



Julie Shiels
Owen Harries-Duke Street 2005
 (from series *Quoting* 2005)
 digital print on canvas
 courtesy of the artist



Julie Shiels
Untitled 2007/09
 (from the series *Sleeping with knives* 2007/09)
 ink jet print
 courtesy of the artist

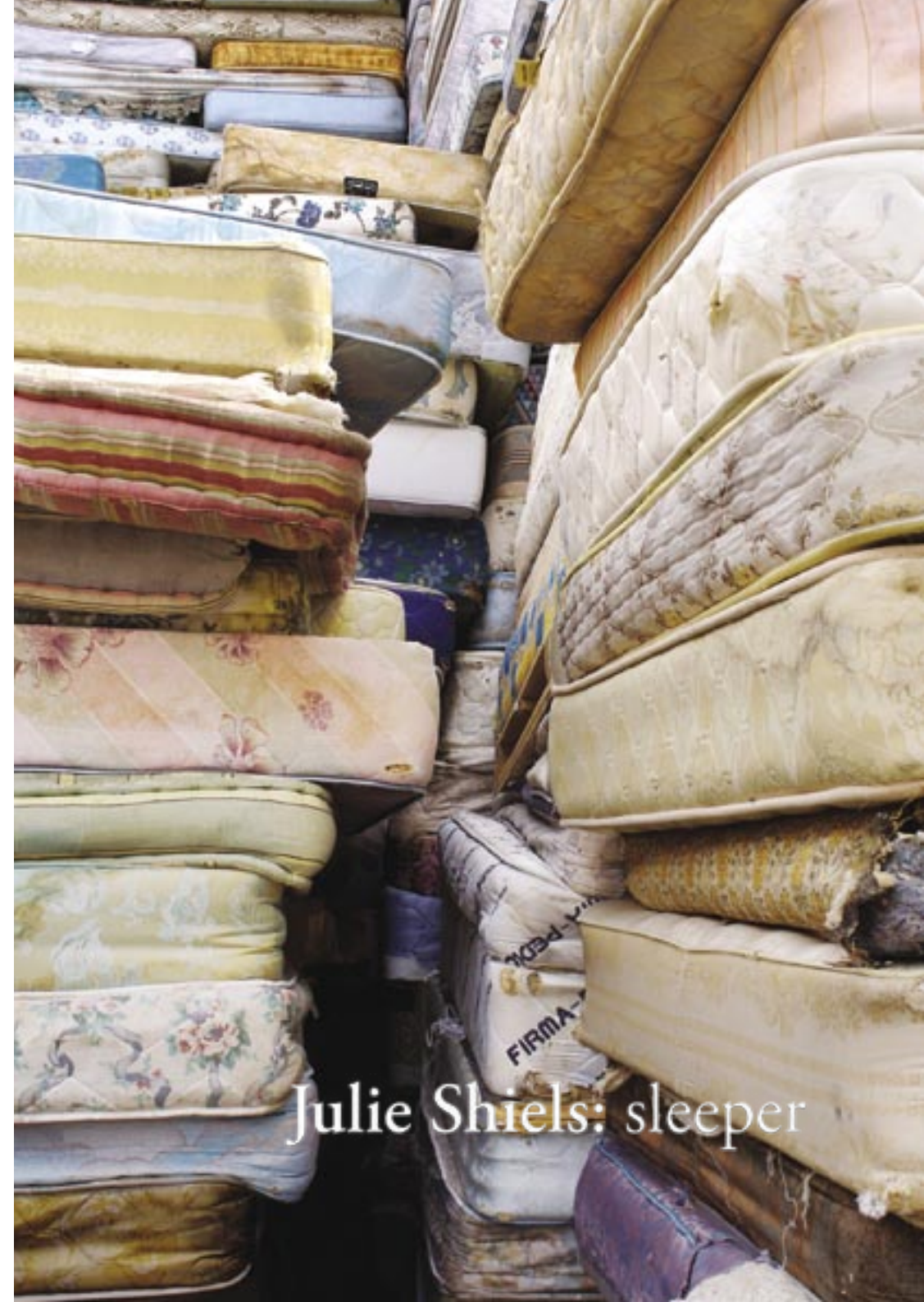
cover image:
 Julie Shiels
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Julie Shiels: sleeper
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julieshiels.com.au



Julie Shiels: sleeper

Sleeper is the culmination of a four-year project during which Julie Shiels has used discarded mattresses as source material for her art. Found on suburban nature-strips or laneways as either hard rubbish or the recent refuge of the homeless, or factory-stacked for recycling, the mattresses have been materially recuperated and conceptually revalued by Shiels in disparate but interconnected works of art.

Situated in its original location, the mattress has been a support for Shiels's stencilled texts; pyjamas have been fashioned from salvaged fabric; an array of sharp instruments functioning as makeshift weapons, and found secreted in the stuffing and folds of the mattress, have been documented with the apparent emotional detachment of forensic investigation.



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Shiels has a long-established art practice working in and with diverse communities on reclamation of social histories; the recall and imaginative visual and physical manifestation of memories; and the residual potency of abandoned objects—particularly those drawn from domestic environments—to suggest poignant or downright unsettling narratives.

In *Sleeper* Shiels plays with connotations of the term. She invokes the innocent sleeper as a reflection of domestic harmony and the bed as an intimate place of nurture. Shiels also casts the bed as an equally intimate but dysfunctional nest of real and imagined fear, emotional discord and isolation. A 'sleeper' can be the enveloping and warming sheath of the pyjama, but it can also be the saboteur.

In the photographic series *Sleeping with knives* Shiels enlarges the scale of knives and scissors hidden in mattresses and found by workers in the mattress recycling factory. Their exaggeration amplifies their embodiment of the fear or menace of whoever hid them for whatever reason. Shiels is setting before us stories on which we probably don't want to speculate. Bleak, abject labyrinths of stacked mattresses and the kitchen shears they concealed add up to a devastating image of social insecurity and insidious domestic violence.

Bedtime stories and *Afterlife* touch on more familiar and familial aspects of the domestic realm. Shiels has salvaged remnant mattress fabrics and collated a suite of swatch books that revalue the surprisingly sophisticated textile designs that distinguished certain mattresses. Shiels advocates here for aesthetic value as an integral bedfellow to the simple utility of the bed. *Story 1* is a book compiled by Shiels using salvaged material from mattresses abandoned on the street. *Story 2* is a book compiled by the men whose daily job it is to skin the mattresses of their coverings for recycling.

Shiels activates a series of contrasts throughout *Sleeper*: loss and redemption, fear and fearlessness; stability and instability, usefulness and obsolescence, absence and presence. In the fashioning of pyjamas for the series *Afterlife*, the human occupation of the bed is configured in all its homeliness and unhomeliness. As Shiels states:

the raw material of these garments once formed the bed of a person or persons unknown and the garments embody memories of other lives. They inhabit

the intimate night-time space of the bed – the site of dreams and nightmares, of contemplation and worry, of passion and loneliness, of birth and death. Crafted from the salvaged fabric *Afterlife* provokes contradictory impulses – we desire to touch the rich, textured material and inspect the quality of the garments, even try them on, but the swing tag labels remind us that these pyjamas have an uncertain, unsettling history.

In her observation of the detritus of our daily lives, mattresses were the most commonly dumped item that Shiels encountered in her local St Kilda environment, and they quickly became a meaningful material support for her stencilled truisms, questions and stories gleaned from people and the street. One stencilled question asks “Is it a disease of the soul to be in love with impossible things?” Isn't it a disease of the soul *not* to be in love with impossible things? And what is impossible? Happiness? Security? Family? Nurture? Belonging? Usefulness? Change? Peace of mind?

Sleeper reminds us why artists undertake the mysterious, compulsive acts they do to externalise their visions and contemplations of the world we inhabit: they tell us it is necessary to look again, to not deny some of the terrors of the everyday, and to see strange beauty and seek solace in some simple (and not so simple) things.

Jason Smith
CEO and Director, Heide Museum of Modern Art



Julie Shiels
Sunday best 1 2006
recycled mattress fabric, paper
courtesy of the artist