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Katrin Hornek
March 8 – June 2, 2024

Critic's Guide to Melbourne Art Week

With Art Week in town, a guide to the best exhibitions to see, from sonic surveillance to Ronnie van Hout's showdown with himself

BY **SOPHIE KNEZIC** IN **CRITIC'S GUIDES** | 31 JUL 18

Susan Schuppli, *The Missing 18 1/2 Minutes (Listening to Tapes)*, 2012, archival photograph. Courtesy: Susan Schuppli

'Eavesdropping'

Ian Potter Museum of Art

24 July – 28 October

The ubiquity of surveillance is a reality of which we are implicitly aware, but mostly think of in visual terms: CCTV cameras in the public sphere and corporate spaces or data-tracking of our every

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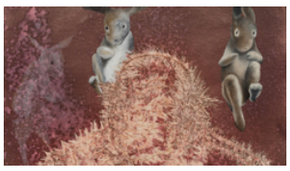

The Best Shows to See in the UK and Ireland This February

The Best Shows to See During Art Toronto digital move by smart phones and connected devices. Sonic surveillance, however, is just as prevalent yet less acknowledged. Listening without consent – eavesdropping – even more so. As the curators of 'Eavesdropping' Joel Stern and James Parker remind us, unauthorized listening used to be a criminal offence but is now embroiled with politico-legal complexity.

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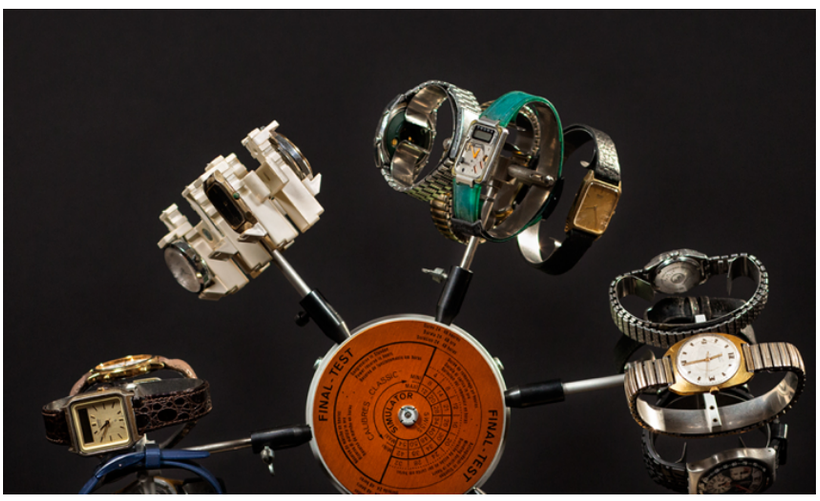
A carefully selected suite of works probe this reality. Sean Dockray's short video *Learning from YouTube* (2018) uncovers the sinister fact of audio capture constantly occurring online; from Google's 'audio ontology' – a taxonomy of 632 types of sound and digital archive of 200 million sounds – to private audio analytics companies capable of capturing and interpreting troves of sounds through advanced algorithmic processes in order to dispatch police personnel to scenes of potential crimes before they take place. Susan Schuppli's *Listening to Answering Machines* (2018) turns the audience into eavesdroppers. Purchasing second hand answering machines from thrift shops, the artist retrieved old voice messages that had never been deleted, collating these into sound files accessible via wall-mounted speakers. The intimacy of these defunct messages makes for surprisingly seductive overhearing, revealing the latent urges in us all to listen by stealth.



Sonia Leber & David Chesworth, *Myriad Falls*, 2017, HD video still. Courtesy: the artists

'Architecture Makes Us: Cinematic Visions of Sonia Leber and David Chesworth'
Centre for Contemporary Photography
27 July – 9 September

Sound artists who have been collaborating since 1996, David Chesworth and Sonia Leber, present a seamless and suave body of work in this mid-career survey exhibition hosted by CCP. An abiding interest in sonic experiences – spanning the dulcet to the discordant, surveillance systems, obsolete technologies and remote landscapes – make for overlapping correspondences that tether the discrete works into a consonant whole. An attunement to relics and ruins is particularly evident.

