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RITA ACKERMANN BROOK ANDREW CHARLES AVERY DEL KATHRYN BARTON HUMA BHABHA KOAK



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515 w 26th st | new york, ny | 10001  
tel 212.244.2579 | [www.albertzbenda.com](http://www.albertzbenda.com)

# DEL KATHRYN BARTON

## MOTHER, DAUGHTER, DANCER

For Del Kathryn Barton, a prolific practice that spans drawing, painting, film and photography, is the portal to an inner universe — one ruled by boundless imagination and the need to follow creative curiosity to its inevitable ends.

By Sammy Preston

"The house went up like a bomb," says Del Kathryn Barton. The two-time Archibald Prize winning artist is recalling the time her childhood home was set ablaze. It was the day of her first public exhibition — a body of work conjured up post art school, from a time she'd retreated away from Sydney city student life to dwell in the quieter realm of her family's sweeping bushland block. "I was throwing artworks out onto the front lawn, and trying to think about things like photo albums," she says. "We lost everything. It was a pretty catastrophic experience to say the least." The fire was unfathomably devastating for the family, but in a way propelling and regenerative for the artist. "It thrust me back out into the world. I suppose I feel that's where my journey as a professional artist, or however you want to categorise it, really started."

Perhaps somewhat symbolically, it's Barton's relentless, fiery imagination that has forever been the spark and the burning hot core of her work. Peering into the layered, explosive composition of her painting, you are straightaway transported into the narrative of a rich cosmic netherworld, an "adult fairy-tale" as she would have it. "From quite a young age, not only did I love drawing anyway and draw obsessively, I lived a very fertile life of the imagination," she says. "I absolutely believed in unicorns; I had fairy friends." The essence of a lush, generative Australian bush, drawn from that childhood, permeates almost every scene, too. Her statuesque space goddesses wear geckos and peacock feathers as hairpieces, while others caress wallabies and wilting lilies.

DEL KATHRYN BARTON  
*The Nightingale*  
*Climax*, 2012-14  
 animation master plate  
 Courtesy the artist,  
 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery,  
 Sydney, A3 Arndt,  
 Berlin and Method  
 Studios, Melbourne

FEATURES

We're sitting in the centre of her Paddington studio, surrounded by a new set of near-complete canvases featuring her signature mystic mothers. One is riding a red cloud nebula, submerged in a galaxy of luminous blue and gold planets. The piece is just one of a few set to be shipped to Berlin for *MAD LOVE*, a group show of Australian talent Barton has been tasked with curating. Opening in June of this year at Arndt Art Agency (A3) Gallery, and featuring new works by friends Ben Quilty, Paul Yore, Dale Frank and more, the show is driven by stream of consciousness-style prose that Barton composed herself. The last line reads, 'BODY as unmitigated surges of light and energy, just briefly, but oh, such, such, love...mad, mad love.' "It's a rhythm," she says from behind thick-framed black glasses, her hair whipped into a sculptural knot on the crown of her head. "It's something I could make work for the rest of my life - and maybe I am."

