



Spy, Voyeur, Flâneuse or Alchemist?

How to brand the uncontainable art of **Nicole Voevodin-Cash?**

Perhaps the trees have answer.

By **Nycole Prowse**



Introduction



Tracing Nicole Voevodin-Cash's artistic journey, as she leaps into her latest incarnation as NVC Studio, is one of expansion and contraction – one that resonates with a Bachelardian sense of space from his seminal text *A Poetics of Space*. For Bachelard the artist and artwork inhabit each other and the spaces they journey through in a physical and psychical shift between the miniature and the immensity of space. Recent followers of NVC would be aware of and even *experienced* one of NVC's billy can walks, from Sydney to Sunshine Coast.

The *M.A.D.E. Billy Can Walking* is an ongoing project by NVC that aims to undo a static, singular viewpoint of the landscape and emphasises the embodied and temporal aspects of perception. The resulting drawings are like signatures—each reveals the different qualities and characteristics of an individual and how they move through the world. Tracing the movement within journey through the precariousness of a dangling pen in a can exemplifies the poetic dance between immensity and miniature that has emboldened NVC's multi-award-winning work over two decades. Capturing a landscape in a can, indeed a world in a can, parallels NVC's poetics of space and also her own journey as cheeky observer, spy and artistic flâneuse. A feminist appropriation of the notion of the flâneur, 'a man who saunters around observing society', the flâneuse celebrates the wonder of the female artist as wanderer.

From her beginnings as a visual arts student at Seven Hills Art School, Queensland to attaining a Master of Visual Arts, NVC has incorporated research and design expertise into her art practice to reimagine the way we interact with space and objects. It has been an exploration that has crossed borders and boundaries. Her oeuvre moves from detail to expanse - ranging from anthropomorphic anarchistic re-functioning of furniture design (including fabric woven with pubic hair); interactive sculptural exhibitions that invite the viewer to become part of the sculpture; to a widening sense of interaction - a re-envisioning of landscape and self from Milan to Liverpool to regional and urban Australia. In every instance, NVC draws on the micro to understand the immensity.

The spatial tensions and insights revealed in NVC's work enunciate her own interaction with socio-cultural spaces. As a female artist and mother of three she has explored the confines of small spaces created by what she sees as an ever-shifting milieu of socio-cultural gatekeepers. Her movement outside of those gates to become a flâneuse of landscapes, accentuates her sense of espionage, voyeurism, and indeed the artistry required of a spatial alchemist.

Trapped into freedom

*...the miniscule, the narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world, which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness. [Bachelard *The Poetics of Space* 1958]¹*

A sense of freedom is quintessential to NVC – her art and artistic journey. NVC has continually resisted cultural, spatial and temporal expectations. It's been a paradoxical freedom though – one gained through the very constraints that tried to trap. It's clear that very early on art offered NVC escape from the smallest of spaces. Growing up with dyslexia, at a time when the condition often went undiagnosed, was the impetus for her love of art:

My grade three teacher, a very old stoic teacher, upon misunderstanding my 'disinterest' in the classroom told me to just sit in the corner and draw. Her reasoning: "that's as good as you ever going be." This was when art began, as a survival. Paradoxically, I was trapped into freedom.

It was an attitude that empowered her to resist the many kinds of gatekeepers she'd come across. Her place of offer at Seven Hills Art School in the 1970s raised stereotypical gendered concerns at the time, "But what are you going to do for a job? You should think about a nursing or teaching career." Brought up in South Brisbane, one of five daughters born to a father of Russian heritage and mother from the tiny town of Dululu, Queensland, if a comparison were to be made with Jane Austen's famous family of daughters, Nicole would be akin to Elizabeth Bennet. A feisty intellect and drive were part of the palette that equipped her journey through gender boundaries at college and what she considered the 'real boys club' of sculpting students. "There were an awful lot of large phallic shapes being made out of metal and so forth. I was one of the first women in Queensland to do tech arts as a subject, I could weld, I could do all sorts of things. I nevertheless found it quite threatening to work in that sort of a group." Which is why NVC found focus in painting initially.

