

SHELTER

AUGUST 5 - SEPTEMBER 3 2023

VERITY BYTH



CONTEMPORARY ART SPACES MANDURAH

The image is a composite. On the left, there is a large, textured fabric structure, possibly a tent or a piece of art, with a blue and white striped pattern. On the right, a person is standing in a body of water, holding a suitcase. The person is wearing a dark shirt and shorts. The water is dark and has a grid of small, glowing green dots overlaid on it. The overall mood is one of displacement and seeking shelter.

Verity Byth

Artist Statement

This exhibition explores the notions and emotions of shelter in a climate-ravaged world. Shelter is universally accepted as a basic human need. Without it, we are unable to live a productive, healthy life, take up opportunities that make the most of our unique human talents, and contribute to our community. Yet homelessness, not shelter, is a persistent feature of our society. Why can't we provide it to all people in our wealthy, secure country?

Central to the idea of shelter is protection and security. This protection is, in theory, woven into the fabric of our patriarchal society. But that fabric neither protects nor sustains women, children, and the natural environment we live in. In the 21st century, we are called to reimagine and reclaim our ideas of shelter so that we can survive and thrive. Women want their voices heard and their communities and ecosystems protected. This requires a new kind of decision-making, in which we draw on our collective priorities and strengths to create and nourish new sustainable solutions.

Grounded in core expressions of shelter – houses, tents, boats life preservers – each of the installations in the exhibition asks community members to respond to the facts of, as well as the emotions arising from, government decisions that perpetuate inequality of shelter and delay just access to it. They also invite the imagining and articulating of women-centred approaches, in which the fabric of society can be re-woven from nurturing, equitable, environmentally sustainable, and inclusive materials. Using remnant and recycled fabrics, some immersed for months in the Mandurah marina, each piece is embellished with simple, imperfect stitches that make visible the mark of a single human hand, repeating an SOS signal in morse code, tracing the shared experience of witness and distress, repeating a mantra of love and justice.

Reneé Pettitt-Schipp

SHELTER

Art as a sanctuary in an unfolding climate catastrophe



In 2019, the CEO of the Australian Institute of Marine Science, Dr Paul Hardisty, was asked at a Perth festival (as an expert in his field) how precarious a position our planet was in. Dr Hardisty responded by explaining our oceans were currently absorbing far greater quantities of CO₂ due to changes caused by human impacts on our atmosphere. The increased CO₂ levels in our oceans was resulting in the rapid acidification of our seas, pushing species to move poleward to survive.

‘But corals can’t walk,’ he added, ‘and under business-as-usual climate trajectories, there will be no coral reefs on the planet by 2050 – 2070’.¹

The panel chair paused, the theatre fell silent.

I heard this statement driving at 110kmph down Albany Highway in the Great Southern, WA. Behind the wheel, as the scenery whizzed by on a dull autumn day, I completely broke down. From my time on Christmas Island in one of Australia’s most remote territories, I remember soft corals swaying luxuriously from burrs in Flying Fish Cove, plate corals bigger than my body from under which moray eels would rise like strange periscopes, fields of staghorn corals like forests in miniature, over which I had once bumped into a young green turtle. Clearly in a hurry to get somewhere, from the deepest and darkest of blues, this strange creature came hurtling in my direction, then suddenly stopped. Slowly, the turtle swam toward me,

her large, dark eyes gazing straight into mine. The two of us floated together for minutes in magical silence, each of us curious about the other, before she just as suddenly turned and went on her way. Twenty-three years and these precious ecosystems, with all the food and shelter they offer, could quite simply be erased from the Earth.

In her profound work, *The Green Boat*, deep ecologist, Joanna Macy, tells us that it is a revolutionary act to bow to our grief and what we are losing¹¹. It is this revolutionary act I believe we witness in Verity Byth's courageous exhibit, **SHELTER**. Byth is unflinching in her ability to witness the 'collateral damage' of a patriarchal system that has failed us; the incremental loss of our aspiration to be a 'Fair Go' country for all. Byth resists the 'new normals' in a rapidly changing world, that leaves that the most vulnerable people in our society unable to achieve the most basic levels of security and safety. Byth achieves her resistance playfully by educating us in our ABCs, a new literacy, a pared back lens, with which to understand our own society. In the work, 'ABCs of Shelter', Byth lays bare facts rendered brutal through their lack of embellishment: *25% of people accessing homeless services in Australia are disabled; in 2021 there were 163 508 households waiting for public housing units; over 30% of single women over 60*

live in permanent income poverty; more than 25% of Indigenous women have been unhoused in the last five years; every year 7600 women return to violent partners as they have nowhere else to go.

