

—NSW FOCUS—

Anne Graham

Gathering

Simeon Kronenberg, *Blue Mountains*

Entering Anne Graham's studio is to be welcomed into a gathering of familiar but also strangely unfamiliar objects – all fundamentally to do with nurture and connection, across time and place. The collection is both generous and generative.

Leaning against the side wall are ordinary looking farm tools, shovels, picks and so on. However, these objects are somehow enlarged by the artist's interventions of various kinds. The handles of the tools are made transparent and are hugely elongated, existing in a kind of symbolic exaggeration that questions purpose and the capacity of the tools to be at all functional. Indeed, both the notions of 'purpose' and 'function' are deeply investigated in the objects through subtle but determined modifications of one sort or another.

Otherwise 'ordinary' objects are transformed in ways that claim them as art, thus making them metaphoric somehow and redolent of meaning beyond the simple and original purpose granted to them through gesture (digging, raking, hoeing). The everyday object becomes much more than itself and, while it remains welcoming in the sense that it is familiar (we have all dug or raked), each is nonetheless challenging because everyday reality is clearly subverted, made surreal, perhaps disturbingly. After all, how does one effectively 'use' an extremely long-handled shovel? This impossibility lies at the heart of the meaning of the object which is transformed and deliberately made 'useless' by the artist, therefore questioning any expected meaning. A new meaning to do with aesthetics and metaphor has been shaped in the very process of re-shaping (re-imagining) the original implement.

The artist's collections of objects and fabrics, and tools of various kinds (from a bandsaw, dangerous and threatening, to combs, both gigantic and tiny) speak to her interest in and commitment to the repetitive and domestic rituals of the everyday and also to her interest in ordering and patterning. Rituals, made up of simple patterned gesture, are what the artist believes hold us close to each other – like the act of combing a loved one's hair, or stitching a person into clothes, even threading a needle in anticipation of garment-making for a friend. It is implied that these very acts of making all contribute to a broader sense of community (through shared effort and/or exchange), place and placement (and purpose) and, importantly, help to increase our sense of connection to each other in a sometimes dizzying and difficult world.

Hanging on the walls of the studio are both garments made for dear friends and fellow artists – Anthony Bond, Eugenia Raskopoulos, Julie Rrap, Johnnie Walker and more – and photographic portraits of these individuals wearing the clothes made for them. The garments constructed specifically for each are made from the collected hair or feathers of various pets and become loving and witty portraits in themselves, speaking to notions of connectedness and circularity.

In the photograph *Eugenia and Atom* (2014), Eugenia Raskopoulos stands with her poodle, smiling, wearing a coat made from the hair of the dog. It is testament to a circular notion of community, having at its centre the artist's love for her friend, the friend's love for her dog and the deep connections between all, resulting in a portrait that explores relationships of many kinds – friend to friend, artist to artist, friend to pet – and has at its heart the significance of gathering and hand-making for a particular purpose. Further, this 'making' claims and celebrates connectedness across relationships through the very act of gathering material for and constructing garments. Indeed, there is a kind of sanctity imbued in the act of constructing clothes. However, this is seen humorously with no pomposity or self-regard but, rather, offers joy in friendship and connection to a domestic, warm and mutually supportive centre.

Images like these speak again to the purpose of gathering and collecting – acts necessary before any 'making' can begin. It is as if the artist is claiming that the very purpose of the everyday gesture, involved in the gathering of materials and the making of the clothes, is to anchor us into a communal, sharing reality that we can count on as an antidote to a world that can appear to spin dangerously close to chaos. Patterning and repetition, gathering and constructing the various hair, fur and feathers (a laborious business involving repeated gesture), provide a shared sense of certainty and connectedness in a world that challenges these very notions.

If the purpose of all art is to make some kind of sense of the world, in Anne Graham's practice it is understood in terms of domesticity and nurture. It is profound in this sense because it speaks to the feminised present, and to an aesthetic that is bound utterly to hearth and home in the broadest possible sense and in a way that is immediate and familiar. It provides comfort, humour and generosity of spirit in the midst of intellectual and aesthetic investigations which are both rigorous and challenging while validating a sense of 'play'. The work is always welcoming and seductive (and often very beautiful), but it demands that we think widely about the significance of art and its place in the world and within our ordinary lives. The artist's fundamental proposition is that we are surrounded by and imbued with a sense of purpose and discovery, available to us through gesture and its ritualisation. The very act of repeating behaviours provides stillness and calm within what might otherwise be difficult circumstances. Quiet and repetitive movements lead us towards a kind of meditative state in which it is possible to find centre and meaning. The artist asks us to listen to the answers provided through everyday ritual, which, for her, is a form of transformative magic.

Surveying the artist's recent work in installation, sculpture and portraiture, 'Anne Graham: Whispering and Rustling, the Susserus of People, Places and Things' is being exhibited at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery from 7 October until 20 November 2016.