

CHRISTINA LOWRY

Memento Vivere



*Memento Vivere*

Exhibition Catalogue

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Images © Christina Lowry

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Brisbane based artist Christina Lowry completed a Bachelor of Fine Art/ Visual Art at the Queensland College of Art in 2002. With a major in Intermedia, Christina developed her black and white film skills, and experimented in the emerging field of digital art. Since 2019 Christina has focussed exclusively on digital photography.

Christina's work is a dialogue between art history and photography, utilising historic and contemporary symbolism to deliver her distinct aesthetic. Blurring the line between painting and photography, her work is anchored in natural and art history. Featuring meticulously sourced and historically accurate props to faithfully complete her vision, each image takes months to construct, informed by extensive research.

Christina works in her home studio where she uses natural light to create a chiaroscuro effect, reminiscent of the Dutch masters. All of her photographs are created completely in-camera, with no compositing (compiling multiple images). With many of her pieces featuring both living and deceased fauna, Christina is also a self-taught entomologist and has a Queensland government issued Collection Authority for deceased wildlife.

*[www.christinalowryartist.com.au](http://www.christinalowryartist.com.au)*

This collection of studio still life photography was created in response to Australia's evolving experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. The works were shot amidst border closures, lock downs, the vaccination roll out, and re-opening of the borders (2020 – 2021). The exhibition draws on the imagery and symbolism of the 17th century Dutch Golden Age, where artists were in part responding to the loss of life from the bubonic plague, which neither the wealth or scientific advancements in their society could protect them from. In just two years 24,000 Amsterdammers lost their lives (10% of the population). While this was more deadly than anything coronavirus has yet caused, the experiences of the 17th century are common to many cities in the 21st: a highly contagious disease whose impact was compounded by social inequality, and government responses including travel restrictions and social distancing.

During this period 'Memento Mori' (remember you will die) still lifes were a popular genre of painting amongst the Dutch merchant middle class. These paintings represent the shift away from Catholic iconoclastic paintings, towards Protestant symbolism. Seventeenth century viewers would have understood fallen glasses, snuffed candles, hourglasses and clay pipes as moral stories on the uselessness of worldly pleasure and the certainty of death. While ivy and wheat represented hope, resurrection and salvation. Richness and fecundity were expressed with expensive exotic flowers and fruit at their peak, while the inevitability of death was symbolised by insects and decay.

In these photographs I am appropriating the visual language, stylistic elements, compositions and lighting of these traditional Dutch floral arrangements and still lifes. I have embraced the signs and symbols of the period, while leaving clues to our modern pandemic: a pair of black disposable gloves, a disposable mask, and a roll of toilet paper. The photographs also contain historically accurate reproduction props including Roemer glasses, a 'Bartman' (bearded man) jug, a vintage Heemskerk candlestick, and Dutch clay pipe.

I have studied entomology and practiced the art of preserving and pinning insects for over twenty years. From a native Australian Carpenter bee, to a Southeast Asian Violin beetle, insects from my personal collection were carefully integrated in the still lifes for their symbolism. I also accessed taxidermy birds, as well as a human skull from the Queensland Museum Loans centre, and utilised a range of live creatures, including silk worms, caterpillars and butterflies, blue tongue and shingleback lizards, and a panda snail. I collaborated with head florist Amy Gurling of Unveiling Poppy, who reinterpreted the historical floral compositions. By including native Australian flora and fauna with these traditional flowers, we have grounded the work in an Australian context.

In this collection I draw inspiration from these historical works and bring them into the 21st century Australian context. Reiterating the sentiments expressed in the Dutch paintings for a contemporary audience.

*Christina Lowry*

## Contemporary anachronism – Bree Di Mattina

Works of art function as time machines. They move us from our own time, swiftly depositing us into alternate places, spaces and realities. Artists manipulate the content and composition of their works to achieve this miraculous warp of time and space. While the breach of these dimensions may seem like contemporary concepts, artists have been offering viewers glimpses into these alternate realities for centuries.

This deliberate contrast of elements, often disparate, is known as 'anachronism'. Stemming from the Greek 'ana' for back or against and 'chronos' for time, artists deliberately include or change items such as costume, scenery or technology in their works to represent a clash of times. In 1425 Italian artist Tommaso Masaccio painted a series of frescos in the Brancacci Chapel. One scene, The Tribute Money, depicts Christ and the Apostles paying a temple tax. While for twenty first century eyes this work is a standard early Renaissance religious scene, for those contemporary to the work the dress of Christ and the Apostles would have been in sharp contrast to the shorter, modern clothing worn by the temple guards. This use of the contrasting costumes in the work was a deliberate ploy by Masaccio to portray the scene in an updated manner, emphasising the lessons being taught through the work for the audience of the time.

While Masaccio's subtle costume changes may be largely imperceptible to current audiences, other modern and contemporary artists continue to use anachronism. In the early twentieth century Giorgio de Chirico created surreal images by contrasting elements of mythology, classical figures and Roman arcades against contemporary objects. He played with perspective and space, creating disquieting images which eluded time classification. These works led the way for the surrealists and the depiction of fantastical and dream-like states in painting.

American Cindy Sherman makes frequent use of anachronism in her photographic works. In her Untitled Film Stills (1970s) series, Sherman exploited bygone settings and costuming. Using her own form and a wide array of vintage clothing she had collected, Sherman would compose scenes and photograph herself in scenarios reminiscent of old film stills. The power of these photographs lies in their quirky composition and the notions of the period she is representing which are embedded in our cultural subconscious.

Canadian painter Jeff Wall takes the composition and scale of classical painting and recasts the works in contemporary settings. Wall utilises the recognisable imagery of works such as Manet's A Bar at the Folies-Bergère (1882) and recasts it in his work Picture for Women (1979) in which he comments on 1970s gender politics.

Christina Lowry continues the anachronistic tradition in Memento Vivere in which she recreates all the voluptuous pomp of the Dutch Golden Age in her meticulously researched and composed photographs. Sourcing items which are either antique or precise reproductions, arranging them as the Dutch artists did and then photographing the scenes, Lowry produces anachronistic works. The inclusion of Australian native flora and fauna further contrasts the new works against their Dutch forebears. Rather than merely recreating the Memento Mori and flower paintings of the Dutch masters, Lowry further explores anachronism by including paraphernalia relevant to the Covid 19 pandemic. Rubber gloves, masks and syringes are juxtaposed against antique Roemer glasses and books. This clever use of anachronism has enabled Lowry to produce aesthetically pleasing, visually robust works which chart the journey the Covid 19 pandemic has taken Australia, and the World, on.

Anachronism, the inclusion of elements in works of art which are from a different time period, has been utilised by artists for centuries to bring added resonance to their works. What it ensures is that art will continue to evolve, drawing on inspiration from the past and updating it for the future.



*Remember to Live (Memento Vivere)* is steeped in the histories of still life painting, Memento Mori and the Dutch Golden Age. Lowry recasts these histories, bringing them into a contemporary context. Created in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, this work draws on the concept of Memento Mori (remember that you will die) which subsequently reminds viewers to live (Memento Vivere).

Contrasting a voluptuous display of grapes, vines and figs against ants, bugs and a protective face mask, Lowry explores the early stages of the pandemic. Largely confined to our homes, donning a face mask for tentative excursions for essentials, many soon forgot the freedoms which we had previously taken for granted. The open book is juxtaposed against the domestic knife and plate, symbolising the finely balanced work from home situation into which many were thrust. Almost imperceptible, the dragonfly rests on the grapes, a symbol of change, adaptability and hope.

Just as the Dutch masters reminded their wealthy patrons of the need for prudence amongst their excess, Lowry reminds viewers that even in the midst of a pandemic, we must Remember to Live.

*Remember to Live (Memento Vivere)* 2021  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
64 × 89 cm  
Finalist Ravenswood Women's Art Prize, 2021





*Flatten the Curve* 2021  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
78 × 63 cm

Early in the Covid-19 pandemic the phrase ‘flatten the curve’ became ubiquitous. Describing the employment of restrictions to hopefully de-escalate the rising panic and slow the rate of infections and death, the phrase entered the vernacular overnight.

*Flatten the Curve* represents the hope that still prevailed early in the pandemic. The belief that restrictions, and the virus, would be short lived. The flowers bloom and attract butterflies, a Carpenter bee and bugs. The wheat, symbolising renewal and rebirth, adds to the optimistic nature of the work.

Unlike other flower works which foreground the wilting and imperfect blooms as well as the beauty, reminding viewers of the fragility of life, *Flatten the Curve* demonstrates the optimism present in the early days of Covid-19.



In *Food Security*, Lowry utilises the 'Memento Mori' tradition of tables piled high with food and drink and elaborate accoutrement to further explore the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic. A single candle is present, a small light in the darkness. As people spent more time at home and certain foods dwindled in availability, many turned to baking bread or raising birds for eggs and meat.

The table is laid with breads, cheeses, eggs and a quail, yet the empty plate and upturned cup represent the hardship many faced. In addition to the candle, light flows from an unseen window, just visible in the reflection of the beaker. The use of a window to light a scene references such great artists as Vermeer and Rembrandt. The abundant table, including the dead quail, show the mixed fortunes of many in the pandemic and capture the spirit of the 16th and 17th century 'Memento Mori' paintings.

*No animals were harmed in the making of this work. The quail belonged to the artist's neighbour and died of natural causes.*

*Food Security* 2021  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
91 × 138 cm





*Social Distancing*, a previously unheard-of phrase, has become ubiquitous with the Covid-19 pandemic. The black cat emerges from the shadows and crouches forebodingly over the lifeless bird, a black cross on the table a reminder of social distancing requirements. The dark, muted tones of the work echo the sombre reality of life in a pandemic.

The black cat, long associated with danger or death, stalks the bird. The native Noisy Miner bird, widely regarded as a pest in Australia, lies inert, its head drooping over the precipice of the table. Invoking religious symbolism, the mark of a cross on the ground has become a constant reminder of the need to maintain a safe distance from others. Amid the pandemic, these crosses became a symbol of safety, protecting us from death and the pestilence. While the Noisy Miner can represent pestilence, it also represents innocence and lives lost. As the cat violates the social contract of the cross on the floor, the bird becomes closer to death.

Filled with tension, this work channels the delicate balancing act and the increased mental stress brought about by the pandemic.

*No animals were harmed in the making of this work. The artist has Department of Environment and Science collection authority to collect deceased wildlife.*

*Social Distancing* 2021  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
45 × 62 cm  
Whitewall Art Prize Finalist 2021  
Gosford Art Prize Finalist 2021



Dutch still life painters in the 17th century demonstrated their prowess by filling their compositions with vessels and items made from many different materials. Light was used judiciously to highlight and draw the viewer's attention to the range of materials. By depicting items made from glass, pewter, silver, clay, bone, stone, feather, wax and paper, the artist demonstrated their skills with the brush. These skills were then further enhanced by their conceptual abilities, arranging the elements of the composition and enriching the work with layers of symbolism.

Lowry channels the ethos of these painters by employing similar compositional and conceptual strategies. *Still Life with Skull and Pipe* features clay, bone, paper, glass and pewter, all materials faithful to the original 17th century pieces. In addition, Lowry has added an unfurling roll of toilet paper and a Kingfisher, native to Australia. This work, as with its 17th century counterparts, serves to remind viewers of their mortality. The skull and extinguished candle symbolise death. The toilet paper roll, a contemporary addition to the genre. The Kingfisher brings a wide variety of symbolic meaning to the work, symbolising imbalance in life and recklessness as well as hope for the future and reconciliation.

*Still Life with Skull and Pipe* 2021

Giclée print. Edition of 3

43 × 64 cm



Still life painters of the Dutch Golden Age were renowned for their use of exotic flowers, animals, shells and other items gathered by the Dutch traders as they travelled the globe. *Travel Restrictions* emulates the abundance and exotic compositions of the Dutch painters through the use of a velvet tablecloth, silver plate, pewter jug, glass and an oriental jug. The Australian native Carpenter Bee is added, resting on the lemon, the peel cascading over the plate, into the foreground of the work.

While Australians are renowned for being a nation of travellers, the Covid-19 Pandemic forced normally avid travellers to remain not only in the country, but also in their state, city or even home. The overturned jug and cascading lemon peel disrupt the elegant table setting, just as travel restrictions and Covid 19 disrupted lives. While animals and insects were typically only used in Dutch floral paintings, Lowry has included it here to ground the work in the Australian context and to demonstrate the bittersweet nature of travel restrictions within Australia during Covid-19.

*Travel Restrictions* 2021  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
46 × 64 cm



*Still Life with Kangaroo Skull* brings the Memento Vivere tradition firmly into the Australian context. Featuring a kangaroo skull and emu feathers the work emulates the traditional Dutch style. The skull sits upon an antique book, flanked by an hourglass which has almost run out of sand, a pewter jug and a Roemer glass.

Roemer (romer or rummer) glasses featured often in Dutch paintings from the 15th to 17th centuries. Usually green and colour and featuring protuberances on the stem to aid grip, the glass featured here is a faithful reproduction. The glass is half full of kombucha, a brewed beverage known for its health benefits, which many turned to making during the pandemic. Also present are a pair of black disposable gloves, previously only seen in health care facilities, they became widely used and difficult to source as every day citizens began using (and hoarding) personal protective equipment to protect themselves from the virus.

*No animals were harmed in the making of this work.*

*Still Life with Kangaroo Skull* 2021

Giclée print. Edition of 3

45 × 63 cm





*Revised Restrictions* 2021  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
62 × 45 cm

The lighter tones used in *Revised Restrictions* bring a hint of optimism to the work. The white earthenware vase and the hastily arranged linen cloth accentuate the splashes of white in the floral arrangement, contrasting sharply against the dark background. Camouflaged within the display are two monarch caterpillars and a praying mantis. The flowers are in varying states of bloom, abundant in their glory. The contrast of dark and light, blooming and wilting expresses the joy and apprehension embodied in the title *Revised Restrictions*.

Restrictions brought about by Covid-19 were both a safety measure and a burden. The revision of these restrictions, be they tightened or loosened, engendered mixed feelings of sadness and happiness tinged with fear. Through clever composition of this work, Lowry has captured the zeitgeist, expressing the emotional conflict brought about by Covid-19.





*Long Covid 2021*  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
63 × 52 cm

In the flower paintings typical of the Dutch style, it was common to find included flora, fauna and other items which the Dutch had gathered in their travels around the world. Prolific traders and sea farers, the Dutch would collect specimens and bring them back to Europe. Here artists would incorporate them into their compositions as symbols of worldliness, wealth and exoticism. In this work Lowry has included both native and imported flora as well as a blue tongue lizard, a snakeskin and butterflies.

As the Covid-19 pandemic has progressed, those who have recovered are often plagued by ongoing symptoms, dubbed *Long Covid*. In this piece, the lingering aftereffects of the disease can be seen in the wilted flora and the discarded snakeskin. While it was common for Dutch artists to include wilting plants, dead animals and rotting fruits as a reminder of death, in this work they serve as a reminder of both the deaths caused by Covid-19 and of the debilitating symptoms which remain with survivors.

*No animals were harmed in the making of this work.*



*New Normal 2021*  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
101 × 91 cm

In the second half of the seventeenth century, many Dutch painters focussed on exuberant floral displays, brimming with flowers and featuring butterflies, snails and other small creatures. These aesthetically pleasing works encouraged appreciation of the beauty of every day.

In *New Normal*, Lowry has embraced this sentiment, filling the frame with a voluptuous floral display including a violin beetle, leaf insect, monarch butterfly, a frog, a panda snail and a shingleback lizard.

As the pandemic continues to grip the world, a 'new normal' ensued. For many this time of flux has brought a new sense of appreciation for the small, average and normal aspects of daily life.



While many floral still life works exude energy this work, *Vaccination Milestones*, evokes a sense of stillness and calm. Emerging from the black background, the arrangement of flowers sits in an undefined space. The horizontal composition is lit from above, with sprays extending delicately into the surrounding dark. Two butterflies resting on the blooms the only hint of movement.

As the pandemic continued daily news turns from focussing on case numbers and deaths to vaccination rates. Governments encourage populations to vaccinate with inducements and promises of reduced restrictions. For many this is a time of stillness. Waiting for the opportunity to be vaccinated and then waiting for sufficient numbers to see the benefit of eased restrictions.

*Vaccination Milestones* 2021  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
43 × 63 cm





*Freedom Day 2021*  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
63 × 52 cm

The voluptuous composition of *Freedom Day* articulates the conflicting emotions one might experience nearing the 'end' of Covid-19 restrictions. The sumptuous burgundy cloth arranged over an antique barley twist table distinguishes this work from others in the series.

While half the cloth hangs smoothly over the table, the other half is haphazardly bunched, revealing the table beneath. The silkworm caterpillars, moths and cocoons, a favourite example of lifecycles for young students, are seen on and around the vase of flowers. While the big, blowsy blooms joyously celebrate the anticipated freedoms, the wilting greenery and limp petals tell of the hardships endured in the process.

Bright light from an unknown source illuminates the vase, flowers and table, in both glory and faded beauty, as the background is cloaked in darkness. Shining proudly at the front of the bunch, the Morning Glory flower heralds the start of a new day.



*In Pandemic or Endemic*, Lowry explores the progression of Covid-19 from outbreak, to epidemic, to pandemic and finally to endemic. This lifecycle of the disease is symbolised by the chicken and eggs, playfully invoking the question “which came first, the chicken or the egg?”. The chicken and quail eggs are positioned alongside a deceased bantam hen.

The abundance of eggs are arranged on the plate and the table surface, adding tension to the composition as they threaten to roll off and potentially shatter. Sheafs of wheat peek from under the pewter plate and into the foreground of the composition. As with the eggs, the wheat symbolises fertility, rebirth and renewal. The humble eggs and hen are juxtaposed against the richness of the glass of wine and the pewter jug.

The muted tones of the work emphasise the humble materials and the sombre subject matter. The glass, jug and wine, together with the wheat, hint at the promise of better times to come.

*No animals were harmed in the making of this work.*

*Pandemic or Endemic?* 2021  
Giclée print. Edition of 3  
47 × 64 cm



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Text: Bree Di Mattina

Florist: Amy Gurling, Unveiling Poppy

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