

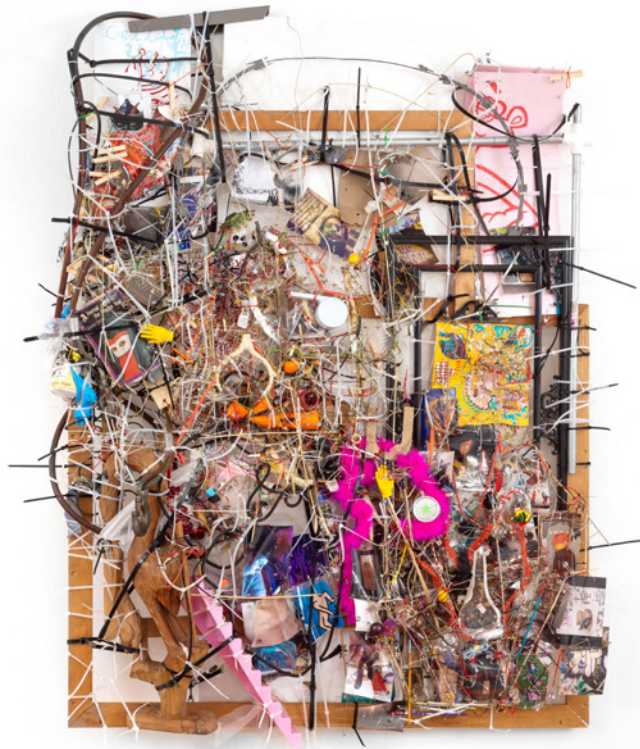
# **BACKWASH**

Artist Q&A

Artist biographies

Drill Hall Gallery

Robert Bittenbender



*Hecuba Hamilton* 2020, mixed media, layered canvases, in custom frame. Courtesy the artist and Lomex Gallery, New York.

separate events as time connects distinct memories. Some unseen force pulls-together hundreds of fragments, which become woven into an ambivalent mess.

While they remain highly specified indexes, they occur within the cultural backwash of the American Dream - a tenuous attachment that could come undone at any point. The works are precarious in their resolution, threatening to slip back into the stream of stuff from which they came.

Bittenbender received a Bachelor of Fine Art from the Cooper Union, New York City (2008). In 2019, Bittenbender participated in the Whitney Biennial. Courtesy Alexander Shulan, LOMEX Gallery, New York.

b.1987, Washington DC, USA.  
Lives and works in New York City.

Robert Bittenbender's work consists of complex assemblages of found objects, printed matter, photographs, and painting. The works are dense, complex and overloaded with information. Some of the materials incorporated are not independently recognisable, highlighting the work's desire to be apprehended as an organic whole.

Arranged with his own sense of "decorative virtuosity", Bittenbender turns the discarded and the cheap - plastic lids, tiaras, wooden fans, safety pins, toys...all kinds of stuff - into hyperbolic tangles of the everyday. Setting large volumes of material into rudimentary frameworks, their structure operates like a sieve, filtering the materials and memories that we accumulate in our daily interactions. The works appear as a recollection, marking a particular time and place. Zip-ties tether

Isabella Darcy



*minaudier #1*, 2023, plastic bag over canvas. 25.5 x 20 x 2 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Sophia Al-Maria is a Kuwaiti-American artist, writer and filmmaker carrying out research around the concept of Gulf Futurism (a term she has coined). Al-Maria's focus is on the isolation of individuals through technology, reactionary religion, consumerism and industry, and the erasure of history. Her poem *Sad Sack* is an important work, and one I love. In it she re-examines Le Guin's image of the carrier bag as an asset to the survival of human civilisation. Al-Maria poignantly turns this notion on its head through her focus on the dystopian and real ideologies of the plastic bag. Le Guin's anthropological vessel, her structure of care and support undergoes a metamorphoses of mythological proportion in Al-Maria's poem. The bag is now a single-use waste product, a weapon, a destructive force against nature and life on earth: '*...this thing that pulled us upright out of the depths of time is the thing that's causing new great dying.*'<sup>1</sup> Al-Maria's interest in the plastic bag stems from her theory of Gulf Futurism. Plastic is a bi-product of oil. The eradication of culture and subsequent erasure of identity is a bi-product of the wealth and power of the Gulf oil industry.

1. Sophia Al-Maria, 'Sad Sack', in *Sad Sack: Collected Writings*, Book Works, 2019

Who are the writers who have been most important in your life?

