

Nisha Madhan and Julia Croft

Messy, Feminist, Subversive, Uncertain: Three Snapshots of Collaborative Practice

In 2019, I invited Nisha Madhan and Julia Croft to talk about their practice and their creative partnership for a performance course that I teach at the University of Auckland. Julia was in Australia at the time of the class, so the two worked over email to create a dialogue about their work, which Nisha then read to the class. Using three photographs from three different works, the two reflected on their politics and aspirations as creators, and their long-standing creative partnership.

I later asked the artists if they would be happy for Performance Paradigm to print the conversation, and I am happy to include it here, particularly as a companion of sorts to Hannah Banks' article in this issue which focuses on the performance-making of three women at the forefront of feminist performance practice in Aotearoa New Zealand—Croft, Madhan, and Virginia Frankovich.

There is both an ease and a richness to dialogue—and perhaps the kind of freedom that arises when a more formal interviewer is taken out of the equation. Madhan and Croft's conversation is a welcome addition to the historical record of contemporary performance practices in New Zealand, particularly those ephemeral unscripted practices that, in a local context, receive less critical attention. Moreover, their conversation highlights the significance of friendship in the creative process—an investment not just in the work, but in the personhood of the co-collaborator. In this sense, the pair's work exists not just in the performances that they create, but in the great care that they take in the cultivation of their relationship. As Julia remarks: "Collaborating with the right people gives me purpose. And it takes so much time to find those people—don't be in a hurry to find them."—Emma Willis

Nisha Madhan: I'm from New Delhi, India and I arrived here in Auckland from Qatar in the Middle East in 1995. I trained as an actor at Unitec Institute of Technology about twenty years ago and I started out in mainstream theatre and television, everything from *Shortland Street* to working with Indian Ink and Auckland Theatre Companies, and I found that in these spaces I was either: 1) ignored; 2) working three times as hard as everyone else; or 3) being tokenised or exoticised while feeling like I should be grateful to have a job. Not only am I a woman in a world where all the parts are for men, I am also a brown person in a world where all the parts are for white people. And whether I or you like it or not, these things underpin my work always.

It's why I choose to practice making my own work which has turned out to be largely experimental and live artwork. I've been doing this for around ten years, but for the past two years I have been collaborating with my friend, Julia Croft, making some of my favourite things of all time. We make work that is non-linear, is often messy, feminist, subversive, uncertain, and asks more questions than it gives answers. I like making this kind of work with Julia because I can relate to living a life that feels non-linear, often messy, feminist, subversive, uncertain, and full of asking more questions than I can get the answers to. The more I live this life, the less inclined I am to find spaces or people that are linear, clean, misogynistic, mainstream, certain, and sure of what the answers are. Spaces and people like this annoy me. But I can understand the attraction of feeling in control. I like feeling out of control myself. I also like having something to rail against, and the mainstream is so much fun to pick a fight with!

The results are that Julia and I often make work that is obsessed with the tearing down of power structures. We use the theatre as our starting point and the idea of us in relation to, or in conversation with you, our audience, to really get going into our investigation of how to dismantle power or at least annoy the fuck out of it. In our work, the theatre is the theatre, not a lounge room or bus stop; Julia is Julia, not an eighteenth-century lady in big dress running through a forest; and you, the audience, are there, you are not invisible tucked safely behind a fourth wall, you are with us and we are experiencing the work together.

We are often in different countries (Julia is in Perth right now, cheating on me with some other artists) and I find it hard to speak or write about our work without her. I really wanted her voice to be here in these words. Because our collaboration doesn't exist in us individually. We work intuitively together and I'm proud of our work as an example of what an intersectional collaboration could feel like. That is to say that it is inextricably bound up and entangled in both of our bodies and timelines.

I sent her three photos from three of our works to talk about. I asked her: from your memory of making this moment with me, what did we do? How did we do it? Why did we do it? I asked myself the same questions. And in the evening of yesterday night in Auckland and the afternoon of yesterday day in Perth we wrote some thoughts down.

Julia Croft: I am in Perth. This is true. Sometimes overseas experiences make you want to move. Often it makes you want to move to Berlin or Brussels and makes you want to stay away forever. But sometimes you realise that Auckland, despite its geographical distance

from a lot of the world, is a very special place. I love being in Auckland because I feel necessary. I feel like there is potential to affect real change in Auckland. This is probably naive. I accept this. But I think to be in the world and certainly to make work in the world, one needs to live under the illusion of purpose. Collaborating with the right people gives me purpose. And it takes so much time to find those people—don't be in a hurry to find them.



Figure 1. Julia Croft in *Power Ballad*, Basement Theatre, 2017. Image: Peter Jennings.

NM: In *Power Ballad* we deconstructed and undid patriarchal and colonial constructs in language using a vocal effects pedal, a microphone, and 1980s karaoke.

We stole this vocal effects pedal from Indian Ink Theatre Company while we were doing a show with them that we hated. We took it home and started singing karaoke through it while playing around with the effects. I sang *Big Spender* in a Tinkerbell voice and you screamed out *Because The Night* in a voice called Thicker You which is just your voice but a bit thicker, a bit deeper. When we decided to make a show about language we thought it made sense to explore what voice does in a theatre. We thought about the microphone and the power it holds and who gets to hold the microphone. We thought about what would happen if you took the microphone and found out what you could say if you weren't really you, but you with a voice that was just a little bit thicker, a bit deeper. We laughed. A lot. And then gave birth to a demon child called Deep Talker. The angriest, most confused feminist in the world. It was a way to be angry, to scream, "FEMINIST THEATRE" and "MAY THE STREETS RUN RED WITH THE BLOOD OF THE STRAIGHT WHITE MALE," while not really having to be held to account. It's just theatre after all, and you were just performing this thing and using a silly voice effect. But in our hearts that's what we were screaming all of the time as we were rolling on the floor laughing.

JC: I remember Nisha directing the show while lying on the floor in her bra and underwear, because it was summer and the room we were working in was fucking hot. But I mostly remember that I would do things on the floor and then Nisha would reperform them for me to see if I liked it and then I would do it back again. I think we accidentally invented a way of making work where each part of the show had been through each of our bodies so many times that you couldn't say which part of the show belonged to either of us. I still hold this up as perhaps the ideal way in which collaboration can work. If we were more intellectual we would call it *embodied collaboration*. I think splitting or disrupting the roles that have historically been subject to hierarchy within a process is a feminist act. And I read somewhere (I can't remember where) that joy is a feminist strategy and I believe that to be true. The ways one can incorporate joy into the generating of work I now think is probably key to a successful wok. I think this is especially true if one is making from a place of anger. Which is mostly my M.O. Anger gives me energy and is part of my everyday experience as a woman and making work from this place is only way I can find to make sense of the world.

NM: In *Medusa* we deconstructed and tore apart patriarchal and colonial storytelling through sound, ritual, and witchcraft.

We made this show with our friend Virginia. And from the start all we really wanted to do was smash apart something with sledgehammers. For a long time we thought it might be a giant block of ice. In the end it was the stage. And underneath the stage was 400 kilograms of clay and that was definitely your idea. Somehow we always mess ourselves up so that we have to have showers afterwards. I think it is because we talk about the injustices and indecencies of structural racism and sexism so much that we end up designing these extreme theatre rituals to process it. We end up having to embody the arguments then smash them up and transform them into something else and that is hard work. It's messy,

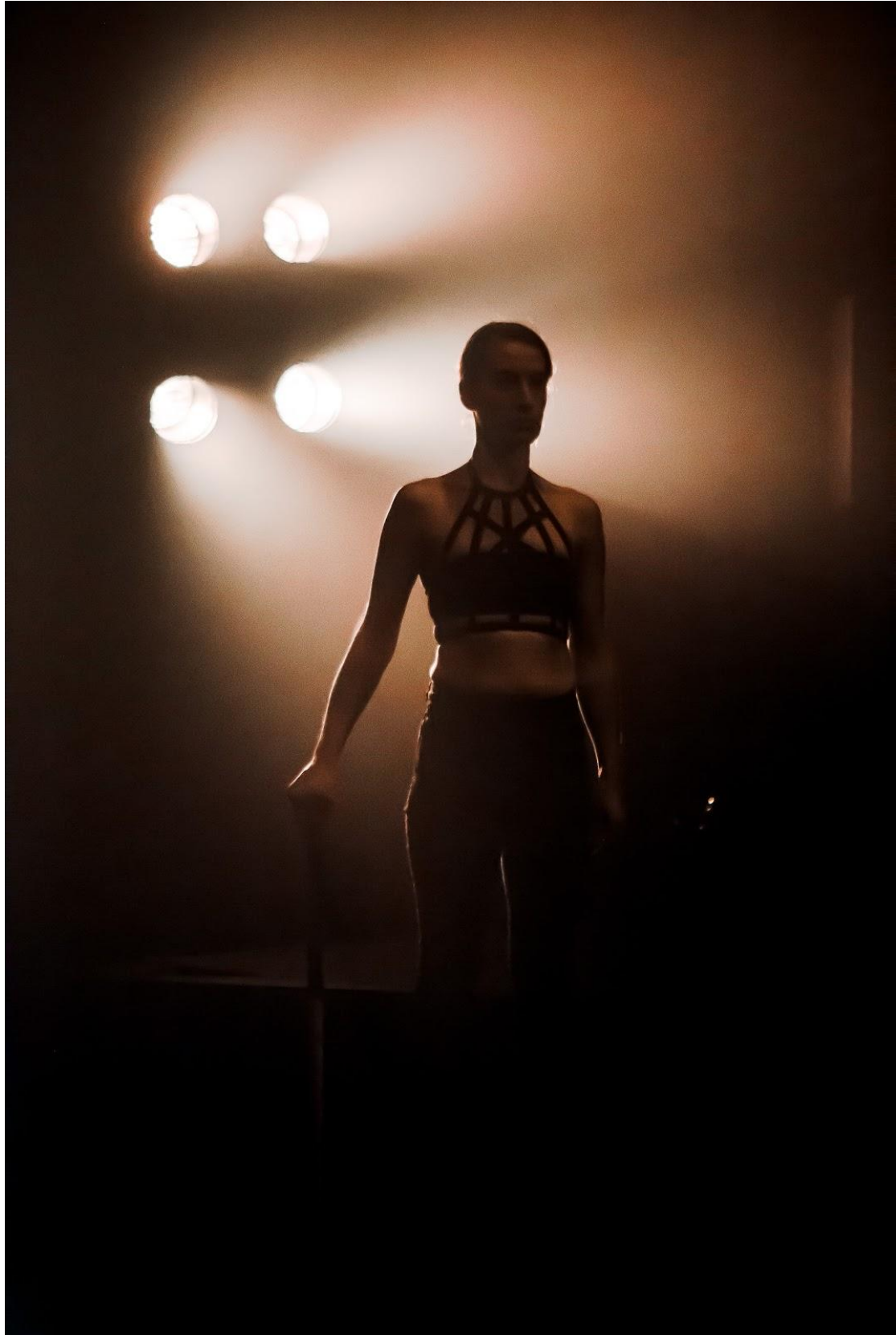


Figure 2. Julia Croft in *Medusa*, Q Theatre, 2018. Image: Julie Zhu.

bloody, sweaty work and when we are done and we shower we feel ready to do it again. To keep trying to break it all apart. Even when things like the Christchurch Mosque shooting happens, or no one believes Dr. Blasey-Ford, and we are limp and crying in our beds, we keep trying. We feel like the only thing that could possibly make sense is to smash up the stage with a sledgehammer and pull clay out of the earth and build ourselves anew with it.

JC: Yeah sorry. The clay was a hundred percent my idea. I take full credit for that. And I think it's because I don't really know how talk to the about the oppression I feel without using metaphor. Because I think what's exerted on the body needs to be expressed through the body. I think that this is where I started to see that the beautiful ways in which we bring ourselves to the process consciously and subconsciously are the material for the work. I feel like Nisha has a natural tendency to want to dismantle things methodically whereas I have a tendency to want to aggressively smash shit to pieces. *Medusa* was the meeting of these impulses. It can be measured and aggressive at the same time. Because when we tried to make it fully aggressive it felt too small. And made my anger feel small. It needed the opposite energy. And the more not-measured it got, the larger and more epic it felt. I think this work dealt with anger in a way that created space, rather than diminished it. It talked to the metaphor without representing the thing.



Figure 3. Julia Croft in *Working on My Night Moves*, Basement Theatre, 2019. Image: Andi Crown.

NM: In *Working on My Night Moves* we built and rebuilt multiple futures while turning the patriarchal and colonial space of the theatre, as understood in the Western world, completely upside-down using movement, sound, and object installation.

I remember starting with a light, just one, and swinging it around the floor. Then I remember we took a light down from the rig, just one, and we left it dangling in space. We'd never seen that before in a show. Then we hung a chair up, just one, in the roof. And I remember we played Nina Simone and projected the stars up on the roof and started crying. We always stick with the ideas that make us cry. We asked ourselves, how do we make something serene and calm and joyful, something that is free from being angry and sad at the patriarchy all the time, and more concerned with where we want to go, what future we could transition to.... So we just tried our best to get into outer space. And we decided to turn the entire room upside down. Because to ask what it would feel like to live in a world free of racism and misogyny is something like asking someone living in the sixteenth century what a life without God would be like when it's everywhere, in everything; it's in the screws that hold the goddamn building together. It's almost impossible to do. But we just tried really hard to do it. And got stressed out in the process but also really, really peaceful. Really, really free.

JC: After a few years of making work that felt oppositional, making *Night Moves* was such a relief. Entering into a process that was finally aiming to crack an alternative way of being in the world, not continually point out what was wrong with patriarchy, but instead build our own world. Turning it upside down is just the beginning. I think breaking binaries is beyond gender and it is beyond legislation, it is actually about imaginatively cracking our conceptions of the world. Like *Power Ballad* the formal ideas of *Night Moves* were moved between both of our brains.

NM: There's so much more to our work and our friendship that we don't have time to tell you. I guess the main thing is that we do it because it's our way of participating in the world, to protest, to ask questions, to pick fights, and be with each other. And we do it by getting in a room and making each other laugh and going out to a bar and raging against the machine over a bottle of wine. Then we wake up the next day and we do it again. Over and over again.

NISHA MADHAN is an independent artist and current programmer of Basement Theatre (NZ). Her career history is eclectic, including performance on stage and screen, direction and creation of contemporary live performance, dramaturgy, and published critical writing. Nisha's company The Town Centre has produced many works including the Auckland Fringe award-winning *Fuck Rant* and *What Have You Done To Me?* With Julia Croft she won the 2019 TOTAL Theatre Award in Edinburgh and a 2019 Auckland Theatre Award for Excellence in Overall Production.

JULIA CROFT is a live artist and performance maker based in Auckland, New Zealand. Julia's practice draws on feminist and queer theories to create performance works that explore representational politics, violence, the body, and, increasingly, feminist futurisms and queer world

building. Her works have toured extensively throughout NZ as well as to Australia, the UK, Singapore, Mexico, and Canada. Julia is currently developing a new solo work, Terrapolis with the support of Creative New Zealand, Battersea Arts Centre, London, and The Marlborough, Brighton.

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