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TO THOSE I'VE LOVED, AND THOSE I'M YET TO LOVE...

What do you picture when you think of love?

Is it a romantic affection shared with an intimate partner, as seen in Doreen Chapman's painting of two lovers after Klimt's iconic *The Kiss*? Or is it ~~the~~ physical intimacy and touch, as represented through Hannah Gartside's *Bunnies in Love, Lust and Longing*?

Is it the care and trust extended through our familial bonds, playfully depicted in the photographic portrait by Rachel Peachey and Paul Mosig? Or is it the camaraderie we have with our chosen family, as seen in the friendship between the subjects of Polixeni Papapetrou's photograph?

Is it in the way we hold compassion and empathy for our immediate and local community, the togetherness we witness in Dhambit Munungurr's bark or in Bronwyn Bancroft's *Going Home*?

Is love all of these things, or is this still not enough?

While there is a universality to the experience of love, it is also undoubtedly shaped by our individual lived experiences, which span a broad range of cultural, political and social contexts. The very diversity of interpretation makes it a difficult concept to grasp; what one considers love may not hold true for others.

*The Four Letter Word* is an exhibition that ponders the nature and meaning of love. It brings together works from the Artbank Collection with those from invited artists Janelle Low and Hannah Gartside to explore a range of topics including intimacy, self-expression, vulnerability, doubt, identity and desire. Through a diversity of voices and artistic mediums, *The Four Letter Word* explores this open-ended question without an answer. The salon hang

of the exhibition, coupled with the video screening area, attempts to de-centre romantic love in a hierarchy of importance, highlighting the multitudes of love we express and experience in our lives.

Too easily we fall into thinking that love is just a feeling, and that what motivates us to love is simply how we feel about someone, something or ourselves alone. Many of our relationships are guided by a belief that we simply "fall" into love, that love is inevitable, or that love is given unconditionally by virtue of existing relationships such as family bonds. Perhaps it is more useful to think of love not as an emotion driven by impulses, but rather a decision. Feminist activist and author bell hooks identifies that if we think of "love as an action rather than a feeling", it would grant us greater accountability and responsibility by recognising it as an active choice.

The responsibility of love comes down to whom (or what) we extend this action towards, who are the ones who we deem worthy of love, and why? One could argue our experience of love begins from the moment we are born, as humans are often socialised to love through the closeness and warmth of familial bonds. Regina Wilson's woven baby basket is a tender reminder of the importance of these formative bonds between parent and child. The basket also honours the artist's matrilineal line, and the learning of basket weaving skills from Wilson's grandmother and mother, skills which the artist will pass on to her own children one day.

As we mature, we increasingly seek and receive love outside of our immediate relations. In this context, choice and action plays a significant role as it relates to individual agency in decisions of love. The works of artists Janelle Low and Anastasia Klase both explore choices made in love, with a critical look at the transactional

nature of love as a form of exchange or barter. Klose's photo series sees the artist standing at the beach offering free kisses to strangers. The resulting interactions are documented by the artist's mother, and offered to the participants as a trade for the kiss.

Janelle Low's work *I'm Not For Sale* uses archival wedding portraits to comment on the cultural practice of bridal dowries and commitment. Through a process of alteration and reprinting, Low obscures the faces of the sitters to subvert the social expectations placed on romantic partnerships. By removing the individuality of the subject through this act of erasure, Low's work can be interpreted as a critical on heteronormative institutions of marriage, and gendered expectations that result from this structure.

While traditional notions of love are centred on individual bonds between people, whether that is romantic, platonic, or familial, love can also be recognised in the actions of individuals towards solidarity and connections with broader communities. The works of artists Claudia Nicholson and Nadia Hernandez are amongst those in the exhibition that consider love more broadly as a means to recognise collective history, using material traditions to honour a connection to culture. For Nicholson, this is in the memorialisation of Latina pop star Selena Quintanilla through the creation (and subsequent destruction) of a sawdust carpet, while Hernandez' textile banner references the political climate of Venezuela. By combining the poetry of her grandfather and the embroidery skills learnt from her grandmother, Hernandez looks to the past as a guide for the uncertain future.

Connection to community and culture being a form of love brings us to the question: if we consider love as an action, can art-making be viewed as a radical form of love? What exactly is the relationship between artist and

their work, and what role does art play as a mediator between artist and audience in expressing desire, fears, needs and more? The privilege of art-making stems from the open possibility of art as both a tool and expression of personal agency.

Ultimately, the open-ended nature of love, the malleability of its meaning, is both its strength and weakness. Together the artists in *The Four Letter Word* present a multitude of perspectives on the bonds that shape our most intimate connections with others, our surrounds and ourselves.

Much love,

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