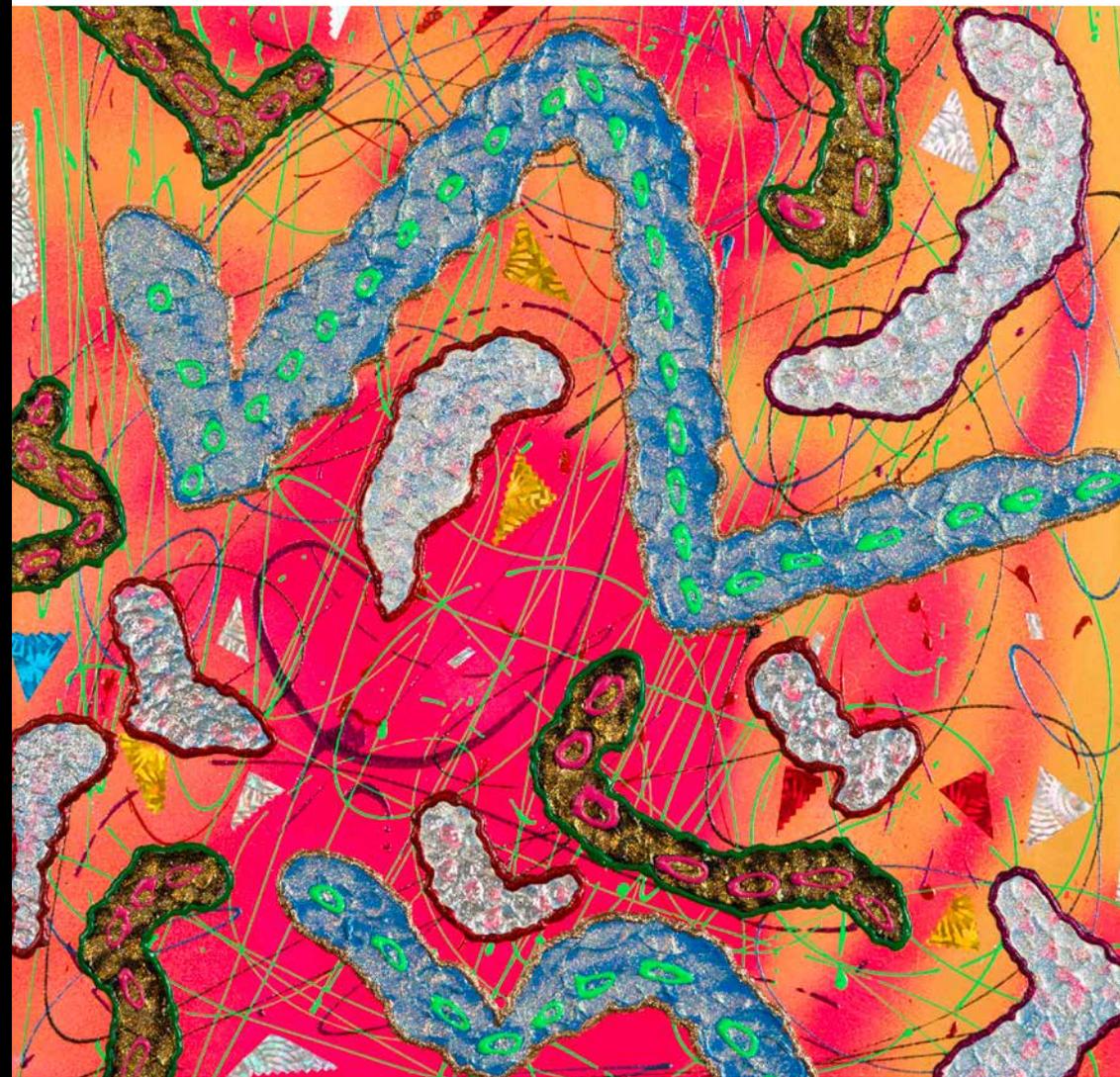


ADAPTATION



Cover Image: Pat Larter, *Pink Glow* (detail), 1994.
Acrylic, glitter and metallic coated paper on board.
From the Liverpool City Council Collection.
Purchased 2005. © Estate of Pat Larter

**CASULA
POWERHOUSE
ARTS CENTRE**



**LIVERPOOL
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21 MARCH - 5 JULY 2020

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ADAPTATION

21 March - 5 July 2020

ARTISTS: OHNI BLU, BRUNO BOOTH, MARION CONROW, PAT LARTER, PRUE STEVENSON, NELL SYME AND LOUISE ZHANG

Adaptation highlights artists living with disability or chronic illness, whose practice has evolved to facilitate bodily or psychological conditions.

Audiences are invited to witness artists who have adapted their artistic expression to the challenges and new potentials of working with their body. While some of these artists make artworks about their conditions, others have adapted their art making to better suit a lived experience with disability or chronic illness.

This booklet features each of the artists narrating their experiences of living with disability or chronic illness, and the ways it is reflected in their artistic practices.

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I don't think there's a clear boundary in my life between what is and what isn't art making. I think a lot of what I am doing is about working through experiences, ideas and feelings. A big motivation in life is just sharing things and bringing people together, creating community and caring about others. This can and has looked like a lot of different things. I have run community events for about 17 years now and I think collaborating with people is always really special.

When I was approached for this exhibition, I proposed to make a work about my electric bicycle and my love for it. I saw my electric bicycle as an accessibility device or tool that really did change my life dramatically and gave me so much more independence and freedom. It helped me feel powerful, to grow strength and gave me a lot of excitement.

During the initial stages of developing work for this exhibition, I was riding my bike home with some groceries and I rode across a big oil spill on a major road. I lost control of my bicycle, fell off, and broke both of my arms the same on both sides. The process to continue making work became a perfect example of adaption. I was in hospital/rehab for a couple of weeks and I wanted to continue to be creative, whether for the exhibition or not, to be able to have an outlet for what I was going through

and to keep me motivated. Whether things become challenging through an experience like an accident or chronic illness or disability, life just keeps moving on. It doesn't really stop and wait for you. I've learnt to really think on my feet in these times.

After the accident, I had very limited mobility in my arms and weight restrictions for what I could hold. My weight restrictions meant I couldn't handle much more than a plastic cup of coffee, and so I came up with the idea of getting a very tiny and light GoPro to make art with. I spent my time in hospital figuring out how to use the camera so that I could document myself learning to use my hands and arm again.

Physiotherapy is another one of those things that is a very solitary and private practice. It requires a lot of commitment and physical labour, but there is almost no acknowledgement that it is happening. It was important to document this process because I didn't want it to be as if I had two broken arms and then people see me again and I don't have broken arms. I wanted people to share in the experience and understand better the amount of dedication to the physiotherapy that I needed to recover. I wanted to acknowledge that achievement in myself and give an ode to the commitment of loving my body back to

better health. I also wanted to express physiotherapy in a different light, as if it was a hand dance that I was learning and practicing.

I don't really know what the future holds for me in terms of how I can and will continue to make art. I finish the video with an interaction with clay and this part of the hand dance was quite painful, physically and emotionally. Ceramics has been a big part of my art making in the last few years and is a very therapeutic practice for me, even though it does take a huge physical toll on my disabled body. Trying to play with the clay showed me how far away I was from being able to use this material to make art. At this point, I can hardly even press into the clay let alone do a spiral wedge like I used. Recovering is generally a long and slow process and one that should not be rushed, and so ceramics may well be off the cards for a while.

Long-term disability has taught me that there is no point ruminating on the negatives, I must always find a way to return to being inspired and motivated. My art making has changed or is always changing based on the flux nature of my body and its capacity. I make with the hope that connection is radical. By sharing and being vulnerable, I hope to expand people's understandings, create community for other sickies and provide a counter to the alienation that people might experience who have gone through the same or similar.

BRUNO BOOTH

I am an emerging artist with a physical disability based in Fremantle, Western Australia in the first few years of my practice. I work across the mediums of painting, social engagement, sculpture, video and installation. My new works are inspired by the navigational challenges that I face as a wheelchair user and the under-representation of disabled people in popular culture.

