

## Emptiness, Meaning and the Spaces In-between

...moving in and out of different cultures and different realities...you are always trying to read what is going on and you read it wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Installations enable new possibilities for the examination and presentation of space where painting and sculpture is sometimes unable to confront the challenging socio-cultural issues of a complex world. They have the capacity to host real interactions with materials, technology and ideas that are profoundly affected by internal and external influences, where their interweaving offers a space for the interpretation of conflict and problem resolution to create meaning. These areas of inquiry are largely around the margins, borders, intersections and in-between spaces. The challenge for Mai Long is how one operates or connects when these spaces, comprising many different parts, are avoided. Do these 'spaces avoided' produce emptiness or create meaning?

For more than a decade Long has observed and confronted cross cultural, cross regional and cross disciplinary issues. Long has produced series of works, mainly paintings and more recently installations, featuring the motifs of consumerism, nationalism, religion and sexual imagery within a discourse of emptiness and meaning. These productions strongly connect to and speak for Long's generation.

Long was born in Hobart in 1970 to a Vietnamese father of Buddhist background and an Australian mother of Irish descent, Catholic background. Her father came to Australia through the Colombo Plan Scholarship program, introduced in 1951 by the Australian Government to build stronger relationships with the Asian region. Long's mother was a school teacher with a history degree from the University of Tasmania.

From her earliest days Long's life has been one of transience. In 1975 the family of six moved to Papua New Guinea and in 1979 to the Philippines, returning to Australia in 1989 where Long undertook Asian Studies at the Australian National University (ANU). In 1992 she studied and traveled in China. In 1994 Long joined life drawing students at the Hanoi University of Fine Arts, Vietnam and in 1996 was invited to under-

take a Master of Arts in Visual Arts at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.

*Aqua Mutt: an Installation with Dag Girl* is a new adventure evolving from Long's 2006 installation featuring the mythical breed of mongrel *Pho Dog*.<sup>2</sup> Long has again used the bold discipline of installation to expand her debate on the emptiness and the complexity of contemporary transcultural spaces to examine and sometimes celebrate meaning. Long is vulnerable, determined and patient in between this spatial discussion of emptiness and meaning. This is the same sort of emptiness Max Ernst (who influenced Long's thinking) felt during World War I. A Dadaist and pure Surrealist, he announced "the exhibition of feelings is against my feelings".<sup>3</sup> Long is a Postmodernist with Ernst's nihilist tendencies, at least conceptually. There is not one single truth and just perhaps, there is no truth.

Closer to home Gordon Hookey, an Australian painter and installation artist of Long's generation, expresses his 'emptiness' towards the Australian Government's attitude to indigenous Australians, for instance the comments uttered by the former Minister for Reconciliation Hon. Phillip Ruddock to a French journalist from *Le Monde*:

"If they had invented the wheel they may have been able to escape our initial onslaughts when the white settlers arrived, it's really their own fault."

From this comment Hookey created *Ruddock's Wheel*,<sup>4</sup> a fete elephant wheel as the centre piece with fifteen paintings providing an alternative vision of Indigenous Australia. Long and Hookey are similar, not because they primarily started off as painters who embraced installation and with comparative styles, or for being Postmodernist within a socio-cultural context with powerful conceptual and visual punches. Rather, it is the critique of their generation's passion for rewriting repression, omission and exploitation that makes them stand out artists.

Quantifying the influence of other artists on Long's practice, there are a number of consistencies there that always appear within her work. The most important influences on Long's work are from the Filipino artists Onib Olmedo, Ang Kiukok, and Juan Luna (principally the *Spoliarium* of 1884). Of the three Olmedo has the most currency. Long interviewed Olmedo and wrote an essay at a very formative period, as a student at the International School, Manila in 1988. Olmedo was inspired by the European modernist movements of Postimpressionism (Vincent Van Gogh), Expressionism (Edvard Munch) and Cubism, with an overriding belief that the act of painting be seen as an exercise of freedom, social commentary and having a view of the world beyond the eyes.<sup>5</sup> Juan Luna's paintings come from the nineteenth century Romanticism period such as artist Eugene Delacroix. Another influential artist and movement to Long's work is Expressionist George Grosz, such as the painting *The City* (1916), the mass popular culture movement of Pop Art and Chris O'Doherty's Mambo style.



