

WRESTLE

MANIA

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Rockhampton
Museum of Art

Tony **'THE HEARTBREAK KID'** Albert
'SUPER-HOT' ChiliPhilly
Leah **'PUBLIC ENEMY'** Emery
Erica **'KAMIKAZE'** Gray
Julia **'HEAVY METAL'** Higgs
Patricia **'HOT ROD'** Hoffie
Drew Connor **'TRIPLE THREAT'** Holland
'HACKSAW' Peter Hudson
Freya **'JACK-KNIFE'** Jobbins
'LETHAL' Locust Jones
Ed **'THE ANVIL'** Luce
Euan **'THE MANIMAL'** Macleod
Paul **'DADDY'** Mumme
'PHILTHY' Philjames
'BAM BAM' Ben Quilty
Bruce **'THE RAVAGER'** Reynolds
Jack **'JACK O' DIAMONDS'** Rodgers
Monica **'RIPCORD'** Rohan
'LAVISH' Lale Westvind
'HOWLIN' Manda Wolf

Curated by
Jonathan **'THE MANIAC'** McBurnie

WrestleMANIA

Professional wrestling is a strange beast. Not quite sport, not quite theatre, it exists in a grey area between forms as a sincere, misunderstood, and yet incredibly self-aware art form.

In the very first paragraph of his 1954 essay 'In the Ring', Roland Barthes wrote of wrestling's virtue as 'a spectacle of excess'ⁱ, and draws comparisons to theatre, circus and bullfights. This remarkable statement cuts to the heart of the matter of wrestling's visual dynamism, its formal hybridity and its fascinating histories. Strangely, however, especially of the massive and more or less sustained international popularity of pro wrestling since the 1980s, Barthes remains the one of the few 'serious' (that is to say, intellectual) commentators of wrestling, at least in the written form, to date.

While there has in recent years been increasing interest in wrestling culture and history, it has largely been explored in the context of documentary and autobiography, rather than cultural theory. While many of these entries are compelling in their own right (autobiographies by wrestlers such as Mick Foley (1999, 2001, 2007) and Big Van Vader (2019), Vice's excellent docuseries *the Dark Side of the Ring* (2019-21) and *Nitro* (2018), Guy Evans' detailed account of the 'Monday Night Wars' and the demise of wrestling promotion WCW), there remains a dearth of material looking deeply into the cultural, artistic and formal complexities of wrestling. *WrestleMANIA* celebrates the complicated hybrid of sport, entertainment, and yes, art, that wrestling has become, examining this unique cultural touchstone through the work of twenty visual artists. *WrestleMANIA* draws parallels between the constructed worlds of art pro wrestling, in terms of both idioms' massive index of jargon and industry-specific terms, the willing sacrifice of one's own self (whether it be mental, physical or a combination of the two) as fuel for the artistic act, and the presentation of constructed versions of the self (whether through the work itself or the adoption of persona).

Many cultures have developed their own unique strain of wrestling, and remarkably, all include a sense of theatre and ritual. From the entrance music and fireworks of North American pro wrestling to the elaborate ceremony of Japanese sumo wrestling. Rockhampton may at first appear a

strange choice for a wrestling-themed exhibition, but it is privy to its own secret wrestling history. Besides being the birthplace of international wrestler Bob McMaster (aka Wallaby Bob) and a stronghold for Olympic wrestler and unionist Hughie Williams, Rockhampton was also a surprising host to a world champion match in the 1960s, along with Sydney and Melbourne.

WrestleMANIA is an examination of this compelling and dynamic entertainment by a diverse selection of artists, asked to provide a body of work which responds to wrestling in all its spectacle, physicality, psychology and humour.

Barthes continues,

Some people consider that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to watch a wrestled performance of Suffering than the Sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque. Of course there is such a thing as fake wrestling which goes to great lengths to produce the useless appearance of a fair fight; this is of no interest. True wrestling, incorrectly called amateur wrestling, takes place in second-rate halls, where the public spontaneously adjusts itself to the spectacular nature of the combat, as does the public of B films. These same audiences are subsequently outraged that wrestling matches are fixed (which, moreover, should mitigate their ignominy).ⁱⁱ

Even in 1957, upon the essay's publication, Barthes is already pointing to wrestling as a hybrid form, linking it directly from sport to theatre and film. By mentioning Arnolphe and Aramanque, both characters of French theatre (comedic and tragic, respectively), Barthes is highlighting two key ingredients in the theatrical presentation of wrestling which remain to this day. Further, he alludes to the classist associations of wrestling, which persist today despite its increasing resemblance to theatre. The 'adjustment' to the spectacle Barthes mentions is as much classist as perceptual, and this can be applied in a contemporary context; wrestling today is a true cross-media format, spanning from stage to screen, including an expanding range of video games, toys and other merchandise.

While television was and is a key component in wrestling's ever-expanding grip on the popular consciousness, it is telling that, unlike many sports, wrestling never found a strong foothold in radio. I would argue that this owes less on an over-dependence upon wrestling's visuality— the entertaining, hyperbolic pathos of wrestling commentators such as Jim Ross, Gorilla Monsoon, Jesse Ventura and Tony Schiavone would quickly disprove that theory— but is rather more likely to be a result of wrestling's place in the sports pecking order.ⁱⁱⁱ

Barthes' comments on wrestling being 'fixed' are interesting in terms of his prescient understanding of the nature of wrestling decades before WWF CEO Vince McMahon Jr admitted that pro wrestling did indeed often enjoy predetermined outcomes. While this was not the first public glance 'behind the curtain' of wrestling, it was the first emphatic statement made on behalf of an entire corporation. This admission was made for financial reasons: legitimate sports were taxed at a higher rate to that of entertainment. As Barthes said in 1957, 'The public couldn't care less that the fight is or isn't fixed, and rightly so; the public confines itself to the spectacle's primary virtue, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters to this public is not what it believes but what it sees'.^{iv} While there had always been doubters of the legitimacy of wrestling, it was not until the 1990s that the boundary between life and performance, which had always been a blurred division in wrestling, began to be actively manipulated and explored by enterprising wrestlers and promoters, made possible largely by the internet, and a fan hunger for deeper engagement than was possible previously. In other words, kayfabe, the wrestler's code of silence regarding behind-the-scenes aspects of wrestling, was no longer an industry secret.

Kayfabe

In the world of pro wrestling, Kayfabe is a term that has evolved around what was for many years a strict code of professional conduct. Wrestlers, with their constructed 'Babyface' (good guy) and 'heel' (bad guy) personas were expected to stay in character outside the ring, lest they reveal to the public that wrestling was, indeed, choreographed with pre-determined outcomes. In Mexico, this was taken to further heights, with many wrestlers wearing their Luchador masks in public and even at home,

embracing their characters completely. Kayfabe was slowly eroded as wrestling began to be televised more frequently, increasing in popularity in the 1980s with the global reach of cable television, and was finally cast aside in the mid to late '90s so-called 'attitude' era of wrestling, which began incorporating far more elaborate soap-opera style plotlines and backstage reality TV-style content, and dovetailed with the new phenomenon of using writers with, or instead of traditional 'bookers', many of whom were paying close attention to fan commentary on the internet.

Rather than 'killing the sport' as many feared, the erosion of Kayfabe has led to a more complicated relationship between wrestlers and audiences, which requires a heightened level of suspension of disbelief and a focus on acrobatic prowess. This brings wrestling far closer to theatre, built on a compelling sense of both self-awareness of both audience and performer, each complicit in the others' understanding of the drama unfolding. Wrestlers began to actively manipulate the boundaries between reality and fiction and building on an increasingly multigenerational fanbase. Somewhat akin to the 1960s *Batman* television show, WWF and WCW appealed to an adult audience attuned to postmodern forms including irony and multivalence, and a younger audience who could still approach wrestling with sincerity, believing the spectacle was real. Fans could get even more involved, with wrestling promotions such as the WWF and WCW pouring resources into their virtual platforms, sensing significant tectonic shifts in the media world.

Far from destroying pro wrestling's credibility, as was feared, dismissing Kayfabe actually propelled the entertainment to new heights of popularity, and paradoxically returned it to its continental American (rather than Grecian) roots; that is, a travelling show more akin to theatre or Vaudeville than sport. Theatrical elements were amplified, and the already steroidal, over-the-top theatrics of wrestling adopted the hysterics and ADHD aesthetic of the contemporary digital world. The paradox of wrestling, of being on one level a fiction (planned storylines, pre-determined victories and losses), and on another level all too real (a high physical toll, frequent injuries, and a culture of endless motels and self-medication) is, outsized, provocative and deeply fascinating. In the years since the so-called

'Monday Night Wars' between WWF and WCW, there have been countless deaths of wrestlers, particularly of the 1980s and 1990s, where a 'broader' approach self-medication often dovetailed with steroid use and relentless performance schedules.

