

## **Littered Under Mercury by Andrew Paul Wood**

**I have often thought there was something slightly shamanic about Mikala Dwyer's work – the way she invests an almost animistic intensity into the object. In fact, I hesitate to call them installations, because each work is so self-contained, integrated, and flirtatiously (cheekily so) formalist, that I find myself obliged to call her a sculptor.**

**Nebulous mists and clouds of cellophane might be punctuated with odd ironic-nostalgic jetsam from 1960s Op and Pop art. The contours of biomorphic surrealism and the colours of 1970s interior design echo up and down the corridors of her artistic process.**

**And there wouldn't be many artists of Dwyer's generation who make such judicious use of the readymade and objet trouvé. Dwyer takes the detritus of contemporary life (with all the ennui and disposability that entails) and liberates her scavenged and adopted babies into brave new horizons and adventure playgrounds.**

**“My father named me Autolycus; who / being, as I am, littered under Mercury, was likewise / a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles” (Shakespeare, A Winter's Tale, Act 4, Scene 3). Dwyer's snapped-up unconsidered trifles have included pantyhose, cigarette butts, Band-Aids, a diverse array of fabrics, and domestic furniture. Like Joseph Cornell on the large scale, Dwyer creates independent worlds liberally infused with imagination and emotion. Dwyer's approach becomes increasingly important in our throwaway Ikea age, because she reinvigorates the sensual and sensuous relationships we have with the objects that daily surround us.**

**I suspect Dwyer's art is, in some distant way, related to the idea of the grotto. At the ancient Roman temple at Praeneste, south of Rome, the oldest part of the sanctuary (ancient even by Roman standards) was situated in a grotto in the living rock where a spring had developed into a natural well sacred to the Nymphs. It was all about being taken out of the everyday world and traveling into the womb of the Earth. Dwyer, I think, is trying to initiate us into a mystical experience in the womb of constructed culture.**

The word “grotto” comes from Italian grotta, via the Vulgate grotta, from the Latin crypta – “a crypt”. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Romans unearthed by accident the covered-over chambers of the Emperor Nero’s Domus Aurea on the Palatine Hill, decorated in designs of garlands and animals. Because of the situation in which they were discovered, this form of decoration was given the name grotesque.

By the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, artificial grotti had become enormously fashionable, constructed out of vast numbers of shells, bits of coral and unusually shaped stones, incorporating sculpture and fountains. They were places for pleasure and seclusion rather than mystical experience, much like Dwyer’s work, and they were similarly eclectic in construction, except in fibreglass, wood, mirror, polystyrene, steel, plastic, paper mâché, plaster, glitter, lights, paint, vinyl, fabric, Das modeling clay, and silicone glue.

The mystery, perceived danger, and closeness to the Earth Mother and Underworld of these early underground sites easily led them being given the status of holy sites. The upper Palaeolithic paintings at places Lascaux and the so-called “Moa Hunter” rock-drawings of the South Island New Zealand would seem to suggest mystical connections.

Christianity has sought to make such places safe by developing shrines there. Popular rehabilitations though the second century AD apocryphal cave-setting for the Nativity, and the Marian grotto is a 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon inspired by the visions of the Virgin at Lourdes and Fatima. I half expect to see a little plaster statue of the Madonna poking out of a Dwyer work somewhere (there does, I have to say, something distinctly Counterreformation Catholic about her approach).

Ultimately though, Mikala Dwyer is an artist of ephemeral moment between now and now.