

| The coalescing art of Mikala Dwyer

Many years ago, Mikala Dwyer had a dream:

Before I really knew anything about Vito Acconci or Mike Kelley I had a dream that I was in the Art Gallery of New South Wales and there were two babies wrestling on the floor. When I saw their faces it was the old faces of Vito Acconci and Mike Kelley on baby bodies. Behind them, the project two exhibition space was an enormous cube of water. From then on I paid more attention to these artists and they have been influential on my thinking. I met Vito Acconci for about a minute when he came to Sydney College of the Arts. I asked him for a job. I didn't get one but recently I got a job with Mike Kelley, doing a video of Jenolan Caves for his Munster project.¹

With its clairvoyance, artistic references, institutional context, wacky imagination, adult/baby hybrids, curious play, enigmatic installation, chutzpah and diligence, this anecdote is a fitting preamble to an overview of Dwyer's practice. Like Kelley, her sculptural installations are crafted from often surprising materials – pantihose, dirty ashtrays and Band Aids appear alongside lame, sequinned fabrics and modelling clay - and although there are figurative or recognisable elements – a shrouded television, plants growing in hanging parcels of heat-sealed plastic – her works are neither naturalistic nor literal. Dwyer's work definitely falls into the category of 'difficult' contemporary art and yet it is likely to bring a smile to the face of any viewer, regardless of their levels of art literacy. Strange and often clumsy-looking, these are communicative, empathetic and sophisticated works – and discussion of them is illuminated by remembering her eccentric dream.

Like Vito Acconci, Dwyer's inquiring, sometimes combative, interest in architecture underpins her practice. Institutional contexts, both physical and conceptual, often became the subject matter of her early works. For instance *Leavened* (1989) consisted of numerous loaves of white bread, crafted into archways between the tops of the S.H. Ervin Gallery's brick pillars.² While the title ironically references the loftiness of such an institution, Dwyer's handiwork reminded visitors to the middle class gallery of a more fundamental matter troubling many who would never enter such gallery doors - survival.³

In the early 1990s Dwyer created a number of installations that argued with their architectural contexts, most notably *Vestibule* (1993), located in the foyer of the Art Gallery of New South Wales for *Perspecta*, a national survey of contemporary Australian art. Some of the imposing bronze busts which usually occupy the grandiose foyer were turned to the wall, one was replaced by a toilet seat (its negative space formally echoing the sculpted heads), the floor was transformed by rubber bathmats, the columns by sequinned fabrics, some hemmed with feathers. As Eve

¹ Mikala Dwyer, email to Anne Loxley, 19 April 2008

² *Leavened*, was Dwyer's installation for *Fresh Art*, S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 1989. Co-curated by Felicity Fenner and the author, the exhibition featured twenty emerging Sydney-based artists.

³ 'leaven' being the raising agent in dough

Sullivan has written, in ‘working within and ‘against architecture’, Dwyer by extension aims to undermine the symbolic edifice of language, the constraints imposed by hierarchical structures.⁴ *Vestibule* was a feisty comic deconstruction of archetypal assumptions of the experience of entering a state gallery, not to mention contemporary art.

Woops 1994 can be seen as marking the advent of the practice we may now think of as quintessentially Dwyer’s; where the form of much of her early work intervened with its architectural contexts, many of her installations since (and including) *Woops* are more experiential or performative. Alternative architectures are still created but within them are countless opportunities for the viewer to experience an ‘identity crisis’. As Dwyer has said

‘If you’re standing in front of one of those sculptures, and if its doing its job, you’ll be getting a bit of an identity crisis with it: you’re not quite sure where you begin and it ends’.⁵

In the joyously discombobulating *Woops*, shiny bright coloured fabrics are the backdrop to arrangements of domestic objects such as vacuum cleaners, televisions, easels, all shrouded in stockings, sequined fabrics and lamé. The company they keep makes these mysterious objects even more enigmatic. At a cluttered dressing table boasting numerous pots of nail polish (viewers were welcome to avail themselves of a fresh paint job), visitors are transported to an untidy bed or dressing room, while the coloured pantihose stretching from floor to rafter suggest gigantic alien forms. But the identity crisis Dwyer is inducing is not just about her objects and the viewer. Her interest in critiquing institutional structures encompasses art history. On the walls in *Woops* we see a series of painted monochromes, executed in nail polish on canvas boards, and a suite of sequined fabric ‘paintings’ – a shimmering inversion of the austere authority of Minimalism.

