



KATHERINE HATTAM: DESIRE FIRST 1978–2015

Under the inaugural directorship of Kiffy Rubbo, from the mid 1970's the Ewing & George Paton Galleries at The University of Melbourne was a critically important platform for women artists, critics and curators and the Women's Art Movement generally.¹ Exhibitions such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife: A Postal Event* (3–21 October 1977) and *Elizabeth Gower's Lost and Found: Objects and Images* (10–27 October 1978)² that engaged with emergent debates around the politics of domesticity, provided the context within which Katherine Hattam's first exhibition was programmed.

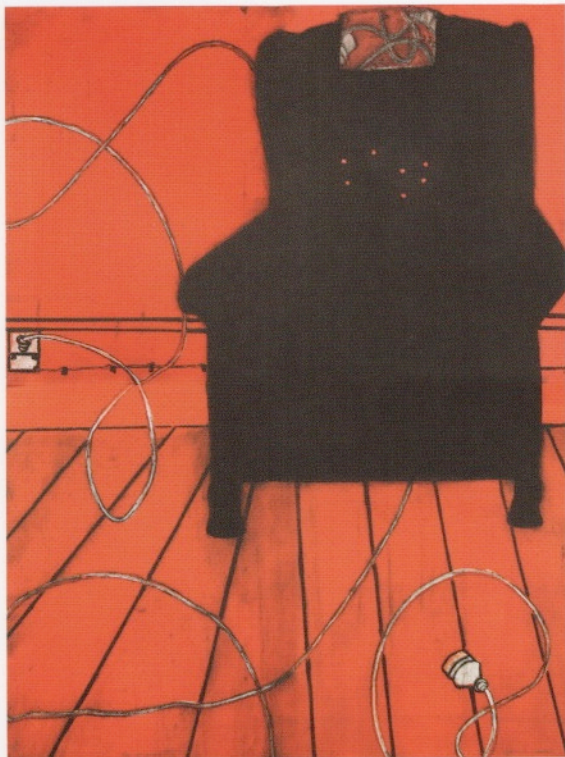
Katherine Mackinnon: Drawings (27 June –14 July 1978) featured a suite of large and small, black and white, charcoal drawings depicting a nude, veiled female archetype (an alter-ego?) performing various activities within a domestic setting. In works such as *Leg of Lamb* and *Reading* (both 1978), Hattam employs the kitchen table, the armchair and an inventory of domestic objects as compositional

elements. While the figure in her work would soon disappear, these motifs and compositional schema would become emblematic of her work in the decades to follow.

However through the 1970s, Hattam considered herself only distantly engaged with the burgeoning feminist movement, living as she was then on a remote grazing property at Casterton, on the border of Victoria and South Australia. No doubt the physical distance from the urban centre of Melbourne, where feminist practices such as consciousness-raising were gaining traction, played a pragmatic part in Hattam's disengagement from such direct activism at the time – a fact the artist has sought to reexamine in recent projects. Nevertheless, through new motherhood, and ensconced in a (mostly) rural family life at this time (Hattam's three children were born between 1975 and 1984), Hattam continued to produce intuitive, intimate drawings along domestic and personal

ABOVE LEFT
Leg of lamb 1978
Pencil on paper
26 x 21 cm; 44 x 38 cm framed
Collection of the artist

ABOVE RIGHT
Reading 1978
Charcoal on paper
100 x 76 cm
Collection of the artist



ABOVE LEFT
 Red armchair 2000
 Etching, edition of 20
 152 x 112 cm overall
 Collection of the artist



ABOVE RIGHT
 John Brack
 Portrait of Harold Hattam
 1965
 Oil on canvas
 115.4 x 81.2 cm
 Private collection,
 Melbourne
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 Helen Brack

themes that also engaged with some of the central concerns of the emergent feminist dialectic.

