Spinning with Dog Hair

Security Blanket, 2006, dog hair
I was privileged to have my mum teach me how to spin using a spinning wheel. Her thirty years experience in this craft meant that I was able to quickly progress from sheep fleece to dog hair. I acquired white dog hair in bulk from a dog groomer who brushed out rather than clipped Samoyed dogs. Once washed 2-3 times in shampoo the hair was clean and ready to spin. I would brush each handful before spinning it. I deliberately under-spun the hair so that it would fluff up once it was knitted. I spun eighteen balls in total and then hand-knitted the blanket using loop needles. Through every day use as a blanket the fibres have loosened enough to create the look of a pelt.
Hairwork
The ornamental and decorative use of human hair in 19th Century Victorian “jewelry of sentiment” was a source of inspiration to me. Traditionally hairwork jewelry was worn as a memento of a deceased loved one or as a symbol of love and friendship. In this light, making hairwork seemed a fitting way for me to explore emotional states that often accompany anxiety such as longing and loss. Consulting a reprinted version of the 1875 book, *Self Instructor in the Art of Hair Work* by Mark Campbell, I adapted the techniques in the text (through a slow process of trial and error), substituting the traditional human hair with horsehair. The whole process took me over six months to learn effectively.

Constructing the braiding stand complete with a revolving top was a fairly straightforward process. My rudimentary but practical stand worked sufficiently. The bobbins and counter-balance, however, were more challenging. Initial experiments using the materials suggested in the book proved to be too lightweight when combined with horsehair. I found that steel nuts and bolts provided the constant and even tension required to keep the hairwork taut. Another problem was encountered when I found that the horsehair was too coarse and thick to pull off the mould. Eventually I managed to braid without using a mould at all or by braiding over a thick wire bound in horsehair. The construction of a length of braid (or hairwork) was then simply a matter of repeating a series of motions of one or more of the bobbins. The pattern or sequence was then repeated until the length of hair was used up.

The resulting DNA-type appearance of the braids (a never ending spinning ladder of hair without beginning or end) could perhaps be seen to reference the notion of a genetic or biological predisposition to excessive levels of anxiety.
The Nodal Point (detail), 2007-2008, horsehair
Hair Tower, 2008, ink on paper
Video
Windsuck (detail), 2006, video still
Windsuck (installation view), Westspace, Melbourne, 2006
Stills from *Windsuck* video shoot two and three, 2006
By recording domesticated animals exhibiting compulsive behaviours and playing them on a loop format I intended to highlight the incessant, relentness and monotonous nature of suffering from anxiety.

I filmed my English Pointer Millie ‘whirling’ (chasing her tail) as one such example. She performs this stereotypic behaviour without provocation whenever she is given food treats such as a bone. Whilst this behaviour may or may not necessarily signify the presence of anxiety, it is nevertheless unsettling as a viewer to observe this behaviour.

Whilst conducting research for my project I was introduced to a friend’s horse named Mr. Jones who “windsucked”. Often caused by the stress or frustration of being stabled or socially isolated, windsucking becomes habitual and will be performed in situations completely removed from the original cause of anxiety. Mr. Jones had windsucked for many years, wearing down his teeth and causing ongoing health problems. I filmed Mr. Jones on three separate occasions to capture the footage for Windsuck.
Photography

*Letting Go*, 2007, inkjet print
Letting Go examines my own feelings of fear, dread and longing by exploring my concerns about the inevitable death of one of my horses, Peppermint, who is now 31 years old.

I constructed a long false tail out of horsehair that I had acquired from the knackery. I sewed and glued small sections of hair together and joined them to make one long tail which was then plaited into Pep’s tail. He was very cooperative during the three photo shoots and allowed me to follow him around as he modelled his tail for me.

The photographic series What A Good Girl You Are was an earlier work that I hoped would explore the shared animal and human experience of suffering from “separation anxiety”. I cut out made-to-measure patterns and hand-knitted a woollen garment with arms that linked myself to my dog Millie. Four separate photo shoots of myself conjoined with Millie were conducted in a local arboretum.
Letting Go, photographs from photo shoot two, 2007
What a Good Girl You Are, photograph from photo shoot one, 2005
Studio
a life lived in fear is a life half lived

a life lived in fear is a life half lived
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BOOKS


**WEBSITES**

Blackshaw, J., ‘Behavioural profiles of domestic animals’ at www.animalbehaviour.net, accessed on 02/02/05.


FILMS

*Do Animals have Emotions? and Are Animals Conscious?*
SBS 19/09/00. From BBC Program.
Watched on 20/04/05.
EXHIBITIONS

2008 - 2009  The Animal Gaze: London Metropolitan University; Plymouth College, Plymouth Arts Centre; Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery; Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World; Peninsula Arts Gallery; and Groundwork South West, UK.
2007  Eye to Eye: Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo, NSW.
2006  The Idea of the Animal: Melbourne International Arts Festival Program, RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
2006  Wind-suck: West Space, Solo Exhibition, Melbourne
2005  Siemens Art Award: RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
2005  Hatched: Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth Cultural Centre, Perth
2005  What if ?: The Wedding Circle, Chippendale, Sydney
2005  The Adventure Project: Firstdraft Gallery, Surry Hills, Sydney
2005  The Influence of Anxiety: Blindside Gallery, Surry Hills, Sydney
2005  Hurt Couture: Blindside Gallery, Arts Program, Melbourne L’Oreal Fashion Festival, Melbourne
2004  Connections: Printmaking Graduate Exhibition, First Site, RMIT Union Gallery, Melbourne
2004  Siemens Art Award: RMIT Gallery, Melbourne
2004  Dislocation: First Site, RMIT Union Gallery, Melbourne
2003  Some thoughts on Therapy: Solo Exhibition, ‘BODY’, St. Kilda and City Stores
2002  Recent Work: Solo Exhibition, ‘Ripe Australian Produce’, Sassafras
2001  Spit, Bite and Grind: RMIT Printmaking Graduate Exhibition, Bulle Gallery, Melbourne
2001  Printmaking: Animals: Tivoli Arts Space, Melbourne
1999  Relating to Nature: George Paton Gallery, Melbourne
EDUCATION

2005  Commenced Master of Arts (Fine Art), School of Art, RMIT University
2004  Bachelor of Fine Art (Honours), majoring in Printmaking, RMIT University
1999-2001 Bachelor of Fine Art, majoring in Printmaking, RMIT University
1997-1998 Diploma of Visual Art, majoring in Photography, RMIT Tafe

PUBLICATIONS

Eye to Eye catalogue: Dubbo Regional Gallery, September-October 2007, Barbara Dover.
Artlink: Volume 25 #1, November 2005, p.68, colour image.
Real Time: Front cover full colour reproduced image, Aug-Sept 2005, and artist biography on p.2.
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