



Mikala Dwyer walks Robert Leonard through *Drawing Down the Moon*

ROBERT LEONARD: This show surveys your recent work concerned with the occult. The first work we see is MOON (2009)—a big hessian banner, with hand-cut felt-appliqué letters. It looks like something one might find in a child's bedroom.

MIKALA DWYER: I wasn't trying to be childish. I associate the work more with Scandinavian modernism, with its preference for wholesome, modern materials—hessian and felt. The words, which are placenames for the swamps, bays, marshes, and lakes on the moon, were devised by a seventeenth-century astronomer, Giovanni Battista Riccioli. They make for a nice poem. I like the range of names. It's interesting what's included and what's not. There's success, love, and rot, and there's rainbows, sleep, fear, and forgetfulness—but no sex. Riccioli projected his Jesuit world view onto the moon. Here's this inert, lifeless object in space, and it gets all these human sentiments projected onto it. I'm interested in the way that something so 'other' can be anthropomorphosised.

WALL NECKLACE (2012) is also in the first room. It's like a charm bracelet, a builder's tool apron, or Batman's utility belt. But it's hard to work out what the clip-on tools are for; what they are supposed to do.

Wall Necklace brings together magic spells and constructivism. It's all plastic and Perspex and big geometric shapes. It's a symbolic key chain, with keys to open the other works in the show. It is one of a series of necklaces I made after the death of my mother, who was a silversmith. I think that many of the forms I've worked with in my art I subconsciously lifted from her. I hadn't realised quite how many until I began to pack up her stuff.

Perhaps these forms were passed on to me through my DNA.

In the NECKLACE, there are clean constructivist objects in high-tech materials, but also rustic clay ones. It's a mash-up of modern and primitive.

Jewellery is a mark of civilisation. They recently discovered that the Neanderthals made jewellery, which makes them more sophisticated than previously thought—they could ritualise and symbolise.

What are the booze bottle and the soft toy for?

The bottle is my mother's whiskey. She was fond of cheap whiskey and I had to bring her cases of it, weekly. When she died, there were lots of bottles left over. Rather than drink this one, I put it in the *Necklace*. It's literally and symbolically 'a spirit'. It's a votive offering, like you might find in a voodoo cemetery. The doll is a real voodoo doll made by a witch. I had to judge an outsider-art prize and this woman dragged me over to see her suitcase full of dolls. She was strange-looking and very determined. She got up at 7 o'clock every morning and sewed dolls all day. They were misshapen and smelled bad. I had this one in the corner of my car for a while, but it kept haunting me. I couldn't let it go, either the smell of it or the shape of it. It just kept insisting that it be somewhere, and somehow it found its way into the necklace.

You're an animist. You talk about objects as if they had agency.

I think all matter is conscious to some degree. Everything has a frequency. Sometimes, it takes a while for material to warm up to you so you can actually sense it. You have to be in an attentive state. I try to get to a point where things can speak for themselves rather having me impose my voice upon them.

So, are you channelling the objects?

No, the objects are doing the channelling. I'm just the props person.

Is there a story behind ALPHABET FOR GHOSTS (2011)?

It's the product of a collaboration between Alterbeast (Carla Ceson, Tina Havelock-Stevens, and myself) and Rolande Souliere. We were working on an exhibition at Penrith Regional Gallery. The building was bequeathed by a former occupant, the artist Margo Lewers, who was instrumental in introducing Bauhaus ideas to Australia. She was a friend of my mother's, and cantankerous by all accounts. Everyone says the place is haunted, so we conducted a séance. Out of respect for being in Lewers's home, we decided to summon her for some advice on how to proceed with our work. We wanted to collaborate with her. We made a larger-than-life Ouija board using a Bauhaus font and made a planchette out of Perspex. It's shape was based on forms in Lewers's work. By echoing her sensibilities, we offered her a familiar channel to speak to us through.

There's an obvious contradiction in using a rational modernist language to open up a paranormal portal. As a modernist, Lewers seems unlikely to have been sympathetic with occultism.

There are lots of closet believers, and I'm sure there are some modernists among them. People tend to see science and occultism as opposed, but Newton was into the occult and William Crookes, who pioneered the cathode-ray tube, was into spiritism. Séances emerged during the rise of science. Spiritists were fascinated by magnetism and electricity.

How did your séance go?

It was successful. With séances, people expect to see chairs flying across the room instantly, but it's a slow process. You have to sit there, shut up, and listen. It can take ten hours, it can take ten days. Lewers definitely turned up. I saw static electricity shuffle across the room from where her bed was and disappear. We had a lot of video and sound equipment for the show and it all broke down. The lights went out. It was like she'd got the shits and was fucking

up all our equipment. Without a body, it's hard to communicate, but she did so through electrical interference.