I started out making colour-field abstract paintings. I love painting. I like the smells and the colours; it is a tangible experience. I like that I get to think of something and then immediately make it happen. More recently, I started developing work about my experience with disability and how it has influenced and shaped my personality, not in the negative way but in a positive way. Abdul-Rahman Abdulla, who a friend of mine, said to me: good art tells a story and I've got a unique story to tell. I guess that's what lead me to pursue my own story after making paintings. It doesn't mean I'm going to stop doing abstract paintings, because I enjoy that a lot, it just means they're going to be one part of my practice that I see as continually evolving.

'The struggle is real' is a video exploring the experience of navigating a wheelchair across difficult terrain. Using a wheelchair is an endurance sport; it can be painful, exhausting

and strangely beautiful. Shopping trips are obstacle courses, crowded bars are an exercise in patience, kerbs are mountains and puddles inland seas. Rocky paths should be conquered, the alternative is a pedestrian life mediated by synthetic surfaces and sanitised experiences. Repetition of motion (and its associated benefits and pitfalls) is something that wheelchair users know intimately.

My partner and I usually go camping at least twice a year. We go on 4WD tracks, we spend time living in a tent, swimming and bush walks and all that sort of stuff. It is a little bit tricky having a wheelchair because a lot of the tracks are rocky, they aren't traditionally what you'd think of as accessible but I'm stubborn so even if these places aren't the easiest to get to I'll try and find a way to make it work. I think it's important to have a connection to nature. I also like when people see me when I'm on these sorts of tracks, they don't expect to see somebody in a wheel chair camping so that's a nice experience for me. I get to be a little bit of a provocateur, which I enjoy.

MARION CONROW

In 2007, I sustained a mild traumatic brain injury from a severe car accident. My video installation titled 'Unravell Egg' represents my healing space after this incident. At this time I was unable to navigate the outside world, I was isolated, I had no visitors, I avoided unnecessary sound and slept 18 hours a day – as my brain slowly healed. Initially I started with little ventures outside to gather necessities for survival, these visits slowly increased and my ability to cope with outside activities such as people, talking, traffic and movement, slowly became more doable. While I looked and talked the same, I was not the "same", and nor will I ever be. This experience and my disability has given me a new worldview I would not have otherwise.

Prior to the accident my arts practice was very active, my passion was projection, installation and sculpture and this passion never left, but the process post-injury became incredibly difficult. Each step I performed naturally beforehand had to be broken down into tiny steps and I needed to maintain regular rests in-between. Making was arduous, all consuming.

In 2015, I ran into an old friend, artist Paul Andrews from community television days, and our discussion lead to brain injury and the frustration of re-entering the art world. He acted on this discussion and successfully received a grant, which led to the Epicormia

Collective, a collective consisting of six artists. This grant and collective led to an exhibition with the brief to explore the idea of epicormic growth, which is a plant response to damage or stress. Epicormic growth involves the growth of new shoots from epicormics buds that lie dormant beneath the bark.

As I worked towards a new work in response to this theme, I began to consider the many stages and aspects of my injury. The work 'Unravell Egg' responds to the frustration with processing language, the inability to communicate for more than short periods of time and the subsequent isolation needed for self-management. These are the ideas that rang strongest for me and my experience.

I chose to use the 'egg' as it is an iconic symbol, but also because it was the ball shape I often took to hide, recover. It also came about from the nursery rhyme 'Humpty Dumpty had a great fall'.

In 'Unravell Egg' the bandaged head interprets the difficult aspect of processing words and conversation "too many words – brain hurts". The "unravelling" of bandages marks my slow re-entry back into the outside world, it is not the same or will it ever be, but I do see it as golden, epicormic within this 'egg'. My disability has been my initiation into who I am today as a human with disability and as a contemporary artist.

PAT LARTER

Diary Entry¹: December 30 1991

Did some work on laser prints, reckon I have enough to put onto board.

Cleaned fucking house.

Wondering if what's in my head, re: laser prints, will work.

Went into Dick place, saw latest paintings and his laser prints. Watched [videos], couldn't sleep, read, knees very painful.

