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MEET THE ARTIST: MAI NGUYEN-LONG



Artist Mai Nguyen-Long with her artwork, Specimen. Photo: William Yang

Walking into Mai Nguyen-Long's exhibition is almost like entering a surgical ward. Intricate paintings, drawings and x-ray images of hearts, bones and other body parts cover the walls, there is a display of glass jars filled with broken dolls, puzzle pieces and other curiosities and in the centre of the room there is a papier mache dog like creature which has been cut down the middle. The jewel like tones of the artworks—from deep ruby red to radiant amethyst, give the entire space a warm glow.

“It’s playful, it’s about body parts in a way, but it’s also about locating place: psychological, emotional, spiritual, biological place... the layered complexities of identity” says artist Mai about her exhibition *Beyogmos*, which is on showcase at [Wollongong Art Gallery](#).

The artworks encourage observers to look beneath the surface, literally and metaphorically. “We’re only reading the outside [of people] a lot of the time and they have all these hidden stories beneath the surface,” says Mai.

This idea is especially evident in *Vesse/*, the papier mache dog cut down the middle. “Out of its belly is not spilling guts and organs but rather there are mirrors; pretty little round mirrors as well as broken mirrors, for me it’s about self-reflection, other broader forms of reflection, as well as being suggestive of transcendence and catharsis” says Mai. She says the artwork is about looking beneath the skin of the dog and trying to find some essence of meaning about life and the things in it.

Part of Mai’s research for the exhibition involved looking at anatomy books, watching online dissection videos, attending a veterinary lecture at the University of Sydney, observing museum collections, and slicing random text from books: self-help, philosophy, genetics and religion. She also set herself the challenge of not buying anything new for it.

“My mum collects a lot of stuff, and she ends up giving them to me. The inability to throw things out (such as the wire spiral from a used notebook) has a legacy in frugality, but can also become a pathological burden. As a hoarder, I’m looking for a healthy re-consideration of objects,” says Mai. She has also put her archaeological hat on while she and her partner have been renovating their house and has uncovered a few things of interest: old bottles, a red toy car, tinsel, layers of clay and a mummified mouse.

Mai hopes people might find a little of themselves in the exhibition, “even though my inspiration is deeply personal, I’m trying to connect with other people, to find grounding in a shared environment. *Beyogmos* is a kind of cultural laboratory, trying to go beyond the distraction of assumed meanings...*Specimen* ponders labelling systems, and *The Camellia Vase* queries domestic ritual, the *Myopic Macro* and *Spirit Map* drawings play with body/land dichotomies. All the works in the show explore layered meanings and dis/connection.”

Beyogmos is on at Wollongong Art Gallery until the 25th of May.

Janai Velez 31 March 2014

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