The unravelling of the fabric of our society, exposed so starkly, causes us to become responsible.

We cannot un-know what Byth's research teaches us. What we do with that responsibility is a question that each of us must carry, feeling its dark weight in our hands, drawing these truths in to hold against our hearts and consider what it asks of us as fellow citizens. As a resident of a regional town in the Great Southern, I find Byth's work stirs a memory, conjures a conversation I had last year with a Goreng-Menang Elder. Over a cup of tea, my Indigenous friend had shared her devastation at the recent removal of a young baby by police in riot gear in the middle of the night, while the baby was sleeping between her parents.

'The family had their troubles', she said, 'but they were trying. The mother knew she needed to leave but had nowhere else to go. She had nowhere else to go, so they took her tiny baby.'

The state stole her child because our society failed to provide her with a safe place to live.

The failure of our culture to address intergenerational trauma in the Great Southern region of Western Australia meant this woman lost her newborn; the state stole her child because our society failed to provide her with a safe place to live.

Byth is unambiguous about where she lays the blame for our current housing crisis. In her installation *Sheltering Who?*, the series of works titled *Men Aground*, Byth, again with characteristic wry humour, uses Ken dolls in fabric homes to form installations that cause us to face patriarchy's legacy squarely. The exhibit's text reads:

- 1. Men in Charge of Housing Policy. Result: 116,000 people homeless each night.*
- 2. Men in Charge of Town Planning and Nation Building. Result: postcode poverty.*
- 3. Men in Charge of Marriage as a Relationship Structure. Result: median marriage lasts 8.4 years.*
- 4. Men in Charge of a Home as a Shelter. Results: 1 woman killed by intimate partner every 10 days; 1 in 5 women over 15 experience physical violence; the most common reason women and children*

experience homelessness is having to flee from domestic violence.

5. Men in Charge of Climate Catastrophe Decisions. Result: 7 of 11 COP27 leaders were female, even though women and girls are disproportionately impacted by climate change.

While Byth's work pushes the viewer up hard against the raw data of our nation's lethal indifference toward the plight of women, Byth is careful not to cast women as mere victims. In 'Rising from Homelessness: Journey Home to Self', Byth bears witness to the resilience of women who continue to survive within this broken system. While Byth acknowledges it is 'policy practices that punish and prevaricate rather than nurture and shelter', she equally honours the will of women to care for themselves and overcome the forces working against them, tracing their precarious journeys toward self-determination against the odds. Here, strength and vulnerability sit side by side in deeply affecting ways, reminding us of the sheer humanity of those we may otherwise be positioned to see as separate from ourselves.

The ability of artists like Byth to own their grief and to hold a mirror to our culture, demonstrates art can hold great relevance in dialogue with society and governmental policy. These works

unsettle us, hold us to account and destabilise the status quo. However, Macy (quoted earlier in this essay), who wrote so beautifully of the revolutionary role of grief, also acknowledged the way in which bowing to our loss can also allow us to experience deep ‘connectivity, belonging and delight.’ Macy’s quote is never more exemplified than in Byth’s collection of works entitled, *Women Afloat*. The distress we experience from seeing the dysfunction of our society reflected back at us, is thrown into sharp relief at the implication of a collective way forward. Armed with seeds, birds, mammals, fungi, knowledge and so much more, these archetypal matriarchs keep us afloat with the world of hope they hold in their hulls.

Through ceremony, strategy and energy, these women will us toward a future that rejects the death and disparity that results from patriarchy’s ruthless individualism. Instead, we head toward a collective future focused on community and the ‘common wealth’. *Women Afloat* is not a naïve or fanciful happy ending, it is a recognition of what ecofeminists have known for decades, that a patriarchal worldview is incomplete. Patriarchy ignores the inherent interdependent nature of life on our planet. Ecofeminists, by contrast, show us the necessary entanglement of our lives with human and more-than-human world^{III}, while also recognising

that oppression of women cannot be separated from issues of social injustice and environmental exploitation.