The abandonment of kayfabe also brings about a more complicated and nuanced understanding of wrestling for the consumer which requires a certain level of suspension of disbelief in order to enjoy and appreciate wrestling in its entirety. The contemporary wrestling viewer is both aware of the industry and theatrical mechanics of wrestling, yet willingly dismisses these notions to better engage with it in the moment. This level of involvement is rarely required outside of the arts; while in most popular sports, fans enjoy a certain level of analysis in the selection of a team or knowledge of recent injuries and so forth, but the outcome will be (in theory) unplanned and unmolested. This, of course, is often subverted through match fixing and so forth, but this is the exception that proves the rule. In wrestling, an outcome may be decided months ahead, or indeed negotiated in the ring in response to audience reaction, which brings its own sense of spontaneity, which would account for wrestling's continued popularity after the abandonment of kayfabe. Strangely, wrestling's closest formal analogue, at least in terms of a postmodern consumer understanding of narrative and its limitations, is pornography. Like wrestling, pornography often manufactures outrageous, even absurd narrative situations that serve as a basis for the 'action', for want of a better word. This is often abetted by the performer's emphatic exaggeration (the wink at the camera, the furtive smile at a co-actor's hammy line), a kind of knowing performance not unlike pantomime; the audience is inherently assumed and co-opted, with a dual understanding of both the depicted situation being presented as reality, but that the reality is inherently flawed, or at the very least, constructed. Both can be discussed in regard to being real or fake, whether we are discussing bodies, situations, acts or outcomes, but in all cases there is a constant mediation between both extremes of this spectrum of what we call reality.

The "fake" and the "real"

Professional wrestling has been entwined in a debate around authenticity for decades. With much of pro wrestling choreographed or improvised

toward pre-determined outcomes, wrestling is regularly accused of being fake. While from a certain perspective this is accurate, the very real dangers of wrestling must be taken into consideration. Theatrics aside, the physical toll on wrestlers is, like many contact sports, incredibly high; injuries are frequent and many wrestlers have died, or been seriously injured, on the mat. At what point is wrestling considered fake or real? Blood— real blood— is frequently drawn in wrestling, often purposefully and sometimes by accident, but this is always exploited for theatrical effect. The line between real and fake is a fascinating grey area, and has certainly gained prescience since the beginning of postmodernism.

Wrestlers have influenced the paintings of Euan MacLeod for years, particularly in his treatment of the figure and their dense and massive physicality. A self-confessed fan of wrestling of the 1960s and 70s, when wrestlers looked more like bricklayers and stevedores than bodybuilders, MacLeod has frequently used Libnan Ayoub's seminal book *100 Years of Australian Professional Wrestling* as a source of visual reference and inspiration. Ayoub's book documents Australia's rich wrestling history, a rough and ready do-it-yourself culture which has been reinvigorated in recent years. The mountains and oceans of MacLeod's paintings are populated by figures who appear to be wandering in an existential search for meaning. These figures are treated with the artist's signature energy and dynamism, an appropriate translation of wrestling's outsized psychology and physical intensity.

Exploring the biblical tale of Jacob wrestling the angel on the banks of the River Jabbok by way of the convoluted mythology of Henry Darger's obsessive outsider art project the Vivien girls, Pat Hoffie's *WrestleMANIA* works are a heady brew of remix and punch 'n' roll semiotics that have distinguished her recent paintings. The danger and violence of Darger's Vivien Girls is transposed into the industrial landscapes of Hoffie's recent oeuvre, displacing them from their ruinous American Civil War battlefields into more ambiguous, postcolonial terrain. Darger's work was always a complicated dynamic of innocence and danger, and Hoffie's triptych ups the stakes, exploring wrestling not only as a performative spectacle, but as a metaphor for (artistic, Sisyphean) existence and the struggle for meaning

and spiritual enlightenment. This tension is highlighted in Hoffie's dramatic brushwork and high-key graphics, transposing Darger's very internalised sense of violence with the biblical melodrama of the squared circle.

Cartoon violence, caricature, exaggeration are frequent cornerstones of Philjames' practice. Depicting an animated scrum of fists and anthropomorphic faces, battling it out in a wrestling ring and a cartoon cloud of colour, Philjames' diptych evokes wrestling's melodramatic tendency toward broadly-sketched character types that can be instantaneously picked up by new audiences. This has its origins in the travelling roadshow of wrestling in the Americas, but prepared wrestling promotions for a smooth transition to television, a medium which demands an equal level of quick accessibility. Cartoons, like wrestling, have been a crucial part of popular culture of the 20th century, and a pillar of television right from the beginning.

Drew Connor Holland's fascination with wrestling, a favourite childhood pastime, and in particular wrestler-turned-actor Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, and wrestling superstar Hulk Hogan, has culminated in a number of works over the years. Holland's process, which involves creating 'situations' through games and 3d modelling software, and then printing the images on rough, hand-made paper containing any number of personal detritus, creates a fascinating collision between the virtual and the physical. Famous wrestlers have appeared beside uncanny, 'wrestler' versions of the artist himself, tangles of bodies in strange, disembodied virtual spaces, accentuated by the glitches and imperfections of the digital and physical media respectively.

