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Putting work in artwork

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Rhonda Dee's Webless Weavers exhibition explores the concept of the mundane becoming interesting. Picture: ROS CANNON

ARTIST Rhonda Dee took the concept of artist-in-residence and gave it a whole new twist when she started work on her current exhibition for the Manly Arts Festival.

For part of her Webless Weavers project, which explores the changing and transient nature of work in contemporary society, the artist set herself up in a series of workplaces to observe and record people as they went about the often mundane tasks that consume so much of their lives.

But through Dee's artist's eye, even the most mundane becomes interesting.

"I wanted to sit down among the day-to-day work activities of people in offices and factories and look at the way they work, how they identify with their work and how rapidly it is all changing," she said. "You may be defined as one thing this year and next year your job is gone; it has evaporated or been outsourced to somebody overseas, so I am interested in how people deal with that."

The results of her observations are now part of a public art initiative, Frameworks, staged by Manly Council for the Manly Arts Festival.

Dee's eight frameworks, or mini-installations, incorporating drawing, found objects and photography, can be seen on the north wall of the Manly Art Gallery and opposite Manly library in Market Place.

Rhonda Dee isn't aware of any precedent for an artist taking up residence in a workplace, but the approach accords with her belief that artists have a place in the broader community and that art shouldn't just exist in galleries and museums.

"I was there drawing people, photographing them, having a conversation with them, so I was doing a whole day's work, doing my art work, while they were working and I was bringing the idea of the artist out of the studio context into everyday life," she said.

Dee, who has worked from a studio in Brookvale since she moved to Australia in 1993, believes this approach has much to do with her background, growing up near the border of Texas and Mexico in a hybrid of Native American Latino and Anglo culture.

“I was around traditional crafts people, there was a lot of indigenous folk art and that kind of thing was a real part of everyday life,” she said. “There were less borders defining where art belongs or where music belongs. It was everywhere all the time, so that has formed a lot of my ideas about taking art directly into everyday spaces and not confining it to the museum/gallery context.”

Dee said background also had a lot to do with her interest in pursuing a deeper understanding of the fragmented, transient aspects of life and culture.

“Webless Weavers is about workers, but on a broader scale I deal with a lot of ideas about personal transition, identity, metamorphosis of the character,” she said. “When I am present in an office or factory, the inspiration is actually coming from watching the rhythm of people moving around, how they move through spaces, the banter of a particular workplace, their body stance and posture, the way the body might become like the work they do. For example, the hunching of the shoulders in somebody working in a sewing factory, where the work actually forms the person- that kind of observation is really stimulating for me as an artist.”

Dee said she met little resistance from bosses she approached to allow her access to the office or factory floor and had no sense that workers found her presence or activities intrusive. “I was kind of in the shadows but I would tell them what I was going to do, for example if I was going to draw them and I would ask them to keep moving; to basically ignore me,” she said. “People who came up to me were mostly curious. Often they would have some story to tell about their own creative journey.”

She said she selected offices and factories because they seemed to her to typify the transience she was exploring. “Factories and industrial operations are dwindling in this country as many jobs are taken up overseas where there is cheaper labor. The result is this ever increasing shrinkage and office work is also changing,” she said. “These days many people are also working from home, so identification with home life is also in a state of flux.”

She said the web in the project's title referred to the fabric of life; and “webless” to the fact that work wasn't necessarily integrated with the broader fabric of life any more, in contrast to times when people held jobs for life and were identified by and with their work.

She said this could be interpreted as a very unsettling notion but it was not necessarily so. “I think the whole concept of work ethics is in a real flux at the moment,” she said. “Some of the changes seem negative, some positive but we're in the middle of it and it's hard to see the actual fabric and form. It's only years later that we will see what those changes have brought about.”

The 2006 Manly Arts Festival runs from September 8-24. For more information phone the Arts Festival Info Line on 9976 1420 or go to www.manlyartsfestival.com