Myriad Falls (2017) is an enthralling rumination on chronometric time through the filming of a cluster of outmoded analogue wristwatches installed on a calibrating machine in a horologist's workshop. The watches' intricate internal circular mechanisms find accord in the machine's calculated rotations; the dual modalities of time and motion, the durational and superannuated, forming a mesmerizingly dynamic interplay. The thematic of obsolescence recurs in *Earthwork* (2016) with its aerial filming of a discarded and decaying architect's model.

The centerpiece of the exhibition is a newly commissioned work, *Geography Becomes Territory Becomes* (2018); an 8-channel HD video installation featuring footage of the 18th century island

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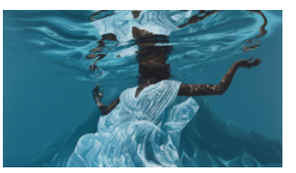
The Best Shows to See in Atlanta Right Now

A Guide to the Best Shows to See During ARCOmadrid fortress Suomenlinna in Finland. The cinematography is predatory, the camera stalking the abandoned structure and shooting through its apertures as if filmed by a sniper. With a soundtrack that thrums with portent, the matrix of screens produces a bracing experience of sonic and visual disorientation.

Irene Hanenbergh, *All systems in a pretty life; Calm Time, 1651*, 2018, oil on canvas, 15 x 20 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Neon Parc, Melbourne

Irene Hanenbergh, 'Mild Fantasy' / Naomi Eller, 'Dead Weights'

Neon Parc

6 July – 25 August

In Irene Hanenbergh's painterly universe, iconic sites in the European and North American landscape, such as the Matterhorn and Niagara Falls – locales that entered the popular imaginary in the 19th century – become leitmotifs in a suite of works that take the historical genre of the Romantic sublime as their touchstone. Unlike the expansive canvases of J.M.W. Turner or Caspar David Friedrich, Hanenbergh's images contract into a diminutive scale. Yet her palm-sized paintings – such as *Lawless parties with pilots* (2017–18) and *Apparition in Limassol (1985)*, (2018) – unexpectedly capture the fire and brimstone of storms at sea and ice-clad mountains, abstracted into tiny coloured whirlpools of motion whose stippled, blotted surfaces summon an elemental aspect of these vaporous climes.

Interspersed with these jewel-like mist-scapes, Naomi Eller's sculptures resemble artefacts excavated from an archaeological dig or a shipwreck. Forged from wax and various clays, the misshapen forms, *Dead Weights I* (2018) or *Portent* (2016), could be ancient figurines or fossilized marine life; fragments dredged from another epoch and suspended from fishing line or rusted railway sleeper nails. Their rounded shapes and abraded textures suggest the patina of old objects yet attest to a gestural process whose vivacity belies such possible archaism. Conjuring old worlds with fleshy materials, both artists beguile as faux-antiquarians.

Kate Ellis, *Untitled (Poodle/Human)*, 2018, beeswax, damar resin, silk thread, velvet cushion, birch wood. Courtesy: the artist and Caves Gallery, Melbourne

Kate Ellis

Caves Gallery

20 July –11 August

Early on in her career sculptor Kate Ellis honed an interest in the life of poodles, developing a refined aesthetic and dexterous technique in the wax casting of these longstandingly beloved animal companions. Arranged in reclining postures Ellis's canine forms, however, had the slender arms of a young woman, making them compellingly macabre yet tender hybrid creatures. Her trademark style was to embellish the pale wax surfaces with milky-coloured silk thread, tracing circular patterns that concurrently appeared as decorative coverings like crocheted dog coats or stylized symbols of lesions and disease. This unsettling oscillation between the exquisite and the infirm continues in her work *Untitled, Poodle/Human* (2018).

In Caves' tiny gallery space, a procumbent cast dog nestles on a small velvet cushion, most of its angular body resting on a rectangular plinth: the hard surface evoking a vet's examination table. The animal's front legs are not canine but svelte female arms, bent over the mongrel's chest in an aspect of self-protection. The wax beast emanates a tranquility that is both unnerving and poignant. In its suggestion of a liminal state between the animate and inanimate, vitality and expiration, the creature connotes an entropic spectrum of beings at once cherished and mourned.

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Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Quite Contrary (XVII)*, 2018, watercolour and paper cut-out, 35 x 47 cm. Courtesy: Murray White Room, Melbourne

Sangeeta Sandrasegar, 'Quite Contrary'

Murray White Room

20 July – 25 August

Known for her brightly coloured paper cut-outs of goddesses from Hindu mythology that excise strapping figures from delicately perforated paper, Sangeeta Sandrasegar now turns her attention to Christian myth. As a child Sandrasegar recalls her Catholic father sermonizing on two Biblical figures – Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary – avowing that his daughters had a moral choice as to which type of woman they could aspire to being in adulthood. Decades after this solemn warning, Sandrasegar has built a body of work around the equivocal figure of Mary Magdalene. A suite of paper cut-outs offer depictions of this iconic saint that contest stereotypical portrayals. Focusing on the period of Magdalene's life when she wanders in the desert for more than 20 years, Sandrasegar's renditions show the figure resplendent with long tresses and an assertive sensuality that firmly situates her in a feminist pantheon, contesting her status as a figure of disrepute. Sandresegar's

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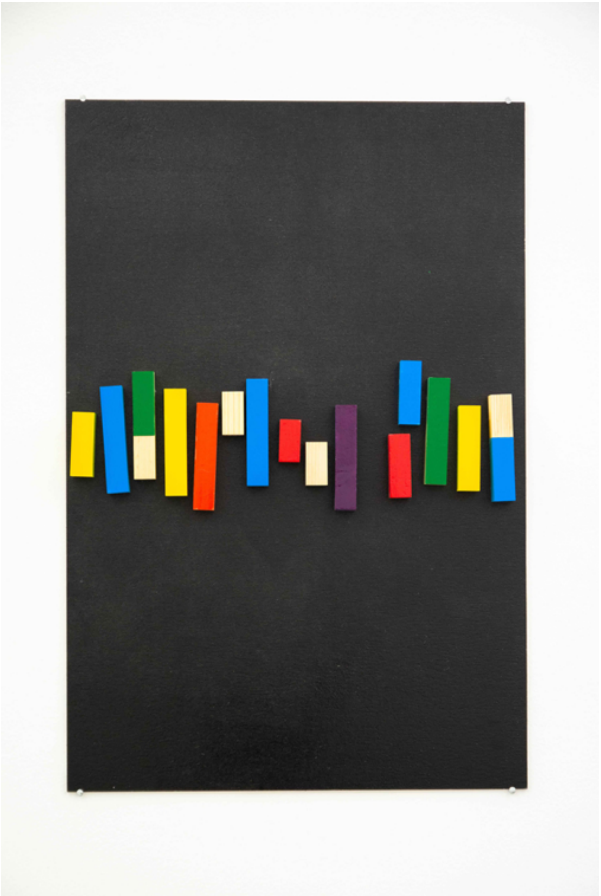
cutting technique shears the paper into intricate lattices and verdant garlands, but mostly voluptuous swirls of hair that become synecdoches for the mythical figure's vitalism and agency. German Gothic sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider's *Münnerstadt Alterpiece* (1492) is a referential touchstone; and his organicist wood carved rendering of Magdalene with whorls of hair covering her body finds an analogue in Sandrasegar's parallel obsession with the hirsute.



