

MIKALA DWYER



MCA LEVEL FOUR GALLERIES

It's hard not to enjoy Mikala Dwyer's work. No matter how challenging it may be for an audience to consider an enveloping and anarchic jumble of coloured pantyhose stretched to breaking point, of plastic guttering and sagging geometric volumes modelled in neoprene, of cubbyhouses and wardrobe spaces casually suggested by draped vinyl or linoleum or recycled cardboard, or of bandaged floating radios and crazy constellations of roughly handled squiggles of modelling clay leaping around like hyperactive viruses or spermatozoa...no matter how bewildering this madcap clutter and fantastic décor may appear, no matter how idiosyncratic or esoteric or elusive the sources of its imagery may be, there is something undeniably and immediately, outrageously and also eloquently comic about it. You can't help but grin at the joyous and uninhibited antics of these bits and pieces of urban humdrum abducted from their commonplace duties and let loose in a world as free from prosaic regulations and as animated with adventure as the land of Oz.

This is a world inspired by the sort of wicked humour that prompts poltergeists to hurl crockery across dining rooms or suspend furniture in mid-air. It is a world operating on the mischief one suspects otherwise respectfully inanimate objects get up to when no-one is around to supervise them. It is a world undone by the cheeky magic of gremlins and put back together like crazy paving by an interior designer tripping on ecstasy. It is a circus. A theme park inversion of the business of existence. It is, in other words, a mode of enchantment. And this enchantment is not just the decorous expression of delight. Not quite wholesome family entertainment, even if the sentiments are inclining in that direction. Seductive as Dwyer's world may be, its allure is not equivalent to charm; nor is our encounter with it reducible to being charmed. There is also a sly and at times caustic intelligence directing the deviant routines of these delirious machines. Keep in mind that when a charm capable of transporting its subjects becomes a spell playing havoc with them, we have serious juju.

It is not all fun and games then. Dwyer's uncommon, fantastic spaces can remind us of so many different regions of relatively common experience at once that we are bound to feel disoriented, if not scrambled, if not fooled and ambushed. Curiously scan her installations for what might suggestively resemble the busy yet abandoned litter of a nursery or a day care centre with its building blocks and playdough lumps stacked or scattered capriciously about, and you could also be doing an inventory of spare parts or bric-a-brac residue in a derelict IKEA stockroom. This analogy may seem facetious and droll, but there's no critical reproach against consumerism or fashion here. Nothing edifying or moralising to it. Even if, you could also imagine standing in the midst of a manic assembly of display fittings from a suburban shopping mall. Or, equally, placed in the transit lounge of an international airport, or a corporate office lobby or inner-city gym. All the while, one might also feel tantalised by the suspicion that you're trespassing onto the secretive, spangled, psychedelic décor of a teenage girl's bedroom. These are, of course, peripheral impressions: the more you focus on the detailed action, the less you can make sense of the general scene. It takes some shrewd work to vividly invoke these zones while rendering their delineation so unstable and elusive.

The clean, modular geometry of modernist industrial design since the Bauhaus has provided a common practical language or at least substructure for both child's play and adult leisure, for the architecture of work as well as domestic space. Images in a fashionably modern infant's elementary picture book can, in their formalist economy, resemble corporate logos or urban traffic signs. In itself this would not be a particularly original insight. But Dwyer's collapse of adulthood, adolescence and childhood, of intimate and public domains and of the customs of consumption and production all into each other decompose our modern perception of their functional, social integrity. These otherwise clean lucid spaces become chaotic tangles of uncontrolled associations, disparate affects and incomprehensible inten-

tions. Allusion in Dwyer's installations to these zones—nurseries, lounge rooms, foyers or public plazas—leads us toward their ambiguous and hazardous antipodes. Beneath the floorboards, so to speak, into crawlspaces and murky basements with exposed plumbing and wiring. Or into captivating doubles of these rooms: ad hoc cubbyhouses or nests, tree-houses and attics.

Work and play are indistinct in these regions; although, this doesn't mean that they are fused in some healing synthesis that transcends the alienation of one from the other. Dwyer's cubbyholes are not utopias, but on the other hand they are not defensive retreats, cocoons or fortresses. Their contours are either torn open or too pliant to contain or shield their occupants. There is too much traffic between the interiors of her forms and their exteriors for the difference to have any fundamental and consistent value. One only identifies an interior or exterior space, that's to say makes sense of it, in the particular event of sticking one's head or arm or finger or eye through a particular opening. By the same principle, the assembly of different objects or materials seems entirely circumstantial—in the manner of an immense doodle. As with any doodle, there are periods of repetitive routine, of idling and negligence, and moments of calculated connection or erasure as well as bursts of ecstatic or manic invention. The activity only ends due to loss of interest or sudden interruption: it is never, strictly speaking, completed. One sees this throughout Dwyer's installations in two modes. On one hand, with the proliferation of web-like structures (neural networks and spiders' webs) that spread their filaments, either sticking to surfaces as if mating with them or dwindling away as if starved of energy. On the other, by the frequent truncation or amputation of the tubing formed out of, among other things, stockings and leggings, or PVC drainage pipes; as if a surgeon were constantly pruning away at and then grafting tree branches, human limbs, or a body's or building's internal ducting.

Like this fantastically indecent surgeon, Dwyer's work never seems finished,

always interrupted by unruly play and always resuming a responsibility to deliver a decisive product. In a literal sense, there is no end to what she does with these materials. It is not just that the artist so often recycles and revises her work, as if she were trying to edit or correct it against an anticipated outcome. What valid or accurate conclusion, after all, can one expect or demand from a doodle? Dwyer's installations cannot ever be completed only momentarily arrested. Each one is more a wave front than an object or assemblage of objects. Not so much a picture as a region of intensity, a vector: the combined effect of actions being exerted for a particular moment in different directions within a medium that displaces, erodes, piles up the things in its path. We, with our sentiments about childhood and concerns about adulthood, are among those things.

