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Memo

TEXTS BY Miranda Samuels • Sabeth Buchmann • Alenka Zupančič • Anna Greenspan • Joshua Citarella • Aodhan Madden & OTHERS

TEXTS ON *Elizabeth Newman* • *Daniel Spoerri* • *Tim Hardy* • *Claire Lambe* • *Wayne Koestenbaum* • *Jon Rafman* • *CC Hennix* & OTHERS



ARTIST FOCUS

Marc Kokopeli

26005

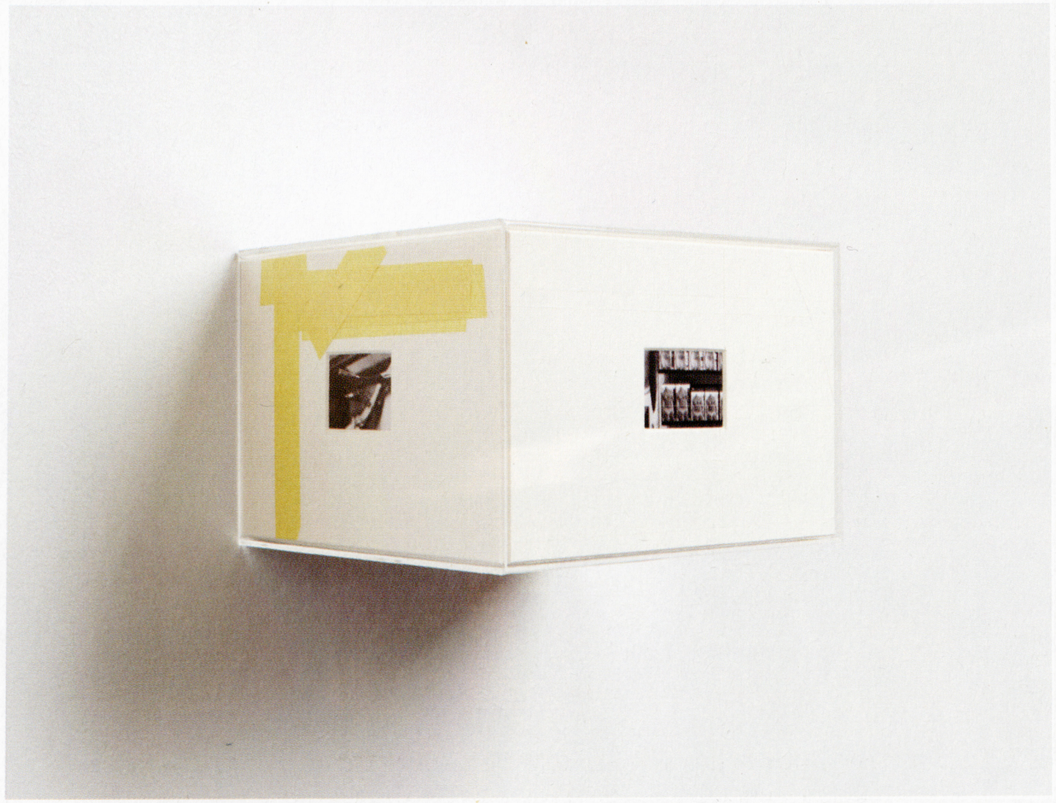
Cameron Hurst

Tim Hardy

Love Is a Crowded Theatre



Tim Hardy, *Dora*, 2026, archival inkjet print, acrylic, mountboard, masking tape, kikusui tape. 23 × 16 × 23 cm. Part of *Reliquaries*. Photo: Tim Hardy.



Tim Hardy, *Dora*, 2026, archival inkjet print, acrylic, mountboard, masking tape, kikusui tape. 230 × 160 × 230 mm. Part of *Reliquaries*. Photo: Christo Crocker.

Tim Hardy had been photographing the same praying mantis every Friday for six weeks when she disappeared. Her name: Dora. Her location: the Melbourne Museum. Her age: unknown. Hardy liked to visit her on his day off and had settled into a ritual of sorts, so it came as a surprise when he returned one week and she was gone. He sent three emails asking after her whereabouts. Finally, an official reply came: "While the unique individual mantis you previously photographed was removed due to it passing away, another individual has replaced it." Like her namesake—one of Freud's patients, a teenage girl infamously diagnosed with hysteria—she had exited her analysis abruptly. Months later, Dora reappeared in a photograph exhibited at Conners Conners' annual emerging artist show, part of an artwork of Hardy's titled *Reliquaries.* What was she doing there?

