

The Making of 'Good' Mirrors: Art and Activism in Public Space

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Abstract

This article, The Making of 'Good' Mirrors: Art and Activism in Public Space, discusses the Feminist and Indigenous methods I apply to co-created collaborative and relational portraiture projects expressly created for public space and semi-public space and how they act as art and activism. The discussed projects, created using still and moving image, work in resistance to the problem of the gendered aesthetic within the Australian context through the applied making methods within a social studio, the politics of representation and the public placement of the project's products. Discussed projects include #IAMWOMAN (2017-current), Women Dreaming (2018) and Flipping the Script (2018).

Keywords: women, representation, photography, collaborative photography, collaborative portraiture, feminism, Indigenous methods, public space, art and activism

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The Making of 'Good' Mirrors: Art and Activism in Public Space

*"Good Mirrors are not cheap
it is a waste of time hating the mirror
or its reflection
instead of stopping the hand
that makes glass with distortions
slight enough to pass
unnoticed."*

(Good Mirrors are Not Cheap, Audre Lorde)

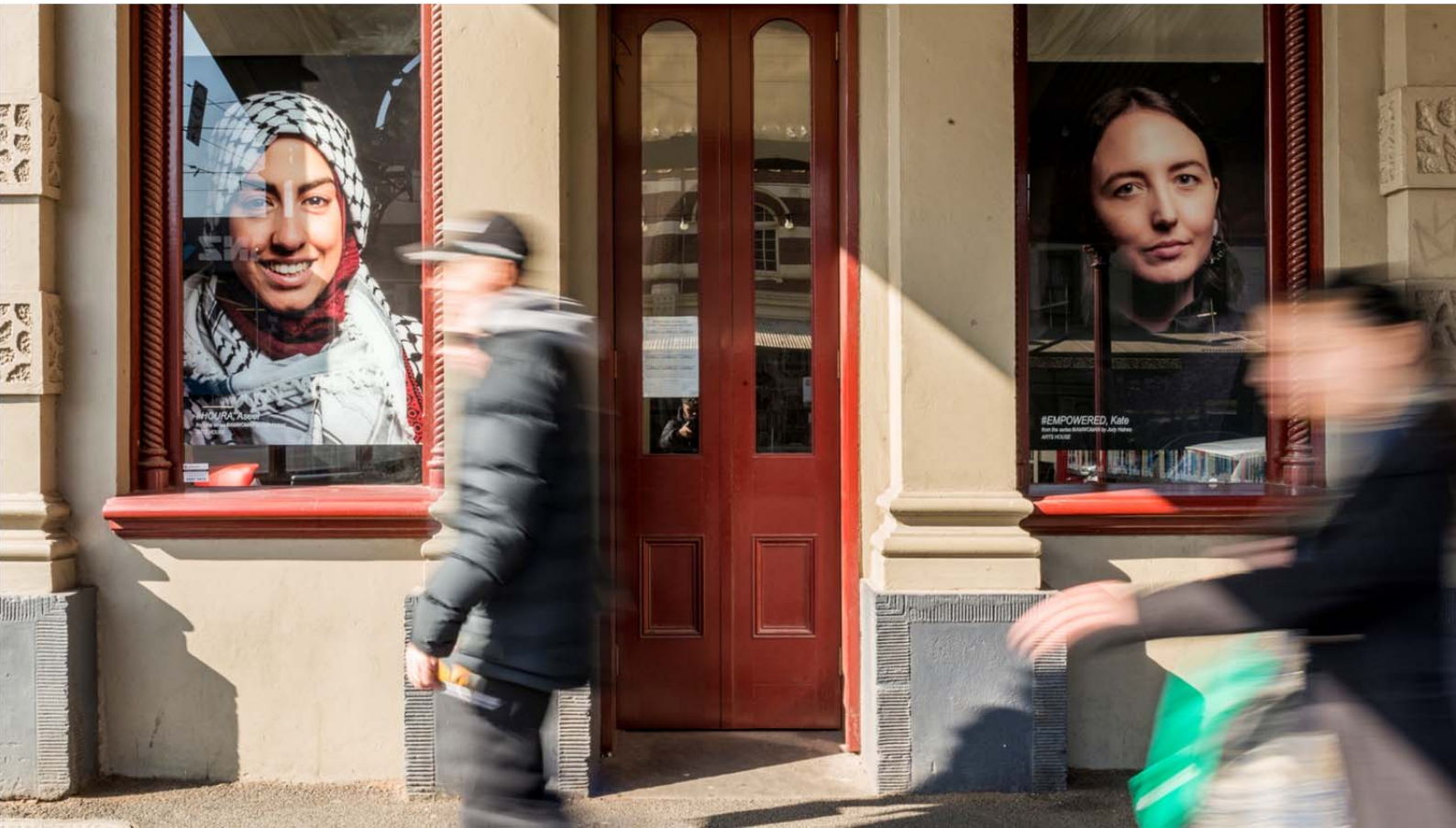


Figure 1. IAMWOMAN 2019 ArtsHouse, North Melbourne, Australia.
Documentation image. Photograph: Jody Haines.

The Mirror

What is and how do we make a 'Good' mirror? African American feminist poet and civil rights activist, Audre Lorde (1934-92) says in her poem, "they are not cheap" (2017: 177). If they are not cheap, is this an indicator of their rarity? Maybe a good mirror is not typical. For me, what I understand to be a 'good' mirror reflects with assumed accuracy. It does not distort appearances but echoes what I am expecting to see; the shape of my body, the colour of my skin, the lines of my face. A reflection I believe to be true. But what if I have never looked into a 'good' mirror but only into surfaces with varying degrees of distortion, imitating and informing my gender, my race, my sexuality. Would I know the difference? Can I see past the twist and the buckle crafted by another's hand and reposition my gaze? Is what I see reality or a construction? In the following document, I discuss making 'good' mirrors or creating an alternate reflection – specifically repositioning the gaze across public spaces, as it relates to the visual representation of women and those humans who identify as women. Through a feminist standpoint and my Indigenous methodology, I co-create collaborative and relational portraits with women. The works, created for public space and semi-public space, actively resist the problem of the gendered aesthetic within the Australian context, acting as examples of art and activism.

