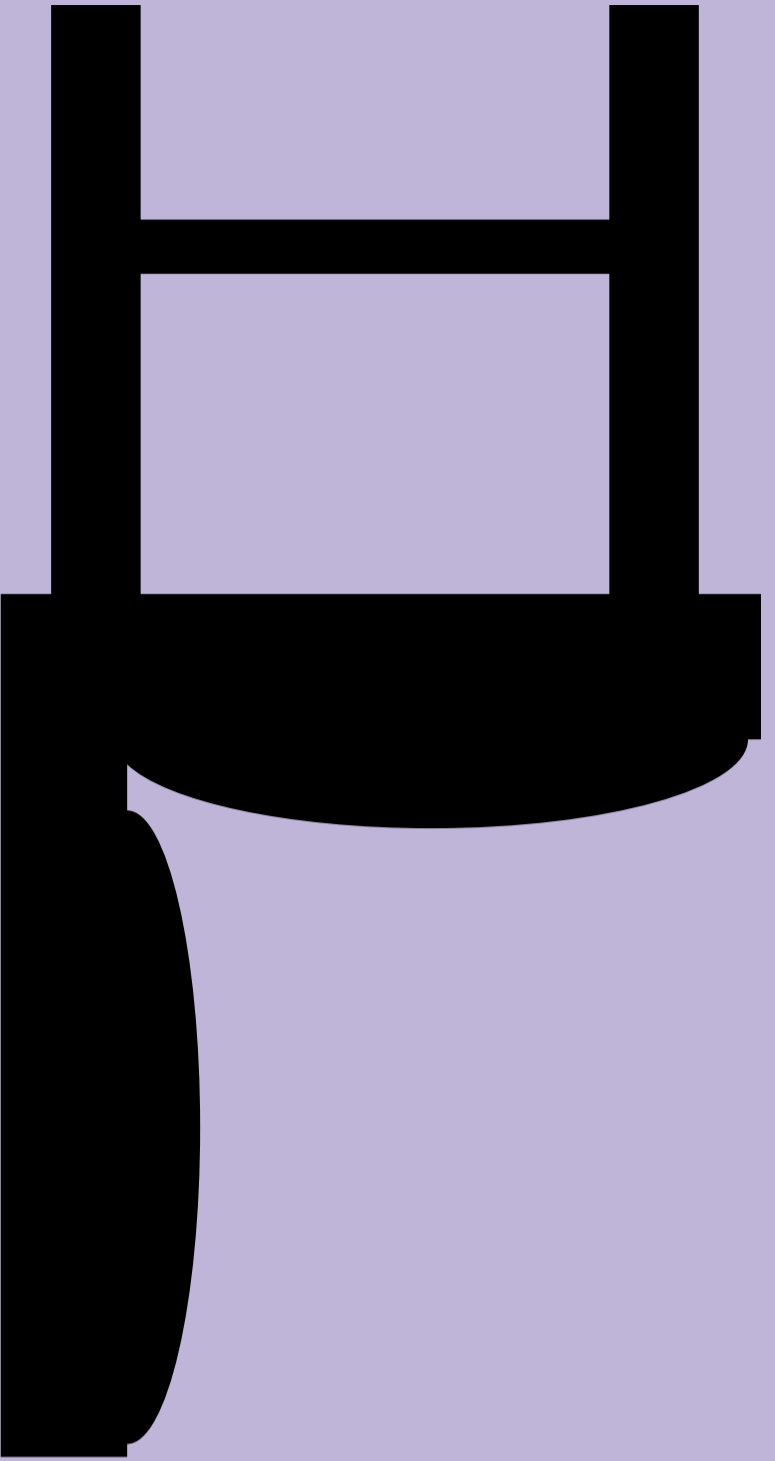


AGATHA GOTTHE — SNAPE TO TRYING  
 WITH THE CRUTHERS COMFORT IN AN  
 COLLECTION OF UNCOMFORTABLE  
 WOMEN'S ART CHAIR



**PICA**  
 PERTH INSTITUTE OF  
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27 July – 6 October 2019

# IF COLLECTION COULD DREAM

# A

In December 2018, Agatha Gothe-Snape spent a week at The University of Western Australia's Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery immersing herself in the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. Agatha is in another sense already immersed in this collection, which includes her installation *Certain Situations/EXPRESSION CURTAIN*, 2013; the large-scale performance document and drawing *Every Artist Remembered with Elizabeth Pulie*, 2009 and a subscription to her ongoing series of PowerPoint animations begun in 2008 and updated at irregular intervals, currently numbering around 50. The tension Agatha<sup>1</sup> feels between her lived experience as an artist and the disembodiment and discomfort produced by her work being acquired forms part of this exhibition's emotional core.

I had previously sent Agatha the available resources on the collection, two books<sup>2</sup> and a link to a PDF listing catalogue details for the nearly 700 works that comprise it. Our task was to put the flesh of an exhibition onto the bones of that information. This week became so densely packed with symbols and stories I remember it now as though it was a dream, everything resonant and meaningful. Each object we looked at became a wormhole.

The exhibition Agatha has produced from this intensive period operates too with a kind of dream logic. In part this is because the parameters of its making create so many loops, shifts and compressions of time and space. Originally initiated by former PICA Senior Curator Eugenio Viola, the project was intended to acknowledge, in PICA's 30th anniversary year, the significant moment in which these two Western Australian art institutions intersected. In 1995, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of International Women's Day, Joan Kerr and Jo Holder's *National Women's Art Exhibition* saw galleries around Australia present exhibitions showcasing women's art. For PICA's contribution then-director Sarah Miller invited Sir James and Lady Sheila Cruthers, who had been collecting art since roughly the inauguration of International Women's Day, to exhibit their 'women's works' – then numbering around 120 – at the gallery. The critical attention garnered by this exhibition, *In The Company Of Women: 100 Years Of Art From The Cruthers Collection*, crystallised the family's vision for a permanent public home for the collection they had been building, which they subsequently focussed entirely on women's art. Just over a decade later a Deed of Gift was signed with the University of Western Australia, forming the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art - or CCWA - in its current form.

