

The Sum of Parts, by Kate Nixon

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The winter of 2013 was when it happened to me. Like any good romance, there was conflict, resistance and tension. But my fate was sealed and by the end of a week with the American experimental glass duo of John Drury and Robbie Miller, I was in love with mosaic.

Such is the seductive quality of mosaic that has captured the imaginations of patrons and artists for centuries. Mosaics have a long history, stretching back to the 3rd millennium BC. Admired by the ancient Greeks and the Romans after them, the appeal of mosaic has transcended religions, adorning synagogues, mosques and cathedrals throughout history and across continents.

Once a sign of power and wealth, mosaics fell out of favour during the renaissance. With the division between fine art and craft firmly established, mosaic found itself on the wrong side of the divide, relegated to the unfortunate status of 'women's handicraft' or 'outsider art'. Sentimental and decorative, mosaic wasn't the stuff of serious artists.

Like many traditional crafts, the 21st century has seen a global resurgence in the popularity and recognition of mosaic art, as artists challenge traditional hierarchies and digital communities democratise the cultural landscape. With the highly publicised completion of New York's Second Avenue Subway featuring mosaic work by artists including Chuck Close and Vik Muniz, mosaic is not unfamiliar to the establishment. Mosaic processes have also been embraced by street artists such as Invader's video-game inspired mosaic graffiti and Jim Bachor's pothole mosaics. Simultaneously, the hobbyist community has exploded with online forums, Facebook groups and YouTube channels sharing how-to mosaic projects for enthusiastic suburbanites.

This tensions between high and low, art and craft are nothing new, but it seems mosaic has been particularly dogged by these labels. TRANSITIONS, turns these assumptions on their head; a very exciting prospect in the contemporary resurgence of this art form.

Like all crafts, there is a history and technical language embedded in their construction. All five artists have been trained in traditional mosaic techniques and this strong craftsmanship and the enjoyment of the physical process of mosaic is evident in the work. However, each of the artists also challenges what we think of traditional mosaic from subject matter to material.

The most striking example of this is Helen Bodycomb's *The Material and the Immaterial*. This 'deconstructed' mosaic challenges preconceptions about what constitutes a mosaic. Combining a range of conventional and unconventional materials from marble tesserae and slate, to fun fur, cardboard and plastic, Bodycomb plays on notions of permanence and impermanence, boundaries and value.

There is a certain musicality evident in many of the works, from the ascending and descending tones of Bodycomb's piece to the curious dancing character of Pamela Irving's *Mr Hanky Panky*. The work that is the most strongly informed by music is Rachael Bremner's. A professional violinist in a previous life, Bremner explores transitions between harmonic and inharmonic states. Playing with the boundaries between the visual and the musical, Bremner's work shares similarities with musical improvisations, expressing both a joy and experimentation in the process, as well as a discipline in the practice and execution.

Similarly, the dramatic work of Caitlin Hughes references a more symbolic realm or inner dialogue. Her *Weapons of the Mind* series, rendered in glossy black smalti, evoke ceremonial objects, hieroglyphs or symbolic codes. There is a cathartic quality to the objects, released through their creation, giving form to the invisible.

One of the inherent qualities of mosaic is its unique dimensionality. Most mosaics are neither 2d or 3d, they exist in their own state of transition where they are both surface and form.

Kate Butler's On (the) Edge series deftly exploits this quality. From a distance the forms appear soft, like velvet or felt, but closer inspection reveals aggressive surfaces with sharp shards of slate and smalti. A play on words, Butler's On (the) Edge series speaks of the sharp textural use of the tesserae, while alluding to the political uncertainty and social inequality that seems to be propelling us towards some unknown precipice.

The final body of work in TRANSITIONS belongs to Pamela Irving. Irving's wickedly funny Mr Hanky Panky & His Seven Deadly Sins series cleverly utilises humour as an entry point into a pertinent political work. In an era of Weinsteins and Trumps, Irving's loveable larrikin, Mr Hanky Panky, takes on a more ominous tone. Irving's delightfully subversive play with materials, stereotypes and traditions delivers a resonant commentary on contemporary life, in a world facing significant change.

Transitions are not always easy. This exhibition of contemporary Australian mosaic presents an exciting glimpse of a dynamic craft that is in the process of challenging conventions and reinventing itself. I am excited by the prospect of disrupting traditional attitudes to mosaic and bringing this nuanced art form to new audiences. And who knows, we may even witness the beginning of some new love affairs.

Glossary

Smalti: coloured glass used in mosaic (the plural of smalto)

Tesserae: a small block of stone, tile, glass, or other material used in the construction of a mosaic.

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