

HI VIS

1 FEBRUARY – 15 MARCH 2020

performer who represents the legacy of the greater Asia-Pacific ballroom community right now. 'Love is the Message' draws from the film's soundtrack, characters and their iconic phrases to recall ballroom history which informs her ballroom community. In an underground culture quickly gaining mainstream popularity, her responsibility is understanding ballroom history and what remains prevalent in its evolution. In this performance Kilia engages origins of ballroom such as drag and lipsync, depicted in Paris Is Burning to embody ballroom past, as a performer, today. The ideas of love and legacy are central to her embodiment. In one act of the performances, Kilia plays dialogue from the film where Venus Xtravaganza and Octavia Saint Laurent talk about their wants and dreams. Alongside this, Kilia talks in her own voice to the audience about her own loves. Through 'Love is the Message', Kilia presents her expression of love, past and present and her performance of femininity and movement as rooted within a lineage of ballroom.

JD Reforma's new video commission 'MISS ANTHROPY', 2020 is presented on the largest screen in the Turbine Hall, looking down on all of Casula Powerhouse's patrons. The video features a representation of Mount Mayon, an active stratovolcano located on the island of Luzon in the Philippines, which has erupted several times since the 1980s and most recently in 2018. As the video progresses, it reveals the artist mounted around the volcano. The artist is as big as the mountain, dressed in strappy stiletto heels, a sash reading 'Let it Reign', a vibrant red skirt, and matching facemask. In a similar way to how Kilia finds guidance through her idols, Reforma was inspired by an evening gown designed by Filipino designer Mak Tumang for Catriona Gray, Miss Philippines, later Miss Universe 2018. The orange and red hand-beaded dress was a direct reference to the recent eruptions of Mount Mayon. As folk tales would have it, the volcano was named after the mythological heroine 'Daragang Magayon' (Beautiful Lady). As Gray walked in the dress, she symbolised national pride, presenting herself as the modern-day Daragang Magayon, a beautiful lady with a fiery passion. Perched around the volcano, the artist considers his own connection to fire and identity. Reforma developed this work in the summer of 2019/20,

during a period of record-breaking temperatures, prolonged drought, and what has been regarded as one of Australia's worst bushfire seasons. It has felt like the world is on fire, and that the smoke in the air is poisoning us all. The facemask worn by the artist in this video is a frank and raw reminder of the state of this country at this moment in time. As the video nears its end, Reforma removes his mask and places it over the erupting Mayon. He is not presented as a higher power, but a body positioned between two worlds on fire. He is not *in* the landscape; *he is of it*. He is connected to it all because we all are, whether we recognise it or not. The costume worn by the artist in this video will be further animated as he competes as a public participant in the Runway category of Sissy Ball 2020. In bringing the outfit to the ball, the artist returns the pageantry and political origins of his work to its performative origin. It shows us that the way we dress and move in clothes can express new and complex ideas and bridge seemingly disparate worlds.

In *HI VIS*, dancing and dressing are fabulous forms of empowerment. The works by Nicole Oliveria, Leila el Rayes, JD Reforma, Joan Ross, Matthew Stegh, Angela Tiatia and Kilia draw an onlooker's attention and push them to engage a range of complex political ideas. Clothing in these works can draw on attention because they feature a familiarity (everyone wears clothes) but push the clothing and its wearer to heightened political dimension. By pushing the familiar, the artist invite an audience to think a little deeper about something they may think they already know. It is in this way that the dressed moving body can be a captivating thing to observe, but the artists are also using these art forms because they create a necessary form of defence: by being impossible to ignore, they create a defence against violence, a defence against forgetting troubling histories, and a defence against not being seen at all.

Luke Létourneau

Curator, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre
January 2020

COVER IMAGE: LEILA EL RAYES, *VULNERABLE & VOLATILE*, 2016. SKIRT MADE OF CHAIN & KNIVES.
PHOTO: CAMPBELL HENDERSON.

HI VIS

ARTISTS: **NICOLE OLIVERIA, LEILA EL RAYES, JD REFORMA, JOAN ROSS, MATTHEW STEGH (HAUS OF HELLMUTTI) ANGELA TIATIA & KILIA**



CASULA
POWERHOUSE
ARTS CENTRE

1 Powerhouse Rd, Casula NSW 2170
Tel 02 8711 7123
reception@casulapowerhouse.com
www.casulapowerhouse.com



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HI VIS

Heavy building construction continues to occupy much of Shepherd Street at the entryway to Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, and for many of our patrons its not unusual to spend a bit of time waiting for the 'go-ahead' from one of these construction workers in their yellow high-visibility vests. When we see workers in these outfits we automatically know that we are at their mercy. They have power over the landscape, and it is written through clothes on their bodies.