Agatha is most frequently described as a performance artist, or an artist whose varied material outcomes are informed by the discipline of performance. In the spirit of performance, Agatha's work does describe art as an experience rather than a discrete object, finding it in embodied encounters between participants, collaborators, audiences or objects. But I think of her true medium, her singular discipline, as something else. It's generosity. Performance is the right verb, but generosity is what sets the verb in motion and determines its direction.

Each of Agatha's projects is shaped by a desire to share: the moment, the platform, the resources or opportunities. It explains the frequency with which she collaborates. The visual sparseness of her works reveals something often misunderstood about generosity, that it is not synonymous with abundance. To be generous does not require an excess of means, and sometimes being generous involves withholding or withdrawing. To offer breathing room, the space to think things through. An escape.

A recurring motif in her work is the doorway. It has appeared in drawings and paintings as a simple geometric abstraction suggesting a door held ajar or as text: PHYSICAL DOORWAY. This phrase Agatha encountered by chance on a business-card-shaped piece of ephemera found on the street in the midst of her pregnancy, whilst she was contemplating her body becoming its own kind of doorway<sup>3</sup>. The open door also

appears as a gesture, whereby either literally or by the disarming openness with which Agatha operates, an invitation is extended to cross some literal or metaphoric threshold and to immerse yourself in an idea.

*Trying to find comfort in an uncomfortable chair* has opened its doors to a multitude of others. Conversations, interviews and chance encounters have been woven into - in Agatha's perfect phrasing - the 'meshwork of the exhibition'. A new PowerPoint animation creates a revealing poem from the titles of collection artworks, many of them referring to native and introduced flowers. It is itself titled after a famous Ann Newmarch print from 1975, also part of the collection - *We Must Risk Unlearning* - in which the artist uses her own image to expose how 'naturalised' attitudes towards women's bodies are in fact violent inventions. The exhibition includes a number of artworks loaned from the CCWA chosen by Agatha, many of which formally reference holes, negative spaces or movement through or beyond the artwork. These are placed in dialogue with a frame removed from a 1937 self portrait by modernist Elise Blumann, the subject of many apocryphal stories and speculations, from which mesh-covered holes have been cut in the backing board, presumably to ventilate the work. Letters to a number of artists or their estates with work included in the collection have also requested the loan of a significant chair or a 'chair like object' that has played a role in their creative practice. This gesture gives the exhibition its title.

