MIKALA DWYER

MCA LEVEL FOUR GALLERIES

The Little Temples of Love for the Dead Things

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Mikala Dwyer's art is about an encounter between ourselves and others. It does not resolve difference into wholeness, but keys into our intuition that self-identity is an illusion. Her sculptures express a desire for union through relatedness, yet simultaneously present identity as changing, permeable and partial. Through an embrace of uncertainty rather than mastery, the artist proposes that things are not dead, nor are they objects that we merely master or assimilate—instead they change with us and we with them. As described elsewhere, Dwyer's is a 'profoundly sociable art'.[1]

Dwyer articulates this with work that delights with its comic overabundance, glamour, sensuality and playfulness, asserting the power of matter to stimulate our imagination. (It has been observed that 'her approach is so profoundly phenomenological that...ideas themselves are both experienced and expressed sensuously—ideas are just more objects'.[2]) The artist enacts a kind of voodoo, her art offering a safe path to confront what makes us uncomfortable. It shows a delight in material but is decidedly anti-materialist. Exploring rather the magical properties of things, it throws you back on your own doubt while at the same time allowing refuge in the seduction of things. Dwyer's works often have a fantastic presence that requires the viewer to suspend disbelief, to trust in the mutuality of the encounter.

Unfinished, beginningless, endless, Dwyer's works are made up of many parts that change with each installation—melding into one another, losing some parts, adding others. In her words: 'each work, each object and each space are in a foggy, indefinable way inseparable...it has always been difficult for me to find a stopping point'.[3] The means of production are often quite visible, even reversible. Openness is fostered by the artist: 'Uncertainty is always a component of my work...I use the generative possibilities of accidents and mistakes'.[4]

This uncertainty shapes our response to the work. In *woops* (1994), a sprawling installation with many parts, change and transformation seemed certain and imminent: would the fragile architecture collapse into a pile of anonymous materials or continue to transmute into ever-varying form, its constituent parts waiting in anticipation of the next act? In this and other installations resides a promise of a metamorphosis of identity, a passage from one thing to another. Such a promise could be fulfilled only in our imagination, or in an unknown future, only to be restated in different form.

This deferral is given material form in one series of works. In Dwyer's *IOU* (1996) a large square of sheer organza hangs—like a painting—above a mantelpiece, on which sit small clay letters spelling IOU. The square of material suggests a debt to modernist or minimal painting. But what is delivered?—a promise that can only arrive too late, suspended in the hanging material like a ghost, or contradicted by the modesty and finality of the sculpted forms.

In Dwyer's later, larger version of *IOU* (1997-98) the letters are constructed in opaque and transparent perspex and sit on a flokati rug, play-pen sized. The 'O' is doubled and mirrors itself and us into infinity. The 'I' is a self portrait (as adult or child?) but also reflects the viewer. A split artistic persona has been observed by one writer: 'there is a tension between observation and autobiography; [Dwyer] seems to play both parent and child; the overseer who comments on behaviour and the subject itself, flailing wildly with the toys in an effort to speak'.[5] Or is it our divided subjectivity that is held up to the mirror? Dwyer's work prompts both a disinterested spectatorial stance and a more primitive, heartfelt response.

Meaning is created somewhere between the objects and us, neither solely a function of surface or of interiority. Rather there is an osmosis between the visible and invisible, inside and outside, effected in part by an astute selection and use of materials. Surface is emphasised and at the same time weakened, through Dwyer's use of porous materials, and by her opening up of glossy, cool, hard surfaces, or sealing up bleeding ones. As a result, the works do not represent life within a fixed boundary or shape, but embody a vaguer and more elusive sensuality. Even seemingly artificial objects are not inert, but part of us.

In *Hollowware & a few solids* (1995), this two-way passage is suggested by the use of porous materials: cork, neoprene, unfired clay, organza, stockings, cardboard. Rather than shoring up against the world these show a receptivity to change, even an uncertainty. In other works, objects that permeate their surroundings are sealed in plastic: smelly old shoes in *Wall to wall: ceiling to floor* (1991), poisonous-looking liquids in *Primavera* (1992). Silicon seals up a TV aerial in *Hollowware & a few solids* (1995), fibreglass smothers a skull and a baby's car-seat in *The Little Temples of Love for the Dead Things* (2000). Such exaggerated protection only renders these objects—in another life quite innocuous—threatening or dangerous. They permeate our sense of self. At the same time we may smile at this unloosing of the mechanics of repression. With conjoined humour and horror, Dwyer's work will make you notice the cracks in the floor...

