

Octopus 23: The Field

Bella Besen, Nicola Blumenthal,
Dean Cross, Raven Mahon,
Ming Ranginui, Shiraz Sadiqueen,
Shannon Te Ao and Mikey Young

Gertrude Contemporary
Naarm Melbourne
15.4.2023-11.6.2023

by Hilary Thurlow



Shannon Te Ao, *Hara*, 2022,
archival digital print on
Hahnemühle photorag paper,
93 x 116 cm (each). Installation
view, *Octopus 23: The Field*,
Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm
Melbourne, April 2023. Courtesy
of the artist and Coastal Signs.
Photo: Christian Capurro

The tale of standardisation is one entangled with colonialism and capital. Born out of the French Revolution of 1789 and Enlightenment's enshrinement of reason and scientific process, the metric system paved the way for industrialisation to circumnavigate the globe, slowly displacing the alternative forms of measurement that lay in its path. For her *carte blanche* at Gertrude Contemporary, *Octopus 23: The Field*, Tamsen Hopkinson has invited a group of artists from Australia and Aotearoa to ponder the base units of the metric system: length (metre), time (second), amount of substance (mole), electric current (ampere), temperature (kelvin), mass (kilogram) and luminous intensity (candela).

Extracted from the earth's crust and weighed by the gram, silver is central to the mechanisms in mobile phones, solar panels, computers and the automobile industry. It's a trope that many of the artists in this exhibition play with both visually and conceptually. Nicola Blumenthal's work *Silver Objects* (2023) gives grotesque, a mess of an assemblage that includes a suitcase (an Antler, to be exact), ply, tarpaulin, newspaper, tape, a mirror, a bedhead, cardboard, wire, a filing cabinet and bits of metal, acrylic and plastic. Thrown together into a pile of now-obsolete goods, the material quality of silver is cheapened, its value as a precious metal is diluted. One man's trash, Blumenthal suggests, is everyone's to bear. Bella Besen's six oversized panels, *whatever happens happens, whatever happens happens, whatever happens happens, whatever happens happens, whatever happens happens, whatever happens happens* (2023), stretch across one wall of the gallery. Each panel is wrapped in a slick silver car vinyl, the kind used to customise money-is-no-object luxury vehicles. The mirrored surface reflects a warped image, an alternate version of the gallery space, embossed in a sans serif font in which the work's title is recited, like a hackneyed, toxically positive wall-decal affirmation promising wealth and success. Shiraz Sadikien's *Washer* (2022) is a dirty dollar coin with a hole pierced through Queen Elizabeth's head, a wound inflicted then amended using surgical wax. It's funny and a touch subversive. The coin no longer holds the value it once might have; it makes a poor trade for labour time, which Sadikien alludes to with the empty clock face of *Steel* (2022), and *Rim* (2022), both mounted in a row with *Washer*.

Living to work and working to live is a dynamic often at play in the exhibition. Ming Ranguin's *Till the clock strikes five* (2023) is another clock face, through which she imagines life in the 9–5 grind as a subversion of a Cinderella story. Made of luscious, gathered satin and with only one clock hand, Ranguin's clock is timeless: the endless time of a day on the clock in retail. *grants and wishes* (2023) is wand-like, complete with a bow: if every grant laboured over was successful, all wishes would be fulfilled. *sky Belle* (2022) takes shape as an enormous ball gown or turreted roof, the kind reserved for princesses and castles. Ranguin's works use the language of fantasy and fairy tales, all the while foregrounding her experience as a service worker in a haberdashery store. Like Sadieken's works, the humour

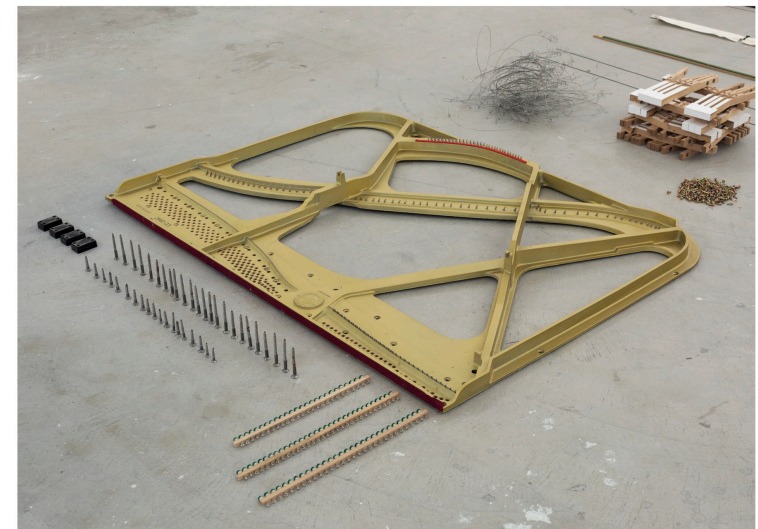
of these gestures belies a critique of labour systems and their implication in cultural fantasies; we learn to dream of and imagine through work, and to have a job you love is often a measure of success.

Tāhū by Shannon Te Ao and Hopkinson is an architectural intervention referring to the central joist of a whareuni. It takes form as a horizontal beam of fluorescent light, wrapping around the gallery's perimeter and radiating an intense luminosity twenty-four hours a day. The concentrated light is a necessary beacon for Gertrude Contemporary, an address to its surroundings in suburban Preston that marks the gallery as a gathering space. As Te Ao's work encircles the space physically, Raven Mahon and Mikey Young's does so sonically. *Ever decreasing circles* (2023) is an audio track composed of polyrhythms that permeate throughout Gertrude's shopfront. Sharing its name with a BBC-hosted sitcom running between 1984 and 1989, the work subtly aligns itself with the show's black comedy—which commented on the aspirational middle class of suburban Surrey—and examines the insecurities that follow us into adulthood. Flowing from a wall-mounted speaker, the sound is tonally polite and at points dreary, like a satire of middle-class existence, a sentiment echoed in Dean Cross's disassembled 1962 Yamaha piano, *sad state* (1962–2022). Staring at all the constituent parts of the piano that Cross has laid out neatly on the gallery's polished concrete floors, it's easy to imagine them surveyed by the mother of a perfect nuclear family who has organised piano lessons and dutifully enforced time to practice. Often inherited, the domestic piano is a symbol of the ways in which bourgeois class is measured and reproduced culturally: its sound, weight and substance. Broken down and dissected, from its smallest internal mechanism to its largest hardware, Cross's piano examines class as it is produced in the domestic space, piece by piece, home to home.

Our system of measurement is a catch-22. Though convenient, it's curious to think what forms of knowledge have been erased with our flattened dedication to universal measurements, and what ways of relating to and understanding the world have gone with them. To think cups used to be literal cups, hands a rigorous unit of measurement and fields measured in how many days it would take labourers to complete a harvest. The artists of *Octopus 23: The Field* reappraise these modes of value and suggest that new measures are perhaps overdue.



Bella Besen, *whatever happens happens, whatever happens happens, whatever happens happens, whatever happens happens, whatever happens happens*, 2023, silver car vinyl, wooden board, 205 x 82 cm (each). Installation view, *Octopus 23: The Field*, Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm Melbourne, April 2023. Photo: Christian Capurro



Dean Cross, *sad state*, 1962–2022, brass, wire, felt, graphite, lacquer, iron and plastic, dimensions variable. Installation view, *Octopus 23: The Field*, Gertrude Contemporary, Naarm Melbourne, April 2023. Photo: Christian Capurro