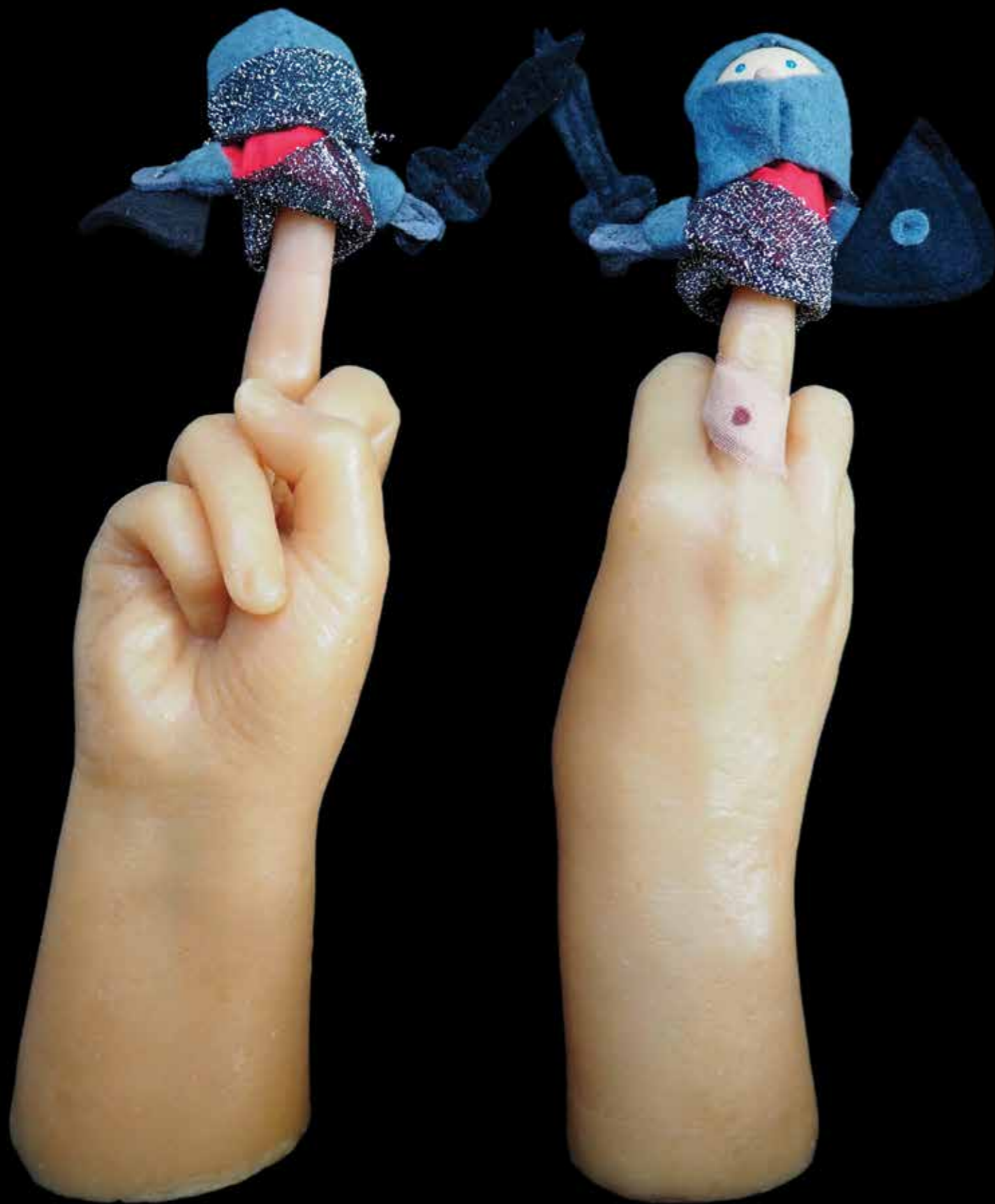




**ONE + ONE = THREE:  
NATALIE RYAN, PIP RYAN  
AND THE RYAN SISTERS**

Pip Ryan, *Happy Orang*, 2011, medium density foam, resin, fake fur, electrical motor, motion sensor, drum, 174cm x 55cm x 80cm. Photo by Matthew Slanton.





**ONE + ONE = THREE:  
NATALIE RYAN, PIP RYAN  
AND THE RYAN SISTERS**

NOOSA REGIONAL GALLERY

10 SEPTEMBER TO 30 OCTOBER 2022

NOOSA REGIONAL GALLERY



## FOREWORD

We recently went out to our community here in Noosa to ask what they want from their Gallery into the future. I distinctly remember one early comment admonished our exhibitions for often being macabre – impressing on us that ‘joy is ok.’ Well, I guess I’ve blown it with this one.

Natalie and Pip Ryan revel in the spooky and weird. Their works – both individually and together – play with death, horror, the unhinged, the gruesome and even the occult. But play is the operative word here. While a river of darkness streams through the works of the Ryan Sisters, it’s floated down with the fun of an inflatable pink flamingo. Mortality, the mythological and mental health. The value of life and the mystery of death. These ideas are met with inquisitiveness rather than dread, often unpacked with a whimsy and wit that manages to still preserve a reverence and regard for the human, animal and hybrid beings that they turn their attention to.

For Natalie and Pip, the macabre and joy are not mutually exclusive qualities, and I thank them for sharing their ghoulish humour, cadaverous curiosity and their fleshy, temporal awe. I’d also like to extend my thanks to Dr Vincent Alessi, whose curatorial vision has shaped this exhibition – a vision that is extended and deepened by the essay herein.

*One + One = Three: Natalie Ryan, Pip Ryan and The Ryan Sisters* anatomises the practices of these siblings, laying out the constituent parts for analysis and understanding. But like Frankenstein’s project, when the elements get mixed together and reassembled, a new creature is born. I am hopeful that this amalgam of beings, however, will be welcomed by our community rather than condemned and cast away.

