

ENTWINE

An exhibition by Helen Gory

M16 Artspace, Canberra

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Essay by Aliza Levi, artist and writer

“One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche

Helen Gory’s body of work, *Entwine*, began in the notorious Melbourne lockdowns of 2020. During this time the artist embraced two art making processes that culminated in an extensive body of work.

The exhibition comprises eighty collages or photomontages installed alongside eighty meticulously painted gold squares. The use of photomontage as an art form originated in the Dadaist movement. Influenced by Freudian theory, artists swapped paint and brushes for scissors and glue, cutting up found images to evoke and provoke. A visible expression of the technique of free association. In the same tradition, Gory collects vintage books and magazines and works speedily to construct collages, ripping out images, finding connections and positioning them on the paper. “In this way,” she states, “the unconscious is heightened, providing space for expression.”

Each collage is a filmic vignette, a brief evocative episode, complete on its own yet, when placed together, part of a broader narrative. The vignettes have no borders and, Gory says, “can be grouped, entwined, intertwined, joined, or cast adrift.” The images are whole or segmented, they connect and disconnect in ambiguous ways. The torso of a horse is placed above an image of a displaced woman’s legs in heels. A hand reaches out and touches what could be the flesh of an elbow or a thigh. A suited man sizes up a naked woman’s breasts while a woman embraces a tree trunk. The work holds both humour and pathos and the artist admits that a sinister element is present. She states that “the shadows and dark edges pervaded and wouldn’t go away, so I just yielded to them.” An image of hair that winds over skin suggestive of adult male genitalia is placed next to a girl, arms twisted in shyness or anxiety. The girl holds an egg in each hand. “My thoughts mingled with the #metoo movement, the pandemic, domestic violence ... everything became a blur BUT there is some humour and whimsy and hope within these tiny vignettes — you have to look for them.”

Moving further into self-reflection, Gory speaks about a tension: “There is yearning for human connection yet an overwhelm of human relationships, a state of transition and turmoil, of wanting to be

wanted yet needing solitude, solace and calm.” The latter is visible in her meticulously painted golden grids which entail an entirely different act of making. In these works, the outer figurative world is replaced by a singular colour of gold, painted in repeat, with delicacy and patience. Each square is layered twice with gold, a colour that is both elemental and metaphysical, a colour that does not corrode and is stable. Gold remains untarnished and unchangeable, unlike the human relationships portrayed in the collages.

The chemical symbol of gold, *Au*, is short for the Latin word for gold, *aurum*, which translates as ‘glowing dawn’. To Gory, “there’s a glint of hope — a meditation. To be singular and solitary is the price to pay for not being intertwined. The grids offer a predictable outcome, a visual mantra. There is solace in repetition, there is calm in symmetry, there is peace in pattern making. Geometrical design is a primitive return to nature, the hearth, a grounding.”

The overview of collages, which engage with the complexity of human relationships, when placed alongside gold symmetrical squares of meditation become in themselves an entwining of chaos and calm. This is a reckoning that we can relate to in the world, as is, right now.