

AMBER BOARDMAN • TARRYN GILL • KAYLENE WHISKEY

# BODYWORK



**26 SEP –  
22 NOV 2020**

**FREMANTLE ARTS CENTRE**



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ERIN COATES, CURATOR

I dislike reality TV. Yet, I make an exception for shows about plastic surgery gone horribly wrong. As the TV surgeons try to fix the collapsed nasal cartilage or lopsided boobs of the participant, I really do want the best for them. But mostly, I find myself captivated by the plasticity and transformative potential of the human body. I am also fascinated by the compulsion to heavily modify one's body, often in the image of a celebrity, or perhaps even a fictional animated character, as was the case in one episode of *Botched* in which a participant had undergone multiple procedures to become the living embodiment of Jessica Rabbit.

Who we idolise and the ways this idolisation interacts with body image and identity are threads that run – at times subterraneously – through the work of all three artists in *Bodywork*. When I asked Perth artist Tarryn Gill about her role models growing up, she delighted me by saying they weren't *real* people, but characters in TV shows and films, sometime even puppets, and included Miss Piggy, Jessica Rabbit, She-Ra and Dr Frank-N-Furter. Kaylene Whiskey grew up in the 1980s in the APY Lands community of Indulkana, and from this remote location she watched MTV and developed an adoration of Tina Turner, Dolly Parton and Cher. In the same decade, Amber Boardman was a child growing up in the eastern states of America, watching 80s cartoons and MTV and cultivating a deep fascination with beauty pageant contestants. Morphing figures, performing bodies and pop icons populate *Bodywork*, as imagined, sculpted and painted by these three artists. The figures are drawn from their childhood role models, social media feeds, popular culture and iconic rock imagery. They come to us as though filtered through the id<sup>2</sup>; amplified, distorted, seductive, repulsive, adored.

In Amber Boardman's painting *Be Your Own Plastic Surgeon*, a woman smiles at us through a toothy, lopsided mouth. Standing in a vaguely clinical setting, she wears a stethoscope and lab coat. Her facial features are an unfocused blur of fleshy forms, and her blond hair is giving way to dark regrowth. The title suggests a ghastly

form of DIY cosmetic surgery is underway, presenting the potent blend of absurdist humour, social critique and body horror that first drew me to Boardman's work. Women's beauty rituals and the social and commercial spheres that grow around these pursuits are ongoing concerns in Boardman's paintings. The characters in her work are warped and amplified versions of people she might see on the bus, in supermarket queues, on Instagram feeds. There is a perverse and voyeuristic pleasure that can be drawn from these portraits (which as my reality TV tastes show, I am not opposed to). Yet Boardman also delivers empathy, intimacy and deep fascination. Her works explore the botched beauty aspirations of her characters with genuine affection. She revels in the strangeness of human bodies and the comedy that can arise from sharing our bodily imperfections and strategies for self-improvement. Beauty rituals become acts of both self-expression and creation: "I think of the women I paint as artists who use makeup, spray tan, hair dye, plastic surgery, etc. as their art mediums,"<sup>2</sup> the artist explains.

While the works in *Bodywork* might play with body and beauty aspirations, they never attempt to suggest any ideal form. Rather, the artists utilise the body as a site for experimentation, empowerment and self-expression. Boardman's warped figures experiment with the possibilities of modifying our bodies; Gill's multi-limbed figures are imbued with a dark and uncanny feminine power; and the performing bodies in Whiskey's paintings assert a message of female strength and camaraderie.

Yankunytjatjara artist Kaylene Whiskey fills her artworks with her female idols; film stars, singers and superheroes. The Virgin Mary even makes an appearance. These women are not lit up on stage in faraway places. They are transported into Whiskey's world in the remote Aboriginal community of Indulkana, to become figures within the everyday narrative of her life. It is an ingenious and joyful inversion of the cliché in which a fan becomes a part of the (fantasied) reality of their idol. Here, Whiskey brings the stars home and appropriates

their iconic status to celebrate aspects of her own reality and cultural identity. Using an illustrative style that often involves breaking the image into boxes – like in a comic strip – Whiskey paints scenes of strong *kungkas* (women). In *Kaylene TV*, Dolly Parton is wearing a pink jumpsuit with silver sequins and hanging out with Cher, who sports a fabulous bodysuit and thigh-high, spurred boots. They sing along to ‘Kaylene TV’, with boomerangs hanging on the living room walls and in the corner is a potted *mingkulpa*, a local native tobacco bush. Mingkulpa features in many of Whiskey’s paintings and her characters sometimes refer to it through speech bubbles; “I’m telling you, don’t steal my mingkulpa white boy!” Tina Turner yells at a figure scampering up a tree in one scene. In another painting, Cher is selling a mingkulpa plant, as the Water Snake in the sky rains down on a quandong bush. Elsewhere, Whiskey is seen planting mingkulpa seedlings in the ground. Local plant use and native animals are interspersed throughout domestic and landscape scenes, as are objects like skateboards and burgers. As Whiskey puts it: “Us younger ones are from the generation that grew up with Coca Cola and TV as well as *Tjukurpa* (cultural stories) and bush tucker, so we like to have a bit of fun with combining those two different worlds”.<sup>3</sup>

Consistent throughout Whiskey’s paintings is her use of shimmering dot patterning in the borders, backgrounds and details of the women’s costumes. The night sky pulses with dotted stars as Wonder Woman takes to the air, wearing her spangly gold and star-studded outfit. Cher’s feather headdress creates a full-body halo around the singer, and Tina Turner’s sequinned jacket has triple-spiked shoulder pads. Whiskey says: “I put in lots of the special details, and everyone likes it”. We sure do. Painting her idols into her own unique universe, Whiskey ensures they exude maximum glitz, glamour and star power.

Sequins, fake fur, sparkly fabrics and performance costuming feature heavily in Tarryn Gill’s practice. The artist participated in competitive calisthenics and dance from the age of five until her mid-twenties, and her art practice mines the aesthetic and materials of this world. Growing up, Gill loved musicals, Jim Henson puppetry and staging dance performances in her granddad’s shed. Although Gill no longer performs, performativity and the theatrical abound in all her artworks. The wall-mounted sculptural series *Show Girl* presents tableaux of fabulous characters and performing puppets, each representing a role model from Gill’s formative years. Spot-lit and clad in a fishnet stocking, the shapely leg of Jessica Rabbit

protrudes from behind a velvet curtain. In another plush piece, Dr Frank-N-Furter (from *Rocky Horror Picture Show*) is draped across a silver throne-like chair. These intricately hand-stitched ‘keepsakes’, made of satin, velvet and lycra, represent both childhood idols as well as familial ties. Gill’s mother sews and her grandmother was a seamstress. The labour-intensive process of sewing in her practice is a continuation of the matrilineal skills in her family. This curious series acts like a set of small portals into the imaginative mind of Gill’s younger self. Her collection of inspirational characters shares qualities with Whiskey’s paintings, as in both there is a conflation of the external world of glitzy celebrity and stage performance with the artists’ own personal narratives.

*Show Girl* is a small, bright counterpoint to the larger, darker works that lurk in the gallery next door. Representing Gill’s biggest works to date, *Limber* is a set of three huge, multi-limbed soft sculptures, commissioned specially for *Bodywork*. The forms, which tower in the air and sprawl across the floor, are based on contortions that Gill would assume when practicing calisthenics. They are also influenced by her recent experiences in Java, Indonesia, where she encountered the winding forms of the colossal Trembesi trees. Long, green epiphytal tendrils hang from the enormous branches of these trees like hair, and their limbs grow into complex shapes, in an imperceptibly slow dance. Gill’s figures are covered in sparkling showgirl fabrics and flesh-toned aerobic lycra, and their skins stretch and bulge as supple muscles appear to flex beneath: alluring and terrifying. Gill recounted to me her experiences as a showgirl in her early twenties, being subjected to a sexualising male gaze and the constant harassment from men that eventually made her leave the profession. With *Limber*, she reconciles this objectification and returns the gaze with defiance. Apart from the staggering scale of these figures and the unsettling sense of not quite knowing which part of the body you are encountering, glass eyes stare back at the viewer from crooks, crotches and bulges. The female body is not a victim here, it is monstrous feminine<sup>4</sup> force.

Where Gill draws on her background in calisthenics to create hyperflexible, contorted figures, the distorted bodies in Boardman’s paintings are informed by her background in animation. The cartoon characters that Boardman worked on in her previous career could be stretched and morphed an infinite number of ways, and this fascination with the plasticity of the human form has carried over into her painting practice. Her impasto technique and fleshy colour palette give a further sense

of visceral corporeality. The morphing, leaking and conjoined bodies remind me of early David Cronenberg films, or Australian director Philip Brophy’s genre classic *Body Melt*. Despite the abject qualities in Boardman’s paintings, the images aren’t horrifying; saccharine pastel hues suffuse many of her canvases, as does a satirical humour. In Boardman’s most recent work *Porn Categories*, the body becomes fragmented into nearly 200 small panels of white, pink, brown and red. The structure and imagery of this painting references the category grids listed on pornography websites, which break down what a viewer may find titillating into categories that could include the nationality of the actors, which sexual acts they will be performing, the number of people in the scene, or animated porn. The effect in Boardman’s painting is a pulsating multitude of bodies, zoomed in on to the point of near abstraction. Boardman reflects that everyone sees something different in this work: “... the imagery that comes forward almost becomes like a Rorschach test for the viewer. I wanted to push into the idea that if you create shapes with vaguely skin-like colours then it becomes about the body.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Bodywork*, the body is fragmented by the screen, enhanced under the surgeon’s knife, imbued with uncanny power, and adored as celebrity icon. The artists draw on diverse influences and experiences to offer an array of approaches to thinking about and viewing bodies. *Bodywork* is an opportunity to make visible the ways that the work of these three important mid-career Australian artists converges. Amber Boardman, Tarryn Gill and Kaylene Whiskey each come from strikingly different backgrounds, yet in all their artworks, women’s bodies are reclaimed, as sites for contestation, self-expression and celebration.

Erin Coates, Curator

1. The id is considered the primitive and instinctual part of the mind that contains sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories.
2. Quote from the interview between Amber Boardman and Kristin Farr in *Juxapoz Art & Culture*, 15 Dec 2016.
3. Kaylene Whiskey, from her statement about *Kungka Kunpu*, a collaborative work that won the 2020 Heathcote Digital Art Prize.
4. ‘Monstrous feminine’ is a term popularised in the book by the same name written by Barbara Creed in 1993. In this text, Creed examines women in horror films, challenging the role of woman-as-victim and arguing that the prototype of all definitions of the monstrous is the female reproductive body.
5. Quote taken from email correspondence with the artist in September 2020.

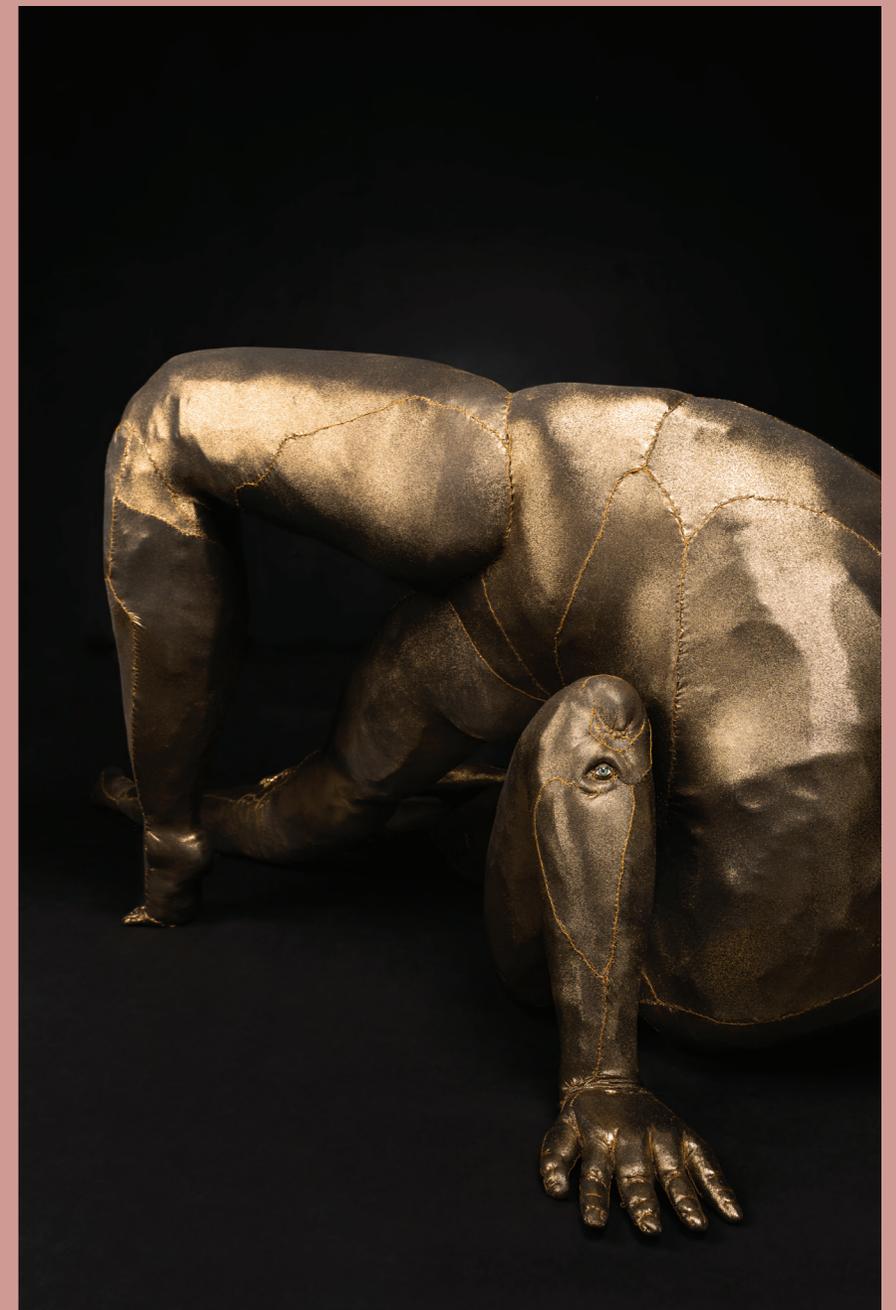
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**Amber Boardman**  
*Porn Categories*,  
2019, oil on canvas,  
122 x 153cm. Image  
courtesy and  
copyright the artist



*"I like to listen to rock music and Tina Turner, and I paint with really strong colours, I put in lots of the special details, and everyone likes it. I paint strong stories too, paintings about heaven and Jesus, and sometimes Mintabie (local mining town,) and paintings about my country Indulkana. Sometimes my paintings tell hard stories, but my paintings are always colourful and painting them makes me happy." – Kaylene Whiskey*

**Kaylene Whiskey**  
*Kaylene TV*, 2018, acrylic  
 on linen, 76 x 101cm. Image  
 courtesy of the artist,  
 Iwantja Arts and the  
 collection of Angela Tiatia

*"The sculptures I make are hand-carved and hand-stitched and are made from sparkling, dance materials and trims, which are influenced by my experience doing calisthenics – I performed from when I was 5 to 25 years old. I'm assembling these materials now in a way that asserts their femininity and makes them darkly powerful in an uncanny way."*  
 – Tarryn Gill



**Tarryn Gill**  
*Limber (1)* (detail), 2020, mixed  
 media, including hand-stitched  
 Lycra, EPE foam and fibre fill,  
 artificial eyes, steel, 1.1m x 3.7m x  
 1.25m. Image courtesy of the artist  
 and Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert.  
 Photography by Pixel Poetry



*“I try to look at the normal things people do, but with a curious mind, and then I imagine ways I can characterise them. An example is my long-standing fascination with women’s beauty rituals and the industry around them. I think of the women I paint as artists who use makeup, spray tan, hair dye, plastic surgery, etc. as their art mediums.”*  
– Amber Boardman

**Amber Boardman**  
*Be Your Own Plastic Surgeon*, 2019,  
oil on polyester, 91 x 71cm. Image  
courtesy and copyright the artist



**Kaylene Whiskey**  
*Cher and the Water Snake*, 2017,  
acrylic on canvas, 76 x 101cm. Image  
courtesy of the artist, Iwantja Arts  
and the Sims Dickson Collection



## TARRYN GILL

Based in Perth, Western Australia, Tarryn Gill is a nationally recognised multidisciplinary artist who works across sculpture, video, theatre set and costume design, and performance. Her aesthetics and materials are heavily informed by her background in competitive calisthenics and dance, and her most recent works are large soft sculptural forms related to the female uncanny body. Gill has held solo exhibitions at the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; Sophie Gannon Gallery,

Melbourne and MOANA Project Space, Perth. Her work is held in the collections of Artbank, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Kerry Stokes Collection and the Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art. Through her solo and collaborative practices, Gill has undertaken residency projects across Australia, in Argentina, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. Gill is represented by Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert.



