

## VISUAL ARTS

# Direct Democracy at MUMA

BY SUZANNE FRASER

Over the next four months, we can expect to encounter at close quarters the many and varied inconveniences of democracy. Not the least of these inconveniences is the wave of disinterest and disappointment that invariably sweeps through our collective psyche every four years, making us feel simultaneously solemn and ridiculous as participants in a political system overburdened with deficiency. And yet in the current group exhibition *Direct Democracy* at Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA), the visitor is reminded of an implicit qualification to the promise of our political model: democracy can only take us so far. The deficiencies we experience in our representative political systems merely serve to represent those in the societies we each create. Through the works of nineteen contemporary artists and artist collectives from Australia and overseas, MUMA's latest exhibition asks us to reconsider our understanding of the democratic model, bureaucracies and all.

In Natalie Bookchin's 18-channel video installation *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2012), the viewer stands at the centre of an assembly of citizens discussing the position of African American men in the news. Here we witness several of the basic tenets of democracy in action, including the freedom to speak one's mind without fear of



Raquel Ormella. Poetic possibility 2012.

reprisal from the state. The Los Angeles artist created this remarkable installation using clips taken from video blogs (or 'vlogs'), in which men and women of various races and social circumstances reduce the actions and achievements of four contemporary American public figures to what they interpret to be the combined capacity of their race and sex. Statements such as "I don't think I'm a racist at all, but..." ricochet around the darkened room, leaving the viewer with an enlivened sense of what it feels like to stand amongst a band of voluble voters. According to curator Geraldine Barlow, this work also leads us to consider "the pressures of leadership". And the withering stares of the public eye.

In a series of works entitled *Combat* (2008) by Sydney-born artist Jemima Wyman, this sense of a united yet miscellaneous crowd of citizens gives way to the image of a homogenised militia. In the context of the current exhibition, Wyman's

series leads the visitor to reflect on the fragility of democratic order and method when faced with the passions of human nature and pack mentality. This work is one of several references in *Direct Democracy* to the persuasive role of protest and dissent in our political systems. In *Combat 02* – a large scale painting created using poured acrylic on canvas – Wyman presents a group of balaclava-clad figures whose identities have been surrendered in order to advance the mission of their collective. This dialogue between individual agency and group participation is a running theme in the current exhibition.

Such confronting political statements as those presented in the works of Bookchin and Wyman – as well as works by Destiny Deacon, John Miller and Alex Monteith – are tempered in the exhibition through visual examinations of the broader concept of a democratic existence: the potential that can be realised through the processes of collaboration

and contest. For curator Geraldine Barlow, the concept of "productive disagreement" – whereby two or more entities foster positive outcomes through moderated conflict – is a key motif in the exhibition. New Zealand artist Alicia Frankovich embraces this tension in *Bisons* (2010), a three-minute video in which a succession of two figures engage with each other in a physical action inspired by the shoulder lock of a rugby scrum. Pushing against each other in order to maintain their positions, these figures must work together in order to gain the upper hand over each other; although the players in Frankovich's routine emerge without apparent victory or loss.

In the diverse selection of works exhibited as part of *Direct Democracy*, Monash Museum of Art offers a deliberately unfixed narrative of the democratic model. With several surprisingly thought-provoking allusions to the Australian flag amongst the displays (in the works of Will French and Raquel Ormella), the story told by Geraldine Barlow and her assembly of artists has a distinctly Australian flavour, in keeping with the current political ballyhoo of election season. Yet the international works in this exhibition also speak to the social and political climate of our settled nation, displaying the multidimensional heritage of Western democracy in Australia. With political scholars increasingly querying how to define and measure the quality of democracy (particularly with the emergence of hybrid regimes), such creative and interrogatory displays as the current exhibition stand as evidence of good democracy in action.

» **Direct Democracy** shows at the **Monash University Museum of Art** until July 6.

[monash.edu.au/muma](http://monash.edu.au/muma)