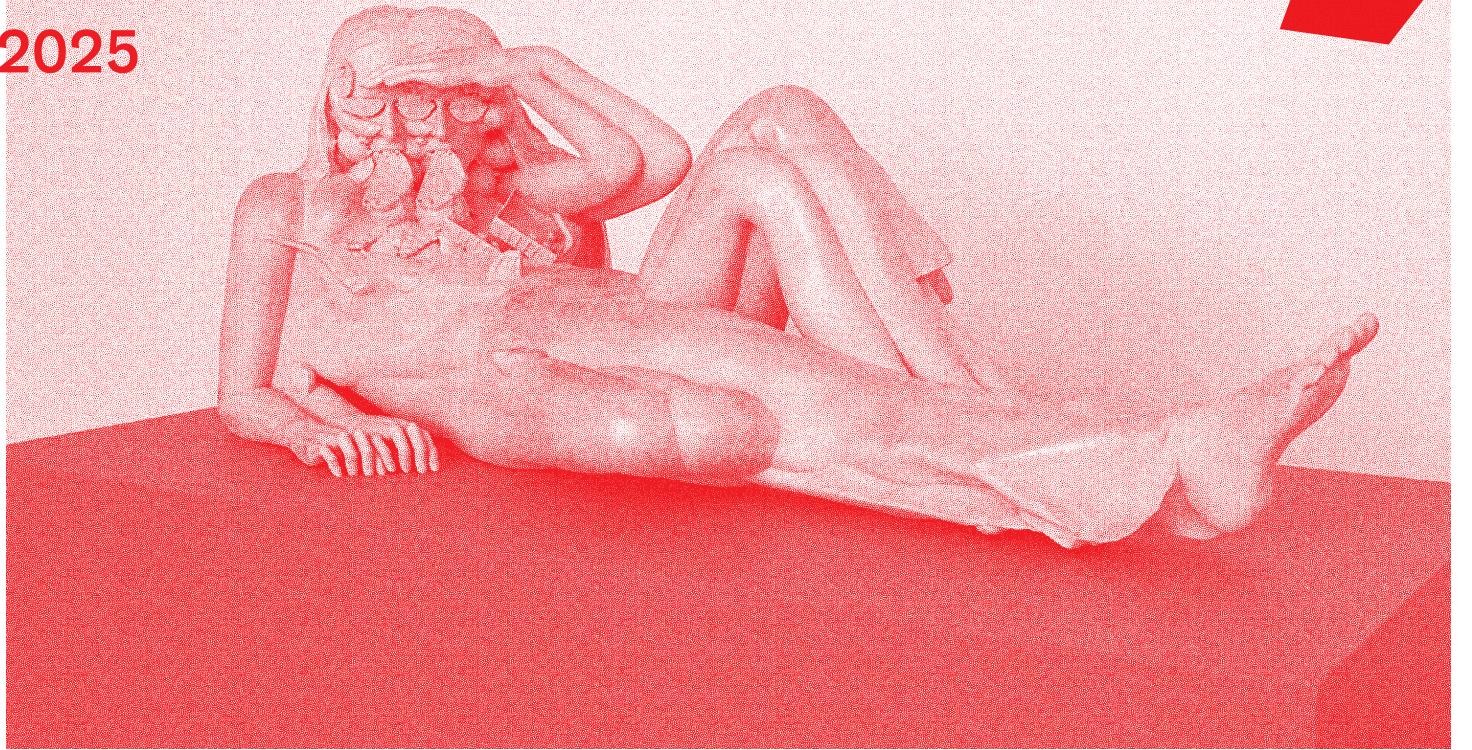


# Unbecoming

23 May to 10 August 2025  
La Trobe Art Institute



(1)



(2)

Jean Barth, Neve Curnow,  
Alicia Frankovich, Matthew Harris,  
Yvette James, Callum McGrath,  
and Keemon Williams

Curated by Tim Riley Walsh



Unbecoming Spotify playlist  
by Tim Riley Walsh

(1) Keemon Williams, *Burning*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.  
(2) Jean Barth, *Clumped Composition (Spilled Blueberries)*, 2024. Courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane. Photograph: Carl Warner



# New dark realms

Tim Riley Walsh

*Unbecoming* examines the underbelly of contemporary queer experience. The artworks presented dwell in a dark, alternative terrain; occupying what theorist Jack Halberstam describes as ‘the unregulated territories of failure, loss and unbecoming’.<sup>1</sup> Where the dominant understanding of queerness in popular culture today focuses largely on visibility, pride and expression, this exhibition looks at the oppositional affects and experiences of being queer. Across sculpture, painting and film, it depicts moments of separation and isolation, darkness and turmoil.

