

Clare Longley

Watch and thee, absent another

Catalogue text by
Julia Murphy

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**CREATIVE
VICTORIA**



Clare Longley
*Watch and thee,
absent another*
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Sweet bitter

In her text *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson focuses on the specifically dual nature of eros, defined as “want, lack, desire for that which is missing.”¹ Carson cites Greek poet Sappho’s connection of eros with the idea of bittersweet and notes that the term can be more closely translated as sweet bitter, a chronological twist on our common understanding of the term. Eros is seen in this reading as a state of contradiction, describing both pleasure and pain. This experience of concurrent sweetness and bitterness is a compelling position from which to think romantic love and erotic desire, in their paradoxically fulfilled and unfulfilled states.

Clare Longley’s paintings disrupt romantic tropes, pulling apart and reframing them. Sweetness and bitterness coalesce in these works, as romantic symbols are awkwardly positioned, paint is applied in scratchy marks, and corrosive colours dissolve romantic clichés. She draws on historical references—elements of Baroque painting and theatrical set design appear throughout her painting process—and repurposes tired symbols of love and emotion: cherubim, flowers, hearts, butterflies. In Longley’s

¹ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 10

most recent exhibition an angry butterfly bullied another, a spray of flowers replaced a languid cherub's head, and a cluster of grapes hid themselves behind another painting. Here, subjectless speech bubbles seem to converse, held together in a frame. The grapes reappear, juicy and full but accompanied by an incomplete, sketchy vine.

There is a strong thread of continuity throughout Longley's works; paintings build upon one another, at times literally. Unstretched canvas that was used as a backdrop during the painting process, streaked with the remnants of other, absent works, becomes the basis of a new painting. Older 'failed' paintings are literally stitched into the canvas of the new, constructed from fragments. Strokes of paint accrete into dense layers, physically exhausting the representation of romantic symbols. Paintings seem to speak to one another; a floral motif appears in the border of one painting and in the squashed bronze forms embedded in the frame of another.

Throughout the exhibition, symbols are repeated and overworked; a large painting is entirely covered by a dense pattern of lurid green flowers and curlicues on a muddy background. The floral motif is mesmeric, yet disrupted by the join between the two canvases and a dividing line within the pattern. In both appearance and effect, the work uncannily evokes the subject of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, functioning as a maddening surface by which the viewer is at once attracted and repulsed.

In another work, Longley references the Baroque painting *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, in which a young boy recoils in pain as a salamander, hidden amongst succulent fruit, bites his finger. Surrounded by symbols of sensuality, he leans back from the viewer in a performative enactment of shock. In Longley's version, a shroud of acid green covers the figurative elements of the painting so that the boy is rendered unrecognisable. Hung on hinges and facing the corner of the room, the installation is shy—prompting the viewer to lean into it, breaching its physical space.

The exhibition's title is derived from a fittingly bittersweet article. *Watch and thee, absent another* are the fragmented words etched onto a pendant the artist found in her mother's jewellery box—one half of a broken heart. Carson describes the word symbol as derived from the Greek *symbolon*, meaning "one half of a knucklebone carried as a token of identity to someone who has the other half." She goes on to state, "Together the two halves compose one meaning. A metaphor is a species of symbol. So is a lover."² Here, the symbol is not a referent, standing in for something other. Instead it subverts the romantic narrative, encompassing the duality of presence and absence, sweetness and bitterness.

Julia Murphy, March 2019

²Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*, p. 75

Clare Longley is an artist and curator based in Narrm/Melbourne. Recent solo exhibitions include *Adult Lullabies* at Daine Singer (2017), *Thanks for Having Me* at Blindsight (2017) and *Nut Ice* at Tinning Street Presents (2016). Selected group exhibitions include MADA Now, Monash University; *The Wizard of Oz: An Updated Classic*, Secret Project Robot, New York (2017); *Carousel*, Abbotsford Convent Industrial School (2016); and *Flush*, Sugar Mountain Festival (2016). Longley has curated and exhibited in *Smoke Screens* at LON Gallery (2018), *Massage Therapy* at Kings Artist-run (2017) and *We Make Memories*, Seventh Gallery (2017). In 2018 she completed her Bachelors of Fine Arts (Honours) at Monash University, where she won the Lowenstein's Award and was granted a scholarship to undertake her Masters of Fine Arts this year. Previously Longley graduated from Victorian College of the Arts in 2014 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Painting).

Julia Murphy is a curator and arts writer based in Narrm/Melbourne. Exhibitions include *Falling blue at Long Division Gallery* (2018) and *everything spring* at *The Honeymoon Suite* (2017). Her writing has been published by un Projects, West Space and Island Island (forthcoming).

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