Body of Opportunity

Tania Ferrier has embarked on a quest to free women from a culture of patriarchal gaze, empowering stripper performers to create their own narrative.

LYN DI CIERO

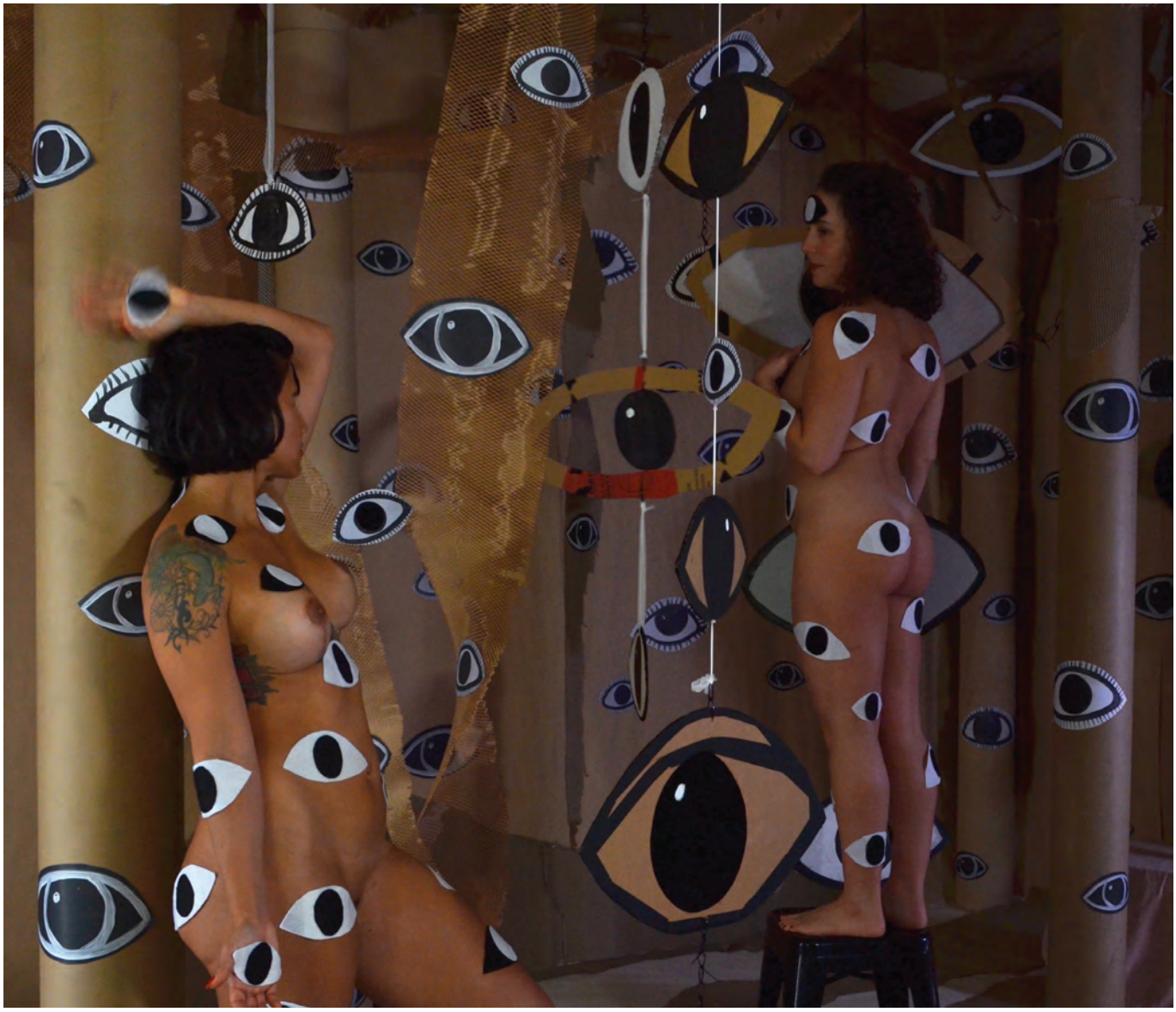
♦ Gabriela Rivas-Ureta with artist Tania Ferrier in one of her studio sets for *Body of Opportunity.* Photo Lyn DiCiero.

