

WORLD SCULPTURE NEWS

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Treasures Of Australian Indigenous Sculpture

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While much of the art world is drawn to the power and beauty of contemporary painting by Australian Indigenous artists, there is a great deal of dramatic indigenous sculpture that is often ignored. A recent exhibition in Switzerland speaks to this with admirable clarity. The range of the sculptural images is testament to the fact that Australian Indigenous sculpture has its own voice and that it deserves to be given a much wider audience than it currently has.

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Processing Multiples

David Mach has consistently utilized pre-existing materials and recognizable images for his ambitious and demanding sculptural installations and collages. While Mach is an artist who has made art more accessible for the public, this has left him open to accusations of being a populist artist. Whether or not one might see Mach as a populist, there is no disputing the power and integrity of his vision.

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A Tightrope Between Art And Commerce

The Israeli artist David Gerstein has parlayed his colorful steel and paper multiples into a global art business. The dilemma he must face is: Has commerce supplanted aesthetic values?



David Gerstein, M. *Descending the Staircase*, 2005, one layer, painted laser-cut steel, 91 x 66 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

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Beyond Stereotypes

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Mai Long, *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Giri*, 2008, site-specific mixed-media installation at NG Gallery, Sydney. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

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The Drama Of Animals

The American sculptor Peter Woytuk has been very busy over the past few years in Thailand. While he has been working as a sculptor, he has also been busy establishing one of the most important fine art sculpture foundries in Asia. This has enhanced not only the casting quality of local sculptors' works, but has also been important in bringing foreign sculptors to Thailand.

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Cover (from left): Terry Wilson Butawiliya, *Wandurrk, Ancestral Spirit*, undated, paperbark (*melaleuca argentea*), height 106 cm; Wangarrkya Munyarryun, *Wayin Ga Wayin, Carved Bird*, 2003, ochre on milkwood, height 98 cm; Unknown Artist, *Hollow Log Bone Receptacle* (work acquired in 1987), Yirrkala, north east Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, painted eucalyptus wood, height 150 cm; and Eileen Nabegeyo, *Mimi Spirits*, undated, ochre on Beach Hibiscus (*hibiscus tiliaceus*), height 162 cm and 167 cm; Semeria Wurrkidj, *Mimi Spirit*, undated, ochre on Beach Hibiscus (*hibiscus tiliaceus*), height 124 cm. All images: Courtesy of Fondation Burkhardt-Felder, Switzerland.



Mai Long, *Aqua Mutt and Dag Girl* (installation view), 2007, acrylic on papier-mâché, dimensions variable. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

Beyond Stereotypes

Australian sculptor and installation artist Mai Long makes bold, fresh work that questions many of the multi-cultural stereotypes against the realities that she has encountered throughout her life. In her art Long is viewing different representations rather than representing "difference," particularly with her papier-mâché installations.

By Gina Fairley

To take flight from convention requires the courage to command a fresh visualization, one that moves beyond stereotypes into a new dimension and understanding.

Australian artist Mai Long's recent work does exactly that, adopting a position at the intersection of cultural, religious, and social mores that signals an understanding of Socrates's words: "Man must rise above the Earth—to the top of the atmosphere and beyond—for only thus will he fully understand the world in which he lives."¹ Mai Long's installation entitled *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl* (2008)—presented in a disused chapel in an inner city suburb of Sydney and calling on the Filipino (Paete) tradition of *papier-mâché*—exposes the tensions that exist in Australia between the compulsion to frame an artist's work upon their multi-cultural heritage and the culturally neutral reading of an object responding to a site and its liberation to the broader context of contemporary art.

This cultural-specific and global dichotomy that exists in Long's work, metaphorically, is captured in the skins of her sculptures, which are densely painted with hybrid references and plucked text from a dizzying array of sources. They remain just beyond our understanding and yet their playfulness has a universal appeal. Encountering one of Mai Long's installations is like entering the fantastical world of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, oddly surreal, jarring in its kaleidoscopic intensity and ignoring the traditional definitions of medium and context, but overall, needling us to participate in her humorous adventure.

Her objects hold a semblance of reality—fragments of understood text, storybook narratives, and folkloric hero-worship. However, as objects, they are not attempting to parry a sentimental connection to a perceived 'lost culture' or concede to one cultural position. Long, rather, leaves us questioning our own constructed world through her mix-matched references and invites us to rise above the known, to ascend, as Socrates suggests. In essence, the brightly colored density of her sculptures is a foil; their true density lies in their intelligence.

