

ALEX SETON
ONCE THERE



sullivan+strumpf

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An Absence of Something

By Chloé Wolfson

Bundles of cloth dot the floor of the gallery. Their topologies were generated through spontaneous gesture but have been painstakingly reproduced through intricate carving. Some of these works are densely gathered, while others are deflated wads. Their surfaces are carved in the likeness of a tightly knitted woollen blanket, a rough linen or a fine cotton. Each work has its starting point in the studio drop cloths of artist Alex Seton.

In Seton's artist studio in Sydney, nearly everything is covered in a fine layer of white dust, generated from the constant marble carving taking place. The artist and his studio assistants usually wear white to work in (they will end up coated in the shade anyway). Every so often an industrial air filter starts up, noisily but necessarily intruding into the space. And drop cloths cover completed sculptures and other objects that need to be spared from being dusted with fine marble.

Textiles have provided rich fodder for carvers of stone through the ages, with softly folded cloth elegantly conjured from lumps of seemingly impermeable rock. The veiled or shrouded subject or object has often been used to signify, rather than depict, grand concepts such as purity, glory, death and the afterlife. Fabric has long been integral to Seton's practice too, enabling him to explore themes of contemporary social justice through objects such as the hoodie and tarpaulin, while also recalling historic elements of classical statuary.

Seton's previous body of work *Cargo* (exhibited at Sullivan+Strumpf Sydney in 2018) saw the artist draw inspiration from the textiles in his studio. In that case, it was seven years of clothing which the artist constructed into bales reminiscent of those produced by the second-hand clothing industry, which the artist had observed previously while working in a studio space situated opposite a factory where such bales were produced.

Cargo's dual concerns of the personal (Seton's own sartorial accumulations) and the political (the increasingly concerning issue of 'fast fashion' and global clothing waste) have been stripped back for

this most recent project. While the works in *Once There* also take as their starting point items in Seton's immediate studio surrounds, the forms have occurred more serendipitously, bundled and dropped unceremoniously, recorded via a sculpting process that allows a greater exaggeration of folds and forms.

In the gallery, visitors navigate a landscape of these dropped, empty shrouds featuring complex carved baroque folds. While a veil or shroud is traditionally a supplementary aesthetic device, here it is the central focus. Shrouded objects invite speculation, and by emptying it of the object it is intended to conceal, Seton has defrocked it of its grander associations, inviting further contemplation of the relationship between humans and the material world.

In 2009 Seton exhibited a series of sculptures of shrouded quotidian objects – a wheelchair, wedding cake, piano, pram, lawnmower, motorbike – recalling art historical moments of shrouding such as the veiled figure of the Nile in Bernini's *Four Rivers Fountain* (1648-51), the wrapped work by Man Ray *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920/72), and of course Christo and Jeanne-Claude's oeuvre of covered monuments. Where that series, *On Hold*, invited the audience to complete the work in their own minds by mentally lifting the shroud, in the case of *Once There* the shrouds have been dropped to the floor and lie devoid of context. As the artist says, these forms "act like a cloud", out of which forms emerge and suggest themselves to each individual viewer, however Seton cannot deny his own point of view, and his choice of titles reference his Classical artistic education and early influences.



Pictured above: Drop Cloth: Stola, 2019, Wombeyan marble

Each work has been named after some of the first garments from the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Greece and Rome. The artist allowed the forms which occurred when the drop cloths fell, and the textures

of each piece of fabric, to suggest particular titles: a *Shendyt* is an ancient Egyptian kilt; *Peplos* refers to a full-length pleated dress worn by Greek women; *Stola* is a traditional woollen garment worn by Roman women while *Chlamys* and *Chiton* were both worn by Roman men; and the Egyptian *Tarkhan Dress* is the world's oldest known garment.



Pictured above: Drop Cloth: Chlamys, 2019, Wombeyan marble

Seton's practice has long incorporated humour, wordplay and visual trickery. In *Once There*, the work *Empire Style* brings a contemporary spin to an otherwise classically toned show. A life-size reproduction of a classic monobloc plastic chair rendered in stone, this piece is central to the exhibition, an ironic throne of sorts whose form and title thumb their nose at the authority of classical tradition. It is from this pedestal that the artist can survey his domain but where visitors can also consider the shrouds and what they mean to them.

While drop cloths have an unassuming function, the concept of the shroud resonates with the mystery and energy involved in the concealing and revealing of objects. Seton's cloths are conjured from the earth: a solid lump of stone cajoled into a form suggesting an absence of something. The artist has likened the process of making these works to drawing: his use of particular tools allowing for certain lines to be made more pronounced and certain forms to be exaggerated. While this process and the relatively abstract aesthetics of textiles implies a freedom in the making of these objects, the reality is quite different. Each bundle contains a certain logic of folds which must be respected by the sculptor in order for that logic to translate to the eye and mind of the viewer. The spontaneous gesture of bundling requires painstaking rendering.

The exhibition's title implies a destination that could be in the past, present or future. *Once There* is a

logical progression for Seton, as we find him stripping back further and further to the basics, looking to the studio space around him at the humblest of materials to articulate the most universal of human expressions. Seton doesn't need to look elsewhere for a subject, as the drape, that most enduring of artistic compositional elements, was right there under his feet the whole time. Having lifted it in the service of this body of work, the question remains: what comes next?

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alex Seton's artistic practice incorporates photography, video, sculpture and installation to investigate the complex relationship between form and substance. He is best known for his beguiling marble carving, applying his refined craftsmanship to unexpected forms. Blankets, hoodies, inflatables and national flags are rendered in stone, invoking a somatic paradox. By infusing the rich heritage of Classical statuary with contemporary concerns, Seton gives weight to the issues we face here and now.

In his recent bodies of work, carved clothing bales reference the free and profit-driven movement of thousands of bales of our discarded clothes – in potent counterpoint to the perilous and stymied journey of the asylum seeker. Life jackets and poolside toys become potent reminders of Australia's troubling policies pertaining to asylum seekers; inflatable crowns celebrate the ease of contemporary life, too readily taken for granted. The creative process itself is interrogated in shows such as *Roughing Out* (Hazelhurst Regional Gallery, 2013) and *Replicator* (Tweed River Art Gallery, 2014), in which Seton explored his practice through performance, video and participatory works.

Seton has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally. Solo exhibitions include *Cargo*, Sullivan+Strumpf Sydney (2018); *Monument*, Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney (2017); *Alex Seton: The Island*, Newcastle Art Gallery (2017); *Someone Else's Problem*, Sydney Contemporary, Carriageworks (2015); *As of Today*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra (2014-15); *Last Resort*, touring McClelland Sculpture Park + Gallery, Langwarrin, Linden Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne & Rockhampton Art Gallery, Rockhampton (2014-15), and *Roughing Out*, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre, Sydney (2013). Recent group exhibitions include *Young & Free* | *An Australian Discourse*, Bega Valley Regional Gallery (2017); Kochi-Muziris Biennale, India (2016); *Contour 556*, Canberra Public Art Festival (2016); *Sealed Section*, Artbank, Sydney (2014-15); *Gifted Artists: Donations by Patrick Corrigan AM*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (2014); *Conflict: Contemporary Responses to War*, University of Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane (2014); and *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Dark Heart*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (2014).