

VISUAL ARTS

Responding to society's idea of madness through art

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From an ex-convent to old artist squats on Sydney's wharf, Olga Cironis' installations bounce off the history of the walls that house them.

In 1996 the Sydney artist conducted a residency at the Bunbury Regional Art Gallery, responding to the 19th-century building's past as a Catholic school and convent, by searching out past occupants.

"I interviewed past students and nuns who had lived or spent time in the building, and created installations based on our conversations," she says.

The resulting work featured embroidered text, a red velvet pew transmitting the sound of the audience's touch, and a pair of suspended steel knickers.

"I was interested in the idea of religion and the sacredness of marriage to God, yet as a human being, what happens to your desire."

The exhibition attracted a fair bit of attention and proved to be historic in



Mad interpretation: Olga Cironis with her gold leaf cot on a bed of blankets.

Picture: Dione Davidson

another way, with Cironis inspired to return to live in WA a year later.

Now based in Fremantle, her latest project is a response to the Heathcote Museum and Gallery, which nestles at the tip of Point Heathcote in Applecross. For the past nine months she has been researching the history of the site, which in 1921 became the grounds for a residential psychiatric hospital.

Cironis is recognisable for her use of

found everyday items, which she transforms.

Previous works have included a dress made of feathers — one of her friends was married in it after it was exhibited — and a series of animal sculptures stitched out of bed blankets, based upon her seven-year-old daughter's drawings.

Last year she won the prestigious BankWest Contemporary Art Prize for a canvas that consisted of packing

tape and feathers woven together into a delicately flecked pattern. "I see it in a way as turning the discarded into something desirable, by giving it a new life and meaning," she says.

For Heathcote, she has taken the stories of ex-residents and workers who she has interviewed, and created works that evoke their experience.

Assorted chairs have been covered with stitched grey institutional blankets, a cot coated with gold leaf, and a sensor-wired rocking horse encourages the audience to touch it, by responding with sound.

Cironis explains that each room references themes reflecting the history of the site and more broadly to ideas of madness.

"I'm interested in how our society responds to the idea of madness, how we hide what may be unpleasant behind closed doors of formality. The installation is in memory of the people who lived, worked and visited there. In a way I see it like a documentation of time past."

The furniture has been collected over the past few years, adding to a collection she stores in her studio — currently a large space under a retirement home in City Beach — "I need a lot of space to store everything, a lot of the furniture is in pieces," she explains with a grin.

She describes her process of collecting as instinctual. "I see something and know there is something in it but I don't know what it is, but I'll pick it up because six years down the track I'll use it." The packing tape, for the BankWest work, began with ribbons of tape found washed up on the beach.

The exhibition is the first of a new program by the City of Melville, called Tilt, where each year a local artist will be invited to respond to the Heathcote site by creating an artwork in a medium of their choice.

Olga Cironis: Cover Up is at Heathcote Museum and Gallery until November 2.