Notable exhibitions of the 1980s included *Shipwrecked: An exhibition of paintings, prints, drawings and sculpture*, a group show at 200 Gertrude St (November 26–December 20, 1986) and a solo exhibition at the Warrnambool Art Gallery in 1988, from which the National Gallery of Victoria acquired *The family, mine and theirs* of that same year, a large charcoal, pastel and collage work on paper.³ Both the NGV and the National Gallery of Australia acquired Hattam's work before she had completed any formal art training.⁴ By 1992 she had graduated with a Master's degree from the Victorian College of the Arts, her first experience of formal art school and an experience to which she attributes a change in her approach to art making: from working intuitively to a more analytic approach.⁵

CHAIRS

From the mid-1990's, Hattam's work took on a new intensity. Following the death of Hal Hattam in 1994, Katherine recalls the moment she wandered through her parent's family home alone, and was struck by the presence of the empty chairs:

'I remember experiencing a conscious desire to draw the chairs that were to me emblematic of childhood...I saw the wing-backed armchair where my father often sat reading, the William IV chair represented my mother, the Australian Krimper chair, the one I sat in to do my homework, was the child.'⁶

She returned to the house and photographed the chairs and the staircase, later to use their image in works such as *Return of the Repressed* (1997), and *Red armchair* (2000). In *Return of the Repressed*, the domestic interior is dark, all-encompassing, suffocating; both the space depicted and the composition crowded with the palpable corporeality



The Hazardous Kitchen
(detail) 2002
Oil and enamel on canvas;
mixed media
122 x 183 cm
Table: 76 x 137 x 27 cm
Collection of Charlie
Mackinnon

of the looming armchairs, the darker 'figure' hovering, partially obscured, in the background and the lighter, apparently appealing to the viewer,

Red armchair (2000), with the strong diagonal lines of the floorboards thrusting the dark, patriarchal armchair high into the top right of the picture plane, serpentine power leads circling and seemingly reaching to entangle the viewer, shares a psychological charge and emotional timbre with John Brack's *Portrait of Hal Hattam* (1965). Brack's painting, one of the most powerful psychological portraits in Australian art,⁷ features a heavy, red and black palette and similar compositional schema to that employed by Hattam in *Red armchair*; an entirely coincidental or perhaps unconscious undertaking, though Hattam was fifteen and of course familiar with Brack's portrait of his friend, and needless to say, her father's struggle with depression, at the time the work was made.

Of the role of the unconscious in art making, the artist said,

My work has mined my childhood explicitly since 1997, and more instinctively before then...Citing the unconscious as crucial to the making of work does not mean I intend to analyse my work, it's more the general principle that interests me. Yet, it is clear that my choice of the domestic as subject matter (as opposed to history, war or landscape) could be seen as 'oedipal', a typically female, less confronting choice aimed at finding a place in a patriarchal world. (But) I have argued that the domestic (is)...not as tame as it appears.⁸

Hattam's teacher, mentor and friend, the late Graham Little, eloquently interpreted Hattam's work through a psychoanalytic prism and observed the strong presence of the artist herself in the spaces she depicts.⁹ The Freudian notion of the



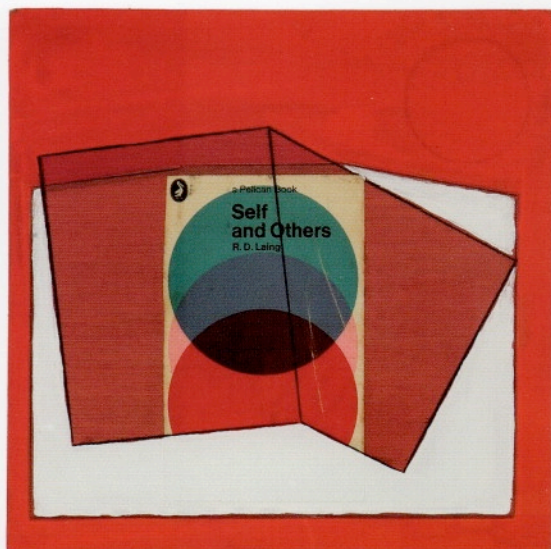
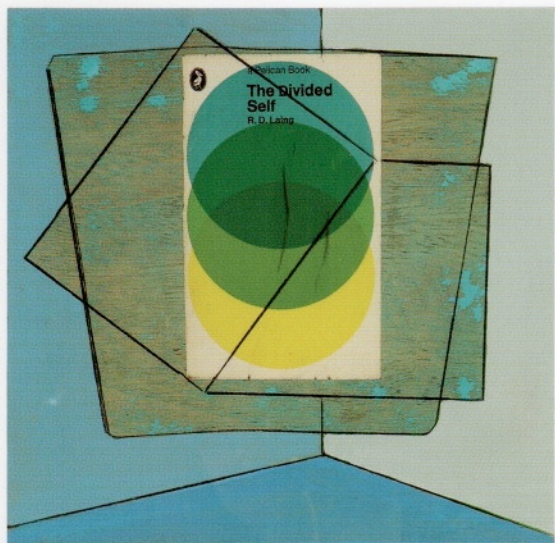
uncanny, as understood through the German word for it, heimlich, and its inversion, unheimlich, describes that which is homely and familiar, but also hidden and secret.¹⁰ Hattam's works, particularly of this period, are incarnate of this quality.

