

PLATFORM

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11am to 5pm, Friday to Sunday
Platform by Canberra Contemporary
19 Furneaux St, Forrest ACT 2603

PARADOX OF CONTROL

Maddie Hepner

5 September – 21 September 2025

Hair becomes grotesque when it's disconnected from the body. A loose strand in your food or across a table can spark instant disgust. Detached, it's stripped of its function and beauty, reduced to a reminder of the body's fragility. This shift between what hair signifies when attached and when removed sits at the core of *Paradox of Control*, Maddie Hepner's exploration of hair as both personal material and cultural symbol.

Hepner's focus on hair comes from lived experience. She has trichotillomania, a compulsive hair-pulling behaviour often linked to anxiety or stress. Pulling out hair can bring a brief sense of relief or control, but it also carries shame, distress, and a deeper loss of control. As the artist puts it, "only my hands can provide the relief that my hands inflict." Those same hands both the source and the remedy for the compulsion, appear in the work as plaster casts and wax candles, each made from moulds of her own hands. They stand in the gallery like bodily imprints made solid, introducing a physical presence that continues throughout the exhibition.

Hepner uses hair to create photograms, to knot around envelopes, and as the central prop in a video works. These gestures make the compulsion tangible, turning something usually hidden into a visible record. Hair, in this context, becomes a trace of anxiety, a material that unsettles precisely because of its intimacy.

Human hair holds a contradictory place in cultural and artistic discourse. As the Musée du quai Branly noted in its exhibition *Cheveux Chéris: Frivolities and Trophies* (2012), hair "can represent normality and individuality, conformism and rebellion, seduction and repulsion... a shaved head or flowing long hair can be the hallmark of a rebel or a king, but also of a hermit, a mourner or a tramp." Bound up with ideas of beauty, identity, gender, and power, hair is always more than itself. In contemporary art, it often occupies the boundary between the self and the abject, an object that can both attract and repel, depending on how it appears.

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This lineage is clear in works like Marina Abramović's *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (1975), in which the artist brushed and combed her hair with escalating violence for nearly an hour while repeating the work's title. It's been read as a critique of beauty ideals and a ritual of endurance, using hair to focus anxieties around self-image and control. Hepner extends this conversation into the present, where the pressures of self-presentation are shaped by the constant visibility of digital life.

The endless demands of screens, notifications, and online presence can erode focus and attention, creating a constant undercurrent of stress. This strain surfaces in Hepner's inverted video, where she cradles a wig as if it were a baby. The inversion flips the gesture of care into something uncanny, suggesting how technology distorts perception and unsettles our most intimate behaviours.

Sound is another layer in *Paradox of Control*. A looping soundscape fills the space, drawing out tones and frequencies so they hover and hum. Interwoven is the call of the black cockatoo (a large pack roosts near Hepner's home). These sounds are both her and not her: interpretations of what anxiety might sound like, mixed with the imagined sonic textures of hair and the body.

Other works in the exhibition bridge the tactile and the digital. The Haptic photograms capture the imprint of hair without a camera, recalling early photographic experiments and spirit photography. The envelopes bound with strands of Hepner's hair form a tension knot, suggesting both protection and restriction, connection and constraint in a single gesture.

Across the works, hair, hands, sound, and image are brought into a shared conversation about vulnerability and control in an age of technological intrusion. By making her compulsion visible, Hepner invites reflection on how we cope, or fail to cope, with our own states of being. Rather than offering resolution, the work remains in the space where control and chaos meet, recognising both as part of contemporary life.

Gabrielle Hall-Lomax

Gabrielle-Hall Lomax is a visual artist and curator who practice centres on analogue photography, experimental darkroom processes. Through research and practice, she examines how social structures shape women's experiences, often using collaboration and performance to reframe related narratives. She is the curator at photo access, Canberra.

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1.	<i>Grip #4</i> , 2025, beeswax, waxed wicks, dimensions variable	POA
2.	<i>Snarl</i> , 2025, synthetic hair, plaster hands, dimensions variable	NFS
3.	<i>Tension (and tension tie)</i> , 2025, plaster hands, human hair, paper envelope, dimensions variable	POA
4.	<i>Pacify</i> , 2025, digital video (00:52) looped	NFS
5.	<i>Grip #2</i> , 2025, beeswax, waxed wicks, dimensions variable	POA
6.	<i>Release</i> , 2025, digital video (10:37) looped	NFS
7-13.	<i>Shed #1-7</i> , 2025, unique silver gelatin prints, 50.8 x 60.9cm	\$400 each
14-28.	<i>Haptic #1-15</i> , 2025, unique silver gelatin prints, 30.5 x 40.6cm	\$300 each
29.	<i>Echo</i> , 2025, sound (16:10) looped	NFS

This project explores Hepner's personal experience of trichotillomania (a disorder characterised by compulsive hair pulling) and draws parallels between the disorder and modern anxieties surrounding rapidly evolving emergent technologies, digital fatigue, and personal health in the digital age.

