

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.¹ 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.² 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?"³

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",⁴ 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. xxvi–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



MIKALA DWYER
GHOST SCULPTURE 2002
POLYSTYRENE, ACRYLIC MIRROR, DMS,
FABRIC, PLASTER
89 X 70 X 34 CM
FROM THE INSTALLATION MODERN LOVERS &
OTHER SCULPTURES, SARAH COTTIER GALLERY
COURTESY SARAH COTTIER GALLERY, SYDNEY