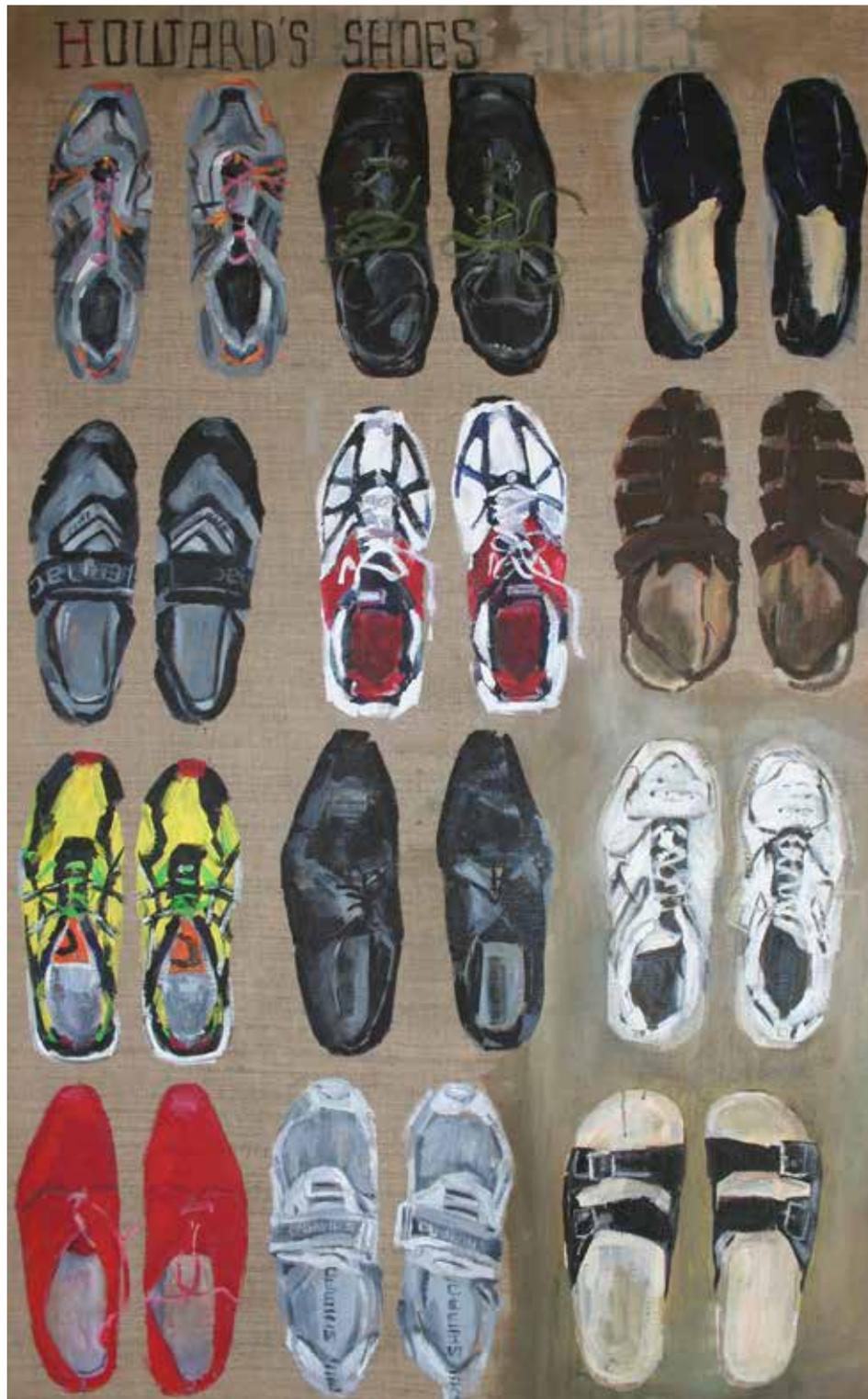


# The Emotional Life of Objects

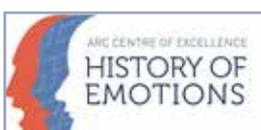


Curated by Penelope Lee and Kate Richards, 'The Emotional Life of Objects' is a collaborative project between the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, Europe 1100–1800, and The University of Melbourne.

