

Forever Transformed

Curated by Georgie Meagher

Rushdi Anwar

Liz Linden

Tony Albert

Tabita Rezaire

Sophie Cassar

Octopus 2017

Acknowledgement of country

Gertrude Contemporary, the curator and the artists wish to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation on whose unceded land this exhibition takes place.

Forever
Transformed

Mark Feary: *Preface* - page 1

Georgie Meagher: *Forever Transformed* - page 3

Rushdi Anwar - page 11

Liz Linden - page 13

Tony Albert - page 15

Tabita Rezaire - page 17

Sophie Cassar - page 19

Biographies- page 21

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Preface:

Forever Transformed, Forever Resilient

It is with great pleasure that Gertrude Contemporary's annual flagship exhibition Octopus ushers in the next phase in the evolution of this organisation, as it relocates from the building it has occupied since being founded in 1983. Far more than just the building it previously occupied, the organisation became synonymous with the street, as an incubator of ongoing change within a precinct of at times chequered history, yet rich cultural depth. In the face of the shifting momentum of the area, as it bounds ever further from its Victorian proletariat beginnings, the constant reimagining of 200 Gertrude Street through artistic projects, interventions and provocations seem now to have been something of a constant within a street transitioning at great pace. Clinching to its geographical location for as long as it could, and with an optimism that the inevitable might somehow be permanently staved off, Gertrude had bunkered down with dogged determination.

The call to change has beckoned for some time, and this call has been heeded as Gertrude opens the doors to its own important transformation. Gertrude Contemporary, Preston South opens with Octopus, an exhibition series that each year engages a leading independent curator to develop a project that draws on current research interests or proposes new curatorial methodologies, with this edition curated by Next Wave Director Georgie Meagher. Its title, *Forever Transformed*, reflects upon what might be required or necessary to persevere as an artist, indeed, and more broadly, what might be required to persevere as a human in these politically tumultuous times. With *Forever Transformed* inaugurating Gertrude's new spaces, the sentiment also echoes the fortitude of the organisation to evolve, to develop and to set a new course for its future. That the first exhibition within our new premises should be contributed by a voice external to the organisation is also entirely apt, reinforcing our

commitment to working with and alongside others, to be collaborative in working methodologies and pluralistic in perspective.

Gertrude congratulates Georgie on her project, and extends its sincere gratitude to all of the artists contributing to it: Tony Albert, Rushdi Anwar, Sophie Cassar, Liz Linden and Tabita Rezaire. Gertrude keenly acknowledges the ongoing support for the Octopus exhibition series by Proclaim, a partnership of over 12 years, and one without which the exhibition would not be possible. Gertrude also acknowledges and values the long-standing design support of Yanni Florence, who has designed this Octopus catalogue alongside many of Gertrude's publications over the past decade. As Gertrude enters the next phase of its evolution, it stands firmly behind the conceptual underpinnings and connection points of *Forever Transformed*, to embrace change, to support difference and to encourage resilience.

Mark Feary
Artistic Director
Gertrude Contemporary

Forever Transformed

Georgie Meagher

Disaster could strike at any moment. International politics are volatile, global warming is leading us to an ecopocalypse, and even though around the world millions are being lifted out of poverty, inequality is rising. Locally, the market for housing is constantly likened to a bubble just about to burst, and social media users are self-radicalising in echo chambers of their own creation. At a moment when art could play a leading role – helping to bridge disparate perspectives, foster empathy, or simply allow a kind of communication in a space of contemplation and reflection – it is cast aside as a luxury, and the ecology that sustains it systematically fragmented and pitted against itself. The world is complex, and increasingly fuzzy, yet popular discourse is polarised, agreeing only on one assertion: we are in a state of permanent threat.¹