Your COSTUMES (2012) are also equipment for tuning in to the world.

The beauty of being an artist is being able to approach knowledge in a lateral, playful way. As an artist, if I want to learn about something, I don't have to undertake a university course; I have other means. I was thinking, could knowledge be absorbed by wearing a costume rather than reading a book? Could I create costumes that impart knowledge? I started thinking about Friedrich Fröbel's time as a crystallographer, before he went on to invent kindergarten. I wondered if people could learn about crystallography from the crystal's point of view by wearing crystal-shaped helmets.

The helmets look like inquisitors' hats.

I did a performance using some earlier *Costumes* for my show *Monoclinic* at Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, in 2008. During the opening, I had local art curators and critics—'judge' types—wear them. It was an experience for the people wearing the costumes and for the people looking at them. You couldn't identify the performers until they disrobed.

The COSTUMES have adult associations (I think of Hugo Ball and the Cabaret Voltaire) but also childhood ones (primary-school theatre productions).

Yes, they come from both. The idea is extended in the two performance videos that I made with Justene Williams, which drew on Hugo Ball. They came out of my residency at Sydney's Cockatoo Island and its convict history. Both responded to the history of women on the island. A bush ranger imprisoned there, Fred Ward—also known as Captain Thunderbolt—was rescued by his Aboriginal girlfriend, Mary Ann Bugg. In our video, *Captain Thunderbolt's Sisters* (2010), Justene and I clamber around a

bunker with high heels gaffer-taped to our feet, wearing stripey prison garb and helmets with slits to look through. We climb around the room without touching the floor, tapping out a communication to the ghosts and to one another with hammers. At one point, we exchange hammers. A lot of Justene's work rifles through forgotten female histories that run parallel to well-known men's histories. The other video, *Red Rockers* (2010), was set in a cave on the island.

It looks like a cross between a dada performance and an exercise tape. It's hysterical feminism.

We were playing constructivist whores, sex machines from the future. At the IMA, I put the videos on flat screens inside a cavity in a wall. You viewed them through slits cut in the wall as you passed through a tunnel on your hands and knees. It was like a sex-shop peepshow, but unsexy, with us in weird costumes. You pass through the tunnel like a warder, checking on the inmates, but you also share their viewpoint, because you are looking through the slits in the wall like they look through the slits in their helmets.

When you go through to the other side of the wall, it's a bit of a letdown. You have to drop down and crawl through this tunnel—this portal to 'the other side'—but when you got there, there are just these burning candles.

The candles are a scrying tool, like a crystal ball. You can gaze into the flames, blur your vision, unstructure your thoughts, and go into a kind of daydream. You can put yourself into a mindframe where spirits can give you messages.

LAMPS (2010-2) is a gathering of totemic lampstands

Lamps weaves together hope and despair, protection and punishment. There are rectilinear lampstands, which suggest totems and gallows—they could protect you, they could kill you.

They are built in this functionalist style, in a simple red, black, and white constructivist palette. Some of them have black-and-white prison stripes. (There are also a couple of plain black tree-trunk lampstands, which I took from another work. I included them as anomalies. The work would look too regular if it was just the rectilinear stands.) I imagine the lampstands surrounding a prison compound. Some incorporate slotted boxes that suggest letterboxes, bird boxes, and ATMs. All sorts of things hang off them, including glazed clay weights, which are like handmade philosopher's stones, and lights—a hopeful gesture. I placed found ornaments all over them. There are all sorts of things, including a crazy Asian cone-head version of the Willendorf Venus. There's a contrast between the functionalism of the lampstands and these tchotchkes.

There's a TV antenna completely coated in silicon glue.

Perhaps it has lost the ability to receive messages, perhaps not.

The lampstands are almost high enough to hang a person.

Or a small child. But they are rickety. They couldn't support a body without falling over. I'm just using them for hanging lights. The lights stand in for bodies, for life force. We are electricity.

By adding the figurative ornaments, the lamps become a landscape.

I think of *Lamps* as a high-rise landscape, which the ornaments populate. The smallness of the ornaments implies vast scale. The lamps are close together, but, from the ornaments' points of view, they are separated by huge chasms.

You made an updated version of THE ADDITIONS AND THE SUBTRACTIONS, where a diversity of sculptural totems gather in a circle. Where did the idea come from?

