

ANNE FERRAN
box ● of birds





Chorus

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(previous page) *Pale-headed flycatcher*









box ● of birds

In her new body of photographs, *Box of Birds*, Ferran reflects again on a photographic archive she first engaged with a decade ago. In 2003 the artist worked with a small archive depicting 38 female psychiatric patients from a hospital in Sydney in the late 1940s. Moving from direct contact with the original source material, she has reiterated and expanded upon her engagement with this small, melancholy history.



In *1-38* (2003) Ferran carefully cropped each of the images to retain the subject's anonymity whilst calling attention to small details and particularities such as hand position, the stretch of cloth across a torso, or the position of a button on a jacket. *1-38* did something quite complex—deeply respectful, it protected the individual's subjectivity by keeping the face from our view; this absencing also alluded to the effects of institutionalisation on the individual and photography's implication in it. *INSULA* (2003), a parallel work deriving from the same archive, addressed the face itself, collating cropped images of the women's faces in an artist's book. In the exhibition, the intimate encounter with these recognisable portraits was mediated by an invigilated space and a gradual revelation enabled by the artist's precisely folded pages.

The new photographs are performative; we see female subjects (distinguishable by their feet and hands, the only visible parts of their body) in active relationship with a number of large felt cloths. They document two performance modes that we might describe as 'presentation' and 'improvisation'. The presentations are structured in a large grid, the improvisations as singular, more isolated experiences. The felt is dyed blue, taupe, grey or brown, with white bands cutting geometric segments across their width and length. Their dimensions are reminiscent of the body—they resemble a blanket, a tunic, a smock. The white bands follow the seams and the felt recalls the matted cloth of the clothes worn by the women in the original photographic archive. As it does in the work of Joseph Beuys, the felt suggests insulation, warmth and a kind of comfort. In its relationship to the archive, however, it also suggests a certain institutional resignation, a standard-issue mournfulness.





How do these performances function? What is revealed, and concealed, by the collaborations Ferran's subjects enact with these cloths? There is, I think, a doing and undoing being performed here—a kind of strange, formal ceremony followed by a release.

In the major grid series of 38 images, the felt is being held in front of Ferran's subjects. In response to a direction by the artist, 38 individual cloths are 'presented' to the camera, as the subjects simultaneously 'hide' behind them. It's a little like a roll-call; the seriality of the cloths opens up to reveal particularities in similar ways to Ferran's 2003 project. Geometries, folds, shadow, light and colour allocate difference within this delicate typology. Ferran has said that these photographs remind her of Walker Evans' images of African masks taken in 1935. This builds a complex association, one of categorisation, colonisation and fetishisation. Most strongly, though, it figures the cloths themselves as a kind of mask, signs of human subjectivity that also act to conceal the wearer's specificity. This association also enacts a shift in scale; the body becomes aligned with the face, shifting between the two registers.

The 'improvisations' in Ferran's suite of photographs are rather more wayward. As such, they resist the drive to categorisation that we might pursue in the grid works. Strangely, the role of the camera feels more predatory in these works. Ferran has sometimes shot from above, or maybe it's just that the subjects are now engaged with the floor as they are enveloped by, tussle with, and are set in flight by these moving, folding, floating lengths of felt. What Ferran captures here is neither dance nor delirium, yet I am reminded of representations of the frenzied, trance-like dancing mania of tarantism, mythologised as both malady and cure. And of Beuys, again, bundled up in the folds of a large piece of grey felt in a cage shared with a coyote, his walking stick protruding from this uncanny form like a beseeching claw.



Ferran has titled these works with names of birds. They are not the names of existing species, but ones she has conjured up, an exercise in imaginative invention, or perhaps reinvention. Further, growing up in New Zealand, I learnt that to feel like ‘a box of birds’ is to observe in oneself a liveliness, a sense of *joie de vivre*. But, like many casual turns of phrase, to describe a feeling of wellbeing in this way has always seemed slightly sinister to me, provoking as it does images of entrapment, likely panic, and of freedom curtailed. Ferran’s engagement is drawn more from Plato, who likened the mind to a cage of birds; in confusion our thoughts flutter from our grasp. Language and its meaning, like photography, are always slippery, a truth Ferran has always been alert to. *Box of Birds* is enlivened and activated by this knowledge, as well as her persistent engagement with the past, imagined in the present.

Kyla McFarlane





Clamorous shriek





Chorus

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Agitated thrush
(back page) *Tricoloured sylph*

Performers: Tess de Quincey, Victoria Hunt, Linda Luke

Image Details

series: **Box of Birds**, 2013

Chorus

38 pigment prints
60 x 42 cm each,
editions of 5 + 2AP

Pale-headed flycatcher

Slender-throated warbler

Night whistler

Clamorous shrike

Conspicuous kite

Stonebird

Agitated thrush

Tricoloured sylph

72 x 48 cm, pigment prints
editions of 5 + 2AP

Feathered emissary

60 x 80 cm, pigment print
edition of 5 + 2AP

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