Kelsey, one of the twelve original *Pho Dog* 2006

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Dag Girl Dreaming of Aqua Mutt, detail: Aqua Mutt: an Installation with Dag Girl

Long describes *Aqua Mutt* collectively as a conceptual gang of misfit mongrels fascinated by water, while *Dag Girl* in this scrum of personalities represents a misfit orphan and an acquaintance of *Aqua Mutt*. The fascination for water has been grafted from the *Pho Dog* named *Kelsey*, one of the twelve *Pho Dogs* which had water object references painted over its coat including a ferry, refugee boat, rowing boat, P&O cruise liner and a variety of other boats. Long views *Aqua Mutt* as a 'subculture' or subset creature of *Pho Dog*. From this sub-grafting, dog changes to mutt and becomes a mongrel dog with simpleton connotations. This mutt concentrates on an aqua life with all sorts of intersections - hence *Aqua Mutt*.

The inter-relationship of the two identities, *Dag Girl* and *Aqua Mutt*, reveals a larger picture here. One represents an animal, the other human. The relationship of animal and human can suggest the beginning of a world that relied on each other for economic, environmental, social and cultural sustainability. However, with the onset of nineteenth and twentieth century industrialisation and later corporatisation, human and animal dissected. Long is possibly attempting to reverse the corporate contamination, or at least expose it. Long has said she wants *Aqua Mutt* to be sociable, full of 'fun' or 'everyone's friend', but also confront difficult questions in a 'friendly environment'. *Aqua Mutt* and *Pho Dog*<sup>6</sup> are multifarious mythical androgynous mongrels. The *Pho Dogs* symbolise a half-breed Asian Australian hyphenation and hero because of its many facets, forms and its ability to survive. *Aqua Mutt* in contrast has a non heroic status because according to Long, *Aqua Mutt* is in an identity crisis possibly caused by Dag Girl. Also, choice of making two mythological beings in the installation announces the metaphysical and the magical within the journey, signaling a new hope against a dehumanised environment devoid of the human scale.

Long has allowed the installation to be semi-autobiographical, using *Dag Girl* and *Aqua Mutt* to tell private memories and desires, while proposing other possibilities. Behind *Dag Girl Surfing* Long is expressing the desire to learn how to surf and to be part of the iconic Australian pastime, more importantly connect-

ing to her partner's devotion to surfing locally and internationally. *Aqua Mutt in Moonee Ponds* pays a bias homage to AFL (Australian Football League) giants the Essendon Bombers ensuring all who appear on *Aqua Mutt*'s coat, including the AFL players, rowers, horse riders and even Sunday riders wear the famous red and black colours of Essendon. Again, Long is embracing an Australian-ism like a diplomatic gesture for nation and partner.

Packed together *Dag Girl* and *Aqua Mutt* create an installation where the community space is transitive, demanding, sheltering, playful and absent. Their coats appear as 'sponges' to other art styles, violence, consumerism, politics, sporting events and environmental disasters. Long's reworking of the original representation (*Pho Dog*) and use of hybridisation and difference is a constant tactic. In *Aqua Mutt in Asian Waters*, where Vietnamese and Japanese representations are juxtaposed to Anglo-Australian example, i.e. "Australia is little London"<sup>7</sup>, Long is placing generic identities that are 'empty' to the existing reality to reveal another meaning. While in *Aqua Mutt Expanding* the fear of past and future colonisation asks big questions of the oppressors of change and the spaces of vulnerability they create, in which Long asks and states ...where is me, that is the whole problem .<sup>8</sup>

The thirty pieces are constructed or 'born' from recycled paper and avian mesh. The mesh is packed with the paper and hand molded. The larger *Aqua Mutts* are reinforced with cooking chopsticks, whilst a number of the pieces featuring *Dag Girl* have internal ceramic plate bases to weigh them down. All the pieces are acrylic painted papier-mâché, followed by an acrylic varnish coating. The papier-mâché medium evokes sensory memories of Long's childhood as a tactile and unpretentious artform. Later, papier-mâché was also appreciated on family trips to the Philippine town of Paete. Although these forms "were beautifully and perfectly done"<sup>9</sup>, in contrast Long explains she has caringly molded the *Aqua Mutt* and *Dag Girl* forms as purposefully imperfect in a kind of bid to legitimise the 'so-called flawed' as opposed to the corporate commodification of aesthetics.