## KAYLENE WHISKEY

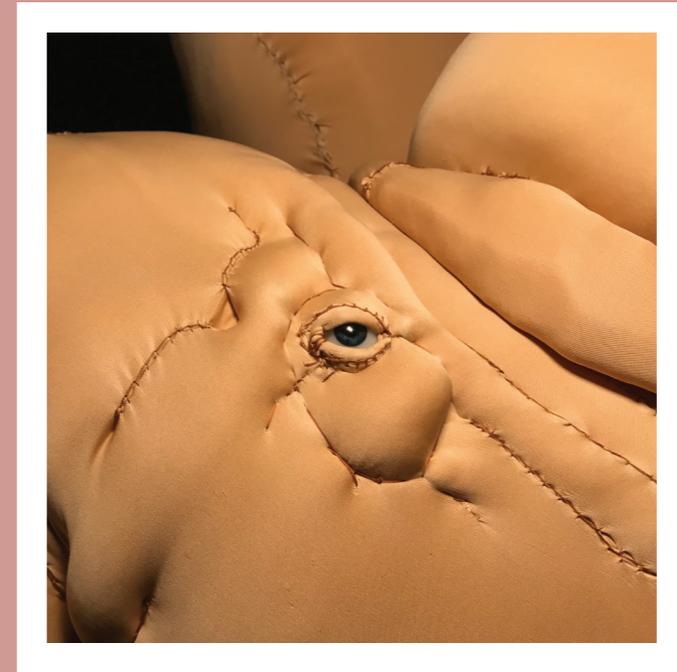
Kaylene Whiskey is a Yankunytjatjara artist from Indulkana community on the APY Lands, South Australia. Whiskey creates joyful, colourful paintings of the famous music and film stars she admires, painting them into scenes with herself that take place on Country. Her paintings are filled with strong *kungkas* (women), wearing fantastic outfits, dancing and sharing messages of wellbeing and celebration. Whiskey's profile as an artist has gained increasing attention since she

won the *Sir John Sulman Prize* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2018. She was included in the significant Australian survey of contemporary art *The National*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney in 2019, and later that year held the solo exhibition *Wonder Women* at Roslyn Oxleyg Gallery. Most recently, Whiskey and collaborating artists from Iwantja Arts won the 2020 *Heathcote Digital Art Prize* for their video *Kungka Kunpu (Strong Women)*.

## AMBER BOARDMAN

Amber Boardman is an American-born painter who lives and works in Sydney, New South Wales. Boardman draws on her background as a professional animator, often exploring the relationship between animation, cartoons and painting in her work. She has held solo exhibitions at First Draft and Chalk Horse, both in Sydney, and been included in the *Archibald Prize* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Boardman has participated

in art fairs in Australia and abroad and her work is held in the collections of Artbank, City of Sydney and the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta. Boardman has founded studio exhibition spaces in Brooklyn and Sydney and has facilitated the exchange of ideas between artists internationally since 2017 with her Artist-to-Artist Workshop events. She is represented by Chalk Horse Gallery.



FAC would like to acknowledge it operates on the traditional lands of the Whadjuk people and that we respect their spiritual relationship with their country. We also acknowledge the Whadjuk people as the Traditional Owners of the greater Walyalup area and that their cultural and heritage beliefs are still important to the living Whadjuk people today. Fremantle Arts Centre is supported by the State Government through the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries. Tarryn Gill is supported by the State Government through a grant from the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries and is represented by Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert. Kaylene Whiskey is represented by Iwantja Arts. Amber Boardman is supported by the NSW Government through a Create NSW grant.

Image above: Tarryn Gill, *Limber (3)* (detail), 2020, mixed media, including hand-stitched Lycra, EPE foam and fibre fill, artificial eyes, steel. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert. Images opposite page: Tarryn Gill. Photography by Pixel Poetry. Kaylene Whiskey, image courtesy of Iwantja Arts. Photography by Jackson Lee. Amber Boardman. Photography by Felicity Jenkins. Cover image: Tarryn Gill, *Limber (1)* (detail), 2020, mixed media, including hand-stitched Lycra, EPE foam and fibre fill, artificial eyes, steel, 1.1m x 3.7m x 1.25m. Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert. Photography by Pixel Poetry