Weather very cool.

Diary Entry: 6 January 1992

Worked on laser prints paintings

Watched S.B.S

Picked up photos not bad.

Diary Entry: 7 January 1992

Worked on boards + it's looking much better than I thought, really enjoying painting in Dick's studio, although find my knees give me hell standing all the time.

Watched 2 vids + kids watched also

Diary Entry: 22 January 1992

Slept O.K. Finished laser print painting. Pleased with it now starting another 3x2 board, Dick helped me stick on silver + coloured paper for painting, after I've finished above painting watched S.B.S. Thunder storms + rain. Still hot.

In 1963, Pat and Richard Larter moved into a cottage in Luddenham with their children Lorraine, Nick and Derek

(Diane would be born 1965 and Eliza 1967) after emigrating from London, England. Richard, who up to this point had failed to experience much success as a painter, began teaching at Liverpool Boys High School to financially support the family while Pat took care of the household.

Richard continued painting and his profile began to grow with his pop and erotic art, which were exhibited in an Australia that still imposed restrictive censorship practices. Pat is the dominant female figure in much of these paintings; she is frequently depicted smiling gleefully or posing naked and unabashed. During their time in Luddenham, Richard made paintings in their shed out the back and Pat helped prepare his canvases. While living in the cottage, without a TV and far away from the centre of the art world in Sydney, Pat and Richard experimented together with sound, a super-8 camera and with performances presented for friends and a growing underground art community. Over time Pat began producing art on her own, making films and also becoming an active figure in the mail art scene, which is an art form that involves sending postcards with drawings and collages to other artists around the world that can be continually modified and passed on again. Pat did not need a lot of space to make this kind of art, with much of her mail art produced

on their kitchen table. Pat's growing profile in the mail art scene led to her participation in *Inch exhibition of International Mail Art*, in Auckland 1974, which was the most important event in Pat's career up until that point. Pat's artistic profile continued to grow with her first solo film 'Men' completed in 1975, which is a film markedly different than Richard's films as well as Pat and Richard's collaborative films.

In 1982, the Larters sold their Luddenham property and moved to a larger house in the centre of Yass, giving both Pat and Richard space to make art. At this time, a chronic knee pain Pat had been living with became more severe and so assisting Richard in preparing large paintings on an easel was increasingly difficult and painful. Pat stopped assisting Richard and he began employing an assistant. Nonetheless, Pat still developed an urge to take up painting as part of her own art practice. It wasn't until after Pat saw an exhibition of Aboriginal women's art, which featured paintings made flat on the ground, that Pat saw an approach that could work for her.

After seeing these works, and in response to her pain, Pat began to paint on her boards flat on a table. This suited Pat not only because it helped her work in a way more sympathetic to her needs but it also opened up the potential to use a range of arts and crafts materials. In these years, Yass had a large craft community rather than a fine arts community and so Pat

had greater access to craft materials over traditional fine arts supplies. Based off this access and the needs of her body, Pat created paintings that incorporated paint that sparkled and glitter that had a runny and liquid texture needing a flat surface to dry. Pat also included collage in her work, incorporating colour paper and photography on her boards, introducing a method of working familiar to her mail art practice. The artworks 'Jelly Beans Blues' 1993 and 'Pink Glow' 1994, which are included in *Adaptation*, represent this stage in the artist's life where she had to evolve her art making to facilitate her new bodily difficulties. These works also importantly reveal how by working with her body she opened up new possibilities for her practice.

Sadly, on 14 October 1996, Pat passed away after being diagnosed with acute lymphoma.

In 2005, Casula Powerhouse purchased 'Jelly Beans Blues' and 'Pink Glow' in anticipation of the exhibition *Larter Family Values* an exhibition that celebrated the lives and dynamic practices of the Larters, as two artists with a significant connection to this place. Pat's two paintings are significant works held in the Liverpool City Council Collection that continue to inspire, educate and hold value for Liverpool residents into the future.

*Words by Luke Létourneau
Curator, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre*

¹ Diary held in Art Gallery NSW archive.

