

A portrait of a woman with dark, curly hair and glasses, wearing a white t-shirt. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a colorful, abstract painting with various shapes and colors like red, yellow, blue, and green.

June and July 2007, her home and studio, Surry Hills, NSW.

From these words by Mai Long, you would guess that she is deeply passionate and articulate about art, and the chaos that she speaks of might be about the global insanity this world reflects and we live in.

private doodle, 1996 – 8 x 7.5 cm



Her art has moved on to include descriptions and visuals of her present situation and thinking from her life in Australia. These are things that are thrown up to Mai as being the vocal and visual points in everyday life; not just in her surroundings, but also in the unseen, and psychological elements of today's Australian life style.

I integrate what happens in my daily life, with what happens in the studio; here I weave in the irreconcilabilities and contradictions that face me on a daily basis. I am fascinated that an object of profound meaning acquires 'kitsch' in some other context. Life is a complex journey through different spaces, and it is these spaces, including the psychological and the geographic, the internal and the external, that compel me to paint"

Still life with Blue background, 2005 – 137 x 183 cm



What happens in the mind of an artist about their particular view of what art is, or what some call an artist's statement is forever developing in Mai's mind. Here she goes on to say, "As I am right in the midst of creating works for a new show, I'm in the process of re-challenging my art, refining and redefining its position, as I resolve them.

I think my broader overriding challenge is to pull people in and challenge their perceptions, while at the same time challenging my own, and continually trying to improve myself, also my understanding of and my engagement with the community around me.

Having said this, I believe that art should be interesting and engaging in a visual sense. If this means 'beautiful' then that is what it needs to be. I think art works best when it can be accessed and absorbed by the broadest range of people possible, on a 'soft' level if you are to engage them, and to take them somewhere else.

I also strongly believe that art is a vital means to maintaining an individual's health and life balance on many levels; the meditative, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, as well as the technical challenges of creation. I feel good art is personal, sincere, and informed - but unpretentious. I'm currently experimenting with art that could be interpreted as fun".

Detail of Installation: Aqua Mutt and Dag Girl, 2007

Mai's current and highly decorative work, is about a conceptual mongrel called "Aqua Mutt" and a special friend "Dag Girl"

'Aqua Mutt is a multifarious mythical mongrel, whose boundaries have been challenged - leaving it unsure of its own unreality. Dag Girl is a special friend of Aqua Mutt so bound up in her own internal dramas that she is oblivious to the world beyond this.'

Mai says, "I am looking to understand the personal within specific regional and worldwide contexts; to legitimize the illegitimate. I am searching for a simplicity that does not discount cultural chaos".

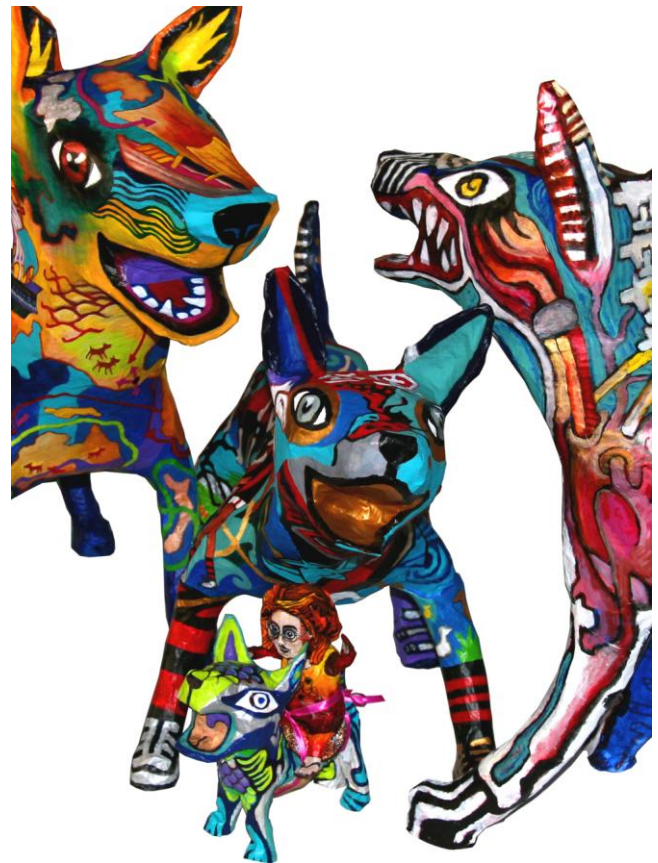
The work is comprised of 30 *papier-mâché* objects painted with bright and playful imagery. Childlike and light-hearted are just some of the descriptions, which could be applied to these works. However, with all of Mai's works there's something else going on in there.

