

English Language

Art Labels

Chantal Fraser: The Ascended

Adapt/Abstract 2010

Video, 4:3, colour, sound, 3:35 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

Chantal Fraser's performances to video began with *Adapt/Abstract* (2010). The movement of the body time allows for visual elements to reverberate with significance—attributes of black and white, visible, and invisible, accessibility and inscrutability, constriction, and freedom. Of this work she explains: 'I was interested in the morphing of these fabrics and what nuances of reading this morphing caused'.

Ornamentation, in Fraser's work, therefore, becomes the aesthetic resolution to control access to the self and to support privacy.

Maiden PowerPoint 2012

PowerPoint slideshow, 16:9, colour, sound, 1:57 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

Fraser's first slideshow work, *Maiden PowerPoint* (2012), performs a tourist's trip through Fraser's own holiday snapshots from Sāmoa and other countries, complemented by the faintly humorous soundtrack of an analogue slide carousel. Using a device that she explored in the photo and postcard series *I'll have my Bebos talk to your Bebos* (2008), here Fraser inserts new Photoshopped portraits into manufactured backgrounds. As the unidentifiable people wrapped in animal print and other fabrics pose for their souvenir, the conflicted eco-social territories in these works is a latent force.

Fraser's large format photograph titled *Lefaga before the tsunami* (2012) is drawn from this PowerPoint work, where two figures are wrapped in animal-print fabric recalls René Magritte's *Les Amants [The Lovers]* (1928), held in the National Gallery of Australia's collection. There are also more oblique references throughout the PowerPoint slides to the elusive French fictional villain Fantômas (who is said to have inspired Magritte), to Victorian mourning shrouds, and to other, more recent, harrowing images. The constricted wrapped bodies might at first seem surreal or incongruous, until we realise that camouflaging and shrouding might suggest awareness of exploitation and danger.

I'll have my Bebos talk to your Bebos 1-4 2008

Digital photo composites, metallic prints

Courtesy of the artist

The social media platform Bebo was launched in 2005 and was a place where Moana Nui / Great Ocean youth were active in sharing photos, music and personal profiles. Fraser's digital postcards employed Photoshop to stitch digital landscapes composed by Fraser with Bebo profile portraits. These pre-selfie-era photographs depict individuals willingly participating in cheeky posturing, as opposed to the photographic postcards of 'Sāmoan people' made by German colonists of the 1900s that Fraser had found in her research.

Riffing on the term 'B-Boys' and Hollywood associated corporate-speak 'I'll have my people talk to your people', Fraser's gaze gives recognition to the superstar qualities within these young men.

Taulima Collection 2004

Chalk on muslin, folded, stacked

Courtesy of the artist

Softness and porousness were key attributes for Fraser's early installations that avoided shock-tactics and transgressive delivery and 'boujee' (slang for *bourgeois*) parts of the art canon. Instead Fraser explored process-based arts and discriminated against 'craft' practices associated with women's work and adorning of homes and bodies.

In *Taulima Collection* (2004) Fraser references the arm-band *tatau* (tattoo) of her older brother and other members of her family, themselves inspired by her mother's family-owned patterns printed on cloth. In white and yellow chalk, Fraser inscribed the patterns across seven sheets of un-dyed muslin. In her exhibition text she observed: "...there is a certain solace in 'owning' a piece of cloth and knowing what lines lay within the folded object."

While the practice of folding and stacking can elicit memories of devalued tasks such as putting away washing or storing fabric, the plinth shape also recalls minimalist, modernist histories involving processes of seriality and repetition. In Fraser's approach, the work contained materials that to her are private and treasured. No agency is given to the viewer's desires for exploration. Not even a visual reconnaissance is allowed. This strategy of eliding scrutiny or explanation (so one is not impelled to decline, let alone respond) is a concept later revisited in her 'un portraits', also in this exhibition.