PRUE STEVENSON

'Expend' is a large human-scale painting created through a process of mark-making with my feet using axe-kicks, a kick used in Taekwondo. This artwork is about the process of expending excess energy, or 'self-regulating' with my foot recording a print during every kick as a symbol of what has been expelled from my body. The painting is a by-product of this energy expenditure.

Taekwondo has been an integral part of my need to "expend" energy, a form of stimming² associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This dedicated approach has resulted in the achievement of my 3rd Dan Black Belt. Taekwondo helps me maintain my energies at a level that reduces my feelings of anxiety, which can cause meltdowns during my normal week.

When I made this work, I thought about how I use repetitive, mundane activities to stimulate myself in a positive way to help manage these energy levels associated with the over sensory symptoms of autism.

Autistic people have a behavioural and sensorial culture which can greatly benefit mainstream society, by helping people to become more self-aware of their sensory perception, emotional expression and allocation of

downtime for processing the amount of information we all consume.

I make artwork about celebrating autistic culture through textiles, installation, performance, and sensory pleasures. I come from a traditional art background, so life drawing and oil painting. Along the way, I've picked up skills of making. I now also do installation artworks, and a lot of those are textile installations or textile sculptures, wearable artworks and performance artworks.

Whilst exploring, connecting with and ultimately embracing my identity as a proud autistic woman through my art studies, I've used my art practice as my way of communicating for my autistic access needs. This self-advocacy work takes a lot of energy, putting yourself out there, going to conferences, advocating for your identity. Being a self-advocate is about educating others and being really patient and maintaining a lot of your energy to educate others on your lived experience.

I was really discovering that I put so many parameters on what art is and now it's like anything is possible and any medium is possible. My approach now is..."What's the concept I have and what is the medium I choose? They really need to relate to each other."

With Taekwondo, it was that expending energy, excess energy that I really

enjoyed. I got influenced by a Korean minimalist artist named Lee Ufan, his work "From Line", and I made the connection that I did Taekwondo which is also Korean. With his paintings, he dipped the paintbrush in paint and then started at the top and drew it down and kept doing that repetitively and that felt like stimming to me. So I did that, but with my feet for 'Expend'.

The Taekwondo "kihap" shout is gathered and focussed by the Taekwondo practitioner to provide power. I notice observers get a little bit shocked at the very beginning of the 'Expend' performance because I keep yelling, which feels even better and it makes your kicks even stronger because it helps come from deep in your belly.

In 'Expend', the "kihap" also represents a shout out of advocacy for neurodiversity acceptance and space to freely express my autistic culture.

² Stimming is a repetitive physical action that provides enjoyment, comfort and contributes towards self-regulation of emotions.

NELL SYME

I'd describe my paintings as very bright. Never dull. Enough to make a person happy. Bright colours make you happy. I like painting a bit of everything; not just birds, flowers and animals, abstracts, landscapes and seascapes, children with animals, dogs and birds and whatever. But never cats, I'm allergic to cats. And they kill wildlife, they kill the birds.

I am a deaf woman and I am autistic. Very mild. I have Asperger syndrome. I only found out about 5 years ago. Not enough to worry about. It doesn't worry me, people can't notice it. I don't go to deaf class much anymore. My daughter goes every now and then. She teaches the deaf. I used to teach her. I've been going to Liverpool Art Society classes for 15 years this year. I wasn't very social at first. New and old people would come and go. My style changed a lot the more I spent there. I used to be interested mostly in landscapes but now I paint a lot more birds and abstracts. Sometimes still lifes too. Still lifes are hard, I don't worry about the shadows I just go.

It only takes me a few hours to do a painting. I used to do oil paintings but I'm allergic. Acrylics is easier, quicker to put away. I use books for references, but I also make a lot of the images up. I make up the birds and the leaves.

