

## Exhibition review

### *Katthy Cavaliere: Loved*

Carriageworks, Sydney, and the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart

Curated by Daniel Mudie Cunningham

5 August – 11 September 2016 and 28 November 2015 – 28 March 2016

Reviewed by Vic Segedin

On a recent trip to Australia I caught the train from Penrith to Sydney, to visit the retrospective exhibition of Australian artist Katthy Cavaliere that was showing at Carriageworks. On the train that cool wet August day, I listened through my headphones to music that fit the mood of the weather: David Bowie's last album, *Blackstar*. As I walked from Redfern station to the gallery, I found myself hearing some of the lyrics more clearly than I had previously. And with the feel of this album still resonating with me, I entered *Katthy Cavaliere: Loved* and Cavaliere's poignant exploration of life and death, identity, dislocation, and the stuff that makes up our lives.

Bowie, though at the forefront of music culture in the '70s and '80s, had fallen off my radar for some time, but had been drawn back into my consciousness by the Victoria and Albert Museum's retrospective of his career that toured Australia in 2014, and then, at the beginning of this year, by the posters advertising what was to be his last album. He died two days after its release. The BBC News item announcing his death showed a clip from the video of *Lazarus*, where the singer, eyes bandaged, struggles then levitates in a hospital bed, and writes furiously before retreating backwards into a cupboard. One wonders if he was using his creativity to process his impending death.

This album playing quietly in my head made a thought-provoking backdrop to the Cavaliere exhibition. The posthumous show, curated by a friend of the artist, Daniel Mudie Cunningham,

seemed to be imbued with the artist's sense of working out matters of existence, of grappling with the realities of death and what is left behind. Set in darkened gallery spaces, the 17 works were lit dramatically and created a haunting trip through the artist's life.

*If I never see the English evergreens I'm  
running to  
It's nothing to me  
It's nothing to see* (Bowie, Dollar Days)

The Italian-born Cavaliere was diagnosed in 2011 with ovarian cancer, the same disease her mother had died of three years earlier. The artist fought her illness for six months before dying in January 2012 at only 39 years old. As she stated after her diagnosis, "I was dealing with mortality as a conceptual artist. But it's not conceptual any more; it's really happening" (Tan, 2015).

In the midst of all Cavaliere's searching for the meaning of mortality, it is an interesting proposition that a body of work left behind grants an artist a degree of immortality. And a posthumous exhibition brings this into sharp focus.

*Look up here, I'm in heaven  
I've got scars that can't be seen  
I've got drama, can't be stolen  
Everybody knows me now*  
(Bowie, Lazarus).

Bowie casts himself as *Lazarus*, a symbol much used in art and literature to convey life after death, well aware that his artistic legacy will transcend his death (Denham, 2016).

Cavaliere's *Afterlife* (2011) is a photographic work depicting a looming shadow of the artist with a large hourglass containing the ashes of her mother, Mara. Cavaliere used her art to deal with her grief at losing her mother. But in *Loved*, this work could be seen as a portent of the artist's own early death.

In *Empty stockings: Full of love* (2010), we see a few dozen pairs of pantyhose hanging on the wall, a suspended scarecrow-like figure, a pile of used clothes, an equal-sized pile of shredded bills, and the recurring motif of the hourglass. The pantyhose are displayed as though a progression of her mother's life – a finite number to mark her early death. These and the pile of clothes could also be seen as a symbol of something quite intimate, evoking that unenviable task of sorting through a loved one's possessions, 'the everyday stuff that makes up our lives' after they have gone.

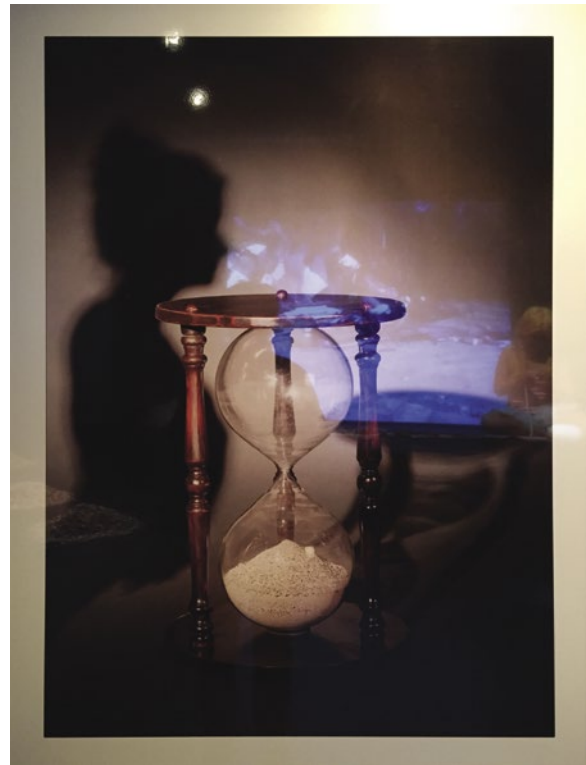
The pile of clothes recalls fellow Italian Michelangelo Pistoletto's work *Venere degli stracci* (1967), in which a mica-covered, and therefore overly shiny, statue of Venus faces a large pile of rags which had been used to polish her. In *Nest* (2010), Cavaliere's reference warrants further examination. In this video work she sits atop a pile of her mother's clothes, looking out to sea wearing nothing but a pair of her mother's stockings on her head; her naked back naturally suggests Pistoletto's Venus. Cavaliere and her mother often met to catch up over fish and chips at Clovelly beach in Sydney. Perhaps this is a suggestion of how much her mother shaped and 'polished' her early life.

*I'm dying to...* (Bowie, Dollar Days)

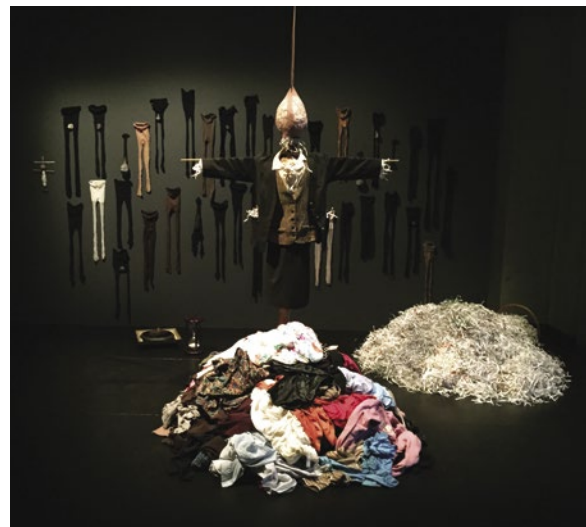
The ambiguous grammar and the spoken (sung) words give me two readings:  
*I'm dying too*

Cavaliere's life is made real and tangible by the material objects that she kept and continually reconfigured into installations in order to make meaning of her past.

[She] had a lifelong project of packing, storing and transporting the stuff of everyday life – the wreckage of her



Katthy Cavaliere, *Afterlife*, 2011, Type C photograph.



Katthy Cavaliere, *Empty stockings: Full of love*, 2010, performance installation: mother's stockings, work uniform and pile of clothes, shredded bills, baskets, human hair, wooden egg, mirror, broom, pins, bamboo, timber, fur, hourglass.

personal possessions, the 'dead among us' – and transforming it into art. Her belongings held a symbolic significance; she used them to banish the past, but in doing so, was never quite able to let go of anything. (Cunningham, 2015)



Katthy Cavaliere, *Story of a girl*, 1999, remains from an installation at Artspace, Sydney.



Katthy Cavaliere, *Katthy's room*, 1998, performance installation: cardboard box, wooden steps, personal belongings.



Katthy Cavaliere, *Brown paper*, 2001, performance installation: cardboard box, brown paper bags, breath. All photography of works by Jill Segedin.

We see this most clearly in *Story of a girl*. In the original work, in 1999, when she staged a solo show at Sydney's Artspace, Cavaliere laid out on a large sheet possessions from her childhood that she wanted to divest herself of: books, toys, sports equipment, clothes, and the like. She then gave individual possessions away to gallery visitors with the obligation that they describe this experience in diaries provided in the gallery space. This work, according to the writings of the artist, prompted a 'personal crisis'. Daniel Cunningham explained that "In giving all this stuff away she felt like she'd given herself away" (Tan, 2015).

In the *Loved* exhibition this work is placed in a separate room – to great effect. The childhood items are arranged on a 10.5 × 1.5 metre sheet, but this time not to be taken by the viewers. Rather, now with the knowledge of the artist's short life, we are forced to read this in a different way – of childhood possessions preserved from her life like a time capsule.

This idea is present in *Katthy's room* (1998). The viewer is presented with a large cardboard box, about 3 metres wide and deep and 2 metres high, and invited to climb a set of steps in order to look inside. The interior is a faithful reconstruction of Cavaliere's childhood bedroom, a continuation of her almost obsessive documentation of herself, her life. In the original installation the artist would inhabit the space, for two-hour durations, as she might have done as a teenager: listening to music lying on the bed, writing at her desk, and interacting with those who might look down on her. In *Loved*, this metaphysical presence is no longer possible and the work becomes more about the artist's absence.

*Something happened on the day he died  
 Spirit rose a metre then stepped aside  
 Somebody else took his place, and bravely  
 cried  
 (I'm a blackstar, I'm a star star,  
 I'm a blackstar)* (Bowie, Blackstar)

Perhaps for me the most emotive work was *Brown paper* (2001) – a coffin-like cardboard box overflowing with brown paper lunch bags, each blown up by the artist and thus

containing her breath – one breath per bag. Inspired by studying with Marina Abramović in Italy, Cavaliere evokes the Serbian’s concept of the ‘the artist is present’. In the original, she performed the work sitting in the ‘coffin’, breathing into the bags. Here in *Loved* it takes on a deeper significance, where the artist is now absent but yet still present, leaving behind something as fundamental to life as her breath.

*Oh I’ll be free*

*Just like that bluebird*

*Oh I’ll be free*

*Ain’t that just like me* (Bowie, Lazarus)

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