3

Shortest and tallest *Aqua Mutts*: Aqua Mutt with Sea Gypsies beside Aqua Mutt Swimming in Cyberspace, as displayed on reflective grid surface, detail: Aqua Mutt: an Installation with Dag Girl



At the feet of *Dag Girl* and *Aqua Mutt*, Long has chosen to place acrylic mirrors, interspersed with black acrylic squares, in a grid formation to contrast the manufactured with the organic. These reflective surfaces also magically connect an imaginary sky to an imaginary water, providing a practical viewing perspective underneath *Aqua Mutt* and *Dag Girl*. Long wants the viewer to have a visible perspective of the hidden sides of *Dag Girl* and *Aqua Mutt* i.e. the stomach and the inner legs, so we do not miss Long's many observations and to perhaps unbalance preconceived notions that *Aqua Mutt* must be male to 'play' with *Dag Girl*.

Each *Aqua Mutt* and *Dag Girl* has a title, such as *Aqua Mutt in Drought*, *Dag Girl Being Evil*, *Dag Girl Riding Aqua Mutt*, *Aqua Mutt in Flood*, *Aqua Mutt Whaling*, *Aqua Mutt on Oil Rig* all gathered from an 'imaginary' world travel of surf adventures that inadvertently led them through a small war-torn and poverty-stricken state, where *Aqua Mutt* possibly met *Dag Girl* and took her under their wing.<sup>10</sup> With the titles comes what Long refers to as *Mutt Chat* giving genesis to their 'origins and purpose'. The tallest *Aqua Mutt* at one hundred forty five centimetres is *Aqua Mutt Swimming in Cyberspace*, with floating letters and an assortment of uniquely shaped and coloured sea life positioned around its coat. This *Aqua Mutt* is in a two way conversation. One part of the dialogue is concerned with the different cultures that can be lifted from the internet without any reference to their cultural context, while the other side of the conversation is gazed in wonder and amazement ...how all these people had their own way of seeing, all equally beautiful.<sup>11</sup> Then it shifts to a thinking out loud comment where the guilt of copyright sets in, must be a nightmare.<sup>12</sup> The dialogue reveals the highs and lows of culture divided by those who care and ones that don't or worse those who know and watch while doing nothing. For Long, to have a past and know your history makes one less vulnerable to the fast and vast information available from cyber worlds and from those who feed it.

*Aqua Mutt with Sea Gypsies*, the shortest *Aqua Mutt* at twenty nine centimetres, is learning about the ocean and the environment by travelling with sea gypsies, but feeling sad about their

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A view of the 'gang' as displayed on reflective grid surface of acrylic mirror and black squares, detail: *Aqua Mutt: an Installation with Dag Girl*



nomadic life because it is preventing them from having a 'voice', even with the worlds' attention on them during the great tsunami.<sup>13</sup> The use of narrative as annexure to the pieces in the installation is a new development in Long's work. Long has used text in her past installations, paintings, drawings and prints but not as a scripted text for a performance or film as in this installation. This is a positive development in her work because it is exposing this emptiness and vulnerability Long feels and the depression that can be created from those who have produced this feeling.

The dialogue has also served Long's desire to draw out the absorbing character of *Aqua Mutt* where they are aware but not 'engaged' with the global movement of ideas as Long has stated *I don't want my Aqua Mutts to be dumb but to appear they are dumb*.<sup>14</sup> What does being dumb mean in the context of the installation? For Long, the *Aqua Mutt* expresses a *personal psychological drama*,<sup>15</sup> because in between the fantasy narratives of *Aqua Mutt* and *Dag Girl* is a reality revealing an entangled social strife that reproduces the reigning ideology and logocentric system that practices sexism, racism, and authoritarianism.<sup>16</sup> Long is careful not to place 'important' motifs, such as religious icons from Buddhism, Christianity and Islam in areas of the *Aqua Mutt* that may feed disapproval or add to the social chaos. Instead Long has empowered the *Aqua Mutt* to defend equality at every opportunity. With *Aqua Mutt in Flood*, in the destructive force of a tsunami, the Islamic mosque and Christian church are destroyed. Long brings together the unifying space between the two religious symbols, but only as a result of a natural disaster. In contrast, Long is comfortable with placing the AFL logo on *Aqua Mutt's* behind highlighting a different perspective of power that operates.