The exhibition title is drawn from a number of sources. The primary is Eric Michaels, the American anthropologist whose AIDS diaries take the same name and describe the experience of Michaels’ death in 1988 in Magandjin/Brisbane. In Michaels’ text, ‘unbecoming’ is reflected in the emotional and bodily reality of HIV/AIDS: the breaking apart of his body and as a person; the degradation of his dignity at the hands of the state; and also his broader, reactive, often recalcitrant behaviour towards others and to Brisbane (‘this terrible city, built on a mosquitoed inlet’).<sup>2</sup> Michaels’ presence looms over this project as a figure who enacted ‘unbecoming’ behaviour and asked provocative yet productive questions of queerness. Halberstam positions unbecoming within a wider constellation of thought he calls ‘low theory’. In opposition to success, which he argues is a heteronormative state, Halberstam’s theory celebrates failure as a fertile and inherently queer alternative position. Zooming further out, *Unbecoming* is informed too by queer negativity, an area of queer theory which advocates for a kind of queer nihilism towards societal structures – arguing that an embracing of futurity stands against queerness’ arguably inherent intimacy with finitude.

Some might consider it counterintuitive to focus on negativity in the context of queerness, especially in the present era when the livelihoods of the queer community, and specifically trans community, is particularly precarious.<sup>3</sup> *Unbecoming* is not an exhibition fuelled by shame nor pessimism, but does see a dark outlook as a less recognised facet of a queer world view.<sup>4</sup> In the context of this exhibition, unbecoming is framed as a generative counterforce to performative modes of visibility and toxic positivity in contemporary framings of queerness. It chooses to read alternative or subjugated cultural positions via the figure of the queer goth – which it argues is a more recent derivation of the goth, a quintessential figure whose position is defined through its opposition to the mainstream. Through the queer goth, the exhibition intends to assert a new subcultural position within queerness. The exhibited artworks elaborate on this character and qualities; they scorn colour, evade visibility, resist definition, and lean toward sinister, horror-tinged imagery.

Jean Barth is a Magandjin/Brisbane based artist whose work explores self-representation in the context of trans identity. Across a practice that includes painting, video and sculpture, Barth replicates an avatar built digitally off her own appearance that she situates in scenes constructed in the rendering software Blender. In *Unbecoming*, Barth presents two sculptures: figures covered in representations of the fecund rot of compost, they conflate both the female protagonist and ‘monster’ of horror films. Exported from Blender, these characters are 3D printed in resin before being arc sprayed with zinc. A neighbouring painting, *Heap* (2022), depicts the potential source of the earthbound materials that cling to the sculptures’ bodies – a small altar of compost with discarded rubber gloves and lit candles, a pagan offering to an absent figure. Barth’s painting evades demands for visibility, glorifying not herself or avatar, but instead the humbling fertility of mud, rot and petrichor.

Yvette James is a Naarm/Melbourne based practitioner who spent their teen years in Djaara/Bendigo. James’ art explores the limits and boundaries of perception. In the artwork *Just Before the Pause* (2022), they create a black mirror of sorts out of everyday materials: some more visible than others. The sculpture recalls a dark, bordering on nightmarish, variation of a familiar scene after a night out: an iPhone dropped into a body of water, replaced here by a pool of viscous engine oil which encloses the device to create a near flush reflection of the inquisitive viewer. *Amongst the dominant clouds I lay my peculiar aches* (2022) is a wall-based assemblage consisting of a large image of an eyeball, enclosed on either side by gray curtains – as if eyelids had been swapped out for domestic blinds. But these are not typical drapes. When lit by the flash of a camera, they react, ruining the image with a reflected burst of light, actively disrupting the subject’s capture. *Enact the law on my frightened body* (2023–24), presented in the main courtyard of La Trobe Art Institute, continues this theme of attempted or evaded capture. Recalling the typical museum vitrine, the work appears haunted, emitting a plume of smoke from a plughole at its centre. The acrylic box attempts to hold this thin, disparate body of smoke, but inevitably fails as the mist slowly escapes the edges of its enclosure.

Neve Curnow explores the Australian Gothic in her video-based practice. Born and based in the Djaara/Bendigo region, Curnow grew up on her family’s sheep farm. In *Shed* (2022), the shearing shed is reframed by Curnow as a site akin to the set of a horror film. Shot in black and white, raking light shines through the eerie, deserted spaces of the structure. The shearing shed is a perennial subject of Australian art history, such as in Tom Roberts’ *Shearing the rams* (1890), and carries with it connotations of broader colonial violence enacted across the continent. In part, Curnow’s film resists representations of the shearing shed as a site of historic and future productivity, and instead presents it as a kind of dead void. No body nor animal is depicted. Surrounding the video’s monitor are piles of sheep’s wool, shorn from the skin. These are the remains of a lively presence whose memory only lingers through its wool and its faint, fatty smell of lanolin – a natural lubricant. The camera is left to prowl the shed, looking for and retracing the steps of its former animal inhabitants. It grazes on the remnant atmosphere of fright once experienced by their thin, cold, wool-less forms.

