

PRESS RELEASE
PILAR CORRIAS presents

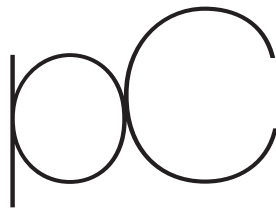
HELEN JOHNSON: AGENCY

Private view: Wednesday 20 November, 6 – 8pm



Helen Johnson, *Self Portrait as Self-Conscious Left*, 2019, acrylic and pencil on canvas, 198 x 137 cm, 78 x 54 in

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In 2018 the global wellness industry was worth \$4.2 trillion annually, more than four times the size of the pharmaceuticals industry. As our planet hurtles towards total ecological collapse at our hands, people seem to be focusing more and more upon their own bodies. As species that have inhabited the planet for millions of years disappear en masse, we focus our sense of responsibility inward, honing our stress management skills and methods of self-care.

What does it mean to paint bodies in this context? And further, what does it mean to paint one's own body? Does it constitute the same sort of introspection in the face of depletion that 'wellness' does? When this question arose in my mind, my first impulse was to charge painting with complicity in this cosy cocoon of denial that we are so invested in spinning. And it is complicit. Painting also, however, operates on people's subjecthood. When a painter produces a body, something pours out of the unconscious and stares back. It's not relaxing or reassuring.

In this body of work, the metaphorical potential of the female body in particular is explored: as a site at once open and engulfing; as an analogue for the tight loops of self-conscious critique that take place on social media; as a space becoming what it always was; as a forum for thought and argument that fails to account for the mind attached to that body.

When someone paints, they paint with their body, and in this moment they ask themselves to inhabit their body fully, to recognise it. If in turn the body serves as subject matter, the vulnerability of this moment is carried forth on another register. Inhabiting one's body in order to carry out a subjective outpouring is, perhaps paradoxically, a useful means to help us find a way outside of ourselves. At present the idea of this is, for me, connected to motherhood, since bringing another human into the world also necessitates a collision of inhabiting one's body anew, a subjective outpouring and moving outside oneself - giving the self over to the interests of another who you made, and then you meet.

Helen Johnson, 2019

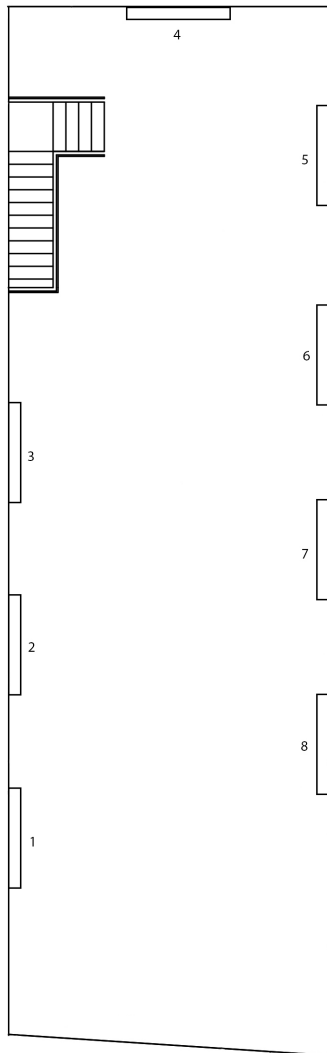
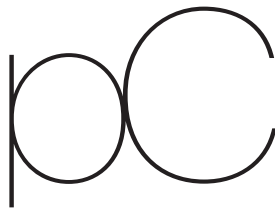
Painting serves as a critical departure point for Helen Johnson's practice, as a set of tools that work beyond language to encircle a range of contemporary issues. Her works engage a broad visual vernacular, including images from the 19th century, graffiti found in public toilets, emojis and fragments of text. The building up of layered surfaces is not merely a technically-driven choice, but also serves as a metaphor for some of the complexities and interplay that operate in the ongoing formation of Australian identity—including 'the persistence of denialist accounts of colonisation, the relationship between personal and official histories, and more fleeting cultural trends that spike the mix, becoming ever present as we lean into the internet'.

Helen Johnson was born in 1979 in Melbourne, Australia. Johnson received her BFA Painting (Hons) from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne and a PHD (Fine Art) from Monash University, Melbourne in 2014. Selected solo exhibitions include: *Agency*, Pilar Corrias, London (2019); *Warm Ties*, ICA, London, Chapter, Cardiff and Artspace, Sydney (2017-18); *Ends*, New Museum, New York (2017); *Barron Field*, Glasgow International (2016); *The body is through*, Laurel Gitten, New York (2015); *Slow Learners*, Château Shatto, Los Angeles (2015); *Ex-execs*, Minerva, Sydney (2014); *At Once (in collaboration with Adelle Mills)*, 55 Sydenham Rd, Sydney (2014); *Just Paintings (in collaboration with George Egerton Warburton and Hamishi Farah)*, Westspace, Melbourne (2014); *Problem History*, MADA Gallery, Monash University, Melbourne (2014); *Time enough for love*, Chapter House Lane, Melbourne (2013); *Meantime*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne (2013); *Air to Surface (with Parker Ito)*, Prism, Los Angeles (Curated by Liv Barrett) (2013); *Dead Metaphor*, ACME Project Space, London (2012); *Universal Remote*, Y3K Gallery, Melbourne (2011); and *System Preferences*, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne (2011).

Johnson lives and works in Melbourne and has undertaken international studio residencies in London, Norway and Germany. She was also a studio artist at Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, between 2003 and 2005, and Artspace, Sydney, in 2012.

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1.
A Mother, 2019
Acrylic and pencil on canvas
198 x 137 cm
78 x 54 in
2.
Becoming What You Always Were, 2019
Acrylic and pencil on canvas
198 x 137 cm
78 x 54 in
3.
Agency, 2019
Acrylic and pencil on canvas
198 x 137 cm
78 x 54 in
4.
Self Portrait as Self-Conscious Left, 2019
Acrylic and pencil on canvas
198 x 137 cm
78 x 54 in
5.
Advice, 2019
Acrylic and pencil on canvas
198 x 137 cm
78 x 54 in
6.
Breach, 2019
Acrylic and pencil on canvas
198 x 137 cm
78 x 54 in
7.
Exchange, 2019
Acrylic and pencil on canvas
198 x 137 cm
78 x 54 in
8.
Denial, 2019
Acrylic and pencil on canvas
198 x 137 cm
78 x 54 in

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