

NATALIE RYAN  
**MORTEM IN IMAGINE**







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A LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art Exhibition

LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art, Melbourne  
**14 July – 5 September 2014**

VAC | La Trobe University Visual Arts Centre, Bendigo  
**7 January – 22 February 2015**









## NATALIE RYAN MORTEM IN IMAGINE

I was talking to Natalie Ryan recently about death.

It wasn't as macabre and melancholy as it might sound. The conversation was more philosophical – existential, phenomenological or ontological perhaps. It turns out her Dad and my Mum both died from cancer around a similar time. I shared with her an anecdote I've told a number of times – how my Dad, one evening on a depression-induced bender, took it upon himself to take my Mum's ashes, together with those of his own Mother as well as those of his Dad, and mix them all together in the soil of a faux Japanese garden he had created in his backyard. While I rarely, if ever, spent time in deliberate and attentive proximity to the container that we brought home from the crematorium following my Mum's funeral (in reality, her ashes were probably already mixed with small amounts of the remains of others incinerated in the same cremation chamber), that possibility had now been taken away from me. Some people respond to this story in abhorrent shock; others with incredulous amusement, almost always followed by an apology for laughing at a story about the apparent desecration of my Mother's remains. Either way, the reaction is always bound up with a sense that my Dad had erred in judgement – that there was something disrespectful in what he had done (to my Mum, or those she left behind, I am still not sure).

I've always taken a measured and objective approach to loss and death. Sure, I was sad when my Mum died, but I didn't feel the need to have an urn to spend time with or a gravesite to visit. Similarly, I've never been the sort of person who surrounds themselves with photos or mementos to remind them of those no longer here. I was therefore kind of surprised to find myself feeling a pinch of hurt, maybe even

betrayal, when I heard of what my Dad had done. I guess there must have been some comfort in knowing that, even if I previously hadn't felt the need to spend time with the vessel that held my Mum's ashes, I knew where she was and the option to visit her was always there. My Dad's impulsive gesture had brought to the surface a contradiction that I'd long buried beneath balanced objectivity and sober reason. It seems there was a need somewhere within me to fill an object or a space with emotively charged experience and memory.

*Mortem in Imagine* seamlessly intertwines these two ways of understanding and experiencing death. The cool, even-handed objectivity of the dissection table is merged with tenderness, fragility and the memorialised form. The nexus of anatomical cadaver for scientific ends and the deceased body laid bare for the offering of respect is disquietingly revealed in Ryan's imaging of the lifeless form.

As in previous three-dimensional work by Ryan, the animal cadaver lies at the centre of this exhibition. In fact it is the foetal remains of several goats that are so peacefully and poetically represented and recreated. Unlike previous bodies of work, however, recognition of this is only achieved via an intimate encounter with the work.

It is a vacuous sense of unoccupied space that first impresses itself on the viewer when entering the gallery. Unsettlingly, however, this emptiness couldn't feel more weighty and loaded. At one end of the darkened room, a singular sphere of illumination punches through the space amid the enveloping black gallery walls. Bathed in this field of light, a stainless steel dissection table is recreated in translucent white wax. Upon approach, seven lifeless baby goats – eyes closed, limbs limp – lay randomly scattered on their sides, cast from the same matt milky stuff. The material gives the bodies a paradoxical quality of both substance and emptiness (being and nothingness) all at once. The forms could be mistaken for sleeping bodies if it weren't for the sinister shapes of the utilitarian surface they lay splayed upon. These ambiguous qualities aid the viewer's ability to see beyond

the qualifying features of the creature and species, instead making space for contemplation of the dividing line between life and death. Meditation on such lofty questions inevitably leads to a projection of self onto and into these inanimate objects. The human audience is able to empathise – to see in the representation of the animal corpse a parallel of their own fragile and fleeting existence.

At the other end of the gallery, three photographs hang bordered by an aperture into a symmetrical adjoining space. Each individual work is itself encased by an ornate and elegant wide gilt frame. Contained within these frames are photographs of three of the lifeless baby goats. The drama of each composition echoes the expansive emptiness of the gallery space they sit within, fields of darkness and depth dominating each image's surface, penetrated by the faces of the creatures resting in peace. Their adornment in gold emphasises the preciousness of the life/lifelessness represented within, recalling both the reverent treatment of old master paintings and the framing of a loved one's image in a gold locket hanging from a chain. These are foetal portraits – valued, endeared, remembered.