Despite its title, the inaugural exhibition at Gertrude Contemporary's new South Preston home, *Forever Transformed*, is an exhibition that is

less about change than the pressures that force it. It is critical of a world where hurt and fallibility are too uncomfortable, and worn narratives of strength through adversity seem widely preferred. In this world, where you can only fail in order to succeed, resilience is everywhere, argued as “the new” stability, security, sustainability and/or vulnerability. It comes up in everything from UN reports about global development and climate change to military training programs. It is the new buzzword for business, ecology, psychology and self-betterment. But how did we get here, and why does this idea have such currency at this moment? Dr Melissa Weinberg, a professor of Psychology at Deakin University, asserts ‘*the problem with our culture is that we demand resilience but we deny vulnerability*’². I suggest this demand simultaneously enables and justifies ever-increasing demands on people, and diverts attention from causal factors exerting pressures on humans as well as states, economies and the environment. Mark Neocleous

goes even further to state *'the presupposition of permanent threat demands a constant re-imagining of the myriad ways in which the threat might be realised. Resilience thereby comes to be a fundamental mechanism for policing the imagination'*.³

In a conversation in the lead-up to this exhibition, Sophie Cassar explained a moment in which she consciously chose to change her behaviour when experiencing periods of intense pain. Aware of the affective relationship between her disposition and constructing a facade of strength for others, Cassar described how she initially focused energy toward the outward appearance of wellness, subconsciously trying to make those around her feel more comfortable. This is alluded to her in her 2016 collaboration with Oscar Millar titled *The Surgery is a Success and the Patient is Dead*, in which Cassar says *'I write about the phrase 'You look well!' as an insult because this is work'*. She adds *'Survival is also work and maybe dying is too'*. Cassar describes

the way she shifted her behaviour as “softening”, both physically relaxing into the pain (like an embrace), and casting off the performance of wellness for the benefit of others, and gaining renewed agency over her corporeal resources by ceasing to resist.

Author Robin James writes about a similar effect in a very different context – the varying responses to Rihanna’s 2012 album *Unapologetic*, the release made in the months following her public assault at the hand of her then partner, rapper Chris Brown. The album received a lukewarm response, with a significant amount of criticism honing in on Rihanna’s refusal to distance herself from Brown. James writes *'Contemporary notions of ideal femininity require women to overcome the damage patriarchy does to them: 'good' women must be resilient and bounce back from negative body image, domestic abuse, work/life double-binds, misogynist cultural traditions (veiling, polygamy), etc.,*

turning them into positives'. James goes on to state '*We expect Rihanna to be resilient because the spectacle of her personal overcoming would contribute to a positive feedback loop that would recycle the damage of the past (racism, sexism) into a promising present and future*'.⁴

As Cassar similarly refuses to participate in a spectacle of bravery and overcoming, she uses the softness and sweetness of "sick girl" aesthetics to reclaim her agency. But feminine strength and empowerment has its counterpoint in Liz Linden's *Damaged Goods* (2016), which makes visible the persistent re-emergence of the female victim narrative trope as a subversive fetish. The large reproductions of book covers bring the depicted women to life-size, making them more damning and difficult to ignore. Linden inadvertently discovered this disturbingly durable trope whilst researching an exhibition of the same name, instead discovering over 20 fictional titles appearing across genres including romance, true crime and

Christian self-help. "Damaged goods" is a term applied almost exclusively to female characters, including sex workers and murderers. The apparent social transgression in making public (or simply not hiding) the outward signs of injury or illness brings Cassar's sweet dark poetry to mind – '*the graft is encased in a baby pink scar. Accessorise the minced meat flesh with Hello Kitty bandaids*'.⁵

While Linden's work reminds us of just one of the damaging ways that female representation in popular culture is perpetuated, Tabita Rezaire welcomes her audience into '*a world where we are not affected, scared, hurt. We don't care about white supremacy, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, misogyny, patriarchy, ableism, ageism. Where all the subtle and pervasive oppressions do not matter*'.⁶ By naming the many phobias that her world lacks, the afflictions of society more broadly become all the more obvious. Rezaire creates a definitively anti-hegemonic space, and in doing so reveals the inadequacies in the purported

'openness' of so many other contexts, a *tabula rasa* which is actually not blank at all, and which by default centres straight-white-male experience and in so doing unwittingly deems aberrant those non-white, non-male, disabled, queer or otherwise marginalised perspectives. For who would want to take life advice from a white male baby boomer online who thinks the world needs to read his 13,000 word treatise on suffering?