The mutt does look threatening, especially when the works are placed together, but Dag Girl might represent the ultimate threat, with her duplicitous, hidden characteristics.

There's a dual nature about all the objects Mai has created for her new exhibition, which is on at The Atrium Gallery in the Incinerator Arts Complex, 180 Holmes Rd, Moonee Ponds, Victoria - 22 August-16 September 2007.

Mai's inspiration for her works comes from a fascinating and unique view of art, and a very diverse life covering many experiences. Born in Australia, she has lived in Papua New Guinea, China, Vietnam, Fiji and the Philippines. Her education and arts training has been equally as diverse. A bachelor of Arts/Asian studies, majoring in Modern Chinese and Art History, from ANU, A Graduate Diploma in Museum Studies, USYD. Vietnamese Art History and Life Drawing at Hanoi University of Fine Arts. A Master of Arts in Visual arts, from QLD College of Arts, Griffith University which included two-month residencies in Hanoi, and Manila.

That type of extensive education and encounters has filled Mai with an abundance of information, insight and life experience that bursts out of her works, but also the inner experiences are finely meshed into her art.



Some of Mai's artistic inspirations come from artists, and styles she feels connected to, such as, Munch, Bosch, Kahlo, Outsider Art, Juan Davila, Yayoi Kusama, Vietnamese communist posters, Vietnamese folk prints, woodcarvings, and votive objects. Filipino religious and processional objects, sculptures, Kitsch, Italian religious paintings, Picasso, Euan McLeod, Aida Tomescu, Chris O'Doherty, Peter Booth, and Linde Lvimney.

Affected by all these varied and significant artists, plus her education, living in so many countries, and her life experience has all played their part in forging her artworks.

But the dominant effect in Mai's works is the dense and twisting psychological narrative, that is so apparent.



These are works that stain your inner being; they are full of mystery, but also balance. *Carpdog* above is a mixing of ideas in a dreamscape that could be from another world. It's patterned and meshed like an artistic view of inside a mind, sprinkled with the leftovers of places and situations that have marked their space and time.

You can't help but get involved in Mai's works; they compel you to interact with them, to seek out what it is they're saying. They can also be disturbing; to see the breaking up, dissecting and blending of animals this way, might remind you of someone who likes to pull the wings off flies.

There is a torturous element in a work like *Carpdog*, one that leaves you feeling uneasy, so uneasy for some that this work no longer exists; Mai painted over it due to concerns from someone close.

The immediacy in Mai's works like *Carpdog* and others all equate to her views and philosophy on the arts today. Art should live and speak of its time; the representation of the here and now in art is something she feels quite strongly about. Mai says, "Art is about the contemporary; It responds to the immediate environment, it is a means to manage and reflect on the contemporary and to move the nature of that contemporary into a more progressive space. There has perhaps never been a better time for art than the 'now'. I don't think I've even thought about wanting to live through another art period

Today art has many voices and so much to say that basically no subject or "taboo" is out of bounds for artists, but I wondered if visual art is as free as it says it is today, and if artists can really portray that. Mai's thoughts are, "I think so long as the intention is sincere, any subject would be fit for painting, however for example, works that intentionally offend for the sake of offending alone is perhaps not that palatable to me".