Persona and alter-ego, costume and theatricality

Wrestling has embraced the idea of persona for many years. This grows out of its origins in the Americas as a travelling roadshow, akin to circus, carnival and sideshow, and a need for an instantly identifiable characters and stories, hence the 'Face' (short for Babyface- the hero) and the 'Heel' (the villain). This has grown into a far more diverse lexicon over the years, but the core tenet of persona remains, with many wrestlers changing their

wrestling characters several times over their careers, and even occasionally keeping several active at once (Mick Foley being the great example, one year appearing as all three of his personae- Cactus Jack, Dude Love and Mankind- at the Royal Rumble, a battle royale where a wrestler enters the ring every two minutes). Alter-egos and personas are, of course, a commonplace within the visual and performing arts, offering avenues for expression outside the bounds of acceptability, taste and good humour.

Theatricality has always been a lynchpin of the wrestling match, branching from frequent use of persona, and theatricality naturally follows. Projecting to the back seats, many wrestlers opt to use a particular set of vocal histrionics, employing catch phrases and vocal tics, but theatricality extends into costume, choreography, body language, narrative, entrance music and in recent years has expanded into special effects such as fireworks, projections, big-screen video intros and reality TV-style vignettes. The ring itself is a stage, which is often adapted to heighten drama; the cage match and the barbed wire match are long-standing wrestling traditions and emphasize the real physical dangers facing wrestlers.

Freya Jobbins explores the use of persona and alter ego in wrestling through its frequent use of costume and, particularly, the mask. Masks are frequently used in wrestling, particularly in the Mexican and Japanese traditions. Some of the world's most memorable wrestlers have used masks to better communicate their persona, and create a theatrical presence; Mankind, El Santo, Big Van Vader, Jushin Liger, The Destroyer, Último Dragón, Rey Mysterio and Mil Máscaras all employed masks into their in-ring personas to enduring popularity (even Hulk Hogan wore a mask for a brief period during his 'Mister America' gimmick). Jobbins' work employs the flesh-coloured, discarded plastics from dolls and toys to create masks with an unsettling and uncanny organic finish. These masks reference superheroes of course, but importantly they highlight an important antecedent to pro wrestling, *the commedia dell'arte*, an early form of Italian comedy theatre, which like wrestling, uses masks as a visual shorthand to indicate specific characters. Jobbins' masks are

accompanied by posters which references Netflix' *GLOW* (short for Glorious Ladies Of Wrestling), a television series based on the lives of a real life troupe of trailblazing female wrestlers from the 1980s.

Erica Gray approaches wrestling from the perspective of theatre, circus and modern wrestling's origins as a variation of the sideshow attraction. Using red, tasselled fabric commonly associated with theatrical curtains, Gray has created a hanging sculptural piece, suspended by lines, orbited by assorted brightly coloured forms. The wrestlers themselves are depicted with the waxed mustachios favoured by late nineteenth century travelling roadshow performers, as well as masked Luchador wrestlers and the starbursts and flat geometries, emulating the graphics of early poster art. The pillowy plushness of the artist's work also recalls a somewhat bizarre series of 1991 wrestling merchandising released by Tonka, the so-called 'Wrestling Buddies', a line of wrestler-themed plush toys marketed to children.

Julia Higgs' pieces embrace the over-the-top antics of wrestling, replacing the face and heel of a match with a vegetable-acid-themed binary, capsaicin versus citrus (or more specifically, capsaicin acid versus citric acid). Beside the gleefully cartoonish costume of these two characters, we are left clueless as to the who is the hero and villain of the works. This is itself a parody of the broad character sketches we come to associate with wrestling but remains deeply affectionate. These two characters would not be out of place in an episode of *Spongebob Squarepants* or *Ren & Stimpy*, and extend Higgs' own practice, which embraces absurdity and humour in its performative elements.

Monica Rohan's works are a departure from her usual interest in the landscape, taking cues from wrestling's unabashed extroversion and performance to re-examine the way emotional states are expressed through the human form. These works deploy a traditionally staged backdrop bringing focus to the figures: multiple versions of Rohan appear to be fighting one another, embracing the physicality and self-aware nature of the wrestling performance to literally act out internal tension and struggle. A counterpart to these works are a series depicting the artist's hands tensely intertwined. While these hands could further



represent human figures locked in combat, they depict the wringing of hands in a moment of anxiety, cropped and enlarged to more clearly express the physical strain in the hands as their blushing flesh is squeezed and pulled.

