

Mandy Ridley is an Australian artist who uses diverse materials to create work for both gallery exhibitions and public spaces. Taking a brief moment away from her current residency at Level for a cup of tea and chat, Mandy discusses her travels, Islamic art, architecture, church bells, mosque lamps, Squinch, smoko and her up coming exhibition, and how all these elements are entwined through a passion for patterns.

Mandy Ridley: at some stage too we should have a listen to the sound pieces that Linda has made. I usually have the radio on all the time, but here I have no Radio or Internet (which is very good), so I have just been playing a whole series of music and sometimes when it comes to the end of the playlist it comes back to those sound pieces and I think “ah! That’s what I do.”

Rachael Parsons: So you are using this sound created by Linda to inform or interact with your work.

MR: I haven’t specifically in this new work, but in 2005 I went to India on an Asialink residency...

RP: You’ve been twice to India I believe.

MR: That’s right, and the second time I happened to meet Linda Neil who was also there with Asialink at the same time on a writer’s residency. I think we went out and had lunch with her and exchanged e-mail addresses and had a bit of a chat, but I didn’t really see that much of her there. Then about a year and half later, Asialink asked me if I would do an artist talk and Linda had also been asked to speak, so we met up at the Judith Wright Centre and started to meet over cups of chai, and it was great to talk with her about our experiences in India. I was about to do a show at Metro, *The Intimacy Project*, and I was telling Linda about it and she said that she had written a piece of music that would go beautifully with the work. So we met and chatted and she then cut that existing music with the recorded interview and made it into a kind of sound work, and it was really lovely.

RP: Does her work respond to yours in an aesthetic way or is it more to do with the thematics or concepts in the work?

MR: I think we do have a similar aesthetic and I think we have a lot of common interests, but I am not sure what she actually gets out of it. For me it is actually really great, because a really critical part of working is the process and the engagement. Even the fact that we are sitting and having a tea now is important. I have wondered over the years as to how I would manifest that in the work, so for example every time I met somebody who was feeding into the work maybe I could take a photo of them and you could make a line around the gallery wall of all these faces of people who had contributed; so the couple at the vinyl shop who have helped me do the vinyl prep, I would have them, and the graphic designer, you know

there would be so many people who actually make a contribution to the work and so for me that engagement really infuses the work.

RP: It's nice that you acknowledge the importance of all the people who do make contributions to the work, even if they are small ones, as artists we are working with people all the time without considering the impact of that interaction or collaboration even.

MR: It's a tricky thing, I am sure people have written about it and how collaboration is defined, but it is really important to me, so is being able to talk about some of the things that are occurring in the work. Linda and I made that first soundwork together and I had a subsequent show called *Recast*, and she created a new separate work. It is interesting when you hear both of these sound works. There is quite a difference in tone between the two; the first one is a bit more wistful. The second sounds much more confident in tone, which is good! It was actually really useful for me to have this experience, because a lot of the work has a kind of narrative or story aspect and the process involves bringing in all these aspects from your day-to-day life.

RP: Do you then present these sound works in exhibition contexts?

MR: That is still something that we are developing. For the Metro show I had originally intended that there would be earphones that people could listen to, but then there were some limitations in the technical support, so it was just projected in the space, but carefully. It worked beautifully in a quiet time like now. I had an experience of meeting a writer there after the show was up on a Saturday morning before the gallery was open and we sat in the space and listened to the soundscape and it was a lovely aural experience. But at an opening with two hundred people it gets completely lost, so in a situation like that earphones would have been good. For the subsequent show I set up a monitor that flipped through lots of images from my photographic materials and the sound was just playing, so in that instance it drew from the greater show and became almost an educational resource. So it's something I am still working through. It would be nice to actually start a project with having a discussion with Linda about how these things should work together.

RP: To find new ways to integrate them.

MR: Yes, and sometimes I have had public art projects and I have thought that it could be interesting if there were an opportunity to bring the sound in.

RP: I think that in public context deliberate sound works can be quite surprising, we are often surrounded by visual stimulus, however sound art is not as common in public spaces. And sound can be so impacting

MR: I think so; in fact one of my mates in India sent back a sound file recorded in the markets so that Linda fed that into the soundscape. I got this file and listened to it in

my house on a quiet Sunday morning and the sound just made you feel like you were there.

