

Portrait

To follow the thread of my hope, I continue this conclusion with a brief reading of my most recent project *Portrait* (2021–23). This performative, participatory project was made with artist Tamara Searle and twenty teenagers with intellectual disabilities. The project articulates many of the ideas developed in this thesis and helped heal a decade-long shame at my early attempts to work collaboratively. In addition to this personal healing, the complex layers of collaboration and the narrated portraits mark an evolution in the aesthetic approach of my practice, the photographs in this work are no longer even physically made by me: two different photographers, Mano Sidhu and Holly Borschman, took them while I focused on working with the students to ensure their comfort and safety in front of the camera.

Searle, who is an Artistic Associate at Back to Back Theatre,⁸¹⁷ a theatre company based in Geelong that makes work with people with disability, initiated this work. She invited me to create the project with her, which we made with two groups of students from two specialist secondary schools in Geelong, who had been identified by teachers, and invited to participate. The teenage participants shared overlapping identities which are often negatively perceived—that of being a girl or nonbinary person,⁸¹⁸ being a teenager, as well as being a person with lived experience of disability. The central idea of this work is that it is critical for young people to understand the power of photographic representation, specifically how it can reinforce, but also contest stereotypes.

Searle and I decided early on that the project would result in a singular portrait for each participant. We met with the participants weekly, over two school terms, the project extended by lockdowns to a two-year period. Our time together was generative, as we wound through conversations about identity, gender, disability, and how we might use photography to visually manifest a sense of our internal selves, and defy the ‘restrictions’ of our perceived identities. We tried on many hats, both literally and figuratively, as we made these images together, using character and costume and embodiment as a way of articulating self. We made photographs in the classroom, and shared what we had made, interrogating our work to understand the performance of portraiture.

⁸¹⁷ *Portrait* is part of Back to Back Theatre’s education programs.

⁸¹⁸ While we use the terms “women” and “girls” to describe the project, some participants now identify as nonbinary or masc. *Portrait* made space for people to question identity, as artists we acknowledge that identity is dynamic and contextual.



Figure 120 and 121. Turnbull et al. *Amber and Ebony*, developing characters. *Portrait*. 2021–23.

We used a range of prompts to develop their ‘characters.’ We even brought on set and costume designer Kate Davis to the project to realise the participants’ elaborate characters (fig. 120). We looked at photographs which anonymised and expressed identity and discussed how we could use structures of visual language to conceal and reveal ourselves in our own photographs. We talked about pronouns, and how we might use words and images to illustrate the layers of our selves via character. Outside of the frame of the camera we moved our bodies to find gestures and actions that expressed what we wanted to say, and incorporated costume and play to straddle performance and self.

Each participant is a co-author of their own image, but participation did not require creation of a final portrait, and several students opted out of this stage. We were responsive to the capacities of the students; one group was more interested in drawing responses than photographs (fig. 121), and their final images were layered collages made by drawing over their photographs on transparencies and collated in Photoshop by me (fig. 122). The other group conceptualised and constructed character portraits which were made over an intensive weekend where we turned the Back to Back rehearsal space into a photo studio (fig. 123).



Figure 122. Turnbull et al. *Claudia* from *Portrait*. 2021–23.



Figure 123. Turnbull et al. *Leila* from *Portrait*. 2021–23.

For me, this project represents a mending. I failed Morgan when I could not understand the value of her elaborate photographic construction, the one that she thought would be the best representation: a portrait which involved symbolic props, lighting, staged on a site of significance. In this work I explicitly set out to do what she envisioned a decade earlier—stage narrative images of vulnerable people, in which they could orchestrate their own representation. We used the prop of character, to let them reveal or conceal their own identities as they saw fit. This work is explicitly *not* documentary. But it is what I envision for collaborative photo documentary making—in which representation is decided by the people in it.

When this work was installed in Geelong Gallery, we made the images as big as we could, and hung them low on the walls (fig. 124). Traces from the process were assembled on a central archive table (fig. 125, 126). The effect of this almost–life-sized exhibition was the feeling of looking into the faces of the participants, as they stood around the room. The images were powerful, created on a foundation of self determination, in which existing photographic representations of disability, age, gender, and sexuality were challenged, allowing each of the participants to reflect on and express their unique identities. The construction of their diverse identities was well contextualised by showing how we had come to make the work together. I wished Morgan had been there to see it.

