ARTIST PROFILE

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TAKING TIME

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A Columbian artist who found worldwide fame through a quirky flea-circus act is now making art from one of Australia’s beloved national emblems – the emu.

**DEAD BUTTERFLIES**, formaldehyde frogs and boiled sheep bones season the work of Columbian-born artist Maria Fernanda Cardoso. But although these elements refer to darkness and violence, there is also contemplative beauty to be found in her mysterious concoctions of deathly nature.

In the past, Cardoso’s experiences of bloody violence in her native land infiltrated her work. These days she lives on the Sydney coast and combines her love of nature and animals with a desire for scientific order and museological management. Yet there is still an underlying essence of otherworldliness, a nexus with the afterlife.

Cardoso was born in 1963 in Bogotá, where she completed her visual arts and architecture undergraduate degrees. She revelled in Colombia’s intellectual atmosphere. “It was vibrant,” she says. “I was stimulated by life and my friends. There were a lot of young people making art without any resources. During the late ’80s there was much terrorism and turmoil. We had to learn to confront death, like Iraq now.”

As a response to this situation, she cast her nets in ever-increasing circles. Cardoso travelled to the United States to study sculpture at the Pratt Institute, New York then to Yale University. Over the years she has held many well-received exhibitions in the US and Europe – at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, Contemporary Arts Museum in Texas, Centre Pompidou in Paris and Fundacio La Caixa in Barcelona – and continues to exhibit throughout the US, South America and Australia.

In 1996 she achieved worldwide notoriety with her performance installation ‘The Cardoso Flea Circus. Staged in a four-metre big-top tent for small groups, the work called on the freakish nature of 19th-century novelty acts. Cardoso trained fleas to perform tricks and built props to re-create an historical scene. Videos elaborated her ideas.

But 10 years ago, following the huge media success of ‘The Cardoso Flea Circus, she moved to Australia. Living in Sydney was a relief. “I was anonymous, I was hiding here, which was nice,” she says. “Nobody knew who I was. Australia is pleasant, very easy. It’s a good life.”

Cardoso’s continued interest in the quirky, the bizarre and the ghastly is not surprising considering her cultural heritage. In fact, as an artist she is far from alone in having resilient ties to the culture, society and memory of her original home, no matter how fraught that existence was. After all, when writer Gabriel García Márquez fictionalised the life of liberator Simon Bolivar in *The General in His Labyrinth*, he drew on the rich textures of magical metaphor, human frailty and the instability of Colombian life. No doubt Cardoso will forever be inextricably linked to her vibrant and stimulating homeland despite the tranquility of her new life in Australia. For instance, as recently as 2003 she represented Colombia at the Venice Biennale.
01 Butterfly Drawing - morphi didius (Peru), 2004, Acrylic, archival butterflies, perspex, metal, 122 x 122 x 1.8cm
02 Woven Water: Submarine Landscape, 2003, Preserved starfish, oreasstus nodulatus (Philippines), galvanized steel wire
03 Butterfly Drawing - papilio ulysses (Australia), 2004, Acrylic, archival butterflies, perspex, metal, 122 x 122 x 1.8cm

Images courtesy the artist and Grafton, Sydney.
In 2007 Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art hosted an ambitious exhibition of Latin American art, The Hours. Cardoso was the only Australian artist represented and, while her three works were some of the most energetic and disciplined, they were also among the most lyrical and accessible. Mounted on a staff (recalling stately rituals of past dominions) was Black Sun, a sphere covered in a mass of dead flies. While this sculptural work suggested a symbol of ceremonial authority, it also referred to the gruesome sight of the murdered in Colombia. “Bodies were dumped and later found because of the flies they attracted,” Cardoso explains.

Also in The Hours was a work called Crown for a Chibcha Princess, where the concept of a crown of thorns was metamorphosed into a coronet of lizards. There are obvious associations of Christ’s suffering, but the work can be read as an extended metaphor for the fate of Colombia’s innocents. Cardoso says: “In pre-Columbian cultures, lizards, frogs and snakes were god-like animals, symbols of fertility and water. This ‘halo’ or ‘crown’ for an Indian princess is a cross between the Christian crown of thorns and the pre-Columbian sacred symbols. This piece represents to me the paradoxical concept of sacrifice: from the dictionary, ‘the forfeiture of some valued thing for the sake of something of greater value.’”

Cardoso’s installations, wall hangings and sculptures still have death in common these days. Animal and plant specimens provide the frames for her explorations of the edge between living and beyond. “People don’t like to be confronted by death,” she says. Her initial link with Australia was through her native and introduced animals. The first one she chose was the sheep. Having sourced shin bones in immense numbers from abattoirs, Cardoso was then faced with the challenge of stripping flesh from the bones and cleaning them before arranging them in neatly organised and geometric patterns for exhibition. It is this combination of geometry and the grotesque that arrests the viewer, along with her consistent use of non-traditional materials in a mesmeric and seductive way.

Having reached the 10-year mark in the safe harbour of Sydney’s suburbs, Cardoso finally felt she was “entitled to take on one of the national icons – the emu”. She says: “I am very interested in animal emblems and how Australians pick their
I am very interested in animal emblems and how Australians pick their identity through them. It is possible to construct an idea of place through animals." Cardoso traveled through museum libraries to accumulate data about emus, their habitats, their reproductive cycles, their hunting natures and so on. A recent exhibition at Grantpirrie comprised re-created emu pelts, portal-shaped wall hangings and cylindrical emu nests. She collaborated with an ornithologist to make the wall texts.

Cardoso is continuing her investigation into this potent symbol of national pride. Through her research, she unearthed one of the indigenous significances of the emu. "In Aboriginal astronomy, the meanings are read through the spaces between the stars," she says. "So the emu is seen as a shadow shape and the changing skies alert Aboriginal people to finding emu chicks and the emu eggs."

"The Aboriginal dream character Featherfoot represents a bad omen." Shoes of emu feathers were worn by indigenous people to prevent hearing or seeing Featherfoot, to thus avoid precipitating bad events. Cardoso has also been working with emu egg yolks to create works on paper, which might sound eccentric until you consider the ancient western tradition of tempera painting using egg yolk. She is also weaving emu-feather cloaks for her exhibitions throughout 2008. Through these cloaks, she makes reference to Maori cloaks made of kiwi feathers and also the Hawaiian cloak worn by Captain James Cook.

The artist was recently invited by Virginia Rigney of the Gold Coast Art Gallery to visit an Aboriginal community near Ernabella, a six-hour drive from Alice Springs. There, she was privileged to participate in a meeting of Tjapukai women at a local sacred site. She witnessed "amazing dances by the elderly women in which they all wore emu feathers". However, Cardoso was a little disappointed to find that the emu feathers that the local women were weaving into their baskets were sourced from

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04  Male Emu with Eggs, 2007, Casas-Riegner Gallery, Bogota, Image courtesy the artist and Arcti Gallery, Melbourne

05  Woven Water: Submarine Landscape, 2003, Preserved starfish, Calliostoma nodulosum (Phillipinensis), galvanised steel wire, Image courtesy the artist and Grantpirrie, Sydney
distant areas of Australia rather than their local region. Traditionally, these baskets were made from local grasses and local feathers, but the supply has been poor recently and so grasses and feathers have been brought in to continue this small cottage industry. There is an implication that the materials have less spiritual significance if they come from somewhere else.

Perhaps this is especially disappointing for Cardoso because of the potency of her own heritage. Old ways and inherited belief systems provide an ordered structure and cohesiveness in our lives. From these associated significant meanings, artists (and writers, architects, dancers, musicians and so on) can expansively investigate their creativity, imagination and individuality. For instance, Cardoso has called on symbols from pre-Columbian art as influences on her work: deities, water gods, gold offerings and curly snakes. The links, both historical and contemporary, between these symbols have resonated in her stylised, anthropomorphic works. But once foundations are shaken and compromises are made, entire schemes are thrown into question. So even in Australia, where Cardoso has found “a good and easy life,” she has borne witness to complex socio-cultural problems and fundamental stories of loss.

Despite the challenges of incorporating a national emblem into her contemporary artwork, Cardoso is creating something new. She is combining a love of epiphenal natural beauty with an exploration of related camouflage and mimicry. With ancient magical and metaphorical imagery and narrative threads from Colombia, and with references to indigenous culture, she is creating fresh systems and innovative, artistic structures of her own. Her ideas are a fresh way of looking at nature’s role in art – and life and death.

For more on Maria Fernanda Cardoso:
www.arc1gallery.com
www.grantpirrie.com

06  Installation: Emu Nest 5km, October 2006, Grantpirrie, Sydney
07  Woven Emu Cylinder (detail), 2007, emu feathers, steel, fibreglass netting, glue, 240 x 14cm
08  Woven Emu Cylinder, 2007, emu feathers, steel, fibreglass netting, glue, 240 x 14cm
   Courtesy the artist and Grantpirrie, Sydney