

# **Poor Materials**

## **in Tumultuous Times**

**Lynette McDonald**



An exegesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Visual Arts, School of Humanities and Social Science, Latrobe University, Bendigo.

Submitted 4th February, 2011

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.....  
Lynette McDonald

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## Abstract

Like many Australians whose ancestral origins lie in an earlier working-class, rural life I have inherited a sense of their attitude to life which was based on survival in a harsh country using whatever materials were readily available. In times of austerity, like the Great Depression, resourcefulness and finding creative and practical solutions to needs were essential for survival. The *waste not, want not* ethic of my ancestors is becoming increasingly relevant in our alienated and acquisitive society where a large percentage of the world's population live in dire poverty and environmental disasters are constant events.

The humble hessian bag is an historical Australian icon. For me it symbolises the ingenuity of working class people who recycled it in many creative and practical ways. It is my contention that the hessian bag will produce a rush of memories across every strata of society when presented in my Art installation.

Inspired by the simple structures built from hessian bags and bush poles by pioneers and people in the Great Depression to provide shelter I will evoke an appreciation of a simpler and more sustainable lifestyle and question the basic notions of our consumer society. Many artists have addressed the concept of shelter but I relate to the *igloos* of Mario Merz and the works of John Davis that consider man's relationship with the natural environment.

My practice continues dialogue with Arte Povera, Minimalism, and Post-minimalism and expands on the ideas and works of contemporary artists who re-contextualise poor or mundane materials in temporal and ephemeral installations.

Like the 1960s Arte Povera artists including Jannis Kounellis, Marissa and Mario Merz and Guiseppe Pennone who reacted against the rapid technological and industrial advances following tumultuous times in Italy, I will combine hessian bags and other poor materials with processes that engage space and viewer and a philosophy that links art, life, nature and culture in my installations.

My research made connections between the Arte Povera movement and its continuing influence on contemporary artists in tumultuous times world-wide. Douglas Fogel, Chief Curator and Deputy Director of Exhibitions, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles commented in 2010 on the affects of the economic recession on artists in the USA:

*Many artists are sensing the seismic shift in the art world (as animals can predict an earthquake), moving into areas of investigation that eschewed the high gloss while starting to do more with less, all the while emphasising the ephemeral, the poetic, and the performative.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> p. 9, Filipovic, Elena and 9 others, 2010, *Creamier - Contemporary Art in Culture*, Phaidon

## Abstract

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### **The Hessian Bag, Memory, and Working Class Identity.**

The relevance of my original proposal related to the growth in the number of people researching their genealogy and searching for identity through past generations and recording their own stories for future generations.

Searching for my own identity through family history, I traced thirty-two lines of my family back to their entry into Australia. I found that without exception my ancestors all came from either England or Scotland, with the last immigrants arriving in 1845. Nine ancestors began life in the colony as convicts and others came to try their luck in the goldfields around Maryborough in Victoria and Bathurst in N.S.W. They were all poor, working class people who raised their families in harsh, isolated, rural conditions.

The frustration in my search for identity through genealogy lies in the truth that very little of a personal nature remains to colour the day-to-day life of these people - a few faded photographs, a lock of my grandmother's hair, taken when she died at the age of twenty-eight, the coroner's report of my great, great grandfather who suffered from "melancholia" and hanged himself when his wife was pregnant with her eighth child, and a brooch in the shape of a thistle from Scotland. They didn't write and were too insignificant to be written about. It is only through general historical accounts that I can begin to piece together and imagine the difficult lives they experienced. Despite adversity, harsh living conditions, and tumultuous times like the Great Depression, the memories that are recorded by people living through these testing times often describe a spirit of hope, resilience, community spirit, pride in their resourcefulness, and a joy of life. Country properties were often far from town. Distance and lack of materials and money led to the good old Australian custom of "making do". You often hear elderly people reminiscing and saying, "Well, you just had to make do with what you had."

In times of austerity, like the Great Depression, resourcefulness and finding creative solutions to needs were essential for survival. Country shows demonstrated the make-

do tradition. Tumut Show in N.S.W. had a category "The most useful item made out of the least useful material" and Melbourne Show had a section for "Objects Made from a Sugar Bag" until about twenty years ago.

Even when times were a little easier it was an important moral virtue to show thrift and economy in all things and the "waste not, want not" mentality continued to be passed down to me through my parents and grandparents. This ethic is ingrained in my psyche and is evident in my materials and process-based practice using recycled materials. My shed is full of things that just might be useful one day and I find it difficult to throw things away.

I have chosen to explore the hessian bag which I see as an Australian icon and a material that exemplifies the ingenuity of working class, rural people. It was recycled in many creative and practical ways by resourceful men and women. Mention hessian bag and everyone of my generation or the previous one has a memory or story to relate.

Some memories are created unconsciously in day-to-day living, others are consciously attached to objects that are cherished as symbols of other places, other times and people in our lives. Memory and identity are continually reconstituted and shaped and impinge on each other. As we get older our memory bank increases and memories may seem to be lost until a moment of involuntary recall occurs, triggered by an object, taste, sound, smell, or environment. Walking through museums you can hear a cacophony of exclamations as people make links with their own memories triggered by a domestic item, furnishing, or photograph.

Hessian bags have this affect on me and many others. Just the smell and texture arouse memories of my grandparents' house, with its internal walls made from calcite-coated hessian, the sugar-bag as a door-mat, and the Coolgardie safe. I remember the joy of jumping to the finish line in sack races at school, with the bag tucked up under

my armpits. I start to itch at the thought of the Indian costume made from a hessian bag and embroidered in wool, that my mother made for me to wear to a school fancy dress ball. My father used them to put the bait and burly in when he went fishing and of course, to bring home the fish.

It is my contention that the hessian bag will produce a flood of memory across every strata of society when presented in an Art installation. As Gaston Bachelard stated:

*So, like a forgotten fire, a childhood can always flare up again within us.<sup>1</sup>*



Image 1, Lyn McDonald in hessian "Indian" costume

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/g/gaston\\_bachelard.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/g/gaston_bachelard.html), accessed 20/10/08

## Historical Research

*A safe but sometimes chilly way of recalling the past is to force open a crammed drawer. If you are searching for anything in particular you don't find it, but something falls out at the back that is often more interesting.*<sup>2</sup> J.M.Barrie

I began by researching the history of the hessian bag, its primary use in the agricultural industry and the re-use of these bags in a multitude of ingenious and creative ways, by resourceful men and women in domestic situations, addressing the 'make-do' ethos in our culture. Many stories are told about how every member of the family found a functional use for the hessian bag. Combining historical photos and text, I have produced a 35 page booklet which I include as Annexure 1 to this exegesis. It supplies the background information which has influenced my choice of materials and the direction of my practice.

From this research emerged a clearer direction for my work. Photographs of dwellings made from hessian bags stitched together with bush pole frameworks fascinated me. One image in particular (Image 2) shows an extended family, sheep, and dogs outside a basic shelter, creatively constructed from available materials.



Image 2, circa 1910, Cloncurry, Queensland, family outside tent and hut with hessian walls.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.annabelle.net/topics/past.php>, accessed 20/10/08

It evoked in me a nostalgia for a simpler life-style, more in tune with the natural environment and the elements. At the same time it questioned the basic notions of our consumer society. I look at the structure and wonder what is inside. What feminine touches have been added to this home? What personal items would we find?

Stimulated by this image, I decided that I would use the hessian bag to create sculptural works which embodied the resourcefulness of these pioneers and the concept of shelter.

### **Living Poor**

There have been times in my life when I have lived in poor conditions and have had to be as resourceful and creative as my ancestors to survive.

In the 1970s after completing Ceramics at East Sydney Tech. I left the consumer society of the city to live in Northern N.S.W. for an alternative lifestyle. Struggling with two babies, we converted a primitive banana packing-shed into a home using recycled materials - no electricity, carting water from the creek, and cooking on a wood stove. Building a kiln and continuing in Ceramics became a low priority with gardens, chooks, goats, and children to look after, so my creativity was channelled into weaving, crocheting and crafts that could be easily picked up in spare moments.

In 1979 I became an active environmentalist, joining large groups of protestors in the rainforest at Terania Creek in Northern N.S.W. and on the beach at Middle Head, near Macksville, N.S.W. We created camps where we lived for months during the campaigns to stop the destruction of these environments. Like the early settlers, we built a community from available materials and found improbable solutions to provide for our needs.

Fed up with being poor, I left my husband to his alternative life-style and moved into a house in town to go to University and completed my Bachelor of Education (Primary) in 1984. After teaching at *Daystar Rudolf Steiner School* for a short period I went to teach at Noonkanbah, an isolated Aboriginal Community two hours drive from Fitzroy Crossing in W.A. At this time the people had no housing, living under shelters constructed from whatever materials they could find - sheets of canvas and tin, and old car bodies, sleeping on the ground or wire bed frames. The school was an old shearing and teacher housing was a one room bough shed constructed from tubular steel, with pindan (ant's nest) floor and tin roof. There were only two walls - one made from two layers of wire mesh stuffed with spinifex and the other corrugated iron. My teenage children slept in curtained-off cubicles and did their correspondence lessons with whirly-whirlies spreading dust through the camp and nets over their heads to protect them from flies and mozzies. But life was never dull. We lived closely with the community for a year and experienced life in the harshest and poorest of conditions and also the wealth of culture and resourcefulness of these people.



## Resourceful and Creative Teaching

The resourceful recycling of materials was particularly relevant during my Primary School teaching career from 1984-2005. Materials for Art were limited to cheap acrylic paints, some crayons and pastels, and the left-overs from the era when Craft processes like basket weaving, woodwork and sewing were taught in schools. Integrating Art activities across the curriculum, using a wide variety of recycled man-made and natural materials, I instilled a joy in creative play and fostered the use of the imagination and problem-solving in the children. For example, after reading the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* I set the children a challenge to make a chair using only a pile of newspapers and masking tape. Hints had to be given about the rolling technique but children worked in pairs to solve the problems they encountered and produced reasonable facsimiles of Little Bear's chair that had been broken by Goldilocks.



Images 5 & 6, *Chairs*, K/1/2 Class, Palinyewah Primary School, 2003



Images 3 & 4, K/1/2 Class, Palinyewah Primary School, Mapping Activities, 2003

Images 3 & 4 show mapping activities, where children first drew maps in co-operative groups and then constructed houses from recycled materials to build a "town" with the whole class.

Needless to say I learnt as much from the children as they learnt from me and I gained intrinsic rewards from the shared creative process.

I saw Art activities for children using recycled materials and the imagination as creating a balance to the emphasis on technology and consumerism in this contemporary world, just as I do in my own practice. Materials and imagination continue to be my starting point. Collecting and recycling, my first question is, *What can I create with these materials?* The form and final concept develop as I work with the materials.

## Research Methodology and Overview

My approach to research is known as *practice-led research*. Practice and research are intricately interwoven in a continuous process of action and reflection. Through researching other artists and their practices and related fields such as Art theory, philosophy, literature, sociology and history I discover new methods, processes, techniques, materials and approaches that influence the direction of my works. As Gray and Malins state:

*Practice through action and reflection provides a means of ...understanding a range of different practices - using one's own practice to compare/contrast those of other practitioners.<sup>3</sup>*

The appeal of *practice-led research* is that the artist may place a specific and prolonged emphasis on a particular topic, or choose to gain a brief but broad range of knowledge across many different fields.

Rather than initially addressing a specific question, my emphasis was on the research process and a range of concerns and related interests that derived from my practice.

Hessian is a material that was utilised by artists in the 1960s and 1970s but has rarely been seen in contemporary works in the last decade so this is where my research began. While working on the surfaces of the hessian I investigated the painterly works of Antonio Tapies and Alberto Burri who used hessian extensively, emphasising the qualities and the imperfections of the material.

In considering scale in my sculptural forms, I turned to the monumental works of Mona Hessing, Ewa Pachucka and Magdalena Abakanowicz who explored the use of hessian using craft techniques that challenged the existing hierarchies of Art in the 60s and 70s. I concluded that it was the scale of their works that led to their acceptance as Artists.

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<sup>3</sup> Gray & Malins, 2004

Deciding to limit my palette to a monotonal range of white and earth colours, I researched the use of monotone from Kazimir Malevich, through to contemporary installation artists. I came to understand various artist's motivations and how they could be put to use in my own practice.

When deconstructing the hessian bags I looked at this process in context with Louise Bourgeois' textile works and the installations Susan Hiller and their use of processes such as stitching and weaving to reconstruct works.

In my Honours practice, 2008, I explored the Post-minimalist sculptural works of Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, and other contemporary artists who used a process-approach to materials - cutting, rolling, stacking, and hanging, allowing the materials to take shape as they fell in random arrangement. The forms in my latest works are less randomly conceived and I explored the path between Minimalism and Post-Minimalist sculpture.