There are two key elements I respond to within my practice – the gendered and racialised aesthetic produced by the Australian media and the commercial photography industry. The media acts as a significant vehicle for the communication of race representation and gender norms that privilege men as a group (Brooks and Hébert, 2006, Dobson, 2015). The Australian media is also highly concentrated, controlled by a small number of corporations and interconnected family interests who dominate much of the production (Finkelstein et al., 2012).

Across media productions, the visual representation of women is both under-represented as producers and also disproportionately featured as either a victim or an object (Darian-Smith, 2016). The portrayal of Indigenous Australians is overwhelmingly poor. A Curtin University study found within 335 news articles over 12 months (2013-14) 15% were positive, 74% negative, and 11% were neutral (Stoneham et al., 2014). These products are highly visible and accessible across public space. The second issue is commercial photography itself, which predominantly is still a 'boys club'. Although women make up the majority of graduates from tertiary photography programs, they make up less than 25% of photographers represented by agencies within Australia (Sebag-Montefiore, 2019) and globally, women sit at 15% of professional news photographers (Hadland et al., 2016). Within advertising, although women make up over 80% of the consumer market, 92% of the advertising images are created by men (Sebag-Montefiore, 2019, Greenberg, 2018). As Internationally renowned portrait photographer, Jill Greenberg noted in her recent TEDx talk, *the Female Lens*, "those who are paid to create the images that shape our culture have real power" (2018 5min 16sec). In other words, it is the images created by men that surround us. The view presented, the creators of the non-verbal postures that we textually read, are predominately generated by the male frame, through their gaze (Berger, 1972, Mulvey, 1975, Wells, 2005, Greenberg, 2018). The first point of my activism: *break the mirror, replace the maker.*



Figure 2 (left). #Bruja, Tania, 2018 from series IAMWOMAN. Photograph: Jody Haines.
Figure 2A (right). #Collected, Vanessa, 2018 from series #IAMWOMAN. Photograph: Jody Haines.

