

Interview between Erin Coates and Emma Horvát & Ómra Caoimhe

Friday 20th March 2020

Erin Coates: I'd love to know how you came to work together and what you've been doing with your studio residency?

Ómra Caoimhe: Our first collaborative work was while we were at TAFE together. It was a period of time when we were trying to figure out the visual art scene in Perth, and what we were inspired by - being in an institution like TAFE. We came out of that institution together into ECU, which was really different. TAFE was so practical and we had made so much work at that point that it was really hard to navigate, but through that we were able to collaborate for WOMXN (2019) (an annual exhibition held at Spectrum Project Space to coincide with International Women's Day) with our work "I'll be Your Mirror". That was the first time we formally collaborated and it was around ideas of trauma.

Emma Horvát: Working with photography as one of my mediums, when Omra and I collaborated for WOMXN; we were using photographs that depicted objects in relation to our bodies in conjunction with objects and their presence in space as metaphorical shells. Omra makes work with found objects and so do I, so we tried to bring the found objects into a psychological space, which turned into a kind of scene.

Erin: So in a sense you started working together out of a need for peership, because you were suddenly in a new context, one that was quite different to being at TAFE. And then you also found synergies between the way you work or wanted to work.

Ómra: I think we knew that it was more about being given the opportunity to work together.

Emma: It's like that whole thing about life and art, both of us came from similar ... I hope you don't mind me saying...

Ómra: Similar circumstances, similar trauma backgrounds and so we were both at a period of time in our lives where we were rebuilding stability, and a new circumstance for ourselves.

Emma: Looking for stability.

Ómra: And that was a part of the concept for *Womxn* and I think it just became really strong emotionally for us to work together, and then we kind of just brought it into this space for the residency.

Erin: It's a great thing to have, a space like this over a period of time; where you can actually let things unfold, and you don't have that pressure of having to know in advance what your outcome is. Walking in here, it feels a lot like coming into a theatre set, where something is going to be activated or is still shifting around. How did you think about this residency before you started, and did you have any strategies for how to use this space in this time?

Emma: We wanted to challenge some sort of notion of photography and portraiture.

Ómra: Yeah, we were really interested in portraiture to begin with. Following the last collaborative work we had made.

Emma: I think we really wanted to extend the work but, obviously like you said, when you come into the space the context changes... The work became more site specific.

Ómra: A lot more site specific, and also kind of reflexive because we were able to use motion, space and architecture. It was so different from the work that we made for *Womxn* in a way but also very connected to it.

Emma: We're both used to making work where you just take a picture in your living room, because that's the only white wall that you have. So this has been a really great change and a challenge for us both.

Ómra: It's definitely developed the work.

Erin: Can we talk about the choice of objects that you've brought into the space – a stripped back mattress, just the bare metal parts showing - it has a domestic connotation but it's insides have been exposed, and then you have this empty wire cage. I know that you're working with objects in a metaphorical way – can you tell me about why you've chosen to bring these objects in here?

Emma: We both saw the mattress on separate occasions and sort of said to each other that we wanted it to be a part of this work.

Erin: On a purely formalist level it has strong qualities; the lines, the way the light filters through it, the shape of it.

Ómra: The biggest thing that I noticed about it is, for me, it's a lot like a drawing.

Emma: And for me it's like a photo.

Erin: Yeah – that's interesting. So it has this notational quality for you, like it's some form of line drawing.

Ómra: The structure of it is comforting because it's really equal. And it's also just so gestural through the motion our bodies imprint on and through its own making, its mechanism. You also think about what it was like, there's still remnants of foam on it, you know it's one of those really awful awful mattresses that...

Erin: ..that you know creaks.

Ómra: Yeah. Remember when you were younger and you had that mattress that you had to grow out of.

Emma: I feel like it's a photo because it has the imprint of someone's body over a period of time. A mattress can be symbolic of so many things all at once, especially when it's stripped of everything that makes it comfortable for a body to be on. The irony and instability of the object as it exists relates really strongly to trauma for me.

Erin: This is clearly a used object, it comes with a history. There's a relationship between the mattress and the cage - both wire structures that have a quality of notation and gesture. They are also structures that relate to bodies, one to support a body and the other could contain a body. Looking at your photos, I can see that you're interacting with these objects with your own bodies and you're using different props and objects in this space to extend your bodies or to shift how they might be read.

Ómra: To be honest when we're in the space it's really hard to think about all of those things so hearing you say that, it's comforting. It's also like an 'outside/inside' thing – we haven't had anybody come into the space either so ..

Erin: .. so I'm intruding into that precarious space, where you don't yet have the answers – you are still working on an intuitive level or however you describe the process. So I appreciate how hard it is to have to talk about what you're doing when you are still understanding what that is.

Ómra: I think it's interesting though because I feel like it can come across –especially in some of the ways that we are using our bodies in the photos– like there seems to be a hierarchy in the way that we're dealing with this, re-enacting within a psychological space.

