



holding

Up The

Sky

Linda Brescia
24 November 2018
- 16 February 2019

The Masks We Wear

“Sometimes we juggle masks, sometimes they just fall off.”

Cleaning is a guise, a mask that veils the imperfections of human living, hiding the detritus of everyday family life. Cleaning is always labour, predominantly women’s labour, even today, especially in the home.¹ Cleaning is usually care-work, but care-work is never just cleaning.

Linda Brescia’s practice engages with dynamics of visibility/invisibility, masking, care and self-assertion.

In October 2016, Brescia began caring for her sister who had a terminal illness. It was during this time that Brescia began coil weaving at her kitchen table with a roll of domestic cleaning cloths. The repetitive weaving process became therapeutic, lessening the emotional turmoil and tug-of-war between sadness, stress, love and frustration. Brescia felt the heavy responsibility, being stuck at home ‘holding up the sky’ maintaining the mask of keeping her home a relatively normal and stable base for the rest of her family - whilst also confronting the illness, and then death, of her dearly beloved sister. Managing, somehow, to stay grounded through the ancient haptic female creativities of weaving and knitting.

Grief sometimes forces our socially-adjusted masks to slip publically, to be openly emotional, then even the most stoic may reach out to others for support. “Sometimes we juggle masks, sometimes they just fall off.”² Through her grief, Brescia extended her extreme knitting pieces into endurance processes, balanced by attending social knitting groups, *Spin a Yarn* at Fairfield City Museum & Gallery and *Crafties Social Group* in Canley Vale. There she met local women generously sharing their skills, knowledge, experiences and stories. Collectively they found shared connections in making - holding up the sky together - to care, support and to be supported. Women are not just holding up the sky, they are also reaching for the sky: for space where their voices can be heard, their stories told, their experiences valued, not just by each other but also more widely by society at large.

Brescia’s *Holding up the sky* exhibition interweaves these embodied experiences of textiles, cleaning, caring and labour. Working with hundreds of meters of domestic cleaning cloths, Brescia’s soft sculptures, *Resilience spiral* (2018) and *Holding up the sky* (2018), playfully disturb our assumptions about what is usually considered valuable or valueless. This engagement with notions of what should be concealed or revealed is synonymous with her extensive use of stockings and pantyhose as masks of appearance and disappearance. The photographs for *Fundamental requirement of play*, *Selfie series* (2018) were initially taken for and shared through Instagram; a social media platform variously self-curated into individual intimate online spaces of

feminist activism and artist networking for some, for others it can become an addictive, anxiety-triggering domain filled by debilitating minefields of unrealistic body expectations. These selfie images present the artist’s face masked and partially obscured by stitched and cut stockings. Yet there is an assertive agency, claiming space in the act of taking a selfie, declaring ‘I am here’ and ‘I am visible’ to the world; or at least to whoever ends up seeing the image through the veiled obscurity of Instagram algorithms, preferences and advertising. This social media world, where the boundaries of public and private are blurred, is also a forum for Brescia’s performances wearing a naked female body painted onto stocking fabric and worn on the outside. Shown rather than hidden and performed in public settings and gallery events to confront and disturb social norms, these engagements challenge the audience to consider their own responses.

Pantyhose are traditionally metaphorical and actual masks, veiling imperfections, cleaning-up one’s appearance and constraining the female limbs into socially acceptable forms. In *Control Brief* (2018), Brescia has pulled and sewn pantyhose into masking layers over a painted portrait, gagging the face within; the binding fabric silences her voice. Although the social expectation of women being quiet and keeping their limbs concealed by pantyhose has somewhat faded over recent generations, the expectation of women masking their faces with make-up, botox and plastic surgery, has not. The social norm pushing women to present their bodies and behaviour as smoother, cleaner and more conformingly attractive - from facial expressions, body language, clothing and makeup - is as persistent as ever. Brescia further engages with this persistent expectation to reupholster one’s body and one’s home in *Worth series* (2018), with careful figurative posing and stitched fabrics. In contrast the photographed naked body in *Respite series* (2018), invites voyeuristic glimpses of the reality of a woman’s tired, scarred, naked, sensuous body, wrapped in a cocoon or shroud of knitted cleaning cloths. There is a felt raw tactility the bare skin meeting the synthetic mesh of the chain-mail woven cloths, which is both protective and suffocating.

Brescia’s work disturbs and challenges how we label and confront ingrained assumptions of women’s roles, their place in society and how women’s experiences are valued. Her play of masks, slippages between visibility and invisibility, engages a strong feminist voice with both current and long unresolved concerns in society about binary gender roles across the personal, familial, community and political spectrums. These works are personal and universal, embodied material experiences of the exhaustion and resilience of *Holding up the sky*.

Dr Kath Fries

1. The 2016 Census shows the typical Australian woman spends between five and 14 hours a week doing unpaid domestic housework. For the typical Australian man it’s less than five hours a week.
<http://theconversation.com/census-2016-women-are-still-disadvantaged-by-the-amount-of-unpaid-housework-they-do-76008>
2. Linda Brescia conversation with Kath Fries, 2018



Respite, repose, 2018, solvent ink digital print



Control (Word agency series), 2018, acrylic on board



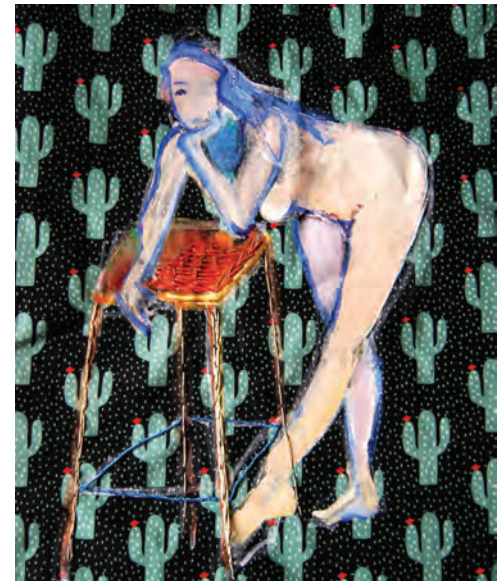
Control brief, 2018, wool, pantyhose and acrylic on wood panel



Fundamental requirement of play (Selfie 2), 2018, solvent ink digital print



Stitched up (Word agency series), 2018, acrylic on board



Resting (Worth series), 2018, acrylic and embroidery on cotton duck



Linda Brescia, Artist in Residence, 2018, in the studio hand coiling *Resilience spiral* sculpture, Fairfield City Museum & Gallery
Photography by Silversalt Photography

Cover image:
Warm sheer tears, 2018, acrylic on canvas and found pantyhose

All images courtesy of the artist.

Fairfield City Museum & Gallery

Open Tues-Sat, 10am-4pm

FREE ADMISSION

Disabled access: wheelchair access to most buildings and disabled parking available.

634 The Horsley Drive, Smithfield NSW 2164

Parking off Oxford street

T: 02 9725 0190

F: 02 9757 4357

E: museumgallery@fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au

www.livingmuseum.com.au

 facebook.com/FairfieldCityMuseumGallery