Break the Mirror: replace the maker – A social studio

To break the mirror, replace the maker, not only refers to changing the gender behind the lens, but also to breaking the gendered approach seemingly inherent to the language of photography. *Shoot, capture, expose, take* are all photography speak and the typical image of the photographer, as author and theorist Ariella Azoulay (1962) has written "is identified as a male figure roaming around the world and pointing his camera at objects, places, people, and events..." (2016: 187). To *replace the maker* required me to change. To change the process and structure of the way I make photographs, the language I used to speak about photography, and the setup and performance of making. Susan Sontag (1933-2004) in her book *On Photography* (1971) notably argued that "there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera" (1971: 7). To break down this idea of the aggressive and the predatory nature of the camera, the experience needed to become a personal and collaborative exercise, the camera, secondary to the engagement. In my practice, the concept of a social studio emerged; in 2017, although I didn't have a descriptor or term until 2019. The implementation of the social studio occurred during a residency at the Women of the World Festival, Melbourne, where I first began #IAMWOMAN. This social studio concept draws on my Indigenous and feminist

standpoint, a Tommeginner¹ feminist standpoint, a location to which I bring my whole self². The photographic studio becomes a place focused on the act of making and making together as equally as the image produced. It is a space where conversation drives the engagement. A discussion centred on examining the gendered aesthetic that surrounds us and encourages a societal change in our representation. My personal Indigenous methodology focuses on the importance of the act of making, and the act of making together, not primarily the product visual outcome produced. The making occurs through collaborative yarning and sharing of knowledge – personal, cultural and tacit knowledge³. This process of the yarnin' circle endeavours to shift the centre of power and knowledge away from a singular person to the collective group, developing the basis from which to form an equal and shared space to create and learn (Martin, 2018, Bessarab and Ng'Andu, 2010, Fredericks et al., 2011).

The projects are female-focused and female lead (for women by women). The objective is to create an *Active/Active* arrangement in the making - *Active* Photographer, *Active* participant. Historically, the active role has been granted to the photographer (generally a male), leaving the subject (usually a female) in the passive position of being looked at (Mulvey, 1975). To create the *Active* participation, firstly the women involved in the projects, all self-nominate. Creating active participation is formed through relationship building, a relational exchange. Together, we explore what it is to be a woman, our feminist futures and feminist pasts, along with the textual analysis of the very public images we see of women. Exploring the downward angle, the soft lighting, the seductive look, and who is privileged within this frame. Together we exchange. We discover. We listen deeply. We plot, we laugh, we cry, we swear. Together we make an image, a representation of a moment containing five frames. A moment directed by the participant who then titles their image with a word, sight unseen.

¹ Tommeginner is the name given to the Indigenous tribal group, the first people, of the North West Coast of Tasmania, Australia.

² The name 'social studio' should not be confused with 'The Social Studio' in Collingwood, Victoria. Founded in 2009, the Social Studio is "a social enterprise that champions the values of diversity, community, education, environmentally sustainable design and ethical business practices" 2015. *The Social Studio* [Online]. Online: Twist Design. Available: <https://www.thesocialstudio.org/about-us/> [Accessed July 2019].

³ Yarning or Yarnin' Circles is an Indigenous way of learning and exchanging knowledge. The exchange is based on the process of caring and communicating. Important elements include: to be present in the moment, to be respectful, to be open, honest and listen deeply. Plus acknowledge and share strengths and knowledge in turn. Dunleavy, J. n.d. *About Yarning Circles: A Guide for participants* [Online]. On line: GNIBI Southern Cross University. Available: <https://www.scu.edu.au/media/scueduau/academic-schools/-gnibi-college-of-indigenous-australian-peoples/About-Yarning-Circles-A-Guide-for-Participants.pdf> [Accessed August 2019 2019].



Figure 3 (left). #Strong, Lorna, 2019, from the series #IAMWOMAN. Photograph: Jody Haines.
Figure 3A (right). #Hope, Natasha, 2019, from the series #IAMWOMAN. Photograph: Jody Haines.