At the Fitzroy Town Hall gallery, one wall displayed a series of six Perspex boxes. They protruded in a neat horizontal line at eye height. Each held three photographs—one on each external face. The pictures were a little smaller than an ID card and were displayed behind cream mounts that were relatively large in proportion to the photos. These mounts were slip mats, salvaged from the rubbish bin at the frame shop where Hardy worked, and their clean paper surfaces were

interrupted with carved lines and layered stretches of yellow and cardboard-brown tape. To see each image properly, the viewer needed to step close and move around each cube-like form. As I walked down the line of boxes, I found myself looking for oblique narrative progressions and connections between the three images in each sequence and across the series as a whole.

One box showed a series of monochrome shots of wooden fences twisting and splaying on bleached white beach sand. One showed scenes of a home's contents being picked over in a West Hollywood deceased estate sale. Another presented three shots of people dining in a food court with a balsa-coloured floor, captured from high above. The white square of each party's table rotated across the triptych, recurring like a beat—mall Mondrianism. In the first image, a middle-aged man hunched over the table, shoulders bowed, across from a woman who sat back, her chair tilted at an angle. Her phone, in a bright-blue case, was face-down on the table, her green pumps directed confidently outwards. In the next picture, a woman with blonde hair drank a pot of tea alone, across from an empty chair. In the third, two women in their sixties leaned towards each other, gesturing with their hands, immersed in conversation. The title of this box: *Gossip.*

Pictures in a box titled *The Circuit Nocturne* were taken inside a New York City nightclub, shot surreptitiously from a low vantage point. They showed the blurred bodies of young, muscular men in underwear, their bulges illuminated by blue, red, and purple bruise-like lights. Interspersed amongst these trade Adonises were other, smaller men, spectators wearing backpacks, polo shirts, and eyeglasses. Dora, the praying mantis, was in her own box furthest to the left. She hung upside-down, her spindly legs clinging to a branch. Beside her was an image of shelves stacked with Calvin Klein underwear, the packaging showing white cotton briefs clinging to flawless, faceless male bodies. The third picture in this box was a close-up: fingers pushing a thin thread through the eye of a needle. Was this a representation of a mundane crafternoon, or . . . what would Freud say?

In April, Hardy and I met to discuss his work at Radii, the bar in the Melbourne Park Hyatt's basement. Radii looks like a location from *Sex and the City* Season 2. It has a grandiose aesthetic that could be described as Y2K *Flintstones* postmodernism. Everything is warm brown, cream, beige, yellow, and chrome—a colour scheme straight from one of Hardy's photographs. There is an abundance of low-slung leather lounges, decorative ovoid sconces, geological motifs, and two-toned wood panelling. Patrons are always scarce. This Friday evening, we were accompanied by just one other group, a trio sitting on the other side of the room, nibbling on their bowl of complimentary spiced nuts. Soft piano pop played over the speakers. In a couple of weeks, Hardy was moving to America. He was heading to a summer residency at Skowhegan, an art school in rural Maine, then going to (Addison Rae whisper) take a bite of the Big Apple: New York. I was catching him on the precipice of radical change. It seemed an apt time to reflect.

Hardy moved from Canberra to Narrm/Melbourne in 2018. He studied photography at the VCA, graduating in 2020. His later art school works referenced the highly idiosyncratic psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, the inventor of orgone accumulators: pseudoscientific boxes with metallic linings, big enough for patients to sit inside and designed to intensify the circulation of libidinal energies. Efficacy aside, they look cool. Glossy silver aluminium walls appeared in Hardy's graduate show work, as well as in *Helium*, a sexy, Abercrombie and Žižekian presentation at Asbestos. In one image, a young woman receives a cello lesson, her anonymised,

hairy-forearmed male teacher lifting her singlet to caress her bare waist; in another, a young man receives a pottery lesson from a similarly instructive male teacher. There were also some woozy, abstract, pastel-hued images of pulsating light—Hardy often punctuates his pictures of people with pictures of inanimate things. *Helium* was also presented as a *no more poetry* photobook (two editions; out of print; Troye Sivan bought one).

