

# NINO MIER GALLERY

LOS ANGELES | BRUSSELS | NEW YORK | MARFA



POLLY BORLAND

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**BIOGRAPHY**



# Polly Borland

**b. 1959, Melbourne, AU**

**Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA, US**



Polly Borland is widely known for her portraits of prominent cultural figures and conversely, underground communities. Borland's decades-long photographic investigations of publicly and privately curated personas are built on the manipulation of body, power, sex and ego. Portraying images of raw vulnerability, pathos and a penetrating desire for comfort and care, her *Babies* series explores the very real world of infantilists – adults roleplaying as infants. Dressed in diapers, often with a pacifier in their mouth, Borland's disquieting photographs portray subjects acting out of a compensatory need to be nurtured. The subversion of the male gaze to surreal, punkish, or ghoulish consequence has always been present in her photography. With later series including *Bunny* and *Morph*, she disrupts traditionally alluring images and subjects, intensifies them, repositions them and essentially turns them on their head through specific staging. This is exemplified with *Bunny* where she inverted the soft, seductive pin-up type with an aggressive, confrontational, and physically domineering model (Gwendoline Christie) in bizarre rabbit garb. Playboy bunnies are certainly a continuation of classic, historic depictions of the female nude, which tend to be demure, reclining in a docile manner with smooth, glowing skin and unblemished features. Borland's images reveal wrinkles, varicose veins, layers of loose skin, body fat and other imperfections that do not exist for male consumption. They do not elicit sexual desire, but rather, reveal hidden truths.

Borland often cites Hans Bellmer, Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley as her biggest influences - all whom play with a combination of the abject, disgust, dark humor and a strangely seductive, aesthetic violence of contemporary life. Recalling Bellmer's disturbing images of doll parts reassembled as the Surrealist 'Exquisite Corpse', Borland's bodies are often rearranged and disjointed. Borland points out the moments of metamorphosis in the images; her work at its best seems to reach inside human beings and turns them inside out, exposing viscera, quietly trespassing into inner worlds to access what usually remains hidden. In her latest unpublished series, *Selfie*, Polly has started to turn the camera on herself. She challenges 'selfie' tropes and social media culture through contorted, grotesque oversized nudes. The confrontational photographic images amplify her aging body with tightly cropped images that seem sculptural and surreal in their abstraction. The artist twists, kneads, flips, and folds her body, handling her flesh like a malleable material while also steering her iPhone camera with a selfie stick. Like the work of these influential artists, from the Surrealists to her contemporaries, Borland's enigmatic and absurd tableaux invite new considerations of underlying cultural contradictions.

*Polly Borland (b. 1959, Melbourne, AU; lives and works in Los Angeles, CA, US) has exhibited worldwide, especially in Australia, the UK, Europe and across the United States, including the major exhibition Polyverse at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne in 2018. Borland has shown internationally at institutions including National Portrait Gallery, London; University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane; National Portrait Gallery, Canberra; and Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Her work is in public and private collections including The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, National Portrait Gallery, London; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; and Damien Hirst's Murderme Collection.*



# INDIVIDUAL WORKS

*\*sample selection does not reflect current availability*



*BOD*, 2023  
Aluminum  
84 x 58 5/8 x 37 1/4 in  
213.4 x 148.9 x 94.5 cm  
Edition of 3  
(PBO23.001)



Installation of Polly Borland's *BOD* at the Michael Phelan Foundation, 2023, Marfa, TX, US

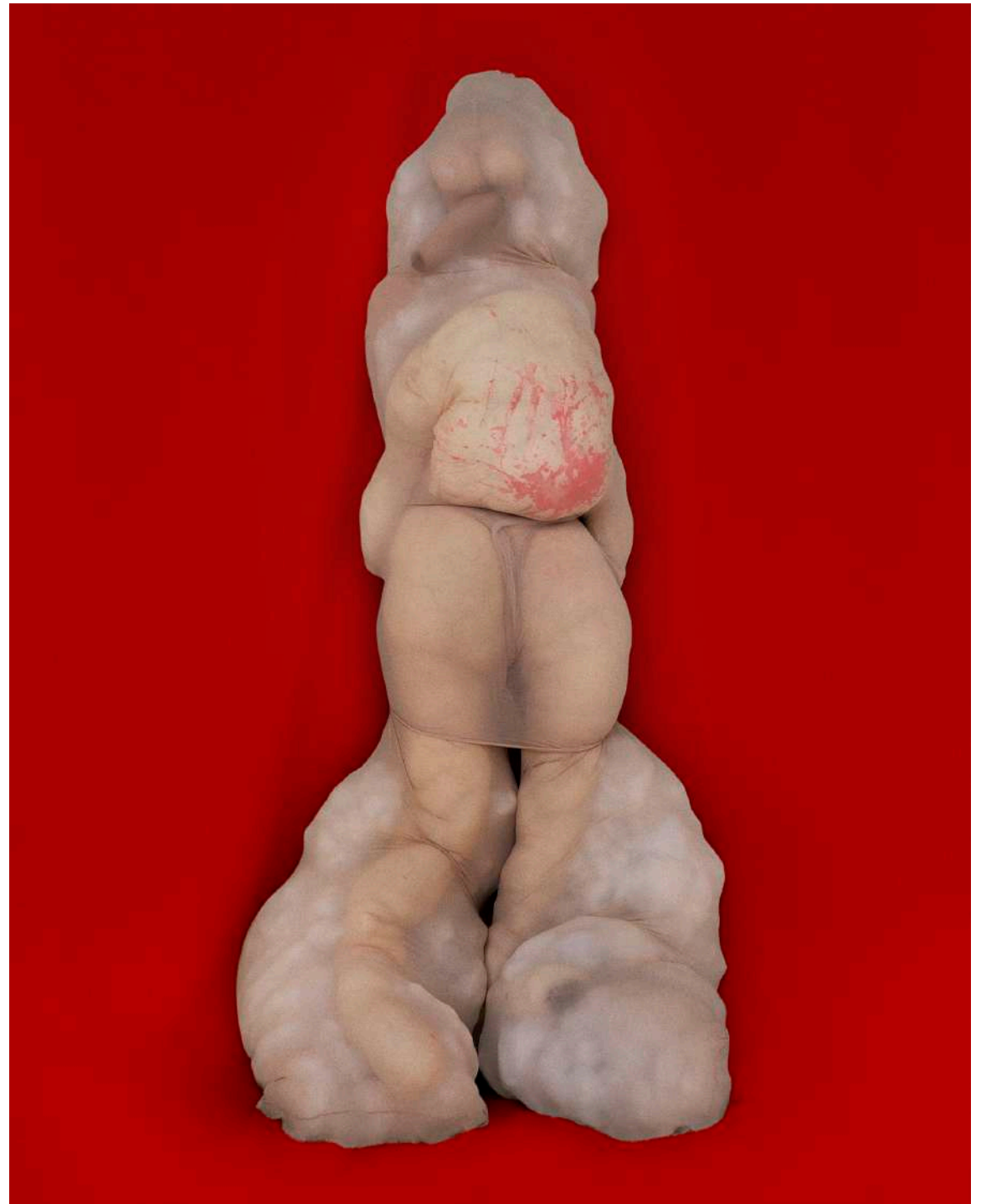




*Morph 14*, 2018  
Archival pigment print  
36 1/4 x 30 3/4 in  
92 x 78 cm  
Edition of 6 plus 3 artist's proofs  
(PBO18.014)



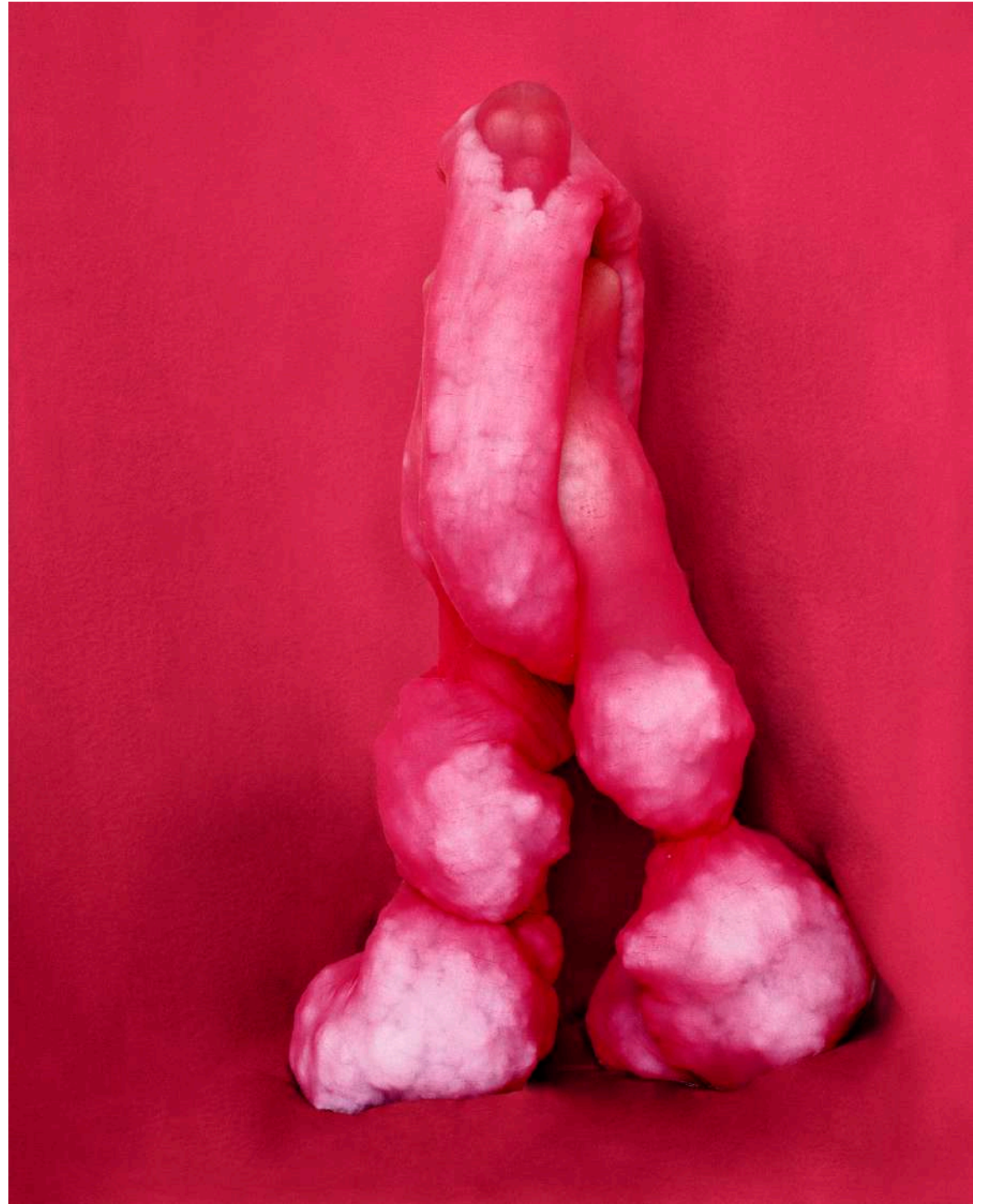
*Morph 29*, 2018  
Archival pigment print  
36 1/4 x 30 3/4 in  
92 x 78 cm  
Edition of 6 plus 3 artist's proofs  
(PBO18.021)







*Morph 2*, 2018  
Archival pigment print  
78 3/4 x 64 in (paper)  
200 x 162.5 cm (paper)  
Edition of 6 plus 3 artist's proofs  
(PBO18.008)



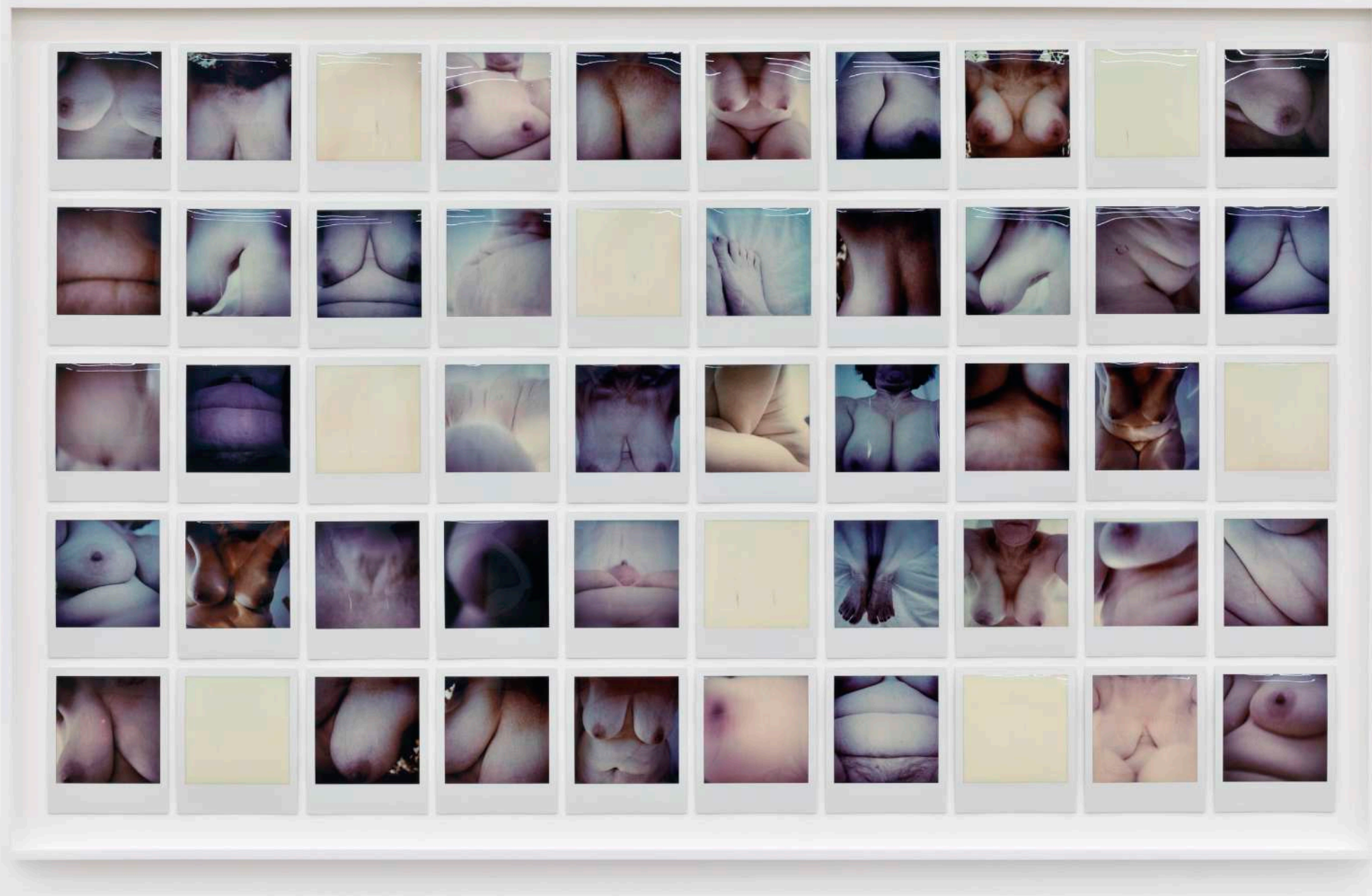
*Untitled, 2021*

50 framed polaroids

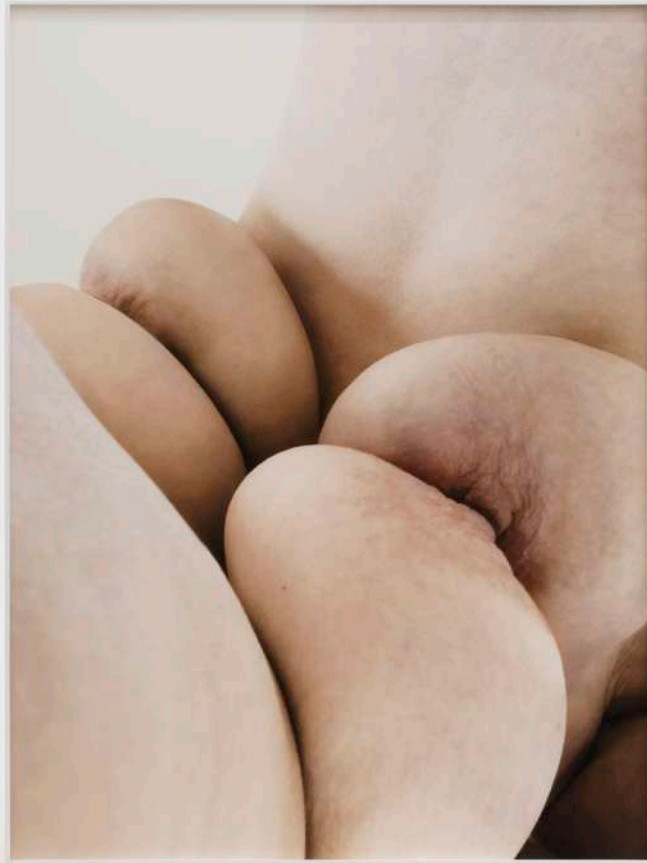
24 3/4 x 39 3/4 in (framed)