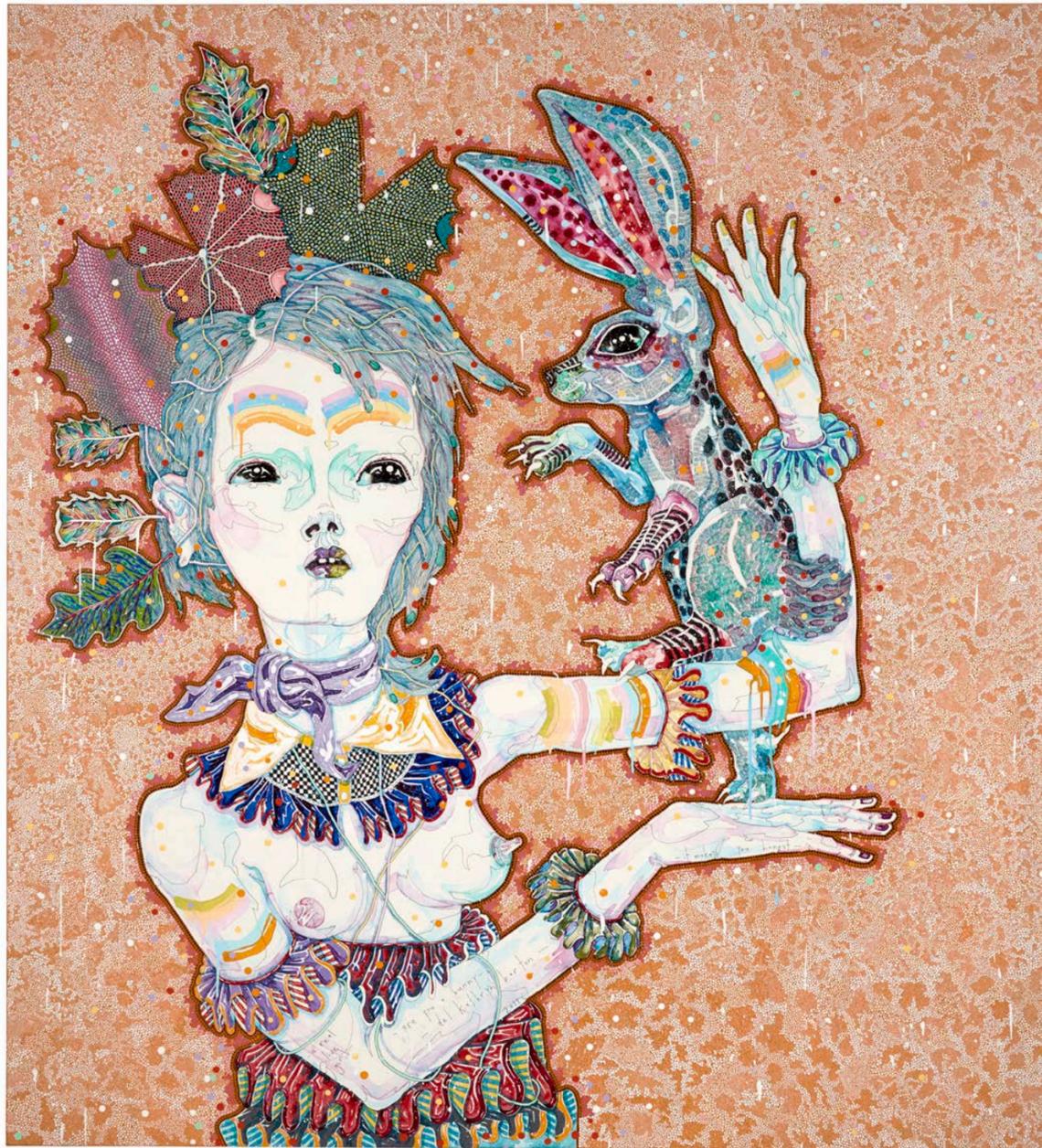
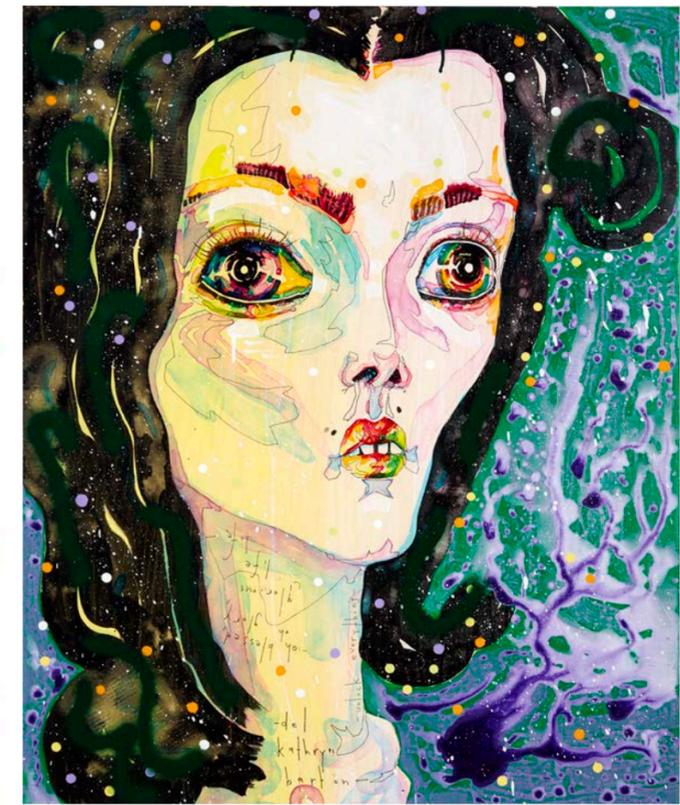
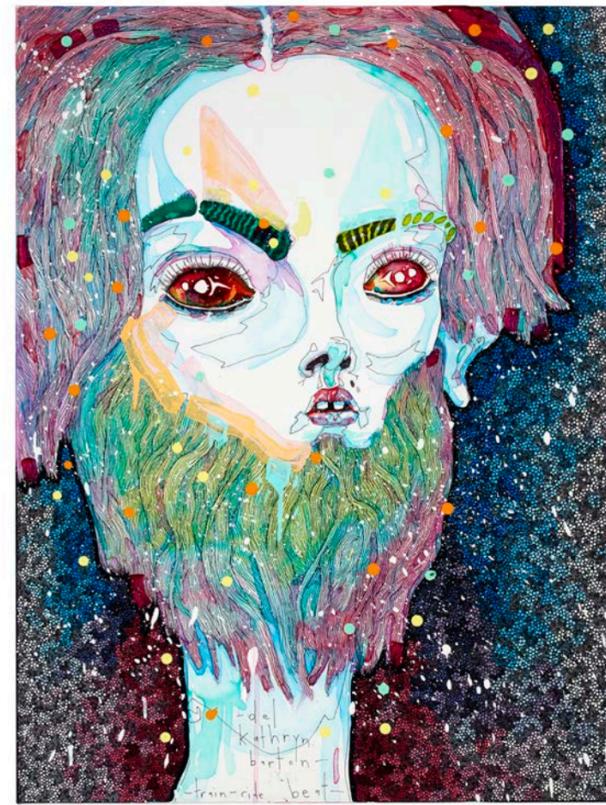
Along with this, the artist's loaded 2017 calendar includes *r u a bunny?*, her first solo exhibition in the United States at Albertz Benda Gallery, and a group show in Vienna. There's also a survey exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria at the end of the year. Titled *The Highway is a Disco*, the show will be a "career highlight" for Barton. "I'm giving everything I've got for that," she says. At the time of writing however, Barton's second short film piece has just debuted at the Art Gallery of South Australia. And while her creative energy is far-reaching and anything but siloed, it's film as a medium that's especially ignited her passion of late. "Drawing is still to this day the most integral, core part of my practice. It's the most immediate - I think very well with my hands," she explains. "The eruption of the inner life, and the conceptual life comes up most freely and most honestly through working with my body. Certainly translating that way of working into film has been challenging, but I do feel that I have found a way to do that."