John Nixon, *Untitled (Black Colour Rhythm)*, 2016, enamel on masonite with wooden blocks, 92 x 61 cm. Courtesy: Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

John Nixon, 'EPW: Selected Paintings'

Anna Schwartz Gallery

5 July – 18 August

In 1978 John Nixon commenced his Experimental Painting Workshop (EPW) dedicated to the continued investigation of non-objective, constructivist and minimalist vernaculars. While these antecedents are firmly historically situated, Nixon's ceaseless attraction to rectilinear and abstract forms imbue with them with renewed vitality. After 40 years, one might conceivably expect a sense of jaded repetition but Nixon's painted constructions hum with an irrepressible liveliness. His sustained explorations are adroit configurations of raw and painted found materials; plywood, aluminium piping, ceramic bathroom tiles and even fluffy, coloured paint rollers. These household materials are set into shallow sculptures with tightly abutting edges, throwing their alternate curved or planar forms into relief. Serendipitous formal correspondences emerge.

Gold Konstruction II (2017) is a checkerboard of two gold and two white rectangles, the latter topped with empty tin cans whose brassy surfaces echo the muted gold lustre of their adjacent panels. It's as if the colour has jumped ship, leaping from metal to canvas and back again. This type of sprightliness recurs across the works, but is especially alluring in the *Briar Hill I and II* (2015), named after Nixon's country locale, where disparate painted woods hold vibrant hues in resonant tension. In Nixon's experimental laboratory Constructivism morphs into 'Konstructivism' – a 20th century avant-garde turbo-charged with a rural-suburban inflection.

'No One is Watching You: Ronnie van Hout', 2018, installation view, Buxton Contemporary, Melbourne. Courtesy: Buxton Contemporary, Melbourne; photograph: Christian Capurro

'No One is Watching You: Ronnie van Hout'

Buxton Contemporary

12 July – 21 October

In 1972 Robert Morris presented a reconstruction of an interrogation room replete with an aluminium table, a bed made from lead and a copper chair in an installation titled *Hearing*. In 2008, Ronnie van Hout replicated and doubled this austere arrangement in *BED/SIT*, adding two robot-like figures topped with scowling faces resembling Van Hout's own, each perched on each table in a cartoonishly bizarre showdown. Such an impish interpellation of the artist into conceptual art and popular culture is typical of Van Hout's practice.

Curated by Melissa Keys, 'No One is Watching You: Ronnie van Hout' features almost 80 works made by the artist over the past 30 years. Characters gleaned from sci-fi films jostle with small sculptures of bananas, sausages and hammers, perversely sprouting human heads and limbs. Life-size figures of children, often dressed in pyjamas, hold sleepy, supplicating postures. A medicine cabinet emblazoned with the words 'Ha Ha' sits alongside a shrink's couch with simultaneous instructions to 'Stand Up' and 'Sit'. These motley characters and objects are perversely transmogrified by the fact that they often feature a cast of the artist's middle-aged, jowly visage. In Van Hout's bad infinity Aphex Twin meets *Being John Malkovich* and the unholy offspring is a *mise en abyme* of devilish fun.

Melbourne Art Week *runs in various venues from 30 July – 5 August.*

Main image: 'No One is Watching You: Ronnie van Hout', 2018, installation view, Buxton Contemporary, Melbourne. Courtesy: Buxton Contemporary, Melbourne; photograph: Christian Capurro

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SOPHIE KNEZIC

Sophie Knezic is a writer, artist and lecturer based in Melbourne.

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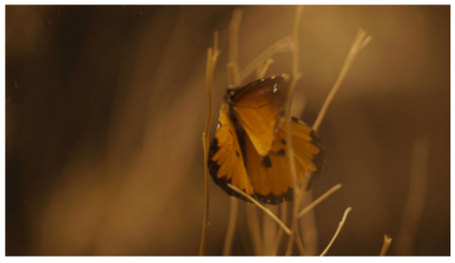

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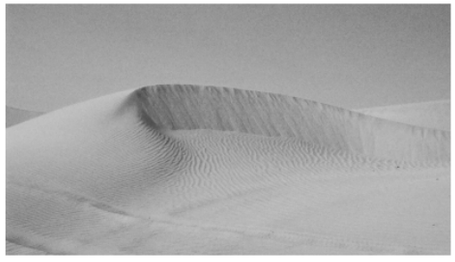

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