



Jane Eccles

In These Threads

January 20 - March 17, 2019



Image: *Suzanne's Dress*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 60"

In These Threads

Essay by Sandy Saad, Curator of Exhibitions and Education,
Visual Arts Centre of Clarington

The lustrous silk of a red evening gown shines, offering rich multifaceted tones of cherry, scarlet, and garnet. It gathers at the waist and its layers fall and expand to the ground. It is the type of dress one would wear to the most formal occasions. A loose-fitting white tulle day dress is embroidered with royal blue flowers and patterns that play with the light shining through its translucent material. Its elegance is in its simplicity. Layers of cut fabric in various shapes and sizes make up a violet button-down dress that loosely flows, while its jagged edges sit just below the knees. The patterns of the formal day dress lead your eyes from one part to the next.

From long dresses to short dresses, floral prints to geometric patterns, embroidered tulle to black lace, Jane Eccles paints all sorts of dresses. There are dresses for special occasions such as weddings and public performances, while others are made to wear on a Sunday afternoon. The dresses are as varied as the women who wore them: Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, farm woman and civic leader Helen Liss, and WWII nurse Vivian Cowan. Since 2005, Jane Eccles has painted dresses lent to her by various women and their relatives because of their link to a significant event or memory. As part of her process, Eccles researches their stories, producing archival paintings inspired by the narrative of each woman. Her work is a reflection of the meaningful interactions she has had with her subjects, paintings that serve as containers of memories. *In These Threads* surveys Eccles's long-standing practice of painting dresses and learning the stories of women from all walks of life.

Viewers can gather some clues about who Eccles's subjects were. Clothes are often texts of identity, and dressing the self can be a way for individuals to communicate belonging to a certain social group, the possession, or lack of, power, or a shared understanding of cultural codes. Through each dress we are able to visualize a woman walking down the aisle, performing in front of an audience, or taking a casual stroll. Despite some clues, the dresses painted by Eccles have no bodies to wear them. They float in the air, separated from their real subjects. In Eccles's work what is absent holds just as much weight as what is present. The glaring absence of the female body in Eccles's paintings turns her work into a feminist critique. She re-articulates a symbolic vestige of the feminine cultural construct through the excavation of memory and visual imagery, offering more than just a pretty dress. Inspired by the stories of women and lacking the actual subjects



Images: (left) *Donna's Dress*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48", (right) *Adrienne's Dress*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Image: *k.d. lang Costume*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 60".

she studies, Eccles leaves clues to their identities while highlighting their absence. There is room for curiosity, ambiguity, and projection. The dresses are juxtaposed against Canadian landscapes, waterscapes, and window scenes that often reference various parts of southern Ontario where they were painted. Some of the paintings are scenes viewed from the windows of Eccles's farmhouse in Bowmanville, Ontario, looking out on gardens and streetscapes. We see rivers and lakes, fields and trees, and parts of neighbourhoods, but no women. Eccles's painting practice implies the absence of the female body in landscapes, portrait - painting and other forms of art. Each wearer has a real story, but she is not seen.

The exhibition includes an 1860's antique Judy frame that stands next to its painting. In the 1950s, Judy became the name for a female dress form representing the perfect mannequin, a three-dimensional female torso used for fitting clothes being designed or sewed. The headless Judy frame is busty and has a small waist, accentuated by curvaceous hips. Eccles's old model is ageing, its fabric ripped, waist misaligned, wireframe falling apart. What comes to mind is the collective masquerade of the female body, grotesque in its social significance: the model which women are told to strive to fit into is now a testament to the unrealistic standards by which they are often measured. Eccles's painting of the Judy is an honest portrayal of a warped figure as the main subject of an identityless portrait standing against a waterscape background.

Also standing against a waterscape is *Ruth's Dress*. Ruth Watson Henderson is a Canadian composer who wore her formal red gown in her performance at the Eaton Auditorium in Toronto. Finding balance as a mother and composer, she would come to some of her ideas walking near the Humber River just near her Etobicoke home. k.d. lang would wear a very different dress when she accepted a Juno Award in 1985. The floor-length vintage satin wedding dress she wore with cowboy boots would serve as a memorable outfit as she accepted the award for Most Promising Female Vocalist. Vivian Cowan's red overcoat dress looks brand new; it was a gift from her husband, whom she met while nursing him shortly after the end of WWII. The dress was delivered to Eccles in its original box and tissue, cared for and cherished. The closet of dresses created through Eccles's work offers a collection of stories that produce a sense of mystery about their wearers. They allow us to be curious and inquire about a history that exists, but may have gone unnoticed.



Images: (left) *Wind Chill*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 60", (right) *Vivian's Dress*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48".

Biography

For over 35 years Bowmanville based artist, Jane Eccles has taught art and devoted her artistic practice to painting and performance. As an art educator, Eccles was awarded the Marshall McLuhan Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1992. Eccles retired from her teaching career in 2003 to practice art full time. Jane Eccles has been painting dresses since 2005, she researches their stories as part of her painting process and activates their narratives through performance and storytelling.

Exhibition Programming

Storytelling by Jane Eccles and a musical performance by Anne Walker

Saturday, March 9, 11 AM - 4 PM

Venues: Visual Arts Centre of Clarington and the Clarington Museum and Archives (Sarah Jane Williams Heritage Centre).

The day after International Women's Day, the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington and Clarington Museum and Archives will host a collaborative program that highlights women's stories from Clarington and beyond. In conjunction with the VAC Exhibition *In These Threads*, the day will start with a performative reading by artist Jane Eccles, narrating the stories of the women behind her dress paintings. Participants will then be invited to a musical performance by local singer-songwriter Anne Walker at the Clarington Museums and Archives. Walker's music captures the spirit of rural Ontario life and the local women who were the backbone of it.



Image: Annemarie's Dress, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"

Schedule:

11:00 AM - 1:00 PM - Performative reading by Jane Eccles. Refreshments will be provided.

Venue: Visual Arts Centre of Clarington (143 Simpson Avenue, Bowmanville, ON).

2:00 PM - 4:00 PM - Musical performance by local folk musician and songwriter, Anne Walker.

Venue: Clarington Museum and Archives (Sarah Jane Williams Heritage Centre - 62 Temperance Street, Bowmanville, ON).



GALLERY HOURS

Monday: Closed

Tuesday - Thursday: 10am - 9pm

Friday - Sunday: 10am - 4pm

CONTACT US

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Clarington



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