

New Day



The Abbotsford Convent stands tall as a sanctuary for Melbourne artists, revellers, and wanderers alike. It exhales creativity, history, and spiritual gravitas. Eery yet warm, brutal yet beautiful, it has been resuscitated into a creative and cultural oasis. But this site is built upon, haunted, and illuminated by, the stories of women. The Convent is synonymous with the women that have walked, prayed, lamented, and raged within its walls, and it is these women and their communities that artist Katheryn Leopoldseder has brought out from the shadows in her exhibition 'New Day'.

Jeweller and artist Katheryn Leopoldseder's studio practice has been established at the convent since 2005. 'New Day' is a searing, mystical and devoted tribute to the Convent, the women who have left their stories in stone here, and the way it continues to be impacted by present day cultural communities. She uses her signature mediums of metalwork and jewellery to create art that converses with the human body, provoking a physical relationship to not only the images she has created, but the memories and narratives they hold. As Leopoldseder states herself, 'Jewellery is an art form associated with preciousness, value, legacy, permanence and the personal, the sacred.' In its many forms, it is an outward expression of inner states of being, a power and a privilege to adorn, often in defiance of the darkness.

Leopoldseder's work hints at a capitalistic/individualistic defiance: in a society where jewellery is appraised upon whether 'it looks good on me', her art implicates the human body with meaning. In the Convent, our bodies become the jewellery as well, adorning its landscape and architecture. Leopoldseder has scaled some pieces up considerably (such as the six-meter sheet necklace in The Great Escape) to bridge the association between body and place, prompting visitors to enter the spaces and the stories they hold more holistically. In addition, she has invited various artists to collaborate on immersive digital accompaniments for several pivotal pieces. This approach is novel for contemporary jewellery exhibitions, indicating an evolution for her practice, too. As an artist who usually works in solitude, inviting multiple artistic perspectives into a work's presentation and interpretation has enriched and pushed Leopoldseder's exhibition. This process of creative cross-pollination calls to the original intention of the salvaging of Abbotsford Convent.

In many pieces in 'New Day', Leopoldseder applies her artistic lens to the richly coloured myths and memories that swirl in the somewhat contested history of the Abbotsford Convent, starting with the four kinds of women and girls that lived and worked within it during the 111 years that it functioned as a monastic site (1863 – 1974). She follows the stories of the nuns, the orphaned and abandoned girls given a new home, the girls brought in to be offered refuge and rehabilitation through hard labour, and the

daughters of upper-class families who sent their children to receive a Catholic education. Though the nuns served all the convents' residents, these three groups of girls never crossed paths, never saw one another, and were treated very differently. Even within the convent's chapel there remains evidence of three separate entrances and halls, that kept each group segregated while maintaining a single view of the altar.

Of the eleven diverse and detailed provocations in 'New Day', there are three that signpost the journey from the 'past' to the 'future' thematically addressed in the exhibition. Selah - The Pool of Reflection, The Round Table, and The Almond Branch that Buds, Blossoms and Fruits.

Selah, The Pool of Reflection is a contemplative sculpture featuring a reflective pool filled with water, the faint silhouette of a quatre-foil just visible below its surface, an element common to the Convent's architecture. The quatre-foil features four leaves as overlapping circles, representative perhaps of the four kinds of women who called the Convent home. The installation is an invitation to sit with not only the Convent but one's own reflection, the black pool offers a kind of halo around its audience/pilgrim, placing them within the historical mysticism of the space, and the rehabilitated artistic community that now flourishes there-in. As Leopoldseder says of the Convent's evolution in the same spirit as its initial monastic rhythms, this is 'A space, becoming a place; where people can be refreshed, sustained, connected and inspired.'

In The Round Table, a black circular table with a central turned pedestal leg has a model of the main convent building growing down from underneath it. Through rows and rows of arched windows, golden light shines through.

In this piece, Leopoldseder addresses those who have more recently fought for the Abbotsford Convent's identity and purpose. As it has continued to provide sanctuary in new ways, and open its doors to artists, the sacred nature of the site has developed and required a new kind of consecration.

Five local community members, each with diverse skillsets, combined their vision and determination to initiate a sophisticated campaign to save the Abbotsford Convent from partial demolition and development into private housing. Initially they met weekly in one of the local homes around a kitchen table to collaborate on the emancipation of the site, and as more members gathered the campaign took shape and direction. After seven years, this grew into a movement far beyond its small beginnings, which led to the Convent becoming the open community precinct that it now stands as. The Round Table reveals the secret artistic seeds being planted as they dared to dream around a humble kitchen table, using their voices to claim the value of the Convent for the community.

Finally, The Almond Branch That Buds, Blossoms and Fruits is a large brooch cast in bronze from an almond branch found within the Convent's grounds, adorned with silver blossoms, buds and almond fruit, and worn upon the heart. A reference to the biblical almond branch in the story of Aaron, whose rod miraculously budded and bloomed as a sign of his calling into priesthood, this piece was created to honour the artists that currently live and work within the Convent, of which Leopoldseder is of course one. It references the ability of the community to continue blooming and creating in season and out. It is an anointing and a blessing – declaring belonging, inspiration, and responsibility over these artists, acknowledging them as both servants and leaders in Melbourne's artistic landscape.

The full spectrum of work in 'New Day' delves deep into the feminist narratives and undercurrents of community power which now found the Abbotsford Convent. With her two hands Katheryn Leopoldseder has created a series featuring both mystical jubilation and tender lamentation. With the collaborative bodies of its audience adorning the architecture of the Convent, this exhibition unearths voices long held in stone, and allows a historical space to become a living, breathing place.

Catalogue essay by Anna McGahan

'Anna McGahan is a writer and performer based in Meanjin (Brisbane), Queensland who prioritises a defiant female gaze to explore experiences of embodiment. Her poetry has previously been published in The Griffith Review, and she has published two books - 'Metanoia' (Acorn Press, 2018) and the poetry collection 'Skin' (2020).'

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Abbotsford
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