And although this may come across as unnecessary snark, the point is important, because unlike Rezaire's world, our reality is such that subtle and pervasive oppressions *do* matter. Lateral violence for example, in the words of Richard Frankland, '*comes from being colonised, invaded. It comes from being told you are worthless and treated as being worthless for a long period of time. Naturally you don't want to be at the bottom of the pecking order, so you turn on your own*'.⁷ Appropriately, de-colonial self-care is Rezaire's first strategy in her instructional

video *Peaceful Warrior* (2015) which advocates connecting with ancestral knowledge as a means of strengthening the self. Tony Albert's 2008 series *Optimism* exemplifies this idea through a simple but powerful action, the continuation of his ancestral culture through the documentation of his cousin's use of a Jawun – a basket traditional to Northern Queensland, worn with a strap over the forehead. The Jawun was made by Ninney Murray, Albert's aunty and a senior weaver. Albert describes the series as '*simultaneously a self-portrait and a family portrait*'.⁸ He describes Jawun as a symbol of "positivity, resilience and hope" – and it is, against the odds, an increasingly rare but brilliant example of exactly that.

Standing in direct contrast to Albert's upbeat images of cultural perseverance, is Rushdi Anwar's work, which subtly addresses the systematic dismantling of the structures that cultivate resilience. As a refugee migrant to Australia, Anwar's

experience as a Kurdish child was marked by a series of conflicts. There are many casualties aside from citizens in the course of war: roads, hospitals, effective government, law and order, but also childcare centres, libraries, schools and universities can be collateral damage in the course of insurgent strikes taking place over many years. In two particular recent cases, deliberate denigration of educational infrastructure was a key military strategy. Taliban forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Boko Haram in Nigeria destroyed almost every school and library within and near conflict zones. In fact education is described as the major fault line of the conflict in Nigeria, and teachers are a primary target. Anwar's sculpture, created of chalk and pigment, alludes to the once ubiquitous classroom blackboard, with individual sticks of chalk gradually ground to fine dust. By circling around the piece there could be two opposing readings of the symbolism; is the chalk disintegrating, an image of violent

pressure, or is it mysteriously reforming? The stark contrast of the chalk and pigment, in so many ways captures the unforgiving dichotomies of the subject matter, the brutal Boko Haram doctrine. Right and wrong. War and peace.

Both Anwar and Albert's works render it clear that it is impossible to critically appraise the virtues of resilience without context. The valorisation of resilience can be dark, distracting us as individuals from more important, more damaging causal factors exerting pressure on our lives and our world. Instead of being better at healing, isn't it more desirable that we aren't wounded to begin with? Some critics venture that resilience and acquiescence go hand-in-hand, and in corporate discourse in which humans are either *resources* or *capital*, it is difficult to dispute this. However, resilience takes many forms, and serves many purposes. In families such as Albert's it plays a vital and generative role. But as the loads increase in weight, and fall

upon us more frequently, it seems pertinent to evaluate who (or which entities) the beneficiaries are, if we manage each time to bounce back and avoid being flattened.

- 1 Permanent threat is a term is borrowed from Mark Neocleous' 'Resisting Resilience', <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/resisting-resilience>
- 2 Dr Melissa Weinberg *Building Resilience: Are we really helping?* <http://this.deakin.edu.au/this/building-resilience-are-we-really-helping>
- 3 Mark Neocleous, *Resisting Resilience* <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/resisting-resilience>
- 4 Robin James, *Melancholic Damage* <https://thenewinquiry.com/melancholic-damage/>
- 5 Sophie Cassar and Oskar Millar, *The Surgery was a Success and The Patient is Dead* <http://2016.nextwave.org.au/essays/the-surgery-was-a-success/>
- 6 Tabita Rezaire, *Peaceful Warrior*, 2015
- 7 Richard Frankland quoted in Jens Korff, *Bullying & Lateral Violence* <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/bullying-lateral-violence#ixzz4i5lNtx2C>
- 8 Tony Albert, *Optimism #2*, 2008 <https://www.mca.com.au/collection/work/2014.60/>