To Be Humble 2017

Video, 16:9, colour, sound, 17:06 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

Fraser's collaborative performances *To Be Humble*, enacted in 2017 at the IMA, Brisbane and Artspace, Sydney, invited audiences to participate in a symbolic communal act of artistic, social, and cultural penance. These one-night events were constructed in and for an Australian context after Fraser learned about the Sāmoan act of *ifoga*, a practice of publicly embodying apology and remorse. For these events, Fraser was deliberate in explaining that she and her collaborative artists were not actually performing this ritual. She articulates:

The act itself is not often seen, and while my parents have witnessed this, it was the act of communal penance and responsibility that interested me, not the bringing of ritual into a Western contemporary art context. How we as humans account for the good and bad of our community and the nuance of forgiveness and penance.

In this work, emerging performer Gerick Leota Thomsen holds a *salu* (broom) in lieu of a flywhisk, which is used to indicate that a person of authority has something to say.

Maiden Prismatic Taupou 1 2011

Hand-cut photo composite, archival tape

Griffith University Art Collection

Purchased 2011

Though Fraser has not been designated with the title, there have been *Taupou* in her family history. The honour/fraught position of publicly representing a village, however, Fraser acknowledges as certain situations have bestowed on her a responsibility to represent 'Sāmoan-ness', whether she wants to or not.

Here notions of choosing one's appearance while also masking the body became a fertile concept. A further photographic collage series eventuated after Fraser began cutting up printed stills from the *Adapt/Abstract* video.

'Ava ceremony performed by Tessa Fa'alaitaua Thomsen Fraser using found materials 2017

Video, 16:9, colour, sound, 32:21 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

The ritual preparation of 'ava was explored in an early photograph titled *Bon Voyage – Contemporary Kava Ceremony* (2009) for which Fraser received the Photography Prize in the Nudgee Emerging Art Award 2009. In this collaborative video, Fraser's mother demonstrates, over three sessions, how to make the preparation using an imported ingredient, and locally sourced materials. After a break of decades, Fraser's mother's hands can be seen regaining familiarity and muscle memory as she connects with her knowledge. As a metaphor for what happens under colonialism, and with distance from protocols and loss of appropriate communal situations, Fraser's work prioritises her mother's process when she is 'given the space to surpass the suppressed'.

Summit 2018

Video, 16:9, colour, sound, 6:57 minutes

Performance at 'Netherworlds', Spring Hill

Reservoirs, Brisbane

Videography: Charlie Hillhouse

Sound: Charlie Hillhouse

All courtesy of the artist

The performance *Summit* (2018) extends the ideas of publicly embodying a state of humility. Stillness, slowness, and staying through time are offered as qualities among the highest orders of conduct. In contrast, these gestures of grace are evoked in the dark below-ground chambers located in Brisbane's Spring Hill.

Paper Leis 2003

Paper towel, toilet paper, napkins, wax paper, crepe paper

'Ula 2023

Tulle, thread

Courtesy of the artist

This installation intermixes *leis* and *'ula* made over twenty years in diverse materials drawn from Fraser's home and fabric collections. Often made with her mother, these magnificently scaled neckpieces reference acts of welcome and the 'framing' of loved ones.

Fraser's early works combined research via her family networks into their histories and cultural practices with the exploration of women's domestic work and craft traditions, so-called 'low arts'. Fraser reflects:

I think there was also a bit of a rejection of the "art material". Not being interested in creating art made from oil paint, canvas, and materials that are part of the canon. I was more interested in making work from what was around me. I saw energy and richness in manipulating, imbuing and giving patience to cheap readily available utilitarian materials. The challenge [to the canon] was far more interesting.

Fraser brought her feminist understanding and political critique of class-based discrimination to her experimentation with household cleaning and cooking products, for example pale-coloured kitchen towel, toilet paper, paper tissues and wax paper. Using handmade processes of assembly and embroidery stitching, concepts of gendered servitude and invisible labour permeated her sculptures and also emphasised wisdoms of the home: thriftiness and resourcefulness, and the unique legacies these practices have in preserving material while transforming its usefulness.

Left to right:

Maiden Militia 2009

Maiden Nesia 1 2009

Maiden Kokonuts 2009

Maiden Nesia 2 2009

All type C prints on metallic paper

Courtesy of the artist

Fraser is acutely aware of the camera's role in colonising, exoticising and displacing peoples. To this end, she carefully controls the extent to which her own portrait is accessible to the gaze of viewers. When her face is not fully covered, it is visible only in fragments, veiled or screened.