When the Australian author, Charlotte Wood, won the Stella Prize in 2016, in her compelling acceptance speech she argued that art ‘is a candle flame in the darkness: it urges us to imagine and inhabit lives other than our own, to be more thoughtful, to feel more deeply... to find a place of stillness in a chaotic world’^{IV}. I believe this place of stillness is what Byth has gifted us in the creation of her deeply moving exhibit. Byth has given us a safe place to take cover and ask where we are as a society, to take shelter in the dream of a different future, understanding fully (even if just for a moment), we are all in this together.

Reneé Pettitt-Schip is an award winning poet, author and activist based in WA. You can learn more about Reneé’s work at www.reneepettittschipp.com.au

FOOTNOTES

^I <https://soundcloud.com/user-894092912/quantum-words-perth-festival-the-ocean?ref=clipboard&p=a&c=0&si=c201e0f01a584631a6d71723ad4e03>

^{II} Pipher, M. (2013). *The Green Boat: Reviving Ourselves in Our Capsized Culture*. New York, Riverhead Books.

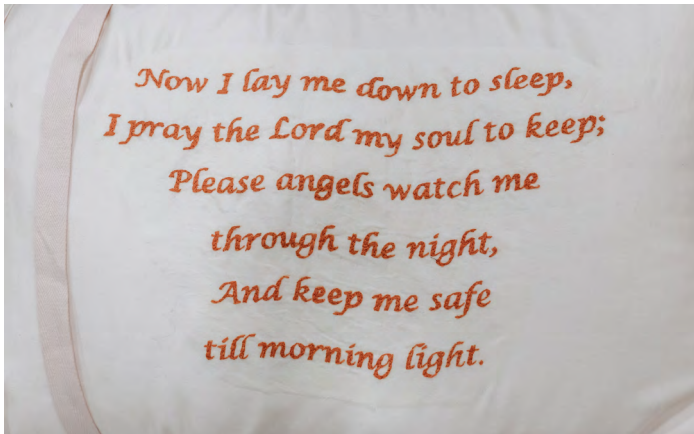
^{III} https://www.academia.edu/5081786/Slowly_Writing_into_the_Anthropocene

^{IV} <https://stella.org.au/2016/04/charlotte-woods-stella-prize-acceptance-speech/>

Exhibits List

Rising from Homelessness: Journey Home to Self

This piece describes a woman's journey from homelessness to a room of one's own. It shows the process of negotiating obstacles on the path to shelter created by policy practices that punish and prevaricate rather than nurture and protect. My aim for this piece is to flip the patriarchal narrative from "she is homeless because she made bad decisions" to "she is strong and brave and persistent in seeking secure housing for herself". The questions I was driven by were: "How does each woman find the rest she needs, in such a threatening and hostile situation? When she lays her head down each night, what gives her the courage to keep going for one more day?"



Installation including domestic furniture and bedding, hand stitched embellishment in cotton and silk thread, barbed wire, cotton header tape, post box

Sheltering Who?

‘Sheltering Who?’ is about two contrasting types of shelter:

‘Men Aground’ describes current facts about government-led housing and climate change policy choices, and their results.

‘Women Afloat’ imagines and revalues shelter in our climate-challenged future from a womanly perspective.

Installation materials include steel frames, fabrics and domestic linens, led lights, metal and paper toys, plastic dolls, manufactured dolls clothes and furniture, rice, embellished digitally printed images and text, bamboo boats, hand-wrapped and embellished dolls, natural materials (seeds, nests, feathers, sticks).

Men Aground

This piece explores the impact of policy choices made by institutions which operate in a patriarchal framework, weaving ever stronger their pin-striped social “fabric”. These social structures and policy choices have disastrous consequences for the health and livelihoods of so many of our community members. They are defended fiercely as economically necessary and prudent by the men who are in charge of making them, despite the fact they do not experience their deprivations. These policy choices treat our ecosystem as a resource for private exploitation, our social structure as a framework to enable and support violence and exploitation of women’s bodies and labour, and use climate change as a battleground for power and privilege.



1. Men in Charge of Housing Policy. Result: 116,000 people homeless each night.
2. Men in Charge of Town Planning and Nation Building. Result: “Postcode poverty” created by policies that reinforce structural disadvantage across postcodes within large cities, as well as between cities, and rural and regional areas.
3. Men in Charge of Marriage as a Relationship Structure. Result: median marriage lasts 8.4 years.
4. Men in Charge of a Home as a Shelter. Results: 1 woman killed by her intimate partner every 10 days; 1 in 5 women over 15 experience physical violence; most common reason women and children experience homelessness is having to flee from domestic violence.
5. Men in Charge of Climate Catastrophe Decisions. Result: 7 of 111 COP27 key speakers were female, even though women and girls are disproportionately impacted by climate change.

Women Afloat

This piece envisions a womanly response to global climate catastrophe. Released from the maps, fences and roles that belonged to the old way of life, women take to the rising waters, using the power of collaboration with wind and tides to navigate to a new way of living in harmony with the natural world. While women prepare, gather, protect, learn and adapt, men continue to insist on being in charge of responses that exploit, exclude and evade.

In this flotilla formation, the wisdom of the elder women to gather and protect that which nourishes and sustains life is prioritised. They use the strength and hope of the younger women to see far ahead and steer towards hope. They hold all that is precious, healing that which has been violated and stewarding treasured resources. It is too early to celebrate because there is still great uncertainty and peril on this journey. They take comfort in companionship and shared understanding that, from trough to crest, they are working for the common wealth of an interconnected world.

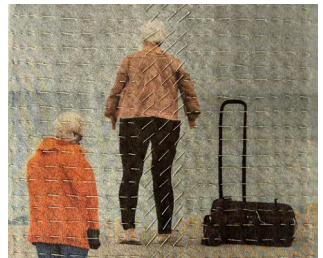
1. The Lead Boat — Energy, strategy, ceremony
2. The Common Wealth
 - Plants
 - Animals
 - Fungi
 - Protista
 - Fresh water
 - Knowledge
 - Tools and Building Supplies
 - Creative Expression
3. The Community
 - Hospital
 - School
 - Kitchen Garden



What will you pack in your suitcase?

This installation comprises 14 framed textile pieces, an animated video, a suitcase embellished with a band crocheted with morse code SOS as its pattern, and an ocean-steeped child's life vest and life preserver.

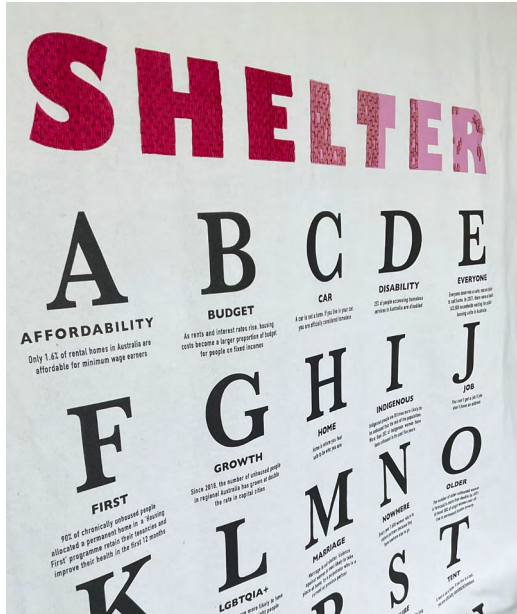
Public service disaster readiness campaigns focus on preparing community members to leave home at short notice, including having a bag of essentials pre-packed. This work explores the experience of packing to flee from home during a climate catastrophe. The images are generated from AI tools using the keywords 'woman, child, suitcase, rescue boat'. They capture the liminal, distorted sense of time and self that fleeing creates in us. The images are "quilted" with stitched SOS's in morse code, juxtaposing the need for, and sense of dislocation from, the comfort and safety of familiar domestic stitching rituals.



Installation materials include fabric, embroidery thread, digitally printed images, domestic suitcase, child's life preservers, video animation

ABCs of SHELTER

This piece is a subversive primer for women considering their own shelter needs. The “poster” captures the current facts about housing inequality and insecurity, on domestic cloth, embellished with increasingly insecure and sparse stitching. The facts in the poster are unambiguous: straight, white men who are not living with a disability are least impacted by shelter insecurity, and yet overrepresented in decision-making about shelter legislation, policy and implementation.



Installation materials include fabric, embroidery thread, digitally printed images and text.

Patriarchy's Broken Promise

This installation uses two vintage dolls houses to explore the assumptions and promises about shelter that are contained in the doll's house – a powerful patriarchal tool for childhood socialization. Girls were traditionally given a doll's house (often made by an elder male in the family) and encouraged to arrange and decorate the interior. They were not encouraged to make their own doll's houses, or the furniture. Their play should rehearse and replay traditional social rituals and roles. Vignettes in each house illustrate the promise and the reality of these early messages about shelter that our society continues to tell girls. The installation shows how those early promises we make to girls are broken in a patriarchal system of home, marriage and parenting.



