

Mikala Dwyer

Wayne
Tunncliffe

Outfield 2009 (detail)
see pages 62–63

A shape of thought

Mikala Dwyer's richly inventive sculptural practice is marked by a receptiveness to the physical properties of materials and the matrix of meanings that gather around them. Dwyer has written of the importance to her of the 'consciousness and liveliness of matter, and the animation of matter and objects', and an attentive response to the substance of our world has driven her practice for more than thirty years.¹ Her work is expansive, engaging and even excessive as it embodies ideas in a panoply of forms and the spaces these forms occupy. Dwyer's agency in making is paired with a cultural medium's capacity to channel unexpected meanings from everyday objects, and her works almost always combine the found with the made. She is deeply attuned to how materials affect us both overtly and at a subconscious level and her art haunts our imagination and our psyche long after we encounter it. Dwyer's adventurous exploration of the relationship between objects, and between objects and us, means she has also not resiled from engaging with the irrational and the suppressed, with animism and even the occult, thereby continuing an anti-classical trajectory in art that can be aligned with such diverse movements as gothic, dada, surrealism and anti-form, as well as more recent aberrant practices.



Dwyer makes her artworks for the locations they inhabit, and the interplay of object, space and architecture is vital to the experience of her work. The relationship between these elements is often porous, with boundaries blurring and distinctions between audience and art becoming unclear as her exuberant works spill over into what we may think of as our space. This lack of restraint is another characteristic of Dwyer's practice, which is the opposite of the kind of formal good taste defined by careful balance, distilled shapes and

harmonious colours. Further clues to the relationship between object and subject in her work, and the fact that she never just presents form for form's sake, can be found in Dwyer's consideration of things as ideas:

I look at all things in the world as kind of 'cooled ideas', as 'thinking' that has slowed down or cooled into forms: whether it be a building, or a chair, a road, or a plan of a city, a toy or a playground. Or fashion. It's all an idea or thinking at some point. That's where the materiality comes from.²

Dwyer's use of 'cooled ideas' to think through matter and meaning has resulted in an art practice that is cumulative and iterative, and that includes its own history as a generative tool. Previous works are recycled into new works as they evolve into new spaces and new exhibitions, and entirely new works may be made while retaining titles and key forms from the past. The distinctive elements of Dwyer's sculptural practice were apparent from when she began exhibiting after graduating from Sydney College of the Arts in 1983, including in artist-run spaces in London where she lived for a short time before returning to Sydney in 1987. From 1989 onwards her work was curated into group exhibitions in the more experimental public art galleries in Sydney and Canberra. In the early 1990s her use of everyday and even trashy materials that carry a freight of meaning – cigarette butts and bandaids, cheap sequin fabric,

nail polish and stockings – and her transformation of exhibition spaces with everything from small gestures to whole-room installations, was quickly picked up in institutional exhibitions. Dwyer’s free-flowing, inventive and hard-to-pin-down work connected with a post-recession zeitgeist for the provisional, disruptive and unexpected.³

In the early 1990s Dwyer’s work was notably curated into two institutional surveys of new Australian art in Sydney: the inaugural **Primavera** exhibition at the recently opened Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992 and the high-profile **Australian perspecta** 1993 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. For **Primavera**, Dwyer stencilled Beatrix Potter-inspired bunnies on painted walls in a room environment filled with a plethora of objects as diverse as satellite dishes and planks of wood wrapped and bound in blankets, band-aids and other materials. The verticals in the room were often swaddled as if ready to lie down for sleep or even burial, while the horizontal



elements were provided with props and supports which meant they ‘were stood up to attention’ in this somewhat sinister version of a child’s nursery.⁴ For **Perspecta**, Dwyer transformed the Art Gallery of New South Wales’s grand neo-classical vestibule through another form of swaddling: wrapping the marble columns in glitzy sequin fabric; covering the dark leather seating in purple, orange and yellow material; and strewing the floor in rubber non-stick bath mats. It was both camp and domestic, a make-do local drag

reprise of international artist Christo’s high-profile white monochrome wrap of the vestibule in 1990.⁵ Both projects sought to highlight the latent ideologies of institutional spaces through this act of veiling, although Christo’s more high-minded approach was counterpoised by Dwyer’s creation of a ‘kind of hybrid space by introducing signifiers of other rooms, for example: the bathroom, disco and gym – sweat, shit and sex’.⁶