Because I have used mundane and recycled materials in my practice, people repeatedly made reference to Arte Povera in relation to my work. Initially, I discovered that there were indeed similarities between the work of Marisa Merz and my 2008, *Shadow* installation (Image 29).

Arte Povera became the focus of my research. In my uninformed state I saw Arte Povera in terms of materials and processes. Robert Lumley, Elizabeth Magnini and other writers believe that this is a common misinterpretation and question definitions of Arte Povera that focus solely on the use of poor materials and process. Magnini emphasises the more political aspects, whereas Judith Blackall believes there is a more mystical and poetic interpretation.

As my research progressed I discovered that my practice has much in common with the wider ethos and philosophy behind Arte Povera and artists such as Jannis Kounellis, Mario and Marisa Merz, and Carli Accardi.

Marisa Merz addresses time and memory in her work with a feminine perspective, craft processes and a philosophy that art and life are interconnected.

Mario Merz creates igloos from manufactured and natural materials which are a metaphor for both harmony and disharmony with nature. They blur the line between interior and exterior, unlike modern homes that enclose us and alienate us from nature.

Carla Accardi's *Tents* alludes to the idea of elementary habitations, protected places that are still subject to interaction with the world through their transparency.

Jannis Kounellis refers to materials as having "memory" and "future"<sup>4</sup> and he combines the ephemeral with more permanent materials, emphasising the contrast. His installations are often like stage sets with a narrative.

There has been a resurgence of interest in Arte Povera world-wide and as Giovanni Lista states: *It can be considered the last great avant-garde movement of the twentieth century and that it continues to be a live trend in contemporary art.*<sup>5</sup>

Mangini states that the Arte Povera field is still plagued by the idea that *its anti-technological bent is a misinterpretation of American Minimalism.*<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, others see Arte Povera as an extension of the international Post-Minimalist movement with its centre in the USA, including artists such as Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse and Robert Morris.<sup>7</sup> Originally Celant included these Post-Minimalist artists under the Arte Povera umbrella but later declared that only Italian artists should be included.

I discuss these ideas in the context of the practice of contemporary Australian artists Kathy Temin, Lauren Berkowitz and Mikala Dwyer who continue a dialogue between

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<sup>4</sup> Mourné, 2007, p.71

<sup>5</sup> Lista, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Magnini, 2007

Arte Povera and Minimalism using poor materials, a process approach with a feminine perspective, and a personal agenda.

Carolyn Christov-Barkargiev and Lista made brief reference to the relevance of Arte Povera in times of change and dissonance in other countries. My research expands on this concept and I address the relevance of *Poor Materials in Tumultuous Times* with examples of artists from countries such as Russia, Brazil, Indonesia, Cambodia, Korea, and The Middle East. I describe how artists have produced works that reflect the philosophy of Arte Povera but are culturally specific and often political.

I conclude that in this age of consumerism and rapid technological developments we continue to live in tumultuous times with economic melt-down, environmental disasters, wars, and terrorism. The anti-technological, anti-consumer, and egalitarian philosophies expounded by Celant and the Arte Povera group, along with the belief that art, nature, and culture should be interconnected continue to be relevant to my practice and that of other contemporary artists.

### **Change of Title**

As my research progressed I decided to change the title of my project to *Poor Materials in Tumultuous Times*. The original proposal was titled *An Exploration of The Hessian Bag, Memory, and Working Class Identity*. The concepts included in the original title are all still relevant but the major focus of my research has broadened from being primarily about my personal search for identity through my working class ancestors to the context of my materials-based practice within the historical Art movements of the 1960s and 70s, and contemporary artists who use mundane, ephemeral, or poor materials in their practice and the significance of this methodology in tumultuous times.

## **The influence of Arte Povera on Contemporary Ephemeral and Temporal Installation Art Practices.**

*Contemporary artists continue to operate on ground that was cleared by Arte Povera. To revisit Arte Povera at its moment of genesis is thus to explore the history of the present and the beginning of now.<sup>8</sup>*

The term Arte Povera was coined in 1967 by Genoese critic Germano Celant in an essay for the exhibition *Arte Provera-Im spazio*. The term is difficult to define as Celant's manifesto was a response to ongoing discussion between artists and critics. Celant acknowledged that *no sooner has this text been written than it will be full of holes.*<sup>9</sup> It was by no means an unequivocal manifesto or movement in the strong sense of the word. It was meant to encourage ongoing discussion between a loose group of artists working on a series of hypotheses to be investigated. Although the artists' works centered around the ideas they shared, their works were diverse and individual expressions of the ethos.

The group were by no means isolated from the rest of the world or immune to other influences such as Minimalism in the USA and the Constructionists in Russia. It was a time of remarkable convergence between the work of artists in America and Europe. Celant saw Arte Povera as challenging the dominance of the American Pop and Minimalist artists. Pop Art was seen by Arte Povera as being too pristine and product-based with the use of industrial materials and technological practice putting a barrier between the artist and their work instead of creating unity between life and art.

In 1969 Celant made associations between Arte Povera and international artists such as Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, and Robert Morris, Conceptualist Joseph Kosuth, 'Earth' artist Robert Smithson, and Minimalists, including Carl Andre and Donald Judd. Superficially the use of humble materials unites these artists, but the uniqueness of the Italian movement lies in its humanism, coupled with the purposeful contrasting of materials and surfaces which are loaded with meaning. The works of Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and the American

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<sup>8</sup> *Zero to Infinity: Art Povera 1962-1972*, catalogue, Tate Modern, 2001 accessed on 5/10/2009 <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/artepovera/default.htm>

<sup>9</sup> p.9, Lumley

Minimalists was based on reductive and geometric exploration. As Lista states:

*Poverist art does not strive towards the essentiality of an abstract purity, but instead to the return to the mainsprings of the aesthetic imagination.*<sup>10</sup>

Arte Povera created dialogue between artists world-wide and that dialogue and interest in the movement continues today. As Michelangelo Pistoletto, one of the original Arte Povera artists, explains:

*Arte Povera was closely connected with Italy, but it was local and international at the same time because we saw that a large part of the world existed in poverty, just as it does today.*<sup>11</sup>

The collective spirit of sharing of ideas and works that bonded the Arte Povera artists encouraged the growth of new ideas. An artist working in isolation tends to internalise and focus on more primal issues, rather than address global concerns in society and the world of Art. There has been a resurgence in the formation of collective groups of artists in the last decade who continue dialogue with Arte Povera, notably *The Young British Artists* who came together around 1992. The group included Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread, and Tracey Emin who are known for their 'shock tactics' and throwaway materials. Critic and writer, Julian Stallbrass states that they have a particular relationship to Arte Povera:

*There is a similar impulse to get back to reality, just to present things, and not be caught up so much in representation. But most of those artists have very little faith in the power of art to achieve any kind of transformation.*<sup>12</sup>

Pistoletto was not convinced about this group:

*They accept the idea that transformation is not something for art, it lies elsewhere. Industry, the economy, politics - they transform humanity yet art has no power of transformation, except over aesthetics. I worry that art is in a very, very limited position*<sup>13</sup>

Recently in Australia however, Ash Keating, Dylan Martorell, Chaco Kato, and Tony Adams demonstrated a more political agenda, believing that Art can bring about change, addressing

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<sup>10</sup> Lista, 2006, p.35

<sup>11</sup> Stallbrass, Julian, Reflections on Art, Poverty and Time: An Interview with Michelangelo Pistoletti, accessed on [http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/blog/art\\_news/](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/blog/art_news/) 2/10/2010

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*



environmental issues with disregard for the commercial art market. Working individually for years using the detritus of society they joined forces as the *Slow Art Collective* and created an industrial garden of waste to question the sheer scale of waste production in society. The 2009 installation, *Transfer Station 2* (Image 7) had a haunting, aesthetic appeal and in the end it was returned to the transfer station furnaces. Only the recorded images survive but the impact on the audience and the message conveyed will hopefully contribute towards awareness of the burgeoning problem of waste in our society.

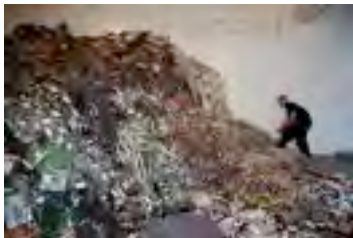


Image 7, Slow Art Collective, *Transfer Station 2*, 2009

The use of ephemeral objects and materials has an enormous power to evoke memory and emotion in the audience through their personal association with the materials.

Christov-Berkargiev makes the point that our lives are punctuated by objects, feelings, and ideas that are endlessly retrieved and re-used. She refers to the philosopher Vilem Flusser who compares commercial waste recycling and psychoanalysis. Both activities aim to:

*regenerate and to rebuild by sifting through and reinstating discarded and forgotten material.*<sup>14</sup>

In the 2009 exhibition *Clandestine* in Mildura by Neil Fetting in collaboration with his son Alex Fetting, displayed the remains of household items salvaged from the Fetting family home destroyed by Australia's worst bushfires just months before. Neil Fetting states:

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<sup>14</sup> Christov-Bakargiev quotes Flusser, Vilem, *The Shape of Things: a Philosophy of Design*, 1999, Pawley Reaktion, London

*It was a very powerful experience sitting through the ash, and with it came all of the human emotions - elation, at finding some remnants, to despair, at the destruction... objects can symbolise things - they're not just inanimate objects, they can communicate things to us.<sup>15</sup>*

The objects and the smell of the ash brought the reality of the trauma of the fires and the emotions felt by the victims to the audience, along with personal memories and associations of similar items from their own past.



Image 8, Neil and Alex Fetting, *Clandestine*, 2009

On the surface Arte Povera artists are known for their use of mundane found materials, following in the footsteps of Kurt Schwitters and Marcel Duchamp. The artists linked nature and culture through the juxtaposition of mundane manufactured materials such as neon tubes, glass, and cloth, combining and contrasting them with organic, natural materials and live animals, or elements such as earth, fire, water and alchemy.

While the most significant writers addressing Arte Povera in the last decade - Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Robert Lumley, Giovanni Lista, Robert Flood, Frances Morris and Karen Pinkus<sup>16</sup> described Arte Povera in a broader social context, Mangini believes there is still a general impression that the primary focus has been on materials and process.

Lumley agrees and states;

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<sup>15</sup> *Sunraysia Daily*, 23/7/2009.

<sup>16</sup> in the catalogue of the 2001 exhibition *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, co-organised by the Walker Art Centre and Tate Modern

*Those who interpret Arte Povera as a set of craft-based practices with a strongly romantic ethos overlook the complexity of the art.”<sup>17</sup>*

In 2007, forty years after Celant's manifesto appeared, Mangini questioned definitions and contemporary interpretations of Arte Povera that refer solely to 'poor materials', 'process' and 'aesthetics' and she emphasised the non-conformist side of Arte Povera. She asks:

*Have mistranslations of the term Arte Povera, and misreadings of the works that the slippery term purport to describe, obscured our view?<sup>18</sup>*

1968 was a turbulent year in Italy with the student and labor movements' largest demonstrations in Turin and Milan. Celant reflected the times, using militant language to urge artists to take to the 'battlefield' in what could be interpreted as 'artistic guerrilla warfare' with direct political action aimed at breaking down the stratifications of class. He urged them to *escape the bounds of a social system that rewards conformity and limits experience* and to reject the market's pressure to conform by rejecting the very language of art and promote an art that was *infinitely variable and free of formal or material conventions*.<sup>19</sup>

Celant conceived Arte Povera broadly as an art that rejected consumer society and modern industrial and technological culture, seeking to impoverish the language of Art. Literally translated it means 'poor art', but as stated, this does not refer solely to a poorness of materials. Lista points out that the Italian language gives a positive meaning to the adjective 'poor' - *placing it in the spheres of spirituality, philosophy, and aesthetics*.<sup>20</sup><sup>13</sup>

Christov-Bakargiev states that even today it is difficult to define Art Povera and that:

*Its richness lies in the pluralistic manifestations...At once conceptual and sensual, literal and metaphoric, poetic and down-to-earth, it is close both to the natural processes of the present and at the same time aware of the past through memory<sup>21</sup>.*

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<sup>17</sup> p.20, Lumley, 2004

<sup>18</sup> Magnini, Elizabeth, 2007

<sup>19</sup> ibid

<sup>20</sup> p.17, Lista, 2004

<sup>21</sup> Christov-Bakargiev

In 1970 when putting up an exhibition at the Kuntmuseum in Lucerne, the group rejected the name Arte Povera because of the inference that material is the only means towards their message. Ammann, the curator proposed the title, *Processi pensiero visualizzati* (*Visualised Thought Process*). He put forward the following definition:

*Arte Povera designates a kind of art which in contrast to the technological world around it, seeks to achieve a poetic statement with the simplest of means. The return to simple materials reveals laws and processes deriving from the power of the imagination, and is an examination of the artists' own conduct in an industrialised society.*<sup>22</sup>

There has been a definite resurgence of interest in Arte Povera in the last decade with retrospective exhibitions being held worldwide and original Arte Povera artists such as Kounellis, Penone, and Pistoletto continuing to exhibit new works in Biennales and prestigious galleries. Many artists, critics, and curators are now acknowledging the significance and influence of the movement after decades of being largely ignored.

