

Joan **Ross**



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COVER:  
*The tortoise and the hare*, 2006, fake  
woodgrain, found frames, fake woodgrain  
lino, animal fur, 350 x 1050 cm irregular  
photo: Richard Glover



*Bungaree Chief, Broken Bay Tribe, crayon on kangaroo fur, found frame, detail, The tortoise and the hare, 2006*  
*Civilized, found panting, frame and gold plastic letters, detail, The tortoise and the hare, 2006*



*It had been a long winter, 2004, fur and ink on paper, 38 x 28.5 cm*  
*My life was never the same without him, 2006, crayon on kitchen carpet with wallaby fur, 106 x 90 cm irregular*

## Joan Ross

Joan Ross takes what was once deemed unwanted or unloved, embarrassing or redundant, and tenderly transforms it into the archetypal object of value: a work of art.

In lieu of the pristine white canvas, Ross begins her paintings with surfaces that are already charged with meaning and whose materiality actively guides her process. The raw materials for her paintings as well as her sculptural works derive largely from discarded former possessions, often of a very intimate kind, such as toys and underwear, even amateur paintings, things that conventional taste would deride as the kitsch of suburban domesticity. Her materials also include what we likewise disavow in our personal lives — intense everyday neuroses like possessiveness, jealousy, and insecurity — and in our cultural identity as Australians — profound ambivalence towards the legacy of colonialism. Ross' work could therefore be seen to memorialise that which would otherwise be buried — psychically, culturally and literally — as worthless or unsightly.

A material that is key to Ross' recent work is fur. Rich with connotations of sex and violence, fur also tests the artist's ethics. Ross only re-uses fur that has little or no market value, be it from discarded toys, fur coats worn by another generation that glut op shops like dirty secrets, or kangaroo pelts rendered worthless by gunshot. Despite this, the ethical dubiousness of using fur runs as an undercurrent in Ross' work that reminds us of our own, everyday, moral compromises. We may know the corollary of fur is a dead animal, for example, yet for most of us fur remains irresistible. According to Ross, this love of fur betrays a profound human need to connect with the natural world and its ideal of unmediated, unselfconscious expression of elemental desires.

Fur's sexual register is integral to Ross' works. The tufts that sprout untidily off the paper in Ross' portraits of everyday 'misfits' bring us uncomfortably close to the intimate lives of strangers, as does the conjunction of used panties with swatches of fur. Ross feels a certain affection for tatty old underwear: the antithesis of the glamorous lingerie of glossies and billboards, it pathetically signals failed attempts to maintain illusions of sexiness, hence is all the more real. Ross' handling of such loaded materials often overflows into humour; this is another vital element in her work, one that allows us to better negotiate discomfiting themes.

Ross has recently begun exploring the conjunction of fur and Australian identity. A particularly striking series comprises the silhouettes of eucalypts and bottle trees cut from a single kangaroo pelt. Fur's power to immediately evoke a sensual register connects us with the feel of the bark, with the living presence of the tree. At the same time, the graceful beauty of the image invites the viewer to consider the disturbing aspects to the conflation of these two icons of Australian identity. Kangaroo and gum tree are elements of pre-colonial Australia integral to Aboriginal life. While once alien to European sensibilities, they were eventually domesticated to signify 'the outback', an ideal unpopulated by indigenous inhabitants who proved much more difficult for the Europeans to negotiate. That these trees are cut from the fur of a kangaroo killed to meet the commercial needs of pet-food merchants, soccer boot manufacturers and trinket-makers serves as a reminder of the violent history behind the construction of these seemingly benign signifiers of 'Australia'.

The visceral quality of fur is also strangely apposite to Ross' reworkings of iconic figures from Australia's past, such as James Cook and Lady Macquarie, Bungaree and Bennelong. Fur's paradoxical evocation of life and death creates a rich stream of allusions that allows these familiar portraits to be creatively reread. Images whose meaning has been leached out by over-reproduction are reconnected by fur with the material world of real bodies, real skin; moreover, the 'European' respectability that these images construct is compromised and enlivened through contact with a wild, native animal. The artist has noted, also, that the way the nap of the pelt forces her hand as a painter is akin to the tendentious nature of historical narrative.

The works of Joan Ross may be at times unsettling and discomfiting, but they are also riveting, raucous and generous in their negotiation of emotional experience. Their economical composition adds to the intensity of their impact, while their materiality brings them with great immediacy into the realm of our everyday.

*Jacqueline Millner*  
 June 2006



*Colonial bounty, 2005, kangaroo fur and bag handle, 178 x 88 cm irregular*

*Ghost gum, 2004, kangaroo fur, 101 x 66 cm irregular*

*I had a dream, 2006, nylon underpants and human hair, size 12*

*Less than just, 2006, stiffened hankies and human hair, 138 x 55 cm irregular*