Art that is provocative like some of Mai's can be, may draw complaints and even censorship from people who don't get what it is art is about. Today we understand more about art, but still some things are censored. Like in the recent Melbourne Art 07 exhibition, where Hazel Dooney's drawings, some not un-similar to Mai's were censored. They hung a white sheet in front of the doorway to her exhibition. Fortunately, nothing of this nature has happened to any of Mai's works or exhibitions.

Journey with self, 2000, Ink on paper – 83 x 100 cm



Some of Mai's artworks are very provoking; the subject matter for some people can be confrontational and stark. They expose her internal and external existence, especially in her drawings where she lets you see the little girl and the woman inside her as an artist.

Here in this image on the left, which was shown as part of a group exhibition titled *Thinking Aloud* at the Ray Hughes Gallery in 2000, we see the image of what looks like a little girl, crouching, hiding and even protecting herself from the world, but at the same time showing and exposing herself as a woman.

The complexity in this drawing is reflective of Mai as a person and an artist. Mai describes her works as "emotive, colourful, naïve and figurative" Idiosyncratic would be another fitting description for Mai and her works.

Most artists are not like the rest of us, they do things that are different, but also they place themselves in positions that most of us would never dare. Revealing things that make us think about our frailties, our actions and ourselves, in ways that a normal existence does not - artists like Mai, open us up.

Existing as an artist usually requires a lot of self-sacrifice and some of an artist's life choices are decisions that other people don't have to make. Mai does work part time and has had to settle at a certain level within her company to be able to stay focused as an artist. Other sacrifices are required for some artists, such as the choice of having or not having children, Mai says, "I don't have children and don't intend to have children, and that's based on a whole life perspective, not just because of my art. I'm not pressured by my parents, they have six grand children; all I need to be is a better aunt.

Mai's life perspective and art perspective are quite connected; the world she portrays and sees is something that she finds difficult, too difficult to bring children into. A closely examined life, like the one Mai lives can be like looking at the world through a maze, a dreamscape from which there's no escape; a reality that is directly connected to non-reality, with many never ending frustrations.

Maze, 2004 – 122 x 137 cm



This perspective can lead to surreal images, a bending and melting of visual ideas, but Mai says, "When I paint things just come out, I'm not afraid of a blank canvas; the world is a mass of confusion, conflict and contradiction and I'm confronted by this on a daily basis, so that's there in my art".

This constant bombardment of everything that happens in life does tend to remain in some people's thoughts, Mai says, "There's this constant static going on." These daily confrontations are evident in Mai's artworks, but she's trying to find what it is that countries like Australia are all about, and with her artistic view, blend all these images and ideas into her artworks.

While there is a world of confusion portrayed in some of Mai's works, there is little that is negative about them. She does take the piss out of some serious things, but you can still find a lot of life affirming images within her art.

Mai says, “The world is a pastiche of different views, opinions and experiences and that’s what it is. It’s exciting and confusing; there’s so much that we have to work through to live together, so in my artworks there’s a celebration of life and within that there’s images of dark difficulties and big questions that we’ll probably never solve, so as an individual I’m trying not be judgmental.

To understand somebody else, you can’t just judge then, and sometimes I think I’m not very good at that. But at what point do I lose my own sense of integrity, how much do I have to change myself and my core values to accommodate and understand what other people are doing and thinking. If I see someone else as ignorant that reflects a level of ignorance on my part; so I think I’m always making concessions for other people, but are they concessions or are they wisdoms, that what’s always frigging going on in my head.

Every day is like another problem to solve, how do I problem-solve myself through this, how do I communicate with this person, have I offended them, right down to the tiniest thing, like how do you word an email, have I forgot to call someone, there’s all these things going on, it’s really traumatic”.

These microcosm levels of life, right up to the biggest things like the war in Iraq are all concerns for Mai, which come across in her art, but has she come to an answer within herself on how much can she take on board, and at what point does she stop being a transmitter for the world’s problems? “That’s my greatest fear, that I’ve emptied myself out so much to stop being angry, to stop being this and that; constantly waiving a big stick at myself to conform, to change, to be more fun, to not be so serious, all of these things are required at certain levels to be part of a society”.

