

Olga Cironis

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Olga Cironis is a multidisciplinary award-winning artist with a Masters of Visual Arts from University of Sydney (1996). Her work is represented in public and private art collections in Australia and abroad. Using cultural narratives, Cironis explores the link between self and place, questioning and re-evaluating the direct and indirect impact of history on personal and collective identity in today's Cultural Globalization.

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LISTENING UNDER WATER

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Olga Cironis' practice is determined by her Czech/Greek Australian identity, informed by a personal experience of cultural diaspora, by the locations and dislocations of belonging and un-belonging, and by the objects that mark people's cultural movements. In her new photo-installation work *Listening Under Water*, Cironis brings into further question cultural identity.

Ten photographs present sitters seemingly looking straight at the viewer, although one will never know for sure. For better or worse, they unabashedly and confidently own the text that defines their identity, emblazoned on their chests. The Perspex and metal gorgets or breast plates as they are more commonly called in Australia given their intrinsic relationship to Aboriginal history¹ and colonialism, have been throughout time both portents of power and protection, as well as symbols of domination and subjugation.

Their eyes are hidden behind a gold leaf censor strip. To cover the eyes, the windows to the soul, the most individual and private self is to deny the viewer a way in, rendering the subject free from the viewer's gaze and at the same time reinforcing the subject's 'otherness'. While the gold strip is a signifier of power, history, wealth and conquest, protecting the subject from the scrutiny of the viewer it also denies the latter the opportunity to create a connection with the subject, invoking a sense of threat through anonymity.

By removing a mutual visual communication, Cironis creates a self-reflexive situation where the viewer is left alone to question the subjects' purpose and intent. Cironis' work always aims to engage the audience within the narrative as a central protagonist, a key player in the dialogue. A connection between sitter and viewer instigated by the text on the breastplate, creates an ambiguous exchange, where the viewer unwittingly becomes the subject; the one being judged and investigated.

Only two of the subjects in this photo-installation work are treated differently. One is the youngest. The girl wears no breastplate. She is still creating an identity by wearing a changeable mask. Her eyes stare straight at the viewer assertively questioning the public gaze upon her. The other is of a man whose breastplate is blank. He refuses a conversation, seemingly giving him total anonymity although his stance affords the viewer a veiled clue.

While there are ten images on the walls there are only nine recycled chairs in the space, arranged like a children's game of "musical chairs". Each chair has been repaired and re-oiled bringing attention to its history, adding new life to a once discarded domestic object. The tenth absent chair has been immortalised in one of the photographs; it is inaccessible. The chair signifies the history that has missed out on being told, it is nevertheless present but only as a testament of memory.