In *Blow up (deployed Tesla Air bag)* (2023–24), Tauranga, Aotearoa/New Zealand born, Naarm/Melbourne based artist Alicia Frankovich explores the human body through a performative and ecocritical lens. However, what lays on the gallery floor looks more part than whole. Recalling a denuded animal or, more overtly, a lung in a cartoon-ish, yet bodily, shade of pink, this defeated organ is slowly inflated and deflated by a small silver cube compressor. Ripped from a scrapped Tesla, the air bag communicates a state of raw vulnerability – without the defences of the car’s skeleton and skin, it is now without purpose nor context. Devised as a life-saving device to protect the human occupants of the vehicle during a crash, it is seemingly itself now close to death. It is a sad, anxious thing. Though overtly mechanical, we cannot help but equate ourselves with it; it exudes an organic quality. It clings to its meagre life only with the aid of electricity. Like us, alive only while the power flows and the lights remain on.

Matthew Harris presents *Lavender Prison* (2025), a new painting reflecting on his upbringing in Wangaratta, rural Victoria, where Harris came out as a goth before a queer. In making and titling the work, Harris took inspiration from the final entry of Eric Michaels’ in *Unbecoming*, where Michaels bemoans the loss of history and progressiveness in the queer community in the early 1980s. Continuing his recent use of a cool-toned, lilac ochre that the artist sourced from close to his hometown, Harris has painted a self-portrait

depicting ‘the reality of being queer and dying alone in the middle of nowhere’.<sup>5</sup> His skeletal remains lie alongside those of his corgi, Rollo. The picture is distinguished by its gritty, heavily-layered, solid expanse of coloured pigment. Flecks of Country are embedded in its surface. While emphasising their deep bond, Harris evades an over sentimentalising of the subject matter. He reduces the materials to a bare minimum – the pink-purple ochre and linen – and allows the negative space of the raw fabric to define the pair’s forms. This play between absence and presence powers the work.

Keemon Williams is a Magandjin/Brisbane based artist. Drawn from a broader and ongoing body of work titled *Fairy Tales*, Williams’ two photographs knit together experiences of queer life, trauma and Indigeneity. In making these two images, Williams played with the drama and theatre of his composed scenes through considered set dressing, lighting and contrasting use of pinks, reds and blacks. The bedroom scene leans toward a camp-ish melodrama. In the second, a darker, gothic sensibility is visible: a blood-red candle blazes (perhaps with the distinct ridges of a Roman column) its wax melting into raw bitumen. A single boomerang – a repeating image in Williams’ wider work – sits next to it, splintered dramatically. It is shot from above, as if recalling a detail from a broader crime scene. Harnessing the medium’s inherent suitability for constructing narrative, the artist has deployed these images ‘to reformat memory, to address and reconcile the past in order to embrace oneself in the present’.<sup>6</sup>

Callum McGrath, a Magandjin/Brisbane born, Naarm/Melbourne based practitioner, concludes the exhibition with his recent video *Together, Alone* (2023). The work offers an alternative historical view of the development of Sydney’s party scene from the 1970s to the present day. From this metropolitan context, the work depicts a growing sense of isolation within urban queer life – a shifting societal understanding of togetherness, a transition from communal connection to deepening individualism. Even at the ‘centre’ one can feel isolated. Following chronologically the course of a single ‘night out’ through history, scenes of DIY community-led aesthetics gradually shift to goth-esque horror imagery. Rather than looking nostalgically at a lost past where proximity was more vital, the video reframes distance and being alone as a hard, necessary, and normal part of cyclical change. Instead of succumbing entirely to a nightmarish void, the video comes out the other side. While embracing the dark – it greets another dawn and day, euphorically – before dusk returns again, and presumably with it, the next party begins.

*Unbecoming* disavows the monolithic status of queerness. Instead, it advocates for a cultural position defined by elusiveness; difficult, divisive, even contrarian. Together, these artists and artworks help to situate queerness within a constantly evolving, alternative terrain. They each traverse new and darker realms.

(1) Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke UP 2011), 7.  
(2) Eric Michaels, *Unbecoming* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), 14.  
(3) In my home state of Queensland, the situation for the trans community is particularly difficult with young trans Queenslanders denied access to gender affirming care; according to the Open Doors Youth Service, 491 young people are currently on the waitlist for the Queensland Children’s Gender Clinic and will now not be able to access care. The same fact sheet notes that trans and gender diverse young people are 15 times more likely to attempt suicide than their cis-gendered counterparts. Read more at <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/system-governance/policies-standards/health-service-directives/treatment-of-gender-dysphoria-in-children>  
(4) Robyn Wiegman summarises queer negativity through the writing of key figures in its discourse such as Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, contradicting negativity’s typical reading as closed to the world or solipsistic. Mixing in quotes from Berlant and Edelman, Wiegman states instead that “‘negativity signifies a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience”. As such, it is not a negation of the social but an “intrinsic” part of it, which makes negativity a crucial resource for social theory, not its “quietistic, apolitical, nihilist, [or] defeatist” foe.’ See Wiegman, “Sex and Negativity; or, What Queer Theory Has for You,” *Cultural Critique* 95 (Winter 2017); 219–243, <https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/e73641b1-7cb5-47b5-8815-c6f81939c31e/content>.  
(5) Correspondence with artist, 8 May 2025.  
(6) Correspondence with artist, 30 March 2025.