Wrestling and gender

Wrestling was a fast adopter of Queer and particularly Camp culture and aesthetics. While it may be understood in a derogatory (or more specifically, a villainous) fashion in early wrestling, gender play quickly became a staple of the theatrics of this popular entertainment. Gorgeous George, one of the earliest stars of wrestling to experience international fame, built his entire persona out of the idea of the stereotype of the perfumed, flamboyant, narcissistic dandy. Gorgeous George becoming one of wrestling's earliest stars thanks to his visuality adapting smoothly to the demands television, the new medium brought wrestling closer to, and eventually into, the mainstream. While not explicitly Queer per se, Gorgeous George's persona was certainly *queering* and undeniably camp. Appearing in lavish outfits of ostrich feathers, sequins and platinum blonde curls may not appear as radical today, wrestling in the 1940s and '50s was a largely working class affair, and Gorgeous George's charisma and elaborate schtick would invoke incredible wrath (or 'heat', in wrestling parlance). Preceded to the ring by a valet who would spray it with Chanel and drop rose petals, Gorgeous George's visual theatrics were perfect for television, a burgeoning media hungry for content, which helped catapult wrestling— and Gorgeous George— into the popular consciousness.^v Indeed such notables as John Waters, Mohammed Ali, James Brown and Bob Dylan have espoused their love of Gorgeous George and his influence upon their showmanship.

Camp aesthetics, gender play and Queer personas have always been a part of wrestling, with varying degrees of success. *Exóticos*, a *Luche Libra* term that has been adopted into mainstream pro wrestling, are wrestlers who competes in drag, often include gender and sexual ambiguity in their in-ring persona, incorporating a campy, playful persona into their performance. Famous *exóticos* include Pimpinela Escarlata, Gardenia Davis, Goldust, Yosuke Santa Maria, Sonny Kiss and Exotic Adrian Street.

It must be noted that while such gender-bending incursions into the usually hetero (or, more accurately, hetero *presenting*) world of pro wrestling may be zeitgeist-cool or on-point in our woke world, this was a provocative and even dangerous move in the postwar years. Adrian Street, the son of a Welsh coal miner, embraced his 'Exotic' Adrian Steet persona in glittering glam splendour. Like many followers of Bowie, Roxy Music and T-Rex, Street crafted a personal and subversive aesthetic response to the hardened realities (and attitudes) of the UK working class, adopting the pomp, chic and dazzle that was until then the purview of the ruling class. 'Street didn't self-destruct, and he kept the camp and revulsion in line, by dint of pure charisma ... In later years, Street's sense of gender fluidity set the stage for a more inclusive wrestling world ... a coal miner's son, dressed like a rock star'.^{vi}

Drawing inspiration from drag, ChiliPhilly's practice often involves donning a costume and becoming a new, camp, performative version of themselves—not unlike the personae created by many wrestlers. The creations provide a humorous take on the masked wrestling superhero living an extraordinary double life. Instead, the artist's cute and strange wearable headpieces turn the wearer into the ordinary, including a frog, hamburger, and tomato. Exploring wrestling's camp and often hyper-masculine costuming of its 'faces' and 'heels,' ChiliPhilly satirises wrestling with affection and humour, offsetting bulging muscles and outsized egos through the realm of knitting and crochet, traditionally associated as a 'feminine' art, itself an association overripe for exploration.

Ed Luce's popular comic, *Wuvable Oaf*, is perhaps the world's first Queer/heavy metal/wrestling culture hybrid. Luce's titular hero, a former devil-themed pro wrestler (called 'Goteblüd'), is a massive, hairy sweetheart and proud catdad, wonderfully rendered in Luce's cartoonish, massive drawing style. While *Oaf* is on some levels a work of eroticism, Luce is careful to avoid overtly explicit content, helping maintain a level of innocence and playfulness, helped along in part by *Oaf*'s love of cats and the earnest sincerity of his character. Luce's comic demonstrates a deep reverence for wrestling and draws out Queer elements of wrestling culture

sometimes overlooked or ignored, despite being a fascinating and indivisible aspect of the art form.

While wrestling has always been gender diverse, this has not always been prominently presented, particularly in the mainstream. As Eric Shorey writes, due to the decades-long dominance of McMahon Jr's WWF and later WWE, most women in mainstream wrestling 'would be relegated to positions of subservience, objectification, and degradation [...] they were largely joke characters or sideshow acts, often played for laughs or raunchy thrills'.^{vii} While McMahon Jr's often perverse, sexist and homophobic plot twists, particularly of the late 1990s, are looked back at today with disdain, it is important to remember that these were considered routinely politically incorrect and often offensive at the time, turning off many long-time wrestling fans, and parents looking for a more child-friendly entertainment. Of course, retrospection also highlights certain exceptions; Shorey notes that Lita and Trish Stratus "didn't exist *only* as objects to be brutalized or leered at by men; it's obvious today how skilled both were in the ring"(my italics).^{viii} Given Lita's incredible acrobatic facility, even this admission appears somewhat understated.^{ix}

