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Feminist Art Collectives: A review of *LAST* and *ShrewD* Collective exhibitions as a part of Collective Polyphony Festival

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Earlier this month, down a cobbled Collingwood laneway, two art collectives celebrated the opening of their respective exhibitions in neighbouring galleries together as a part of the *Collective Polyphony Festival*.

Both comprised of five female artists, *LAST* and *ShrewD* Collective's mediums and outputs vary, yet they share the mutual aims of community building and collaborative creativity, simultaneously operating as a collective whilst nurturing their own independent practices. Both are feminist-identifying collectives, communicating their goals through shows stripped of female imagery, instead alluding to socially conscious ideals, such as how we occupy space and communicate with one another—tied together by the belief that artists don't have to work alone.

Female artist collectives started developing in the late 1960s when the women's movement gained traction. Joining with like-minded artists, they would produce art, curate group shows, and share the load of the mundane art administration. Dealing with the pressures of motherhood and domestic roles, these collectives understood that through adopting a collaborative approach, their independent voices could be amplified. Playing to each group member's strengths and creating a platform for female artists in a sphere that solo white male artists dominated.

In Melbourne, feminist art groups emerged in the 1970s during the women's movement liberation of Oceania (late 1960s – early 1980s), including the first Australian Women's Day rally in Melbourne in March 1975. A year later, the feminist magazine *Lip* burst into

the arts scene, manifested by three female art collectives: Women's Film Festival, Women's Art Register and Women's Theatre Group. The magazine was the first of its kind in Australia, showcasing a range of political, social and cultural stances through essays and reviews of visual and performance art. By examining art from a female perspective, the magazine aimed to regain agency of female representation in the media and reflect upon the cultural conditions of Australian women. Publishing seven issues between 1976-1984, the magazine's legacy continues today by demonstrating the success of a collective approach to feminist ideologies based upon a strong sense of community, paving the way for future female art collectives to emerge.

Driven by these types of concerns, the *ShrewD* collective's five artists, Chris Fontana, Tracey Lamb, Amanda Laming, Nina Sanadze, and Mimmalisa Trifilò, exhibition *Habitat* has manifested through the collective exploration of the "Tower of Babel" narrative, a biblical parable that explores the themes of language, communication and division. Occupying various gallery surfaces, including the exterior façade, the show is all-encompassing through the mix of mediums such as sculpture, text, intervention and textiles. Simultaneously, it allows audiences to view each artist's individual practice whilst curated in a way that the works "speak" to one another through underpinning themes.

The concept of collectivism is silently present throughout the exhibition. The artwork itself, along with supportive infrastructure, such as Tracy Lamb's *Conversation Pit*, is located within the heart of the gallery. Composed of two curved benches facing each other, the artwork allows for reflection or conversations with other viewers, promoting incidental encounters. Illuminating how we embody this non-verbal communication daily, such as the shift to make way for another or welcoming someone to join us and making the invisible visible.

Next door, *LAST* (Light and Air and Space and Time) collective's exhibition *SPACE* is centred around ideas of how we occupy, experience and encounter space. With the

collective name derived from a 1992 poem by Charles Bukowski, the group's artists, Beth Arnold, Melanie Irwin, Katie Lee, Clare Rae and Hanna Tai, artistic practices span the mediums of sculpture, photography, installation and painting. Each is occupied with the materialisation of temporal conditions and subtle gestures that encompass our everyday.

In *SPACE*, the artworks are as crucial as their assemblage, utilising different hanging methods, such as suspension, wall hanging and manipulation of scale, bringing attention to the space between, around and above the works, which can often be overlooked. Katie Lee's site-specific work speaks to this further through the design of a custom steel rod designed to fit Mary Cherry's gallery's two walls, suspending a delicate silver 'claw, a motif re-presented throughout Lee's practice in multiple ways. The artwork prompts discussion around how the space in which artwork is displayed can inform how it is read, juxtaposing how often artworks need to fit within the gallery context by making a custom-made work.

You can visit *SPACE* and *Habitat* at neighbouring galleries Mary Cherry and Gertrude Glasshouse until October 7.

LAST and *ShrewD* is part of the *Collective Polyphony Festival*, a collective-centred festival throughout September across seven various Melbourne and Kyneton venues. Developed by artist Nina Sanadze, the festival celebrates all things collective through multiple exhibitions, talks, workshops and events. To find out further information, visit <https://collectivepolyphony.com/home>.