



# STILL LIFE

THE INAUGURAL BALNAVES FOUNDATION SCULPTURE PROJECT

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... THE INTIMATE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE INANIMATE AND THE ANIMATE, THE LIFELESS AND THE LIVING, AND THE INEVITABLE TRACE OF DEATH EVEN WHEN SCULPTURE IS MOST REALISTIC ...

A renewed interest in objects has been a defining feature of art practice over recent years. Artists are carving, cutting, modelling, moulding, assembling and casting to create three-dimensional art works that are as much about our material engagement with the world as they are about representing things or being things in themselves. *Still Life* brings together work by five Australian artists, James Angus, Mikala Dwyer, Emily Floyd, Ronnie van Hout and Ricky Swallow, who are making a significant contribution to contemporary sculptural practice. The exhibition title *Still Life* suggests the intimate connections between the inanimate and the animate, the lifeless and the living, and the inevitable trace of death even when sculpture is most realistic – terms which continue to underlie our experience of the medium. The 'life' in the title also refers to the interest in representation and forms of realism, albeit usually a conceptual or factitious realism, that has been apparent in recent art practice. The works in this exhibition are attentive to the interdependence of objects and people, and to how things tend to have a life of their own that intersects with and shapes our experience of the world. These art works share a close observation of the animate and inanimate, a consciousness of material affect, and an interest in how objects participate in our experience of time, space and memory.

*Still life* also refers, of course, to the history in painting of depicting things, where both everyday domestic items and remarkable or curious objects often symbolised a meaning beyond their physical depiction. In 17th century Holland, a time of exceptional mercantile wealth, still life painting proliferated and seemed a reflection of the materiality of that culture. More than just a picture of goods, still life painting traded a balance between the worldly and the spiritual, with the *vanitas* tradition striking an ominous note affirming the transience of material existence. The second period in which still life was of particular cultural importance was the late 19th and early 20th century. Experiments with pictorial space and representation by Cézanne and later the Cubists, altered our perception of form and space. Through the depiction of such ordinary things as bowls of fruit, newspapers, and café tables, the objects and places of everyday life were restructured conceptually and materially.

While I am not making claims for still life to have a similar level of cultural importance now, it is notable that despite our own culture having been described as one of spectacle, where the media, the virtual and the digital are altering our perception of the real, we have probably never been so obsessed with the look of our immediate physical environment. The popularity of home improvement TV programmes and other lifestyle media continues unabated, encouraging us to pare back our rooms to function as an exhibition venue for furnishings that apparently say a lot about who we are and how we live. The objects that surround us have probably never had to carry so much ontological weight. It is within this heightened sense of our reality being mutable, depending on our encounters with objects, that the works in this exhibition exist. These sculptures are generally individually conceived and handmade. However, they take cues from, and reflect upon, the relationships between the unique sculptural object and the mass produced and commercially available.

While objects in art practice have again become independent of installation and no longer need to be part of a cumulative effect within a specific site, the spatial encounter remains important. Space and temporality are intimately connected and in many of these sculptures time slips into both the future and the past before settling back into our present moment. Both Emily Floyd and James Angus rework modernist architectural and literary icons. Floyd interrupts narrative space and time with fragmented text and scaled distortions. Angus reconsiders the rationalism of modernist space through objects and a wall drawing which are also subtle geometric propositions. Van Hout explores contemporary ideas about the alienation and isolation of the individual, through a failure of self-representation. Ricky Swallow treats space as a metaphysical site, and Mikala Dwyer engages in a form of proto-urban planning that suggests our primary encounters with space.

As the title *Still Life* also implies, in its juxtaposition of stasis and animate existence, there is a quietly affective afterlife to these works. Encountering these sculptures suggests that the split between object and subject, between the thing and us, is imminently negotiable as the sculptures engage us experientially and exponentially. As Elizabeth Grosz has said, "We actively produce, make, objects in the world and in doing so, we make the world amenable to our actions, but also render ourselves vulnerable to their reactions".<sup>1</sup>

1. Elizabeth Grosz, 'The thing itself', paper presented at *The pragmatist imagination: thinking about 'things in the making'*, conference, Columbia University, 1–2 May 2000