Tate Modern in London held an exhibition in 2001, *Zero to Infinity: ArtePovera 1962-1972* which then travelled to Minneapolis and Los Angeles before a final show in Washington.

In 2008, The Moderna Museet in Stockholm presented *Time & Place: Milano-Torino 1958-1968*, a three-part exhibition which explored the preceding generation's artistic ambitions and those of the later Arte Povera group including Michelangelo Pistoletto, Alighiero Boetti, Mario Merz, Giuseppe Penone, Giulio Paolini and others.

In 2002, *ARTE POVERA: Art from Italy (1967 – 2002)*, a major exhibition documenting the evolution of Arte Povera was staged at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. (MCA) This exhibition presented work by eleven artists which included a number of significant early works from the artists as well as more recent works. Artists included Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Giulio Paolini, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio.

Judith Blackall, Head of Artistic Programmes at MCA, who curated and chose works for this

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<sup>22</sup> Christov-Barkargiev, 1999, p.226

exhibition agrees that Arte Povera has been an important influence on contemporary artists but stated that the message was not a political one and that there is a *broader, more mystical interpretation*. She also makes the point that these artists were not immune to world trends.<sup>23</sup> Blackall has worked at the Prato Museum of Contemporary Art, Tuscany, Italy which has given her firsthand insight into the ongoing movement, its art and theory through personal contact and direct knowledge of the artists and Germano Celant.

In 2011, Germano Celant will curate exhibitions simultaneously in several important museums and cultural institutions in the Italian cities of Bologna, Milan, Naples, Rome and Turin dedicated to Arte Povera.

These and a multitude of other exhibitions have brought enormous exposure and awareness of the movement and have resulted in links being made with Arte Povera and the works of contemporary artists using *poor* or *ephemeral* materials and installation as method. It seems that artists and critics need to place works in historical context and Arte Povera has become a convenient tag.

Giovanni Lista states that:

*It can be considered the last great avant-garde movement of the twentieth century and that it continues to be a live trend in contemporary art.*<sup>24</sup>

He continues:

*The acceptance of contradiction and complexity, tied to a sense of the importance of openness, fluidity, and subjectivity, positions the practice of Art Povera beyond Modernism, and sustains our continuing fascination with it.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Blackall presented a paper titled *Politics and Poetics in the Italian Arte Povera* at the (to) give time to time symposium in Mildura, Sept. 2010

<sup>24</sup> Giovanni Lista

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

## Poor Materials in Tumultuous Times

Writers such as Lista and Christov-Bakargiev have made references to the relevance of Arte Povera in times of change and dissonance in other countries, predominantly in the USA in the late 1960s during the era of protest against the Vietnam War, Black Power, the Civil Rights Movement, Feminism and the rejection of materialism by an alternative society in the 1970s.

Artists in countries such as Russia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Brazil, and the Middle East, emerging from war and oppressive regimes have produced installation works using mundane materials. Closely aligned with the philosophies of Arte Povera but reflecting their own unique culture they used their Art to signify hope and make political statements.

Parallel to Arte Povera in the 60s and 70s, avant garde artists, Hélio Oiticica and his partner Lygia Clarke founded the Neo-Concretist movement in Brazil, producing significant ephemeral works, particularly Oiticica's *Sensorial Spaces*. Like the Arte Povera artists, they believed that an artwork should engage with space and the viewer and they expanded on this concept, exploring the notions of time and malleability which were later taken up by other Arte Povera artists.

Brazil too was suffering under a brutal military dictatorship and artists were forced into exile. Clarke spent these years in Paris teaching at the Sorbonne where she developed her more famous interactive works with her students, exploring the role of sensory perception and the psychic interaction between the participants and her artwork. For Clark, artwork would have no representative meaning outside of its manipulation by the participants who would take the art objects and fashion them in any way that they pleased. At this point, the line between the participant and art work would become blurred.

In his work *Bóides and Parangolés*, 1965, (Image 9) Oiticica evoked urban life in a favela, with sand on the floor, a flower-patterned vinyl curtain, macaws and a television. He challenged bourgeois taste and focused on the idea of individual freedom from oppression -

whether those demands came from gallery owners or the national government. He advocated the radical notion of 'hanging out'. Bishop states that:

*He developed the term "supra-sensorial", which he hoped could "release the individual from his oppressive conditioning" by the state. Inviting viewers to walk barefoot on sand and straw, or to listen to Jimi Hendrix records while relaxing in a hammock.<sup>26</sup>*

Oiticica's notion of 'hanging out' has been expanded in the many manifestations of performance art - where the viewer is obliged to spend an extended period of time (whether relaxed or otherwise) in the presence of the artist.

Now that Brazil is developing at breakneck speed, contemporary Brazilian artists continue to expand on Oiticica ideas. In 2009 Brazilian brothers Gabriel and Tiago Primo literally hung out on the wall of a building, sleeping, eating and working 33 feet in the air for twelve hours a day for three months. (Image 10)



Image 9, Hélio Oiticica, c.1965, with *Bólides and Parangolés* in his studio in Rio de Janeiro



Image 10, Gabriel Primo and Tiago Primo, 2009

In 2008, *Russian Povera*, a Sergey Gordeev Project opened in Ordzhonikidze with works of 36 world-renowned contemporary Russian artists in dialogue with Italian Arte Povera using many similar formal elements and simple materials such as cardboard, old wood planks, rubber, iron, coal, ceramic tile, plastic, and even soap. Sergey Gordeev says that

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<sup>26</sup> Bishop, 2005

this exhibition reveals and demonstrates all of the qualities of contemporary Russian art:

*...an art that is authentic, deep, an art that goes away from surface beauty towards a real miracle.<sup>27</sup>*

Curator of this exhibition, Marat Guelman, states:

*"Poor" art has an important subtext - its naturalness. It is much closer to nature than art that is rich, glossy, and built on technologies. The very material of "poor" art returns us to naturalness, breaks down the border between natural and artificial. This art grows out of nature itself.<sup>28</sup>*

He explains that Russian Povera art reacts to the situation in post-totalitarian Russia just as Arte Povera in Italy reacted to the cultural situation in post-war, post-fascist Italy by replacing the lavishly pompous aesthetic of the Mussolini era with Art that described the everyday life of the masses in a war-ravaged country.



Image 11, Nikolay Polissky. *Likhoborsky Gate*, 2005, Environmental installation on the Likhoborka River

Russian artist, Nikolay Polissky discovered art as a communal activity and fun collective enterprise. He lives in the village of Nikola-Lenivets, two hundred kilometers from Moscow and along with the residents of the village, makes snowmen, builds palaces out of firewood, pyramids out of hay, and towers out of vines. The inhabitants of a forsaken village found something to do and started making money. Polissky states:

*Our country lacks common sense, but it is very big, and I feel that things for my people should be big. In order to do everything on a large scale, one needs large amounts of material. My peasants cannot buy expensive wood boards - therefore we use a crooked stick. snow, hay, firewood, vines, with which all of our fields are overgrown.*

<sup>27</sup> <http://bednoe.ru/eng/> accessed 12/4/2010

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*



*Or dead elms - a wonderful material. When we find a lot of material, we walk around happy. A feast of thoughts begins in my head right away as to what can be done with this material.<sup>29</sup>*

The Arte Povera movement originally addressed the big questions of what it means to be making art, the relationship with commercialism, and the place artwork has within the gallery walls. These issues are still relevant today, even if the original protagonists appear to have joined the art establishment. These Russian peasants are making art with available materials for the pleasure of creative expression and in the process giving meaning to their life and hope for the future.

Arte Povera aligned with the philosophies of John Dewey who believed that the artist while creating begins to experience the meaning of life and nature. Dewey describes this as:

*the sensory, the sensational, the sensitive, the sensible, the sentimental, and the sensuous.<sup>30</sup>*

The acceptance of the use of 'poor materials' brings a more egalitarian perspective to Art. Artists can express their creativity and ideas no matter how impoverished they may be and this form of Art gives them a platform to publicly espouse their social and political commentary, unencumbered by the Art market and gallery system. In developing countries coming out of tumultuous times and with freedom of speech only just beginning to emerge, many artists have taken an even more politically-active role than the original Arte Povera artists.

Jason Jones, in his thesis, *Could Installation Art be the New Medium for Southeast Asia?* explores the rise of installation art as a medium of artistic expression in the developing countries of Southeast Asia as a tool for social, cultural and political commentary, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand. Like the Arte Povera movement, he sees installation art using *valueless* materials as breaking down the *class status* and exclusivity of art, blurring the lines

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ibid

<sup>30</sup> Christov Barkargiev, p.26

between art and society, and focusing on the interpretive, rather than the monetary value of the exhibition.<sup>31</sup>

In Indonesia, in 1987, the *New Arts Movement* was formed by a group of eminent contemporary artists, many of whom fought in the war for independence. Jones says that:

*They used their art as an outlet for the emotions that accompany such an experience, frequently focusing on the suffering of the people around them.*<sup>32</sup>

Jones gives an example of an Indonesian artist, Moelyono, who adapts an extremely controversial event to installation art, expressing the outrage of the Indonesian people toward the powers-that-be in regard to the lack of labor rights in the newly industrializing country. It addressed an outspoken factory worker, Marsinah, who represented a group of workers protesting dismal working conditions and low pay in an East Java factory. This action led to her abduction, rape, and murder by the local authorities. Moelyono's installation addressed the human implications of this atrocity with human forms made of straw and hanging latex gloves set against a black and white checkerboard background embellished with the Javanese word "inggih", or yes.



Image 12, Moelyono, *Pameran untuk Marsinah*



Image 13, *Weaving with flowers and banana leaves*, Ubud, 2006

<sup>31</sup> Jones, Jason, Could Installation Art be the New Medium for Southeast Asia? accessed 9/9/2010 on <http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/explore/jones.html>

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

Contemporary installation art manifests in different forms in different countries, reflecting the culture of that country. Having visited Indonesia many times over the last thirty years I can see this link in Moelyono's work. Checkerboard fabric drapes traditional statues in Bali and woven plant matter is used creatively in dwellings, and rituals. (Image 13)

In Cambodia, artists Leang Seckon and Pich Sopheap share a concern about the speed of development. Both have been made homeless because the lake around which they lived has been drained for development. Leang's current work focuses on the loss of the lake but he has addressed other environmental issues. In 2006 he established the grassroots indigenous environmental art project, *Rubbish Project* where they created a *naga snake* 225 metres long from recycled plastic, mostly discarded bags dumped in the Siem Reap. In 2009 he reproduced a 90 metre version of this work which was donned by an army of volunteers and paraded through the streets for the *4th Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale* in Japan.



Image 14, Leang Seckon, 2009, *Maka*

Pich Sopheap, however, is a sophisticated, contemporary artist whose family left Cambodia during the tumultuous Pol Pot era in 1979. He returned to Cambodia to live in 2003 after twenty years of living in France and the USA. He explores his Cambodian identity using indigenous material like bamboo and rattan and wire to weave his pieces. He addresses

childhood memories speaking directly to those who have experienced loss and trauma but with a degree of abstraction that allows layers of interpretation. He states:

*These materials have concealed strength, not unlike Cambodia. One can see through my works and yet they are almost indestructible.*<sup>33</sup>

In discussing his 2009 show *The Pulse Within* at the Tyler Gallery in New York Pich says:

*They saw my art as transcending all the usual negative associations, the poverty and all the baggage of Cambodia.*<sup>34</sup>



Image 15, Pich Sopheap, 2009, *The Pulse Within*

Here we see the two of the primary focuses of Arte Povera: One uses the detritus of industrial process as a warning to their fellow citizens while the other uses natural materials to direct people's attention back to traditional values.

In other sophisticated contemporary works, Korean-born artist Do-Ho Suh uses ephemeral materials to link the present, past, and future. Although he now lives in the USA he retains strong connections to his Korean heritage. He constructs site-specific installations that question the boundaries of identity. Suh's works range from a room with the floor covered in polished dog-tags that combine into an erect metal jacket (Image 16) to a transportable, fabric house. (Image 17)

He has an interesting attitude to war, having served in the military in Korea. Suh doesn't

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<sup>33</sup> Turnbull, 2010

<sup>34</sup> ibid

represent war as an ugly event like many artists, seeing it *to be a learning tool that people should experience*.<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that he has not experienced active combat.

His works are precisely constructed and aesthetically beautiful. Having gained recognition he is able to employ teams of craftspeople to construct his works. Suh's re-creation of his family residence, *Seoul Home*, is sewn in diaphanous, green silk organza that drapes on the floor in one installation and floats like a ghost in the air in another. Both works have an element of incongruity between the materials and the forms.



Image 16, Do-Ho Suh - *Some/one*, 1998



Image 17, *Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home*, 1999

Lebanese born artist, Mona Hatoum, in her 2008 work *Hanging Garden*, uses 700 jute sacks filled with sand to replicate a protection barrier against war. Plants grow from the sacks to signify hope. (Image 18) She has been linked to Arte Povera and her piece shows distinct similarities to the 2005, *Untitled* work of Jannis Kounellis (Image 19) where he used rolled bags with plants growing from them. Again we see the combination of plant matter and industrial materials.

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<sup>35</sup>[www:http// 2foundations.wetpaint.com/ page/Do-Ho+Suh](http://2foundations.wetpaint.com/page/Do-Ho+Suh), accessed 3/4/10

Image 18, Mona Hartoum, *Hanging Garden*, 2008Image 19, Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 2005

The use of mundane materials in tumultuous times is summed up by another Lebanese artist, Zena el-Khalil:

*I take objects of violence and aggression and über-masculinity and I kind of take them in and spit them out into my world, which is filled with love and beauty and peace. Death is a few steps away. And so I think that you develop a kind of humor or irony when you live in a situation like this, and it helps you get through life.<sup>36</sup>*

Aesthetically, her works have a glitzy Pop Art sensibility. She uses the black-and-white photo of a militia-man and feminises it with pink artificial flowers, pearl necklaces and rubber dolls. (Image 20) but under the superficial glitziness of the works Khalil's intelligence and compassion are evident.

Also, another Lebanese artist, Hassan Sharif, demonstrates his optimism and hope for a peaceful future using brightly coloured sandals in his work *Plastic Sandals* (Image 21)



Image 20, Zena el-Khalil, 2008

Image 21, Hassan Sharif, *Plastic Sandals*, 2008

<sup>36</sup> Sherwood, Seth, *Things Are Happening in Hamra*, *New York Times*, October 1, 2010 accessed on [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/02/arts/02iht-scbeirut.html?\\_r=1&ref=arts](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/02/arts/02iht-scbeirut.html?_r=1&ref=arts)

Just as Arte Povera arose out of tumultuous times in Italy, artists in other countries emerging from tumultuous times since the 1960s have produced art and continue to produce art in the spirit of Arte Povera - rejecting traditional Art forms and by-passing the consumer Art market to produce Art installations using a great diversity of mundane and ephemeral materials. These projects range from collective grass-roots works to artists who have left their country of origin and established themselves in the world-wide art market.

Overall they echo the Arte Povera message that Art and life and nature and culture are interconnected. They signify optimism, hope, and beauty, while expressing their fears, political messages, traumas, and individual and collective cultural identity.

Reusing materials that come from a public world, the artist connects the universal and the individual, giving new meanings to the materials, which in turn are reinterpreted by the audience who bring their own life experience to the viewing.

These words from philosopher, John Dewey sum up the Arte Povera ethos and the practice of a multitude of contemporary artists:

*The material of art should be drawn from all sources, and art should be accessible to all.*<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Leddy, Tom,

## Arte Povera, Post-Minimalism, and Contemporary Ephemeral Artists in Australia

The use of mundane or ephemeral materials in the development of sculpture and installation art in Australia from the 1970s paralleled world trends, using distinctly Australian materials and relating to the Australian identity, culture, and environment.

I have recently discovered the importance of the *Mildura Sculpture Triennials* (1961-1988) through the Australian Experimental Arts Foundations project *Give Time to Time* (Mildura, September, 2010.) *The Triennials* showcased the development of various forms of sculptural works, including Conceptual, Environmental, Performance, and Earth Art with artists like John Davis, Ken Unsworth, Bonita Ely, Jill Orr, Domenico De Clario, Joan and Roy Grounds, and many others.

I was interested to hear presentations from speakers addressing the use of non-traditional ephemeral materials. Judith Blackall reiterated the influence of Arte Povera on sculptural practices of the 70's in Australia. She expressed the opinion that Arte Povera had no political message, but a broader, more mystical interpretation. Her Museum of Contemporary Art colleague, curator, Glen Barkley, made the connections with Arte Povera clear in terms of contemporary artists who produce works that resonate with the concerns, processes, materiality and forms of the 70s and early 80s.

It is the group of Australian contemporary female artists who use craft processes and a combination of monotone and recontextualising found materials who relate to my own practice. They explore connections between Arte Povera and the use of 'poor materials', Minimalism, and post-Minimalism in sculptural installations.

Mangini states that the Arte Povera field is still plagued by the idea that *it's anti-technological bent is a misinterpretation of American Minimalism* but others see Arte Povera as an extension of the international movement of the era with its centre in the USA, including post-Minimalist artists such as Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse and Robert Morris.



The 1998 exhibition *The Infinite Space: Women, Minimalism and the Sculptural Object* at the Ian Potter Museum, Melbourne included artists Lauren Berkowitz, Mikala Dwyer, Rosalie Gascoigne, Gail Hastings, Janet Laurence, Susan Norrie, Rossalyn Piggot, and Kathy Temin, who continued this dialogue, repoliticising the discrete Minimalist object.

As Loughnan and Hughes state:

*By reasserting the female figure in the presence of what was once largely positioned as a masculine reduction of form...engaging with a dialectic of minimalism and its subsequent conceptual framing, whilst incorporating a number of contemporary feminist concerns.<sup>38</sup>*

In 2010, Lauren Berkowitz, Sriwan Spong, Elizabeth Newman and Alex Martinis Roe followed up this exhibition with *Discreet Objects* at *Utopian Slumps* in Melbourne.

Berkowitz, Temin and Dwyer are of particular interest to me, each making historical Art references to Minimalism and Arte Povera in their practice in different ways: Questioning the impersonal qualities that have traditionally been associated with Minimalist materials and subverting or distorting the phenomenological body of Minimalism. This is described by Lougham and Hughes:

*... inflections of psychoanalysis and seriality, cultural history and collective memory seep through to destabilise the minimalist body.<sup>39</sup>*

Lauren Berkowitz' sculptural methodologies involve collecting, arranging and repetition of various natural and recycled objects to create sensuous hanging and floor-base installations. In the installation in Image 22 she uses off-cuts from the manufacture of cricket balls in one work and in the other she uses telephone directories. In the past she has used a wide range of materials including plants and plastic shopping bags (Image 23) to address issues of humanism, contemporary feminism, and the environment. Working within the stylistic

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<sup>38</sup> Melissa Lougham and Helen Hughes in catalogue for *Discreet Objects*, at Utopian SLumps, Melbourne, 2010, accessed 2/10/10 on <http://www.utopianslumps.com/>

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

idiom of post-minimalism, her process-based approach reflects both order and chaos.



Image 22, Lauren Berkowitz, 2010, Installation view, *In The Balance: Art For A Changing World*

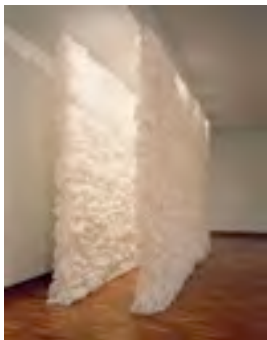


Image 23, Lauren Berkowitz, 1994, *Bags*

Kathy Temin's monumental sculptural installations in soft, fake fur have a hand-made aesthetic and embrace ideas of place, identity, and memory. The soft material evokes sentimentality and associations with children's toys. Her work *My Monument: White Forest*, 2008 (Image 24) is immersive and other-worldly, aimed at making the audience feel small. Her works often make reference to her family as signifying optimism in contrast to adversity and creating a place for contemplation to mark hope, memory, and faith.<sup>40</sup>

Temin's practice also makes references to Art history. For example, in 1995 she created a floor piece which was a maze reproducing Frank Stella's painting *Work Sets You Free*. The title copies the text that is embedded into iron gates installed at Auschwitz. Temin's family were holocaust survivors and she describes why she chose to reproduce Stella's work:

*It was about wanting to understand the gaps between the title and the abstract line image of the painting and the disconnection between the two. This disconnection is something I did not understand*

<sup>40</sup>Temin discusses her practice on <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s2724486.htm>, accessed 20/10/10

in 1995 and I felt that the painting and the title held something significant for me, so I made the work to explore it. It wasn't just a formal translation from painting to sculpture ...<sup>41</sup>



Image 24, Kathy Temin: *My Monument: White Forest*, 2008. Synthetic fur, acrylic, steel, MDF board, paint.

Mikala Dwyer continually makes teasing references to modernist abstraction and the more organic forms of Minimalism, (Image 25) and she acknowledges artists such as Claus Oldenberg in her baggy vinyl shapes, Kenneth Noland with her target forms, and Joseph Beuys, in her work *Hanging Eyes*, (Image 28) with forms that resemble clothing hanging from the wall.

Her fantastic installations explore different notions of time, space and reality with natural and un-natural materials, creating a parallel universe.

In *Hanging Smoking Garden* of 2007 (Image 26) she combined plants in soil in clear plastic, ashtrays and bottles of vodka in a 21st century revisiting of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. The space appears chaotic, yet ordered, with repetition of objects suspended in isolation. The plants seem vulnerable, in need of care, while dirty ashtrays and vodka bottles imply a general human disregard with nature.

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<sup>41</sup> Gellatly, 2007



Image 25, Mikala Dwyer, *Lovesongs for the Cannibals*, 2003



Image 26, Mikala Dwyer, *Hanging Smoking Garden*, 2007



Image 27  
Mikala Dwyer, *Installation view, Seance for an Island*, 17th Biennale of Sydney 2010



Image 28, Mikala Dwyer, *Hanging Eyes*, 2002

Dwyer was associated with the *Grunge* artists in Sydney in the 1990s who defied the aesthetic approaches of artists and an art scene dominated by superficially beautiful objects of the 1980s. Purcell describes *Grunge* as:

*A combination of Neo-Expressionism and Art Povera that was strategically transgressive, rough, defiantly parochial and oxymoronically subjective.*

Her work continues to defy traditional aesthetics with incongruous combinations of materials but there is an undeniably haunting, aesthetic appeal that I experienced in the combination of the black geometric shapes with the carved stones and found objects in her *Biennale of Sydney* installation, *Seance for an Island*, 2010 (Image 27). In her artists' talk she made the connection between the circle and seances which she said were theatrical events, placing

one on the edge of belief. I wanted to step into the circle where the sound was concentrated but wasn't sure if I should. Dwyer had consciously manipulated audience behaviour with the structure, creating a fear of crossing the threshold.<sup>42</sup>

For me, Mikala Dwyer is one of the most important installation artists in Australia today.

I have been trying to solve the conundrum in my own practice of bringing hessian, a natural material with historic implications into a more contemporary framework by combining it with unnatural materials such as plastics. Dwyer demonstrates that this combination of incongruous materials can be successful, particularly in her 2010 *Sydney Biennale* installation which is site-specific and makes historical and personal references using stone from her father's house and other materials, but the installation also plays with the audience in form and space.

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<sup>42</sup> Brain, C. & T

### **My relationship with Arte Povera artists**

While discussing the relevance of my own practice to particular Arte Povera artists I also make reference to the work of other Australian artists whose practice appears to have similar roots to my own.

Initially, I can identify several ways in which my own practice relates to Arte Povera, and particular artists - Jannis Kounellis, Marisa and Mario Merz, and Carla Accardi, and the international network of artists including Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, Claus Oldenberg, Joseph Beuys, and Robert Rauschenberg who had connections with the movement.

Basically, it is the complete openness towards materials and processes, lack of formal restraint, engagement with space and the viewer, and a philosophy that art, life, nature and culture are interconnected that I associate with.

#### **Marisa Merz**

My interest in Arte Povera was aroused when I discovered the work of Marisa Merz. Her *Untitled (Living Sculpture)* installation of 1966 resonated with my *Shadow* installation from 2008 (Image 29), although I had not previously been aware of her work.



Image 29, Lynette McDonald, *The Shadow*, 2008

Merz' work, *Untitled (Living Sculpture)*, (Image 30) was first exhibited in 1967 at Sperone, Italy, then re-installed in 2009 at the 55th Carnegie International. (Image 31) The work was developed over two years where it hung from the ceiling of the house she shared with artist husband Mario, creating a dense, entangled, forest-like space of swirling, aluminium curls. Her use of the ceiling rather than the wall in the hanging of these changeable forms defied the authoritarian notion of art in a definite shift away from classical modernism and as Christov-Bakargiev states, *far from the reductive geometry of contemporary Minimalism*.<sup>43</sup> It's a prime example of how Arte Povera has stood the test of time with the work appearing just as contemporary as at the time it was created.