In the early 2000's, a lightening of Hattam's palette may be seen, and in works such as *TV and Videos* (2000), she continues to explore the use of the chair as motif in adding the wooden kitchen variety to her inventory. Initially this took the shape of *Bronze kitchen chair* (2000) and then the monumental *Chair & its Component Parts* (2001), produced for her solo exhibition *The Vocabulary of Chairs* at the Geelong Art Gallery the following year. Unlike the chairs of previous works, closely associated with particular family members, the humble wooden kitchen chair was non-hierarchical,¹¹ and in a formal sense, allowed the artist to explore a range of possibilities, including that of the negative spaces between the struts of the legs. In *The Hazardous Kitchen* of 2002 (the palette

of which is reincarnated in *Specific Object – Pink, Orange and Yellow* of 2007), these negative spaces are explicitly highlighted. Hattam's kitchen chairs recall the chair sculptures of contemporary Colombian artist Doris Salcedo, but have a definitively lighter pitch: the negative spaces of Salcedo's chairs, mired in concrete, evoke spaces vacated in terrifying circumstances, while Hattam's are an exploration of form and shape borne of a particular motif; her domestic not tame, but not violent.¹² The *Specific Object* series of sculptures, originating as wooden kitchen chairs from the artist's own family dining room, are an extension of this exploration. Their provenance can be traced through countless family dinners around the table; to the artist's young children painting them in bright colours; to kicking around in Hattam's studio; to an inspired encounter with the work of Donald Judd, to whom they owe their title.¹³ The artists' book *Chairs & Books / The Vocabulary of Chairs* (2013), in the Deakin University collection, may be read as an inventory of Hattam's chair motifs.

OPPOSITE
Bronze kitchen chair 2000
 Bronze
 30 x 13 x 14.5 cm
 Collection of the artist

ABOVE
Chair & Its Component Parts 2001
 Enamel on hardwood
 181 x 89 x 82.5 cm
 Collection of the artist



ABOVE LEFT
The Divided Self 2008
 Book cover, oil and pencil
 on plywood
 35 x 35 cm
 Collection of the artist

ABOVE RIGHT
Self and others 2008
 Book cover, oil and pencil
 on plywood
 35 x 35 cm
 Collection of the artist

COLLABORATIONS

The central preoccupation of the family and the domestic in the work of Katherine Hattam extends to include artistic collaborations with family members: her children, Will Mackinnon and Harriet Morgan; and also posthumously, with Hal Hattam, demonstrating a willingness to directly engage with artists of the generations preceding and following her. *Under the Influence* (2007) is a seamless collaboration with Will Mackinnon, a domestic interior based on eldest son Charlie Mackinnon's Port Fairy house. The wallpaper from the house is depicted, and an ode to Rover Thomas faces off to an outside 'view' of Eugene von Guérard's *View of Tower Hill*, (1855, in the collection of Warrnambool Art Gallery), referencing the ongoing fascination of artists in this site and its particular history. A still from *The Sopranos* (familial drama on a whole other level) blinks from a TV atop a pink occasional table, normally residing these days in Katherine's Thornbury studio (and accommodating the artists' book in the present exhibition).

The ground of *The Go-Between* (2005) is an unfinished gouache by Hal Hattam. Here, Hattam reckons, literally, with the work of her artist father. The use of the

table as compositional device and the book spines are Hattam's own; and while the gouache of Hal Hattam's hand is central to the composition, the image is decidedly Katherine's; her father's work incorporated into her own vision. Hattam revisits this composition in *The doctor's dilemma* (2007), arranged upon a grid of book pages, her father's medical instruments scattered upon the table top, a seductive veil of fabric partially obscuring an ultramarine world outside. Whether this work refers to an unseen moral dilemma as faced by the protagonist in George Bernard Shaw's play is anyone's guess. Hattam tantalizes with suggestive personal references in her works, hinting at inner conflicts and unresolved relationships.¹⁴ Works such as *The Divided Self* and *Self and Others* (both 2008), featuring the covers of these modernist psychoanalytic texts, are further examples (and also apt studies of a mid-century design aesthetic).

