



shaped by behaviour  
works by  
nicole voevodin-cash

# shaped by behaviour

## nicole voevodin-cash

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## interaction as a strategy

I have been privileged to witness the development of Nicole Voevodin Cash's work over the last 10 years, from her first solo show *Hiatus* at Noosa Regional Gallery to her most recent show *SOFTscape* at Albury Regional Gallery. At Noosa I immediately recognized a regional artist who thought deeply about contemporary art and whose practice transcended the invisible but deeply restrictive boundaries regional artists face in making it in the serious art world.

For me the role of a regional gallery director or curator is to open a debate with artists in order to give them space to consider their practice within a wider national and international context. Therefore, it seemed highly appropriate when Nicole asked me to write an essay on the history of her practice, that the essay is in the form of a conversation.

Kevin: When I think back to *Hiatus*, your interest in interactivity and furniture was already deeply embedded in your practice and you were concerned about how audiences navigated the gallery space. What were you trying to achieve with this work?

Nicole: I was hoping to achieve an exhibition that made people stop for a while, hence the title *Hiatus*, and to consider not only the objects within the space but themselves and their relationship with these objects and space. So if I used objects that were like furniture then people would be less inhibited and take their interaction to another level from just seeing to touching. I produced a soundscape for the show to assist the audience to interactively explore these objects. The soundscape was made up of human sounds which created an eerie quality...but basically its aim was to anthropomorphize the furniture. I took this further in my next show '*.....so you want to be touched!*' by dressing up stools as a way to animate them. I have always been fascinated by the stories of how teddy bears and other toys came alive at night when you were asleep and obviously stories like *Beauty and the Beast* with household staff of transformed household furniture and utensils influenced me.

Kevin: But what strikes me about your first show *Hiatus* was that the interaction was focused on individual body parts – different works asked you to use different senses – touch, hearing etc. There was a kind of fragmentation taking place. It was still like a traditional gallery show with discrete objects offering different experiences, except here were a range of sometimes familiar kinds of furniture spread around the gallery space. This fragmented experience was very different to the immersive experience of the cinema where many of our senses are engaged simultaneously and we are pulled into a different mental space. I think you achieve this in your current Albury work where the audience's sense of space and place is changed in a more whole of body experience by different



*Hiatus* 1996, Noosa Regional Gallery, installation shot, photograph courtesy the artist



*Hiatus* detail, cabinet drawers, wood, found objects, Noosa Regional Gallery, photograph courtesy the artist



*Hiatus* detail, cabinet wood, found objects, fabric, Noosa Regional Gallery, 1800 x 500 x 300mm, photograph courtesy the artist

size ratios of work, the concept of spaces within spaces and the sound of blowers that remind one of industrial or domestic spaces

Nicole: In *Hiatus*, the interaction between object and subject raises the connection between viewer and artwork to an intimate level. The spaces, drawers, cupboards, sounds and holes create for the viewer a relation between inside and outside which requires activation by the viewer to give it full meaning. Touching is very much encouraged.

So even though the body of works were fragmented for me it was to make the audience engage with a more bodily experience, albeit a minimal one. That minimalism might be simple like putting their fingers in through holes and touching things they weren't normally allowed to touch (the art object). By only being able to touch something without knowing what you are touching looks like, relies heavily on the individual's association of touch. Yes, I was still treating the gallery as an architectural space to be filled with objects that were objectified within that space.

Now I challenge the idea of what the landscape of a gallery is, as each work collectively creates an intervention that effectively transforms a previously familiar landscape/object/space/habitat and our relationship to them. The works in the show *SOFTscape* in Albury were all site specific works aimed in their production to harness the concept of the invisible touch. That is they aimed to develop for the viewer/audience via engagement an intuitive response that creates new modes of communication that are sensorial and intensify the experience of the artwork (art, craft, design), its site and its audience as an exploratory gestalt.

Kevin: I guess I understand what you mean by an invisible touch; it's like a learned or expected understanding of what to expect. But I am not sure what you mean when you say it then creates for them new modes of communication. Do you mean that they have to use their physical senses more than their brains to experience the artwork?

Nicole: No, it is not one or the other but to connect the mind and the body in the experience and this ensures this experience will be different for each individual viewer.

Kevin: After *Hiatus* and ...so you want to be touched, you embarked on a very different project in a non gallery commercial public space – a young girl's dress shop in the Valley. The 'Retail Therapy' project seemed to be a turning point for you?

Nicole: In this project I was not just making the furnishings that go into a gallery space and not just making a piece of furniture



*Bedside Table – Ranger* 1997, '.....so you want to be touched', masters exhibition, Metro Arts, Brisbane, MDF, glass, light objects, 920 x 310 x 310mm, photograph courtesy the artist



*Bedside Table – Tower* 1997, '.....so you want to be touched', masters exhibition, Metro Arts, Brisbane, MDF, laminate, objects, light, 1220 x 250 x 250mm, photograph courtesy the artist



*Bedside Table – Cart* 1997, '.....so you want to be touched', masters exhibition, Metro Arts, Brisbane, ply, light, objects 920 x 300 x 300mm photograph courtesy the artist

that behaves differently to a normal piece of furniture for a shop. I was more interested in a pure sense of engagement based on Merleu Ponty's idea that it's not until we engage with an object through our skin, through our touch that we understand what it truly is. So if I only allowed people to see the work it would only be read on one level but to put objects anywhere to be touched and to be engaged in would provide greater understanding. So the fabrication, the surfaces, the textures became extremely important. In doing this work it was a chance to work in a very different public zone and in a site which was steeped in history. It was a butcher shop, then a massage parlour and now a little dress shop for slender young girls.

Kevin: So how did people respond to the work and what was different about this space to the public foyers in the Judith Wright Centre that you used in the later *Lobby Play* show. I am still not clear on how it changed your practice.

Nicole: *Retail Therapy* made me truly understand a space as a site, artwork as landscape. I produced a sculptural work that functioned as a seat titled *Meet Seat*. It was to act like furniture as you need a chair/couch/lounge in a boutique and it was based on the notion of the love seat, a Victorian style love seat where you sit back to back and side to side so intimacy was a given. Many a time I would see a young couple enter the shop and she would try on clothes while he watched. So I embellished the seat further by making one side HOT the other side COLD, making the interaction unsuspecting and random, but relevant to the landscape in which the sculpture was placed.

Kevin: Nevertheless people have been attracted to the way your gallery works are also clever furniture. I am just wondering whether the invitations to take part in a range of furniture design exhibitions in the years following *Retail Therapy* have been a major factor in your continuing use of furniture in your work and also your definition at times as a designer rather than fine artist.

Nicole: Yes, I imagine this is so, though I have never fought against this labelling. It is other people who have problems not being able to pigeon hole me. If I feel that I am getting too focused on furniture as the object I refocus my motives in using them and consider other directions. I am much more interested in the consideration of space or landscape rather than objects per se. I am more an architect in that sense than a furniture designer. Although I use the semiotics of furniture to help engage the audience on a sensory level, they will more freely engage with a perceived piece of gallery furniture than an object of art. I am dealing here with the development of a new landscape while investigating and reinterpreting the old.



**Invasion** 2004, McClelland Sculpture Award, McClelland Sculpture Gallery Victoria, 10 + 5 mm plate aluminium varying sizes 1800 – 200mm photograph by Megan Voevodin



**Couch** 2005, Temperature – Queensland Sculpture Survey, Museum of Brisbane, 10mm plate aluminium 2400 x 800mm, photograph courtesy the artist



**Homely** 2000, Romantics, Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville, wool/felt, hair, wood, 1000 x 600 x 1000mm, photograph courtesy the artist



**Stool 2** 2000, Permanent Transient, Intra-Regional Travelling Exhibition, Noosa and Cooloola Regional Galleries, fabric + objects, 650 x 330 x 330mm, photograph courtesy the artist



Stool 2 detail 2000, Permanent Transient, Intra-Regional Travelling Exhibition, Noosa and Cooloola Regional Galleries, fabric + objects, 650 x 330 x 330mm, photograph courtesy the artist



**Meet Seat** 2001, Retail Therapy, Fortitude Valley, retail shops Brisbane, 2400 x 1600mm, photograph by Andrea Higgins

Kevin: What about your outdoor works, particularly the Lempriere and McClelland works. They were fairly traditional plonk sculpture events and so obviously presented new challenges for you to be able to continue your interest in furnishings, interactivity and site-specificity. How did you maintain your conceptual parameters in these events?

Nicole: The Lempriere work *RUG* was still a furnishing. I wanted it to be interactive but I needed to make it out of something people could interact with but not know that they were interacting in it. That's why it used the gardenscape because people could walk and lie on it but it subverted that landscape just as in the following year *Joyce Terrain* in the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane subverted the landscape of the gallery. It wasn't just your normal gallery space or your normal gallery furniture and it's not your normal grass turf area and it's not your normal garden. You can actually sit and lay in it. The McClelland work was indeed furniture but it was more a play on me being a designer or how people interpret me as a designer. I was having a bit of fun with that. The other imperative was the freight issue i.e. the huge cost in sending large three dimensional sculptures. How could I send this work like a painting in a crate and for it still to be a sculpture? So I drew the sculptures making them look 3D when in actual fact they were 2D flat metal works. But it was still furniture; it was what many Australians have in their backyard, a BBQ.

Kevin: Do you feel more at home in the gallery than you do in other spaces i.e. making works for the gallery as opposed to public art works?

Nicole: Yes only because the gallery has all these kinds of rules and I like to flout rules and play with the way the gallery defines meaning. I find O'Doherty's seminal 70's book the 'White Cube' still very relevant today. He investigates the modern gallery and how it deals with the art object, how it influences the object as subject and how the gallery's context overrules the object becoming the subject. Also as much as I decry the precious object syndrome of the gallery I also want to make precious objects and use the concept of preciousness. People tend to treat these objects in a gallery differently and this offers a kind of safety net for me, whereas with public artworks they are roughly treated and become more utilitarian with more limited meaning due to a whole set of other rules that govern our public domains.

Kevin: I thought your strategy of placing works in different locations both in the IMA and in various foyers in the Judith Wright building for your *Lobby Play* show was an interesting strategy, particularly in the way it problematized the art object and its



**Into You!** 2004, Lobby Play, IMA, Brisbane, created + installed in the Judith Wright theatre foyer, 10mm aluminium upholstery each, 650 x 300mm, diameter photograph by Andrea Higgins



**Joyce Terrain** detail 2004, Lobby Play, IMA, Brisbane, installed Gallery 1, foam + upholstery, photograph by Andrea Higgins



**Reception Disc** 2004, Lobby Play IMA, Brisbane, created + installed arterial foyer, aluminium wire drawing + looped DVD receptionist, photograph courtesy the artist

relationship to furniture or in a broader sense art and its relationship to design. Firstly, is it an issue that the audience might only see a work as furniture and not as an art object, and secondly does the gallery context turn everything into an art object even supposed furniture?

Nicole: Yes it is an issue but then it's not. What overrides that duality for me is the engagement that people have with the work. Obviously there are different sets of rules in the gallery than other places and, for example, with the work *Joyce Terrain*, I had intended it to be an artwork that grew out of the gallery itself, to view art from, a kind of furniture if you like, but once people interacted with it, it became the artwork and the people became part of that artwork and in so doing created their own artwork and meaning. In this sense it mediated and created a different space compared with the works in the foyer spaces which as spaces required a more limited kind of activity. But having said that, all the Lobby Play works at the IMA were about waiting - waiting in a gallery, waiting in a landscape. These hybridized works focused on the mnemonic quality an object/space/place/habitat/furniture holds for the individual. For example sensory experiences are stored as memory and via engagement with other objects, materials, spaces, textures, sounds, smells; memories/experiences/aspirations/feelings can be unlocked. The question raised is how do I feel when I am within this space?

Kevin: But I guess I am thinking of the people who walk into a gallery and generally understand that you look and don't touch. Wouldn't people have walked into the gallery space and seen *Joyce Terrain* as a kind of white sculptural landscape? Wasn't putting the ballet dancer into that landscape emphasizing it as a landscape to be looked at?

Nicole: I have no problem with that. In that sense it became a true landscape and the sculptural object I aimed for. But on mass interaction it didn't, but then it still did. I had kids there who interacted with it like a playscape and is that any different then to a green landscape? Each audience perceived it in a different way and putting the dancer through it was one way of showing a responsive interaction and emphasised how the works deal with the body through its absence. Interaction by necessity (having to sit or stand or roll over, the meeting place of art and design, of the aesthetic and the functional) leaves a human residue, mediating between the body and culture. The fact that touch/interaction is socially and culturally constructed therefore sets the ground rules for how we interact and react.

Ideally the emphasis in my work has always been to enhance and to experiment with our lack of use for the tactile and dependence on the optical. I have always aimed to create an awareness of the body, its experiences and sensations, and strive to create stimulations that ease rather than stress, as a direct response to our over stimulated public and

private lives.

Kevin: I'm still interested in the notion of integration. It's not so much the context of the art gallery that gives it meaning, which of course it does, but the way the art gallery integrates anything into its space as O'Doherty explains in *The White Cube*. But what I find interesting about *Joyce Terrain* is that seems to be part of the space not as furniture and not as an artwork - it seems to grow out of the space. It compares to the grass work called *Watermarks* outside the Department of Primary Industries - it just seems to naturally grow out of that space. That sense of being integrated or part of the space was *Joyce Terrain*'s strength as opposed to the other works in the Judith Wright building which seem to me, to be more like furniture.

Nicole: Yes, I think *Joyce Terrain* was successful in that sense and for me another turning point in my practice. Though I do think the works I produced outside of the gallery and in the Judith Wright Centre also grew from these spaces especially *Reception Disc* in Arrial's office (not functional) and *Into You* (functional) for the theatres foyer. Lobby Play obviously helped inform other works that have since been produced outside of the gallery such as works like *Watermarks* and *RUG* produced for the Helen Lempriere Sculpture Award. These I believe are 'inside-outside' works, meaning inverting ideas from an interior space and re-creating them outside.

Kevin: So after the IMA show where did things head for you?

Nicole: Well Lobby Play was a culmination of 18 months of production after coming back from the Australia Council studio in Milan, Italy. This involved expensive and intensive research and finding sponsors for materials. After Lobby Play I returned to the studio with the assistance of an Australia council new work grant. I again embarked on another 18 months of experimentation to develop further the intervention my landscape works create within the exhibiting space.

Kevin: How did your residencies assist in your development?

Nicole: I think they helped me to understand landscape more. I mean the broader landscape, not the physical outdoor landscape but the landscape of design, the landscape of worldliness and me within that worldliness. My work came back from Milan more sophisticated and more streamlined. I felt more confident about my work and comfortable in a practice that flowed from one context to another.

Kevin: What about Bundanon?



**What if?** 2004, Lobby Play IMA, Brisbane, created for Youth Arts Offices, 1m diameter x 400mm, photograph by Andrea Higgins



**Dimple** 2004, Lobby Play IMA, Brisbane, created for the IMA cinema room + foyer, each 2m x 2m x 600mm, photograph courtesy the artist



**Dimple** detail 2004, Lobby Play IMA, Brisbane, photograph by Andrea Higgins



**RUG** 2003, Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award, Werribee Mansions, Victoria, plants + soil, 10m x 8 m, photograph courtesy the artist



**A Slice of Heaven** 2006, Bundanon, Nowra, NSW, ephemeral site specific work installed Bundanon historical gardens, white paint, 45m x 30m, photograph courtesy the artist



**Watermarks** 2006 department of primary industries, Cleveland, permanent public art commission, 9 varieties of turf, 30m x 10m, photograph by Rod Buchholz

Nicole: Bundanon was a dream. I had a whole month for me – no T.V, no kids, not having to stop and make dinner, go to work or bed at a certain time. I was able to immerse myself in my work and of course within a beautiful natural landscape. Plus it allowed me the privilege to re-examine the landscape on a painterly level. The work I produced and left for the foundation was an ephemeral response to the site. A work titled *A Slice of Heaven* that fades over time but will be forever present in the minds of the audience.

Kevin: I would imagine that your public art commissions would also have had an effect on your interest in landscape or place

Public art has made me more grounded in the concept of landscape. I have actually gone out into the landscape and had to deal with it, but its not that I have done lots of public art works. I have only had one full commission, but I have been paid concept development fees for about 12 different projects. I actually love getting these concept design projects because they pay you to come up with designs that I use and re-use in my practice. Even the one commission I did get to develop *Watermarks*, the grass work for the DPI, required intensive knowledge of turfs and drainage for such turfs. It gave me a huge library of resources and information that I can draw from and use for other projects whether it be other public art commissions, my own practice or for my own home garden

Kevin: So let's return to the Albury show. Where did the blow ups come from?

Nicole: Artists create and design things for specific reasons and places. *Joyce Terrain* was a massive landscape work with 52 pieces and was something like 13 by 3 metres in size. Where do I store it? I would have loved a gallery to buy it but it wasn't to be, so I had to take on off site storage which was costly and put pressure on me and my family. So for the last 18 months I have been cannibalising *Joyce Terrain*. It was not only the storage issue that I had to deal with but the perennial problem artists face with freight costs. I had to ask myself how do I resolve the issue of the volume of material. It became a design issue. The idea of the blow-ups was a way of resolving the volume problem.

Kevin: So when you started cannibalising the foam works what made you carve the foam into decorative pieces that seemed so distant to the minimalism of *Joyce Terrain*?

Nicole: *Joyce Terrain* was totally machine made and I would have loved to have made it myself by hand. As an artist when you are using your hands in the making you are in your element. So as a strategy I wanted to see what I could do with my own hands (my own interaction) with this hard and dense foam, so I decided to cut it and carve it and then resurface it.

Kevin: But another element of what you did was also to return to a much more intimate kind of art. So where did you start with this? Were you trying to make three dimensional representational objects or simply exploring decorative surfaces?

Nicole: Well the recent works I sent to Dubai, *flowerBEDS* and *WALLflowers* were very much about decoration. The flower beds were hand carved with beautiful flower designs taken from 19th century Chinese designs into slabs of foam, flocked white and then placed flat on the floor with a pillow. They became the objectification of furniture and bedding, a reinterpretation of the landscape (inside) of the bed through the embellishment of pattern to create a landscape (outside) within a gallery.

Kevin: Was this also a response to the gallery?

Nicole: Yes, MONDO Arte Gallery in Dubai is a stark white minimalist space designed by Phillippe Starke and I wanted to insert or grow my work out of this space as a response to the gallery, and to that city and country. So it had to be white and it had to be highly decorative. I chose flocking as a textural surface specifically for its softness and its plushness. However since I have been carving these designs in foam I have explored all kinds of other surface treatments from sprayed on rubber to thin skinned upholstery and felting.

Kevin: Let's return to the blow up works. You have said they were partly a response to the freight issue of moving around large solid works. What else led to these works?

Nicole: I wanted to make some really large works and move away from the solidness of form not only for freighting issues but for aesthetic reasons like their tactility, size and accessibility to an audience. So after spending 12 months experimenting with blow-ups and failing many times before I got things to work physically I discovered that these works had their own vulnerabilities. So what was I to do? I embraced this vulnerability – especially the concept of deflating as they evolved into living organic objects that with air further changed their reading as an object/space.

In the current exhibition *SOFTscapes* at Albury Regional Gallery I began from a response to the site, the city and its architecture. I responded firstly with a red foam carved work – *Landscape 1* based on a 19th Century sofa. I removed its legs and pushed this shape as far as I could by reinvestigating it 4 times in 4 different mediums and 4 different sizes.



**WALLflower** – lily detail 2006, gift of colour mondo arte gallery, Dubai, hand carved foam + felt finish, photograph by Rod Buchholz



**flowerBEDS** – orchid detail 2006, gift of colour mondo arte gallery, Dubai, hand carved foam + felt, photograph by Rod Buchholz



**LANDscape 1** 2007, *SOFTscape*, albury regional gallery, Albury, hand carved foam + felt, 1000 x 600 x 300mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz

Landscape 2 was the first re-landscaping of this object made in PVC creating a sealed inflatable twice the original size. Then Landscape 3 was made larger again but relied on a constant air flow to create its form, and was made of spinnaker cloth, hand painted and attached to a small blower. Landscape 4 was the last work in this re-landscaping. It was large and round taking up a major part of the gallery space and a work in which you could investigate the interior landscape of this object rather than just its exterior. These progressive investigative works moved from the solid to something that moved, breathed, lifted off and was connected by a kind of umbilical cord to its life blood – AIR and where you are able to walk inside the object/space.

The shape of this object changes through this progression as it grows and takes form in different materials. The conical form that creates *Landscape 1*'s seat back is inverted in *Landscape 4* to physically fit it in to the gallery and becomes its spine to hold it all together, bringing the outside in and visa versa.

Kevin: In this last show you have again started with the furniture idea and I know it was partly in response to the public art residency you did here in Albury. But it seems to have morphed now into a different way of looking at space compared to the IMA show. The large work in particular seems to posit the inside and outside space as interconnected. The inside spine is connected to the outside surface and you can touch both inner and outer surfaces. It creates a kind of expansion of spaces especially when you take the space of the gallery also into account. For me you have now come full circle from your first show back to a new kind of interactivity, where spaces are confused and where surface and inside touch can be one and the same, so where to from here?

Nicole: More blow-ups and inflatable's, I love the way they take on a life of their own. Though I haven't quite finished with the foam carving and am halfway through another landscape series titled *DELICATEscapes*, which are stiffened and crocheted geometric forms and detailed lasercut flocked foam shapes, clustered to form a landscape of objects that re-enforce the obsession with the precious gallery object. I will continue to present the audiences for my work with the challenge of defining the landscape that they find themselves in, whether in an art gallery or in other public spaces, and their own position in that landscape.

Kevin Wilson is currently Group Leader Cultural Services for Albury City and formerly the Director of Noosa Regional Gallery

O'Doherty B 1976 'Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space'  
London. University Press.



**LANDscape 2** 2007, SOFTscape, Albury Regional Gallery, Albury, PVC inflatable, 1200 x 1000 x 500mm, photograph courtesy the artist

**LANDscape 2 + riverBEDS** 2007, SOFTscape, installation shot, Albury Regional Gallery, Albury, photograph courtesy the artist



**LANDscape 3** 2007, SOFTscape, Albury Regional Gallery, Albury, sail clothe inflatable, 2000 x 1500 x 600mm, photograph courtesy the artist



**SOFTscape** 2007, installation shot, RIVERscape + LANDscape, hand carved foam + felt, PVC inflatable, photograph courtesy the artist



**LANDscape 4** detail 2007, inside and internal shot of LANDscape 4, Albury Regional Gallery, Albury, ripstop nylon inflatable, 5m diameter x 2400mm, photograph courtesy the artist



**SOFTscape** 2007, installation shot, Albury Regional Gallery, Albury, photograph by Jules Boag



*Joyce Terrain* 2004 lobby play IMA, Brisbane, installed gallery 1, foam + upholstery, 52 pieces, 12.95m x 3.95m x 1m, photograph by Andrea Higgins



*flowerBEDS* – orchid 2006 gift of colour mondo arte gallery, Dubai, hand carved foam + felt, 2000 x 1200 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz





*flowerBEDS* – stars 2006 gift of colour mondo arte gallery, Dubai, hand carved foam + felt, 2000 x 1200 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz



*WALLflowers* – lily 2006 gift of colour mondo arte gallery, Dubai, hand carved foam + felt, 2000 x 1200 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz



*WALLflowers* – rose 2006 gift of colour mondo arte gallery, Dubai, hand carved foam + felt, 2000 x 1200 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz



*pinning 4 YEW* 2007, can't see the words for the trees series, hand carved foam + felt, 9 pieces 2000 x 1000 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz



**LANDscape 1** 2007 SOFTscape, albury regional gallery, Albury, hand carved foam + felt, 1000 x 600 x 300mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz



**LANDscape 2** 2007 SOFTscape, albury regional gallery, Albury, PVC inflatable, 1200 x 1000 x 500mm, photograph courtesy the artist



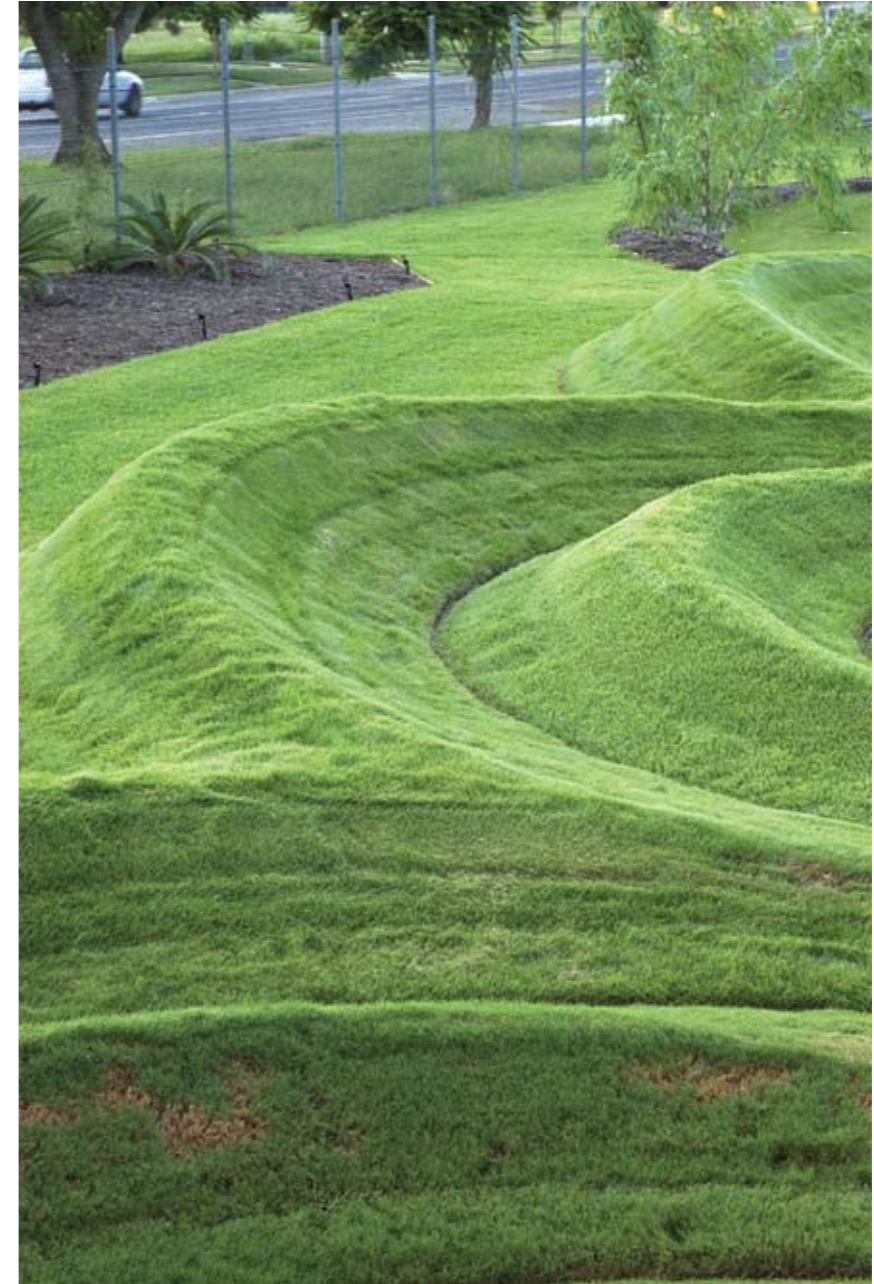
**LANDscape 3** 2007 SOFTscape, albury regional gallery, Albury, sail clothe inflatable, 2000 x 1500 x 600mm, photograph courtesy the artist



**LANDscape 3** 2007 SOFTscape, albury regional gallery, Albury, ripstop nylon inflatable, internal shot, 5m diameter x 2400mm H, photograph by Jules Boag



*RUG* 2003 Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award, Werribee Mansions, Victoria, plants + soil, 10m x 8 m, photograph courtesy the artist



*watermarks* 2006 department of primary industries, Cleveland, permanent public art commission, 9 varieties of turf, 30m x 10m, photograph by Rod Buchholz

## Nicole Voevodin-Cash: Patterns in the landscape

'Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.'  
Simon Schama, *Landscape and memory*, Fontana Press, Harper Collins, London, 1996, p. 61

For centuries, the rhythmic patterns and chaotic ferocity of nature have been a source of inspiration for artists. The emergence of landscape painting reached its height in 12-13th century China, but it wasn't until the late 18th and early 19th century that European landscape painters captured its full metaphoric potential in oil paint on canvas. What we see is a pictorial representation of nature in the form of landscape, but it is imbued with poetic metaphors for the human condition. Capturing an impression of nature's wild, untamed forces, finding a visual parallel for the sublime, representing the life-force chi in black and white ink paintings, or extracting intricate patterns from botanical or geological forms, endless imagery can be harnessed from the micro and macro natural world.

In the 21st century, artists engaging with the landscape recognize that they are dealing with the confluence of nature and culture, that a landscape is an idealised version of nature seen through a filter of culture. Whether it is imposing order upon the landscape, or extrapolating order from it, the patterns that emerge as part of this natural/cultural system represent a convergence of chaos and order.

Nicole Voevodin-Cash works within this realm, deriving order from chaos, and finding chaos within orderly systems. Her work traverses aspects of the landscape, sometimes being imposed upon it in the tradition of extravagant gardens of the Renaissance, sometimes being derived from it, using the intricate floral patterns, Japonismes and Chinoiserie of the nineteenth centuries as the basis for her sculptural reliefs.

As a sculptor who works with the physical form of the landscape, Voevodin-Cash is somewhat removed from the objectivity that landscape painters adopt – that the landscape is 'out there' with the artist looking at it from a distance – a gesture that we, as viewers, must imitate in order to understand the landscape painter's viewpoint. With Voevodin-Cash's works, the viewer is not afforded that distance, but becomes a participant, performing (even as oneself) within a constructed landscape. The installations may comprise lines on the ground, domestic plans imprinted onto lawns, geometric maze-like patterns, or concentric circles, but they demand interaction, to be experienced physically and not just contemplated from afar.



*peaceful DATES* 2007, can't see the words for the trees series, hand carved foam + felt, 5 pieces 1500 x 600 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz



*can't see RED* 2007, can't see the words for the trees series, hand carved foam + felt, 9 pieces 1000 x 1000 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz



*silly old PEAR* 2007, can't see the words for the trees series, hand carved foam + felt, 5 pieces 1200 x 1000 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz

The challenge of creating sustainable interactive works of art has intrigued Voevodin-Cash for a number of years: how to make something with which people can engage, that will withstand the rigorous demands of physical activity. It is an ongoing thread in her work, whether the object produced are furniture, sculpture, installation or two-dimensional works. Voevodin-Cash suggests that this type of engagement results in a work that "is" and "does" rather than simply represents or depicts'. Engaging with the work on a physical level demands more than an understanding of the work from a purely intellectual perspective, it requires the viewer to set aside their self-consciousness and become physically involved.

Voevodin-Cash's work may take the viewer on a circular walk around raised grassy mounds (*Watermarks* 2006 installed at the DPI Research Station at Cleveland), through a floriated maze-like geometry (*RUG*, at the Helen Lempriere Sculpture Prize 2003), or up and down in springy steps across a minimalist landscape of one's own construction (*Joyce Terrain*, shown at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane 2004). This can have some surprising results. While looking at Voevodin-Cash's work, one's muscles and sense of balance are drawn into play, olfactory senses are tested by the materials used, as well as one's eyes, straining over a distance to scan the installation, or across a wall to sketch out a forest. Such sensory experiences can unlock, or reinvigorate, memories of the past, recalling similar scents and physical actions. Each sensory trigger elicits different meanings for each individual.

*Joyce Terrain* toyed with another aspect of Voevodin-Cash's work: that of the viewer's role in the work's construction which, in turn, reflected on the question of what constitutes a 'finished' piece, as *Joyce Terrain* constantly shifted and morphed according to the direction and level of participation. Provided with a series of white, geometric forms – cube, sphere and cone, reflecting the geometries found in cubist landscapes – the viewer was invited to create and recreate the landscape, to 'personalise' it, within an essentially impersonal white box space. This, the artist suggested, aroused 'playfulness in the audience, encouraging them to interact and rearrange each shape in the creation of their own environmental landscape. ... It is the body of the sitter, the toucher that creates the demarcation of this landscape – from sculptural installation, to furniture, to habitat, to corporate identity – through their engagement, mischievousness and movement of and through the Terrain.'

Voevodin-Cash's recent works are less involved in imposing order upon an unruly outdoors landscape, or allowing the viewer to activate and control the shape of the landscape indoors, but are concerned more with deriving forms from it. Of this work, the artists states that she is 'trying to bring indoors the feeling you get when you might be outside looking at tidal markings, rippling wind marks, ocean waves, plant foliage, flower



*remembering YEW + YEW + YEW* 2007, can't see the words for the trees series, hand carved foam + felt, 10 pieces 2000 x 1000 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz



*stuck on YEW* 2007, can't see the words for the trees series, hand carved foam + felt, 2 pieces 1000 x 600 x 20mm, photograph by Rod Buchholz



*riverbed* 2007, SOFTscape, albury regional gallery, Albury, 10m x 800 x 200mm, handcut felted foam, photograph courtesy the artist

beds and gardens by creating a dialogue directly with the landscape it exhibited in and for.'

Voevodin-Cash's recent works comprise a series of intricately carved and 'flocked' relief works which stand in stark contrast to the white minimalist geometries of *Joyce Terrain*. In these works the artist has incised intricate designs based on natural forms into high density foam, which is then sprayed with commercial 'flocking', to create a velvety texture that is at once perfectly even, but reveals the hand-carved substrate. *Flowerbeds*, the larger of these works, are installed horizontally, bed-like, and the *Wallflowers* installed vertically, reminiscent of large, carved marble reliefs of antiquity. The surface designs are based on eighteenth and nineteenth century patterns which were themselves inspired by nature, and link the external, natural, botanical world (even if seen through a veneer of culture) to the internal, cultivated human domain (where much energy is spent deflecting chaos). With names like *WALLflower lily* and *WALLflower orchid*, Voevodin-Cash plays on the negative implication of being compared to the botanical world – even if the flower is elegant and glamorous.

In the series *Can't see the woods for the trees* Voevodin-Cash titles groups of carved tree silhouettes with familiar one-liners. Again, the high-density foam and flocking technique is used to create a series of slender tree shapes that are precariously pinned to the wall, but they are created in velvety, dark colours that are reminiscent of deep forest shadows. While the works are evocative and sensuous, the titles, *Stuck on Yew*, *Pining 4 Yew*, *Silly old Pear*, are sentimental and corny. When coupled with the repeated, identical tree shapes that, en masse, signify the homogenisation of idiosyncratic botanical specimens through agricultural plantations or personal viewing habit, these works become disturbing reminders that cliché is not restricted to word – images of the landscape can just as easily succumb to cliché.

However, Voevodin-Cash lives and works surrounded by the natural world: her studio and house is situated in a lush, sub-tropical rainforest of nine and a half acres. It is a major wildlife corridor teeming with different birds, animals and insects. The drive to it winds through the southern valley of Buderim, in the Sunshine Coast hinterland. Voevodin-Cash's concept of the landscape is derived as much from personal experience and observation of it as from any historical knowledge about it. Hers is not a romantic ideal. It is lived and worked. That the landscape in which Voevodin-Cash lives has been fashioned by her is as critical as the manner in which it impinges upon her. For this artist, the cycles, patterns and chaos of nature are in concert with her attempts to create ordered landscape in which to live. The oscillation and coexistence of order and disorder, culture and nature, are constantly both reality and inspiration.

Robyn Daw  
Brisbane 2007



I-LAND 2005 McClelland Sculpture Award Proposal, floating turf, image the artist



green hills 2005 Melbourne Laneways Proposal, vertical turfing, image the artist

## Living Works

One of the most astute strategies for devising successful public art is to produce works that aren't recognised as art by the public. Freed from the barriers of reverence or disdain that some people automatically create when looking at art, works like this can be assimilated more directly into everyday life. Many of the interesting and pleasing things that we encounter in public spaces are put there by artists, but not necessarily as an alternative to putting them in a gallery. Nicole Voevodin-Cash is strongly aware of the need for public art to be a response to its environment rather than sculpture that happens to be located somewhere other than a space dedicated to art.

Her 'living works' – temporary and permanent rearrangements of landscape and vegetation – illustrate all this very clearly. Working with plants is now an important area of her practice, and has helped to define her approach to public art. These living works are thoroughly integrated into the existing terrain, and their engaging qualities are largely derived from the fact that we don't know exactly what they are when we see them. They don't fit into the categories of sculpture or landscape design. Without a preconceived frame of reference we have to negotiate them on their own terms. This type of art catches viewers by surprise in a way that more conventional monuments and murals can't.

As a finalist in the Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award in 2003 she produced a patterned carpet of multicoloured grasses and groundcover plants at Werribee Park near Melbourne. This combination of the familiar and the incongruous recurs in much of her work. It causes viewers to do a double take, and experience a changed perception of something they might otherwise have assumed was not worth a second look. As well as providing an element of humour, the playful surprise makes people look more closely at their surroundings, and by seeing their environment differently they also think about it differently. *Rug*, the living carpet produced for the Lempriere Award, was set in an existing lawn – an outdoor carpet of grass. The formal geometric design of Voevodin-Cash's carpet provided a subtle commentary on the way humans re-shape nature and by implication also alluded to the way European settlement has changed Australia. This was particularly appropriate for the site, the grounds of a grand colonial mansion.

*Watermarks* is a permanent living art work produced in 2003 for the Redlands Research Station, where the Queensland Department of Primary Industries is researching grass species that will allow the continued cultivation of lawns despite water shortages. Over 100 demonstration plots have been planted with grasses from all over the world. The deeply sculpted waves of earth that comprise *Watermarks* are also planted with multiple different types of lawn, so this work of art is directly related to the scientific work conducted on the site. It combines the twin subjects of grass and water in a lyrical and imaginative way, achieving the soothing effect of wave patterns without vast quantities of water. Drought has made fountains a thing of the past in public art and this work is simultaneously a reminder that the problem exists and a demonstration that there are ways of dealing with it. Vegetation, like water, renders an environment more sympathetic. It conveys a sense of sustainable life that fulfils the purpose of public art in the simplest possible way.

Timothy Morrell



urban patch – lace mats, 2005, Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award Proposal, image the artist

NICOLE VOEVODIN-CASH lives and works on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS 2007 SOFTscape, Albury Regional Gallery, Albury; 2004 Lobby Play, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; Waiting Terrain, Ipswich Regional Gallery, Ipswich; 2002 The same but different Cucina Stars, Via Farini Galleria, Milano; 1997 .....so you want to be touched?, Metro Arts, Brisbane; 1996 Hiatus Noosa Regional Gallery, Noosa. SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS 2007 Art in Public Spaces, Albury Regional Gallery, Albury; 2006 Gift of Colour, Mondo Arte Gallery, Dubai; 2005 Sufferance, Craft Queensland, Brisbane; Floating Land, Noosa regional Gallery, Noosa; TEMPERATURE, Museum of Brisbane, Brisbane; 2004 Tactile Art, Object Gallery, Sydney; 2003 The McClelland Sculpture Survey + Award, McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park, Victoria; The Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award, Werribee Park, Victoria; 2002 Chemin d'Art, St Flour, France; Wideangle, Hervey Bay Regional Gallery, Hervey Bay; 21st Century Chair Exhibition, Brisbane City Gallery, Brisbane; 2001 INNERSPACE – Experimental Australian Design, Jam Factory, Adelaide. RESIDENCIES 2006 Albury City Public Art Residency, Albury; 2005 Bundanon Artist Residency, Bundanon; 2002 VACB overseas studio residency, Milan, Italy. GRANTS 2006 Arts Queensland Publication; 2005/06 Australia Council NEW WORK; 2005 Maroochy RADF grant professional development, Bundanon Residency; 2003 Arts Queensland production of work for Lobby Play, IMA, Brisbane; 2002 VACB Milan Studio, Italy; SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 2007 Kevin Wilson Creative Territories – site specific art as communion, P 26, 35, 95; 2005 Louise Martin-Chew, Sufferance: Women's Artists' Books, Review Object No 48 Dec + The Australian Tues Sept 2; 2004 Robyn Daw, Rules of Engagement, catalogue Lobby Play, IMA, Brisbane; Ken Scarlett, Australia's Sculpture Prizes, Forum SCULPTURE, Vol 23 No.1, Jan/Feb; Julie Walsh Furnished Spaces, Temperature Catalogue, MoB; Kris Calon Debating the Climate: Contradictions in Temperature, SoFA; Martin Kronberger, Out of Sight = Back in Mind (Inside) Australian Design Review Issue 34; Maggie Frazer, White Encounter, INDesign No18 Aug; Sandra McLean, Future Shock, The Courier Mail Sat 28 Feb; 2003 Robert Nelsen Bring Out the Big Guns, The Age, Oct 8; Mary O'Brien, Great Ideas, Great Shapes, The Age March 5; Glenis Green, Works that Grow on You, The Courier Mail, 27 May; Holy Arden Chemin d'Art review, Nicole Voevodin-Cash, Eycline No.50 summer; 2002 Kristen Fitzpatrick, 21st Century Chairs, Artlink, Vol 22 No. 4; 1997 Jane Magon Hiatus: Nicole Voevodin-Cash, Eycline No.33 Autumn/Winter.

KEVIN WILSON is the Group Leader, Cultural Services, Albury City

Kevin Wilson started out as an artist in the area of photography and exhibited in Australia and overseas and has work in a range of collections including the National Gallery of Victoria. He is known now as an innovative gallery director who was the founding director of Linden Art Gallery in St.Kilda, Melbourne. He earlier managed the St Kilda Collection and taught tertiary visual arts. He received a professional development grant to work in the education department at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and has continued to have an active interest in art and education

Kevin was the director of Noosa Regional Gallery for 10 years and gave the gallery a strong contemporary focus with extensive artist in residence programs and an internationally focused art in environment series of events. He was the instigator and director of The Floating Land, an international site specific event in nature and was for 5 years the president of Artists in Nature International Network (AiNIN), an art and environment organization based in France.

He has curated a range of exhibitions including Art and Land, which toured Asia and Australia for Asialink, Flesh – contemporary art and the erotic exhibition from the collection of Alex Mackay, and a range of other shows to regional galleries in Australia and New Zealand. He also writes on contemporary art and artists.

ROBYN DAW is originally from Melbourne, she holds degrees in Art History, Fine Art and Arts Management and has experience lecturing, curating, training and writing on contemporary art, craft and design issues. She has worked at the Queensland Art Gallery, QUT Art Museum and was Manager of Education at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. A year ago she returned to Brisbane where, with her partner, artist Ian Friend, she created ArtBunker, and together they undertake a variety of visual art, craft and design projects.

TIM MORRELL lives in Brisbane, and has contributed regularly to exhibition catalogues and periodicals on Australian art for the past 20 years. He has been a curator at the Art Gallery of South Australia and the Queensland Art Gallery, and his freelance curatorial work has included exhibitions in Australia, Asia and Europe, as well as public art projects in Brisbane.

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