

**Transgressive Desires:  
The influence of Surrealism and cultural readings of  
Nature on Installation Art practice**

**by Sue Rogers**

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a  
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Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
School of Communication, Arts and Critical Enquiry  
Latrobe University  
Bundoora, Victoria, 3086  
Australia

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**Summary**

This exegesis aims to explore the process of studio-based research, which I have undertaken in order to create installation art. Through producing my art, I endeavour to express my personal understanding of nature. In doing so, I attempt to locate my experience within a wider context of historical and cultural readings of nature, including the experiences of Australian Aboriginals. I make particular reference to a place that is important to me: my home on the banks of Goulburn River in Shepparton. I aim to address the uneasy intercession between culture and nature in contemporary life.

My research compares the art made by the women of the Surrealist movement with the contemporary practice of Australian artist Louise Weaver. I also discuss the political significance of so-called 'tribal' objects and Primitivism to the Surrealist artists and how this has influenced my own choice of art materials.

This exegesis endeavours to situate my studio practice within the recent history of ephemeral art practices. I look specifically at the artwork made by Taiwanese artist Charwei Tsai and how her artwork, as well as my own, relates to the teachings of Buddhist philosophy.

I aim to position my studio research within the history and theory of installation art. In doing so, I explore how our bodily experience of the space we occupy, while an inescapable condition of our existence, is essential to our understanding of how we perceive and relate to installation art.

## **Statement of Authorship**

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis of any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Sue Rogers  
January 2011

## Introduction

An empathy with nature is integral to my art practice. Through undertaking my studio research, I became aware that I was attempting to produce surreal forest environments. These environments led the viewer inwards and confronted them with unexpected material forms. I wanted the artwork to be obviously handcrafted, and yet conversely, to give a feeling of being connected to nature. My resultant work aims to portray a natural world obscured by strange dreams. It borrows remnants of shamanic ritual merged with the detritus of feminine artifice and sets them together in an otherworldly garden of undying flowers.

I discovered that I wanted to explore my personal understanding of nature through my experience of a place that had meaning to me, that being my home in Shepparton, on the banks of the Goulburn River. In doing so, I was attempting to locate my personal experience within a wider context of historical and cultural understandings of nature, including the experiences of Aboriginal Australians.

As an undergraduate student, I had used materials sourced directly from the forest environment- namely twigs and tree bark. As my work progressed, I became quite interested in mimicking nature without necessarily always using

natural materials. I think this is why I was attracted to using faux fur; it references nature and yet it is so obviously artificial. I began to question whether society is becoming increasingly more comfortable with a sanitised, synthesized version of nature, in preference to the more gritty reality of the natural world.

My use of materials taken directly from nature, contrasted with synthetic simulations of natural materials and the resultant artwork led me to become curious about contemporary cultural readings of nature. I felt compelled to look at whether my own relationship with the natural world shared any similarities to traditional, non-Western understandings of nature. I had harboured a long-held interest in Eastern and Oceanic cultures and their art, and especially Australian Aboriginal art.

Through my experimentation in the studio, I found that what I really wanted to address was the uneasy intercession between nature and culture in contemporary life. I wished to discover how best to represent this tenuous duality when creating my installations. I combined the use of materials sourced directly from nature, such as feathers, with an attempt at representing the expansive spatial structure of the forest near my home. My installations aimed to re-present nature as though mediated through a dream.

At this time, the work of Australian artist Louise Weaver was also a significant influence on both my aesthetic and conceptual direction. Weaver's use of what was once regarded as traditional women's craft led me to explore a feminist



reading of art theory. I wanted to investigate why art created by women seemed to need a specific theoretical discourse in order to be fully acknowledged. I feel that this exploration gave me permission to pursue an element of my artwork that was both delicate and decorative; two terms that seem to hold questionable political implications, amongst art historians and theorists.

Weaver's work also appealed to me because of its surreal qualities. The juxtaposition of unlikely or unusual materials alongside each other induces a perplexed mood in the viewer. As well as being about feminine surface appearances, Weaver's work has a dream-like aura to it. I realised that I wished to then further explore my own art practice in relation to both Weaver's work and the work of the women Surrealists, with a particular focus on art materials and their juxtaposition.

Artists of the Surrealist movement appropriated so-called 'tribal' or 'primitive' objects with the political intent of drawing attention to the failings of Western society with its zeal for rational thought. I wanted to understand the political significance of tribal objects and Primitivism to artists practicing in the contemporary sphere.

As I approached studying for my Master of Visual Arts, my sporadic studio practice consisted of making large-scale, hanging installations that were quite sparse, minimal and devoid of colour. Intermittently, I was also making large acrylic paintings, exploring a very similar aesthetic. My painted surfaces consisted of repetitive, linear mark making, which formed very pale, fragile grids.

During the evolution of these artworks, I had borrowed from a range of different philosophies, including Buddhist teachings and the theories expounded by the artist Joseph Beuys. Beuys believed that processes operating within nature had the ability to demonstrate to humanity the path towards spiritual progress. Beuys, as an artist, envisioned his role as being similar to that of a shaman, having a responsibility to ensure a community's spiritual life was healthy.

Conceptually, I think my primary concern had always been the notion of 'connectivity.' I was intrigued by what it actually is, that binds together people and places, their thoughts and their dreams. I was asking myself about the connections people feel towards the environment in which they dwell. I was also curious to know how connectivity functions within a social community of people. I wondered if there were perhaps some similarities between the way that an ecological system operates in nature and how a community of people functions within society. Each system seemed to consist of an intricate network of parts, which interact and rely on each other, in order to flourish. My initial research proposal was based along this line of questioning.

Unfortunately, this proposal was too vast in scope and essentially too amorphous to form the basis of a Master of Visual Art exegesis. I felt as though I might be attempting to obtain the much sought-after "theory of everything" that both physicists and spiritual gurus, alike, are seeking. I realised I needed to narrow my focus and use my studio practice as a starting point for generating research questions, rather than looking towards the world at large.

The term 'nature' is one that presented me with a challenge. We tend to manipulate its meaning according to our ever-changing political agendas. When you look at the way the Earth has been utilized by the all-encompassing processes of global capitalism, you could conclude that nature only exists for us as another commodity. We use it at our convenience and yet simultaneously we rally against its over-use and its degradation. We want to preserve nature, but we can't resist studying and analysing it, with the hope of understanding a natural world that is fundamentally uncontrollable.

My installations are essentially ephemeral. They exist in a certain place for a certain time and then they are taken down and either discarded or completely reconfigured. The transient nature of the work is, in part, influenced by Buddhist philosophy. In this respect, it shares some similarities to the work of Taiwanese artist Charwei Tsai. I felt the need to locate my art practice in relation to that of Tsai's work and Eastern culture, especially since I chose to work with folded paper origami.

I became interested in exploring where my work sat within both the history of ephemeral art practices and the history of installation art practice itself. My question then became: How are cultural readings of nature and the influence of Surrealist art best articulated by contemporary installation art practice? While literally weaving threads with my hands, I hoped to weave an intricate mesh of ideas encompassing transience, Surrealism, tribal culture and femininity.

## Chapter 1.

### **Nature and its significance to my studio art practice**

In this chapter, I aim to explore my personal relationship to nature through my experience of a particular place, my home on the banks of the Goulburn River in Shepparton. I will also explain how my interaction and appreciation for the forest environment surrounding my home informs the art I produce in my studio. In doing so, I will attempt to locate my personal experience within the wider context of historical and cultural understandings of nature, including the experiences of Indigenous Australians.

The term 'nature' is a problematic one. We tend to assign to the natural world a plethora of meanings that have more to do with our own emotional and intellectual agenda than anything else. Nature is something perpetually outside our immediate sphere of reference. To a scientist, nature is something to be examined and explained. An explorer might wish to conquer nature, while a person on a spiritual quest may regard nature as evidence of divine creation.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote of nature evoking both our enjoyment and our terror.<sup>1</sup> The immensity of a mountain or the fierceness of a storm, were for Kant, phenomena that brought about a feeling of the 'sublime' in the

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant quoted in Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, Allworth Press, New York, 1999, pg. xii

observer.<sup>2</sup> As an artist, I associate nature with both beauty and the transient, mysterious processes of growth and decay.

Forests themselves are imbued with contradictory symbolic meanings. They are at once sacred and profane, enchanting and dangerous.<sup>3</sup> In fairy-tales, the forest is a place where the protagonist undergoes initiation rites.<sup>4</sup> They are places for choosing paths, confronting foes and finding one's way – both literally and metaphorically. As a city dweller, I cannot think of a forest without the niggling fear of what it would feel like to be lost and alone.

The painting by the Australian artist, Frederick McCubbin, entitled *Lost* (1886) depicts a child, or perhaps a young woman, alone in the hazy, sun drenched bush. Her forlorn figure appears diminished by the tangle of trees that surround her. Becoming lost would have been a common occurrence amongst rural settlers in the 1800's. I know through my own experience how easily it is to become disoriented in the heart of a forest.

Throughout the history of Western literature, the forest has been associated with our subconscious minds.<sup>5</sup> It is often a place of magic and mystery, a refuge for outcasts or an apt location for mayhem. The Brothers Grimm used the woods as a setting for the tales of Snow White and Hansel and Gretel, while Shakespeare set

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant quoted in Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, pg. xii

<sup>3</sup> Robert P. Harrison, *Forests the Shadow of Civilization*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1992, pg. x

<sup>4</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, Random House Inc, New York, 1995, pg. 107

<sup>5</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, pg. 209 - 211

A Midsummer Night's Dream in an enchanted forest. In the children's film The Wizard of Oz, the forest is a terrifying mesh of malicious trees that come to life.

