“I was studying art history at this hippie school ... but I couldn’t draw, so they said, ‘Why don’t you make your own dark room?’ At around the same time, I saw the work of Diane Arbus and Weegee, and a little bit later an exhibition of Larry Clark’s work. They were these photographs of kids on the edge, shooting up - dressing up. They were just tacked to the walls with drawing pins. I knew then that that was what I wanted to do.”

Polly Borland 1
About this guide

Polly Borland is one of Australia’s most successful artists, although she is not widely known in her homeland. Her photographic practice has straddled commercial, photographic documentary and fine art practice, and is characterised by an edgy sensibility that lends her images tension and resonance. She has created some of the best-known images in our collective consciousness, and her work has featured in leading international journals and magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Independent* and *Dazed & Confused*, among others. She has shot album covers for Goldfrapp, lent her images to Nick Cave for the cover of his book *The Death of Bunny Munro: A Novel* 2009, and been fêted with awards, such as the John Kobal Photographic Portrait Award, which she won in 1994.

*Polly Borland: Everything I want to be when I grow up* examines the last fifteen years of Borland’s practice, bringing together *Australians*, *The Babies*, *Bunny*, *Smudge*, and her most recent work, *Pupa*.

This learning guide provides information and focus questions on prominent themes that emerge in Borland’s work. It aims to enhance understanding of Borland’s practice for new audiences, and enrich the appreciation of her work for those already familiar with the artist. The material included complements and supports the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue, *Polly Borland: Everything I want to be when I grow up*. The resource is organised chronologically, and explores a number of images that appear in the exhibition. Definitions of terms (highlighted in bold text) appear in the glossary at the end of the learning guide, along with a list of further resources that will extend students’ and teachers’ knowledge of Polly Borland’s art practice. The material is intended for use by senior secondary students, tertiary students, teachers and lecturers, and is to be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition. It may be used by visitors prior to, during or following a visit to this exhibition or, alternatively, the online guide may be used as an independent e-learning or teaching resource, which is available to download from

Polly, Portraiture and Photography

Borland’s larger oeuvre represents an exercise in the study of portraiture. From the photographs of famous faces that form Australians, through to The Babies, and even Bunny and Smudge, what emerges is a complex and intelligent study of the contemporary portrait and its broader function, even while the artist seeks to erode convention by adopting a strategy of what we could call anti-portraiture. Borland often creates images that appear to deny the subject both their likeness, and any exposure of their ‘true’ character.

Borland’s photographic practice is decidedly ‘old school’. She shoots on film and takes an enormous number of frames to arrive at the desired final shot, and never uses Photoshop. As a result, an element of risk exists in Borland’s process – waiting for the test sheets to arrive, the surprise of the result, and the subtle to and fro of selecting images. What makes a good picture? What makes a bad picture? Arguably, Borland’s work relies more for its visual power on the answer to the latter question. Borland’s test sheets reveal small differences between frames that have greater impact when printed large. Instead of looking for the perfect image, Borland seeks the imperfections, the flaws. This off-kilter approach to looking lends the work its edgy awkwardness. In presenting the final selection, Borland invites the viewer to share her askew vision.

> It’s a young country battling to find itself. I think essentially it’s got a dark melancholy nature, which is a source of material, if not inspiration, for a lot of Australian artists.²

Borland is, above all else, not afraid of ugliness or otherness. Rather, she deliberately highlights the cringe-worthy awkwardness of her subjects. For Borland, the inherent ‘beauty’ of her subjects lies in their apparent abnormality or threat to normalcy. Simultaneously, a curious childlike innocence is evident, even when the artist explores sexual tropes. Borland’s own position, however, could only be described as ambivalent: she takes no moral position, adopts no superior tone. She does poke fun at sexual innuendo and thwarts expectations of beauty. If anything, her art might lie in outsider territory. It is rogue, unpredictable and anything but polite – a challenge to taste or good manners. Her images can be vulgar, but also very funny: very Australian.

