

# *Unbodied*

BY STELLA ROSA MCDONALD

Jedda-Daisy Culley's work is characterised by its attention to light and vivid colour—as if the sun and earth had sprung a leak—and by its dedication to the many different aspects of the body. Since Culley began working as an artist in the late aughts, producing extraordinary knitted half-nudes with tiny pink genitalia and urgent anatomical ink drawings that looked the way a body can feel, the banality, sensuality and force of the body have remained a mobilising focus of her work.

*Unbodied* explores the physicality of grief through the body and is the second series in a cycle of paintings Culley made after a recent boating accident and near drowning. Her first series, *Download Hats* (2022), documented the men in uniform who steered and surrounded the capsized boat but failed to render assistance. *Unbodied* shows her coming to terms with survival and the question of where and to whom the body belongs.

As a vessel for the cultural imagination, a vehicle for the psyche, and a biological wonder, our body is never entirely our own. For something we keep so close, it's unnerving to realise how independent the body can be. In *Unbodied*, Culley returns to the body to reconcile the point at which her survival became entangled with who she was. Following the accident, she described feeling 'gigantic and alien', no longer herself. She was forced to be the saviour, the strong one. The family dynamic shifted. Why was she so angry? Being close to people felt different. What was she connected to if this host of skin, bone, and feeling no longer fit?

Surviving bodily transgressions, like illness or accident, anchor us to death at the same time as they bring living into focus. Famously, Susan Sontag wrote about illness and spoke of being intoxicated by survival; "It has added a fierce intensity to my life, and that's been pleasurable..." When that feeling receded some years after she survived her first illness, she said, "In a way, I'm sorry; I would like to keep some of that feeling of crisis...I think it's good to be in contact with life and death..."<sup>1</sup> It wasn't illness she wanted to hang onto, but the liberation of living - again.

As with much of Culley's work, genre feels like a useless binary. She renders figures like territories and terrain, while her landscapes are alive with an almost physical dimension. In *Unbodied*, giant canvases mimetically capture a body in repose and standing. Each one is made by a hand moving furiously and fluidly between figuration and abstraction. Although the pose is virtually identical across the works, each figure is subtly transformed through a play of light and colour. A breast in one becomes a baby in another, a shadow becomes a leak, and a seductive Venus becomes a monstrous mother. Each painting is made as a diptych as if to emphasise a rupture or split in identity, and at the point the two canvases meet, a third image appears. Whether these are sensuous landscapes or treacherous bodies is probably the point; Culley deals in doubling, borderlessness and uncertainty.

*Unbodied* shows Culley wrestling with the idea that our bodies are both unknown and unknowable and that, because of this, they can feel exceptional, even miraculous. And so, the "I" in Culley's work is mystic and impersonal, if not extra-terrestrial. Mother, Wife, Woman, Daughter. A being that can float, bleed, shrink, carry, and grow. The paintings speak simultaneously to the pleasures of inhabiting a body and the horrors of being contained within one. Ultimately, they suggest the liberation that comes with understanding how much we contain and how huge we can become.

Via a gestural and intuitive formal practice, Culley's paintings insist on the body's spooky autonomy and attest to her experiences of difference. They also show a dedication to something much messier; our hunger and desire—the avidity as Sontag called it—to not just survive, but to live.

<sup>1</sup> Roiphe, Katie, *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End*. New York: The Dial Press, 2016. pp31-32

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Stella Rosa McDonald is a writer and curator with a Master of Fine Arts from the College of Fine Arts, UNSW. She has contributed critical writing, fiction and poetry to a variety of artist's projects and publications including Vitamin P3, New Perspectives in Painting (Phaidon), Overland Literary Journal, Ocula Magazine, Das Superpaper, The Art Life and Art amongst others. McDonald is currently the curator and manager UTS Gallery & Art Collection.

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