Image 30, Marisa Merz, *Untitled, (Living Sculpture)*, 1967, strips of aluminum dimensions variable

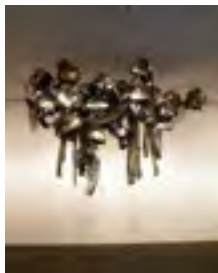


Image 31, Marisa Merz, *Untitled*, 2009, Carnegie International

In another work *Untitled*, 1966 (Image 32) Merz uses wire netting and hemp, with the threads of hemp resembling the mass of threads that I have been pulling from the hessian bags. The hemp threads are knotted onto the copper wire cylinder. There is a contrast of materials but they don't conflict with each other. They seem to merge together.

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<sup>43</sup> Christov-Bakargiev, 1999, p.34



Image 32, Marisa Merz, *Untitled*, 1966

Merz handcrafts her works and has said, *There has never been any division between my life and my work.*<sup>44</sup> She often includes references to her daughter in her work and fragments of her personal life addressing memory and time. Merz was one of those female artists of the 60s/70s, like Eva Hesse, who successfully brought craft skills and a feminine perspective to the world of mainstream Art. The press release for an exhibition of her work at the Madre Museo Contemporanea, Naples in 2007 comments about her weaving:

*The action of weaving is one which has always been associated with the patience of women, shut away in the private space of their homes. The artist feels she wants to change this outlook, to open it up*<sup>45</sup>

The same press release refers to how Merz addresses time and memory in her work.

*The works of Marisa Merz are marked by their different temporal spheres: that of objective time, tied to the flux of events, and that of memory. Memory is voluntary when it includes fragments of the artist's private existence and involuntary when it presents archetypes of the world of women.*

Merz takes objects from the familiarity of her home environment and by combining various objects and materials she creates artworks which connect with our collective heritage.

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<sup>44</sup> ibid

<sup>45</sup> ibid



## Mario Merz

Marisa's husband Mario refers to *temporal density* in his work:

*It is absurd to ask ourselves whether these forms are art or not: what we have to ask ourselves instead is whether they have some organic meaning or not. These are forms which stretch into space and therefore they are to be understood as a process of development; this is how one can enter into the rhythm of how things were yesterday and how things are today, something which, however, from the fact of being, is already tomorrow.*<sup>46</sup>

Mario Merz is best known for his *Igloo* shapes which bring to mind the geodesic domes developed by R. Buckminster Fuller and artist Kenneth Snelson at Black Mountain College in 1948 and 1949 that were to become an iconic structure for dwellings by the alternative movement in the 1970s. With memories of the domes constructed at Nimbin in the 70s and thoughts of constructing shelters I was drawn to Mario Merz' work. The *Igloo* first appeared in Merz's work in 1967 and continued throughout his life in many different forms. It was seen to relate to nomadic life and was a metaphor for both harmony and disharmony with nature. His *Igloos* blur the line between interior and exterior unlike modern homes that enclose us and separate us from nature, Merz is questioning our relationship with the natural world.

This concept is highly relevant to my idea of constructing works that combine natural and man-made materials that reference the shelters of pioneers who lived closely with the natural environment and what questions and answers these structures might offer in our contemporary acquisitive society.

Merz was obsessed by Fibonacci numbers, a mathematical sequence that underlies the growth patterns of natural life in the plant and animal kingdom. In using this spiral form in his work he highlights the idea of continual growth on our planet and the idea that without the past there is no future.

Although the igloos appear geometric in form he says in his artist's statement of 1971 that:

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<sup>46</sup> Christov-Bakargiev, 1999, p.252, from Mila Pistol, Interview with Mario Merz, Marcatre, nos. 30-33, Rome, 1967

*I am concerned not to make the hemisphere geometrical.*<sup>47</sup>

The structure of his *Igloos* began with a metal frame which he then covered with netting and amorphous substances such as clay, earth or wax, thus subverting the geometrics of the structure to which he added writing, usually in the form of neon tubes. (Images 33 & 34) The *Igloos* for him were his way of taking art away from the wall as he says:

*a space that is total within itself; it is a hemisphere resting on the ground.*<sup>48</sup>



Image 33, Mario Merz, *Igloo*,



Image 34, Mario Merz, *Igloo*,

**Matthew Barney**, used a geodesic dome in the middle of a eucalypt forest to exhibit his work at *De Lama Lâmina* (2004-2009), a 3,000 acre shrine to contemporary art outside a small town in Brazil. He constructed a complex narrative about the conflict between Ogum, the god of iron, war and technology, and Ossanha, the deity of forests, plants and the forces of nature. Obviously paying homage to Arte Povera and Merz. (Image 35)



Image 35, Matthew Barney *DE LAMA LÂMINA* 2004-2009

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid*

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*

**Carla Accardi** was another artist from the 1960s who constructed shelters. Although she is a painter and not closely aligned with Arte Povera she demonstrated a willingness to break free of the confines of a painting, opening the work to real space by making ambient structures from the same material she used in her paintings. *Triplice Tenda* (*Triple Tents*) (Image 36) is composed of three structures, each inside the other, designed as tents of diminishing sizes. Made from sicofoil, the tents allude to the idea of elementary habitations, protected places, that being transparent, still interact with the world. The viewer moves from the visual to the sensory and psychophysical with the layers of transparent sheets allowing a continual interaction of line and color through the various layers of the tents. It creates an ever-changing dynamic environment. It is painted in a pleasant rose color that gives the work a kind of feminine perspective and a delicate aliveness, referring to skin and nature.

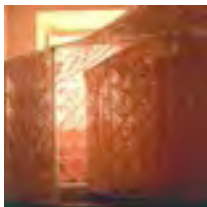


Image 36, Carla Accardi, *Triplice Tenda*, 1969

In 2005, the Australian artist **Greer Honeywell** produced the work *Embroidered House* (Image 37) which bears striking resemblance to Accardi's work. She pays tribute to the small tasks that become daily rituals by drilling thousands of tiny holes in the walls and roof of the plywood house. Their illumination creates a poetic pattern both on the structure and the surrounding walls.



Image 37, Greer Honeywell, *Embroidered House*, 2005

In talking about choosing to address the concept of 'home' in her work Honeywell states:

*The voice of the domestic hearth is embedded deep within the collective psyche. It is a voice unique in tone, modulated by personal experience and the individual search for identity, place and fictionalised ideas of 'home'. It is an all pervasive voice. It is a voice heard by all... I draw upon collections of memories, artefacts and systems to remake simulcras of reality.<sup>49</sup>*

Another Australian artist, **Rose Nolan** has constructed similar works. (Image 38) Her practice references historical sources, in particular Constructivism and non-Objective Geometric art with abstract motifs and shapes, including almost abstract letters and her resourceful use of simple materials such as hessian and cardboard connect her to this tradition. Her painted cardboard constructions, each glued, stitched or tacked together in a handmade way, use the iconography of Constructivism. As Cramer states<sup>50</sup>:

*Nolan's work replays the drama and visual excitement of revolutionary aesthetics but recontextualises these with content that has more to do with her everyday reality. She continues to be inspired by a defining historical moment when it seemed art could play a central role in social change, but recognizes with a mixture of romance, longing, humour, sadness and happiness her own inevitable distance from those times.*

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.greerhoneywell.com/profile.html>, accessed 10/5/2010

<sup>50</sup> Cramer, Sue, Rose Nolan, 2002, *Frieze Magazine*, Issue 70, accessed on [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/rose\\_nolan/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/rose_nolan/), accessed 23/9/2010



Image 38, Rose Nolan, *Tunnel/Tent Work - HARD BUT FAIR/POINT LESS*, 2009

### Jannis Kounellis

After deciding to use hessian bags in my practice I discovered that Kounellis had used them extensively and on researching his works I was despondent, thinking that there was nothing I could do that this master had not already done brilliantly with the hessian bag and everything that I had already done including bags stitched together resembled his work.

Kounellis refers to materials as having “memory” and “future”<sup>51</sup> and he combines the ephemeral (plants, animals, fire, and smoke) with more permanent materials such as steel and stone, emphasising the contrast. In *Senza Titolo* (Image 39) he combined hessian, carbon, metal sheet and butterflies. I relate to his methodology, which he describes as:

*Intuition, reflection and configuration make up an intertwined whole that is impossible to unravel, and technique is a crucial part of this indivisible nodule.*<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Mourne, p.71

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, p.46



Image 39, Jannis Kounellis, *Senza Titolo*, 2003

While I was struggling with decisions about the scale of my work I discovered this statement by Kounellis in 2007 about scale in his works:

*The measure is always the same as a double bed. I have always worked with these kinds of dimensions and relationships between things. I can't exceed the height of a man. I don't want to forget the human being; I must not and am not able to forget the cultural coordinates that I received during my intellectual and human education and that pushes me to accept these borders.*<sup>53</sup>

He did however exceed these borders with his *Atto Unico* (One-act play), 2002, a monumental installation which was a gigantic labyrinth of 143 vertical iron panels, each about eight feet tall, surmounted by a layer of coal, at the Galleria Nazionale D'Arte Moderna in Rome. Perhaps, though, he was only creating a framework with the panels which created small chambers that contained traces of earlier works - heaps of coal, coal-stained burlap bags sewn together to form a sort of cloth, an iron cot with two blankets thrown on top, bags full of coal resting on large shelves, in turn suspended from iron butcher's hooks, and small shelves holding coffee grounds.<sup>54</sup> (Image 40)

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<sup>53</sup> Bellini, 2007

<sup>54</sup>ibid



Image 40, Jannis Kounellis, *Labirinto*, 2002,

**Ken Unsworth** seemed to have had similar ideas to Kounellis and Merz, using the dome form and hanging rocks in his suspended Rocks series (Image 41 & 42).



Image 41, Ken Unsworth, 1978

*Suspended Stone Circle 111*,



Image 42, Jannis Kounellis, 1970

*La salle des Pierres*

### **John Davis**

After viewing John Davis' exhibition *Presence*, at the National Gallery of Victoria in July, 2010 I became aware of how much his gallery works from 1979-83 resembled my own ideas in relating to the Australian landscape with sculptural forms. He says of his his work *Nargan*: (Image 43)

*I wanted 'Nargan' to express some aspects of the Australian landscape in a specific and general sense, as well as establishing a dichotomy between the assertive and aggressive stance of the pyramidal form and the fragility, tenuousness and poetic detail of the qualities of the detail.<sup>55</sup>*



Image 43, John Davis, *Nargan*, 1979, twigs, string, paper mache, stones, canvas, calico, felt

Davis saw space as being as important as the objects. As he says, *I think the objects themselves cut up and measure the space.*<sup>56</sup> In *Region* (Image 44) the floor space of the gallery is almost completely covered by the works impeding the progress of the viewer, making it difficult to get around. There were about 25 pieces and each was different but all had a rectangular base. The plan was like a grid, like the map of a city. Nothing dominated. This work is a statement about man, the structures he builds and his relationship to his environment in a very similar way to my own thoughts. As Scarlett says,

*'Region' is about humans and their constructions in the fullest anthropological sense: not merely buildings as shelter, but as an expression of beliefs and traditions, prime urgings and complex need, all those tangible mysteries that add up to culture.*

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<sup>55</sup> Scarlett, p.133

<sup>56</sup> Scarlet, p.144





Image 44, John Davis, *Region*, 1980-81, General view of installation at Watters Gallery

His later works *Absence and Presence* took on a more philosophical perspective and showed a deeper concern for environmental issues with the Murray River and fish becoming an important metaphor in his work.

## Sourcing materials

Hessian bags have become scarce. I presumed that people would have old ones in the shed but not so. Potatoes were one of the last products to come in hessian bags but even these have become hard to find. When I asked at *Roundagain*, (the local tip recycling shop) the man responded with, "Haven't seen one for years." It seems that the material is ephemeral and I have been living in the past. However I have found a limited number of old bags in various stages of decomposition.

I finally resorted to Ebay. Coffee is still imported in hessian and jute sacks and I got fifty sacks for ten dollars to start. I was hoping for a variety of bags with branding describing Australian products but I made do with what was available. The odd original sack appears on Ebay as a collector's item at inflated prices.



Images 45 & 46, Collector's items, Hessian bags

It is ironic that my original idea centred around the hessian bag as an icon of Australian working class society and that the only bags that are now available are from third-world countries including Indonesia, Africa, Bolivia, Columbia, and New Guinea. It makes a statement that I had not originally anticipated on the changing times and the globalisation of Australia's culture.