MIKALA DWYER'S sculpture recalls Gaston Bachelard's concept of a material imagination: of the way imagination resides in things; and how things become familiar to us, invested with meaning and memory. As well as being modelled, moulded, stitched, glued, shaped, and cut, the components of *Lovesongs for the Cannibals*, 2003, appear to have been willed into being and they have the haunting life of imaginary things becoming, if not real, at least three-dimensional. Bachelard also considered there to be a fundamental connection between houses and the imagination, and that the image of the house is important to how we learn to inhabit ourselves.<sup>1</sup> Many of Dwyer's seemingly abstract forms and her more directly representational sculptures originate in the artist's interest in shelter, in the home and in urban structures. This interest often focuses on such primary manifestations of the desire for habitation as the child's urge to construct cubby houses, small domains in which they exert control over their environment and the meanings of things.

In *Lovesongs for the Cannibals*, Dwyer has constructed a largely abstract sculpture that is also an imaginary habitation. Clear and coloured plastic bubble-like forms are a type of contained shelter or room, long plastic passages are conduits connecting objects that seem habituated to their plinths, island shapes support structures made from accumulations of piled-up materials, and household tables and stands hold poured and splattered lopsided constructions. The forms Dwyer uses are enigmatic, associative, even comical and occasionally scatological. Her urban planning has not forgotten green space and she has included a soft and saggy version of a hydroponic garden, log-like extrusions which sprout vegetal forms and other more unlikely conical shapes the artist calls 'ups'. Clear plastic predominates in this work and its often erratic modularity also resembles speech bubbles, waiting to contain thoughts or language that is more appropriately visualised than articulated out loud. The speech bubble is not just the domain of comic book narratives, but has been used in art to contain and convey dream and fantasy sequences.<sup>2</sup> The connections between habitations and the imaginary were also suggested by Plato when he wrote, "Should we not say that we make a house by the art of building, and by the art of painting we make another house, a sort of man-made dream produced for those who are awake?"<sup>3</sup>



Plastic is, of course, a synthetic polymeric substance that can be given a permanent shape. The origin of the name of this product in the act of turning material into form, the 'plastic' of the plastic arts such as modelling and sculpting, is now often forgotten. As with all of Dwyer's sculpture a visible plasticity – the moulding, extruding, shaping of material – is essential to both the form and meaning of her work. Dwyer's bubbles and shapes owe something to the legacies of pop art and *arte povera*, and to the more organic types of minimalism, but her plasticity has a life all of its own, as can be seen in the richly inventive visual language she has created. Imagination inhabits this work just as the work itself is a type of habitation, a home for material thought. Dwyer's sculptures are always on the verge of becoming immersive environments as their component parts replicate and expand to fill available space, and this work is no exception. Its parameters are not contained or clearly delineated. As we negotiate our way around the gallery, it repeatedly intrudes into what we presume is our space and we are always in danger of being tripped up or bumped into by the work itself.

The longer you look at Dwyer's work the more an underlying system appears within the initial chaotic structures, revealing not only an undercurrent of formalism in the placement of the component parts, but also a pleasurable material aesthetic. Abjection also plays a role, apparent in the sculpture's porous, leaking borders. With this work, the supporting principle is the

mirrored three-dimensional letters that spell out IOU. Dwyer often recycles parts of her sculptures, evolving forms through different incarnations, and these particular letters have had two previous lives as outdoor sculptures. The abbreviation IOU is a leitmotif that has appeared in many of Dwyer's works. The mirrors covering these text/structures dematerialise their surface, both replicating and dissolving the accumulation of shapes, fracturing space and light, and creating a void-like effect which suggests a much more infinite space than that delineated by the contours of the gallery. If, as Vito Acconci has said, "public space is leaving home",<sup>4</sup> the IOU acknowledges much more than a debt to the recent history of the plastic arts. Dwyer's simple abbreviation enters into a humble exchange with the audience, suggesting the importance of bringing private associative imaginary realms into public institutional space.

1 Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii

2 See Mick Carter, 'Picturing the dream', chapter 6, *Putting a face on things*, Power Publications, Sydney, 1997

3 Plato quoted by Gombrich quoted by Mick Carter, *Putting a face on things*, p. 217

4 Quoted in Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: art, architecture and anxiety in modern culture*, p. 135

