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# JENNY WATSON: THE FABRIC OF FANTASY

– Exhibition in Focus

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Museum of  
Contemporary  
Art Australia

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**CLASS KIT**

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# JENNY WATSON: THE FABRIC OF FANTASY

## – Exhibition Introduction

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Jenny Watson

*Wings of Desire 1* 1989

oil, Indian pigments, haberdashery on Belgian linen

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Henry Salkauskas Art

(Purchase) Award, 1992. Image courtesy and © the artist.

Photograph: AGNSW

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Jenny Watson's paintings tell us the story of her life, but not in the way we might expect a life story to unfold.

Inspired by music, literature, feminism and punk, Watson has been creating highly personal, conceptual paintings since the 1970s. In the 1980s Watson moved away from a realistic style of painting to a deliberately naive style.

raphical facts are combined with a range of imagined identities to create a compelling fantasy world, as if she has spent her whole career trying to understand and communicate what it means to be Jenny Watson.

In this class kit, we explore four of the main themes in the exhibition. These include: **A Personal Symbolism, The Subtext of Existence, The Jewel Box** and **The Punk Scene**.



**A PERSONAL SYMBOLISM**

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## personal

ADJECTIVE [Pronunciation: personal /pəːs(ə)n(ə)l/]

1. Belonging to or affecting a particular person rather than anyone else.
2. Of or concerning one's private life, relationships, and emotions.

## symbolism

NOUN [Pronunciation: symbolism /sɪmbəˈlɪz(ə)m/]

The use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities.

[oxforddictionaries.com](https://www.oxforddictionaries.com)

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**In three minutes, tell the person next to you the story of your life so far.**

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- What did you include or leave out? Why?
- If you were to tell your story visually, what objects or symbols could you use to represent key moments in your story?
- Are there symbols that repeat in your story?



**WARM UP**

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“

I think as a woman  
you draw on your back-  
ground as a girl growing  
up, as well as those  
sort of fairytale type  
characters... that affect  
you - they're part of your  
psyche

”

Jenny Watson quote in *Jenny Watson: The Fabric of Fantasy*, exh. cat.,  
Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, p84

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The paintings on the following slides are all self-portraits of Jenny Watson. In some of these self-portraits, she represents herself through different objects, characters or even animals. Examine these images and consider:

## How can we recognise Jenny Watson in her paintings?

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**DISCUSSION  
IDEAS**

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**Jenny Watson***He'll be my Mirror* 2013

Liquitex acrylic, Holbein pigments and haberdashery  
on rabbit skin glue-primed Belgian linen

TarraWarra Museum of Art Collection, acquired 2013

Image courtesy and © the artist





**Jenny Watson***Eye of the Storm* 1983

oil, synthetic polymer paint and coins on canvas

Ross Bonthorne Collection

Image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9

Gallery, Sydney © the artist





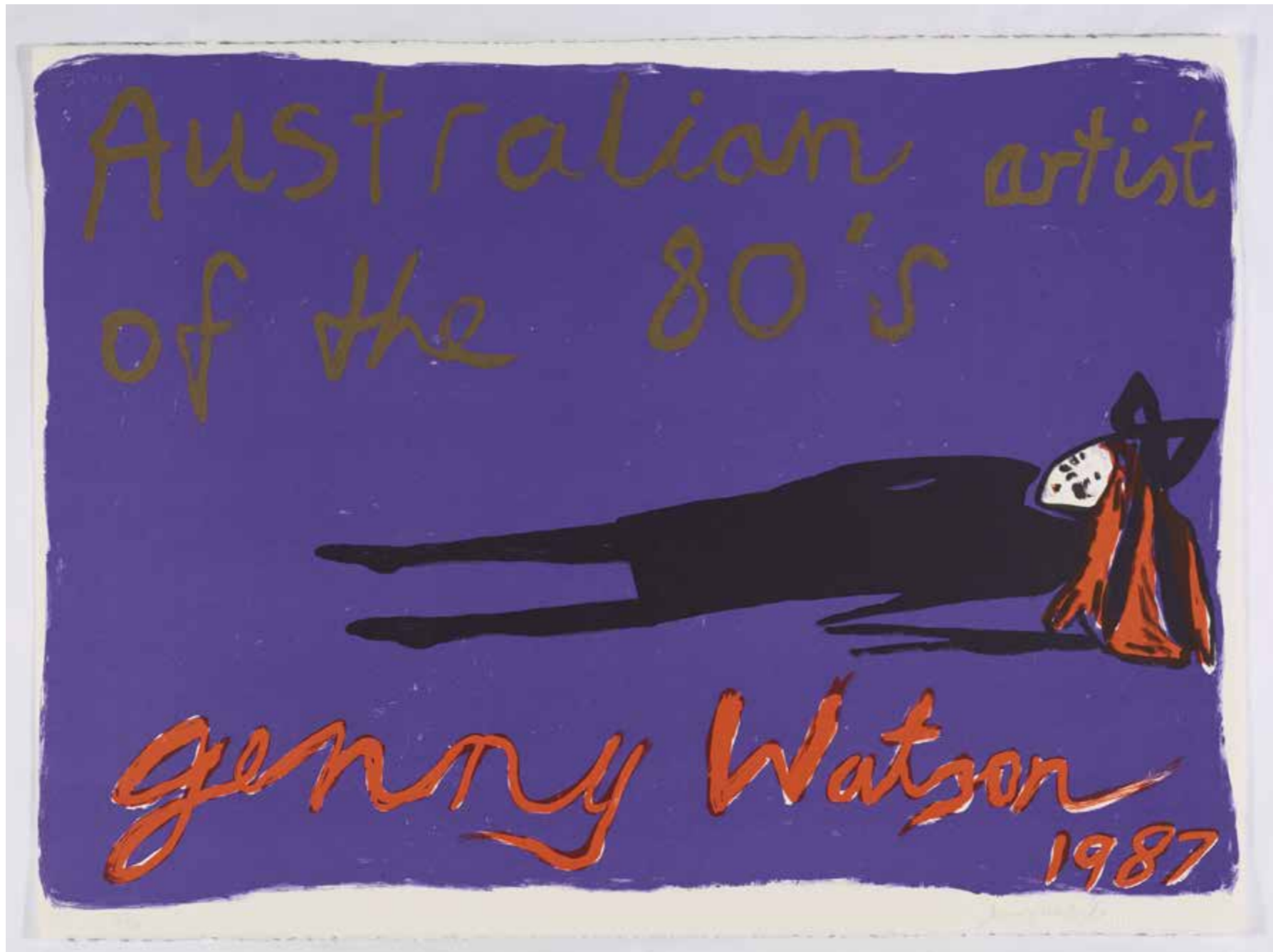
## Jenny Watson

18 1992

oil, sequins and metal collage on canvas

State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia © the artist

Photograph: Bo Wong



## Jenny Watson

*Australian Artist of the 80s* 1987

offset colour lithograph on paper

Griffith University Art Collection, 1988

Image courtesy the artist and Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney © the artist

**Jenny Watson***Self Portrait as a Little Girl* 1987

synthetic polymer paint and oil on Indian cotton

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen

Image courtesy the artist, Galerie Transit, Mechelen and Verlag für zeitgenössische Kunst und Theorie © the artist

Photograph: Bert de Leenheer



**Jenny Watson***Hobbled* 2006

oil and synthetic polymer paint over rabbit-skin-glue-primed synthetic organza suspended over damask

Collection of Andrew Birch, Sydney

Image courtesy and © the artist

Photograph: Jessica Maurer

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Consider the paintings you have just seen.

## What characteristics or symbols does Watson use in her paintings to signify herself?

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- What do you think these characteristics or symbols communicate?
- Jenny Watson often uses the same symbols in her self portraits. Why might she choose an object, an animal, or a character from a book to portray herself?

**DISCUSSION  
IDEAS**

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## Create your own me-moji:



Emojis are simple icons that clearly communicate emotions, occupations, attitudes. Anything non-essential is simply left out of the picture! Consider:

- *Which emoji do you most often use to describe your basic state?*
- *Which emoji do you think describes how others see you?*
- *Do you think these are accurate representations?*
- *What could you add or take away?*

- 
- Using this information, create your own me-moji that describes you inside and out. Include easily recognisable visual symbols that indicate the things about you that make you, YOU!
  - How did it feel to reduce yourself to a symbol? Are you happy with how it represents you?

**QUICK  
ACTIVITY**

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“

I turned from the observation  
of the outside world to the  
recording of an inner space  
..... I wanted to shatter  
the techniques I had learnt  
..... to let a random  
uncontrollableness  
take hold of the work

”

Jenny Watson quote in *Jenny Watson: The Fabric of Fantasy*, exh. cat.,  
Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, p16



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Consider the quote on the previous page. Jenny Watson is a highly skilled painter, who deliberately “de-skilled” her style.

## Why do you think Watson has adopted a more childlike style to represent herself in her practice?

- What might these more simplified representations offer us that realistic representations do not?



**DIG  
DEEPER**



# THE JEWEL BOX

“

**[Jenny Watson] describes her recent works as being like colourful talismans in a jewel box, each one recalling specific memories, dreams, feelings and atmospheres that are linked both to their imagery and text, as well as the evocative fabrics they are painted on.**

”

Curator Anna Davis in *Jenny Watson: The Fabric of Fantasy*, exh. cat., Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, p41



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Jenny Watson's pictures are sometimes painted on fabrics and backgrounds with familiar patterns. The familiarity of these patterns often provide extra visual richness, emotional resonance and poetic meaning.

When Watson uses patterned fabric she often uses the length needed to make a dress in her size.

.....

## Jenny Watson

*Scarlett O'Hara with a Budgerigar* 2014

synthetic polymer paint and Japanese pigment on rabbit-skin-glue-primed English printed linen

Courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney © the artist

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**Patterns are all around us. What patterns surround you in your world? List as many as you can think of.**

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- Think of patterns you encounter everyday. For example wallpaper, tiles in the bathroom, couch material, your favourite shirt, a loved one's dressing-gown or your computer desktop background.
- What clues might these patterns offer about where you are and what time it is? For example, a repeated print of a cartoon character on flannel could suggest pyjamas in a bedroom at a time when the cartoon was popular.



**WARM UP**

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“

The moment of transcendence  
when we witness perfection –  
a beautifully balanced horse  
rider, a satin clad rock  
guitarist in the spotlight  
or a perfect tiny ballerina –  
it's an illusion that lasts  
for a particle of time

”

Jenny Watson quote in *Jenny Watson: The Fabric of Fantasy*, exh. cat.,  
Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, p156

**Jenny Watson**

*Cyclone Fence with Great Dane* 1972

oil and acrylic on ten ounce cotton duck

Courtesy and © the artist

Photograph: Carl Warner

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Jenny Watson often collages fabrics and patterns and uses them as a background in her paintings. Patterns can form a backdrop to our memories and experiences.

## Think of a childhood memory. What are the things in the backgrounds of your memory?

- Do these patterns, songs or smells place your memory in a particular time or place? For example, smells of faraway places, people long gone or fashions passed.
- Can you think of ways that these patterns influenced your memories? For example: did you ever find faces (either fierce or friendly) in densely-patterned wallpaper or woodgrain? Do you remember the pattern on your baby blanket?

**DISCUSSION  
IDEAS**



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## What meanings do found materials and patterns bring to Jenny Watson's artworks?

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Look at the previous artworks and think about:

- What personal meanings could these background patterns bring to the main image?
- What kinds of cultural or historical meaning might we associate with these patterns?



**DIG  
DEEPER**

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**THE SUBTEXT OF EXISTENCE**

“

(Looking at) art is not a  
pure experience  
..... I'm interested in the  
sub-text of existence

”

Jenny Watson quote in *Jenny Watson: The Fabric of Fantasy*, exh. cat.,  
Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, p116

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## subtext

NOUN [Pronunciation: subtext /'sʌbtɛkst/]

1. A hidden or less obvious meaning
2. An underlying and often distinct theme in a piece of writing or conversation.
3. The implicit or metaphorical meaning (as of a literary text)

<sup>1</sup> [dictionary.cambridge.org](https://dictionary.cambridge.org)

<sup>2</sup> [oxforddictionaries.com](https://oxforddictionaries.com)

<sup>3</sup> [merriam-webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com)

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What happens when you put two seemingly unconnected objects together?

Take two things in your current surroundings that you normally wouldn't use together and place them side by side.

What stories could be told between these objects?

