

THE IRONING MAIDENS

MELANIA JACK

Melania Jack is a queer, non-binary, feminist artist working within digital art, projection, electronic music and performance mediums. Melania's practice uses digital collage and 'vidding'; video editing of archival and filmed materials, projection mapped onto domestic object sculptures to explore socialisation, gender, race and class issues connected to unpaid and low-paid domestic labour.

The work examines these issues through a glitch feminist lens, using the glitch aesthetic within the work to represent a disruption of the image to reveal the unseen work, and other realities beneath the surface image.



On Pressing Topics -
A multi-media installation of projection, sculpture, digital collage, video and sound to critically examine the unseen labour of women.

Written by Melania Jack of The Ironing Maidens

PRESSING TOPICS

12 DECEMBER — 14 JANUARY 2023

PATTY PREECE

Patty Preece is a musician, electronic music producer and sound artist who works with hacked domestic objects to critically explore aesthetic and relational hierarchies at the intersection of sound, gender and technology. Preece's practice spans performance, instrument design, production and most recently installation.

This Cairns based artist creates performance ecosystems using discarded domestic steam irons, ironing boards, DIY sensors and electronics. Their live performances engage with augmented domestic objects, noise and the relationship of performer, instrument and context. Preece's creative practice research explores themes of labour, instrument design, sonic cyberfeminisms and sound art.



The Ironing Maidens project is the art love child of Patty Preece and myself, Melania Jack. Over many years of shifting industry paradigms, from live shows to live streams and back, the project has seen many incarnations. During lockdown our inbox filled with cancellations of the live show into which we had just invested a year of work. So we adapted to the strange times by experimenting with media new to us, including a pilot episode of a narrative-based podcast, a live stream project, and most recently installation work. Some of these projects were a great experience, helping us to acquire new skills and experience new collaborations; others were like random op shop finds: we took them home, and they just didn't quite fit.

We slowly realised that the previous show, *A Soap Opera*, would not tour again. It would be too long until venues reopened; and more personally, we had outgrown this work. Our political views on these subjects had changed too much. The world also felt different, more serious. How can we pun about ironing while people are dying from covid? How can we broach these domestic issues when people have had no choice but to be contained to the domestic home? It's like calling a caged bird lazy. Still, it felt like there was so much left to say. While families isolated, more people spending more time at

home meant more work for women. Sourdough bread and home improvements became just another expectation for women to add to their massive daily list of to-do's.

Statistically, and anecdotally, the housework situation hasn't changed much for women since the 1950s. The stats show that from cleaning the home to cleaning up the environment, it's still women doing the bulk of the work - physically and emotionally. On top of that, we are not getting paid for it. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency, in a report released on the 12th December 2022, show that women earned, on average, \$26,596 less than men in 2021-22.

We've spent generations teaching girls that they can 'do anything': more women as CEOs, more women learning to code, more women in tech; but when women in Australia are spending the equivalent of one whole month of housework each year more than their partners - how do they find time to further their careers and invest in themselves? How do we reinvigorate the stalled feminist revolution of the '70s that was meant to free women from the role of 'domestic goddess' when social media is bursting with cleaning influencers like Mrs Hinch, who are glamourising and cashing in on the collective social anxiety of the (COVID) moment?

Photographer: Cristina Bevilacqua



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 1 The Ironing Maidens, *Strike*, 2022, multimedia. Video: Cian Saunders. Image courtesy of the artist
 2 The Ironing Maidens, *Strike*, 2022, multimedia, Onespace, 2022. Video: Cian Saunders. Photo: Louis Lim
 3 The Ironing Maidens, *Strike*, 2022, multimedia, Onespace, 2022. Video: Cian Saunders. Photo: Louis Lim
 4 The Ironing Maidens, *Domestic Body - Iron Hands*, 2022, digital video collage. Photo: Cristina Bevilacqua
 5 The Ironing Maidens, *Domestic Body - Hot Tits*, 2022, digital video collage. Photo: Cristina Bevilacqua
 6 The Ironing Maidens, *Domestic Body - Microwave Vagina*, 2022, digital video collage. Photo: Cristina Bevilacqua

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PRESSING TOPICS

With a lack of real solutions to the gender imbalance in the domestic debate, the common response is to send the work further down an even more feminised and also racialised line - hire a cleaner, send the clothes to the dry cleaner, pay for help, and in the spirit of *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Tim Ferriss - outsource, outsource, outsource. This excess work is increasingly the lot of low-paid, migrant and women of colour who are then experiencing rising rates of exploitation and abuse.

