

WART About Face

What a title. With a snap to attention the paramilitary commands of mid-morning school assemblies come to mind. It's the 1960s and summer assembly days are boiling hot, someone is fainting, and children have leant to play at marching orders. "About face" is performative, what philosopher Gilles Deleuze called 'order words', particular expressions that have no inherent content other than a call to action.

As such Wart's "about face" demands attention to seemingly disparate but related agendas: fragile environments and equally fragile mental health. If only it were that simple, that with a command an indifferent populace could be instructed to 'about face' and change the direction of otherwise preoccupied and overly stressed planet-depleting lives. With the extinction list growing at an alarming rate, the world's wildlife is under increasing stress, as are the numbers of those suffering with conditions of mental health. Some adapt and cope, and others don't. Not all species do as well with habitat loss as the Ibis, or bin chicken, one of Wart's favourites, and a familiar resident of Sydney's urban streets. Mental health advocate and animal lover Wart, known for performing with a Band-Aid across her forehead, has developed this exhibition around themes of mutual care of each other, critters included, and the world we share.

Her motto is: "broken brains, good heart."

Laid out across two rooms, this exhibition is organised in parallel zones. The first room entered, *Endangered Diptychs*, greets the viewer with walls of wildlife, the concertina form of an artist's book, and a set of sculptures. *Heads and Tails* is a series of paintings comprised of five diptychs: three sets of birds and two of animals. Against aqua blue skies paradoxically suggestive of 'not a care in the world' Wart presents a selection of endangered species: the yellow-green Orange Bellied Parrot, the yellow-splashed Regent Honey-Eater, and the Far Eastern Curlew. Grounded on Australia's iconic red dirt, the Spotted Quoll and the Numbat share those same bright skies.

Each of the birds and animals has been cut in half; their upper and lower torsos separately framed. Hence, the 'broken' diptych is savagely symbolic of their endangered status. Furthermore, this fracturing of their images underscores how homeland territories have been carved up. Tragically, mating practices have been brutally disrupted, with birds and animals left stranded, calling forlornly for their 'other half'.

Of this series Wart had this to say,

"It's time yes *Heads or Tails*, we are, as a nation, such gamblers but do we want to gamble the lives of our precious animals...

It's time.... to use our heads so we can keep on having some tales to tell.

It's time... to make a stance and protect our wildlife.

A variant of *Heads or Tails*, reproducing the separated upper and lower torsos of the paintings, has been reimagined in the sculptural forms of *Oddlongs Come and Play*. Presented as a relative of the children's game of 'match up the sides of the blocks' this work is an invitation to engage in environmental 'repair', to put the birds and animals back together again. As in the adage of 'learning through play' these sculptural forms have been designed as a form of cognitive re/programming.

In *Poet tree (inertia creeps)* the narrative plays out in concertina form in a 'book' taking the shape of a graphic novel loaded with snatches of poetic code and vivid line-work puzzles to crack: again as a form of multigenerational play. The text "press paws" is an invocation to reflect on the plight of the creatures in the natural world, their collective "paws" under pressure enough from land clearing, introduced species, pollution, and accelerated floods and droughts brought on by climate change, not to mention the decimations of mining predations. "Unceded seed" introduces the concept of Rights of Nature. Already New Zealand has accorded the Whanganui River the protection of personhood and civil rights. Hence, the idea of "unceded seed" provokes the question of why not give the same protections to native seed, and local fauna?

The Second Room is attuned to human fragility and staged as a journey into mental health, with a particular emphasis of the physical effects of powerful psych drugs. Getting the shakes and other unpleasant adverse effects of the medications can be overwhelming. The management of these aspects of treatment has been under-scrutinised in the public health system, much less publically talked about. By way of opening up a conversation, Wart's artist's book *Wobble and Calm* is populated with the 'graphic narrative' of splintered line-work that takes the viewer through the experience of fragmented states of being as lived by those on psych drugs.