Three works stand out: Joke Robaard's *Unconditional Love: The Repertoire of Poverty* (in *Archive Species. Bodies, Habits, Practices*, 2018), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory Fiction* (1986), and most significantly *Sad Sack* (2019) by Sophia Al-Maria. Robaard considers the history of imitation and identity in the marketing and manufacturing of clothing. His dissection of "the hole" in clothing is particularly pertinent to my practice.

Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory Fiction* directed my focus to how practices of use and wearing may reveal about cultural structures and gender politics. Le Guin challenges the Anthropocene. Her ideas on systems of care open up the potential for divergent examinations of the history of the body and clothing as an architectural framework around materials and identity.

How do found materials or 'poor materials' influence your approach to making art?

Using found materials gives contextual significance to my work. Found materials carry their own cultural associations, symbolic meanings and history. By incorporating and layering different found materials, I am able to tap into their inherent narratives, creating a palimpsest of meaning. The unique textures, colours, shapes and patterns of the plastic bags I use direct the work. When I started to use found materials it was focused around ideologies of consumerism. I unpacked these ideas using mass-produced materials (plastic bags, jeans, towels, envelopes, discarded textiles). Over time my familiarity with these materials has grown and I have now found a way to use them to shed light on form, pattern and colour as well as ideological concerns. Working with these kinds of materials often involves embracing chance and unexpected

<p>discoveries both formally and conceptually. They also reflect a psycho-geographical plain - they signify where I have been and what I have seen whether it be on the street, while I am shopping, at home. The waste materials that form my work are societies' backwash.</p>	<p>particularly to her knitted wall works. Other influences include Alex Vivian, Alexandra Bircken, Joke Robaard, Andreas Exner, Elisa Van Joolen, Eugene Carcesio, and Susan Cianciolo. I feel an affinity with the arte povera movement and believe my work shares attitudes of abstraction, modernism and postmodernism.</p>
<p>Do you have any thoughts on the commerce of art and the art market? Or on consumerism and its social affects more broadly?</p>	<p>Isabella Darcy b. 1995, Naarm/Melbourne, Australia Lives and works in Naarm/Melbourne</p>
<p>In my photographic project <i>Reworked</i> (2019) I collected photographs of people in public spaces, cropping the images to focus on bodily gestures and clothing. The project honed in on subcultural trends and correspondence with consumerism through fashion and culture. Likewise the materials I use in my painting practice - plastic bags, jeans, towels - are closely related to my own observations on consumerism. Using byproducts of mass-production speaks of the harm caused in their production processes and the social and economic demands of consumers.</p>	<p>Isabella Darcy works across a diverse range of media, including installation, photography, printmaking, textiles, and expanded painting. Her practice follows an interest in the systems and flux of value within consumable objects and design. Interrogating how distinct modes of value are layered within mass-produced items, she reflects on the alignments of consumption and class.</p> <p>Darcy recirculates throwaway items into new realms of presentation, reinscribing materials such as plastic bags, envelopes, towels, discarded textiles or unwanted clothing, that have otherwise exhausted their utilitarian function and shed their original symbolic value. Through their re-use, Darcy questions the inextricable relationship between consumption and environmental degradation, the harm caused by exploitative manufacturing processes, and the toxic run-off effects of our systems of wastefulness.</p> <p>In contrast, Darcy treats her material with care, showing appreciation for the material's uniqueness, its texture, colour, shape and pattern, details that were at one time deliberated on by an unknown (creative) worker. She acknowledges that these formal decisions are not arbitrary but have a human back story. Art can be found everywhere, by chance, or occur out of nothing. In this way she shares an ethos with the nonobjective artist and her mentor John Nixon, finding interest in the conjunction of art and the everyday.</p> <p>Darcy completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) from Monash University (2020), and continues to exhibit regularly in Melbourne.</p>
<p>What was your earliest intimation that you were going to be an artist?</p>	
<p>When I was in my final year of secondary school I was so certain that I wanted to pursue art that I applied to three different university art schools. I didn't feel like I was a proper artist until I went on a university exchange to Italy for a semester. Experiencing contemporary art on an international scale opened a door to the possibilities of contemporary art and pushed me to explore and define my own practice. The Fondazione Prada made a particular impact. Seeing art on that scale in such an institution revealed to me the power of art.</p>	
<p>Which artists (any field, not just visual arts) have influenced you longest and most deeply?</p>	
<p>John Nixon was a close friend and mentor. I always look to his work for inspiration. Recently I have been compelled by the work of the German artist Rosemarie Trockel. I relate</p>	

George Egerton-Warburton



*Woozy Heights*, 2022, steel from farm machinery and infrastructure, castor wheels, Eucalyptus branch, chain, antique plough point, Guzman y Gomez table numbers, United Airlines ratchet strap, strainer, designer coffee mugs, water bottles and carrier, Calvin Klein underpants and security tag, and disco ball, 192 x 90 x 200cm. Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery Melbourne.

How do found materials or 'poor materials' influence your approach to making art? How do they facilitate the visual language within your work? How do they direct its form and structure?

I am interested in how materials socialise with words, histories, and bodies to create friction. The materials I pick up often seem to have soaked into the landscape at some point, physically or spiritually. It's about suspending a kind of rot or compost. Re-contextualising an idea or a material is a craft, and there's something inherently funny about it, even if all it takes is a car trip, moving or rearranging something. A lot of my favourite works are dematerialised. Although I don't exclusively work with that legacy, I am keenly aware of the space around the work; its psychic broadcast. Sometimes this synchronises with something material - for instance in my show

at Heide (George Egerton-Warburton, 29 June – 10 November 2019) when a nest of native wasp larvae that were inside some rotating augers I had bought from a salvage yard were stimulated by the gallery air conditioning. There was an outbreak. Janet Burchill's and Jennifer McCamley's work *SAFE* (2005) - a neon rendition of Todd Haynes *SAFE* movie title - was hanging nearby. The effect was like some strange incantation of the movie.

The exhibition is titled 'Backwash', how do you interpret this idea in relation to your work? Or what comes to mind?

In my late teens I frequented a surf break called 'Sandtracks' in North Fremantle. Nestled in an industrial area, bordered by man-made break walls constructed of big rocks, it was secret in the way that surf breaks are never really secret. It was like a strange stadium surrounded by stacks of shipping containers. There was a tiny cafe on one side, there to serve the trucks that were pulling in and out of the dock 24/7. The allure of this wave was that the swell would hit the rocks and backwash would bounce off the wall, so that lines of swell would collide and make big wedge shaped peaks. It was a bizarre confluence of nature and industry.

Years later on a visit to WA, I drove down to check out the surf at 'Sandtracks'. I was a bit disoriented and I couldn't figure out where I had made a wrong turn. I was circling around a big gravel carpark when I spotted the little truck cafe, but it was no longer on the edge of the break wall. I realised the carpark I was driving on was the surf break; it had been entirely filled in to make more space for the trucks and more containers. It was a completely eerie experience.

Spaces like this, which have been ignored because they are deemed not beautiful, and subsequently endure a process of accidental conservation, are my favourite spaces. One of my favourite walking spots when I lived in Melbourne was a beautiful grassland bordered by a sewage plant and a decommissioned rubbish dump down near Altona. I could see residential developments encroaching on it like a tide.

George Egerton-Warburton  
b. 1988, Kojonup, WA, Australia  
Lives and works in New York City

George Egerton-Warburton's practice involves a variety of mediums, such as painting, sculpture, kinetic machines, installation, text, video and performance. Egerton-Warburton is primarily "interested in how materials socialise with words, histories, and bodies to create friction." His work explores the social and cultural conditioning of consumerism and its ensuing effects on behaviours, norms and impulses.

Egerton-Warburton's works are often hard to pin down. He prefers to work outside of fixed definitions, in which openness, deficiency, and "haziness" contribute to a multiplicity of meanings. As he states, "My studies start with the artwork, event, or paragraph, and encompass their dematerialised potential, as well as the rumours, notes, misunderstandings, feelings, and incidental references and associations that accrue along the way. This cumulative effect creates an atmosphere for the artwork, without ever defining it completely." Embracing "confusion," his work testifies how ideas, artworks and people can communicate with one and other through aesthetic experience.

In 2015, Egerton-Warburton and his entire MFA cohort dropped out of the program at USC Roski School of Art and Design in protest of fee structure changes and a shift in the program ethos. This included the removal of key lecturers and mentors. The program had been known as an exemplary pedagogical model and was to be replaced by a neo-liberal framework of streamlined education and associated fees.

Egerton-Warburton completed a PhD in Fine Art by Research at MADA, Monash University (2022). He has held solo exhibitions in Australia, USA and New Zealand, most recently exhibited as part of Melbourne NOW (2023). George Egerton-Warburton is represented by Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.

Sarah Goffman



Detail from *Garbage and the Flowers*, 2022, Deakin University Art Gallery, Melbourne. Photo: Ross Coulter.

