



INTERVIEW

Life in ISO

Interview with Jessie Turner by Sandie Bridie

Sandie Bridie: Jessie, what course are you studying, where and what year?

Jessie Turner: Well, I'm in third year in the Photography Department at the VCA. Even though I am in the Photography Department they let you study other mediums.

Could you talk about the exhibition False Plasticity that you planned for the George Paton Gallery to be exhibited in the gallery from 1-9 April. Who is in the show and how did the idea come about?

A bit less than a year ago, I went to the Venice Biennale as part of the travelling overseas elective subject and they had a lot of resin work in there that I really liked, so I came back and made some resin work. At the end of the semester I really wanted to exhibit them, but because I did not make them entirely carefully, not all of them were fully cured, I was a bit worried about putting them into a gallery space and the conditions such as temperature being wrong and then them melting or getting too hot or too cold and I didn't want to put them into something like an art prize. There were a few artists who I knew of who were making resin works and I decided it would be a fun idea to have a show entirely with resin works.

Had these artists who were working in resin been on the same trip with you?

Evelyn was, actually, but she was making resin works previously – she was making earrings out of casts of her teeth and she made different coloured ones. I actually bought a pink pair of those. I had been following **Justyne Allen** on Instagram for a while, even before I started making resin works myself. She was doing some really cool stuff, so I wanted to talk to her about that and eventually asked her to be in the show. Mona was in my CATS – my Theory class, so she was talking to me about some resin work that she had made. This was just before I came up with the idea and I asked her to be in the show, as well. So, I was making my resin works last semester and someone in my mini crit, who was friends with **Anabelle Aronica** suggested that I have a look at her work. So, I did, and I found her Instagram and I thought they were really cool and then I asked her to be in it.

One of the artists is from RMIT, is that correct?

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Yes, Justyne Allen. She graduated in 2017.

So, that's a nice mix, to have people from outside of Photography, like Evelyn Pohl, who is in the Painting Department and outside of the VCA, like Justyne.

Yes, Mona and Evelyn are both from different departments as well, so **Mona Quilty** is from the Sculpture Department.

Would you see your role in this exhibition as a curator, a coordinator or just as a participant in a group show?

I haven't really thought about that. I guess I would think of it as a combination of curator and participant, because I feel like it acts a bit more like a group exhibition in that it is not super tied down to a theme, it's more the material.

If I was organising this show, I would call myself the coordinator, because it is less thematic and more about the materiality, but also, you invited those others to be in the exhibition, you set the conditions for the show. Everyone has different definitions of these role, has it been difficult for you taking on the organising of the show?

Yeah, I would say so. This is the first show that I have ever organised and just getting everything together for the application, and just in general, it was a bit of a process.

So, you essentially wrote the application, did you?



Josephine Allen, *Dirty Word*, 2019

Evelyn Pohl, *Teeth Earrings*, 2019

Mona Quilty, 2019

Yeah. I got the participants to send me the short statements about their practices and then I had to edit it down.

*And you were the one who wrote the rationale for the exhibition in the proposal form? It was really straight forward, but the title **False Plasticity** is great, I think – it's a wonderful tautology.*

I found it difficult because the George Paton Gallery is such a big space and resin works can be quite small. It's been a bit of a challenge figuring out a way to make the work look too spaced out. But I think I have worked that out, the actual resin work that I made is quite small, but the way that I am going to install it is a large installation, and I know that Anabelle has these largish paintings but made out of resin that will go on the walls.

So now, regarding life in ISO, how are things working out regarding the remote study for your course? What is working and what isn't?

Obviously, it is a very different experience studying remotely, being away has worked and it hasn't worked for me, actually. In ISO I have been able to make a greater volume of work than normally. I would normally have a triptych – three photographs printed quite large, framed nicely. So, it is different, I've made a series of, so far, ten photos and it is probably going to expand to fifteen and I don't have to worry about things like costs.

Are you producing the photographs purely digitally, on the computer screen

Yes. But then the other side of that is that I don't get to see the final product and of course the assessments will probably work quite differently.

In relation to tutorials and stuff it is quite different, again, because people normally comment on the print and the art, 'you could print it in a better quality to get a better presentation', comments like that, and how it would work in the space. They have made the tutorials more about the work and less about the presentation/installation.

Do you find the group tutorials satisfying online?