Below  
DEL KATHRYN BARTON  
*are you a bunny - a real live girl*, 2017  
acrylic on French linen  
180 x 200 cm

Opposite  
Left to right  
DEL KATHRYN BARTON  
*train ride beat*, 2017  
acrylic on French linen  
61 x 81 cm

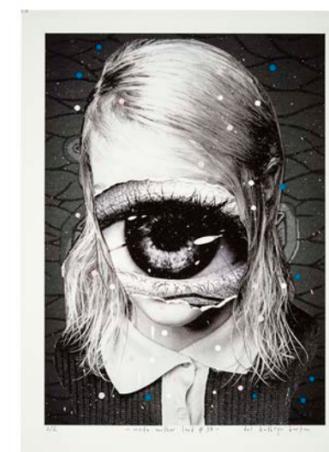
DEL KATHRYN BARTON  
*unlock everything*, 2017  
acrylic on French linen  
80 x 100 cm

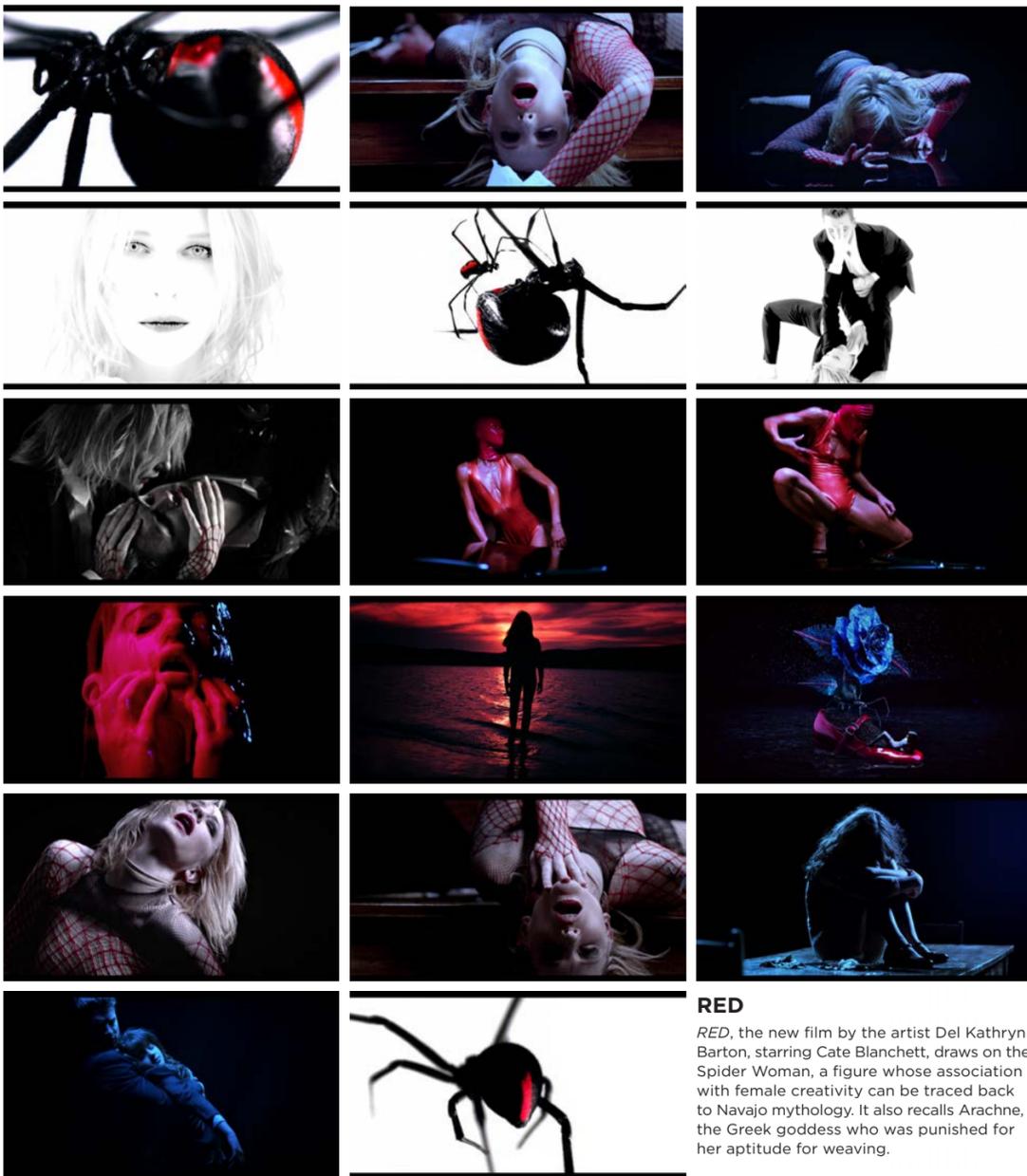
Courtesy the artist,  
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery,  
Sydney and A3  
Arndt, Berlin



DEL KATHRYN BARTON  
*inside another land #22, 24, 30, 38, 43, 45*, 2016  
acrylic and archival pigment ink on rag  
95 x 69 cm

Courtesy the artist,  
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery,  
Sydney and A3  
Arndt, Berlin





**RED**

*RED*, the new film by the artist Del Kathryn Barton, starring Cate Blanchett, draws on the Spider Woman, a figure whose association with female creativity can be traced back to Navajo mythology. It also recalls Arachne, the Greek goddess who was punished for her aptitude for weaving.