62.9 x 101 cm (framed)

(PBO21.001)







*Nudie (2)*, 2021  
Archival pigment print  
53 1/2 x 40 1/4 x 1 1/2 in (framed)  
135.9 x 102.2 x 3.8 cm (framed)  
Edition of 3 plus 2 artist's proofs  
(PBO21.016)



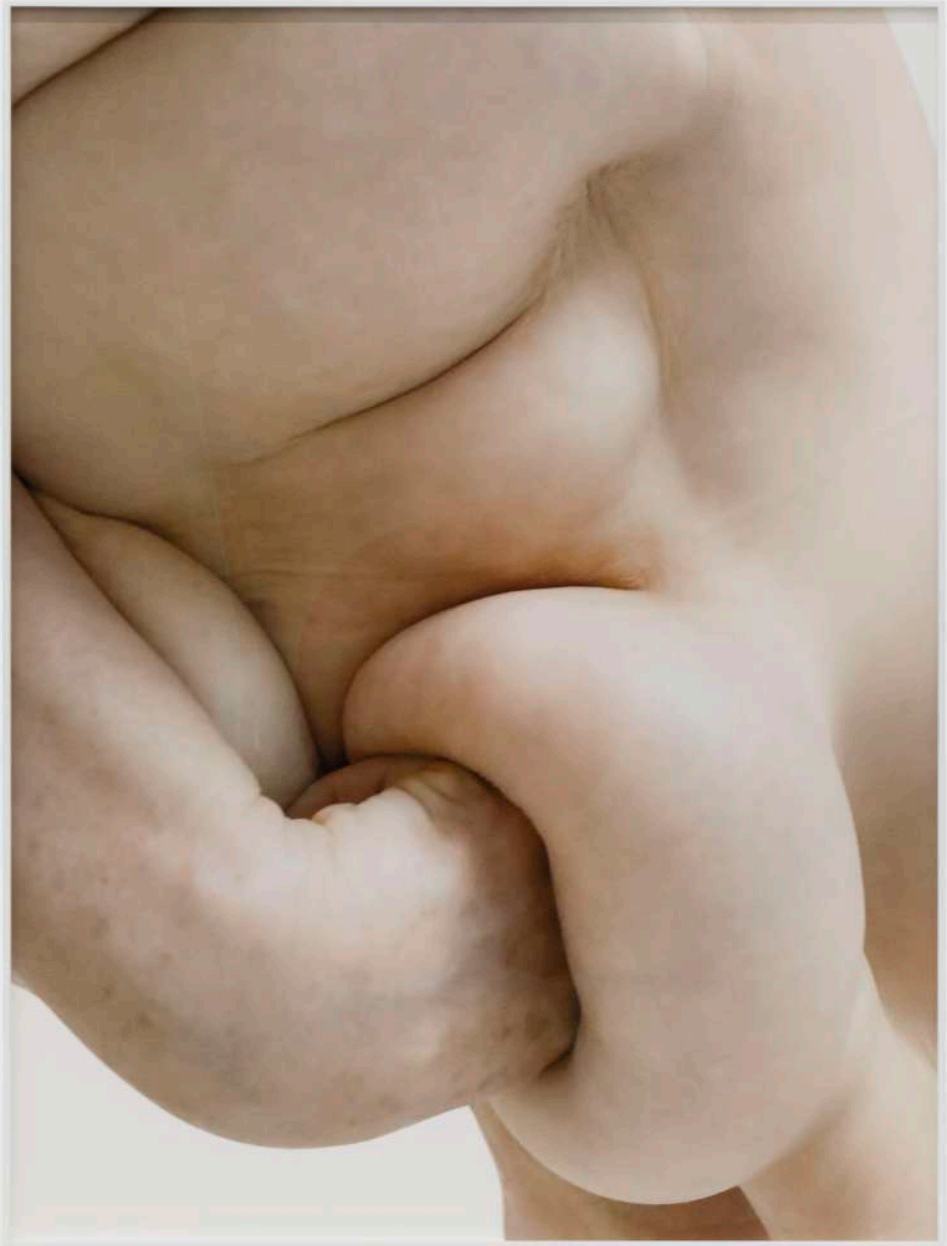


*Nudie (10)*, 2021, archival pigment print, 40 1/4 x 53 1/2 x 1 1/2 in (framed), 102.2 x 135.9 x 3.8 cm (framed), edition of 3 plus 2 artist's proofs, (PBO21.010)









*Nudie (1)*, 2021  
Archival pigment print  
53 1/2 x 40 1/4 x 1 1/2 in (framed)  
135.9 x 102.2 x 3.8 cm (framed)  
Edition of 3 plus 2 artist's proofs  
(PBO21.017)



*Bunny Eyes*, 2009  
Signed on front  
Giclee print, felt, and sand paper collage on German etch paper  
Edition of 15  
Published by Other Criteria, London  
26 3/4 x 20 1/4 in  
68.1 x 51.6 cm  
(POB09.001)





*Bunny Nose*, 2009  
Signed on front  
Giclee print, felt, and sand paper collage on German etch paper  
26 3/4 x 20 1/4 in  
68.1 x 51.6 cm  
(POB09.002)





**SELECTED EXHIBITONS  
AND PROJECTS**



# SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS

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***BLOB OUT***

2023  
SULLIVAN+STRUMPF  
SYDNEY, AU

***BOD - MARFA INVITATIONAL***

2023  
NINO MIER GALLERY  
MARFA, TX

***BLOBS***

2023  
LYLES & KING  
NEW YORK, NY

***NUDIE AND BLOBS***

2023  
STATION  
MELBOURNE, AU

***NUDIE***

2021  
NINO MIER GALLERY  
LOS ANGELES, CA

***POLLY BORLAND: POLYVERSE***

2018  
THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA  
MELBOURNE, AU

Sullivan+Strumpf is thrilled to present *BLOB OUT*, a new exhibition of works that propels Polly Borland's momentum into sculpture and three-dimensional imagery.

Famed for her photographic work, Borland's continued evolution into an expanded dimensionality sees the artist create works written with the same visual language but spoken through a different materiality. Today, her figures have stepped out of the frame to stand before us.

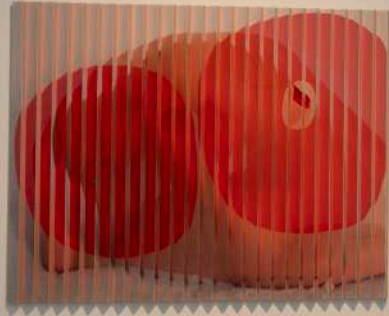
*All images courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf. Photography by Mark Pokorny.*

## ***BLOB OUT***

**2023**  
**SULLIVAN+STRUMPF**  
**SYDNEY, AU**

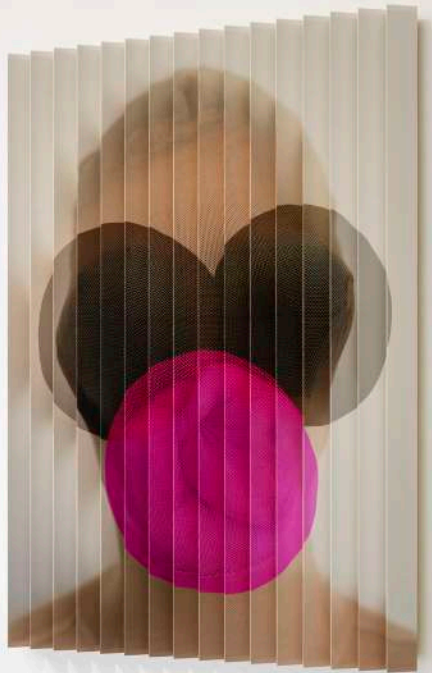
















# ***BOD - MARFA INVITATIONAL***

2023

**NINO MIER GALLERY**

**MARFA, TX, US**

The world renowned photographer Polly Borland, famous for her images of models claustrophobically wrapped in carbuncled cotton stuffed pantyhose, has rendered such a figure into a life-sized sculptural form. *BOD* (2023) is a seven-foot-tall pink aluminum figure cast from a live performer wrapped in her same signature soft sculpture. The seemingly flesh-like or almost gooey abstracted figure, *BOD* is finished in a matte automotive paint, embracing a new sculptural potential of the artist's original abstracted forms. This painstaking lost wax cast process, done with the help of a team of collaborating fabricators in Hudson Valley, speaks to Borland's continued interest in pushing the boundary of her own artistic practice.

*BOD*'s soft and fleshy allure belies the sculpture's resolute solidity – a strange combination of heroic, steadfast metal enveloping in an undulating, almost damp, nacreous surface. Hints of the human form underneath: an exposed long neck, a jutting elbow, the crook of an ankle or the soft edges of an ear hidden behind the tight tugs of fabric, remind us of our own physicality and immediately connect us to the implicit human presence within. Echoing the photographic origins of Borland's

© Polly Borland; Courtesy of the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.  
Photography by Timothy Johnson





practice, the viewer reprises the role of photographer, searching with their own lens to connect with the ghost beneath the shell as it gazes into the arid abyss.

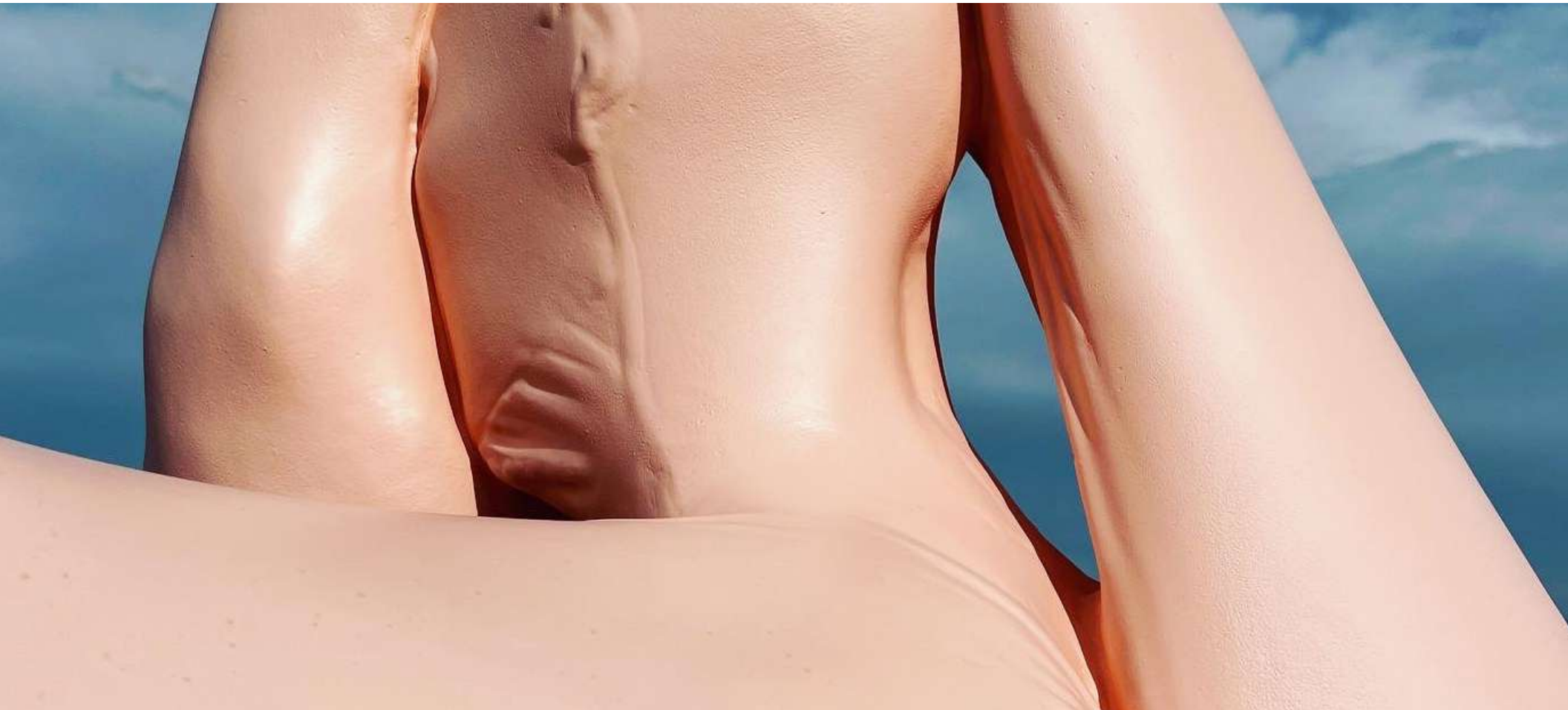
Aside from an edition of two-foot-tall preparatory maquettes realized in 2022, the revelatory prelude to Borland's sculpture was the artist's iconic photographic series *Morph* (2018). The series serves as a dramatic, almost surrealistic expansion of Borland's visual language, with her attention to color and reimagining of form at the forefront. *Morph* captures a model, against a flat colored background, enveloped in colored pantyhose material stuffed with rough cotton fluff. In conjunction with her strange postures and crumbled poses, Borland disfigures the female body to a point of grotesque abstraction. *Morph* creates divergent moods: horrific, claustrophobic imprisonment contrasted by the perceived sensation of safety marked by a sensual swaddling of the nude; the works are human and inhumane at the same time. In an overall sense, *BOD* carries the strange gestures of *Morph* into a new realm by evolving it into a three-dimensional form.

The decision by the artist to move into sculpture began with a chance meeting about the concept with soon to be collaborator Dan Tobin, a founder of ArtMakers and the

co-owner of UAP foundry. Their conversation led to the revelation that throughout her photographic practice, Borland had already been working as a sculptor without truly realizing it. In addition to *Morph*, in *NUDIE* (2021) her nude and subversive "selfie" photographs, the artist served as her own model, manipulating her flesh in front of an iPhone lens with such surreal proximity, that her own skin closely resembled a sculptural material. Noticing this continued impulse, Tobin invited the artist to multiple foundry residencies in order to explore her sculptural practice with a myriad of materials at her disposal.

*BOD* was first installed in situ as part of the 2023 Marfa Invitational fair's "MONUMENTS" section; the outdoor sculpture grounds where the Michael Phelan Foundation plans to open a year-round cultural center. Temporarily installed from May 2023 through May 2024, *BOD*'s pink, towering tangle of bulbous forms stands looming above visitors in the sublime and art-historically rich Far West Texas Chihuahuan Desert.

With the concept of pulling the sculpture out from within the *Morph* photograph's two-dimensional plane, *BOD* begins.



Images courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King, New York. Photography by Charles Benton.



## *Blobs*

2023  
LYLES & KING  
NEW YORK, NY, US

"I am convinced that of all the manifestations of the ephemeral the human body is the most vulnerable, the only source of joy, all suffering, and all truth."—Alina Szapocznikow

Lyles & King is pleased to present *Blobs* by Polly Borland, an exhibition of three new resin sculptures. This is the first time Borland's sculptures are being exhibited in the United States.

Polly Borland's *Blobs* are bulbous, grotesque, humanoid figures teetering between irreverence and the grotesque. Their weight is viscerally felt—stuffed, folded, tied, and exaggerated—as she has explored in her photographic work since the early 2000s. The Blobs create a playful unease, conveying a feeling that they could melt or ooze out of their own forms at any moment. Cast in translucent resin, the sculptures' appearances subtly change with natural daylight cycles and the ambient LED bulbs that illuminate them from within. Borland's *Blobs* read as apparitions or beings trudged up from an toxic extraterrestrial swamp.













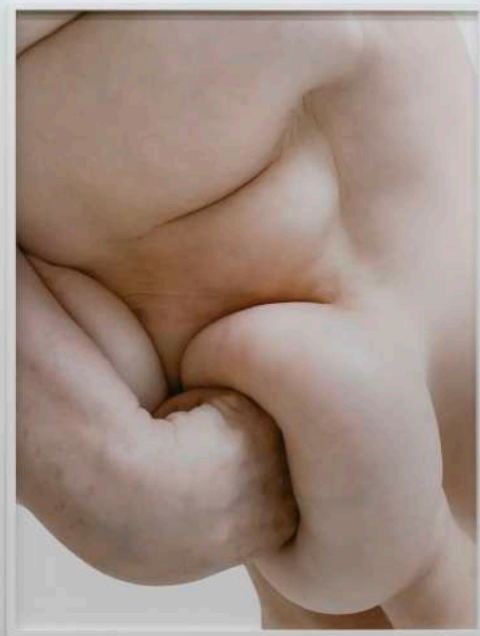
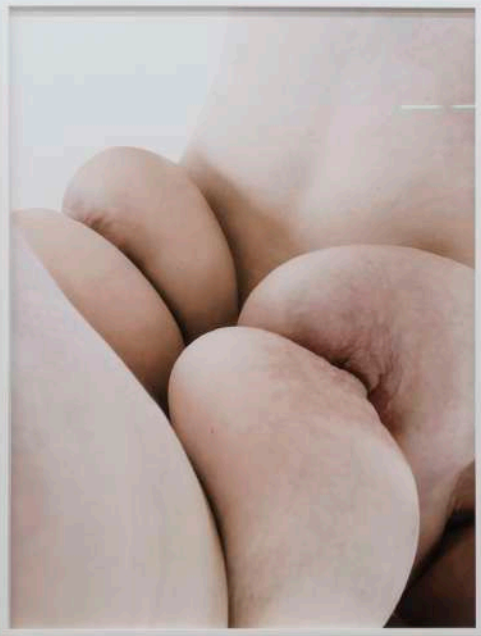
# ***Nudie and Blobs***

**2023**  
**STATION**  
**MELBOURNE, AU**

Polly Borland is an internationally-recognised artist known for her surreal and disquieting practice, spanning photograph and sculpture. Borland's recent work transcends and challenges the portraiture genre, with her unsettling photographs and sculptures portraying subjects often obscured, rendering them amorphous and abject.

In this body of work, Borland reflects on and embraces her ageing body through the use of large yet intimate photographs and sculpture. Consisting of fragmented representations of soft, embryonic flesh, *Nudie and Blobs* celebrates the comfortability and awkwardness of the human form.

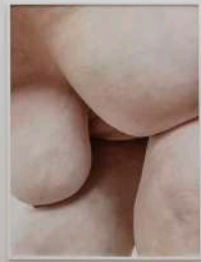
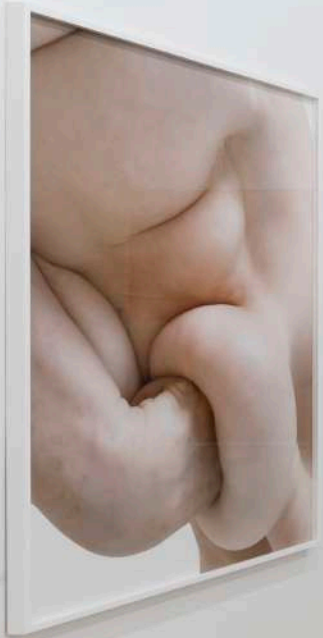
"The selfie work is confronting my ageing body. They are nudes basically, so I decided to use my iPhone and do what everyone else is doing but not beautifying or hiding anything. It's about the body's decay as one grows older."















# Nudie

2021  
NINO MIER GALLERY  
Los Angeles, CA, US

Nino Mier Gallery presents *Nudie*, a solo exhibition by Los Angeles-based artist Polly Borland presented in the newly inaugurated Gallery 3, on view from May 15 - June 19, 2021 at 7327 Santa Monica Blvd. in West Hollywood.

After a long career of photographing others, world renown Australian photographer Polly Borland has, for the first time, turned the camera lens on herself for this striking series. Borland gained global notoriety in the 1990s for her editorial portraits of prominent cultural figures, capturing moments of unique vulnerability beneath the steely veneers of oft-photographed politicians, rock stars and the like. By equal measure, her early artistic investigations expanded into figures who had never before been photographed, capturing the dark seedy underbelly of underground communities, like her *Babies: photographs of infantilist fetishists who existed in a pre-internet anonymity*. With her latest exploration with the *Nudie* series, Borland unveils these immensely personal self-portraits and boldly demonstrates the same vulnerability she notoriously elicited out of her past portraiture. Borland explains, "I think of my camera like a microscope, regarding my sitters closely. On a good day, it is more like an x-ray machine being able to penetrate below the surface. At its best, portrait photography is psychologically revealing."

For *Nudie*, Borland challenges social media 'selfie' tropes and the widespread culture of self-worship and self-image curation through presenting contorted, grotesque oversized nudes taken with this era's most popular tool: an iPhone camera. Her large scale, confrontational photographic prints amplify the sculptural nature of her aging body with tightly cropped frames that are surreal or even landscape-like in their abstraction. The artist twists, kneads, flips and folds her body, handling her flesh like a malleable material while also steering her iPhone camera with a selfie stick or pressing herself against mirrors. The sculptural handling of her own body revealed in such a provocative way culminates a decades-long photographic investigation of publicly and privately curated personas built on the physical and digital manipulation of body, power, sex and ego.

Borland also concedes that ironically, such revealing work may not have been possible for her to take on at a younger age. With age she has gained the wisdom and maturity to care less about vanity, what value might be assigned to her body or the judgments about her choice to pose nude at all. Borland explains further, "The selfie work is confronting my aging body. They are nudes basically, so I decided to use my iPhone and do what everyone else is doing but not beautifying or hiding anything. It's about the body's decay as one grows older," she says, "also, it was time for me to do to myself what I did to others."







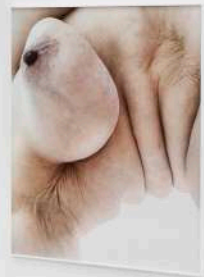
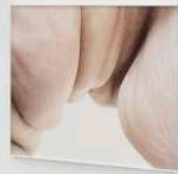
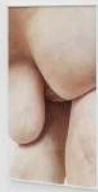
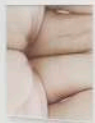
The subversion of the male gaze to surreal, punkish or ghoulish consequence has always been present in Borland's photography. She disrupts traditionally alluring images and subjects, intensifies them, repositions them and essentially turns them on their head through specific staging. This is exemplified with her past Bunny series where she inverted the soft, seductive pin-up type with an aggressive, confrontational, and physically dominating model in bizarre rabbit garb, amplifying the absurdity of sexualizing women by dressing them as small animals. Playboy bunnies are certainly a continuation of classic, historical depictions of the female nude, which tend to be demure, reclining in a docile manner with smooth, glowing skin and unblemished features.

Borland's huge images for *Nudie* revels in the wrinkles, varicose veins, layers of loose skin, body fat and other authentic depictions of women's bodies.

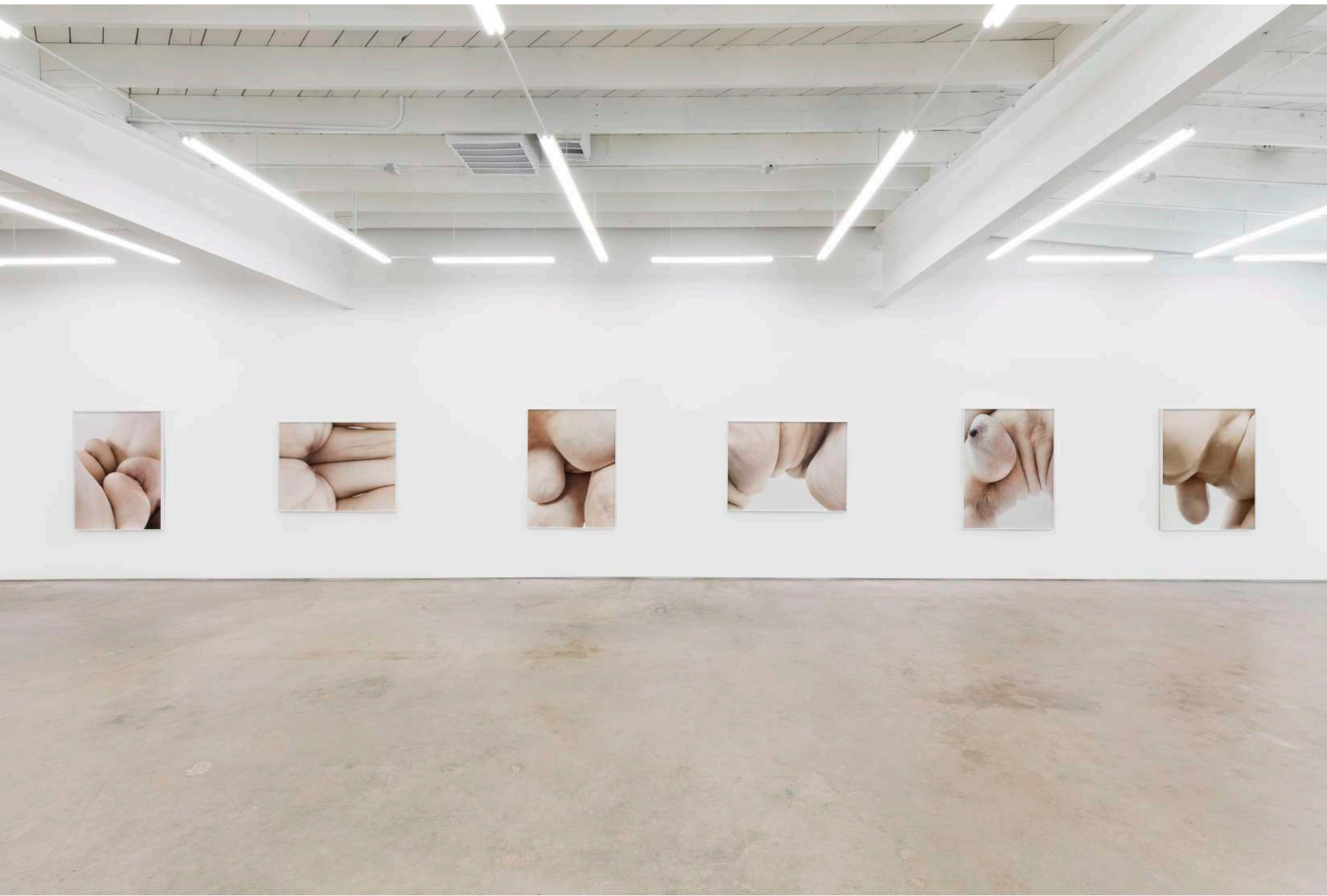
Furthermore, in *Nudie (1)*, where she plunges her fist into her breast, her body is physically handled in such a way that subverts the female form into an object - but not for male consumption. Her breast is not delicately cupped or lifted – it is kneaded like clay in an almost violent or absurdist gesture. These images do not exist to elicit sexual desire, but rather, confront the underlying violence present in the systems of control in historic image making that govern set gender roles and sexuality. *Nudie*

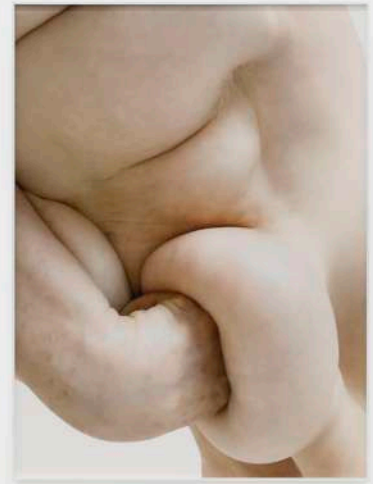
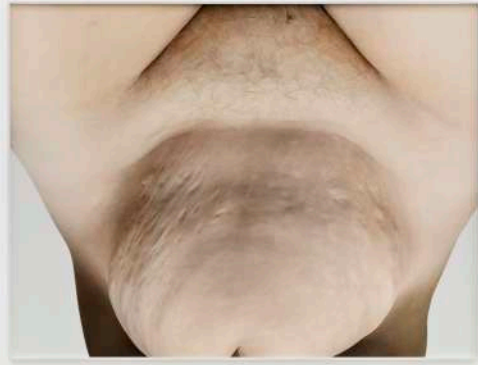
forces upon us the unyielding truth that remains behind our highly constructed and filtered social and digital realm.

Borland often cites Hans Bellmer, Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley as her biggest influences – all who play with a combination of the abject disgust, dark humor and a strangely seductive, aesthetic violence. Recalling Bellmer's disturbing images of doll parts reassembled as the Surrealist 'Exquisite Corpse', Borland's body seems rearranged, disjointed or reordered in *Nudie*, as features like elbows and knees get convoluted with breasts hanging upside down. Like the skin pressed against glass in the photographic work of Jenny Saville, Borland shows the drooping breast and loose skin so close to the picture plane, the shapes become abstractions, like stalactites in a Yves Tanguy landscape. Like the work of these influential artists, from the Surrealists to her contemporaries like Sarah Lucas or even Lucien Freud, Borland's enigmatic tableaux invite new considerations of underlying cultural contradictions. Borland's choice to display her own ageing body, a taboo reserved to shock in popular media, is entrenched in her reversal of the ubiquitous exercise of highly curated, posed and 'filtered' nudes and self-portrait exchanges in youth culture. For all her brutal honesty, she chooses to exclude her face, perhaps referencing the anonymity of modern relationships played out online, but also making the resulting images all the more inhuman and surreal.

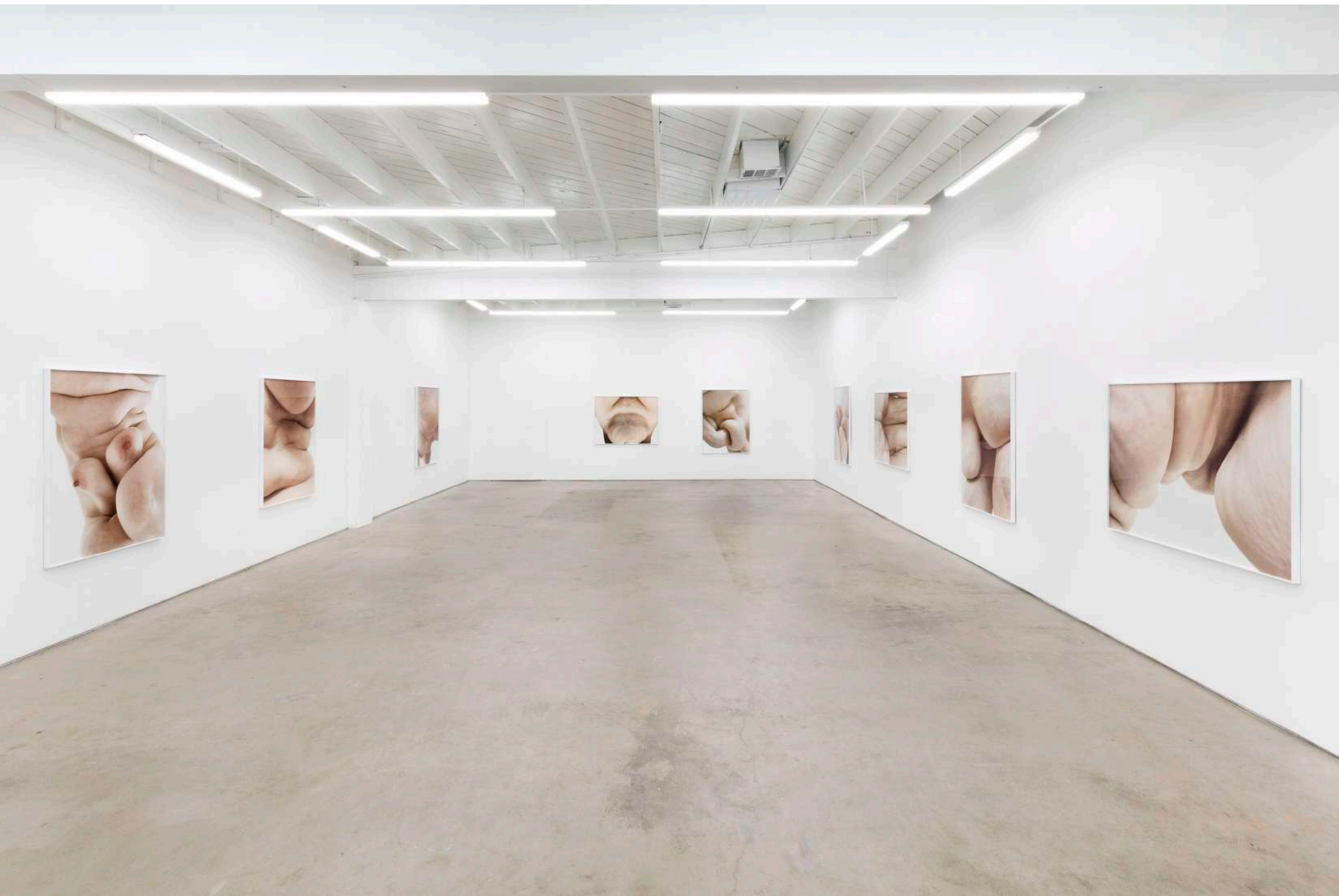










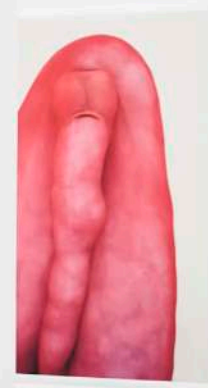


# ***Polly Borland: Polyverse***

**2018**

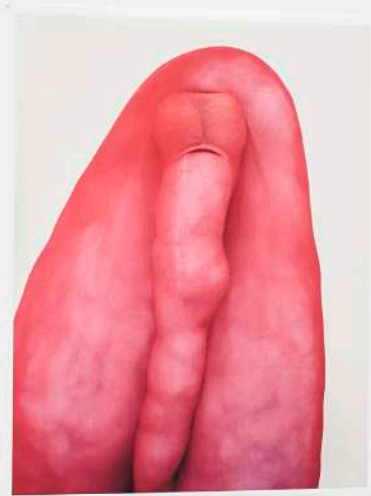
**THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA  
MELBOURNE, AU**

The NGV presents an exhibition of new and recent works by celebrated Australian artist Polly Borland. Borland is a Melbourne born artist who now lives in Los Angeles and is known for her photographs of noted figures including Queen Elizabeth II, Nick Cave and Gwendoline Christie. The recent period of Borland's practice has seen her explore more abstract and surreal imagery. Borland creates images that invite the viewer to see the human form in unfamiliar ways, infused both with humour and an unsettling disquiet. The exhibition comprises works from several of Borland's important recent series, including *Monster*, *Bunny*, *Smudge*, and a series of new works.