### **Working on the surface texture of the hessian bags**

I began in the Minimalist tradition of Carl Andre who emphasised truth to materials, saying: *You can't impose truth on materials* and Gaston Bachelard who stated: *The dreamer no longer dreams images, he dreams materials.*<sup>1</sup>

With images in mind of the bag-walled structures of the pioneers, Indigenous fringe-dwellers, and the poor during the Great Depression, I began by experimenting with applying media to the hessian bags. My intention was to create surfaces which would have a haunting patina suggesting the harshness of the elements and hardships experienced by these people who used hessian bags in their homes. It was my intention to give voice to the material and retain the surface texture of the hessian while enhancing/changing the surface with other mediums.

I established that I would use mediums and materials that were used by the people I have mentioned to make their bag walls imperious to the elements. Examples included combinations of calcite, rabbit skin glue, newspaper, wax, cotton fabrics, wall paper and newspapers.

### **Influential artists who used hessian in 2D works**

Painters such as Ian Fairweather used hessian as a cheap substitute for canvas, covering the surface and disguising the cheapness and qualities of the material. But Antonio Tapies and Alberto Burri used the material in a way that emphasised the quality, texture, and characteristics of the material in the same way that I intend to. Like Burri, who also used recycled bags, I responded to the colour, the weave, the thickness, the opaqueness, the smell, and also the tears and marks and stitching in individual bags.

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<sup>1</sup> p.90 Corti, Jose, 1991

In Burri's works he chose materials for their intrinsic qualities, emphasising the marks and roughly stitching pieces together. When given structure and form these marks and imperfections replaced the brush stroke.

Hessian sacking had a deep resonance for Burri. It had served as a rough canvas for his paintings in the POW camp during World War II. There was something about it that encapsulated perfectly the atmosphere of post-war Italy, a country that could not provide enough food for its people and relied heavily on handouts.

In 1952 Burri started making his *Sacchi* using recycled hessian bags which were used to bring relief supplies into Italy. The bags could also have been used during the war as a blanket, a hold-all, a curtain, a bandage, scrim for a plaster cast, or a shroud.

Hessian sacking is the roughest and most primitive of textiles. Re-stitched and repaired, or impregnated with filth, or retaining the traces of its original contents in its fibres, it could also been seen as a parody of the fine linen and canvas used by artists.

His mainly monotone works with splashes of red and tortured stitching and burning have been constantly interpreted as a metaphor for experiences of war where Burri served as a doctor but he has always maintained that his use of materials was determined purely by the formal demands of his constructions. He said in 1976:

*If I don't have one material, I use another. It is all the same,... I choose to use poor materials to prove that they could still be useful. The poorness of a medium is not a symbol: it is a device for painting."*<sup>2</sup>

The work *Composition* (Image 47) emphasizes the artist's concern with issues of construction, not metaphor. But it is an obvious reaction by the viewer to link his war experiences with his work. Perhaps though, like a lot of soldiers, he does not want to talk about the experiences of war. The horror is best buried. He does however admit that his work is part of himself and the realities he has experienced in saying:

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<sup>2</sup> [www.museomadre.it/opere\\_cfm?id=421&evento=38&pt=1](http://www.museomadre.it/opere_cfm?id=421&evento=38&pt=1) accessed 10/2/10

*My painting is a reality; which is part of myself, a reality that I cannot reveal in words.*<sup>3</sup>

Despite working with materials which have little aesthetic appeal, whether they be hessian or concrete, and torturing the materials with rough stitching and burning, Burri created works that were aesthetically beautiful in form. As Burri himself said:

*I've always been interested in making something beautiful from poor materials.*<sup>4</sup>



Image 47, Alberto Burri, *Composition*, 1953. Oil, gold paint, and glue on burlap and canvas, 33 7/8 x 39 1/2 inches. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. 53.1364.

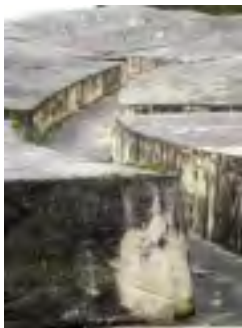
Later, Burri's work became far removed in scale from his hessian collages. Following an earthquake in Gibellina, Sicily in 1968 he proposed that the entire ruins and detritus of the abandoned hill town be encased in concrete, creating a memorial to victims. Gaps were left in the concrete masses which followed the streets of the old town, linking the present to the past in an artistic and abstract way. This gigantic work, *Cretto* (Images 48 & 49) is now a 20+

<sup>3</sup> Oisteanu, Valery, *Alberto Burri*, 2008, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, accessed on [www.brooklynrail.org/.../artseen/alberto-burri\\_20/2/10](http://www.brooklynrail.org/.../artseen/alberto-burri_20/2/10)

<sup>4</sup> Chiivers, Ian, "Burri, Alberto," *A Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art*. 1999. Encyclopedia.com. 11 Feb. 2010 <<http://www.encyclopedia.com>

acre piece of mesmerizing land art. At the end of his life, in 1994, in an attempt to sum up the logic of his lifelong aesthetic ambitions Burri stated:

*Form and Space! Form and Space! The end. There is nothing else. Form and space!*<sup>5</sup>



Images 48 & 49, Alberto Burri, *Cretto di Gibellina* (1973) in Sicily

His radical use of non-art materials in a dialogue about textures and materials and three-dimensionality in painting paved the way for the Arte Povera artists of the 1960s and '70s and Burri is now seen as a critical influence on other artists including Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly who visited Burri in Italy. Sacking and fire would later turn up in the works of Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis. While Burri used cut-up pieces of hessian sacks, subverting the original form to create painterly surfaces, Kounellis presents the sacks in their original form and in terms of their original function as containers.

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<sup>5</sup>Hamilton, 2008

**Review of practice - February - July, 2009**

Although I liked the idea of working with the bags in their original form as Kounellis did, my initial process was to experiment with applying various combinations of calcite, rabbit skin glue, newspaper, wax, cotton fabrics, wall paper and newspapers to the single surface of the bags. I unstitched the bags and cut up sampler-size pieces to try the different combinations of surface treatments.

Applying a mixture of calcite with water as a whitewash to larger pieces gives a chalky surface which has an aesthetic appeal but it is unstable and rubs off easily. I find it hard to believe that people in the past used just calcite in water to coat their walls. The calcite was not as opaque as I expected.

Mixing the rabbit-skin glue with the calcite achieved a more stable surface but also hardened it. Several coats are needed to achieve opaqueness and there's a point where you lose the textural definition of the hessian.

Different qualities of bags give different results. In the more open weave the holes do not fill completely, (Image 52) whereas the lighter, close weave absorbs the liquid and loses definition after three coats. In the heavier, closer weave the mixture is not totally absorbed into the material. (Image 50)

I then experimented by coating the calcite surfaces with shellac and coffee grounds to modify the colour of the jute sacks, and glued fabric and newspaper to the different hessian surfaces.



Image 50, Lynette McDonald, Heavy hessian with calcite

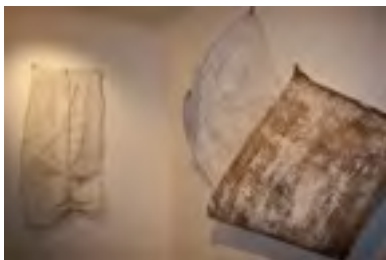


Image 51, Lynette McDonald, Installation view,



Image 52, Open weave hessian, rabbit skin glue, calcite. Detail of work in installation view,



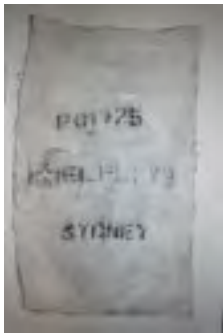


Image 53, Hessian bag with calcite and water mix.



Image 54, Heavy, close-weave hessian with rabbit skin glue and calcite and shellac

The fact that the rabbit skin-glue hardened the material somewhat opened up the 3D possibilities of the hessian bag. I stuffed several bags with materials from my recycling bin and coated the surface with the calcite/glue solution, turning them into free-standing forms. (Images 55 & 56)

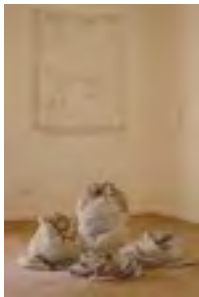


Image 55, Installation view, Hessian bags hardened with rabbit-skin glue



Image 56, Hessian bag, calcite and rabbit-skin glue

I was given some old bags, one of which was so old that it disintegrated as I opened it out (Image 57) It had changed colour and was dark brown with a shiny patina. I dipped it in rabbit-skin glue to try and hold it together and preserve it. I experimented using pieces of this bag, stitching them to other hessian but the contrast in materials was too extreme (Image 58) so I discarded this idea.

I also experimented with glueing other materials like newspaper, fabric, and netting to the hessian. (Image 59 ) I was given a recipe for glue using powdered milk and lime. I experimented with this but found rabbit-skin glue more effective and easier to mix.



Image 57, Disintegrating hessian bag



Image 58, Combining materials



Image 59, Hessian, calcite, rabbit-skin glue, cotton netting

After reading that animal fat was used to make the outside of hessian walls waterproof I experimented with other materials to serve that purpose. Substituting beeswax for fat, I combined it with with calcite, yellow ochre and red iron oxide to build up layers (Images 60 to 66)



Image 60



Image 61



Image 62



Image 63 Calcite, rabbit-skin glue, oxides, hessian



Image 64 wax, rabbit-skin glue, oxides, hessian



Images 65 & 66 Two panels of three bags, wax, rabbit-skin glue, oxides, hessian  
installed at Phyllis Palmer Gallery, Latrobe University, Bendigo, July, 2009

## Deconstruction

I've used this term in my work to mean pulling apart, as in the removing of the threads from the hessian. I realise that there are more complex theories and interpretations around the word but it literally describes my process. Deconstructing and restructuring are an ongoing part of my work.

Quinn's description of deconstruction relating to textiles is appropriate:

*Deconstruction is both a philosophy and an aesthetic, and sometimes a metaphor for the dilapidation and disintegration associated with urban decay.*<sup>6</sup>

Still in the experimental process of my work I suffered the conundrum of contradiction: On the one hand wanting to create painterly surfaces of a Minimalist persuasion, on the other wanting to tear apart and reconstruct, producing 3D works of an aesthetic nature.

So I simultaneously do both without preconceived ideas of their use or whether the works will ultimately be discarded. I find the often labour-intensive process of deconstruction to be meditative and it gives me intimate contact with the material, it's structure, and qualities.

Louise Bourgeois, relatively late in her career, turned to textile forms, often ripping the textiles apart, shredding them, and joining them together with Frankenstein-like stitching. Quinn says: *her textile works create a nexus of making, wearing, dwelling, and thinking about the meaning of the fabric.*<sup>7</sup>

Bourgeois has said *that threads weave important memories and emotional connections for us all*<sup>8</sup>. The ripped surfaces, torn selvages and roughly-sewn seams in her work could be seen as a reflection of the emotional turmoil that childhood memories have for her. As she deconstructs the textiles to basic forms, she intentionally subverts the smooth surface traditionally associated with textiles. (Image 67)

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<sup>6</sup> Quinn, p.16

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.19

<sup>8</sup> Storr, 2003

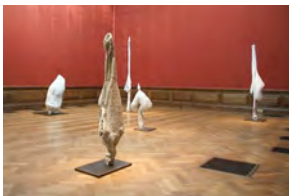


Image 67, Louise Bourgeois, *untitled*, steel and fabric sculpture, 1998.

Constantly recycling, I considered the threads I had been pulling from the bags as well as weaving. When I taught in the Rudolf Steiner school we made dolls from yarn. On a whim I made dolls from the threads I'd pulled. Later I discovered Bourgeois' fabric, lace, and thread *Untitled* work. (Image 68)



Image 68  
Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, 1996,  
Fabric, lace and thread



Image 69 Lynette McDonald,  
Dolls made in Rudolf Steiner tradition using  
threads pulled from bags

In my studio practice I am constantly recycling and transforming previous works.

Susan Hiller used this process in her exhibition, *Work in Progress*, 1980, where a display of her paintings went through a material deconstruction and a formal transformation over the period of the show. Painting became sculpture which became drawings and order

turned to chaos to become a different sort of order:

*as if one authorial self, or one part of the psyche, was slowly and visibly ceding to another, by way of the same materials.*<sup>9</sup>

She unravelled the weave of one canvas, thread by thread and hung them in skeins on the wall. At the end of the first week, each skein was hand-worked, by knotting, looping or braiding, into individual three-dimensional 'thread drawings' whilst the remaining canvases were cut into small rectangles, made into little bundles and given a date stamp.



