

ARTIST PROFILE

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REVIEWS: This language that is every stone,
23rd Biennale of Sydney: rīvus, Pliable Planes

Kate Mitchell

Two Worlds Collide

THE ALCHEMICAL PROCESS OF CONCEPTUAL AND AESTHETIC LAYERING IS THE KEYSTONE OF KATE MITCHELL'S PRACTICE. IN HER MULTI-DISCIPLINARY WORKS, CONTEMPORARY SUBJECTS CRASH INTO CONVENTIONAL STRUCTURES, THE OUTCOMES OF WHICH SEEK TO CHISEL A CHINK IN THE ONTOLOGICAL ARMOUR OF WHO WE ARE, WHAT WE VALUE AND HOW WE EXIST.

Story ELLI WALSH Photography CLAIRE LETITIA REYNOLDS

How do we begin to make sense of a world that seems both knowable and totally incomprehensible? How do beauty and wonder exist right beside the abject cruelty of human behaviour? Why do we keep showing up, in the face of infinite adversity? These are the kinds of questions Kate Mitchell wrestles with, wrangling each dichotomy into forms enticing for the viewer. “On the surface my work is inviting, like a river on a hot day,” remarks the artist, “but underlying, my practice is more fierce, like wild currents; sometimes apparent and discernible other times very well hidden.” Her works are multilayered, with various entries, in ways that allow us to burrow as deep as we wish. “I am always trying,” she says, “to slip through the conceptual back door, so that an idea may embed itself in a person’s psyche and release its medicine in the moment or later down the track, like a psychic dart.” Her tools, here, are humour, a vivacious colour palette, absurd situations, and familiar contemporary topics.

Mitchell is drawn to New Age practices and magical thinking as they provide frameworks for self-understanding, showing how we find a place within the world, especially during times of mass uncertainty. Presently, strains of climate anxiety, pandemic fatigue, and global conflict have birthed a worldwide trend toward heterodoxy alongside a surge of interest in “New Age” spiritual practices like tarot, astrology, meditation, energy healing, and crystals. Mitchell collides these popular culture trends with rational

structures and data sets – as in *All Auras Touch*, 2020, where the Australian Census meets aura photography, or the rubbing together of search engines and spirits in *Open Channels*, 2022. “I’m trying to shift perspectives,” she comments, “so we can see a point of view afresh, in order for us to reassess behaviours, policies, structures; to move the pendulum to the side of the greater good, to orientate the compass towards compassion, kindness, and care.”

Open Channels, a video work created for the 2022 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, came about as Mitchell compiled a list of high-volume questions Australians asked Google across 2020 and 2021 during the bitter shadows of lockdown. For answers to our earthly predicaments, she turned to nine channellers and mediums from around the world, whose responses are formatted like a conference call. The online becomes oracular here, as disincarnate spirits mingle with invisible algorithms to offer community, guidance, meaning; the stuff of human connection. One of the spirits who came through, says Mitchell, was her late nan: “It was very clear that she really wanted to be a part of the work!”

The scorching, often tragic queries of *Open Channels* confront us with our collective subconscious during a time of tumult, yet the takeaway is much less grim. Whether you believe in spirit guidance is irrelevant here. The unlikely crossover of two ephemeral networks – the digital and the spiritual – invites us to reflect upon personal



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ARE GUT FEELINGS REAL?

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“ She talks about pregnancy and birth as a ‘dropping of the veil,’ a time of colossal transformation and rawness, a turning inside out ”

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cosmologies: “What do you believe? Where have these beliefs come from? Do they need updating? Wisdom is all around and the answers to our contemplations are within reach, and sometimes they are hiding in surprising places.”

In her earlier practice, Mitchell primarily worked in film, exposing contemporary anxieties through absurd physical actions (usually featuring herself) rendered as looping clips. *In Time*, 2015, for example, is a hyperbolic examination of time and our collective obsession with it, where the artist clung to the minute hand of a giant clock face for twenty-four hours. In *Fall Stack*, 2012, a column of monitors depicted Mitchell falling through shop front awnings in a repetitive and endless plummet – a metaphorical “slow-motion fall through everyday life.” She was, at the core of these video works, always asking, “What does it feel like to live in a society which is structured in this particular way, with these particular capitalistic focuses? Are we OK with grinding people to their core and valuing them only for their productivity and output?” Though Mitchell pulls the conceptual meat off the bones of these searing social standards, she does so respectfully, subtly, comically, such that the viewer can consume and digest it at their own pace.

The medium through which Mitchell articulates her ideas – or, rather, packages them – shifted abruptly after the birth of her

son in 2018. The artist speaks openly about the experience, about feeling elated but also stretched, exhausted, let down, and angry at the astonishing electric shock that is new parenthood. “The birth experience and its aftermath left me feeling shattered, and I felt a hot rage surge at my core. I remember thinking repeatedly ‘why didn’t anyone tell me about this?!’” she reveals. Eventually she found a way to channel this cyclonic energy into her practice, allowing her lens to widen and refocus, to coexist with her new life. Mitchell began working with inks, harnessing every fifteen-minute window her baby would afford her. Encouraging the inks to bleed through the paper, she presents the spectral underside of each image, a peering behind sure facades. She talks about pregnancy and birth as a “dropping of the veil,” a time of colossal transformation and rawness, a turning inside out. Her fragile inked forms threaten to deliquesce at any moment, limp with instability yet persisting with inherent fortitude. An apt caption, perhaps, for the maternal experience.