Dwyer’s inclusion in these prominent survey exhibitions brought considerable curatorial and critical attention to her work, and to that of a cluster of her Sydney contemporaries who were being grouped together at the time by curators and critics. This new wave of artists was associated with the artist-run Firstdraft Gallery and the CBD Gallery (directed by David Thomas) and included Hany Armanious, Adam Cullen, Tony Schwensen and Justene Williams. All were using modest everyday materials to make provisional artworks that avoided the more grandiose manifestations of postmodern art from the previous decade and were shown in exhibitions with titles such as **Rad scunge**, **Shirthead** and **Monster field**.⁷ In an article in *Art + Text* magazine in 1993 Jeff Gibson described their work as ‘avant-grunge’ and drew connections between it and Seattle-based indie rock music and the idea of generational disenfranchisement embodied in Douglas Coupland’s 1991 book *Generation X: tales for an accelerated culture*.⁸ ‘Avant-grunge’ was a catchy name for their practices, but most of the artists grouped under this rubric were opposed to the label as it was inevitably reductive in framing their work and ignored their formal and conceptual differences as well as their often quite specific local cultural references.

opposite:
woops 1994 (detail)
see page 39

Vestibule (for Jed) 1993 (detail)
see page 36

opposite:
The silvering 2017
see pages 107–11

Although Dwyer’s work and that of her contemporaries marked a strong break with the more theory-dependent practices associated with postmodernism, their immediate precursors in Australia included the unfiltered household materials used by some artists in the 1980s, such as Jenny Watson’s paintings on hessian with collaged elements, and the ‘junk ‘n’ funk’ aesthetic of the Annandale Imitation Realists who worked with found urban detritus in the early



1960s.⁹ Their international antecedents include arte povera (literally ‘poor art’), some aspects of pop art such as Claes Oldenburg’s food sculptures, and the more eccentric sculptural practices that arose concurrently with industrial minimalism in the 1960s in the work of artists such as Robert Morris. Dwyer’s use of fabric, nail varnish and pantyhose was also associated with a

feminist materiality, one that referenced an absent body and a latent rather than overt politics, and with Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois among other highly individual practitioners.¹⁰ Robert Morris’s 1968 definition of anti-form in art remains relevant to Dwyer’s work in its emphasis on gravity as being as important as space in constituting the art object, and in its acceptance of chance and indeterminacy as part of the process of making art.¹¹ However, Dwyer’s approach is more wilful than Morris’s: empathy, chance and gravity play a part in her working process, alongside the considered manipulation of materials.

Since these first major exhibitions in the early 1990s, Dwyer’s practice has been characterised by remarkable invention. While her work often takes on new forms, her aesthetic parameters have been consistent and she has expanded on earlier elements and antecedents as her knowledge of both has deepened. Gravity and artistic precursors come together in works such as **The silvering** 2010–17, whose levitating silver mylar forms recall Andy



Warhol’s floating **Silver clouds** 1966 as well as the shiny space-age aesthetic of 1960s fashion and film design.¹² **The silvering** was first shown in Berlin in 2010 and has subsequently been remade in Melbourne, Brisbane, Dublin, Berlin (again), Paris and now in Sydney. In its second showing in Berlin in 2013 its connection to pop was made evident when it was installed in a

room at the Hamburger Bahnhof containing major Warhol paintings from the 1960s and 1970s.¹³ Each presentation of the work is a new iteration owing to the short lifespan of its materials and because it is adapted to the specific dimensions of the space in which it is displayed.

The silver ‘O’ forms that comprise **The silvering** connect with Dwyer’s use of circular forms since the early 1990s and her exploration of the space they describe as inside and outside – with all the psychological connotations of insider and outsider, belonging and not belonging. Dwyer has progressed in that time from including circular objects in larger installations to the installations themselves assuming a circular form. Circles have appeared in

many of her works: in the blanket-swaddled satellite dishes of her **Untitled** 1992 **Primavera** work; the sequin-fabric-wrapped forms in **woops** 1994; the 'O' in the **I.O.U.** works of 1996 onwards, with their suggestion of a one-sided cultural pact between the artwork and audience; the circular cut-out in the hovering magic carpet platform in **Recent old work** 1996, which echoed elements of the gallery space in which it was installed; the essentially circular arrangement of **Oloodoo** 1998, a collaboration between the artist and her



daughter Olive; in the cylindrical PVC pipes that form the brightly coloured contingent townscape in **Iffytown** 1999; in the ocular- and target-like inclusions on the baggy vinyl **Hanging eyes** works of 1999 and 2000; and in the circular gatherings of disparate sculptural elements in what is known as **The additions and the subtractions** series begun in 2007.¹⁴



