

# FLOWWAH POWWAH - Alice Lang -

Art and words have the power to provoke us. Alice Lang's engaging, edgy, and brilliant creative works in *Flowah Powah* make use of words and images that stimulate and challenge the viewer to engage with the political moment we find ourselves in.

We live in deeply troubling times. This may seem a trite statement, yet how can we not be disturbed at things like having to witness Donald Trump and his supporters mock and deride those who have accused him of sexual assault? Trump is only one example of the most high-profile reminders of how women need to fight for every right, every freedom, and every breath in a world where they are all too often denied their freedoms.

In countries such as the United States, reproductive rights—fiercely fought for, and at a cost—are now being taken away or at the very least eroded. This instructs us that progress is never absolute; it is hard-won and needs to be protected at all costs. We should never take for granted that the rights we enjoy today will not be taken from us tomorrow. Lang's work highlights the fragility of both bodies and rights. Statements such as *Never Again*, *Believe Women*, and *My Body* resonate. The personal remains, as always, political.

As a feminist academic concerned with words, my eye is often drawn to text-based art such as Lang's. The English language is historically sexist. It reflects long centuries of seeing women as "other". Words for women have been, and still are, those that reflect their sexuality, their fecundity, and their appearance. Language has long described (often from a male perspective) women's behaviour, while also constraining it. Women are jezebels and witches, sluts and harridans, cows and bitches.

The colours and textures of Lang's work may be reminiscent of the counterculture, and they have a strong connection to the feminist movement that emerged from that time period. One of the powerful acts by the feminists of the 1970s was to point out this sexist history and to call for a new herstory of womyn. The effect of language was recognised. Sometimes words were reclaimed and repurposed to feminist ends. Reclaiming slurs such as 'bitch', 'slut', or 'jezebel' can be a radical act of empowerment; as Lang reminds us, *Slutz Vote*.

Some people find these words confronting, even offensive. This may be the case especially with 'cunt', so memorably presented to us in *40 Ways to Say Cunt* (2023). The feminists of the 1970s repurposed 'cunt' to make a statement about women's ownership of their bodies and their sexuality, yet the word has never lost

its power to shock. In more recent years, our attitudes towards even the most powerful taboo words, such as this one, have shifted. 'Cunt' has also gained new meanings within drag and transgender culture. In Australia at least, 'cunt' is now far less taboo than it once was. But it is not the feminist (or queer) claiming of the word that has ultimately won through, but rather the (often male) use of it as a term of address that has seemingly pushed it away from taboo status.

If *40 Ways to Say Cunt* (2023) engages with the politics of gender, then *40 Ways to Say Shit* is a piece that reminds me of Australia. Our tendency to play with language, including our swear words, is well attested, something captured in this work. 'Shit' is not exclusively Australian, of course, but 'bullshit' has long been seen as a word readily and frequently uttered by us. Perhaps it is that laconic cynicism to which we are prone that makes 'bullshit' so Australian. The piece also plays with the ways a single word can be used and reshaped in myriad forms: 'shit' as expletive, literal 'shit', 'shit' as part of a threat, 'shit' as playful; it goes to the heart of the malleability of language and speech.

These works also recall an anecdote I read recently by Elizabeth Reid, the first women's advisor to a prime minister. Reid was appointed to work with Gough Whitlam in 1973, and her work led to ground-breaking policies that benefitted women. She writes that while there was much practical policy work that women wanted government to do for women, the Women's Liberation Movement of which she was a part also sought a revolution in mind and behaviour. One of the first things women did in embracing women's liberation and abandoning 'lady-like' behaviour was to use swear words. The radical potential of swearing—especially when taboo words are uttered by women who are expected to behave in certain ways—is all too often forgotten.

The male body does not escape Lang's sharp eye. Many of the works in this exhibition are playful takes on the male body, serving as a reminder that it is rarely observed with the same critical eye as women's bodies are. Yet beyond that, Lang's works reminded me of the continuing power of the 'dad bod' in our culture: we are subjected to powerful men making political capital out of their dad bods all the time. For example, consider a certain former prime minister and his 'daggy dad' routine.

Art can force us to confront a sexist reality; it can also provoke us to engage with another reality of the world in which we live, that of the privilege of those with white

skin. Lang's gaze does not shy away from this, with her evocation of sunburnt skin in pieces such as *Smiley Sunburn* (2023). For Australians who live on colonised land, the reminder of our tenuous position on stolen land is challenging. It is a year of enormous significance, when a decision will be made by the Australian people about whether First Nations Australians will be given a Voice.

One final observation is related to Lang's employment of marbled paper in some works. The paper acts as a call back to the decorative endpapers of a book, and is a fascinating way of linking her art's use of language and words to books, the vessels that carry words to the reader. In a book, the endpapers protect the text, but they also were once one of the most aesthetically pleasing aspects of the material book. Lang's visual evocation of these now-perhaps-forgotten pieces of paper combined with powerful feminist statements is intriguing. Perhaps we can interpret this as evoking the historical exclusion of women's words from texts that have claimed authority over knowledge.

In concluding, Alice Lang's works are provocative, challenging, and boldly political in a time where we are in need of such statements. They make viewers think deeply about issues that are universal as well as personal and local. They challenge audiences to think about everything from gender politics to the power of language, to the nature of white skin in a sunburnt land. *Flowah Powah* is a call to engage with the politics of our moment; with the benefit of hindsight, we can affect the future.

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*Flowah Powah: Alice Lang* was shown at QUT Art Museum from 20 June to 1 October 2023.

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IMAGE: Alice LANG, *Slutz Vote* 2020, marbled paper and acrylic on paper. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Louis Lim.