*Matter* (2009) makes sense to me as I struggle to find order in chaos and navigate my own materialism. It has helped me understand that the relics of our present era are totemic, they are the social anthropology of consumerism.

How does your practice as an artist sit in the context of a consumerist society?

It is my responsibility as an artist to question consumerist society and contemporary culture as well as questioning my own role in that structure. It is utterly prevalent in every molecule of my practice.

When you make a work, what are the qualities you would like it to evidence?

Evidence is a key word. My work is evidence of living and time now.

How do found materials or 'poor materials' facilitate the visual language within your work?

Growing up in New York City in the seventies I saw abandoned spaces, defunct factories and huge lots filled with weeds. Artists occupied those fringes and collected garbage which they converted into art, it intrigued me. Now I like to think of the packaging of an object as its cloak, the thought engages multiple metaphors that I am attracted to. The found objects I use in my work direct their own placement. I'm just a conduit, being instructed by the bower birds in nature.

The twentieth century prepared me to consider all materials fair game. In the film *The Gods must be Crazy* (1980) a coke bottle falls from the sky and when it is found becomes an object of veneration. That struck a chord with my teenage self: the vast difference between rich and poor, the waste of the rich being used by the poor. It highlights the socioeconomic disparities and inequities I witness every day.

I appreciate the materiality of our culture and am inspired by both conspicuous consumption and wanton neglect. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant*

Do you feel that your art questions the traditional structures of visual art? Are there particular flashpoints in the history of visual arts that have been an inspiration to your work?

I don't think my art questions the traditional structures of visual art. I consider a lot of what I make redundant in the grand scheme of things. Thousands of artists worldwide are making ridiculously lovely things everywhere, ugly and beautiful responses to the world around us. It is shared and that is good.

Dada blew me away. Responses to the politics of time resound with me.

What was your earliest intimation that you were going to be an artist?

Some early memories spring to mind:

My mother was incredibly proud of a drawing I did before I was six years old. She had it framed. When we moved it disappeared. I wish I could see it again.

I recall lying in bed when I was even younger looking at the sun through my fingers and being astounded by the hues of pink that outlined my hands. I felt an unbounded love for what I was seeing/creating/enjoying and was proud of my ability to fill a mundane moment with beauty.

I was given tiny dolls, Thai dancing women and a little Japanese doll set with crocheted embellishments and I'd play ornamental games with them, not knowing that my mother had designed Chinese costumes for a theatre production when she was younger.

At a very young age I started adapting my clothes and shoes, snipping bits off and changing the way things were worn, necessity being the mother of invention.

When I was about ten years old I was in love with Elton John's double album *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (1973). I played it in my room and made up dance routines for the entire album.

I created my own world one summer and I occupied that fantasy so vividly. It was an installation.

Was there a specific artwork, piece of writing or music, which revealed to you the power that art can have?

I remember seeing Joseph Cornell's work at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice and I wanted to live in his shadow boxes.

When I was about seven years old we visited an artist friend of my father's in France. He'd made a huge sculpture, I think of stone. It felt like it took up the whole room. We had to circumnavigate the dark room, squashed against the wall. I loved that. I loved the feeling.

Staring at Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *Valley Curtain* images in 1972 astounding my six year old brain.

Music-wise there was everything from Popcorn to Vangelis, Jean Michel Jarre and Elton John (of course), even Mozart's *Magic*

*Flute* would entrance me. My dad believed in culture and took us to see a lot of jazz in the early seventies, and when we lived in the States he subscribed to the opera for weekly concerts. I'd be bored at times, but then parts of the music would enter me and create such big feelings that I'd cry and shiver with excitement.

As a child every piece of writing I was exposed to mattered to me. But the book which I first learnt to read, Sergi Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), its illustrations and accompanying music remains seminal to my enjoyment of all these things.

Who are the writers who have been most important in your life?

George Orwell, Roald Dahl, John Steinbeck, Doris Lessing, Somerset Maugham, Paul Auster, Olga Masters, Helen Garner, Patrick White, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Marge Piercy, Pearl S. Buck, Walter Benjamin, Ian McEwan, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolfe, Raymond Carver, P.K. Dick, Charles Dickens, Iris Murdoch, Edna O'Brien, Jean Baudrillard, Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, David Ireland, Miles Franklin, Emily Dickinson, E.E. Cummings, Siri Hustvedt, Haruki Murakami, Franz Kafka, Heinrich Boll, Samuel Beckett, Berthold Brecht and many more.