Hattam's domestic is personal, but never introspective, however, and also articulates a broader set of concerns. *The Wild Cherry Tree* (2015) is a sublime example of this, referring to the worlds of ideas within books and indeed, to literature itself. A relatively uncluttered, white table top leads the eye into a horizon where warm reds, pinks and oranges spliced with



white and black emphasize the flat, vertical perspective typical of Hattam's tabletop compositions. A grid of book pages provide the ground for Hattam's familiar visual lexicon: the clock, coffee pot, hairbrush, phone, suburban mynas and lorikeets and of course, the Penguin book spines repurposed from her late mother's collection. Rodchenko's teapot is another recurring motif in Hattam's work, an image which has captivated the artist since she saw it in the major MoMA retrospective of the artist's work in 1998 during one many trips to New York on the international contemporary art trail. In Rodchenko, who used line to describe the characteristics of directness and strength,¹⁵ Hattam found a dynamic motif that defined the way the seemingly domestic could be located within broader social agendas. The tabletop, a Hattam compositional device but also a space in the centre of the family home so often used by the artist for the production of artworks themselves; a space where works on paper may be

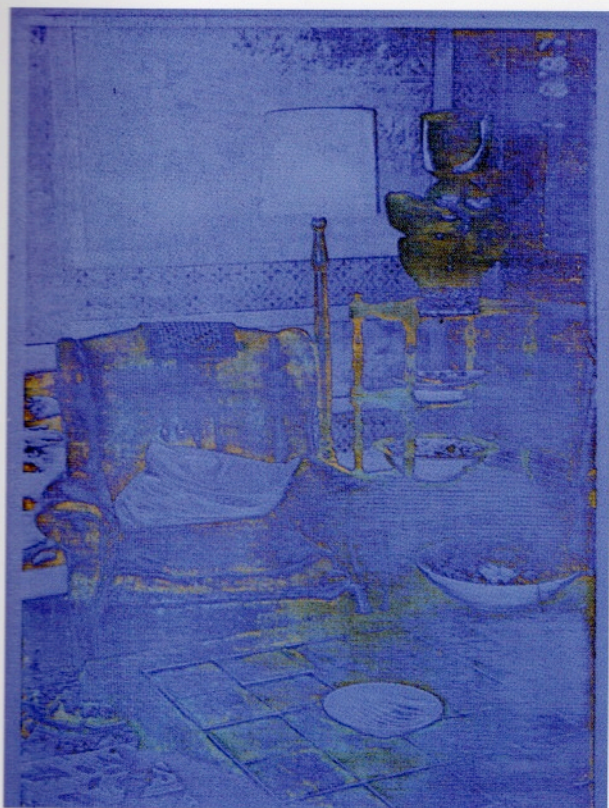
picked up and put down again as familial obligations allow. But as Ellen Koshland has observed, Hattam's tabletops do not evoke a female reality alone: the central, lived activity they represent speaks to a reality we all share.¹⁶

EXPERIMENTATION

The past decade has seen Katherine Hattam's work continue to evolve, as she has combined experiments with new materials, such as plywood, with new techniques of digital photography and printmaking. In the Merri creek series of paintings and in works such as *Thinking about New Zealand* (2010), Hattam's gaze turns to the outside, and marks a shift towards less private themes. In *Graffiti Merri Creek* (2010) and *The Creek* of the same year, Hattam deploys a looser, yet graphic style, the familiar Melbourne landscape abstracted in high-keyed colour. Here, we are still invited into Hattam's world, sharing in her discoveries

ABOVE
The Creek 2010
Gouache on plywood
41 x 29 cm; 42 x 30 cm
framed
Collection of Will
Mackinnon

OPPOSITE
*Thinking about New
Zealand* 2010
Gouache on plywood
120 x 80 cm; 121 x 81cm
framed
Collection of the artist



of her local neighborhood, since 2003 in the inner north of Melbourne, but again, the personal is the medium through which broader ideas are conducted. The Merri creek series of works, referring to this minor but significant waterway of Melbourne, lead to a collaboration with Victoria Hattam (the artist's sister and Professor of Politics at the New School, New York) in the project and exhibition BACKWATERS, which explored similarly significant minor waterways in Brooklyn and Shanghai.¹⁷ *St Kilda - Nolan's Bay* (2014–2015) sees the familiar inventory of Hattam household objects mingle in an ode to the Melbourne of one of Australia's greatest artists: Sidney Nolan's *Boy and the moon* and *Luna Park* jostle alongside pattern and decoration, the vision decidedly Hattam's.

