

TRANSITIONS: UNDERTONES

Exhibition Essay by Michael Smith

Transitions is an annual undertaking by Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts and Townsville City Galleries that pairs local, emerging artists with mentors who support their creative practice. After group critiques, one-on-one mentor sessions and rigorous, process-driven experimentation, this exhibition marks the final stage of the program, with new artworks presented by Alicia Allen, Daniel Meza, N.A. Simpson and Simsala Grimm, and this exhibition essay from me. In *Transitions: Undertones*, each work holds multiple and even diverging inquiries, with shadow themes veiled through symbolism and metaphor.

Alicia Allen's *Blak stitches, white spaces* (2025) is an ode to her journey of reconnection to family lineages and cultural practices, told through a mural rag tapestry. The tapestry's material foundation is repurposed rags: cotton brush cloths from Allen's mural practice. The rags contain remnant marks of an artist's process. The repurposed rags speak to transformative aspects of Allen's personal, artistic and Cultural identity as a proud Aboriginal woman with connections to Kunja, Margany and Gunggari Country. As a typically discarded material and byproduct of her mural artwork, the rags become an integral base for the map(s) of the country she grew up on, Kooma Country.

Blak stitches, white spaces contains two maps. One is the bright, acrylic paint marks sprawled across the rags; the colourful markings of commissioned, mural artworks as a temporal mapping of artistic becoming. Here, the bleached recycled rags regain their own colour as Allen reconnects to culture through art. The other is the symbolic mapping of spiritual and cultural elements from Allen's childhood memories on Kooma Country, told in iconographic landmarks and figurative paintings of native animal portraits. This combination of contemporary and cultural elements is a metaphor for reconnection: weaving and mapping Culture back into her identity after experiencing fear of generational displacement as a result of colonisation.

The work is held together with black raffia (dried palm) to symbolise Allen's Blak Spirit. With keen eyes, one notices small patches between panels have been left unstitched. Allen has intentionally created disconnected lines in the panelling. This absence connects with Allen's autobiographical account of her journey as being in process, unfinished and lifelong.

Blak stitches, white spaces is a highly personal, autobiographical artwork. While it is splashed with bright spontaneous markings, Allen stitches undertones of grief into the artwork as a motivating force for connection. Similarly, beneath N.A. Simpson's bright and pleasing *Tulip Tree Flower*

(2025) prints, a darker story is being told. With their vivaciously warm yellows, reds and oranges, these flowers are a recognisable staple of the Gurambilbarra / Townsville environment. They are an emblem of vibrant North Queensland. However, despite their attractiveness, they are an invasive species. And they are wreaking considerable damage.

Simpson has paired analogue techniques and digital experimentation to highlight the dualistic nature of the African Tulip Tree. Throughout the seven prints, traditional aesthetics slip into digital play, dilating our vision as the tones of the flower morph and glitch. Simpson's considered use of colour draws our eye, like the native bee, towards the flowers' innards. Though the character of the flower shifts in each work, the powerful yellows, oranges and reds are further reinforced by Simpson's bold and consistent line. The vitality of the image is both attractive and alarming, telling both sides of the African Tulip Tree - where vibrancy and beauty clash with death and destruction.

From colour we move to shadow in Daniel Meza's black and white photographic portraits. With a background in street photography, Meza has shifted his focus to studio portraiture as grounds for experimentation throughout the *Transitions* program. All three photographs are carefully staged, with inspiration from film noir and the series *The Twilight Zone* informing the timeless style. Through Meza's experimentation with studio lighting, we find meaning in the placement of shadow and its interaction with the physical elements.

In *Head up high* (2025), a figure stands with their back to the camera, facing the same direction as the viewer. Two shadows form on either side of the subject. The shadow on the left appears lighter than the right, creating a sense of the subject posed between two aspects of themselves, each reflected at varying intensities. Although we do not see the figure's face, their posture conveys a sense of contemplation, as one looking in a mirror reveals elements of selfhood.

In motion (2025) centres Meza's camera on an empty chair. As in *Head Up High*, the left side of the photograph appears darker than the right, with the chair's shadow veering to the left. This stark image, void of the human figure, maintains dualistic notions of light and dark. Meza's positioning of the shadow animates the chair, giving a sense of movement to the seemingly still object.

Meza's third photograph, *Venomous* (2025), brings together the physical elements of the previous two photographs: figure, chair and shadow. The figure is dramatically posed, their elbows and knees form

a symmetrical, angular dance with the shadow beneath. Here Meza uses high contrast to fuse the figure and shadow's edges, distorting the human body into something otherworldly. Meza's clean stylistic aesthetic of the previous two photographs evolves in *Venomous*, where the physical form becomes dramatically abstracted through the placement of shadow - a kaleidoscopic human drama as a climactic finale.

To unpack gendered archetypes, Simsala Grimm explores cinematic horror and its use of 'hagsploitation' - the depiction of elderly, female figures as distorted or unwell. In hagsploitation, age renders the female body as inherently grotesque, something to be feared. This is a symptom of patriarchy's misogyny, which disregards elderly female wisdom by creating archetypes such as the witch. In horror, this weaponised cliché pushes the elderly woman to the fringes of societal worthiness, where she becomes a villainised outcast.

For *Mary / Mother / Hag* (2025), Grimm constructed a large-scale set featuring a sculpture of a mutated female figure. With three breasts and a tentacled limb, the figure poses with her face tilted, subdued innocence and contentment combines with a smirk. Behind her, a demonic, mythic creature lit in startling red appears from the darkness. Grimm has experimented with digital altering photographs of this set up, adding drooped and melted wax-like qualities to fabrics in the scene.

Like a tarot card, Grimm tells a new story of the female protagonist through her placement of symbols. Moving from left to right, the artist has placed a bird, the female figure, a large textile flower and a burning candle with another younger

female figure beneath. These themes of purity, fertility and a burning youth are overlooked by a symbol of evil. Grimm experiments with archetypical aspects and representations of womanhood as expressed in horror, though such representations are not restricted to the genre. These standardised, misogynistic references have influenced a social yet fictional narrative of the aging woman as villain.

While the predominant use of white alludes to Christian ideas of purity, referencing the virgin bride, Grimm complicates this by using white to also comment on 'white neutrality'. This subtle yet poignant message brings racial themes to the table, with Grimm likening the privileged position of white neutrality to an act of horror. *Mary / Mother / Hag* reveals the vilifying aspects of news media narratives engaged with race. Grimm urges us away from passive positions and towards being active, conscious, even critical consumers of media.

These works demonstrate the program's capacity to hold artists in ways that allow for the development of nuanced and multilayered artworks. The result is diverse and unique experimentations that are in no way self-indulgent. The role of art for these emerging artists is to have social, cultural and environmental impact. Art provides a means for these artists to grapple with the complicated present. Moreover, what lies beneath these artworks, the 'undertone' of the *Transitions* experience, is the formation of a community. As emerging artists, it can be daunting to share early works. Yet with the support of peers, mentors and organisations such as Umbrella, the confidence and quality of these artworks reflect the meaningful, accumulative efforts of many. And that speaks volumes.