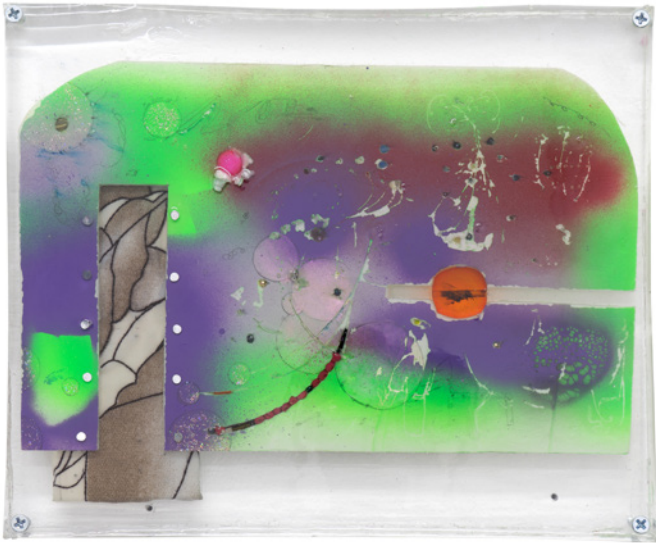
Sarah Goffman  
b. 1966, Eora/Sydney, Australia  
Lives and works in Naarm/Melbourne

Exhibiting since 1994, Sarah Goffman's practice centres around the transformation and reevaluation of waste materials. Goffman's work is inherently political. She states: "My work is evidence of living and time now!" Through her embellishment of PET plastics, Goffman converts waste into elegant replicas of antique ceramics, porcelain vessels, museum objects or original artworks.

Her work serves as a counteraction against the excess of mass production generated by consumerism. It questions the commodification inherent in contemporary society and the subsumption of art into a market economy, while undermining conventional ideas of value and aesthetic worth.

Goffman has an extensive exhibition history, presenting work in the context of museums and fine arts galleries but also in public spaces and everyday situations. Her choice of venue contributes to her ongoing critique of the institution. Goffman completed a Diploma of Arts in Photography (1994) and a Bachelor of Fine Arts (2000) at the National Art School, and received a Doctor of Creative Arts (2018) from the University of Wollongong.

Spencer Lai



Untitled, 2023, foam core, spray paint, beads, house fly, pom pom, nail polish, pencil, ink, fabric, nails, resin. Courtesy the artist and Neon Parc, Melbourne.

vessel heavy, the motor skills undeveloped, the mechanics are wrought. Bacteria swells, invisible inside the vessel. The contents can be consumed or thrown out.

Are there aphorisms, or words of advice you were given which you sometimes bear in mind when you are making a work?

I think a lot of Cathy Wilkes' reflections on her installation *Non Verbal* (2005):

The objects are toys, it was very important not to make objects, to avoid production and to show concentration and openness without further action (production). To show a lack of making, or a different way of making - (like waiting (with the bowls and trays), or playing) the work shows the objects as toys, it is expressive that they are intimately related to, in that way, as toys.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of toys, of playing and waiting resonate with me and my practice. I work in two methods. The first is driven by the desire I feel for certain objects, their materials and textures. Here I let my subconscious guide me. I then let the work gestate in the studio. I digest it. The work sits around for a while like an unloved toy until I am ready to animate it, play with it, and put it to work. Maybe it becomes something else in the process.

1. Cathy Wilkes, *Non Verbal*, 2005, as quoted by The Modernist Institute, <https://www.themoderninstitute.com/artists/cathy-wilkes/works/non-verbal-2005/101/>

The exhibition is titled 'Backwash', how do you interpret this idea in relation to your work? Or what comes to mind?

'Backwash' brings to mind the need to make sense of the material and immaterial stuff that fills our lives. As an artist working and playing in the cultural muck of Melbourne abjection resonates with me. It is freeing and containing. There is a yearning to be free, to emancipate oneself through knowledge, through identification, through the fulfilment of desires known and unknown: the desire to love and be loved; to care for one another; to have people remember our birthdays; to guide and be guided; to better oneself through education, skill, labour; to achieve virtuosity through our appearance and physical expression. To do what is expected of us. To become formed through instruction, as we are shaped by many hands.

'Backwash' also brings to mind something unhygienic or tainted, a shiver down your spine at the threat of your drink being ruined, invaded by someone else's saliva. In this case backwash can only be accepted by those closest to you. An infant learning to drink, the

When you make a work, what are the qualities you would like it to evidence?