RP: It's transportative.

MR: Yes, so that use of sound is kind of part of the way the work has been evolving.

RP: And you recently returned from Spain.

MR: Last year I got some research funding to make new work from the Australia Council, which was very exciting. The work I am making now is an initial response to this first lot of travel. I went to Spain and attended a fantastic symposium on Islamic Art, And Diverse Are Their Hues – Colour in Islamic Art and Culture. It was run by American academics, Sheila Blair and Jonathon Bloom, who work in a university in the United Arab Emirates, this husband and wife team are very respected scholars who framed the symposium with a whole range of concerns. As an artist I am interested in Islamic art but from an artist's perspective, but there were people at this gathering who had spent entire careers looking at one particular aspect of Islamic art, it's amazing. I started my research by attending this symposium. What a lovely way to start. I then spent a total of seven weeks in Spain, which was fantastic.

RP: When you were applying for your grant to go to Spain were you specifically interested in examining Islamic art, or was that an interest you developed when researching the region?

MR: What I am passionately interested in is pattern, I have been looking at pattern for a long time, and I am really interested in textiles and objects. *I am interested in the sorts of objects people have and what that says about our worldview.* I was doing some research for a project in Darwin in 2008 and ended up in the museum there and they have quite a lovely collection of all sorts of things including some wonderful textiles. There was this one particular pattern that I found interesting, the Kawung motif, a pattern of interlocking circles, which you see in many many parts of the world. I was able to arrange with the curator to view the textiles. She generously arranged to show me textiles from their collection that featured this pattern. Interestingly I learned of Dua Negri (two countries) textiles from Indonesia. There was a particular region where there may be a village where the people were ethnically Chinese who would do the borders of a textile and then they would send the same fabric to another village where the local Islamic people would then do the centre and in those textiles there is this evidence of the overlapping of patterning and motif which I find really interesting. Then I came across some writing by an American academic and she was talking about medieval Spain and what a homogenous and dynamic time it was with all these threads being pulled together. I thought that it was a really interesting idea to explore.

RP: In terms of your interest in pattern, which is quite apparent as you look through images of your past work, where did that develop for you?

MR: I'm not quite sure. In our family we always made things, so I have come from a sewing background and a garment construction background and so have always had patterns there. My mum until recently lived in an old farmhouse which had quite a lot of objects and I am always interested in sculptural forms or object forms not flat space.

RP: And that is where the architectural element starts to come in?

MR: Yes so when you are in a space there is the feeling that you could be overwhelmed by the pattern completely. So in the last say five to ten years, aspects of my practice have begun to crystallize. Particularly through working in public art projects, I have developed a much greater sense of landscape and a feel for landscape, which I hadn't really noticed before. But in terms of textiles and patterns *I have always made things and have been interested in the process of construction and fabrication.*

RP: There does seem to be a resurgence of craft processes being used in contemporary art practice.

MR: Yes, you can think of a lot of examples. I can't follow a recipe, so I have no desire to go to Spotlight and get an embroidery kit; it's always about putting your own input and interests into what you're doing.

RP: Going back to architecture, in reading your statement, in this work you have been particularly interested in church towers and minarets

MR: Yes, that is very important to me, it's actually trying to make sense of where we are now. When I start reading the history of that 700-year period when there was Islamic rule and there was a whole culture of appropriating from indigenous traditions, you know the Romans had already been there. The new Andalusian architects would say, "Oh that's a nice column, I'll have that," so there was this interest in making use of the resources that were already there. There was no pure kind of vision in that sense. Historically there were also situations where buildings were claimed and then requisitioned for new religious purposes. For instance there was one really feisty fellow, al-Mansur who led raids in a city in Northern Spain massacring people and claimed the church bells, which is the start of the whole thing about the pilgrims way across the top of Spain, The Camino de Santiago de Compostela. (The way of St James). Al-Mansur took the church bells down south and melted them down and made them into mosque lamps. So here we have a mosque lamp and a church bell as two objects, which are not dissimilar in terms of form and they both provide a different function, but they are actual practical examples of a symbol of one religion being acquired by another. Also at the time

when I was in Spain the Zurich government, or the people rather, voted to not break down the minarets that were currently there, but to not allow any new ones to be built. *As someone living now, there is this question of how would you ever figure the world out, how would you make it right, and it really requires an enormous amount of good faith*, not in the religious sense but in the sense of intention. I don't think it is helpful to be promoting a climate of fear; I think we have to proceed in good faith. I am not a religious person myself I don't have an active Christian background and I haven't picked up the veil but I think that it can't hurt to have as much dialogue going as possible. So in a way I think what I'm doing is not hitting people over the head with an aggressive political work but it is actually mindful of the politics of our time, so I suppose that is what I am thinking about. So what I have actually done, and we have managed to avoid discussing this until now...