**Michael Brennan**  
Gallery Director  
Noosa Regional Gallery

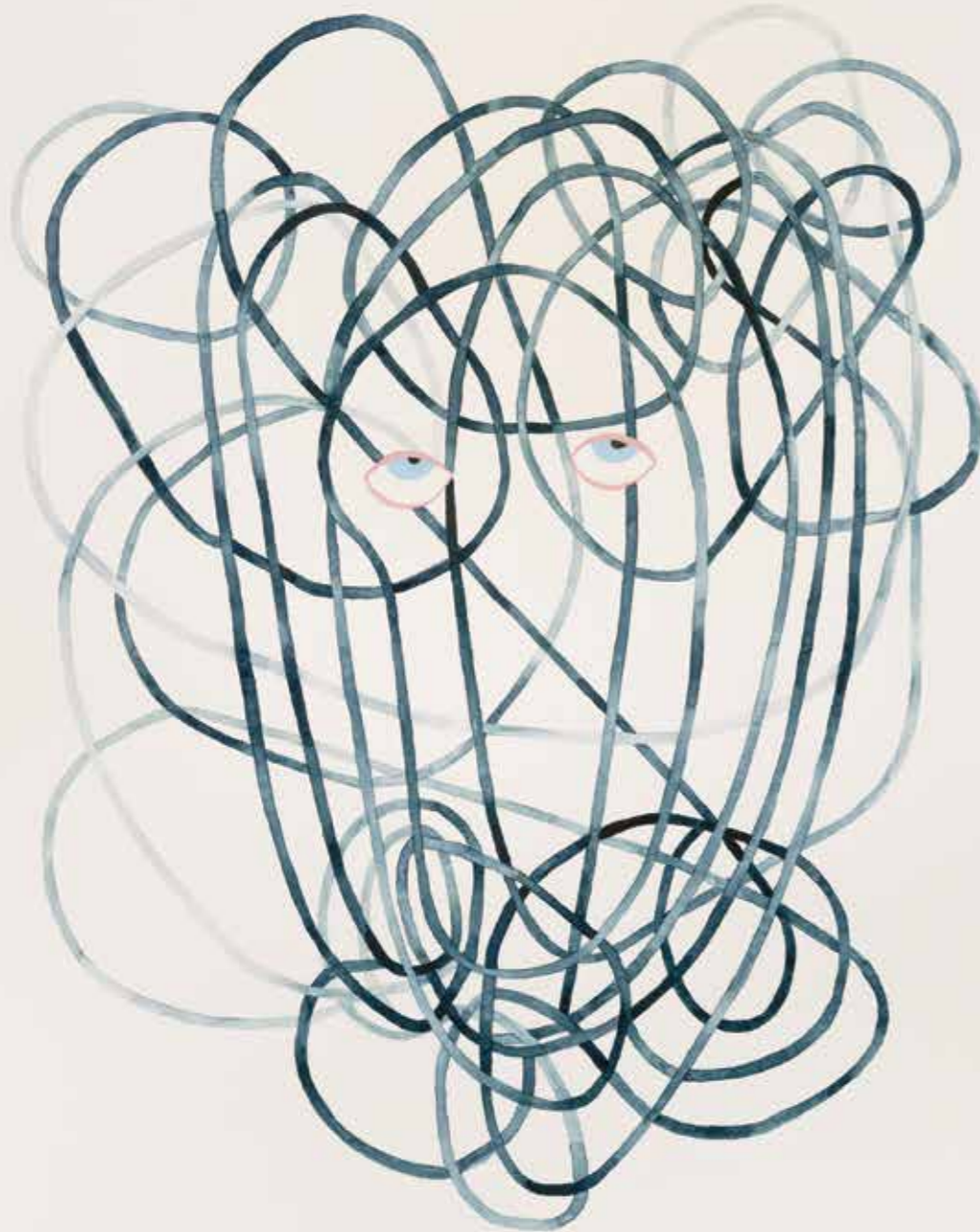
## The Story of Youths Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was

Once upon a time there were two sisters...

Many a story and fairy tale has begun with the iconic phrase *once upon a time*. It is apt to begin this essay with such a trope as it focusses on the work of two sisters, Natalie and Pip Ryan, artists who share a close bond as siblings and whose works engage with folktales, cinema and memory. Their story is not unique, there have been many artistic siblings throughout history: the Duchamps, the Boyds, and in film, the Cohen brothers. Like them, the Ryan sisters have a close working relationship, discuss and share ideas, make work together, assist each other, and place collegiality above competition. As individual artists their practices are quite diverse. Natalie's work has a quiet introspection and meditation, dealing with notions of morality and death and the representation of the cadaver and the natural sciences. Pip's work is more openly humorous, gothic and macabre exploring themes of the uncanny and the absurd. As The Ryan Sisters, their collaborative practice, many of these individual concerns collapse and morph into something different again. What is consistent throughout is a very deep personal starting point: experiences, memories, family and time spent together. If nothing else, it is what ties the three practices together.

*One + One = Three* is an exhibition that brings the work of these three artists – Natalie Ryan, Pip Ryan and The Ryan Sisters – together in one space and in one broad conversation for the first time. The practices are not isolated and presented as individual focused exhibitions. Instead, the gallery becomes the playground for the collapsing and blurring of works and ideas, revealing shared and diverse interests, aesthetics and approaches. It encourages the audience to make connections, look for the differences and to witness the magic of artists conversing, pushing and coming together in support of making.