The sitting room (2013), a digitally inscribed woodblock featuring an image from Hattam's South Yarra childhood home (the patriarchal armchair making

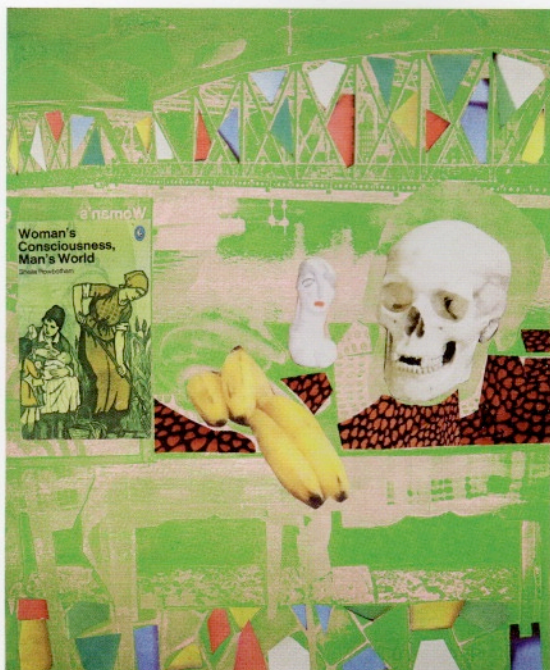
a reappearance), marks a recent foray into experiments with photography and printmaking. Back in the mid-2000's, Hattam was experimenting with the jigsaw method of woodblock printmaking, and had admired Brent Harris' works made with this method on a visit to his Melbourne studio.¹⁸ In a trip to London in 2006, Hattam visited the print study room at the British Museum to also study the works of Paul Gauguin and Edvard Munch produced in this same method. In employing plywood for the woodblocks, Hattam was initially motivated by the incidental patterns the wood grain afforded on the resultant print; it was son Will who initially observed the woodblocks as interesting objects in themselves.¹⁹ The potential afforded by technology to digitally inscribe the woodblock with a photographic image saw Hattam forge this new direction in her work, revisiting personal themes in a fresh way and exploring the pictorial possibilities of urban landscape.

ABOVE
The sitting room 2013
 Oil on digitally inscribed
 plywood
 38 x 28 cm, 39 x 28.5 cm
 framed
 Collection of the artist

OPPOSITE
St Kilda - Nolan's Bay
 2014–2015
 Book pages, charcoal
 and gouache on linen
 170 x 130 cm
 Collection of the artist
 (Not in exhibition)



ABOVE LEFT
Woman's Consciousness, Man's World 2014
 Oil on digitally inscribed plywood
 57.5 x 48 cm
 Collection of the artist



