



TO FANNY LOVE MAB
Shannon Slee

A Miegunyah Student Project Award 2023
The Grimwade Collection

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To Fanny Love Mab

From the prism that I have called *matrixial*, to the extent that “woman” diffracts, she also digs channels of meaning and sketches an area of difference with sublimational outlets and ethical values paradoxical in the phallic paradigm.¹

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger
1996

My art practice seeks to translate history through textiles. Contemporary Australian performance artist Barbara Campbell, who engaged with The Grimwade Collection in 2003, notes history as an interpretive act and archival material, as something that is “always changing in relation to what comes after it.”² Textile work, like sewing, knitting or weaving rely on strands going in multiple directions, over and under, through and around. They are complicated systems which reject linearity and create exchanges between creative practitioners across time. As a result of their long historical connection to women’s art, textiles as an art medium, often go unrecognised.³ Textiles and textile work tend to exist in the margins. For these reasons, I believe textiles are an ideal medium from which to interpret the archive.

My first point of contact with The Grimwade ‘Miegunyah’ Collection was Fanny Anne Charsley’s, *Wild Flowers Around Melbourne* (1867). I specifically sought it out from the Grimwade’s collection as a known piece of work by a woman. An audible creak occurred when I opened its large hard blue cover. Each page is tinted with a gold edge and the paper is heavy with a quality unfamiliar to me, due to its age. Thirteen plates of exquisite watercolour paintings depict a total of fifty-eight native Australian plants. Between each illustrative page, Charsley provides a page of descriptions including Latin names, the geographical distributions of the plants and their application to domestic use. For Plate VI, she notes the creeper *Billardiera scandens*’ fruit is eaten by First Nations people and goes on to mention that she herself does not like the flavour. In doing so, she engages with First Nations knowledge and its important connection to land. The book is evidence of Charsley’s extraordinary body of knowledge, developed within nine years of living in Melbourne and one year on her return to England, when it was published.

In colonising Australia, the British not only migrated themselves, but they also clung to their gendered and classed hierarchies of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. Charsley accords to roles placed on women at this time by commenting that her work merely amused the

¹ M. Catherine de Zeghar, and Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston, Mass.), eds. *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1996).92

² Barbara Campbell, *Barbara Campbell: the Grimwade effect*, (Parkville, Vic: Ian Potter Museum, 2003).

³ For a good summary of women’s historical connection to textile work along with its dismissal to be used for important artifacts please see, Sofi Thanhauser, *Worn: A People’s History of Clothing*, (S.I.: Penguin Books, 2023). 7,8.

mind and reminded her of the “Great Creator.”⁴ In this act, Charsley effectively apologises for stepping out of the domestic sphere where women, in the nineteenth-century, were expected to remain. British art historian of decolonial feminist studies, Griselda Pollock, disentangles the complexities facing women in this century. Pollock sees the empire as provoking a homogenous idea of “Woman,” through its saturated, ideological and domesticated zone of “feminine” art and literature.⁵ The outcome is what Pollock terms an “overfeminisation,” where women were limited not only by their economical dependency and their social immobility but essentially, as we see for Charsley, their capability to claim their own artistic success and with it, their voice.

Returning to Campbell’s earlier framing of history as that which we can interpret and archival material as that which comes after it, my project for The Russell and Mab Grimwade collection sought to intervene through a determinacy to strengthen connections between women. This paper has already begun to shed some light on the temporal conditions of Charsley, but the other central woman in my project and in the collection, is Mab. On introduction to the collection by Alisa Bunbury, she described Mab as ‘difficult to get to know.’⁶ And as 2021 awardee to the project, Arabella Frahn-Starkie recognises in her project *Tacitly Mab*, we can begin to ask questions of Mab’s conditions through an active interpretation of the many photos taken of her by her husband photographer.⁷ I believe the best photographs are those of Mab in the garden. My favourite is Mab hiding in the shadow of a large hat, behind what I think are Camellia’s and in front of a brushwood fence (see figure 1). Thea Gardiner in her new book, *Mab: The World of Mab Grimwade*, describes Mab as desiring to sustain a life in the shadows⁸ and this is certainly evident in this image. Her engagement with her garden and the knowledge that she had a purpose-fit flower arrangement room, complete with Margaret Stones botanical illustrations,⁹ enlighten us to the creative actions of Mab – she enjoyed flower arrangement.

Drawing on textile practitioners long enduring habits of sharing methodologies from generation to generation, across space and time, I wanted to pick up on the two key creative and artistic methodologies of Fanny (Anne Charlsley) and Mab (Grimwade). In doing so, I took my gaze to the ground of Melbourne University Parkville Campus, which Mab had been so involved in, and like Fanny, made acute observation of the plant life – specifically native plants. Thanks to the gardeners’ work and the timely nature of being spring, I was able to locate and identify several of the same plants from Charsley’s publication in the gardens including Billy Buttons, Everlasting Daisies and Happy Wanderer from Plate XII; Pig Face from Plate XIII; a form of Grevillia from Plate X and my favourite find - Fringe Lily from Plate VI. Employing Mab’s love of flower arrangement, I utilised three vases; a black coil vase my mum made in the 1970s, a small round vase of my daughters and a gold vase from my neighbour. I

⁴ Penny Olsen, *Collecting Ladies: Ferdinand von Mueller and Women Botanical Artists*, (Canberra, ACT: NLA Pub, 2013).60

⁵ Zeghar, *Inside the Visible*, 67.

⁶ Alisa Bunbury, “Grimwade Lecture,” (lecture, Science Gallery, University of Melbourne, Carlton Vic, 15 August, 2023).