In the years after art school, Hardy had a couple of solo shows. He also made collaborative works, like *We Are Shaped by the Hands of Many*, a series of elaborately staged pedagogical scenes devised with Spencer Lai and exhibited at Neon Parc in 2023. One memorable picture depicts the artist and VCA tutor Lou Hubbard leading a crit of some tragic little animal sculptures. (The libidinal dimensions of knowledge transmission of all kinds, the frisson that passes between the experienced and inexperienced, seem to be a recurring fixation for Hardy.) Also in 2023, Hardy exhibited *The Bold and the Beautiful*, a paean to bodybuilders with Chelsea Young at Centre D'Editions. And for a solo show at NAP Contemporary in 2024, *Vanity Torso Animal Spirit*, he made a short film with friend-actors (Penelope Burke, Pasha Lukovic, Anna Sun, Athan Vlahogiannis, Moss Lasica-Wood, and Alexander Sheehan). The Altmanesque movie was shot on a starkly stylised set with a crisp white backdrop. It included scenes of a middle-aged woman shopper on the verge of a nervous breakdown, a role played by Lukovic, an auratic, auburn-haired beauty in the category of Isabelle Huppert and Julianne Moore. Lukovic works as a medical receptionist. Hardy cast her after meeting her in the line at Brunetti's café in Carlton. He finds muses in unlikely places.

Over the years, I've come to associate Hardy's work with certain recurring characteristics: an attunement to the delicate structures of group dynamics; an eye for subtle gesture and body language; a sense of the nonverbal transmission of emotion and desire (trying to parse the relations between his subjects, one projects horniness, jealousy, resentment, infatuation, social anxiety, mentorship, platonic admiration . . .). As curator Pip Wallis puts it, Hardy's images "contain narrative clues to nowhere in particular, and, with their peculiar specificity, allow the mind to concoct possible scenes and dramas." There is a borrowing from the vernacular of cinema and fashion imagery, and a certain elegance and poise balanced against carefully calibrated scuff and messiness. Clear distinctions between what is staged and natural, real or fiction, are rare. Gender expressions are both archetypal and ambiguous. To speak crassly, the people in the pictures are invariably hot. And thank god for that: Hardy's artworks offer deeply voyeuristic pleasures, both in subject matter and framing. They allow you to feel like a hidden observer, peeping through a window or around a door.

Reliquaries, the Conners Conners work, was contiguous with Hardy's existing oeuvre. But for all the similarities, there was a newness, too. This came in the translucent box display format, as well as the return of more informal images after a period of experimenting with heightened theatricality. Prior to our meeting at Radii, Hardy had shared his digital archives with me. I don't know what I expected to find in them exactly, but what I encountered exceeded my expectations (by which I mean to say: they made me jealous, suddenly aware of my own digital sloppiness, but of course even Hardy's Google Drive is as precise, tasteful, and intentional as his art). It was a neatly ordered and addictively readable collection of years of material. There were reams of texts—that he had read, that he had written, and that others had written for him—as well as image references, versions of works in progress, and documentation.

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I was struck by a passage he had written parsing the process of creating *Reliquaries*:

> This work came about very slowly and loosely. After *Vanity Torso Animal Spirit*, I had no desire to make and struggled with a complete loss of creative drive for about a year. Throughout this time I kept reading, writing notes, noticing small connections and taking photos sporadically in my day-to-day life.

Hardy shoots on slide film, which is analogue but doesn't have the dreamy, hazy quality of negative film. Slide is closer to digital. It's crisp, more neutral, and more cinematic. It is also imbued with the aura and mystery of a medium that cannot be accessed immediately after the moment of creation, as with images taken on a digital camera, but must be processed. Once Hardy has taken pictures, he often lets them accumulate for weeks, months, even years at a time. Then he takes his collected slides to a studio or library and lays them out atop a lightbox. When making *Reliquaries*, he brought out many of the pictures he had taken on a trip to the United States. "I realised everything I had been reading about and researching was already present in all the images and scenes I was photographing unconsciously," he wrote. The photographs of fences on the beach, for example, came from a trip to Fire Island—a gay America pilgrimage site that also appears in 1930s and '40s photographs by the collective PaJaMa and Larry Kramer's 1978 novel *Faggots*. Hardy began to pull sequences together.

