

Dress for success in mesh

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Sculptural mesh dresses give new meaning to "see through", writes Louise Bellamy.

Sculptor Anna Eggert, 53, likes to wear clothes that blend in. Her sculptures - full-length evening dresses made of industrial stainless-steel mesh, usually the preserve of sieves - are, in sharp contrast, extravagant.

The gallery space at Karen Woodbury, where 11 life-sized body-less dresses appear to dance in lace, has been transformed into a surreal ballroom, such is the movement her manipulation of the mesh - achieved by pummeling it with river rocks in rubber-gloved hands - creates.

The former history teacher, who migrated to Australia from Croatia in 1962 aged 10, has been making objects for as long as she can remember. "In Croatia there was flax for linen, wool for jumpers and flour for bread. The only thing we didn't make was sugar and salt."

It was during this time she started making three-dimensional objects - dogs, houses, everything - in clay.

At the Catholic school in Sydney's western suburbs "where I was ignored rather than ostracised because I couldn't speak English", she started copying drawings from Catechism books.

By 15 she could speak English; by 18 she was at Sydney University studying ancient history; and from 21 to 29 she taught at secondary schools supporting her husband, who was doing a PhD.

After her two children, now in their mid-20s, went to school, the family settled in Canberra and she studied visual arts at the Australian National University, continuing to teach part-time.

Eggert says her sculptor lecturer, Ron Robertson-Swann, gave her the courage to pursue her own ideas, and painting lecturer Robert Boynes taught her that materials have to have a reason for being there.

And so began her exploration of what she describes as "the culture of women's clothing and their ability to constrain or liberate". Nagged on one hand by her own experience at school of being forced to wear stockings held up by suspender belts, and on the other by her studies of classical Greek sculpture, Eggert started working with lead sheets.

Creating life-sized tops and shirts moulded with her hands, indented by the pressure of the river rocks to suggest bodily form and connected by bolts, she "translated the choking quality of clothing, about women having to push their bodies into shape, into the shape the culture dictates".

For the past two years she's been exploring the liberating aspects of contemporary fashion, replacing lead with mesh and bolts with rivets, work that has recently been selected for both the prestigious National Sculpture Prize and the McClelland Survey and Award.

These new works, also done in bronze mesh, are optimistic, "reflecting a time when the female body, whether heavy or light, is allowed to move freely, beautifully, not like our mothers' generation where women were pulled in, told to fit in".

As in previous shows - this solo exhibition, her ninth since 1992 - the actual female body in all the works is missing. Its force is always implied through the undulation of the drapery "as the body beneath the material is pushing out; out of the corsets of the past and into shapes and forms suggesting individuality and strength".

There are also three small sculptures based on constricting clothing worn by children of the nobility in the 18th-century Spanish courts, "reminders of the ghosts of the past".

WHERE Karen Woodbury Gallery, 4 Albert Street, Richmond