Both Natalie and Pip attended art school, the former majoring in sculpture, the latter drawing. Due to age difference their paths did not cross within the confines of the academy, however, the formation of their artistic relationship had begun prior and outside of the institution. As teenagers in secondary school both sisters were making art, a determination already formed to make this their vocation. During these years the two had already begun to exchange ideas, borrow from



each other's practice and collaborated – Pip using photos of Natalie in her work and Natalie drawing Pip and casting her body for her sculptures. It was not until both had graduated from art school that they had the opportunity to study together, this time in film making. Each worked on the other's films. Each took very different approaches. Natalie focused on making schlock horror films and Pip on avant-garde abstractionism. This educational period together was to be pivotal for what would eventually become their collaborative practice. It informed ways of making and grounded their practice in a filmic aesthetic drawing on their joint interests in horror films, the anamorphic body and personal histories.

The personal is inherent in all three practices; family stories, memories, histories and personal moments are the starting points. It is what grounds the work and is the foundation for the exploration of broader universal themes, such as death, mortality, anxiety and the personal body. Natalie's *Dead Hair*, her first animal sculpture, is a case in point. Lying peacefully on its side, a hare, ribs showing but remaining intact, is a picture of recent death. The skin of the hare, a deep brown, is not its own but instead is made of thousands of strands of the artist's own hair, embedding herself within the conversation of death and mortality. Natalie has confronted these issues personally as a teenager in a near-death experience and as a 5-year-old diagnosed with juvenile arthritis. She recalls this early time, much of it spent at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, where she was constantly in close contact with terminally ill children: "I think this really cemented my fear of death and illness from a young age."<sup>1</sup> It was also a period where she became aware of the medicalised body, an idea that she has drawn on throughout her practice.

The medicalised body has been central to Natalie's work for over 15 years. It has manifested most often in her exploration of the cadaver, originally in *Dead Hair*, and in following years in neon-flocked taxidermy animals, translucent silicone and ceramic sculptures and series of photographs and drawings. While Natalie has articulated her fear of death, her works do not shock but instead awe with a peacefulness, poetry and beauty. *Pretty in Pink (wild boar head)* has all the aesthetics of a trophy hunt. However, the confrontation of an animal's head hung on the wall in celebration is neutralised by the seductive pink flocking, a mocking, as Kelly Fliedner states, of the "tradition of both worshipping the relic and esteeming the kill."<sup>2</sup> While the wild boar retains its menacing sharpened incisors, its unnaturally coloured skin transforms it from the ghastly to the poetic. It is no longer in the

realm of a barbaric trophy but instead has become an invitation to look closely and think deeply and imaginatively about mortality. The silicon-made *Untitled (sheep's head)* uses similar aesthetic inventiveness to coax us into a non-threatening relationship with the object. Amazingly realistic, the sheep stares calmly into the space before it. Ambiguous in its representation, the animal seems to oscillate between life and death, a precarious moment that many think about and one that we will all confront. In a series of three photographic prints the foetal remains of goats are bordered in gold gilded frames, their aesthetic quality reminiscent of Caravaggesque Baroque paintings. Like the previously discussed sculptures, they present the deceased animals peacefully, poetically and with empathy. The elaborate gold frames emphasise, as Michael Brennan suggests, "the preciousness of life/lifelessness represented within" and pay homage to foetal portraits that are "valued, endeared and remembered."<sup>3</sup> The association with the painterly and dramatic aesthetic of old Master paintings disrupts our expectations and engagement with the subjects depicted. They are no longer anatomical photographs for study. Instead, they speak to the idea of mourning and memorialising. For Natalie this series of work speaks beyond her own experiences with mortality. It is intimately connected and grounded in her own loss, of her father to cancer when she was in her early twenties.

Pip's whimsical drawings and sculptures similarly begin with the personal. Like Natalie, many of her works reference her childhood. The humorous sculpture *Red Hose*, resplendent with its antique glass blown eyes, is representative of childhood memories. Describing her subject as a character, the work evokes recollections of playing outside with her sisters spraying each other with the garden hose, as well as family outings, such as encountering electric eels at botanical gardens. In more recent works Pip has explored self-representation, not in a traditional self-portraiture guise, but rather as a means of navigating and investigating her domestic space and corporal being, particularly during the many Victorian covid lockdowns. In a new work, the triptych *Self Portrait with Heads*, the artist stands in the central panel, arms spread, holding her own severed heads. The outer panels, smaller in scale, are two further self-portraits, this time the heads staked on thin black rods. It is macabre but also uncomfortably humorous, psychological instead of violent. Secluded in an apartment, unable to travel to the studio or visit family and friends, the work reflects the isolation and the accompanying anxiety and angst experienced during the



Pip Ryan, *The Adventures of Wolf Man and Pig Man*, 2019, watercolour, gouache, 22kt gold leaf, pencil on paper, 76 x 56cm. Photo by Matthew Stanton.



The Ryan Sisters, *Lights Out*, 2015, wax, steel, candelabras, battery operated candles, fabric, wood. Photo: Lucy Parakhina.

pandemic. It is a manifestation of the mind racing endlessly, morphing into an anatomical hydron collider where multiple thoughts clash and bang into each other like atoms; this psychological state requires more than one mind and one head to process. A series of drawings made in 2020 during Melbourne's long lockdowns offer moments of personal reflection, a diary of navigating a strange new world. They record and present the artist's deepest thoughts and feelings and bring to the fore personal reference points. *Blue Ribbon*, a drawing of a tangled blue line with sombre eyes looking out towards us longingly, speaks to the artist's feeling of being "tied in knots". The fleshy tones of *Boobie Beast*, *Three Headed Pointer* and *Nipple Nun*, all self-representations, link to Pip's corporal being, a site of physical sensation and sexuality. The influence of the long lockdowns cannot be understated in these works, particularly their conflicting horror, absurdity and humour. As Pip herself has expressed, "my practice has always celebrated the absurd and elements of the grotesque; I love horror and humour, so my works generally sit somewhere between these two states. The lockdowns have sent my work into a much more ridiculous and fantastical space, with elements of the domestic creeping in."<sup>4</sup> *The Sum of All Parts* brings many of these ideas, feelings and personal representations full circle in a concluding nine-panel drawing. In it we see Pip in multiple guises and states, and the acknowledgement of how memories have informed and shaped her artistic practice as a solo and collaborative artist.



The Ryan Sisters, *Ups and Downs*, 2017, resin, fibreglass, fabric, shoes, tires, rope, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Like all their work, the sculptures and installations created as The Ryan Sisters are deeply embedded in personal memories, in this case, particularly Natalie and Pip's childhoods and their joint admiration and knowledge of horror movies. As children they were read dark, scary children's books, such as The Brothers Grimm

folktales – the title of this essay and reference to one of their stories – and the iconic German *Der Struwwelpeter*, a book with ten moralising illustrated stories about the consequences of misbehaving children.<sup>5</sup> As youngsters and through their teenage years they were drawn to horror movies, the majesty of Jim Henson's puppetry and sci-fi films such as *Labyrinth*, *Return to Oz*, *The NeverEnding Story* and *Alien*: the latter a key influence due its subverting of the usual misogyny of horror films by casting a strong female lead. A family holiday in 1989 where they were able to see a replica of *Jaws* and the *Psycho House* at Universal Studios Hollywood, severed heads at the Chamber of Horrors and waxworks at London's Madame Tussauds, was pivotal. Here they engaged fully with the many films they loved, and saw first-hand the power of animatronic objects, prosthetics and realistic wax bodies as sculptural objects which were filmic, narrative driven and engaged the audience in visceral ways. All these influences are evident in The Ryan Sisters and have shaped the practice's key conceptual concerns: humour, horror, death and the absurd. Furthermore, they have defined the visual manifestation of ideas, seen in the use of prosthetics, the collapsing and exaggeration of bodies and large-scale installations which are animated and cinematic.

The personal also resides in the making of these collaborative works. Both sisters cast their own bodies and parts thereof for figurative elements. Labour and conversations of the studio becomes integral, represented by the inclusion of shoes and clothing worn during the making of the works in the final sculptures. These acts reinstate Natalie and Pip's adult selves into childhood memories inherent in the works. The cinematic installation *Is Anybody There*, draws on the experience of hosting séances as teenagers. Walking into a quiet darkened room the audience is an observer of multiple incarnations of Natalie and Pip sitting around a table channelling the dead; the eight pairs of hands placed on the table are casts taken from the artists own limbs. *Gruesome Twosome*, a key work, not only uses the artists' bodies as casts – Natalie's torso and arms and Pip's legs – it cojoins the two, resulting in a singular body. In this work, Natalie and Pip's working relationship and personal bond become completely enmeshed into the one being, playing with the dualities of their individual identities and engaging with their interest in the changing and morphing body and the use of prosthetics, particular in horror films, as visual articulation.

While the personal is the anchor point for all three practices, the logic borrowed from horror films,

itself personal, becomes the vehicle for the artists to shape their aesthetic and presentation of work as well as to confront personal fears and anxieties.

Morris Dickstein in his essay *The Aesthetics of Fright* wrote that "to go to a horror film ... is to submit to an *experience*, to court a certain danger, to risk being disturbed, shaken up, assaulted."<sup>6</sup> This sentiment can be applied to much of the works in this exhibition as can his clarification that horror films do more than overwhelm us "with gore and violence" that they in fact "remain exceptionally lovely to look at... they often have a stunning visual quality that seems quintessentially cinematic" and are produced by "visually oriented directors who are still captivated by sharply etched childhood memories."<sup>7</sup> The Ryan Sisters sculptures and installations may be disturbing but they are inherently humorous (a device used to neutralise overt shock), beautiful and an engaging experience. *Is Anybody There*, cinematic in its use of dark and light and its enclosure behind a red velvet curtain, invites us into the experience of the séance. The scale of *The Watchers* places us in a direct engagement with the figures. We become part of their space, welcomed towards their open arms, looked down upon not sure if we will receive a warm embrace or the gouging of an eye. *Ups and Downs* creates its own stage, an imaginary park, where children scream and laugh, families picnic and two ghostly figures wait for someone to push them on swings. It is a work that locates us in The Ryan Sisters' own horror movie; approach and push the swings at your own peril.



The Ryan Sisters, works in progress. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The same kind of experiences are elicited in the solo works of each sister. Two early works, both animatronic sculptures, create a direct engagement with the audience. Pip's *Happy Orang*, a giant interactive version of a wind-up drumming gorilla toy, stands like a sentinel being waiting for our arrival. Upon approaching the audience becomes a collaborator, part of the experience, activating the static giant toy as it begins drumming away. "I was

interested in taking a familiar ready-made object, such as a toy", Pip articulates, "and through the use of scale and mechanical engineering turning it into something very unfamiliar, absurd and ridiculously menacing."<sup>8</sup> Natalie's *Patrick* similarly encourages close engagement, however, in a more contemplative way, but nonetheless disturbing. A taxidermy cockatoo sits on a bird stand, provided with water and bird seed, almost motionless. We are compelled to approach where we soon see the bird's body moving with breath, not sure whether it is alive and paralysed or dead with a strange lasting respiratory condition. What began as wonder becomes unease and concludes with a smile.