This period of the WWF (referred to as the 'Attitude Era' was also the home of Chyna, a female wrestler whose massive, muscular physique set her apart from every other performer of the time. 'Chyna's entire legacy can be seen as a sort of counter-argument to the logic of misogyny entrenched within wrestling [...] It was Chyna whose body was read by commentators and competitors alike as simultaneously deserving of lust, disgust, and even envy'^x. Such statements would seem align Chyna's gender ambiguity with the subversive, satirical edge of camp and dragging, but this is not necessarily an accurate assessment. Considering the prevalence of women and gender diversity in both wrestling and body building culture today, Chyna's Otherness would likely be much more accepted— and celebrated— today, a time where the bodybuilder aesthetic is no longer the province of men only. With jacked wrestlers like Beth Phoenix, Rhea Ripley and Kaitlyn performing largely free from the kind of hateful commentary experienced by Chyna (at least outside of social

media), it is likely that Chyna would have a completely different experience today.

Lale Westvind's comics push the very limits of the human form and movement, with an intensely graphic approach to abstraction, storytelling and mythology, which usually revolves around female protagonists. Forming a fascinating visual arcology of female deities and genesis allegory, often in combination with pop culture touchpoints including motorbikes, Jack Kirby and Art Deco, Westvind's work is as multiphrenious as it is dynamic. In *WestleMANIA*, the artist explores the early, hand-painted wrestling posters of carnivals and travelling roadshows—a nascent form of popular culture and a middle ground between the graphic or comic book qualities of the wrestling aesthetic. Both Westvind's drawings and her inspiration are hyperbolic, toeing the line between sincerity, melodrama and camp, with three representations of her creative muses: the inner primal being, Wilda, a spiked and clawed warrior whose multiple breasts emerge from her expansive orange fur, the visionary sprit, Vizor, whose costume echoes *Spiders From Mars*-era Bowie and some kind of *Tokusatsu* villain, and the human/machine hybrid the Jet, a cyborg of gleaming metal. Each character is bedecked with their own comic book logo, and Westvind shows a gleeful familiarity with the spectacle of wrestling in the heroes' bodyslams and the smoke and fireworks of performance.

Manda Wolf's work also plays on the pumped-up, neon aesthetics of wrestling, drawing heavily from the 1980s, a period which saw the WWF successfully cross over from niche sports-entertainment into the mainstream, aided by the massive popularity of wrestlers such as the Ultimate Warrior, the Legion of Doom and Hulk Hogan, all of whom were outlandishly, and brightly, costumed. Wolf explores eroticism, satire and persona through elaborate soft-sculptural costumes and playful performances and props, scored by an electroclash dance beat. 'Foreign objects' themselves are a recurring trope of wrestling, with baseball bats, ladders and of course folding chairs serving as 'weapons' in the ring. Wolf satirises this convention with props of giant bananas, barbells and chains, all being moved to the pulsing beat, a Camp spectacle which enjoys the

boundary pushing of the more fetishistic, outré qualities of wrestling, not unlike a music video.^{xi}

Embracing the flamboyant, high-flying stylings of *Lucha Libre*, Latin America's own distinctive pro wrestling, Leah Emery approaches the Luchador mask with equal parts veneration and sartorial camp. Employing cross-stitch, weaving and crochet, Emery makes a playful statement about a pastime commonly associated with masculinity through art forms commonly associated with femininity. In actuality, wrestling has always featured a prominent female contingent (look no further than Bolivian *Cholita* wrestling), yet only in more recent years has this become more prominently recognised. Emery explores the aesthetics of *Lucha Libre* with equal parts kitsch, camp, glamour and fascination, creating a piece that as much enshrines these aesthetics as reinvents them.

At its core, it must be remembered that wrestling is, by definition, Camp. Much like theatre, pure Camp is defined against its own sincerity, its own naivety, 'the essential element is seriousness, seriousness that fails [...] the spirit of extravagance'^{xii}. As Sontag clarified in 1961, 'the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric— something of a private code, a badge of identity'^{xiii}, a statement applicable to wrestling's cultural complexities if there ever was one. It is unlikely Sontag considered wrestling in her analysis of Camp, but the specificity of her treatise in terms of its cultural complexities, gender politics and relationship to high and low in the world of mass media are all particularly pertinent. Perhaps, like Camp, wrestling is best viewed as an imperfect art, imbricated with aspects that may not be reconcilable by the artist or performer, or indeed persona.

Tragedy

Tragedy has always had a place in wrestling, whether in the context of theatre and narrative, or in the real-life consequences of a transitory life of self-medication, the pitfalls of stardom (or lack of it) and the incredible physical toll of wrestling itself. Tragedy, itself a heightened form of storytelling, is a natural bedfellow for wrestlers, whose outsized personas and oversized physiques. Tragedy often informs the narrative framework

of media about wrestling. Darren Aronofsky's 2008 film, *the Wrestler*, was built around the physical and personal ruin of fictional wrestler Randy 'the Ram' Robinson, physically embodied by the battered visage of Mickey Rourke, himself a somewhat tragic figure. The docuseries *Dark Side of the Ring* is primarily built around the real-life tragedies of wrestling, from injury and drug use to mob enforcement and murder-suicide, a wrestling-centric take on the 'true crime' strand of literature and documentary.

Paul Mumme's work has long dealt with the absurd, meditating on the Sisyphean act of artistic practice, itself a wrestle with the absurdity of human endeavour. Referencing the ropes of the wrestling ring, affectionately known as 'the squared circle', Mumme has tied down an entire house in suburban Brisbane, playing on the bathos and humour of pro wrestling as a parallel to artistic practice. The action of tying them in place is futile and irrational, a pointless and over-the-top attempt to establish unnecessary certainty. Wrestling ropes are a key aspect of pro wrestling, providing a contained area for action, as well as an opportunity for subversion; wrestlers frequently leave the ring in their matches, as well as using them as a launchpad or slingshot, and ropes often provide potential for an aspect of slapstick visual comedy to break up longer matches.

Ben Quilty's large scale piece, *The Wrestler*, emphasizes the high physical toll upon wrestlers. Despite the often-choreographed nature of the spectacle, wrestling invariably leads to high rates of injury, leading many wrestlers to work in an injured state which sometimes lead to long term physical problems. The massive figure in Quilty's piece is appears to be stabbing his own leg, with a Trump-like mask falling away from a skeletal face, perhaps referencing the truth behind the constructed persona. The sickly greens of the background and slippery application of oil paint lends the work a hallucinatory, unsettling quality. Is Quilty's piece a Trump allegory? Always with an eye to the ratings, Trump appeared as himself on WWE in 2007, beating McMahon in a 'Hair Match', a long-standing wrestling convention wherein the loser of a match must submit to having their head shaved in front of the audience. The Trump-McMahon Hair

Match is a prime example of wrestling's tendency toward theatre and farce, but not at the expense of ticket sales.

Bruce Reynolds' works take wrestling back to their antiquary origins. Long before the fireworks, sequins and steroids, wrestling was a test of not only one's strength, but the clarity and focus of one's mind. This has evolved into modern day Greco-Roman wrestling, the name of which references wrestling as the embodiment of spiritual values and philosophies, a far cry from what we now associate with pro wrestling. Perhaps more easily associated with the verbose histrionics of pro wrestling is Greco-Roman wrestling's connection to mythological figures such as Heracles and Gilgamesh. Reynolds' sculptural forms, created by relief and plaster casting, themselves embody a massive physicality, and connect the contemporary with the ancient.

Wrestling's place within popular culture

In the 1970s and 1980s, Vince McMahon Jr's understanding of the potential for national, and soon international exposure via cable television and licensing deals changed the landscape of wrestling in continental America, turning it into what was essentially a number of regional promotions, and into a multinational juggernaut. Aided by some sharp cross-promotion (think Cyndi Lauper and Mr T appearing on televised episodes of WWF), merchandising, the increasing popularity of Hulk Hogan and an aesthetic that was built around massive physicality, the WWF became a pop cultural sensation. Popular culture such as comic book heroes and *Star Wars* characters have been orbiting Tony Albert's work for years, and the artist's 2009 studies of family and friends wearing *Luchador* masks are one of his earliest meditations into the nature of popular culture and identity. Albert's people, the Girramay, are a group known for the forests they inhabited in North Queensland as much as their reputations as a warrior tribe after successful defence of their lands during the early years of the colonisation with wooden swords and shields. The *No Place* works updates the Girramay warrior tradition and intersperses it with the theatricality and persona of wrestling, in particular the *Lucha*

Libre wrestling of Latin America, a strand of wrestling in which characters are often embodied beyond the ring, into public and even home life.

Peter Hudson's drawings of sumo wrestlers emphasize the wrestler's intimidating mass and form and accentuate the intensity of their exploits. Unlike pro wrestling, sumo is not pre-planned, and bouts rarely last more than a few seconds. Choreography, however, still forms a key element of the sport in the form of the pre-match rituals, which clearly demarcate sumo's origins in dance and display. As Japan's national sport, sumo wrestling in many ways reflects the national character, embodying ancient traditions (the earliest documented sumo dates back to 720AD, but some sources date the mythological origins of sumo as far back to 23BC) alongside a contemporary attitude. Pro wrestling is also hugely popular in Japan, and sumo has maintained a strong influence in this more mainstream and less ritualistic entertainment, particularly in Samoa and Hawaii, both places of which have produced formidable wrestlers of both varieties.

Locust Jones' references the rigging and staging of pro wrestling in the geometric divisions of his *WrestleMANIA* works, echoing the ropes that typically signify the barriers for the match, barriers which are rarely strictly adhered to as such. Executed in response to world events as they unfold, Jones' works are also loaded with wrestling-specific jargon sourced from wrestling magazines, which have a long history of commentating the entertainment with sincerity, expanding the edges of kayfabe beyond the event itself. In engaging with the subject matter, the artist has become fascinated with wrestling as metaphor, and a frequently deployed symbolic tool used in religious and mythic allegory. Fused with the visual *horror vacui* of contemporary visual culture, this is a fascinating and vital response to life in the 21st century.

Jack Rodgers' series of portraits of wrestlers and wrestling fans in a Festival Hall audience. These are character studies at their most kinetic, verging on nightmarish and hallucinatory. Comprising faces in the frenzied throes of performance and spectatorship, Rodgers brings his eye for humorous observation to the world of wrestling. Rodgers' wrestling fans and performers are displayed together in a tight grid, playing with the idea

of fandom, obsession, and the cult of the persona. Many wrestler's careers have been built upon their charisma, stage presence, and monologues, rather than their athleticism or physique, and this particular audience, turning out in droves for a 1985 World Wrestling Federation tour, are enjoying some of the best. Rodgers' caricatured execution highlights larger-than-life characters (and audiences) of wrestling, an entertainment which has always verged on the comic.

Perhaps wrestling is beginning to be more widely understood as an art form, rather than maligned as a less-than-perfect sport. Now a generation after the curtain was lifted on kayfabe, a more nuanced understanding of wrestling is beginning to emerge. Wrestling's very first journal, *Orange Crush: The Journal of Art and Wrestling*, making its appearance in 2020 perhaps marks this turning point. With considered critical writing about wrestling in its wider form, and very clearly in the context of art and theatre, *Orange Crush* is giving attention to aspects of wrestling that ordinarily receive short shrift, deepening the conversation around its cultural impact beyond simple celebrity. Perhaps more than any art form, pro wrestling embodied the complexities of art and its creators in a multifaceted prototype that could not be completely unpacked until postmodernism— and fans that hadn't been 'smartened up'— caught up with it.

Jonathan McBurnie, Curator

ⁱ Roland Barthes, *trans.* Richard Howard & Annette Lavers, 'In the Ring' in *Mythologies*, 2012, p.3, Hill and Wang, New York.

ⁱⁱ Barthes, 3-4.

ⁱⁱⁱ In a conversation with *WrestleMANIA* artist Bruce Reynolds some years ago, we both discovered a remarkable parallel in our own experiences with wrestling on television, used as a kind of filler to spend the final minutes of airtime on Channel Nine's *Wide World of Sports* program, which for years was broadcast on Sunday mornings. In the days before pay television (let alone the internet) had reached Australia, this or a trip to the video shop was the only way of seeing wrestling, at least in suburban Townsville. Being a generation apart, we found this a remarkable constant, a reminder of how radically the media landscape has been changing since the 1990s. This conversation perhaps began the line of thought that would eventually culminate in this exhibition.

^{iv} Barthes, 3-4.

^v Biographer John Capouya makes a compelling argument for Gorgeous George being the first truly international star of television in *Gorgeous George: The Outrageous Bad-Boy Wrestler Who Created American Pop Culture* (2008, HarperCollins).

^{vi} Hunter Braithwaite, 'So Many Ways To Hurt You' in *Orange Crush: the Journal of Art & Wrestling*, Winter 2022, Vol 3, p.7.

^{vii} Eric Shorey, 'Wrestling Beyond Gender' in *Orange Crush: the Journal of Art & Wrestling*, Spring 2020, Vol 1, p.21.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 21.

^{ix} Lita was a total *badass*.

^x Shorey, 21.

^{xi} Music videos are, of course, no stranger to wrestling, with wrestler and manager Captain Lou Albano appearing prominently in Cyndi Lauper's 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' music video in 1983, and the Ultimate Warrior wrestling with Phil Collins in one of the music videos for 'two hearts' in 1990, Collins decked out in full wrestling regalia.

^{xii} Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp' in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Penguin, London, 2009, p. 283.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 275.