

I am obsessed with detail

"Our age is characterised by invisible latent threats working quietly in the air we breathe and the bodies we inhabit." (1)

At first glance Lyndall Phelps' work appears beautiful and serene, at times even humorous, but upon closer examination a darker, uneasier side is revealed. A sense of latent threat underpins her work, often exposing the fragility of human life.

Phelps is becoming increasingly interested in repetitive physical labour, particularly when it is enforced upon an individual and the act is carried out in silence. In *I am obsessed with detail*, she has explored the private nature of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), in particular the repetition of what are often illogical thoughts and futile tasks. Patients with OCD often suffer in silence, hiding their problems or isolating themselves when their behaviour becomes extreme.

In *Laura's Portrait*, Phelps references a particular case study. At around the age of seven, Laura was compelled to silently count up to 50 between reading and writing each word and to fill in the enclosed parts of each letter. This silent counting has continued for over 20 years.

Test 1, 2 and 3, a series of stitched text panels, not only highlights OCD symptoms but reveal the diagnostic process that is used by physicians dealing with the disorder. The statements originate from the Maudsley Obsessional Compulsive Inventory, a widely used self-report instrument for OCD patients, who answer true or false to a series of 30 questions.

The objects Phelps appropriates and recreates as works of art; witches' balls, surgical masks, glass ball and feather targets, ropes and safety nets share common attributes. Several of these objects are used to either protect against harm or offer a means of rescue or escape. Some are now seen as obsolete and by spending considerable hours recreating these objects by hand and then placing them in a gallery context, Phelps imbues them with a particular value. This labour intensive process of making is evident in this exhibition, with the artist employing repetitive actions with painstaking attention to detail. This can be seen in *Self Portrait: Rope*, which Phelps has been knitting for the past three years and is an ongoing work. The rope is currently 70 metres in length.

Phelps often sources myths, folklore or fables when researching material and *Superstition* reflects this. Superstitions are so deeply ingrained in our society today we still ward against bad luck by repetitive movements such as spitting or turning around three times. It can also be a driving force behind obsessive and compulsive behaviour.

Superstition consists of three hand blown glass balls filled with lengths of crocheted threads alongside an accompanying DVD. The glass balls represent a certain type of witch's ball that was made from clear glass and filled with coloured thread, the idea being that if a witch entered your house they would be immediately attracted to the beauty of the ball and its contents. As they were mischievous creatures, it was thought the witch would begin to pull the coloured threads out of the ball one by one through the small opening at the top. Once started, the witch would continue until all the threads were removed and it was hoped by then they would be so bored they would leave your house.

Most of Phelps' installations are formed from a series of objects. The recurring forms and use of a simplified, often monochromatic, colour palette refer to formalist abstraction and minimalism. '*I have an ongoing interest in the monochrome. I find the use of colour in Yves Klein's work mesmerising, to the degree that even the paintings become objects. The use of a single colour allows the viewer to focus on the object with greater attention.*' Social and/or cultural associations also determine Phelps' choice of colour. The blues, greens and purples in *Superstition* reference healing and spirituality, similarly the use of red in *Self Portrait: Rope* alludes to danger and the promise of rescue.

Phelps has a strong interest in the history of medicine, science, mathematics, horticulture and women's handicraft, particularly how they impact on our behaviour as human beings. She enjoys her freedom as an artist to enter the worlds of specialists in these fields. Phelps imparts every aspect of her work, from the research to the making and its installation with considerable attention to detail. The process of making each work is central to her practice. It is extremely labour intensive. The 1,200 plus threads in *Superstition* are all crocheted by hand taking many months.

Like patients with OCD the repetitive movements completely occupy her mind and hands. However, for Phelps it creates a comforting meditative state and she only notices the passing of time when her hands begin to ache. There is a sense of a private performance unfolding when she knits *Self Portrait: Rope*, the ball of wool sways back and forth and the rope slowly spirals to the floor. Imagining this scene I am reminded of Baudrillard.

'The fascination of hand-crafted objects derives from an object having passed through the hands of someone, the marks of whose labour are still inscribed upon its surface, we are intrigued by what has been created; it is unique, because that moment of creation cannot be reproduced.'
(2)

This is what draws me to Phelps' work and why I am a curator.

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1. Mansfield, N., *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 2000, p.169-70

2. Baudrillard, J., *The System of Objects*, Verson, London, 1996, p.76