

Fiona Gavino

By Lycia Trouton



Dr Lycia Trouton is an artist and writer who has been based at the University of Wollongong, NSW and obtained her BFA (hons) and MFA in the USA. She held a Visiting post at Charles Darwin University in 2005 and is currently a Lecturer in Craft/Design History and Theory at the University of South Australia, Department of Art and Design. When she was a young sculpture student in Pittsburgh during the 1980s, she found inspiration in the textile based works of Lee Bontecou. During this time, Trouton also studied under Sam Gilliam, an African American artist based in Washington, DC who is known for redefining painting with draped, wrapped and shaped canvases.

When I first saw Fiona Gavino's artwork in Darwin I was immediately struck by its resemblance to the USA artist, Lee Bontecou and her well-known oeuvre from the 1960s: powerful, bulging wall reliefs pierced by deep cavities. For the purposes of this article Gavino's woven work, 'Whose History?' best illustrates her work in this vein. Gavino clarified with me in an interview that she has not been influenced by Bontecou, and it did not seem unusual for her to be unaware of Bontecou's work, given that Gavino's practice is located on the other side of the planet a few generations later. Yet both artists work with similar conceptual concerns alongside an obvious pleasure in the crafting processes of 'making'. Their concerns are a critique of our culture of war-mongering, together with a deep sensitivity to ecological issues. Bontecou's iconography is inspiring, as one of the few women who 'made it big' in New York City's *Leo Castelli Gallery* sculpture stable of the 1960s, with the likes of conceptual minimalists like Donald Judd. In 2005, while Judd is practically a household name, Bontecou's reputation remains elusive. One reason is that in the 1970s Bontecou opted out of the 'centre', to live in rural Pennsylvania, USA to teach and raise a child. Gavino chooses to live on the very periphery, in remote Darwin, Northern Territories, Australia; she is the mother of three.

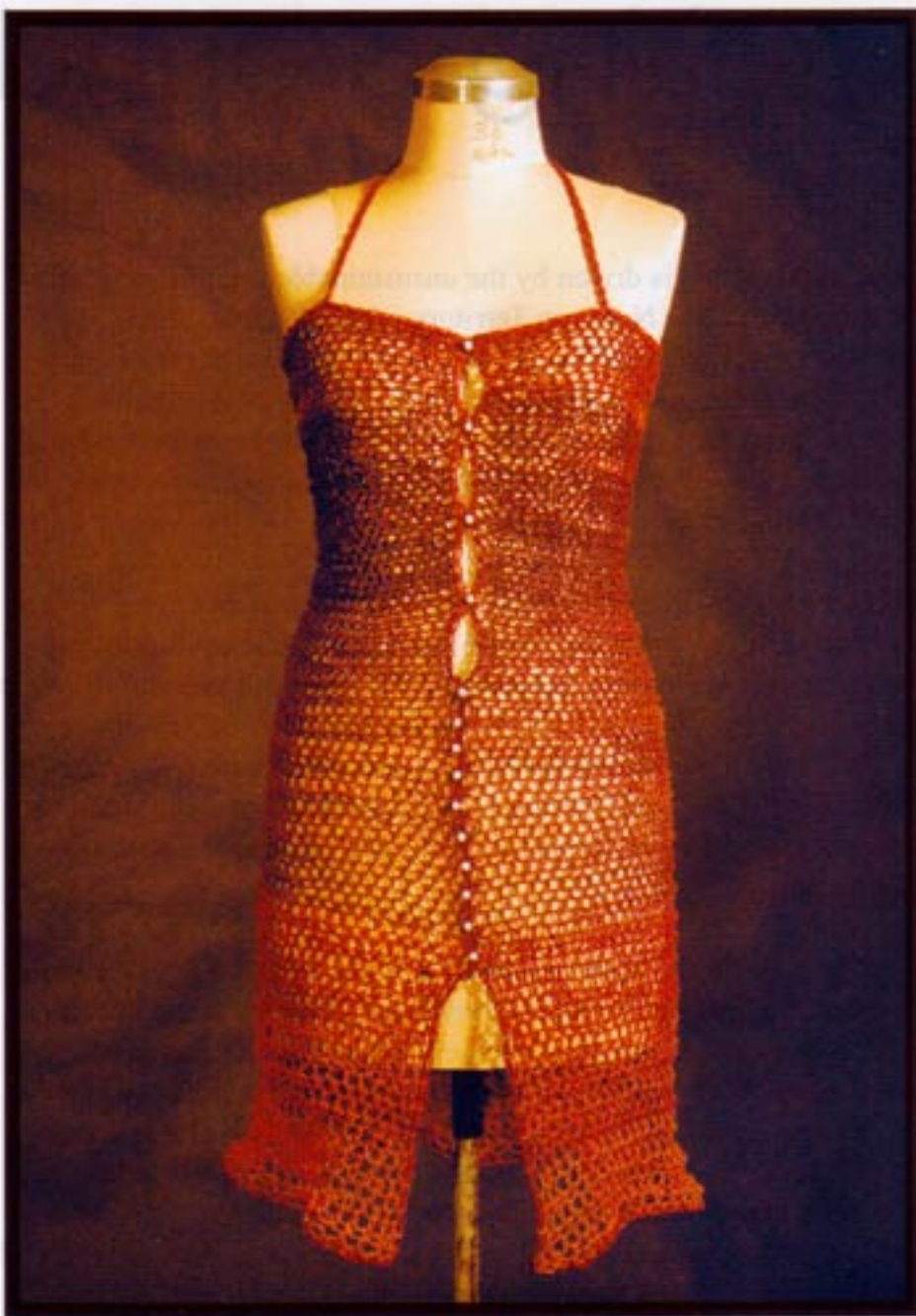
In both Bontecou's and Gavino's artwork, one can sense the weight of political concepts together with a direct handling of materials; at the same time, there is a fragile elegance in their methods of

making. Contrary to when Bontecou was working on the cusp of the burgeoning feminist movement in the late 1960s, today the once-odd juxtaposition of large-scale with miniature; or political aplomb with the fragile and poetic tends to meet with an absolute acceptability in audience awareness. This is the case whether the artwork is made/crafted by a man or a woman, and/or a person from a minority group.