Her portrait of Cate Blanchett captures the actress in an unfamiliar state: unadorned and, seemingly, without makeup. The portrait has taken on a greater resonance as Blanchett’s star has continued to rise; Blanchett has since been photographed by some of the most highly regarded photographers in the world, including Annie Leibovitz. Borland’s portraits of Natalie Imbruglia and Toni Colette, from the same series, capture their subjects in a similar raw state, almost vulnerable. By deliberately thwarting and deflating the image of celebrity, Borland creates a tension between what is concealed and what is revealed. She denies these famous faces the façade of ‘makeup’, shooting her subjects up close, sans improvement. In contrast, when Borland photographs non-celebrities, that is, everyday subjects, she uses makeup and costuming to transform them into extraordinary, almost otherworldly, beings.

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**Focus Questions**

**Researching:** Listen to ‘Jack’s Shadow’ by Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds. How do the lyrics reflect a particularly Australian attitude?

**Developing:** Take a photograph of yourself (or of a friend) that captures you in an unfamiliar state.

**Reflecting:** Why would Borland portray celebrities in their ‘natural’ state and ordinary people in costume?
Polly Borland

*Her Majesty, The Queen Elizabeth II (gold)* 2001

type C photograph

210.0 x 160.0 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne

© Polly Borland
The Queen

When Borland was invited to photograph Queen Elizabeth II in 2001, she was given strict time parameters, so the artist worked with two simple backgrounds, one of gold lamé, and the other, a piece of blue and white Marimekko fabric. The resulting two portraits capture The Queen in both blinding glory and whimsy. Here is Her Majesty in a moment of rare candour, smiling and relaxed, looking directly at the camera.

Tightly cropped, the gold Queen evokes religious icons. Borland has employed the lamé (a pictorial device she has used in previous work, such as her famous image of Monica Lewinsky) to the same effect as hand-applied gold leaf in paintings of saints and martyrs. The technique imbues Her Majesty with the Madonna’s aura, almost as though Borland were acknowledging the regent’s beatific nature and benevolence. Borland’s gold image of Queen Elizabeth II is imbued with a tongue-in-cheek, albeit respectful, humour. In a Warholian gesture, she captures the ‘brand’ image of The Queen, while subverting it gently with kitsch glitz and excess. This is The Queen as she has never been seen before – a little bit disco. It is a fond gesture and ultimately very Australian. We might even see Borland’s portrait through the prism of the Republican movement, by virtue of her slightly irreverent approach.

Within this exhibition, Borland’s images of The Queen – the most photographed woman in contemporary history – are displayed alongside the aforementioned early portrait of Cate Blanchett. A contemporary audience will inevitably view the two portraits through the wider lens of popular culture. Blanchett twice played The Queen’s most famous relative and namesake, Queen Elizabeth I, to great acclaim in the films Elizabeth 1998 and Elizabeth: The Golden Age 2007. Queen Elizabeth II is at once monarch and celebrity, just as Blanchett is a celebrity and, on screen, a monarch.

Focus Questions

Researching: Explore how other artists, such as Andy Warhol, Chris Levine and Rolf Harris have portrayed Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in their work. How does each artist portray ideas about The Queen’s identity?

Developing: Cut out the image of The Queen and apply it to a background of your choice. What artistic choices did you make in your selection and why? Does your finished image portray ideas about The Queen’s identity? Explain.

Resolving: Cut out a photograph of yourself and apply it to a background that reflects your identity. How have you expressed your personality through your choice of background? Consider the way that colour, pattern and texture can be used to communicate meaning about identity.
“I don’t think I’m that special or different that other people aren’t going to be able to relate to how I’m feeling or how I’m viewing the world. It’s art by osmosis and I think that that’s the most successful art. I personally might not be the most successful artist but I’ve always felt the most successful art manages to articulate and crystallize the complexities, ironies and the contradictions of the time that we live in without ever consciously trying to do so.”

