order. In reverse, Helena explores this phenomenon by reintroducing the *matter back into place* to deliberately, even uncomfortably, trespass the forces of such shared beliefs.

She achieves this with restraint, attempting to, "Evoke the 'yuck' not the 'holy fuck, I can't deal with that.'" Many pieces link to consumption- a platter to be eaten off, a whistle to be blown. The introduced 'gross' is not intense, either. Helena neutralises it: she doesn't put on gloves when handling teeth, hair, and nails. She appreciates friends' time taken to collect, store, and deliver these items from their personal grooming. They are special, not yuck.

Rather than downplaying context, this process intensifies Helena's enquiry. With *Spoon Fed*, the hair covering the spoon repels as you imagine putting it in your mouth. Being moustache hair, it transgresses again correlating itself with the predatory male. But how

would you know the hair belonged to a man? That's the point: Helena believes feminism isn't only about women. No one knows it's from a moustache – it's just hair. Regardless of the offending gender, crossed boundaries cause distress, even the thought makes the body curl. As a last defence, and for the sake of consent, the line should probably stay.

While the work manifests a feminist lens, it's misinformed to consider it feminine. The artist, often disarmed by the false equivalence of ceramics as pretty and girly, admits this might be a personal schtick. She purposely reassigns a feminised spin when required, such as *Basket Case* referring to gender inequity within household chores, or *The Old Ball and Chain* ruminating on ownership of women. In her words, "It doesn't have to be feminine to be beautiful, it can have a feminist context, but it doesn't have to be feminine, but you can play into that and make it very feminine, and also make it gross and play with that in-between."



The Old Ball and Chain

When viewing these works in an exhibition space, does Helena want you to be repulsed by your repulsion? Not really. Personal convictions aren't the objective and, more importantly, reception to the work requires consent. It does not force itself. Helena makes it possible to half-consume it at a funny surface-level, with the artwork titles' wordplay dismantling instinctive revulsion or admiration. "When something is pretty and beauti-

ful, it can be put on a pedestal. Humour brings it down to earth," Helena says. For instance, the title *Ripe for the Picking* warps viewing the ceramic, which otherwise conjures itself as a sticky platter of devoured berries or a violent sexual act with its red substance and fingerprint scratches.



Basket Case

Still, humour's blurring of the line invites you closer. If you step forward, Helena evokes novel frontiers with the abject. If you get this far, she hopes to induce a series of thoughts: how can something become revolting so quickly, and why do you want distance from it? What is an okay amount of matter off the body? What is meant to be beautiful?

Not to be that writer circling back to COVID, but I find pertinence in examining how repulsion to bodies and their expulsions controls the social mind. Someone's cough could kill, or it might not, and a hair probably (definitely) won't. But we find both disgusting, perpetually disturbed by uninvited interactions with matter moments ago linked to the body, afraid it will become part of us again.

Is the human body, with its parts together or disarrayed, beautiful or grotesque or both – should we lean in or keep away? Helena plays a mind game with society's limits, probing them with finesse. The line blurs, it intersects, more lines appear, looping and overlapping to revolt and please us to no end with no way out of this thought-prison of our own device.

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The Wandering Room acknowledges the traditional owners and sovereign custodians of the land on which we operate, the peoples of the Wurundjeri.

We extend our respect to their Ancestors and all First Peoples and Elders past, present and future.