



emu next 5km

Emu Loops (detail) 2006  
Emu feathers, fiberglass netting, glue  
91 x 91 cm



**Emu Square (detail) 2005**  
Emu feathers, fiberglass netting,  
impasto, fabric, glue  
105 x 110 x 22 cm



**Maria  
Fernanda  
Cardoso**



In a banner for Maria Fernanda Cardoso's renowned *Cardoso Flea Circus*, the slogans 'Real Live Fleas' and 'Patience and Science' beam out to the audience, co-opting the seductive language of advertising to publicise the unusual fusion of materials and strategies that characterise the work. Indeed, these slogans may be read as wry signifiers for many defining aspects of Cardoso's practise, including her tendency to reflexively examine the mechanisms by which meaning is constructed in different contexts through language and modes of display.

For Cardoso, working with materials from the natural world – often in an unaltered form – is a crucial strategy for examining relationships between humans, their environments, and other living species. In the past, her use of organic matter has ranged from cattle bones and guava to preserved insects, frogs, and starfish, privileging a direct engagement with the 'real' over representation. Responding to the formal and socio-cultural properties of such symbolically charged materials, Cardoso creates a distinctive visual language in which the legacies of high modernist movements intersect with her personal concern for generating social commentary through everyday references.

The use of geometry and taxonomies as organising principles is a defining feature of Cardoso's aesthetic. Her absurd synthesis of the organic and contrived is a strategy that juxtaposes the complexity of nature with modernist notions of order, control, and purity of form. Cardoso's imposition of an external, rational logic onto nature is suggestive of broader tensions and hierarchies that exemplify the attitudes of humans towards other living creatures. The formal beauty of her compositions, with their emphasis on detail, balance and repetition acts, like the Flea Circus slogans, as a seductive mechanism by which to coerce viewers into becoming "accomplices in the more disturbing aspects of the works"<sup>1</sup>. For Cardoso's creations, though undeniably beguiling, defy any kind of gratuitous exoticism.

Much of Cardoso's practise might be said to hinge on precisely this convergence of opposing or contrary ideals. While her aesthetic draws heavily upon the formal influences of minimalism and *arte povera* in the use of readymade, ordinary materials and pared back compositions, a baroque sensibility underlies her treatment of colour, texture, and surface. Her sculptural objects thus hover between the sensual and austere, immersive and reductive.

The particular selection of materials for each body of work is informed by Cardoso's own desire to connect with her environment. As a migrant who has lived across three different continents, she brings to her work an acute awareness of the conditions of cultural displacement. Working with native or culturally significant species and materials consequently emerges as a mechanism for forging a connection with place – an interrogation of locational identity informed by Cardoso's personal experiences and a publicised history gleaned from sanctioned information channels such as libraries and museums. Certainly a strong sense of empiricism informs Cardoso's approach, in which studio, laboratory and museum coalesce. Recast as a sociobiologist of sorts, her practise asserts itself as thoroughly process-based; performative research that also manifests in sculptural, installation, and video forms.

Cardoso's latest body of work, *Emu next 5km*, encapsulates all of these qualities. A decade since relocating to Australia, the exhibition stages the perspectives of a person who, being 'out of place', has endeavoured to construct a sense of emplacement through an investigation of environmental specificities. Using the emu as a primary source and point of reference, Cardoso has laboriously constructed sculptural forms that oscillate between the alluring and unsettling. The feathers she uses have been reinvigorated from their status as industrial waste – a by-product of the farming of emus for their oil, leather and meat. Salvaged by Cardoso, they become an allegorical foundation for the investigation of several complex systems of relations.

There are a number of contexts in which the emu most often surfaces in our collective consciousness: as a national emblem, appearing on Australia's coat of arms and national flag; and in tourist paraphernalia as a symbol of the uniqueness of our landscape. Like other native animals imposed upon by colonisation, the emu also appears on road signs, as a warning of their presence and vulnerability under circumstances where they risk a grim end as road kill. And, as Cardoso has knowingly exploited, the emu is now a resource for the development of new product-based economies.

