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Artist Lillian O'Neil employs collage on a grand scale to create intriguing juxtapositions of the seemingly random.

WRITTEN *by* LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW

# MICRO MACRO

LILLIAN O'NEIL

Lillian O'Neil's approach to collage may not set out to subvert our expectations, but her application of this age-old technique is unique. Equally, her journey toward this method of art-making is anything but ordinary. Born in 1985, O'Neil did an undergraduate degree at Monash University, graduating in 2008, and worked collaboratively with Blaine Cooper and Jonathan Oldmeadow as Safari Team until 2010. Their collective filmic projects included three digs to China, characterised by a unique idiosyncratic take on evolution, and a dance video. Having viewed the latter on Vimeo, I can vouch for the quality of O'Neil's moves. It looked like fun; the reality was very different, she tells me from Japan, where she has just begun an artist residency at Youkobo Art Space. "Most of our time was spent in a freezing concrete studio wearing ski-suit onesies and working on

exhibitions and events at Artist-Run Initiatives in Melbourne and Sydney." The connections between this early work and the collaged grand narratives she constructs now are not immediately obvious, although they possess similar ambition and drama, filmic scope and epic scale. She began working with large-scale collage during her 2012 honours year at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), study that progressed into a master's degree in 2013–14. The collage is constructed from an always-growing collection of second-hand books, generally printed between the 1960s and 1990s. Favourite finds include collections of "how to" guides: how to decorate your home, have sex, read minds and hypnotise. When O'Neil met Amanda Rowell, Director of The Commercial, at her graduation exhibition, she was invited to make a new collage for one of the opening



group shows in 2012. It was, according to Rowell, “almost four metres high and over two metres wide, extremely sophisticated in its composition, full of Romantic everything. Cosmological. It got a lot of attention.” Artbank acquired O’Neil’s work in 2014, then the National Gallery of Australia and Art Gallery of New South Wales each bought from her 2017 exhibition. Fellowships and institutional exhibition opportunities have been integral, and commercial reception was also enthusiastic. Rowell says, “From the outset, Lillian’s work has been in high commercial demand with a waiting list. The strong sales of her work parallels its critical support, but is separate.”

The work is difficult to categorise. *Deep sleep* (2018), shown at Sydney Contemporary in September, depicts two figures. They sit within a variety of fractured forests and are, in turn, spliced, the ostensibly male and female bodies inexplicably joining male to female genitalia – a parallel, perhaps, to the strange and often dysfunctional coupling



**“I WANT PEOPLE TO FEEL THEY CAN DRIFT IN AND OUT OF THE IMAGE, THAT IT LINKS TO AND RESONATES WITH THEIR OWN MEMORIES AND/OR EXPERIENCE.”**

might be at the time. That is the principal constraint and she is always pushing against it.”

O’Neil has worked with collage for a long time, but the scale developed with the move to Sydney. “I started seriously collecting old books and magazines. At SCA, my studio floor was covered by a dense patchwork of cut-out images, books opened at interesting pages, groupings and colours, matching vanishing points, combinations of people and places, and it looked like a map: like an atlas of human activities, interests and beliefs. I had read about Aby Warburg and his *Mnemosyne Atlas* – Mnemosyne being the embodiment of memory in the form of a goddess – and I thought that the images layered on my studio floor looked like a self-created atlas, an attempt to map memory via collecting.”

The layering creates the physical depth in the works and, as a result, her process toward a final narrative takes time. She says, “After months of combining and editing, the puzzle starts coming together: an accumulation of small details where

microcosm and macrocosm exist in one image. I want people to feel they can drift in and out of the image, that it links to and resonates with their own memories and/or experience.”

Many writers on O’Neil’s work have looked to poetry and the memory contained by these old materials. The original materials are strenuously reinterpreted by images that appear to conjure the tenor of the changeable and fractured times in which we live, their disjunctive stimuli and disconnected realities. Motifs that recur include symmetrical and tightly constructed images using geometric shapes and planes, fractures and facets, and figures male and female, often hybridised to create both sexes within the one body. It’s evident that erotica is an interest for her. Research earlier this year took O’Neil to London, and the UK National Archives, the National Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum. She found “a bottomless archive of photographs of naked women but a very limited one of men”. In the *Wellcome Collection*, however,

Installation view  
LILLIAN O’NEIL  
Sydney Contemporary 2018  
The Commercial, Booth E19,  
Bonita Bub and Lillian O’Neil  
Photo: Alex Kiers

