



# A knife and a torch

MARCH 7 - MARCH 15

This exhibition catalogue documents *A knife and a Torch*, a group exhibition held at The Hold Artspace.

*A knife and a Torch* featured work Kay Lawrence, Kat Sawyer & Vanessa Stanley.

The exhibition opened on 7 March 2014 and continued until 15 March 2014.

**Front cover**

Kay Lawrence *Separation Anxiety*, 2014

**Over page**

Kat Sawyer *Slumps*, (detail) 2014

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Vanessa Stanley *Swings & roundabouts*, 2014



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# Soft Bodies

by Madeleine Stack

The further and faster we move, the more a craving for specificity tugs us. Tonight I watched a tourist bus pass, featuring a gimmick I hadn't before experienced wherein the passengers sit sideways in tiered seating to look through an enormous panoramic window. This simple perspective switch lays bare the truth of tourism: they are the audience, passersby their performers. The sidewalk becomes a stage, solid buildings nothing but façades. But through the high glass window the passengers are illuminated under a spotlight, drawing looks from those on the street. So who is performing? Who is watching? I wrote this text in the northern hemisphere as summer was breaking. I don't know what the artists look like, nor have I experienced their work in person. Instead, we communicate across time-zones and borders, through the hyper-mediated world of emails and attachments, web-pages and image files. Second and third examinations of their photographs, squinted at on a computer screen, reveal what I'd misunderstood. When looking at art in transit there is a slippage, a constant potential for mistranslation.





In their investigations, ongoing and overlapping, the three artists approach the three central homes of clothing, of dwellings, and of nature. This trinity encloses the body in three distinct layers, each porous and shifting. The works are mute, suggesting a past whose impact is not yet clear and combining the hard and the soft, the seen and the unseen. The idea of the artist as permanently 'on residence'; which is to say, not a resident of any place at all, means to move away from the known and enter the knownabout. The globalized artist flits from one context to another, playing the role of frequent flier and performing 'engagement' with both public networks and private spaces. In Aimoto, a small Japanese village, Vanessa Stanley, Kat Sawyer and Kay Lawrence lived in near-isolation, both drawing from the locality and staying separate from it. What is it to be a body in a city that is not one's own? Habit is the expression of a once-emotion; in the desire for repetition, we deny the terror of the unexpected. In the process of knowing a place, of learning it, of simply being in the street and softening to a different frequency, one learns the humid haze of the subtropics in winter when the city is stilled under a grey vase of cloud. These works contend with physics, body consciousness, geology, geographies, the invisible movement of matter. Their soft bodies become soft architectures that hide as they expose.

### ***The Universe Has A Memory***

A child thrills at weightlessness. From the unconscious float of the womb are forged briefer, more tantalizing moments of experience: leaping on a trampoline, being thrown in the air by a parent, reaching the tip of the curve with your feet on a swing. As adults these pleasures are mediated by technology, but no less shocking, for to lose one's foothold on the earth is a divine thing. In *Swings and Roundabouts*, **Vanessa Stanley** materializes the way that memory stretches and the past organizes itself differently in each mind, the way that experienced time expands and contracts. It is a kind of proof that the matter of the universe is messy and riddled with loose threads, slipped stitches, unravellings. In the gallery the swing remains inert until brought to life by a curious visitor, and the loose coloured strands of its seat fly as easily as the streamers siding a girl-child's bike. Humans move together in the swing; the universe bends and boughs, tenuous

and precarious. In the video *Elongating the Fabric of Matter*, this connection is made explicit as Stanley demonstrates physically the theoretical truth of matter by creating a long strip from cast-off second hand clothing, readying it for another type of movement.

In the work *Positive Fabric of Matter*, Stanley erases the negative space around clothing; the space where a body belongs. These garments, mounted doll-size and flattened on the gallery wall, still dance and move as though inhabited, suggesting the central character and emotional resonance inherent in clothing that has had a past life. Secondhand clothing carries associations in its threads that are lost to us. It is impossible to get dressed in the morning and not consider these associations, between the body and cloth, between the body and city. Clothing, though porous and malleable, protects us from the world. I climb into a garment and the garment assumes my shape. Before me, the garment bore only the memory of a body. You must know that fabric forgets us. The smell disappears and what is stretched out of shape assumes a new form. A shirt stolen from a lover is returned, sheepishly, when it forgets how to smell like them. Potential clothing is a potential life, potential energy. The willing erasure of the past in the presence of a glimmering future. A superstitious friend used to sniff and refuse to enter thrift stores with me. *No way! Someone coulda died in that thing!* She'd sit outside in the street, wary of being infected by the breath of the past. Stanley tackles the anonymous garment, plucked from the ether to serve a new purpose.

