

The Womanifesto Way: Sydney Gathers

Shuxia Chen
Helen Grace
Virginia Hilyard
Shirley Hilyard
Toby Huynh
Charlotte Mungomery
Sue Pedley
Kyati Suharto
Phaptawan Suwannakudt

3 November – 17 December 2023



4A Centre for
Contemporary
Asian Art

List of works

Ground floor:

Helen Grace and Toby Huynh, *Towards Empyrean Grove*, 2023, single-channel video with sound, 4min 11sec. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. Courtesy the artists.

Helen Grace, *As It Was...*, 2023, single-channel video with sound, 4min 05sec. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. Courtesy the artist.

Shirley Hilyard (1929–2023) and Virginia Hilyard, *Shirley's Park*, 2023, mixed media installation with 360 degree virtual reality, stereo sound, dimensions variable. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. Courtesy the artists.

Shirley Hilyard (1929–2023) and Virginia Hilyard, *Remembering Yellow*, 2021/2023, modelling clay, pillows and plasticine, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artists.

First floor (L-R):

Kyati Suharto, Charlotte Mungomery and Sue Pedley, *KinaeSthetiC*, 2021/2023, ink, graphite, pastel, Vietnamese Dó paper, single-channel video, stereo sound, dimensions variable. Assistance by Anie Nhu. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. Courtesy the artists.

Phaptawan Suwannakudt and Shuxia Chen, *Unspoken*, 2023 fabric from Thai vegetation fibre (cotton, banana fibre and Kapok), nylon mesh, silver fabric, woven cotton, single-channel video 3m 09s, stereo sound. Video editing by Cantra Chaaysaeng Clark. Subtitling by Shuxia Chen. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. Courtesy the artists.

The Womanifesto Way Material Timeline, 2023, mural with original and archival materials.

Exhibition Co-organisers: Phaptawan Suwannakudt,
Dr Yvonne Low, and Marni Williams
Exhibition Producer: Con Gerakaris
<https://4a.com.au/exhibitions/thewomanifestoway>

Adapting, gathering, connecting—these are just some of the relational approaches of women artists. *The Womanifesto Way: Sydney Gathers* explores the ethos of this women-centred arts collective through collaborative exchanges between Womanifesto artists based in Sydney, and by embarking on open process of visual and digital art—history making that reveals nearly three decades of collaborative reinvention.

Womanifesto began in 1997 with the first feminist Southeast Asia-based international biennial, and has since brought together more than 150 contemporary artists across 45 countries. A uniquely collective approach facilitated by key members Varsha Nair, Phaptawan Suwannakudt and Nitaya Ueareeworakul and others, has guided every Womanifesto initiative from biennial exhibitions and community-based workshops, through to artist-led publications and online collaborative art projects. The collective's unique longevity and diversity suggests there is much we could learn from women- and artist-led approaches to intergenerational and cross-cultural exchange. And here such exchanges range from the intimacy of one-on-one conversation and local gatherings during lockdown, through to multilingual children's book projects and an expansive, ongoing digital art history project.

Efforts to personally relate and embody space together resonate between the Sydney artists' works and reflect their beginnings as part of the 2020 Womanifesto Gathers project that was, like anything else, affected by the global pandemic. As Sydney socially distanced and then locked down, the artists devised innovative ways to create new works and stay connected.

The works may be local, but in true Womanifesto form they still attempt to cross cultures and generations. The performance and installation work *Unspoken* by Asian-Australians, Phaptawan Suwannakudt and Shuxia Chen sees a tension created by mismatched mother tongues overcome by the singing of lullabies. Initial feelings of disconnect also reverberate through the video-sound installation by Helen Grace and Toby Huynh—their *Towards Empyrean Grove*, offering a glimpse into two lives spent for long periods outside of Australia. We find fragmentary memories of displacement and housing in the bleak suburbs of Western Sydney is soon replaced by midnight motorcycle rides through cities, border crossings, and queer lives.

Remembering Yellow, on the other hand, is a mother-and-daughter collaboration between Shirley Hilyard and Virginia Hilyard created in between pandemic lockdowns. Together with her 91 year-old mother who was then living with vascular dementia, Virginia made clay and plasticine models of flowers and familiar things. We experience them cherishing moments of making together through virtual reality. Like kinship, friendship is foregrounded in the playful kinetic multi-media installation by Sue Pedley, Kyati Suharto, and Charlotte Mungomery. Their field recordings of voices and musical instruments evolve into an improvised score for collaborative mark-making in the work *KinaeSthetiC*.

Themes of gathering, and intergenerational and cross-cultural exchange continue on in the adjoining exhibition and workshop space. Led by Nilofar Akmut, the Camel Library book project invites artists to submit book contributions to be translated and distributed in Pakistan. In response, Phaptawan Suwannakudt collaborated with three children on *Three Lady Ducks*, inviting each child to imagine a new ending. The legacy of the Womanifesto way continues with community-centred workshops, on mending and bookmaking.

As the Sydney artists relate with the immediacy of their voices, the sounds of familiar places, or time spent talking and making together by hand, Womanifesto artists elsewhere have been invited to work remotely to create works, engage with digitised archives and record personal reflections. Womanifesto has presented innovative digital projects as far back as the early 2000s and the meandering material timeline on the wall is not just a physical presentation of the past, but a first step towards the international cohort mapping out their memories in digital form.

As their visual history expands and evolves in the coming months, it marks the beginning of an experimental, open process of artist-led digital publishing currently underway through Power Publications. The new set of challenges of a co-created anthology will no doubt be generative for a collective that continues to offer up new ways of relating and sharing creatively, and whose work prompts us to take seriously the creative work required to build and maintain relationships and our understandings of one another.

This exhibition has been undertaken in partnership between Power Publications, and 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art which has been assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body. Power Publications has received funding from the Australia-ASEAN Council and the University of Sydney through the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, as well as the Power Institute Foundation for Art and Visual Culture's Visual Understanding Initiative, supported by Penelope Seidler AM. The project has also been supported by Asia Art Archive and the Bangkok Arts and Cultural Centre.