Installation view of *Polly Borland: Polyverse* at NGV  
Australia: The Ian Potter Centre running from  
28 September 2018 – 3 Feb 2019  
Photo: Tom Ross





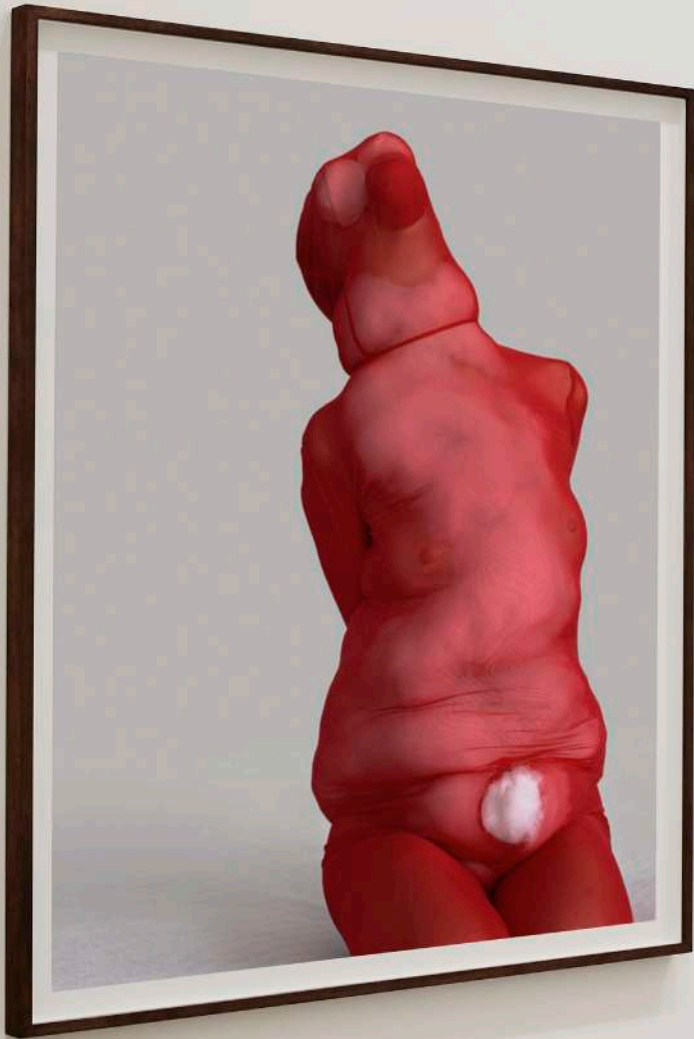
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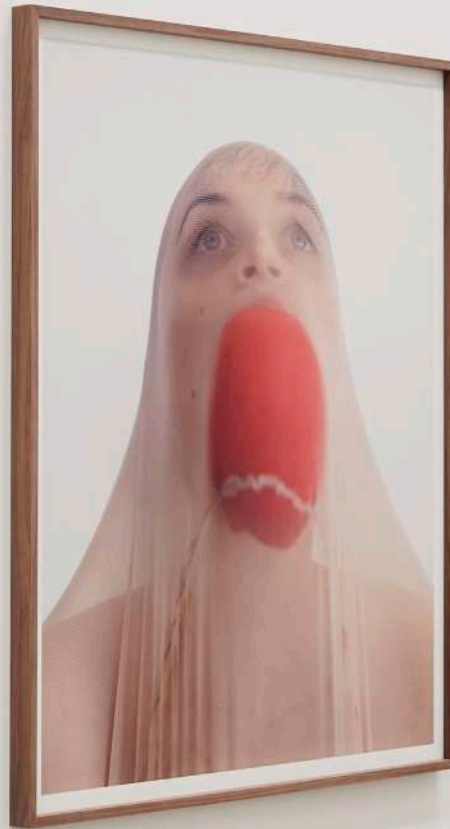




Installation view of *Polly Borland: Polyverse* at NGV  
Australia: The Ian Potter Centre running from  
28 September 2018 – 3 Feb 2019  
Photo: Tom Ross



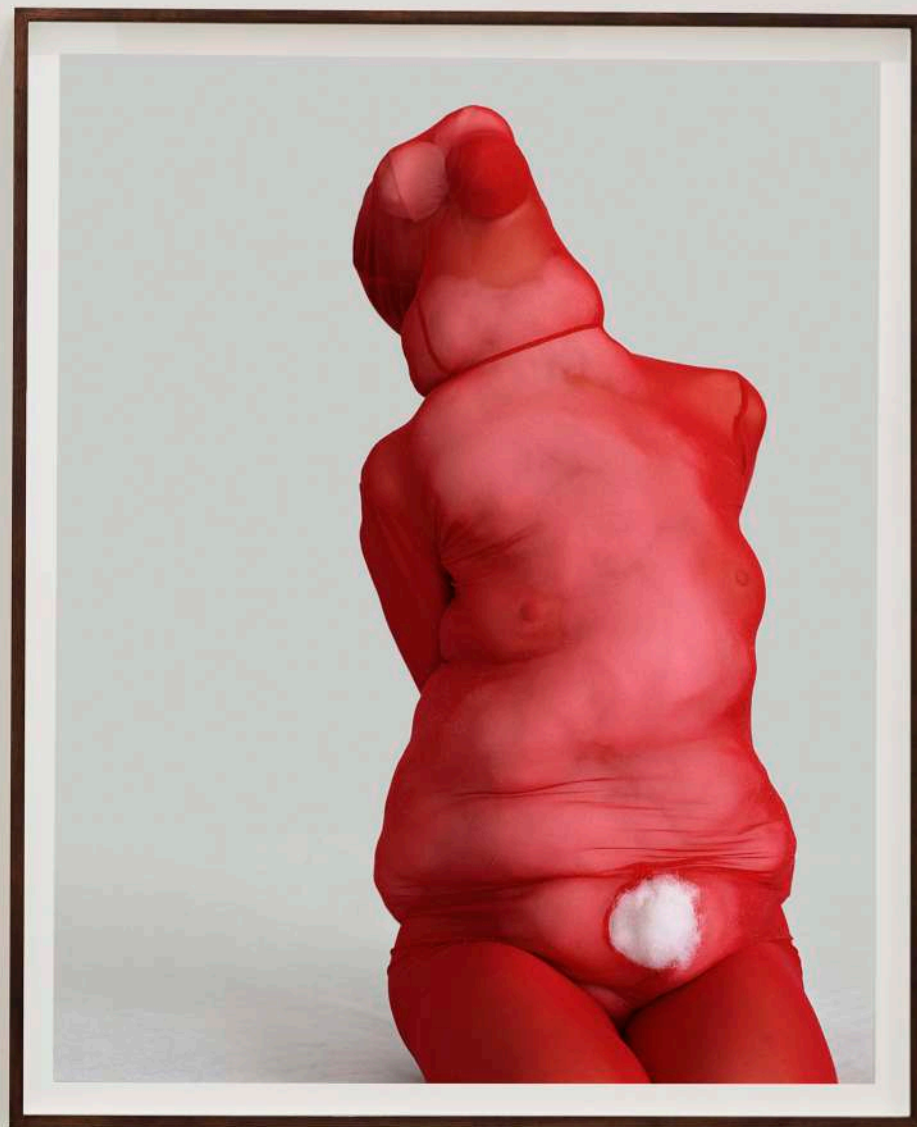
Small informational label on the wall.



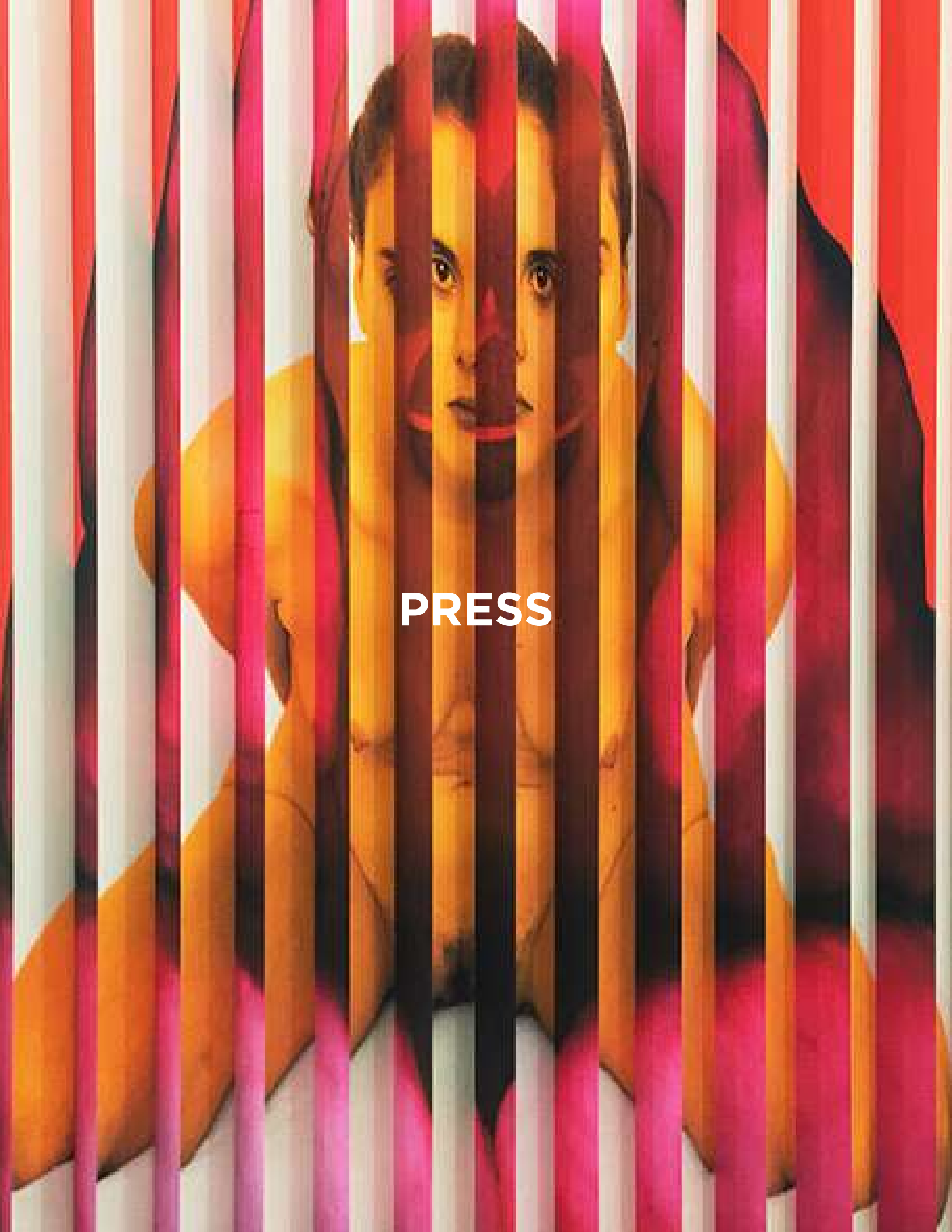
Installation view of *Polly Borland: Polyverse* at NGV  
Australia: The Ian Potter Centre running from  
28 September 2018 – 3 Feb 2019  
Photo: Tom Ross



**Wrist**  
2018  
Acrylic on canvas  
100 x 100 cm  
Polly Borland







**PRESS**

# PRESS

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**HARPER'S BAZAAR AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND**

MAY 2023

BY CLAIRE SUMMERS

**CULTURED**

APRIL 2023

BY ELLA MARTIN-GACHOT

**ARTS HUB**

FEBRUARY 2023

BY JASMINE PENMAN

**THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD**

JANUARY 2023

BY KERRIE O'BRIEN

**LOS ANGELES MAGAZINE**

MAY 2021

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

**THE GUARDIAN**

NOVEMBER 2018

BY BRIGID DELANEY

**THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD**

NOVEMBER 2017

BY ASHLEY CRAWFORD

**STURGEON**

2015

BY CHRIS MCAULIFFE





# 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

**P**olly 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 gooey 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.



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



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.

# CULTURED

APRIL 2023

## Penny Slinger and Polly Borland's Photographic Playground

By Ella Martin-Gachot



Penny Slinger and Polly Borland, *Mylar*, 2022. All images courtesy of the artists and Lyles & King

Penny Slinger and Polly Borland did not become artists to be likable. The duo have had long, polymorphous, and disruptive careers. London-born Slinger, 76, uses the erotic and divine as lenses through which to apprehend and dissect femininity. Melbourne-raised Borland, 64, investigates celebrity, abjection, ego, and authenticity through her genre-bending photographic practice. Over the past few years, the two have come together to play with the aging female form and its possibilities. The fruit of their rich collaboration, “Playpen,” is on display at Lyles & King in New York starting today. CULTURED took this opportunity to chat with Slinger and Borland about using the camera as a mirror, exploring fluidity beyond gender, and rescuing older women from invisibility.

### **CULTURED: What instincts came up in the collaborative process of making this show?**

**Penny Slinger:** It was an alchemical journey that we went on together, stimulated by Polly coming to me and saying that she felt kind of stuck and wanted to collaborate.

**Polly Borland:** I hadn't lived in Australia for over 30 years, and I somehow got stuck there for a year and a half when the pandemic hit. I had a show opening at Nino Mier, my gallery in LA, and they were all selfies of me. It was the first time I had revealed myself in that way in my work, and I wasn't there for the opening. I had no real birthing moment with the work, and I felt lost. Penny and I had done a talk a few years before on “reframing the muse.” So, when I came back to LA, I emailed her.



I put myself in the role of the muse, and it was a journey of transformation. We used each session as a playground where Penny would oversee the play but got to play as well. It was a very safe environment for me to be free, and in a body that was 20 pounds heavier because of Covid. There were a lot of things that normally I would have been extremely self-conscious about ... For me, the camera is a tool of control, and to relinquish that control to another person, albeit an artist and someone that is in sympathy with me, was a big step.

**Slinger:** It's super important at this point in time, especially for women, to collaborate. We've been put in this competition aspect with each other. Now, I think we've got to leave all that behind and come to a next level of interaction where we're really helping and supporting each other. I built my practice for many



Penny Slinger and Polly Borland, *Alien Fruits*, 2022.

years, starting with photographing myself but extending that to other people, having that camera be like a mirror and the person behind the camera being invisible. You're entering into this symbiotic situation where you're reflections of each other and it's all one energy.

What we did in this work together is something that I really stand behind, which is saying: a muse is someone who can inspire and embody boundless creativity. In each section, we reinvented the idea of the body. It's like a study of morphology, but each particular facet is opening up the body to look at it in another way, culminating in our doing the exquisite corpse, where we're chopping the body in three and bringing together all kinds of different combinations. It's really celebrating self-invention.