Feminists can call out for women to march, smash the patriarchy, pull down the capitalist structures, decolonise the country - but how do we start any of that while standing at a kitchen sink full of the greasy slippery dishes of romantic promise, family expectations and the ground-in grime of gender socialisation?

This is what I am exploring in *Pressing Topics*, a sound and projection installation that is presenting at *NorthSite Contemporary Arts* from December 2022.

In *Strike*, a projection and sculpture piece, I use the lens of glitch feminism (a term coined by

Legacy Russell) to explore ironing itself - utilising a 1950s image of the quintessential housewife ironing. This is the image that second wave feminists rallied against - a white, middle class housewife doing all the housework among the avalanche of white goods designed to lure her back into the post war household. But there is a glitch, an error; the image breaks and reveals what is underneath: the women in the factories building the iron and its components. Women are employed for their patience, attention to detail and 'nimble fingers'. This trend that has moved from the fashion industry to the IT and new tech sector is seeing millions of women existing in modern day slavery conditions. Their slavery builds irons, for other slaves to iron. The irony is real.

In *Domestic Body*, I explore my own gender training within my family and society as an eldest girl child. The need to please, the guilt of not doing enough, the idea that satisfaction should come from a clean kitchen floor. The patronising pink used in this work is overt and constant,

bleeding into the skin while the forced smile gleams. The body has become part of the machine: washing machine belly, iron hands - I am the tool and the work itself. Again, the glitch disrupts, exposing other emotions - fear, sadness, regret, loss, mania and anger. How is my self imagined in this domestic body?

I am sometimes asked: why do I care? As a queer, non-binary person who is trying to build a different life to the one I was raised in, I can choose to sit and read a book and let the dishes wait. But can I? I still feel the pressure to do the dishes first. Since taking on the co-care of an elder with dementia, I feel keenly the sense of duty to provide this care. As a woman. It seems cellular, but it is sold as feminine and nurturing - I know it is socialised. Children and elder care are a massive global themes. It is the work of women and like all feminised industries, it is underpaid and unacknowledged.

This gender imbalance seems to run all the way into our futures. Technology will not save us; it didn't save the women of the 1950s, who just ended up with more work at home, managing the new machines.

Now the smart homes of the future require new attention - to program the smart fridge, to talk to the assistant who will turn the lights on. Studies such as those in the recent book, *The Smart Wife* by Jenny Kennedy and Yolande Strengers, show that in this 'smart future' the work is still feminised; from the voices of the assistants, to the design of modern robots, we are building this sexism into our future.

They (seem to) burn with a strange fury, a comment by a critic of the original Wages for Housework activists of the 1970s, is the title of one of the pieces of this exhibition. In it I have used an algorithm to explore the extent of our gendered programming around domestic labour. I use the words 'cleaner' and 'housework' to search online video and image. The top image results from these search terms are generally women. I project these images onto ironing boards that stand around a burning fire of irons. Are they planning a revolution? Are they burning the tools that oppress them? Are they the ghosts of the past or are they people from our future?

These strange years have birthed this new work, a deeper exploration of the themes of *The Ironing Maidens* project.

My hope with this exhibition is that I can navigate a path out of my own gender training, to check myself and my privilege. To find ways to revive that stalled domestic revolution, with a more expanded and inclusive view. Because really, I am tired of the housework. I am busting to get onto the next work, a new world, the next question - what does a non-binary, de-capitalised, de-colonialised world look and sound like?

I don't know yet, but I have some ideas; I imagine you might too.

Written by Melania Jack
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