Where the process of exhibiting or of being 'acquired' might for an artist produce a complex bouquet of emotions - pride, relief, shame, empowerment, discomfort - the chair provides silent witness and support for creative practice disengaged from the requirement, until now, to perform that labour for a public. These borrowed chairs circumvent expectations of two of the the collection's most recognised thematic areas, self portraiture and the domestic environment. The former implies an 'essence' expressed through visibility, and the latter - even when the subject of critique - weds women's labour to the home. As a functional support, the form of the chair conjures the body through its absence. They become a cypher for the artist, in their place of work. Shifted from being an object in which contemplation takes place to an object for contemplation, these chairs work like abstraction, providing concrete forms onto which experiential and symbolic readings can be projected whilst also strategically concealing something of their source.

But, the process of explaining what these chairs 'do' in the gallery feels like to me like whittling, a process of streamlining their unwieldy power, when what they *actually* do is the opposite. They open, each of them, onto a lifeworld richer and deeper than I can express. There are so many stories condensed into this exhibition, so many competing or complimentary or contradictory experiences, that it wobbles any idea of a clean narrative arc into a dark-matter jelly of sensation.

This density and wobble, to me, is what gives the exhibition its particular dream-like quality. I think of *Trying to find comfort in an uncomfortable chair* as a dream the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art itself might have, if it were able to. Agatha has produced a contemplative space in which something of the collection's 'inner life' is expressed through symbol, archetype, chance, coincidence and unexpected juxtaposition. The exhibition expresses the combined subjectivities and subconsciousness of each of the artists it represents, of each member of the Cruthers family - Lady Sheila and Sir James, their children John and Sue - of Agatha's, and of mine. And, like a fresh dream described to a partner over breakfast, it also reveals without our realising our own biases and vulnerabilities. The things that in the light of day we take for granted, or endeavour to keep secret.

Gemma Weston  
Curator, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art,

Image: Agatha Gothe-Snape, *Certain Situations/EXPRESSION CURTAIN*, 2013, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia (c) Courtesy the artist



<sup>1</sup> The choice to use Agatha's first name in this essay rather than her surname is intended to acknowledge the spirit of comradeship that has characterised this process, and to acknowledge that Agatha, myself and PICA Curator Charlotte Hickson are, in the complicated blur of the social and professional that comprises the art industry, friends (I hope) as well as colleagues. I'm aware that the informality of this gesture - particularly applied to a 'woman artist' - carries its own politics and could be interpreted as a professional diminishment, but the use of 'Goth-Snape' feels like an authoritative performance I can't bring myself to do.

<sup>2</sup> *In the Company of Women* exhibition catalogue, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, 1995 and *Into the Light: The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art*, UWA Publishing Custom, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Recounted to Tai Snaithe in the episode 'Agatha in Puzzling World' from the podcast series *Tai Snaithe: A World of One's Own*, 2018/19

TRYING  
TO  
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UNCOMFORTABLE  
CHAIR

FIND  
AN



Image: Agatha Gothe-Snape, Studio view, 2019.  
Photo: Jessica Maurer

AGATHA  
GOTHE — SNAPE  
WITH THE CRUTHERS  
COLLECTION OF WOMEN'S ART

## List Of Works:

Agatha Gothe-Snape, *Certain Situations/EXPRESSION CURTAIN*, 2013, laser print, 28 x 36 x 3cm; found fabric circa 1980 sourced from Sydney College of the Arts and purchased in Christchurch Sunday 3 March 2013, seam, dowel, open window, dimensions variable, CCWA 948/949, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

With:

Helen Eager, *Yellow Curtain*, 1984, lithograph, 45 x 57cm (paper size), CCWA 928, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