Hovering and rustling, crinkling and shimmering, bumping together in the gentle eddies of the air-conditioned room, Dwyer's levitating silver balloons are leashed to a silver sheet that is in turn tethered to both the gallery's architecture and to handcrafted clay base anchors to prevent them drifting off into other artworks or escaping out the

gallery's front door. The 'O's are quite a gathering; in fact, there were more than 150 balloons in the work's latest manifestation, of the type that usually spell out names or numbers for birthday parties or special anniversaries. Their shiny reflective surfaces suggest a party modality or event status, although displaced from their usual context they are more than a little poignant: have we missed the party or has it not yet begun? Either way, in occupying the gallery air space (usually untouched by art) and reflecting us in their rustling forms, the balloons make us aware of the gravitational pull of our own bodies; evoke the childhood pleasure and pain involved in the conflict of holding onto a balloon or letting it float away (or, worst of all, accidentally popping it); and suggest the ultimate endgame that is the zero that awaits us all at the end of our lives.¹⁵ This latter meaning is particularly relevant for Dwyer as she is interested in materialising the immaterial and the zeros that comprise this work suggest the 'void' – a concept of emptiness or nothingness at the heart of our universe that has preoccupied many philosophers and artists. In using helium, Dwyer calls on its nature as a key constitutive component of the universe, as well as using its levitational abilities to set her sculpture temporarily free from the bounds of gravity that govern us all.

A tussle with gravity is also a constitutive part of **Square cloud compound** 2010, one of Dwyer's most significant works of recent years and which again riffs on forms that have appeared previously in her practice.¹⁶ While **The silvering** levitates in the gallery's air space, **Square cloud compound** combats gravity by being stretched taut and lashed to the structure of the gallery itself. This exuberant arrangement of colourful cubic shapes is held aloft by stockings tied to the walls and ceiling, and anchored by a series of

opposite:
Hanging eyes 2 2000
vinyl, plastic, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, synthetic fur, felt, steel eyelets
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased through the NGV Foundation with the assistance of the Rudy Komon Fund, Governor, 2001

I.O.U. 1997–98
transparent and opaque synthetic polymer resin, synthetic fur, mirror, television
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, presented through the NGV Foundation by Peter Fay, Fellow, 2002

Oloodoo 1998
collaboration with Olive Corben Dwyer
palm trees, rocks, fabric, paint, paper, wood, polystyrene
installed in *Beauty 2000*, 2 July – 1 August 1998, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane



lamps that demarcate the perimeter of the space. The fabric cubes have a lineage in Dwyer's work, from her soft renditions of formalist sculpture and painting, such as her two drooping vinyl works with protruding American mid-century abstraction-like targets, **Hanging eyes** 1999 and **Hanging eyes 2** 2000, and her minimal fabric

wall-work **Untitled** 1995.¹⁷ **Untitled** is one of a small group of works made from shimmering organza fabric sewn and pinned into the shape of the fundamental structuring forms of geometry and sculpture: cubes, cones and triangular prisms. Pinned to the gallery wall, they are glamorous, transparent and beguiling – characteristics not usually associated with the aesthetic of minimalist sculpture. Dwyer subjects hard-edge and geometric precursors to softness, drooping, colour and – quite literally – frayed edges. These works have been discussed as a feminising of masculine hard-edge formalism, although this leaves the gendered association of hard/male and soft/female intact, while Dwyer has spoken of them as questioning the logic of geometry and, by extension, logic itself: '[formal geometry]. It's a given. Everything's built on those premises and it's the shape of logic. I started questioning: whose logic? What does logic look like? What's the shape of my logic? And trying to understand why everything's built on those kind of things.'¹⁸

Dwyer has scaled up this alternative fabric geometry in **Square cloud compound**, with some forms more successfully taut and squarish than others, which sag down into the overall space of the work. The distinctive stocking tethers have been present in Dwyer's practice since the early 1990s in works such as **Untitled** 1993 (exhibited in **Shirthead**), and in two of Dwyer's impressive solo exhibitions at Sarah Cottier Gallery's first incarnation in Sydney's Newtown, **woops** 1994 and **Hollow-ware & a few solids** 1995.¹⁹ In both exhibitions the stockings had an anchoring function; stretched taut with legs pulled from crotches in different directions, they had a resourceful fit-for-purpose capability as sculptural components while as gendered clothing items they were quite fetishistic. The deviant sexuality of the splayed legs was undercut by the humour of seeing stockings put into sculptural service like this. The absent body inferred by the stockings is echoed in the sentinel-like lampposts that surround **Square cloud compound**, which also have a sense of being human stand-ins, guarding as well as demarcating the perimeter of the installation. The addition of right-angled armatures to these totems gives them an air of being jolly sets of gallows, reinforced by the prison stripes with which some of them are painted. They are self-contained sculptural ecosystems, for as well as carrying light fittings that help illuminate the sculpture, they support miniature cubbyhouse-like nest boxes, are adorned by suspended mobiles and other objects, and are inhabited by china and glass ornaments like so many offerings to the square cloud spirits.

