



Australia

Olga Cironis

MATERIAL POWER

Behind Each Look, 2007, 260 × 250 × 600 cm, eucalypt branch, woollen blankets and cotton thread.

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▲ Olga Cironis. Portrait by Robert Frith, Acorn Photo 2020.

The woman sits, working at a loom. From her fingers unfurls a cloth made of many hues: umbers, russets, golds. The fibre is human hair; the weave composed of strands from disparate heads. For the performance piece Mountain of Words, contemporary artist Olga Cironis wove together locks of hair donated by audience members. As Cironis worked, she chatted with the donors, connecting together the material and stories of different people.

Cironis was born in 1963 in Czechoslovakia to parents who had fled the Greek Civil War as refugees. In 1971, at nine years of age, Cironis and her family migrated across the globe to Sydney to start a new life. These experiences of migration, exclusion and the deeply-human search for belonging, thematically underpin her work. After graduating in the mid-1990s

from the Sydney College of the Arts with a Master of Visual Arts, a visit to Perth prompted Cironis to stay on, the sandy-shored city becoming the base from which she has forged a leading art practice. Over the past three decades, Cironis's work has been exhibited widely in Australia and internationally. In 2020-21, her work was showcased in three major solo exhibitions: *Forest of Voices* at the

Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (3 November 2020 – 10 January 2021); *Olga Cironis: Dislocation*, at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at The University of Western Australia, in association with Perth Festival (27 February – 5 June 2021); and *Olga Cironis: This Space Between Us* at the Art Collective WA (20 March – 17 April 2021). In 2021, an extensive book showcasing her career, *Olga Cironis:*



▲ *Mountain of Words*, 2017, performance work with metal loom, speakers, amplifier, paper and hair, installation dimensions variable. Photo Rebecca Mansell.



▲ *Seeing Red*, 1999, animal bones, velvet and cotton thread, individual dimensions variable. Acorn Photo.

This Space Between Us, with articles written by Paola Anselmi, Jacqueline Millner and Lisa Slade, was published by Art Collective WA.

Cironis's work explores ideas of nationhood, identity and culture through the lens of being a migrant and a woman in contemporary Australian society. Across sculpture, installation, performance, photography and video, she draws sharp attention to the gaps that exist between the dominant narrative and unheard voices: those that are overlooked or silenced. The impetus, she explains, is the experience and witnessing of 'the injustice of how people – migrant people, women, children, people in poverty – are treated by others in our democratic system'.

An experimental approach to working with material characterises Cironis's work. Household fabrics, furniture, ornaments, tools, feathers and hair are treated to processes of assemblage, modification and augmentation. Working primarily with recycled materials, she sources supplies 'from everywhere – from the side of the road, second-hand shops or given to me'. She selects material for its symbolism and traces of past use. 'Everything I use needs to have a universal meaning. Materials have to be exploited, so that I can play with them and turn the meanings on their side. For example, if I start with a stool, I consider who may have owned or used one – not the farmer, more likely the gentry. Class, gender, political issues all come into consideration.'

A signature method of the artist is

the wrapping of objects with fabric to create sculptural pieces. The work *Seeing Red*, is formed of twenty-four animal bones, ranging from a large ram's skull to the intricate rib of a small mammal. Each structure is covered in rich velvet, stitched up to form delicate packages. A vibrant blood-red, their colour gestures to organs and interiors; their composition to taxidermy and ornaments. All at once the objects are fragile and violent, biological and cultural, signalling both life and death. A sense of unease imbues the forms which hint at murky, complex truths that lie beneath the exterior.

In *Under Cover*, nursery cots are covered with grey woollen blankets. Lined up in austere rows, their formation references institutional

▼ *Under Cover*, 2002, installation dimensions variable, repurposed wooden cots, military blankets, cotton thread and castors with projected text.



settings, the government-issue cloth sparking conflicting associations of security and loss, warmth and segregation. Stripped of individuality, the beds powerfully signal forced compliance cemented by the haunting rallying call projected on the wall: 'If you're not with us, you're against us'.

Cironis's introduction to textiles began early in her life. Growing up, her mother was a cutter and sewer for the outdoor clothing company Paddy Pallin and brought home fabric off-cuts for the family to utilise for clothes-making. At school – as a girl, 'expected to sew and make home!' – Cironis learnt knitting, crocheting, embroidery and sewing, but 'I hated having to do them – it makes sense that I now subvert the mediums in my work'.

Today, it is the traditions and power of fabric that interest her. 'Fabric is where the home and nature begin. The process of making fabric is very organic. Army uniforms look so deadly and symbolise power, vulnerability, fear, death, impermanence – yet the camouflage design is originally based on nature.'

Tropes of children, war, domesticity, gender roles and the natural world repeat across Cironis's works. Baby dolls are swathed in military camouflage, faces obscured with shells, feathers, or stitched away altogether. In *Bouquet*, the features of a tapestry-covered doll are formed by found objects. In *Hollow Desires*, a

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▶
Bouquet, 2020, 97 × 34 × 25 cm,
repurposed mannequin, tapestry,
porcelain and found objects.
Acorn Photo.



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▲
Hollow Desires, 2016, 111 × 83cm, child's clothing, hair and cotton thread on military canvas. Acorn Photo.

camouflage baby onesie is laid out, like a deity, upon military canvas. In *Falling Into Your Arms*, two stock-horse saddles are adorned: one with a landscape tapestry, the other with military fabric. Both are fringed with feathers and gold thread. The material of the pair suggests the dual human and gendered activities of making craft, and making war.

