

# JHANA MILLERS

Elisabeth Pointon

*THERE IS AN ARTWORK IN ALL OF THIS.*

TENT Art Week

4 – 7 November 2021

Jhana Millers Gallery Foyer and Yu Mei Lounge, Wellington

## Staying afloat

There are many ways of being an artist. Elisabeth Pointon's preferred mode is "double agent." The playful surfaces of her artworks disarm us while she smuggles in some other message. You can choose not to take Elisabeth seriously, but that's on you. Do so at your own risk. Like the court fools in Shakespeare's plays — who exercise the privilege of speaking truth to power as well as entertaining — Elisabeth makes the most of her comic dispensation. She cultivates fun, only to cut it with a dash of critique. She opens your mouth with laughter, only to slip something serious in.<sup>1</sup> Tragedy and comedy in equal parts; humour balanced by absolute sincerity.

Elisabeth's latest exhibition, *THERE IS AN ARTWORK IN ALL OF THIS.*, for TENT Art Week, 4 – 7 November 2021, includes new video, painting, installation, and signage works. Some of the visual language is familiar. The signs and the inflatable ball pit fit easily within Elisabeth's existing family of artworks, which co-opt the look and feel of promotional merchandise, mega inflatables, and soft play. Elisabeth also continues her use of text here, but she's no longer drawing on the lexicon of the corporate workplace; the words and phrases in this exhibition are more philosophical. There are other unexpected things in this series too — including paintings and a new fixation with pool noodles.

While the angles of Elisabeth's previous exhibitions have been sharp with bravado, *THERE IS AN ARTWORK IN ALL OF THIS.* is tender and vulnerable. The exhibition marks a turning point for Elisabeth as an artist, reflecting several significant shifts in her life. Firstly, Elisabeth is finally free of her antagonist-muse: her day job at a luxury car dealership. This is a BIG DEAL. Elisabeth began working at the dealership while she was still at university, and her art has always been caught up in the conditions of this work. It was through her day job that Elisabeth developed the modus operandi of the double agent. It wasn't just that she carried experiences out of the workplace to turn into art, she also imported art into the workplace to try and intervene in its hierarchies and relationships. Her artistic gestures ranged from facilitating meetings to handing out self-printed business cards — all motivated by her belief that art truly can transform social dynamics.

Elisabeth shares this belief with Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the New York Sanitation Department's long-running "artist-in-residence." Ukeles's best-known work, *Touch Sanitation* (1979-80), saw her seek out, thank, and shake hands with each of New York City's 8,500 sanitation workers. Ukeles and Elisabeth are both interested in the implications of work and value, and in overcoming the alienation of the workplace. But this comparison between the two artists also brings other

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aspects of Elisabeth's practice into the light. In her 1969 manifesto, which launched her lifelong mission to acknowledge the unglamorous work of maintenance, Ukeles declared "I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother: (random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I 'do' art... Now... MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK." Like Ukeles, Elisabeth is trying to overcome the separation of her art from the realities of her life. She is searching for ways to put it all together.

*THERE IS AN ARTWORK IN ALL OF THIS.* takes another step towards this goal. These works are crafted from personal endings and beginnings. Elisabeth's dad, Richard Pointon, passed away last year and *THERE IS AN ARTWORK IN ALL OF THIS.* honours her relationship with him. He believed in beauty, and was taken with a line from Rumi's poem, *Spring Giddiness*: "Let the beauty we love be what we do." It is Mierle Laderman Ukeles's declaration ("My working will be the work") said another way. Society carves us into little pieces: work, family, art. Elisabeth — shaking off the tensions of the workplace and moving through loss — is seeking a return to a state of beauty, to a whole and harmonious self.

Having read Elisabeth's own writing about her work for years now, I know that her dad is in all of her art, and all of her living. But this is the first time I've seen it surface in the work itself. Elisabeth and her dad shared a kindred belief in art's ability to keep us afloat through life's challenges. The title of this exhibition responds to a question he often asked her when things seemed tough — throughout her life and right until the end of his — "do you think there might be an artwork in all of this?"

Tragedy and comedy; humour and sincerity. The appearance of the pool noodles in Elisabeth's art begins to make sense: as a spark of joy, as therapy, and as a way of clinging to that kindred belief. Imagine Elisabeth spinning around with a pool noodle, imitating Len Lye's *Water Whirler*. Imagine the spectacular sight of a noodle rushing to the surface after being submerged, shooting into the air, as if gasping for breath and the chance to fly. Elisabeth Pointon has found a new, maybe temporary, muse — one that offers spurts of beauty, moments of paradise.

### K. Emma Ng, October 2021

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**TENT Art Week** was designed to offer galleries and artists the opportunity to pitch their tent, or 'Pop Up' in a space other than their own gallery. This exhibition was originally designed for the large Yu Mei Lounge in Newmarket, but shifted to Wellington due to the COVID lockdown.

Yu Mei will also launch their first shoppable artist collaboration, featuring a limited edition bag designed with Elisabeth Pointon.

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1. Elisabeth sees Jacob Rajan's (actor, playwright and founder of Indian Ink) idea of "opening the audience's mouths, only to slip something serious in." as inspiration for the way her own work operates.