There is a labyrinth quality to forests, you get the feeling that there are an endless number of paths you could choose to follow, but each path appears much the same as all the others. A forest can have the uncanny ability to draw you into its depths before you are fully aware of how far you have journeyed. Meandering in towards its hidden depths, you become aware that you no longer have a horizon as a visual reference, nor can you readily see the sky.

Since the time of the ancient Romans and Greeks, human beings have been sky-gazers; we look to the stars for guidance and divination.<sup>6</sup> As dense woodland canopies obscure our view of the sky, they seem to sever our relationship with the celestial realms. Because of this, forests have been denigrated as essentially godless places.<sup>7</sup> Immersed deep in the wilderness, we might be tempted to shed our morality and to let ourselves become in tune with our more instinctual side.

The Roman author Tacitus described pagan tribes in wooded Germania who worshiped trees and practiced human sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> They shunned gods with human attributes, believing divine spirits were inseparable from natural forms, such as oak trees.<sup>9</sup> In an annual ceremony in a sacred forest grove, they would sacrifice a human being and hang the corpse from a tree.<sup>10</sup> It is no small wonder

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<sup>6</sup> Robert P. Harrison, *Forests the Shadow of Civilization*, pg. 6

<sup>7</sup> Robert P. Harrison, *Forests the Shadow of Civilization*, pg. 6

<sup>8</sup> Tacitus quoted in Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, pg. 84

<sup>9</sup> Tacitus quoted in Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, pg. 84

<sup>10</sup> Tacitus quoted in Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, pg. 84

that early Christians held some reservations about people who dwelled close to the wilderness.

The landscape near my home in country Victoria is crawling with life and vibrancy. It has a timeless quality, although it is seldom still. When I walk through the forest, my bodily awareness is enhanced. I become more than ordinarily attentive to the process of moving my body through space; I become more perceptive. My path has obstacles, which as a town-dweller I am not accustomed to. The ground is uneven, and puddles of rainwater muddy the trail. Fallen logs partially occlude my way. The long grass beneath my feet is inhabited by snakes. I have seen them. They remind me of just how perilous my journey may become.

Alone in the forest, I find the unfamiliarity of my surrounds unnerving. In an attempt to compensate, I become more focused on what I see around me. I may be physically quite close to home, and yet I feel far-removed from all that is familiar and comforting. Although it is a place I have visited frequently, it always seems to me that I am venturing out anew, when I enter the woodlands. There can be something uncannily sinister about walking alone towards an unseen destination.

The author Gaston Bachelard has written:

'We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of "going deeper and deeper" into a limitless world. Soon, if we do not know where we are going, we no longer know where we are.' <sup>11</sup>

Being by myself, deep in the immeasurable forest, I sometimes feel that not only do I not know where I'm going, but perhaps I do not even know *who I am*. There is a strange sense that I am in danger of losing my very identity when I remove myself from civilization. The wilderness seems to have the inexplicable power to inhabit the psyche of those who pass through it. It has the ability to literally *bewilder* a person- to cause confusion. I have thought many times that there is something ominous in this power.

This menacing quality that the forest exudes was perhaps what Dante was referring to in his Divine Comedy, with the words:

'...this savage forest, so dense and rugged,  
which even in memory renews my fear!' <sup>12</sup>

It is a fear that does not attach itself to a specific object- it is not the terror of wild animals, nor that of concealed enemies. It is a fear bordering on existential anxiety. It is a form of alienation induced by being in the forest environ, that can be, in itself, frightening.<sup>13</sup> In the forest, I cannot escape an intense awareness of my own thoughts and emotions, and I am usually confronted with whatever is

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<sup>11</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1994, pg. 185

<sup>12</sup> Dante quoted in Robert P. Harrison, *Forests the Shadow of Civilization*, pg. 82

<sup>13</sup> Robert P. Harrison, *Forests the Shadow of Civilization*, pg. 82



foremost on my mind, or worse still; that which is lurking just below the surface of my conscious thought.

Deep inside the forest labyrinth, anxiety is mingled with awe. Nature inspires feelings of wonder. Living in an urban Western locale, I see nature as something totally 'other' than myself. It is beautiful and serene, and associated with nostalgic ideas of simplicity, freedom and peace.<sup>14</sup> Most often, when I think of nature, I think of beauty.

In prehistoric times, religions honoring Earth mother goddesses were prolific. The earliest known sculpture is a small caved stone figure, the Venus of Berekhat Ram, estimated to be from 230,000 BC, pre-dating Neanderthal man.<sup>15</sup> Similar such 'Venus' figurines have been found throughout Europe, dating from the early Stone Age. These carved figures, made from clay, stone or ivory are female forms, with large breasts and protruding or pregnant bellies. It is believed that these figurines are evidence of a matriarchal culture that revered female deities.<sup>16</sup> Female fertility was celebrated and aligned with the fecund mother Earth.

It is believed that these early religions did not distinguish between the sky and the earth, nor animal and human.<sup>17</sup> Human beings had not the capacity to see

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<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Price, 'Looking for Nature at the Mall: A Field Guide to the Nature Company', in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 1995, pg. 190

<sup>15</sup> Whitney Davis, 'Beginning the History of Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 51, no. 3, Summer 1993, pg. 339

<sup>16</sup> Marija Gimbutus quoted in Lauren E. Talalay 'Review: Cultural biographies of the Great Goddess', *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 104, no. 4, Oct. 2002, pg. 789

<sup>17</sup> Robert P. Harrison, *Forests the Shadow of Civilization*, pg. 19

themselves as separate from nature. The world was conceptualized as a totality. Far from being godless places, forests were where the great Goddess dwelled.<sup>18</sup>

Australian Aboriginal people also align their spirituality with an understanding of the natural world. Aboriginal people embrace a belief system that recognises a creation process known as the Dreamtime.<sup>19</sup> During this time, the landscape was an undifferentiated mass, traversed by ancestral beings. The escapades of these Dreamtime spirits became inscribed upon the lands that they travelled, giving the lands their characteristic form and appearance.<sup>20</sup> The land itself therefore holds great spiritual significance to Indigenous people, as it tells the story of its own creation.

Through ceremonial practices, Aboriginal people assert their direct relationship to the Dreamtime and their connectedness to the land they inhabit.<sup>21</sup> The people hold themselves responsible for their lands- they have an obligation to sing for the land, to paint it, and to keep its stories.<sup>22</sup> Aboriginal women, in particular, are concerned with nurturing the land, in a similar way to how one nurtures children.<sup>23</sup> The Indigenous Australians see their relationship to nature as a reciprocal one. They can harvest the lands' bounty, but they must adhere to complex ceremonial practices in return.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert P. Harrison, *Forests the Shadow of Civilization*, pg. 19

<sup>19</sup> Diane Bell, 'Person and Place: Making Meaning of the Art of Australian Indigenous Women', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, Spring 2002, pg. 95

<sup>20</sup> Diane Bell, 'Person and Place: Making Meaning of the Art of Australian Indigenous Women', pg. 95

<sup>21</sup> Diane Bell, 'Person and Place: Making Meaning of the Art of Australian Indigenous Women', pg. 96

<sup>22</sup> Diane Bell, 'Person and Place: Making Meaning of the Art of Australian Indigenous Women', pg. 96

<sup>23</sup> Diane Bell, 'Person and Place: Making Meaning of the Art of Australian Indigenous Women', pg. 103

Aboriginal people of the Yorta Yorta tribe still reside near the Goulburn River, and although they no longer live directly from the land, they maintain their spiritual connections to it. The Yorta Yorta Co-operative Management Agreement was established in 2004 in order to recognise Aboriginal people's affiliation with the land and allowing them co-operative governance over it.<sup>24</sup>

The forest that surrounds the Goulburn River consists predominantly of river red gums, but there are also tea trees and wattles. The forest floor is a dense expanse of native grasses. Above, the tree branches create a high, airy canopy, which allows sunlight to reach the ground. The trees are huge, but they are not silent. Walking through this environment, I am attuned to the expansive feeling of space that surrounds me.

I find that I want to return again and again to the same area. Walking alone in the wilderness, shadowed by a mysterious anxiety and struck with awe by the beauty of my surrounds, my thoughts turn to creativity. I make my art in response to the feelings that I experience in the forest. There is a complex interplay of memories and emotions that fuel my perception of things.

When walking alone, I am sometimes transported by memory to an earlier time, when as a child I experienced the forest as a magical place. There is a blurring of boundaries in my mind, as to what are my actual memories and what might be

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<sup>24</sup> Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation, [www.yynac.com.au/co-op.php](http://www.yynac.com.au/co-op.php) a declaration was signed by YYNAC and the Victorian Attorney General, Rob Hulls, on 10 June 2004. It reads, in part: 'The State [of Victoria] recognises that the Yorta Yorta Peoples are the traditional owners of and have a unique inherent relationship with and responsibility to their country ... In accordance with this recognition, the State will ensure the ongoing important role of the Yorta Yorta Peoples in land and water management decision making relating to the protection, management and sustainability of their country, including cultural and environmental values.'

recollections of fragments of my vivid childhood dreams. Those dreams were fed by fairy-tale stories and children's movies that evoked a sense of the forest as an otherworldly place. I try to bring this wondrous, otherworldly sensibility to my art practice.