¹ Bachelard 155

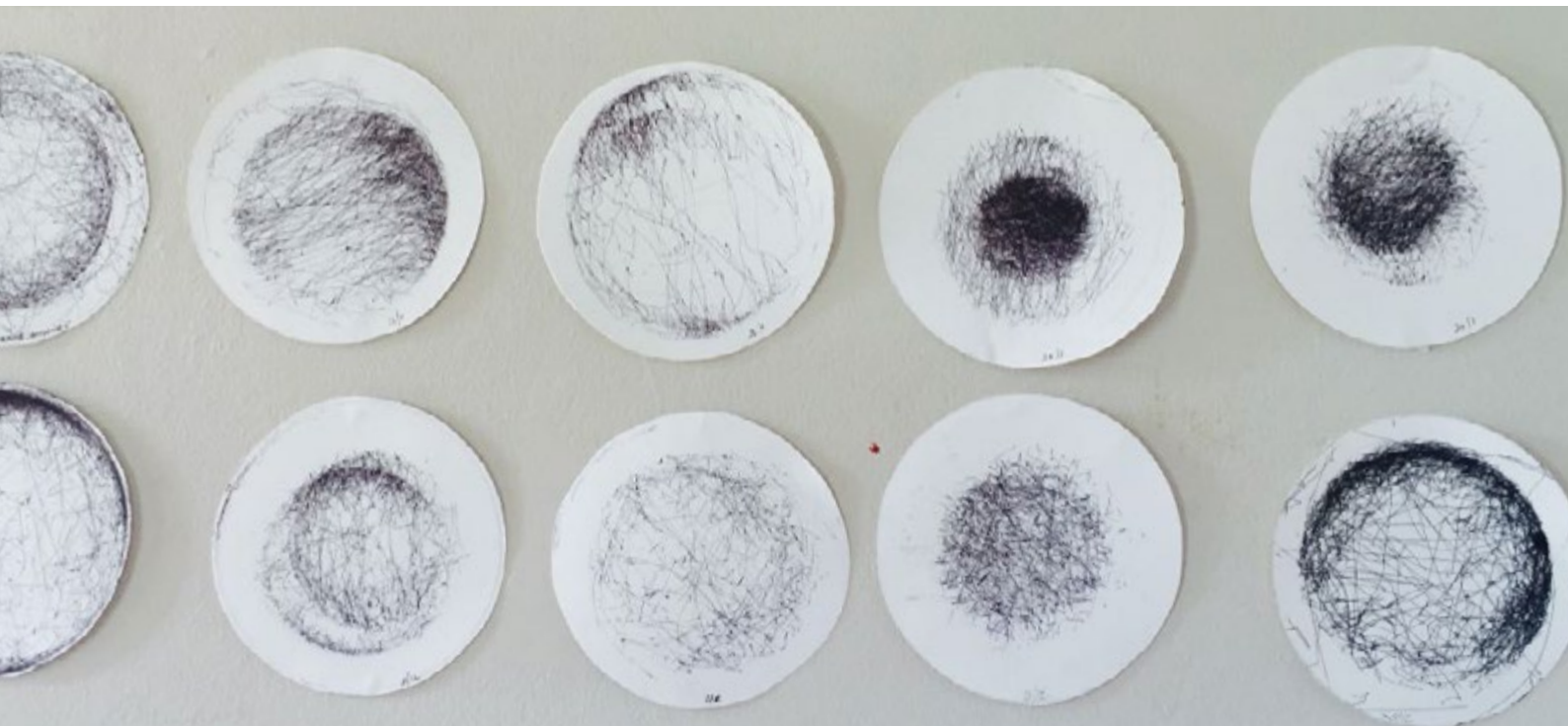


Painting three dimensionally

Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness ... by living in a world of miniature, one relaxes in a small space. [Bachelard The Poetics of Space 1958]²

While NVC investigated low relief sculpture at art school, it wasn't until becoming a mother that NVC created the shift from painter to maker. Instead of viewing motherhood as restrictive it allowed her the psychological space, albeit a very small physical space, to begin the 'making' that eventually widened her career. In a Bachelardian sense, NVC's inversion of the 'perspective of size' stimulated 'profound values' in her as an artist, "I'd been painting for some time when I realized that having three children meant I didn't have the time to be a great painter. I had to find another way of being creative." It was in a confined studio-come-children's-craft-space where NVC shifted her artistic practice. "I made small boxes. I felt quite contained so I poured my creative energy into that intense spatial reflection." While not viewing herself as a sculpture at the time NVC recognizes that having children enabled her to make the move to "do painting three dimensionally". It would be a process that allowed another kind of birthing, a Masters of Visual Arts and a first major exhibition.

