

Aftercare

Emily Portmann

Through still and video documents of a private performance, Portmann explores the emotional and psychological ideology of self-care. The works record successive gestures of cocooning and containment as the artist gradually encases her head and body in bubble wrap. A parody emerges of a society in which fetishised notions of self-comfort, protection and healing coincide with the commercialisation of wellbeing.

Leaky borders by Alice Mawhinney

What exactly might have provoked Emily Portmann's impulse to dress her entire head in a large roll of pink bubble wrap for her latest series, *Aftercare*? Then again, what might be more wacky than confiding in an A.I. chatbot-therapist about how lonely you are during a world pandemic, or the absurd gesture of "elbowing", or, spending the last 3 hours of the day scrolling through psychology infographics only to feel completely pathological? At least the candle you just bought donates 5% profit to mental health charities. Come to think of it, listing these hypotheticals one after the other begins to feel like slowly wrapping something obnoxious and suffocating around my own head.

Normal and abnormal.

Pre-pandemic, Portmann's oeuvre explored questions of identity and psychological mindscapes through self-portraiture. Neutral tones and urban spaces frame her expressive body: her features, void of expression. At times, Portmann's portrayal of the psyche feels disturbing, as in *UNCERTAIN GAMES*, 2005, and at others, tender, as in *I CAN NEVER ESCAPE MYSELF*, 2006-2007. The work is often site-specific. In *Born Out of Fire*, 2016, Portman lays on a damp and muddy bed of fallen eucalyptus leaves in bushland, and in *SURVEYOR / SURVERYED*, 2005, she perches on the chairs of a lecture hall.

With a newly heightened awareness of everything considered normal and abnormal; safe and dangerous, Portmann's focus during the height of the pandemic shifted from the physical environment to the psychological purgatory of navigating quotidian interactions and their boundaries.

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Hold Tight's hospital-blue backdrop and plastic sheet with built-in gloves – an invention to be able to “safely” hug loved ones during the pandemic - allude to public health procedures and institutions. In a world of stay-at-home orders, Hold Tight, 2020, stressed the profound impact that a lack of everyday touch and connection had on individuals' psychological states.

In Aftercare, Lego-like figures – with large, cylindrical, faceless heads - navigate their way around a pink, monochromatic space, unable to see, smell, hear or speak. Disconnected from most senses, the body guides these curious characters as they explore textures and connections via their hands. Take the work, Action Eight for example, in which one figure tactilely peels back the wrapped head of another, or Action Four where the figure's hands scrunch up a tail end of the bubble wrap: stimulating a visceral, palpable sensory memory of capitalist nostalgia. Touch, of course, was the primary sense deprived during peak pandemic in 2020 and 2021: a theme explored in Hold Tight. Aftercare wrestles with ideas of comfort, care, and their intersection with the commercialisation of well-being industry in the aftermath of the last few years.

Currently, there are little to no restrictions on distancing. Aftercare, however, has not returned to urban landscapes or auburn bushlands. Instead, Portmann poses among the raspberry hues of an identifiable space. Saturated pink consumes the work, and the transparent, plastic sheet from Hold Tight has morphed into opaque pink bubble wrap. Aftercare's glossy, colourful, and commercial aesthetic is more reminiscent of an advertisement, Eggleston, or a Darren Sylvester than Portman's early work.

So, why pink?

The red pink that floods Aftercare is intentionally bodily. The title of the work is polysemous. When I google it everything from medical rehabilitation to BDSM and incarceration comes up. For Portmann, the treatment and care of physical wounds, becomes a springboard off which she proposes the question, “What would aftercare to a mental health or emotional injury look like?” Post-pandemic, Portmann does not return to the external, site-specific concerns she once had, but shifts deeper into a preoccupation with the internal.

Here, between dichotomies: internal/external, mind/body, human/environment, artificial/natural, lies something rather interesting. There is a tension between these dualities (highlighted by the duplication of Portmann's body) and an interconnectedness suggested by the monochromatic hue. In attempting to make tangible an embodied and psychological site, Aftercare simultaneously contextualises itself within dialogues of mind-body dualism, relationality, and New Materialism. There is no boundary or distinction in the ambiguous pink space between the nude body, the mind and its environment. In the age of the Anthropocene, Aftercare addresses the poignant reality that we are all under the illusion we are separate from the environment.

What concerns me (and, hopefully you)

What concerns me (and, hopefully you) about Aftercare is that the raspberry pink bubble wrap - a stand in for consumer culture – is, too, part of this monochromatic network. That is to say, there is no distinction between body/mind, or late capitalism. The system is entrenched in our being. Thus, the bubble wrap is paradoxically cushioning Portmann's mind, yet in using it, she renders herself a kind of product. Ultimately, it's hard to define what's harmful or helpful for any of us in an age bombarded with advertisements, where concealed forces manipulate our decisions and desires. The monochromatic pink blurs lines between the leaky body and its permeable environment, mental health, and capitalist motivations.

Funnily enough, my first association when I saw the beehive-like crown of bubble wrap in Aftercare was the Venus of Willendorf (I'd just recently been in a conversation about its mysterious origin). Whilst there aren't many other parallels between the work of Portmann and this 30,000 year old figurine, Aftercare grapples with one of the most pressing questions of our epoch: self-identity in the era of late capitalism, a global pandemic, and a world that potentially won't survive the next 100 years.

Alice Mawhinney is a dancer/curator curious about embodied knowledge, relational aesthetics, and Neo-Baroque theory.

1	Emily Portmann, Aftercare, Action 1, 2021, archival pigment print, 100 x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 2AP	\$2,000
2	Emily Portmann, Aftercare, Action 2, 2021, archival pigment print, 100 x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 2AP	\$2,000
3	Emily Portmann, Aftercare, Action 3, 2021, archival pigment print, 100 x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 2AP	\$2,000
4	Emily Portmann, Aftercare, Action 4, 2021, archival pigment print, 100 x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 2AP	\$2,000
5	Emily Portmann, Aftercare, Action 7, 2021, archival pigment print, 100 x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 2AP	\$2,000
6	Emily Portmann, Aftercare, Action 8, 2021, archival pigment print, 100 x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 2AP	\$2,000
7	Emily Portmann, Aftercare, Action 9, 2021, archival pigment print, 100 x 120 cm	Ed.3 + 2AP	\$2,000
8	Emily Portmann, Aftercare, Performance, 2021, single channel video, 6:22 mins	Ed.3 + 2AP	\$1,200

About | Emily Portmann

Emily Portmann works primarily in photography and digital media, exploring the body as site for internal states of being. She was a finalist in the Sunshine Coast Art prize (2021) and has shown nationally in Australia and in Singapore (2017). Her work is held in public collections such as Artbank and Tweed River Regional Art Gallery. She received the Olive Cotton Portrait Photography Prize in 2008.