I attempt to re-present nature as though experienced through a dream. My artwork combines an affinity with the spatial structure of the forest, combined with the use of materials sourced directly from nature, such as feathers. There is a duality at play in my artwork, a resolution between representation and the material reality of actual natural objects.

When I create something in the studio, the process that I undertake is very similar to being immersed in a dream-like state. During a dream, my mind throws up random images and emotions and yet I can somehow consciously choose a path through the confusion and turmoil, and disregard certain images in favour of others. I am usually aware that I am dreaming and that I am, on some level at least, creating the dream as it unfolds.

The process of creating something new is, for me, an instinctual process. I am aware that navigating a path through a forest shares some similarities with negotiating a path through a dreamscape. Both involve a complex, but only semi-conscious process of choosing and discarding multiple options. Both processes involve a type of altered or heightened awareness.

The ability of nature to bring our instinctual tendencies to the surface is

something the artist Joseph Beuys addressed.<sup>25</sup> Looking afresh at photographs of Beuys' prolific artistic output, I am struck, not only by his references to nature, but also by his ingenious and repeated use of certain materials. These materials, namely animal fat, felt, and copper are themselves derived from the natural world. The work entitled *Eurasia Siberian Symphony* (1963) (fig. 1.1) shows how Beuys has used wedges of both felt and fat placed against rods attached to the legs of a dead hare. To Beuys, these substances represented certain transformative processes that had the ability to propel human consciousness into the realm of the spirit.<sup>26</sup>

It may have been in response to Beuys' artwork that I first incorporated materials taken directly from the forest into my studio practice. I was interested in the ability some materials seem to have to transmit a sort of energetic resonance. I am aware that the materials that constitute our surroundings can have a range of meanings and functions that are not purely practical. Using matter taken directly from the natural environment seemed to bring a complex set of energetic nuances into my studio space.

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<sup>25</sup> Alain Borer, *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1997, pg. 25

<sup>26</sup> Alain Borer, *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, pg. 21, 22



1.1 Joseph Beuys *Eurasia Siberian Symphony* 1963

Materials are imbued with the personal or cultural significance we attribute to them. For instance, animal fur is rarely seen as just a neutral fabric with a range of practical uses. In contemporary culture, it is often affiliated with endangered species and therefore with cruelty. However, until only recently, fur was regarded as a signifier of luxury and high fashion- it was associated with affluence and prestige. Using fur to make my art is a considered decision, as I'm aware that it is a material with varied and conflicting connotations.

Historically, in the West, nature has been associated with the feminine principle. In direct contrast to the goddess worship of prehistoric times, more recently, both women and the natural world were viewed as essentially passive and receptive. Both were subject to domination and control by the male patriarchy.<sup>27</sup> Culture was seen as a masculine construct. Significantly, art has had a central role in producing and sustaining the cultural status quo. The heroic figure of the artist as cultural arbitrator has been uniformly assigned as male.

For a woman to re-present nature in her art, she paradoxically aligns herself with the natural world as well as demonstrating her ability to reinterpret and show governance over it.<sup>28</sup> It is this apparent paradox that makes art produced by women, about nature, so appealing to me. When I use a manufactured material, such as paper, to create a representation of something natural, such as a lotus flower, I seem to experience a sense of resolution regarding my relationship with nature.

Concern for the status of the natural environment has been on the rise in Australia, as is evident with the success of the Greens in the recent federal election. This unease with the continuing problems faced by the natural world is part of a much larger, global movement that calls for direct action to halt carbon emissions and dramatically decrease our reliance on fossil fuels. This concern is reflected in the number of artists and exhibitions that attempt to convey an

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<sup>27</sup> Julie Ewington, 'In the Wild: Nature, Culture, Gender in Installation Art' in Adam Geczy and Benjamin Genocchio (eds.), *What is Installation? An anthology of writings on Australian installation art*, Power Publications, Sydney, 2001, pg. 33

<sup>28</sup> Julie Ewington, 'In the Wild: Nature, Culture, Gender in Installation Art', pg. 34

environmental message. At the 17<sup>th</sup> Sydney Biennale several artists, including Janet Laurence, produced work that engaged with these environmental issues.

Janet Laurence's somber and mesmerizing piece entitled *Waiting- Medicinal Garden for Ailing Plants* (2010) at the Sydney Biennale succeeded in demonstrating the fragility of nature as it faces an onslaught of threats from pollutants, introduced species and climate change. Laurence's work draws awareness to the intervention of science in helping to conserve nature.

Environmental art plays an important role in educating the public and drawing attention to towards environmental issues. The work I've produced endeavors to bring about a realization as to the importance of our ongoing reciprocal relationship with the natural world. Nature not only literally sustains us, but it inhabits our collective psyche in a subtly compelling way.



## Chapter 2.

### **Surrealism and femininity**

In this chapter, I would like to give a brief account of the history of Surrealism and then compare the art made by women in the Surrealist movement with the contemporary practice of Australian artist Louise Weaver. I aim to then further explore my own art practice in relation to both Weaver's work and Surrealism, with a particular focus on the use of natural materials.

Surrealism was founded by the writer Andre Breton in response to the catastrophic and senseless destruction that characterised World War I.<sup>29</sup> The Surrealists embraced Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis and occult philosophies as a means to rebel against the prevailing dominance of reason and logic, which they felt had only hindered mankind.<sup>30</sup> The movement was wide-ranging, sustained and influential in the realms of painting, photography, sculpture, poetry and film.

Influenced by Freud, the Surrealists explored the notions of the unconscious, dream analysis, and fetish objects. They were interested in breaking down accepted boundaries between male and female, human and animal, and fantasy and reality.<sup>31</sup> Surrealism made use of chance juxtapositions and unrelated or

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<sup>29</sup> Amy Dempsey, *Styles, Schools and Movements- an encyclopaedic guide to Modern Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2005, pg. 153

<sup>30</sup> Amy Dempsey, *Styles, Schools and Movements- an encyclopaedic guide to Modern Art*, pg. 151

<sup>31</sup> Amy Dempsey, *Styles, Schools and Movements- an encyclopaedic guide to Modern Art*, pg. 153

strange combinations of objects and images in order to subvert rational thinking. They also practiced automatic writing- a process by where an individual would simply allow himself to write whatever popped spontaneously into his head, no matter how bizarre or nonsensical. The Surrealists felt they could directly access the source of their creativity by bypassing the rational mind.

This involvement with absurdity and the irrational is what appeals to me about Surrealism. When I am making art, I am aware that my decisions regarding my work are not always rational. My reasons are diverse and idiosyncratic, but I don't think they are initially conscious. For me, the instinctual process that generates creativity feels very close to being embedded in dreaming and the subconscious.

My sleep has been disturbed by vivid and unusual dreams for many years now. The imagery contained in my dreams is chaotic and confusing, but it often leads to personal insights. Dreams tend to have the ability to speak to us in a metaphorical and symbolic language. Images that at first appear to be totally bizarre and illogical can lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves, as they give us an insight into our subconscious motivations.

Since the eighties, the prevailing feminist tendency has been to regard Surrealism as deeply misogynist.<sup>32</sup> Surrealism was a movement founded and

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<sup>32</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2000, pg. 1

controlled by men.<sup>33</sup> There is much documented evidence to suggest that the formative movement was, at best, dismissive of women, if not openly hostile towards them.<sup>34</sup> To contemporary eyes, many of the images produced by male Surrealists seem almost laughable in their blatant depiction of women as passive erotic objects.

Rene Magritte's drawing *Le Viol (The Rape)* (1934) depicts a woman's face replaced by her nude torso, so as her breasts become her eyes and her genitals become her mouth. The resulting image is comical, but it is also grotesque. The woman's face is both mute and unseeing.<sup>35</sup> The woman Magritte depicts has lost her ability to communicate and her capacity to perceive the world that she inhabits. All that is left to her is her sexuality- a sexuality that is perpetually on display, as it is always one's face that we present to the world.

Magritte was not alone in depicting the female form as a passive, expressionless object. Man Ray's photograph entitled *Coat-Stand* (1920)(fig. 2.1) shows a woman's nude body, with her face and arms completely obscured by a crude cardboard cut-out, on which a drawing of a face has been rendered with child-like simplicity. The result is disturbing, as with her real face hidden, the woman no longer seems to have an identity. She is rendered lifeless, and somehow helpless. The implication of the work's title is that the woman is there only to fulfil a practical use; she has become an inanimate object- a coat stand.

