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# Mai Nguyen- Long

ONE OF THE driving forces in my work is the urge to transcend my entanglement in polarising forces within the Vietnamese community and my upbringing. Presenting my artwork as a 'Vietnamese-Australian' artist to a 'Vietnamese-Australian' audience is highly fraught. The integrity of my artistic practice, sense of empathy and purpose, and the authenticity of my identity and personal experiences have been deeply challenged by the clear 'not permissible' feedback from exhibiting my work within this community. Although it is tempting to simplify the cause-and-effect scenario, the issues are not simple, nor are there tidy answers.

Such is what I value most about my artistic practice. It is a journey through life and each new project endeavours to travel just that bit further than the last, towards finding some form of truth or prized realisation, shining light through my blind spots or other intangible obstacles.

My previous object sculptures have been left behind. *Beyogmos* is the most recent genesis of my so-called 'dog series', again with a focus on transcending but this time also synthesising, and going beneath the skin. You might say 'beyond the dog cosmos'. I look directly at cultural politics yet invoke a more conscientiously spiritual mapping.

*Beyogmos* has evolved out of working with curator Gina Fairley who brings an energetic interest and experience, having worked with artists across a range of mediums in varying cultural contexts. This adds significance to

my process by providing a new framework for stretching my skills and opening up my artistic awareness beyond boundaries I may otherwise have set. The steep challenge is welcome and necessary.

These inner landscapes are a metaphysical journey. Existing visual language is further informed by exploring dog and human anatomy, and finding favoured parts and organs. I see streets and atlases; veins become rivers and flesh the earth: a mapping of the universe. Brains get confused with genitalia, and hearts get directly connected to brains. I am excited by X-rays, and marry human innards with those of animal: shared body parts. They form nondescript masses of micro macrocosms, patterns, shapes and forms. The process involves a tension between the observed and functional forgetfulness. A variety of new media are in motion, however drawing is the key.

Glass vessels and found mixed media objects recall scientific systems of categorisation and labelling. How we see the world can be overly dictated by labels and this can permeate our homes, affecting how we think, hear, smell and function. It can be a blinding mechanism. Grouped jars tell a revealing story. But any one jar or specimen out of place can change the whole story. Science might be systematic and objective but, emotionally, I also link science with the more violent aspects of colonisation, racial segregation and Darwin's theory of evolution. I both honour and question science, political correctness, and the stories we create about ourselves to help

get from one day to the next. When does keeping the peace become an alternative phrase for complacency? How does rhetoric function to obscure real meaning?

Through this process of making I am discovering that the idea of labelling is liberating. But for cultural labelling to be useful it cannot be a means to an end in itself. It must be both robust and porous. It must be continuously seen in new contexts, prodded, questioned, examined, opened up, and pulled apart again and again, not unlike a scientific process, but with heart. *Beyogmos* is my humble offering on the complex issue. It is not a didactic exercise but a journey of wonderment, and suitably porous. ■

Mai Nguyen-Long is represented by NG Art Gallery, Sydney.

EXHIBITION  
*Beyogmos: Mai Nguyen-Long*  
Wollongong City Gallery  
Visiting Curator Gina Fairley  
22 February to 25 May, 2014

[www.ngart.com.au](http://www.ngart.com.au)  
[www.wollongongcitygallery.com](http://www.wollongongcitygallery.com)

01 Cultural Specimen, 2013, glass vessels and found mixed media objects, dimensions variable  
02 Spiritual Mapping, 2013, ink, paper and PVC, 21 x 14.5cm  
Courtesy the artist and NG Art Gallery, Sydney



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