

# TROY-ANTHONY BAYLIS I WANNA BE ADORNED

The work of Troy-Anthony Baylis has as the very veins of its life the connective arts of knitting, weaving, and sewing. These forms inspire visions of constancy and quiet, wrapped in a memorial to lost femininity. Yet, these very same forms carry the force of unravelling, getting knotted and stitching up. In Baylis's queer hands—and his hands are ever present in such work, making, making—these literally embodied works create a suite of connections between pop songs, Indigenous mythical figures, queer performance, and things you would never have thought of together. Baylis laughs, feints, elegantly pierces our preconceptions, and joins us to a new critical dance choreographed by his prodigious imagination.

*I wanna be adorned* is an exhibition in part devoted to ideas of the body and orders of adornment. To begin with is the colourful *Modesty Sets* (2013) series. The three sets suggest bikinis but, made of wool and jute, these faux clothes also suggest the intractable and uncomfortable. The bikini was named for the Bikini Atoll, the site from which the Marshallese peoples were forcibly removed to make way for nuclear tests in the 1940s. Earlier on, these same people were forced into shirts and dresses that made them ill in the name of missionary modesty. In a different part of the world, Indonesia unsuccessfully tried to ban the penis sheaths worn by the Dani men of Irian Jaya in the 1970s, and the sheaths are now political markers of opposition. So what is it to be modest: Limit the taking of other peoples' land? Contain the neo-missionary desire to make others' bodies in one's own likeness? There is nothing modest in the colonial imagination. There is, however, something earthy about these pieces. Something suggested via the use of jute but also in the knitted fashioning and the circular motifs, particularly on the uncapped breast section. Looking at the work from above, we see a mud map, a reminder of Country, come into view. And then after all this thinking, a last laugh, ribald and refreshed—for sure—that penis sheath is TOTALLY *Modest!*

Long interested in the ways in which Indigenous artefacts can be re-imagined, Baylis has made many works that refer to the very many diverse 'dilly bags' that are traditionally made by Indigenous women and used to carry all sorts of items. In *The Blindcited* (2020), we come across what at first seems to be a kind of meeting of football beanies. Except not quite. The shapes are not soft enough, the colours are not commercial enough. And as upside down dilly bags, they are not carrying food but words: 'We were lost, now we are found, we were blind cited, now we are seen'. Blind cited means deferring to an irrelevant authority, or, put another way, proposing that a country and its peoples be treated in a particular way because someone unrelated to that place and those peoples says so. This scathing, penetratingly historical denouncement of colonialism and its aftermath is delivered in knitted acrylic. In fact, this piece is a commanding strike into the very soul of settler Australia precisely *because* it softly sits around

looking a bit sporty. Think of all the Indigenous artefacts mis-named and misrepresented to support a convenient misreading of Indigenous cultures. Think of the ways minority populations have been dressed in uniforms of all kinds to be blended with a convenient order and think too of sporting idioms—of 'level playing fields' and 'tackling' the gap. Through all the machinations of colonial and neo-colonial policy, the dilly bags stand, carrying an upside-down protest in words on the outside. Inside, they remember perhaps what it was to be filled and carried.

Baylis's sculptural pieces made from knitted tubing seem unnaturally still. Their joyful, luminous colour suggests a springing into life that is momentarily quiet, waiting to entwine or fly. Have the mischievous Mimi taken knitted form and are they biding their time to deliver new lessons in art and cuisine? These elongated beings also raise connections with those strange figures once called the 'Tall Boy'—those waving inflatable long-armed figures who would rise up from used car sales yards and bargain shops. Once again, the sacred pervades the secular, reminding us that Indigenous country is everywhere. In one long piece with one long title, *Schutzmantelmadonnamimi* (2019), many of Baylis's worlds are knitted together. There is the German language part—*schutzmantel*/protective coat, layer or shield—that starts the very long word (it is very German to have long words), and Baylis has a long connection to Berlin; then there is Madonna as saint and singer; and finally Mimi. If one of Baylis's intentions has been "to draw upon all imaginings of history, including colonial history, to create new mythologies, new artifice that transforms the past, present and future" (Troy-Anthony Baylis, 2014), then he has succeeded here. Such a diverse set of creations suggest orders of protection and all in their turn rendered in acrylic but looking/feeling like Mother's wool.

In the series *Two Hearts* (2022–23), Baylis uses sliced and rewoven acrylic on linen, embroidery cotton, and buttons. 'Sliced and rewoven' might also be a prescription for making new ways of thinking and a method of re-using existing archives and national mythologies. At this moment in time, there is an 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' where 'heart of the nation' (Uluru) is set across a statement from THE heart. Two hearts? But what has that to do with Kylie, Olivia and Prince, and the sentimental glory of the pop anthems such folk have sung about hearts? The woven acrylic squares echo plastic kitsch of all sorts, while the buttons might be *Frankie* magazine retro-cool. And then there are the words: '2 hearts are beating together, I'm in love, woo' and 'double heart attack couple, both died in a fight'. It doesn't help to listen to the suggested songsters while looking at the hearts. I tried that. But it does help to sit with them a while. When I did, I felt overcome with the possibilities of queer blak kitsch (kamp perhaps?). There is a gentle generosity here. Perhaps it's the playing of a possible atmosphere of hope that sits beside death and

deep sadness but also something we might call love? Imagine a moment (and there are such moments) when two kinds of beingness are momentarily in step. Isn't that the hope in the heart of even our plastic-coated world? Plastic fantastic emotions?

There is a connection between the *Two Hearts* pieces and the now extended, powerful postcard series (2012–23). At face value, postcards are sent between people. But these 'postcards' also call up the colonial breastplates 'awarded' to Indigenous peoples and the need for armour against physical attack and systemic racism. They plot journeys that connect massacre and mission sites about which no tourist postcard is produced. And yet they also create an imaginary world where connection can be made, when there is a promise of safety and a care for history. And perhaps that connection can be made across the colonially divided hearts of this country?

Finally, it is the pom-pommed *First Queer* (2009) in its pink and purple glory, standing up tall, that completes for me the re-assertion but also re-making of the reality that Indigenous people always have, always will be, here. This is the first and forever queer. It includes queer Indigenous individuals, the trickster queerness of the Mimis and the soft celebratory delight of a knitted phallus, hanging around being a cutey but a constant, a forever here, queer blak cutey. Knitted to last all climates.

A guide to Baylis's work might prescribe: laugh on arrival, fall suddenly quiet, and then wryly notice the heart, the ever-beating heart of the (at least) two worlds we live within. They may never beat as one, but Troy-Anthony Baylis suggests an expansive, critically campy, politically piercing mode of looking that might help.

---

Katrina Schlunke writes and researches about the interconnections between art, sex, race, Indigenous interventions, natural history and extinction. She is an Adjunct Associate Professor at the University of Sydney (Department of Gender and Cultural Studies) and the University of Tasmania (School of Creative Arts and Media). Katrina's most recent poem 'Burning Captain Cook' was published in *Southerly* in 2022.

*Troy-Anthony Baylis: I wanna be adorned* was shown at QUT Art Museum from 20 June to 1 October 2023. 2 George Street, Brisbane [artmuseum.qut.edu.au](http://artmuseum.qut.edu.au)



IMAGE: Troy-Anthony BAYLIS, *Am an animal and a plant (third version)* 2023, knitted and embroidered acrylic. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Louis Lim.