In Berlin in 2006, I was asked to collaborate with an artist duo. They were used to collaborating, but only with each other. So I decided to do an anti-collaboration and make a totally selfish

work. I created my own psychic fortress, away from them. I'd been thinking about Freud's collection of antiquities, which were like his imaginary friends. He travelled with them, and, when he fled Vienna, he took them with him. At the Freud Museum in London, they are still lined up on his desk as a screen between him and his patients. I wanted to do something similar. My fortress—a rubber tent—was guarded by my own amateurish versions of Freud's figures. The circle works evolved out of that thought. I've made a lot of them, probably one per year since then. I recycle elements. I add in pieces and take others out, which is why I call them *The Additions and the Subtractions*. Each time, I add a new site-specific element.

The circle is a ritualistic power form. I'm reminded of spaces like Stonehenge, spaces for initiates.

The circle is a convenient system. I can place anything I want into it. It tolerates difference. It unifies all the disparate content. It provides a focus, an inside and an outside, and a threshold. I want to see how people negotiate that threshold. I like the fact that people are tentative about entering the circle, but, once they do, they become performers in relation to other people on the outside, who become 'the audience'.

Some individual totems are flimsy, others are hefty; some are ugly, unformed, or undecided, others pretty, resolved, or refined.

Yes, they reflect the chaos of thought. They are half-thoughts, neither-this-nor-that thoughts, the sorts of thoughts that wander in and out of my head during the course of a day. There are short and tall thoughts, deep and shallow thoughts, figurative and abstract thoughts. Some totems are mostly made, some mostly found. Some are highly crafted, some crap. Just as contradictory thoughts co-exist in my head, disparate totems co-exist in the circle. Within its tight geometry, the totems can be themselves. The circle contains their difference without diminishing it. At

the same time, as soon as you put one totem next to another, you create a relationship. There are families and factions within the circle. The totems speak to one another through rhymes and contrasts of form, material, and iconography. A lot of them are argumentative, and the circle allows them to remain so. I don't want to suppress argument. I also don't want to either homogenise or prioritise. The circle is ecumenical.

With so many examples to compare and contrast, the Brancusi-esque play between object and base is heightened. You play out so many possible relations between object and base.

There are small objects on large plinths, large objects on small plinths. The totems are all different heights, suggesting a bar graph, a psychic barometer.

The work is also a lexicon of art-making techniques.

I think of Friedrich Fröbel's twenty Gifts, which capture all those making impulses that people have. Spells come out of similar impulses: to gather, to join, to hold, to model, to build, to protect, to destroy.

Let's look at some of the individual totems. One is an extremely tall plinth, with figurines around the base and then a few on top. It suggests an upstairs-downstairs hierarchy, a politic between characters on top and characters below.

Yes and no. On top, there's Christ in ascension, but also a smoking Buddha, a Venus figure, a witch, and a misshapen lump of clay. Witchcraft is more earthbound, which is why I find it interesting, but it's there with the resurrected Christ. This totem expressed all my confused feelings about religion—transcendence and immanence.

One of the totems is an upended couch pierced by a length of red timber. I was reminded of THE OMEN, where photos of future victims reveal a

portentous shadow passing through them, as if they had been speared from on high.

That couch had been in my studio for ages and I had an overwhelming desire to spear it, to murder it. To me, that couch is a body, it's a black monochrome, it's 'IKEA', and, upturned, it becomes a cubby-house. It's been moved from its dormant position to an awake one—you can't sit in the couch, you can't be a couch potato. I've pulled the couch out from the wall, so you can see its underside, and, in the cavities there, I've placed objects: Cuban cigarettes, bottles of wine, and some paperback books. So you can have a smoke, a drink, and a read. People were stealing cigarettes at the opening. The objects invite you to be a bit naughty. The books were given to me by a friend who works with mentally ill people. One of the people she works with gave them to her. It's a peculiar collection. The titles read like a poem, like the placenames in *Moon*.

Several totems are banged-up bits of sheet copper on plain MDF plinths. They are dispersed throughout the circle.

Because my mother was a silversmith, I think a lot about metals. Copper is a conductor and it's malleable. Placing copper pieces throughout the circle is a way to conduct the conversation—the electricity—through the circle's neural network. Some of the copper forms have bits of quartz and coal stuck to them, suggesting some kind of alchemic process. One totem is made of metal parts held together by magnetism. Invisible forces are a fact of life. We are only standing here because of magnetism. It's more earth magic.

Tell me about the freestanding curved Perspex sheet with the glowmesh.

