

Listening, watching, making and reading to better conserve: a collaborative project with the artist Mirka Mora

Sabine Cotte, Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne, Australia E: sabinec@ozemail.com.au

The artist

French-Australian artist Mirka Mora (born Paris 1928) is a major figure of Melbourne's social and artistic history. Artist and restaurant-owner with her husband George, who later became a pioneer art dealer, she was instrumental in reviving the Contemporary Art Society in Melbourne. Her career is closely linked to the development of the city, the expansion of community art policies in the 1980s and 1990s and the gendered perception of the artist figure. With her public commissions, art workshops and performative behaviour, Mora produced a vast corpus of work made in an incredible array of mediums. She is still today an active painter, aged 86.



The conservator

Moved to Australia from France 14 years ago. Sharing the same migrant background, language and gender. Past conservation collaborations with Mora have helped creating a respect and trust-based relationship enabling in depth research.



The materials and working processes

Oil paintings, painted textile embroideries, mosaic, plaster and gauze painted masks, painted soft sculptures, mural paintings, tapestries, charcoal, watercolours...

Take a stroll around the poster to appreciate the variety of materials used by Mirka Mora!

Methods of research: Participatory and traditional methodologies

Oral history: Interviews with artist and her entourage

In depth interviews in the artist's studio, free conversation around a theme, in French. Semi structured interviews with entourage (art dealer, assistant, curators) with questions focused on materiality and conservation

Study of realia, observation of artist at work

Interspersed spontaneously during the conversations. Artworks and objects shown as illustration of concepts, painting occurring while talking; this allows observation of 'intangible' information such as texture of paint on the palette, gestures and handling of brushes and tools, building up of composition and colours through constant reworking

Study of selected diaries

In close collaboration with the artist and under her control. Diaries greatly inform technical process, material information and history of execution. Revisiting the past also triggers additional comments and reflections on the historical context.

Study of existing sources (written, audiovisual)

Library archives and artist's own archive, more complete.

Workbooks with artist's feedback

Preliminary research put in a book as images, comments and questions. The workbooks are annotated, commented and enriched throughout interviews with the artist. The workbooks set up reciprocity in the research and the artist's feedback allows more accuracy.

Reconstructions with artist's feedback

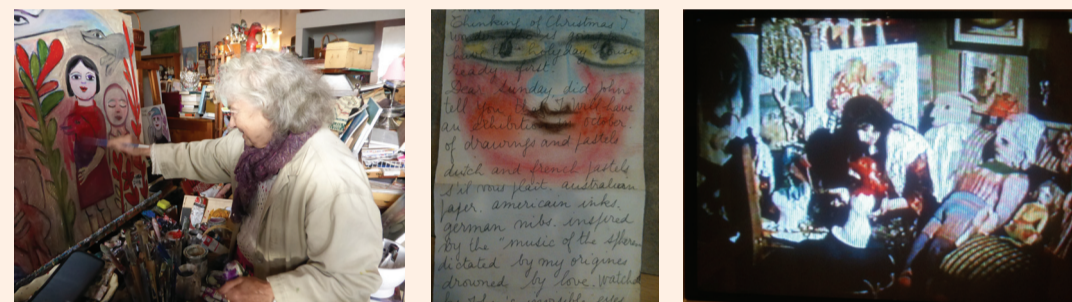
Reconstructions of soft sculptures from oral information and visual observations. New questions arising from practical reconstruction are discussed with the artist and additional information recorded

Joint observation of previous artworks

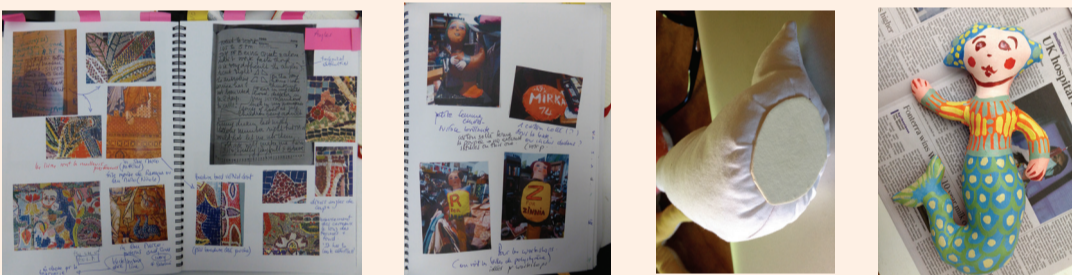
Triggers historical memories, emotional responses. Provides verifiable technical information through in situ discussion and visual evidence.

Limitations of participatory methods with a conservation approach

Participatory methods in conservation have intrinsic limitations, linked to memory, to the shifting nature of relationships between people and the need of constant renegotiation of boundaries. Methodologies need to be customised to the artist in a flexible framework. The subjective nature of the information needs to be acknowledged. Within these limits, I propose a different approach to Mora's art, at the interface of conservation, art history and social history.



Archives from State Library of Victoria, Performing Arts Centre, artist's own, unfinished artwork



Clockwise from top left: workbook's pages; various steps of soft sculpture reconstruction; rediscovering a lost mural painting;; reacquainting with the masks done in 1979

Reading Mora's production through her materials

- Looking at Mora's art across materials: techniques inform each other in an organic relationship; themes travel through various materials
- Exploitation of the versatility of materials to best suit various uses (from masks to soft sculptures to embroideries).
- Materials' practicality, shaping the life or being shaped by it: heavy and requiring physical input, transported in pram to worksite, or light and transportable to suit travelling life (embroideries, watercolours)
- Materials' economy: best quality, high prices, use of symbols of affluence (gold, silver) and desire for longevity
- Communicating through materials in her workshops; sharing techniques to earn a living
- Identity-making through the use and transformation of gendered materials and processes
- Use of material culture (dress, toys, dolls, books, images, objects) in building archetypal artist's myth
- Mora's language about her materials to make her place in art history.



Looking at the past, preparing the future

Conclusion

Materials in Mora's art can be considered as a definition of the self, constantly present in the image of the artist. Through her many uses and choices of media, Mora invested materials with significance. Collecting this data from the artist requires testing methodologies, cross referencing sources and managing relationships. All documentation collected contributes to present and future conservation of her work. Conservation decisions are linked to context. Decrypting and documenting the significance of materials and their various meanings in an artist's oeuvre at a present time will assist decision making for the future in yet unknown contexts; this is now part of the ever changing role of conservators in contemporary art.

