



This Is Not A Solo Show

MICHELLE CAWTHORN

// PETER SHARP

This Is Not A Solo Show.
A concept album.

BY REBECCA GALLO

No, this is not a solo show; it's more of a love song. A two-way dedication, but not of the Richard Mercer variety. Something with rougher edges and a bit of a twist: maybe a bittersweet Nick Cave ballad with a hint of Gainsbourg and Birkin (whose breathy version of *Je T'aime...Moi Non Plus* - recorded, fittingly, in 1969 - was considered so erotic that it was banned in several countries). You could also think of this show as a concept album: two lovers cover one another's songs, and write new ones together.

This Is Not A Solo Show marks the first collaboration between Michelle Cawthorn and Peter Sharp, two artists who have long been each other's most trusted consultants. They discuss and advise on each other's work in progress, but the actual making and conceptualising has, until now, remained individual. Both have their own studios near the water, but suburbs apart. Michelle examines memories and makes them tangible, whilst Pete creates poetic abstractions of landscape.

Having kept their artistic practices independent for this long, why start working together now? Perhaps it is the logical trajectory of a close relationship, in which so much else is shared, that Michelle and Pete should eventually turn their artistic practices to face one another.

If this show is a concept album, each artwork is a song that explores a different approach to collaboration. It traces a process of careful investigation, as Michelle and Pete test out the parameters of this new exchange, gradually integrating their distinct visions. Working together is always an experiment, and in a jam session, you have to let go of outcomes, listen to what you can hear and play off that. These works are litmus tests for future projects: testing grounds for how two independent artists might bring their skills, ideas and aesthetics together to make something greater than the sum of its parts.

— Hospital Corners III // 2016
Pigment print on Premium photo paper
80 x 53.4 cm

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The first step was to make work dedicated to one another. In both Michelle's *Special Pillow* and Pete's *Slow Down Chell*, the artists explore new territory in their practices in response to this new catalyst for making work. Michelle has made soft sculpture before, but usually using fabrics imbued with memory and history (for example in *Boy* (2014), a large spherical form with protruding limbs, sewn from old shirts of both her and Pete's sons). In contrast, *Special Pillow* is sewn from new, shiny satin; it speaks of future action rather than past happenings. Whether it is a threat of sex or a promise of death remains unclear.

Throughout an exhibiting career of almost thirty years, this is only the second time Pete has exhibited video work. *Slow Down Chell* depicts the churning Cronulla swell during recent storms, and apparently its title is a line that gets wheeled out with some regularity. It's not entirely surprising; she is the proactive whirlwind to his laid-back calm. But Pete is a surfer, and it is often when it is most dangerous that the ocean is most appealing. Both these 'dedications' are playful, but also honest and unforgiving. The act of making art dedicated to one's partner is saccharine enough for this couple; the works themselves are candid reflections on the tensions and complexities of their relationship.

After these initial, introductory tunes, the stakes were raised as the artists traded finished work for the other to remix. For two people used to creating work independently, this represents a significant act of letting go. However, rather than working in isolation to carve their own signatures into each other's work, the process became a shared one. They worked together in Pete's studio to determine how Michelle's fabric sculpture would interact with his assemblage components, which are mostly recycled, perforated and painted wooden forms.



— *The Special Pillow // 2016 // MICHELLE CAWTHORN*
Black stain, polyester thread and feather pillow
75 x 50 cm



— *Slow Down Chell (film still) // 2016 // PETER SHARP*
Single channel video
20 second duration

MICHELLE CAWTHORN // PETER SHARP

bemusement of a passing police patrol, the couple enacts a measured choreography with a white bed sheet. They hold it from opposing ends, as if to bend down and drape the earth. The sheet is the distance between two lovers. It is a shroud. The wind fills it like a parachute.

This most mundane, though surprisingly contentious of domestic chores, is taken outside of the house and into open and public space. A literal airing of dirty laundry, or perhaps an attempt to come together over a potentially divisive task. Based on both personality and practice - Pete's laid-back attitude and bold, loose gestures; Michelle's focus, intensity and her precise marks - it is not hard to imagine their contrasting sheet-folding and bed-making habits.



— *Hospital Corners II // 2016*
Pigment print on Premium photo paper
80 x 53.4 cm



— *Forward Planning // 2016*
Faux fur, MDF, threaded rod, hex nut, eye nut, rope, pulleys, snap hooks, eye plates, cleat, ply/cotton thread, fill, hand hewn eucalypt timbers, acrylic paint and found stool
Dimensions variable



— *Pole Dancer // 2016*
Poly/cotton scarves, satin, pompom trim, faux fur, calico, timber batons, poly/cotton thread, wadding, hand hewn eucalypt timber, acrylic paint and stand
Dimensions variable

They arrived at the playful positioning of a horizontal scarred plank, penetrating the folds of Michelle's textile wall work. It is frank, explicit and irreverent, exemplifying the freedom that can come with the promise of shared responsibility and dual attribution.

Michelle's remix of Pete's sculptural forms, titled *In Your Shadow*, is a more serious reflection on the partnership. A quick glance at both artists' CVs shows a significant discrepancy in years of practice. Being the 'early-career' to your partner's 'well-established' has both benefits and drawbacks: expectation, pressure and cynicism arise, but are countered by support, guidance and understanding. This ongoing dialogue is beautifully distilled in Michelle's subtle addition of fabric shadows - supple, diaphanous, insubstantial - to objects that are solid and assured.

Forward Planning is a collaborative piece that incorporates objects from both artists' studios. Two earthy, anchoring hunks of wood are elements of Pete's sculptures, whilst hovering in the centre is a curvaceous, furry form. When Michelle first exhibited this form as a stand-alone sculpture, it was titled *Pussy*. This three-part sculpture is suspended with pulleys and ropes, alluding to the push-and-pull of compromise and coexistence, whilst harnessing that Gainsbourg-Birkin eroticism and playfulness.

Collaboration is at its strongest in a series of new works titled *Hospital Corners*. This series of photographs was planned and executed together from scratch. Photography provided neutral territory, as neither artist has used it previously in their practice. Shot in the backstreets of Cobar, much to the



— *In Your Shadow // 2016 // MICHELLE CAWTHORN*
Ceramic sculpture, black satin, wadding and polyester thread
Dimensions variable

In *Hospital Corners*, the couple shakes off these quotidian concerns, drawing attention instead to the waltz of folding sheets; the caress of wrapping a mattress; the complex choreography of coaxing a doona into its cover.

Compromise can mean a dilution of competing or opposing desires, but the process of negotiation can also yield something new and valuable. A long list of successful and productive artistic collaborations, from Jeanne-Claude and Christo to Jake and Dinos Chapman, would suggest that working together has its benefits. There is the simple fact that two people have more time and energy than one, and there is also something less quantifiable that brings two people together to work towards a shared vision. Working alone in one's studio can be intensely rewarding, challenging and varied. This exhibition, however, displays a different sort of energy. One born of shared adventurousness and trust, experimentation and synergy, chemistry and curiosity. It is not better or worse than a solo show: it is new territory altogether.

ISBN: 978-0-9946051-0-8

GRAPHIC DESIGN · Franz Anthony // PRINTING · Darkstar Digital

This project was assisted by a grant from Arts NSW, an agency of the New South Wales Government and supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian State and Territory Governments. The program is administered by the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA).