

# JULIE FRAGAR: NEW PAINTINGS

SARAH COTTIER GALLERY, SYDNEY

9 OCTOBER - 1 NOVEMBER 2014

There is no doubt that on a technical level, Julie Fragar is one of the most competent painters working in Australia today, and certainly of her generation. But separating her from a dozen other technically competent painters is a sense that painting is only part of it. Unlike her more unctuous contemporaries, whose work seeks to dazzle in its virtuosity, or its sheer tastefulness, Fragar's work appears to harness her fearsome technique only as a means to an end. Fragar's application of paint does not merely satisfy, it magnetises, begging further involvement, and her latest exhibition, *New Paintings*, demonstrates this strength.

Perhaps the most surprising development in Fragar's work is its escape of the reliance on the snapshot as a starting point. While Fragar continues to use photography as reference, there seems to be a more conscious construction of image in these works, an imbrication of myth and reality. The mythic lends Fragar's work a hefty visual gravity, evolving its aesthetic to a place more akin to Gericault than Peyton. This evolution is welcome; not that Fragar's work was ever less than technically superb. Rather, the world of painting has been slowly catching up, and Fragar is (fortunately) taking a deep breath and pushing into more bracing territory. Gone are the intimate moments, the self-conscious captures and Barthes's *punctum*, repurposed in paint. *New Paintings* sees Fragar engaging with staging and composition in a much more active way, revealing scenes that we can hardly imagine, much less photograph.

Fragar's last exhibition at Sarah Cottier, *Marathon Boxing and Dogfights* (2013), was visceral, unnerving and tough in its frank anger. Deftly executed, the exhibition was comprised of dogfights, bleak self-portraits and images of meat and unnerving violence, and it bravely exposed some raw, sore emotions of the artist's personal life. In *New Paintings*, the artist has clearly made some progress, tending to draw us in with storytelling, rather than buffeting us with the same raging catharsis. The sinewy, sensual paint is still there, but this time it is weaving a story, rather than a bandage.

One cannot help but be drawn into the fragmentary true story of Fragar’s ancestor, Antonio, who at twelve was packed onto a whaling ship by his father in an attempt to save him from being enlisted. After the vessel was shipwrecked, Antonio survived and lived on one of the islands of Fiji for some time. As Fragar explains, the narrative is incomplete, being made up of the few documents that remain, but what is known is that Antonio fled the island for fear of cannibalism, assisted by missionaries, eventually making his way to Australia. Fragar uses the incompleteness of Antonio’s backstory as the impetus to examine different aspects of the tale, particularly the grieving of his mother—Antonio would never manage to get word back to his parents—in the only text work of the exhibition. This work, entitled *Father Takes Control, Father Goes Mad*, anchors the series, giving the exhibition both a kind of start and end point from which to approach the other works. Immediately, it sets up the story, the fantastic voyage of Antonio, and signals its incompleteness. There are things Fragar does not yet know about Antonio, and things we *cannot* know.

Using for models her son (as a stand-in for Antonio, who was the same age when he left on the whaling ship), and another relative, many of the works verge on self-portraiture, an aspect of Fragar’s practice we have come to expect. However, Fragar does not appear once throughout the work, *per se*. With many of the paintings being made of collided images, their snatches and passages hint at possible incidents, and Fragar’s presence—or is that Antonio’s presence—permeates the work. By filling out the fragmented narrative of her forbear, Fragar not only examines a fascinating part of her familial past, but simultaneously engages with the metaphysics of art and history. By fleshing out and then interpreting and expanding upon Antonio’s story, the core of portraiture is exposed for the half-truth, the construct, that it has always been.

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Julie Fragar, *Off Sure Feet*, 2014. Oil on board, 137 x 102cm. Courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

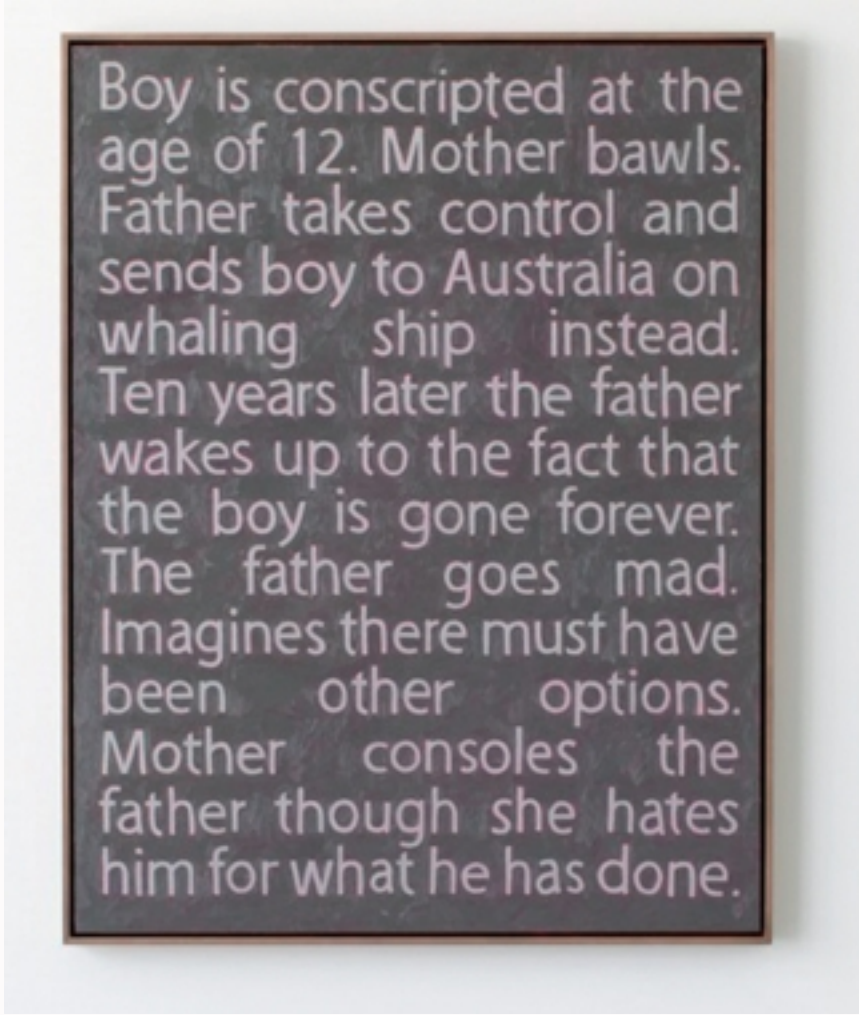




Julie Fragar, *The Strings*, 2014. Oil on board, 137.5 x 102cm. Courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.



Julie Fragar, *Pinned Like Chickens Eaten Like Chickens (Fiji)*, 2014. Oil on board, 92.5 x 72.5cm. Courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.



Julie Fragar, *Father Takes Control, Father Goes Mad*, 2014. Oil on board, 92.5 x 72.5cm. Courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

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