Mai Long has presented one of her most innovative artworks. *Aqua Mutt: an installation with Dag Girl* offers many different possibilities in-between the spaces of a mutt and a girl, a metaphorical water journey and a semi-autobiographical narrative in the context of offering a new reference of understanding for Long's generation. Through the installation process Long has discovered for us that a discourse on

emptiness is a 'dusting' of spaces forgotten by those who are able to and those who are not, and when these spaces are juxtaposed against concepts of emptiness, a balance of meaning is created then avoided.

**Kon Gouriotis OAM**  
Executive Director  
Casula Powerhouse  
July 2007

#### Notes:

- 1 Kon Gouriotis, *Mai Long interview*, 18 April 2007.
- 2 Mai Long, Artist Statement in *I love Pho* catalogue, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, 2006.
- 3 Lucy R. Lippard, *Changing essays in art criticism*, A Dutton Paperback, 1971.
- 4 Dr John von Sturmer, Ruddock's Wheel, Kon Gouriotis discussion with Dr John von Sturmer, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre and Liverpool Regional Museum program July – December 2001.
- 5 Cited Mai Long, *Onib Olmedo: Filipino Artist, IB essay*, May 1988.
- 6 Dr. Boitran Huynh-Beattie, *I love Pho catalogue introduction*, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, June 2006. Pho Dog was exhibited in *I Love Pho* between the 8 – 17 June 2006 at the Liverpool Regional Museum, a project of the Casula Powerhouse. The Pho Dog was commissioned for the exhibition and acquired for the Casula Powerhouse Collection. Boitran writes Mai Long's work, Pho Dog, might surprise some viewers; by means of a Pop Art effect, she conveys her insolence and audacity on the subject. Mai is a hybrid, of a Vietnamese father and an Australian mother, and these mongrel dogs could be interpreted as self-mocking, while pointing to Pho's hybridity. Pho originated in Viet Nam during the French colonial era, drawing on Chinese spices, enhanced by delicate herbs from the Vietnamese cuisine. The images that Mai Long has painted on her twelve Pho Dogs narrate Viet Nam's historical, political and social bonds: Hero Dog, Conflict Dog, Boat Dog, and so on; Fauna Dog is decorated with images of toad, rooster, pig and buffalo, in the tradition of Vietnamese Dong Ho folk prints. These Vietnamese motifs are intermingled with Australian references: kangaroo, Tasmanian devil and koala, in so much that the dog seems to embrace the childhood of an Asian-Australian. However, the Vietnamese homeland of Mai's father remains a myth, and these dogs allude to her fascination and ceaseless questioning, with a work that resonances the 'snapping' voice of Linh Dinh's Pho Poems.
- 7 Mai Long, *Mai Long notes on exhibition*, 27 May 2007.
- 8 Kon Gouriotis, *Mai Long interview*, 20 May 2007.
- 9 Kon Gouriotis, *Mai Long interview*, 20 May 2007.
- 10 Mai Long, *Mai Long notes on exhibition*, 27 May 2007.
- 11 Mai Long, *Mai Long notes on exhibition*, 27 May 2007.
- 12 Mai Long, *Mai Long notes on exhibition*, 27 May 2007.
- 13 Mai Long, *Mai Long notes on exhibition*, 27 May 2007.
- 14 Kon Gouriotis, *Mai Long interview*, 27 May 2007.
- 15 Kon Gouriotis, *Mai Long interview*, 27 May 2007.
- 16 Vincent B. Leitch, *Postmodernism Local Effects, Preface pp. ix*, Global Flows, State University of New York Press, 1996

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*Dag Girl Surfing*, detail: *Aqua Mutt: an Installation with Dag Girl*

**Exhibition Dates:** 22 August-16 September  
**Launch:** 2-4pm Saturday 25 August 2007



The Atrium Gallery  
Incinerator Arts Complex  
180 Holmes Rd,  
Moonee Ponds VIC 3039  
(Melway 28 D7)  
Open: Wed to Sun 11am-4pm  
Phone: (03) 8325 1750



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Cover Image : Left to right: *Aqua Mutt Expanding*, *Aqua Mutt in Moonee Ponds*, *Aqua Mutt Holding Water*; centre: *Dag Girl Riding Aqua Mutt*, detail: *Aqua Mutt an installation with Dag Girl*.