HI VIS does not focus on the yellow high-visibility vest – although it makes an appearance – instead, it is interested in how bodies signal meaning through clothing worn on the body. The exhibition features clothing by local designers, clothing worn by performance artists, and clothing in visual art practice. Side-by-side these diverse uses of clothing signal a range of complex political ideas and power relationships through the clothed body in motion.

In **Joan Ross'** extensive art practice, fluorescent yellow and high-visibility clothing acts as a symbol of colonialism in Australia. For *HI VIS*, Ross exhibits 'BBQ this Sunday, BYO,' a 2012 video depicting the incremental bleed of fluorescent yellow and high-visibility clothing across a colonial landscape painting. The video commences with a group of Aboriginal people camping around a fire, along a river. This landscape has been stitched together from a series of early 19th Century paintings by Joseph Lycett, which depicts members from the Awabakal tribe. The source material, like many early colonial paintings, is heavily influenced by European landscape paintings, evident in the colours of the landscape and in the loincloths worn by the campers sitting around the fire. As the video progresses, we see a range of Europeans dressed in fluorescent yellow 19th Century attire populate the landscape. Before too long, the fluorescent yellow has bled into the river and has even dressed one of the original campers. Through the symbol of fluorescent yellow, Ross represents the Australian landscape changed physically and psychologically by the European figures who have carelessly pranced onto it, exerting their self-designated authority to visually re-organise it to fit their aesthetic dispositions. Through Ross' video, fluorescent yellow and high-visibility clothing represents the way colonisation has re-imagined the landscape and continues to maintain its authority over it.

While Joan Ross' work uses colour, clothing and a laissez-faire attitude as a metaphor for banal symbols of power, **Matthew Stegh's** fashion designs give wearers permission to find and be found by

those that share their politics and values. Stegh is the designer behind **Haus of Hellmutti (HOH)**, a local fashion label which has created a range of custom outfits for members of Sydney's queer party and performance scene for more than 10 years. The collection of outfits exhibited as part of *HI VIS* highlights the significance of Western Sydney performers in the evolution of Sydney's queer performance scene.

Custom performance costumes are a significant part of the HOH brand identity, however just as important is the more accessible range of items that Stegh sells at markets and on the Internet. This tier of the HOH brand sells items including shorts, t-shirts, singlets and onesies, they are often produced in comfortable fabrics and have large illustrated prints or embroidered sections. This range cannot be bought in stores; to buy these items customers almost have to already be 'in the know' to find them. This exclusive element of the label means that the clothes tend to be worn by a sect of Sydney's queer scene who shares a queer politics. And Haus of Hellmutti takes its own politics very seriously; HOH uses salvaged fabrics as a refusal to support unsustainable fabric manufacturing in Australia, manufacturing occurs entirely in Sydney by working with family businesses in the South West who have been impacted by relaxed tariffs for international manufacturing, and the label provides an alternative to binary gender classifications by producing clothing in broad sizing and without gender classifications. This combination of politics and values imbued in the clothing means when you see someone in the crowd also in a HOH, be it on the dancefloor or the street, you know you share more than a brand of clothing.

Much like Stegh, **Nicole Oliveria** uses her fashion designs to signal a politics to those who know what to look for, albeit in her case this signalling is to the older members of her own family. In Summer 2019, Oliveria debuted her fashion collection titled *Maria Clara*, a reference to the heroine in the 19th Century novel *Noli Me Tângere* by Filipino nationalist José Rizal. Oliveria was attracted to this character due to the perception of Maria Clara as a traditional feminine ideal in Filipino culture. Oliveria comes from a family of seamstresses who have expressed a familiarity with Maria Clara and the feminine ideal she represents. To create her collection, Oliveria draws on representations of Maria Clara - who's is characterised by ornately embellished gowns with big puffy sleeves, voluptuous skirts and cinched waists - then remixes them with images from youth-focused streetwear magazines, such as i-D Magazine. For *HI*

VIS the designer presents these collages alongside her *Maria Clara* campaign photoshoot set on the front lawn of the designer's family orange brick house in Mount Druitt, and garments produced alongside her seamstress Aunt. Also included in this installation is a sound work that was produced as part of the runway showcase. This sound work features a heavy dance beat overlaid with a recording of Florence Oliveria, the designer's mother, reading a passage on Maria Clara from *Noli Me Tângere*. This sound piece, which played as models strutted down a runway, reinforces the dynamic central to the collection: the designer is collaging her family and cultural ideals with her own contemporary tastes to create a new multifaceted femininity.