Erin: Because one person is straddling or sitting upon another. Is this what you mean by hierarchy? There is a sense of dominance and subjugation in the photos.

Emma: Yeah, and that comes back to trauma, which is the base of what we're talking about in the studio.

Ómra: Also, throughout the residency we were interested in making a bit of an archive of ancient baby toys and bottles.

Emma: Then we were using clay, and then we were making drawings influenced by Jenny Watson and some written works by Judith Butler.

Ómra: And this is meant to be a sort of depiction of how a mouse moves. (showing Erin the drawings and props)

Erin: Ah, ok.

Ómra: From a comfort object that we have at home.

Erin: So this is an enlarged version of a toy?

Ómra: Yeah, it's a toy, and then the scissors and the combing of the hair, in one photograph I'm putting Emma in the cage.

Erin: There is an exaggeration of scale and, to me it feels a little bit like German expressionist theatre or early cinema.

Ómra: Oh wow, that's interesting.

Erin: Can you tell me a bit about the mouse tail you're wearing?

Ómra: It relates to the comfort objects that I had, and also sentimental because it relates to where our education came from, And it's a beautiful prop to have... the way it moves, it sort of just fits in this space.

Emma: It's from a person who really believed in us, and she's made as a gift, it's so delicate.

Erin: I don't know if you've seen the works of Roni Horn?

Ómra and Emma: Yes.

Erin: Immediately when I saw your work in here, I was thinking of her work in terms of the use of props to extend to the body, and also looking at how trauma or pain are imprinted on the body – embedded in it – and this idea of using these props to externalize trauma back out of the body, and to explore the kinespheric potential of the body.

Emma: I think that's what we were trying to talk about when we said that it's a psychological space; we're reenacting 'historical' experiences from sensory memory.

Ómra: And there's like a certain kind of discomfort that we feel when we're producing images. You have to rationalize it because you have that personal connection that's obviously leading you to create a scene and then how you think people may perceive it also comes into it – like we're partners so there's just all of these different aspects that really link it to life.

Emma: It's so entwined.

Erin: Obviously there's a huge level of trust between you two, in that you're exploring personal traumas together and you're understanding your own boundaries about how you can talk about it, what is okay to explore inside of an art practice that other people are going to then see. I think trust is important in collaboration. It's really difficult as well.

Ómra: It's so important.

Ómra: Yep, we're learning about it a lot.

Emma: As much as we fight we trust each other.

Ómra: Yeah we do, we always disagree on every decision that we make at each stage, but it's good.

Erin: It sparks a conversation, because conflict leads to then having to hash out and understand; why do I feel this way, why do I want to do it this way and you want to do it that way. You are then forced to have to talk about it and rationalize your decisions.

Erin: That is actually a key part of your collaborative process?

Ómra: I think so, yeah.

Erin: Have you ever explored art therapy and looking at how art therapists work?

Emma: Are we going to talk about how I do imagery (in therapy), and your current therapy? (asking Omra)

Ómra: Yeah. If that's okay...

Emma: Okay. (laughter) So I've been doing therapy for two years and it's called Schema Therapy.

Erin: Schema Therapy - what is that?

Emma: It's where the therapist goes into your memories and, say, a door is closed they open the door and take you out of the traumatic memory. They take you to a comfortable place and then you'll be able to see through the confusion. It helps you rationalize what maybe wasn't ok about what happened and how maybe it should have been, so it's like almost rewriting the past.

Erin: So it's having to be exposed to those things that are difficult to remember but doing it with some tools in place so that you have somewhere comfortable, in a metaphysical sense, that you can go to when you are thinking through those memories.

Emma: Yeah, kind of like that. And EMDR is based on Schema Therapy as well.

Ómra: When we began making this work I had started going through EMDR therapy [Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing] and that triggers a lot of imagery in your head.

Ómra: It focuses on multitasking. It's a really intimate therapy, so usually a therapist intervenes through buzzes or lights or eye movements. You have to watch their finger move, and they always have to be quite close to you so it feels a little bit intrusive. There's a thing called a 'window of tolerance' that is when your brain goes into avoidance, I think it's really when your brain starts going into disassociation. There are a lot of things that come out during EMDR therapy and it's interesting because it's kind of backwards and forwards. It's a great way of coping and learning about yourself but in this context, as visual artists, and I think in any type of therapy, for me it becomes a little bit more like theory, it's a really good way to bring it into your conceptual basis, because it's human, and it's science and it's psychology.

Emma: It's funny because the way that you think about everything (even you practice) changes when you get therapy.

Erin: I mean it's fascinating just hearing you talk about it I want to learn more about it.

Emma: Yeah it is fascinating. Schema therapy is based on the idea that your mind is like a blueprint, or like a floor plan and it's made during the first 15 years of your life.

