

Sarah Hall, Artist Prudence Flint in her own words, *The University of Melbourne*, 2017



Artist Prudence Flint in her own words

by Sarah Hall

Prudence Flint graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts in 1989. Since then she has held solo exhibitions across Australia. She was a finalist in the Archibald Portrait Prize in 2015 and 2016, won the Len Fox Painting Award 2016, the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize in 2004, and the Portia Geach Memorial Award in 2010.



I graduated from the VCA in 1989. You didn't get a lot of specific instruction in those days, but that was just the way it worked. I had a really strong cohort of women in my year, including [current Head of Painting at VCA Art] Kate Daw. I did it all, working as a waitress while living in a share-house in Carlton.

I don't come from an artistic background, and had probably been to a gallery once in my life. But I was very interested in women. I loved fashion magazines and thought I wanted to do fashion illustration. I look back now and that seems crazy.

Initially I thought that, if I was going to be a painter, I'd have to paint mountains and landscapes and important things like that. But in my first year at the VCA the penny dropped and I started painting women. It was as if I realised that it was OK to paint the things I was obsessed with. That was huge for me – it was a really exciting time.

I think I play out a lot of personal stuff in my paintings. That can be a lot of trouble because, wherever I am psychologically, that's where my paintings have to be as well.

Self-doubt is a big part of my work; all of those unpleasant emotions like shame and guilt and feeling like I don't deserve space. I've learned to make friends with it now. Some people reconcile those things in real life but I tend to do it in my work.

My main model is a friend of mine who's nearly 30. I've painted older women, but the minute you put an older woman in a painting, a bit of grey hair or whatever, the painting becomes very specific, which can be distracting. So for now, I've gone back to doing younger women.

When I dream, I'm still 30, not 50, and I love that paintings can have that dream logic. I set myself free so I can paint.

I'm always asked where the men are in my work, and why I only ever paint women. Do people ask Peter Booth those types of questions? His male figures represent "humanity". It is curious to me that my figures are not described in that way.

My parents were really horrified with what I decided to do with my life. They wanted me to have security, a nice house, a family. "Become a secretary, you'll get paid well," Dad would say or, "You could have done anything ...". It wasn't until I won a prize worth \$100,000 that my family realised, "Maybe you're OK at this". Money is freedom, if you don't spend it, even though people don't tell you that when you're young.

I never felt envious when my friends had children. I'd think, "Woah, that's a scary thing to do with your body, your life, your partner". I couldn't afford having kids and, for me, it would have been self-defeating anyway. I saw my mum's life, raising four kids, and I didn't want that.

I've become better at exhibiting my work, although I still get anxious and dwell on what I may not have pulled off, and what I've exposed. I try to remember that it always feels imperfect and unknowable, and to find the pleasure in the ride. I have days when I enter my studio and think, "Thank God for this." Investing in yourself gives back in all kind of different ways.

Sometimes, when I show students my work, they'll ask why I paint women big, and I think, "Who's the policewoman here? What's normal? What's big? What's small?" We're all so strangely, weirdly different and yet we're made to feel so much shame about our bodies. I'm trying to paint the feeling of being a body.

I feel like I have to protect myself. In the studio when I'm procrastinating about a painting, I knit and I sew. Since I was a child, everything has to be just so. It's like a way to feel ok about myself and keep anxiety at bay. It's a control thing.

Sometimes I'll hate certain things about a painting, and then I'll do a flip and I work through an idea until I transform it. I know I have to cross thresholds with my work to feel that I'm allowed to do things and open up new territory.

I've had a show every year for the last six years and that's pretty exhausting. That can interrupt the flow of the work and take you outside yourself. My favourite time is when I'm in the middle of a body of work, not yet worried about how it looks from outside.

I've always struggled with feeling socially confined but with my work it's a whole other front – I feel much more free and true to myself. Art is a place where I can really feel the expansiveness of life.