

Hannah Valentine and

Vivienne Worn

Looking in, breathing out

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Slipping between the physical and the ephemeral, the exhibition *Looking in, breathing out* by Hannah Valentine and Vivienne Worn offers nuanced mappings of personal experience in an increasingly dissociated digital age. Simultaneously immanent and tactile, Valentine and Worn's installation harnesses what Jennifer Fisher terms the "haptic" sense, coalescing the proprioceptive senses of touch, memory and movement. It creates morphologies of feeling that seem to exist both within, yet somehow beyond, the virtual planes of social experience in which we now found ourselves.

Phenomenological perception is at the core of the practices of both Valentine and Worn. Both seek to restore sensorial experience and embodied perception to modes of viewing and interacting. René Descartes' seventeenth-century hypothesis of mind-body dualism occasioned and retrospectively advocated for what Lisa Wiegel terms an "abstracted visualism," which has since permeated and pervaded contemporary thought.¹ Disembodied and objective, Descartes' Cartesian eye is static, rational, and analytical and, most significantly, detached from human experience.

Digital technologies have compounded and complicated Descartes' distinctions between detached gaze and lived experience. It seems almost trite now to comment on the lack of authentic human engagement experienced within the embrace and encroaching presence of the digital. As described in countless "Millennial-critiques" by news media outlets, screens are swiped, chatbots initiate conversations, nuanced facts are reduced or manipulated into click-bait fodder and lifestyle choices (or appearances) are curated through a constant onslaught of highly-saturated imagery. Digital screens, codes, faces and voices now act as assumed extensions of ourselves, mediating our immediate senses and experiences into new habitual behaviours. Yet cliché or not, it is apparent that digital life has occasioned a re-visioning of meaningful

personal communication. Worn and Valentine simultaneously acknowledge and repudiate this division of sight, mind and body in their practices. Through subtle forms of questioning and exploration, both re-invest habitual disengaged modes of seeing and feeling with a revitalised presence. Valentine's sculptural practice has consistently interrogated the performance of physicality in our post-industrial, capitalist age. Associated with routine, rigour and the "daily grind," she looks specifically to the modern gym as a constructed space that compartmentalises and measures physical activity. For Valentine, the gym is a complex site of tactile and cognitive interactions in which the body enacts, recalls and produces memories shaped through time and individual experience. Her solid bronze forms, rippling with undulations and irregularities moulded by her hands, exude an organic physicality that in turn reminds us of our own. As unique re-workings of gym apparatus, Valentine's sculptures restore subjective corporeality to the mass-machinations of fitness culture. Overtly evidencing the human touch of an individual maker, her sculptural pieces invite us too to participate in their tactile trajectory. They recall corporeal memories of how we have, or might, use the machinery that the objects simulate to re-track physical movements, rhythms and sensations. Re-contextualised within the gallery space, the equipment referenced by the objects is stripped of its routine function. Instead, they become active sites of charged, individual engagement driven by a new set of physical encounters.

Worn too charts and questions the nature of materiality, yet does so through ephemeral journeys that traverse time. Retracing the maker's marks of deceased female artists, Worn's canvases present the past as an ontological ground for the present. They act as conduits through which historical presence is revitalised and re-performed through iteration, reinterpretation and re-reading. In *Looking in, breathing out* the thick, visceral slathers of Rhona Haszard's brushwork constellate in

canvas in a soft, pulsating motion. Amplified and concentrated, Haszard's brushwork is re-staged by Worn to create moments of highly charged, optical tactility that celebrate the physical presence of paint. In an age in which paintings—including Haszard's—are predominantly glanced at upon screens that flatten and numb the potency of maker's marks, such revitalisation through in-depth focus is revelatory.

By re-enacting Haszard's painted traces, Worn's painting at first seems like an act of dedication, an homage to the legacy left by a significant female artist from New Zealand during the early 20th century. While this is certainly true, for me the delicacy of the physical traces in Worn's canvases encourage a more amorphous response. Worn condenses Haszard's figurative paintings into a series of floating marks that emphasise empty space as much as they demarcate physical presence. As much as they testify to Worn's physical presence, they also act as indexical signs for the ghostlike presence of their absent, referential author: Rhona Haszard. Haszard, who died at the age of 30, has, for the most part, been neglected from New Zealand art historical canons that have traditionally privileged white male artists. Perhaps this is the absence that resonates. Or perhaps it is a wistful recognition of the work absent from Haszard's oeuvre that could have been produced had her career not come to such an abrupt end. Floating against the nebulous ground of the canvas, Worn's painted marks shimmer in immanence, hovering on the periphery of physical and ghostly realms. Creating an evocative aesthetic experience, they act as a catalyst for imagined, prosthetic memories in which the collective and abstract is rendered individual and intimate.²

