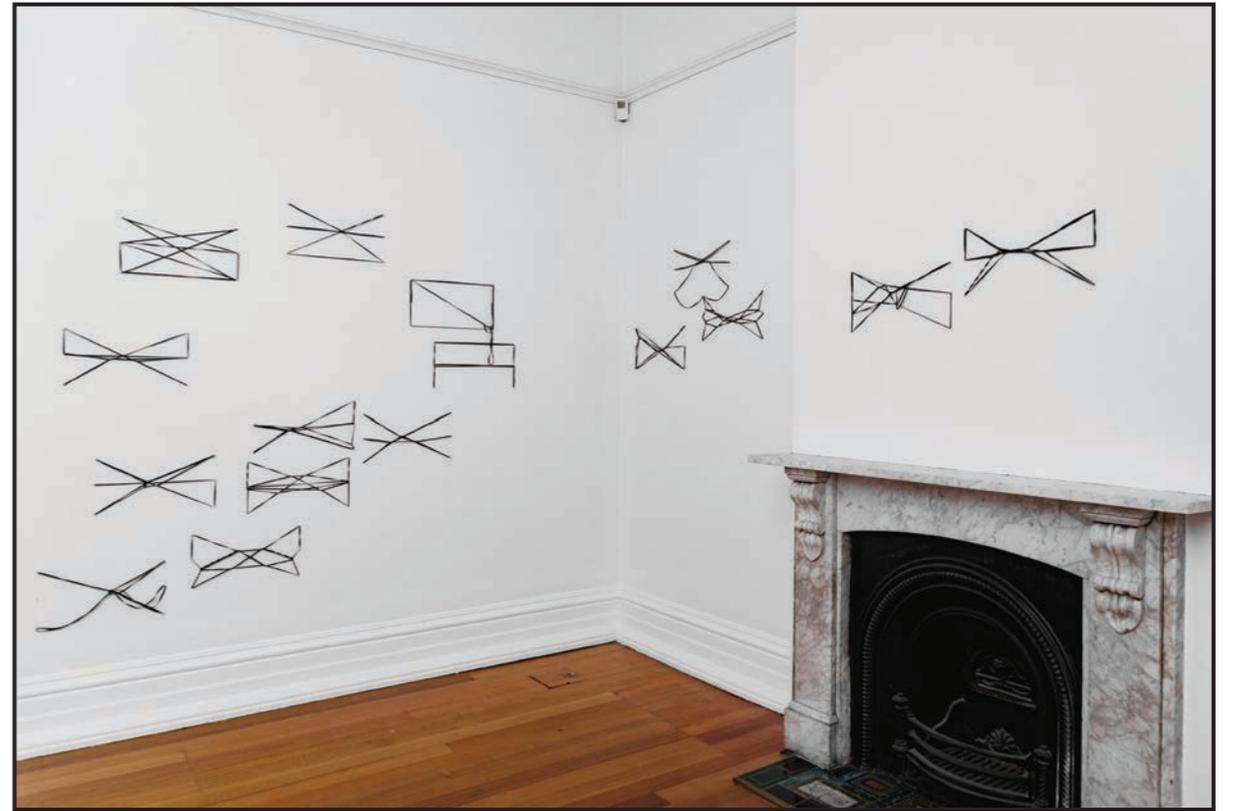


LOUISA  
BUFARDECI

*Figuring*

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ART





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IMAGES > [Front cover] Louisa Bufardecì, *Figuring* [Installation view], 2022. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

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IMAGES > Louisa Bufardecì, *Figuring* [Installation view], 2022. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

# LOUISA BUFARDECI

## *In conversation with Juliette Hanson*

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**JH: Your exhibition has been inspired by a phenomenon that would be instantly recognisable to many visitors – the making of string figures. Is this something you did as a child?**

LB: Yes, I did practice string figures as a child. I remember playing them with my friend Patrick in primary school. We played cat's cradle where we passed the figure between ourselves in a predetermined way that meant a new figure was created at every step.

Then, a few years ago when my daughter was at primary school, she also became interested in string figures, and I enjoyed relearning the cat's cradle game with her. Her aunt had given her a book of instructions

with a loop of string, which was too small for my hands, so I plaited some embroidery floss that I had in my studio and made a substantial loop for myself. We practiced the figures from her book and then I found a book from 1906 by American ethnologist Caroline Furness Jayne called *String Figures: The Study of Cat's Cradle in Many Lands*, which has hundreds of figures to learn. Doing that together really kick-started my research into them.

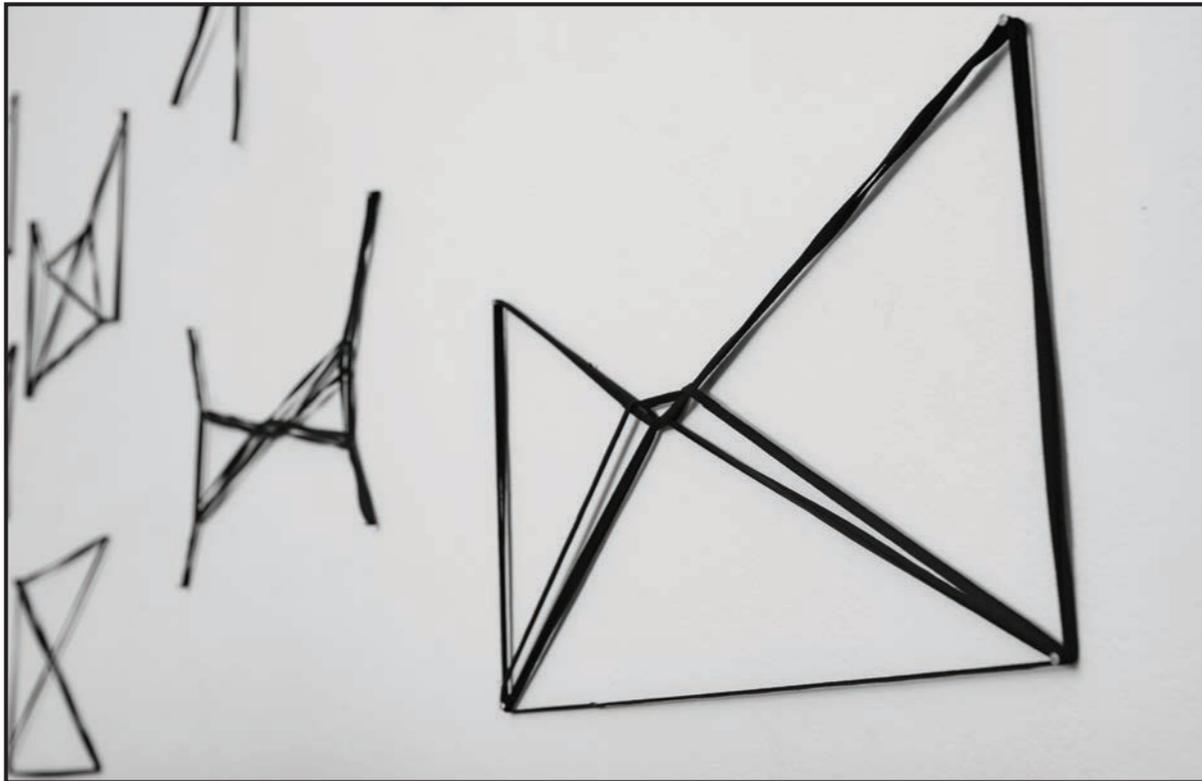
**JH: You have chosen to make the string figures out of face-mask elastic. What is the significance of using this material and what do you hope it might evoke for viewers?**

LB: The mask elastic has had a particular place in our lives over these past couple



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IMAGE > Louisa Bufardecì installing string figures, 2022. Photograph: Shelley Xue.



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IMAGES > Louisa Bufardeci, *Figuring* [Installation view], 2022. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

of years and it feels to me that it's a very significant material for these times. It's one that one that we have come to live with in a way that we never thought we would ever have to. I like the idea of this being a material for these particular times. The work is also asking, what can we make at this time and how can we figure ourselves as we move deeper into this time, and I feel like these kinds of questions are embedded in the material too.

**JH: How did you first start to think about string figures as something that could form the basis of an artwork?**

LB: I have always been interested in figuring as an artist – whether it is the figuring that comes through the collection and collation of data or the figuring that comes through abstract imagery, and sometimes it's both those at once! What string figuring has introduced particularly for me is the question of how to figure something before it exists. In this sense it is a figuring that is also a kind of conjuring. So, I started to ask myself the question, what can we figure out for ourselves today with string figures?

The works in the show are not already known string figure designs, but more like potential figures or emerging figures. I'm using the string figures from the Caroline Furness Jayne book, which were collected by various ethnologists and anthropologists in the 19th century. String figures, like images in art, can be literal, symbolic, and metaphorical, sometimes all at once. They hold abstract ideas and concepts that are not already formed, figured or figurable. I think this is one of the things that has made them so valuable to many peoples all over the world, and this is what makes them interesting to me as an artist.