Dwyer’s interest in a relational sense of self spawned one of her most persistent tropes, the ‘IOU’s which first appeared in Dublin in 1996 in a mail art exhibition at the Debtors’ Prison.⁶ The artist explains the work she made for this exhibition:

‘was two organza ghost forms of paintings one by one meter, one black, one white, with the clay letters IOU on the mantle-piece. Two works in two different rooms, so it was like IOU everything between black and white, between one room and the other, between the clay sculpted letters and the see through ghost form of the painting.’⁷

One of the most elegant manifestations of this concept was *IOU* (1997-98), rendered in Perspex on a flokati rug, while in the 1999 banner designed for the Sydney city

⁴ Eve Sullivan, ‘Mikala Dwyer’ *Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993, p.32. Sullivan’s reference is to Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille*, trans. B. Wing, October/MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1989

⁵ Mikala Dwyer, quoted in ‘Mikala Dwyer in conversation with Susan Rothnie’, *Eyeline*, No 55, Spring 2004, p 32

⁶ *Aerphost: an exhibition of contemporary Australian Art*, Debtors’ Prison, Dublin, 1996. Curators Mark McCaffrey and Anne Mulroney

⁷ Mikala Dwyer, email to Anne Loxley, 19 April 2008

streets the text was blood red against a camouflage ground. Where the Perspex installation glistened with designer furniture appeal, the banner was a strident heckler; the former transaction invoking glamorous lifestyle, the latter, war, death and fashion. The endless permutations of this one social exchange demonstrate again and again the fluid possibilities inherent in life, moment to moment.

In *I care because you do* 2005 (NYRT Gallery, Berlin), the text, as with the IOUs, expresses a fundamental connection between you and I. In both instances you and I are inescapably linked, first by debt, second by care, and no matter how different these links may be, one gets a strong sense that for Dwyer, care is as onerous as debt.

The endless remarks about the playfulness of Dwyer's installations can obscure the fact that as her dream suggests, Dwyer takes play very seriously. One of her abiding influences is Friedrich Frobel (1782-1852), the German educator who invented 'kindergarten' and thus revolutionized the way children learnt. This has affected in the shapes and forms Dwyer works with. 'If you can get down to the core structures of our imagination, why can't we change them?'⁸ Since 2002 Dwyer has been working on a playground design for Casula in Western Sydney. 'It is loosely based on a giant that died and all that remains are some bones, a tooth that is a cubby house which is a little bit based on Frederick Kiesler's Tooth house drawings and some intestinal tunnels.

Dwyer's solo exhibition at Anna Schwartz Gallery in July continues three recent concerns: *The Hanging Garden*, *The Additions and the Substractions* and a performance/wall work. Using idiosyncratic units of plastic pockets holding growing plants, (mostly Chinese lucky trees) Dwyer's Hanging Gardens in Berlin were a twenty-first century revisiting of the ancient Babylonian wonder, but through the inclusion of ashtrays and bottles of vodka and tequila, the work also became a very different type of garden.

(In *The Additions and Substractions*,⁹) In the Additions and Substractions Dwyer has said 'The circle of motley, disparate objects owes its temporary coalescence to the strong formal limitation of the circle. It is in a sense a psychic fortress or theatre of an imaginary self. It expands or shrinks as objects are added or edited. In its next incarnation at Anna Schwartz gallery viewers will be welcomed to sit on sculpted stools along with the objects.'

As with her performance for *The Monoclinic*, crystallography and her colleague Lionel Doolen are key to the Schwartz performance/wall work. The costumes (which will later hang on the wall) (reference a range of crystals through their colours and forms., At the exhibition opening performers don these costumes and perform a gesture devised by Doolen; in *The Monoclinic* it was a specific rolling of the eyes, in *Only One and a Bit Days to Go*, they 'objectified people in a slightly affectionate way'¹⁰. Where *The Monoclinic* was based on the crystal, sulphur (also known as brimstone and celebrated for its antiseptic qualities),¹¹ Through using ideas from the