This process was applied to working with Aboriginal Elders (Aunties) in the *Women Dreaming* project⁴. The relationship was established through the collaborative yarnin' circle, exploring our connection to history, to culture, who we are as Aboriginal women. American author, professor, activist, and cultural critic bell hooks (1952) in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* says

Since decolonisation as a political process is always a struggle to define ourselves in and beyond the act of resistance to domination, we are always in the process of both remembering the past even as we create new ways to imagine and make the future (1992, p. 5)

It is this act of re-defining ourselves or defining our position through the yarnin' process I am transferring into the studio for the image-making, creating images that draw on the returned gaze and the right to 'look'. The visual feel of the project was co-created between the Aunts – the colour transitions and use of language words included in the project. The end product was the representation they wanted to share, a description of a moment containing five frames. In the words of feminist author and academic, Sara Ahmed "moments can become movements" (2017: 436). My next point of activism: *Break the Mirror, reposition the gaze – whose voice?*

⁴ 'Aunty' is the term provided to a female Australian Aboriginal Elder. An Aboriginal Elder is someone who has gained community recognition, respect and standing, someone who holds knowledge or is a custodian of knowledge and lore.

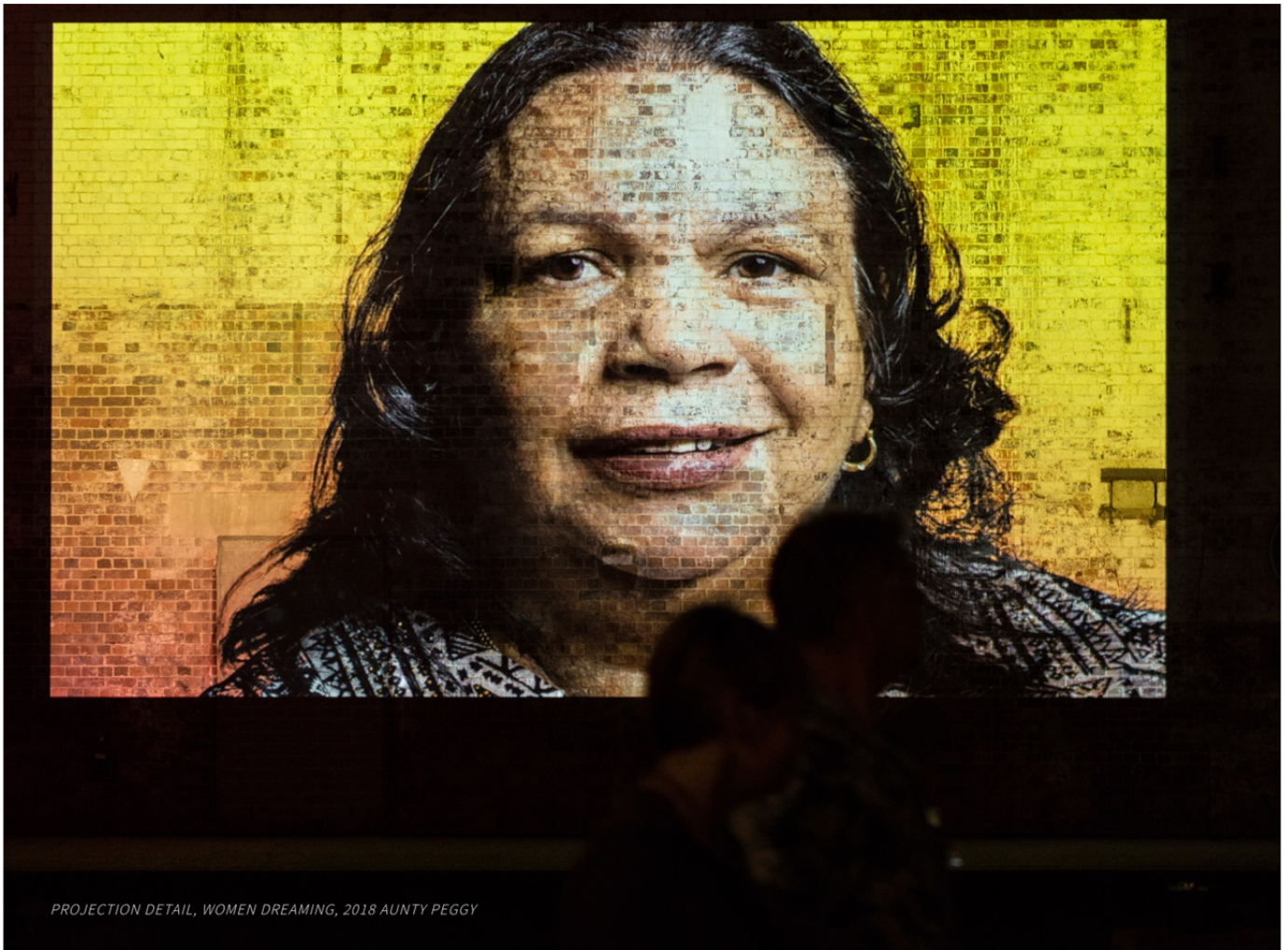


Figure 4. Projection Detail, *Women Dreaming*, Auntie Peggy, 2018, Brisbane Powerhouse, Queensland, Australia. Photograph: Jody Haines.

Break the Mirror: reposition the gaze – whose voice is privileged?

Woven through my work is a commitment to the politics of representation and how we represent ourselves. I acknowledge I am far from being the first artist to engage participants in a co-authoring or collaborative portraiture process. The shift towards including participants in the making rather than being seen as the 'subjects' of photographs has been developing since the early 1970's, growing out from the community photography movement in the United Kingdom (Palmer, 2013, Turnbull, 2015, Luvera, 2010).⁵ Inside my practice although generally my finger is on the shutter, the process of how we 'represent' is explored with each participant - through informed consent and engaging in an open discussion about the look and feel of images and their 'directorial role' in the engagement. #IAMWOMAN project privileges the voices of

⁵ Key artists working in the collaborative photography field include (but are not limited to) Australian photographer Anthony Luvera, American photographers Wendy Ewald and Susan Meiselas, and French artist, JR.

