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HUW DAVIES GALLERY
1 – 11 December 2016

Mother Tongue

Andy Mullens



Image: Andy Mullens, *home, assimilation, family, language, displaced, heritage, refugee, birthplace, history, loss, culture, boat, identity, north, south, stories, nationhood, trauma, half, reconcile, foreign, war, connection, ownership, native, inherit, honour, bloodline, mother tongue, home* (detail), 2016, single channel video and rice, 3:40 min dimension variable

The limits of my language means the limits of my world
– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922 (5.6)

Words, writing, speaking, talking: language is an ultimate divider and connector. When attempting to learn or speak another language, it can feel like leaving one's world behind and entering another. This is the case for Andy Mullens, whose exhibition, *Mother Tongue* illuminates being caught between two cultural identities while reaching out to link the two worlds.

Staring straight into the camera, Mullens reads Vietnamese words aloud clumsily, while her mother repeats them with ease and confidence. Mullens' frustration is clear; her eyebrows draw closer together as she concentrates on her pronunciation. She provides a glimpse of the difficulties of being identified with a culture, which although is part of her heritage, is not part of her direct personal history.

The title of the work reflects the list of words spoken in Mullens' video: *Home, assimilation, family, language, displaced, heritage, refugee, birthplace, history, loss, culture, boat, identity, north, south, stories, nationhood, trauma, half, reconcile, foreign, war, connection, ownership, native, inherit, honour, bloodline, mother tongue, home* (2016). Aided by this, these words do not limit our understanding, but add to it. Language is an entry point to culture.

These words are loaded, and even in English they can fall heavily off the tongue. They speak of Mullens' mother's past as a refugee who travelled to Australia in the 1970s. They speak to a current mood in Australia, where there is a schism in popular thought about present-day refugees. They speak also of the connection Mullens feels with her mother, her mother's past, and how attempting to speak Vietnamese could possibly bring Andy closer to understanding this past.

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Partially covering the floor of the gallery with rice connects us further to Mullen's discomfort. Rice is often used as a symbol of Southeast Asian cultures, representing an ancient harvesting tradition and food source, which in Australia can be simply bought in any supermarket. The rice forms a pathway that leads to plastic red stools, the type you might find around a Vietnamese street vendor. Red is a re-occurring colour in Mullens' work, linking to Vietnam's long-standing history with this colour: from the colour of the flag, to the influence of Communism, to the colour of lucky money packets. Both the rice and the stools link in with an 'every day' concept of Vietnamese society. However, ultimately the rice restricts where we walk, and how we view the work, in the same way Mullens' entry to Vietnamese culture is restricted.

Although the Vietnamese culture may be foreign to many of us, there is something fundamental about the words that Mullens has chosen. Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951), a prominent Austrian philosopher spoke of the limits of language and linguistics. He elucidated that there are no things in existence that we cannot think of – that is – if it is unthinkable it cannot be described and thus cannot exist. The initial disconnect we feel when not being able to understand these words, shifts to an understanding of the human condition. These words can be thought of and described in one language and with help can be translated into another. Language need not be limiting and Mullens demonstrates it can be learned.

Through the video, Mullen's becomes more familiar with words that she has mispronounced. Repeating words in a system akin to rote learning, the changes in her speech are subtle, reflecting how understanding may slowly progress and meaning can emerge from uncertainty. The process draws us in and despite Mullens' dismay at not being perfect, we hang onto both of the women's words to see if – and how Mullens improves. Each new word documents her growing connection and ownership of culture.

What is left for us to contemplate is not only Mullens' reconciliation with her cultural heritage, but also the reflection of her mother's journey in learning the English language – and the parallel difficulties she would have encountered, which are not documented here.

Ellen Wignell

Ellen Wignell is a curator and writer, currently working at Newcastle Art Gallery

Andy Mullens | Artist statement

In my exhibition *Mother Tongue* I have used installation and video performance to explore language. I am interested in highlighting the discomfort and disconnect I experience being monolingual, through exposing my inability to speak Vietnamese through performance, this contrasts with the natural and confident performance of my mother speaking her first language. The list of loaded words, translated from English to Vietnamese, become lost as they fall clumsily from my mouth. There is connection in disconnection, as you and I experience the discomfort together, becoming more familiar with both the failed words and the true words throughout the duration of the work.

Andy Mullens | About the artist

Andy Mullens is an emerging visual artist living and working in Canberra. She employs photography, installation, found objects, sculpture and textiles to communicate an ongoing exploration of cultural identity. As the daughter of a Vietnamese refugee Mullens uses her heritage as a Vietnamese-Australian as a case study in her works, constantly re-negotiating ideas about dislocation, connection and ownership of culture. Through her multidisciplinary art practice Mullens moves to reconcile with her Vietnamese heritage. Mullens graduated from the Australian National University School of Art with a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) in 2014. Mullens has exhibited locally and interstate, including at Canberra Contemporary Art Space and the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. She was recently the winner of the 2016 Yen Female Art Awards, and was a finalist in the 2016 Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery National Works on Paper Exhibition Awards. Mullens is the inaugural PhotoAccess *In Focus* resident, awarded to one emerging photo-based artist from the ACT region. Mullens spent eight months in 2016 being supported by PhotoAccess to develop a new body of work for exhibition in the PhotoAccess Huw Davies Gallery.

Work

Andy Mullens, *home, assimilation, family, language, displaced, heritage, refugee, birthplace, history, loss culture, boat, identity, north, south, stories, nationhood, trauma, half, reconcile, foreign, war, connection, ownership, native, inherit, honour, bloodline, mother tongue, home (detail)*, 2016, single channel video and rice, 3:40min, looped, dimensions variable. POA

Public program

Artists in conversation with Andy Mullens, Mikhaila Jurkiewicz and Crasey Crockford at 5pm on Thursday 1 December, immediately prior to the opening event, in the PhotoAccess Huw Davies Gallery.