

# the exhibitionist

HUMANITY is at the heart of celebrated Australian artist POLLY BORLAND's work, which spans SCULPTURE, PHOTOGRAPHY and a memorable shoot with this issue's cover star, Jennifer Coolidge

Words by CLAIRE SUMMERS

Polly Borland has spent her career getting under the skin. Spanning photography and sculpture, her work deals with what lies beneath: existential angst, the psychological versus the body and the stark humanness in us all. Borland describes her work as a “puzzle”: the full meaning is never initially obvious; something in it is always unrecognisable or just out of reach. Australian-born and Los Angeles-based via a formative stint living and working in London, Borland has long secured her place as one of Australia's most important international artists.

There is an intimacy and an immediacy to her early portraiture, a sense of urgency that pulls the viewer closer. While Borland has photographed many iconic figures, such as Nick Cave, Queen Elizabeth II, Cate Blanchett and Vivienne Westwood, she is selective about who she shoots. Photographing Jennifer Coolidge for *Harper's BAZAAR's* cover story (literally) reflects Borland's reverence for the actor and her sudden appearance in the centre of the zeitgeist after a decades-long career. “There's a rare authenticity to her,” Borland says of the unification between the public and private persona that Coolidge embodies, something the artist has sought to capture.

Portraiture photography, the kind that grasps you as Borland's does, necessitates cultivating a great deal of trust in a brief period. “Photographing someone is a collaborative process; the success of the image depends on trust,” she says. “The subject needs to be up for abandoning vanity and ego.”

Since she began her career at 17, Borland's strong sense of identity has left an imprint on all of her work — while she strives to show us the truth within her subjects, she also reveals something of herself. In an article for *Memo Review*, arts writer Rex Butler examines the subtext of WHO ARE YOU, an exhibition of portraiture at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2022, in which Borland was a featured artist. Butler posits that “every work of art is now a portrait or, even better, a self-portrait: the questions we ask of it concern the identity of its maker and what is their relationship to their subject matter, whether they

have the right to depict what they depict and what this is to say about them.” Accepting this as a truth of contemporary art — that we want the work to tell us not only who we are but also who its maker is — when we look at Borland's portraits, we catch a glimpse of the person behind the camera.

Borland's photographic work has moved away from commercial portraiture yet retains that same psychological intimacy. She now confronts those same early themes through a treatment of abstraction. It takes very little for us to recognise an image as “human”. A cartoon smiley face — two dots for eyes and a curve for a smile, encased in a circle — will do. Whether the visual treatment of the body is reductive, abstracted or hyperrealist, so intense is our desire to see and connect to the humanness of an artwork that we are bound to find it.

Borland's recent work increasingly mounts the abstract, moving further and further towards the threshold of the non-human. The bodies we see here are contorted, morphed or bulged to the point of being nearly unrecognisable, yet preserve a shocking humanity. “The thing with abstraction is that once you arrive there, everything becomes fragments,” Borland says. Her work has always been concerned with eradicating didactic detail, forcing viewers to question what they are looking at. In her photography today, her subjects encase their bodies in stockings, swollen with blobs, rendering them amorphous, alien and not-so-slightly unsettling.

More recently, Borland has used her photography to reveal more of herself and her own body in ways that the artist admits are confronting. In *PlayPen*, a recent collaborative exhibition with artist Penny Slinger, the pair deliberately push against their physical boundaries to re-energise themselves as artists in a state of experimentation. Viewing these images is an almost hallucinatory experience: they're smeared with goeey colour, the figures inside them distorted by clumpy growths. Blurred and pulled out of shape, each subject becomes an odd and unnerving sculpture in its own right. Here, Borland surrenders herself as the subject.

Borland has described her relationship with the camera as one of control. If the camera is defined by control, then



Polly Borland.



vulnerability could be defined by the lack of control. It is this tension in which Borland now positions her photographic work. “It was sort of a creative logic to eventually turn the camera on me,” she says. In her recent series *Nudie and Blobs*, in which Borland photographed her naked body in an abstract and claustrophobic manner, the artist continues to tackle that same vulnerability. Taken with an iPhone, the images muse on selfie culture and on confronting that which we often hide or dismiss as frightening.

The next frontier sees Borland move her art practice more firmly into sculpture. In 2018, the National Gallery of Victoria hosted a significant presentation of her work, *Polly Borland: Polyverse*. In it, Borland showed lenticular prints — photographs printed with a three-dimensional element that causes the image to change depending on the viewer’s perspective — and tapestries hung in the middle of the room, viewable from all sides. These modes of exhibiting her photographs brought them into the realm of sculpture, giving them a new dimensionality and relationship to the space around them. Borland had breached a barrier between two and three dimensions in her work for *Polyverse*, but it wasn’t a shift she had set out on so decidedly. Later, Daniel Tobin of Urban Arts Projects (UAP) suggested to her that through these experimentations, sculpture was already a part of her practice and that bringing her creatures to life in 3-D was the next step in a line she was already walking.

The same themes and characteristics that have defined her photographic practice are still present in these new forms: they are amorphous, abstracted, lumpy and vulnerable. Although they’re not quite human, they’re not entirely unfamiliar; the humanity we long to see can still be felt in these works. “It’s a continuation of what I’ve always been communicating: a sort of surreal, existential angst depicted through weird, almost-human creatures that are isolated and alone,” she says.

Borland recently presented her largest sculptural work, *Bod*, at the Marfa Invitational in Texas. Constructed from aluminium, the piece is a landmark moment in Borland’s already extraordinary career. Her next Australian solo exhibition, at Sydney’s Sullivan+Strumpf from October 22, is comprised entirely of sculpture — a meaningful progression in this compelling new chapter. As with all her work, her care for her subject, whether they are human or something beyond our species, makes the pieces so profound. “They’ve been brought to life through my love of them,” Borland says. When they are imbued with such affection from their maker, it is easy for us to feel that same tenderness for these creatures, to see the humanity under the skin.



Artworks by Polly Borland. Opposite page, clockwise from top: *Bunny VIII*, 2004; detail from *Bunny and Louis (Pink and Lilac)*, 2018; *Untitled (Nick Cave in blue wig)*, 2010, which was featured in *Polly Borland: Polyverse*. This page, from top: Borland at the site of her installation, *Bod*, 2023, at Marfa Invitational in Texas; *Her Majesty, The Queen, Elizabeth II (gold)*, 2001, which featured in the *WHO ARE YOU* exhibition.

Portrait courtesy of the National Gallery of Victoria. Artworks courtesy of Sullivan+Strumpf. Photographs courtesy of Polly Borland; *Bod*, *Bunny and Louis*; Aaron Anderson