Rushdi Anwar

Liz Linden

Tony Albert

Tabita Rezaire

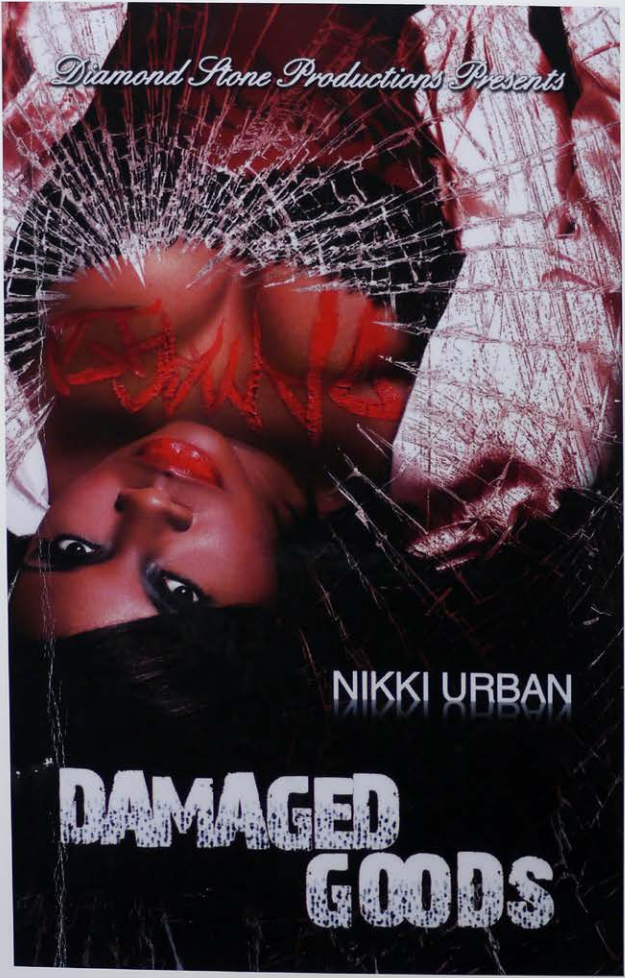
Sophie Cassar

Rushdi Anwar
The Circle of Knowing and Unknowing, 2012-2016
White Chalk, Black Paint Pigment
Dimensions Variable
Courtesy of the Artist



Liz Linden
Damaged Goods (Hampson), 2016
Archival Inkjet Print
112x183cm
Courtesy of the Artist

Diamond Stone Productions Presents



NIKKI URBAN

**DAMAGED
GOODS**

Tony Albert
Optimism #2 2008
Chromogenic Print
80× 80cm
Courtesy of the Artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney



Tabita Rezaire
Peaceful Warrior, 2015
Digital Video
5 minutes 31 seconds
Courtesy of the Artist and Goodman Gallery,
Johannesburg and Cape Town