²Bachelard 155



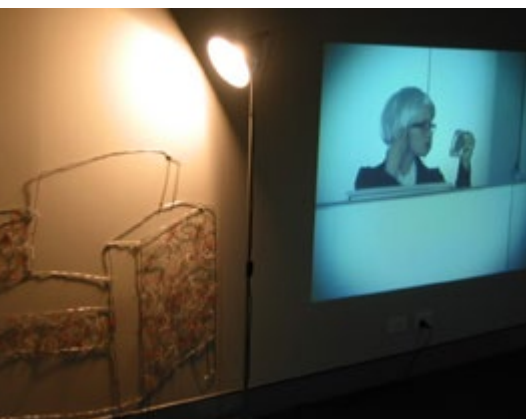
I am an inanimate object

It was Motherhood and Maurice Merleau-Ponty that honed the particular sensory elements accentuated in NVC's artistic work – *observation and interaction*. Merleau-Ponty recognises, that bodily feeling and world-experience takes its lead from touch and draws attention to the relatedness between them. "As the subject of touch, I cannot flatter myself that I am everywhere and nowhere; I cannot forget in this case that it is through my body that I go to the world."³ It was this sense of bodily feeling and world-experience that drew NVC's attention to the relatedness between them. "My artistic interest in the haptic of touch and interaction was peaked by my research around Merleau-Ponty's theories of touch that corresponded with my observations at the time - watching how children interact in the world. Children don't need direction, it's a sensory engagement, the process of growing as a human."

This observation that touch is constitutive of the sense we have of being in the world, developed further while working at the Queensland Art Gallery. NVC became adept at observing how people reacted and interacted with exhibitions. In particular, it was her experience with visually impaired visitors that inspired a shift in her artistic strategies and the concept of interaction, "We would incorporate a pseudo interaction with Rodin sculptures for visits with people were visually impaired. I say 'pseudo' as we were asked to provide gloves for these visitors. It seemed utterly counterintuitive. And questioned the practice because they wouldn't be able to feel anything." NVC's questioning of the 'tuck your hands behind your back' museum etiquette of the time was the impetus to begin working on *interaction* as a sculptural strategy. "I really wanted people to roll and play and feel and experience the work."

³ Merleau-Ponty 316

Photos © Andrew Higgins



'Receptionist'



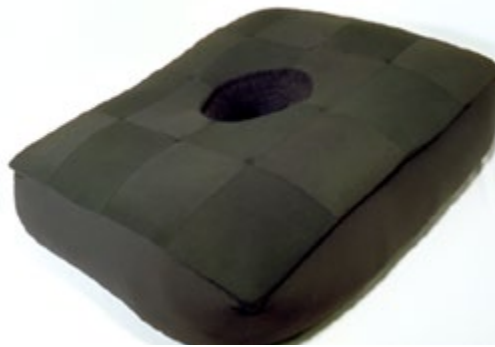
'What If?'



'Flinstone'



'Into You'



'Dimple'



