

ANNA EGGERT NARRATIVE & SILENCE.

Anna Eggert's sculptural installation *Mesmerized* is an extraordinarily complex and multifaceted work.

It is beautiful both in the individual components and in the unity of the whole. It is at once enigmatic, intriguing, seductive, alienating, elusive and allusive. The dialogue it establishes between culture and difference, a dialogue so important in our contemporary world, is presented in such a way that the viewer is coerced into active engagement simultaneously with the dialectical proposition and the aesthetic construct offered by the artist.

The viewer is ostensibly presented with eight female figures wearing the Islamic burqa. The latter is a (usually) voluminous outer garment worn over normal daily clothing for the purpose of enveloping the body or at least drawing attention away from the body underneath. Whilst not a part of all Islamic traditions, in a US-Eurocentric view it is seen as the almost iconic visualisation of the Islamic woman.

I have said that *the viewer is ostensibly presented with eight female figures, ostensibly* because there are in fact no bodies beneath the garments. The garment creates form, and the body underneath exists as an imagined and conversely vehemently real construct. In many ways what Eggert presents us with is the gap between imagination and realisation, the correspondences between representations and objects (or in this case persons) represented.

For Eggert the above begins with her dialogue with the material that becomes both form and content. The material in the current exhibition is a densely woven stainless steel mesh more normally used for medico-scientific purposes. In a sense this material is formless, but it is invested with an innate structural strength that enables Eggert to mould it to suit her particular conceptual and aesthetic needs.

Eggert allows the mesh to celebrate its materiality, its ability to capture the rise of shadow and the falls of light, its malleability and its essential character of appearing to be what it is not. For Eggert's philosophical dialogue, this mesh is the perfect medium.

The installation consists of eight figures, each named. The figures move through the gallery space in a simultaneity of connection and disconnection and intersubjective dynamics. Each figure is part of a presentation of individual and collective enunciation. Each moves through and in the space as though she is apart from it, yet each is integral, through her collaborative interaction with the others, in the production of the spatial dynamic created by the artist.

Samra, Rahima, Amina, Fatemah, Ula, Sarah, Bashira and Laila coexist. However, their differences (and each is clearly individualised) are not subsumed into a single unity but are rather set with and against one another, to provide aesthetic and thematic resonance. Just as the artist's processes of placing the figures within the gallery space are integral to the work's meaning, so too are the processes undertaken by viewers when they relate with this work by walking amongst the group, touching the mesh, etcetera. The audacious physicality of each figure provides viewers with concrete simulacra of difference, embodiment and situation. We are forced to examine and pay detailed attention to notions of materiality, place and negotiated histories.

As much as Eggert is placing an aesthetic proposition before us she is also positing a cultural one. To represent something in an artistic way is to make a wider proposition about that thing. The choice of subject or theme is as much a socio-political one as is it aesthetic. For me, all art is political. Every aesthetic statement/product, even if it is concerned with art about itself, is a political statement as well.



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Very little art (no art?) is produced in a vacuum. Art arises within individuals because of an inner need, experiential or imagined, to say something in a creative way about our world, others and ourselves. The definitions of these are unlimited and hence art's ineluctable ability to be as multifarious in its product as it is in its makers.

To choose, as Eggert has, to portray representations of Islam in a contemporary Australian context, is to engage her viewers in an examination of their views about women, about difference, about cultural confrontation and about the intersection of the positions of art, culture, social comment and philosophy.

Eggert questions the paradigm that the aura of the art object ties it to a particular place, culture, ritual or whatever, through a form of positive subversion. It is not so much the art object that is tied to a particular place and time; it is rather the historic specificity of the artist's choice of theme and means of presentation of that theme. So, by choosing the subject that she has Eggert has imbued *Mesmerized* with an incisive contemporaneity that completely captures the viewers' perceptual capacities in an engaging and overt way.

That done, she then proceeds to offer a variety of perspectives from which viewers may interact with their feelings, thoughts and sensations. First and foremost we are, after all, dealing with an inherently captivating and beautiful artwork. The steel mesh is able to capture and hold light. The figures become objects of three-dimensional chiaroscuro, with light and shade moving around and across each, as viewers move around and as the light changes throughout the day.

This active engagement with light makes *time* an essential part of the artist's aesthetic strategy; structured here by corporeal movement (real {viewers} and *imagined* {figures}), and by memory evoked by the continuing and recurrent passages of time. The immense subtlety of this in *Mesmerized* underscores the finesse of Eggert's aesthetic and intellectual sensibilities.

The silence of the artist's *faceless figures* is another strategy judiciously manipulated by her to allude to the unspoken oscillations between the internal and the external, appearance and reality as manifested in the figures without bodies and faces. Despite the absolute reality of non-corporeality there is a correspondingly absolute *physicality* in Eggert's figures which is intimated through such simple devices as tilted heads, raised arms or a leg thrust forward. The latter is said knowing that there are no heads, arms or legs present. Unsettling omissions are both ingenious and effective in locating and conveying Eggert's authorial strategies.

Eggert's aesthetic process is predicated on viewers being aware that as much as they are part of that process they are also part of a social process. The aesthetic reality discloses social reality. Here, the didacticism of the choice of Islamic protagonists and female Islamic protagonists is an important ploy. The artist's choice is not merely a way of articulating the domain of women; it is a way of articulating a sense of belonging to the group, of the interaction and mutual reinforcement of social custom, religion and cultural identity.

Eggert creates an interrogative set of relationships within an equally interrogative spatial configuration and in doing this simultaneously creates a range of different perspectives from which viewers can observe their own feelings, thoughts and sensations. For the artist there is no need to obscure the public moment of intercultural confrontation by subsuming it into a totally aesthetic event. The coexistence and fusion of the visual, the cultural and the social underlie this beautifully enigmatic work and imbues it with an aesthetic and conceptual eloquence which speaks of the individual and the wider society of which we are all a part.

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