

# ghosted matter, phantom hurt (and other chimera)|2021

**ghosted matter, phantom hurt (and other chimera)** by **Leora FARBER** is a digital media exhibition of videos showing fleeting 'impressions' of domestic objects made through an experimental combination of biomaterials and microbes. In the videos, the impressions appear and disappear, hovering restlessly in a liminal space of constant becoming. In their initial forms as material matter, they already inhabit an ever-changing state of in-betweenness, slipping in-between life and death; visibility and invisibility; human and other-than-human; actuality and imagination; being and non-being; (semi)living and non-living. This sense of liminality is heightened when the impressions are translated into digital media, which, in itself, foregrounds the transientness of light, time and space.

## Gallery25

Exhibition dates: 6 to 22 July 2021  
Gallery opening hours: Tuesday to Friday 10:00am - 4:00pm  
Building 10, 2 Bradford St, Mount Lawley



**symbiotica**  
BIOLOGICAL ARTS



**ECU Galleries**



## Artist Statement

For the past three years, I have engaged intensively with bioart - an umbrella term for a range of art forms that engage critically with biomaterials and bioscientific practices. 'Bioartists' mix artistic and scientific practices, often using live tissues, bacteria, living organisms and life processes as media.

The 'impressions' of domestic objects that feature in the **ghosted matter, phantom hurt (and other chimera)** video installation – the third in a series of installations that began in 2020 and will continue into 2022 – are made through an experimental combination of biomaterials and microbes.

The impressions imaged in *ghosted matter* (2018-2021) and *chimera* (2021) are made from a cellulose-fibre produced by the symbiotic action of the bacteria *Gluconacetobacter xylinus* and yeast. This culture, which feeds off a mixture of tea and sugar, forms a biofilm at the interface between the liquid nutrient and air. The biofilm grows to form a cellulose fibre that when dehydrated, bears uncanny resemblance to traces of human skin – sloughed off, shed, discarded. In *phantom hurt* (2019-2021), the impressions are made from a solidified mixture of agar and bacterial nutrient, onto which live, naturally pigmented, mildly pathogenic bacteria have been painted. Inscribed into, imprinted onto, or infused with the translucent jelly-like substrate, the bacteria grow unpredictably and uncontrollably in response to the patterns or surface applications that I attempt to create for them. In both instances, rather than being the product of my creative efforts alone, the work is made through collaboration between the micro-organisms and myself; they happen 'with' the agencies of the microbes in a dynamic process of organic exchange.

In the videos, the impressions appear and disappear, hovering restlessly in a liminal space of constant becoming. In their initial forms as material matter, they already inhabit an ever-changing state of in-betweenness, slipping in-between life and death; visibility and invisibility; human and other-than-human; actuality and imagination; being and non-being; (semi)living and non-living. This sense of liminality is heightened when the impressions are translated into digital media, which, in itself, foregrounds the transientness of light, time and space. From their states as matter which evokes both the visceral and the ephemeral, the tactile and the translucent, when translated into video, the impressions appear and disappear across the screen as ghostly, weightless, ephemeral, ethereal, transient forms (which often dissolve into formlessness); they become fleeting semblances of presence which simultaneously unfold into absence. Through these precarious 'things' that are barely things, the viewer-participant is invited to try and grasp the ungraspable – fugitive, fragmented remembrances of familiarity, strangeness, comfort, dis-ease, intimacy, distance, vulnerability, trauma, complicity and loss.

The impressions reference various design styles, periods and surface patterning. They include items taken from Chinese porcelain and English bone china; some feature blue and white patterns of Chinese origin, such as the willow pattern, which the British copied in their production of 18th century porcelain, and the Dutch reproduced in their 'Delft blue' porcelain. These designs, which are still being produced by the original companies, or reproductions thereof, have become domestic 'classics' in post-colonies such as South Africa and Australia. In these contexts, the objects, as well as the actual and filmic impressions I take of them, thus resonate as spectral traces of the violent colonial legacies that haunt domestic interiors and broader individual and collective imaginations. They carry hauntological resonances of British and Dutch Imperialism and colonialism – the very mechanisms that drove the enculturation of capital. Sugar, tea and porcelain were commodities of colonial commerce that were shipped by the Dutch East India and the British East India companies to the colonies alongside enslaved peoples, themselves

considered fungible objects of trade. Read against this historical backdrop of dispossession, exploitation, genocide, displacement and precarity, the filmic impressions may be seen as uncanny spectres of disquietude that continue to inhabit the present, and will continue to haunt the future. They are like “ghosts ... weeds that whisper... of the many pasts and yet-to come that surround us”.<sup>1</sup>

