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Museum of  
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Jenny Watson's assured handling of paint, and the worlds hidden beneath it, as well as her exploration of feminism and psychoanalysis, make her a vital Australian artist, writes *Patrick Hartigan*.

# Elemental, my dear Watson



**PATRICK  
HARTIGAN**  
is a Sydney-  
based artist.

At her best, Jenny Watson is less a painter of things than a generator of energy. Her works aren't about their content so much as the field of time through which that content briefly rides. This is particularly the case when her compositions lose their centrality, when the shapes, smears and drawn reveries drift to the edges of the canvas, somewhat in the manner of toys in a child's bath.

Paintings are made substantial and given energy in mysterious ways, and while pictorial tropes and narratives grab our superficial attention, it's what can't be so easily snatched by the eye – the forces of circulation and touch lying beyond the instantly visible – that often draws us in and keeps us looking. It's these reasons, as much as the vicissitudes of life and career, that make Watson's survey exhibition *The Fabric of Fantasy* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, on until October 2, so pleasing.

The exhibition climaxes around a group of very

large canvases from the late 1980s. The appeal of these works lies as much in their abrupt and fugitive totalities as it does in the strangeness of detail forming them. They speak of the place Watson has in Australian art and the unique corralling of text, feminism and psychoanalysis in her work.

*Self Portrait as a Narcotic* (1989) has its alphabet soup and anti-heroine drowning in a syringe amid what seems to be the tacky, yellow aftermath of an egg ambush. *Spring* (1989), in turn, bears a hue more of earth and blood, the washy and blotchy purchase of its ground somewhere between parchment and pathology slide. A horse and rider – windswept tail of one echoing the hair of the other – emerge through these muted currents in a manner reminiscent of early film montage. The playfully handled letters of the title, a nonsensical bouquet of flowers above the horse's head, and a shower of copper-coloured beads and small pieces of paper, including a tiny newspaper classified for someone named Lucy, punctuate and enliven this palimpsest. The clipping reads: "Married and settled in Rushworth in the 1850s ... Among her treasures, Lucy still has a wedding dress worn by one of her grandmothers and her own ring made from Rushworth gold."

No longer wearing or cherishing her wedding dress, the fabric Lucy now clings to is absolutely alive. Watson's greatest skill as a painter – presumably in her other life as a dressage rider, too – seems to be in the way her touches, movements and fragments tame their very large supports while always remaining sensitive to the



moment of contact between fabric and painted strata.

Recalling a conversation with John Cage, the painter Philip Guston described the process of submitting to a painting in terms of vacating the studio: “When you start working, everybody is in your studio – the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas – all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you’re lucky, even you leave.” According to Guston, a kind of “third hand” took over at that moment of surrender.

Despite being a self-portraitist of sorts – many of her paintings appear as pages from a diary or photographs from a family album – Watson understands this. Her work reveals that painterly “luck” is that which lies beyond herself. Or as she puts it: “It’s not about me – it’s not the world of Jenny [but] the possibilities of being that are expressed.”

*Death of a Horse* (1990) depicts its decaying subject upturned and floating among letters, broken words and collaged fragments. The way these elements fall across the canvas’s grubby surface gives the look of a half-completed page – foxed and long forgotten – from a colouring book. Language in this picture is not the learnt mechanism through which to prescribe meaning so much as a means by which the ground below language can be broken and mined for hidden reserves and riches. Here, perhaps, it’s worth noting the impact psychoanalytic thought had on Watson in the 1980s and the “dream journal” she started keeping.

There’s darkness and unease in the room of works in which *Death of a Horse* hangs, or rather drops. The transition from more twee cohorts in neighbouring galleries reminded me of the descent towards Goya’s show of horrors at the Prado in Madrid. The way Watson activates these particular fabrics, with parched and patchy fields of paint, also brought to mind the early surfaces and debauched dramas of Francis Bacon.

Returning to those surrounding rooms, Watson’s work seems to suffer when the enigmas of painting, language and experience are approached too consciously. Here I’m thinking of the works emerging from the early 1990s, exhibited in the Australian pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennale, in which she separated image and text into separate panels, later adding objects, too. The premise of these works concerns what Watson calls “glitches between the conscious and unconscious”

– namely the states of distraction and inattention we bring to art.

For me this exercise in unpacking undermines Watson’s interests; the gesture comes across as contrived, its separation of never clearly delineated fields only dulling the forces and tensions found in her paintings.

