

ILLAWARRA
MERCURY

Weekender

MARCH 1, 2014

Search for identity

How artist
Mai Nguyen-Long
found a home
in the Illawarra



6
COVER
STORY

Fight for peace with self

Artist Mai Nguyen-Long talks to JODIE DUFFY about her struggle with identity, her obsession with mongrel dogs, and how she found peace and a home in the Illawarra.

In an explosion of colour, the raw, crimson dog lays on its back, feet in the air, its ripped belly exposing its organs.

The mongrel dog at the centre of Mai Nguyen-Long's solo exhibition at Wollongong City Gallery signifies a major transition in the life and work of the Bulli artist.

Her decade-long obsession with the papier mache mongrel is finally drawing to a close.

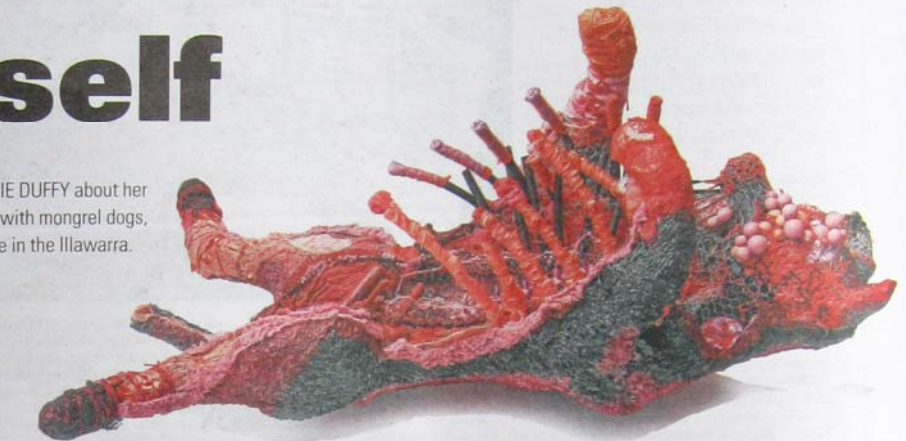
For Long the mongrel represents a 25-year identity crisis – a blending of cultures and environment and intense feelings of not belonging, of exclusion and pain.

The journey to self-acceptance and belonging has clearly been a traumatic and tortuous process.

"Opening the dog up was wanting to get beneath the surface of labels and meaning," Long explains. "I wanted to get away from my previous conversation and obsession with creating dogs in all different guises. I'm trying to get at the core of things. So opening the dog up is like a conceptual opening. It's about having a sense of peace with each of us as individuals and how we can really contribute to a broader society. It's about containment and restriction. It's not being worried about being misunderstood. That there's space for all of us to fit in and exist in this world."

There was a time when Long felt she didn't have the right to exist, that she had been "snuffed out". That her voice as an artist had been squashed after she was forced to censor her own work. It's taken years to heal and her exhibition *Beyogmos* is the result – a visually stunning, vibrant, dynamic comeback.

In 2009 at her *I Love Pho* travelling exhibition in Perth she received a wash of negative attention and criticism from the



Vessel, which Long completed last year, cracks open the carcass of her papier mache dog releasing an obscured truth.

Vietnamese community. At the centre of the dispute was one of 12 papier mache mongrels, in which she had merged a number of flags, including the current Vietnamese flag, with the former South Vietnamese flag, as well as, among other countries, symbols from the flags of Australia and USA.

The uproar began after one Vietnamese woman complained that it was akin to flashing a swastika in front of a Jew.

Long was gutted her work had been misunderstood. The Vietnamese community called for her to destroy the dog. Instead she chose to cover the entire exhibit with a black shroud.

"It was totally not my intention to upset anyone," she said. "I was misunderstood. I thought it was really unfair. I was just playing with symbols because flags are so interesting. I was mixing them up and the art work was completely misread."

Born in Tasmania to a Vietnamese father and Anglo-Irish mother, Long left Australia with her family at the age of four to live in Papua New Guinea.

At the age of eight the family moved again, this time to the Philippines, where her father worked for the Australian government in aid and development. She returned to Australia at 19 to begin

her university studies.

"Growing up I totally believed I was Australian," Long says. "I had no idea that I looked different or that culturally I was different. When I got to university I realised there was so much I didn't understand about Australia. Something didn't make sense. I was really confused and I couldn't quite understand why. I didn't understand the Australian lingo or everyday things, like television programs or the music of my peers. It took me years to figure out what was going on."

The mongrel dog she says became a symbol of her identity crisis.

"I created the mongrel dog to try and address coming from mixed up backgrounds. I was trying to equally consider all these historical perspectives at the one time," she says. "I found it was a nice consumable way to refer to my cultural heritage."

Her solo exhibition *Beyogmos* is a joint project with friend and curator Gina Fairly, who helped Long re-discover her voice.



In *Specimen* Long has collected, washed and debranded everyday glass vessels, recalling the scientific process of classification and compartmentalisation.

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Misalignment is a conceptual grid of 44 canvas boards – a map of psycho-cultural spaces.

I find we live our life with so much of it shut down

"She came to my home a few years ago and helped me archive and document my massive storage of artworks, which have taken over our entire living space," Long says. "She found some of the works I'd done in 1998, which I've included in this exhibition. They are more abstract, almost sea-like images."

Beygmoss is Long's contemplation of her own history and different parts of her identity.



"It's about looking at where I am now and how much that identity is shared with everyone else in the community," she says. "We all come from mixed up backgrounds. Sometimes we might get pigeon holed but it's really up to us to keep trying to move out of these identity pockets. For example, there are so many ways to be Australian. There are so many different back stories to the theme. If you scratch the surface there are a lot of past complications and histories."

In one of her pieces, Long has mixed X-rays of herself, her mother and maternal grandmother, arranged in the shape of a face doily.

"It's like we all come together," she says. "We're a genetic print that we can't escape from and the doily represents domesticity."

That domesticity is carried on in her jar installation – a compartmentalisation of objects with scientific labels.

"Even though I have debranded the jars you can still tell what they were used for, just because of what we are used to. It's hard for us to see past our cultural programming," she says.

Another piece, *Misalignment*, is made up of 44 canvas boards. Long, who turns 44 this year, says it's part of the weaving together of separate layers.

"For years I have been putting parts of me in shoe boxes and putting a lid on things in a conceptual way," she says. "I wanted to own those parts of me I had been hiding away. I find we live our life

with so much of it shut down."

In 2010 Long moved from Sydney to Balli with her partner Stuart Horstman, who operates surf tours to Indonesia. She says she has finally found a sense a peace in the Illawarra, and a place to call home.

"For the first time I have neighbours I can talk to," she says.

"Wollongong is a place where people know their bus driver by name. You don't get that in the big cities."

■ *Beygmoss* runs from February 28 to May 25 at Wollongong Art Gallery. Long will also run a two-day Journey Drawing workshop on May 24 and 25, where participants over the age of 16 can create a personal spirit map using drawing and collage techniques. The workshop is open to people with or without art experience.



Installation artist Mai Nguyen-Long is holding her first major solo exhibition at the Wollongong Art Gallery.



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