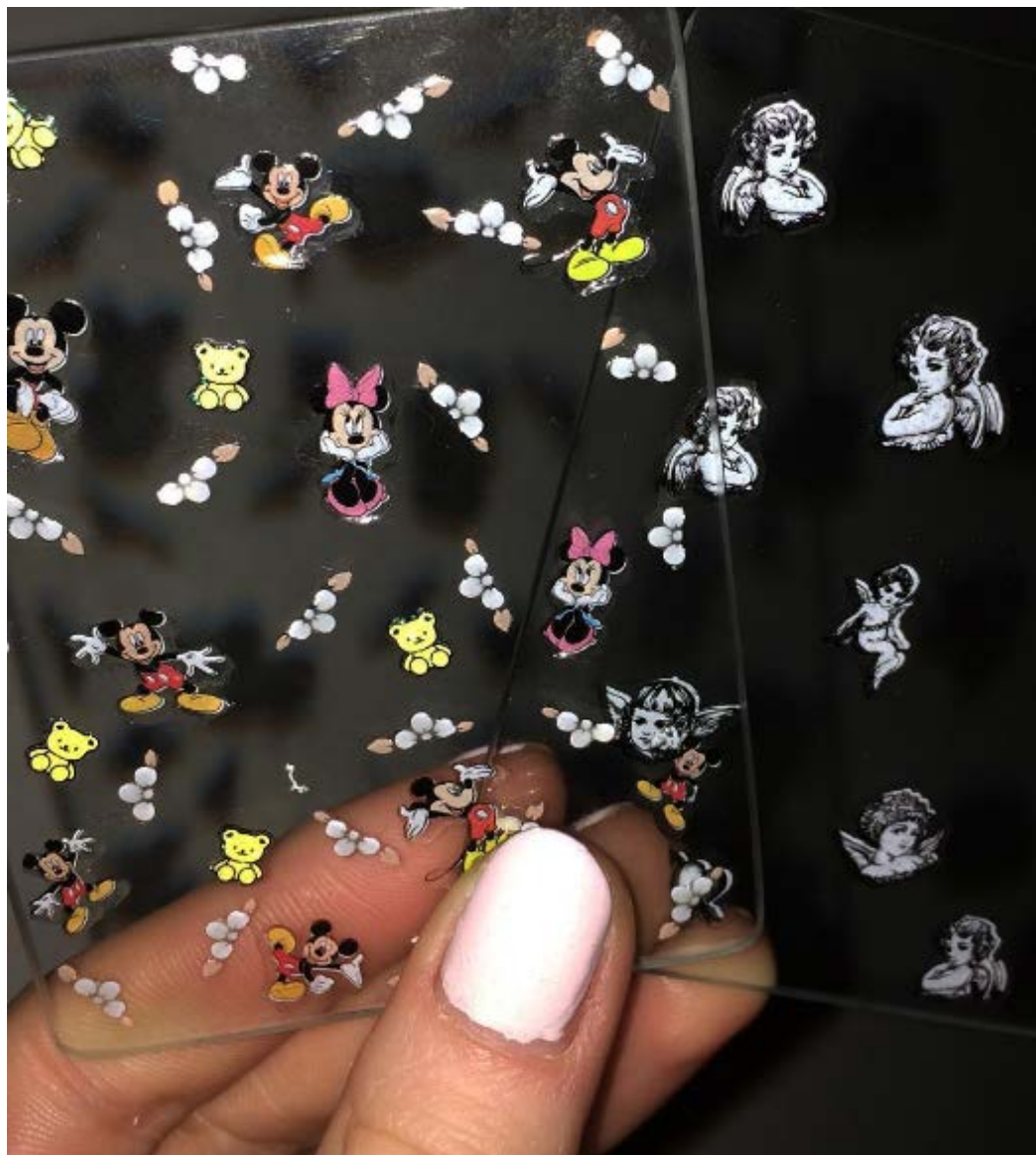


Sophie Cassar

*Little girls love to cry so much that I have
known them to cry in front of the mirror in order
to double the pleasure* (detail), 2017

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist



Georgie Meagher has worked as an artist, writer, curator and producer in major multi-arts venues, independent spaces, producing organisations and a museum. She is currently Director and CEO of Next Wave, a leading organisation supporting new generations in Australian art.

Meagher recently initiated a major project with Australian and Pacific Indigenous artists for the Asia Pacific Triennial of Performing Arts and is currently Dunlop Fellow in the Asialink Leaders Program. She is alumni of the Independent Curators International intensive program in New York, the recipient of a Cultural Leadership grant from Australia Council for the Arts, and holds a Masters in Creative Arts from the University of Wollongong. Independently, she has published critical texts about the future of artist self-organisation, curated exhibitions about economics, organised screenings about strange obsessions and given lectures about James Franco.