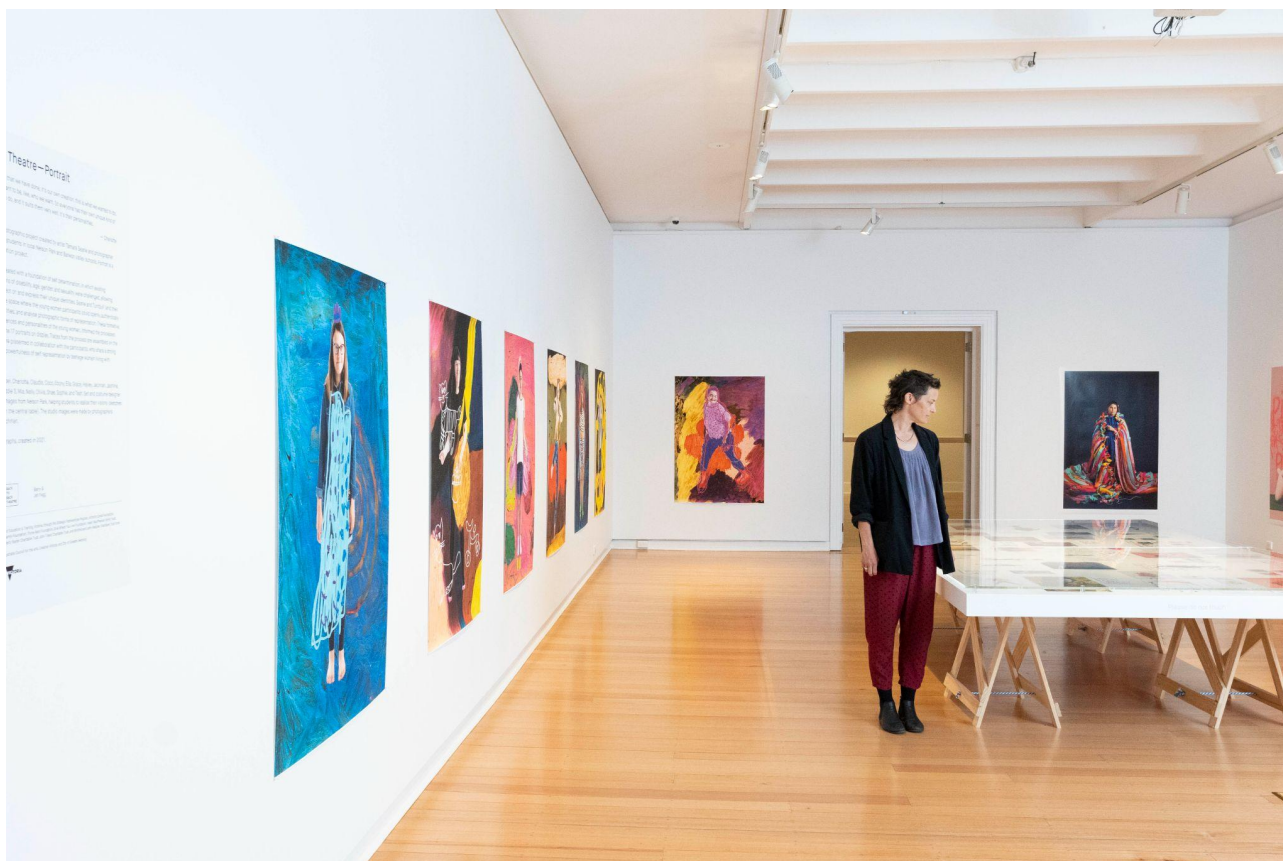


Figure 124. Ferne Millen. Tamara standing in the installation. *Portrait*. Geelong Gallery, March 2023.



Figure 125. Andrew Curtis. Archive table. *Portrait*. Geelong Gallery, March 2023.

Figure 126. Ferne Millen. Archive table. *Portrait*. Geelong Gallery, March 2023.