*The impressions featured in phantom hurt were produced in a microbiology laboratory at the QEII Medical Centre, Nedlands, Perth, in collaboration with Dr Kate Hammer, Senior Lecturer and Deputy Director Graduate Programs in Infectious Diseases, School of Biomedical Sciences, University of Western Australia. The work was made during Farber's residency at the SymbioticA Centre of Excellence for Biological Arts, University of Western Australia (September 2019-January 2020).*

The **ghosted matter, phantom hurt (and other chimera)** installation will open on 22 August 2021 at the University of Johannesburg's Art & Culture's Moving Cube virtual platform.

*The work was made possible through the generous funding provided by the South African National Research Council and the University of Johannesburg Research Committee.*

## Biography

**Leora FARBER** is a Johannesburg-based artist, academic, writer, curator and editor. She obtained her BA Fine Art from the University of the Witwatersrand (1985); MA Fine Art (Cum Laude) University of the Witwatersrand (1992) and DPhil Visual Art (Creative Production) from the University of Pretoria (2013). She is currently Associate Professor in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA), University of Johannesburg, and Director of the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre in FADA.

Farber has exhibited extensively in South Africa and internationally. Solo-exhibitions include *intimate presences/affective absences (or, the snake within)* (2020, FADA Gallery, Johannesburg); *disquieting domesticities/vestiges of violence (or the ghost in the house)* (2022, IZIKO South African National Gallery, Cape Town, 2021) and *Dis-Location/Re-Location* (2007-2008), which traveled to seven major South African galleries and museums (The Albany History Museum, Grahamstown; The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Art Museum, Port Elizabeth; The South African Jewish Museum, Cape Town; The US Art Gallery, Stellenbosch; The Oliewenhuis Gallery, Bloemfontein; The Johannesburg Art Gallery; The Durban Art Gallery). *intimate presences/affective absences* was shortlisted for the South African National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences in 2021.

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<sup>1</sup> Gan, E, Tsing, A, Swanson, H and Bubandt, N. 2017. 'Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene', in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, eds. A Tsing, H Swanson, E Gan & N Bubandt. Minneapolis: G1-G14, here G6.

Group exhibitions that she has participated on include *Second Skin*, curated by Ellen Lupton, Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (2007) and the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei (2007); *Skin-to-Skin*, curated by Fiona Kirkwood, Textile 07 Kaunus Art Biennial, Lativa (2007); *Through the Looking Glass. Representations of Self by South African Women Artists*, curated by Brenda Schmahmann, Albany History Museum, Grahamstown; King George VI Gallery, Port Elizabeth; Durban Art Gallery; South African National Gallery, Cape Town; Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg (2004); *Skin: Surface, Substance and Design*, curated by Ellen Lupton, Cooper-Hewitt Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, New York City (2001); *The New Anatomists*, Gallery 1010, The Wellcome Institute, London (1999); and *The Exquisite Body as Commodity*, Nexus Contemporary Art, Atlanta (1999).

Farber has published articles in academic journals such as *Critical Arts*, *Image & Text* and *Visual Arts Review*, *African Identities* and *Textile*, and has presented papers at national and international conferences, often as an invited keynote speaker. She has edited four volumes: *Johannesburg and megacity phenomena* (VIAD, 2008); *Imaging ourselves: visual identities in representation* (VIAD, 2009) and *On making: integrating approaches to practice-led research in art and design* (VIAD, 2010); *Critical Addresses. The Archive in Practice* (VIAD, 2016). She has guest-edited four special editions of *Image & Text* and *Critical Arts* respectively. Her work is represented in numerous South African collections, including the Sanlam Corporate Collection; Unisa University Collection, as well as the Johannesburg Art Gallery and Tatham Art Gallery collections. Farber has been the recipient of multiple grants from funding bodies such as the South African National Research Foundation, The Ernest Oppenheim Trust and the South African National Arts Council.

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**ghosted matter**, 2018 - 2021, video, 21:10

2

**phantom hurt**, 2019 - 2021, video, 6:40

3

**chimera**, 2021, video, 10:12