

Irreverent Tales – Pamela Irving

Artspace, 22 June-29 July 2017

Liza Dale-Hallett, Senior Curator, Sustainable Futures, Museums Victoria

Thank you Jacquie and Pamela for the opportunity to speak here tonight.

Welcome everyone to *Irreverent Tales!* What an exhibition.

When I view Pamela Irving's art it reminds me of why art matters. How it keeps our brains and hearts primed for living.

Pamela's YOLO Men graphically & optimistically remind us that we Only Live Once.

When I look at Pamela's art, these are the words that come to mind:

Surprising
Provocative
Personal
Joyful
Fun
Useful
Colourful
Symbolic
Passionate
Poetic
Complex

Her work has many layers of meaning & depth across time

Pamela has, more than most artists, used her talents to foster creative communities and enrich our public places with vibrant and fun art.

Her work is found in collections across Australia and the world. It is on our streets, in our schools. It is very firmly planted in our hearts and has become part of Melbourne's urban legends.

We are indeed very honoured to present over 30 years of Pamela Irving's artistic practice in paintings, drawings and mosaics. It is particularly special to know that she created her first ceramic work in Box Hill.

Some of these works in this exhibition have never been shown in Australia. One work on loan from Museums Victoria has not been seen publicly since 1991!

'Something old, something new, something borrowed, someone blue' – was acquired by me, as a young, just married for the first time (!), curator. It became part of the Ritual & Belief Collection within the Museums Victoria, and had been intended for the new Museum at Southbank. This wasn't to be; and with 18 million items in our collections we are only really able to exhibit about 3% at any one time. So the wedding cake has never been exhibited - until now!

This wedding cake was part of 'The Bride Stripped Bare' exhibition at Blaxland Gallery, Myer Melbourne, 1991. In this parody of bridal customs & rituals, the bride sits upon her own cake of shattered dreams - the new hideous gifts she once desired and the horrific mortgage that surrounds her have left her blue, disorientated, a bit tipsy & perhaps a little disillusioned. Pamela Irving talked about this work in the following way:

'Weddings are public rituals. Inevitably such occasions are replete with ceremony, tradition and bring

with them their own taboos. "The Bride Stripped Bare" reveals some of the anxieties associated with this ritual. The seating arrangements, the idea of a "pure white wedding" (my 2nd wedding was red!), taking the vows and wedding protocol - not to mention the wedding night jitters. When my brides are "stripped bare" the underlying joy and fears are exposed for all to ponder and bemuse.'

And, of course, there is the other cake: 'Royal Tears: The Wedding, The Honeymoon, The Heirs, The Mistress and Those Phone Calls' – make sure your track the title of this piece to the cake decorations!

The earliest piece here is Untitled Dog 1985, which came into the collection as a City of Box Hill Acquisitive Prize. This sits alongside three new works, acquired for the Whitehorse Art Collection - Adoration of YOLO Man, exhibited for the first time, along with two highly decorative works, representing Mr Hanky Panky. Don't you love those titles – alive with personality, spunk and narrative!

Dogs seem to be an ever present feature of Pamela's works. One particular and very special dog is Larry - Pamela's alter ego, who follows her everywhere.

Most of you have probably met Larry La Trobe, the bronze larrikin dog who lives in Melbourne's city square. Larry is so well loved (just search Google and 49,000 results pop up!) and probably rivals Phar Lap in legend status.

Larry was installed in 1992 and was the first sculpture for Melbourne's Open Air Sculpture Museum. When he was 'dog-napped' in 1995 the public was outraged. The Melbourne Times initiated a campaign to find Larry, replicas were made and installed in Melbourne trams, a 2 metre high Larry Moomba Float was made the quest to locate Larry; this was later taken to Osaka where it won best float award. There was even a song written in his honour.

A sculpture of 'Larry' riding Phar Lap and titled 'Phar Larry' was also created by Pamela for the 1999 Melbourne Cup.

There is no end to the creative potential of Larry!

'Ned Kelly's Last Supper' was first created for an exhibition in 1992, South Yarra. This led to a series being commissioned and sold by George's department store in Collins Street. The real and imagined experience of eating off a masterpiece is an example of how Pamela Irving revels in absurdities and creates multiple layers of meaning in her art.

Pamela uses an eclectic pallet. She up-cycles materials from Op Shops, friends, neighbours, locals (even my brother who brings broken tiles from his building works). She embeds people's lives into her mosaics and transforms shattered treasures into intricate and complex art including:

- 120 year old dinner sets
- Commercial tiles
- Hallmarks and shards from some of the great potteries
- Doll parts
- Figurines

Each mosaic piece is a form of 'Memory Ware' – just like the 19th century American folk-art tradition where women would fix keepsakes to the outside of special vessels. Usually these vessels would hold the narratives of these women's lives – Pamela too creates intimate and provocative narratives with her mosaic art.

So where else can you see Pamela's work?

The most recent piece in this exhibition was completed this year 'Taking Tea with my golden P.....' [pussy] which will be featured in November at the prestigious SOFA: the Sculpture Objects Functional Art and Design Fair in Chicago. This is the world's premier sculpture fair; each work is considered a one-of-a-kind masterwork.

On a local level, you can also find Pamela's mosaics at:

Luna Park – 100 square metres of mosaic 'Dreaming with Open Eyes'

Railway bridge at Patterson Road, Bentleigh has hundreds of fabulous portraits

Pamela's studio, and her bird courtyard, Patterson Road, Bentleigh

And finally a comment on Reading the Layers

I suggest that while you view the works tonight, pay particular attention to the titles. The City of Whitehorse has carefully edited some of these – which of course is an invitation for you to use your imagination!

When you walk through this exhibition you will be walking through time to many deep myths, legends, art history and allegories. You will meet many impressive individuals – famous artists, infamous dogs, extraordinary empresses, even 'An Angel for Fake Truth'! In each mosaic chip, or line drawing, you will also see a reflection of your own lives.

There are numerous layers of meaning in Pamela's works – look carefully at the detail and have fun uncovering them.

Pamela describes this exhibition as a reflection of her 'love of humour, travel, history, satire and storytelling.' I encourage you all to come along to a talk by Pamela about her works on 22 July.

Nearly everything is available for sale – what an opportunity!

Finally, congratulations Pamela!

It gives me great pleasure to open 'Irreverent Tales'!

Enjoy!