Joyce Terrain, Photo © Andrea Higgins

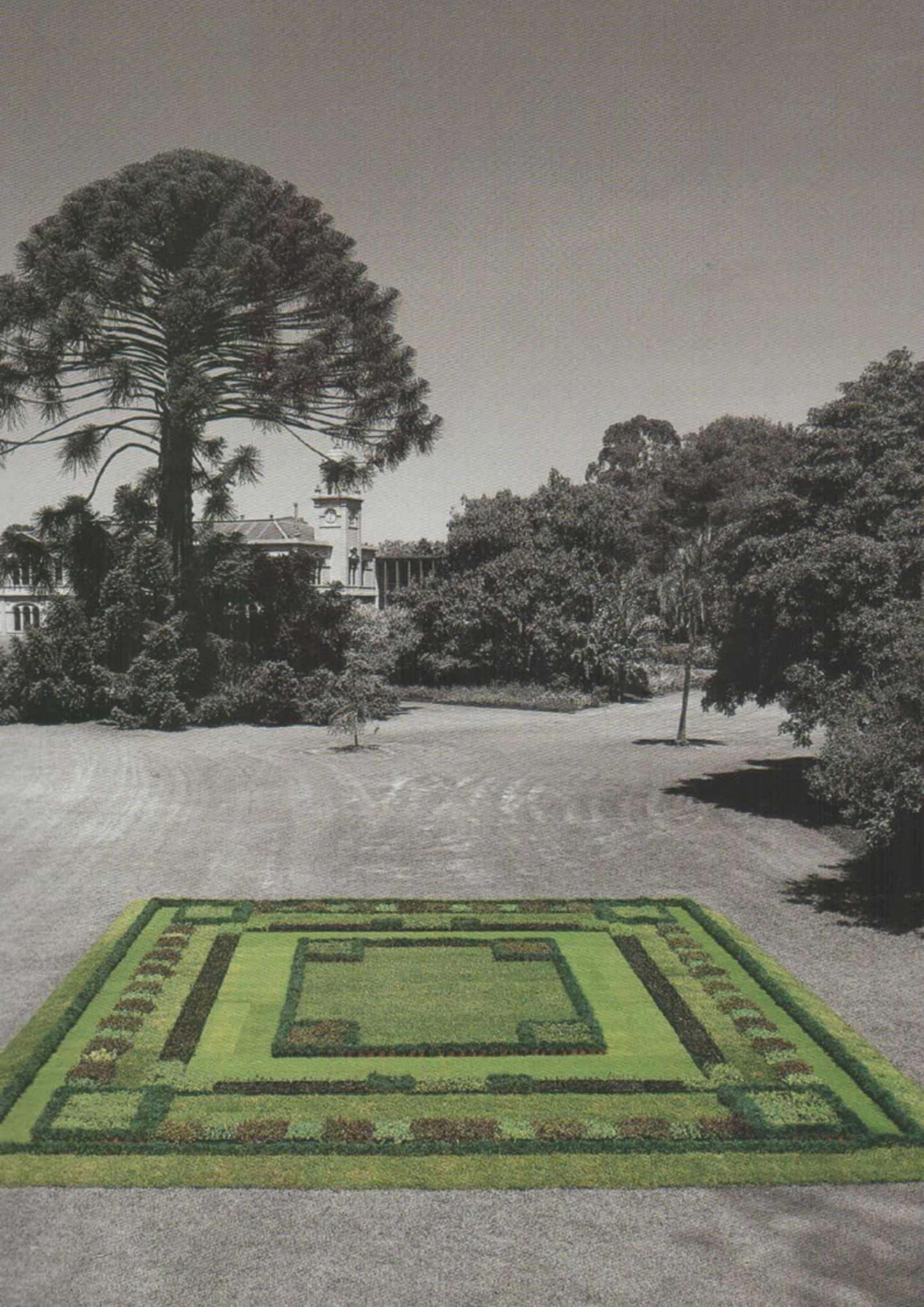
For her first sculptural exhibition, NVC again looked to her children for inspiration, “we forget that childlike quality – holding objects, sniffing them, touching them, engaging tactility and using our senses. We block those things and become quite inhibited. I wanted to tap into the haptic of touch and encourage people to engage in things before they realized what they were engaging with. If you said it was art, there would be an immediate distancing, they wouldn't touch it.”

Her first show *So You Want to be Touched*, which encouraged interaction and even conversations with furniture, reimagined not just the physical but also the metaphysical constructs of design. “Furniture to me was very anthropomorphic – it had this personality. Inanimate objects actually have some sort of human quality to them. I dressed them providing them with function, personality and agency.’ For NVC it was a way of encouraging people to engage in art in a more thoroughly tactile way instead of a visual-only stance. In terms of Merleau-Ponty’s theory, disrupting the *eclipse* that the visual has of our sense of belonging to the world, and opening up a new sensory experience of the world and indeed the self.