RP: [laughing] I'm sure we'll get to the work eventually

MR: So I had my first trip to Europe and I felt it was amazing and I had a lovely time, I went around chatting to people and I took a million photographs. I visited the Alhambra, which is a very famous monument in Southern Spain. After several weeks I started spending time at the Alhambra museum, where you couldn't take photos but it was actually quite good because it meant that I had to sit down and draw to record my impressions. I started to do these little drawings, and made notes and just little scratchings. But I had to actually spend time really looking at the objects. I would go every day and you would see the same five guards, they didn't have a lot of English but showed with friendly greetings that they were starting to recognize me. One guard indicated that I should take a chair so I could sit while drawing, so there was this lovely interaction that began to occur. There was a fabulous mosque lamp hanging up and they had it lit from above and it made a fantastic shadow on the floor and I was desperate to take a photo of it but of course I couldn't, so I was sitting there trying to draw this beautiful pattern. It was really exciting to me as in my practice I have been doing a lot of work using laser cutting and cut outs so I have this thing for silhouetted patterns like this object. And also if you look at the lamp in the main mosque at Alhambra it is bell shaped and this is, *[reading from notes]* another reflection of the phenomena of acculturation between two religions who have cultures close to one another at similar times, antagonistic and at times complimentary the bells of the Christian church and the lamps of the Muslim mosque seem to find a common footing with the same shape being used for liturgical objects. So isn't that interesting. So I was pottering a way sketching things, this little design thing came from a side of a bowl (shows a drawing). I went to talk, which was in Spanish so I didn't really understand what was being said but I was looking at the slide images very carefully and the speaker assumed I was really interested and delivered her speech quite directly in my direction – fortunately I was able to get a translated version after the talk to gain the key ideas. I will admit there is a kind of naivety in what I am doing in a way and you really try not to do the wrong thing, but I think it is about being up front, (Though I did not own up to not speaking Spanish!). So that's my process, I am collecting images, noting my own

responses and trying to make sense of what I experience. I have these other bits of pattern that I have acquired but I became really interested in that idea of how these two objects are similar. Then on the world news at night I was hearing about the Zurich referendum on the banning of the construction of new minarets; even recently there was also the hype around Obama's stand on constructing a Mosque in lower Manhattan, and I just think that any conversation around these issues is useful.

RP: Sure, particularly I guess looking at the similarities that you have found and also going back to your example of the textile made in part by a Chinese village and then in part by an Islamic village, and taking that as a symbol for the possibility of positive cultural exchange and collaboration and how that may then show us a way of working together in broader social and cultural contexts.

MR: Yes, there is too much at stake not to, I mean there are all sorts of daily desperate circumstances that people are in, almost too much to think about really. So from these things I have just been pottering on, and *I came here thinking I had three months and wanting to insert another stage into my practice* and with a long list of things I wanted to achieve; drawing, dialogue and exploration of processes, really a years work.

I wanted to come in and do lots of drawing, but because I had this whole idea around the minarets I started to play around with the idea of building up forms using different elements. In the first instance I thought it would be good to make a big color graphic on the wall but there were so many different things to explore it was almost overwhelming. So I started to just play around with all these elements that I had documented, I printed out some of the things I had seen and had photographed in the museums, graffiti, all this beautiful stucco work, hinges, sculptures, endless amounts of stuff that I have been looking at, from cathedrals and mosques, these fantastic carved capitals in southern Spain which has a very particular aesthetic style that evolved. So this is the material that I have been working with, and what I ended up thinking of was to take these disparate elements and to build them up into minaret forms and this concept expresses the idea that there was this time when there was an amazingly dynamic hybrid culture.

