



James Bonnici, *Sam 2*, 2017, oil on linen, 36 x 31cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries.

Brian Keyte, *POOP!*, 2016, stoneware, bronze and granite glazes, 16 x 48 x 26cm, Image courtesy of the artist.

Graham Brindley, *Gravity*, 2017, aluminium water bottle, gesso, pencil, Simpson Desert red sand, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Slippery When

29 August to 6 October

Elsa Ardern | James Bonnici | Graham Brindley
Timothy Clarkson | Tony Irving | Kate Jones | Brian Keyte
Linda Loh | Catriona Macleod and Michael Bellemo
Dan Peter Petersen | Jared Thorp | Huang Yin

Mannerisms might maketh the slippery man in these instances, and it does beg the question, “Just as we recognise slippery surfaces, how do we recognise the slippery person?” What subtle cues do we look for in other people’s gaits, facial expressions and manners to tell us they’re trustworthy or not? How often do we get it wrong? Indeed, wouldn’t the most slippery of all characters be able to elude our ability to detect them in that way?

This isn’t, of course, encouragement to develop means by which to identify particular qualities in people based on their appearance. But people do try. Phrenology was one such attempt. More recently, researchers Michal Kosinski and Yilun Wang have courted controversy with their development of algorithms that supposedly correctly identify a person’s sexuality from a selection of photographs in 81% of cases. Other projects like Biometric Mirror, led by Niels Wouters at the University of Melbourne are revealing the pitfalls of software that, like Kosinski and Wang, make inferences about people purely from their appearance.

If you’ll pardon a double pun, critics might say that not only do such technologies represent something of a slippery science, but they also put us on a slippery slope to becoming a society that openly makes judgement and inferences based solely on appearance. But that’s perhaps a conversation for another day.

In terms of this exhibition, we might reflect on how the slippery slope metaphor is so very effective. Even though most applications of the phrase exaggerate the consequences of the first step onto that slope, it conjures up a very real, relatable sense of uncontrollable, unavoidable descent. One that can’t be exploited and contained for the thrill of it.

Similarly, if we speak of slippery memories, we understand entirely the flux and movement described, whether it’s referring to mere changes in the detail of a memory (was she wearing a red top or a blue one?) or to a memory slipping away entirely. Again, we might feel our memories are always correct, but this is something that is seemingly out of our control.

As is the slippage of time, time being something that we definitely cannot grasp or retain. Thoughts, ideas and concepts can also be slippery. Expressing them with language can also be a fraught process, as the meaning and usage of words slips and moves from person to person, group to group and over time.

At its simplest, that is the premise of this exhibition – to think about the many applications of and associations we make with the term slippery, and view the exhibition’s artworks with these in mind; to see, feel and understand slippery through them.

By the way, when was the last time you slipped on something?



COVER: Timothy Clarkson, *Washed Away*, 2017, earthenware, glazes, 45 x 60 x 40cm. Manningham Art Collection. Image courtesy of the artist and Skepsi Gallery.



Catriona MacLeod and Michael Bellemo, *Sidle*, 2007, painted reclaimed metal playground slides. Manningham Art Collection. Image courtesy of the artist.



Linda Loh, still from *Clyde Greyscale*, 2016, full HD video, 00:03:03 looped. Image courtesy of the artist.



Kate Jones, *My Fake Name* (detail), 2015, terracotta, slips, glaze, dimensions variable. Manningham Art Collection. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Andrew Barcham.



Tony Irving, *So you're in it too*, 2017, oil on linen, 62 x 77cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Lindberg Galleries.

Almost dropped my phone the other day. I was leaning over a full kitchen sink at the time too, so it would've been disastrous. Later, when out running, I slowed down and found myself awkwardly leaning forward as I ran across a footpath where a tap leaked over some fallen leaves. Afterwards, whilst repainting our bathroom, I was repeatedly frustrated by a roller I was using. It wouldn't get enough traction as I painted, instead slipping and sliding across the wall because it was soaked in paint.

Common enough experiences. Hardly the makings of a best-selling novel, but they're common and relatable. And that's really the point. Start paying attention and you'd probably be surprised how often you slip or, let's say, *encounter slipperiness* in just one day.

