

Emily Floyd's Alphabetical Artistry

EMILY FLOYD'S WORK IS A CONVERSATION WITH HER VIEWERS. EDWARD COLLESS JOINS IN THE CONVERSATION. PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIRSTIN GOLLINGS.



Emily Floyd's latest work is on display at the National Gallery of Victoria, in Federation Square. It is like some exotic and fantastic ornamental literary machine mounted on a podium the way that historic or anachronistic furniture is displayed in those sorts of period rooms that have been fabricated social history museums.

A cluster of immaculately carved wooden models of Russian onion domes rises, like forest mushrooms, out from a fertile mound of accumulated, carved wooden letters. This typography is loosely piled up, as if the letters were wood chips or debris spilling over from some publishing or printing operation, or just litter swept into heaps. But some of this alphabetical soup has been separated and sorted out, like kindergarten play blocks, and put together playfully – maybe even unconsciously – to form sentences from Fyodor Dostoevsky's famous novel, *Crime and Punishment*. This is confident, mature and sumptuously intelligent artwork.

Yet, astonishingly, it was only two years ago that Floyd showed her first major installation work at Melbourne's 200 Gertrude Street, where she had scored a studio residency almost as soon as she had left her sculpture course at RMIT in 1999. That installation, titled *Cultural Studies Reader* was made up of a group of small wooden platforms – eleven "islands", she called them – made of jagged sheets of MDF, each one carrying citations, in carved wood, from each chapter in Melbourne academic Simon During's cultural studies textbook of the same name. Floyd assembled these slabs of text to resemble models of mass housing blocks; and these floating communities were the habitat for a small population of black wooden rabbits, also carved from wood, who sat with chalk in their mouths having written messages to each and to us along the "streets" of their cityscape. "We're having a meeting about our process. My work is about notions of popular culture." These bunnies were the inhabitants of an artistic culture steeped in cultural theory, and their communités were bureaucratic graffiti. But they breed fast, and you could tell they would take over this space quickly; even if they all looked and acted the same.

The prominent and adventurous Melbourne gallerist Anna Schwartz noticed Floyd's work at Gertrude Street, and took it that year to Artissima in Turin, then at the start of 2002 to Madrid's ARCO. Only a few months later, Floyd installed her first solo show at Anna Schwartz's gallery in Flinders Lane. Early this year, Floyd's grand installation of massive white dining tables with sentences cited from Franz Kafka's *The Trial* – composed from red wooden letters marching across the tabletops and spilling into lush red drawers, opening up like Daliesque orifices – filled one of the generous spaces in the showcase *New 03* exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. Several months later this same monumental piece went up to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, before going into a private collection.

In her first years out of art school and with only a handful of exhibitions – but each one memorable, commercially successful and critically acclaimed – Emily Floyd is enjoying a meteoric blaze of fame, with the enthusiastic publicity, market appeal and curatorial support that gathers usually around more veteran artists. And on the quality produced so far, it's attention that is deserved and likely to be sustained. Surprisingly, however, for a career leapfrogging the routine isolation and survival strategies of most young urban art, Floyd's work is not sensationalist, nor really all that fashionably hip. Many of the issues that seem to be motivating her work derive from the sorts of paradoxes and aesthetic provocations that characterised postmodernist Australian art in the 1980s: the status of the author, the ironic effect of quotation, and the deconstruction of originality. These serious theoretical topics have persisted into the millennium, particularly in critical studies and in the institutional forms of art as academic research; but there is also an anachronistic tone to them in Floyd's highly articulate nostalgia for postmodernism, all the more vivid when embodied in such lush and labour-intensive, precious objects.

Floyd admits that her work emerges as much from her brief encounter with an Arts degree earlier in the 90s as from her studies at art school toward the end of the decade. A couple of years of philosophy, of sociology, film theory, psychology, of cultural studies and, especially, of post-modern literary theory, all gave her a taste for the intellectual, post-Duchampian manoeuvres of appropriation art. "In the past when you studied literature you were encouraged to imagine the characters, identify with them and understand their motives," Floyd explains. "But when I studied, we were deconstructing the literary text, looking at cultural, philosophical intertextuality and at the discursive implications of the text." Her interest in Dostoevsky and Kafka – and an emerging inclination to Albert Camus's *The Outsider* – is not an indicator of any great personal love for those books. (Even if, she admits, she does like them.) Rather, it is because *Crime and Punishment* and *The Trial* are canonical texts: text books, in fact, which is to say, they are pedagogical tools as well as revered masterworks. And they are texts that she studied. "I use work that has been part of my formal education."

Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus: of course these names (the pedigree of existentialist anguish and modernist moral and religious crisis) provide readily identifiable cultural capital for any work of art seeking to elevate its intellectual and aesthetic status. But, Floyd points out, to simply identify with these famous literary works, to siphon off some reserve of their wisdom or artistic value, would be

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Emily Floyd pictured at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.



“an obviously wanky thing to do: like using a quote from some European genius as an epigram stuck onto your gallery invitation.” Floyd has a far more problematic relationship with – and sceptical use for – her source material. “These works put the young European male at the centre of everything, depicting this narrator as a privileged figure, the only figure capable of creating or evaluating meaning. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov makes his confession of murder in front of an orthodox church, in front of a patriarchal god; signified in my version of the text by the configuration of onion domes. A similar language of confession ... and compulsion ... applies to artists.”

When the sentences form on her tabletops or in front of her domes or around her wooden animals, the words seem to be accidental flashes of meaning. Hardly bearing the profound authenticity of their anxious narrators, these statements appear frail, fortuitous even phantasmic moments of coherence. And many of these texts are arranged so that they imply the to and fro, the hesitation and extortionate rhetoric of conversations, arguments, accusations and lovers’ quarrels. “By the time you come here twice or thrice you will hardly notice how oppressive it is in here”, and “Do you want to leave already?” Floyd expands on this effect of her typographic deconstruction: “I think these works also have a kind of neediness: the artist is like a child who is needing affirmation but the audience is rejecting that artist, saying that contemporary art is too difficult, doesn’t deserve funding. The artist is this kind of infantilised subject.”

Not surprisingly then, the alphabetical devices that populate Floyd’s installations are not only reminiscent of an educational tool, but also a toy as animated as the magical objects leaping out of boxes and drawers in Alice’s Wonderland. The drama suggested by these erudite and ponderous citations may not be so much about the nightmarish dilemmas expressed in their sources, as it might be about the acquisition and breakdown of language itself manifested in the effort to assemble a creative message from these building blocks. “My work is as much about being inept at language,” says Floyd. In a recent series, Floyd constructs phrases from the French that she tried learning ineffectually up to Year 9 in high school. Some of these phrases are incorrect as French: “Voyez mes oussieux”; although as memories, they are truthful. “See my birds”, the sentence struggles to say; and appropriately, it induces the appearance of ornamental, but multiple and identical, little wooden birds, as flatly iconic as a hieroglyph and as cheeky as the residents in a cuckoo clock.

A novice learning French is forced into an infantile relationship with language and the world, no matter what one’s age and intellect might be. It’s not just that one does primary school exercises in reading and speaking, but the world you picture is simplistic and one’s negotiations with it are naive. It could have dark forces and dangers, or pleasures close at hand, but one simply cannot recognise them. Perhaps Emily Floyd pictures the idiom in which we negotiate our artistic values as a similarly foreign language; and that our manipulations of it and sense of competency with it are always at the level of play; like children piecing together meaning with pared down, sleek modernist building blocks. “Submit to the meaningless,” advises one voice emerging from a playground jumble of linguistic signs. And lurking nearby, a response that sounds as if it could be from Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty: “Because I talk too much I do nothing.”

Emily Floyd’s work is featured in *Fraught Tales: Four Contemporary Narratives*, at the National Gallery of Victoria, 29 November 2003 to 26 January 2004.

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Opposite page: Emily Floyd, *This door was only ever meant for you* (detail), 2003. Wood, paint, Hydrostone, flock, dimensions variable. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY.

This page: above left: Emily Floyd, *Introducing Marxism, #4 Redistribution of Wealth*, 2001. Mdf, pine, acrylic, chalk, plywood, 60 x 50 x 30cm. Above right: Emily Floyd, *Cuckoo*, 2003. Wood, silver, steel, acrylic, enamel paint, 121 x 53 x 45cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY.