

Story
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Olga CIRONIS

Uniting Voices



“ Red velvet was always just for the cardinals and the royals, and I brought it back to the public ”



COLLECTING STORIES OTHERWISE UNHEARD AND REPURPOSING MATERIALS OTHERWISE UNWANTED, WESTERN AUSTRALIAN ARTIST OLGA CIRONIS DRAWS ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS TO POIGNANT EFFECT. BUT HER WORKS ARE NOT MEANT TO BE PRETTY: THEY ARE MEANT TO MAKE US QUESTION, TO DRAW US CLOSER, AND ULTIMATELY, TO UNITE US.

Olga Cironis is a collector of stories; a salvager of innocuous fragments of life's unseen moments, otherwise confined to individual memory. For Cironis, personal stories have collective meaning, and to share these stories is to give power to voices that would otherwise remain unheard. Steeped in personal experiences with migration, identity and otherness, Cironis' works raise questions about where we come from, who we are, and what our places are within this wide world.

Born to Greek parents in Czechoslovakia in 1963, memories of war and conflict linger in the artist's family psyche. Cironis' parents had left Greece during the Greek Civil War in the 1940s; they found refuge in Czechoslovakia, where they met and started a family before migrating to Australia in 1971. 'When we came here we were really poor,' Cironis muses, 'You couldn't buy a house where you wanted to. We were put into a poor area in Western Sydney.' It was a difficult transition for the family. They had been included and accepted in Czechoslovakia, despite going there as refugees. In Australia, finding acceptance was much harder.

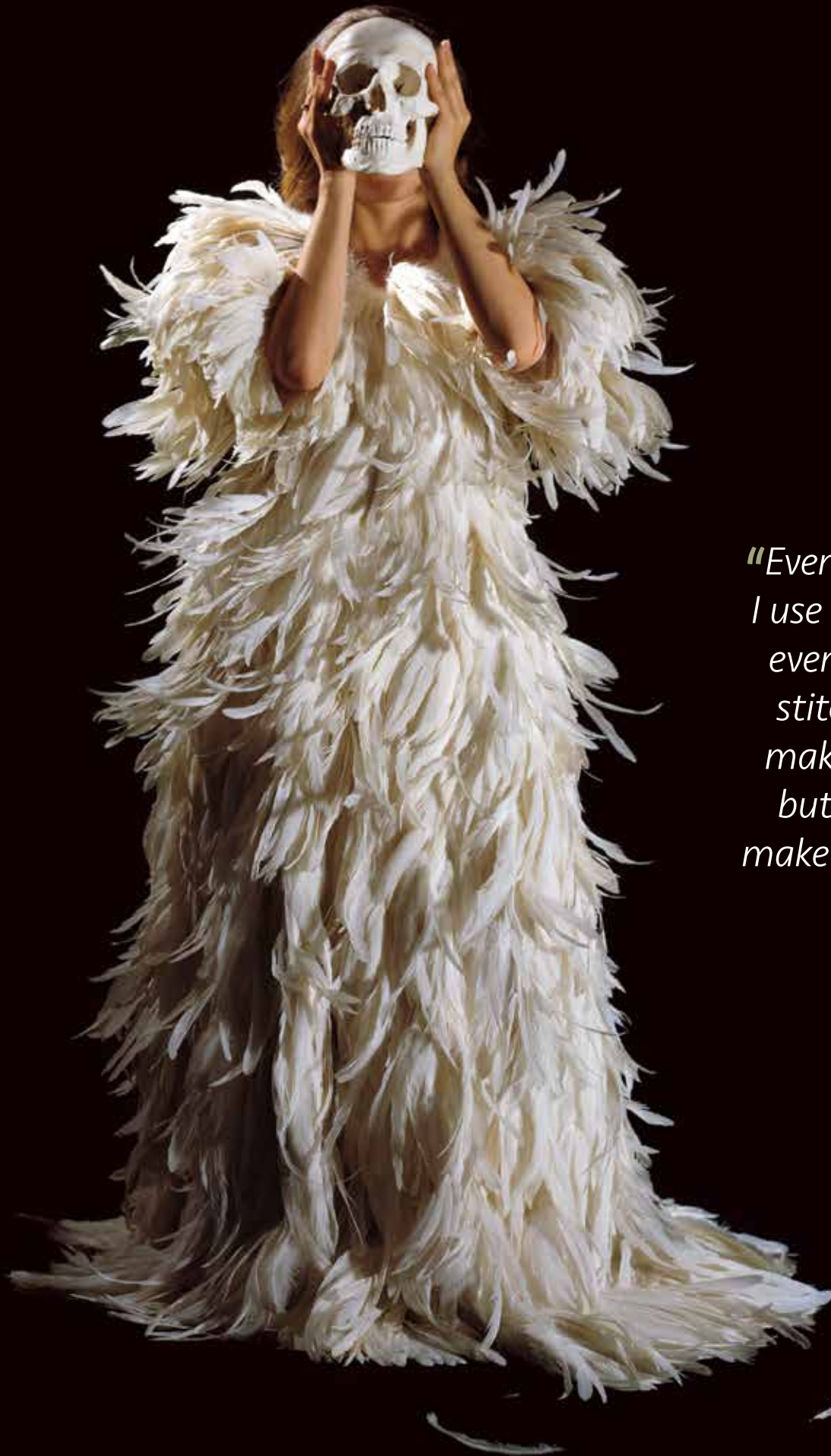
Where there is injustice or unfairness, Cironis faces it head-on. She is fearless of discomfort and confrontation, in art and in life. 'The fact that some people are treated less than others throughout history is pathetic. For me, it's a satire, it's ridiculous,' she says. 'It infuriates me when I see someone who comes from nothing not having the right to get something better. I would like to think that we are all equal, but I know that's not the case.'