It also revealed the voyeuristic delight of the observing artist, exemplified at a particular interactive exhibition in Townsville. NVC had sewn pubic hair into the felt when making the fabric for a piece of furniture design which visitors were encouraged to sit on. “Because of the design, visitors had to spread their legs, sit right in the centre of the flower shaped mound, which vibrated at the same time. This forced them to have to hold and touch and all too soon realise what they were touching. The reaction was astounding...I'd sit and watch people all day.”

NVC's foray into furniture design collapsed boundaries - object/human, animate/inanimate - but as an artist she was also destabilizing disciplinary boundaries. NVC's focus in furniture and design, including an Australian Arts Council residency in Milan, saw her exhibit in design shows alongside and in collaboration with leading Australian designers. But her artistic boundary riding convoluted the cultural gatekeepers.

“They couldn't place me. I wasn't architecture, I wasn't furniture, I wasn't industrial design, and I wasn't straight art. I was moving in liminal disciplinary spaces and it was perhaps uncomfortable for the purists.” Refusing to be siloed NVC embraced her artistic bricolage, and stepped into the immensity of land art.



Where I Am

*We are not 'cast into the world', since we open the world ...
Immensity is within ourselves. [Bachelard *The Poetics of Space* 1958]⁴*

NVC shifted her artistic processes to include more and more time outside. The shift into the landscape was a process that rekindled her artistic beginnings: "I'd always maintained the painterly quality and embraced landscapes this way. I see the landscape as a painting, but physically put in the layers which is much more fun, and a lot more energetic." Increasingly she followed the process of walking, drawing, facilitating studio workshops and then exhibiting.

This led to an artistic shift entirely into landscape and a stronger ontological collapse between artist and space: art as landscape – landscape as art.

The spatial shift expanded to include movement, walking/movement as art; art as walking/movement. In a Bachelardian understanding of inhabited space NVC practices a heightened awareness of the spaces she works in. "When I'm making work I'm really conscious of where I am and where I'm making the work, so it's not just where I come from. It's where I am. And what that means to the people that live there." Her sense of artistic voyeurism accentuates this process:

I like to talk to people about what went on, the history, what do they do in those sorts of spaces. But if I can't do that, I'll do an empirical study so I'll sit there and I watch. And I look at how people engage in spaces and move through those spaces and activate them minimally as well as bigger gatherings of people. I'm a bit of a voyeuristic spy.

⁴Bachelard 184

NVC's shift into land art was at a time when public art was just starting to get legs, but also a time when "blokes still seemed to have a monopoly on the big sculptures that cost a bomb". Life as a male artist was made easier than that of the female artist. It was however NVC's renewed sense of movement and rebellion when the landscape flâneuse was born. As Lauren Elkin's celebratory study of the flâneuse suggests, it's up to the flâneuse, the female artists fighting to be seen, to rewrite narratives of space. NVC's large number of exhibitions and commissions in public art over the past ten years is testament of her continued refusal to abide by gender gatekeepers in the art sector.

Driven by what she suggests is an environmentally conscious approach, rather than a radical approach, NVC's public art provides a mindful juxtaposition within grey landscapes of buildings and urban constructions. Bundanon 2006 is a response to the growing residential sprawl on the eastern coast.

Inflatable landscapes as part of Art+Place were temporary commissions installed in six Brisbane CBD locations - including the State Library, The Judith Wright Centre, The Old Museum and Southbank Piazza – each time morphing and changing itself and the public's reading of its landscape.



'Slide of Heaven on the Shoalhaven'
land drawing, Bundanon Residency,
Photo © The Artist



'Landscapers' acknowledging the collaboration with Elizabeth Woods

The Carpette at Artisaan, a mountain range of lounges in a small gallery space became affectionately known as Mounques. The mounques continued their life outside with the I-LAND commission pop up for the Brisbane Airport Corporation – and the 2012 treeme performance series. “To have the mounques pop up like mountains coming out of the ground trying to reclaim the space is definitely part of an environmental approach, even though they’re plastic, and they’re polystyrene, it’s really about the visual that they give - that they are trying to push their way back and push the city out. At the same time people enjoy to roll and play on them and sit on them – a play between the real and the unreal.”

