

PROJECT 21 EXQUISITE CORPSE

Exquisite Corpse – a strange, evocative, and funny combination of words. Used by Surrealists to describe a drawing game that involved participants taking turns drawing on a sheet of paper and folding it to obscure their contribution before passing it to the next person. The final drawing, the combination of many minds and hands, is something out of their control – it is often wild and amusing. To embrace this kind of chaos is a brave project for artists to undertake. Three years ago, Nelson-based contemporary jewellers Kay van Dyk, Joel Fitzwell, and Katie Pascoe began their exquisite corpses as a collective under the banner Project 21. The result is 21 necklaces made in complicated collaboration with only the measurements of the joining rings – 10cm apart – to guide them.

X-ray representations of organs, native flora in the finest silver, and matted cat fur sit uncomfortably next to each other – their integration jarring to the eye but intriguing.

Quiet examination of the individual pieces reveals the unique aesthetics of three very different makers – brought together through proximity, a passion for jewellery, and mutual respect.

Unconventional materials, precious metals and stones, plastic and found objects are juxtaposed in ways that surprise. We start seeing faces in the combination of agate, mother of pearl, brass, plexiglass, sterling silver, copper, and cotton. Silhouettes recline on spiked wheels under a cloud of silver; while pearls, nylons and neon create what could be the remnants of a 1960s house party gone awry.

In these untitled works meaning can only be ascertained through a surrealist understanding of materiality and the making process.

Surrealists embraced a mode of making that revelled in the absurdity of the world. Founded post-WWI it can be seen as a direct response to the trauma of that ‘Great War’. The horror of war was countered with the exploration of dream-states and the rejection of logic. The resulting art is characterised by its utilisation of chance as a tool – the driving force behind an exquisite corpse.

Initiated in 2020, Project 21’s Exquisite Corpses have been born out of a very similar environment. The pandemic revealed to many of us not only the fragility of our lives and social structures, but also the reality that control is often an illusion. In giving in to this anarchy the artists have created

works that vacillate wildly between joy and pain, growth and loss, beauty and the grotesque – a truly exquisite corpse.

Time is key to this body of work – covering three unique years, 2020-2023, these Exquisite Corpses gave these three artists a sense of community during a time of great isolation. The pieces are intimate conversations between the artists, the world, and their materials.

Each ‘round’ of the project saw the makers create three parts of three pendants – the number three features heavily in their work and is one of the few binding ‘rules’ of the corpses.

Collaboration is usually understood as a process by which individuals come together to work towards a common goal – something this project utilises while also breaking one of its cardinal rules. While the artists communicated with each other throughout, they kept their contributions a secret until the final reveal, when each component was bound together to create a single, unpredictable entity.

Objects that have a purpose often pose a challenge to an art gallery – these artworks, as necklaces, are intimately connected to the human form.

Removed from the body and exhibited in the gallery space, these necklaces are caught in a strange space between object and idea. Without the human form to animate them they are reliant on our imagination – taking them even closer to the surrealist model of making. Literally disembodied, these works hold the ghost of the human form within them – another kind of corpse within the exhibition.

Play, chance, bodies, loss, community, and materiality are the abiding themes in these 21 works. Their goal is not to be exquisite, although many of them have formal and informal beauty in their compositions.

Seeing these 21 objects, exhibited together for the first time, shows us that an exquisite corpse is not about aesthetics. What is exquisite is the process of creating this body of work – the letting go of control, trusting other makers, and finding beauty in the unexpected.

Exquisite Corpse – a strange, evocative, and funny combination of words, and a striking, honest, and complicated collection of artworks.

Sarah McClintock
Director, Aratoi Wairarapa Museum of Art and History

12 AUGUST - 08 OCTOBER 2023

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES |

Joel Fitzwell is a goldsmith based in Whakatū Nelson. Working primarily with precious metals, Joel is a process-based maker who enjoys exploring traditional goldsmith techniques like construction, repoussé, granulation, setting and engraving. Joel completed a Bachelor of Art and Media at NMIT in 2012, majoring in contemporary jewellery and completed a trade certificate in Manufacturing Jewellery with JIRBNZ in 2018.

Kay van Dyk is a contemporary art jeweller and object maker from Whakatū Nelson. Her practice is informed by materiality, metaphor, and the agency of existing objects where she explores the relationships between materials, meaning and their relationship with the body. Kay has tutored jewellery and object making in the tertiary sector and taught Adult Community Education jewellery courses

for 20 years. She currently manages Magenta Creative Space, a project space for artists with a lived experience of mental health and is a project manager for Nelson Jewellery Week.

Katie Pascoe is a contemporary jeweller with an educational and work background in Visual Arts and Art History. After completing her Bachelor of Arts and Media in 2016 with excellence, Katie Pascoe was accepted into the contemporary jewellery mentorship programme, The Handshake Project. Her mentor was London based sculptor Francis Upritchard. Katie Pascoe’s work often explores social and collaborative practices between people and objects, beginning with her graduate show *Possession*. Katie Pascoe lives and works out of her studio in Whakatū Nelson where she exhibits both locally and nationally.

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