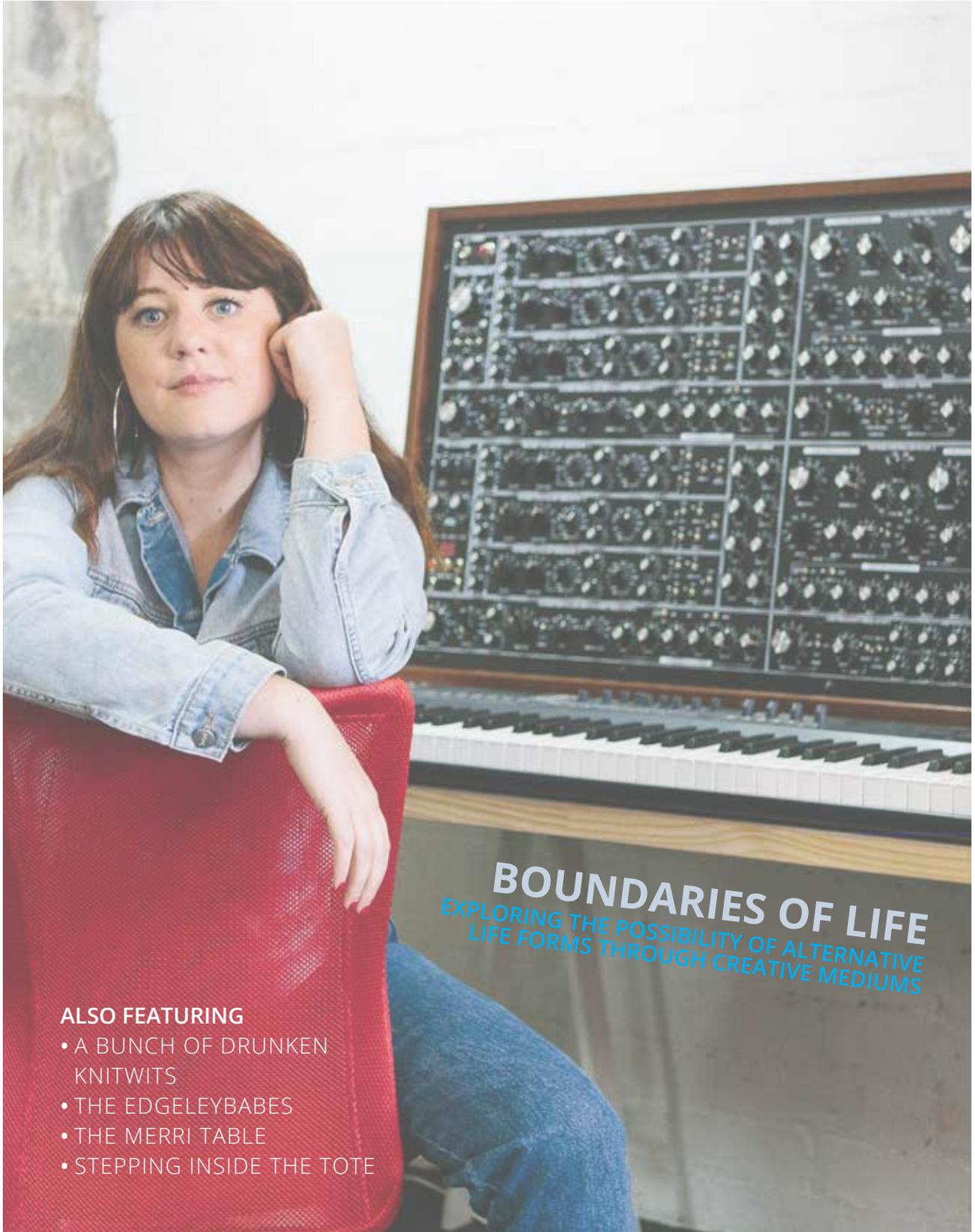


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BOUNDARIES OF LIFE

EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITY OF ALTERNATIVE
LIFE FORMS THROUGH CREATIVE MEDIUMS

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- THE EDGELEYBABES
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THIS IS MELBOURNE'S INNER NORTH



BOUNDARIES OF LIFE

EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITY OF ALTERNATIVE LIFE FORMS THROUGH CREATIVE MEDIUMS

Written by [Quincy Malesovas](#) Photography by [Adele Cochrane](#)

While Melbourne has unfailingly been a creative capital of the world for decades, it has only been in more recent years that it has gained notoriety as a tech hub. Time can only tell when it will join the likes of San Francisco and Berlin as an innovator's paradise.

What we are seeing now, as creative and technological outputs compete and co-mingle in this city, is a growing population of artists who choose to marry the two. People who embrace rather than shun technological and biological sciences. People who show that the stratification between art and science is not as large as we might like to believe -

in fact, the fields can coexist in harmony and support growth in one another.

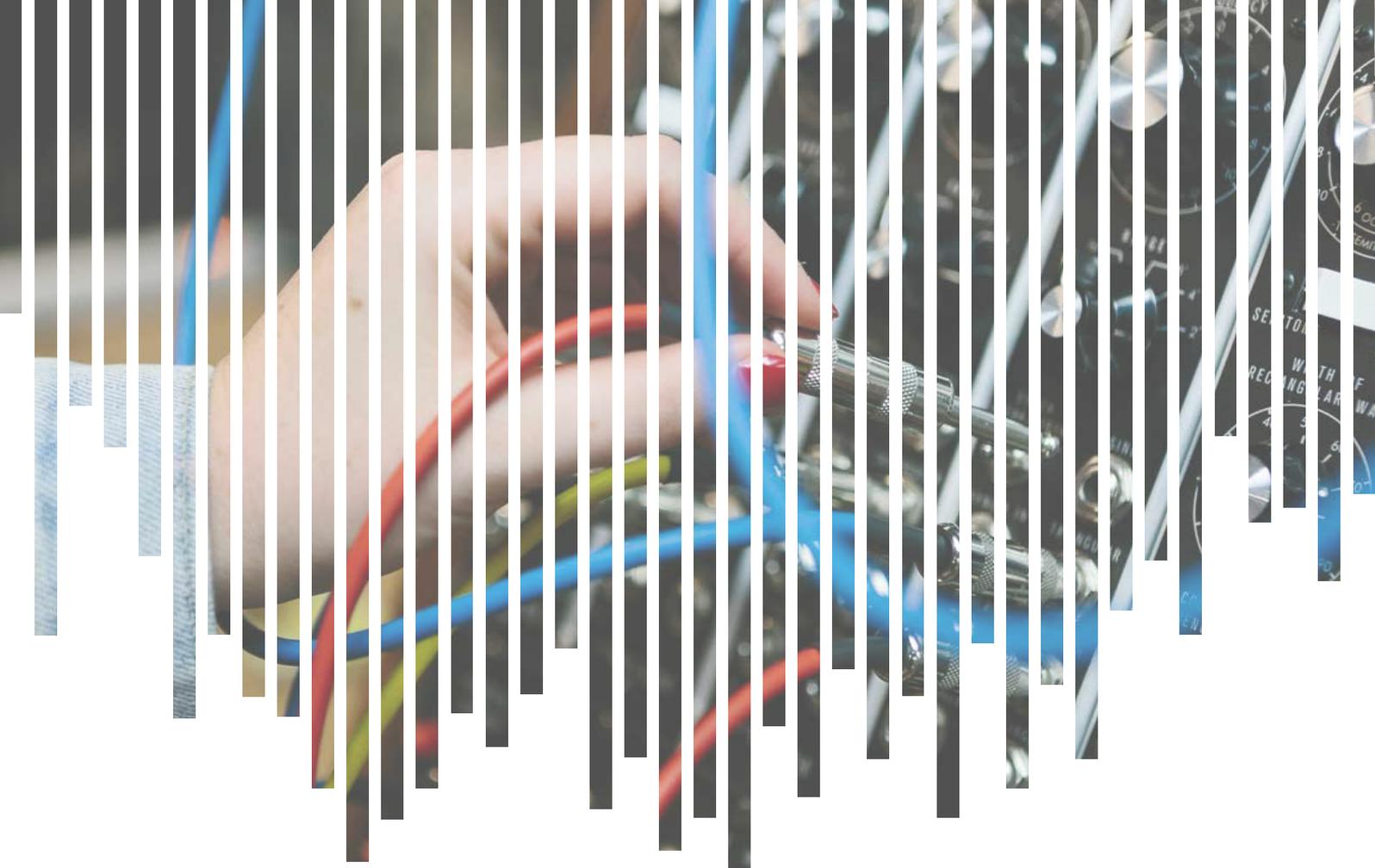
Prudence Rees-Lee, an Australian artist who splits her time between Melbourne and Los Angeles, is one to look towards as an example of someone straddling the space between the sometimes-sterile world of hard science and the seemingly limitless landscape of Melbourne's creative arts scene.