Polly Borland
Polly Borland

Snuggles in Mummy Hazel’s Garden 2001
from the series ‘The Babies’
type C photograph
121.0 x 181.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne
© Polly Borland
The Babies

_The Babies_ began in 1994 when Borland was commissioned by _The Independent_ newspaper in the United Kingdom to document infantilism; through the project Borland developed a deep interest in this subject. Over some five years, she photographed a number of practicing infantilists – adults who choose to dress as babies for sexual pleasure – in France, America, Australia and the United Kingdom.

Writing about _The Babies_, the late Susan Sontag observed that Borland gives us all the details and accoutrements before she delivers what Sontag calls the ‘punch line’. The critic used the term ‘scrutinize’ to describe Borland’s gaze. Her images are honest – they are not pretty or airbrushed.

While _The Babies_ emerged out of Borland’s documentary photography, the series is closely aligned in spirit to her fine art practice, and was the genesis of work to come: _Bunny_, _Smudge_ and _Pupa_. An interest in costume emerged – clothing as armour, transforming and transformative. Borland appeared confident to experiment with obfuscating and obscuring her subject, reducing it to abstract elements.

Borland was most struck by the generosity of those who allowed themselves to be photographed and, therefore, exposed. She wrote, ‘In the five years of doing this project the most common story I heard was that the Babies felt unloved as children.’ Borland draws respectful attention to these fringe dwellers whose personal desires mark them as outsiders, unable to share an important aspect of themselves publicly. Perhaps, like so many of us, they cannot face the sight of themselves – sick of their own appearance, they prefer themselves in this guise, as babies. How can we pass judgement on these individuals? Who does not, on some deep, subconscious level, wish to be picked up again and held, nurtured as a baby?

Writer Peter Conrad has observed, ‘Polly has a way of seeking out fragility, and sympathising with it.’ _The Babies_ provides evidence of her empathetic, yet non-sentimental, gaze. Rather than inviting sympathy, Borland empowers her subjects by seeing them, and making us see them too.

Focus Questions

**Researching:**

**Resolving:**
Borland often cites the work of photographer Diane Arbus as a creative influence. Compare Arbus’s photograph _A young man in curlers at home on West 20th Street, N.Y.C._ 1966 to _Snuggles in Mummy Hazel’s Garden_ 2001. In what ways can Arbus be seen to have an influence on Borland’s work?

**Reflecting:**
Discuss the value of _The Babies_ series to our understanding and acceptance of society’s fringe-dwellers.
“...when I look at paintings or photographs on a wall I want them to be able to do more than one thing, be something more than just pretty. For me, beauty is easy. Don’t get me wrong, I love beauty, I love looking at beautiful looking people. That being said, I think that we see it so often we’re saturated by it. That is what is so marvellous and fantastic about the world and life. Go look at a sunset, look at the sea, the world can be breathtakingly beautiful to look at. I’m just more interested in conveying a truth, and that the truth is underneath every surface there’s something that’s not as simple or as straightforward as just beautiful.”

Polly Borland 6
Polly Borland
Untitled XVII 2004–2005
from the series ‘Bunny’
Fujicolour crystal archive print
75.5 x 51.0 cm
Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2008
© Polly Borland
Bunny

Conceptually, Borland’s Bunny series echoes The Babies. A similar strategy of scrutiny is employed in her studies of the exceptionally tall model Gwendoline Christie. Borland was drawn to Christie having observed her for some time around Brighton before asking her to be the subject of Bunny. Borland describes the genesis of Bunny:

This girl was a total stranger, who I’d seen walking around Brighton for a while in 2003. She was extremely tall and captivating in her style, like a 1950s starlet. One day, it just came to me that I should be taking photos of her. So I found out that she was called Gwen and where she worked, and marched in there and gave her my phone number. Then she rang me and said she’d like to be involved, so we started taking the photographs.

At first it was going to be a Bunny Yeager-style pin-up shot. But it evolved into me dressing her up in weird costumes to do with femininity and female representation. She was very theatrical in the way she presented herself, and it just seemed to naturally develop. As this was going on, Gwen and I formed a deep friendship as well. In her bedroom, I got her dressed in ballet tights, and then drew the face. The eyes are lipstick, and the mouth is eyeliner; I think we used socks to fill the ears out. I wanted it to look very homemade. I don’t know where the idea of putting the tights on her arms and head came from.