⁸ Mikala Dwyer, interview with Anne Loxley 9 April 2008

⁹ Mikala Dwyer, interview with Anne Loxley, 9 April 2008

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

experimental science of crystallography and pataphysics (which is about ‘imaginary solutions to problems’), and the all important input of Doolen, Dwyer relies on her ‘recurring hybrid of architecture,,play and superstition.’¹² Dwyer describes her working method as an exercise in ‘survival of the fittest’.¹³ Her installations are often discussed in terms of not being finished - by the artist as well as writers - however I would suggest it is more accurate to perceive this inherent fluidity as a consequence of Dwyer’s insistence on openness:

‘The pieces that leave my studio and go on are things that I haven’t got too bored with yet. The gallery is always an extension of the studio in that the work gets worked on again in that space. I always find the permutations are too endless’.¹⁴

Dwyer’s contributions to the conversations that lead to this article were so peppered with the word ‘coalesce’ that I quizzed her about it. Her response makes a fine conclusion:

‘Yes it is key to my understanding of a model of self, reality, time, space, etc. Momentary bouts of cohesiveness. Coalescence and dissolution are in my experience the way we go, minute to minute, day to day assembling into some order to fall apart again in the next, entropy’.¹⁵

Anne Loxley

Mikala Dwyer on six past key works

1. Woops, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, 1994

This explosive installation began with a revision of a key component of Minimalism. ‘*Woops* was a question of what might be left out of the Monochrome. It began with a Monochrome painting I was doing in nail polish. First I added a title (as the tradition of monochrome painting usually avoids this) the titles came from the nail polish names, great slutty titles like ‘nude whisper’, ‘no, not ever’, ‘warm peach’ and ‘envy’. The paintings were painted with the nail polish brush. I think *Woops* was about trying to make something abstract, pure and formal reveal its underbelly of sex, mess and bad decisions’.

2. Un, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, 1999

The small shelf work, *Un* - as in the English prefix meaning ‘not’, rather than the French indefinite article - is in many ways, a model of one of Dwyer’s most seminal concerns. ‘*Un* was where I started to try and create unconscious architectures. It has influenced the playground design for Casula and informs most of my work nowadays’.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Mikala Dwyer, quoted in ‘Mikala Dwyer in conversation with Susan Rothnie’, *Eyeline*, No 55, Spring 2004, p 30

¹⁴ (Mikala Dwyer, email to Anne Loxley, 19 April 2008

¹⁵ Mikala Dwyer, email to Anne Loxley 19, April 2008

3. *I maybe you, Face Up* exhibition, Hamurger Bahnhof, Berlin 2003

I maybe you was an ambitious project that took Dwyer's unconscious architectures to a monumental scale. 'This was a rather complicated attempt at doubling and inverting an improvised installation. This was partly in response to the doubling of institutions in Berlin, that is visible since the wall came down'.

4. *Swamp Sculpture*, Omi Sculpture Park, Upstate New York (2006)

For this permanent sculpture park, Dwyer created her first floating work. 'There was a swamp at the sculpture park and as I was walking past it with my friend Mike Stevenson, he suggested, possibly as a joke, to put a sculpture in there. I thought it was a nice idea to have the sculpture ungrounded and floating around willy-nilly in a swamp - all volume, but transparent and empty and unfixed to a single position'.

5. *Superstitious Scaffolding* and *The Hanging Garden*, 2007 *Mystic Truths* Auckland City Gallery.

This was an experiment in combining three major works. 'I was interested in seeing what would happen if I started recombining installations. It is both 'hanging garden' and 'superstitious scaffolding' and with the new addition of a tree reader. Jean the tree reader would do clairvoyant readings from the drawings of trees done by viewers. It becomes another sort of unconscious architecture. I realized through combining works that all my work is connected like one big lifelong sprawling messy installation. There is an idiosyncratic logic that binds them. I would like to one day put many more together in this way'.

6. *Monoclinic*, Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand, 2008

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(Despite its ominous associations?), 'Monoclinic' is one of seven systems of classification for crystalline structures within the science of crystallography. 'I use this name with poetic and pataphysical license. There are various elements in *The Monoclinic* that I am continuing at the moment - the Performance and the Additions and Subtractions. The performance is a collaboration with an old friend, Lionel Doolen, with whom I went to art school. For me, the work was a sort of imaginary solution to learning about geology'.