

## Faint Echoes

### Pia Johnson

Bundoora Homestead Art Centre 2022

Pia Johnson's photographic series *Mooramong Green* is set in the former mansion home of millionaire Donald "Scobie" McKinnon and Claire Adams in the Victorian town of Skipton. Named Mooramong, this sprawling estate was gifted to the National Trust after McKinnon and Adams' deaths and has been preserved in time with the owners' original furnishings. Johnson's photographs show her posed in various rooms in the house, barefooted and wearing a pink dress that might have come out of Claire Adams' 1950s wardrobe. The house's interiors are perfectly manicured, and lacking the detritus of daily life (dishes, washing, books), they carry air of the artificial. This artificial quality is exacerbated by the photographs' theatrical lighting, where light and shadow produce a chiaroscuro effect. Having largely positioned herself against windows, Johnson silhouettes her form as though spot lit from behind and presenting herself to an imagined live audience.

The story behind Mooramong is one of opulence. It was gifted to McKinnon by his father and he took up residence in the mansion in 1928 together with his new wife Adams, a former actress. The fact of Adams' previous life is obsessed over on the National Trust's website, where it is stated that she brought Hollywood-style glamour to her mansion after having to leave Hollywood itself. Johnson is also an actor in Mooramong—but an actor insofar as she is out of place. As a woman of mixed Asian and European heritage, she could never have inhabited a space such as Mooramong in the early twentieth century in the same way that McKinnon and Adams did. As such, Johnson's photographs interrogate why particular things are preserved or afforded a platform. In the case of Mooramong, the affluence it represents is closely tied to whiteness—it is a symbol of the way in which whiteness is preserved to the present day. Indeed, in presenting these images within the galleries of the Bundoora Homestead, which is another carefully-maintained building with a white, affluent history, Johnson highlights the way in which colonial constructs continue to manifest.

In a second photographic series, *Slippage*, Johnson has photographed herself in the old Castlemaine hospital in black and white and spotlight from above. Again, Johnson considers her own identity within pre-existing cultural structures—the structure, this time, being modern art. Posed against a bare concrete backdrop, Johnson mimics famous artworks, including Edward Weston's *The Attic* (1921) and a work from Francesca Woodman's *Polka Dots Series* work (1976). In the

process, she has repositioned herself as both the maker and subject rather than the viewer. However, this is not a case of appropriation. Taken against the same backdrop and clearly in the same sitting, time is intimately woven into the fabric of the works and the photos come to embody a sense of dynamism. This feeling of movement shifts the works away from art history's sometimes stagnant character into a sphere of self-determination. In another photograph, *Untitled Self Portrait (birthday)* taken on Johnson's birthday and loosely invoking Dorothea Tanning, the artist stares defiantly into the camera, asserting her position in what is perhaps a counterpoint to the passivity shown in *Mooramong Green*.

Although *Slippage* and *Mooramong Green* are separate series, they nonetheless speak to one another across the wall of the Homestead galleries. In each series, Johnson takes on a persona, but she does so as a means of recalibrating the dominant narrative of white histories to include a broader concept of truth. Lit with a sense of drama, the photographs take on an aesthetic of the artificial—this despite the fact that they are set in once-functioning buildings (as opposed to theatre sets or a stage). As such, each of Johnson's series is an embodiment of photography's capacity to act as both tool of documentary and fabricator of truth. Johnson, in turn, takes advantage of this split personality to represent her own complex position within the world.

—Amelia Winata

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