I usually approach a work starting with a base material or form that I allow to influence the attitude of the overall work. I tend to enjoy shapes - the cube, square, rectangle, box - and the language of containment. I work in many methods with a lot of different materials so having a logic or rule can help to reign in the form and stop the possibilities of what it could be overwhelming me. From this point of containment I hope to achieve a quality of openness. I don't enjoy being told what to think or feel when it comes to art so I aim to construct

<p>a scene in which the viewer can enter from various points, without being strict or didactic. The desired qualities of individual works depend on what attitude I want that work to convey. This attitude is based on me - my mood and what is going on in my life at that time - and on what I insinuate or infer from the materials through an exploitation or contradict of their innate language, attitude and tonalities.</p>	<p>How do found materials or 'poor materials' Do you feel that your art questions the traditional structures of visual art? Are there particular flashpoints in the history of visual arts that have been an inspiration to your work?</p>
<p>How do found materials or 'poor materials' influence your approach to making art? How do they facilitate the visual language within your work? How do they direct its form and structure?</p>	<p>Structurally my work sits comfortably within the language of contemporary art. I grew up in the 1990s and 2000s. The culture, graphic design and aesthetics from that era naturally influences my work. So too does minimalism, art povera, vernacular/folk art and the Cologne scene. I remember thumbing through a Phaidon book on arte povera as a teenager, Giovanni Anselmo's <i>Untitled: Sculpture that Eats</i> (1968) totally blew me away. Jannis Kounellis, Marisa and Mario Merz and Alberto Burri are other favourites that I return to quite often.</p>
<p>When I started making work in art school found objects and in particular 'poor materials' - foam-core, felt, balsa wood and other craft materials - were a means to an end. My budget dictated what I could make and what I made reflected what I chose to spend money on at the time.</p> <p>Over time my connection to these materials changed from being a necessity to an inspiration. I became interested in the language of readily available materials, particularly the configuration and reconfiguration of units. The restricted and designated design of the unit (the pre-fab material) provided a contradiction to the openness and freedom of creative endeavour. This extended into an interest in possession and choice, for instance the clothing we chose to wear and how that acts as a faint skein of a being. The fading edge between object and being prompted the question: what constitutes a person? Where do they fade into nothing or distil into an essence, an attitude, a form, a unit?</p> <p>The chance pairings and situations that occur in everyday life, at an antique store, rummage sale or the op shop, influence how I compose my work. They speak of intricate codes of language and their infinite possible combinations. The material language of the unloved and desecrated sits with me on a personal level. And so too does the pure form of the unit. The combination of the two excites me.</p>	<p>Was there a specific artwork, piece of writing or music, which revealed to you the power that art can have?</p> <p>In my adolescence I was transfixed by Bret Easton Ellis' <i>Less than Zero</i> (1985). It was one of my first experiences of a piece of writing that made me feel something that I hadn't before. It made an impact on me. Since then I have been inspired by writers Dennis Cooper, Peter Wächtler and Ottessa Moshfeg. Artists who have made an impact include Michael Haneke, Cathy Wilkes, Richard Tuttle, Mike Kelley, Kai Althoff, Carol Rama, Jordan Wolfson.</p>

Spencer Lai

b. 1991, Sarawak, Malaysia

Lives and works in Naarm/Melbourne

Spencer Lai is a multimedia artist, curator, and writer. Their practice shifts across many formats to include drawing, assemblage, sculpture, installation, and performance. The work draws from a wide-range of visual languages, with reference to fashion, luxury, Y2K-era graphic design, traditional folk art, vernacular craft, and various youth subcultures.

Lai's tactile approach involves the careful collation and re-combination of lowcost materials, readily available objects and ornaments. Finding inspiration and potential within materials encountered in the daily life of a consumer, Lai exploits the grotesque charm of cheap, kitschy craft supplies and vernacular objects sourced from both real and virtual marketplaces.

This engagement underscores an empathy for the discarded and the under-appreciated. Yet the work's playfulness retains a threat of violence, where decoration is a distraction from the material's ultimate violation.

Lai has a design-driven obsession that runs parallel to how we model identity through intricate codes of presentation, through the incorporation of archetypal symbols, and corporate signifiers. This mode of construction relies on methods of containment, certain material limits, and systems of control. Lai employs these parameters to test the openness of creative freedom.

Lai received a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours) from the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne (2014). They are the co-founder and curator of the Bossy's Gallery in Melbourne, and recently presented a major solo exhibition with Neon Parc, Brunswick.