In this powerful representation, intercut with instances of Wart's trademark humour, the struggle to get by is palpable. Deceptively simple and unfolding in the mode of a graphic novel, the 'wobbles' are a series of jagged line drawings demonstrating catastrophic peaks and troughs of mental disturbance. Punctuated by the sheer falls of precipices, or towering waveforms, the mental journey is perilous. And then there is the calm. The wobbles flatline. The drugs are kicking in. You feel the relief. And have come to understand a lot more of the existential stakes of the hard-won daily battles of mental health.

In the painting series *The Jutters ...And The Calm* Wart homes in on the face as the jittery medium of expression of what lies beneath. Under various conditions of legibility, the psychical underside of interior turmoil manifests as a tangle of intensely fractured lines and shapes that transforms across the set of eight paintings to stabilise in a fully formed face. It is as if the face can't properly exist in or for itself under conditions of mental disturbance but can only be realised in a composed state of mind.

Uncannily *The Jutters ...And The Calm* mirrors the psychological analyses of the face, the primary site of affect, in Deleuze and Guattari's masterwork, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Furthermore, by way of another uncanny coincidence, much of their discussion is based on an analysis of the close-up in Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), a film that traced Joan of Arc's journey of faith through tightly framed camerawork on her facial expressions. In 2004, Wart performed in Javier Tellez's *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc: Rozelle Hospital* (2004), a revisiting of Dreyer's original.

In *The Undercovers* the exhibition takes a turn to the pre-linguistic realm of the psyche, a realm that could be described as prior to faciality and its codes. This is a realm where psychological forces of thought and feeling can be imagined as marshalling themselves in readiness for more definite expression. Determinedly not quite representative these gentle paintings trade in mystery and a certain mode of withholding.

Lipstick Smear and Shut the Fuk Up, by contrast, reveals the darker aspects of abuse: the silencing and the shutting down of the voices of those diagnosed with a mental health condition. The smudge of smeared lipstick represents that violence, which, though not necessarily physical, manifests as a psychological indicator of a fragile mental state (things are not going well), while the final painting with the mouth delicately stitched up, is a potent metaphor for the barbarity of that silence.

The Secret Phases of Fear (reworked) has a long history. It was first exhibited in 2006 in *For Matthew and Others - journeys with schizophrenia* (Campbelltown Arts Centre) and again in *Good Neighbours* at Art Bank (2017) and *Four Women: (I do belong) Double* at Lismore Regional Gallery (2017). Originally installed as larger sixteen-piece painting set it presented a chilling insight into what it was like being taken in an IPCU (Intensive Psychiatric Care Unit). Don't be fooled by the innocuous title that makes no mention of the terrors of high walls and solitary confinement, and gives no indication of the horrors that took place in the boondocks of Rozelle Hospital in 2004. Revisiting what remains of the series (many were sold), this subset of paintings can be interpreted as a form of therapeutic reworking of a damaging treatment some twenty years on from a much better place of improved mental health. A video interview with Wart explains the work in her words: "They are paintings of someone going through emotional turmoil, through real fear" (<https://wart-the-website.com/secret-phases-of-fear-2005/>). The twenty-year interval speaks volumes in itself of the slow processes of trauma recovery. (Details for the catalogue essays that accompanied the earlier iterations of this work are listed separately in the endnote below, and are by Anne Loxley, Daniel Mudie Cunningham and Djon Mundine.)

In the following Q&A Wart gives the backstory on the genesis and development of the works in the exhibition:

1) AF: Wart, you had as a pet a parrot named Fingers. Can you talk about your relationship with this bird, and, more generally, about your ongoing affinity with birds. I'm thinking of your previous exhibition *Eye See Pink, Black and White* in which the black and white Ibis, affectionately known as Sydney's bin-chicken, but held as sacred by the Egyptians, is squared off against its flashier cousin the pink flamingo.