Perhaps the title of Long's most recent exhibition *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl*² and its central character "Godog" offers a clue with its oblique reference to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), the story of two men waiting for another, perhaps God, who never arrives. It is a hint to Long's wry questioning of the absence of meaning within contemporary society and our compulsion to construct value systems aimed at

'enlightening us.' It is not the arrival of the mysterious *Godot* that was the revelation, rather the waiting itself. Similarly, Long's interest in an acceptance of non-understanding is central to her work. Her mythical breed of *papier-mâché* mongrels becomes a metaphor for her own weave of identity and yet they manage to step beyond mere alter-ego to describe a kind of ethnicity that speaks of us all today, that fusion that globalization inevitably brings.

Born in Australia of a Vietnamese father and mother with Irish descendants; a childhood spent in Papua New Guinea, schooling in the Philippines and study trips to China and Vietnam before settling in Australia, Mai Long describes a condition of our contemporary world. In fashionable art circles one is labeled a peripatetic artist; in Australia one gets locked into the categorization as a multi-cultural artist. The two come from very different psyches and it illustrates the residual colonialist mentality that continues to shape Australia's sense of regional positioning. Singaporean writer Lee Weng Choy defined this condition more broadly as, "...the situation of art today could well be described as the *management of difference*..."³ Mai Long's sculptures and installations are certainly different, but are they necessarily Vietnamese-hyphen-Australian? So how, then, do we read her odd sculptural fusions?

Long made the transition to *papier-mâché* and installation in 1996 during a residency at the Hanoi University of Fine Arts, after her early career as a painter. The real transition to object-based work, however, came in 2006 with a commissioned installation for the exhibition *I Love Pbo*, curated by Cuong Phu Le for Casula Powerhouse, located in the well-populated, migrant-Vietnamese suburb of Sydney's outer west. It was to become a milestone for Long on many levels, one that concluded in the self-censorship of the work during its showing in Perth some two years later. To understand the complexities in this transition from painting to celebrated object to politically sensitive icon, one might ask: What or who is *Pbo Dog*?

Long has an elaborate menagerie of characters: *Pbo Dog* was the



Mai Long, *The Offering* (detail from *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl*), 2008, mixed-media installation.



Mai Long, *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl* (detail), 2008, mixed media, dimensions variable.

first *papier-mâché* form developed in 2006, followed a year later by *Aqua Mutt* and the alter-ego *Dag Girl* and, in 2008, the fourth manifestation of her mongrel installations introduced the deified *Godog*. Constructed using a traditional foundation of wire, Long has updated this age-old craft by first applying a layer of instant *papier-mâché* for strength, then finishing off the object with layers of phone book pages (the kind dropped outside inner-city flats that are left uncollected for weeks, aging with the city's urban decay.) They are placed over an unsanded surface to ensure a rough, handcrafted but urgent finish—this finish then dictating the rhythm and tensions of their painted content.

It was a recipe that liberated her suffocating canvases into a spatial dimension. As Long says, "...my overly complex subject matter needed to be released from [its] choking environment."⁴ She found this liberation or 'truth,' as she describes, in the sculptural form of *Pbo Dog*, "... a character that contemplates difference and tries to understand it in the broader context of human nature and complex political histories," she says. "If *Pbo Dog* is a mongrel, then *Aqua Mutt* is the earthy version [and] *Dag Girl* is our fallible humanity."⁵

For *I Love Pbo* Long arranged 12 of her mythic mongrels on a ground of mirrored tiles. The reflection and density of her installation, the jar between tightly packed objects and the blaring volume of their surface decoration, reeked of

Filipino kitsch, an Asian embrace of multi-gods and a fear of empty space or *horror vacui*, common to contemporary Asian societies. It is this reading, for this writer, that is more “Asian” than the visual triggers or cultural symbols that their painted decorations allude. It is an interesting position when considering Long’s work as sculptures rather than three-dimensional paintings. Getting bogged in the minutiae of the skin’s “content” is where one can fall down in an appreciation of Long’s work, and this is exactly the situation that led to the recent censorship of her sculpture.

