

Ten questions with Mikala Dwyer

Interview by
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WT — Mikala, you and your artist friends and peers arrived on the Sydney art scene in the early 1990s with quite an impact, but you actually began making art and exhibiting in the early 1980s. How did you become an artist?

MD — I didn’t set about becoming an artist but found myself going to art school in 1983, when I was twenty-one. I was making up for lost time as I’d been expelled from school when I was quite young.

When I was sixteen I travelled to New Zealand and met some art students in Christchurch who were making hardcore conceptual sculptural works and I remember how bad I thought it was, how unfinished it seemed. But I think back now and realise that it was ahead of its time. I also visited many museums on my travels in Europe after I left Australia at the age of eighteen. It suddenly occurred to me how great art was – seeing work by artists like Alberto Giacometti and Niki de Saint Phalle opened up a whole new world for me.

When I came back I enrolled at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA) at a very exciting and dynamic time. SCA was an independent school with an innovative program and fantastic lecturers. It was wild. Instead of having modular electives we had people: artists who were travelling though Sydney came to the college and did workshops with students. The visiting artists were diverse and included Japanese actor and dancer Min Tanaka, performance artists Marina Abramovic and Ulay, Aboriginal elders, Anthony Howell from the performance group The Theatre of Mistakes, and Doc Neeson who was the lead singer of the rock band The Angels. We had real artists coming from all over the world doing intensive workshops and it was an amazing education.

After leaving art school I went straight to London and studied for more than a year at Middlesex Polytechnic, which also had a very good program. My previous teacher from the SCA, Adrian Hall, had taken up a post there. It was an exciting time to be in London in the mid 1980s. Sculpture was big, music was weird; it was the deep dark Thatcher years and strikes were long and horribly drawn out. Artist-run spaces were mushrooming as well, and it was the very beginnings of the group of artists who came to be known as the YBAs (Young British Artists), showing their work in artist-run galleries and warehouse exhibitions. I was involved in some alternate spaces with artist friends and was beginning to exhibit after art school in a lively context full of contradictions.

I returned to Sydney in 1988 and became involved in Firstdraft Gallery as one of its second group of artist directors. The gallery had been set up in 1985 by Narelle Jubelin, Tess Horwitz, Paul Saint and Roger Crawford, and after two years it was handed over to my group [from 1988–89], which included Adriane Boag, Astrid Kriening, Joanne McCambridge and myself. It was a great reintroduction to Sydney. Later, I ran a space called Black that was next door to a film production company of the same name, which gave me some pocket money to run it and free rein with the program. I began to be curated into exhibitions in other art galleries, one of the first of which was when Louise Pether included my work in an exhibition, **Delineations: exploring drawing**, at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in 1989, where I crawled under the floorboards and made a work which consisted of projecting a super-8 film from under the floor and a wire spire that extended through a trapdoor to the ceiling. After that, things picked up.

Your mother was a jeweller and silversmith working in a modernist style and your father was an industrial chemist. Are there aspects of your upbringing that you draw on in your work?

For a long time I tried to defy my parents and rebel against them. My mother’s Danish heritage of good design and her very formal aesthetic in her jewellery work – as well as her choice of furniture and everything around her – was there to reinforce her identity. She tended to create spaces that were very mid-century Danish and I hated that. I wanted the Queen Anne furniture and the frilly white curtains like everyone else had – I didn’t want liverwurst sandwiches in my lunch box, I wanted Vegemite! Danes can be quite direct and there is an honesty there which at times can be a bit brutal. My mother was a very tough critic and said, ‘You’re not allowed to call yourself an artist, that’s for other people to decide.’ Now I think that was a fair-enough opinion.

My father was an industrial chemist – a very lovely and playful one, who was also very inventive, and some of his products became successful. He had quite a trippy mindset; he was more of a surrealist industrial chemist in some ways, and he was a profound influence on me. He always had a desk full of weird substances, from uranium yellowcake to unusual rocks and metals, and I loved going to his laboratory – a huge room full of glass beakers and things to cook stuff up in. It was perhaps more difficult for him to understand what I was doing and yet in some ways he connected to it more.

After my parents died I found notes and drawings by both of them that were uncannily like the things I was exploring, just in different scales and materials. I’ve realised that everything I’ve made has been genetically coded and passed down, as there are very similar forms and ideas that we were working on.

From early on you gravitated towards objects. What is the power of ‘things’ that you wanted to explore in your practice?

When I was at art school I spent the first year-and-a-half drawing quite obsessively – a lot of big expressionist drawings. Then, at the start of my second year, I suddenly stopped. I got to a point with drawing where I just didn’t want to draw in two dimensions; I wanted to draw with objects and materials. I think my interest in objects is based on their ability to act like props, as three-dimensional mark-making in space, which hold ideas or become repositories of the memories we project onto them. They also have their own kind of voices and qualities and consciousness. I made the decision to stop drawing as such and to begin drawing again with objects, and I think to some extent that is still what I’m doing.

What led you to working with everyday materials?

I worked with what I could afford and what was available, as I still do. For my generation it was what you could find in the hardware store, or the two-dollar shop, or on the street. It was a way of refusing to be silenced by poverty: you could still make work, say something, and be an active agent with very limited means. Having nothing is a great point from which to start, and going out and having to find something means you must think on your feet. When you’re

thinking through ideas suddenly the world is very alive with stuff that can activate, or talk to or hold those ideas, and when you're working on something, walking down the street becomes a totally different experience.

I remember going and seeing punk bands and, rather than headbanging, I'd be shoe-gazing and looking at the floor and noticing the carpet and certain formations. It was a great inspiration, and something to do with the music and how it frees you up to look and think. When you're lost in the zone of making new work and you're excited about a train of thought or an emotional state, things become apparent, they appear like apparitions and present themselves to you in ways that they won't when you're not in that state of thinking and making.

You've used glitter, blankets, nail varnish, bandaids, organza, cigarettes, clay and many other unexpected substances and found objects in your work. Do they generate meaning as well as the forms you shape them into?

The forms and materials come together to convey the emotions the work embodies. Cigarette butts, for example, are a great barometer of anxiety, while everyone can connect to the colour and the smell of a bandaid. The latter are super-weird in a gallery, but they talk about wounding and vulnerability, about containment and a pathetic gesture to patch something up that isn't going to hold. They talk about the skin, the border between outside and inside, between me and you; they're on that peripheral surface. I used bandaids early on at a time when I was interested in a surface that was porous, that could breathe. I also used neoprene or organza fabrics – which let light, air and water pass through them – to emphasise an idea about containment that wasn't fixed. I am still working with that idea in many ways: shapes that contain, or materials that convey borders, whether personal, psychological, architectural, sociological, political or economic. You can describe these borders or containments in ways that are very easy for people to access, then you can mix them up with other things as an alchemical brew of substances and ideas that complicate all these boundaries.

The psychic fortress that my circle works create, like **The divisions and subtractions** series 2017, also explores the irony that any fortress or closed system that emphasises containment also draws attention to its opposite – to openness, vulnerability and porosity. In many ways accentuating one thing activates its other, as when you make enough circles in an exhibition for people to start thinking about squares. Or when you excessively make squares and they end up being organic, as with **Square cloud compound** 2010, where I kept adding together very formal squares that should be a strong, organisational, stackable shape, but because they are made from soft fabric they ended up becoming a huge, messy organic structure.

Spatial relations also seem important to your practice – the relationship between things, the space between the work and the viewer, and the architectural space in which you intervene.

The objects are not so important, they're props for people, props for conversations, props for movement, props to activate. The work is never totally

situated in the object or the audience or the architecture – it's a continual interplay or movement between them all. I'm always trying to crack open an extra space that's like an extra dimension within these object-laden rituals.

The objects are often excessive so that they almost cancel each other out and you can't actually see them. For all their sculptural-ness and object-ness they tend to disappear when you put enough of them together so that you can create other states. You can create its opposite again, you can create a void, or a need for nothingness or emptiness. They're really elaborate sets in a way to create another space, another world, a momentary place that you can inhabit even if you're just going to walk through it, but it's not going to be like anywhere else you've been that day.

Your work is playful and engaging, but it can also be unsettling, as objects seem to have considerable autonomy and at times begin to take over. Is there a darker side to your practice?

Completely. One of my students the other day was talking about how violent some of the objects are. There is an impulse at times that is dark and violent, and there's a process of dark and violent urges coming into the world through art, which is therapeutic – they cease to be as violent as they could have been if you had literalised them. Rather than axe someone to death, I can put an axe behind a bandage on a wall and quieten it down, and somehow in that process I come out the other end happy – the impulses are really alleviated through the making!

Colour is also important and American artist Mike Kelley, whose work also has an underside, summed it up well when he said that colour is a great doorway or access point that people respond to and that allows them into the work. It's like that lovely family uncle who says 'Come sit on my knee', and everything seems normal and then suddenly it's not – it becomes sleazy and complex. You open a door and let people in, but then it's no longer sweetness and light and colour as you play with a contrasting darkness and twist it in another direction. Putting the nice and the nasty together is an animating force that can create a liveliness and it brings the work back to where it's closer to a performance, as if someone has just left the room. My work is closer to performance at times as I'm not interested in well-made objects, I'm more interested in when the viewer can sense the making of it. And yes, anyone can do it – you can do it and your four-year-old should do it – which comes back to a punk ethos in some ways.

You've directly drawn on occult or spiritualist practices at times, such as conducting séances or asking tarot card readers to help resolve sculptural conundrums. Is this part of your interest in questioning logic and rationalism and their hidden ideologies?

Ever since I can remember I've been interested in alternative knowledges, such as the occult, but for a long time I didn't open that up into my work. At one stage I hit a block so I went to a clairvoyant to find out if she could help me see what the work would be. It was an interesting experiment as

I’m a parallel sceptic and believer, which is a complicated position to occupy. The clairvoyant described a work in great detail in a very open way, and not in the language of painting or sculpture that you might expect. She described something quite nebulous and beautiful and I wondered: ‘How am I going to make that?’ I tried making exactly what she described and it was a disaster and ended up in the skip, and yet I found after two years I had made what she said but not in a literal sense. **Square cloud compound** and **The additions and the subtractions** works all connect to this experience.

The additions and the subtractions series is also connected to the death in 2007 of Stephen Birch, a good friend and a great artist. I visited his studio after his death and saw all these wonderful unfinished experiments, and in some ways my subsequent circle sculptures respond to his unfinished work and a desire to explore his ideas further on his behalf. Thinking about the occult and the afterlife, whether you believe or not, is another way to free yourself up, another lateral thinking tool.

Which leads me to Catholicism. You were brought up a Catholic and, in recent years, Christian religious references have appeared in your work. What are you exploring by incorporating Catholic iconography?

Catholicism is an impossible one to shake; I think everyone agrees that once a Catholic always a Catholic, no matter how much you decry it or even despise it a little. In these works I was looking at my own personal mythologies, and what has shaped my thinking, and asking myself why I come up with particular forms. Is the Catholicism still there and does it influence what I make? I’m trying to get underneath my thinking to explore formative influences and to find out what they mean. It’s the illogic of belief that Catholics are particularly good at, such as the magic act that happens in Communion with the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, which I find fascinating. There are also alternate theologies in the Catholic Church, such as the Virgin Mary as a co-redeemer, alongside Jesus, providing direct access to God, which then opens up the possibility of many redeemers and Christianity no longer being a monotheistic religion. Whether we like religions or not, they have a hold on us and don’t tend to go away too quickly.

You often work with other artists on projects and with people from different fields – in a sense you draw together creative people in your practice, in your teaching, and your participation in artist-run projects. Is this community of makers important to your practice?

I think it goes back to the bandaid, to open forms and open systems that can be infected and contaminated by each other. Like many artists, I often want to work alone in my studio and not talk to anyone, but I find when I force myself to open up and invite others in – like when I was making the **The divisions and subtractions** work in 2017 – that it’s a very positive experience. It’s not generosity though, in offering other artists exposure by participating in my exhibitions, it’s because I’m devouring and cannibalising them into my work! But it’s an exchange and part of my process of derailing my habits and

patterns of thinking – I am quite a fixed thinker, but by inviting people in or being with students or by exposing myself to work by other artists I open up my thinking to more lateral possibilities.

I fail again and again, I’m stubborn and I’m fixed and I want things my own way. I’ve found though that with people like Nick Dorey, Stevie Fieldsend, Hany Armanious, Andre Bremer, Adriane Boag and Matthys Gerber, if I shut up and listen when they come into my studio and let things unfold they show me things that I would never have thought of myself. It’s not a collaboration necessarily, but they’ve given nuance to and enriched the work. They’ve put their energy in there too, so that the work is not just mine but a community of objects and a community of people, as you never really make your work on your own.

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