WART: Actually I grew up with a menagerie, my brothers and sisters included... but my eldest sister had canary's (in a goldmine) and my late brother (1962-2022) bred quail and peach face parrots....we had plenty of animals which I immersed myself into when our Mum died in 1973....hmmmmm But yes , the Ibis has been stalking the bins in my area for around 15 odd years...

They got released from the zoo 30 years ago and chippo used to be a water way, they have cleverly adapted to our 'bin juice' , they are surrounded by miners and pigeons, we used to have sparrows , magpie family and a crow ...I have lived in my place for 28 years.....

Fingers , wot a bird, a rainbow lorikeet, made me larf, it, like my cat Moonlight, was musical and both of them had the run or flap of the flat.....where moonlight played the piano, Fingers would wrap his claws around a saucepan handle and bang to his rhythm , I had a drummer and a pianist in my animal family..... much amusement!!!!

2) AF: In *Eye See Pink, Black and White* you champion the Ibis paying homage to the urban adaptability of this remarkable bird. Many other species have not been so lucky given their reliance on nutrient chains and habitat that are fast disappearing. Can you say something more of the story behind *Oddblongs*? Plus, as a painter (cartoonist, poet and performer) what prompted this new engagement with the medium of sculpture, and your decision to reimagine the children's game of blocks?

WART: I spose I was thinking and have always been For the animals Fauna and flora but it compounded in a performance I did at Cementa 21 ? where I did a eulogy piece about my Dad , Kandos was surrounded by fires , there was smoke in the air, we, myself and Victoria Spence (performer and Founder of LifeRites Funerals) did this piece in a little stone church we built into the performance that the audience could light a candle for a loved one or sprinkle or wash in water themselves with water for the fauna and flora being ravaged by the fires.... It was profoundly moving and a full house.... The audience were then led to a watering hole, the railway hotel as a wake and place to talk reminisce and it was a hot smokey afternoon

That is wot made me want to look and think about wot I could do Thru conversations with Bec Dean the ideas firmed up....i as a word worker remembered a game where you wrote a statement , folded it and someone else would add another and so forth..... you usually got something pretty weird and wild to work with

There was Exquisite Corpse which originated with the Dadarists. The block idea became a firmer option and The ODDLONGS were formed. Its name not being realised until later in the process and I also after seeing the prototypes realised

there are 36 variations in one pair of The ODDLONGS showing basically you cant mess with nature is it cryonics
NATURE is VULNERABLE. Don't Fuk It Up ANYMORE
THESE ODDLONGS are FRAGILE
Be gentle with them its there first time

3) AF: Discussions of mental health are still very much 'Hush, Hush', in particular on the gargantuan effort of managing the physical adverse effects of those very powerful psych drugs. And we hear even less about how that world is governed or managed. Or the hierarchies of doctors that have to be negotiated between those treating the mind, the shrinks, and those mitigating the damages of the drugs to the body – the shakes, the bloating, the constipation and so forth. To what extent is the realm of mental health a secret world of power and control?

WART: The constructs of western medicine are imperialistic, patriarchal, and colonialist, the world of psych treatment since the 80s is in a mode of drugs rather than discussion around social, economic and environmental needs...nd have the ability to imply that if you overstep your line they can push your drug intake up to shut you up.....be seen but not heard.....patriarchal crap
..tho some psychs are forward thinkers and not necessarily shrinks, but harder to find in the public sector.

They can use forms of social control, over use of cto, community treatment order, social control thru heavy sedating drugs , which can be under police wotch.... So yes there is sooo much power to the doctor and not much credence to a psych patient.....you learn very quickly you area lowest grade person.....and can be very drugged to fight it

4) AF: And how have the drugs themselves evolved over the period you have been taking them? What are the improvements? And which are the drugs, still prescribed, that are to be avoided?

