

An abstract painting featuring a dense grid of small, irregular squares. The colors are muted and earthy, including shades of brown, green, purple, and grey. The texture appears thick and layered, with visible brushstrokes and some areas where the paint has been scraped or rubbed away, revealing a lighter surface underneath. The overall effect is one of a complex, textured mosaic.

# ICONOCLASTS

YVETTE COPPERSMITH  
CHELSEA LEHMANN  
PAUL WILLIAMS  
HEIDI YARDLEY

## ***Iconoclasts***

### ***image + to break***

In a secular, 21st Century context iconoclasm could be seen as a form of ‘taking images to task’, defacing, erasing, or otherwise disrupting their context or reading—a kind of decommissioning. Iconoclasm has its roots in the act of denouncing visual propaganda of a Christian nature. According to *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* (1907), an iconoclast was “a breaker of images, one opposed to idol-worship...” This definition goes on to elaborate the broader meaning of iconoclast as “any hot antagonist of the beliefs of others”. The term “hot antagonist” might suggest one inclined to an instinctive, performative interrogation. In this exhibition, these two definitions have been combined and applied to contemporary artistic investigation to arrive at a hot antagonism towards images.

The artistic process can generate all kinds of responses to imagery, such as ambivalence, mistrust and even denigration. By extension, these sentiments can be applied to the place in which images are commonly manifested: surfaces. Surfaces retain the history of decisions made in an artwork, their secrets and regrets, or ‘pentimenti’ (meaning literally ‘repentance’), i.e., a change made in an artwork that remains visible or appears over time. Surfaces are a place of capture: of time, gesture and material and their attendant meanings. There is also the relationship between image and surface in which two and three dimensions are continually negotiated and illusions can be both constructed and pulled apart. Antagonistic dialogues between image and surface, and processes and materials, encourage a vigorous creative scrutiny, a kind of *iconomachy* (a Byzantine term for ‘image struggle’). This struggle does not pertain to the subject matter represented, but to the tropes and assumptions of representation itself and the stylistic conventions that emerge with it.

The artists in *Iconoclasts* ‘break’ images in diverse ways, toying with the illusions inherent in representation, the assurances of ‘style,’ and the authority of the painted surface. The rupture of the image through mark-making, the by-products of process, the serendipity of ‘mistakes,’ and the remixing of one’s own oeuvre are all privileged in the quest to break with a straightforward facture and assimilation of images and their meanings.

To further investigate this approach, beyond their own individual contributions to this exhibition, the artists also worked collaboratively with the directive ‘to break’ each other’s images. In the spirit of the Surrealist game *exquisite corpse*, paintings were exchanged between the four artists; each person adding, subtracting, and/or painting over, resulting in a productive conflict between styles and intentionality. Each artist’s struggle to assert their own sensibility gives rise to a kind of group iconomachy, or battle between styles that challenges the ownership over subject and method implicit within sole authorship.

Yvette Coppersmith’s paintings explore the fragmentation of the image through mark-making, a dispersion of gesture and colour over surfaces that often hold the histories and scars of former paintings. Coppersmith’s faceting of forms and space recalls the Cubists’ treatment of pictorial space in the early 20th century, a time of stylistic revolutions characterised by a form of iconoclasm based on the usurping of one ‘ism’ after another.



Heidi Yardley's work is informed by processes of collage and erasure. Sourcing images from books on various subjects including antiquarian sculpture and female pop-culture icons from the mid-20th century, Yardley tears and cuts this material and mediates it through drawing and painting to form new and unsettling juxtapositions. As Isobel Parker Philip states in her catalogue essay for Yardley's exhibition *Unfamiliar* (Blackartprojects 2014), "collage is contingent on severance and amputation [...] each fragment is coupled with other uprooted images and woven into other narratives."

In the work of Paul Williams, the contents of the studio are fodder for remixing and making which references itself, creating links between process, materials and motifs. Williams employs an improvisational play informed by various practices within abstraction, and the cross-fertilisation of painting, drawing and sculpture. Layering, erasure and re-cycling feature in his approach, evoking an intimacy with the vicissitudes of making across time.