**Borland:** Each session enabled me to go into an almost semi-conscious state. It was like a psychodrama play where I was able to express myself physically in a way that I'd probably never really been able to. It was the act of being seen by Penny, but also engaging in the materials. What did the fabric mean? What did the clay mean? What did the sensory experience mean? It wasn't an intellectual thought process; it just unfolded as I became more in touch with my body. Like the fruit within the stockings—it was sort of fleshy, wet, and quite hard. It wasn't comfortable. Each material brought out different poses and sensual experiences.

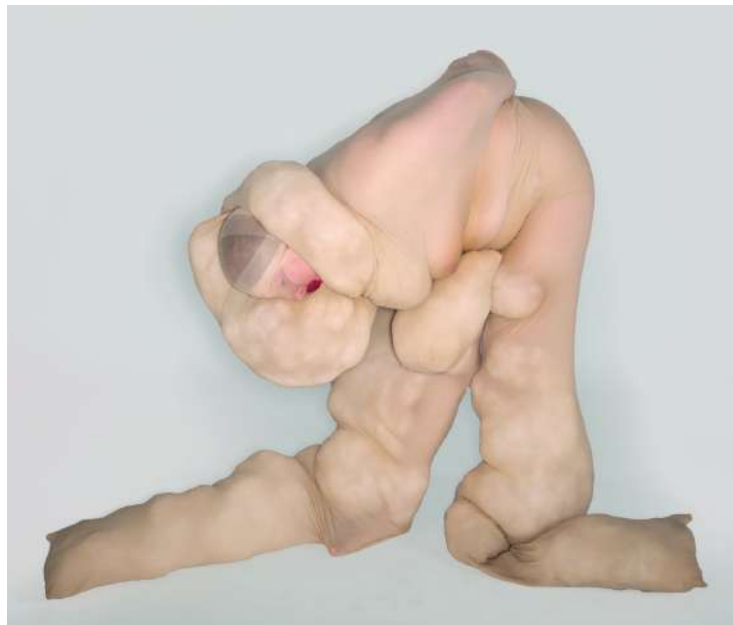
**Slinger:** All we had to rely on was our creativity and our ability to respond to the materials and to everything we brought into that playpen, and let it come through like children—playing, fresh, and inquisitive, and not caring what anyone else thought about it.



Penny Slinger and Polly Borland, *Exquisite Corpse*, 2022.

**CULTURED:** The images in “Playpen” play with the grotesque in beauty, or beauty in the grotesque, which can be seen as a commentary on the expectations projected onto women’s bodies, but also on the freedom that’s found in bodily modification. Could you speak to that tension?

**Slinger:** At this moment, when we’ve got much more of an opening to gender fluidity, we’re certainly exploring that in the images we have. But we’re also exploring a fluidity that goes beyond just definitions of gender, one that merges with elements and creatures and expands the idea of what is beautiful or ugly into a much wider palette ... Like with Polly putting these fruits in different parts of her body, it becomes an altered kind of being. We didn’t have to go to the plastic surgeon for this, we just had to use what was in our refrigerator and our costume cupboard.



Penny Slinger and Polly Borland, *Morph*, 2022.



**Borland:** It's all non-binary, actually, because it's not about the opposites, it's about creating something new ... I've become increasingly interested in viewing things through paradigms that I wouldn't normally look through, and I think that's really where I'm at with that. The inside's coming out, the outside's going in, and it's all mixed together in this cacophony.

**Slinger:** It's like the edge where the water meets the land, and you've got all kinds of new, interesting creatures forming. We're in that place of forming creatures together.

**CULTURED:** **There's something in this work that really evokes hunger, or a sort of unleashed desire. What are you two hungry for right now?**

**Slinger:** I'm hungry for the recognition of the female elder! When I was younger, I made my book 50% *The Visible Woman* to show that we're only seeing half of a person when we're looking at her surface. Now, it's like how does one make a woman of a certain age visible? I think it's important for society that we allow the wisdom of experience to percolate back in, and that accumulated beauty is not seen as a faded rose but allowed to bloom.

**Borland:** Since doing this project with Penny, I feel so reenergized in my practice. It's interesting that, at the age of 64, I have the kind of drive and creativity of when I was in my early 20s. I'm just raring to go.



Penny Slinger and Polly Borland, *Through the Glass*, 2022.

*“Playpen” is on view through May 13, 2023 at Lyles & King in New York.*

# The Sydney Morning Herald

JANUARY 2023

## Polly Borland on nude selfies, ageing and having the Queen in her loo

By Kerrie O'Brien

Acclaimed Australian photographer Polly Borland has taken shots of many people in the nude and now, for the first time, she has turned the camera on herself.

For her latest series, the 64-year-old uses her body as sculpture, literally squishing bits of it together to create slightly abstract, occasionally surreal and often playful works.



Polly Borland at her new exhibition, *Nudie and Blobs*. SIMON SCHLUTER

*Nudie and Blobs*, which opens at STATION Melbourne this week, includes five large-scale photographs that celebrate Borland's body while commenting on the obsession with the selfie in our culture today. Ironically, it was only through using an iPhone she was able to get the shots, despite the renowned portrait photographer previously having zero interest in moving to digital. "I even bought a selfie stick," she says with a laugh.

It is her first exhibition with the South Yarra-based gallery and includes two amorphous creatures made from resin – called *Blobs 1* and *Blobs 2* – in the first Australian showing of her recent sculptures. "I feel like I'm very political, but I don't feel necessarily that I'm consciously political in my work. For me it was more a play on the idea of the selfie and everyone's taking photos of themselves. Everyone's posting photos of themselves. Everyone's using an iPhone. The whole age thing is kind of incidental, it was more that, you know, there's something beautiful in these mounds of flesh. I think the age thing is obviously



extremely relevant ... and women in art and older women being photographed, you know, it's not done in this way."

It's confronting to show your own body in this way, she says, but "I'm just doing what I've done to others ... I was sort of scared to show the work here I suppose because it is quite revealing, [it's] not flattering. It's kind of playful as well, I mean, there's humour, but it sort of feels joyous to me, like a celebration. It was quite liberating because I've always had body issues, not with nudity, but weight. I've always been a bit chubby."

Borland's portrait of Germaine Greer naked on her bed, shot in 1999, is one of the most well-known. It proved controversial when Greer later said she had been manipulated into taking her clothes off, when Borland recalls it was in fact the feminist writer's idea.

Borland was holidaying in the Greek islands when she noticed the incredible shadows her body cast on the ground. She started capturing those images on her phone and continued to take pictures of herself when she got home.



Borland's portrait of Germaine Greer, 1999. POLLY BORLAND

Sculpture is the Melbourne-born artist's latest passion, even though she realises now she has been working her way towards it for some time. It has revitalised her and ushered in a whole new chapter for her art.

During lockdown, Borland was trapped for 18 months in Byron Bay, arguably one of the best places in the world to find oneself in such a scenario, where she met and worked with the artist Karla Dickens, also the creative director of the Art Byron festival; Dickens' portrait by Blak Douglas won the 2022 Archibald Prize.

*'It's given me a whole new energy in my relationship to my work.'*

Australian photographer Polly Borland, on her newfound passion for sculpting

They went to a dinner together "literally in the middle of nowhere" and Dan Tobin of Urban Art Projects (UAP) was there, known for his work with artists Lindy Lee, Phillip K Smith and Ai Weiwei. Borland approached him at the end of the night and he invited her to the foundry in Brisbane. That serendipitous meeting marked the beginning of a significant next phase of her evolution.

"I don't usually have those moments of the stars aligning, and then all of a sudden I've landed this incredible opportunity," Borland says. "He just said, 'You are creating sculpture in your photographs and we want to take the sculpture out of the photographs and into the real world'."

"It's given me a whole new energy in my relationship to my work and hopefully the world's relationship to my work. I love it! I was creating sculpture but it couldn't last because it was on people. All the *Morph*



Detail of Polly Borland's photograph *Nudie (1)*, 2021. POLLY BORLAND

photos, which were done live, I was dressing people, enveloping people in these weird costumes.”

*Morph* featured a series of people in various costumes she'd designed, including her good friend Nick Cave in a sparkly dress, his face covered by a sheer stocking and eyes obscured by a bright blue wig, with a bright red slash of lipstick across his mouth. "I had to give myself over to this process of being degraded. That was kind of really exciting," Cave told *Polymorphous*, a documentary about Borland released in 2013.

She was already thinking "kind of sculpturally": her tapestries from around 2017 are double-sided. "I was beginning to reuse the photos actually, using single photographs and then fusing them together for the lenticulars, then I created a double-sided one..."

While in enforced exile in Byron, she was shocked to see then Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the news wearing an Akubra; it struck her that Australia continued to be a colonial outpost.

Since her stunning 2002 portrait of Queen Elizabeth, commissioned to celebrate the Royal Jubilee and one of the only official Royal photographs to zoom in close to her majesty, Borland has grappled with the fact she played a part in the propaganda "machine" as she describes it; a version of the portrait takes pride of place in the toilet at her LA home.

At Prahran College aged 18, Borland fell in love with photography, which she says gave her a way of ordering the world, in a life which up until then had been quite chaotic. "It was more than a way of documenting things, it was a way of creating work as an artist."

Like Cave, Borland has lived away from Australia for more than three decades: in 1989, she moved to the UK and since 2011 has been based in LA. She is married to filmmaker John Hillcoat and has a son, Louie, who is studying music at college in the US; Louie appeared in her *Not Good at Human series*.

Using her own body as a sculpture in these latest images and the two sculptures included in *Nudie and Blobs* signal what lies ahead. Thus far she has made work from aluminium and resin and she plans to tackle wood at some stage; many of her favourite sculptors have used resin and she likes the way the light plays with the medium. "It's like glass... [the two sculptures in the show] are sort of these creatures. We're trying to figure out a name for them..."

Also underway is a huge, 7 foot version of her first sculpture *BOD*, which will be shown at the prestigious Marfa Invitational in Texas. Made from aluminium and then painted, it is under construction by Tobin and his team at UAP's foundry in Beacon in upstate New York.

It's an exciting new chapter for the visionary artist, one of this country's best, who describes herself as a

humanist. Borland says her work is always questioning and challenging, confronting audiences yet also finding beauty in ugliness.



Detail of Borland's *HM Queen Elizabeth II*, 2002. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MURRAY WHITE STUDIO.

*Nudie and Blobs* is at STATION | Melbourne until February 25



JANUARY 2022

## Exhibition review: Polly Borland, *Nudie and Blobs*, STATION

By Jasmine Penman



Polly Borland, 'Nudie and Blobs', installation view at STATION Melbourne. Photo: Simon Strong.

Polly Borland has made a career out of photographing others. Over the last several decades, the Melbourne-born, Los Angeles-based artist has photographed the likes of Susan Sontag, Nick Cave, Cate Blanchett and Queen Elizabeth II. And now, for the first time in her professional life, Borland is turning the camera on herself.

*Nudie and Blobs* is the title of Borland's latest Australian exhibition, currently on show at STATION Melbourne. Featuring five large-scale photographs (all of which were shot on an iPhone) and two resin sculptures, this exhibition is a radical study of the human body.

Upon entering the space, one is immediately drawn to Borland's *Nudie* works, a collection of five photographs that display a female body – specifically Borland's – in close and intimate detail. In these works, she presents us with a naked, obscured and fragmented version of herself. She looms over us with dimpled folds and draping breasts, bringing into view a cropped body that almost appears to trickle out of the picture frame.

These photographs depict Borland's own body; however, they are not portraits in the traditional sense. In *Nudie (4)* (2021), for example, we see a body that has been twisted and contorted almost to the point of complete abstraction. Here, Borland asks us to think about what we are looking at and, in doing so, challenges the representational nature of photography itself.

Borland's decision to photograph her own naked body is significant for two reasons. The first being that it provides us with an opportunity to reconsider representations of women in art, and the second being that it allows for a total removal of the female body from the male gaze.

In a move reminiscent of Jenny Saville's feminist nudes from the 1990s, Borland defies the traditional and idealised view of the female nude by presenting to us instead these large-scale, abject versions in which Borland claims agency as both the artist and the artist's model. In these photographs, she shows



*Polly Borland, 'Nudie (4)', 2021. Archival pigment print, 101.6 x 135.3 cm. Image: Courtesy the artist and STATION Melbourne*

us her body as she sees it, complete with its wrinkles, veins and loose skin. It's not supposed to be pretty, but it is supposed to be subversive. By crafting these uncompromising images of her ageing body, Borland counters traditional conceptualisations of female beauty and radically challenges one of the most established conventions of Western art.

In the corner of the gallery stand two sculptures titled *Blobs 1* (2023) and *Blobs 2* (2023). Crafted out of resin, these sculptures have a soft and organic quality to them. And, despite being abstract in nature, they still possess a human quality that is so beautifully emblematic of Borland's practice at large.

Although *Blobs 1* and *Blobs 2* are the only two sculptural works in the exhibition, it feels as if Borland has approached all her works in a similar way; that is, from the perspective of a sculptor. In the *Nudie* photographs, we see Borland confront the materiality of her own body. She kneads and twists and folds her flesh into different shapes, rendering herself both malleable and elastic. Here, Borland injects a new layer of dimensionality into her photographs and, in doing so, pushes the boundaries of the medium itself.

Borland's works constantly oscillate between being abject and beautiful, ambiguous and precise, grotesque and alluring. By teetering along these dichotomous lines and working from that space of in-betweenness, Borland invites us to find beauty in the ambiguity of it all. And believe me, once you find it, it's impossible to look away.

*Nudie and Blobs* continues at STATION Melbourne, until 25 February 2023; free.

MAY 2021

## **‘I’ve Got Nothing More to Hide’: Polly Borland Puts Her Nude Selfies on Display**

Of her new project ‘Nudie’ the legendary L.A.-based photographer says, ‘it was time for me to do what I’d done to others’

By Michael Slenske



Courtesy Nino Mier Gallery

Most photographers love having the ability to hide behind the camera, relishing the agency it affords them. Melbourne-born, Los Angeles-based Polly Borland isn't immune to these pleasures. "I like photography because it's about control," Borland says on a Zoom call from her native Australia, where she's spent the entirety of the pandemic.

Though Borland devoted the first three decades of her career to crafting decadent, erotic, and uncannily hypnotic images of others, she's rarely trained her lens on herself. For her breakout series, *The Babies*, she documented a group of infantilist fetishists. After discovering actress Gwendoline Christie in a Brighton boutique called Pussy, she made the future *Game of Thrones* actress the subject of the visual fairytale, *Bunny*. And for her *Smudge*, *Pupa*, and *Morph* series, she ensconced various models in layers of nude and high-chroma pantyhose.

"The reason I wouldn't have done it when I was younger was that I was too vain," she says of turning the camera on herself. But after being stuck in Melbourne while trying to get her green card sorted, Borland



and her family—her husband is director John Hillcoat and her son Louie, aka Sleepie Louie, is an aspiring hip-hop artist and CalArts student—they decided to take their first vacation in years in the lush seaside enclave of Byron Bay.

Once Borland realized that the isolated New South Wales beach town wasn't as hard hit by COVID as places like Los Angeles, she started working in earnest on a selfie-inspired series she'd begun while traveling in Greece. "It was like pulling teeth, this body of work. I'm usually looking through the camera and I've got complete control. But I kind of knew I was going to need to use the iPhone," says Borland, who had always shot film before this project. "I didn't know how to do it in a way where I had some objectivity. I was using my hand and getting the camera pointed at me or the iPhone and eventually I got a selfie stick and that kind of worked a little bit better, but not really, and then I brought my selfie stick with me to Australia and I started using it as a tripod and that meant I had more control over the arrangement of the body."

Borland and her L.A. dealer, Nino Mier, who will open an exhibition featuring 14 of the artist's new photos at his latest space in West Hollywood on Saturday, May 15, consider this recent body of work, dubbed *Nudie*, to be the most revealing of her career, both literally and figuratively.

"It's the best work I've ever done," says Borland.

This new series of confounding, compelling, and closely cropped self-portraits of her naked body was created by Borland contorting her skin into undulating landscapes that look like classical, if slightly psychedelic, statuary. It's a study in radical vulnerability and the death of ego as it relates to the ageism and sexism implicit in selfie culture. And it's actually quite a labor-intensive labor of love.

"It's really hard because I'm having to balance. Basically I ate my way through COVID, the lockdown and after, and it's only now that I've been able to do these yoga intensives that ironically all the fat is going," says Borland. "I was fatter than I've ever been before. People say, 'You're so brave.' I don't think it's brave it was just the next step. But my husband can't even look at them and John isn't fainthearted about anything. I was like, 'I'm sorry, I have to do this, and I'm doing it.'"

We talked to Borland about the experience of turning the lens on herself.

**Do you think you've always been working toward this, that every body of work was a self-portrait in a way? Even though you're photographing other people, it's all sort of about you, to me anyway.**

No, definitely. I think the main point of it was that I felt there's some resentment by one of the people I've photographed and she felt taken advantage of or embarrassed that she had been naked even though it was really her decision. It ended up being really quite complicated. I read somewhere that when someone sits for you it's like a transaction and unless it's very clear what the transaction is, what happens is people have different expectations as to what the outcome is going to be.

**Welcome to journalism.**

Exactly, so the whole thing becomes complicated with psychology and desire. The crux of the matter is that it was time for me to do what I'd done to others. I've never been comfortable in my own skin, never felt comfortable in my own body. I was a chubby child. I was one of six sisters, all slender and beautiful. My mother had a food disorder, she was virtually anorexic. She smoked and drank and didn't eat. Fed all of us, she was a brilliant cook, but I was a chubby child. I still am a comfort eater. I used to be called "Fatty" in the family even though I wasn't fat, I was chubby, and I think that I just never felt comfortable. This new work isn't sexualized at all and a lot of my other work is and people have asked me about the sexy stuff in my work and I cannot figure that out. I don't know where that comes from. I've tried to analyze it, but with this work that is non-existent. And a lot of feminist women have said the sexy stuff in my work is not about the male gaze, it's much more a woman's view. My work is gritty. It's not pretty pretty. For me, I feel like I've got nothing more to hide. My life has been spent on hiding the fact that I did not feel attractive.

**You say that but you're a style icon to so many people—maybe that's a separate identity from this *Nudie* work. There's the iconography, and maybe this is a totally different thing.**

I think it's me using my body as sculpture. I think the work is very sculptural and I think probably after *Morph*, where I dressed up [model] Sibylla [Phipps], who is in all the costumes, it was really soft sculpture. There were reveals of body parts through the stocking fabric, but I think it was time to get rid of all that it was a stripping back of all the props and there's the flesh. I started shooting this a few years ago but I hadn't really nailed it, so I was intermittently shooting it.

**Did you start shooting it in L.A.?**

No, it was in Greece. I started shooting shadows of myself in Antiparos. I continued shooting these shadows and that's where the idea came from, me photographing my own shadow and then it came into this idea of selfies. First it was random, looking for a way in, and over time I realized what was working, which is, "What you're looking at isn't what you're looking at." You can probably tell what part of the body it is, but what angle is it?

**That takes away any gaze or any sexuality because when you first sent them to me absent of any text explaining it I wasn't sure at first if I was looking at a human or some other sculptural form.**

Yeah [laughs] the ones I like the best are the weirdest.



**The one with the fist smashing into your skin is amazing.**

Well that I took very early on, that I took in L.A. and that became the beginning.

**So what the hell are you doing to create these forms. If you step back and let the body come to it sort of has this weird, intense yoga sensibility.**

Yeah, I started doing all these yoga intensives here because COVID isn't as bad where I am as it is in the rest of the world. I started yoga in lockdown over Zoom with a yoga teacher in Melbourne and I'm in New South Wales. It's ashtanga yoga and it's the one thing I managed to do in lockdown and I just kept going. I wasn't doing any exercise and I wasn't even motivated to do walks and I'm in a really beautiful part of New South Wales.

## **Have you been there the whole pandemic?**

Yeah, we came here for a holiday waiting for our green card, and then the green card didn't arrive. One of our documents were out of date, and this guy sent us away and said it would take three weeks. This was the beginning of March and I said, "We've got to get back to L.A." In actual fact all the governments knew what was coming and nobody was being told. We went back to Melbourne where mine and my husband's families were and I said, "Let's not stay here, let's go on a holiday, we haven't been on a holiday in years and we've never been to Byron Bay so we came to Byron Bay and a few days later lockdown happened. Byron Bay is a seaside town and it's attracted a lot of different types of people. Every time we went to get food we put a mask on disinfect all the packaging. We were in a six-week lockdown and then slowly we reemerged and it took a while to realize that COVID hadn't really hit here.

## **Because you're so isolated.**

Isolated and Australia locked the borders down. They locked Chinese people out early on and then hotel quarantine was put in place right at the beginning, so they closed all the borders. Australia is very good at that because it's one of the most racist countries. It's really well hidden. Everyone thinks Australia is like Canada. It's not. It's got some of the harshest immigration laws of any country. They've built offshore detention centers for people who have tried to get here by boat and there's no hope to get processed they can only go back to the countries where they may be killed. And then recently they've brought a lot of asylum seekers to Australia for medical care and they've been put in hotels, in locked rooms with no fresh air for 24 hours a day and they still haven't received any medical attention. It's against all human rights. Amnesty International, the UN, have all condemned Australia for these practices. I just found out the other day that Australia is not part of the UN Human Rights chapter and they've made up their own laws and they don't seem to care. It's this island mentality and the population has been brought up on this fear of invasion even though the white, European Australians are the original invaders. It's unbelievable and the indigenous Australians are still treated despicably and there's never been a reckoning. In school I was brought up thinking it was a peaceful transfer of land. No, it wasn't. It's very like America.

## **It's interesting because while you're stuck there in that idyllic but also fraught political climate there is this reckoning taking place in America, and very dramatically in Los Angeles, which is at the center of the COVID and social justice movements. I know you tried to get back to L.A., but do you think this work was made possible by being in this isolation there?**

I tried immediately to start working but we were pretty traumatized being in so much fear because it was a total unknown as to what would happen with COVID. I got to work immediately but it wasn't really until the last six months, maybe four months even, that I really started hitting it out of the park. The whole body of work, excuse the pun, it was really hard to do. I couldn't get control or predetermine or even imagine what I was going to get. I couldn't tell what was working and what wasn't. It was just really difficult to do. Half the work was produced in the last four months.

## **You started drawing, too.**

It was my first time drawing and I started doing art classes. When everything started opening up someone told me about this art school, the Byron School of Art, that's about three-quarters of an hour away from me. A friend was giving me a tour of all the schools and galleries around the area, but they had painting and ceramics classes. I'm pretty well-known in Australia, but I went in and they're all working artists, and I said, "I hear you do art classes, I'd like to take a painting class." And they started laughing at me. I said, "No, I'm serious."

## **I could imagine the looks on their faces. Do you like it?**

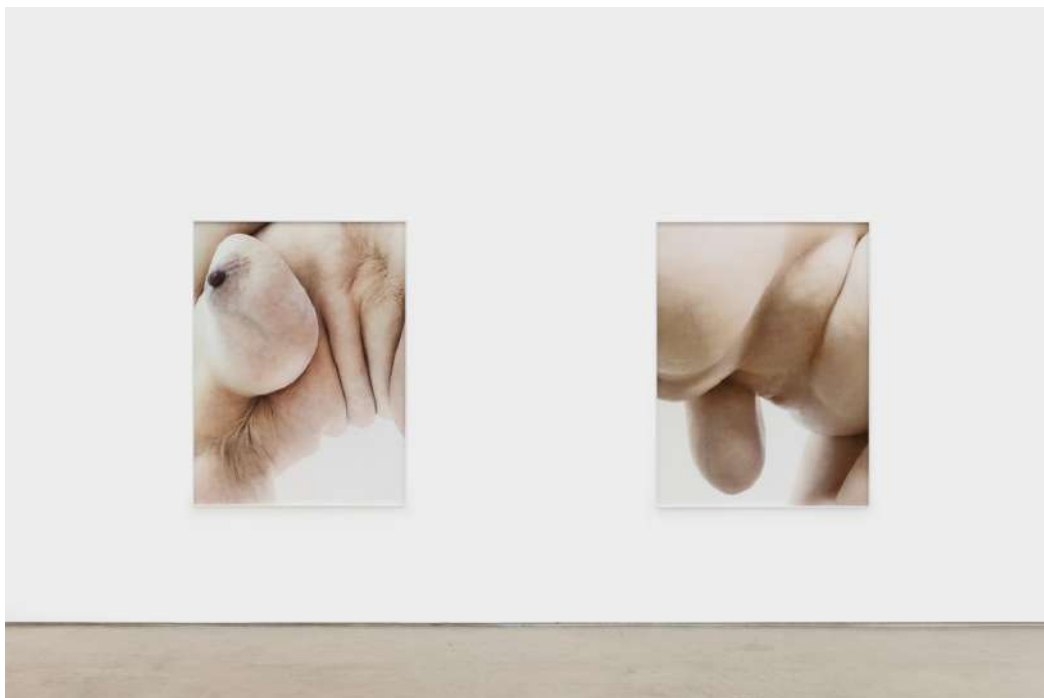
It's fantastic. It's in this incredible old warehouse and you can do one-off, six-week courses. So I signed up for this oil painting course and it was still life and I was like, "I don't know about this guys." And they were like, "Just do it, it's going to be fun." So basically I'm now in my second semester and I'm doing a



painting course with one of the owners of the school. He's an abstract painter. Still life wasn't really my bag, but I'm sure I learned something. I'd never really used any paint before. This one I'm using gouache and it's abstract and I absolutely fucking love it, Michael. I'm not a painter but the teacher said, "All you need is to understand the materiality of paint, what it can do, and you're going to be able to paint." I love photography, but I love documentary photography. I suppose that relates to what I'm doing now. I've gotten rid of all the props. *The Babies* is still one of my most groundbreaking bodies of work.

**Well, your work seems to delight in exposing these subcultures or secret desires and maybe, in this case, this secret terrain of your body. But this is the first body of work you've done digitally. How do you think this new work relates to *The Babies* or shooting Nick Cave or the Queen of England?**

Obviously it's a play on the whole selfie culture. They're not really selfies. It's me, but are they selfies? I think it's me exposing myself actually. I think all my work on an aesthetic level, there's a simplicity, there's almost a classical framing, so I think I'm always getting rid of mess from the frame. So I can see the link aesthetically. I got stuck in the portrait thing. In art school the photography department I was over influenced by what people told me. One of the lecturers told me, "Oh you can do fashion." Portraits always came easy to me because I was always interested in other people. I was involved in the punk scene in Melbourne, but I was also an observer. I was photographing artists as well for some alternative magazine. I shot Tony Clark wrapped in a sheet like a Greek statue and Nick Cave saw that photo and sought me out to photograph him. I started photographing Nick for myself after that and then he collaborated with my husband, John Hillcoat, on *Ghosts...of the Civil Dead*, which is about super prisons and the manipulation of the guards and how to control the inmate population through mind games. It's really wild, it's like my *Babies*. It's gritty and hard-hitting and it's an amazing film. We moved to England and we lived near him and that sort of cemented the relationship and I became the go-to photographer for him. I worked all over the world for *The New Yorker* and *Vogue* but that was always a means to an end. When I photographed the *Babies* for the *Independent* it was sort of a photography magazine back in those days.



Well in Susan Sontag's essay in the *Babies* book she has this line, "Close is ugly," and I think that could be the Trojan Horse M.O. of what you do. It's sort of like a drug hit, this proximity or forced intimacy, and you might be scared or tripped out at first, but then you're kind of hooked on this new sensation.

I think that's because people have to figure out what they're looking at. Now I've gone into more abstracted versions of that and, again, I think for me when I discovered the photos of Larry Clark at the Photographers Gallery, during this explosion of artists and creatives coming together in Melbourne during art school, it was truly shocking and I remember being thrilled by it. They were black and white and shitty printed and had all these fluff marks and scratches and they were pinned to the walls, no framing, and of course Larry Clark being Larry Clark, there were people shooting dope. I remember thinking this is what photography should be: it should be about revealing things that you haven't seen before and there was a whole debate in the early-'80s about getting the perfect print and the greyscale. The landscape photographers at the school were all concerned about that. These photos did not feel deliberate, it was like they just didn't give a shit. It added to the shock value. On some level I wanted my work to do the same thing getting toward *Babies*. There's a side of me that's the fashionista and always wanting to be nice coming from a nice, but not-so-nice middle-class family. We were considered a bit wild my family because my mother and father were quite liberal and part of the Melbourne creative scene. My father was this incredible architect and he'd been brought up as dirt poor and he educated his way out of poverty. His father was a dust man and his mother was a cleaner. He was very charismatic and they were very gorgeous and in a way I had to get out of Melbourne because it's a very competitive and stifling place. But I was brought up in this chaotic, seven kids household. I'm the third. On one hand I was brought up with these suburban middle class values, everything had to be nice. But my dad bought me a camera. He sent me to this hippie school. This hippie teacher set up a dark room in a cupboard because I said, "I can't draw, I can't paint." And I fell in love with taking photos and I was looking at *The Face* and all those youth culture magazines and I was working for Australian Vogue the minute I left college. Interestingly, I've reconnected with the art director who hired me, Christina Zimpel. We found each other on Instagram.

**Doesn't she make paintings of you?**

Yes, she's amazing. She really gave me my first magazine break. So this is a full circle creatively. I'm doing art classes again.

**You did photographs of yourself in college, right?**

I did a few but this is the first big effort to photograph myself. I love this idea that close is ugly, because most of my work is ugly but then lit beautifully and the colors and the content and subject matter has a grittiness. They're ugly beautiful and I think I've achieved that in this body of work. I'm interested in the sculptural aspect of this work and I think the stockings are done. I think it's the best body of work I've done...for now. I haven't figured the next step out.

**Maybe you'll be a painter next?**

Oh my god, I love the painting. Photography came very easy and it was easy for me to build my own thing with photography and I do feel that everyone is a painter now, but having said that I've probably got the images in my head and just I just need to figure out what I want to do with the paint. For me, it's always been about originality. People say that doesn't exist, and maybe it doesn't exist, but an original vision does. The people that stand out to me are the ones that are doing it their own way on a technical and in an imaginative way. If I can't achieve that in painting but maybe in the pursuing of it you find out if you can do it or not. Of course in the ceramics class all I did was nude figures with holes in every part of their body. I looked at everyone in the class and said, "Sorry, I can only do disturbing."

*Polly Borland: Nudie, May 15–June 19 at Nino Mier Gallery, 7327 Santa Monica Blvd.*

NOVEMBER 2018

## Polly Borland on art, bodies and Melbourne in the 80s: 'It was kind of a free-for-all'

As the LA-based Melbourne artist's surreal photographs grace Australian galleries, she talks selfies, Nick Cave and shooting the Queen

By Brigid Delaney



Portrait photographer and artist Polly Borland said she had a 'really hard slog' when she decamped from Melbourne to London in the late 80s. Photograph: Eugene Hyland

The group of friends would go on to become some of Australia's most important artists, film-makers and musicians. But in Melbourne in the 1980s, they were just kids: young, hanging out, with an inexhaustible appetite for partying.

It was the era of punk and the "little band scene", where small bands formed and dissolved over the course of a night or a week, playing in venues around St Kilda and Fitzroy.

The dark side of the scene was captured in Richard Lowenstein's *Dogs in Space* (starring Michael Hutchence as a heroin addict), filmed in Richmond in the mid-80s.

But three friends from around that time – film-maker John Hillcoat, musician Nick Cave and artist Polly Borland – have thrived since: Cave's decades-long music career branched into books, festival curation





Polly Borland and Nick Cave in London in 2011. Photograph: David M Benett/Getty Images

and film; Hillcoat has enjoyed global success with movies such as *The Proposition* and *The Road*; and Borland is currently the subject of a 60-work retrospective at the NGV – *Pollyverse* – staged as part of the Melbourne festival.

Speaking from her home in Los Angeles, she says those early years in Melbourne were “kind of a free-for-all”.

“At parties it was a mishmash of different types of people from different disciplines. There were painters, photographers, film-makers, musicians, actors, criminals, fashion designers, working-class people, middle-class people – so many different types of people. A lot of it was centred around the music scene. Every Friday night and every Saturday night we’d go to the Crystal Ballroom, and Nick Cave and the Boys Next Door and all those punk bands would play.”

Borland had been at high school with Lowenstein and worked on that film along with her sister, glass artist Emma Borland. “Life was a bit like [*Dogs in Space*]. Everybody was doing drugs and drinking and sleeping with everyone else – and it was stimulating creatively. A lot of us were very ambitious and we were very in awe of England, all the magazines – the *Face*, *ID* magazine. Everyone was looking towards England. People didn’t identify with the Aussie rock around at the time ... London was the place to be.”

Borland married Hillcoat, and the pair moved to London later in the 80s. “[Hillcoat] had a just made a film



‘I had only ever wanted to be an artist.’ Photograph: Shaugn and John

– Ghosts ... of the Civil Dead – and we knew a few people in London. But initially it was a really hard slog. It took me three years of hanging in there before I got work as a photographer.”