I told Hardy that, until I looked through his archive, I had not realised how seriously immersed he was in reading psychoanalytic texts. His images do not wear their references in obvious ways, but they are replete with layers of meaning that reward, well . . . analysis. The praying mantis, for example, appeared in his archive in a dense 2012 paper by a woman named Véronique Voruz. Voruz read the Dora case via Lacan, whose parable of the praying mantis is an attempt to illuminate how "anguish" operates. "When you see a praying mantis," she explained, "and you don't know whether you are wearing a male or a female mask, anguish sets in because you *don't know* what fate is to be expected from the praying mantis."

You do not know how the mantis sees you—how you are perceived by the Other, by the object of your desire—and this petrifies you. Crucially, female praying mantises are sexual cannibals, who consume their male partners after copulation. *Quelle horreur!* Seriously though. The small bug captured in Hardy's photograph suddenly assumed a terrible power.

Here, I'll acknowledge that there is something punishingly, almost campily esoteric and cult-like in much of psychoanalysis as it appears in theory and practice today. Yet its practitioners' tendency towards literary weirdness, their ability to transform seemingly benign objects and interactions into sites of surprising significance, is also what underpins its enduring appeal. The amazing, deranged scholar and cultural critic Camille Paglia despises Lacan, but her approach to Freud comes to mind:

> One reads him not for his conclusions, which were always tentative and in process, but for the bold play of his speculative intelligence. He shows you how to conceptualise, how to frame long, overarching arguments, how to verbalise ambiguous, nonverbal psychic phenomena. Reading him, you feel new tracks being cut in your brain . . . I don't read Freud and go, "Oh, wow, he is the ultimate word on the human race"—that's not how I *read*! I follow him, and I go, "This is interesting. Now maybe he needs to be supplemented."

There is a similarly intuitive, bowerbird-like excitement in the way Hardy collates PDFs on the so-called "impossible profession." The texts in his archive were filled with analysts' recurring interests, like power relations (as in the student–teacher relationship), the nature of sexual desire, the mutability of gender identification, mirroring, social masks, and transference. If you give over to it, psychoanalysis can provide a way of thinking in associative metaphors; Paglia's tracks being cut in your brain leads to Freud's mystic writing pad leads back to Hardy's incised photo mounts.

Hardy told me he had been drawn to Freud's ideas about dreams—the so-called theatre of the mind—and the frameworks of condensation and displacement. "A dream can condense multiple different symbols, fragments, and memories into one motif or scene," Hardy said. A person could represent six different associations. So could an object. Everyday matter transformed into a composite image laden with potential meaning. A similar process occurs in art-making. Even when the maker thinks they are stuck, inhibited, or blocked, if they are still reading, watching movies, travelling, taking photos, participating in the world, then they're still ambiently absorbing new information, collecting residue.

For a while, Hardy had stopped using overly personal materials in his artworks. The *Vanity Torso Animal Spirit* film had scripts and imagery drawn from memories and interviews with friends, but it had been shot with a crew in a couple of days in a studio environment and operated in a stylistic language of high artifice. In the text he had written about making *Reliquaries*, he reflected that he felt that, after art school, he had "unconsciously fled to conceptualism and theory to 'cool off' my work and make it more scene appropriate." This meant more masculine, too. There was a claustrophobia here—as Hardy put it sardonically in his writing, "One must not be 'cringe.'" Sincerity and biography seemed taboo. People could hide behind matted, crusty paintings, or blank, bland minimalist objects, inscrutable genres that repel interpretation.



Installation view of Tim Hardy, *Helium*, Asbestos, 2021. Photo: Christo Crocker.

