

Just Breathe

by

Mig Dann

What two words could have more resonance at this extended moment of global crisis? Whether you are following with grief the countless lost lives of African Americans at the hands of police and racist brutality (#ICantBreathe), or the now-3.6 million lives lost globally to the COVID-19 pandemic, an ability to breathe – even, someday to breathe easily – seems like a distant dream. And so it is deeply resonant to experience this multi-modal exhibition by Mig Dann, re-imagining the history of 19th-century women prisoners in the Old Melbourne Gaol – but also echoes of those women everywhere and every-when, who have been incarcerated, oppressed and shunned institutionally, socially, politically as well as familially.

The work is made up of two main components: a series of evocative masks and a haunting short film. These ‘silence’ masks (masks that women prisoners were compelled to wear in order to keep them quiet, and faceless) are worn by dancers in the film to great effect, but even on stands flanking the entryway to the exhibition, through which viewers must pass, the power of their eyeless gazes are intent. We can’t remain distant, nor can we remain deaf to the loud and dissonant score (soundtrack?) of the film, crashing around the exhibition space. As viewers, we are immediately implicated, entangled, immersed in the discomfort of these tools of oppression that have long been used against women. There is nowhere in the small gallery to escape the discomfort, and I imagine this is the intent of the artist. She doesn’t want us to be able to avoid these harsh realities that generations of women were themselves not able to – why would she? This is art made for impact, and impact it does.

Dann’s work particularly brings to mind the short film "Submission: Part 1", written by Somali writer and politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, directed by Theo van Gogh, which turned its lens to the treatment of women in Islam. While both Ali and van Gogh received death threats, on 2 November 2004, van Gogh was assassinated by Islamist Mohammed Bouyeri in a violent response to the film’s content. Like Dann’s work, the film attends to the ever-provocative bodies of women, veiled with a range of materials. In both films, viewers are moved through the visceral movements of these bodies, the filmmakers creating a kind of humanising homage in counterpoint to the social dehumanising of those women and those bodies.

While the world continues to grapple with the inequalities made even more stark by the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical responses to its spread, works like *Just Breathe* are crucial and timely in reminding us that art makes links between health inequities, institutionalised torture, and intergenerational and transcultural practices of femicide and misogyny – and in these pandemic times, the resonant symbolism of Dann’s work will carry as a stark reminder that these interrelated programs of work are never done.

Professor Dan Harris

School of Education, RMIT University

Co-director, Creative Agency research lab: www.creativeresearchhub.com

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