Mai’s artworks do show us what life and her life are all about; they are a true and accurate reflection of what she is as an artist and a person. Her philosophy and her arts philosophy took on a deeper meaning during her drawing training in Vietnam. In Hanoi, she did life-drawing classes five, sometimes six days a week for the time she was there, and she describes this as an extremely significant art-experience for her.

Back in Australia about the year, 2000 was a big year for Mai in many ways, she explains, “Well in 2000 I consciously tried to delete my Asianness; I got sick of being boxed, societies can be insensitive if you’re not seen to be part of them, I found I was always being labeled a Vietnamese Australian, and being judged by that yardstick. So I needed to know if even I was using that connection to describe and define myself, I wanted to know who I was without that. However, you can’t find that out, because you can’t escape from yourself.

I was being lumped into a box by some groups, I was put into something that wasn’t me and didn’t represent me, on the other hand I’ve had people and galleries just accept me for who I am. After about five years of me trying to be intensely Australian, I’ve come to a point where I sort of feel okay who I am and my past”.

Pink Room, 2005 – 101.5 x 152.5 cm

Mai is cynical about some things understandably, and sometimes also about art, but never enough to make her change her chosen vocation. She explains, “Art can be like a battle, sometimes I think why the hell am I doing this, is there a purpose, is it just self indulgent, and then I see how art promotes positive debate and helps share different perspectives for other people, and possibly provide some sort of guidance for others.

I’m really just at the beginning of realizing that my art can have a positive power, and that’s very life affirming for me and hopefully others”.



The visual dialogue in Mai's works can be quite apparent and that is appropriate for this style of art, there's no sense of a monoculture in Mai's works or any connection to idealism. Other forms of dialogue in visual art such as music and literature have a random effect on Mai's art. Being a Radio National listener does make her feel at ease when painting, just hearing about the other arts inspires her when painting, but there is no conscious transcription of another art form put into her works.

Mai loves opera and classical music, she says, "Opera takes me to emotional highs that I can't get out of popular music; I want to die because it's so beautiful, I cry but I do enjoy other music; introduced to me by my partner, like Moby, Johnny Cash the Ramones and stuff like that".

Mai sees the different art forms without hierarchy, and thinks they are all equally important. She says, "The arts are all distinctive, I feel they all express similar things, but on different levels, through different mediums. One could argue that in Vietnam literature, poetry and folksong have been the predominant forms of artistic expression, with less emphasis on visual arts. There are many historical reasons for this, but this doesn't mean that this or any civilisation are lesser because of this. To me, no art form is more important than another – they are each significant forms of expression that provide cultural nurturing and highlight what it is to be human." So visual art for Mai, is just one of many languages.

Rugby (games with oval balls), 2006 – 137 x 122 cm



One of the languages that Mai makes prominent in her artworks is the subject matter, whether it is a specific subject like football, or getting across a feeling of something visually intangible like a "floating disconnectedness", the subject matter holds the principal importance in all her works.

Within that subject matter, is something that just grows and grows. Mai says she's not a methodical painter, but she always has a specific idea of what a painting is to say.

The works do grow by themselves; nothing is penciled or gridded up and as she says, "What happens in the end is part of my inner world." The refining of Mai's works is a well-brushed process, connected to a thought process that builds and builds.

There is a high degree of stream of consciousness in her works, and she does admire most of the surreal artist's works, because as she says, "Travelling in the mind, gives me a feeling of comfort, and it's like having the freedom of a child or like playing in the sand".

Mai's artworks resonate on many levels, she is always trying something new and she's not afraid to experiment with different art formats. Her enquiring playful mind is ready to try to except alternate concepts, while getting her individual point and style across to the viewer.

Mai's own description of what her art is, is perhaps the best picture of all "It comes from the gut, it's what I feel".

Mai in her studio working on Aqua Mutt