Image 70, Susan Hiller, *Work in Progress* (as shown in Matt's Gallery, London 1980)

The 'thread drawings' were pinned to the walls and the bundles displayed on small shelves during the second week. Hiller says that this process evokes the classical story of Penelope who wove by day and unravelled by night while she waited the return of Odysseus, stating:

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<sup>9</sup> Brett, Guy, *Landmark Exhibitions Issue*, *Elasticity of Exhibition*, accessed on [http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09autumn/brett.shtm#\\_edn10](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09autumn/brett.shtm#_edn10), 21/2/10



*This activity has been used to generalise the work of women artists as a 'predilection for the monotonous – repetitive and ritualistic'.<sup>10</sup>*

She proposed instead that the Penelope theme represented an attempt to:

*keep time static' – the 'false sense of permanence' that is attached to art objects – and has nothing to do with repetitive obsessive work for its own sake'<sup>11</sup>*

I agree with this. In the past too much emphasis has been placed on interpreting the work of women artists as obsessive, monotonous, and repetitive, denigrating this process and excluding women from recognition as visual artists.<sup>12</sup>

I immersed myself in the material with traditional craft processes such as weaving while making reference to the 'make do' mentality of my ancestors. I incorporated the hessian bag and scraps of other materials that would have been readily available to impoverished women who recycled meagre materials in creative and ingenious ways.



Image 71, close-up of woven work, jute backing, cotton fabric

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Fisher, Jean, *Susan Hiller: The Revenants of Time*, exhibition catalogue, Matt's Gallery, London; Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield; Third Eye Centre, Glasgow 1990

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.susanhiller.org/index.html>

Hiller's practice and extensive writing includes *The Provisional Texture of Reality*. This contains thirty years of talks, catalogue essays, introductions and interviews where Hiller demonstrates a verbal facility in regard both to her own work and broader structures and histories of art and thought.



Image 72, Jute bag interwoven with floral cotton material,



Image 73

Jute bag dyed and interwoven with cotton fabric, leather scraps and photographs



Image 74, Detail of 73



Image 75, Hooked rug - cotton fabrics woven into hessian bag



Image 76, Detail of 75

### Historical Use of Hessian in Sculpture

The use of hessian as an artistic material has negative connotations from the 60s and 70s. It brings to mind all those seisal macrame works and hessian wall hangings that became a popular means of creative expression with hobbyists. On the other hand it was the monumental scale of the sculptural works of artists such as Mona Hessing, Ewa Pachucka, and Magdalena Abakanowicz who explored the use of hessian and seisal using craft techniques and processes that challenged the existing heirarchies of Art. I am referring back to them in considering scale and craft processes in my own practice.

Hessing produced works such as *Scoop* which resembled Robert Morris' catenary works in form but her focus was still on the handcraft processes, hanging as a two-dimensional form from the wall.



Image 77, Mona Hessing *Scoop*, 1972, woven seisal construction,

Ewa Puchucka also used hessian and the sheer monumentality of *Landscape and Bodies* (Image 78) portraying humans living in harmony with the environment gave it credence as a sculpture, rather than being classified as craft. The life-size crocheted figures are punctuated with knots and stitching, accentuating the mammoth task of producing the piece. It was included in the 2009 exhibition, *Soft Sculpture* at the National Gallery, Canberra.



Image 78, Ewa Pachucka, *Landscape and bodies*, 1972

**Magdalena Abakanowicz** produced sculptural pieces even larger in scale than Pachuca's using similar materials such as hessian and seisal rope and again, challenging the existing heirarchies of art. She started with soft and pliable objects that were rough to the touch. First came the *Abakans* (1966-75). (Image 79) These enormous three-dimensional hanging structures, woven from a variety of fibres encouraged the audience to enter into their folds and interact with the textures and smell of the works. Rose describes these shapes:

*Stretched flat they could be circles or rectangles, but once suspended by wires and cables to swing freely in space, they no longer had any discernible familiar shape. Neither abstract nor representational, they were hybrids with tactile qualities and colours that invoked painting but were resolutely sculptural.*<sup>13</sup>

These works evoke phenomenological concerns which I am considering in relationship to the scale of my work which Rose describes as:

*different kinds of information deducted from the perception of shape from different points of the eye and the hand had to be reconciled by the mind.*<sup>14</sup>



Image 79, Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Abakan Round*, 1967, sisal weaving on metal support

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<sup>13</sup> Rose, 1994, p.23

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p.39

In other soft works, *Embryology*, 1973-75, (Image 80) she completed a sequence of some 800 stuffed potato-shaped forms of varying sizes, covered with sackings and occasionally spilling their innards. This is repetition in the extreme. In these works Abakanowicz moves to the use of found material, rather than weaving the whole piece herself. The pieces feel like a 3D version of Alberto Burri's *Sacco* works, with their rough stitching and used materials. Having experienced wartime Europe as Burri did, this is understandable. Rose states that she had a memory of Russian soldiers sleeping on the floor of Prague station:

*In their summer linens they looked like sacks stretched across the floor and this image of slumped - over, sacklike bodies stayed with her.*<sup>15</sup>



Image 80, Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Embryology*, 1980, Venice Biennale, 1980, burlap, cotton, gauze, hemp rope, nylon and sisal

Her works became more figurative, making seated or standing figures, backs, hands, and heads. It is the moulding processes she used that interests me as I have been experimenting with rabbit-skin glue which hardens the hessian. In *Seated Figures*, (Image 81) she made plaster moulds of the back and the front of a seated man, discarding the idea of a full figure. She then made multiple casts by waxing the plaster and glueing pieces of rough hessian sacking onto the surface.

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<sup>15</sup> Rose, 1994, p.86



Images 81 and 82, Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Seated Figures*, 1974-79, burlap and resin, pedestal: steel Eighteen pieces,

**Review of Practice, September, 2009**

In this series of my work I have explored hessian bags through two different methods and I installed the two series of works in separate rooms at Visual Arts Research Studios, Mildura (VARS).

Firstly what I refer to as 'deconstruction' where I deconstructed the hessian bag by pulling threads, resulting in the skeletal remains of eight bags and a pile of threads. I dipped both the bags and the threads in glue and by hanging and stretching them I produced 3D forms.

When installed as a group the works cast ghostly shadows and the phrase *Ghosts of Future Past* kept running through my head. I was reminded of a quote I heard somewhere: *The past is a ghost, the future a dream, and all we have is now.*

The deconstructed works (Images 83 to 88) have possibilities of expanding the use of shadows by experimenting with lighting.

Secondly, I unstitched bags and opened them out to a single thickness and dipped them in PVA glue and moulded them on corrugated iron, creating a hessian facsimile of the iron. (Images 89 to 92) I have always been fascinated by corrugated iron which goes back to my childhood when my grandfather used to give me a paintbrush and a bucket of water and I'd spend hours 'painting' the shed. When I applied water to the red iron painted surface the colour darkened, only to fade again when the water evaporated. I was fascinated by this process.





Image 83, Deconstructed works, installation view 1

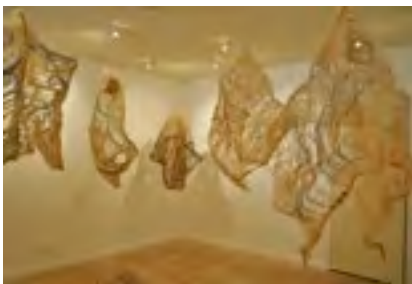


Image 84, Deconstructed works, installation view 2



Image 85, *Deconstructed work 1*



Image 86, *Deconstructed work 2*



Image 87, *Threads 1*



Image 88, *Threads 2*



Image 89, Hessian moulded on corrugated iron, Installation view 1



Image 90 , *Corrugated Hessian 1*



Image 91, *Corrugated Hessian 2*



Image 92, Corrugated hessian, installation view 2

Neil Fetting's advice to me following this installation was interesting, particularly about manipulating the 2D materiality.

*The wall works were more successful than the floor based pieces, although the more sculptural they became, the more interesting they were. That is, the buckling and folding away from the strict relief + the engagement with both floor and wall (sitting on floor and leaning against the wall) was effective. I think because the hessian is such a utilitarian material, the more you can manipulate its 2D materiality, the more poetic possibilities it has. In addition to this, they need to be larger – full wall, even a continuous room. Can they be sewn after the bending process into wall size pieces. Then you could link back to one of your earlier interests, being the hessian huts complete with rough cut poles*

### Considering scale and exhibition venue

The Visual Arts Research Studio rooms do not allow me to combine pieces. It feels constricting and doesn't allow the viewer to step back from the work. The larger the object, the more we are forced to keep our distance from it. I need a large white cube with high ceilings and ideally I should be producing work for a particular space. I need to decide on a venue for my exhibition as soon as possible. As Fried says:

*The space of the room is a structuring factor in terms of the effect different sized and proportioned rooms can have on the object/subject relationship...*

*The awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object. Space between the subject and the object is implied in such a comparison.<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> Fried, M., 1998

### **Hessian and Bush Sticks**

Returning to my idea of dwellings made from hessian bags and bush poles I got a permit and collected about thirty straight Mallee *sticks*. The Mallee tree has multiple straight trunks ideal for building and the *sticks* I collected are about three metres long with a diameter from 10 to 15 centimetres and purposely cut with a fork at the top. The colour is a soft purply-grey which contrasts with the white-painted hessian so I opened out and stitched multiple hessian bags together to make several pieces approx. 2.5 x 3 metres and painted them white.

I considered the connection with the Mildura Sculpture Triennials and thought about installing my works in the parkland adjoining the Mildura Arts Centre. I constructed a piece using Mallee *sticks* and white-painted hessian in this vicinity to experiment but discarded the idea. The work loses its impact in the large open space without lighting and shadows.

### **Review of Practice - Installation, May 2010.**

This installation related firstly to the bagged walls of impoverished homes and secondly to the fate of farmers. I sewed multiple unpainted bags together to cover the large picture windows at the front and back of the Visual Arts Research Centre. I realised that the writing on each bag showed the country of origin - Ethiopia, Indonesia, New Guinea, and Bolivia. It had become a metaphor for the globalisation of our economy and the increasing irrelevance of local producers. Rather ironic since I began by seeing the hessian bag as an icon of Australian working class identity relating to my own purely Anglo background.

As I hung the installation of three bags I decided on a knot that is similar to a hang man's noose. I thought of how they tested the gallows with a weighted bag and how my great, great grandfather hanged himself when his wife was pregnant with her eighth child because life was just too hard.

The three bags have wheat, rice, and red sand trickling from a hole in each bag to form a pile beneath. They referred to the passing of time and the fate of farmers in times of drought.

(Images 93 to 96) I placed a white calcite work beneath to represent the increasing salination of our environment.<sup>17</sup>



Image 93, Review Installation, Visual Arts Research Studios, May, 2010 View 1



Image 94, View 2

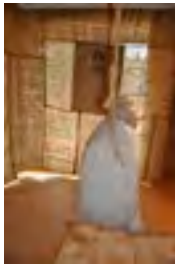


Image 95, View 3



Image 96, View 4

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<sup>17</sup> After careful consideration I have decided to discard the idea of the hanging bags in my final installation but I will still use the stitched hessian pieces that cover the windows. The concept of the bags is too diverse from the concept of shelter.

## Monotonal

In my Honours practice in 2008 my final installation was monotone in grey and black and I didn't realise the full impact of this until I photographed it and the colour photos looked as though they were taken in black and white. (Image 97) Lacking colour contrast brought out distinctive nuances and emphasised the play of texture and patterns in the unified environment.



Image 97, *The Shadow*, Lynette McDonald, installation view, 2008, carpet underlay, various recycled industrial materials, acrylic paint, perspex

Colour has always been important in my life and my creativity has been centered around combining colour in my clothes, house, and garden and craft. Creating a monotone installation for my Honours seemed like a contradictory thing for me to do and yet there was a satisfaction and relief in the calmness and lack of conflict when I made the decision to eliminate colour. Initially it was a move to unify the work and solve the dichotomy between the colourful crafty works and the grey industrial materials I was working with. It was a radical departure for me but one that ultimately took my work from a more personal to a more universal and spiritual place. It became clear from the many audience reactions that the installation produced both intense and often contradictory emotions.

Sufi mysticism gives special meaning to the monochrome, representing it as the realm of God. Loud polychrome colours depict the self and passion and are in conflict with the single

hue of the Divine. The world of the spirits is monochrome and within it there is no conflict or struggle. This is how I felt when I made the choice to eliminate colour from my *Shadow* installation. I needed the lack of differentiation to unify the work and the conflict was gone.

I have been researching as part of my methodology, the historical use of monotone or monochrome, from Kazimir Malevich in Russia, through to contemporary installation works to understand the implications for my practice as I have decided that my final installation will also be monotoned. The terms "monotone" and "monochrome" for me are interchangeable and have the same essential meaning.