Top to bottom, left to right  
 DEL KATHRYN BARTON  
*volcanic woman*, 2016  
 archival ink and acrylic on paper  
 102 x 76 cm

DEL KATHRYN BARTON  
*you can hold my heart*, 2016  
 archival ink and acrylic on paper  
 102 x 76 cm

DEL KATHRYN BARTON  
*RED*, 2016  
 film still  
 Photo: Mark Rogers

Opposite  
 DEL KATHRYN BARTON  
*RED*, 2016  
 digital video  
 15 mins

Courtesy the artist,  
 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery,  
 Sydney and A3  
 Arndt, Berlin



An utterly arresting visual and sonic feast, *RED* is the follow up to Barton's AACTA award-winning *Nightingale and the Rose* animation. The short is based on the unusual mating ritual of the Australian redback spider, and features a spellbinding Cate Blanchett as spider woman, as well as some Attenborough-style macro film of real-life amorous spiders. "We did a lot of research and realised that this had never really been captured on film. That made me even hungrier to capture it. We worked with this incredible insect wrangler, crouched under a weatherboard house in Queensland."

Intended to funnel the "radical poetics of female power", the narrative of *RED* follows mother, daughter, and dancer. "There's so many cultural myths of the spider woman being this innate creative force, which I found so interesting and engaging, but in a very brutal, dichotomous way," Barton explains. "It occupies this threshold between life and death." While her work has always taken an unbridled and fantastical approach to feminine power and sexuality, she admits she gets "a chill now thinking about how relevant this is in 2017."

Barton's own daughter was cast in the film, while Sydney Dance Company's Charmene Yap improvises a wild spider-like rave across the bonnet of a violet-hued muscle car. "For me 'dancer' was that impossible to define, fierce as fuck, hungry, killer, sex goddess, beast dancer that I think all women have inside of them."

The film's palette is a *chiaroscuro*, and a heightened, intense juxtaposition of violent, visceral raging red, and soothing cobalt blues. But it is the sound of *RED* that is perhaps its most potent power. "Half of [the film] is the sound," Barton agrees. Featuring licensed noise from English outfit Fuck Buttons, and a soundtrack developed by Tom Schutzinger, it is an energetic and ear-splitting aural experience. "[It's] so full on, it just comes at you, slaps you round, seduces you, stabs you in the brain, stabs you in the heart, stabs you in the stomach."

"Filmmaking for me is all about relationships, and working with people that understand that I talk a slightly different talk [even if] that's something that they find inspiring, scary, annoying," Barton says. She feels lucky to have been surrounded by great Australian talent and was inspired by the creative alchemy she shares with her film collaborators. "It's this idea of serious play for me, and if you trust me, I know that we can make something amazing."

The artist says she will always need space for a more immediate practice than film, and has more recently ventured into photo montage (the NGV survey will feature a set of 75 new montage works). "I feel I really need those other things that I can make quite quickly and keep the creative energy flowing," she says. "For me making collages is a lot like drawing, there's a real imminence. My paintings have always been so labour-intensive, and the film work even more so." Regardless, Barton is in the process of developing a feature film, with the support of Screen Australia. Titled *Flower*, the feature will follow a male protagonist with a fetish for flowers. "I'm equally hungry to do both," she laughs when asked if she prefers her art practice over film. "But I feel there's so much momentum with film for me now, especially after *RED*." **V**

*MAD LOVE* shows in Berlin as part of AUSTRALIA NOW, a cultural exchange between Australia and Germany, from June 6 to August 30, 2017.

Del Kathryn Barton is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and A3 Arndt, Berlin.  
[roslynoxley9.com.au](http://roslynoxley9.com.au)  
[arndtartagency.com/mad-love-2017](http://arndtartagency.com/mad-love-2017)



**THE ERUPTION OF THE INNER LIFE, AND THE CONCEPTUAL LIFE COMES UP MOST FREELY AND MOST HONESTLY THROUGH WORKING WITH MY BODY. CERTAINLY TRANSLATING THAT WAY OF WORKING INTO FILM HAS BEEN CHALLENGING, BUT I DO FEEL THAT I HAVE FOUND A WAY TO DO THAT.**