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Maybe not as much as I would have in regular classes, because you can't go into more detail about the particular qualities of the work in real life, such as the colour and specifics of the print and you spend a bit more time talking about the ideas of the work. I think it is because the Photography Department places quite a lot of merit on how work is presented and how it works in the space.

I guess when you get back to school there will be a rush to print your photographs, to see your work 'in real life' rather than virtually.

Do you have any issues with the quality of engagement that you are experiencing working remotely with the VCA as far as your course goes? I know that Southbank students have had more issues regarding remote learning because of the practical nature of their courses, than say, some of the courses at the Parkville campus.

I think a lot of people are having difficulty with that, I am as well. I miss wandering around the VCA just looking at everyone's work – I get some of my ideas from doing that. But because it is such a practical course, it is different to some other photography courses where you can do everything digitally. It is definitely lacking in engagement a bit, and because I am in third year this is the year where you would spend the most time at the VCA – you would be there all the time.

Have you thought at all about seeing if you could defer the year, have you weighed up those options? I know some students in Honours, because it is a one-year course, they have been thinking about deferring if it is possible. Or have you accepted that this is the nature of this year, and everyone has to deal with it?

I have considered it; I was thinking about it over the mid-semester break because it is quite difficult to do work. But eventually I decided against it because it does seem to be impacting only this semester. If it does extend to next semester though, I might think about it more seriously, because I don't really think I can have my whole third year be online, that would affect my work too much.

It is also if the VCA would accept that a number of students would like to defer, because generally, it is not accepted, you can't ask to defer except under exceptional circumstances.

I am not sure, it might be different for different departments, but I think the process for deferment is quite difficult. What I have been told by my tutors is that it looks like they may be relaxing the process so that it may be a bit easier.

Also, there may be options of taking the course part time as well, doing theory this year and the practical side of the course next year.

I haven't heard about that, but that would be beneficial. I find the photography instruction goes up and down, but the theory, I find it quite difficult to concentrate on that.

Why do you find it hard to concentrate on the Theory?

I think it is just that everyone's heads are in a bit of a distracted place. The way that I make work, I go into a weird space, I get zoned out, so I don't have to think about that, but with Theory I have to concentrate quite hard.

Are you keeping in touch with the other artists in the exhibition?

Yes, obviously I have been letting them know what has been happening and the revised dates for the exhibition and everything. Apart from that, I am in this life drawing class with Evelyn, so I am going to go to one of those tonight, that will be fun.

How do you go about making your artwork in your home environment?

I am doing photos this semester, doing the resin was kind of a bit of a detour. I have what I guess you could say is a studio, but it is more where I store all the stuff that I need for art. I don't tend to make much art in there. A lot of my artwork is based on mirrors, if that makes sense. I take out a bunch of materials, gross as it sounds, I have a little box of dead insects that I have found, I have some other objects like feathers, eggshells, a snake skeleton – I didn't find that though. I take these over to a field across the road from my house – less of a field, more of an abandoned square of grass! It gets the best light, it has light all day long and there are no shadows until it is quite late.

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Would you spend several hours out there?

Yes, with Isolation I have been doing a lot more shoots, I think I have done four or five this month. Each shoot would be at least an hour and a half, maximum of about three hours, I guess. I have the objects and sometimes I make a liquid background. I made one background out of egg yolks and one with fake blood. I spend a lot of time just arranging the objects and playing with different objects together.

Do you take multiple photos, or is the time mainly spent setting up?

I would take a lot of photos, of course I change up the set-up, as well. I would take 500-1,000 at each shoot.

Would the subject matter have changed while you are at home during this period, or was this a program that you had set yourself prior to mid-March?

Yes and no. I had planned to do a lot of stuff with insects, which I had also done last year, as well. I was originally planning to add a more human element to it. In a couple of earlier photos taken before isolation came into effect, I had a model and I would put different objects on different parts of the body. I have a photo of the snake skeleton wrapped around their foot. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to keep doing stuff like that – I had a whole plan to do work like that.

Would you find that the certain kind of abeyance – the fact that certain materials and models are not at home and certain setups are not able to be used – that you are writing notes for things to do after lockdown. Has Isolation made your process slightly different, for instance, is there is more notation involved because there are certain things that you can't play out given the current situation?

Yeah, I think I would say so just because I have a lot more time to think about it. I write a lot more notes, plans for future shoots and then there have been a couple of times when I have done shoots where they just haven't worked because of technicalities, so I have to tweak that to get what I want from it. It is quite different, it is a bit less free, I would say. Normally I take the photos and not worry about it, but it has bought out the planning side of it.