Marian Tubbs



*lazy river*, 2022, digital print on lustre, American oak frame, 148.5 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist and STATION, Australia.

polarising as backwashed drinks. They are both fetishized and shunned. The new healthy thing, the cleanest water, is coveted until a green washing story comes out and the brand is 'cancelled.' The dialectic of 'originally pure' vs 'newly pure' bubbles to the surface and connects filtration to other dialectics, such as 'old money' vs 'new money', and the habits of indoctrinated class structures.

When you make a work, what are the qualities you would like it to evidence?

Complexity, simplicity, generosity, energy, consideration, experimentation, and intimacy.

I want the work to feel easy. I want the viewer to know I have had a good time making it and for them to have fun with the works and feel someone generous has made something for them, even if the works are chaotic, deal with politics, and require a lot of research and reading in their creation.

Often a work springs from a sensation I have experienced that I do not have immediate words for - so I need to make a work for it. I aim to return to that sensation through the making process, and I stop when there is a sense that I have caught the feeling.

The titles arrive during making, when the work is almost finished and I understand its tone. I have a library of personal aphorism-like notes and usually they are purchased to sit next to the different works as titles.

The exhibition is titled 'Backwash', how do you interpret this idea in relation to your work?

Initially 'Backwash' made me think of adolescence sharing drinks at school sports or parties: "I do or don't want your backwash." In school thoughts about backwash were polarising. It could swing between ostracization and intimacy. The pandemic has probably effected this high school dilemma. The loss makes me feel nostalgic about schoolyard naiveté and young friends.

Since discovering the title of the exhibition I have been reading about the processes involved in the science of backwashing water and filtration. It is helping me to finish a video I started after the 2022 floods in Lismore, where I live. I think about purity, consumption, and even religion. Why do we have to filter our water, who decides what additives are included in the drinking water where you live? Filtered and green consumption are as

How do found materials or 'poor materials' influence your approach to making art?

Found objects and images have been the heartbeat of my analogue and digital practice for the last 10 years. Discarded and 'poor materials' are loaded with information, they report on the locales of contemporary value. In this respect they are incomparable to other materiality. It is this quality in objects I chance upon that calls out to me and defines the trajectory of my projects. What is captured from being in 'real' phenomenological experience

<p>wrestles with what I search for in digital detritus, meme energies, and tech thinking. The push and pull between the two helps me get away from myself and my immediate tastes. Specific materials are themselves the machinery that allow my complicated feelings about authorship to swerve, pivot and produce new metaphors.</p>	<p>different for the assemblage of ‘poor materials’ which need all the smart words available by the critic to gain in market value. My perspective has changed somewhat, it’s certainly more complex than the above, but it was my starting point to think through the market.</p>
<p>How does your practice as an artist sit in the context of a consumerist society / contemporary culture of excess?</p>	<p>Do you feel that your art questions the traditional structures of visual art?</p>
<p>Early writing about my work focused heavily on the idea that I was performing a critique of consumerism, but that was not exactly the case. Pluralism allows us to be many things. The work has never been interested in shaming, but I pay close attention to cultures of excess, value creation and disruption. Empathically, the internet gives us contemporaneous multimodal aesthetic delivery. The acceleration and bifurcation of platforms will continue and I will continue to find visual poetry to sit alongside it. I include the silly or cute image as much as peak design of luxury aesthetics. Works in the exhibition like <i>lazy river</i> and <i>i will do all the work I will just do it all wrong</i>, mimic the whirling speed of today’s tech and image culture. They are layered, verging on chaos but are also contained compositions. I am interested in emergent trends in tech, the potential political consequences of these, and digesting this to arrive at new forms.</p>	<p>Yes, all new work should question traditional structures, but for me dialectics are also at play. At core my practice is formalist. When I was growing up contemporary art was largely dominated by relational aesthetics and I could not get a hold of it. I was more interested in what things looked like, what they could look like, what they shouldn’t look like but despite this succeed in being asserted as art. My enquiry is driven by look and feel. I connect to the history of looking, the cannon, and the historically under-recognised practices that I find along my research paths. Signalling to previous forms is key to continuing discourse and affinities.</p>
<p>Do you have any thoughts on the commerce of art and the art market?</p>	<p>What was your earliest intimation that you were going to be an artist?</p>
<p>The art market, like any moneyed institution is incredibly interesting and abjectly banal in its operations. It is porous for abuse and ripe for revolution. In the Australian market, mediocre and hardworking artists with opportunity rise well. My place so far is in the penumbra, I don’t over produce and I have a day job that takes up energy.</p> <p>I used to have an indexical theory about art value and words. That is, the abstract painting with scale does not need many words to achieve an applicable value in the market. It is</p>	<p>Sensations from play when I was three years old stand out. Things like making mud-cakes with my dad in the backyard and mixing colours for finger painting. Later in primary school I drew this human figure with charcoals and chalk. I think Miss Young hung it up on the class wall. I was surprised by the positive attention. It changed something fundamental for me - I realised I could do something I love and receive a little pat on the back.</p>
	<p>Are there aphorisms, or words of advice you were given which you sometimes bear in mind when you are making a work?</p>
	<p>I had a lecturer in art school who painted funny dogs in surreal settings, he told a 19-year Marian that she could not solve the world in one painting. It helps to think about this still; takes the edge off.</p>