The figures are very difficult to translate from the instructions in the book and there's a kind of collapse that happens when I'm making them because I've either forgotten what the next move is, or the string slips out of my fingers in a way that I didn't expect. I have arthritis so there's a varying limit to the dexterity of my fingers. The figures that emerge however are always holding a potential; they're always in a state of becoming, which really interests me as an artist.

**JH: The exhibition is called *figuring*, which is a term that carries many meanings. Can you explain a little more about what that term means to you and how it relates to the work?**

LB: The many meanings of this word have been shown to me by the American, feminist anthropologist, biologist and philosopher Donna Haraway. She has a poetic and metaphoric way of seeing the world and I feel really influenced by her work. She plays delightfully with language, and she showed me the metaphoric potential of the words “figure” and “figuring”. She also talks about the value of being in a state of becoming rather than having permanent finished states of things too.

So, a “figure” is not just a string figure but also a figure that might be an image, a figure that might be a diagram, a figure that might be a number. A figure might be an apparition or a form that cannot quite be named. A figure might be something abstract that is yet to exist as itself. String figures can also present systems of thinking, which can be linked to a broad range of theories including science fiction and scientific data, speculative feminism, or any social, political

or historical narrative or structure.

**JH: Can you talk more about the importance of the state of becoming that has drawn you to the making of the string figures?**

LB: Learning the figures through Jayne’s book rather than by being shown by someone takes a lot of time, practice and mistakes. Because string figures are made by hundreds of language groups across the world and the instructions are largely handed down orally and by demonstration through the generations there was no single language around string figures to make them comprehensible or makeable by people outside of the various communities.

For me it takes many days of practicing to get a figure right because I only go by the written instructions in the Jayne book. And then once I have it right, I really need to practice it every day to keep it in my memory. Often, I have to go back to the beginning and start over to relearn the concepts. These times are interesting because sometimes I can see how my muscle memory overtakes my brain memory; I don’t remember how to make the figure,

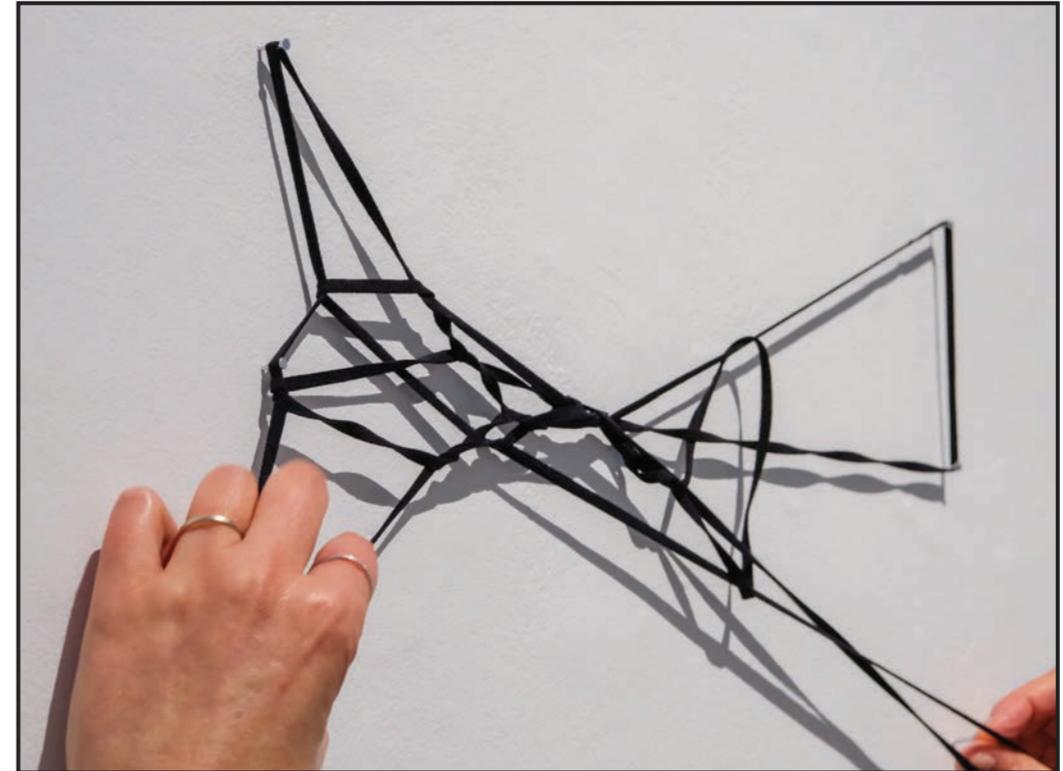


IMAGE > Louisa Bufardeci installing string figures, 2022. Photograph: Shelley Xue.