By subtly playing with the expectations and associations of different contexts, Ryan dissolves the distinction between animal cadaver and human corpse. The reframing and relocating of these images of animal cadavers – both two-dimensional and sculptural – allows for the same longing, mourning and memorialisation usually reserved for lost human loved ones to play out in proximity to these lifeless remains – remains more typically framed as representative specimens rather than unique, singular beings. Rather than designating a corpse as animal or human, Ryan raises us above an anthropocentric frame of reference, instead simply embracing the idea of life (or lack thereof), somewhat contradictorily allowing us to anthropomorphise these goat fetuses by pouring what we recognise in ourselves into their frame. Ryan provides us opportunity to recognise what we share, infusing the animal cadaver with the same capacity for spirit and sentience as the human body.

There's a poetic parallel to this transference of sentiment, understanding and value in Ryan's making process. Cast in wax from moulds taken of hand built sculptural forms, Ryan's goats are literally a representation of the empty space of a receptacle, made positive, meaningful and whole through a pouring of substance into their latent form. The material is heated and melted down, made pliable and fluid. Coupled with the altar-like treatment of the surface and space of their presentation, there is a kind of ceremonial or ritualistic feel to this process – perhaps even cathartic. Reshaping. Reforming. Imbuing the substance with something that wasn't there before. It might even be an action echoed in the mixing of ashes and soil.

**Michael Brennan**

**Acting Senior Curator, LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art**

Natalie Ryan, **Untitled #1** (2014)  
Pigment print on archival paper, 28 x 35cm  
Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne

OVERLEAF

Natalie Ryan, **Untitled #2** (2014)  
Pigment print on archival paper, 28 x 35cm  
Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne

Natalie Ryan, **Untitled #3** (2014)  
Pigment print on archival paper, 28 x 35cm  
Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne







Natalie Ryan, **Untitled** (2014)  
Wax, wood, 180 x 105 x 85cm  
Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne

Natalie Ryan, **Untitled** (details) (2014)  
Wax, wood, 180 x 105 x 85cm  
Images courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne











## LIST OF WORKS

All works by Natalie Ryan  
All works collection of the artist

**Untitled #1** (2014)  
Pigment print on archival paper  
28 x 35cm

**Untitled #2** (2014)  
Pigment print on archival paper  
28 x 35cm

**Untitled #3** (2014)  
Pigment print on archival paper  
28 x 35cm

**Untitled** (2014)  
Wax, wood  
180 x 105 x 85cm

# NATALIE RYAN CURRICULUM VITAE

## EDUCATION

- 2013 PhD (Fine Art), Monash University
- 2007 BFA Sculpture (Honors, 1<sup>st</sup> class), Monash University
- 2005 Master Class in Facial Reconstruction, Victorian College of the Arts
- 2002 Bachelor of Fine Arts Sculpture, Victorian College of the Arts

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Mortem in Imagine*, LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art, Melbourne  
*Project*, Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne
- 2013 *Imaging the Dead*: PhD Exhibition, MADA Gallery  
The Ryan Sisters – *Guess Who?*, C3 Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne
- 2012 *Evanescere*, Dianne Tanzer Gallery
- 2011 *End Stage*, Switchback Gallery, Gippsland
- 2010 *Pretty in Pink*, Dianne Tanzer Gallery  
*Unnatural Selection*, Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale
- 2009 *Devoid*, Grantpirrie Gallery, Sydney  
*Pretty In Pink*, Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts.  
*Devoid Matter*, Dianne Tanzer Gallery.
- 2008 *Static*, West Space.  
*A Void*, Kings ARI, Gallery.

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *New*, Lindberg Galleries, Melbourne
- 2013 *Please Allow me to Introduce Myself*, Strange Neighbour, Melbourne  
*Animalised*, Hungry for Arts Festival, Sydney  
The Ryan Sisters – *The Big East*, curated by Kiron Robinson, Scout Halls in Heathmont, Melbourne
- 2012 *Where the Birds Always Sing*, curated by Theodore Whong, Ausin Tung Gallery, Melbourne
- 2011 *Salon Show*, Switchback Gallery, Gippsland
- 2010 *Melbourne Art Fair*, Melbourne Exhibition Building, Dianne Tanzer  
*White Hot*, Dianne Tanzer Gallery, Melbourne  
*Lot This*, curated by Sanne Mestrom, West Space
- 2009 *Nothing out of the Ordinary*, Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne  
*Sex, Death and Violence*, Blindsight  
*Object*, Michael Koro Gallery  
*Skin*, Shifted Gallery
- 2008 *Team Australia*, Curated by Veronica Tello, Carlton Hotel  
*CRYPTOZOLOGY-in search of the missing link*, Toyota Community Spirit Gallery  
*Convergence*, Shifted Gallery.  
*The Devolution Project* Curated by Simon Maidment & Mark Feary, West Space Project Melbourne & University of Southern Queensland  
*Debut 1V*, Blindsight Gallery.  
*Fan Art*, Ziehl-Abegg "In Vent" Technology Centre, Kunzelsau, Germany.

## SELECTED RESIDENCIES, AWARDS & GRANTS

- 2014 Recipient *VicArts Grant*, Arts Victoria  
Finalist *JUWS Photography Award*, The Arts Centre, Gold Coast
- 2008-14 Recipient *Linden Artist Studio Program*, Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts
- 2013 Recipient *Australian Postgraduate Award*, PhD Monash University
- 2012 Finalist *Australia China Foundation Residency Award*, Ausin Tung  
Finalist *Artecycle*, Incinerator Gallery
- 2011 Finalist *Woollahra Small Sculpture*  
Finalist *Substation Contemporary Art Prize*  
Finalist *Yering Station Sculpture Award*
- 2010 Recipient *Medical/Art Residency*, Medical Department, Monash University Gippsland
- 2009 Finalist *RBS Emerging Artist Award*, Sydney  
Finalist *Toyota Community Spirit Travel Award*

## SELECTED ARTICLES & PUBLICATIONS

- 2014 Dan Rule, *New- In the Galleries*, The Age 24/5/14
- 2013 Pip Wallis, *Funny Games*, Stamm, September/October Issue  
Dan Rule, *Please Allow me to Introduce Myself – In the Galleries*, The Age 14/9/14  
Dylan Rainforth, *Desire to Connect*, The Age 18/12/14
- 2011 Simon Gregg, *New Romantics*, Australian Scholarly Publishing  
Nikita Vaz, *End stage on Display*, The Latrobe Valley Express, 21/4/11
- 2010 ABC TV, Feature on *Arts Nation Program*, 4/7/10  
ABC ARTS GATEWAY, *Natalie Ryan- Art Nation Web Extra*  
ABC, *Radio interview by Gerard Callihan*  
3MBS, *Radio interview with Simon Gregg by John Sheridan*  
*Art and Medicine Collide*, Times-Spectator, 22/6/10  
Robert Nelson, *Rock Art but not as we know it*, The Age 28/7/10  
Edward Colless, *Fine Display of Optimism*, The Australian 6/8/10  
Robert Nelson, *Images of hearth and home, theatres of isolation*, The Age, 17/3/2010.  
*Art gallery exhibits Unnatural Selection*, Times Domain, 2/2/10  
Nicole Cleary, *A Fair to remember*, Mx, 28/7/10  
Robert Nelson, *Upscale fair, scaled down range*, The Age 6/8/10
- 2009 Ashley Crawford, *Under \$5000*, Art Collector Issue 49, pg194-195, July-Sept 2009.  
Suzanne Boccalatte and Meredith Jones, *TRUNK BOOKS Volume 1: HAIR*.  
Frances Johnson, *Sightlines Galleries: Metaphors of Morality*, The Age. Pg 17, 6/2/2009.
- 2008 Simon Gregg, *A Void: Natalie Ryan*, Eycline Contemporary Visual Arts: Number 67, reviews pg 70, 2008.  
Ashley Crawford, *Around the Galleries*, The Age, 15/09/08.  
Ross Moore, *Crazy Critters*, The Age, 1/8/08  
Megan Backhouse, *Art around the Galleries*, The Age 9/2/2008  
Megan Backhouse, *St. Kilda three are home free*, The Age, 23/4/08

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**Cover image**

Natalie Ryan, *Untitled #1*  
pigment print on archival paper  
28cm x 35cm  
2014