There are a lot of birds in my neighbourhood: rainbow lorikeet,

cockatoos, pigeons, they come and go. They know me. They all hang out in trees and then come to my house. I paint out of the book, but the local birds help too. There used to be a kingfisher that would come every now and then. There was a kookaburra that used to come a lot but he moved away somewhere else, he still comes every now and then. The main birds that come are the white birds, but the people in the street hate them, but they're everywhere you can't stop them. The birds with the black peaks are very common, Ibis. I don't paint them. They like to come to my front yard because I have water there, but there aren't many now that the neighbours complained. I used to feed all the birds at my house but now I just feed the birds right near the river. I go to the river to feed them, but I still feed the birds at the front lawn, but very quickly. It's very hard. Now I just go to the river in the morning and evening, quickly feed them and go. I go maybe five days a week. The birds wait for me. I can walk to the river from my place, 10 minutes, it's nothing. I've been doing that for a couple of years now.

I started painting when I was about seven. I've been painting on-and-off all my life. When my mother and father passed away I used to drink more and do silly pictures, but we all go through it. I painted over them. I'll paint as

long as I can, why not. If I'm happy or unhappy I still paint.

I paint at home a lot. I paint whatever I feel like painting. I paint in the lounge room, as long as I don't make a mess. I've also been going to art classes for 15 years. I go to Liverpool Art Society at The Lakes Boatshed, Chipping Norton. It's right on the lake, one day a week each Thursday. I go every week, they have coffee and biscuits and I know the people. I also go around the corner to the Civic Centre at Chipping Norton Public School on Wednesdays, but I can't go there every Wednesday, it's too much for me. I go there once every two weeks. You go when you can.

I'm a happy person most of the time, easy-going. I have to be more careful who I mix with, because sometimes people give me a hard time because I am deaf. It's good to have an outlet. A good painting is something that makes you happy. Something pretty, colourful. Anything really. I've got a style of my own.

LOUISE ZHANG

I am a Chinese-Australian artist, my practice spans painting, sculpture and installation. I explore the dynamics of aesthetics, contrasting the attractive and repulsive in order to navigate the senses of fear, anxiety and a sense of otherness reflecting my identity. I take inspiration from horror cinema, Chinese mythology and botany, and adopt and place symbols and motifs in compositions of harmonic dissonance. My practice now tends to lean towards the merging, or rather, mediating and understanding the significance of my cultural and religious upbringing(s). Symbolism is something rich in Chinese culture and it is also a language I understand. So I try to incorporate those into my work as a way to come to term with what makes me, me.

The artworks in this exhibition are a series of recent works that reflect my practice, but also demonstrate different making strategies that I have created to work in a way that is still healthy for my body.

Pain comes in many forms. I am an artist who experiences repetitive strain injury (RSI) pain in my hands and spondylosis (a type of arthritis) in my lower back, so I have to adapt my practice and work schedule to work with it. RSI and spondylosis are common forms of pain but it still largely impacts my daily life and art practice. The pain I experience in my

hand and lower back at times limits – or even completely halts – my art making. The limited (or inability) to make for periods has a big impact on my mental health and energy levels. Pain comes in different levels, it can flare up and subside but is never gone, and so it is something that I am constantly considering and working with and around.

In my paintings and sculptures, I use materials ranging from acrylic, oil, enamel, resin, expanding polyurethane and silicone. I'm particularly drawn to synthetic materials that are founded in movie making props but also materials that have an element of transformation, movement or manipulation in it. Whether its clay, resin or paint, I really like working with visceral materials.

As I began to be more considerate of my injuries, I transitioned away from the amount I used oil paints because for me, oils are more straining on the wrist than acrylics. I have also been incorporating more block colours and illustrative lines in my paintings so that I can continue to try and narrate what I want to say or show within my capabilities (e.g. less shading, more silhouette). Sometimes my pain can flare up really bad and it was a time like this when I began to focus on my digital banner works. I can make these works on my laptop when I am

in bed. These works are an important extension of the themes and ideas of my practice and it's great that I can make works like these when I am not well enough to paint. Alternatively, if my wrists are completely in too much pain, these are good times to think conceptually and research how I can progress making things within my capabilities – asking myself things like, “should I try textiles?”, “Less drawing perhaps” or, “what if I get someone to fabricate?”

Art is an important and huge part of my life so I am determined to find the best way to work with the body that I have.