The Kangaroo Point Park commission, The Green Room, began in 2009 and was groomed for a total of three years. Part of the commission at Kangaroo Point Park were the inflatable ghost trees – in memory of all the past, present and futures trees of the park. “The inflatable trees were harking back to the ghost trees of what was and what could be planted in those spaces.”



‘Carpette’ Artisan, Photo © The Artist



‘treeME’ series Tree God Performance Auspicious Me, Photo © Rod Buchholz - detailing the artist



'Ghost Trees' opening event
Kangaroo Point Park





'Aforest' shaped and espalier trees in Kangaroo Point Park



Falling and Freedom

*The world is large, but in us it is deep as the sea. [R.M. Rilke]⁵
Space has always reduced me to silence. [Jules Valles]⁶*

NVC's acclaim in sculpture parks led to a three-month residency in the UK as part of the Liverpool Biennial research into sculpture parks. It was a journey that began the deepest collapse between a sense of inside/outside and her identity as an artist. Within the expanse of the English landscape NVC channelled the micro "to capture the residue that goes unseen." It was a way of seeing "more deeply, more intimately and the environmental awareness that is increased through that process."

Upon her return to Australia, Nicole was to experience personal family crises lasting a number of years and included the death of her father. "I couldn't focus on my work I wasn't making any work." Taking time out for family and being out of the sector for years impacted her practice. Her absence from the sector created a memory vacuum of the years of work and she found she was being overlooked by a new version of cultural gatekeepers:

Public art, and any opportunities were really thin on the ground and they weren't engaging someone like me. They just dismissed me. Maybe read the cover, I was older and less interesting, less attractive to them. When I did put myself and my work out there people had no idea I had that depth of practice. And the new cultural gatekeepers are on a completely different level now. But because I hadn't worked in Melbourne or Sydney I was considered 'regional and parochial.'

⁵ Qtd in Bachelard 183

⁶ Qtd in Bachelard 183



NVC found herself falling but returned to the poetics of her art process for restoration and a new sense of freedom. Connecting with the metaphoric of landscape NVC examined this sense of 'free falling' in her observations of the trees and their cycling. In particular, she became interested in collecting and examining that which is left behind, "The trees would drop things and so I was like the collector of this aftermath." The process reignited her exploration of land scanning using a lens scanner and digital rubbing process she began in Liverpool.

It was an examination of the residue of what is left behind in the environment that ameliorated her own sense of being left behind,

Things that are left behind, that nobody else is looking at. Seeing it with fresh eyes or different eyes as an artist can capture it in that way. I suppose it's about existence and for me I was then relearning and rediscovering and becoming more existent again in myself.

It was the process of art and movement in space that NVC found liberating. In particular it was the movement within trees that she found captivating – and in turn, the trees that captured her fall.

The trees have branded me

*Space, outside ourselves, invades and ravishes things:
If you want to achieve the existence of a tree,
Invest it with inner space, this space
That has its being in you. Surround it with compulsions,
It knows no bounds, and only really becomes a tree
If it takes its place in the heart of your renunciation.
[Rilke in Bachelard *The Poetics of Space*]⁷*