In an ambitious project to wrestle back the naked female form from a dominant culture of patriarchal gaze, Fremantle artist Tania Ferrier has created *Body of Opportunity,* opening in January at Central Gallery in Perth. Working with young women who are performers in the adult entertainment industry, Ferrier's multimedia exhibition includes large format photography, video, painting and performance. Her aim has been to create a space with specially constructed sets, where the narrative is controlled by the artist from a feminist point of view. Ferrier says the young women involved in the project, who are stripper and burlesque performers, have been keen to express themselves through movement for an audience outside the machismo sex industry culture of their workplace. "They talk about how liberating it is that the works aren't essentially a sexualisation of the female body, and how it gives them voice," she says.

Ferrier has been inspired by the work of American photography artist Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), who used her own nude body in abandoned spaces which acted as a set, incorporating props to mask sections of her body from view. Ferrier says various female writers have elucidated about the freedom they found in her images where the nude was not sexualised. "Her compositions upend the patriarchal order in art history, where women are the carriers of meaning, rather than the creators of meaning," she says. "I'm interested in creating new meanings outside the sexualised representation of the female form, where women can freely use their bodies for their own opportunity."

The exhibition is a new development in a theme of her practice, harking back to the 1980s when working in a bar in New York, Ferrier witnessed the sexual assault of a stripper on stage. In a light bulb moment, she sewed sharpened teeth on the skimpy costumes of strippers. Her *Angry Underwear* became an international media sensation, sold in exclusive outlets and worn by the likes of Madonna and supermodel Naomie Campbell. When the work was shown in Perth in 1989, it was labelled obscene and the exhibition briefly closed. A media frenzy ensued across talk back shows and in print. When the show reopened, thousands visited.

Renewed interest in this artery of her work following the #metoo movement saw *Shark Bikini* purchased by the Art Gallery of WA in 2019, which featured in the *Know my Name* exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia in 2021. In 2022 she was invited to show a new project, *Pop Porn* and a mini retrospective of *Angry Underwear*



♦ *In search of the nude #3* by Tania Ferrier in *Body of Opportunity* at Central Gallery.

at Fremantle Arts Centre. In *Pop Porn,* Ferrier explored the representation of women in pornography in the 1980s and 90s with assemblages created from Playboy centrefolds.

Stripper Gabriela Rivas-Ureta is one of the performers involved in *Body of Opportunity,* and works in a club run by women. She also has a degree in sexology, her sexologist practice centering on empowering women to live their full self. “It’s about taking control of their sexual lives and living honestly and true to themselves,” she says. Of Ferrier’s project she says, “I am a mother, a stripper and a sociologist. I felt it was an opportunity to express the whole of what womanhood can be. It was like I could be all of those things in one space, which is rare. As a dancer you keep things hidden.”

Originally from Chile, Rivas-Ureta has reflected recently on why she was brave enough to jump into stripping. “Providing for my child was my green card to try something I would not have tried otherwise. Because I am doing it for my son, motherhood gave me the validation I needed to take that risk.”

She explains the tiers of the industry from strippers to those who provide ‘full service.’ She says there are a lot of people with disabilities who are clientele, as well as FIFO workers. “We deal with almost front line mental health for manhood,” she says. “For men who work away, no one has hugged them in weeks, and physical touch is a human need. It allows them to be vulnerable.”

There are downsides to the high earning industry. Rental agencies expect drugs are part of their lives, and many in the community shun them. Ferrier says, “You should be able to say what your work is without being stigmatised, because you are a community member. You shouldn’t be demonised for your choices.”

Body of Opportunity will be officially opened by Annika Kristensen, Perth Festival Visual Arts Curator, and an essay is provided by Aimee Dodds. Ferrier says she’s grateful to Rivas-Ureta for making contact with her. “You can become very insular as an artist, and think you want to be alone in your studio all the time. Having worked in the film industry, it was good for me to work collaboratively again. There’s no one person, you are in a team.”

Body of Opportunity is on show at Gallery Central from 24 January until 16 February.