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## A maverick on fabric: the strange, unconventional art of Jenny Watson

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Detail from Jenny Watson's *The Pretty Face of Domesticity*, 2014, oil and synthetic polymer paint on velvet striped shantung. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen ©the artist

Is Jenny Watson Australia's equivalent to Tracey Emin? Watson is about a decade older; she is less concerned with listing everyone that she has ever slept with and more obsessed with horses, but shares Emin's interest in punk and street culture, feminism, the conceptual dimension of art and the use of unconventional materials. Both artists are also fine draughtsmen in the conventional sense of the word, but choose to break the rules and cultivate an intense, awkward line.

These reflections on the art of Watson have been provoked by a substantial retrospective exhibition of her work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. *Jenny Watson: The fabric of fantasy* is her largest show to date, with over 100 pieces spanning over 40 years and accompanied by an excellent catalogue largely written by the curator of the exhibition, Anna Davis.

Watson was born and trained in Melbourne, initially at the National Gallery School (subsequently known as the Victorian College of the Arts) and then spent a number of years travelling and living abroad, mainly in London, Paris and New York. She is quoted in the catalogue as saying,

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Jenny Watson Rock Star (detail) 2014 oil, synthetic polymer paint and Japanese pigment on rabbit skin glue primed damask; vintage plaster duck. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen ©the artist

*I turned from the observation of the outside world to recording an inner space ... I wanted to shatter the techniques I had learnt ... to let a random uncontrollableness take hold of the work.*



Jenny Watson, White horse with Telescope 2012, synthetic polymer paint on rabbit skin glue primed cotton. Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery ©the artist

Developing an interest in combining text and image; embracing techniques of collage and bricolage, and engaging with feminism and punk culture certainly gave her art of the 1980s and 1990s a sophistication and internationalism that was uncharacteristic for Australian art at the time and made it highly attractive to curators who wished to work on the international scene.

In Watson's CV there is one entry that stands out from the rest: "1993 Jenny Watson, Australian Pavilion, Venice Biennale". To represent Australia at the Venice Biennale is the highlight of any artist's career and Watson had that opportunity thrust upon her at the age of 42. The circumstances for her selection may not be relevant for us today, but she felt at the time, and has told me on a number of occasions, that it would have been better if this had occurred a bit later in her life. However, the chance was not to be missed.

Her exhibition at Venice, *Paintings with Veils and False Tails*, was quirky, unusual and controversial. Most of the oil paintings were of horses or girls with ribbons and false horsetails on red velvet and accompanied by inscriptions. One reads, “She realised she was in love with him after he visited the other girl for afternoon tea”, while another, “I feel like when Mum caught us smoking as kids”.

The combination of childish innocence, autobiography intertwined with fiction, adolescence and obsessions with horses, the “fab four” and pop culture of the 1960s, Twiggy and movie stars were part of the fabric that prepared the way for this significant exhibition.

Watson likes to think of herself as a rebel for whom a prohibition and a declaration that something cannot be done is sufficient incentive to try to do it – she is a compulsive rule breaker. Her major preoccupation in Venice was, in her words, “My decision to filter the life of a suburban girl through a conceptual lens [which] was a slow developing but key moment”. This remains a preoccupation throughout her art.

The other challenge that she has taken upon herself is not simply to succeed as an Australian artist, but as an artist on the world stage, who was born in Australia. The Venice Biennale gave her a brilliant platform from which to be picked up by international galleries.

Two of them did precisely that and Watson showed with some success and to some acclaim in Europe, America and Japan. Things generally came undone with the Global Financial Crisis of 2007/08 when sales largely evaporated and Australia and Australians once again became her primary market and audience.



Jenny Watson *Tied Up*, 1993, oil on canvas with organza bow  
Courtesy and © the artist. Photograph: Carl Warne



Jenny Watson, I've got a dirty pig on my mind 2013 oil paint on cotton, grounded with rabbit skin glue frame. Image courtesy the artist, Galerie Transit, Mechelen and Verlag für zeitgenössische Kunst und Theorie ©the artist Photograph: Bert de Leenheer

Jenny Watson is, in some ways, a maverick artist in the Australian art scene. Although she is sometimes associated with Tracey Emin and Jenny Holzer through her extensive use of text, her strange and unconventional creations on cloth are immediately recognisable as uniquely her work.

Her love of the horses that surround her on her property in Samford, some 21 kilometres north west of Brisbane, keep her grounded, while her imagination still explores reality through the eyes of the little girl in the backblocks of Melbourne who sees and questions the structures of the physical world and its intersection with the world of the imagination.

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*Jenny Watson: The fabric of fantasy is at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney until 2 October*

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