At times Borland’s photographs have a random quality – as though the subject, in this case Christie, was not quite ready. The effect is to transform these playful, largely innocuous photographs into more powerful images of female sexuality. While the series makes reference to the idea of Playboy Bunny centrefolds, we see none of the beautification evident in that style of shoot, no Vaseline on the lens or airbrushing.

In the resulting images, Borland presents Christie as a twisted centrefold – exposed and displayed via a child’s dress-up box. Yet, importantly, Christie is not passive in presenting her sexuality, almost confronting the viewer, flaunting her sexuality. At times she is disguised, wearing a horse-head mask. Sometime she appears almost prepubescent and ungainly, at other times, predatory. She and Borland are performer and director, and the resultant photographs document a performance in which Christie’s body is made extreme, both beautiful and ugly; her attenuated limbs are exaggerated with stockings, her features amplified with excessively applied makeup. Borland appears to revel in the grandeur of her subject’s proportions, exploring Christie’s body almost as though it were a landscape, folding her subject in on herself as though to abstract her sexuality. We see a bruise through the gauzy red tights, and are confronted with veins and wrinkles.

Focus Questions


Developing: Make a list of connotations that the rabbit or ‘bunny’ suggest. How do these contribute to the meaning of Borland’s series Bunny?

Resolving: Consider how the meaning of Borland’s Untitled XVII (2004 –2005) would be transformed if a different animal was represented.
Polly Borland

Untitled III 2010
from the series ‘Smudge’
chromogenic print
147.5 x 122.0 cm
Private collection, Sydney
© Polly Borland
Musician, actor and author Nick Cave has collaborated frequently with Borland since the two met in Melbourne in 1978 and, though notoriously uncomfortable being photographed, Cave has appeared many times as a subject for Borland as himself, and in costume. In 2010, he worked with Borland on Smudge. In the Foreword for the publication on the series, Cave wrote about his discomfort being the subject:

My friend Polly Borland rang me one morning. She wanted me to model for some photographs. Now there are two types of people in this world: those who like having their picture taken and those who don’t. I exist squarely in the latter… So it was that I went around to her house in Brighton. We played dress ups. Polly squeezed me into body stockings, rubber bathing caps, crotch-accentuating leotards; she shoved ping pong balls down the front of a lycra tankini, attached cow udders to my face, rouged my nipples, pulled shredded pantyhose over my head; wigs were put on backward – electric blue ones, blonde ones, horrid ones made of rusted steel wool; she glued phallic noses to my forehead, fright-wigged me, squeezed me into glam rock boob tubes.

Often reminiscent of the theatre, Borland’s costumes reflect her interest in circuses and beautiful clothing, that is to say, a child’s appreciation of ‘beautiful clothing’: all static-producing cheap materials, high shine, and tacky sequins. Borland relishes materials such as polyester, stocking, icky-sticky fabrics that speak of scratchiness and sweat, and make a sound when worn. This love of costuming also speaks to childhood games of dressing up, playing with clothes that are too large or too small, ill-fitting and age inappropriate. Her costume creations are fantastically DIY clumsy, cobbled together. When she does use props, she frequently thwarts their intended form, using them back to front, or not as they were intended, often to hilarious effect. There is an element of ‘Everything I want to be when I grow up’ (Borland’s choice of exhibition title) in almost everything she makes, as though she were recalling her own youth, living it again vicariously through her subjects, though without sentimentality.

In Smudge, Cave observed, ‘…her pictures are never voyeuristic, never observational and never merely shocking. Rather Polly seems to me to be shooting into a distorted mirror and simply bringing back heartbreaking refracted images of herself.’ This concept, that the subjects act as surrogates for the artist herself, provides a useful insight. To extend the mirror analogy, it is as though Borland was looking into a fun-fair mirror, seeing her reflection distorted and contorted.

