



# Rhonda Dee

STORY SARAH VANDEPEER

**R**HONDA DEE HAS a pivotal memory from her childhood in Texas. The phenomenon of masses of Monarch butterflies on their annual migrations from Mexico to Canada, has charged her lifelong fascination with metamorphosis, escape, migration, and transitional states of being. After falling in love with an Australian while travelling in Europe following art school in San Antonio and Seattle, Dee migrated to Sydney in 1993. At the heart of her practice lies a fascination with transformation; her installations and paintings are zones of possibility in which boundaries, culture, the body, emotion and psyche intermingle.

**You were born on the border of Texas and Mexico in the USA. How has the culture and circumstances in this region shaped your approach to life and art making?**

Growing up near the border of Texas and Mexico was exciting and crucial in my development as an artist. Early on I was influenced by the intensely political, visual, hybrid world of border culture and subsequently, had a fascination for all things in transition!

I grew up in a predominately Latino neighborhood, and began studying art in 1987. The Chicano Arts Movement was in full swing and I had the privilege of being taught by some of the most influential artists of that movement. Feminism and the birth of multiculturalism were on the rise, and the emphasis was on cultural and political change and resistance to right-wing Reagan-era politics.

**Can you talk about thresholds as a theme of your oeuvre, and particularly the installation *Hoot 2*?**

I believe the act of acknowledging a 'threshold' is pivotal to the human psyche, as it creates movement between one state of consciousness, and another. As we pass through the world, the world also passes through us, sometimes quietly, sometimes turbulently. *Hoot 2* is a gateway, and as such, harbours the potential to become a marker in time.

**Do you see your works as instruments for thought?**

I hope the work creates space for the transmission of feeling. Pieces succeed for me if upon completion, they stop me in my tracks. If the works become instruments for thought, the transfer is complete.

**How do you think the elements of chance and control interplay in your work?**

Improvisation is vital to my process. I resist resolution, rightness, completion because these notions are resistant to transformation. Working with collage and fragmentation is a way of bypassing predictability.

I create 3 to 4 metre paintings then cut them up along with thousands of magazine images... I create piles of fragments that I dive into and the magic begins through association.

**Mylar is an unusual choice of medium. Why have you chosen an archival material as a painting surface?**

I began working with Mylar eight years ago when I came across a stack of discarded maps in a rubbish heap. Mylar is a traditional material used for cartography and architecture. I responded instantly to the maps and the possibilities of using a translucent surface to describe the body.

**What is the role of the body in your work: both as subject matter and as a mode of interaction?**

By inviting the viewer to participate physically, as well as intellectually, the pieces dissolve barriers between spectator and participant and open a zone of exchange.

**How do your works push the limits of form?**

Visually, I cross boundaries freely between gender and species as a way of exploring our very human desire to transcend form. There is no direct reference to a specific gender or perceived gender code, but these are an entry way toward exposing layers of intelligence and sensitivity embedded in the body itself.



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**Often the figurative works include gaping orifices, as if the body has been bored out in places. How does penetration function as a motif in your work?**

On a structural level, the holes or portals relieve the surface of its rhythmic layered surface and offer deep perspective. Psychologically they can be experienced as a kind of open road to the interior.

**How does identity discourse inform your work?**

I am keenly aware that in a world increasingly focused on naming, identifying and tracking bodies in public/private space, the perception of the individual as a porous, ambiguous entity with a shifting identity can be seen as undesirable or even threatening. I am interested in creating works that reassemble static views of the body and celebrate process.

**How does art necessitate survival for you?**

I drew obsessively throughout my childhood. I lost my mother when I was 3 and making drawings was a way of communicating all the feelings that I could not express. Once I began formal studies in my 20s, I never looked back – I found my ‘tribe’ and have been carving this road ever since. Art, at its best, remains a wild horse and represents all that I understand about freedom.

**What new ideas are you exploring in your current body of work?**

Many of the new works from the *Plundering the Verge* series consider ritualistic acts of public and personal transformation, and investigate what lies between an idea and an encounter. ■

Rhonda Dee is represented by MCLEMOI Gallery, Sydney

EXHIBITION  
Until 7 March, 2014  
MCLEMOI Gallery

[www.mclemoi.com](http://www.mclemoi.com)  
[www.rhondadee.com](http://www.rhondadee.com)

01 Fluis, 2013, acrylic on Mylar on board, 122 x 87cm  
02 Between Firmness and Vertigo, 2011, acrylic on Mylar on board, 122 x 87cm  
03 Second Nature (detail), 2012, acrylic, maps on Mylar, 285 x 87cm  
Courtesy the artist and MCLEMOI Gallery, Sydney



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