On the success of *I Love Pho*, the exhibition toured nationally starting in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray in Victoria, followed by the Breadbox Gallery in Perth (Western Australia). What happened in Perth was a hijacking of Long’s idealism for the broadest possible cultural dialogue by what, in the most simplistic terms, could be described as a politically driven sector of the “Vietnamese community” in a given location. They singled out *Pho Dog Keala*, a dog amidst the pack painted with a number of interweaving flags and symbols from various countries including Vietnam—a five-pointed yellow star laid on the red background of the dog’s skin—deeming it insensitive to a fraction of Australia’s Vietnamese community. Media frenzy ensued, resulting in *Pho Dog Keala*’s call to be removed.

The installation was shrouded with black cloth in a symbolic gesture mourning the embrace of fresh dialogues. Long’s work was not intended to make a political statement, yet it was forced into that position. One may recall the words of eminent modernist Clement Greenberg, “art is a matter strictly of experience, not of principles,”⁷⁶ reiterated in the words of Lee, “Political correctness, either for or against the powers that be, is a poor substitute for aesthetic experience.”⁷⁷ The experience is muddled beyond the artistic intent for the object.

Curiously, Long’s détente with censorship occurred at the same time as the media-hyped closure of Bill Henson’s exhibition of photographs of a pubescent girl at a premier Sydney gallery and a heightened hysteria for cultural, religious, and social sensitivities that has become the new endemic in contemporary art in Australia. As a consequence, the *Pho Dog* withdrawal denied the kind of broadening of understanding it sought by the very community it celebrated. It is important these gestures move beyond the realm of tabloid journalism that endorse certain actions through sensationalism and allow them to enter regional dialogues as important questions about the state of contemporary art now



Mai Long, *Pho Dog*, 2006–2008, acrylic on papier-mâché, dimensions variable. Installation view at Breadbox Gallery, Perth.

and to discuss, indeed, how we broker the muscle of sectarian voices. It is an increasingly global condition that we must navigate as artists, writers, and audience.

Lee Weng Choy commented in 2006 referring to a Singaporean context that has a resonance to Long’s sculptures within this contemporary climate in Australia: “... difference must not be legitimized solely in terms of territory, where only certain representatives are authorized to speak for certain domains... The hope for an ethical representation lies in the provisional communications across incommensurate and unclearly defined fields—in the flux and tensions of dialogical to-and-fro, of speaking out of turn and of dialectical (mis)understandings—in the debate and contest of interpretations. The problem with relativism is that, despite its preoccupation with territory, it stakes no claim in constructing the grounds on which to test different representations.”⁷⁸

Mai Long is navigating that brave territory of different representations rather than representing ‘difference’ through her papier-mâché installations. Whilst *Pho Dog Blackout* (2008) occurred in Perth, she was working on *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl* in a Sydney studio. The experience



Mai Long, *Pho Dog Blackout*, 2008, acrylic on papier-mâché, dimensions variable. Installation view at Breadbox Gallery, Perth.

would offer a liberation that lifted her work beyond the narrow cultural framing and criticisms based on microcosmic detail. The shackling she experienced gave her the boldness to disconnect from the cultural detailing and to realize the work’s complexity as an installation; to focus on its vernacular as three-dimensional work and its reading in terms of space, form, light, and surface. It had the same liberating breakthrough as her earlier move from painting to sculpture.

For the first time, Long approached the gallery site as the foundation for her narrative. Presenting her installation *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl* in a former Christian mission in colonial Sydney, she was acutely aware of the site’s multiple readings echoing it in the religiosity of her *papier-mâché* tableaux as a processional. It is a crescendo reminiscent of Renaissance religious painting where architecture was used as an expression of social power and mythology. But this motley procession of *Aqua Mutt* and *Dag Girl* is far from a flight of grace. Long’s “stumbling ascendance,” as she describes it, is not a singular or static world. It is impossible to read this installation as anything other than a surreal parade within a space, its energy playing up its vertical relationship: the casting of shadows, throwing jeweled light off a disco-ball, and the mobile-like movement of suspended objects—Long does everything imaginable to disconnect from a conditioned cultural reading of her work.

Audiences are overwhelmed by the physicality of this installation, foremost, as their eyes are pulled across cartoon-like dogs and malformed girls to arrive at *Godog*, the steroid-proportioned dog-on-wheels positioned before a cross painted in black-and-white tiles with the graphic clarity of

Keith Haring. It is fractured visually jumping between art historical, ethnographic, religious, and political references with the kind of speedy fracture of a landscape through a moving vehicle. What cohesively connects this installation is the sculptural form, and it frames Long's work, for the first time, from a conceptual rather than a cultural standpoint.