The Ryan Sisters, works in progress. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In the introduction to the text *The Philosophy of Horror*, Thomas Fahy writes that the "feelings of anxiety, fear, relief, and mastery are certainly an integral part of the pleasure that people derive from the genre". Continuing, he suggests that "horror not only plays with our desire to encounter the dangerous and horrific in a safe context, but it also wrestles with the complex nature of violence, suffering and morality."<sup>9</sup> This idea of confronting the uncomfortable, is the psychological aspect of Natalie and Pip's works – independent and collaborative. In an interview when asked what does your art mean to you? Natalie responded with it is "a way of trying to process and understand the things I find the hardest to comprehend."<sup>10</sup> These are, as has been discussed previously, notions of



The Ryan Sisters, *The Watchers*, 2017, resin and fibreglass, 180 x 160 x 60cm. Photo: Lucy Parakhina.



death, mortality and loss. The confrontation with sculptures and photographs of dead animals in various poses from the calm to the aggressive has an element of horror. However, in the safe space of the gallery and in the care and love shown in their making they elevate the form, dimension and fear of the unknown, as Dickstein argues is a central function of horror films, to the “more human, more comprehensible.”<sup>11</sup> Pip’s macabre and often gruesome works – severed heads on stakes, frogs with fangs and internal ghosts, three-headed beings – are a means of comfort and reconciliation for the artist. They are to a certain extent, introspective, a portal to “examine states of anxiety, itches that can’t be scratched, and wounds that are persistently interrupted by picking.”<sup>12</sup> The Ryan Sisters’ *Is Anybody There* fills the viewer with unease with its severed hands and anxiety of interrupting a séance. However, the installation also speaks of the suffering of loss, of wanting to speak once again with a loved one who has passed. For all its uncomfortableness and its ability to elicit fear, the work intrinsically engages with complex emotions, suffering and celebrates love. Its disquietedness, as Susan Sontag reasons about horror films, ‘normalize[s] what is psychologically unbearable’ and “beautifies the world” for us.<sup>13</sup>

Artists are always in conversation, with their peers, the art historical cannon, family and friends. Natalie and Pip Ryan engage in all these ways, but it is perhaps the relationship they have together – as artists and sisters – that is most important. Their individual and collaborative practices are an example of this. This exhibition reflects on this connection revealing shared interests and approaches. It speaks to their studio practice and through osmosis gives us an insight into how each artist is an integral soundboard for the other, how shared ideas and memories can inform and shape each practice and how close artists can have something of each other in what they do without copying or replicating. As individual artists, Natalie and Pip are aesthetically and conceptually divergent, but their works are made in conversation with each other. “That’s going too far”, “that doesn’t work” or “you are really onto something there” are the silent echoes we hear in this exhibition, invisible soundwaves that bounce from work to work. We see focus and a form of restraint in the individual practices, a freedom in the collaborative works and shared interests and a strong relationship in the whole. Once upon a time there were two sisters who understand that one plus one could equal three.

**Dr Vincent Alessi**

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Hagan, ‘Comprehension Through Installations with Natalie Ryan’, *Style No Chaser Magazine*, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly Fleidner, ‘Taxonomy to Taxidermy... And all that lies between’, exhibition catalogue, 24 September – 25 October 2009, Grantpirrie Gallery, Redfern, NSW.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Brennan, *Natalie Ryan: Morten in Imagine*, exhibition catalogue, 14 July – 5 September 2014, LUMA | La Trobe University Museum of Art, Melbourne, Victoria.

<sup>4</sup> ‘In the studio: Pip Ryan’, *Art Almanac*, 24 November 2021.

<sup>5</sup> The title of this essay is a play on The Brothers Grimm folktale *The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was* originally published in 1819.

<sup>6</sup> Morris Dickstein, ‘The Aesthetics of Fright’ in Barry Keith Grant & Christopher Sharret (eds.), *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>8</sup> Pip Ryan, ‘About Orang’, *Fletch Arts* [website], <http://fletcherarts.com/pip-ryan/>, accessed 17 August 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Fahy (ed), *The Philosophy of Horror* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Hagan, “Comprehension Through Installations with Natalie Ryan”.

<sup>11</sup> Dickstein, ‘The Aesthetics of Fright’, 55.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Pick it till it bleeds’, *Kynetron Stockroom* [website], <https://stockroomspace.com/pip-ryan-exhibitions>, accessed 17 August 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘*The Imagination of Disaster*’, *Commentary*, 40/4 (1965), 42.



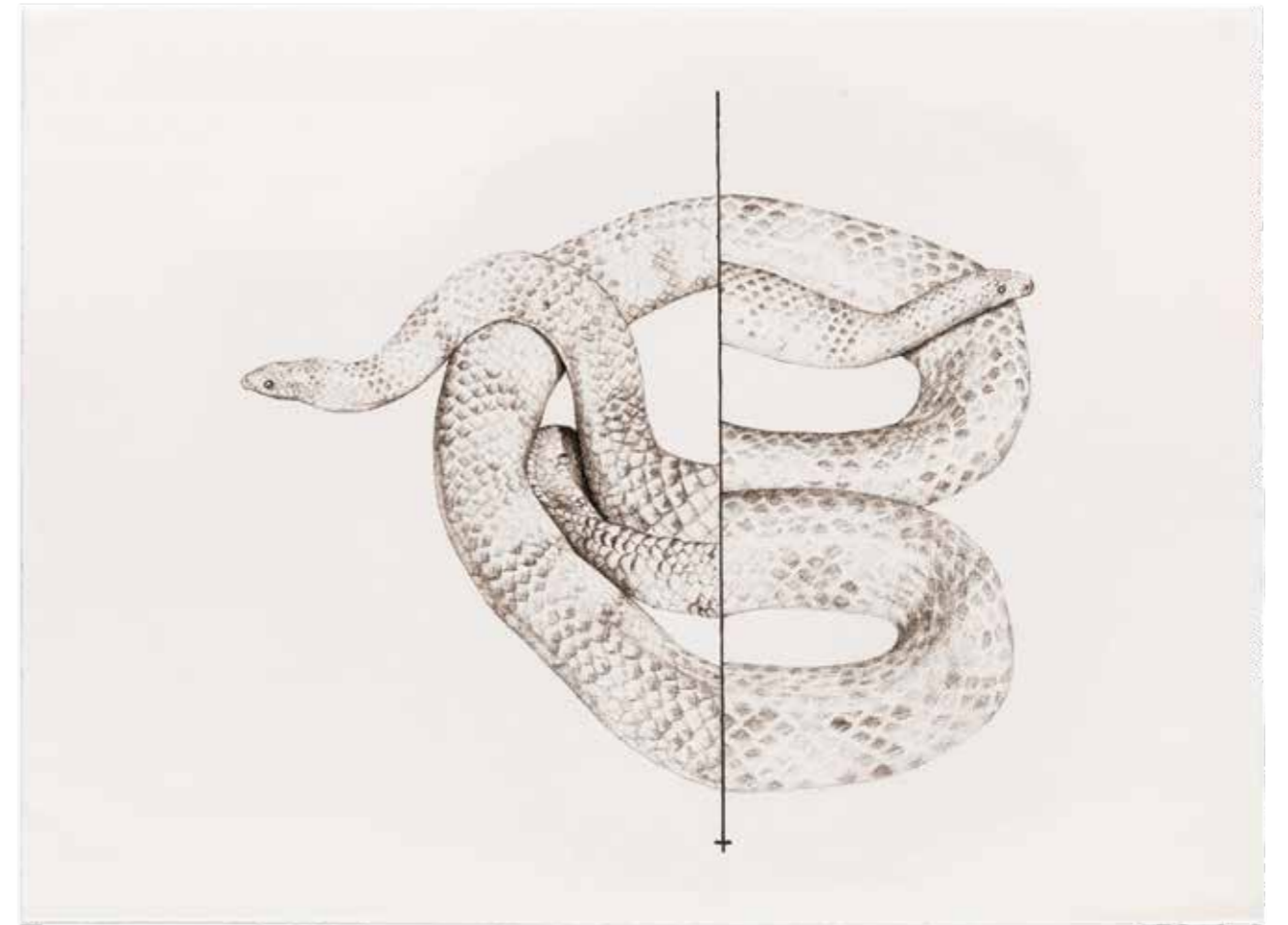
(below): The Ryan Sisters, *Ups and Downs*, 2017, resin, fibreglass, fabric, shoes, tires, rope, dimensions variable. Work in progress. Photo courtesy of the artist.  
 (right): The Ryan Sisters, works in progress. Photo courtesy of the artist.