This fury against injustice, coupled with personal experiences around migration, identity and otherness, drives the artist's practice and permeates all her work. 'I don't make stuff that you put on your walls and feel good about,' she says. 'Everything that I do is based on research, discovery, conversation, experience and being a sponge for information. When I make, I experiment. If people don't like it, that's not important. It needs to communicate.'

Cironis is someone who brims with conversation, stories and anecdotes. Nothing she says is uninteresting. She has spent her life enquiring, engaging in dialogue and looking for deeper meaning in the everyday. 'My knowledge and experience of the world comes from life and other people,' she explains. Her works



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always include the voice of the other; they consider the audience and are completed by participation and response. Connection is key.

Her momentous project *Mountain of words* (2013–) sees the artist engaging in an ongoing collaboration with her audience by gathering their hair. Cironis has collected hair – along with names and stories – from thousands of donors, weaving it into a singular ribbon using an old loom. The work, which is as much a document of humanity as it is a commentary on the power of united voices, will be continued throughout Cironis’ survey exhibition ‘Dislocation’ at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, as part of the Perth Festival.

‘Dislocation’ also presents a new video work featuring a wedding dress made in military-issue camouflage fabric. ‘No material that I use is neutral,’ Cironis says, ‘Even the cotton I use is symbolic, even the way I stitch; I could make it pretty, but I want to make it scarring.’ For Cironis, material has to be loaded with meaning. She has often made use of camouflage fabric – sourced from militaries all around the world – or velvet and grey blankets, to wrap objects. In doing so, she smothers the presence of the original object and replaces it with new meaning, loaded with cultural and historical significance. The effect can be poignant, or unsettling.

‘Red velvet was always just for the cardinals and royals,’ she says, ‘and I brought it back to the public. It’s bloody, feminine, physical and erotic. I covered a lot of objects in the red velvet.’ In works that contemplated death but also life and desire, Cironis covered bones, beds and discarded furniture in red velvet. ‘Then I found blankets,’ she says; ‘I respond to blankets because of my history. After the



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Czech Cold War era, they opened up bunkers and there were still grey blankets inside. Grey blankets, to me, mean poverty and refuge homes for children. Then I came to WA and you go to Rottneest and they had grey blankets! It was really weird.'

Sure to Cironis, grey blankets represent institutionalised history. Having originally sourced a small number of grey blankets from Rottneest Island holiday lodgings when she first came to WA in the early 1990s, these began to feature in Cironis' practice, and have become emblematic of her work. 'I use really crappy, discarded stuff, stuff that society no longer wants, the history that we don't like to look at, that is not of the victors.'

'Fabric was another way of introducing tactility,' Cironis explains. As an artist who invites touch, the tactility of materials is an important feature of her works. It draws the audience in, creating intimacy. Public and private spaces merge. The audience is more aware of their surroundings. Cheap, discarded objects become heroic. 'When I first started making art, I was really shocked at how it was hierarchical. It was put on a pedestal and you had to bow down to it. Art was seen as 'holier than'. I was irritated by that ... I wanted to make art that broke all those barriers.'

With connection and unity at the heart of her practice, Cironis has certainly broken barriers with her art. In 'Forest of Voices', a solo exhibition at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art between November 2020 and January 2021, Cironis invited the public to share their stories of intimacy, touch and connection. The stories were gathered as audio recordings and presented as a sound installation. The room, filled with small, suspended speakers, reverberated with intimate exchanges uttered all at the same time, murmuring like wind through branches. Reflecting on the work, Cironis says, 'It is the pure essence of love, which is being in the moment, that is what makes us equal. We all have it. It makes

you stop, makes you question your place in the world, makes you realised that your story is everybody else's story.'

Through the realisation of shared experience found in Cironis' work, we are able to feel more connected with our fellow people. We are reminded that we are far more alike than we are different, no matter where we come from, who we are, or how we perceive our own places within the world.

Art Collective WA is publishing the first monograph of Olga's thirty-year career as part of a WA artist series, launched on 25 March 2021. The publication, titled *This Space Between Us*, will feature contributions from Lisa Slade, Jacqueline Millner and Paola Anselmi. Cironis is presenting a solo exhibition of the same title at Art Collective WA, to coincide with the launch. ■

olgacironis.com

[@olga_cironis](https://www.instagram.com/olga_cironis)

Olga Cironis: This Space Between Us
Jacqueline Miller, Lisa Slade and Paola Anselmi
Art Collective WA, Perth, 2021

EXHIBITIONS

Olga Cironis: Dislocation
Until 5 June 2021
Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth

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- 03 *Untitled*, 1991, archival digital print, 176 x 119.5 cm, City of Bunbury Art Collection
 - 04 *Seeing Red*, 1999, animal bones, velvet, dimensions variable, photograph Robert Frith
 - 05 *Playing War With Daddy*, 2016, repurposed toy, hair, cotton thread, 35 x 25 x 2 cm
 - 06 *Forest of Voices* (detail), 2020, steel chairs, red velvet cushions, speakers, dimensions variable, photograph Robert Frith
 - 07 *Mountain of Words* (detail), 2017, metal loom, chair, amp, 9 speakers, 800 cm hair ribbon, dimensions variable, installation view, Fremantle Arts Centre, photograph Christophe Canato
- Courtesy the artist, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, and Art Collective WA, Perth