Marian Tubbs

b. 1983, Eora/Sydney, Australia

Lives and works in Tchukamboli/Lismore,  
NSW

Marian Tubbs is a multi-media artist, whose assemblage-based works span photography, collage, painting, video, internet art and installation. Tubbs is interested in 'poor materials,' contemporary trends in technology, the transformation of value, and the political issues affected by tech and visual culture.

The use of found materials is central to Tubbs' practice. She says, "found objects and images have been the heartbeat of my analogue and digital practice... 'Discarded' and 'poor materials' are loaded with information; they report on the locales of contemporary value and are incomparable to other materiality. For this the materials and objects that I chance upon or which call out to me, define the trajectory of each project." Utilising lowvalue commodities, everyday images, internet memes, texts and surveillance footage, Tubbs challenges traditional notion of value, creates new metaphors, and transforms her materials into new forms of "visual poetry."

Despite the political aspects of Tubbs' works, she is keen to retain a sense of playfulness: "Even if the works are chaotic and deal with politics, I want the viewer to have fun and feel that someone generous has made something for them." Mimicking the overflow of objects and images in both physical and virtual realms, Tubbs' works are layered and chaotic, yet poetically arranged. Instead of outrightly condemning consumerism, the work engages with contemporary cultures on their terms.

Tubbs completed a PhD at the UNSW Art & Design (2015). She was Lecturer in Photomedia at the National Art School (2017), and currently works as Course Coordinator and Senior Lecturer at the Southern Cross University, Lismore. Marian Tubbs is represented by STATION, Australia.

## Philadelphia Wireman



*PW 902*, c. 1970-75, mixed media, 15 x 11 x 8cm.  
Private Collection, Canberra.

### b. Unknown.

Lived in Philadelphia sometime in the 1970s.

Philadelphia Wireman is the name given to an anonymous artist who produced roughly 1200 wire-bound objects in the 1970s. These small-scale workings combine a gamut of material remnants, from single-use plastics, foils, papers and tapes, to fragments of manufactured goods like lighters, toys, coins, buttons, jewellery, cigarette butts, candy wrappers, food containers, piano keys, mirrors, electrical devices, and scraps of anonymous metal. Each artefact is a unique group of common wastes bound together with wire. The entire collection was salvaged from the curbside of a street in South Philadelphia by Robert Leitch in the late 1970s. With a particular alertness to abandoned items, Leitch instantly recognised the aesthetic peculiarity of these purposely arranged objects. In 1984, Leitch introduced the objects to gallerist John Ollman who immediately purchased 650 of them. In 1985, the sculptures were exhibited at Ollman's gallery Janet Fleisher Gallery and they became attributed to 'Philadelphia Wireman.'

Despite their wide recognition, their presence in numerous museum collections and popularity on the art market, the identity of the maker and the motivation of the work remain unknown. Surely provoked by their aesthetic brilliance, art discourse puzzles over the significance of their vernacular provenance. Some speculations link them to traditional Congolese power objects, inferring they possess animistic power, or that they are in some sense sacred. In our experience of them as unknowable aesthetic creations, we are lead paradoxically somewhere and nowhere.

Philadelphia Wireman's work not only reveals the inherent human impulse to create, to gather and to recycle, but also documents what has been produced, consumed, and discarded.

Abandoned to remain in despair and relative oblivion, the work's story parallels the collective fate of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood in which they were found. Through an 'urban renewal' project, the population who lived in one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged suburbs of Philadelphia were displaced to make way for a new development. Wireman's figurations invoke a story of a population that has experienced systematic discrimination: people who have been dislocated, forgotten, thrown away or excluded from mainstream society.

Some of these appear in 'Backwash' courtesy of a local private collection.



# **BACKWASH**

Robert Bittenbender

Isabella Darcy

George Egerton-Warburton

Sarah Goffman

Spencer Lai

Marian Tubbs

Philadelphia Wireman

Drill Hall Gallery