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<sup>33</sup> Patricia Allmer 'On Fallen Angels and Angels of Anarchy' in Patricia Allmer (ed.), *Angels of Anarchy Women Artists and Surrealism*, exh. cat., Prestel in conjunction with Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, 2010, pg. 13

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Allmer, *Angels of Anarchy Women Artists and Surrealism*, pg. 13

<sup>35</sup> Robin Adele Greeley, 'Image, Text and the Female Body: Rene Magritte and the Surrealist Publications', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1992, pg. 48

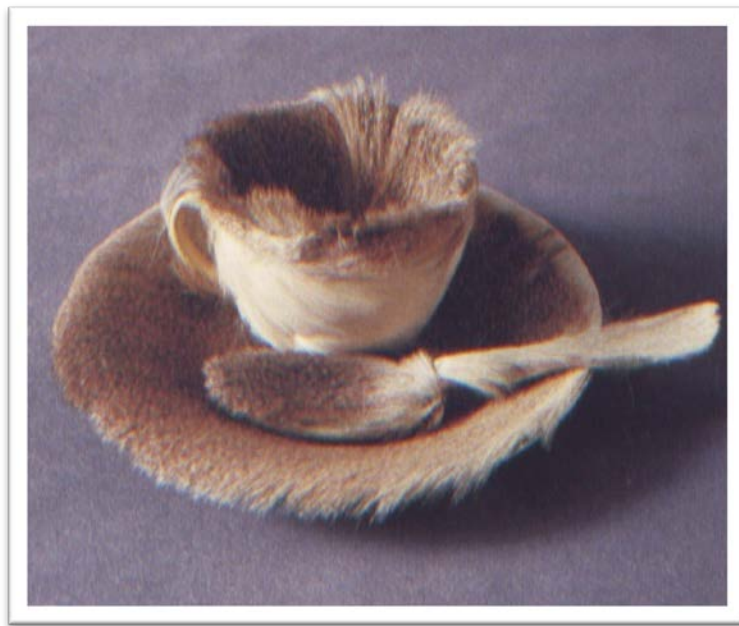


2.1 Man Ray *Coat-Stand* 1920

While some of the works by their male counterparts seem hopelessly dated, the work of the women Surrealists themselves remains inspiring and influential. As an undergraduate student, I saw and identified with Meret Oppenheim's *Object (Le Dejeuner en fourrure)* (1936) (fg. 2.2). I found the work playfully humorous with its absurd coupling of fur and teacup. The object seemed to me both strange and alluring. I was curious when I found Oppenheim's work described as

‘shockingly sensual.’<sup>36</sup> I had to ask myself if there *is* something shocking about sensuality.

I believe that Oppenheim’s work may have inspired my first tentative experiments with synthetic fur. Fur is soft and people seem to instinctually want to reach out and stroke it. Artworks that incorporate the use of fur can present a paradoxical message, as traditionally viewers are not permitted to touch art displayed in a gallery. Fur is seductive because it invites transgression. We would like to touch it, but simultaneously we experience the knowledge that what we desire is forbidden.



2.2 Meret Oppenheim *Object*  
(*Le Dejeuner en fourrure*) 1936

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<sup>36</sup> Alicia Foster, *Tate Women Artists*, Tate Publishing, London, 2003, pg. 190

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan asserted that desire only exists in response to the subject's recognition of some primordial absence.<sup>37</sup> Satisfaction itself, when obtained, is never complete as it necessarily contains the initial recognition of this absence.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps fur is desirable because seems to embody warmth and softness and so we associate it with the corporeal properties of the body. The deep-seated taboo surrounding the touching of artwork renders the satisfaction obtained from touching fur in a gallery doubly uncertain, in light of Lacan's assertion. We must suffer first the recognition of absence that led to desire and then accept that satisfying our impulse to touch is a cultural transgression.

Fur cannot escape associations with its animal origin. In some ways, it is a very inconvenient material for people to use- it is labour intensive to acquire, and its quality and colour may be variable and unpredictable. Politically, the use of animal fur is almost universally reviled in the West, because we tend to link its use with threatened and endangered species. For many people, the use of synthetic fur is also reminiscent of fluffy toy animals, and so has powerful connotations of childhood.

When I create artwork from synthetic fur, I'm aware of myriad associations the viewer might bring to a reading of the work. Fur is soft, sensuous and enticing,

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<sup>37</sup>Juliet Mitchell, 'Introduction- 1', in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds.), *Feminine Sexuality Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 1982, pg. 6

<sup>38</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Feminine Sexuality Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, pg. 6

but conversely, it could also repel people, if they think of the violence that accompanies the acquisition of real fur. When the fur I've chosen to use is obviously artificial in its coloring and texture, then it is often read as just another fabric bought from a shop- it loses many of its ties to the natural world.

Australian artist Louise Weaver has also had her work compared to Oppenheim's surreal sculptures.<sup>39</sup> Weaver uses a menagerie of animal forms that she casts directly from actual animal bodies using taxidermy techniques.<sup>40</sup> The artist then adorns her creatures with intricate, sometimes dazzling, skin-tight coverings, liberating them from nature, into a world of bizarre fantasy.<sup>41</sup>

I first encountered Weaver's art at the *Contempora 5* exhibition, at the Ian Potter Museum in Melbourne in 1999. What I like about Weaver's work is that it is unashamedly feminine, vividly colorful and dexterously crafted. There is something obsessive in the way she meticulously crafts her crochet coverings.<sup>42</sup> My own artwork also sometimes conveys this kind of fanatical handcrafted detail.

Traditional women's hand craft, such as sewing, knitting and crocheting were not historically awarded the status of 'high art'. Being almost exclusively produced within the domain of the female domestic role, these skills were not usually highly prized outside that sphere. Fortunately, with the emergence of the second

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<sup>39</sup> Sally Couacaud, *After Nature*, exh. cat., Lake Macquarie City Gallery, Lake Macquarie, 2005, (catalogue pages not numbered)

<sup>40</sup> Sally Couacaud, *After Nature*, (catalogue pages not numbered)

<sup>41</sup> Sally Couacaud, *After Nature*, (catalogue pages not numbered)

<sup>42</sup> Louise Weaver, 'Louise Weaver in interview with Rachel Kent', *Art & Australia Magazine*, vol. 44, no. 3, Autumn 2007, pg. 413

wave of feminism, women's traditional craft was tentatively given the recognition it deserved. Yet, there still seems to be some disputed political implications surrounding women's penchant towards the use of specifically 'feminine' traits in their art.

Other contemporary women artists, including Tracy Emin, use feminine crafts in a satirical or subversive way. While embroidery and crochet can remind the viewer that women were historically confined to domestic subservience, they can conversely imply that women now have the power to playfully explore the scope of their feminine identity, and embrace or discard elements at their will.

I had the good fortune to encounter one of Tracey Emin's works, entitled *Chess Set* (2008) at the Bendigo Art Gallery in 2010. Emin had roughly hand-stitched what appeared to be a miniature patchwork quilt, on top of which she had assembled her cast bronze chess pieces. The color-contrasting, chequered surface of the quilt mimicked the black and white surface of a chessboard. I thought that use of traditional women's handcraft and soft fabrics to represent something that would usually be deftly manufactured to more precise standards was cleverly confrontational.

Louise Weaver employs traditional women's handcraft in a similar fashion. Her installation, *Taking a Chance on Love* (2002-3) (fg. 2.3) presents the viewer with a strangely distorted version of the natural world. A bear, a weasel and a squirrel inhabit a hybrid interior/landscape, each encased in a vibrant red hand-



crochet skin.<sup>43</sup> The animals are mute and immobile, almost like museum exhibits displayed in an arena especially crafted to resemble nature. But this habitat actually resembles someone's lounge-room floor, complete with carpet, a rug and some very odd furniture.



2.3 Louise Weaver *Taking a Chance on Love* 2002-3

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<sup>43</sup> Sally Couacaud, *After Nature*, (catalogue pages not numbered)

Weaver has covered carefully selected sticks and stones with crochet and placed them on the carpet. What appears to be an electric lamp sits atop a painted red rock. In a clever visual pun, the centrally placed, fluffy rug is of the type that I would be tempted to describe as a 'bear-skin' rug. While the bear in Weaver's installation has to make do with a coat made from crochet, his own pelt has become a mere furnishing for the floor.

The pelt is probably the only element of the artwork that retains its integrity as a material that might have been sourced directly from nature. The animals, sticks and stones are completely covered and therefore their true origins are obscured.<sup>44</sup> As a viewer, I can't tell whether or not there are actual bodies of animals or real sticks of wood hidden beneath Weaver's crochet. I am left with only an elaborate, exquisite charade to behold. It is a vision of nature wholly engulfed and corrupted by contemporary culture.

Weaver's forest creatures are deliberately cute- like so many representations of animals found in popular culture. I find something a little bit disturbing in their prettiness. Yet, I am also attracted to them, as I would be to merchandise that has been carefully presented for consumption in a shop. I wonder if the 'skins' Weaver has so deftly crafted for her menagerie are somehow related to the shifting identities that women wear and discard as they fulfill their various roles within society.

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<sup>44</sup> Louise Weaver, 'Louise Weaver in interview with Rachel Kent', pg. 413

I can't agree with the theorist Sally Couacaud's comment that Weaver does not attempt to critique 'culture's love affair and interference with nature'.<sup>45</sup> I think the work does point to a society that is becoming progressively more at ease with manufactured re-presentations of nature, in contrast to a direct, authentic experience with the environment.<sup>46</sup> It is also artwork that critiques a culture of rampant consumerism and obsessive interest surface appearances.

Jennifer Price has written:

*'I encounter nature most often out of place, in the city, through artifice and simulation.'*<sup>47</sup>

Most Australians dwell in an urban locale, where we are surrounded by sanitized and idealistic representations of nature, both in popular culture and in art. I am reminded of ubiquitous T.V. commercials that use images of nature, such as waterfalls and baby animals, to promote shampoo and toilet paper. These images are so familiar to us, and yet our encounters with the actual natural world are far less frequent.

Like Weaver, I also have an interest in producing seductive, tactile surfaces that are inviting to gaze at, when I make my art. People describe my installations as being 'feminine', but the gendered appearance of my work was never a conscious consideration during its production. My only experience of life has been as a

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<sup>45</sup> Sally Couacaud, *After Nature*, (catalogue pages not numbered)

<sup>46</sup> Kate Just, 'Louise Weaver', *Artlink Magazine*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2006, [www.artlink.com.au](http://www.artlink.com.au)

<sup>47</sup> Jennifer Price, 'Looking for Nature at the Mall: A Field Guide to the Nature Company', pg. 201

female. I have been socialized as a woman and I have only ever lived in a patriarchal culture. However, I will acknowledge that being a woman has impacted on my aesthetic preferences, albeit subconsciously.

## Chapter 3.

### Surrealism and primitivism

'Motivated by an alchemical and shamanistic urge to mix, make and mark, Surrealist objects remain dark and unconsecrated in their spirit and primitive in their magical, animistic appeal...'<sup>48</sup>

Tribal objects have been appropriated by Western art since the early 1900's.<sup>49</sup>

Artists of the Surrealist movement looked toward other cultures as a means of subverting and challenging what was accepted cultural discourse at that time.<sup>50</sup>

The Surrealists aimed to critique a society that perpetuated the horrific and senseless destruction brought about by World War I. They embraced 'tribal' or 'primitive' influences as a political tool, with the intention of transgressing the accepted Western canon.<sup>51</sup> The Surrealists challenged the hegemony of Western culture, its class system and the legacy of the enlightenment project.

Reflecting on post-colonial theory, labels such as 'primitive' and 'tribal' appear steeped in ethnocentric egotism. We should not forget that these objects held important ritual and social significance within the societies that produced them.

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<sup>48</sup> Kenneth Watch, 'The Souvenirs of Sensation Surrealism and its Objects' in Juliana Engberg (ed.), *The Aberrant Object: Women, Dada and Surrealism*, exh. cat., MOMA at Heide, Melbourne, 1994, pg. 29

<sup>49</sup> Thomas McEvilley, 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: "Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984' in Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (eds.), *Uncontrollable Beauty toward a new Aesthetics*, Allworth Press, New York, 2001, pg. 152

<sup>50</sup> James Clifford quoted in Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, pg. 2

<sup>51</sup> Andre Breton quoted in Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, 'Surrealism is allied with peoples of colour, first because it has sided with them against all forms of imperialism and white brigandage... and second because of the profound affinities between Surrealism and primitive thought. Both envision the abolition of the hegemony of the conscious and the everyday, leading to the conquest of revelatory emotion.' preface

Their creators never intended them to be displayed as art, as we understand the notion of art in the European tradition.<sup>52</sup> While it may be very convenient for the industrialized nations of the West to label other cultures as 'primitive', it is a mistake to assume these cultures lack complexity or reason.

Surrealism, as a movement, attempted to embrace other ways of understanding. They did not limit their concerns to subconscious desires and dream analysis, but were also interested in raising awareness of culturally constructed knowledge and its alternatives. Hence, the Surrealist use of artifacts from Oceania and Africa was not in any way tokenistic nor simply aesthetically driven.<sup>53</sup> These traditional objects were appropriated with the awareness that there is more than one way to understand our world and our place in it.

As a child, traveling with my parents through central Australia, I remember being shown a pair of Aboriginal ceremonial shoes, constructed entirely from emu feathers, human hair and blood.<sup>54</sup> I have never seen anything remotely like these shoes, either before or since. They were delicate and beautiful and for some reason seemed to hold a certain aura of strength, coupled with strangeness. I think that I was almost hypnotized by the sight of them. (fg. 3.1)

It could simply have been that like most children, I was fond of assigning magical qualities to a range of objects, quite indiscriminately. To me, those shoes were

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas McEvilley 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: "Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984', pg. 161

<sup>53</sup> Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic*, pg. 13

<sup>54</sup> D.S. Davidson, 'Footwear of the Australian Aborigines: Environmental vs. Cultural Determination', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 3, no. 2, Summer 1947, pg. 116

deceptively fragile as they were suffused with supernatural powers. I would have felt too uneasy to have reached out and touched them.

The shoes would have once belonged to an Aboriginal sorcerer known as a “Kurdaitcha.” The role of the Kurdaitcha in traditional Aboriginal culture was to stalk and kill an individual who was deemed by the tribe to deserve such a punishment.<sup>55</sup> Wearing the emu-feather shoes concealed the sorcerer’s identity, as the shoes ensured that he would not leave a discernable footprint, in a culture where a person’s footprint was akin to his signature.<sup>56</sup>

I was fascinated to learn that it was not strictly necessary for the Kurdaitcha Man to wear the feather shoes in order to benefit from their magical qualities. It was enough for him to simply be in possession of the shoes, and his footprints would then be obscured.<sup>57</sup> This knowledge would explain the pristine, unsullied appearance of the shoes that I recall seeing as a child. But I can only guess as to why I might have sensed their otherworldly affinity.

When I use feathers to make my art, I like to think that I am doing so with an awareness of how they have previously been used in Australian Aboriginal culture. I think that this awareness shares some similarity with the Surrealist’s appropriation of tribal objects, that is, that it is done with a sustained attempt at understanding other ways of being, aside from the Western paradigm.

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<sup>55</sup> D.S. Davidson, ‘Footwear of the Australian Aborigines: Environmental vs. Cultural Determination’, pg. 16

<sup>56</sup> D.S. Davidson, ‘Footwear of the Australian Aborigines: Environmental vs. Cultural Determination’, pg. 116

<sup>57</sup> D.S. Davidson, ‘Footwear of the Australian Aborigines: Environmental vs. Cultural Determination’, pg. 119



3.1 Australian Aboriginal 'Kurdaitcha' shoes

(creator and date unknown)

Taking materials directly sourced from nature and using them in my art has been a reoccurring practice for me. There is something quite primal in the attraction I feel towards natural materials. I think it goes beyond the Beuysian association with energetic resonances and the implied capacity natural things have to evoke a spiritual awareness. Natural materials, such as feathers, leaves and flowers are so essentially complete within themselves. While working with these materials, I became aware that it was not possible to add to their beauty. I had to incorporate them into my work in such a way as to utilize their beauty to its best advantage.



An undated and untitled work (fig. 3.2) by the Surrealist artist Elisa Breton presents us with an Amerindian charm, transformed into a strangely grotesque sculpture.<sup>58</sup> Breton has replaced the feathers from around the rim of the charm with bundles of actual dead birds, strung up limply by their beaks.<sup>59</sup> The stuffed head of a real mink has been placed in the center of the work, where a carved animal would have sat.<sup>60</sup> Breton's work is strikingly colorful, but bleak in its representation of death and the violence which characterizes some of our human interactions with nature.



3.2 Elisa Breton (title and date of work unknown)

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<sup>58</sup> Patricia Allmer, *Angels of Anarchy Women Artists and Surrealism*, pg. 67

<sup>59</sup> Patricia Allmer, *Angels of Anarchy Women Artists and Surrealism*, pg. 67

<sup>60</sup> Patricia Allmer, *Angels of Anarchy Women Artists and Surrealism*, pg. 67

Breton's lifeless birds are reminiscent of specimens laid out for our perusal in a museum cabinet. The decapitated head of the mink draws strong associations with the use of animal fur to make fashionable women's clothing. There is perhaps even some sly reference to the derogatory colloquial use of the word 'bird' to denote a woman.<sup>61</sup> We have to wonder if Breton is suggesting that our patriarchal culture prefers women's bodies to be lifeless (or at least passive) and laid out for perusal by the male gaze.

By recycling an Amerindian charm, Breton draws on its shamanic resonances, elevating her sculpture into the realm of animist fetish. I think it is of importance that the artist chose to work with materials that related directly to the elements of the Amerindian amulet that she had removed or covered. Breton cleverly incorporates a recognition and appreciation of the original function of the Amerindian amulet. It is not used merely as a device on which to pin ill-considered ideas, nor is it used because it happened to be of the precise physical size and shape that would support the other elements of her sculpture.

Breton's work, like the work of Louise Weaver, raises some challenging and defiant questions about the problematic relationship between nature, cultural 'otherness' and feminine identity. Feathers, fur and flowers have been used to adorn luxurious, fashionable garments in the West, for centuries. Sometimes, when we see these things taken out of the natural environment and displayed enticingly, their encoded cultural status, as signifiers of luxury, seems of foremost importance to us. They are so obviously taken from nature, yet they are no longer allowed to speak quite so forcefully of nature; they become tamed and

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<sup>61</sup> Patricia Allmer, *Angels of Anarchy Women Artists and Surrealism*, pg. 67

constrained.

When I use feathers and fur to make my installations, I often think of this uncertainty, avowed by the continued identity crisis that natural materials suffer in our culture. Natural materials don't necessarily evoke only nature itself, but are encoded with a range of symbolic meanings that are determined by the perspective of the person viewing them.

In the recent past, traditional non-Western cultures routinely used feathers and fur to adorn their bodies, and while these garments were also used as social and cultural signifiers, to me their use seems less contrived. I worry that it is simply my ethnocentric romanticism that overshadows my judgment, as I cannot reasonably speculate at the intricacy and diversity of thought that is behind the creation of traditional costume. This basic conundrum in understanding the culturally encoded significance of natural materials informs the art that I produce.

George Nona, an artist from Bandu Island in the Torres Strait, uses cassowary and pheasant feathers, along with cane, beeswax and natural pigments to create ceremonial 'dhoeris' or traditional headdresses (fg. 3.3)<sup>62</sup> Dhoeris were originally worn by the people of the Torres Strait during tribal wars but are now used almost exclusively in dance performances.<sup>63</sup> Nona intentionally re-contextualizes the headdresses once again, by exhibiting them as art objects in

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<sup>62</sup> Tom Mosby, 'George Nona to be helpful in bad times' in John Birmingham and David Burnett (eds.), *Contemporary Australia: Optimism*, exh. cat., Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pg. 166-167

<sup>63</sup> Tom Mosby, 'George Nona to be helpful in bad times', pg. 167

their own right.<sup>64</sup> So even within the cultural framework of a cohesive group of people, dwelling within a reasonably isolated place, a ritual headdress does not necessarily signify a fixed or set meaning.