01 *Open Channels (still)*, 2021, HD video, 1 hour 36 minutes

02 *Invoking the spirits to help complete this work*, 2021, ink on paper, 42 x 29.7 cm

03 *An uneasy calm*, 2022, ink on paper, 42 x 29.7 cm

04 *In Time*, 2015, digital video, 24 hours





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All Auras Touch was the first major project to come out of this new life chapter; signalling a shift not only in medium and momentum, but also mentality. On the drive home from the hospital after giving birth, Mitchell sat with her tiny son and felt her consciousness being split, perceiving the world from multiple points of view: “It felt truthful, like this is how it is, this is how we are all connected.” This cosmic, cognitive energy simmered away for a year, eventuating in the portrait of interconnectedness that is *All Auras Touch*. To make the expansive installation, Mitchell invited 1,023 members of the public (representing the main occupations in the Australian Census) to have their aura photographed via electromagnetic field imaging equipment. Luminous colour gradients enshroud each subject, which, together, sing of a shared essence; a subatomic symbiosis. Though at the work’s core is a blistering cognisance of mass disconnect in an age of hyper-connectivity, this is cushioned by Mitchell’s gesturing towards empathy, energetic bonds, and a heartfelt belief in invisible community.

If we are all vibrating energy, then everything is malleable and new courses of action can always be charted. This belief is, perhaps, the motor of Mitchell’s life and work. She is constantly adapting, evolving her practice to meet the needs of the

05 *All Auras Touch*, 2020, 1,023-piece photograph installation, dimensions variable, installation view at Carriageworks, Sydney, 2020, photographed by Zan Wimberley

06 *Hurling a rainbow into the abyss*, 2022, ink on paper, 42 x 29.7 cm



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“ At the work’s core is a blistering cognisance of mass disconnect in an age of hyper-connectivity ”

present moment. “I don’t think of myself as a magician, more of an alchemist; I want to transform things for the better and endeavour to remind a viewer that they can too,” she reflects. These days, Mitchell works with a sense of urgency, as there’s no time to waste. But her ideas take time; they are complicated to put together and corners cannot be cut. The artist observes, “It can be exhausting flipping between reference points; like, the world is burning up at a rapid rate but please take all the time you need to nail that reverse park. Sometimes you just have to laugh.” ▣

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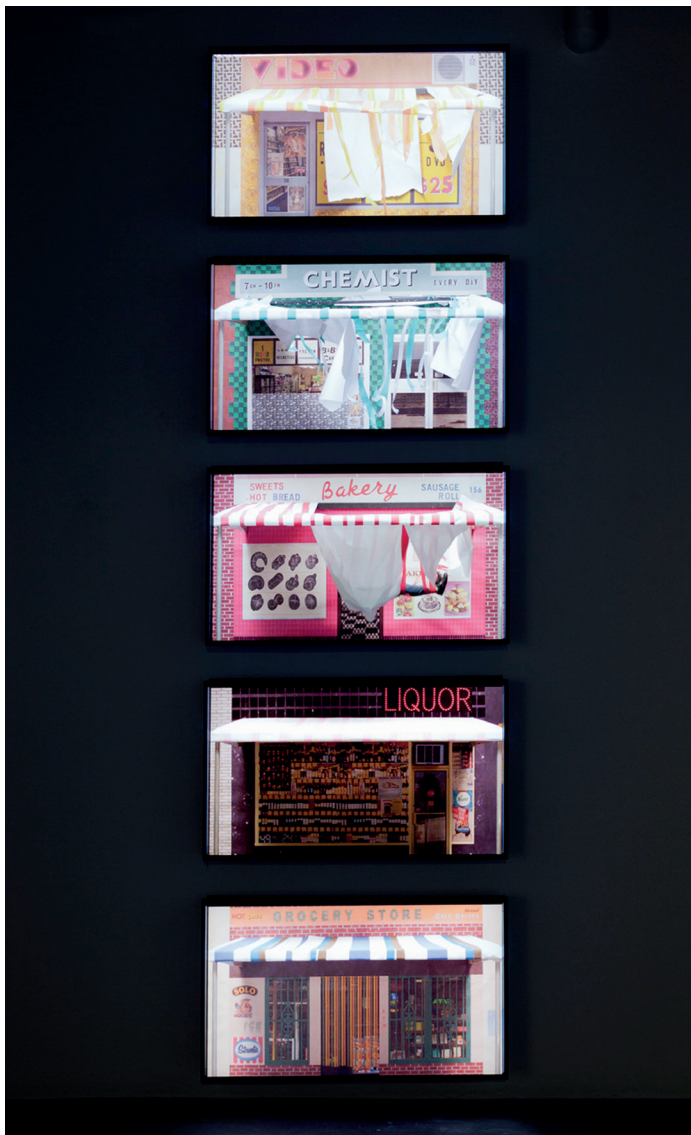
@kate__mitchell

EXHIBITION

Kate Mitchell

4 – 27 August 2022

Chalk Horse, Sydney



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07 *Fall Stack* (production still), 2012, five-channel synchronised video installation, dimensions variable

08 *Fall Stack*, 2012, five-channel synchronised video installation, dimensions variable, installation view at Artspace, Sydney, photographed by Silversalt Photography

Courtesy the artist, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Chalk Horse, Sydney, and Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne