



[dip] contemporary art

**KAWITA  
VATANAJYANKUR**

cover:  
Knit, Documentation of live  
performance, Ultra HD Video,  
2019

## **KAWITA VATANAJYANKUR**

In her performative works, Kawita Vatanajyankur transforms her body into a site upon which issues of labour, feminism, oppression and consumerism are thoroughly interrogated and challenged. Vatanajyankur undertakes various repetitive and strenuous tasks, turning herself into mechanical tools and domestic objects as she pushes her body to its limits as a testament to human capabilities and female resilience. Drawing from a globalized and digitally networked visual language of consumption and instant gratification, her videos bears semblance to bold and colourful commercial advertisements, only breaking away from their similarities within her constantly recurring moments of physical and emotional discomfort; the result is a bodywork that is as strikingly compelling as it is uncomfortable to witness. Vatanajyankur performs a series of physical experiments that playfully, and sometimes painfully, test the limits of her own body, and challenge the viewer to keep looking well beyond their comfort zone, while wilfully exploiting the global visual language of instant gratification in acid pop colours.

Protagonist of the contemporary Asian, Australian and American art scene, Kawita investigates throughout her video-performances the vulnerable female condition, provoking questions surrounding the place of cultural identity, feminism, women's work, consumerism and lived experiences - classified through a lens of hyper-coloured realism and the intensity of physical versus material composition. Her work offers a vignette into the physicality and vulnerability of the feminine body, and the activities in which female bodies are engaged in almost impossible balancing acts, while captivating and luminous colors characterize an aesthetic research that draws on the visual language of the network, a sarcastic allusion to consumerism that claims to give instant gratification.

Kawita has achieved significant recognition since graduating from RMIT University (BA, Fine Art) in 2011. In 2015 she was a Finalist in the Jaguar Asia Pacific Tech Art Prize and curated into the prestigious Thailand Eye exhibition at Saatchi Gallery, London. In 2017, her work has been curated into 'Islands in the Stream' exhibition by Alamak!project in collaboration with Concilio Europeo dell'Arte alongside the 57th Biennale di Venezia; into Asia Triennale of Performing Arts at the Melbourne Arts Centre, as well as 'Negotiating the Future' curated exhibition of the Asian Art Biennial Taiwan. In 2018, she showed her works as part of the Bangkok Art Biennale 2018. Vatanajyankur has exhibited widely across Australia, as well as Asia, USA and Europe. Vatanajyankur's work is held the National Collection of Thailand and in Museum collections including Singapore Art Museum, Dunedin Public Art Gallery (Dunedin Art Museum), Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum, as well as university collections and private collections in Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Europe and America.

## PERFORMING TEXTILES SERIES 2018-ongoing

*Performing Textiles* is the title of a suite of video works in which the artist powerfully critiques the many challenges faced by Thai women (and more broadly Asian migrant women) in relation to the backbreaking physical manual labour processes of contemporary manufacturing industries.

This series - created when travelling around New Zealand - stems from a journey in Thailand that the artist has undertaken to explore the various textile production techniques existing in small villages, adopted by local women workers: here, production was often time-consuming, but the quality of fabrics fashioned by these women were superior.

Kawita's body performances giving voice to the work of these women, questions the way in which work is organized and, in turn, the position of women in society. Textile related activities are recognised as women's labour. Indeed, basketry, loom weaving, knitting, crochet and lacemaking are all feminine material skills that rendered men unnecessary. As such, Vatanajyankur's practice "focuses on valuing women's everyday work and labour, while offering a powerful examination of social and cultural ways of viewing women's work".

Labour exploitation is a major issue within consumeristic society, blocking access to female empowerment and gender equality.

In her performances, Vatanajyankur transforms her body into various textile process tools. Her physical form becomes the embodiment of a spinning wheel or weaving shuttle. As the works progress, her body struggles to compete as the material tool, and thus her form undergoes both psychological and physical metamorphosis. repeating infinitely the movements. Textiles are linked symbolically to birth, fertility and reproduction. The practice of working with materials connects women's bodies to the earth.

It is a symbol of life and power.

There is a poetic parallel which exists between the creation of new thread and new life.

These actions are presented through the double-lens of a hyper-coloured formal composition and a study into the physical abilities/vulnerabilities of the body, combining as works that provoke questions of labour, consumption, feminism and the artist's lived experience.

This series is commissioned by the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand.



The Spinning Wheel is in The National Collection of Thailand (Ministry of Culture) and Maaam Contemporary Art Museum.

In *The Spinning Wheel* - part of the series "Performing Textiles"—Vatanajyankur's facial expression remains composed, if not serene. Such composure throughout sustained exertions amplifies the absurdity of her iterative actions, and serves to bolster her ongoing parody of working life. Indeed, Vatanajyankur's critique tackles both the unpaid or lowly paid manual labor carried out by women in Thailand (whether domestic or employed), and that of any working person, regardless of income bracket, intent on shoring up wealth. It is the skewed field of capitalism that is Vatanajyankur's ultimate target. This is evident not only in the absurd and frequently abject contortions that Vatanajyankur subjects her body to, but also in the hyper-colored backdrops and painted structures she utilizes. "Vatanajyankur's Day-Glo palette mimics the attention-grabbing packaging and advertising of hyper-consumerism. She invokes the strident visual language of capitalism via détournement, and though her absurd, repetitive actions are interpreted as being critical of the system, the artist recognizes that such a critique is positioned from within the capitalist world—the fact that the actions she performs may not derail capitalist mechanisms only adds to a sense of absurdity." (Pickens R, *Performing Textiles*, Art Asia Pacific)

**THE SPINNING WHEEL**, 2018-2019

C-print

40 x 60 cm

Edition of 3 + 1 AP



Vatanajyankur, against an eggshell-blue background, is herself an implement, a vehicle for the Medusa-like sprawl of threads attached to her head. Her ankles are bound and she is suspended headfirst over the large bowl of dye for a full 7 minutes and 42 seconds. For much of the time, Vatanajyankur holds her breath underwater in an attempt to dye the white wool attached to her head red. In addition to her bound ankles, Vatanajyankur wears her trademark pale apricot leotard, and a pair of hands clasp either side of her hips to guide her in this intentionally absurd and repetitive procedure. Vatanajyankur grips her handler's wrists.

"Arguably, *Dye* is a work that most explicitly addresses the gendered, frequently sexualized nature of labor. Many of the generative tensions in Vatanajyankur's work are evident in *Dye*: submission and strength, abjection and hyper-color, absurdity and performative intention. The artist is at once subjugated and resilient, and the female laborer vulnerable and powerful within the larger warp of hyper-capitalism".

(Pickens R, *Performing Textiles*, Art Asia Pacific)

**DYE**, 2018-19  
C-print  
40 x 60 cm  
Edition of 3 + 1 AP

*Dye* is in the collection of Dunedin Public Art Gallery, (NZ) and Maiiam Contemporary Art Museum (TH)



**SHUTTLE**, 2018-19  
fine art print on \_\_\_\_\_paper  
cm 150 x 100  
edition of 3 + 1AP

Vatanajyankur constructs human-size structures, such as looms, which she then becomes a part of. In the video *Shuttle* (2018), an aqua-colored metal structure supports a purple skein of fiber across its arms. Vatanajyankur launches herself through the narrow gap between the threads and slips through to the other side. She wears a pale apricot leotard with bright red strands of wool encircling her lower torso, which unwind behind her and then cross the purple fibers. As the title *Shuttle* suggests, Vatanajyankur is herself the shuttle, who produces, with each dive through the warp and weft, another line of a woven textile.

Her moves are carefully choreographed, and she practiced for weeks or months in advance of filming, as the sequences she performs are physically demanding, frequently tugging at the limits of endurance. Vatanajyankur draws on the positive effects of meditation, such as enhanced focus, to assist her stamina and, importantly, to channel her abilities to become, in this instance, the shuttle. (Pickens R., *Performing Textiles*, Art Asia Pacific)

*Shuttle* is in The National Collection of Thailand (Ministry of Culture)



**PRINT**, 2018 - 2019  
fine art print on \_\_\_\_\_paper  
cm 150 x 100  
edition of 3 + 1AP

PRINT is part of the Performing Textiles series, a suite of recent video works in which the artist powerfully critiques the many challenges faced by Thai women (and more broadly Asian migrant women) in relation to the backbreaking physical manual labour processes of contemporary manufacturing industries.

The artist's durational performative processes and hyper-coloured compositions create images that are captivating and seductive yet disquieting. They are a celebration of women's strength, endurance and resilience in the face of burden. Using her own body in a series of machine-like scenarios, the artist highlights the vulnerabilities of the human body and its spirit, provoking questions surrounding consumption, labour, feminism and social justice.

## WORK SERIES 2015 - 2017

Vatanajyankur's exploration of everyday and domestic work is particularly telling of her Thai homeland. A place where, for many, daily chores aren't always assisted by electronic contraptions or white goods but are time-consuming, physically exhausting, and often the task of women. The videos' happy, day-glow colours, dark humour and undercurrents of violence, however, bring a universality and contemporary currency to the historical trajectory of feminist art. It is telling, for instance, that she describes her performances as "meditation postures", when such gruelling tests of resilience and fear are quite the opposite of what we might think of now as zen. But, for Vatanajyankur, extreme physical endurance offers a way to free herself from her mind: a mechanism to lose her sense of being. This deliberate objectification, she says, turns her body into sculpture.

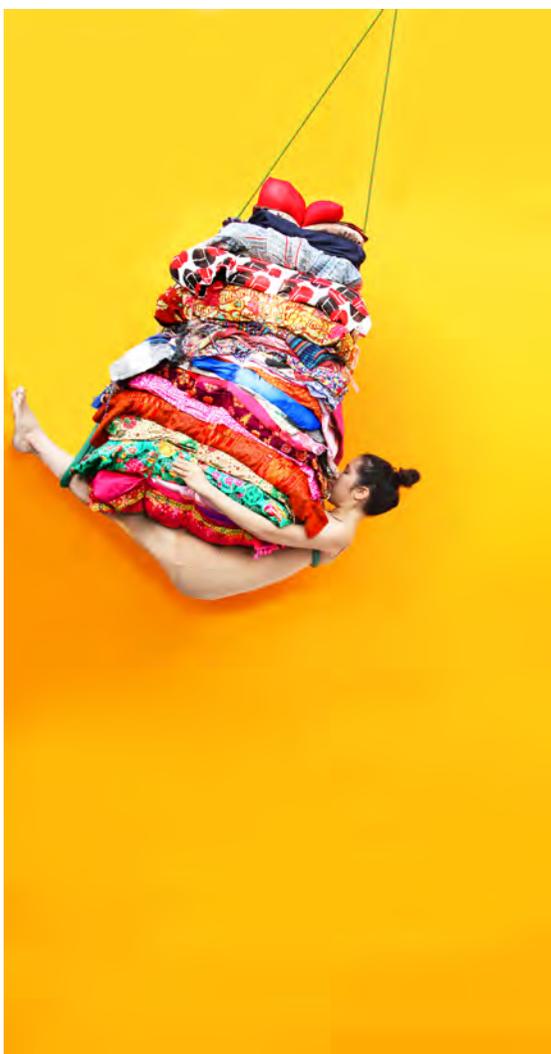


**THE SCALE OF JUSTICE, 2016-2019**

C-print  
40 x 60 cm  
Edition of 3 + 1 AP

In *The Scale of Justice* (2016), the artist becomes a traditional 'beam scale', balancing hanging baskets from her arms and feet. Against the jewel-coloured backdrop of sapphire pink, the baskets fill up and overflow with luscious green veg while we watch as her balance and composure are increasingly tested, her corporeal and psychological limits measured.

(Text by Josephine Skinner, Stills Gallery, Australia)



**CARRIER I**, (dyptic) 2017-2019

C-print  
40 x 60 cm  
Edition of 3 + 1 AP



**COLANDER**, 2016  
Video still

For *Colander*, the artist acts as a noodle strainer, a specific kind of breathing was incorporated. The breathing technique of synchronized swimming athletes was applied as she exhaled while going under the water, and inhaled when coming up from the water.



THE SCALE 2, 2016  
Video still

In the video, “The Scale 2,” above, the artist Kawita Vatanajyankur hangs suspended from ropes, eyes closed and arms outstretched, supporting two wide, flat baskets. A neon green background blazes out at the viewer, and dried rice begins to fall into the baskets. The trickle becomes a torrent; grains ricochet off her face as her arms sway under the load.

The downpour intensifies for two increasingly uncomfortable minutes before fading out. Throughout, her expression remains unchanged.

(Written by Daniel McDermon in The New York Times)

## **SPLASH SERIES**

### **2017**

Splashed is a new approach towards a different artistic practice as it rather focuses on commenting the modified lies, modification and manipulations behind consumerism. Packages of food are printed and painted with surrealistic happy characters and graphics, bright and colorful logos, as well as idealistic and perfect shapes and colors of meat covering the truth behind the untold, unreachable, unseen stories of exploitations, violence and disturbance.



**Carrier II**, 2017-2019  
C-print  
40 x 60 cm  
Edition of 3 + 1 AP

Carrier II, from the Splash series.  
In this work, Kawita supports buckets of fishes whilst being swung back and forth on a rope. These images allude to the everyday physical labour endured by workers of the fishing industry and other consumerist means of production. With her eyes shut and expression solid, she performs repeated motions familiar to these unseen workers, evoking both them and the commodity that they handle.

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