3.3 George Nona *Ceremonial Dhoeri* 2008

Just as the function of a ceremonial headdress in the Torres Strait may shift over time, in the West, the cultural function of clothing made from feathers and fur may also be in flux. For instance, I make use of feathers taken directly from cheap feather boas, bought from a discount shop. A feather boa conjures images of costume, performance and the world of feminine artifice. It is such a culturally

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<sup>64</sup> Tom Mosby, 'George Nona to be helpful in bad times', pg. 167-168

loaded piece of bodily adornment. As I remove each feather from its boa, it loses these somewhat disreputable associations and becomes once again something very unaffected and pure. When I use the feathers to create an installation in a gallery, they in turn become re-coded with the multiple, shifting meanings that could be attributed to the artwork.

Chapter 4.

### **Ephemeral art practices and Eastern philosophy**

This chapter deals with the history of ephemeral art practices from the 1950's onwards. I will attempt to explain where my own research sits within the sphere of contemporary ephemeral art, with a particular focus on the work of the Taiwanese artist Chaiwei Tsai. I will look at how Tsai's artwork, as well as my own, relates to the teachings of Buddhist philosophy.

'Happenings' were a form of art that emerged in the late 1950's, under the directive of Allan Kaprow, an artist and theorist who questioned the distinction between art and everyday life.<sup>65</sup> A happening might consist of any number of objects, materials, colours and sounds brought together at an event where people participated in a way that approximated everyday experience.<sup>66</sup> Happenings, by their nature, were transient, ephemeral events that had a performative aspect.

The Situationist International was formed in 1957 in Europe. The movement challenged the passivity of the individual in a society they felt was drenched in

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<sup>65</sup> Jeff Kelly (ed.), *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1996, pg. xii

<sup>66</sup> Jeff Kelly, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, pg. xii

propaganda and banality.<sup>67</sup> One of the key figures in the movement, Guy Debord, advocated the conscious creation of situations that would fulfil unmet primitive desires people had previously subverted.<sup>68</sup> The 'derive' was one such practice; a stroll through a city where the participant allowed herself to be attracted to whatever she might find along her path.<sup>69</sup> The derive was spontaneous and at least partially dictated by the physical structure of the city spaces themselves.

Richard Long's early work entitled *A Line Made by Walking* (1967) is a photographic record of a path of flattened grass in a field outside London. The artist had walked repeatedly back and forwards across the field in order to leave the temporary imprint of his presence.<sup>70</sup> The work arguably borrows from the practices of conceptual art, land art, performance art and Arte Provera, as well as photography.<sup>71</sup> What is most noteworthy about Long's work is the total absence of the art object; the artwork exists only as a record of a process of intervention with nature.

I was interested to read that Indigenous Australian women also make ephemeral artworks. They use red ochre to paint on boards that are then used in elaborate group rituals of song and dance that assert their kinship ties to the land. At the end of the ceremonies, the boards are scraped clean, returning the ochre to the

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<sup>67</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' in Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*, Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, 2006, pg. 4

<sup>68</sup> Ivan Chtcheglov, 'Formulary for a New Urbanism', pg. 4

<sup>69</sup> Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Derive' in Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology*, pg. 62

<sup>70</sup> Dieter Roelstraete, *Richard Long A Line Made by Walking*, Afterall Books, London, 2010, pg. 2

<sup>71</sup> Dieter Roelstraete, *Richard Long A Line Made by Walking*, pg. 2

earth, from where it came.<sup>72</sup> Unlike Richard Long, the Aboriginal women are not concerned with keeping photographic records.

A contemporary artist whose work is also process-based and ephemeral is Andy Goldsworthy. Goldsworthy directly intervenes with the environment by making intricate arrangements of natural materials which he sources straight from the place where he is working. He uses leaves, stones, sticks, snow and soil to make site-specific works that are left open to erosion by natural elements and therefore have only a limited life span. The resultant works continue to exist only in photographic documentation.

During the writing of this exegesis, I was very curious to discover that Goldsworthy also creates gallery-based installations from natural materials, which is how I first began my own installation practice. After spending some time making art on site within the natural environment, it felt as though I was somehow coming full-circle by retuning again to the gallery with materials sourced directly from nature.

Once my gallery-based installations are taken down, at the end of an exhibition, they no longer hold their former structure. Often, I simply discard them. They are quite fragile and impossible to transport intact. They must be constructed on site, in the gallery, from the very beginning each time they are to be displayed. I think of this transient, ephemeral aspect of my art as being quite important.

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<sup>72</sup> Diane Bell, 'Person and Place: Making Meaning of the Art of Australian Indigenous Women', pg. 104-105



For me, it is the dedication to the process of construction and the presentation of my completed installation that is significant, rather than just the art object itself. It is reminiscent of the process of completing a Buddhist sand mandala. It is something that exists in a certain place for a finite period of time and then essentially ceases to exist.<sup>73</sup>

The influence of Eastern culture could also have been instrumental in my decision to experiment with origami. I started folding paper origami towards the end of my first year of studio research for my master's degree. It was at a time when I was becoming increasingly frustrated and disillusioned with my art praxis. I had seen a documentary on television about contemporary origami craft and I was intrigued. It was the beauty of the meticulously crafted, yet fragile objects that attracted me.

In Japan, origami has been historically associated with ritual and ceremonial practices.<sup>74</sup> Ornamental paper butterflies were used to decorate sake bottles at weddings; a practice that still survives today.<sup>75</sup> The indigenous religion of Japan, Shinto, has shrines that often display paper folded into zigzag patterns, strung up by rope. These paper forms can also be found adorning sacred trees or rocks.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> In regard to the influence of Eastern thought on my work, it is difficult to say exactly where this interest first manifested itself. In 1992, I did have the opportunity to travel throughout China on holiday. Even before this, at a time when I was not actively practicing as an artist, I was attracted to traditional Chinese calligraphy brushwork and landscape paintings. In 2001, I studied meditation with a Korean Zen Buddhist nun, in Melbourne.

<sup>74</sup> Isao Honda, *The World of Origami*, Japan Publications Inc., Tokyo, 1976, pg. 1

<sup>75</sup> Isao Honda, *The World of Origami*, pg. 2

<sup>76</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto the Way Home*, University of Hawaii Press, Hawaii, 2004, pg. 67

Paper has a special significance in Shinto, as the Japanese word *kami* translates as both 'paper' and 'spirit.' Shinto belief asserts that the natural world and the spiritual realm are interdependent; that one cannot be complete without the other.<sup>77</sup> Nature is respected and honoured in Shinto, as is simplicity and purity.<sup>78</sup>

Paper is a material whose physical properties I am intimately acquainted with as an artist. Paper is a substance that is derived from nature. It has a fibrous, delicate, malleable quality that is sometimes a challenge to work with. Paper has a memory- once you make a fold, this directive cannot be erased, but remains forever embedded in the paper's structure. So perhaps for me, the practice of making origami is emblematic of an uneasy human intercession with nature.

Choosing to work with the lotus blossom form was a subconscious decision. (fg. 4.1) What I love about the origami lotus flowers is their symmetry. There is a mandala-like appearance to them, making them very restful to look at. But the lotus cannot escape associations with its spiritual symbolism. Lotus flowers hold a particular importance to Buddhists, because they evoke the concept of purity. As a lotus flower emerges from a bed of mud, but opens to reveal clean, unspoiled petals, it is said to embody the essence of purity.

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<sup>77</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto the Way Home*, pg. 17

<sup>78</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto the Way Home*, pg. 42-47



4.1 Sue Rogers *Lotus Circle* (detail) 2010

Folded paper

My origami blossoms are clearly representative of something from the natural world, while remaining resolutely artificial. They are not constructed in order to perfectly mimic the blossoms found in nature- they are too pristine; too exact. They are obviously devoid of life and yet they aim to represent life, and so they embody a kind of impossibility. If, as a woman artist working with representations of nature, I place myself in the contradictory position of being both aligned with the natural world and yet also exerting power over it, then the

effect is doubly pronounced by the life/lifeless duality that the origami flowers represent.

I have become increasingly interested in the ability art has to speak eloquently to the notion of paradox and to visually reconcile opposing themes. This ability could be considered the visual equivalent of a Zen Buddhist koan, in that it evokes intuitive, rather than rational understanding. Perhaps the Zen koan provides an inroad into intuitive understanding in a similar way to that of our dream lives. Neither Zen philosophy nor the language of dreams speaks to us in a manner that is logical and easy to grasp.

When I briefly studied the teachings of Zen, I found myself fascinated by the fable of the Buddha silently holding a flower aloft for his disciples to contemplate. The only disciple who recognised the true meaning of what the Buddha was attempting to convey was Mahakashyapa, a monk who saw the beauty of the flower and smiled widely in response. His was an understanding that was beyond words. I think art is also capable of inspiring a wordless or silent understanding in the mind of the viewer. The readings we take from art often have more to do with intuitive and emotive responses than they do with empirical learning.

