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Jenny Watson and the Evolution of a Suburban Girl

The MCA's new must-see exhibition is an expansive retrospective one of Australia's pivotal painters.



1/5 The Fabric of Fantasy

Photography: Jenny



Jenny Watson is a self-described run-of-the-mill suburban girl. The Brisbane-based artist grew up in the areas of Mont Albert and Box Hill in Melbourne and it's from here she plucked the rich narrative of her four-decade oeuvre.

Watson is one of Australia's pivotal contemporary artists and was the first woman to represent the country with a solo exhibition at the Australian Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 1993. A dense selection of her work – deeply personal as well as social, and local at heart but also well travelled – has been compiled into an expansive retrospective now open at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Titled *The Fabric of Fantasy*, curated by Anna Davis, the exhibition took three years to develop and features more than 100 of Watson's paintings and textile works from the 1970s to now. The collection closely tracks the evolution of her realist leaning, and later, uniquely conceptual work. It charts the experiences and adventures of Watson's iconic artistic alter ego: a suburban girl with flaming red locks and her beloved horses, cats, and birds.

Her experimentation with fabric, found materials and text over time is revealed too – as is the development of Watson's distinctive, youthful brushstrokes (a style Davis describes as “distilled and deliberately naïve”).

“As you can see I started off in a fairly realistic style, influenced by American super realism at the time,” Watson says of her earliest pieces in the show. Here there are elements of Chuck Close (in a 1979 piece titled *A painted page 1: Twiggy by Richard Avedon (for Paul Taylor)*) and a portrait titled *Sam* from 1980), a little of the gloss of Richard McLean (in *Brown Horse with a Yellow/Green Headband* from 1973). “As a young painter starting out, that was a style that really appealed to me,” she says. “Though, it's a movement that's almost been forgotten.”

In the '70s, Watson also painted the post-punk explosion in Melbourne and elements of the St Kilda's legendary Crystal Ballroom club. There's a portrait of a young Nick Cave, and an album cover for The Go-Betweens. According to Davis, music has been an integral part of Watson's practice and a specially curated Spotify playlist accompanies *The Fabric of Fantasy*. On it are rock'n'roll classics from The Beatles and the Rolling Stones; there's Patti Smith, The Doors, James Taylor, The Easybeats, David Bowie, and – fittingly – Watson's girlish bent perhaps – is Kate Bush's *Wuthering Heights*.

A decade on, Watson pivoted her style to the naive, childlike inflection she still uses today. “It was an unlikely image to use in painting – usually paintings are about heroic or idealistic themes, or aspiring to something other,” she says. “I just decided to use that very ordinary scenario, but filtered through my knowledge of conceptual art and influenced by other things that were going on at the time, and in the end it became a viable self-portrait to work with over the years.”

There are also female fairy tale heroines – a tumbling Alice in Wonderland, and Ophelia, Cinderella, Snow White, Beauty and Charlie’s Angels. Faceless figures from popular culture, like dolly birds, rock stars, and movie stars, fill up Watson’s fantasy too. All are part of her melange cast of alter egos, experiencing and navigating a wider world beyond simple suburbia as Watson eventually did. “I guess in a way she morphed into a sophisticated globetrotting artist and a [worldlier] woman you might say,” she says.

A piece titled *Self Portrait in a New York Taxi* illustrates that shift for Watson. “On the seat of the taxi is a little doll, which is sort of the innocent suburban girl she’s leaving behind,” she explains. “I’ve actually never done anything before or since that’s quite as symbolic. But seeing it in the show now – it was definitely a significant moment. Taking on a bigger world and having to cope with it.”

A counter play between image and text also become a key part of Watson’s artwork. In the ’90s, she began to place panels of hand-painted verse beside many of her paintings “to talk about emotions and feelings, to explore inner life,” she says. “Sometimes the text being completely different or less obviously connected to the image somehow makes the image all the more poignant. It imitates that fact of consciousness where we’re never ever completely focused on just one thing.”

The most recent piece in the exhibition, *The Street* from 2016 is distinctly nostalgic, almost yearning for the humble suburbia a young Watson once felt waylaid by. “It’s a very nostalgic image of ’50s Melbourne where kids could play on the streets and there wasn’t much traffic. Maybe in some points of view, it is a more open world.”

The Fabric of Fantasy is on at the MCA until October 2.

mca.com.au/exhibition/jenny-watson

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