Barbara Rose, in her excellent publication *Monotone*, (2004) has documented this history in some detail and she summarises the development of monochrome in the 20th century:

*It appears to be divided between the spiritual search for a transcendental experience and the wish to emphasise the material presence of an object as a concrete reality and not an illusion.*

Rose also sees monochrome as *the ultimate paradox* and states:

*The monochrome challenges interpretation. It is simultaneously fullness and void, a moment of silence in a world of noise. It goes nowhere and everywhere, it is specific and universal, tangible and immaterial.*<sup>18</sup>

Monotone is neither a movement nor a style but a personal stance and the artists who used a monochrome palette have done so to achieve a multitude of meanings.

The Los Angeles Monochromatic Group of the 60s including Yves Klein, Angeles San Jose and Robert Rauschenberg in his Black Mountain period, were heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism. Rauschenberg described his monotones in terms like "silence", "restriction", "absence", "nothing", and "the point where a circle begins and ends." He claimed:

*My black paintings and my white paintings are either too full or too empty to be thought - thereby they remain visual experiments.*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rose, 2004, p.80

<sup>19</sup> Rose, 2004, p.58



There was a rather nihilistic streak around in monochromatic works during the sixties which is summed up by Frank Stella when he said: *What you see is what you see* and Manzoni who described his own works as a *colourless surface that is just a colourless surface*. On the other hand, Ad Reinhardt in 1967 described his own works as *objects of contemplation and meditation*.<sup>20</sup>

The two opposing meanings of monochrome come together in the work of Kazimir Malevich who painted the first true monochrome, a white square on a white field that were nearly indistinguishable from each other in 1918. Malevich saw the monochrome as both a spiritual icon and a step in the revolutionary process towards the elimination of the object.

He described his process:

*I was gripped by a kind of timidity bordering on fear when it came to leaving the world of will and idea in which I had lived and worked and in the reality of which I had believed. But a blissful sense of liberating non objectivity drew me forth into the "desert," where nothing is real except feeling . . . and so feeling became the substance of my life. This was no "empty square" which I had exhibited but rather the feeling of non objectivity. I realized that the "thing" and the "concept" were substituted for feeling and understood the falsity of the world of will and idea.*<sup>21</sup>

It is the aspect of "feeling" which Malevich describes that I wish to explore. By limiting colour to a pared-down palette the environment created becomes something not quite of this world where rational, intellectual thought is replaced by feeling. My installation will reflect the tonality of a harsh Australian landscape and evoke feelings of that landscape in the audience.

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<sup>20</sup>ibid

<sup>21</sup> Kazimir Malevich "Suprematism", <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/malevich.html>

### Minimalist modular units or integrated whole?

It has been suggested to me that I consider Minimalist forms, which go against my natural inclination but also seem appropriate given the rectangular form of the hessian bag. I researched Minimalist sculpture to help me make this decision.

In my Honours year in 2008 my research started with exploring the work of Post-Minimalist sculptors of the 1960s and 1970s who used soft materials in a reaction against Minimalism's ethos of industrial materials, sharp edges, and increasing rigidity. My major influences were the Process Approach of Robert Morris (Image 98) and his *Feltworks*, Eva Hesse and her *Contingency* and *Rope* works (Image 99) and Richard Serra's *Belts*. (Image 100) My *Shadow* installation (Image 97) incorporated processes used by these artists but differed in that the installation created an all encompassing free-form environment. The audience was surrounded by and interacted tactilely with the work, rather than it being a series of discrete pieces extending from the wall.



Image 98, Robert Morris, *untitled*, 1968



Image 99, Eva Hesse, *Untitled (Rope piece)*, 1970

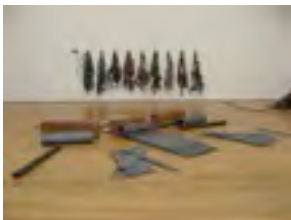


Image 100, Richard Serra, *Beltworks*, 1966/67

My focus now is still material-based but differs in process. Previously I explored the response of materials to simple actions and the variability of the shapes was determined by natural forces such as gravity. I manipulated rectangles of material by cutting to create chaos and allowing the pieces to take their own shape as they fell in random forms.

The difference between my previous installation and my projected one is somewhat determined by the qualities of the materials, The hessian bag is basically a rectangular form, although it's softness can be manipulated to disguise rather than emphasise its original state. I have explored both emphasising the minimalist rectangular form and destroying the form. I am considering how these two processes can come together as a unified installation while retaining a memory of the original material- and of course I am considering scale.

Returning to the 1970s and this important historical era in sculpture to help me clarify sculptural concepts, I researched the differences between Robert Morris and Donald Judd in the writings of Michael Fried. He believes that Morris conceived his work as resuming the lapsed tradition of Constructivist sculpture established by Vladimir Tatlin and others and states that:

*Morris and Donald Judd held views in common, asserting the value of wholeness and that they are opposed to sculpture made part by part, by addition, composed and in which specific elements... separate from the whole, thus setting up relationships within the work.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Fried, 1998, p.148

Fried says that Morris used *strong gestalt or unitary-type forms to avoid divisiveness* whereas Judd was more interested in the kind of wholeness that can be achieved through repetition of identical units. Donald Judd's monotone sculptures were free-standing and open-framed and he was concerned with unifying space, light, shape, and material in a unique fusion, emphasising the material qualities and their characteristics as a three dimensional object. (Image 101)



Image 101, *Untitled*, 1974 Donald Judd

My proposed work will incorporate some of the qualities of Morris, in that the irregularity and softness of the material will evoke an anthropomorphic quality which refers to human interaction with the material.

I will combine materials that contrast but I will achieve "wholeness" in my installation through the relationship of the materials, repetition of units (the bag in all its forms) and a monotone palette.

Contemporary Australian installation artists, including Lauren Berkowitz, Tara Donovan, Kathy Temin, and Mikala Dwyer, re-contextualise found objects in Minimalist constructions and I discuss their works within this exegesis.

Eva Hesse investigated the inside of the minimalist cube in her works and this is a concept I find compelling.

## Marquettes

I am currently experimenting with marquettes to create structures using mallee bush poles and hessian bags painted white. (14 bags approx. 170 x 70 cm ) I have two panels of four bags stitched together (Image 103) and six separate panels. Three panel have photographs of female ancestors transferred onto them.(Image 104)



Image 102



Image 103

In the marquette I have thirteen panels and fourteen sticks. The aim was to see if such a structure could be self supporting and I experimented with both open and closed forms. It could be manipulated successfully in this small, light form but the bush poles are quite heavy.

Solving the problem of constructing indoors is a challenge as I have been asked not to make holes in the wooden floor of the building where I'm exhibiting. Callum Morton's work, *Monument #23: Slump*, (Image 111) has similarities to my proposed structures and from images of this work I got the idea of using hessian sand-bags to support uprights.



Image 104, Marquette 1



Image 105, Marquette 2



Image 106, Marquette 3



Image 107, Marquette 4



Image 108, Marquette 5



Image 109, Marquette 6



Image 110, Callum Morton, *Monument #23: Slump* 2009, polyurethane, epoxy resin, fibreglass, sand, cement, timber, acrylic paint 260 x 960 x 270cm

### Installation as Theatre set

Malevich, Klein, Lucio Fontana and Rauschenberg all conceived monochromes as theatre sets. Rose describes their work as:

*Monochrome serial arrangements of modular units that eliminated composition based on internal relationships and illusionistic space... and that in many cases their work represented a closed hermetic space that rejected allusion as much as illusion.*<sup>23</sup>

While I am attracted to the notion of removing illusion (because my installation will consist of free-standing and individual objects), it is my contention that by selecting the elements of these constructions, allusion will be a major part of the emotional response created in my audience.

Jannis Kounellis, on the other hand, from his roots in Arte Povera, through to contemporary times, has exemplified theatricality in a more narrative form. Since the 1980s he has been collaborating with people like Carlo Quartucci and Heiner Muller in classic spaces such as the Gobetti theatre or in opera houses in Amsterdam, Berlin or Vienna with a freedom unknown to most set designers.

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<sup>23</sup> Rose, 2004, p.60

As Moure states:

*Free from restriction of style or accountability to the script the materials and their deployment transformed from catalysts into protagonists, the stage set will have become an artwork. The plot is replaced by the process of perception.*<sup>24</sup>

While it is impossible to assess Kounellis' contribution to the overall narrative of these productions from one still photograph, I am attracted to his use of hessian bags stitched together and combined with ephemeral objects in his work *Opera Beuys*, (Image 102) It resonates with my thoughts on my proposed installation.



Image 111 Jannis Kounellis, *Opera Beuys*, Odeon, Vienna, 1990

This introduces another question that I am considering. Moving beyond the creation of individual emotions in my project, the narrative implied is the connection between the imaginative ways the poor in Australia (whether they be Pioneers or Depression-era parents)

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<sup>24</sup> Moure, 2007, p.54



managed to create positive lives for their families living in such difficult conditions and how this may relate to our present alienated and acquisitive society. It is clear that internationally this kind of question is occupying the minds of many residents of affluent societies worldwide. People are still living in tumultuous times and a large percentage of the world's population live in poverty. When I see images on the news of war torn areas and people displaced by environmental disasters the hessian bag continues to be used in make-shift shelters.

### **Venue for Proposed Exhibition**

I have secured a suitable venue for my exhibition for 18-25 March. The space is in a large building in Langtree Avenue, in the Mildura CBD. It is currently being converted into a Community Art Space. The area I will use is on the second floor and is about ten metres square with overhead beams that will allow for hanging works. There will be partitions built to enclose the area as the whole floor is being turned into artists' studios. Image 112 shows the space and a partition will be built across at the point of the second down-beam from the window.



Image 112, Exhibition space, 39 Langtree Ave, Mildura

I will mask the windows to eliminate natural light and use large stitched raw hessian pieces from a previous installation shown in Image 113 (but not the hanging bags) to create a false wall in front of the windows. I intend to project shadowy figures on this wall from behind and a sound-scape that hints at human habitation.



Image 113

It will be a challenge as there are two flights of steep stairs and a long corridor to bring the materials into the space. I will have a week to assemble and install my work. I have no preconceived final plan - just piles of materials and ideas that will be crystalised during the process of installation as I physically interact with the space. This interaction with the space and materials will determine the final outcome and I remain open until that point. This is a process I am familiar with which has worked for me in the past.

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# ***The Ghosts of Futures Past***

Lyn McDonald



This installation is the culmination of my research and practice towards Master of Visual Arts (Research) through Latrobe University. I acknowledge assistance from an Australian Scholarship which has enabled me to complete this project.

All civilizations collapse – some in a metaphorical blink of an eye. Our spiritless, self-obsessed and destructive civilization is approaching a tipping point – the centre no longer holds. Do we stumble, lemming-like into the void or can we step back, re-assess our priorities, reduce our expectations and go on to more fulfilling lives?

My work references the generations of working class women – my grandmothers, my mother and myself who were forced by circumstances to “make do”. Not only was their creativity tested – almost daily – but they managed to maintain a protective and loving environment for their children.

I think there are many lessons to be learned from these women and their peers that may save us from the precipice. Consequently I believe they could be thought of as:

### *The Ghosts of Futures Past*

Many artists have utilised mundane and poor materials to express truths to their tumultuous times - beginning with the Arte Povera movement in post WW2 Italy but today similar works can be found in the cultures of Brazil, Indonesia, Russia, Cambodia, the Middle East, Korea and China.

The philosophy of Arte Povera rejects consumerism and technological “advances” that alienate us from nature and even ourselves. It also seeks to break down elitism and class structures to make art more accessible to us all.

My choice of a poor material for our tumultuous times is hessian which was used to weather-proof shelters, as bedding, floor covering and to make children’s clothes. It took produce to markets and returned potatoes, sugar and flour to keep people alive. Recently it has been used for sandbags in floods.

My work references the makeshift shelters, built by the early settlers and those built by the thousands of unemployed during the Great Depression.

During my life I have had periods of living in similar circumstances: converting a banana packing-shed without plumbing or electricity into a cosy dwelling for my children and later, living in a remote Aboriginal community in an open bough shed surrounded by people who slept in the open or under rusty pieces of tin, canvas or car bonnets.

It was there I leaned to “make do”. It was also there that I developed my awe and admiration for my female ancestors.

As the basis of my work I have chosen the cube - historically a Minimalist form - stark, white and very masculine. Through my choice of materials and processes I have attempted to humanise that notion of “the cube”.

Artist such as Alberto Burri, Jannis Kounellis, Magdalena Abakanowicz, and Louise Bourgeois used hessian bags extensively in their practice - tearing and restitching it into a myriad of forms, Burri stated that he wished to make beauty from poor materials - and this has also been my aim.

Bourgeois said that threads weave important memories and emotional connections for us all and deconstructing and restructuring the hessian bags for my installation has given me ample time to consider the line of extraordinary women of which I am the current example.

As you move through my work I can only hope that you might feel a faint echo of my concern about our future and the pride and passion I feel for my female antecedents and for people displaced from their homes by poverty and environmental disaster who must learn to “make do”.