## George Paton Gallery

Level 2, Union House, The University of Melbourne  
Wednesday 4 May – Friday 13 May 2016, 11am – 5pm

**GEORGE  
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GALLERY**



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## Foreword

Throughout our lives we come to surround and adorn ourselves with objects: bought, found, gifted or created. Many are utilitarian, others are meaningful and intimate. Our possessions become extensions of ourselves; they operate as self-portraits and provide us with a means to contemplate, comfort and understand. Why do we hold onto them? Do they burden us, or prompt us into remembering times, places, experiences and/or people, even those we wish to forget? Are they testimonies to the progression of time that hold traces and fragments of our histories, both personal and collective? Does their meaning change over time?

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions investigates how emotions are thought and felt, and how they function, both personally and communally, in history and in the present. 'The Emotional Life of Objects' is a curated exhibition that features the work of seven invited artists – Clara Bradley, Andrew Turland, Elizabeth Rich, Nicholas Mellefont, Linda Judge, Georgina Cockshott and Robyne Latham. Simultaneously concerned with objects and their absence, their artworks represent the act of remembering, and invite questions about emotional resonance and our intimate relationship with the material world.

'The Emotional Life of Objects' incorporates participatory elements, which invites audiences to share, contemplate and meditate upon their personal object of significance, its physical and affective dimensions and how it connects to memory and history. During the exhibition the curators will conduct a series of casting workshops and audio interviews, and engage with students from the disciplines of creative writing and music composition. The emerging responses will be incorporated into the exhibition, with the aim of utilising the gallery as a site of discourse, whereby personal artefacts sit alongside artworks. What will be created and left behind by audience members, beyond the individual traces of their personhood, is as yet unknown.

**Curators: Kate Richards and Penelope Lee**

**COVER** Linda Judge, *Howard's Shoes*, 2014, Acrylic on linen, 150 x 102cm. Image courtesy the artist.



Clara Bradley, *SAPPHIRE*, 2016, Polyester, rayon, steel, acrylic, 100 x 90cm. Image courtesy the artist.



Robyne Latham, *Cloak*, 2013, Bronze, 18.5 x 30 x 30cm. Image courtesy the artist.



Elizabeth Rich, *When Darkness Falls*, 2015, Glazed and unglazed stoneware and earthenware clay, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist.

## The Emotional Life of Objects, Past and Present

When does a possession become a thing of sentimental value, treasured and not simply owned? From the late medieval period, the word 'item' (from the Latin meaning 'in addition') was used in inventories and wills to distinguish between the different articles in a list: 'Item. Two candlesticks. Item. A brass pot.' The practice of inventorying goods in this way led to the present-day meaning of the word as a 'thing', most usually a commodity, which may be bought, sold, kept or given away. But in the past, as in the present, such 'items' might also be prized, cherished or beloved. In his last will and testament, William Shakespeare bequeathed 'all my wearing apparrell' to his sister Joan, and to his daughter, Judith, a 'silver gilt bole [bowl]'. But what do we make of Shakespeare's famously leaving his 'second best bed' to his wife? Much ink has been spilled over how to read Shakespeare's relationship with his wife through this seemingly odd bequest. And yet, history shows that in the early modern period the 'best' bed in the house was usually reserved for guests, while the 'second best' bed was mostly likely the marital bed, used by the couple every day. With the exception, perhaps, of art, it is very often those the things that we use every day which become our most valuable possessions. Such objects tell stories of our emotional lives, representing something intrinsic and even unsayable about our relationships in – and to – the world around us.

