

This conversation was conducted as an email dialogue over the weekend 23 - 25 February. Mai Long is currently working on a solo exhibition for NG Art Gallery (Sydney) www.ngart.com.au. Her work is currently touring nationally in "I Love Pho" curated by the Casula Powerhouse www.casulapowerhouse.com.

gf: Mai what are you working on in the studio?

ml: I am currently working towards a September show with NG Art Gallery, previously an old mission building in the inner-Sydney suburb of Chippendale. This body of work continues my exploration of the relationship between Aqua Mutt and Dag Girl, this time within the chapel-like structure of the gallery. The main focus of the exhibition will be a kind of "processional": a series of objects on the ground, in combination with a number of objects suspended from above. There will be a super-sized mutt and a totem-like structure of comparable height. There may be a couple of guard dogs. Dag Girl still takes on the appearance of a children's story-book-like prepubescent form. However, her head has bubbled into oversized proportions with multiple eyes and faces. The Aqua Mutts seem aroused or excited by this new form. I'm interested in the inter-relationship between these different elements: the commercial gallery, the church, the dog, the girl.

gf: When did you first start working with papier-mache and make that jump from canvas to object making?

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Cuong Phu Le, curator of the exhibition "I Love Pho" phoned me about creating an installation piece for the show. I had done an installation at the Hanoi University of Fine Arts Gallery in 1996 and was excited by this invitation. The timing was perfect for me: I needed a legitimate opportunity to escape from painting on a 2D surface - my overly complex subject matter needed to be released from a choking environment. In addition, I had been toying with the idea of working with papier-mâché as a signifier of the unpretentious, and a symbolic return to "childhood".

ml:

The diasporic quality of pho and the overtly legitimized connection with Vietnamese-ness gave me license to explore themes important to me that I had been conscientiously trying to obscure over the last decade, and in a medium that was suitably "fresh".

Various forms of mongrels and visual symbols representing "spaces in-between" had been appearing in my work over the years. It quickly became obvious I should marry mâché with mongrel; mongrel with painted imagery; and dog with pho.

gf: How important has it been in the development of your work?



ml: Very significant: moving into 3D was like returning home to a self that was lost in a blinding cycle of de-contextualized aesthetic demands and self-criticism. Working in 3D introduced me to a physical world representative of my imaginary world, making both worlds more real. My Aqua Mutt was developed a year after Pho Dog. Both installations are now part of the Casula Collection.

gf: Our own sense of place and cultural collision is inseparable to who we are - you were born in Hobart (Australia) of a Vietnamese father and mother with Irish descendants and your childhood was spent moving between Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Canberra, before later study trips to China and Vietnam. Is your mythical breed of mongrel a metaphor for your own weave of identity, or does it move beyond mere alter-ego status attaining a kind of ethnographic skin that speaks to us all today?

ml: I've been working at creating a legitimate tangible space for those experiences that fall neither here nor there. I'm sure that this ongoing aspiration to "own who I am when I am there" is some kind of shared ethnographic skin. We are all this to varying degrees: the straddling of multiple cultures; the constant navigating through different value systems.



Pho Dog and Aqua Mutt are both mythical mongrels; but even mongrels differ within a given pack. Pho Dog functions to challenge me to find a truth; to be more connected. If Pho Dog is a deified mongrel, then Aqua Mutt is the earthy version: therefore Dag Girl is our fallible humanity. However, sometimes I fear Pho Dog may be a confused hypocrite; or at worst a balimbing*. It's that ongoing self-doubt. If these characters can speak on various levels to as broad an audience as possible, then that would be satisfying to me, as it is the opposite of self-perceived alienation.

**In Philippine politics, balimbing (starfruit) describes a person who painlessly shifts political affiliation for convenience*

gf: How important is narrative in your work, or is it a more of a visual response that you're after?

ml: Certainly, the visual response is the main driving force in my work. However, my work is inspired by very personal issues and events, and I can't help but there be some narrative going on. I certainly would like to impart joy and curiosity to my viewer, based purely on what they see before them. I would prefer not to speak *at* my viewers, but to speak *to* them. To clarify, I am not making art to please others or even to please myself. The art has to make itself; my role

is to let it. I realize aesthetics are so subjective. I am not adverse to humour and fun in art and I try not to be precious.

gf: I remember in an earlier conversation you explained that drawing is an intercede between subject and painting; that drawing is integral to your working process. Is this still the case?

ml: I am working on some black and white drawings on paper as part of this show – connected but in an adjacent space to the installation. Drawing is something I have always done in some shape or form. While the making of the 3D objects and the drawings each have lives of their own, now they are talking to each other. The drawings will further explore subjects and themes suggested by the 3D objects.

gf: Increasingly I find your work mining various whispered taboos: abutting religions, sexuality, migration and popular culture with a kind of post-modern ease yet devoid of its associated rhetoric. Do you feel your work is becoming increasingly provocative?

ml: I'm not very comfortable with rhetoric. Thinking back, I guess these issues have always been in my work but sometimes so layered with disguised symbolism and a degree of self-censorship they have been undecipherable. Having an appreciative audience for my work gives me a sense of being part of broader community and not just floating in a disconnected vacuum. It's an empowering experience so, maybe subconsciously, I am becoming a little bolder; becoming part of a world and participating in it. If personal issues become provocative in particular contexts, then I am going to disown that. It helps me understand new things and I like that. It is a legitimate form of communication and I would hope a constructive one.

gf: Destination next - where will your next journey take you?



I want to open more doors; I want more questions, more answers. I want to learn more, be a little braver. To do this I just have to keep making; keep breathing. I've had a great and rewarding relationship with m'achéing and would like to see what could happen with another 3D medium; outdoor mediums; moving mediums. It needs to make conceptual and philosophical sense. Having been relatively settled in Australia now since 1996, I feel it may be time to find out more about Vietnam again.

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Mail Long is represented by NG Art Gallery