women. The women who participate in the project are intergenerationally ranging from younger to older (18 to 89 years old). They're also intersectional across their lived experience - race, religion and sexuality. *Women Dreaming* privileged older Aboriginal women, honouring their knowledge, lived experience and community standing. For *Flipping the Script*, an initiative of Wyndham City Council and Creative Victoria, the women included here are young women from the Afro-diaspora living in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. Young women ranging in age from 15 to 20 with family roots in South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia and more. At the time of creating the work, the political climate prescribed an African Gang problem existing across Melbourne, which in turn became a racialised media frenzy (Budarick, 2018). The young women were completely unrelated to the 'gang problem', yet they personally expressed how they felt socially labelled and treated as such.

Across four weeks, learning photography and video techniques, lighting, storyboarding and visual language, the young women explored ideas of Australia's cultural ignorance of *Africa...Not a country* (Haines et al., 2018a), Queer identity in *For You* (Haines et al., 2018b) and the feminist politics of hair in *Don't touch my hair* (Haines and Olubodun, 2018). The collection of video works may not have been the familiar stories expected by the commissioning body, but the funders voice wasn't the priority. The stories reflected the representation the participants wanted to create, privileging their stories, their faces, their lived experience. Next point of Activism: *Break the Mirror, reposition the gaze – public placement*

Break the Mirror: reposition the gaze – public placement

As indicated in the previous section, the politics of representation is not a new idea and today, there is an increasing number of photographic practitioners choosing to work through this question, in collaborative or socially engaged practice (Luvera, 2019). The key characteristic of my practice I explore after the making of collaborative works, is their placement across public spaces, and how this could be read or received by the public.

The product of *Women Dreaming* was a large-scale projection displayed on an exterior wall of Brisbane Powerhouse in Queensland. The venue, an old Power Station transformed into a contemporary performance and arts space, sits adjacent to the active public gardens, New Farm Park, Brisbane. Programmed during the state-wide Cultural Celebrations Festival 2018 (created for the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games), and Women of the World Australia 2018 (both the commissioning parties), *Women Dreaming* aired for four nights, situated amongst the celebration of the Commonwealth⁶. An entity that stole, colonised and practised the systematic destruction of Indigenous knowledge, language and culture. Australia, as part of this celebrated 'Commonwealth', is the only Commonwealth Country to have never signed a treaty with its First Nations People (Marshallsea, 2017).

⁶ The Commonwealth is a political association originally created by the British Empire.



Figure 5. Projection Detail, *Women Dreaming*, Auntie Norita, 2018, Brisbane Powerhouse, Queensland, Australia.
Photograph: Jody Haines.

A number of ideas went into the presentation, including the colonial ideas around who has knowledge (First World/Western/modern worlds) and who has culture (Third World/first peoples/indigenous peoples) (Mignolo, 2009). Knowledge played into the work by incorporating a language word provided by each Elder. Culture operated in the magnitude and scale of the projection. At approximately nine meters high and sixteen meters wide, the size felt like the women's gaze challenged the audiences right to look and ultimately, the structure of the celebration itself. Strong black women looked back. They were asserting their space and their culture. Outside of the programmed festival audience, the very public location allowed the wider community to 'stumble' across the work. Wanting to know more, many people engaged in conversations on treaty,

constitutional recognition, language, and why only female faces were displayed. The grandkids of the women looked on in awe. They saw black women, older women, their family publicly honoured - not a visual representation Indigenous kid generally see. Seeing our community represented, in a self-directed, collaborative way, rather than as a victim, object or negative representation expands options and perspectives for the next generation. As American activist Marian Wright Edelman says, "It's hard to be what you can't see" (2015, para. 5)



Figure 6. Install Image #IAMWOMAN 2017 Knox Community Arts Centre, Immerse Festival.
Photograph: Jody Haines.

Counteracting woman-as-object, #IAMWOMAN has had several public presentations across different iterations of the work, from being installed in A0 sized light boxes facing a highway at Knox Community Arts Centre, Baywater, an outer suburb of Melbourne, to appearing in two Women of the World festivals across Australia (Brisbane and Melbourne). Fifteen newly created images were installed across public spaces in North Melbourne (July - August 2019). Supported and programmed by Arts House, City of Melbourne, large portraits appeared in windows across the North Melbourne Town Hall, Post office, Library and Community Centre. The faces are women from around the area. Often #IAMWOMAN is located and viewed amongst the myriad of images that occupy public space – primarily the advertising we are surrounded by; this iteration is no different. The proximity and juxtaposition with advertising hold the potential to de-power the images, reinforcing the idea of woman-as-object (Greenberg, 2018). However, through the size, intimacy and visual difference of #IAMWOMAN, a visible difference created through the social studio experience, the work due to the proximity with advertising also has the potential to impact a viewer. Australian art historian, Dr

Julie Cotter, who specialises in portraiture, wrote the following about #IAMWOMAN telling the impact she experienced in a letter of congratulations,

"The images show an intimacy of interaction between the artist and subject, gently shared in turn with the audience, displaying a depth of emotion and dignity; you feel you could know them in a personal way." (2017)



Figure 7 Projection Detail, Women Dreaming 2018, Auntie Moira. Brisbane Powerhouse, Queensland, Australia. Photograph: Jody Haines.

The true impact on the viewer is unmeasurable. But if the images raise interest or show them something different, I can only hope they'll begin to question and challenge "the hand that makes glass with distortions." (Lorde, 2017: 177)

'Good' Mirrors

In conclusion, creating good mirrors is a slow process. It takes time and necessitates bringing your whole self to the table. It exercises deep listening and changing behaviours – both personal and social - to build feminist futures that recognise Indigenous identity, to reimagine the mirror. My activism, my practice, it's a quiet, slow burn, chipping away at the fabric of our social bias by reshaping the mirror, by our own hands.