RP: The confluence that you write about.

MR: That's right. So that is the idea that I have stuck with and then it became a question of how to manifest that so I have gone back to my more recent work where I had worked a lot with vinyl and playing around with how to make use of this space. What I wanted to do with this residency was to insert another segment into my public art practice Usually what happens when I have those types of jobs is that you generate a huge amount of research and then you pick something and you work with a designer and you pull it through to completion and you just end up with (apart from the installed artwork) a huge pile of paper and *I thought really what*

I should be fabricating is immaculate works on paper that exist as self contained art objects in their own right. So I have tried to do that. In that process you have to think about things like are you going to use paint, is it going to be colourful, do you cut it out, what scale do you use. I have trialed many processes, using projection, and drawing and played with cutting out and creating a kind of glow affect. It was interesting in looking at the solid colour, the reverse side of the works, which is also really attractive, but I think for this show I will feature the drawing side. They play around with the idea of tone and line work and then flatter areas. Now I am cutting them out which is quite difficult given some of the detail, but it is not about the tradition of paper cutting, which I do acknowledge, but it isn't about me being a perfectly meticulous paper cutter, which I am not. There is something very exciting happening with the variation in surfaces, a sculptural form emerges. So the plan is to pin them up so that you get this amazing shadow and light occurring, so hopefully there will be enough time during install to play around with the best way to include some of that.

RP: That idea of light links back quite strongly to some of the thematic issues of your source material in mosque lamps and religious sites where light is such an important consideration.

MR: Yes.

RP: These are beautiful.

MR: Thanks, but I mean look at that [*the drawn image*] and then look at this [*the reverse side which becomes a bright orange block cut out*].

RP: The reverse links back so strongly some of your earlier work particularly your use of vibrant blocks of colour

MR: Yes yes, so it is pretty hard to go past this, it is very attractive. But anyway it may be that it is reversible work, or maybe elements of the work could be layered. For this installation I will be very pleased if I can just get the front sides finished and up.

RP: I guess though this exhibition is just the first installment and then you have all this other material and ideas to further develop in the future.

MR: Yeah, they will be able to manifest in different ways. I have been thinking about some previous ephemeral vinyl work that I have done and that just by tweaking files and making positive aspects of the image into negative you can make almost new objects that could then be re-cut. In terms of the eventual installation of the work, I have been looking at this book of Tales of the Alhambra by Washington Irving that has these 1820's engravings in it of the Alhambra, with the hills and a traveler making his way, so tying into that idea of the landscape. I am working with using

that in the layout of the work for this show. I haven't done anything quite like this before so I am not sure if it is going to work, I'm hoping that it will.

RP: In your previous work you have used a lot of hard block colour, so these drawings, which are softer and very pictorial, are quite a departure from your other work.

MR: *Well it's an experiment and this space [Level] is really set up for people to try things.*

RP: When I was reading through some of the text about your work it seemed important that the exhibition or public site that the work will exist in becomes an important consideration for you, was there anything about this site that you have considered?

MR: Well, I have actually made observations that for the purpose of making this work I have discounted which is a bit sad. For example using the windows, but I had to consider the entire context of when the work will be seen and the opening is in the evening when the bulk of people will come and so this gorgeous effect would be lost then. If they all came back in the afternoon it would be beautiful, there is something very particular about the afternoon light in this space. So I did initially think that I would reference the space and I made measurements of walls and looked at the floorboards and thought I could make strips of vinyl as wide as the floorboards.... But I haven't done that. It can be tricky, how do you decide what to do?

RP: You have been involved in making a number of public art works in various contexts and scales. Is your approach to making these public works different to your process for gallery exhibitions?

