

**TROPICAL DADA:**  
MARIA FERNANDA CARDOSO'S *EMUWEAR*  
BY SUSAN BEST

Situated between the body and the gallery wall, Maria Fernanda Cardoso's *Emuwear* are an unusual hybrid of clothing, sculpture and monochrome. No art historical term quite captures this mixture of genres. The closest approximations would be "specific objects" and Design Art.

"Specific objects" is, of course, Donald Judd's term of 1965 for works – such as his own – that blurred the boundaries between sculpture and painting.<sup>(1)</sup> Or, if we were to honour the earlier South American term, we might think about calling such hybrid forms: não-objecto: no-objects or non-objects.<sup>(2)</sup> In Brazil, as early as 1959, Ferreira Gullar coined this term for the convergence of painting and sculpture.

Design art, on the other hand, describes contemporary art practices combining the disciplines of design and art such as the work of Andrea Zittel, Lucy Orta and Jorge Pardo. Orta's blend of art and clothing has an overly didactic tone and purpose that doesn't chime well with Cardoso's hybrids. The work of Zittel—which gently ridicules the irrational underbelly of classic modernist design programs—accords more closely with the tone of Cardoso's work, even though outwardly the forms of each artist are very different and refer to very different traditions.

**Absurdist Clothing**

When worn as cloaks, the *Emuwear* conjure both traditional Amerindian feather clothing and the haute couture animal finery of the golden years of Hollywood. In both styles of clothing, the macabre presence of a head or a claw, such as we see in *Emu Wrap* (2006-2008), would be bent to an appropriate decorative or functional purpose. To add a further twist to this potent mix, some of the cloaks in the *Emuwear* series also suggest the absurd geometric costumes of the historical avant-garde: Bauhaus ballet attire or, more particularly, the wrap-round cylindrical costume of Dada performer, Hugo Ball. The famous image of Ball reciting his nonsensical sound poetry while encased in what looks like an incomplete tin-man costume is rendered in a fluffier but equally fanciful form in *Ruana* (2008), *Emu Flag + Cloak (Fluro Orange)* (2006-2008) and *Reversible* (2006-2008).

Fashion, when operating in unrestricted mode, that is, without the brake or disruption that humour provides, would voraciously devour its tribal or avant-garde sources with little or no residue. The absurdity of the cloaks however, successfully maintains and mediates the clash between high fashion and tribal costume. Absurdity tends to be understood as a theatrical genre and has only very recently started to inform curatorial practice in the visual arts.<sup>(3)</sup> Despite this oversight, absurdity is a very powerful tool for confronting contemporary contradictions in the visual arts and elsewhere; the particular quality of humour it generates brings together irreconcilables, but with suitable irresolution. One could say an edge or touch of absurdity is now a requirement of realism.

**Plinth/Body/Sculpture**

Made from glue, feathers and fibreglass or nylon netting, *Ruana*, *Fluro Orange* and *Reversible* render the body as geometric and sculptural rather than displaying or tailoring to organic form. The body is to some degree camouflaged, or more accurately, it becomes a support for the work. In other words, the body is not absolutely necessary for the *Emuwear* to be displayed, but like a plinth, pedestal or other apparatus for sculptural display, it enhances the apprehension of the three-dimensional forms.

In this respect, these cloak-carapaces have a life of their own, they are not activated by the body in the way we might describe the work of Lygia Clark, an artist whose body-clothing propositions set out to explore the sensorial and psychological possibilities of the interaction. For Clark, the body was absolutely crucial; substances revert to mere materials without the body's support.

**Monochrome, Achrome, Emuchrome**

The corporeal and sartorial associations virtually vanish when the *Emuwear* become rectangular forms and are affixed to the wall. In this more traditional high art location, they recall the variant form of the monochrome invented by Piero Manzoni—his artificial achromes. These late works, while staying true to his rejection of colour, nonetheless made flamboyant use of texture. He used a range of colourless materials: bread rolls, cotton wadding, rabbit skin, polystyrene, and fluffy fibreglass, sometimes partially tamed into grids of curling tresses, others presented in a loose all-over style, approximating a pelt-like carpet.

Cardoso's primary material, emu feathers, is not based on a rejection of colour but rather close attention to her immediate environment. The emu is at once an incredibly prominent Australian animal –; after all it is a national emblem, prominently displayed on the country's coat of arms. But it is also an oddly neglected animal, barely part of the national imaginary. It would not be too unkind to say that it is far less affectionately regarded than its partner shield-holding animal—the kangaroo.

And yet, when emu material is transformed into a canvas, and thereby considered more formally, the emu's feathers have motility, texture and variability that make for a rare pictorial sensuality. At once landscape and abstraction, these works capture some of the tensions of Australian painting, where the urge towards non-objective art seems very often to dress in local colours or muted organic and natural themes.

**Tail/End**

The conversion of a cloak to monochrome/emuchrome is an astonishing transition. The wall claims the rectangle for painting, as if the fashion photographs of models adorned in *Emuwear* are of something else entirely. This magical transformation is perhaps where we see the meeting of humans and animals: each has its own methods for ostentatious display as well as blending in, adapting to its surroundings and even disappearing.



**Tony Stephens**  
Director

**Antoinette Bailey**  
Gallery Manager

Printing:  
ABC Printing  
Design and  
digital artwork:  
VOLT

**GRANTPIRRIE**

86 George Street  
Redfern NSW 2016 Australia  
T +61 2 9699 9033  
E info@grantpirrie.com

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MARIA FERNANDA CARDOSO | *EMU WEAR* | APRIL/MAY 2009

YOUR INVITATION  
TO ATTEND THE  
OPENING OF  
**EMU WEAR**  
6-8PM THURSDAY  
30 APRIL 2009

**MARIA FERNANDA  
CARDOSO:  
EMU WEAR**  
**GALLERY 1  
GRANTPIRRIE**  
**30 APRIL – 23 MAY  
2009**



**Maria Fernanda Cardoso:  
Emu Wear**

**Opening:  
6-8pm Thursday  
30 April 2009**

**Exhibition:  
30 April-  
23 May 2009**

To preview the work prior to the opening please contact the Gallery on (02) 9699 9033 to arrange an appointment.

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**Images:**

01. *Ruana* 2008  
Lambda print on photographic paper  
185 X 125cm  
Edition of 3+1 AP

02. *Reversible B* 2006-2008  
Lambda print on photographic paper  
185 X 125cm  
Edition of 3+1 AP

03. *Reversible (detail)* 2006-2008  
Lambda print on photographic paper  
185 X 125cm  
Edition of 3+1 AP

04. *Reversible A* 2006-2008  
Lambda print on photographic paper  
185 x 125cm  
Edition of 3+1 AP

05. *Emu Wrap (detail)* 2006-2008  
Lambda print on photographic paper  
185 X 125cm  
Edition of 3+1 AP

Cover:  
*Ruana (detail)* 2008  
Lambda print on photographic paper  
185 X 125cm  
Edition of 3+1 AP

01



02



03