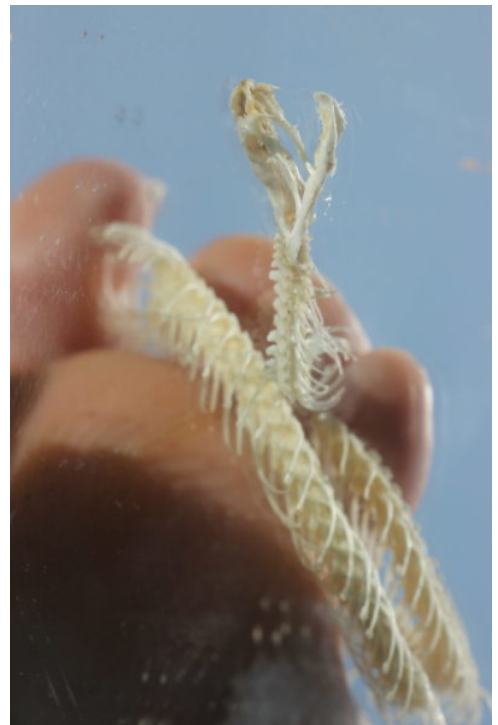
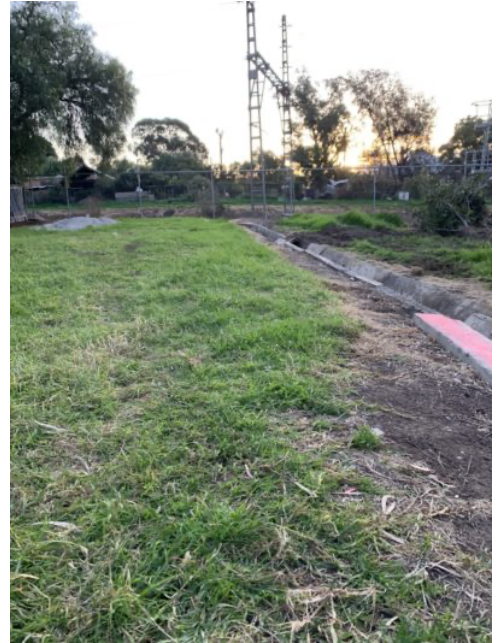
Also, I imagine the situation of being on your own is a bit more like when you have graduated from art school and you have your own studio practice where you don't have the structure of the art school to support you. You are drawing on your own resources much more as an individual artist.

Yeah, I have found that. I am quite surprised, I had assumed that after art school I would be a bit of a mess for awhile and wouldn't know what to do, but it has actually been all right. I guess I realised that I can be self-motivated. I would say that I am not reliant, but I really value the teacher's input and I think I will miss that after art school.

You have generally talked about your process, could you talk specifically about a couple of art works, can you talk to them?

This is the snake skeleton photo that I was talking about. I made this before isolation.

IMAGES: Store room/studio | Meadow Studio | Jessie Turner, *Snake*, 2020



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So that's an example of a hand?

No, actually it's a foot, a few people made that mistake. For this photo I did two shoots. The skeleton was already a bit broken – I didn't really look after it that well – so the head of the snake is not actually attached to the body.

Ah ha. Where did you get the skeleton from?

I bought it from this place in Queensland. It was actually made as a work of art already, so it was in a frame with a black background. I couldn't really find many in Australia, I would have had to import it, and I didn't really know the legalities around that.

Did you go in search of a skeleton of a snake, or did the work come out of seeing the snake skeleton?

I did go in search, because originally, I wanted to put the snake skeleton in some resin for the show, but unfortunately, I couldn't find one that was small enough to fit in. This was the smallest one I could find, and I was hoping when it arrived that I would be able to use it but with the kind of moulds it would have been quite impossible to fit it in there. So, I decided to keep it for later inspiration. I had my friend put her foot over a mirror, so she was hopping around for a bit and I had to lie on the ground to get the angle and everything. I originally wanted a darker, night-like background and for the snake to be a bit silvery, but the Lockdown came into effect.

Another photo that I have done that I really like is this one. It's a moth and a spider in a spider web. What's different about this one is that I normally completely create the photo. I'll arrange all the objects and have it exactly the way I want it, but obviously, the spider's web was already made. The blue background is a piece of blue silk – I really wanted the dark blue.