MR: There is a whole process in those kinds of jobs that involve lots of other people and in public jobs you are quite well supported but it is a huge responsibility. *Its like you are on a huge steam express train on the prairie and you point and shout, We are going that away," and you just have to hope you are going the right way.* Hopefully your initial research has been finely tuned enough to reveal/inspire the concept. You have people watching the production and installation schedule, time is charged out at X dollars an hour, you have budgets for whatever, so you can't mess around. If you have a good curator or project manager on the job they keep things on track and in a way that is a really good thing whereas here in the studio its very much, I could do this or I could do that, where do I start? So depending on your temperament it can be quite galling to you or it might be very useful in terms of getting something done. But my approach to making something is I tend to make these little drawings and I have a bit of a photocopy fetish because something really exciting happens when you take an image and photocopy it, or you change the scale, it can be very interesting. Often times you will end up with

something very close to your first reaction to the site. You will have a particular response and I have learned how to listen to those responses because the things that you notice, like it is extraordinarily windy, or the intense colour of the sea or whatever, you should write them down because you come back to them and use them. So in the Darwin job I was aiming to use the colour of the sea, something I noticed within minutes of undertaking the site visit. In public work they often have a whole lot of boxes that you have to tick off, but you have to find something that is organic and true of the situation to work back into, so its not really a design exercise *its really scrambling around on your hands and knees in the mud trying to find that bit of something that appeals to you whatever it is*, it could be a shape or a colour or whatever, and then you can overlay that conceptually and that becomes very very exciting.

In this project that I am working on now I came across an architectural word 'squinch' which actually means vault or a point where you go from a square or rectangular space to a dome or a vault or an archway, and I thought 'wow'. First of all, the word just sounds great and then it is such a beautiful concept about being here and then wanting to change to there, so it actually works for me in terms of my practice wanting to insert another space into it, it also works in the terms of the fact that this work is my first response to the travel and then I am going to go back to India and to Malaysia, and it also works in other more abstract ways. We can all recognize times in our lives when we were in a transitional zone, our own kind of squinch spaces. Those realisations of how you are in the world feeds back into the practice, and maybe it is hard to explain but it is really critical to how you function in the space and how you make sense of how you function.

RP: So you are returning to India soon?

MR: Yeah, hopefully later in the year.

RP: That trip will be your third to India and as we have talked about how you have also gone to Spain to research and gather source material, what is it about these places overseas that feeds so strongly into your practice, do they have something that Australia does not, is it about being somewhere exotic?

MR: It's a bit of everything, when I was researching in Darwin I paid my \$120 and took the bus out to Kakadu, which was a fabulous thing to do. I was completely blown away when looking out at the treed plain and the raw physicality of that landscape. To go to places where there are architectural constructions that are really old it's just amazing, to see these completely overwhelming structures with mind blowing levels of pattern and decoration. And then you go and meet people, I have made some really dear friends, and you become excited about going back to meet them. And it's a real jolt to you, *it's quite a shock to go somewhere like India because you are confronted by multiple realities in every moment and so it sort of does you head in.*

RP: I suppose that moment of being jolted is almost a place where creativity can come from, being exposed to those points of difference, or being confronted with various issues can open your mind up to new thoughts and ideas.

MR: Well you would hope so.

RP: When you talk about confluences or lots of cultures existing together is that an interest that has also emerged for you from living here in Australia, which terms itself to be multicultural, or is there something more specific in these other countries that is more important to your work?

MR: I think it is just the intensity of the experience when you are away and also I was born in the sixties so growing up in country Australia was a very mono-cultural experience, Deb instant mashed potato and the local football on Saturday, you can not imagine, because you are from a younger generation, what it was like. I would never have believed then, that I would have as an adult this opportunity to have this travel, and even just to go down to my local supermarket and find food from many places is different to how it was then. I also travelled to the states for a year as an exchange student when I was a teenager and had this extraordinary experience with other people from many parts of the world and it was just incredibly powerful to feel such a strong connection with others of different culture.

RP: You do talk about the fact that having interactions with people even over a cup of tea is a vital aspect to your process, so traveling and meeting people from different places makes perfect sense.

MR: I don't see that just in exotic cultures, or in some other country. I am very interested in the variation in cultural practices in daily and working life in Australia. One thing that gives me a little bit of joy is if I'm driving and it's about nine o'clock and I see on the side of the road the guys having smoko, and they are sitting on their eskies, I think that is just great, because you know that for a working person to actually stop and have a cup of tea, is important. But there is a purity of intent it's a raw kind of human interaction, people need a refreshment and a chat. You know another example is in ordinary speech. At the photo copy place down the road, when I go down there to get prints the woman there calls me darl - she calls everyone darl which is fantastic. She is a very warm and friendly person. *These are people, who are not going to become key friends in your life, but at that point there is a connection that happens and I find that very satisfying.* To make work about that experience you would have to be extraordinarily careful not to be patronising, but it is that minute detail that occurs within interaction that I quite enjoy.