Square cloud compound developed from a residency Dwyer undertook on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour in 2010 and responds to the specific sites and histories of this evocative location. Cockatoo Island figures large in Sydney's colonial past. The site was initially used as a convict prison surrounded by

a shark-inhabited harbour, and then as a reform school for young ‘wayward’ women and, concurrently, one of Australia’s most important shipyards. While Dwyer produced works that connected closely to the history of Cockatoo Island, **Square cloud compound** takes a more lateral approach to this place.²⁰ The delightful absurdist title of the work suggests both containment (compound) and dreams of escape (clouds as a metaphor for reverie and freedom) – although the impossibility of square clouds anchors it to the realm of thwarted desires (the imprisoned). While Dwyer’s work has often been discussed in the context of provisional children’s play structures, such as cubbyhouses, the analogy of the architecture of **Square cloud compound** can be extended to the artist’s studio itself. In re-creating the work each time it is exhibited, the artist turns the gallery into a form of studio, a zone both safe and confronting as making and creating unfold with all their triumphs and anxieties. Dwyer’s installation offers escape and containment, comfort and confrontation, as its wonderful excess spills over into our space and engages our desire to inhabit its beguiling dream-encouraging shelter while its sentinel lampposts and the gallery’s guards balance this through monitoring our interaction.

The improbable title, **Square cloud compound**, is testament to irrationalism as a working methodology in Dwyer’s practice, particularly her interest in the occult, supernatural and paranormal. These ‘others’ to the scientific and philosophical enlightenment erupted into the popular imagination in the nineteenth century when seances, ouija boards, ectoplasm, ghostly manifestations and fairies at the bottom of the garden vied for attention and for pseudo-scientific proof of existence. Combined with a dadaist interest in absurdism evident in the accumulations and excesses of **Square cloud compound** and its related performance videos, a genealogy of cultural otherness and outsider art informs Dwyer’s practice, including her interest



in some of the more obscure spiritualist underpinnings of early modernism as well as her occasional practice of consulting a clairvoyant for advice on how to resolve particularly tricky artworks. Dwyer’s empathy with the outsider is apparent in the gatherings of disparate and unlikely objects, and elements both found and made, that are arranged in ritualistic circles in her

series **The additions and the subtractions**, a major example of which – **An apparition of a subtraction** 2010 – Dwyer made on Cockatoo Island following her residency. Gravity anchors these objects to the gallery floor, while the circles magically unify elements which could be otherwise difficult to associate. Assembled together in this way, they allow comparisons to be made and highlight certain formal sculptural qualities – scale, mass, density, transparency, colour and balance – in objects where we may not expect to find them.

While circles have been an essential part of Dwyer’s practice from the beginning, it was only about a decade ago that they emerged as an organising principle. The circular gatherings began small in **Black sun, blue moon** 2007 and **Monoclinic** 2008, gathered force in **Outfield** 2009, and reached peak

opposite:
The divisions and subtractions 2017
(detail, figure by Andre Bremer)
see pages 124–29

Spell for a corner (Aleister and Rosaleen 2017 (detail), in *Occulture: the dark arts*, City Art Gallery | Te Whare Toi, Wellington, New Zealand, 2017

clustering in such major works as an **An apparition of a subtraction, Panto collapsar** 2012 and **The additions and the subtractions** 2012.²¹ The lampposts in **Square cloud compound** also trace out a circular form that contrasts with the less contained fabric superstructure. The circle has proved to be endlessly inventive for Dwyer, enabling each work to develop a distinctive identity through the choice of component parts, some of which reappear in subsequent works as their aesthetic energy is needed. The most recent example, **The divisions and subtractions** 2017, works in the same way as all these gatherings, establishing an object circle which demarcates an inside and an outside, with a threshold that tests the viewer’s resolve in remaining an observer outside the ring or becoming the focus of the sculpture’s attention by passing into the inner circle. As Dwyer has said of these works: ‘[they are] a tight form of geometry, a completely closed system – a psychic fortress that can hold together disparate thoughts and objects.’²²



The divisions and subtractions brought together a community of artists who worked with Dwyer on the work’s individual components as well as more broadly in conceiving it, the former including Hany Armanious and Nick Dorey, and the latter Adriane Boag, Andre Bremer, Stevie Fieldsend and Matthys Gerber. The resulting work presents disparate gifts to the sculptural gods, to the gallery and to the viewer, invoking a childlike sense of wonder in discovering the remarkable in the everyday and overlooked. Dwyer has an interest in

pedagogy and theories of education and has herself been an influential art teacher in Sydney for many years, so these gatherings could also be a circle of pupils.²³ A further childlike sense of object-magic is suggested by Dwyer’s oft-cited interest in the theories of Friedrich Fröbel, an early nineteenth-century German educator who recognised that children have unique educational needs. Fröbel developed his theories in the 1830s and coined the word ‘kindergarten’ (meaning ‘children’s garden’) as a name for his institute for young children that advocated for play and games as ways of learning – theories controversial at the time. He designed a set of educational toys known as ‘Fröbel gifts’ – coloured balls, wooden spheres, cubes, cylinders and triangles – intended for children to explore and develop object relations at successive stages of development.²⁴ Dwyer’s works invite us to reconsider our own object–subject relations and to see things with fresh eyes, which also recalls a modernist preoccupation with reinvention through emulating children’s vision, a form of local rather than exotic primitivism that coincided with the traumas of war and other devastating events during the twentieth century. As children are also capable of great cruelty, being in the centre of Dwyer’s circular works can give the sense that the sculpture’s gaze may be judging us and finding us wanting.

The anthropomorphism present in Dwyer’s art strays into an animist spirit at times, as is evident in the **The additions and the subtractions** series with its sense of a ritualistic gathering of objects for ceremonial purposes. This can appear pagan, emphasised by Dwyer’s inclusion in her installations of hooded costumes – also worn for performance events in galleries and outside in woodland glades – as well as the circular forms that recall ancient stone

circles. Animism, the attribution of a spiritual essence to all things living or inanimate, which also allows for all material phenomena to have agency, is another organising principle that can be considered in relation to Dwyer's work. As one of the world's most ancient belief systems, common across many cultures and still surviving in some, animism is another way of thinking and believing that can suggest alternatives to the consideration of ourselves as apart from the natural world and the belief that things are governed only by their inherent physical properties. This is not to suggest that Dwyer is a New Age spiritualist, but rather that 'listening' to her materials and



seeking to understand their place in the world can be creatively rewarding and enable thinking outside the rationalist systems that continue to entrench power in economic elites.

Dwyer's sculptures often suggest an absent body – implied by her materials, such as stockings; her making of den and cubbyhouse structures; and her addition of eyes and other facial features to inanimate objects – but the human body itself has also been very present in her performance works. The performance accompanying the 2013 exhibition **Goldene bend'er** at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne brought Dwyer's circular forms, ritualistic gatherings and the human body together



in perhaps their most fundamental way.²⁵ Dancers dressed in elaborate gold costumes circled a series of cylindrical seats in a solemn rhythm before sitting on them. The participants occupied these thrones in still rectitude as they focused on their bodies and bodily functions and, over a period of time, passed faeces and urine with greater and lesser success into transparent cylindrical containers under the seats. Dwyer's earlier interest in the abject, in the porous and liminal zones of the body and what is injected and ejected, was here made manifest in the gallery space as she enacted a reverse alchemy of turning gold into shit. Viewing these natural everyday acts in an unnatural ritualistic setting was somewhat voyeuristic, with its sadomasochistic undertones, but it also brought into the public realm the normally private and most basic of bodily functions. The circularity expressed in this work is one of the core organising principles of life itself: what goes into the body must come out. That such an indisputable fact remains taboo in public discourse was evident from the outcry this work invoked from the right-wing cultural commentariat.²⁶

In looking across Dwyer's own art history as she is now entering her fourth decade of practice, a clarity of purpose can be discerned in her alchemical transformation of everyday materials and objects into cultural gold in an iterative and evolving practice. Her work comes from a long-term engagement with materials and methodologies led by her deeply curious mind, but in which material empathy and intuition also play an important part. As Dwyer has explained:

Agebbo skoven 2013
see pages 76–77

Goldene bend'er 2013 (detail)
see pages 76–77

I think all matter is conscious to some degree. Everything has a frequency. Sometimes, it takes a while for material to warm up to you so you can actually sense it. You have to be in an attentive state. I try to get to a point where things can speak for themselves rather than having me impose my voice upon them.²⁷

The idea of intuition in art practice has been discredited as art historians have sought more concrete analytical terms to quantify art and its role in society, but if intuition can be thought of as the unconscious sum of life experience, dedicated practice, engagement with the world, personality, ability, intellect and insight, then perhaps it is the closest term for describing how Dwyer approaches making her works, in tandem with the deep thinking required to find the shape of their final form and understanding its place in the world. For Dwyer, there is always pleasure and playfulness in this process, which we experience in our encounter with her work.