

Luna Palace depicting HA HA and Mr Moon

Dreaming with Open Eyes

Pamela Irving discusses her mosaic installation at Luna Park in Melbourne

Entry to Luna Park through Mr Moon's gaping mouth is an experience Melbourne kids have enjoyed for 100 years. As I walked through the entrance in December 2012, I reflected upon my own journey as an artist over the past thirty years that had brought me to this place. How had my ceramic education and practice taken me from making coil-built ceramics (sculptural mythological creatures, glazed and fired) to applying 'ready-made' ceramics to more than 100 square metres of a permanent mosaic installation on Luna Park's Luna Palace?

My undergraduate and postgraduate work in ceramics centred around kiln-fired, sculptural works. I exhibited works based on myth, both ancient and modern. For the first decade or so of my professional practice, I had the time to devote to the technical challenges of sculptural ceramics; however, the arrival of children led me on a completely different trajectory. The demands of newborns did not sit well with the production of coil building, glazing and firing. I resorted, from necessity, to making lots of smaller ceramic objects – things that I could fire, glaze and cement together, achievable within my time constraints. Unconsciously, out of necessity rather than by design, I was becoming a mosaicist.

Reference to the history of pottery and ceramics has always been very important to my mosaic practice. I began to combine my early handmade components with found objects and commercial tiles. I sought out hallmarks and shards from some of the world's great potteries and ceramic production ware, which placed the work within a context. At times I used the hallmarks as part of the narrative.

My early mosaics used doll parts, figurines and ornaments, which I altered. Some of these were shown in my 2004 exhibition, *Treading the Boards*, which toured around some of victoria's Regional Galleries. That body of work was inspired by the American folk art tradition of Memory ware – a 19th century craft developed by women who affixed keepsakes to the outside of vessels. I found the notion of creating these visual time capsules as personal mementoes, very inspiring.

It was from this time that I stopped making my own ceramic components. Instead, I used factory-produced wares and tiles exclusively in my work. The use of commercial ceramic shards makes reference to the demise of the production potter whose wares were rapidly being replaced by cheap Asian imports. My palette came from opportunity shops and friends who gave me their broken, treasured ceramic heirlooms and kitchen china. Their trash became my mosaic treasure.



Nom Nom figure

The use of broken china in mosaic is called 'pique assiette'.

While it translates literally to 'picnic plate', it is also colloquially used to describe "one who steals from others' plates". As a mosaic technique, it describes the process of using broken and recycled china as the tesserae. A good example of the application of this technique is found in a china-encrusted house in Chartres, France called *La Picassiette*. Other examples of mosaic environments created from found objects are Nek Chand's Rock Garden in Chandigarh, India, and Isaiah Zagar's Philadelphia's Magic Gardens in the USA.



As my children grew, family holidays involved visiting those three sites as well as Niki de Saint Phalle's Queen Califia's Mosaic Garden in San Diego, Jean Linard's Cathedral in France and, locally, the Old Curiosity Shop in Ballarat. These places have been enormously inspirational for me. Other travels took us to the classic Roman mosaics of Pompeii, to Carthage and El Jem (Tunisia), Volubilis (Morocco) and Italica (Spain). Inspiration from the modern mosaic environments has combined with my fascination for ancient Roman pottery and mosaics to inform my current ceramic practice.

In 2010, I received a large commission from the Luna Park Trust. It came about quite serendipitously, I was travelling with my husband in Tunisia at the time, looking at Roman mosaics in the Bardo Museum. when I received an email from the Executive Director of Luna Park, Mary Stuart. Mary had visited my gallery/studio in my absence and fell in love with my courtyard, a space encrusted with scores of bird mosaics and bird ornaments. She felt my quirky, playful style would be a perfect fit for Luna Park.

The front arches of the Luna Palace Building, housing the famous dodgem cars with a reception area upstairs, presented as the ideal site. Located in the centre of the Luna Park complex, it is approximately 25 metres wide and one metre in height. I was given free reign as to the content of the work, as my playful style was already anticipated.

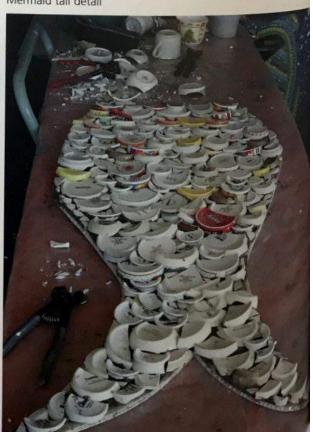
I decided to make large, giggly heads - a reference to the Giggle Palace that adorned the Park before a fire destroyed it in 1981. I also used my vocabulary of animals and characters which inhabit my prints and drawings. The workers at Luna Park (sometimes referred to as 'The Carnie People', as in 'carnival') also provided inspiration.

This installation also makes reference to pottery and ceramic history. On one archway is the St. Kilda Mermaid, which is a 2.5-metre reclining figure. Her tail is made from the bottom of coffee mugs cut

Installing the HA HA figure



Mermaid tail detail



in half to create scales, each one bearing their hallmark 'Made in Japan', 'Made in China', 'Made in England'. She is a truly multicultural mermaid, befitting of the generations of immigrants that have entered through Mr Moon's Big Mouth since it's opening on 13 December 1912.

My entire mosaic installation at Luna Park is titled *Dreaming with Open Eyes*. It is not only the title, but also describes my approach to this major project.

The first installment was unveiled on 13 December 2010 by transport magnate Lindsay Fox, one of the Park's owners. On that night I was commissioned to do another section, the 12-metre high turret immediately adjacent to the arches. On the second section many of the characters represent people in the real world. They have more personal significance.

One example is the large 'HA HA' figure, with a face made using shards collected by the vivacious, tattooed, in-house carpenter, Dalida Azar. The Luna Park site was a tip in the 1890s. Dalida collected the shards for me while repairing the scenic railway. Inside the HA HA figure's stomach, you can see what he has just eaten – duck, rabbit and chook! The little antique animal figurines are perched inside his stomach, much like the pigeons seen perching around the park. The HA HA figure has a peg leg. Peg Leg was an imaginary figure I shared with my grandmother. He also has two tattoos with swallows, which represent my grandfather who worked at the Swallow and Ariell Biscuit Factory in Port Melbourne for most of his life.









Genie head with skewers in place to keep the screw holes open

The words 'HA HA' emerge from his mouth representing the joy and laughter that rings out through the park. It is also harks back to the original Giggle Palace that I remember so fondly from my childhood.

This second section was unveiled for the Park's 99th Birthday by Simon Crean, Federal Minister for the Arts. The third section, celebrating the 100th birthday, was unveiled by former prime minister Paul Keating in December 2012.

The third section of the installation covers the second turret and connecting arch of the Luna Palace building. Here, Mr Moon does a kind of disco jig and finds a girlfriend – his own carnie girl, Mrs Moon. Mrs Moon sports whole plates as eyes, salt and peppershakers for eyeballs, and a broken dinner set for her skirt. My favorite piece on this section is above the archway, Harry Happy Pants. His big, grinning face is made from smashed Moroccan tagines and Italian smalti.

Creating works using the historic shards found by Dalida, gifted ornaments, and pre-loved dinnerware, has given the large, wacky pieces their own character as 'Melbourne Memory ware'.

In September 2012 I attended the International Mosaic Conference in Cyprus, where I gave a PowerPoint presentation of the mosaic installation, *Dreaming with Open Eyes*. From this presentation I received an invitation to participate in an exhibition at the Ravenna Mosaico, the International Festival of Contemporary Mosaic in Italy, to be held in October 2013. I have also been invited to create a new section (the fourth installment) for the Luna Palace building.

So, how did I move from coil-built ceramics to a huge mosaic installation at Luna Park? I suppose the answer is that my ceramics journey has not been conventional, but throughout three decades of ceramics practice, I have always been dreaming with open eyes.

Entry to Luna Park is free. See their website for opening times.
Pamela's gallery at 68 Patterson Road, Bentleigh in Melbourne is open by appointment.
T: 03 9557 2688.

You can see progress shots of the installation on www.facebook.com/pamelairvingart www.pamelairving.com.au