Dwyer's art makes us imagine a bodily inwardness, a bodily knowledge that is uncertain, indecisive, but which we nevertheless rely on to function. In *iffytown* (1999), brightly coloured PVC tubes are arranged on the floor (in a later incarnation they also came down from the ceiling). In shapes of periscopes and s-bends, they connect us to a world of plumbing, passageways of waste, and make us imagine another less inert world underneath the floor. Nevertheless our imagination is never given full reign, as we know that we see only bits of plastic on the floor, not conduits to a living organism. Similarly in *woops* (1994) the lavish artificiality of lamé, sequins and satin and their opaque and reflective surfaces both invite and deflect our imaginative urge. We can see that what is actually concealed by the gaudy finery is only a collection of ordinary objects.

The most recent works stop the flow of whatever life we might imagine. *Selfshelf* (2000) comprises a coffin-like shape on a high shelf with an opening to a drain—but ends in a stump. In a new work made for this exhibition, modelled clay tubes weave under and over themselves, spill out of a variety of props, forming branches and networks of mind trying to make links. The bits of clay are shaped like dismembered limbs, part-objects, leached white or turd-like (rejected ideas, failed thoughts in bodily form). Where we suppose tubes might join or flow, their passage is terminated by a stump or mirror. Everything wants to connect, but stops short, leaving the viewer to make an imaginative leap across the gaps. Dwyer has said that 'a state of dismemberment is a perpetual state of unknowing'.[6] One that is preferable to the nightmarish realisation of Frankenstein's dream of infusing life into a body of fragments.

Nevertheless a seductive ideal of plenitude seems to motivate Dwyer's continued production, even if it is cut to ground. Several major installations (*Primavera, woops, Hollowware & a few solids, Contempora5*) are composed of many parts that do not add up to a whole. Instead there are peculiar and shifting relations between things. Cigarettes, corks, dinner plates are arranged in accumulations (which Dwyer terms 'addons') like representations of time, both domestic and sculptural. Squares of material are stitched or pinned together to form little groups that themselves seem open-ended. In the ironically titled *Closing Plan* (1998) thousands of delicate grey tulle squares are pinned together to form a voluminous veil.

Sounds accumulate in other works. As Edward Colless has written: '*Sad Songs* is not finished. It is loose enough in its form to never really be completed. It accumulates, almost by its own volition like a rumour or an atmosphere: some areas of it condense, others dissipate'.[7] Similarly, layers of indistinct voices hang in the air in *Jean's OK* (1994) and *Floating Old Man* (2000).

The impulse to keep on adding on is tempered by Dwyer's 'holding patterns': 'In my work, it is often a simple thing that becomes a "holding pattern". It becomes my own imaginary outline to momentarily contain and order thoughts'.[8] Against the excess, the redundant accumulation of matter, there is always some device, a 'holding pattern' that constrains total proliferation and enables the articulation of form and space: circles and cylinders in *iffytown*,

stars in *Vincent (Aries)*, bunnies in *Primavera*, and more recently the cubby house, a form of temporary containment. For *Olloodoo* (1998) Dwyer constructed an island, that most romantic container of imagination, to articulate a space in which her two-year old daughter, Olive, could pour paint, glitter and other materials to her heart's desire...

These holding patterns are temporary ordering devices to make sense of life's accumulation of events. They anticipate that any kind of personal architecture is subject to collapse, that at some point any structure becomes invalid. Rosalind Krauss has written that 'the dream of architecture is to escape entropy.'[9] Operating against this illusion of permanence are the places of memory and imagination: the haunted houses of fiction, the Borgesian rooms that contain entire universes—inhabited spaces that transcend the logic of geometry.

Dwyer looks at how spaces and household objects determine and are changed by our behaviour. If a building is a form of logic solidified, Dwyer's work 'shows the things that cannot easily be mapped, explained and made intelligible according to a geometric grid of reason'.[10] In her work, as in most domestic interiors, an often unforgiving structure is transformed by personal effects.

In *Primavera* (1992) an unsteady column of dinner plates supported the gallery ceiling, while a replica of one of the gallery columns lay down, supported by a builder's horse and pillows. A part of the floor was bandaged with Elastoplast. All suggested that the architecture was vulnerable, anticipated its collapse, or death (in a curious twist of fate this gallery no longer exists). In *Recent Old Work* (1996) a handle covered in soft knitted wool was set across a corner constructed to match the corners of the gallery. This mobile corner could be wheeled around by visitors to the exhibition. Open in form, detached from its role as a place of banishment, it could absorb alternative imaginings.

A crucial point of departure for Dwyer was her response to growing up with Danish furniture in 1960s Sydney suburbia—and the conundrum of how such clean, seamless surfaces, associated with a 'timeless' egalitarian modernism, could be reconciled with the emotional tenor of familial life. For as the artist recognises: 'Childhood pieces of furniture accrue an emotional investment over time. It becomes difficult to define the boundary between self and object. Objects and buildings become extensions of us and we extensions of them.' Dwyer and her sister Stephanie exhibited their family furniture as *Family Portrait* (1993): perhaps just good furniture to some viewers, but for the artists also a means to test how such items maintain or reinforce identity.

This two-way passage between things and us is a key trope of Dwyer's work, which animates that most clinical and 'neutral' of modern architectural spaces, the white cube of the gallery. In several works, Dwyer literally opens up the building. In *Sad Songs* (1995) eleven small circles were cut out of the gallery wall, revealing a cavity between it and the 'real' wall and windows of the building. Incoming light from the street met with escaping wafts of sound in a breathing space that offered release from the claustrophobia of enclosed rooms and their attendant murmurs and accumulation of emotion.

This hidden space behind the wall, 'a space for mischief; a place for spiders to breed in musty, undisturbed air',[11] anticipated Dwyer's exploration of the cubby house as a personal space where one seeks refuge and independence. Her recent cubbies and items of furniture are adaptive, temporary, parasitic, presenting an alternative to self-sufficient, unchanging architecture. For her the cubby has become a model for a sculpture that can survive architectural and design constraints, and one that encourages an inventive use of pre-existing structures and materials.

In *My Home is Your Home* (2000) a video monitor and cushion sit inside a makeshift 'room' of scaffolding covered in baize. The electrical cord for the video exits from a hole in the wall, seeming to plug the room as a whole into the surrounding gallery. We enter through another opening to watch the video,

which takes us through a series of internal spaces spliced together, a kind of architectural anatomy of different rooms, stairs, doors and passageways. This rough assemblage of abandoned and inhabited, domestic and institutional spaces is strangely unnerving, as if one could sense the house, and by extension the body, as a stitched-up aggregate of parts only just hanging together.

In Dwyer's work there is always something switched on—lights, radio, TV. Music or sound is used to activate memory in several works, the tape recorders acting as 'memory machines' in *Sad Songs*. In *Jean's OK* (1994) empty chairs sit around a dinner table on which are placed several tape recorders that play back dinner-party conversations and sing-alongs. Shown in a half-renovated hotel room, it looks like a set-up to contact the dead, overladen with other people's presence. Voices overlap, fade, and linger, sounding out the melancholy memory of a dumb object.

Through an activation of memory, Dwyer tries to retrieve something of the uncanny sense of an adult when he or she experiences something long familiar, like the irreconcilable disjunctions of scale experience when visiting a childhood home. It has been remarked that the uncanny takes the form of repetition—something that was once familiar returns as strange and elides the difference between reality and imagination.[12] Similarly a feeling of vertigo splits us: we are in two places at once—at once fallen and upright.

Dwyer uses sculptural means to incite such feelings of unease in viewers. Subtle dislocations of scale make us aware of our own bodily scale. Like Alice in Wonderland, we find ourselves in a world that shifts from large to small, intimate to alien. The constructed nests and habitats in a new work for this exhibition are child-size, the chairs too small to sit on, arches too small to squeeze through. Weaving throughout are tiny clay tubes, and much larger vinyl ones. In the grouping of works presented in *Uniform and Contempora5, Hanging Eyes* (1999) is a collection of garment-like forms that look too big, shrinking us, while we are giants looking over the tiny organic forms of *un*. We can only reconcile these shifts in scale imaginatively, contracting our mind to inhabit some spaces, allowing it to expand into the installation as a whole.

Dwyer also manipulates our point of view. We may literally have to crouch or crane our necks to look at something. In *Oranges and Lemons* (1990) the TV monitor is placed high so that our viewing pose mimics that of the girls in the video looking up to heaven; in *Wall to wall: ceiling to floor* (1991), we become conscious of stepping on the 'right' place. A new complexity to point of view animates more recent works, in particular *Contempora5* (1999). Our gaze is constantly shifting, beckoned and deflected by mirrors, windows and wall openings set at different heights. Pipes (cylinders, periscopes and s-bends) sit on the floor, come out from the wall and down from the ceiling, not meeting, but reflecting each other mirrored end to mirrored end. Nothing is still or isolated. We have to crouch or tip-toe; a reflected light catches on surfaces as it circles around the room. If we look at an object, we usually see ourselves and glimpse other objects that may not be directly visible. The preponderance of circles within circles makes it seem as if what we see are eyes looking at us—point of view is inverted in favour of the objects themselves. There is a kind of intimacy created in this mutual exchange, reminiscent of the tactile world of a child, where things are animated and continually transformed.