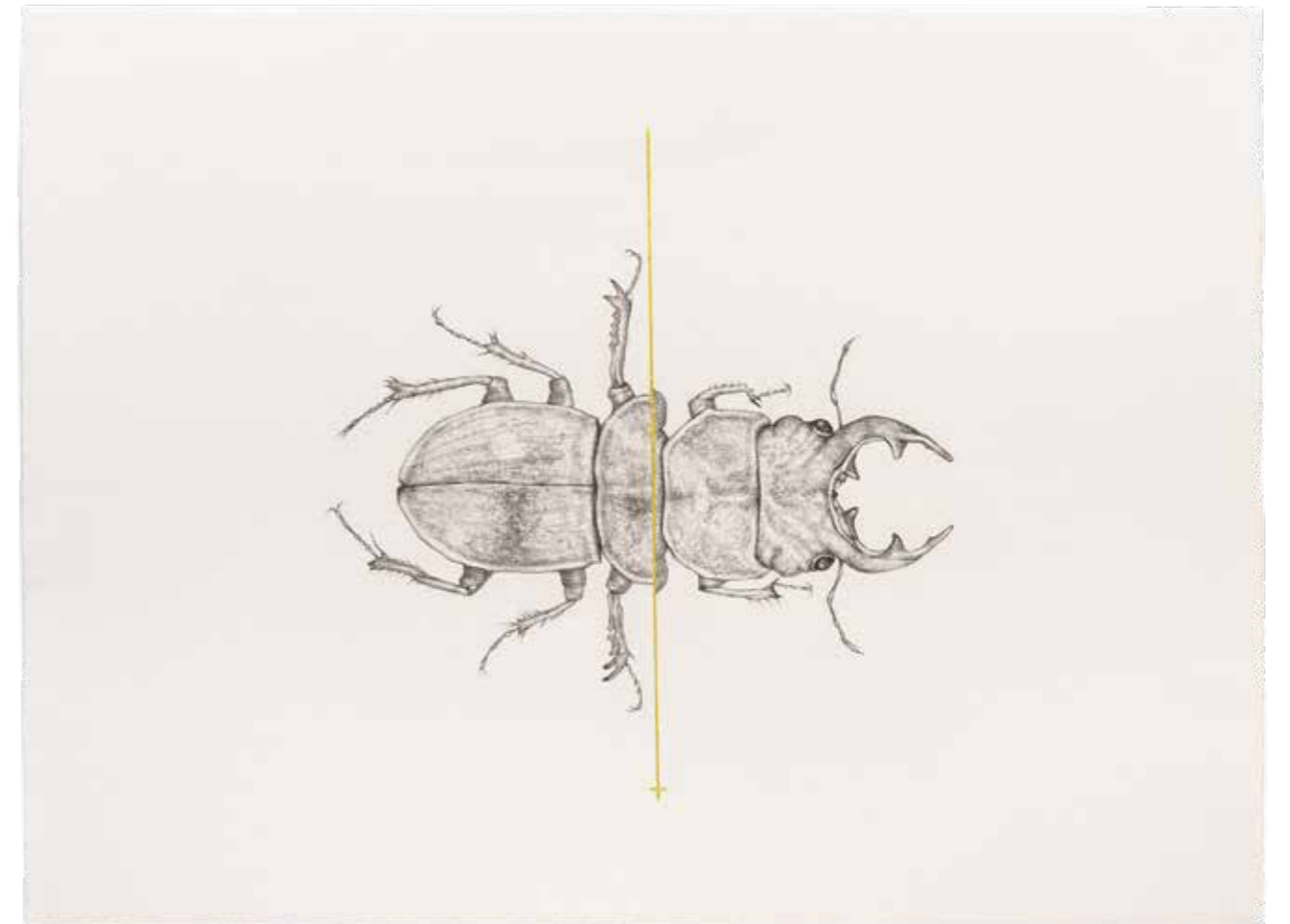
The Ryan Sisters, *Gruesome Twosome*, 2017, resin, fiberglass, jumper, leggings and socks, 235 x 120 x 144cm. Darebin Art Prize. Photo by Nicola Dracoulis.



Natalie Ryan, *Bothrops jararaca*, 2022, bronze, 108 x 20 x 7cm. Photo: Matthew Stanton.



Natalie Ryan, *Aipysurus apraefrontalis*, 2020, pencil on paper, 22kt golf leaf, 37.5 x 28.5cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.



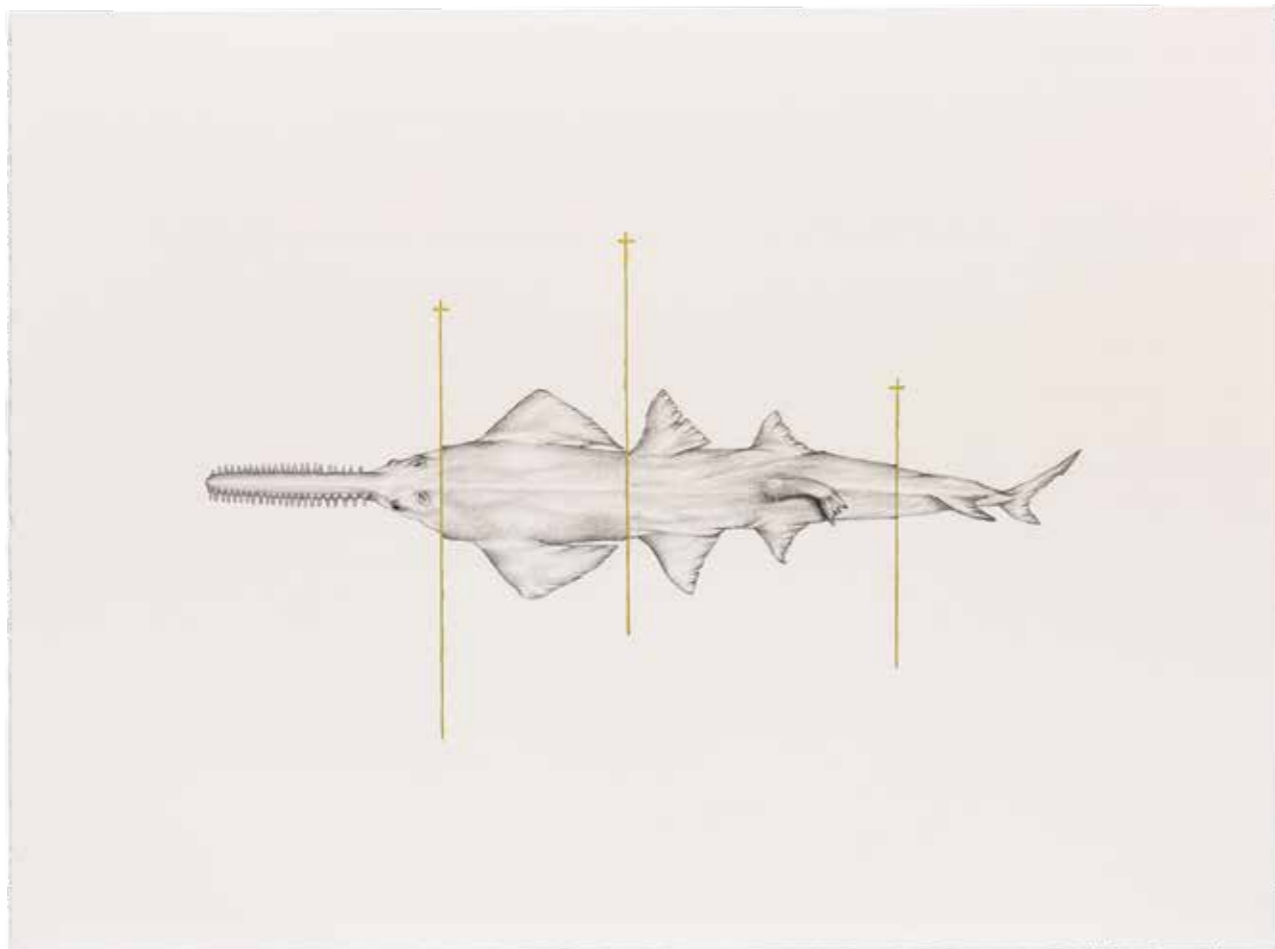
Natalie Ryan, *Hoplogonus bomemisszai*, 2021, pencil on paper, 22kt golf leaf, 37.5 x 28.5cm. Photo: Darren Tanny Tan.



