

JULIE
FRAGAR
**BIO
GRAPH**

Education Kit

Touring 2022-2024

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This Education Kit is intended to aid Gallery patrons, teachers, and students in their interpretation of the touring exhibition *Biograph* by Julie Fragar. It can be used as a means of encouraging individual and group responses to the art on display. Included are discussion points, engaging activities and ideas for further research. It can be used to prepare for your Gallery visit, during your Gallery visit, or after your Gallery visit at home or in the classroom.

Touring Venues and Dates:

Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, 2 December 2022 – 12 February 2023

University of the Sunshine Coast Art Gallery, 1 March – 28 May 2023

Tweed Regional Gallery & Margaret Olley Centre, 9 June – 27 August 2023

Rockhampton Museum of Art, 8 December 2023 – 3 March 2024

Resource Credit

This resource has been put together by Townsville City Galleries, Julie Fragar and Dr Jonathan McBurnie.

Townsville City Council acknowledges the Wulgurukaba of Gurambilbarra and Yunbenun, Bindal, Gugu Badhun and Nywaigi as the Traditional Owners of this land. We pay our respects to their cultures, their ancestors and their Elders – past and present – and all future generations

Cover Image:

Julie Fragar

The Single Bed [detail] 2017

Oil on board

135 x 100 cm

Collection of Griffith University Art Museum. Purchased 2017. Photography: Carl Warner

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EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Julie Fragar makes paintings about the stories we tell, simultaneously chronicling and critically analysing her chosen subjects. Bringing a unique level of **psychological** enquiry to the activity of painting, Fragar's practice brings into focus the slippery relationship between reality and fiction. Through her unique language and remarkable aptitude as a painter, Fragar blends intense studies of social politics with biographical detail and personal speculation into vivid figurative and textual imagery. Often superimposing fragments from disparate sources, Fragar's is a careful process of selection, editing and **obfuscation** that interprets the glut and vastness of post-internet connection through her own experiences, memories and associations.

Biograph is the first career **survey** of Fragar's work. Mapping more than twenty years of practice, the exhibition assembles key works made between 1998 and 2021, including some previously unexhibited. The survey is arranged according to key ongoing themes for the artist, including biography, memory, identity and **narrative**. This major retrospective of Fragar's distinctive style will tour between galleries in Queensland from December 2022 to March 2024, commencing at Perc Tucker Regional Gallery before travelling to University of the Sunshine Coast Art Gallery, Tweed Regional Gallery, and Rockhampton Museum of Art.



Image:
Julie Fragar
Rain on Your own Parade 2021
Oil on board
90 x 70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Cottier
Gallery, Sydney

PORTRAITURE AND BIOGRAPHY

BIOGRAPHY

Julie Fragar's artworks investigate **biography** - what happens and why things happen in a human life.

Fragar's paintings are full of personal details and historical references, including exploration of the lives of her **ancestors** and the family folklore that surrounds them. One such narrative is that of her ancestor Antonio de Fraga. At 12 years old, Antonio was sent by his father away from his remote island in the Azores, a Portuguese archipelago in the North Atlantic Ocean, 1400 km off the coast of Portugal. Without the knowledge of his mother, Antonio boarded a Cailifornian whaling ship in search of better opportunities. In the seven year journey that followed, Antonio not only worked in terrible conditions, his ship was also twice shipwrecked. Antonio, unlike the majority of the ship's crew, managed to survive. As Fragar explains, the narrative of Antonio's story is incomplete, pieced together by the few documents that remain, but what is known is that Antonio ultimately fled a pacific island for fear of cannibalism, eventually making his way to Australia. The incompleteness

of Antonio's backstory led to the artist filling in certain details, raising questions about our relationship with our ancestors and their experiences and how those narratives inform our self-perception.