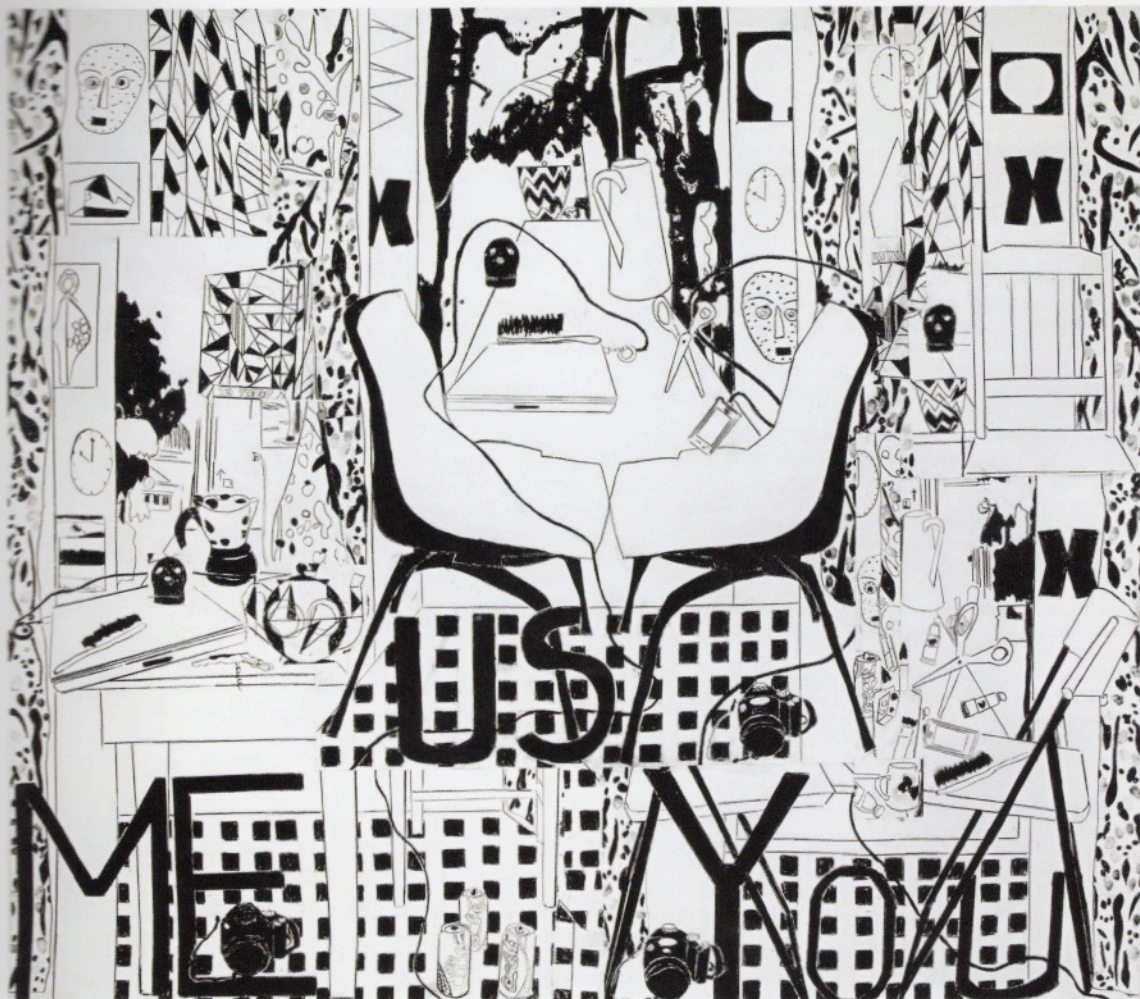
ABOVE RIGHT
Woman's Consciousness, Man's World 2014
 Collage on relief print
 57.5 x 48 cm
 Collection of the artist

THIRD WAVE

In *Consciousness Raising*, the artist's first exhibition with Daine Singer gallery in 2014, Hattam reexamined her experience of this feminist activist practice of the 1970s, an activity adopted from the Civil Rights Movement in the US in the late-1960s which sought to raise awareness of women's oppression through the sharing of personal stories.²⁰ This project was, in part, a celebration of the artist's friendship with the late Diana Gribble, prominent publisher, feminist and Hattam's closest friend for 25 years, who had died in 2011.²¹ Alongside new works produced for the show which incorporated aspects of key second-wave feminist texts, Hattam invited an intergenerational group of women, including Ellen Koshland, Hilary McPhee, Winsome McCaughey, Victoria Hattam, and New York sociologist and pioneering feminist Ann Snitow, to reflect on their feminism and on their participation (or not) in the feminist movement. The resultant group of essays – an act of consciousness-raising in itself – were published as an adjunct to this exhibition.²² A subsequent project, *Re-raising Consciousness* at

TCB art inc. co-curated by Katherine, her daughter Harriet and Fayen d'Evie later that same year, similarly featured works from an intergenerational group of women artists, and the space itself, set up as a temporary living room, was utilized as a site for a series of consciousness-raising events for the duration of the exhibition.²³ Hattam's work from this exhibition, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (2014), a collage on relief print and the woodblock itself, celebrates Sheila Rowbotham's pioneering feminist text of this title. This work and these projects demonstrate Hattam's ongoing interest in locating her work within – and forging – a contemporary feminist discourse.