### ***A Space Having No Definition***

In the drawing *Warehouse*, **Kat Sawyer** conveys the delicacy of dwellings, of humans moving within and between dwellings, of humans moving between rooms – a building in a state of grace, of approaching disrepair, of movement. An unlivable house is a shell. How to sustain the knowledge of a home when that home is lost to us? It becomes ossified, a fossil of a memory bleached out and lacking in life. Sawyer's work apprehends the relationship between the body and the object, how one presses against the other, the hard impressing itself upon the soft. Japan in the Western mind is a mirage of opposites – the frenetic





pace of the metropolis, the ancient elegance of the ritual. The hyper-tech and the hand-wrought. 'Things wabi-sabi are usually small and compact, quiet and inward-oriented. They beckon; get close, touch, relate. They inspire a reduction of the psychic distance between one thing and another thing; between people and things' (Leonard Koren).

Kat Sawyer's *Slumps* do exactly that, cast floppy and moving toward and against the walls of the gallery. Each form offers a suggestion of familiarity without recognition; the objects containing a certain uneasiness of the hard made soft and the soft made hard. In looking at sculpture, the body moves around it in order to know it, to see all sides. It is an impossible task. Each step opens a different window. The flaccid rubber inner tubes are cast in matte white plaster like dentist's moulds the way a rained-out city is washed of its colour. They are sans pedestal or plinth, quotidian objects made strange by their solidity, akin to flotsam washed up on a seashore bearing the mark of what it once was. They suggest bodies sagging or leaning, interrupted movements, a heavy feeling of weight and tenderness. The idea of an interior stripped of its support but remaining upright aligns with the hyperawareness of being alone and foreign, noticing others as though for the first time, noticing sounds, small details which transform themselves into signs and symbols. Though pale, Sawyer's material investigations leave the impression of tension, stretching into a grey distance.

## **Mend The World**

*All the memory stretches out in a continual thin plane. We're  
speaking for the air in the shape-filled cities, the air of the  
black branches...  
- Lisa Robertson*

The black-twigged branch in **Kay Lawrence's** Tree Line could be dead. When is it a dead thing? When is it just lying fallow? Suffering and growth intersect as two fruits of the same tree. A desire to mend is to be at the centre of what is felt and what is done. The world is at a flux point, either an inhale or an exhale. In the centre of the breath it is hard to tell which way the air is going. It is interesting to note our fascination with the homely and utilitarian in times of political or socio-cultural flux. It is these times that the handmade receives renewed appreciation. Is it because we forget (willfully) how to live when capital intervenes? These knowledges are discarded in moments of reckless forward motion; when the wheels of progress stutter, we are left to look to the past to relearn how to live. Vernacular and folk techniques exist to remind us of our own historical and geological context.

A tree grows out of a chair. *Sadly optimistic?* Perhaps. Or perhaps it is another example of the past bending into the present and future, the reformation of matter into another state. In *Liminal Being*, a tree seems to grow downwards, subverting the logic of the natural world. To crochet over a tree is an abstraction, somehow fogged: are they being bound or clothed? *Recology #1* is a gently shredded embroidery suggestive of form, while not quite achieving solidity. Again, it is this pressing of hard onto soft – as thread through cotton – that suggests the permeability of the body. Fabric alludes to the women's work of mending and weaving, the association of the maternal, the protective, inherent in clothing and fabric. Here Lawrence approaches slowness and reflection as a choice. In *Tree Line*, the space between negative and positive is starkly outlined, and in *Separation Anxiety*, only a black-clad hand and foot are visible, with the figure reduced to a blurred silhouette. Each of these works are contingent on light and shadow, the grey area where object and gesture meet. These shadows are mimicked by those cast by the sculptures, each lit so as to expand on the back wall of the gallery.



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