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WARM  
UP



Even though  
she was a  
successful  
linguist, she  
was still  
upset about  
having given  
up ballet

.....

Jenny Watson often uses text in her paintings. Sometimes the text is incorporated in the image and sometimes the text is on a separate panel next to the image. Sometimes the text describes what is happening in the image, sometimes it makes a surprising collision of two different things.

In this artwork, *Ballerina* (1992) the added panel of text adds clear emotional information and transforms this image into a memory by using the past tense.

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## Jenny Watson

### *Ballerina* 1992

synthetic polymer paint on Indian cotton over canvas with rabbit-skin glue; synthetic polymer paint on pre-made canvas

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen © the artist

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Look at the paintings and the text panels on the next two slides.

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**QUICK  
ACTIVITY**

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This painting  
is in the  
process of  
being relegated  
to a back  
room

i saw my  
friend  
the black  
cat in the  
street  
today

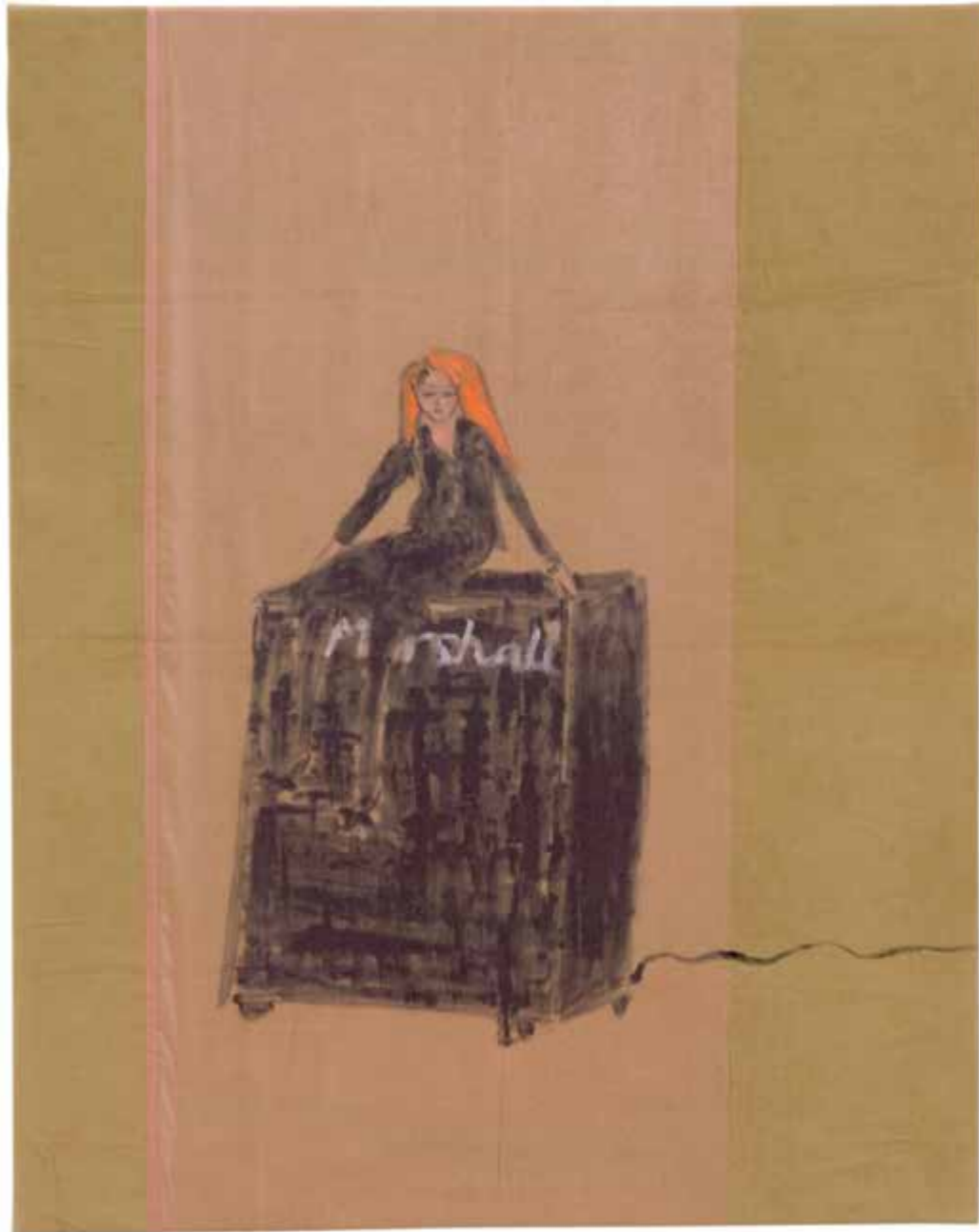
.....

**Which caption would you pair with which image? Why?**

.....



**QUICK  
ACTIVITY**



i saw my  
friend  
the black  
cat in the  
street  
today

## Jenny Watson

### *Self Portrait on a Marshall Amp* 2011

synthetic polymer paint on corduroy, organza overlay; Liquitex acrylic on canvas

Collection of Jen Livingston and Joe Connor, Melbourne

Image courtesy the artist, Galerie Transit, Mechelen and Verlag für zeitgenössische Kunst und Theorie © the artist



This painting  
is in the  
process of  
being relegated  
to a back  
room

## Jenny Watson

### *Domestication* 1992

oil on taffeta with netting and sequins;  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
Collection of Amanda Harkness, Sydney  
Image courtesy and © the artist  
Photograph: Jessica Maurer

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## How do Watson's text panels impact on your interpretation of the image?

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- What kind of captions could you write for the works *Self Portrait on a Marshall Amp* or *Domestication* to create your own subtext?



**DISCUSSION  
IDEAS**

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Consider your experience of image and text from the previous slides.

**What might Jenny Watson mean by the phrase  
“the subtext of existence?”**

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**DIG  
DEEPER**

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**THE PUNK SCENE**

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## Make a playlist for an imaginary party.

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- Decide the purpose of the party, and who will be there. Is it a party for a friend, a younger sibling, an older relative?
- Choose songs that will create a particular experience for your guests. How does this playlist reflect your guests' shared values and experience?



**WARM  
UP**

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## punk

NOUN [Pronunciation: punk /pʌŋk/]

1. A loud, fast-moving, and aggressive form of rock music, popular in the late 1970s.
- 2a. A worthless person (often used as a general term of abuse)
  - b. A criminal or thug.
  - c. An inexperienced young person.

[oxforddictionaries.com](https://www.oxforddictionaries.com)

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Punk used to be an insult; it meant a person with no ideas or ambitions. In the 70s, the term was adopted by young people who were feeling betrayed by society. They broke all kinds of taboos, were deliberately shocking and disrespectful, and poured all their energy into the feeling and camaraderie of being a group of outsiders who were rejecting society. They created a very potent and compelling alternative culture that stretched out to include not only music, but fashion, politics and art.

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Left:

**Jenny Watson**

*Rock Star* (detail) 2014

oil, synthetic polymer paint and Japanese pigment on rabbit-skin-glue-primed damask; found toy

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Transit, Mechelen © the artist

Right:

**Jenny Watson**

*The Crimean Wars: The Bar at the Crystal Ballroom* 1985

oil, synthetic polymer paint, gouache, mixed media on cotton duck

Museum of Contemporary Art, gift of Loti Smorgon AO and Victor Smorgon AC, 1995. Image courtesy the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia © the artist. Photograph: Jessica Maurer

“

It was no-one trying  
to set up & say "This is  
where culture is"  
It was very casual &  
very friendly & very  
disorganized & very  
unmoneeyed. It was an  
art scene education by osmosis

”

Jenny Watson quote in *Jenny Watson: The Fabric of Fantasy*, exh. cat.,  
Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, p68

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Jenny Watson was part of Melbourne's thriving punk scene in the 70s. Much of her aesthetic was influenced by being part of this community.

## What are some of the ways that groups define themselves outside of the mainstream?

- What are the unconscious/conscious elements of group identity?
- What might you gain from being part of a group identity?
- What might you have to give up?



**DISCUSSION  
IDEAS**

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# What evidence of Jenny Watson's involvement in the punk scene can you see in her work?

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- Look back at the description of punk to help guide your analysis of the artworks.



**DIG  
DEEPER**

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**THANK YOU!**