RP: When talking about being careful, do you find that you have to be quite considerate when using the imagery that you have collected given that it is appropriated from different cultures and is strongly connected to religious sites?

MR: I try to be, I don't try to be exclusively provocative in how I use it. I remember at one of the earlier APTs I was chatting to a traveling artist or academic and at the time I was making constructed objects using patterns and objects from China and putting these into different configurations. (And that always happens in the work, so I'm never going to weave a carpet in wool with a traditional design, but I may take the design from a carpet and make it in plastic on a wall, so there is always a twist in the use of material, often the scale). So I was commenting to this woman on my use of other people's patterns and she said "Oh for goodness sakes, the Chinese people have been appropriating patterns for many years, just get on with it!"

Saying that, I am aware of the extraordinary issues that exist around the appropriation of imagery from indigenous Australians, so that is something that I am mindful of. The objects and patterns that I am looking at exist in the public domain.

RP: When talking about materials, you have mentioned that in this work you chose this material for quite practical reasons, allowing the needs of the work to determine the material used, so you have a work in your mind and you find a material that will best fit it. Is that how you generally choose your materials or are there some things you just enjoy working with, or do you sometimes approach making work starting with a material you want to explore?

MR: I tend to use one material for a period of time and then move on to the next. So for example in earlier works I used carpet tiles. *There is this thing of pattern and movement and industrial materials and our contemporary consumer society and this is something that has been floating around in my work for quite a long time.* There is a kind of a manic way of making where I explode the objects in terms of materials and scale, but also, for example, huge processes of putting string through paint to reproduce an intricate embroidered object using carpet tiles, it is really mad. I had a polypropylene phase because there is a lovely thing that occurs with the light. I think it is quite playful. I moved into vinyl and doing things like installing it onto glass and other architectural surfaces. Post India I was playing around with mehndi patterning and laser cutting, with wiring for light sculptures. Another example was when in India I had a public art residency where I had the word intimacy translated into lots of different languages and then commissioned a fellow to carve them on rocks at the university. After that project I came back and met with Linda and we made the soundscapes around the making of the work, so playing with materials and developing the work is happening all the time. The work is all different but I think you can look at them and say, "oh that's Mandy's work."

RP: Yes, definitely.

MR: It is a bit tricky, and it is tricky to work out how to function as an artist. If you are a person who painted, you paint and you use canvases that are either square or

rectangular and you can predict that in a year's time, whatever you are doing, the images might be slightly different but it is still likely to be on a square or rectangular canvas. That is very different to my use of material and there are a lot of people who work like I do, between materials.

RP: So when you return to India do you currently have any ideas on how you might move this work forward?

MR: Well I am really thrilled that I have had a genius brain wave and have figured out the title for the next two shows. So this show is *Squinch Uno*, uno being Spanish for one and then I have looked up the Hindi character for two and so it will be *Squinch 2* (using the Hindi) and then I found the Malay for three which is tiga, so there will be Squinch (tiga).

No seriously, I think that it has been a very productive way of working in that I have time to figure out my process. I have never really done a residency quite like this before and now that I have had the experience, I feel it has been quite useful. I can transplant this model to other contexts. It is also about having faith, because when you are there you have this idea that you have this grant money and this opportunity and you think that you better not waste it, because lots of other people wanted these opportunities too.

RP: So you have this responsibility to deliver on what you said you were going to do and to make the most of your chances

MR: Yes, and it can be quite terrifying and also tiring when you are away, so you just do what you can do but it is having faith that you can make good use of that time. So the works that I have made in response to travel have always been an exploration of a specific thing that I have noticed and been interested in. For example the intimacy work came from both personal experience of staying with friends at their houses and people had given up their beds and in the public domain, when you are in the street there was a whole different dynamic with physical contact. Travelling to India you kind of met the rest of the world, there were all these people from many other places there and so the word intimacy became interesting in relation to that experience.

RP: So you install this work next week, are you ready?

MR: I will be by next week!!

Rachael Parsons conducted this interview on August 20 at Level.

To view images of Mandy's work visit: www.mandyridley.com