The multifarious works seem to link back to her association with conceptual art modes in the 1970s. Watson, who was born in Melbourne and now lives in Brisbane, and who has been exhibiting since 1973, described her moment of departure from more

systematic practices of pulling language and meaning apart as “taking the plunge into private and forbidden territory”. If conceptual art produced in Watson a healthy respect for distraction, it was the Melbourne punk scene of the late 1970s and ’80s that gave her the opportunity to branch away.

“Putting a grenade in my working practice,” is how she described *The Mad Room* (1987), a collection of text paintings highlighting this anarchic turn. Spotlit on a black wall, a compilation of local punk classics playing in the room, the broken narratives of these works leap forward like the eyes of fellow debauchees on a dance floor.

On some of these surfaces I felt sure I was looking at bile. Elsewhere, *The Key Painting* (1987) provides the scrambled ledger of someone very hungover, its figure lying comatose across the scaffold of a purple spray-painted signature: “I did not use a needle; I did drink a lot; I did wake up in strange places; I did stay out all night; I did wake up in the gutter with blood on my face; I did sleep a lot; I did cry a lot.”

Watson has pointed out that as a painter and elder she was “largely an observer in the punk world”. This concurs with a split not only in the works from the 1990s but across her oeuvre, one speaking to self-portrait painting more generally: the artist as both the peered-upon protagonist and material agitator of that protagonist’s stage. For this spectator, it was the all-pervading force fields, those works in which paint meets a sheet and taps into a reservoir of energies unseen, which stole the show. ●

**SPOTLIT ON A BLACK WALL, A  
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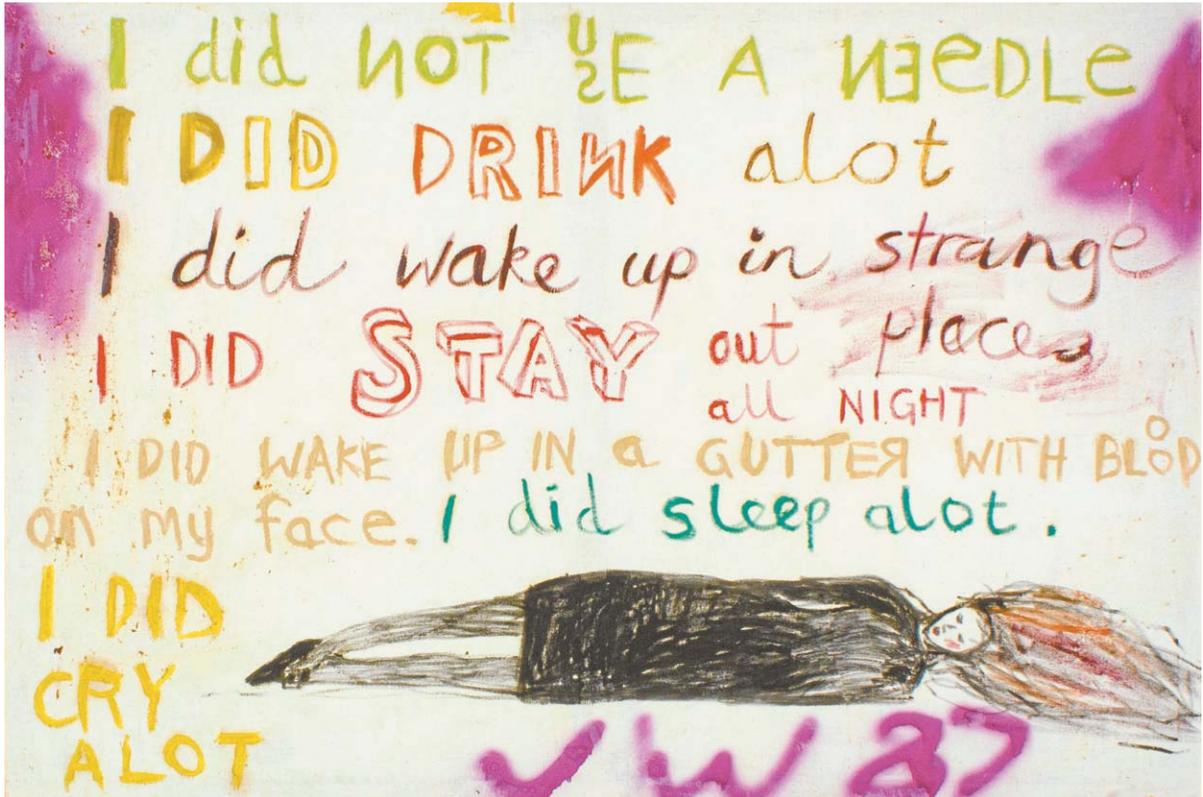
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Jenny Watson's  
*The Fabric  
of Fantasy*  
exhibition  
(above), and *The  
Key Painting*  
(facing).