

Under the
SURFACE

Transformative, mysterious and utterly compelling,
Meg Cowell's unique work is on the rise.

WORDS BY JASON ROUND





If there's one word that summarises Australian artist Meg Cowell's body of work, it is surely 'intriguing'. From scenes of death to intimate female apparel, Cowell loves to explore the surreal and evocative. These themes continue with her current series *To The Surface*, whereby Cowell has submerged and photographed garments in water to act as body-less sirens adrift on some strange temporal plain. Dark and complex in true gothic fashion, we spoke to Cowell about her photographic process and what drives her towards such distinctive subject matter.

TAKING THE DIVE

Cowell's first year at art school was a basic introduction to painting, sculpture and photography, but like many the simple and mechanical nature of 35mm film cameras was what first piqued her curiosity to explore the craft. In particular, she notes the "magic and alchemy of black and white film processing. I used to race through rolls of film, shooting at practically anything so I could get back into the darkroom and continue the magical process of image making. I enjoyed the complete technical control and the

various stages of decision-making that manage exposure, cropping, tone and contrast, and what felt like to me the almost supernatural processes using chemical dips and rinses that create and seal the camera's vision."

Three years later, Cowell completed her honours year in photography under the guidance of Anne MacDonald. "Anne belongs to a sub-genre within contemporary art termed 'Tasmanian gothic'. This genre is premised on the idea that something about Tasmania's isolation, climate and convict history tends to produce artists with an inclination to the sinister. Anne's work is a continual reference for me, and I feel very connected to her work and this sub-genre."

BREAKING FREE

Perhaps the most recent acclaim of Cowell's work has come about through her series *To The Surface*. Featuring ethereal garments seemingly animated by nothing, the series is also deeply significant for Cowell on a psychological level. "This project originated from my personal interest in collecting and archiving discarded feminine garments from the gutters and alleyways of suburban Adelaide," she says. "Once collected, I began photographing each garment submerged, adding liquids and dyes to augment a transformative process. My interest here involved an investigation into transformation – biological and fictional – and a study of found-object photography. Eventually, a literal upsizing of the project (from 100 litres to 1000 litres) allowed me to capture whole garments. The use of full garments in my work has allowed a much greater capacity for expression and narrative interpretation."

Cowell's current work depicts female garments, lingerie and couture arranged and illuminated while suspended in water. It is a massive, highly technical endeavour. "I have assembled a 1000-litre pool in my inner-city backyard in Melbourne in which I am able to immerse whole theatrical costumes and wedding dresses. I select these particular

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garments because of the sensory and emotional values that are evoked by the colour and quantity of the fabric, but also because of their association with a formality and deliberateness in dressing that has slipped out of meaning, like the absent wearer from my images.

"My objective in submerging the subject of my photographs is to generate a sense of the garments being 'inhabited', not only by an absent female body, but also by a complex of psychological states – the emotions and associated character traits. The desired effects are achieved through careful stitching and arranging, and a sense of movement elicited by the garment's submergence in water."

ISSUES OF IDENTITY

Issues surrounding female identity are close to Cowell's heart. When sourcing garments for her work she actively looks for pieces that communicate the kind of mood, feeling or emotion she wants to express. In particular, she has found wedding dresses to be especially potent. "They speak of hope, expectation and, of course, a symbolic transformation."

"One of my key inspirations is the 'princess' archetype of fairy tales, particularly wherein feminine garments operate as vehicles of metamorphosis, as in Disney adaptations in which the downtrodden character becomes a princess



through the wearing of the dress," she says. "As young women, we learn to include these ideas in our identity and hope for the future. When we are grown, we act out this hope through the wearing of the white wedding dress. I purchased the subject of my work Tidal from an op shop in the outer suburbs of Melbourne and photographed it saturated with

blue dye to enhance a sense of this symbolic transformative process and also to suggest a phase of biological metamorphosis."

Looking at Cowell's work, there is an immediate emotional connection for most, which is perhaps why she's fast drawing the eye of the art elite. It was entering the Emerging Artist prize with

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Flinders Gallery in 2013, though, that gave Cowell her first 'I've made it' moment. "The prize featured 10 artists from around Australia the gallery had earmarked for success in the future. Although I didn't win the prize, the gallery offered me a contract to become one of their regular artists. I'm showing with them this year as part of the Melbourne Art Fair along with various group exhibitions, and I'm holding my first major show with them in November this year."

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

You might be surprised to learn Cowell does not have a background in costume or puppetry, but shooting this series has given her an understanding of theatrical costume, its use and meaning. In fact, she now works for Masquerade Costume Hire, a costume hire company in Melbourne.

Many of Cowell's works also involve highly elaborate setups in order to enhance the dreamy, floating effect she's become renowned for. "My tripod mount is attached to the ceiling of the studio, allowing me to shoot from a bird's eye view into the pool. I run a cable from my camera to laptop and operate the camera using software."

Cowell does confess, however, that she isn't terribly savvy with photo-editing programs. "I left my love of post-processing in the darkroom. Especially as my photos are so large (92x133cm), any mistake in processing is very obvious. I have a technician in Adelaide who I pay to do my editing, which mostly just involves removing bits of floating debris and unwanted light reflections from the surface of the water." On lighting, Cowell prefers to use natural light only. "This is important, because the garments move in the water and I need a quick exposure."

Bringing your vision to reality is one thing, but many artists remain unable to find an audience or market for their work. Cowell's advice for those looking to crack into the fine-art world is to find a photographic artist or commercial photographer who is where you want to be

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and go about logically unpacking how they got where they are, and why. "Have a look at their CV and take note of the kind of prizes they've entered and enter them yourself," she says. "Have a look at the kinds of places they are exhibiting and consider whether your own work might be suitable for that market. Have a look at their website. See what kind of publications are writing about them. Find a reason to contact them, perhaps with a short question about their work, and see if they're open to giving you some advice.

"Also, education is a great tool. I completed my post-graduate diploma at the University of South Australia and undertook whole units of study about how to shape my CV, write grant applications and present myself professionally. I was also lucky enough to be paired with photographic artist Deborah Paaue through their mentorship program and received one-on-one coaching on all aspects of my practice, including professional development."

THE WORLD STAGE

Cowell left Tasmania after art school in 2008 and doesn't believe she'd be where she is now if she stayed, though she does point out there are still many successful artists in Tasmania who exhibit nationally and internationally. For Cowell, it's the world, rather than humble Australia, she hopes to make her stage.

Recently, Cowell has been invited to undertake a one-month residency at the Red Gate Gallery in Beijing, starting in January. The residency program provides facilities and a support network for international artists to take influence from the diverse and dynamic environment of Beijing. "The focus of my residency will be to make a research project of Chinese arts, theatre and textiles in order to shape an understanding of the meanings and narratives that are traditionally suggested by certain Chinese garments. My specific focus will be Beijing opera. Particularly, I would like to investigate the way costume is used in Chinese opera to illustrate emotional states and character according to colour symbolism and embroidery. I intend to use the resources and inspiration I have gathered during my residency to produce a series of photographic works featuring Chinese costume for exhibition with Gaffer Gallery in Hong Kong in 2015."

Beijing or Burwood, wherever Cowell finds herself a wake of striking, bold work is sure to follow. 



VISIT WEBSITE



VISIT FACEBOOK

IN THE BAG

CAMERAS

▶ Nikon D90 body

LENSES

▶ Nikkor 35-80mm lens

▶ Nikkor 60mm (for shooting jewellery)

▶ Tamron 18-270mm lens