

Megan Mushin Gardner

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Megan Mushin Gardner (she/her) is in her final year of a dual B.A. and B.Sci. at the University of Queensland with majors in art history and bioinformatics. She takes particular interest in new media, intersections between scientific and artistic practice, and plans on further postgraduate studies in art history.



## Summary

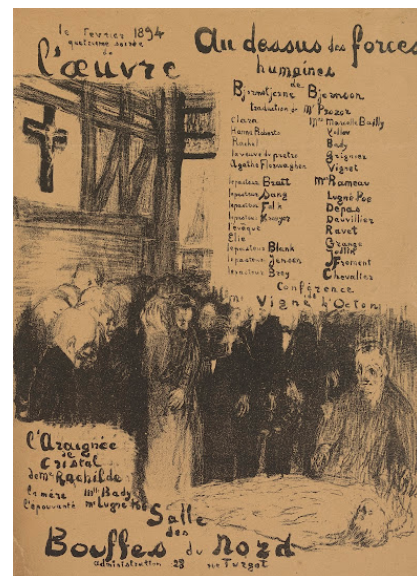
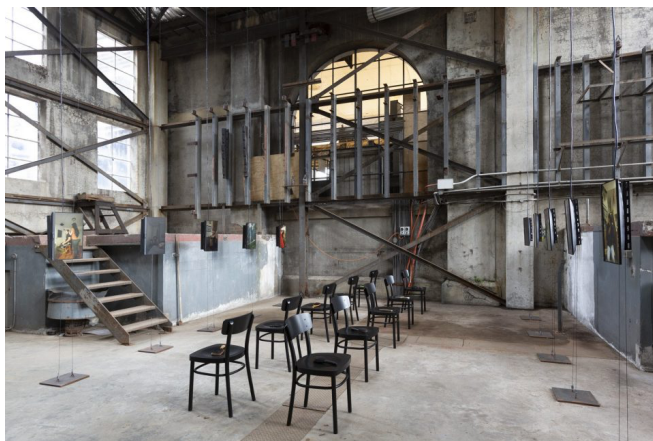
This talk looks at the historical constellation of two artists who contest the boundaries of normative and naturalised identity: Rachilde, a *Belle Époque* writer, and S.J Norman, a contemporary Wiradjuri artist. In their historical moments, each artist assumes non-normative identities. Each artist deploys technologies of vision contest the boundaries of personal identity, and to critique how they are naturalised in the first place. Rachilde's dramatic use of a mirror in her play *L'Araignée de cristal* (1894) stages the process of symbolisation, pointing out the fragility of gendered categories. Norman's video installation, *Magna Mater* (2020), similarly points to naturalised knowledge conventions in the colonial context.

Rachilde was a writer and pioneer of *fin-de-siècle* theatre in Paris. A self-proclaimed “*homme de lettres*”, she identified fluidly across genders, and favoured sobriquets including “werewolf” and “Mademoiselle Salamander”. This contestation with conventional identities is also developed in her novels and theatre, where the mirror is used as a symbol of the process of representation itself. *L'Araignée de cristal* was written and produced by Rachilde. It follows “Mother” and her son Sylvius in dialogue about the horror of mirrors. Sylvius describes traumatic encounters with his reflection, describing bodily monstrification, incest, and sexual perversion. Through this symbolic fracture, Rachilde exposes the artifice of self-identity and the ease with which supposedly natural categories are undermined.

Working over a century after Rachilde, S.J Norman is a cross-disciplinary Koori artist of Wiradjuri descent. His practice explores the structure of subjectivity and non-normative knowledge systems.

*Magna Mater* is a video installation of self-recorded phone footage taken by twelve indigenous men as they brush their hair together over a moon cycle. Echoing the over-determining framework of museums, the footage is presented on screens alongside the brushes used by each performer. The work “centres the body as a site of historical negotiation.”<sup>1</sup> Like Rachilde’s mirror, *Magna Mater* isolates the *image* of the body, externalising the discursively constructed idea of indigenous identity. Through bodily ritual, *Magna Mater* presents a radical alternative to this naturalised discourse, through a performance of a care-full relations.

Resonating across time and space, Rachilde’s and Norman’s practices deploy technologies of vision to critique the stability of purportedly natural categories of identity. Rachilde destabilises conventions of gender and sexuality through a theatrical mirror encounter. Norman similarly points to the colonial over-determination of indigenous identities; he prostheticises this vision using phone video, further suggesting an alternative, bodily self-determination. Both artists tarry with the “non-naturalised”, exploring self-identities that defy hegemonic systems of knowledge.



Left: S.J. Norman, *Magna Mater*, 2020. Installation view of for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Biennale of Sydney (2020), Cockatoo Island. Photograph: Jessica Mauer.

Right: Edouard Vuillard, Theatre programme for *Au-dessus des forces humaines* by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and *L'araignée de cristal* by Rachilde (Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, 13 February 1894), lithograph in black on wove paper, 32.6 cm x 47.5 cm. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

<sup>1</sup> Joseph M. Pierce and S.J. Norman. “Magna Mater,” *Biennale of Sydney*, accessed 25 April 2024, <https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/participants/sj-norman/>