Cironis uses stitch in a way that draws attention to construction: lines are visible; tails of cotton thread are left to hang – seeming to gesture to the unfinished nature of the subject matter. In *First Up*, a kitchen egg-beater is covered in checked orange woollen blanket; strings of red thread streaming below, anchoring the object within blank space. *Handmaiden* fuses a child's crutch and a branch together as a part-functional, part-organic tool embalmed in grey-woollen blankets, threads emerging from seams. In *Behind Each Look*, a sweeping flayed eucalypt tree is encased in blankets with each sharp twig individually wrapped.

Text is a central device in Cironis's practice. Works, including *Today I Am What You Want Me to Be*, *Why Are You Here?* and *I Did Not See It Coming*, spell out the phrases of their titles in letters cut from woollen blanket. In a form of collage, the words are stitched atop decorative fabrics, military canvas and domestic wooden furniture – the result a jostling



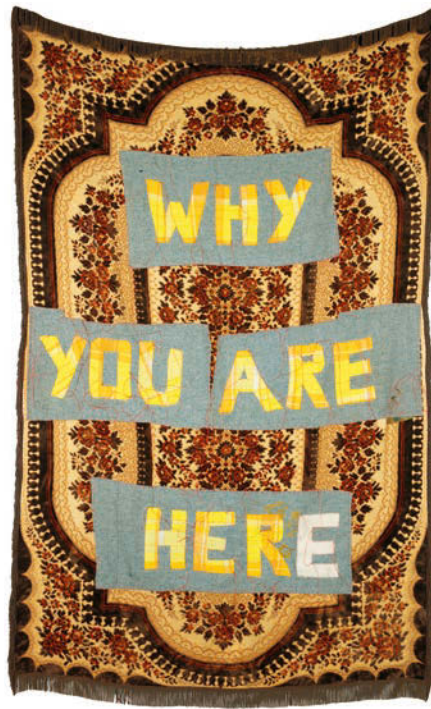
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▲▼
Falling Into Your Arms, 2018, 300 × 640 × 1200cm and 400 × 530 × 550cm, two repurposed stock horse saddles and tapestry, feathers, military fabric, cotton and gold thread. Acorn Photo.





▲ *First Up*, 2020, 30 × 10.5 × 9cm, repurposed utensil, woollen blankets and cotton thread. Acorn Photo.



▲ *Why Are You Here?*, 2018, 200 × 130 cm, woollen blankets and cotton thread on repurposed domestic fabric.



▲ *Today I Am What You Want Me to Be*, 2010, 35 × 68 × 36 cm, repurposed wooden furniture, foam, woollen blankets and cotton thread. Acorn Photo.



▲ *Holding*, 2018, 42 × 35 × 20 cm, acrylic and repurposed shelf. Acorn Photo.

juxtaposition evoking the push-pull of forging selfhood. 'Playing on words is important in my work. Text is more like a scream, it's not polite. I use it for impact, and to add another layer of meaning. It's also about talking to a predominately English-speaking audience from a bilingual background: meanings can be lost in translation very quickly. Text allows me to satirise the meaning behind words, turn meaning on its side.'

In *Holding*, an ornate Rococo-

styled shelf with a sleek acrylic top is attached to the wall, the verb of the title gracing the glossy surface. The object – merging history and modernity – is precariously fastened, but persists nevertheless. In *I Will Not Clean Your Home* a cry against subordination – gendered, ethnic – is made with a vinyl neckpiece.

Cironis's use of installation and performance provide another dimension to the experience of her works. Across her career she has

regularly invited the public to directly interact with her works. In *Handle Me Gently*, audience members could rearrange ambiguous mammal sculptures made of fabric, using in-built handles. *Hush*, for Sculpture by the Sea Cottesloe, invited people to view the sea from a gilded metal chair placed on the sand. For the installation *Forest of Voices*, people could share their intimate human stories of love, pain, fear and loss. These stories were later played

▼ *Handle Me Gently*, (detail) 2008, steel, foam, woollen blankets and cotton thread, individual dimensions variable. Photo Pascal Veyradier.



▼ *Hush*, 2020, 130 × 49 × 45 cm, aluminium and gold leaf.



as fragmented voices through suspended speakers to listeners sitting on red-velvet upholstered steel chairs, arranged so that some faced each other, and others away.

Cironis explains that this element of her work intentionally positions the audience as a contributor. 'The work is not protected, the audience can add meaning to feel close to it, the sense of being part of it. The audience can change the direction of the meaning by how they interact. Using audience

interaction can seduce them into a space where they leave a little of themselves behind.'

Like the many for whom a lock of their hair is now part of a woven composition representing the complex diversity of the Australian public. Or for whom the Indian Ocean is forever imbued with the sensation of sitting upon a splendid golden seat – looking outwards, in a quiet, free, moment. 'I want to make us think about how it is for other people and

for how we are in the world. The best way to do this is to make us think and question our place in the world, to communicate, through the artwork.'

The book about Olga Cironis's practice, *Olga Cironis: This Space Between Us*, published by Art Collective WA, is available at: www.artcollectivewa.com.au

Nyanda Smith
Arts writer

▼ *Forest of Voices*, 2020, speakers and speaker wires, steel, velvet and cotton thread, installation dimensions variable. Acorn Photo.