Did you find the spider's web in the 'meadow' and take the photo there?

It was actually taken in my backyard. This one is different because I don't usually use fabric as a background, but I was aiming to make it look like the sky.

Were the spider and the moth in the spider's web?

No, it was just the spider. I kind of didn't want the spider in the photo, but I decided to try and put the moth in the very middle of the web. It worked for a bit and the spider actually tried to eat it, which was quite gross. I got a couple of photos with just the moth, but the web got ruined in the process.

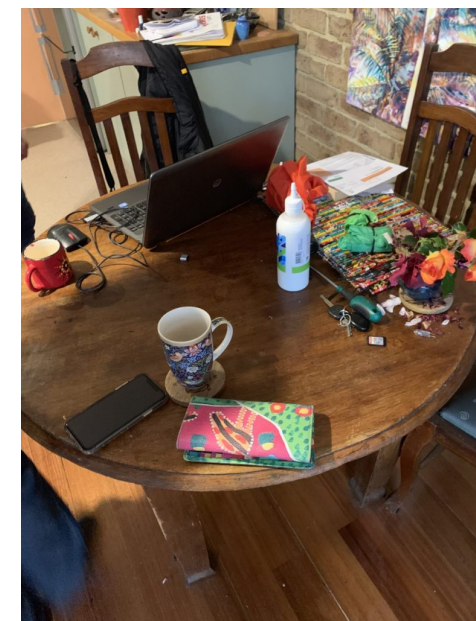
Do you have any examples of your resin work that you could talk to?

I made about 20-25 resin pieces; I didn't get a chance to photograph them all.

What size are they?

They are about 5 x 3 centimetres. I will arrange them on a giant mirror in the exhibition. Specifically, this bee one here in the yellow resin, and there is the glove in a kind of bluey-green at the bottom, those ones were directly linked to some of the works that I saw in the Venice Biennale, one work there was a resin floor and it was that green colour and they had objects such as eggs and gloves and even a plastic hand and it was meant to be the ocean floor with all this trash, old cell phones and stuff.

IMAGES: Jessie Turner, *Moth*, 2020 | Jessie Turner, *Egg*, 2019 | Loungeroom



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And so, are you taking that kind of comment about the ecology and applying it to your own work? Or do you see your work as about something else?

I did originally want to take that comment, but what I found was that found objects will always be linked to that comment on sustainability, anything with plastic in it. But eventually, it did morph into a little world and the combination of colours and objects. I had one with an old statue that I had found, really small, it was of an angel and it had these little ducks on its wings. I broke the ducks off and then arranged them in the resin with their beaks next to each other like they are kissing.

Where is your studio or workplace at home?

I live at home with my mum, so we have a three-bedroom house and I use the spare room. As I said before, I don't really take too many photos in there, mainly because a) it's a mess and b) the light in there is not very good. I did make the resins in there and I could store them in there as it was the right temperature.

So, you don't need order to create work.

No, I don't, in fact being messy helps me a lot more.

It's funny, different people have different ways of approaching their work and their work spaces.

Haha yeah that's true, I find this an easy way for me because you know you might find something that you had forgotten about.

You have three sites for work then, this storeroom that has your equipment and material in it, then you have your studio, which is actually outside – the meadow – and then you work on your computer in another room to do the aftereffects of your photos – to Photoshop them and to do your theory homework. Is that right?

For that I just use the lounge room because the internet doesn't really extend much further than that.

Has anybody else been using the meadow, is there any competition for that site?

Not really, it is quite abandoned, it is not like a little park or anything. It gets a lot of rubbish and stuff; I found a giant empty Campari bottle there.

That site then, fits in with the themes of your work, including the resin work. It is the stuff you might find in a site like that.

Is there anything further you would like to say?

I guess I was wondering about the show not really having a theme. Even though it doesn't, some of the works sit next to each other quite well, Justyne and Evelyne work with teeth moulds.

Both of them?

Yeah, and Mona does taxidermy and the resin would be the eyes. So, the whole show has a body, natural, fluid kind of feeling.

I was thinking about what you were saying about in your photography using the egg white, that would simulate, or have a similar look or feel that resin does, a kind of viscous transparency.

Yeah, one of my teachers described my work as obsessions using particular objects – and eggs are definitely one of these obsessions. There is one of my pieces here with an egg in purple resin. I am very drawn to translucent materials and objects.

Thanks Jessie.