Hardy found himself reacting against his reaction, wanting to deprogram himself of scene paranoia. He had become obsessed with Paul Thek, an artist and sometime boyfriend of Peter Hujar. Thek made a series of sculptures at the height of New York sixties minimalism that took the era's familiar, austere forms and filled them with gruesome chunks of bloodied flesh. Hardy sought out skerricks of material about Thek in the MoMA and Morgan Library archives in New York. With characteristic vigour, Gary Indiana wrote that Thek's boxes were filled with "surreal forensic residue, guaranteed to frighten the crap out of people or maybe just remind them that, however precise and well ordered the containers they pass their lives in may be, there's this bloody mess gurgling inside them to contend with, stuff that might be living now but one day will most definitely be dead and rotting." The sculptures invaded and perverted the sterile conventions of a scene-sanctioned mode from within. Hardy felt the frisson of identification. "Similar to Thek, I enjoyed creating these hyper-clean, acrylic forms, and then filling them with something almost diaristic or camp," he wrote. The Conners Conners work title was an homage to Thek, whose series of grotesqueries was titled *Technological Reliquaries.*

However, even though the images Hardy used in *Reliquaries* were "diaristic" in the sense that some originated in his everyday life and were made without a clear idea of where they might end up, it was not at all like they were just a series of holiday photos. The final work transcended his individual experiences. To risk stating the obvious, none of Hardy's pictures are presented in randomly chosen sizes or frames or contexts. A core part of the process of transmogrification

comes about in the ways by which he selects, edits, and displays. The outcomes of these processes are as artful as the compositions of the photographs themselves. For example, Hardy cannot not crop. "An image can have seven different stories in it, depending on how you crop," he said to me. "Usually there'll be just a moment—like, there'll be a hand that really excites me." He has to stop himself from cutting everyone's heads off.

Cropping creates anonymity, drama, tension. The American photographer Jeff Burton came to mind as one influential predecessor: "He was working on porn sets in the late nineties, and he does all this really interesting framing where nearly everything is cut out of the frame." In one of Burton's photos, a mirror shows a guy's foot in a sock and sneaker raised high in the air. The disembodied ankle is in the hand of another guy, who is standing, looking down at the invisible body beneath him. "The action is happening elsewhere," Hardy said, thinking of Burton's work. "That's something I really love. Something's happening just outside the frame, and you want to see it, but you can't." In Hardy's own work, this feeling is heightened by the oversized mounts—*Rear Window*–esque binoculars that double the voyeuristic feeling of the images themselves.

Considering the way Hardy transforms his images, I thought of Henry James's famous line about art and life. I first came across it in Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Line of Beauty* (2004), where it appears with a shade of irony in the mouth of the naïve aesthete protagonist Nicholas Guest, who refers to James obsequiously as "the Master." Yet it still hits: "It is art that *makes* life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things . . . and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process."

A reliquary is a frame for a spiritual treasure. It protects, and it focusses our attention and devotion. It's a particularly fitting form for a praying mantis. Hardy said he thought the final version of *Reliquaries* had an elemental quality. In a way, the series of images in the boxes was a distillation of his ambivalence towards the different worlds around him—the worlds that are, in varying degrees, around all of us who try to make lives in modern cities, to participate as actors in modern life. There was the flickering sexuality of the circuit nocturne. The efficient, orderly practicality of the fluoro-lit food court lunch. In the estate sale, the accumulated possessions comprised a ghostly posthumous portrait, a West Hollywood *memento mori*. Picket fences appear twice, separately, in *Reliquaries*: painted bright white and standing strictly upright in front of a two-storey house with white rose bushes, a paragon of suburban domesticity; and raw and unpainted, unsuburban, undomestic, twisting seductively on a wind-swept beach.

This is what Hardy's work observes and stages in so many different ways. The Dionysian and the Apollonian. Hedonism and asceticism. Freedom and responsibility. Night and day, work and play, partying and property accumulation. Order/disorder. Canberra/Melbourne/New York. The straight world and the . . . not-straight world. Man and woman. The divisions are never so neat in real life, obviously, but we're talking archetypally here. "In the day we are social creatures, but at night we descend to the dream world where nature reigns, where there is no law but sex, cruelty, and metamorphosis," writes Paglia (who else). "Moment by moment, night flickers in the imagination, in eroticism, subverting our strivings for virtue and order, giving an uncanny aura to objects and persons, revealed to us through the eyes of the artist." Outside Radii, the sun was setting over the city. Hardy had places to be, planes to catch. We got the bill and walked up the spiral staircase, into the autumn night. ●



Tim Hardy, *Vanity Torso Animal Spirit*, 2024, Tasmanian oak veneered MDF, clear varnish, two Sony PVM-20 CRT monitors, progressive video (20-minute continuous loop), two-channel audio, 2427 × 501 × 573 mm. Photo: Tim Hardy.