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IMAGE > Louisa Bufardecì, *Figuring* [Installation view], 2022. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

but I remember what feels like the right movement to make. Sometimes I can make a figure perfectly without thinking about it but if I think about it, I can't make it again. There is metaphor in that too. We have been in these kinds of bodies for millennia – I suspect there are knowledges stored in there that we are not yet situated to reveal.

So here instead of exhibiting the finished figures I'm exhibiting the attempts and asking if, in the attempt, there are figures to be found. And yes, as I'm highlighting the value of attempting something different without necessarily coming to a final state or position, I'm presenting the figures as always in a state of becoming. I wouldn't use the term "unfinished" because that assumes an end position that is known or knowable. In this case, the figures I am attempting to complete are just a springboard and the limitations of my body, including memory and dexterity, take the figures somewhere else.

**JH: Historically, in some cultures, were the string figures seen to hold some kind of energy or power related to their capacity**

**to embody certain forms and to convey important narratives? Do you feel that sometimes too, when you are making them, that they are much more than just a game?**

LB: Yes, that's true!

The research that I've done comes mainly from colonial ethnographers and anthropologists who were studying cultures around the world, and they found that there was this practice of string figuring in common, in practically every country. But then of course by the time they got there so many of the original practices had been erased through colonialism, so it was probably an even stronger practice than was realised in the 19th and early 20th centuries by ethnologists. I think it was pretty understood that these practices had their own power and that the colonialists did not want the people to be able to exercise that power. When string figures are written about by people from First Nation backgrounds, they talk about it in different ways. It is a way of playing but there doesn't seem to be a difference between playing and conjuring and figuring the world in very real ways.

For me in terms of my own art practice, understanding string figures has been kind of unsettling because I realise now that it has the potential to create different kinds of relationships that are perhaps doing what I want art to do, in a way that the art that I've always made doesn't. It's been more confusing for me, but it's kind of been fun too. I feel like the potential and the power of what string figuring can do is totally beyond me, but I can try and figure it out a little, in my own limited capacity.

**JH: It is interesting to see that string figuring can encourage different ways of thinking, or new ways of figuring things out. Are you optimistic about the potential of art and creative practices to help us forge new ways of being in the world more broadly?**

LB: I am very optimistic about the potential of art to help us forge new ways of being in the world. I think it does that in small ways already. However, for art to forge new ways of being in the world in significant ways I think it needs to be released from the

institution so that it can foster a different kind of relationship between all the beings of the world, one that doesn't make distinctions like "artist" "curator" "viewer" but one that is based on making and flourishing together.

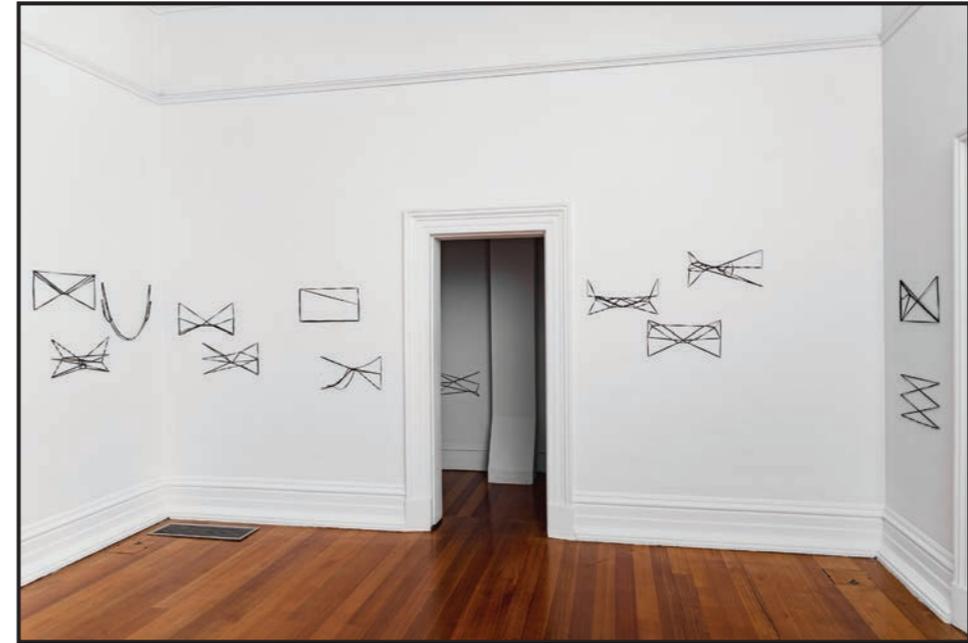


IMAGE > Louisa Bufardeci, *Figuring* [Installation view], 2022. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.



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IMAGE > Portrait of Louisa Bufardecì, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Lindy Bufardecì.

## LOUISA BUFARDECI

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Bufardecì's practice has focused on the collection of data representing human experience. She has translated it into visual imagery to create provocative conversations with audiences. Bufardecì works across various media including needlepoint, drawing, digital mapping and installation. Often using visual coding systems and patterns to represent statistical information differently, Bufardecì's abstract compositions are grounded in real systems and facts about the world around us.

Louisa Bufardecì has participated in major international exhibitions including the NGV Triennial in 2018, the Asia-Pacific Triennial in 2012, and the Asian Art Biennial in 2009. Her work has been included in numerous

solo and group exhibitions in Melbourne and other cities in Australia and overseas. Bufardecì also contributes to her art community by teaching, volunteering as a guide to contemporary art at her local community centre and by mentoring young artists.

<http://www.louisabufardecì.net/index.html>

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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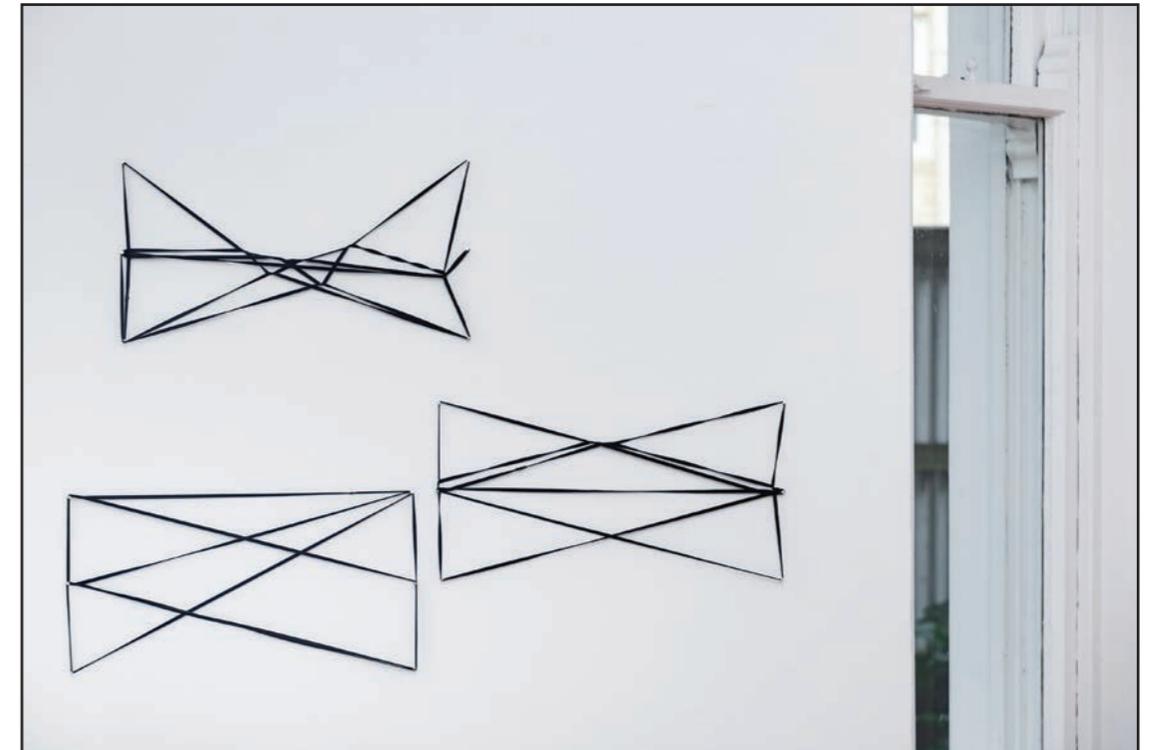
The artist would like to acknowledge that this work was developed on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples whose creative thinking and practice has been a part of living for millennia, and to restate that this always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

# SPECIAL THANKS

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The artist would also like to acknowledge with gratitude the generosity of her daughter Gena without whose willingness to play and experiment with string figures this exhibition may never have come to be.

The artist would like to thank Dan St Clair, Matthew Bufardecì and Porphyria Lu for their assistance.



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IMAGE > Louisa Bufardecì, *Figuring* [Installation view], 2022. Photograph: Theresa Harrison Photography.

# LIST OF WORKS

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*Figuring*, 2022  
 mask elastic,  
 dimensions variable  
 NFS



Melinda Martin – CEO + Director  
 Juliette Hanson – Curator + Exhibition Manager  
 Liam James – Gallery Manager  
 Shelley Xue – Design & Marketing Coordinator  
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