Opposite  
Top to bottom  
LILLIAN O’NEIL  
*The simmer dim*, 2018  
collage on Dibond, framed  
183.7 x 223.7 x 6.5 cm  
Photo: John O’Neil

LILLIAN O’NEIL  
*Deep sleep*, 2018  
collage on Dibond, framed  
176.7 x 176.7 x 6.5 cm  
Photo: John O’Neil

Previous page  
LILLIAN O’NEIL  
*The waiting pool*, 2018  
collage on Dibond, framed  
176.7 x 176.7 x 6.5 cm  
Photo: John O’Neil  
Courtesy the artist  
and The Commercial, Sydney



of heroic Western humanity within deep nature. This large collage (176.7 x 176.7 x 6.5 cm deep) is dramatic, with the figures scaled like the treetops that surround them, yet it is a relatively serene image within O’Neil’s oeuvre. *The simmer dim* (2018), also shown at Sydney Contemporary, evokes the tension, sensuality and dramatic climax of a Delacroix historical narrative painting. A central view through a window offers a panoramic cityscape at night, with another city vignette on either side. A male figure has his head thrown back, fragmented body arching, as he stretches out toward a couple who are spliced with squares of paper, legs and arms almost connecting. There are other shadowy human presences within this scene, one of which holds a draped sheet while others look away; it pulses with the proximities of city life, its connections and disconnections pressing close.

The scale of these works is striking: *The simmer dim* measures 183.7 x 223.7 x 6.5 cm deep, and it is unexpectedly heavy. Rowell says, “Her work is the largest and heaviest of two-dimensional objects we work with. The Art Gallery of New South Wales recently bought a major collage and it weighs in at 80 to 90kg. Her work is the size of her studio floor, however big that





she identified search parameters to locate the male nudes. She says, “It’s cathartic to simply reverse-objectify, but a more complex understanding and diversification of erotic narratives is needed. The public archives hold the history of accessible and publicly acceptable erotic narratives and make it shatteringly plain that the male gaze rules supreme. I am interested in searching for other perspectives, as well as making my own.”

O’Neil is an Asialink resident in Japan for three months at Youkobo Art Space until March 2019, and her collecting habit continues with her travels. She tells me, “Yesterday I visited the Jimbocho ‘Book Town’ area for the first time and in six hours I managed to visit only four of the 180 second-hand bookstores. I’m going to see what is buried in Jimbocho and see what emerges from the found images.” New work made over the period will be seen at the end of the residency, in an exhibition at Youkobo in March 2019, an exhibition at The Commercial toward the end of 2019, and an exhibition of new work at the *Ideas Platform* at Artspace, Sydney. This will comprise banners, which draw on images from feminist literature at the National Library of Australia; this project emerges from protected archives where O’Neil can’t cut up her sources. Another 2019 initiative is use of a recently purchased high-end printer. This may result, according to Rowell, in “the macro scale coming to the fore as a result. It has always been there in the work in a limited way but now she can really refine that.”

These challenges are opening up new possibilities for O’Neil. But it is clear that her first love is “the immediacy of collage, its ability to give direct access to original material from a specific time, which is then altered to align to a personal narrative. This is unique and often very moving. Because of this, its indefinability and its immediacy, collage will continue to be the king of all mediums.” It offers O’Neil infinite scope. In *If you die, everyone dies* (2015), the human condition comes full circle in a poetic facing-up to the consequences of environmental catastrophe. Its complexity and the interrelationship of imagery and subjects are rendered starkly, and the image is compelling, drawing the viewer into its depths. As Rowell sees it, “Lillian’s work has universal appeal. It is hard not to be drawn into it. Her use of analogue collage is deeply anthropological – human civilisation, the human condition, obsolete technology side by side with outward signs of grief and dismay, ruins, fortunes lost. But also joys: physical intimacy, encompassing nature. Geological time. There is a wonderful tactility and texture to her collages, which is absent from most digital imagery that surrounds us. There is also the proliferation of meaning that cannot be anticipated in collage – its hallmark.” **V**

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In 2019 Lillian O’Neil will exhibit at Youkobo Art Space, Japan, and as part of *Ideas Platform*, Artspace, Sydney.

Lillian O’Neil is represented by The Commercial, Sydney.

[artspace.org.au](http://artspace.org.au)

[youkobo.co.jp](http://youkobo.co.jp)

[thecommercialgallery.com](http://thecommercialgallery.com)



LILLIAN O'NEIL  
*Meltdown*, 2018  
 collage on  
 Gatorboard, framed  
 183 x 183 x 6.5 cm  
 Photo: John O'Neil

Courtesy the artist  
 and The Commercial, Sydney