Agatha Gothe-Snape, *Trying to find comfort in an uncomfortable chair*, 2019, fourteen letters requesting the loan of chairs sent between 1st and 15th April 2019, dimensions variable, Courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney

Chairs courtesy of:

Penny Bovell, Angela Brennan, Charles Burleigh, Susanna Castleden, Penny Coss, Sue Cruthers, Helen Grace, Narelle Jubelin and Margaret Moore, Lee Kinsella and Katherine Stannage, Eveline Kotai, Elizabeth Newman, Michelle Nikou

With:

Janet Dawson, *Untitled*, 2019, handwritten letter and watercolour on paper, dimensions variable, Courtesy Stella Downer Fine Art

Helen Eager, *Chair - Unfinished business*, 1975-, photographic prints semigloss 250gsm, each 29.7 x 21cm, Courtesy Utopia Art Gallery

Giles Hohnen, *Waiting for Harry*, 1984, oil on canvas, 123 x 93 cm, Courtesy the artist

Narelle Jubelin, *Series 7 chair by Arne Jacobsen*, 2019, cotton on silk petit point, travel frame, Courtesy the Artist and The Commercial, Sydney

Ann Newmarch, *Women Hold Up Half the Sky*, 1978, screenprint 2nd state ed. 15/35, 83 x 60cm (frame size), CCWA 566, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

Agatha Gothe-Snape, *Exit Strategies*, 2018-19, frame removed from 'Elise Blumann, Self Portrait, 1937, oil on canvas, 52.5 x 62.5cm. CCWA 37'; photograph of Lake Monger c 1914 by Louis Shapcott sent to Gothe-Snape by Penny Coss, obtained from State Library of Western Australia, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney.

With:

Janet Dawson, *Montant (Rising)*, 1960, colour lithograph ed 34/40, 80 x 41.5cm (paper size), CCWA 910, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

Maria Kozic, *Master Pieces (Mondrian)*, 1986, Oil on wood relief, 183 x 122cm, CCWA 421, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia.

Lily Napanangka & Peter Talbot Jupurrula, *Ngalkirdi Tjukurpa (Witchetty Grub Dreaming)*, 1985, Acrylic on canvas groundsheet, 285 x 245cm, CCWA 280, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia.

Elizabeth Newman, *Untitled*, 2005, bonded wool, 239 x 145cm, CCWA 933, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

Michelle Nikou, *Spread Box*, 2005, etching (unique state) 54 x 39.5cm (paper size), CCWA 883, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

Rosalie Gascoigne, *A Rose is a Rose*, 1986 – 88, torn linoleum on board, 62 x 116cm overall, CCWA 482, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia.

Agatha Gothe-Snape, *Hakea Ghost Drawing*, 2018, coloured pencil on paper, 42 x 29.7cm, Courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney

Agatha Gothe-Snape, *Wattle Ghost Drawing with Conversation Notes (John Cruthers)*, 2018, pencil and pen on paper, 42 x 29.7cm, Courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney

Agatha Gothe-Snape, *We Must Risk Unlearning*, 2018, pencil and pen on paper, 42 x 29.7cm, Courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney

Agatha Gothe-Snape, *We\_Must\_Risk\_Unlearning.pptx*, 2018, PowerPoint Presentation converted to movie file Courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney

Mei Swan Lim, *Sky Life*, 2018, audio recording, 23 min loop, Courtesy of the artist

Mei Swan Lim, *Ground Life*, 2018, audio recording, 23 min loop, Courtesy of the artist

Miriam Stannage, *Hakea in Landscape*, c 1984, pastel, 62.5 x 48cm (paper size), CCWA 783, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia,

## About the Artist:

Agatha Gothe-Snape works across visual arts and performance. An attuned understanding of performance informs the visual, relational and architectural contexts of her work. Each work is singular, embracing the complexity, ambiguity, and slippages of both performance and language in an aesthetic style that is questioning, poetic and political.

Gothe-Snape is actively involved in Wrong Solo, a collaborative performance group that she began in 2006 with fellow Sydney artist, Brian Fuata. In 2019 they presented a major exhibition *Certain Situations* at the IMA, Brisbane.