Most recently, she explored this concept while undergoing an artist residency at Melbourne Electronic Sound Studio (MESS) - a not-for-profit sound production workshop dedicated to electronic content,

based in North Melbourne. While there, her primary focal point was exploring the possibility of alternative life forms through creative mediums. She has collaborated with several U.S.-based universities to continue this exploration, through a long-term project titled *Boundaries of Life*.

Despite Prudence's ever-hectic schedule of shuttling between continents and participating in residencies, she set aside some time to answer a few questions for us about the project, her involvement with MESS and why she believes science and art are two forces that are more powerful when combined.





Prudence was first called to L.A. to collaborate with Four Larks theatre company. They were undertaking a residency at the Getty Villa in Malibu at the time, which she describes as a magical introduction to the city.

According to Prudence, the creative climate of L.A. is quite different to that in Melbourne - one she has experienced as wild, experimental and a bit anti-establishment. It's hard to say whether Prudence's innovative nature has been stoked by her move or if she was drawn across the globe as a reaction to this trait; regardless, her love for exploration is evident in everything she's done thus far.

"The quality of Melbourne's creative output is extremely high and concentrated," says Prudence. "American

audiences are more excited, Melbourne audiences are more discerning." Prudence's own relationship with Australian arts may have sparked this theory. She studied cello at university, where classical, orchestral and chamber music was prioritised and discern was the name of the game. That being said, she did supplement her technical projects with experimental and "contemporary classical" sounds that some would consider avant garde.

"After that, I kind of slipped out of the classical world and went to a lot of gigs in Melbourne," Prudence told us. From there, her musical taste, as both a maker and consumer, began to shift again, and slowly leaked into her work. It manifested as a synth band called *Hammocks and Honey*, formed by Prudence and a friend.

"Working with synths means manipulating voltages and electricity," Prudence says. "There's something very primal and magical about that. It feels as though you are conjuring sound from the natural elements."

During her residency at MESS, Prudence spent a week or so learning about the instruments they have available and exploring them, "without any pressure to 'make something' or produce any result." She classified this as nothing but pure luxury and a unique chance to learn. During the second half of her residency, she began to work on a soundtrack for a documentary about the search for alternative life forms. She quickly made the connection between this research and processes in modular synthesis, and the two have been coexisting forces in her work ever since.

"Modular synths [in particular some of



the larger systems they have at MESS, like the Moog 55 and Buchla 200e] seem to have an inherent life and character of their own. [Working with them] feels as though you are collaborating with someone or something that has an active role in the process.” “To me, creating a complex modular patch is like setting up parameters for an ecosystem. Then there are all these possibilities for you to discover as you interact with that system. It’s wild!”

Prudence’s residency at MESS was surely unique, although each artist’s experience is different. There can be many different things involved in a residency, depending on the artist, their subject matter and the place of residency. Prudence said the process can involve pretty much anything, from solo research and development to community engagement to, of course, creating new works of art.

“I think one of the biggest advantages of a residency is having concentrated time away from regular life to focus on your practice.”

Prudence has also found that the people she’s met during residencies have been as interesting to her as the work she’s done. Although she was in L.A.

when MESS opened, she was struck by how lovely and inspiring everyone who she met through the studio was. She was so excited about the program that, on her next trip back to Melbourne, she approached the studio about a collaboration. Next thing she knew, she was in residency. MESS is planning to offer a more formal residency program within the next year.

Prudence’s big project at the moment,

The three main questions they are looking at are; what parameters and bounds of life exist, whether life has originated more than once, and how likely is life to exist elsewhere in the universe.

“This potential life is called ‘shadow life’, and the hypothesis is that it could have evolved alongside life as we know it, but gone unnoticed as we have never thought to look for it.” So far, music, movement, games,

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Boundaries of Life, is “a multi-year, multi-institute collaborative effort aimed at identifying diverse and novel forms of life, some of which might exhibit properties outside our current definition of biology.”

The project brings together scientists from Caltech, Stanford, Global Viral and NASA. Prudence runs an experimental studio in L.A., called Schema47, that is currently working with *Boundaries of Life* to develop creative and artistic responses to their research.

visual art and a curated series of events have been developed in response to this research. Prudence is also putting together a short documentary which will include snippets of interviews with scientists involved with the project.

Prudence’s hope is that by engaging with artists, scientists are inspired to think differently about their own processes and research.