In March 2010, I had the opportunity to visit the sixth Asia Pacific Triennial in Brisbane. The work of Taiwanese artist Charwei Tsai appealed to me because of its delicacy and its transience. Her installation entitled *Mushroom mantra* (2009) (fig. 4.2) presented the viewer with groups of live mushrooms sprouting from soil

that had each been inscribed with text by a local group of Buddhist monks. The text was from the Buddhist heart sutra, a spiritual lesson in the impermanence of life.<sup>79</sup>



4.2 Charwei Tsai *Mushroom Mantra* 2009

Again, for me, it is the intricately hand crafted quality of Tsai's artwork that I find very visually seductive. While Tsai uses different materials from Louise Weaver, both artists make use of very repetitive, finely tuned and carefully orchestrated techniques. Tsai creates work that I would find quite relaxing to produce, as it seems to evoke a kind of meditative state with its gentle, subtle repetitiveness.

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<sup>79</sup> Ruth McDougall 'Charwei Tsai A Space of Contemplation', *The 6<sup>th</sup> Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, exh. cat., Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2009, pg. 179

There is even an intriguing scientific explanation as to why I might be seduced by the nature of this work. Psychological research demonstrates several areas of cognitive brain function that are relevant to the production of art, where gender differences can be noted.<sup>80</sup> Most importantly, men appear to possess a more accurate sense of spatial perception.<sup>81</sup> Women tend to have better peripheral vision<sup>82</sup> and are more skilled at differentiation and comparison of visual details.<sup>83</sup> Women also tend to excel at visually locating specific details from in amongst complex settings.<sup>84</sup>

Whether these differences are inborn or the result of conditioning, it is impossible to say, but it seems women's cognitive function is dissimilar to that of men. As a result of this difference, women have a propensity to find patterned surfaces attractive.<sup>85</sup> This tendency could be reflected in the presentation of the art they choose to make. It is an aesthetic propensity that has been described by Joan Snyder as:

"...a repetitiveness, use of grids, obsessive in a way."<sup>86</sup>

Charwei Tsai's careful adornment of mushrooms with text produces a patterned surface. In my own artwork, prior to commencing my Master's studies, I have used text in a similar way. I am aware that as well as functioning as a conduit to

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<sup>80</sup> Selma Kraft 'Cognitive Function and Women's Art', *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2, Autumn 1983-Winter 1984, pg. 5

<sup>81</sup> Mark McGee quoted in Selma Kraft 'Cognitive Function and Women's Art', pg. 6

<sup>82</sup> Diane McGuiness quoted in Selma Kraft 'Cognitive Function and Women's Art', pg. 5

<sup>83</sup> Anthony W. H. Buffery and Jeffery A. Grey quoted in Selma Kraft 'Cognitive Function and Women's Art', pg. 5

<sup>84</sup> Selma Kraft 'Cognitive Function and Women's Art', pg. 5

<sup>85</sup> Selma Kraft 'Cognitive Function and Women's Art', pg. 6-8

<sup>86</sup> Joan Snyder quoted in Lucy Lippard, *From the Center*, Plume, USA and Canada, 1976, pg. 86

convey meaning, text has aesthetic, decorative properties relating to its structural appearance, being formed from a variety of related shapes and lines. Ever since learning to write in childhood, I have found text to be very pleasing to look at, over and above its obvious function.

As well as text, Tsai's work often involves the use of organic materials such as flowers and tofu, which deteriorate or decompose during the time they are on display. As with the installations I make, her work is impermanent and so only exists in a certain place for a finite period. In this way, I think Tsai cleverly reinforces the spiritual lesson of impermanence that the heart sutra teaches.

Tsai's *Lotus Mantra* (2006) inadvertently had her audience participating in her work. Although it could not have been foreseen, a woman who worked at the temple where the work was being displayed released a fish into the water that held the Tsai's text-adorned lotus flowers.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps the woman saw Tsai's artwork predominately as a spiritual practice, rather than as contemporary art. Tsai claims that she is not interested in making art that caters only to the privileged elite.<sup>88</sup> She has praised art for the power it has to permeate all aspects of human endeavor.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Charwei Tsai in interview with Lesley Ma, 2009, [www.charwei.com/sicv.html](http://www.charwei.com/sicv.html) 'For example, when I made Lotus Mantra for the Singapore Biennale in 2006, where I wrote on the lotus plant at a popular Buddhist temple, I found that temple visitors who were not familiar with contemporary art related to the work even more than the biennale visitors. They would take time to examine the scripture written on the plant and the relationship between the text and the impermanence of the plant. A lady who worked in the temple even brought a little fish from her house to feed from the water in the lotus plant while some others bought flowers to worship.'

<sup>88</sup> Charwei Tsai in interview with Tony Brown, 2009, [www.charwei.com/sicv.html](http://www.charwei.com/sicv.html)

<sup>89</sup> Charwei Tsai in interview with Tony Brown, 2009, [www.charwei.com/sicv.html](http://www.charwei.com/sicv.html)

## Chapter 5.

### **Installation art practices**

In this chapter, I aim to position my studio art practice within the history and theory of installation art. I will explore how our bodily experience of the space we occupy, while an inescapable condition of our existence, is essential to our understanding of how we perceive and relate to installation art. I will also look at the social and political implications of the gallery space.

Installation art emerged in the 1960's, after minimalism, although it was not entirely new.<sup>90</sup> Pablo Picasso had assembled three-dimensional collages in his studio as early as 1913.<sup>91</sup> The founder of Russian Constructivism, Vladimir Tatlin, went on to produce his abstract corner constructions, at least in part as a response to Picasso's work.<sup>92</sup> Tatlin aspired to bring together architecture, art and engineering in a way that transformed and shaped space itself, and hence people's relationship to the spaces in which they dwelt.<sup>93</sup>

Carl Andre's minimalist work entitled *144 Lead Square* (1969) enticed audience participation by allowing gallery visitors to walk on it.<sup>94</sup> In this way, the artwork invited the viewer to take into consideration the relationship between the floor

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<sup>90</sup> Amy Dempsey, *Styles, Schools and Movements- an encyclopaedic guide to Modern Art*, pg. 101

<sup>91</sup> Faye Ran, *A History of Installation Art and the Development of New Art Forms*, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., New York, 2009, pg. 77

<sup>92</sup> Faye Ran, *A History of Installation Art and the Development of New Art Forms*, pg. 77

<sup>93</sup> Faye Ran, *A History of Installation Art and the Development of New Art Forms*, pg. 77

<sup>94</sup> Mark Rosenthal, *Understanding Installation Art*, Prestel Publishing, New York and London, 2003, pg. 63



and the piece itself.<sup>95</sup> In so doing, they would then become more aware of their own relationship to the space that they occupied and how this relationship, in turn, influenced how they experienced the artwork.

The Surrealists were also considered influential in the development of installation art. Marcel Duchamp's work entitled *Mile-Long Piece of String* (1942) consisted of a network of twine running haphazardly throughout a gallery where other Surrealist works were exhibited. The string directed the path of viewers but also obstructed their access through the gallery. The work produced a total environment that the viewer could not avoid becoming immersed in.<sup>96</sup>

Duchamp's *Mile-Long Piece of String* shares some visual similarities with Eva Hesse's post-minimalist work *Untitled (Rope Piece)* (1970) (fig. 5.1), although Hesse's suspended artwork does not invite direct tactile involvement to the same degree. Hesse's softly formed sculpture, made from latex and rope, commands the space it occupies, but curiously sits aloft from the viewer. It is obvious from looking at the piece that you could not navigate a path to move bodily through it.

Hesse's playful and evocative work opened my eyes to the vast potential of employing three-dimensional space, when I was an undergraduate student. *Untitled (Rope Piece)* was made from flexible latex; it was malleable and hence able to be installed in any number of different ways without damaging the

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<sup>95</sup> Julie Reiss, *From Margin to Centre The Spaces of Installation Art*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1999, pg. 51

<sup>96</sup> Faye Ran, *A History of Installation Art and the Development of New Art Forms*, pg. 79

physical integrity of the artwork. In theory, at least, the work could be made to fit any existing room space.



5.1 Eva Hesse *Untitled (Rope Piece)* 1970

I create my hanging installations on site, in order to fit the specific space that I have available to me, whether it be in a gallery, a foyer in a building or the corner of a room in a group exhibition. My aim is to make them as large as a space will allow, while keeping in mind that people must have room to be able to move

around the work freely. I have to be aware of the features of a room, the windows, the lighting and especially the doorways. Doorways dictate where a viewer must enter a gallery and so I am acutely aware of how the person will first encounter my artwork; how their first sighting of it will take place.

I make sure there is enough room for a viewer to circumnavigate my installations, thereby encouraging them to spend the maximum amount of time with the work. If there are windows present, I don't obstruct them, as I like to see the subtle, ever-changing effects of natural light on the surfaces of my installations.

My installations are not 'total environments' in the same way as the work of Ernesto Neto might be regarded. Neto creates soft membrane-like coverings for the walls and floor of his chosen gallery space, in works such as *Walking in Venus blue cave*. (2001). The room in which this work was housed was almost totally obscured, so that its architectural features are not visually apparent. When I create an installation, I take into account the physical features of the room I'm using, but I don't deliberately occlude them. I try to show an aesthetic relationship between the room and the art, with each complimenting the other.

Unlike a two-dimensional image, an installation relies on the viewers' ability to move bodily through a space and experience the work over time, from multiple vantage points. In this way, viewing installation art is somewhat similar to an ordinary lived experience we would have in the world. However, the work is

installed in a specific locale - the gallery, and thus it remains isolated from everyday experience.