The Perspex looks like a screen to get dressed behind, except it's transparent. I think of it as a kind of radiation shield; you stand behind it to protect yourself from the circle. The Perspex is the shield and the glowmesh is a protective costume.

A lot of the totems are about secrets.

Like the plastic display-dome ones. The domes are grubby, so you can't see what's inside. They are also completely glued up, so you will never access their secrets. Sometimes it's better not to know. I inserted messages on paper scrolls into some of the totems, Wailing Wall-style. Some of them came from séances—they are letters to the dead. They are rolled up, so you can't read them.

Why are rituals so important to you?

Because they slow us down. After my mother died, I had to pack up all her stuff. I had to do it way too fast. I thought, what if, instead of putting all her letters into the bin, I could burn them and say a prayer, and somehow embody the ancestral knowledge in a more meaningful, osmotic manner.

You called your wall painting SPELL FOR A CORNER (2012). Why does a corner need a spell?

It needs to be liberated from itself. *Spell for a Corner* is a salutation to the moon, entreating it to come down. For me, bringing down the moon is all about questioning the opposition between the transcendent and the earthbound, idealism and materialism—the continual problem of the woman. The painting's geometries are my ponderings on how to do that. Of course, *Moon* is also about bringing the moon down, but there it is by bringing it into language.

The wall painting reminds me of the early days of abstraction, when it was freighted with all kinds of metaphysical and occult speculation.

I like the Swiss healer-painter Emma Kunz (1892-1963). Her symbolic mandala-like abstracts feature intricate webs of lines. She made them using a divining pendulum. They were not made to be hung on gallery walls, but to lie on the floor between her and her patient. She used them as energy conduits through which she could realign and rebalance her patients' psyches.

In THE SILVERING (2010-2), a sheet of Mylar is suspended from Mylar party balloons.

The balloons are helium-filled. I'm fascinated by helium. Most helium is helium-4, which is believed to have been formed during the Big Bang. It's ancient. Mylar is a high-tech, space-age material, which was used to insulate lunar modules. *The Silvering* is a floating ghost sculpture. It does what you don't expect sculpture to do, to hover and drift around the room. You can interact with it and try to herd it around. I was thinking about how to float a void—the balloons being like mirrored zeros. While many of my other works are earthbound, *The Silvering* is trying to lift off. Nevertheless, the balloons leak and need to be pumped up every day. The work is constantly falling back to earth, confounding that idealism. There's hubris there. Again, there's a connection with my mother, as a silversmith.

The IMA version is different to previous versions. It's like a mirrored cave.

That came about by accident. The first Mylar sheet we used was too heavy, and, when we took the weights off, the balloons couldn't lift it. We started transferring the balloons to a lighter sheet, which floated up over the other one, making this two-level structure, one sheet airborne, one earthbound, creating a walk-in cave. For some time, I'd been trying to make a cave that would float, so I was pleased. I left it. I like the idea of having a primitive kind of architecture—a cave—in space-age materials, and floating. There's a strong desire to make buildings float, but it's constantly thwarted by the need for plumbing.

A SHAPE OF THOUGHT (2007) developed out of the EMPTY SCULPTURES.

For the *Empty Sculptures*, I used a plastic used in vacuum forming. I discovered it through a New Zealand props-maker working on *Lord of the Rings*. It's malleable—it goes soft at low temperatures. I heat it with a hot-air gun, wrestle it into shape, and weld it to itself. I hate working with it. It's disgusting. But I constantly find new

possibilities for it. The material is used to create clean, hard-edged, repetitive geometric forms for packaging, but that's not how I use it. My forms always have an organic quality.

The EMPTY SCULPTURES make me think of rocks, but they are the opposite: they're hollow (all skin), synthetic, transparent, and as light as a feather. They are like ghost rocks.

My *Empty Sculptures* are hauntological—they play on the edge between being and not-being. You have to negotiate them in space like boulders, but they are transparent. You can see into them, through them, and they distort your view. They're an odd combination of the lumpy-and-primitive and the synthetic-and-modern. In *A Shape of Thought*, I project videos onto the transparent forms. One is a video of my eyes; the other, of my father's eyes. It's like these ectoplasmic, psychoplastic sculptures are forming in the nexus of our gazes, as if my father and I are willing them into being, mentally shaping them. After I made this work, someone said to me: you're doing that because your father worked in plastics. I hadn't realised that before, but it's true. My father was an industrial chemist who worked with plastics. While my mother was craft-based and materialist, my father was the mystical scientist—scientific but romantic. Knowledge gets passed down in your DNA. Whether you know it or not, you are often just riffing off your parents.

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