

EFFACE

A painting of a head, likely a classical bust, completely covered by a bright yellow, heavily draped and folded cloth. The cloth's texture is rendered with thick, visible brushstrokes, creating deep shadows and bright highlights. The head and neck are visible at the bottom, painted in soft, realistic tones of skin. The background is a solid, dark navy blue.

CHELSEA LEHMANN
& LUKE THURGATE

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About Face

Efface is a collection of paintings that appears to be two collections of paintings – a face-off. Superficially, there seems little connection between Thurgate's crisp bright portraits and Lehmann's dramatic figures and dark swirlings. Scratch the surface, however, and one discovers a shared concern with history, identity, and the problematics of painting. Spectator-participants are in fact engaged to erase the surface of their collaborative wall-work, *Face-off*, in which each artist has drawn over the schematised self-representation of the other. And so, the exhibition's title is a verb. For it is in this cycle of face-deface-efface-face that the interchange between these apparently distinct bodies of work is revealed.

The noun *face* came relatively late to English. Before the Middle Ages, '[t]he front part of the head, from the forehead to the chin, and containing the eyes, nose, and mouth', had been called, among other names, the 'nebb'. The new name came from the mediaeval Latin *facia*, or 'portrait'. Behind this word lies the classical Latin noun *facies*, which referred to the 'outward aspect' of a thing, and behind that, the verb *faciō*, 'to do' or 'to make' (*OED*). In the hip parlance of the 1960s, to be a 'face' was to be somebody. But the apparent subjects of *Efface* do not get, or get to be, faces. Instead, they discover themselves defaced by the unpainting of Lehmann's non-representational blurring and wiping-away and the overpainting of Thurgate's virtuosic rendering of fabric folds.

Thurgate's work draws on the urban legend of 'The Yellow Socks Boys', which appears to have been created through a combination of police paranoia and press sensationalism. This 'gang of perverts' – in reality, a few gay men in Newcastle in the 1950s who had been charged with 'abominable offences' and pushed to identify others – allegedly distinguished themselves by wearing yellow socks or ties. Thurgate's portraits are supposed to be of the eight 'offenders', but beyond the yellow fabric and facial contours made by its folds, none is furnished with a distinguishable face. These coverings look aggressively stuffed into the crevices of the underlying face. Thurgate addresses the way in which signifiers of identity are often imposed from without: a dynamic also inherent in the act of portraiture itself.

Lehmann's work critiques the history of figurative painting and its attendant traditions of gender signification. The women in her paintings are de-faced through painterly acts of elimination or superimposition, their bodies partially emergent, dream-like, from dark grounds. They remain elusive, and cannot be fully possessed by painter or viewer. Yet their hands are foregrounded and relatively sharply rendered. Around these hands, half-finished ornaments and abstract gestural elements eddy and erupt, the haptic processes of accumulation and erasure focusing viewers' attention on the material trace of the painter's otherwise invisible 'hand'. Notably, in the full-figure female nude, *Window*, the left hand, as well as the head, is effaced. Its title suggests that a portrait might offer a view, not of its ostensible subject, but rather, through the surface, to its maker.

The surface of a portrait is a patina of the movements of the painter's hand, as idiosyncratic as the features of a face. In the wall painting *Face-off* both artists and audience are engaged in a cyclical process of camouflage and discovery, through which significations of identity, gender, sexuality, and chronology become destabilised. Such problematised representation points to what Lehmann, after Bojana Kunst, calls the 'impossible body' – the challenge posed by mutable subjectivity to fixed interpretations of body identity. Portraiture was once something like the self-effacing capture of another's identity. *Efface* shows another kind of portrait in the index of the painter's hand, which points instead to identity-in-flux and the origin of *face* in *facio*, suggesting the inextricable link between appearance, meaning and making.



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Cover: Luke Thurgate, *New Recruit* 2016, oil on board, 24 x 18 cm

Inside: Chelsea Lehmann, *Brisé* 2016, oil on linen, 72 x 56 cm

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