

# A LONG WAY HOME

*For Vietnamese-Australian artist Mai Long it has been a rocky road to self-acceptance of her cross-cultural identity. Earlier this year, her artwork unintentionally courted controversy with an exhibition in Perth. The experience has reaffirmed her belief that art can reveal deeper truths about the human experience, even if they are unpleasant ones.*

Stepping into the world of Vietnamese-Australian artist Mai Long for the first-time is like being hit by a truck – the unsettling effect of being thrown headlong into a world familiar yet strange.

It is something that Long is all too willing to admit.

“That’s the problem. You should have seen my canvases - they were way too dense. Someone once commented to me, ‘your mind is like a fan that splatters paint everywhere’,” says Long.

“An artist friend once asked if my work is about the everyday like his, and I told him, ‘yes, but I guess my everyday is a little different to yours.’”

## **The evolution of Aqua Mutt**

Long’s latest exhibition continues the adventures of Aqua Mutt and Dag Girl established in last year’s installation ‘Aqua Mutt: an installation with Dag Girl’, which followed the Pho Dog installation of 2006.

A group of eighteen brightly coloured, densely patterned papier-mâché dogs queue in obeisance to the enlarged figure of ‘Godog’ and the conjoined figures of Dag Girl and VC Aqua Mutt, titled ‘The Offering’. The figure of Dag Girl is suspended above the whole spectacle as she rises into a higher plane of consciousness.

The work is reminiscent of Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer prize-winning comic, ‘MAUS’ – German for ‘mouse’ - about his father’s experiences surviving the Holocaust as a Jew. The Jews are depicted as mice and the Germans as cats. Long also uses the same anthropomorphic technique, but this time to explore questions of cultural identity and belonging.

“In this exhibition I decided to deify Pho Dog into Godog because I realised in my mind that it [the original Pho Dog] had become an overly idealised character and it became to me to be about power structures heroes, and leaders,” says Long.

“We can get lost in the idea of belonging to a certain ideology and we stop questioning. But Godog doesn’t really provide any specific answers for Dag Girl or VC Aqua Mutt, but is just an aloof entity.”

## **Trash to treasure: The humble origins of VC Aqua Mutt**

At first glance the aesthetics of the installation suggests a playfulness, humour and irreverence that disguise the serious intent behind Long’s interrogation of meaning systems and symbols in today’s culture.

Long is not afraid to show cheek. The VC Aqua Mutts were papier-mâché from Telstra phonebook pages. “You know the ones Telstra drops outside inner-city flats every year; and are left for weeks uncollected, their plastic suction wrappers growing filthy in city grime,” she tells me.

Community newspapers from her local Redfern newsagents are the basis for the painted text on the mutts’ papier-mâché surface.

The interplay of text and materials give rise to a babble of meaning that slowly resolves itself into a picture.

"It's almost like you're in a dark room and the light gradually comes on, and you can actually see what is in front of you," says Casula Powerhouse Director and long-time mentor, Kon Gouriotis OAM of Long's work.

### **Cross-cultural straits**

Long is a wonderful contradiction, her American accent is at odds with the strong stamp of her Vietnamese heritage, while the youthful exuberance of her voice and the playfulness of her art reveal an inner-child that is still alive and well.

Ensclosed on a stool next to her installation, she is an eloquent speaker – the Asian Studies graduate speaking - as quick to ask questions as she is to answer them. Her ready-laugh is infectious, shoulders hunched, eyes twinkling as if to share a secret. The spark of intelligence behind the eyes hint at the maturity and insight gained from being well-travelled and borne of an intense curiosity in the world around her. Everything from Southeast Asian art to literature by Samuel Beckett provides ready fuel to her mind.

She speaks with frankness, honesty and humour about the struggle involved in reconciling her Asian-Australian identity, using the term 'mongrel' almost affectionately.

"It [Pho Dogs] started off basically with this thing called mongrel and my mum telling me don't call yourself that. I don't have a problem with it - we're all mixes of all different things."

Born to an Australian mother and Vietnamese father in Tasmania, Long left Australia at the age of four and grew up mostly in the Philippines and Vietnam before coming back to her birthplace at the age of 18.

"I came to realise I didn't really fit in here. It was all different...So I decided to shutdown the Asian in me," says Long.

"It's been a journey of trying to understand things. I was beginning to pretend I did not have a past at all.

"Dag Girl Learning to Surf in the last exhibition was my metaphor for becoming Australian".

"From an outsider's perspective, 'Australia' was beach and booze" she adds.

### **Courting controversy**

A long-time supporter of Long's work, Gouriotis says Long is an artist who brings a highly attuned cross-cultural perspective and intense immersion to her art practice with an unerring ability to put her finger on the hot-button issues of the time.

"Like a lot of artists of her generation she is interested in social issues and she is unique in that sense because of her cultural background and the way she wants to take on these issues," says Gouriotis. "She feels it very strongly, it drains her. And I think that is what makes her work unique."

Earlier this year, Long's Pho Dog exhibition toured to Perth where it was lambasted by the local Vietnamese community for the use of the Vietnamese flag on the papier-mâché surface of one of Long's dogs.

After steady negative media attention, including personalised criticisms of the curator, and repeated calls to remove the artwork from the 'I Love Pho' exhibition at the Breadbox Gallery in

Perth, Long responded by shrouding her installation with a black sheet to symbolise the blackout on the issue.

“It was amazing for me to shroud it – a bridging of political divides...I didn’t know my artwork was real, it was just something in my mind. To place it out there and get such a powerful response...suddenly it confirmed an abstract thought I had [that the artwork] was in fact ‘real’,” says Long.

“I think in any way I might have represented the flag, it would have upset them, except if I had overtly honoured it.”

Long pauses as she takes a moment to self-reflect. “Sometimes when someone says B you hear A.”

“And it’s not because we can’t hear, it’s because the cultural conditioning is different, and there are a lot of layers to work through when people live in boxes and cannot find a common way out of those boxes. Do we need to talk about these issues? I don’t know the answer.”

The whole experience of creating the various mongrel characters (Pho Dog, Aqua Mutt, VC Aqua Mutt, and Godog) and Dag Girl has helped Long embrace her self-doubt over her cultural identity and sense of belonging.

“All of my life I felt that my life has been disjointed and only now do things seems to be forming a sort of pattern in my head,” she says. “And I am becoming more comfortable with the disjointedness.”

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