Imbued with the sensorial intimacy of embodied perception, Valentine and Worn's works weave nuanced connections between the mind and body. Amidst a context of digital visual saturation and simultaneity, Valentine and Worn's practices bring a subtlety, a nuanced form of subjective engagement that teases

out physical and cognitive complexities. They provide pause for thought, room to breathe, space to enact. Viewing their works is a cyclical, organic, rhythmic process in which new corporeal understandings are awakened, strengthened and evolved—replenishing dulled senses with new vitality through the process of *Looking in, breathing out*.

1. Lisa Wiegel, "Perception in the digital age: Analysing aesthetic awareness of changing modes of perception," (Master thesis, Utrecht University, 2010), 8.

2. Isabelle Graw, "The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy," in *Painting beyond itself: the medium in the post-medium condition*, ed. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burchard (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 79–102.

Image: "Rhona seated in front of her paintings at her exhibition 9–16 December 1928, at Claridge's Hotel, Alexandria. Two of the works can be identified at Spring in the Marne Valley and Early Morning at Camaret." Joanne Drayton, *Rhona Haszard: An Experimental Expatriate New Zealand Artist* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2002), 69.

Courtesy of: E H McCormick Research Library, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Rhona Haszard Estate, 2004



About the artists

Hannah Valentine's sculptural practice interrogates the conditioning of the human body within a digital and capitalist landscape. Her work takes form primarily in object, installation and documentary style film. Valentine graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts with an MFA (Hons) in 2017 and now lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau. Contemplating notions of desire, endurance and value, her recent work has focused on the production and display of bronze objects cast from hand-moulded wax. These objects show remnants of the artist's fingerprints and moments of touch, pressure and temperature from the casting process. Resembling equipment such as dumbbells and gymnastic rings, Valentine's sculptures recall the space of the gym—a space understood by many as an outlet for stress or refuge from contemporary life. *Looking in, breathing out* includes a series of these cast objects, presented on metal stations that recall retail display systems. Visitors can caress, carry and move these objects around the gallery space and between stations. In choreographing this encounter, Valentine explores the affective qualities of weight, temperature, texture and desire. Recent exhibitions include: *A thought for disruption*, Auckland Art Fair, 2018; *Flex*, Small Space, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, Auckland, 2017; *Grips, slips, of space, a memory*, Drawing Wall project, Te Tuhi, Auckland, 2016-2017; *New Perspectives*, curated by Simon Denny, Artspace, Auckland.

Vivienne Worn also lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau. She graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts with an MFA (Hons) in 2017. For *Looking in, breathing out*, Worn delves into the life and work of painter Rhona Haszard (1901–31), who was born in New Zealand and immigrated to Europe in the early twentieth century. This research is a continuation of Worn's engagement with the lives and work of women who were painting within a heightened moment of Western modernism, but who still remain relatively overlooked within this canon. Spending time with Haszard's archive and painted works, Worn samples what she describes as "clippings" or close readings of particular brushstrokes and painterly moments. These moments act as beginnings for her own works as she zooms in on the rich mosaics of Haszard's painted landscapes, re-rendering the artist's mark-making at a much larger scale. Operating somewhere between abstraction and figuration, the physical gestures of both women are decidedly present within the resulting work. Recent exhibitions include: *Never an Answer*, The Vivian Gallery, Auckland, 2018; *Re-reading Laurencin*, Window Gallery, Auckland, 2017; *The Graduate Art Fair*, Guangzhou, China, 2017; *Back to Fore*, George Fraser Gallery,

1. Vivienne Worn, *Breathe (Haszard)*, 2018, 1810 x 4930 mm, oil on un-stretched canvas.
2. Vivienne Worn, *Details (Haszard)*, 2018, 600 x 500 mm, oil on canvas.
3. Hannah Valentine, *Circuit*, 2018, dimensions variable, powder coated steel, cast bronze, Roca cord, nylon webbing, elastic, furniture castors.

Please note visitors are invited to touch and interact with the objects in the gallery.