WART: Yes there are slow improvements but only if you are in the know,.. I helped set up the first sexual health clinic in a psychiatric hospital (Rozzelle Hospital c2000s)???? and was privy to some of the contents.....of the drugs There was a new antipsychotic drug for men to help with sexual function and nothing for women of course.....they used to give radical hysterectomies to women in psych wards....such control or imbed depot so conceiving wouldn't happen....men in suits deciding hmmmmmm
Its an arcaicic system that needs change, tho there are some new lighter drugs, a lot of shrinks prefer the drug way....easy control.....rather than listening and interpreting

I have been soo overdrugged that I was very incontinent.... A truly embarrassing and eggstreemlee uncomfortable time.... They didn't care.... It shut me up but not to my exceptional GP who found me a drug to stop it.... They the shrink gave

me massive injections in my bum every month and to stop it I had to sniff a drug..... weird visual....
My GP became my ally and we worked at getting me out of that situation

Some drugs make you constipated sooo mean and not only does it do that but gives you the shakes and depletes your bone density.... Hmmmm and I was going thru men a pause. Soooo bad for me... I soon was removed from that cycle by another great expand mind psychiatrist, and she is a woman... love that

Does the doctor doctor the way the good doctor doctors. Doctors
Aaarrhhhh DOCTORS

I have very lucky and unlucky I have experienced both sides of the dial, the drug em stage and the more listen stage hmmm... Good medicine should do no harm
Bad medicine is lazy medicine

5) AF: In previous conversations you mentioned one of the least known physical effects of psych medications: of the face becoming frozen and immobilised, unable to express emotions. This is at odds with the astonishingly expressive qualities of your paintings for example ***Secret Phases of Fear (reworked)*** where the psychological underside of your mental state could be said to have found an outlet. Can you say something more about this phenomenon and/or its relationship to your paintings?

WART: Interestingly that series originally were dark and stark backgrounds, I was always going to do something with those 3(secret phases of fear) and I was recovering from a severely broken wrist held together by 9 screws and a bent plate..... there were 10 screws but I had a loose screw!!! I am used to that, HaHaHa and they had to re operate and took it out..... which really set me back in the healing stakes..... But as I started my rehab, I worked so hard at moving my cyborg wrist that I decided to rework those three and the more I did I was building a different feeling surrounding the anguish were bright in yer face colours, slowly my feeling of self worth was coming back in eggsplaining the originals they were done after a psychosis where I was in isolation unit at Rozelle Pychiatric hospital
Revealing the total horror I had felt at that time...early2000s??????? I think

Just thinking, I have always been searching for my face....I hid from fotos...I couldn't find me in the realm of drug culture of some , well most of the psych doctors.....me being my face.....it seemed to me to be emotionless, eggspreshionless, a blank, so I tried to find mine in paintings and words....it's ongoing but I am gradually becoming more aware.....sorta. There are many scars... ..many shields ...self esteem is no where but nearly now here.....just saying

When I was first put in the bins I couldn't work out wot the fuk was going on... It took a few years for a diagnosis, which incidentally changes with how your doctor doctors you.... So my next series in the early 90s were under the title Mood Swings 1 and 2.

Coincidentally I was put under the Guardianship board and they basically had to take me out of the studio set up and as an outlet for me to pursue my creativity I wrote and fanged out on guitars... this led me into more performance based work and getting 2 books published.

I am now based in a studio situation again thru grants sales and have been for the last 7 years

Endnote

For Matthew and Other: Journeys with Schizophrenia Campbelltown (2006)

Anne Loxley, 'The Charisma of Schizophrenia', in Dysart and Fenner (eds.), *For Matthew and Other: Journeys with Schizophrenia*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2006, p. 42

Good Neighbours Art Bank 2017

Daniel Mudie Cunningham, 'Mental Olympics: in between breaths with Wart', in *un Magazine* 11.1, *un Projects*, Melbourne, 2017

This is also available on Wart's website, <https://wart-the-website.com/mental-olympics-2017/>

Four Women: (I do belong) Double Lismore Regional Gallery 2017

Djon Mundine, "Four Women: (I do belong) Double." This is also available under publications on Wart's website, <https://wart-the-website.com/four-women-i-do-belong-double-2017/>