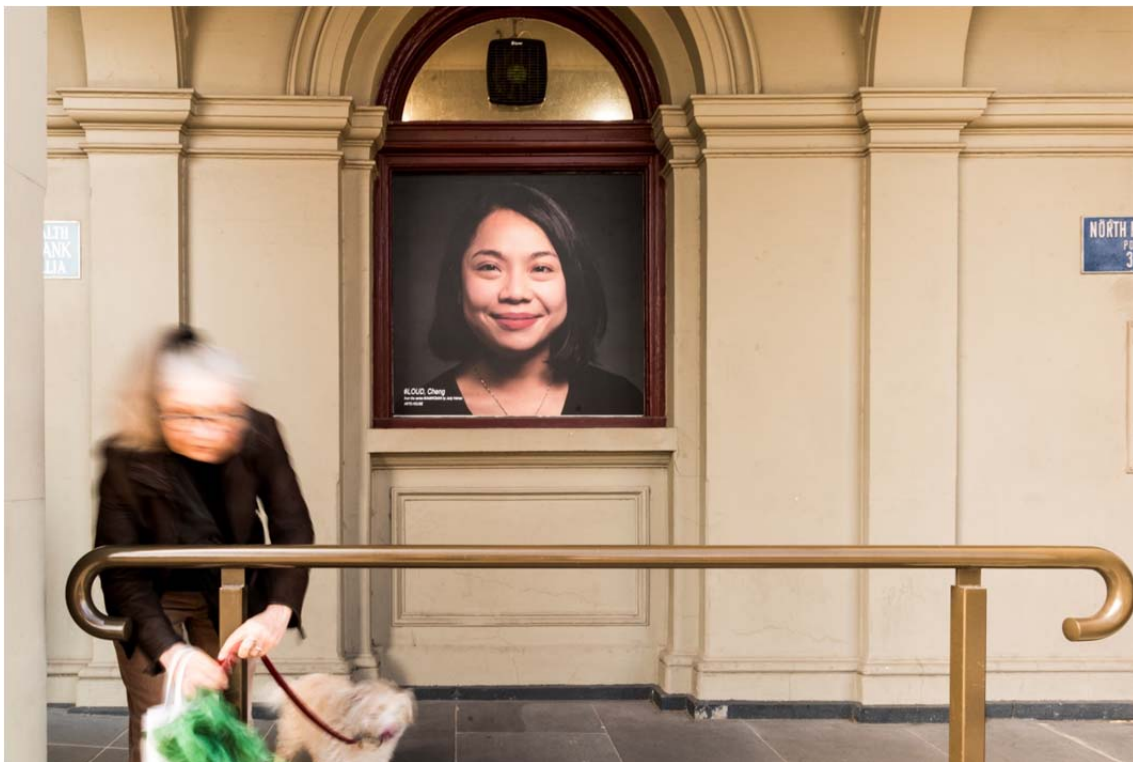


Figure 8 IAMWOMAN 2019 ArtsHouse, North Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia. Documentation image. Photograph: Jody Haines.

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Jody Haines is a photo media artist - photography, video and projection - based in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. By applying an Indigenous and feminist filter to her work, Haines focuses on identity, representation and the Female Gaze within the Australian context. Haines presents her work across the gallery cube and public spaces. Haines has exhibited widely including Sydney Festival 2018 and Ballarat International Foto Biennale 2017 as part of Tell: Contemporary Indigenous Photography, and Gertrude Street Projection Festival 2017. In 2017, Haines was awarded the Emerging artist award for Immerse 2017, for her work #IAMWOMAN, an ongoing social portrait project. She has been commissioned to create work for festivals such as Women of the World and Festival 2018 Commonwealth Games with the Women Dreaming Project, and Through sKIN we Breathe, held in Dance Massive 2019, and Our people Our place a new public art commission for Horizons Festival 2019, Sunshine Coast Queensland, collaborating with the local community in a visual and audio projection work. Engaged as a lead artist/video artist across projects including Flipping the script 2018 and Place Patterns 2018 both supported by Creative Victoria and Wyndham City Council. Haines completed a Master of Arts, Art in Public Space, at RMIT (2018) with Distinction, and was included on the Vice Chancellors Academic List RMIT 2018. Currently a PhD candidate at RMIT School of Art, she is looking at Relational and Collaborative Photography as a tool for social change. She lives and works on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples and is a descendant of the Tommeginner peoples of Tasmania.

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