Bontecou is still alive and had a USA national retrospective a few years ago, a time when there was a re-reading of her work. Her early work was sewn with copper wire and she used strips of weathered conveyor belts and rough canvas; later she used vacuum-formed plastics. According to critic Michael Kimmelman in the *New York Times*, July 30 2004, Bontecou "made hulking, ferocious wall reliefs with yawning black cavities... thrusting out from the walls, a battery of loaded weapons threatening to go off... [By 2004] they evolved into more elegant, billowing wall sculptures." (p. B29).

Gavino's work ranges from wall reliefs and three dimensional sculptural pieces which explore the limits of 'inside-outside' to elegant knitted dresses. Her media include everything from stained, compressed newspapers impaled with metal staples to bales of hay and hand-rolled string. Gavino is always sculptural in her approach, even completing a large temporary public site-work in Darwin's downtown civic centre, Raintree Park, in 2005. Yet, she is primarily focussed on 'handiwork' or the craft-processes of weaving, knitting, stitching and other direct techniques learned from various mentors, including Indigenous artists.

Gavino states that she is of Spanish, Filipino, Maori and, *just-plain* 'Australian' heritage. One could say this makes her typically Australian, and a valuable citizen in this multicultural nation. The concepts behind her artwork are influenced by a well-developed political consciousness - an acute sense of knowing about injustice(s) - perhaps born from her personal journey as someone who can easily be labelled *just-plain* 'different.' In my experience, she 'performs' her unique ethnicity with an incredible sense of style and confidence. Given how she has dressed for interviews with me, she may one day start her own fashion label....



Artists like Gavino continue working in an effort to creatively share experiences of suffering along with visionary ideas and beautifully crafted aesthetics. Interculturalism and transcultural arts practice still hold a fragile space in Australia, yet Gavino is part of a new generation of artists who have learned to integrate their muddled ethnic bloodlines and position their cultural heritage as powerful and honourable in their artwork.

Recently, Fiona Gavino sent me a statement on her ideas about how she views the colonial legacy of the settlement of Australia, how this history directly impacts on her artistic work. While she primarily knits with plant fibre, she provided a rather humorous statement about this technique in another context: "The idea of knitting makes me think of sheep and when I think of sheep I think of colonialism. Colonialism, the founding era of the Australia (as we know it today), was developed on the back of a sheep. Colonial practices of ownership and attachment consequently overrode the recognition of Indigenous ownership of land and justified dispossession within Indigenous country. The transition into a postcolonial Australia has led to the re-evaluation of the former ideologies of colonialism that have created 'The Australian Identity'.

"In the desire to transcend a society of black and white reconciliation, my artwork, *Wrapped in Country*, negotiates such difficult ground. In my art, I blur the boundaries between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in an effort to communicate to the viewer the need to achieve a postcolonial way of thinking.

"*Wrapped in Country* honours my *amala* Ann Gondjalk and all she taught/shared with me along with my Spanish, Filipino, Maori and Australian heritage. The artwork is also an acknowledgment of Australia's traditional custodians and of how the sharing of their knowledge has helped me negotiate my own relationship with the country in which I live. I hope, in turn, that the work I produce will motivate the mainstream Australian viewer to look at the Australian landscape through new eyes."



Unlike Bontecou, with Gavino there is a concern for the plight of the Indigenous, and a disturbing pathos which echoes the experience of 'the alien other'. Perhaps these ideas are best illustrated by the public 'haystack' artwork Gavino temporarily installed in Darwin's Raintree Park in direct juxtaposition to a statue of European explorer John McDouall Stuart. Stuart is renowned for completing the 'first' crossing of Australia, from Adelaide to Van Diemen Gulf, passing through the country's centre and returning safely along the same route in 1862. Gavino titled her work, 'The Diminishing of the Golden Age' and said that her sculpture refers to "the ending of the acquisition of land by white Settlers from Indigenous owners."

More usually, Australia's Top End (Darwin in particular) is well-known for its beautiful sunsets. With her formed-haystack artwork, Gavino is also referencing Claude Monet's beautiful series of impressionist haystack paintings (1890s), some of which were painted at dusk. Therefore, Gavino's haystack, although not a painting in colour, acts as an iconic reminder of the twilight of the Industrial Revolution and bids us reflect upon the contemporary times in which we live. 2006 is a period when the digital revolution in Australia has severed both Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of 'place' and 'belonging'. Gavino's oeuvre is an unwilling participant in a world which privileges the plasma screen and the visual sense. If her viewers are to metaphorically trip on her haystack and fall on the needle embedded within it, they may be sure to touch upon the shock of some of the implications which lie ahead for our future(s).

Gavino is a weaver of slightly disturbing three-dimensional images which, upon close inspection, tell tales about where we are going, and won't let us entirely sleepwalk ahead.

Opposite page, Whose History; above left, Wrapped in Country; above, Holey Shit