So much of what we do involves managing the friction between ourselves and the surfaces we touch and tread on, or between the various objects we use every day. And slipperiness and friction are on the opposite ends of the same scale.

But it's more ingrained in us to think in terms of friction *and its lack*, than to think in terms of slipperiness. As an example, you don't buy a pair of runners based on their ability to achieve an appropriate level of slipperiness, but on their ability to 'grip' or achieve friction.

Slipperiness, too, is a term that carries negative connotations. Describe a footpath or a rope as slippery and you're probably not praising it. Describe a person, their actions or manner as slippery and, well, it's unlikely they're your friend. Describe an activity as being 'on a slippery slope towards X', and X is likely not a desirable end point.

To return to the opening anecdotes, we all know and understand slipperiness as a physical, mechanical thing. We know what it feels like to 'slip' on something or to have an object slip from our grasp. It's decidedly unpleasant, even when we don't fall completely, drop an object of little value or re-grip something before it hits the ground.

One immediate physiological response is fear. We have an expectation of pain, injury or damage. It only adds insult to injury when that feeling later morphs into regret and sorrow for the object that we dropped and broke, or we're embarrassed because we look stupid.

On another level, the loss of control itself is frightening. Not to overstate it, but it threatens our autonomy and reminds us that our minds don't always have the final say on what our bodies do.

Lack of control can also be a desirable thing, though. Think of slippery dips, waterslides, backyard slip'n'slides, rollercoasters. Each is an example of 'controlled' motion, certainly, an instance of slipperiness being co-opted for a particular purpose. When we volunteer for these slippery adventures, we understand that our descent is contained within a track and our speed is to some degree determinable. And yet, intrinsic to the thrill of each is that sense that what we are doing is unnatural for our bodies

and carries with it the potential for harm, even death. Moreover, we submit control to the ride itself – once commenced, we can't just stop or leave the experience. We have to trust that some engineer somewhere got their calculations right.

For the artist, submitting control to slippery materials like paint or clay slips can come with its own fears and thrills. A potter might carelessly dab on coloured slips or glazes to a clay body and simply wait to see what comes of it. A painter might slap colour upon colour then tilt the canvas this way and that, letting the paints do what they will, interacting amongst and in relation to one another.

Like the engineer designing a slide, the artist sets certain parameters for their materials to work within; they know what will happen if the paint is too thin, the canvas not sufficiently primed or the clay too wet. The fun here is in exploring the space within those parameters, reshaping and extending them. It's in guiding materials across a surface to almost *discover* results rather than making distinct, predetermined marks. And it's in embracing the unexpected *and* the risk of failure simultaneously.

The artist's work in this sense, like any activity, is a process of managing friction between materials. There's a visceral, sensory element to this, a tactile pleasure to be had in the feeling of soft clay or paint running through fingers and across skin. This is akin to the experience of a massage or of satin or silk clothing slipping across one's body.

Being focused on achieving visual ends, we might say that the artist's process in these instances is also about visualising or depicting friction and/or slipperiness. This might manifest as a series of drips arrested just at the point at which their weight can no longer overcome friction – the very point at which they stop being slippery, if you will.

Which puts into mind the bogglingly complex way in which we learn to see slipperiness. How do our minds piece together the myriad of cues that tell us to tread carefully at certain times or to adjust our grip between one object and another? How different does peanut oil look from water when spilt on a linoleum floor? Leather can look glossy, slick and smooth but will catch a finger when dragged across it, as can rubber.

Obviously things aren't always as they seem. Or maybe we're yet to perfect the art of *seeing slippery* as a species, because accidents still happen.

We, nevertheless, do see it in some sense. And it's not only slippery surfaces and materials that we claim to recognise by sight. People, their mannerisms and actions can be described as slippery. The term is synonymous with untrustworthiness and deceitfulness and it is something that we believe we can see as much as detect by other means, like the tone of a person's voice. If we read a news article about an alleged criminal who repeatedly escapes prosecution, we'll undoubtedly feel we can see their character in accompanying photographs. Contemporary detective dramas and before that, the film noir genre, has produced a vast visual catalogue of criminal types, looks and characteristics that we undoubtedly draw from when gathering impressions of others.