As sources for understanding how people felt about their things and about the roles things played in their lives in the past, wills are invaluable. But they speak, too, to the ephemerality of objects in the material world. The present exhibition explores how we remember 'things' that are no longer there, but also, crucially, how we remember with

things – or even with the memory of things – the people and places we hold dear. At the ARC Centre for the History of Emotions, we are deeply invested in reading the emotional texture of lives in the past, using objects, texts and images to unlock ways of thinking about the experience of being human. What 'The Emotional Life of Objects' does so beautifully is present us with a material meditation on materiality itself, which reflects on just how deeply people invest objects – from the everyday to the unusual – with different types of emotional value. The values attached to these objects and their representations speak together to the broader theme of memory – of the individual as well as the object – but also to the ways in which simple commodities, from shoes and records to bottle tops and Troll Dolls, may be invested with a sense of their worth which goes far beyond the utilitarian function or the financial worth of the item.

In pieces specially created for this exhibition, Clara Bradley and Georgina Cockshott each use material processes to shape artworks that are about objects displacing and encasing each other. Bradley's midnight blue satin cloth, hand-stitched with her own prose, remembers an absent ring, offering up an intimate narrative of the place of the ring in the artist's life. Cockshott's rows of Troll Dolls, made of crumbling fired glass, are a tiny fragile army behind a shiny glass display. One substance stands in for another, a material metaphor. Robyne Latham's *Cloak* casts in bronze the folds of the possum skin cloak it seeks to memorialise, drawing together the ancient histories of both Australia and the West. The exhibition contains things to touch us, and remind us of our own pasts, and other things that cannot be touched, and remind us of what can be touched no longer: *Howard's Books*,

shoes and records, painted by Linda Judge, are a kind of inventory taking, a paean to individual memory and to the memory of the individual, even an attempt to order the intensely personal experience of grief. In Latham's *Mother*, the empty coolamon is a poignant symbol of loss, both individual and communal.

How objects might console and comfort is a major theme of this exhibition, as is how they mediate between our inner experience of the world and its expression, and help give our lives meaning. The various shades, contours, textures and shapes in Elizabeth Rich's *When Darkness Falls* give material form to emotion and emotions themselves: smooth or rough? Sharp or round? The collections of 'found' objects in Nicholas Mellefont's mixed media collages are left open to interpretation at the same time as they might provoke us to wonder when, where and how they were lost. Finally, Andrew Turland's *Neo Vanitas* is a 'moving' homage to the Dutch Vanitas paintings of the early modern era, in which we see material itself undergo a process of transformation, here today and gone tomorrow. Each of the artworks in this exhibition tells a history of its own making through materiality and material process, using glass and bronze, paint and film. Finally, it is those objects which are the artists' own focus, lost or absent, represented either voluntarily or through necessity by other material means, that lie at the heart of the exhibition's meditation on how the past might be materially recaptured.

*Dr Stephanie Downes is a postdoctoral research fellow in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions at The University of Melbourne.*



Andrew Turland, *Neo Vanitas*, 2012 (video still), *Digital Media*, 7:37. Image courtesy the artist.

## the artists

### **Nicholas Mellefont** **Overboard, 2014**

Found object, mixed media collage  
31.5 x 25.9cm

### **Still Life, 2014**

Found object, mixed media collage  
31.5 x 25.9cm

### **Fossil Information, 2014**

Found object, mixed media collage  
31.5 x 25.9cm

### **Burroughed Time, 2014**

Found object, mixed media collage  
31.5 x 25.9cm

### **This Here Now, 2014**

Found object, mixed media collage  
31.5 x 25.9cm

### **New Artefacts, 2014**

Found object, mixed media collage  
31.5 x 25.9cm

### **Silly Monkey, 2014,**

Found object, mixed media collage,  
31.5 x 25.9cm

### **Prosodic Neologism, 2014**

Found object, mixed media collage  
31.5x 25.9cm

We intuit things on many levels. The physical qualities of an object coalesce with its psychological values as a symbol or a concept, and the subjective associations of the artist and the audience. There are agreed values shared by a society, and also personal ones. Mellefont's collages combine ready-made/ found objects with elements of his own creation. The selection and composition of objects fuses a range of artistic philosophies to document experiences of the everyday in a visual language assembled from everyday things.



*Nicholas Mellefont, Silly Monkey, 2014, Found object, mixed media collage, 31.5 x 25.9cm. Image courtesy the artist.*

**Linda Judge**  
**Howard's Books, 2014**  
Acrylic on linen  
137 x 137cm

**Howard's Shoes, 2014**  
Acrylic on linen  
150 x 102cm

**Howard's Records, 2014**  
Acrylic on canvas  
152 x 122cm

These works are part of a series in which the artist has documented the personal impact of her partner's death. Judge states, 'Initially I believed that if I painted his things it would stop me forgetting who he was and then maybe, it might be easier to throw some of his things away. But this wasn't the case and I still have most of his books, shoes and records (which I sometimes listen to)'.

**Robyne Latham**  
**Cloak, 2013**  
Bronze  
18.5 x 30 x 30cm

**Mother, 2013**  
Bronze  
35 x 14 x 17cm

Emblematic of the highest echelons of the fine arts, Cloak and Mother are bronze casts. They bear witness to the impact of colonisation on the First Nation peoples of Australia.

**Mother.**  
Across the generations we still hear the silent screams of agonizing loss. The mother sees her cradling coolamon is empty. Her baby's been taken. Never again will she rock him in her coolamon cradle. Never again will she see him. Never again will she hold him.

**Cloak.**  
The possum skin cloak stands cold and empty, though the cloak remembers his form and grace. For the twenty years the young man wore this cloak, it grew with him, possum pelt by possum pelt, his history intricately etched in ocher on the soft leather. It was his cloak. But now he's gone.

The blanket he traded for an axe head was infected with small pox. Now he is dead, though the cloak remembers his grace and form.

**Clara Bradley**  
**SAPPHIRE, 2016**  
Polyester, rayon, steel, acrylic  
100 x 90cm

A Black Sapphire is said to imbue a confidence in one's own intuition when worn. SAPPHIRE investigates the potential for a channel of communication between the dead and living via years of layered touch. It conveys anecdotal evidence of the artist's relationship with her late mother through the adornment of the former's engagement ring.

**Georgina Cockshott**  
**Where Dolls Lay, 2016**  
Glass (pate de verre) in vitrine  
dimensions variable

Psychological attachments to objects in childhood and adolescence shape identity. Discomfort is felt when this attachment is broken or lost. Icons of pre-adolescent culture in the 1990s, Troll Dolls have been cast using a pate de verre technique (literally 'paste of glass'). Like fossils or ghosts of a pastime, the spirits of these collected toys are captured within the vitrine. Devoid of their colourful hair and individualism, only the residue of their forms remain.

**Andrew Turland**  
**Neo Vanitas, 2012**  
Digital media, 7.37

The tradition of vanitas painting, typical of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, employed symbolic still-life compositions to represent the transience of life. Turland's still life is awakened through a screen based time-lapse. Elements of the composition are looped in forward and reverse, employing the digital medium to convey notions of death and denial of death.

**Elizabeth Rich**  
**When Darkness Falls, 2015**  
Glazed and unglazed stoneware and earthenware clay  
Dimensions variable

In a brooding, rich palate, erratic gestures of painterly brushwork reveal surfaces and mark making. Details of colour, texture and surface become a vocabulary of transient felt states, embodied in rounded forms. Aiming to evoke a connection with the viewer by acknowledging the affective potential that objects can engender, this work attempts to make the intangible landscape of emotion tangible.

**The organisers acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which this exhibition and associated events are taking place as the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations. We pay our respects to their Elders and families, past, present and future. The organisers would like to acknowledge that sovereignty over this land was never ceded.**