Maddie Hepner (b.1998) is an American–Australian–Canadian artist working across photography, video, sculpture, and sound, based on Ngannawal Country (Canberra, Australia). Her practice engages with personal identity, political discourse, and the shifting role of the image in a digital context. Recent works explore the intersections of health, anxiety, and technology, drawing on lived experience to reflect on compulsive behaviours and digital fatigue. Through both analogue and digital processes, she creates works that navigate the body's vulnerabilities within an increasingly mediated world.

Special thanks to Gabrielle Hall-Lomax, Madeline Cardone and Lani Shea-An

The works in this exhibition were created with support from ACT Arts Activities Funding

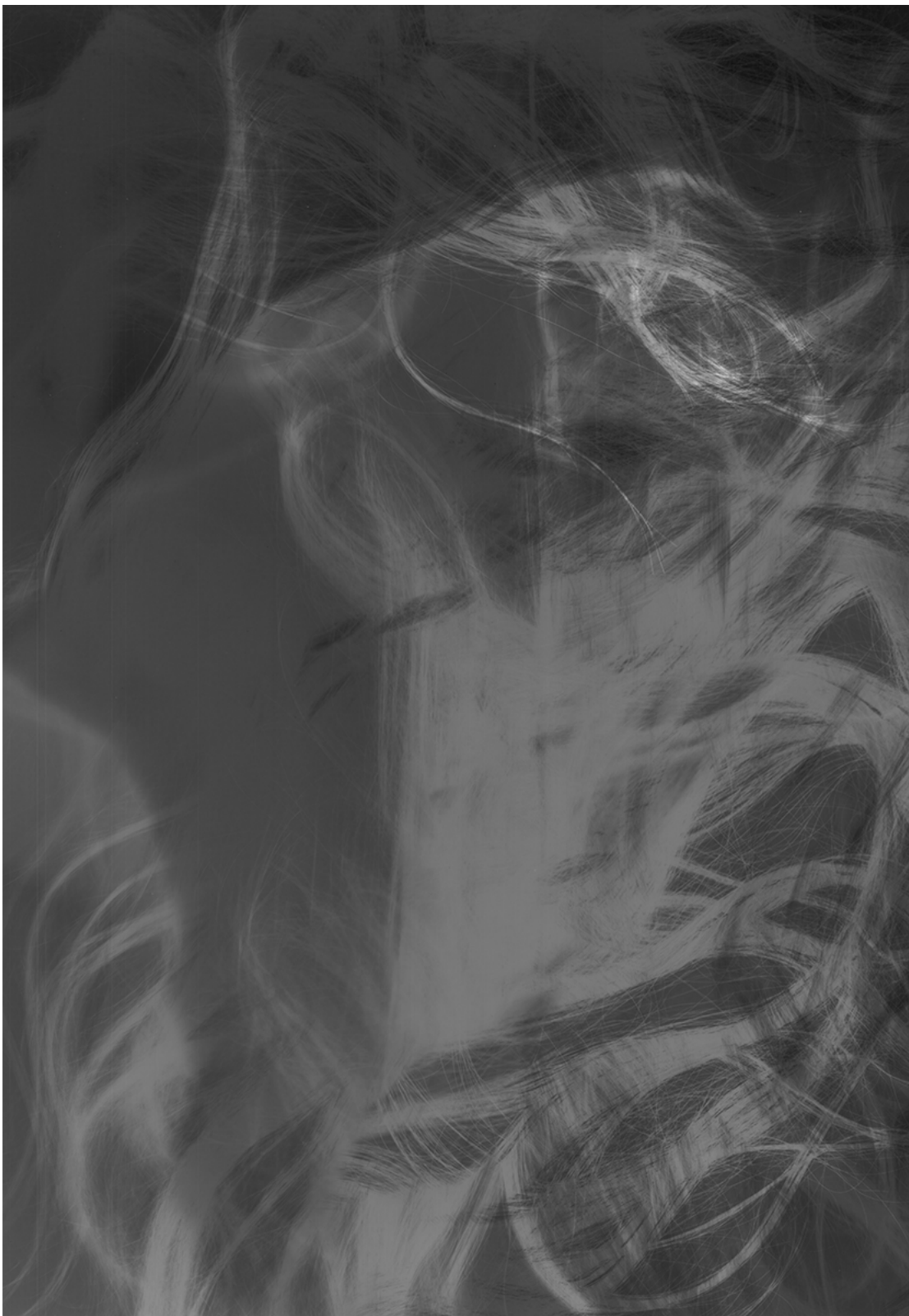
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Haptic #4, 2025, unique silver gelatin print, 30.5 x 40.6 cm

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