Chelsea Lehmann's paintings explore surface by privileging 'the underneath'. The strata of paint layers are frequently stripped back to reveal hitherto unknown conjunctures of images. This process has been informed by the aesthetic and philosophical potential of scientific imaging techniques like X-ray, which expose the extrasensory properties of paintings, disclosing the mysteries of pentimenti and material components normally inaccessible to the naked eye.

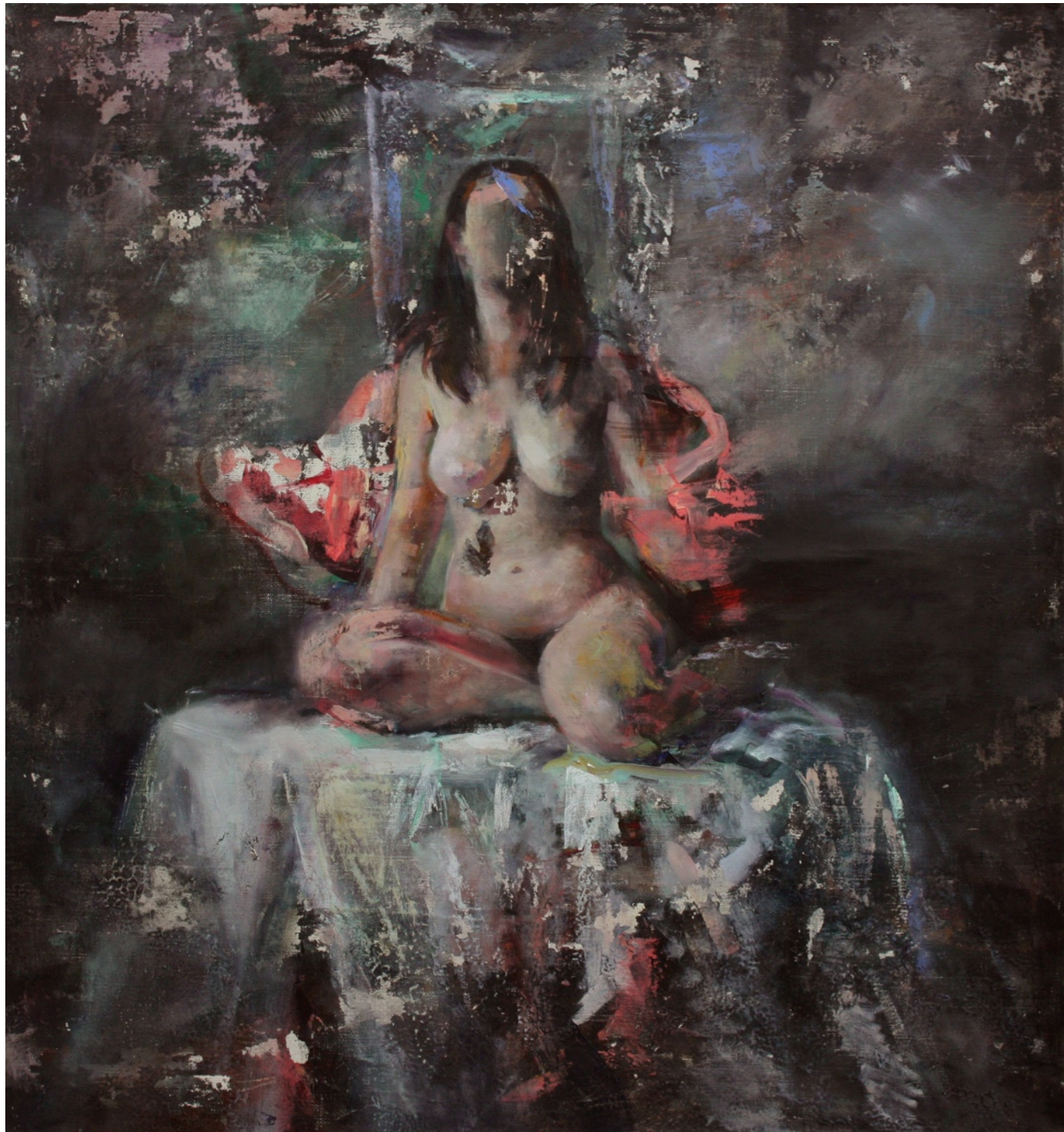
In her catalogue essay for the exhibition, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (MOMA, 2014-15), Laura Hoptman states, "What characterizes our cultural moment at the beginning of this new millennium is the inability—or perhaps the refusal—of a great many of our cultural artifacts to define the times in which we live." She points to terms such as *atemporality* and *super-hybridity* as attempting "to describe a cultural product of our time that paradoxically does not represent—either through style, content, or medium—the time from which it comes." The same could be said for the artwork selected for *Iconoclasts*. Reinventing art's past is to familiarise ourselves with its present. Something old within something new continues the progression of artistic innovation in a way that is not tied to inflated notions of genius and avant-gardism. As Hoptman explains, it's a tactic that is "innovative but not novel, pertinent rather than prescient."

Within the context of an artist's practice and its relation to the art historical canon, images can harbour a kind of self-satisfaction eliciting an impulse to break them. By 'attacking' images, artists can shatter illusions of certainty, opening up a range of possible readings. Surfaces can be erased to reveal previous frames of existence, creating a richness and complexity reminiscent of historical artifacts. The interaction between the spectral aftermath of former layers and new gestures within surfaces echoes the transhistorical nature of both subject matter and style in the artwork brought together for this exhibition. The process of assembling, disassembling and reassembling calls attention to the interrelationship of destruction and creation, the speculative venture of risking loss, and the potential of 'breaking' in order to renew.



Yvette Coppersmith, *Pranks of Destiny (Justin & Troy)*, 2014, oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm





Chelsea Lehmann, *Berlin*, 2014, oil and resin on linen, 82 x 76 cm





Paul Williams, *Untitled*, 2014-15, oil on board, 36 x 28 cm





Heidi Yardley, *White Noise*, 2014, oil on board, 38 x 35 cm

**Heidi Yardley** is a Melbourne-based artist. She explores uncanny worlds of the familiar and strange in her depictions of fractured figures, scenes and still lifes. Yardley was listed as one of Australia's 50 most collectable artists (Australian Art Collector magazine, 2011) and has been a finalist in a number of prestigious awards including The Archibald Prize (2013, 2014) and The Doug Moran National Portrait Prize (2009, 2011, 2013). She has held two artist residencies in New York funded by the Ian Potter Cultural Trust (2011, 2014). Yardley is represented by Arthouse Gallery in Sydney and Jan Murphy Gallery in Brisbane.

**Yvette Coppersmith** holds a Bachelor of Fine Art (Painting) from the Victorian College of the Arts (2001) and has exhibited in Melbourne and Sydney at Utopian Slumps, Gallery 9, Chalk Horse, Gallery Ecosse, Rubicon ARI, Blindside ARI and Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts. Coppersmith was winner of the inaugural Metro 5 Art Prize in 2003 and has been finalist in the Rick Amor Self Portrait Prize, Arthur Guy Painting Prize, Fletcher Jones Art Prize, Portia Geach Memorial Award, Archibald Prize and The Doug Moran National Portrait Prize. Coppersmith's works are held in the collections of Artbank, Trinity College, The University of Melbourne, Supreme Court of Victoria, Benalla Art Gallery, Melbourne High School and the Jewish Museum of Australia.

**Chelsea Lehmann** is an artist working primarily in painting and drawing using sources such as art historical painting and contemporary images of the figure combined in non-illusionistic pictorial spaces. Her current work explores the aesthetic potential of scientific imaging techniques such as X-ray and infrared photography. Lehmann has been the recipient of several grants, residences and awards including the Ruth Tuck Scholarship (SA), project grants from Arts SA and the Helpmann Academy and recently the Australian Postgraduate Award. Chelsea Lehmann is currently a PhD candidate at UNSW Art & Design.

**Paul Williams** is a Sydney-based artist working across a range of media. The process of making is central to Williams' practice, which playfully links memory, time, materiality and gesture through the accumulation of marks and processes of layering, erasure, destruction and renewal. By blurring the lines between painting, drawing, sculpture, form and function, Williams' practice reveals the conundrums of the artist in the studio and reflects how we build and shape the physical properties of things.

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Curated by Chelsea Lehmann.

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