Cave writes, ‘I am struck by Polly’s deep love for her subjects and the dignity that exists in their dysmorphia.’ This notion of dysmorphia – an obsessive-compulsive disorder in which the sufferer believes their body to be imperfect – is symptomatic of contemporary culture’s obsession with the body beautiful. Borland’s photographic practice shines a harsh light on the gritty truth of the human form with its lumps and bumps, bulges and ingrown hairs playing up the tension between the private and the public. That is to say, Borland turns us all into voyeurs, with a bawdy humour and wry eye, making us look at that which we may not actually want to see.

Focus Questions

Researching: Investigate the disorder dysmorphia. How is Borland’s exploration of dysmorphia especially pertinent to our culture today?

Developing: Using props and dress-up clothing, photograph yourself in a Borland-esque disguise.

Reflecting: Does the concept of concealed identity take on further meaning once we realise the person behind the disguise in Untitled III 2010 is Nick Cave? Why/Why not?
“I’m not doing it for shock. If anything I don’t like it when people can’t look at my work because it’s to be looked at, I’m to be looked at. But at the same time I make work the way I like and I don’t want to look at work that is easy, that’s for me really what the bottom line is. It’s not only what I’m trying, the ideas and the emotions that I’m trying to convey, it’s also that I don’t want it to be easy.”

Polly Borland
Borland’s most recent body of work, *Pupa* 2012, emerged after she relocated to Hollywood, which inspired her to explore narcissism through a series of images of contorted forms reflected in mirrors. They might be real bodies or stuffed mannequins – bound taut, their ‘skin’ bulges and spills out and cannot be contained. In Borland’s hall of mirrors, to return to that side-show analogy briefly, there are echoes of Hans Bellmer’s unpleasant dolls (the Latin translation of ‘pupa’ is doll) and, of Cindy Sherman’s sex photographs of medical mannequins. *Pupa* seems the very evocation of the body made abject, grotesque in its malformed state. The forms, for they scarcely resemble ‘bodies’ as we know them, are endlessly refracted and reflected, abstracted and distorted. In *Pupa*, the ideas in *Smudge* are logically extended: the body pushed to its limits of taste and physical form, broken down into shapes made visceral. Something repulsive as well as seductive exists in the creepy stocking material with its beige ‘skin’ tone and static-inducing quality: nothing is so unlike skin as flesh-tone stockings.

*Pupa* alludes to an insect’s chrysalis stage, suggestive of something growing and fattening, in the process before ‘becoming’. In the pupal stage, an insect will adopt a camouflage to protect it from predators. Like so many of Borland’s subjects, the forms in *Pupa* are full of the promise of what they could become. Borland plays on Hollywood’s allure and promise of beauty to be had at any price, whether through cosmetic enhancement or digital manipulation. The body/bodies in *Pupa* are halfway between being wrong and beautiful, fecund in their reflected repetition. Again, the subject is suppressed, identity is disguised and, in fact, irrelevant. He/she/it is pushed and pulled to an extreme.

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**Focus Questions**

**Researching:** Explore the sculptures and photographs from Hans Bellmer’s body of work *Les Jeux de la Poupée* (*The Games of the Doll*).

**Developing:** Using a camera, create a mirror image of yourself that distorts your appearance. Try using additional props and more than one mirror to further manipulate the image.

**Resolving:** Observe the painterly appearance of Borland’s *Pupa XII* 2012. Paint a self portrait using brushstrokes that emulate this effect.
Polly Borland
Pupa II 2012
archival pigment print
122.0 x 152.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne
© Polly Borland
Endnotes

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Andreu, *Polly Borland: Everything I want to be when I grow up*, 27.

Glossary of terms

**Bunny Yeager**: Bunny Yeager was a 1950s photographer who began her career as a pin-up girl. She is best known for her photographs of famous pin-up model, Betty Page.

**gold leaf**: gold that has been beaten into a very thin sheet, used in gilding

**lame**: fabric with interwoven gold or silver threads

**Marimekko**: a Finnish textile and clothing design company established in 1951, renowned for its original prints and colours
Further Reading


Videos


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