

wyndham art gallery

# INHABIT by Elaine Miles

INSIDE OUTSIDE-INHABIT-INDOOR OUTDOOR



Elaine Miles likes to inhabit her exhibition space. Instead of seeing the paintings, drawings and prints on the walls of an artificial lounge room that most gallery exhibitions emulate, Elaine brings furniture and domestic objects into the picture. Usually seen in glass cabinets or mantle pieces these precious glass works are gathered from opportunity shops and households across Wyndham and beyond.

Trained as glass blower, her previous installations included glass objects crafted from molten glass. Her practice has evolved to include found glass object for her installations. Her eye as an artist is crucial in this process.

Context is everything for an artist. Once the idea for an exhibition is developed then everything is framed by it. It's amazing how the world seems to organize itself around the immanence of an idea. Small things catch your peripheral vision. Strangers talk about the very thing you're working on in supermarket queues. Your Aunt, who you hardly see, drops in with a *plate* of the perfect example of your vision.

This is the craft of the installation artist. Marcel Duchamp and the conceptual artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century made installation art possible by creating the frame for the idea, questioning the conventions of what made something art. Elaine's work is informed by his term 'readymades' which referred to everyday objects taken from their normal habitat and placed in a gallery, thereby making it art.

Inhabit is further confusing the model for art. It is not only made of objects that are interior domestic objects, gathered by the artist and contributed by community members, but it is eventually going to be reorganised to become a public artwork called INDOOR OUTDOOR, placed in a permanent position outside the Arndell Community Centre. How do fragile domestic objects become public art? How does an artist who works with performance and temporary installation transform her practice to create a permanent public artwork? INHABIT aims to explore these questions and expose some of the artist's process.

Elaine Miles has exhibited her work nationally and internationally, working with percussionist Eugene Ughetti to create the Glass Percussion Project which brings together performance, sculpture, light and sound. This was the beginning of her approach to exhibitions which incorporates both temporal and static viewing. The audience who attends a performance sees her glass work in a totally different light than those who visit the installation as a sculptural experience. However the sounds and movement of her previous work linger in the objects. Wandering through INHABIT, even if you're not lucky enough to be there for a performative moment, you can imagine the tinkling of glass or even the crash of a broken object, perhaps a memory of a childhood mistake and the scolding that came after.

By frequenting local opportunity shops over a period of months Miles' gathered glass that holds local memories, aiming to retrieve memories that may otherwise be discarded or lost. She also worked with community groups over several months to make and gather their precious objects for this work. Her artist's eye watched over the making and collecting, making sure they all fitted within the parameters of her overall vision.

There has been much debate over the years about the schism between *community versus fine art*. Perhaps one of the misunderstandings in this debate arises from the notion that everyone can be an artist. Certainly everyone can, well most people, but only in the way that most people can be surgeons or elite sports people.

Just because you can kick a footy doesn't mean you would be allowed onto the field on grand final day and no one ever questions that. Being an artist requires the same kind of commitment, initiation by fire and plain hard work over countless years as does being an Olympic athlete.

When this is understood then community participation in a professional art project is a guided participation. Anything doesn't go. Careful decisions need to be made to allow the work made by non professionals to be seen in the best light and provide high quality work for all members of the community not just the people whose lives take them to the National Gallery as well as the sports field. This is just respecting the skill level of someone who has given their life to practicing their art.

Elaine has cleverly crossed the line between these two domains, including the local community in a public artwork which they will have to live with but at the same time doing it in a way that will provide them with a quality work of international standing. They may even see a special object in the final piece that will have personal meaning to their family history. INDOOR OUTDOOR is a monument to the everyday, honouring what is usually discarded.

In the upper gallery Miles has created a bed of glass from these objects, complete with the shape of a bed head, allowing the audience to bring multiple interpretations to the work. Like a bed of nails a glass bed can conjure up pain but the visual pleasure of all that beautiful gold glass also delights. She creates domestic furniture with a placement of glass and stands the furniture against the wall in a sculptural play of light and shape.

INHABIT is an indoor installation but the knowledge that most of the pieces will end up outside, going from private to public makes it all the more interesting as a gallery exhibition.

Dr. Megan Evans 2012  
Visual Art Curator – City of Wyndham