Many of the artists in *HI VIS* create work that is in the mode of dance or dress, with an influence of the other. It is useful to see a work about the power imbued in clothing alongside a more dance-focused work so that you can also consider the significance of the body that moves in the clothes. However, in the work of **Leila el Rayes**, we have a near-equal combination of both dance and dress. For *HI VIS*, el Rayes exhibits 'V&V (Vulnerability & Volatility)', 2016 a video work featuring herself performing a dance in a metal chain and knife skirt, saturated in a red light and moving to the beat of an Arabian drum. Alongside this video, the artist also presents 'V&V (a relic)', 2020 a recently evolved version of the skirt depicted in the video, which for *HI VIS* is encased in a glass vitrine for protection (its protection and for ours). This series represents the evolving ideas core to the artist's practice in relation to their experience of the vulnerability and volatility of being. When we observe the artist's belly dancing, we are witnessing a body in control of her movements but a body dancing alone; their vulnerability is on display. Cutting up this vulnerability is the aforementioned knife-skirt slashing the air surrounding the artist's dancing hips. In this representation of the artist you cannot get close, they are in charge of their own space, and yet while the knives slash the air they could just as easily risk a slash the dancer's own body. While dance and dress give the artist power to control their space, being on display also makes the body vulnerable to danger. However, the title of 'V&V (a relic)', gives some indication that the artist is still resolving their own ideas around the vulnerabilities of being a body on display. The evolved version has the skeleton of the original skirt pieced throughout the newly adorned chain and blade object. By deconstructing and rebuilding the skirt, the artist extends and readdress the emotions that fuelled its original creation. In

doing so, the work becomes a continuous feeling; refusing to remain static but warp and challenge itself with time and its surroundings.

Vulnerability is also a key theme in the works presented by Angela Tiatia and Kilia. While el Rayes creates work that explores the experience of putting one's own body on the line, **Angela Tiatia** critiques the way media representations of the female body make these bodies available for public consumption. 'Women's Work', 2016, features three female dancers performing a series of dance moves familiar to anyone who has spent much time watching pop music videos. The dancers are dressed in black leotards and wear icy blond hair, obstructing the view to their faces, and perform with hot pink objects that range from exercise balls to machine guns. The dance moves are performed repeatedly in synchronicity, if also a bit robotically, but as the video progresses it becomes clear that the trio is feeling the exhaustion. Is it an exhaustion with being a seemingly infallible icon, or is it an exhaustion with being a body always on display, famous or not? Through dance, the video attracts an on-lookers gaze and then reveals the tiring body forcing the onlooker to confront the potential drain and exhaustion that gaze produces.

Kilia is a Western Sydney-based Fakaleiti artist, with a movement-based practice focusing on queer belonging and cultural performativity. For *HI VIS*, Casula Powerhouse has commissioned Kilia to develop 'Love is the Message', a new multi-act live performance for the Turbine Hall on 1 February 2020, at the launch of the exhibition. The performance considers the community and cultural significance of the landmark 1990 documentary Paris Is Burning. Paris Is Burning (dir. Jennie Livingston) chronicles the ballroom culture of New York City in the 1980s and the African-American, Latino and queer communities central to it. The film interviews prominent members of the scene, including Pepper LaBeija, Dorian Corey, Angie Xtravaganza, and Willi Ninja who discuss the language and signifiers of the scene. Through their stories, audiences see how ballroom is used to escape social class and gender stereotypes and how family structures (houses) are formed whilst dealing with poverty, discrimination and murder. Dance and dress are two central forms of expression in the ballroom scene that allow the participants to perform and exaggerate gender, class and culture in a joyful and fabulous setting. As newly titled "godmother" of the house of Slè – a ballroom house in Sydney who presents community balls all over Sydney as well as Sydney's biggest vogue ball at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, Sissy Ball – Kilia is one