

Helen Johnson

born Naarm/Melbourne 1979

Restoration Australia 2021–2022

Naarm/Melbourne

synthetic polymer paint and pencil on unstretched canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2020–21

‘This work forms a response to *Foundation*, regarding the role of women in the media. In this painting, the eyes of mainstream female media figures are trowelled on as plaster to the laths of backroom deals that are a mainstay of colonial power. Lath and plaster is a traditional way of plastering in which narrow strips of wood (laths) form the support for the plaster, which is pushed through the gaps in between to solidify. This technique was commonly used in nineteenth century buildings in Australia. It is often seen on the television series *Restoration Australia*. This series often omits First Nations narratives that would have overlapped with the construction of these buildings.

This lath and plaster process, and the blindness of it, felt like an appropriate metaphor for how we build a sense of nationhood; how one form of denial becomes the framework for another.’

—Helen Johnson, 2022

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Foundation 2021–22

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‘This work draws on imagery produced around the time of Australian Federation, in the years immediately before and after 1900. In the press at that time, the popular way to depict the newly federated Australia was as a young white woman, usually shown seeking guidance from an older patriarchal figure, like the politician Henry Parkes, or someone who represented European powers. Forming a shoddy foundation beneath these women are the faces of four members of the first parliament of federated Australia. The quotes issuing from their mouths are taken from the Hansard records of that first sitting, which throw into relief the stark racism that forms the foundation of Australia. One politician, Samuel Winter Cooke is recorded as saying: ‘We must do our best to see that Australia remains as a possession for the white man, and the white man only.’

—Helen Johnson, 2022

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The birth of an institution 2021–22

Naarm/Melbourne

synthetic polymer paint and pencil on unstretched canvas

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'The birth of an institution depicts a white woman giving birth—not to a baby but to the dome of a colonial institutional building. She is surrounded by invested parties: the banker/father, the priest, the policeman, the schoolmarm, the doctor, the nurse. When I started this painting, I was reading Richard Broome's *Coburg: Between two creeks* (1987), which traces the history of the northern Melbourne suburb and clearly lays out the priorities of the colonial state: setting up the church, the police force and the education system to support mechanisms of suppression, exploitation and financial exchange.

I was interested in putting a woman at the centre of this scene. I was thinking about women's labours, and the position of being exploited by, and an active participant in, building a colonial society. In this painting the rigid architecture of the institution becomes slippery and organic, subsuming the body of the woman before it has even come from her.'

—Helen Johnson, 2022

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The edges of a dream/mother, sister, daughter 2021–22

Naarm/ Melbourne

synthetic polymer paint, painted silk and pencil on unstretched canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2021–22

‘This painting depicts a woman asleep, in colonial dress. Images from her dreams overtake her body. The edges of her dream space are held by a mother, a child, a sister, a friend. Their hands are drawn from those of my mother, my daughter, my studio assistants. So, in a way, I think of this as a self-portrait. The dreams described on the verso are my own. The dream includes images of decadence, of ‘boosy backrooming’, of floating hands severed from bodies. Dreams help us to maintain our sense of reality, but they also reveal its cracks.

Tears stream from the sleeping woman’s eyes: this is the white woman’s guilt. As the tears make their way around the edges of the painting they become salt crystals, scattered along the ground. This is a biblical reference, in which a conqueror scatters salt on the earth of a defeated city so that nothing will grow there again—a destructive act.’
—Helen Johnson, 2022

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System maintenance 2021–22

Naarm/Melbourne

synthetic polymer paint and pencil on unstretched canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2021–22

‘This painting was inspired by a controversy regarding the poisoning of protected temperate grassland in New South Wales on a property owned by Jam Land, a company in which federal energy minister Angus Taylor has an interest. In this painting I wanted to honour that grassland. Beneath the grasses swirl clouds of herbicide from an agricultural sprayer.

Overlaying the grasses is an image from a nineteenth century Australian cartoon, showing two babies greedily plunging their fists into a tin of jam. Elsewhere, the thoughts of two men appear as tiny speech bubbles which could be mistaken for sperm: the little ideas of self-interested men that can lead to massive loss.’

—Helen Johnson, 2022

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Crises 2021–22

Naarm/Melbourne

synthetic polymer paint and pencil on unstretched canvas

Commissioned with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation 2021–22

‘The decorative lettering in this painting is mainly taken from early colonial publications such as *The Bulletin* and *The Police Gazette*. It should be noted that I did not include the racist depictions of First Nations peoples and other nationalities that I found in these publications. It is not appropriate for a white person to work with such imagery.

I am, however, interested in how the colonists represented themselves at this time. These images present a clear picture of the colony as a police state fixated on class and personal wealth. The amount of information in the imagery means that the words spelled out in the painting can be hard to read. However, they are gradually revealed: complacent, cowed, ignorant, complicit. It’s a pretty heavy-handed list, but it’s there because these are characteristics of Australian colonial society. This is not to say that everyone is these things, but that they run like veins of quartz through the bedrock.’
—Helen Johnson, 2022