Personal Pronouns (2015), a new work produced for the present exhibition, has echoes of the artist's early large-scale, charcoal explorations of the domestic space. Two Sebel stacking chairs face off in the centre of the composition, democratically, though; and the word 'US', forms the high point of a triangle grounded with 'ME' and 'YOU', tempering the dynamic in the relationship(s) eluded to here. This is the only hierarchy apparent



in this image, where the domestic and the personal intertwine with Hattam's familiar inventory of personal, art world and the rest-of-the-world references. The personal is, after all, inseparably linked to the political.

POSTSCRIPT: ON DESIRE

Twentieth century philosopher Gilles Deleuze conceived of desire as a positive, productive force, not, as Plato held, the opposite of reason, and something to be controlled, nor the libidinal force as famously opined by Freud.²⁴ Katherine Hattam's desire to make pushes her practice ever forward, driving her ever closer to making some kind of sense of it all. In repeatedly depicting her world and

the objects within it, she seeks to capture, consider and reveal this world; to wrangle the banality, messiness and joy of family life so as to uncover some universal in the minutiae of the everyday; to claim her place in a patriarchal (art) world; to make as an act of restitution. For Katherine Hattam, desire is the positive force at the helm of art's making.

Emma Busowsky Cox

*Personal pronouns 2015
Charcoal on paper
163.5 x 164 cm
Collection of the artist*

FOOTNOTES

1. Janine Burke, 'A home for the revolution: the Ewing and George Paton Galleries and the first phase of the women's art movement', *When you think about art: the Ewing and George Paton Gallery, 1971-2008*, pg. 180
2. Helen Vivian, 'An archive of postmodernism' in *ibid*, pg. 29
3. *The family, mine and theirs*, 1988, charcoal, pastel and collage on paper, 148.0 x 213.4 cm, DC18-1988.
4. The NGA acquired *Letterbox, Canterbury*, 1988 (NGA 89.424), a drawing in charcoal and synthetic polymer paint on paper, in 1989.
5. Letter from the artist to the author, 15 July 2015.
6. Katherine Hattam, 'Art and Oedipus', PhD dissertation, Deakin University, 2003, pg. 41.
7. Kirsty Grant, 'Human Nature: the art of John Brack', in Kirsty Grant et al., *John Brack*, National Gallery of Victoria, 2009, pg. 110.
8. Hattam, *ibid*.
9. Graham Little, *Katherine Hattam: Seashore and Porcupines*, 1999, Katherine Hattam and Graham Little
10. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 1919, translated by David McLintock, Penguin, London, 2003.
11. Drusila Modjeska, *Katherine Hattam: The Vocabulary of Chairs* exhibition catalogue, Geelong Gallery, 2002, pg. 7.
12. Hattam, *ibid*, pg. 49.
13. Will Mackinnon interned at The Chinati Foundation in Texas in 2005. Donald Judd's seminal text was *Specific Objects*, Arts Yearbook 8, 1965. Reproduced in <http://www.juddfoundation.org/generalinformation>, retrieved 22 July 2015.
14. Patrick McCaughey, *Strange Country: Why Australian Painting Matters*, Miegunyah Press, 2014, pg. 350.
15. Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* pg. 103.
16. Ellen Koshland, 'The table is real: some musings on Katherine Hattam's consciousness raising', in *Katherine Hattam: consciousness raising*, Daine Singer gallery, 2014, pg. 18.
17. BACKWATERS, La Trobe University Museum of Art, 22 September to 7 November 2014.
18. Email from the artist to the author, 16 August 2015.
19. Anita La Pietra, 'The Platypus and the Shopping Trolley: Chance Encounters in BACKWATERS', BACKWATERS exhibition catalogue, La Trobe University, 2014, pg. 1
20. Feminist Consciousness-Raising, National Women's Liberation website, Gainesville, Florida, 2015, womensliberation.org, retrieved 12 August 2015.
21. Email from the artist to author, 16 August 2015
22. Koshland et al, in 'Katherine Hattam: consciousness raising', *op cit*.
23. *Re-raising consciousness*, 13-29 November 2014, TCB art inc., Melbourne.
24. Jihai Gao, 'Deleuze's Conception of Desire', *Deleuze Studies*, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pg. 406-420.