I was very interested to read the author David Summers' exploration of the concept he terms 'real space'. He theorizes that our commonplace understanding of the space that surrounds us is defined by the finite spatiotemporality of the human body.<sup>97</sup> Objects or elements in our immediate environment are large in relation to our size, immobile in relation to our strength, or soft or sharp in relation to our sensory perception.<sup>98</sup> We take these relative understandings of space for granted, as they are inseparable from the realm of lived experience.<sup>99</sup>

The gallery is such a politically loaded space. It seems to exist in the social order of things somewhere between a church and a shopping mall.<sup>100</sup> We feel we are supposed to revere art, as something precious, rare and untouchable. We know art is imbued with indisputable cultural functions, even though we may be at a loss to define these explicitly. Yet, anyone with enough money can purchase an art object. Once the object is reduced to a possession, there is little to ensure its venerable status continues.

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<sup>97</sup> David Summers, *Real Spaces World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, Phaidon Press, London, 2003, pg. 36

<sup>98</sup> David Summers, *Real Spaces World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, pg. 37

<sup>99</sup> David Summers, *Real Spaces World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, pg. 38

<sup>100</sup> Dave Hicky quoted in Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Reel, France, 1998, pg. 62 '...idolatry and advertising are, indeed, art, and the greatest works of art are always and inevitably a bit of both.'

With the acknowledgement of the precarious nuances that the gallery infuses my artwork with, I've experimented with making installation outdoors, in the actual forest environment. It seemed to be a logical progression in my art practice, as I had been consistently taking natural materials indoors, so I just reversed the process, by taking conspicuously man-made materials, such as luridly coloured synthetic fur, into the forest. The resultant work exists only as documentary photographs. (fg. 5.2)



5.2 Sue Rogers *Excursion with Fur II* 1999

Synthetic fur

This period of experimentation lasted for a year or so, but by the time I commenced study for my Master of Visual Arts, I found I was again drawn to

exhibit in a traditional gallery environment. Just like a church or a shopping centre, the gallery has the power to draw people to it. There is a pleasant sociability around galleries; people go there to have a good time, to see art, but also to see other people. If you are willing to embrace the gallery system, it is so easy to find an eager audience for your work.

In March 2010, I held a show entitled *Over and Beneath* in the Phyllis Palmer gallery in Bendigo, for the duration of six weeks. Over the course of the exhibition, I had the opportunity to repeatedly go into the gallery and re-arrange, change and add to my installations. So my work became a constantly evolving, unstable, changeable entity. It was reminiscent of the processes that operate in nature, where nothing is ever fixed or complete, but endlessly evolving cyclic rhythms of life, death and renewal.

What very few viewers would have realized when they saw my work was that many of the changes I made to it were in direct response to suggestions I had received from interested people. My audience unknowingly became co-creators in the artwork, simply by way of making comments or offering their own ideas, which I then responded to. It is fortunate the Phyllis Palmer gallery functions as a kind of public thoroughfare, allowing access to a series of offices, class-rooms and other semi-public spaces. It means that many people had little option but to return to the gallery regularly and, by default, see my work grow and change.

In some ways, *Over and Beneath* shared a conceptual affinity with Allan Kaprow's 'happenings' of the 1960's, in that there was a performance aspect to the work,

albeit a very subtle one. Kaprow's happenings however, were much shorter in duration and a great deal more overtly collaborative.

Because one of my installations, entitled *Underfur* (2010) (fig. 5.3), was large and hung at eye-level, visitors to the gallery had no real choice but navigate a path around it, in order to traverse the length of the gallery. I hope that in this way, the work drew an increased awareness in the viewer to the trajectory of their body traveling through space. Perhaps this bodily awareness could share some similarity with my own heightened responsiveness that I feel when immersed in nature.

*Underfur* was comprised of 52 spheres, each encased in synthetic fur and suspended separately from the ceiling. I deliberately chose not to have signage in the gallery merely asking people to refrain from touching the work. Several people asked me "are we supposed to touch it?" or "are we allowed to touch?" which, of course, gave me an indication that they probably wished to do so. Because of the sparsely structured layout of the piece, there was also an opportunity to carefully walk *through* the work, rather than around it. A few people reported that they had done so, but only when they were sure that no-one was watching them.

One of the things I like about installation art is the ability it has to draw the viewer into a perceptual and experiential relationship with the work, in a way that two-dimensional works don't necessarily allow. When we walk into a gallery and see a canvas hung on the wall or a sculptural form atop a plinth, it's

universally accepted that we are not permitted to touch them. With large-scale installation, the boundaries for tactile involvement are far less clearly defined. Because the work might sit directly on the floor, or hang from the ceiling without involving the walls, it seems to beckon the viewer into a direct physical



5.3 Sue Rogers *Underfur* 2010

Synthetic fur, feathers, crystal beads, thread

relationship, in a comparable way to how an item of lounge room furniture might suggest our bodily response.



Because my installations are reasonably fragile and are hung by a multitude of fine threads, they can move and sway subtly as people pass by them. Even when a door in the gallery is left open, the work may move in response to the draught of air that is created. I hope that in this way, my installations draw attention to the way we are all subtly influenced by the environments we choose to engage with, whether they be natural or constructed. As the theorist David Summers has posited, we all exist in relation to other things. As human beings, we are never absent from our material surrounds, and there is often an almost imperceptible energetic interchange that passes between each element of the whole environment.

Initially, when I installed the piece entitled *Wallflowers* (2010) (fig. 5.4) in the Phyllis Palmer Gallery, I felt compelled to arrange my origami blossoms in rows on the wall, as the structure of the brickwork seemed to dictate that this would be the most visually harmonious choice. I am always concerned with creating an impression that my work sits harmoniously within the space it occupies. The brickwork of the wall delineated a grid-like surface on which to place the origami, and so I sought to follow this grid with my placement of the lotuses.

However, several people brought it to my attention that I might like to try arranging the lotuses in a circle, and so I went into the gallery and changed their placement accordingly. I think the work that resulted was much more successful. Viewers would then ask me the question “Does your installation keep on changing, or is it my imagination?”

I find that the time-consuming and labor-intensive process of constructing my installations allows me time to make aesthetic decisions as I work. In this way, making my artwork within the gallery space is much the same as experimenting in my studio. It is the same creative process that I undertake. Even with the help of a detailed plan of the gallery, and weeks of studio preparation, I still make most of the decisions regarding the overall placement and structure of the work when I am physically present in the gallery and have begun installing.



5.4 Sue Rogers *Wallflowers* 2010

Folded paper

So my developing work retains a little bit of mystery, even to me. It is difficult to know how it will look, until it is finally completed. Being in this state of 'not knowing' is how I can ultimately stay engaged with the work, as I feel compelled to unravel its mysteries while I work. In the process of doing so, I tend to generate new ideas for future projects. Once I have completed hanging an exhibition, I find great benefit in sitting with the work and sensing where my art will lead me next.

## **Conclusion**

My studio research produced installation art that intentionally brought together a plethora of diverse ideas. As I physically wove threads with my hands, I laced together an intricate web of ideas around the concepts of impermanence, nature, femininity and shamanic ritual. The resultant artwork reveals a hybrid world where nature and artifice co-exist in an otherworldly harmony.

Living on the edge of town, I had always felt I had one foot placed firmly in civilization, with all its comforts and distractions, while the other foot trod tentatively in the forest near my home. Civilized culture is drenched in sterile and improbably idealistic re-presentations of the natural world, but my own experience of nature was less serene. I found something foreboding in walking alone in the forest.

My research explored how contemporary culture distorts and re-construes our understanding of natural things. By using feathers, a material sourced directly from nature, alongside synthetic fur, which has been designed to mimic nature, I demonstrated how tenuous the distinction is, between charade and authenticity.

My investigation into the use of materials sourced directly from nature led me to explore both Australian Aboriginal art and also how traditional tribal objects had influenced the artists of the Surrealist movement. Just as so-called 'tribal' objects were appropriated by Primitivism and re-contextualized for a Western audience, Louise Weaver takes elements from the natural world and reinvents their appearance

in a way that would appeal to a sleek, consumer-driven society. Weaver cleverly calls our attention to our own hunger for novelty and artifice, while Surrealist artists such as Elisa Breton aimed to question Western empirical homogeny and its dire political consequences. I discovered that the art of both Breton and Weaver was fundamentally critical of the Western cultural paradigm.

Through undertaking my Masters of Visual Arts research, I embarked on a journey of exploration. My ideas and interests shifted and evolved over the course of the two years I have spent in studio investigation. From my initial focus on the concept of 'connectivity', I moved towards an involved analysis of my relationship to both the irrational world of dreams and the cyclic rhythms of nature.

Making ephemeral installations in a gallery setting was, for me, an act that challenged our materialist culture's obsession with the art object as a consumable entity. Because my artwork is temporary and site-specific, it is not generally considered salable. My research enabled me to more clearly understand the Buddhist philosophy of impermanence and to explore where my artistic praxis sat in relation to the work of other artists who also deal with transient processes, such as Charwei Tsai. Nature, itself, is a complex system of ephemeral processes, and is recognized and celebrated as such in Buddhist thought.

My research has enabled me to place my artwork conceptually within the historical and theoretical discourses of both ephemeral art practices and installation art. I have been able to gain an understanding of how our corporeal relationship to the space we occupy affects our appreciation of the art we encounter within the gallery space. Our

experience of art is not necessarily an isolated encounter between an art object and ourselves, but is an experiential interaction that is at least partially dependent on the space in which it takes place; usually, but not always, a gallery.

The installations resulting from my studio research are ephemeral gardens of aberrant, everlasting flowers. They combine a fusion of nature, feminine artifice and shamanic ritual, set together in a quiet alliance.

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