Upon these associations, Cardoso then imposes a formal reading of the emu according to her own aesthetic taxonomies. Mimicking the classificatory systems of museology, she sorts the feathers according to hierarchies that subtly expose the arbitrary foundations of knowledge systems by intermingling miscellaneous elements. Colour, sound, length and texture all become distinguishing features of separate groupings, and subsequently individual works. By contrast to the bright, colourful spectacle of Cardoso's previous series made using butterfly wings, the emu feathers produce a visual effect that is muted and subdued, defined by earthy tones and textural surfaces. In a sense the wall pieces function as landscape paintings. Drawing upon the feathers' intrinsic camouflage attributes, Cardoso reiterates the emu's own imitation of its environment, in effect reconstructing the specific colours, textures and even movements of their habitat.

The resulting works may appear innocuous at first glance, grounded as they are in the sensuous qualities of tactility and accumulated density. Like the original camouflage function of the feathers, however, behind this masquerade lies an incisive commentary with a pedagogic bent. Cardoso's interest in the emu was fuelled in part by a lack of public knowledge or accessible information about this distinctive bird, despite its status as a symbol of national identity and pride. *The Emu Facts*, cast 'specimens', and abundance of actual feathers work to remedy this gap in understanding, providing a realm for both cerebral and sensory engagement. The texts present information in the spirit of haiku poetry, again disrupting assumptions about the objectivity of scientific or historical evidence. Correspondingly, Cardoso's emu limbs cast in resin deviate from established taxonomic principles by leaving the feet retracted, obscuring a strictly anatomical reading of the object in favour of an aesthetic or emotional response.

This provision for a direct and affective dynamic between viewer and subject is extended in other works to incorporate a more pointed interrogation of human/animal relationships. In *Male emu with eggs*, an emu taxidermied 'trophy-style' sprawls across the gallery floor like a domestic rug, overtly referencing the preservation and cultivation of animals for both scientific and consumer causes. The pelt rests on a nest of hollow eggs, emphasising the male emu's contribution to nurturing offspring. As part of Cardoso's *Male Role Model Series* this work intersects with her ongoing project *The Reproduction Museum*, which has developed out of a fascination with all aspects of reproductive behaviour. Exposing the relativity of social values, the parental instinct of the male emu inverts an engrained mythology surrounding gender roles, providing an alternative social paradigm.

If there is a certain insistence in the obsessive labour and taxonomic allusions that underscore this exhibition, it is on the way in which nature is paradoxically revered and treated as expendable. Cardoso's works highlight the irony in the fact that we market the image of the emu, like other native flora and fauna, as a national icon, and yet our knowledge of and engagement with the species is limited and removed. In *Emu next 5km* the bird thus becomes symbolic of our apathy and complacency, of the disconnection between a signified or stereotyped and enacted identity.

Likewise *Emu next 5km* draws to our attention the extent to which contemporary society has become disengaged from nature, exemplified by the fact that close encounters are most often in environments contrived for its preservation (zoos, botanic gardens, farms), or those that specifically mark its passing, such as museums, supermarkets, and other places of commercial trade. Cardoso works from within such a space, inserting the natural world into a gallery context where the 'real' is often conspicuously absent. Nature, commodity and artefact here become ambiguously intertwined. This mutability – like Cardoso's own multifaceted character as artist, scrutineer, foreigner, and parasite – might be understood as a reflection of her impulse to understand and belong. It is a desire to intervene, however, which emerges as the most compelling feature of Cardoso's endeavour to critique and recuperate ideas of cultural specificity in a post-national context.

Anneke Jaspers, 2006

1 Maria Fernanda Cardoso interviewed by Elizabeth Ann Macgregor in *Zoomorphia*, ex.cat. MCA, 2003