In Australia, Borland had begun making a name for herself, shooting for Australian Vogue. But in London, “I had to take a waitressing job, work that I had only ever done when I was a student. “When I hit England, there was the explosion of the YBA [young British artist], people like Damien Hirst. I could have got in on that but I was doing editorial work. Eventually I ended up where I needed to be anyway,” she says. “I kind of did waste time but I flew all over the world and photographed really interesting people, so it was fun in that respect.”

But ultimately, the work she was doing wasn't art. “I used to do portraiture but I had only ever wanted to be an artist. If you are taking a portrait of someone, you can't put a stocking over them,” she says, referencing a common motif in her work. “It's the limitation of the job – and you only get a certain amount of time.”

But being a portrait photographer did give Borland access to high-profile people – and in 2002, she took a photo of the Queen, commissioned by the palace for the golden jubilee, which quickly became iconic for its pop, modern aesthetic.

She was given only a few minutes to get the shot.

“It was very stressful,” says Borland, who shot the photo on film. The backdrop was a glittering gold cloth that she had bought from erotic lingerie and sex toy shop, Ann Summers. The result is very bright and almost frightening in its garishness, but also quite intimate, as the Queen is shot close-up.



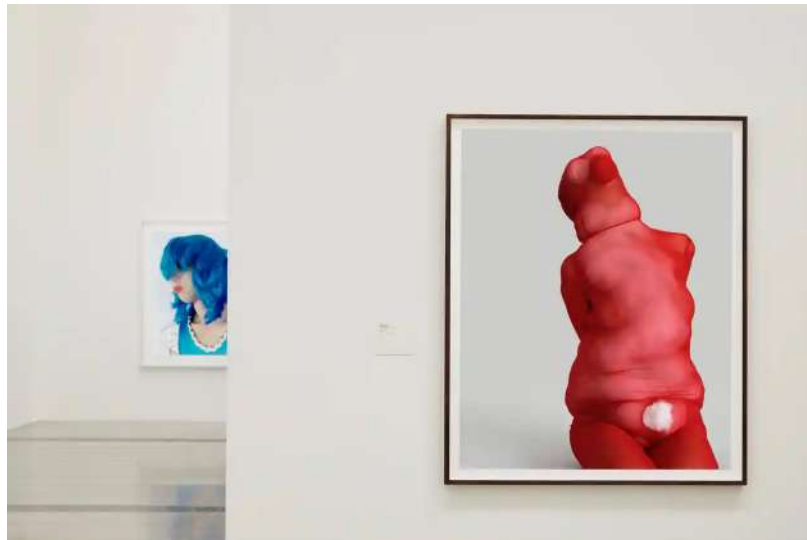
Borland's portrait of the Queen, which got a second life as a tapestry stitched by incarcerated prisoners. Photograph: Eugene Hyland

Borland has since commissioned prisoners who were trained in needlework to make a tapestry of the portrait, which is also displayed as part of the NGV retrospective. She acknowledges there is irony of having prisoners incarcerated “at her Majesty's pleasure”, stitching a picture of the Queen.

As a renowned magazine photographer, taking portraits and shooting fashion spreads, Borland had the money, time and space to pursue her art. This current phase of her career is her richest and most authentic, she says – and the work that launched it was her 2001 series *The Babies*: arresting portraits featuring grown men who like to dress as babies. They shave their body hair, wear nappies and roll around on the ground. The work took five years to create and makes for unsettling viewing, yet the images are bright, almost cheerful. Borland is not passing judgment.

Her subsequent series *Bunny*, featuring *Game of Thrones* actress Gwendoline Christie, subverts the Playboy stereotype, showing nudes through a female gaze. In one image, the Playboy bunny ears are too long, making the model look cartoonish. Christie and Borland, who met in Brighton (where they both lived at the time), collaborated on the photographs over five years, with Christie suggesting props or clothing.

And then there are the pictures of bodies covered up – such as Nick Cave, unrecognisable with a giant stocking over his head, a blue wig and garish red lipstick. “It’s sort of about this idea of revealing and hiding at the same time,” Borland told Broadsheet in 2010.



Installation view of Pollyverse at the NGV – including, at the back, a portrait of Nick Cave. Photograph: Tim Ross

“Polly has always worked outside of the system,” Nick Cave told the Age last year. “She is, of course, the most extraordinary portrait photographer. I mean, really quite thrilling. And a great fashion photographer, as well. Her other work has become increasingly challenging as her subjects become more and more brutalised and reduced to the neurotic essence.”

And later this month, Borland’s newest work, Morph, which is also on display in Melbourne, will come to Sydney.

Morph is a large-scale, surreal work of photographs, each featuring a person stuffed, sausage-like, into a stocking until they are no longer recognisably human. “The dream sequence in Dumbo, where Dumbo gets drunk with the mouse, was a big influence,” says Borland.

“It was supposed to be preconscious. There was an unconscious trance-like state in those figures, and originally I didn’t want them to be figures, I was trying to create my own creatures and slowly they grew legs and arms and became more human. It was definitely an evolution into humanness – originally it was meant to be hallucinogenic, mindscape experiences.”

I mention a series of striking works in the retrospective: a group of nude photographs from Bunny that have been folded into lenticulars, their perspective shifting depending on where you stand in the room.

“I had certain images that I thought would be really good to do lenticulars with. I photographed nudes of my model and it came together pretty easily; the framing was trial and error,” says Borland.

“A lot of how I work is pretty basic,” Borland says. “It’s conceptual, but also revealing who’s inside the costume, their identity, who’s human and what’s not.”

Borland is now back in her studio in Los Angeles creating a new work around the concept of the selfie.

“The selfie work is confronting my ageing body. They are nudes basically, so I decided to use my iPhone and do what everyone else is doing but not beautifying or hiding anything.

“It’s about the body’s decay as one grows older,” she says. “Also it was time for me to do to myself what I did to others.”





Installation view of Pollyverse at the NGV – including, at the back, a portrait of Nick Cave. Photograph: Tim Ross

# The Sydney Morning Herald

NOVEMBER 2017

## **Polly Borland treads further into darkness, turning celebrities into monsters**

Even friend Nick Cave finds the expat Melburnian's latest images 'challenging'

By Ashley Crawford

Photographer Polly Borland is not sure where her dark imagery comes from, but she suspects her home town played a part. "Maybe it had something to do with growing up in my household and the suburbs of Melbourne," she says.

Speaking on the eve of her latest exhibition, she says that "Melbourne is infected by a darkness, maybe to do with its own history and the treatment of the Indigenous people of Australia ... I feel there's a stain on



Polly Borland suspects that growing up in Melbourne fed her taste for dark imagery. SIMON SCHLUTER

Australia right up to present day, seen with its treatment of adults and children seeking asylum on Nauru. It's horrifying how official policy can be so cruel and against all human rights."

Her friend and fellow Melburnian Nick Cave, who also fled the Antipodes for a more rigorous intellectual life abroad in the mid 1980s, recognises a fellow outsider in Borland.

"Polly has always worked outside of the system," he says. "She is, of course, the most extraordinary portrait photographer. I mean, really quite thrilling. And a great fashion photographer, as well. Her other work has become increasingly challenging as her subjects become more and more brutalised and reduced to the neurotic essence.



Mouth, reversible tapestry, 2017. POLLY BORLAND, MURRAY WHITE ROOM

"But even though there is a thread of horror that runs through much of what Polly does, her photos never appear ugly or exploitative and never stray far from her own sense of empathetic beauty. Even in the most disturbing of images we are drawn towards them because of the magnificence of the photos themselves – their texture, their colour."

Borland's latest exhibition, suitably titled *Monster*, includes typically grotesque photographs and tapestries whose subjects gag on oversized tennis balls or strain under claustrophobic body stockings.

Borland, Cave, artist Tony Clark and filmmaker John Hillcoat all moved to Europe at around the same time to pursue their creative visions on the world stage (Borland and her husband, Hillcoat, now live in Los Angeles).

"We are all the closest of friends," Borland says. "We share similar interests and love what each other do. These three are some of my closest friends and creative advisers." (Borland's sister, Emma, is also, she says "a huge influence on my work and one of my favourite artists".)



Gag, 2017, archival pigment print, 40.5 x 33.5 cm, edition of six.  
POLLY BORLAND, MURRAY WHITE ROOM

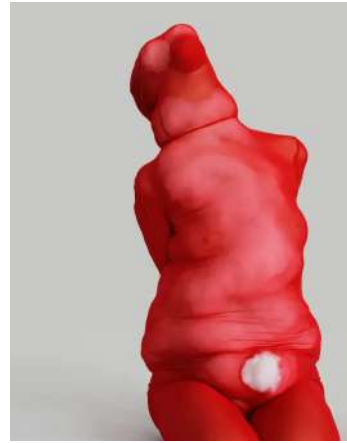
It was not just being Australian that linked the four. Each create works that maintain a distinctly dark edge. Clark's gloomy and romantic landscapes, Cave's punk-goth lyrics, Hillcoat's films such as *The Road* and *The Proposition*, all carry hints of the funereal. Of them all, this strange aesthetic tendency has been carried forward most overtly by Borland.

Born and raised in Melbourne, Borland's fate was sealed at 16, when her father gave her a camera. Attending art school, she soon discovered the works of such photographers as Weegee and Diane Arbus and began contributing to small independent magazines with dark and stark portraits of friends including





Mother, 2017 (detail), archival pigment print, 40.5 x 33.5 cm sheet, edition of six. POLLY BORLAND, MURRAY WHITE ROOM



Monster, 2017, archival pigment print, 162 x 135 cm, edition of six. POLLY BORLAND, MURRAY AND WHITE ROOM

Cave and Clark and visiting celebrities such as Keith Haring. She moved to London in 1989, freelancing for such magazines as *Vogue*.

Her reputation as a portraitist was cemented when she was commissioned by Buckingham Palace to photograph Queen Elizabeth II to commemorate her golden jubilee in 2002. Many viewers describe Borland's royal portrait as strangely chilling.

While she had mastered the mainstream, other investigations were simmering. Two years before the Queen, she made a series of portraits titled *The Babies* in which she explored the world of grown men who shave their body hair, wear nappies and suck on pacifiers (the text in her 2001 publication on the works was written by none other than Susan Sontag). The photographs were first shown at London's Meltdown festival in 1999, which Cave curated.

In 2008, she produced *Bunny*, a collection of bizarre photographs featuring English actress and *Game of Thrones* star Gwendoline Christie. (*Bunny* also featured a fairytale written by English writer Will Self.) *Bunny* was followed by *Smudge* (2011), which featured abstract depictions of three of her friends, including Cave.

As the years have passed, Borland has developed a particular fascination and even fetish for the body and the "bodily". *The Babies*, *Bunny* and *Smudge* series see her subjects twisted and distended, arrayed in unnatural poses that at times suggest degradation and, at others, an unruly eroticism. *Monster* takes this further, with her subjects gagged, assailed by carcinomatous prosthetics, bloodied and veiled.

"I try to trace it," she says of this tendency, "but don't know where this comes from. I think it's a metaphor for decay, our decay ... I'm a figurative artist but I'm [also] interested in the emotional abstract ... My art is very existential. I'm dealing with abstracted emotional mindscapes. I use figurative abstraction to reduce body parts to shapes that hint at this psychological interior or allude to existential crises."

Unsurprisingly, given her fascination with the bodily, she cites the macabre work of surrealist Hans Bellmer as a powerful inspiration. "I love Hans Bellmer, but Diane Arbus was my first love, then Larry Clark, later it was Pierre Molinier and Picasso."

The recent move to Los Angeles has caused discomforting issues for the artist, who has always gravitated to greyer locales such as Melbourne and London. "John came here for work and I came here kicking and screaming ... It's the most toxic place I've lived in, so I'm sure it's good for my work." She is quick to acknowledge, however, that the city produced two of her favourite artists, Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy.

Gallery director Murray White notes the remarkable network of celebrity friends Borland has coerced into posing for her, from model and actress Liberty Ross to Cate Blanchett. "They still sit for her and yet they're totally invisible," he says. "They're totally disguised and all the works are untitled. It could be anyone but these great people still sit for her, and they're totally obscured." *Monster* features Australian actress Bella Heathcote and Los Angeles author Ava Berlin.

The show also showcases Borland's recent move into tapestry, with photographic images "transformed" via thread. "Ten years ago I became interested in tapestry because a friend found a mail-order pattern maker, *From Photos to Needlepoint*," Borland says. "It was the '70s of it all ... I used to love arts and crafts and I'd spin my own wool at Montsalvat and crochet my own made-up design cardigans with wooden buttons I made myself ... I loved doing that ... I like the idea of transformation, so changing a photo into something else – wool and texture and distorted from the original – I love."

Distortion and transformation lie at the heart of Borland's oeuvre. *Monster* takes this to extremes. "There's something quite foreboding about the new images, and there's always a slightly on-the-edge connotation to what's happening in them," she says. Indeed, it is difficult to discern whether her subjects are victims or seductresses, mothers or murderers. Despite the grotesque visages she presents, they remain beguiling and oddly alluring.

*Monster* is at Murray White Room, city, until December 21.



2015

**Beauty, Horror and the Terror of Life**  
By Chris McAuliffe



# Beauty, Horror and the Terror of Life

Chris McAuliffe

“Do I look all right?”, Nick Cave asks the photographer. Professional obligation prompts the question; the lens is his cue to deliver indie-rock-god. There’s a part to be played, however contrived he finds it.

“Do I look alright?” Actually, under the circumstances, it’s a legitimate question. Cave is sporting an electric blue wig and a matching dress. His head has been squeezed into a stocking. A crude lipstick mouth has been scrawled across his crushed features. The Joker meets Sailor Moon. “You look beautiful”, Polly Borland reassures him.

Really? Beautiful? “I think my work is ugly but beautiful at the same time”, says Borland. “There are two contradictory elements. I surround myself with what I consider to be beautiful things but I don’t think my work is beautiful. I think technically, it’s beautiful. The way I photograph things is beautiful. But I don’t think the subject matter or the content is beautiful.”

Portraits & Styling John Tsiavis









This duality is something Borland traces back to her childhood in Melbourne. The daughter of an architect, she recalls, “There were always two different things that I was attracted to. I was surrounded by a lot of Scandinavian design...there was a certain level of sophistication and taste. But I also was very attracted to the garish and the tacky and the carnivalesque style; cheap clothing from the Victoria Market, kewpie dolls from the Melbourne show.”

Fresh out of art school in the 1980s, Borland says she was “obsessed” with beautiful people. No surprise, then, that her early work was in fashion and editorial photography. But eventually she concluded that while “beauty is fantastic, there’s a lot more going on in life than just that. That’s why I’m not content with pretty pictures.” All the same, after Borland moved to England in the mid-1980s, her success as an editorial photographer meant that her subjects were frequently people who were beautiful for a living; Natalie Imbruglia, Kylie Minogue and Michael Hutchence among them.

Confronting that contradiction made for a curious type of portraiture. Borland didn’t deny the beauty of her subjects but neither did she surrender to it. Cate Blanchett, says Borland, “is incredibly beautiful.” But that didn’t tempt Borland into glamour photography; “I’m not in pursuit of an idealised form of beauty; in those photos, she’s stripped back, no makeup, plain clothes.” While there’s no getting around the essential architecture of Blanchett’s beauty—there’s a spot reserved for her cheekbones in the National Museum of Australia, right next to Phar Lap’s heart—Borland’s flattened, frontal perspective injects a stark, schematic note. It’s almost as if the tight framing and unmodulated, occasionally chilly, lighting were damping the bright flames of charisma and celebrity. Elsewhere, Borland seems to contest her sitter’s aura; rich, decorative fabric backdrops and lush, saturated colour make for an amped-up kitsch that talks over the top of the subject.

A portrait, Baudelaire wrote, “is a model complicated by an artist.”<sup>(81)</sup> And Borland is adamant that her complications, not the model’s attributes, take precedence.

“I want things to be difficult to look at,” she told David O’Reilly in 2007. “I don’t want things to sit easily. I don’t want people to be comfortable with my work. I find the things that have influenced me most through my life are things that have jolted me out of complacency, shocked me almost... Things that have got a horror to them.”<sup>(47)</sup>

There’s a clue there to the particular version of beauty that Borland pitted against what she now calls the “La La land” of colour supplements and newsstand glossies. The

disquieting effects of many of Borland’s photographs have their roots in surrealism’s ‘convulsive beauty’, which André Breton discovered in the mysterious effects of natural camouflage and mimicry, the eerie stasis of frozen movement and the fetishised fragments of the found object. Versions of these are scattered throughout Borland’s photographs in her shape-shifting masquerades, stark apparitions and talismanic constructions.