A sense of scale is always related to memory and Dwyer underscores this with her use of objects and materials associated with childhood. We think of something as too small or too big in relation to our current physical size. But when we encounter things familiar from the past, our experience is simultaneously physical and imaginative—we cannot separate the child in us from the adult we are. A sense of internal division is triggered by objects that have inhabited us.

Dwyer exploits the sensual charge of materials that function to support or protect the body and that are commonly associated with childhood or infirmity — bandages, bedpans, blankets, teddy bears. Objects that we have touched and loved or have been used to heal us, they are both subject and object, very

familiar and yet not-us. Their emotional proximity to comfort, pain and bodily functions allows us to displace feelings onto them. In *Oranges and Lemons* (1990) is perhaps Dwyer's first use of the ubiquitous Elastoplast, which she uses to tape an axe to the wall, underneath a video documentary about four girls' visions of the Virgin Mary, and opposite a circle of rotting oranges and lemons. There is a complicated series of links between the three parts but we could hardly be uncertain of the general effect... the unsettling tone of the eponymous nursery rhyme, the vulnerability of the necks of the girls as they crane in rapture, eyes fixed on the sky (as we, in unison, look up at the video), combined with the heavy rotting fruit and the axe, activated by its sticky, familiar, warm-smelling covering.

Dwyer's art is similar in effect to a b-grade horror film. It's an art that goes for meaning *and* affect, combining the insignificant with the portentous. It has been described as 'deflated, cosmetic and trite', 'casual', 'all surface', 'flimsy' and 'quintessentially commonplace', and conversely as 'ominous and precious', 'sinister' and 'grotesque'. Such a combination makes us laugh, because we are always drawn back to the sensuous materiality of the work, the extraordinary life of ordinary things, even while they make us imagine things unseen. Dwyer plays on our willingness to believe in what we do not see—are signs all surface or is there something else?

The process could be described as occult, of having qualities not immediately obvious, such that one reviewer could rightly state that 'a first impulse is to make light of the work' but later that 'this house-bound tragi-comedy tears your insides out'.[13]

That we see anything beyond the objects themselves can only be a suspicion —if a quite visceral one, gleaned from Dwyer's repeated and always failed attempts to make things cohere. She takes what we surround ourselves with—mundane or glorious, whatever in our material world we like to identify with, and displaces this identification. We take intimate pleasure in our many disguises, whether effected through make-up, clothing, household effects or other props. Dwyer sticks pins in these second skins, so that anxiety and laughter swell in equal measure.

Of the shoes in plastic bags in *Wall to wall: ceiling to floor* (1991), Gail Hastings has written: 'Sanitised for society's sake, like a cadaver with its toe tied to a name tag: all God-forsaken smells of rotting flesh, of living flesh, extinguished, saving our nostrils the distaste of life and its death. Held captive also, so as to not infringe upon our sanity, is the commotion of our confused and muddy feelings; kept tidy between (like the shoes in plastic) two distinctions easy to make: life, death'.[14]

Or, as Dwyer puts it, her works are 'The Little Temples of Love for the Dead Things'.[15]

1. Toni Ross, 'Mikala Dwyer', *Contempora5*, catalogue, The Ian Potter Museum of Art, The University of Melbourne in association with the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1999, p. 12.
2. Helen Back, 'Everybody's in The House of Love', *Henle's Loop*, brochure, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1993, n. p.
3. Mikala Dwyer, unpublished MA thesis, College of Fine Art, University of NSW, 1999, p.1.
4. Mikala Dwyer, ibid., p. 4.
5. Phil Kelly, 'Untitled: Mikala Dwyer', *monica*, Summer 1997, p. 62.
6. Mikala Dwyer, in conversation with the author, 2000.
7. Edward Colless, *Sad Songs*, catalogue, Artspace, Sydney, 1995, n. p.
8. Mikala Dwyer, unpublished MA thesis, College of Fine Art, University of NSW, 1999, p. 5.
9. Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Threshole', in *Formless: A User's Guide*, Yves-Alain Bois & Rosalind E. Krauss, Zone Books, New York, 1997, p.187.
10. Sue Best, 'Purl and plane geometry', *Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial*, catalogue, part 2, p. 59.
11. Edward Colless, *Sad Songs*, catalogue, Artspace, Sydney, 1995, n. p.
12. Rosalind E. Krauss, ibid., p. 194.
13. Phil Kelly, 'Untitled: Mikala Dwyer', *monica*, Summer 1997, p. 62.
14. Gail Hastings, *Wall to wall: ceiling to floor*, brochure, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, 1991, n. p.
15. proposed title for a new work for the current exhibition.