

# Meg Cowell: Symbolism and Transformation

fluoro spoke to Australian artist Meg Cowell who explores the symbolism of fashion garments and the element of water through photography.

Cowell's images are mysterious at first view, with garments appearing to hang suspended in darkness. The true beauty of the photographs emerges with the knowledge that water is the key element used in her process. Fabrics and theatrical garments are submerged into the dyed water, removing the dresses from the connection to their wearer.

The concept of submerging fabrics and garments in water began from a personal fascination of Cowell's, which saw her collect and archive garments discarded on the streets of Adelaide, Australia. "Once collected I began photographing each garment submerged, adding liquids and dyes to augment a transformative process," Cowell says. "Eventually, a literal upsizing of the project (from 100 litres to 1000 litres) allowed me to capture whole garments, wedding dresses and theatre costume."

Cowell's fascination with immersing garments and fabrics has seen her actively seek particular garments depending on the mood she hopes to evoke. Cowell has worked with a range of garments from wedding dresses to elaborate theatrical gowns, each instilled with symbolism and meaning.

## **(f) How do you determine which garments you will use within your work?**

The subjects of my photographs are full-sized theatrical garments, costume and wedding dresses. I borrow some from theatre companies and others I purchase from op shops and second-hand boutiques during treasure hunts throughout the country. On my missions around these stores I look for garments that communicate the kind of mood, feeling or emotion that I want to express. I have found that wedding dresses are particularly potent garments to work with. They speak of hope, expectation, and of a symbolic transformation.

## **(f) Tell us more about how your work explores feminine identity.**

(MC) One of my key inspirations is the 'princess' archetype of fairy tales, particularly wherein feminine garments operate as vehicles of metamorphosis. This is seen in Disney adaptations in which the downtrodden character becomes a princess through the wearing of the dress. As young women we learn to include these ideas in our identity and hope for the future, when we are grown we act out this hope through the wearing of the white wedding dress.

I purchased the subject of Tidal (pictured) from an Op shop in the outer-suburbs of Melbourne and photographed it saturated with blue dye to enhance a sense of this symbolic transformative process and also to suggest a phase of biological metamorphosis.

## **(f) Does the water itself hold significance in the narrative of your work?**

(MC) Water operates within my images on a number of levels. It is foremostly a medium of buoyancy and illusionistic display, suspending the garments in the space holds the added pigment

and increases the saturation.

The water in my images also acts symbolically. Water has a long history of significance as a vehicle of transformation and re-birth. I look to film, literature and artworks for inspiration with this theme.

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Since moving into a communal studio in late 2013, Cowell has developed an interest in exploring the use of fabric as a mode of expression within painting. Inspired by the other artists in the studio – most of whom are painters – Cowell has been experimenting with applying the characteristics of painting to her photographic pieces. “I am able to recreate the effect of renaissance paintings in which the fabric seems buoyant and under the power of its own mysterious energy. In my reconstructions the water acts as a medium, suspending the fabric, allowing it to move in ways that contribute to its own organic force,” Cowell says.

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