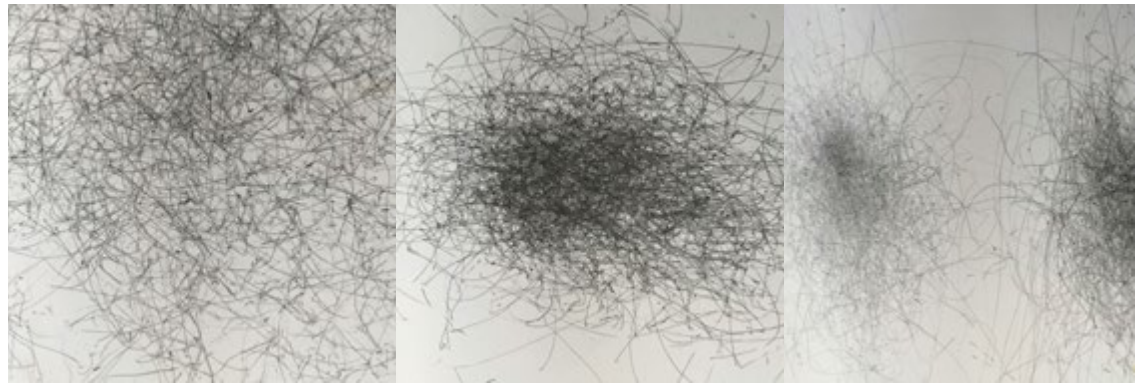
Bachelard believed that we could discover the immensity within ourselves in familiar environments and objects. In particular, the forest was a metaphor of this liberating extension of ourselves: “Forest peace...is inner peace. It is an inner state” (Bachelard *The Poetics of Space*). The trees facilitated NVC's reconnection with her art, and herself as an artist. During an immersive weekend workshop in the landscape NVC began to interact with the trees through a process of rubbing and meshing images and moving through and tracing the surfaces. She then found herself talking to the trees, patting them, moshing them, watering them. Eventually, she found herself asking the trees for help, knowledge and inspiration.

⁷ Qtd in Bachelard 200



*The trees wrote
back– this is
what they said:*

'Tree Dialogues' from the
Figs, Photo © The Artist



For 18 months NVC continued her conversations with the trees. They enunciated a belief in herself and renewed a sense of gratitude and respect: “You are the centre of your making, the landscape where you find yourself and you will know”. It was this symbiotic relationship, what Merleau-Ponty would see as an oscillation of connection, with the trees that led to a residency in Ashfield, Sydney: “I decided to go to the city to talk to their trees, did they say the same? Why, yes, they did.”



'A discussion with a tree and a rose' Ashfield Residency Sydney

The impact of this conversation with the trees changed the entire process of how NVC makes art. It forced her to enter the landscape in a much more symbiotically engaged way, “I wasn’t just in the landscape making art anymore, I was *within* the landscape. I started to become. I’m actually the environment here, you know, I am that tree. It connected me back to where I needed to be and it started to ground me. The trees helped ground me. They branded me. I realised I am air. I am wind. I am an element of Alchemy. Some would say I had fallen. But for me it is a more beautiful place where I find myself today.”

NVC reflects on the continuity that the trees symbolise in her practice as artist, “I feel like the trees, they give you that sense of longevity.” Bachelard, too, recognised the lesson of trees in understanding our limits as mere accidents. He believed that the tree, like every genuine living thing, is taken in its being that “knows no bounds.”⁸ And as is evident in the journey of Nicole Voevodin-Cash as voyeuristic artist and flaneurian spy, Bachelard illuminates, “together, the tree and its dreamer, take their place, and grow tall.”⁹

⁸ Rilke qtd in Bachelard 200

⁹ Bachelard 200-201

Nicole Voevodin-Cash

Nicole Voevodin-Cash is an Australian artist, designer and landscaper based on the Sunshine Coast. Her research-driven practice explores concepts of art as landscape and landscape as art.

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Dr Nycole Prowse

Dr Nycole Prowse is a writer, story facilitator, educator and academic scholar whom founded Peripheral Arts in 2016 upon completion of her PhD in Literature. She has over 27 years' experience in teaching at tertiary level and in the creation and production of creative and literary projects and festivals in urban and rural communities in Australia, Japan, China, the UK and the Middle East. Nycole has published widely in the area of literary representations of gender, space and the body, including editor of a multidisciplinary anthology *Intervening Spaces* (Brill 2018), a transnational examination of the inter-connective impact and potential of literature, performance, art and design on people and place. And has recently published her book *Heroin(e) Habits: Potential and Possibility in Female Drug Literature* (Gylphi 2018). She is currently writing a chapter on Australian writing and addiction for an upcoming edition of the *Routledge Companion to Australian Literature*.

www.peripheralarts.com.au



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NVC

www.voevodin-cash.com