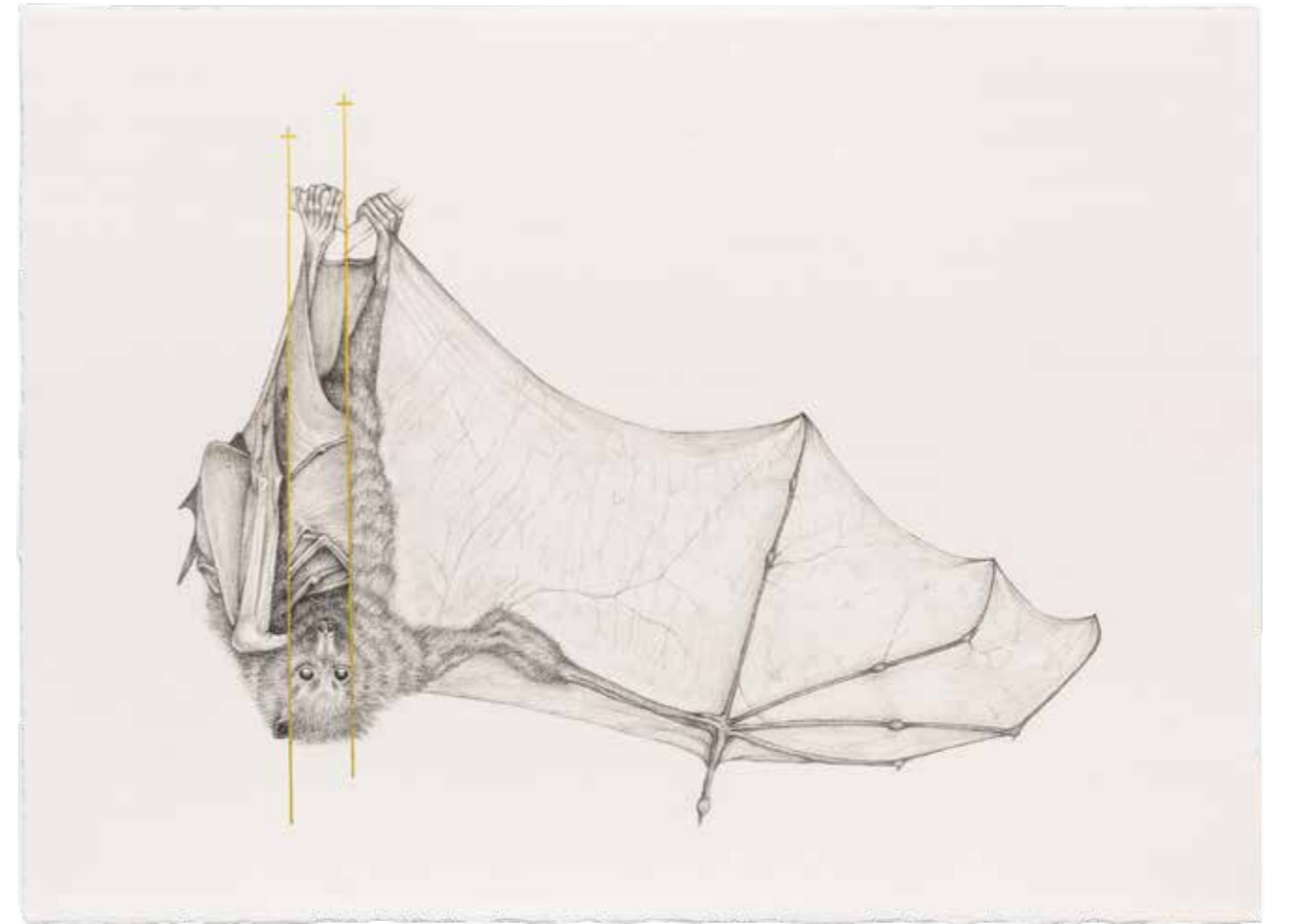
Natalie Ryan, *Numenius madagascariensis*, 2021, pencil on paper, 22kt golf leaf, 37.5 x 28.5cm. Photo: Darren Tanny Tan.



Natalie Ryan, *Litoria booroolongensis*, 2021, pencil on paper, 22kt golf leaf, 37.5 x 28.5cm. Photo: Darren Tanny Tan.



Natalie Ryan, *Pristis pristis*, 2021, pencil on paper, 22kt golf leaf, 37.5 x 28.5cm. Photo: Darren Tanny Tan.



Natalie Ryan, *Pteropus melanotus natalis*, 2021, pencil on paper, 22kt golf leaf, 37.5 x 28.5cm. Photo: Darren Tanny Tan.



Pip Ryan, *Two Heads*, 2018, watercolour, gouache, 22kt gold leaf, pencil on paper, 76 x 56cm. Photo by Matthew Stanton.



Pip Ryan, *Bandits*, 2019, watercolour, gouache, pencil on paper, 76 x 56cm. Photo by Matthew Stanton.



Pip Ryan, *Boobie Beast*, 2021, watercolour, gouache, pencil on paper, 21 x 15cm. Photo by Simon Strong.



Pip Ryan, *Compost Heap*, 2020, watercolour, gouache, pencil on paper, 29 x 19cm. Photo by Matthew Stanto



Pip Ryan, *Nipple Nun*, 2021, watercolour, gouache, pencil on paper, 29 x 19cm. Photo by Simon Strong.



Pip Ryan, *Wrestler*, 2021, watercolour, gouache, pencil on paper, 39 x 29cm. Photo by Simon Strong.





Pip Ryan, *Three Headed Pointer*, 2021, watercolour, gouache, pencil on paper, 39 x 29cm. Photo by Simon Strong.



Pip Ryan, *Chest Bandit*, 2021, watercolour, gouache, pencil on paper, 21 x 15cm. Photo by Simon Strong.



Above: Natalie Ryan, *Rat King*, 2020, bronze, 7 x 46 x 46cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.  
Right: Natalie Ryan, *Bothrops jararaca*, 2022, bronze, 108 x 20 x 7cm (detail). Photo: Matthew Stanton.



Natalie Ryan, *Untitled (gold horse head)*, 2018, ceramics, composite gold leaf & prosthetic eyes, 55 x 21 x 30cm. Photo: Claudia Terstappen.





Above: Pip Ryan, *The Sum of All Parts*, 2021, watercolour, gouache, pencil on paper , 90 x 65cm. Photo by Simon Strong.

Right: Natalie Ryan, *Patrick*, 2012, taxidermy cockatoo, breathing motor, batteries, bird seed, water, bird stand, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.





ONE + ONE = THREE: NATALIE RYAN, PIP RYAN AND THE RYAN SISTERS

10 SEPTEMBER - 30 OCTOBER 2022

NOOSA REGIONAL GALLERY

Catalogue published by Noosa Regional Gallery September 2022

Copyright © 2022 Noosa Regional Gallery, authors, artists, photographers and designers. All rights reserved. This catalogue is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this publication may be reproduced in any process, electronic or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher. Neither may any information be stored electronically in any other form whatsoever without such permission. All views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the publisher. All works of art are reproduced with the permission of the copyright holder. All photographic material is reproduced with the permission of the photographer



NOOSA \ REGIONAL GALLERY