From 2013-2015, she was a studio resident at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne. In 2017 she was awarded a 12-month free studio at Artspace, Sydney. In 2018 she was UNSWA&D Artist in Residence. In 2019 she received a Clothing Store Artist Studio at Carriageworks, Sydney alongside her collaborator Brian Fuata.

Solo exhibitions include *OH WINDOW*, MAM Project 23, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, (2017), *Rhetorical Chorus*, Liveworks, Performance Space (2017); *Rhetorical Chorus*, Performa (2015), *Inexhaustible Present*, AGNSW, Sydney (2013), *Late Sculpture*, The Commercial Gallery, Sydney (2013), *You and everything that is not you*, The Physics Room, Christchurch (2013).

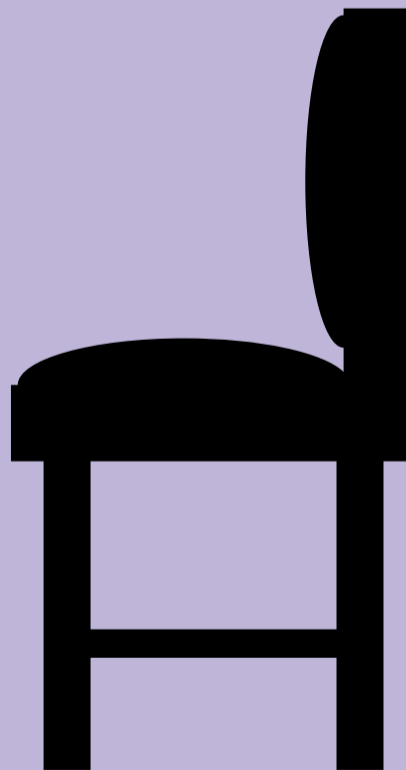
Group shows include *Returns*, Gwangju Biennale, South Korea (2018), *Will to Form*, Tarrawarra Biennale, Victoria (2018), *The Score*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Melbourne (2017), *The National: New Australian Art*, AGNSW, Sydney, Carriageworks, Sydney, MCA Australia (2017), 20th Biennale of Sydney: *The Future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed*, various locations (2016) *Framed Movements*, ACCA, Melbourne (2014), *Art as a Verb*, MUMA, Melbourne (2014), 8th Berlin Biennale, Berlin (2014), *Melbourne Now*, NGV, Melbourne (2013).

Gothe-Snape's work is in the collections of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney; the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art at the University of Western Australia, Perth; Griffith University Art Collection, Brisbane; Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne; Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne; the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia; the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and the University of Technology Sydney Collection.

## About the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art:

The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art (CCWA) is the only public collection focused specifically on women's art in Australia. The foundation of the CCWA was a substantial gift of artworks made to the University of Western Australia in 2007 by Sir James and Lady Sheila Cruthers. The Cruthers family began collecting women's art in the 1970s, focusing primarily on portraiture and self-portraiture and other key thematic areas such as still life, abstraction, feminism and the domestic environment.

The CCWA includes works from the 1890s to the present day in a variety of media and continues to expand through focused acquisition and generous donation, aiming to contribute to and challenge dialogues about Australian women's art through exhibition, teaching, research and publication. An annual program of exhibitions drawing from the collection is presented in the Lady Sheila Cruthers Gallery, a dedicated space within the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at UWA.



With artworks and contributions from

ELISE BLUMANN – PENNY BOVELL – ANGELA BRENNAN  
PENNY COSS – SUSANNA CASTLEDEN – JANET DAWSON  
HELEN EAGER – ROSALIE GASCOIGNE – HELEN GRACE  
GILES HOHNEN – NARELLE JUBELIN – EVELINE KOTAI  
MARIA KOZIC – MEI SWAN LIM – LILY NAPANANGKA  
AND PETER TALBOT JUPURRULA – MICHELLE NIKOU  
ELIZABETH NEWMAN – ANN NEWMARCH – MIRIAM STANNAGE