The paintings are made up of transparent, weaved, and collided images, that use painting to bring family members together across space and time to make one comprehensible whole. Fragar uses her son as a stand-in for Antonio in many of her works, also including images of herself, her daughter and other family members along with internet imagery of Azorean people who Fragar imagines might resemble her ancestors. Through this imaginary making of scenes - part fact, part fiction - Fragar highlights our desire for connection to our ancestors and the past, a need to put it all together, to make sense of it and to thereby make sense of ourselves. In these paintings about her ancestor, Fragar is visually filling out the fragmented narrative of Antonio in a way that is impossible in reality but that nonetheless exists in the reality of the painting.



Image:

Julie Fragar

Antonio Departs Flores on the Whaling Tide 2016

Oil on board

120 x 160 cm

On loan from the Devonport Regional Gallery. Tidal: City of Devonport Acquisitive Art Award Winner 2016, DCC Permanent Collection 2017.001

Questions

There is a connection between the past, the present, and the future in Fragar's works, a pulling together of the narrative. In the painting *Antonio Departs Flores on the Whaling Tide* how do you see the representation of past, present and future?

Why is Fragar or her children always present in these paintings?

Activity

Take the time to reflect on your own ancestors, your family, or even yourself. How would you connect the past, present and future visually? In the space below, sketch key images that you would include in an artwork that would connect the three.



PORTRAITURE

Fragar's paintings deal with portraiture, a subject in which the painter has to communicate a story, event or even lifetime of a subject in one artwork. In Fragar's case, her works explore this challenging task of depicting complex narratives in a single image. For example, in Fragar's painting *Richard* - a portrait of renowned indigenous activist and artist Richard Bell - Fragar seeks to relay the felt impact of Richard Bell's early life growing up in the remote QLD town of Mitchell and the racism he experienced there. Fragar has represented that story, both through the sensitive way she has depicted Bell and through subtle images that refer to his home that sit in the background of the painting; Bell's home was demolished against the wishes of his family by local council. In the experience of standing in front of the painting, we are having an encounter with Bell and his story. We are meeting him, or an artist's image of him. This is a significant aspect of Fragar's interest in portraiture, that the painting is used to connect human subjects—artist, subject and viewer— and to allow us to feel that connection in the moment of viewing.

Activity & Discussion

Find the portrait of Richard Bell in the Gallery space, and spend some time looking at this piece. Discuss in a group or pair:

What do you see straight away when looking at this artwork?

On looking closer, what do you notice about this artwork?

How is Fragar revealing Richard Bell's narrative in this painting?

What effect does the size of this artwork have on you as the viewer?

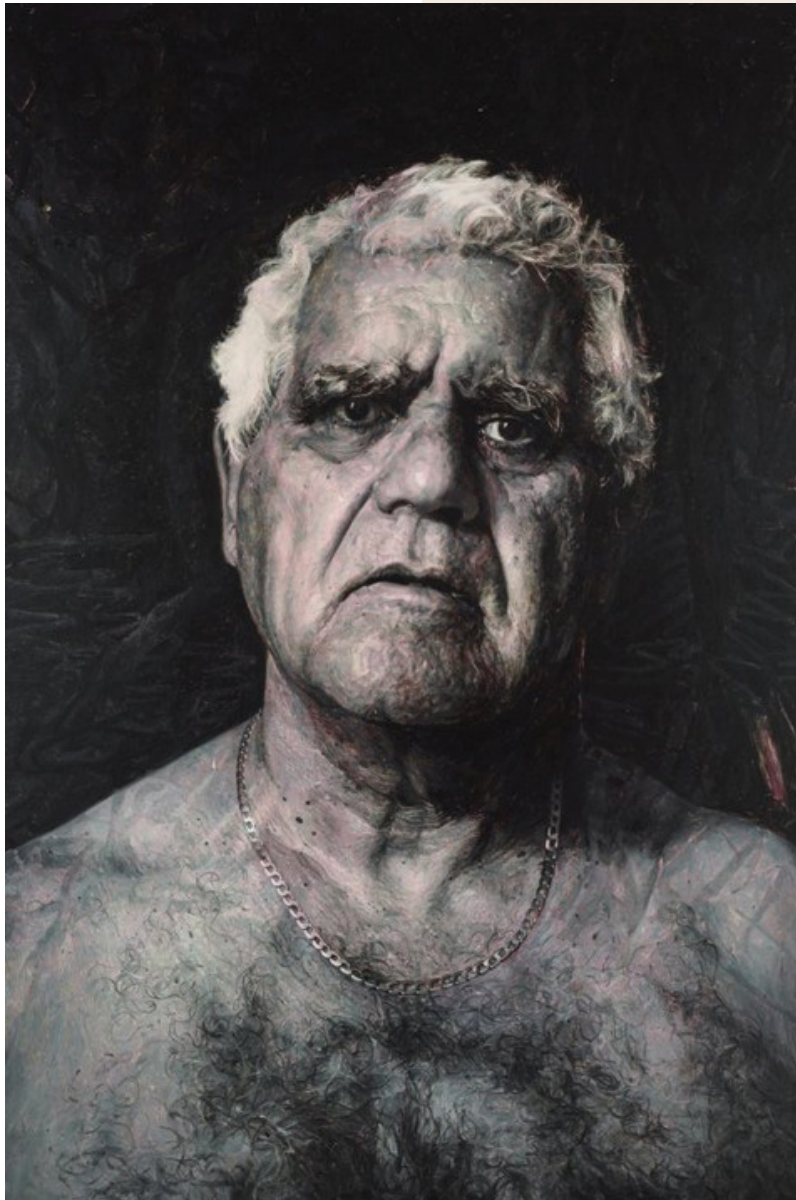


Image:
Julie Fragar
Richard 2020
Oil on board
202.5 x 135.5 cm
Museum of Brisbane Collection

SELF-PORTRAITURE

Self-Portraiture also forms a significant part of Fragar's practice. As in her use of portraiture, Fragar seeks to make visible the emotional reality of human experience, in some cases, her own. In *The Single Bed* Fragar visualises her experience of turning forty and being single. In doing so she not only psychologically processes that experience for herself, but offers others a way to connect through shared experiences of age and loneliness. In more concentrated self-portraits, such as *There Goes the Floor*, Fragar seems to be using self-portraiture as a type of mirror. Fragar has referred to these more direct facial self-portraits as a periodic way of checking in or 'getting a good look at yourself'. These paintings, perhaps more than self-portraits such as *The Single Bed*, *Flagyl* or *Wassily Chair*, feel much more like a face-to-face encounter with the artist. This is partly because the paintings are human scale, and also partly because they are looking directly back at us.

Activity & Discussion

Select a portrait or a self-portrait in the exhibition and in a group or pair describe what emotions are depicted in the artwork.

- How has the artist portrayed these emotions?
- Do you feel connected to the emotions within this artwork? Why/why not?

Mediums such as film and especially literature have time for storyline and character development but in painting or photography, only a still image can be depicted. Discuss the methods Fragar uses to overcome this constraint. What other techniques could you employ to depict more than a single moment in time?



Image:
Julie Fragar
There Goes the Floor: Self-Portrait 2020 2020
Oil on board
60 x 50 cm
Collection of the Artist

BIOGRAPHY VS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Biography

A Biographer observes and seeks to represent the life of another. In that way, biography is always the perspective of an outsider.

Autobiography

Autobiography, by contrast and by definition is both about and from the perspective of the artist, or insider.

Although **autobiography** and biography are different forms of storytelling, the two are often contaminated by each other. When one undertakes an autobiographical work, one must also take some distance from the self and imagine ourselves as others see us and how we would like to be seen. We have to start looking at ourselves from the outside and organising ourselves into a tidy narrative others can relate to; we become characters to ourselves. In that way there is no 'pure' autobiography. In the case of biography, the author will always frame the subject according to their own logic, temperament and experience; they can't help it. In that way, a biography is always also the story of the writer and therefore partly autobiographical. These overlaps between the personal, interpersonal and social—the autobiographical and the biographical—are key to thinking about Fragar's work.

PAINTING

When we look at a painting it can be easy to forget that we are having an encounter with an artwork in real time. We might start talking about what it depicts or what the colours are etc. While these can all be important aspects of a painting, we often fail to ask the most important question of all: 'What is this painting *doing*?'

Many of the devices Fragar uses in her work are intended to evidence that sense of encounter with a painting. In some of Fragar's paintings we have a sense of swimming in and around the painting, many of the multi-layered works can induce this sensation. In other works we might at first explore the imaginary world of the images, but then be snapped back to the reality of the painting's surface with a visual shock such as a cut out shape or an abstract gesture. In others, such as *Appearing before the Hawks and Hounds and Those who Tell the Stories* or *Gnash*, we might feel as though the painting is looking at us. In small works we might be very drawn in to see the work and experience a sense of intimacy with the object. In broken or collaged images we might experience a sense of disharmony, chaos or visual searching for cohesion. All of these experiences and any others you may have are worth making note of. They are integral to the meaning of any artwork and significant to the nature of Fragar's practice.

Activity & Discussion

Find one work in the exhibition that you think is more biographical and one work that is more autobiographical. For both works, say why they are more one than the other. You should then describe how each also has aspects of the other, ie. what you can see in a primarily biographical work that could also be considered autobiographical and visa versa.



Image:
Julie Fragar
Second Consideration After The Fact 2014
Oil on board
150.5 x 122.5 cm
Monash University Collection. Purchased by the Faculty of Science
2015. Courtesy of Monash University Museum of Art.

Activity & Discussion

Fragar wants viewers to be aware of their own looking, and the way they engage with the paintings she creates. Look at the paintings *Goose Chase: All of Us Together Here and Nowhere* and *Second Consideration After The Fact*. Why would you view these paintings differently, what characteristics do they have that make you feel a particular way?

What effect do the white scribbles in *Goose Chase* have on you when you view the painting?



Image:
Julie Fragar
Goose Chase: All of Us Together Here and Nowhere 2015
Oil on board
160 x 122 cm
Gift of the Art Gallery of South Australia Contemporary Collectors 2018, Art Gallery of South Australia

PHOTOGRAPHY AND PAINTING

Photography has often played an important role in Fragar's paintings. In some works, especially in her earliest work, she uses personal snapshots of everyday life. In later works she uses more photographic elements in collaged works or studio photography for portraits. Individual snapshots often investigate the similarities and differences between painted portraits and photographic portraits, looking at colour, exposure, saturation and composition. Then there are the works that are a visually complex weaving of images, based on numerous images as a starting point.

In each case Fragar is conscious of the difference between painting and photography and in what one medium can offer to the other. For example, in some cases a photographic aesthetic (black and white or the bright light of a flash for example) might lend a sense of everyday life or reality to a painting; a useful device in a painting practice concerned with lived human experience. Painting can also offer the photograph a slowing of time and of increased contemplation or longevity of an image. In this way Fragar follows the tradition of early 1960s and 70s pop and photorealist artists who sought to understand the role of painting after photography; and as a contemporary artist, the role of painting after digital photography.



Image:
Julie Fragar
Kind of Woman 2010
Oil on board
90 x 135 cm
Private Collection



Image Credit:
Julie Fragar
Fidel's #2 2005
Oil on board
40 x 60 cm
Collection of the Artist

Questions

Fidel's #2, one of the earlier works in the exhibition, shows a snapshot in time.

What techniques has Fragar used to produce a photographic quality in this painting?

In *Fidel's #2* Fragar has referenced a photo taken of her and her son. It is obvious that the artist didn't want the photo taken, this is made clear by the positioning of her hand, a signal for stop, yet she has chosen to then paint this moment.

Why do you think the artist chose to paint this moment in time?

What does it mean to have Fragar's hand so central in the work and blocking nothing?

What are the similarities and differences between a painted portrait and a photographic portrait? Is one more effective than the other?

Fragar doesn't describe her works as layered, instead preferring to call them knitted or weaved together but there still seems to be a **hierarchy** of images in the works. Looking at works such as *Goose Chase* and *The Single Bed*, how does the existence of this hierarchy affect the story being told in the paintings?

Activity

Collect photos of your friends and family, and use these photos as the basis for an artwork. What story are you going to tell in this artwork? Consider how you can use these photos to get you started. You can copy, cut, and rearrange these images to start your artwork.

WITNESSING

In 2017 Fragar attended a two-week long murder trial in the Supreme Court of Queensland, observing proceedings from the public gallery. From this came Fragar's *Trial Paintings*, with layered works based on the trial's narrative and proceedings. This interest in the judicial system, and the laws and protocols that govern its mechanics led to a related, but very different second series in *Next Witness*; one in which Fragar made a conscious effort not to focus on the details of the trial narrative, instead becoming a much more overarching analysis of the court system itself, extending into the territory of media and the institutional impact on individual human lives.

If truth in art is not universal, if the artistic experience from one human differs from that of another, then what is the purpose of art? The artist witnesses the world and lives life, then reflects their understanding and exposure - their truth - back at us through their creative output. **Phenomenology** is an approach to inquiry that seeks to describe the essence of a situation by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it —both in terms of *what* was experienced and *how* it was experienced. By examining an experience as it is subjectively lived, new meanings and appreciations can be developed to inform, or even re-orient, how we understand that experience.



Image:
Julie Fragar
Appearing Before the Hawks, the Hounds and Those who Tell the Stories 2018
Oil on board
140 x 210 cm
Collection of the Artist

Questions

Appearing Before the Hawks, the Hounds and Those who Tell the Stories is one of the artworks from the *Next Witness 2018* series. This painting offers a commentary on the media's tendency to reduce many complex realities into a single commodified narrative for showing in shortened and manipulated form on television news.

What do you think the cameras are a visual **metaphor** for in this painting?

Are there other visual metaphors that you can find in the artwork?

Why do you think Fragar included her own face in the painting?

How has the use of composition affected the outcome of this artwork?



Image:
Julie Fragar
Exhibit 30: Post-Mortem Injury (Incise Wound) 2018
Oil on board
105 x 70 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney

Activity

Consider the theme of witnessing.

After witnessing Julie Fragar's exhibition *Biograph*, reflect on *what* and *how* you experience it and compare it with others from your group. Think about individual works, the artist, the space, how the works were arranged in the Gallery, the experience of coming to view the exhibition as a whole. What ideas did you bring with you and what did you take away?

INTERVIEW WITH JULIE FRAGAR AND BIOGRAPH CURATOR DR JONATHAN MCBURNIE

Julie - Where did the exhibition title come from?

Actually Jonathan McBurnie came up with that title; I thought it was perfect for a show that looks back across a couple of decades at human experiences. Any artist's practice forms a kind of autobiography across a lifetime, but I guess relative to some other kinds of creative practice, mine makes a more determined look at that kind of life story in painting. In the title, 'Bio,' gives you the human life part and 'graph' gives you the writing or painting part.

Jonathan - What is involved in curating an exhibition of this kind?

There are a number of stages in curating, but in a way it all boils down to a good idea, and then planning. The 'good idea' part is usually the most instinctual; we all get excited about particular artists and topics, and if you choose an artist or theme that you feel strongly about, you are going to come up with a better show, because you will need to sustain that passion and momentum for a long period of time. And that is when the planning comes in. When you are working with an artist like Julie, who has been collected by a broad array of public collections and private collectors, and rightly so, there are a lot of players to juggle. This extends further with a tour, wherein you are dealing with several galleries rather than just one, so a decent amount of planning is essential, but it will be fed by your passion for the project itself. In this case, I never would have been able to keep it all going without an absolute belief in the artistic value of Julie's work, as well as in the artist herself.

Julie - What are your artistic influences?

The first art book I had was a small publication on 19th century French Realist painter Gustave Courbet. Either because he was my first art hero or because I naturally related to his interest in human experience and psychology, I started working in that Realist tradition and never really stopped. In terms of artists, I am influenced mostly by painters who make work centred on those reflectively human themes. South-Africa born artist Marlene Dumas has been of particular importance. But I am maybe more influenced these days by what I observe in everyday life and what all kinds of people have to say, write and philosophise about it. I listen to a lot of psychology, philosophy and economics podcasts. I also listen to audiobooks when I'm painting and love classic authors like Elisabeth Gaskell, John Steinbeck, George Eliot, Philip Roth, Joan Didion, Charles Buckowski, Dickens and other contemporaries like David Sedris, Helen Garner and so many others!

Maybe as you get older you start to become more just who you are as an artist. My friend and amazing Australian artist Jenny Watson says that when we are younger artists we have to "try on mummy's dresses" but that we eventually grow out of it. I'd say that is true for most artists who keep going past their twenties.

Jonathan - What do you believe Fragar's influence has been on Australian contemporary painting?

I think Julie is one of the most influential Australian artists today. Throw a rock in the air and you will hit one of her imitators. This can be a tough thing to contend with, but I maintain that while many of Julie's devotees will cling on to one aspect of her practice - whether it be treatment of text, self portraiture, whatever - and spin out endless variations on the theme. Meanwhile, she has been developing the way her own artistic conversations play out in the paint, she does not stand still, and it was a privilege getting to look at this very intimidating, very thoughtful body of work and try to make sense of it in terms of chronology of themes and approaches, and telling this story. There is a cyclical return and innovation of themes that is really fascinating, and gives Julie's oeuvre a toughness and a complexity that many Australian artists lack.

Julie - what are you currently working on?

A series of works about groups and rituals. In the past few years I've made paintings about people interacting with larger institutions like courts and hospitals. I've ended up thinking more about that social space in terms of the interpersonal dynamics we perform when we come together, not just in physical institutions but also in other organised ways. I'm thinking of things like funerals and weddings and even staff meetings!

Julie - Do you have a key piece of advice you'd share with any aspiring artists that might be reading this?

We are all different so whatever advice anyone gives you will be more or less useful depending on your circumstance. That said, in my experience as both an artist and an educator, I've noticed three main characteristics in successful* artists of all ages. First they are confident to make the work they genuinely want to make. Second, they know a thing or two about art history and the art world. Third, they work hard and don't make excuses.

*You should also define success however you want to. I'm thinking here of artists who have managed, one way or another, to keep making and showing their work. There are however innumerable ways to be an artist and innumerable artworlds. You should choose whatever path you find rewarding.

KEY TERMS

ANCESTORS

One from whom a person is descended and who is usually more remote in the line of descent than a grandparent.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Autobiography, by contrast and by definition is both about and from the perspective of the artist, or insider.

BIOGRAPHY

A Biographer observes and seeks to represent the life of another. In that way, biography is always the perspective of an outsider.

HIERARCHY

A hierarchy is an arrangement of items (objects, names, values, categories, etc.) that are represented as being 'above', 'below', or 'at the same level as' one another.

METAPHOR

A metaphor, in this use a visual metaphor, is regarded as representative or symbolic of something else.

NARRATIVE

Something that is narrated, a way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values.

OBFUSCATION

To make obscure.

PHENOMENOLOGY

The study of the development of human consciousness and self-awareness as a preface to or part of philosophy.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

Directed toward the will or towards the mind, specifically in its conative function.

SURVEY (EXHIBITION)

An overview of the work of either a movement, genre or an artist.

Perc Tucker Regional Gallery
Cnr Denham and Flinders St
Townsville QLD 4810
Tue - Fri: 10am - 5pm
Sat - Sun: 10am - 1pm

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