Installation materials include fabric with digitally printed images and text, embroidery thread, vintage doll houses, dolls and furniture, hand-made and embellished dolls and doll furniture.

Backpack

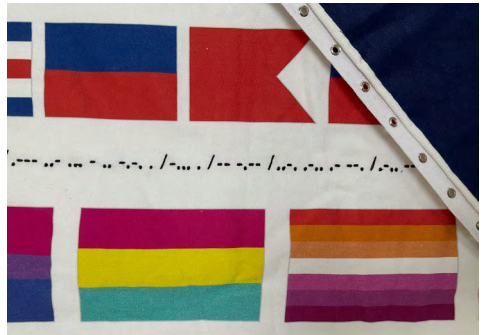
Backpack captures one of the adult fears of being homeless: that we can neither shelter nor protect our children, however much we try and whatever cost we are prepared to accept as parents. Inspired by a poem written by award-winning WA author and poet Renée Pettitt-Schipp, a child's backpack, immersed in the Mandurah estuary for three months and filled with sand and flotsam, anchors the reader's eye and heart to the the reality of so many children, lacking basic shelter and protection in their country of origin, whose lives are lost or torn apart.



Installation materials include digitally printed cotton, embroidery thread, recycled packaging materials, branded backpack, sand, scavenged toys from beaches on Christmas Island.

Our Community is Our Shelter

This large boat structure, decorated with marine flags and a quilted canopy, creates a place in which community members can pause and reflect on what shelter means to them. Here, they can consider what decisions they would make to change the fabric of their society to create a more sustainable future in the face of climate catastrophe. Its message is that ‘She Rescue’ can be powered and protected by love and justice for all. From the seat in the boat, there is a direct sightline to “What Will You Pack in Your Suitcase?”. The hull of the boat is made with remnant bed sheets that were immersed in the Mandurah estuary for three months. The marine flags and hand-stitched morse code embellishment on the canopy spell out “Love and Justice Are My Flag” – the title of an anthem written by WA artist Kavisha Mazzella and first performed in 2008 by a choir of 400 women to celebrate women’s right to vote.



Installation materials include aluminium scaffolding, recycled bed sheets, digitally printed cotton, embroidery thread, domestic seat.

Thanks

My creative practice is at the intersection of feminism, finance, and fabric. My previous exhibitions have focused on women's relationships to money, and their lived experience of financial inequality. In May 2022, I was fortunate to be selected for Annette Carmichael's creative development workshop, Ecosystem for Art and Ideas, sponsored by Circuit West. It was clear to me that climate catastrophe was an urgent issue for Australian women to consider and prepare for, and reluctantly, I turned my attention to a creative response to this threat. The subject matter is difficult to digest, the facts tell a bleak story about what lies ahead and of course, patriarchal governments and organisations continue to ignore the voices of women and children who are most impacted by its values and decisions. My creative response is now on view in this exhibition, and I am so grateful for the support of my creative community, in Denmark WA and beyond.

What happened during the months between the catalyst and the final form of this project is a testament to the phrase 'we rise by lifting others'. Wonderful women contributed their attention, care and skill to this project:

- Marta contributed her creative development guidance, as well as her graphic design skills
- Jen brought her fine attention and wide appreciation to the myriad creative questions, as well as her very practical companioning and nurturing;
- Martha tackled all the gnarly ideas with me, gave feedback about iterations and prototypes, brought tea and hugs, listened like a legend;
- Gwennie and the Sewing Sisters gave me a chance to do show and tell, giving me a sense of progress and productivity that is hard to judge as a solo stitcher
- Nadja provided textile inspiration and companionship, gently leading me out of stuck places;
- JB brought her signature sense of conviction and support, finding solutions and cheering me on when doubt set in;
- Joanna and Nicci lent their unique perspectives on dolls, emotions and expression to inspire the flotilla of boats that lead me out of despair and into new creative territory;
- Rachel quibbled about words for me when my eyes and brain were exhausted.

Many other women lent a hand, or an eye or an ear. They simply trusted and helped. They lifted my spirits and kept me on track. They helped women's voice be heard. Thanks be to them all.

And thanks always to Val and Elsie, my late mother and grandmother, whose spirit and energy run through all of me and all of this.



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