Borland is no card-carrying Surrealist; it’s not a case of direct affiliation, more the chance meeting of the crepuscular figuration of Charles Blackman and Arthur Boyd with punk rock in early 1980s Melbourne. Convulsive beauty isn’t a matter of merely startling images, such as the infantilising of grown men in Borland’s series ‘The Babies’ (2002). It has more to do with effects first explored in her portraits and brought to a head in her recent series ‘Smudge’ (2011), ‘Pupa’ (2012) and ‘Wonky’ (2014). These are photographs of creepy domestic theatrics, perverse dress-up games, and manky arts and crafts projects. Bodies are squeezed into tights, sprouting boils and phallic appendages. There’s a menagerie of scruffy plush toys that you wouldn’t want anywhere near a nursery, and a giant bunny that’s more Donnie Darko than Peter Rabbit. Thrift store stockings are transformed into shabby puppets or crushed together into tabletop landscapes that look like the sock drawer from hell.

Borland melds beauty and decrepitude in a fatalistic aesthetic. A Freudian trajectory, then? Pleasure principle meets death drive? I prefer to think that Borland is taking up Ralph Waldo Emerson’s challenge, setting aside the superficial, the “boasters and buffoons,” and joining the “perceivers of the terror of life”.<sup>(318)</sup> “I’m twenty years away from death,” says Borland, “it’s always there, you get more and more conscious of it. We’re all in various states of decay. Nature’s in various states of decay and yet it’s incredibly beautiful. People are beautiful in their various stages of decay. I’m celebrating life but I’m also aware of the inevitable horror.”

This is a riposte to a beauty become routine. As Stendahl put it, “Beauty is the expression of a kind of habitual search for happiness.”<sup>(251)</sup> Always forthright, Borland puts it more bluntly. “For me,” she told Ignacio Andreu, “beauty is easy... I think we see it so often we’re saturated by it.”<sup>(24)</sup> The more astute observers of Borland’s photographs aren’t led astray by beauty but turn instead to the deeper mechanisms at work in the exchange between the image and the viewer. For Susan Sontag, the key issue is the “attractiveness” of Borland’s







photographs.<sup>(6)</sup> Beauty is a button to push, attractiveness is an appeal to a psychic economy—a kind of courtship ritual involving the photograph’s offer and viewers’ discovery of their desire. As Peter Milne notes, this is what makes the photographs both “seductive” and “sinister”; honest viewers have to admit that an image is attractive because it unearths their deep fantasies rather than just delivering on the superficial ones.<sup>(7)</sup>

Beauty is a complex calculus of display and desire, exhibitionism and voyeurism. In Borland’s case this rests on conscious, hard-worn transactions. She pursued Gwendoline Christie, her model for the series ‘Bunny’ (2008), through the streets of Brighton and, having recruited her, spent five years developing the relationship that would produce the works. Aside from Christie’s height (the physical attribute that initially caught Borland’s eye), her great contribution was her sense that photography somehow owed her its attention: “When Polly came into the shop and wanted to take photos of me I just thought, ‘Finally!’”<sup>(Walker, 78)</sup> Both artist and model understood that the photograph was a partnership, a kind of aesthetic contract. One wanted to photograph, the other wanted to be photographed; a relationship that gave the images an almost primal character. Both had made such a direct investment in their desire for the image that the question “Do I look all right?” became redundant.

But it wouldn’t look all right to someone outside of the transaction. Christie reported her then-boyfriend’s response to Borland’s photographs: “He was horrified. He didn’t recognise me in them and I think he was disturbed to see the recorded visual evidence of the depths of a relationship he was no part of.”<sup>(Walker, 78)</sup> Christie says: “Look at me”; Borland says: “You must look at her”. But viewers feel that this is an imperative disguised as an invitation, a demand that they enter a territory that they haven’t designed, wouldn’t care to design. To find an image repellent isn’t to declare it the opposite of beautiful; it’s about being unwilling or unable to participate in the image.

In ‘Bunny’, Borland and Christie partnered up in a battle against complacency. That is, complacent image making; easy beauty. And complacent image consumption; liking beauty rather than constructing desire. Being open about what they wanted out of an image meant being open about what images were for; the enactment of desire. That’s not always a pretty sight.

Complacency now underwrites the ubiquity of the transmittable digital image. The glib instantaneity of a

post-and-like online image culture must be shocking to a photographer who routinely devoted years to a project. Borland has recently started using Instagram and Facebook. “I’m horrified at what it’s doing even to me”, she says. “You become more and more aware of the homogenisation. Not only of conceptual and intellectual information, it’s the homogenisation of visuals that I find really scary. And the fact that I’ve become more and more aware that everyone’s doing the same thing.”

Borland’s responses to this have been simple but substantial. Now based in Los Angeles, she has almost totally abandoned editorial photography. “You become dependent on the people you’re photographing, and I didn’t want to be dependent on people.” For the first time in twenty-five years, she has a studio. She’s begun confronting digital homogeneity by painting and drawing on photographic prints; something she did as a student over thirty years ago; “I always really wanted the photos to almost look like paintings. It’s a little bit punk rock. Even though the photographs are technically not rough, what’s in them is a bit rough.” She’s enjoying a sense of release and license; “I’m now much more in touch. It’s almost like the photograph isn’t enough. I’m using photography as a medium but I’m no longer really a photographer. I’m a visual artist.”

#### REFERENCES

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STURGEON



Polly Borland  
*Untitled XXIX* 2010  
Type C photograph, 80 x 69 cm  
'Smudge' series  
Artbank collection, gift of the artist 2013



*Untitled XXXVII* 2010  
Type C photograph, 80 x 69 cm  
'Smudge' series  
Artbank collection, purchased 2013





**CURRICULUM VITAE**



## **POLLY BORLAND**

Born 1959, Melbourne, Australia  
Lives and works in Los Angeles, CA

### **EDUCATION**

1983 Dep. Photography, Prahran College, Melbourne, AU

### **SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

- 2024 Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US (*forthcoming*)
- 2023 *BLOB OUT*, Sullivan and Strumpf, Sydney, AU  
*Blobs*, Lyles & King, New York, NY, US  
*Playpen*, with Penny Slinger, Lyles & King, New York, NY, US  
*Nudie and Blobs*, STATION, Melbourne, AU
- 2021 *Nudie*, Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
- 2018 *Polly Borland: Polyverse*, The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, AU  
*Polymorph*, Sullivan & Strumpf, Sydney, AU
- 2017 *MONSTER*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU  
*The Babies*, Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
- 2016 *Not Good at Human*, Sullivan & Strumpf, Sydney, AU
- 2014 *YOU*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU  
*Wonky*, The Australian Centre of Photography, Melbourne, AU
- 2013 *YOU*, Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, NY, US
- 2012 *Pupa*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU  
*Everything I want to be when I grow up*, University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, AU
- 2011 *Smudge*, Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, NY, US  
*Smudge*, Other Criteria, London, UK  
*Smudge*, Gloria Actar Birkhauser, Madrid, ES
- 2010 *Smudge*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU
- 2008 *Bunny*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU  
*Bunny*, Michael Hoppen Contemporary, London, UK
- 2002 *The Babies*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, AU
- 2001 *Polly Borland: Australians*, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, AU  
*Polly Borland: Australians*, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, AU

- 2000 *Polly Borland: Australians*, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK
- 1999 *The Babies*, 1999 Meltdown Festival, curated by Nick Cave, Southbank, London, UK
- 1984 *Polly Borland*, George Paton Gallery, Melbourne, AU

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2022 *Picture This*, Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Horsham, AU  
*Chrome City – Australian Art in Los Angeles*, Durden and Ray, Los Angeles, CA, US  
*Sight Unseen: The Lockdown Exhibitions*, Nicholas Thompson Gallery, Collingwood, AU
- 2021 *Cake Show*, The Pit, Palm Springs, CA, US  
*Philjames & Polly Borland*, Nicholas Thompson Gallery, Collingwood, AU  
*Inaugural Exhibition*, Nino Mier Gallery, Brussels, BE
- 2020 *The Body Electric*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, AU  
*Monster Theatres*, 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, AU  
*Summer Group Show*, Sullivan & Strumpf, Sydney, AU
- 2019 *LA on Fire*, Wilding Cran Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US  
*Transworld*, Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US  
*Glossamer*, curated by Zoe Bedeaux, Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate, UK  
*Defining Place/Space: Contemporary Photography from Australia*, Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, CA, US
- 2018 *Perfect Stranger*, Sullivan & Strumpf, Sydney, AU  
*The Waves*, curated by Kate Britton, Sullivan & Strumpf, Sydney, AU  
*Summer Group Show*, Sullivan & Strumpf, Sydney, AU  
*Galerie Pompom*, Sydney, AU  
*GROUP06*, Murray Whiteroom, Melbourne, AU  
*Pussy, King of the Pirates*, Maccarone, Los Angeles, CA, US  
*Spring 1883*, The Hotel Windsor, Melbourne, AU  
*Sheer Fantasy*, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, AU
- 2017 *Versus Rodin*, National Gallery of South Australia, AU  
*Homeward Bound*, Nicodim, Los Angeles, CA, US  
*Group Exhibition*, Sullivan & Strumpf, Sydney, AU  
*Spring 1883*, The Establishment Hotel, Sydney, AU  
*Contemporary Photography*, National Gallery of Victoria International, Melbourne, AU  
*Skin Thing*, Bundoora Homestead Art Centre, Melbourne, AU  
*GROUP05*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU  
*Group Show Winter 2017*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU
- 2016 *Arrival*, Sullivan & Strumpf, SG  
*Human Condition*, curated by John Wolf, Los Angeles, CA, US  
*Group Exhibition*, Sullivan & Strumpf, Sydney, AU  
*Spring 1883*, The Hotel Windsor, Melbourne, AU



- 2015 *Borland + Borland*, Canberra Glass Works, Canberra, AU  
*Spring 1883*, The Hotel Windsor, Melbourne, AU
- 2014 *Small is Beautiful*, Flowers Gallery, New York, NY, US  
*Pardon My French*, Marcas Gallery, Anaheim, CA, US  
*Episodes: Australian Photography Now*, 13th Dong Gang International Photo Festival, Seoul, KR  
*Spring 1883*, The Hotel Windsor, Melbourne, AU  
*Other Criteria Flagship Store/Gallery Opening*, New York, NY, US
- 2013 *We used to talk about love*, Balnaves contemporary: photomedia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, AU
- 2012 *Theatre of the World*, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, AU  
Royal Melbourne, City Gallery, Melbourne, AU
- 2011 *GROUP04*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU  
*The University of Queensland National Artists' Self-Portrait Prize*, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, AU  
*Let the Healing Begin*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, AU  
*Monanism*, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, AU
- 2010 *Shoebox Art – Exhibition and Auction*, The Haunch of Venison, London, UK  
*PREVIEW 10*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU
- 2009 *Wild Things, Stricola Contemporary*, New York, NY, US  
*William and Winifred Bowness Photography Prize*, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, AU
- 2008 *GROUP 01*, Murray White Room, Melbourne, AU
- 2007 *Nick Cave: The Exhibition*, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne, AU
- 2004 *2nd Auckland Triennial*, Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, NZ
- 2003 *Play*, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Melbourne, AU
- 2002 *Golden Jubilee Portraits*, National Portrait Gallery and Windsor Castle, London, UK  
*Contemporary Australian Portraits*, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, AU  
*Ten Year Anniversary John Kopal Photographic Award Show*, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK  
*Nick Cave: The good son*, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Mornington, AU  
*About Face: an exhibition of contemporary Australian photo-media*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, AU  
*Psycho: Art and Anatomy*, Anne Faggionato Gallery, London, UK  
*Play*, Plimsoll Art Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart, AU
- 2001 *Young British Artists*, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK
- 1999 *Glossy: Faces Magazines Now*, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, AU

## COLLECTIONS

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, NY, US  
Murderme Ltd., London, UK  
Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, AU  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, AU  
National Portrait Gallery, London, UK  
National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, AU  
Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, AU  
Queensland University Art Museum, Brisbane, AU  
City of Melbourne, Melbourne, AU  
Lyon Housemuseum, Melbourne, AU  
Hayman Collection, Melbourne, AU

## AWARDS & COMMISSIONS

2017 Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award  
2001 Photographed Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for her Golden Jubilee  
1994 John Kobal Photographic Portrait Award 1994

## FILM

*Polymorphous*, Screening and Artist Talk with Polly Borland  
Directed by Alex Chomicz  
Other Criteria Gallery, New York City, NY, US, 2014  
<http://vimeo.com/48286591>

*Polymorphous*, a documentary on Polly Borland and her work  
Directed by Alex Chomicz  
ABC Television, Australia, March 2013  
<http://vimeo.com/48286591>

*Berlin it's All a Mess*, IO Echo  
Directed by: Polly Borland & John Hillcoat  
MOCA TV, commissioned by: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA, US 2012  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDmlT4Qq2vc>

*Polly Borland*, Art Nation  
ABC TV, Australia  
Aired 5 September 2010  
<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s3002024.htm>

## PUBLICATIONS

2023 *PLAYPEN: PENNY SLINGER & POLLY BORLAND*, Penny Slinger & Polly Borland

- 2018 *MORPH*, Polly Borland, Perimeter Editions
- 2013 *YOU*, Polly Borland, Perimeter Editions
- 2011 *Polly Borland SMUDGE*, Actar, Barcelona, ES
- 2008 *Polly Borland: Bunny*, Other Criteria, London, UK
- 2001 *The Babies*, Polly Borland, essay by Susan Sontag, PowerHouse Books
- 2000 *Polly Borland: Australians*, National Portrait Gallery, London, UK

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- 2022 Calvin Bendiant, *Conversation with Polly Borland*, Lana Turner No. 15, 2022  
Mudie Cunningham, Daniel. "Off the Wall and Into the Room: on Polly Borland",  
Pull Focus Melbourne Art Fair, Special Edition of Art Collector, 2022
- 2021 Michael Slenske, "'I've Got Nothing More to Hide': Polly Borland Puts Her Nude  
Selfies on Display," Los Angeles Magazine
- 2018 Sebastian Goldspink, "Polly Borland: Settle for Nothing", Ten Gallery,  
Autumn/Winter 2018  
Jane Rocca, "From British Vogue to the Queen, a new National Gallery of  
Victoria exhibition celebrates artist Polly Borland", Domain, 2018
- 2017 Ashley Crawford, "Polly Borland treads further into darkness, turning  
celebrities into monsters", Sydney Morning Herald, November 14, 2017  
Lisa Davidson, "Polly Borland's disquieting document of grown-up babies is as  
difficult to view as it is utterly compelling..." WeHeart, August 11, 2017  
Catherine Womack, "A Glimpse at the World of Adult Babies Through L.A.-  
Based Photographer Polly Borland's Lens", LA Weekly, July 18, 2017
- 2016 Sophie Eastaugh, "Photographing the Queen: 'The most surreal moment of my  
career'" CNN, April 21, 2016
- 2012 Jane O'Sullivan, "Curator's Take", Australian Art Collector, Issue 62, 2012  
Tracey Clement, "The twisted portraiture of Polly Borland", Art Guide Australia,  
September/October  
Dan Rule, "Traveller in a strange land", The Saturday Age, August 18, 2012  
Robert Nelson, "Review in Visual Arts", The Age, September 12, 2012  
*Everything I want to be when I grow up*, Exhibition Catalogue, University of  
Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, AU
- 2011 *Face Off*, Annemarie Kiely, Vogue Living Australia, January/February 2011
- 2010 ABCTV Art Nation, Sunday 5 September 2010  
Oyster Magazine online, September 2010  
Dan Rule, *Around the Galleries*, The Age, Saturday 21 August 2010  
Dan Rule, *Melbourne Broadsheet*, 27 August 2010.



- 2008 *How We Met: Gwendolynne Christie and Polly Borland*, The Independent, Sunday Review, UK, June 29, 2008  
*Sheer Polly: Will Self salutes Polly Borland*, The Independent, UK, 24 July 2008  
*Polly Borland's Best Shot*, by Leo Benedictus, The Guardian, UK, 15 May 2008  
*Turning Playboy image on its head*, Richard Willingham, The Age, 2008  
ABC TV, Sunday Arts, screened 27 July 2008  
*Private Worlds, BUNNY review by Ashley Crawford*, The Weekend Australian, August 2 – 3, 2008  
*Points of View: Polly Borland BUNNY*, Photofile #84, Summer 2008
- 2003 Natalie King, *Art round up: Melbourne*, Art Monthly Australia, No. 157, March
- 2002 *Polly Borland: Portfolio*, Photofile #65, May, 2002
- 2000 *Getting to the heart of the matter: Polly Borland by Ruth Learner*, Poster Magazine, Issue 18, Summer 2008/2009

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