⁷ Arabella Frahn-Starkie, *Tacitly Mab*, (unpublished paper for Miegunyah Student Project Award 2021) <https://art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Arabella-A-Tacit-Sense-of-Lady-Grimwade-1.pdf>

⁸ Thea Gardiner, *Mab: The World of Mab Grimwade*, (Carlton, Victoria: The Miegunyah Press, 2023). 147.

⁹ Gardiner, *Mab*, 134.

commissioned local photographer and artist Astrid Mulder and we set to work documenting the three flower collections (see figures 2, 3 and 4) with strong coloured backdrops. These were turned into textiles through digital printing and paired with fabric remnants and a piece of old coat to create three textile collages (see figures 5,6 and 7). The work speaks to the creative and artistic exchanges of multiple women across generations, over centuries, between disciplines and through different mediums. Specifically, they speak to connecting two women in the archive and joining them together, like a note between friends. I called the works and the broader project, *To Fanny Love Mab*.



Fig. 1. Mab Grimwade in Miegunyah Garden. April 1913. University of Melbourne Archives.



Fig. 2. Shannon Slee, *Studies in Flower Arrangement with Mum's Black Coil Vase*, 2023.
Photographer: Astrid Mulder.



Fig. 3. Shannon Slee, *Studies in Flower Arrangement with Amanda's Gold Vase*, 2023.
Photographer: Astrid Mulder.



Fig. 4. Shannon Slee, *Studies in Flower Arrangement with Molly Round Vase*, 2023.
Photographer: Astrid Mulder.



Fig. 5. Shannon Slee, *To Fanny Love Mab #1*, 2023.



Fig. 6. Shannon Slee, *To Fanny Love Mab #2*, 2023.



Fig. 7. Shannon Slee, *To Fanny Love Mab #3*, 2023.

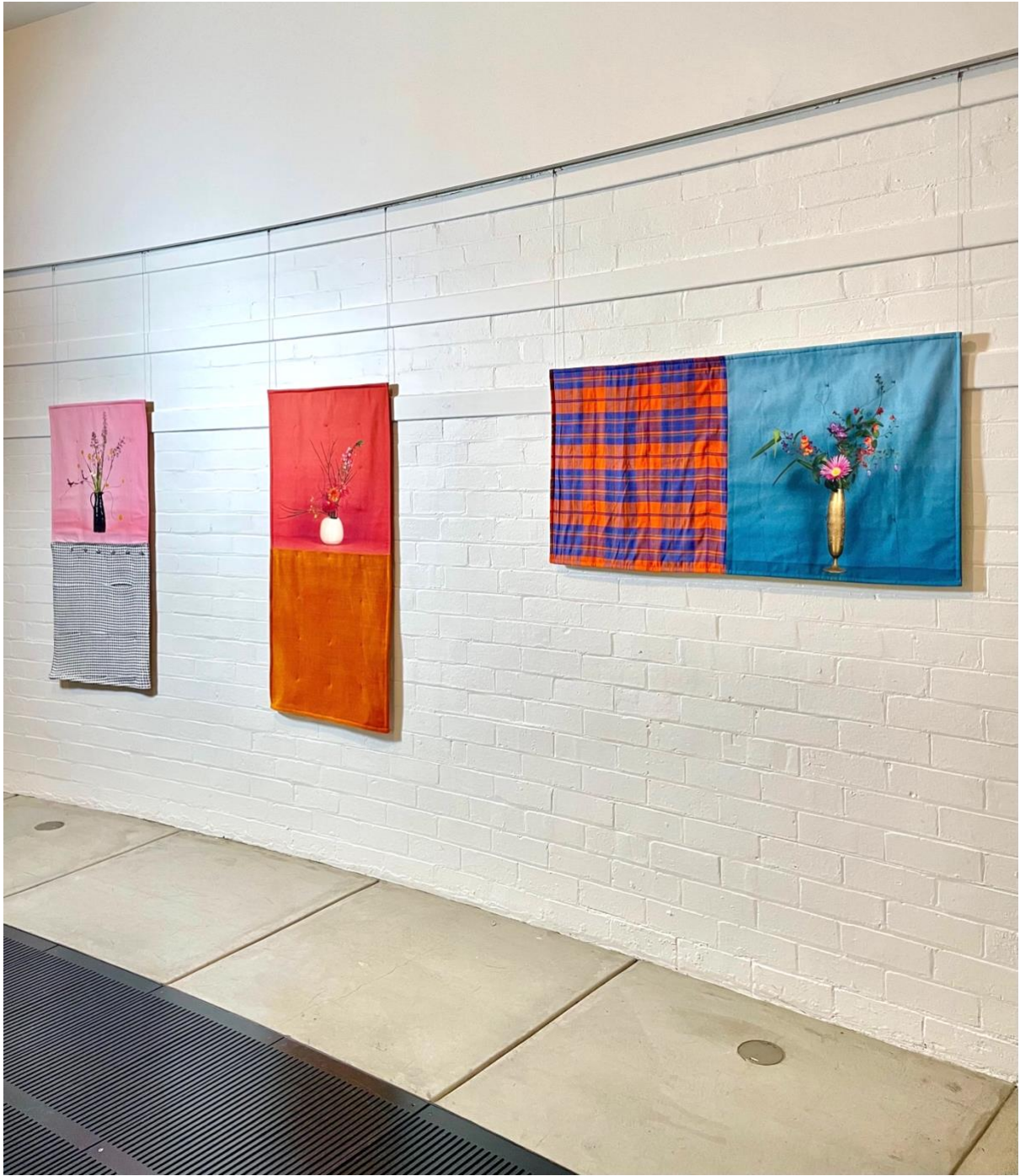


Fig. 8. Shannon Slee, *To Fanny Love Mab* (Install shot), 2023.



Fig. 9. Shannon Slee, *To Fanny Love Mab* (install shot), 2023.

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