Take for example the portrait of Filipino nationalist hero Jose Rizal that is graphically fused with Ho Chi Minh, the last full-blooded Tasmanian Aborigine Truganini and Superman on pendants worn by her *Aqua Mutts* in the genre of leis adorning deities. They equally reference the scapular of Catholicism, contemporary ID cards, and Filipino amulets. Collectively they offer an introduction to Long's method for constructing her own world of meaning that is beyond geographic definition. In a similar post-modern deconstruction of "accepted cultural imaging," Long randomly uses language from community newspapers as a kind of social camouflage, where no one voice dominates. The resulting surface babble works against the narrow-minded rhetoric propagated by such forms of media that indeed were the vehicle behind *Pho Dog Blackout*. Long adopts the same kind of poetic metaphor with her text as the ancient Javanese site Borobudur, for example, where scenes carved on the structure describing everyday life enter a spiritual dimension. The skin of Long's dogs performs the same transcendental role lifting her absurd architectonic forms to a metaphysical plane. Again we are reminded of Socrates's prompt to rise above the earth to garner understanding of his world.

This oblique reference to a spiritual search—whether through Beckett's play in the *Godog* character, the use of amulet adornments, the constellation-like reflections of light off a disco-ball, or the another-worldly sci-fi quality of her multi-faced *Dag Girls*—is constantly underlined through this installation linking it back to the site. There is a physicality to these objects that is bewitching and shrine-like.

Dag Girl is central to this world, suspended by nylon on fishing swivels, "the nylon catching the light like cobwebs," as Long says, "at the slightest breeze they turn, changing the reflections on the



Mai Long, *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl*, 2008, site-specific mixed-media installation at NG Gallery, Sydney.

walls. When one turns, the next one does, as they hang from the same line. It is magical for me and satisfying."⁹ Painted with multiple faces, these celestial beings are far from angelic and could even be construed as menacing. *Dag Girl* takes on a kind of gladiatorial quality as her repeated noses and brows create a colonnade, topped with hair of water and crowned by the 'Hail Mary' prayer. The words spiral in the same fashion as the snake vertebrae headdress worn by Ifugao women in the Philippine mountain province as a protective amulet or the spiral of contemporary neon-text art favored by biennales. The references become as oblique as the work is surreal—Long's fetish objects finally move beyond context. It's indecipherable—we are left, primarily, with the sensorial experience of the object in space.



Mai Long, *Untitled* (from the *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl* series), 2008, charcoal on paper.

While the installation *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl* pushes Long's work beyond stereotypes, it is her drawings that are the eventual liberation of the work. They move entirely into a psychological space. In a conversation with Long, some years ago, she described her drawing as interceding between subject and painting. Her most recent drawings, in contrast, appear to come from a psychomotive action; the ramblings of a deep consciousness that collects, collates, and distills information into fresh dialogues. Of course there are residual references and a cohesion that extends from the three-dimensional objects to the page, but Long's drawings have the disconnection of logic, context, and narrative. It is as though the process of object-making and an engagement with a site on a spatial dimension has allowed Long to find that place that celebrates who *she* is—not who she is supposed to be or the category within which she is placed.

Mai Long has positioned her work where it can no longer be primarily explained through her identity. Her strange and oddly welcoming sculptures and psychological drawings present blatantly true and raw, and in that, occupy the most celebrated place one can hold as an adroit, intelligent, and probing artist working in these times. Δ

Notes:

1. Web reference <http://www.skygod.com/quotes/quotes.html>.
2. *Godog & the Ascension of Dag Girl* shown at NG Art Gallery, Sydney, September 9–29, 2008, www.ngart.com.au.
3. Lee Weng Choy, "A Taste for Worms and Roses," published by Artspace Sydney, critical issues series 7, 2006, pg. 8.
- 4-5. Artist in email conversation with writer, first published in *Asian Art Report*, www.slot.net.au, May 2008.
6. Clement Greenberg, "Abstract, Representational and so forth," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, pg. 133.
7. Lee Weng Choy, *ibid*, pg. 12.
8. Lee Weng Choy, *ibid*, pg. 10.
9. Artist in e-mail conversation with writer, September 2008.

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