Tony Albert

Tony Albert's art practice interrogates contemporary legacies of colonialism in a way that prompts the audience to contemplate elemental aspects of the human condition. Mining imagery and source material from across the globe, and drawing on personal and collective histories, Albert questions how we understand, imagine and construct difference.

Albert has exhibited his work internationally, at venues including the Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux, France; Singapore Art Museum; National Museum of China, Beijing; and Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel. He was also included in the 10th Biennial of Havana, Cuba, and the 2014 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, *Dark Heart*. Albert is well represented in institutional collections in Australia, including the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, and Gallery of Modern Art | Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. In 2013 Albert was commissioned to create a public artwork for the Hyde Park War Memorial in Sydney, installed on Anzac Day 2015 to commemorate Indigenous soldiers.

Rushdi Anwar

Rushdi Anwar is a Melbourne-based artist, originally from Kurdistan. His installations, sculptures, paintings, photo-paintings, and video works often reflect on the socio-political issues of Kurdistan, Iraq and the Middle East. Exploring these issues through an investigation of form conditions, material vocabularies and processes, his works reference the social and political unrest in his home country, as well as his Kurdish heritage, but they also have a broader message and speak to us of care, attention and even redemption through art.

Rushdi was educated in Kurdistan and Australia, studying at the Institute of Kirkuk, Enmore Design Centre / Sydney Institute. He holds a Master of Fine Art (MFA) and a Doctorate of Philosophy Art (PhD) from the School of Art at RMIT University, Melbourne. He has held solo and participated in group exhibitions widely in Australia, as well as in Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, France, Japan, Kurdistan, Norway, Switzerland, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates.

Sophie Cassar

Sophie Cassar is an artist and student based in Narm/Melbourne. Cassar's practice focuses on the body in states of sickness and notions of girlhood using writing, objects and video. Recent exhibitions and publications include *The gaze is not something you have or use (it is a relationship entered into)* (2016), at Meanwhile, Wellington, New Zealand, curated by Lokal Stories for the Cyber Nectar residency; *Molten Upset - Poetry & Noise* (2016), at West Space, Melbourne, curated by Autumn Royal and Lisa Lerkenfeldt; and *The Surgery was a Success and the Patient is Dead* published in Next Wave's digital publication *Worm Hole* through their Writers in Residence program in 2016.

Liz Linden

Liz Linden is an artist based in New York City. She received a BA in Literature from Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut in 2002, and was a studio artist in the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York City from 2008 to 2009. Linden is currently a PhD candidate in Visual Art at the University of Wollongong, and will submit her thesis in 2017. Linden's work has been exhibited internationally, most recently Linden presented a solo exhibition, *Damaged Goods* (2017) at Cleopatra's in New York, and a live public performance, *TELETHON* (2017) with Jen Kennedy at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Linden's critical writing has appeared in catalogues, art magazines, and in peer-reviewed journals, including recent issues of *Art Journal* and *Third Text*. *Target Practice*, an artist's book/monograph on her work, was recently published by Surf Street Press.

Tabita Rezaire

Tabita Rezaire is a French born Guyanese/ Danish new media artist, intersectional preacher, health practitioner, tech-politics researcher and Kemetiic/Kundalini Yoga teacher based in Johannesburg. She holds a Bachelor Degree in Economics and a Master in Artists' Moving Image from Central Saint Martins College, London.

Rezaire's practice explores de-colonial health and knowledge through the politics of technology. Navigating architectures of power - online and offline - her works tackle the pervasive matrix of coloniality and its effects on identity, technology, sexuality, health and spirituality. Rezaire's digital healing activism offers alternative readings decentring occidental authority and preach to dismantle the oppressive white-supremacist-patriarchal-cis-hetero-globalised world screen. Rezaire is a founding member of the tech-health agency NTU, half of the duo Malaxa, and mother of the House of Seneb.

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