In 2009, Fraser began turning the camera lens towards herself. The resulting photographs instead became 'anti-' or 'un-' portraits when she chose to depict herself in tightly wrapped *'ie lavalava*, adorned with handicraft items that visiting relatives gifted to the artist and family. She explains:

I believe we should have the authority to not reveal our entire identity. It's a conscious choice in my work to shroud. I think that has come from my work having a direct connection to being Sāmoan, or from the Pacific Islands. ... The Pacific Islander becomes a hybrid, a thematic hybrid being, a cultural understanding of a person.

As an artist, I have found it challenging to bypass the anthropological context-setting of cultural heritage or background, to get to the grittier parts of what I want to talk about in work. So, there is also a sense of control in holding back of facial identity, but also, our face is not the only component of the body.

With playful titles, Fraser's raiment functions in every case to slip through photographic capture while interrupting viewer's expectations that a portrait represents the truth of a subject and their interior life. Fraser shows that portraits are more accurately a mirror to the viewer's own projections and biases.

The Ascended 2023

Five HD video projections, three 4:3 MDF screens, colour, sound, 23:46 mins

Videography: Joshua Maguire; Soundtrack: Jesswar;

Performers: Jori Etuale (artist), Lisa Fa'alafi (Hot Brown Honey);

Punipua Fa'alaitaua Elizabeth Thomsen Fraser (artist's mother);

Saskia Sassen (Daughter of Papa)

Courtesy of the artist

The Ascended (2023) video presents contemporary deities or *Atua*, representing a link between the earthly and non-earthly. These beings continue the knowledge, divinity, and power that has always been and will always be.

Five chapters are sequenced across the three projection screens, like an alternative altarpiece to the seers, heralders, warriors, dancers and mother figures. Land, water and elements are sited in Fraser's works as a latent force. *The Ascended* crafts a symbolic language of the intellectual, political, spiritual, and emotional forging that is necessary to think our way beyond capitalism.

Understanding that there are people and parts of reality that have already transformed their thinking and being and have achieved a state of ascension offers succour to those of us who remain earth-side.

Riot Gear 2015-23

Macho posturing, threatening, and illegal physical mistreatment by some people in state-sanctioned roles of authority is an experience many people growing up in Queensland are exposed to. Across Fraser's network, racial profiling and its terrifying consequences are common knowledge and a shared experience.

This series had its genesis after one of Fraser's brothers was unlawfully attacked by members of the Queensland Police force, and yet, the series is not about centring his experience. It recognises the performativity of people in uniforms who are supposed to protect and serve, but who uphold brutal systems through threat and violence. For many marginalised peoples they are 'monster'.

Continued beyond the 2020 iterations of #blacklivesmatter and Covid19 protests, Fraser series *Riot Gear* (2015-23) includes impact-resistant helmets and shields as raw material. The procurement of ballistics grade equipment is restricted to those employed by carceral regimes—the police and military.

Riot Gear in Fraser's words, brings "the performance of authority into 'jest', [to position it as] something that is merely ornamental posturing or 'performative', a decorative farce".

Left to right:

Mouth Protector 2023

Plastic, synthetic cloth, elastic, adhesive, metal screws, acrylic rhinestones

Workers Hide 2023

Leather welding apron, adhesive, acrylic rhinestones

Crucible Royal Blue 2023

Leather welding gloves, adhesive, acrylic rhinestones

Crucible Safety Yellow 2023

Leather welding gloves, adhesive, acrylic rhinestones

Courtesy of the artist

Helmets 2023

from the series 'Riot Gear' (2015-23)

From top row, left to right:

Crown Rabble 1 2023

Crown Rabble 2 2023

Crown Rabble 3 2023

Second row, left to right:

Fântomas Black 2023

Fântomas Gold 2023

Fântomas Release 2023

Third row, left to right:

Fântomas Silver 2023

Diamond Standard 2023

Divine Standard 2023

Bottom row, left to right:

Gold Standard 2023

Seraphic Standard 2023

Welding helmets, polycarbonate safety hats, high-density polyethylene hard hats, adhesive, acrylic rhinestones, metallic glass shards, metal applique, metal screws, nails

Courtesy of the artist

Riot Shell Lens 2023

Polycarbonate safety glasses, adhesive, shells, acrylic rhinestones

Eye Shield Gold 2023

Polycarbonate safety goggles, elastic strap, adhesive, metal screws, plastic crystals, mirrored glass

Riot Diamond Lens 2023

Polycarbonate safety glasses, adhesive, metal applique, plastic crystals

Riot Stone Lens 2023

Polycarbonate safety glasses, adhesive, acrylic rhinestones

All courtesy of the artist

Body Amulets 2023

from the series 'Riot Gear' (2015-23)

Aluminium plate, baking tray, baking pan, serving platters, steaming bowl, mixing bowl, steel pot lid, aluminium ring, polycarbonate plastic, wire, tin, brass, metal screws, nails, string, hazard tape, adhesive, acrylic rhinestones, mirrored glass

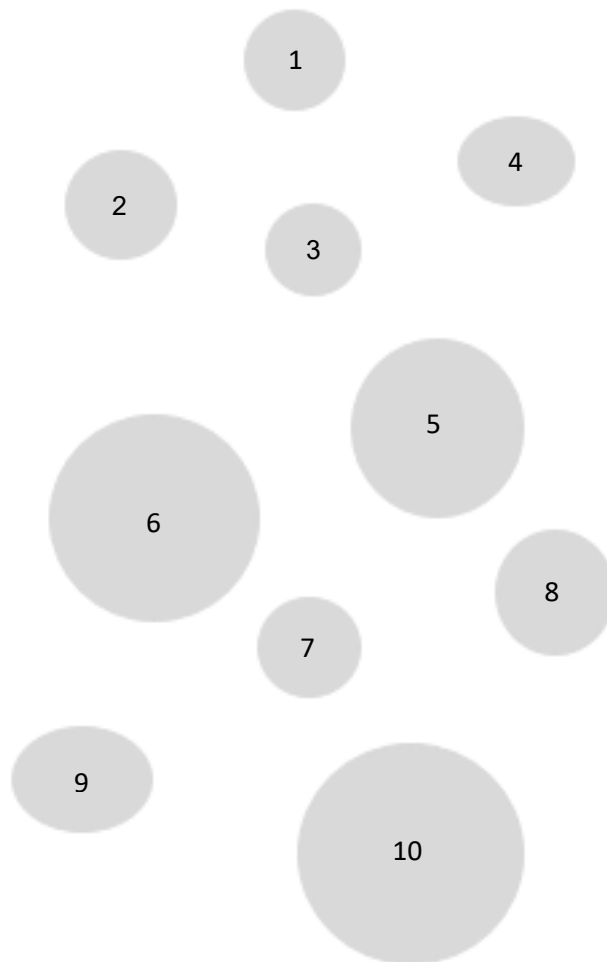
Courtesy of the artist

Shields 2023

from the 'Riot Gear' series(2015-23)

Polycarbonate plastic, woven straps, sponge, metal lids, glass lids, baking tin, steaming bowl, serving trays, adhesive, metal screws, studs, acrylic rhinestones, mirrored glass, plastic beads

Courtesy of the artist



1. Rabble Amulet 2
2. Mineral Atua 1
3. Dazzle Shield 3
4. Dazzle Shield 4
5. Rabble Amulet 1

6. Dazzle Shield 1
7. Mineral Atua 3
8. Riot Shield 2
9. Mineral Atua 2
10. Dazzle Shield 2

Traditional Riot Helmet 2015

ABS plastic, adhesive, plastic crystals,
rhinestones

Courtesy of the artist

Traditional Riot Shield 2015

Polycarbonate plastic, adhesive, acrylic
Rhinestones

Private collection, Brisbane

Traditional Tribal Shield 2015

Metal lid, leather strap, adhesive, acrylic
rhinestones, bullet casings, broom bristles

Courtesy of the artist