Ómra: Which is crazy, but maybe that says something about the way we're working.

Erin: That it is like a schema, a plan being laid out, and you're shifting things around inside of parameters that you've set for yourselves. Can you tell me more about your photography – I had a look at some of them and they're really interesting. At the moment they're laid out on a table and obviously there's some kind of sorting process going on. How do you see those photographs sitting within your work – are they part of a process or are they things that you want to share with people at the end?

Emma: We had decided that we would make some bigger prints but we had a disagreement on how so we're not sure.

Ómra: A lot of the ones that are for this set have not been printed yet.

Emma: It's a deciding process; we've picked the ones that we think work the best or speak for what we're trying to say.

Erin: So the ones that I'm looking at right now are the mattress photos, in which you're in a corner and you're pulling and contorting the mattress around you, using the pressure of your body and your limbs to distort it and fold it over yourself. Do you know in advance of these sessions how you might work with props or is it something that is intuitive at the time?

Ómra: A little bit of both.

Emma: Yeah, both, we direct each other, because it is about making a scene and having it be directed and curated but at the same time we're not completely closed to the idea of chance.

Erin: There are some recurring motifs and gestures in these photographs. There's a lot of extension, pulling and pushing, as well as wrapping and twisting materials around themselves and around your bodies.

Ómra: The ways of using the objects that you're describing started with the mattress, then using more props and then the paper came into it because we wanted something that was a bit more about scenography and that brought it into the psychological space that we were working with.

Emma: We found this quote by Luce Irigaray "The Power of Discourse" which embodies that in Judith Butlers "Bodies that matter".

...the necessity of "reopening" the figures of philosophical discourse... One way is to interrogate the conditions under which systematicity itself is possible: what the coherence of the discursive utterance conceals of the conditions under which it is produced, whatever it may say about these conditions in discourse. For example the "matter" from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce

itself, to reproduce itself; the *scenography* that makes representation feasible, representation is defined in philosophy, that is, the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues, indeed their tragic relations, without overlooking the *mirror*, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject, to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself....

Emma: We came to the conclusion that the room had to be a nowhere space for it to be perceived as more psychological.

Erin: So, wrapping the walls and the floor with the white paper was a way of disassociating the space from the architecture that it sits in, so that you are then more able to manipulate the meanings inside of that space.

Emma: Disassociating is a great word to describe it. Something we both work with in our individual practices is visual language - the meanings that are conveyed through objects or actions.

Erin: And what's this object here that's sticking out of the mattress?

Emma & Ómra: That's the comb.

Ómra: This is the first object that we found for this residency.

Erin: Again, it has that sense of exaggerated scale, like a German Expressionist prop.

Ómra: That's really interesting, and it still has Emma's hair in it (laughing).

Emma: It's a loom Comb, and we decided we wanted it to be part of this residency and collaborative body of work. I found it in an op-shop and Omra wanted it, she was jealous of me and I thought, okay, let's both use it together.

Erin: it's interesting this conflict; jealousy and disagreement are all part of a collaborative process and they can be generative because they then force a reaction and a response. If there is total harmony and everyone agrees, I think sometimes nothing goes anywhere. So, tell me a bit more about what you have been reading? Obviously getting into Judith Butler, what else is on your shelves or artists that you have been looking at?

Emma: Kurt Schwitters and Jenny Watson.

Erin: Ah, Kurt Schwitters. I knew there would be a reference to him somewhere.

Emma: I like to have some staples in the studio.

Ómra: But Emma also really likes the genre of memoir and I think autobiography has had a big influence on this work.

Emma: Which you also do, Omra, but you do in a more subversive way.

Ómra: In a different way. When I first met Emma she was very interested in Virginia Wolf and then it changed Jeanette Winterson, and Susan Sontang and now it's Judith Butler.

Erin: You're following a great lineage of women writers here.

Emma: The context of our work is interesting in that sense I guess.

Erin: So, you set the camera up on a tripod and do you set it to take photographs at certain intervals?

Ómra: 30 seconds and 10 images.

Emma: With a timer propped up on a chair.

Erin: Do you know in advance what you will do?

Emma & Ómra: We have a rough plan

Ómra: Sometimes I feel like it flows more to do something spontaneously, like when I'm combing Emma's hair, we might do something more intuitively when making a scene. If we're not working together physically, then it's much harder to negotiate the space.

Erin: So, there's this reliance perhaps on certain gestures that you know that you will be working with that allow you then to improvise inside of that.

Ómra: Yeah, like going into the cage, coming out of the cage, recently putting Emma in the cage, combing her hair.

Erin: I have noticed that you photograph only in black and white and that also you are wearing grey, black & white, and there's a very restrained pallet in your installation as well.

Ómra: It's been like that for me for a long time.

Erin: You just gravitate towards that pared down, monochromatic space?

Ómra: I think that colour, the use of colour and what you are drawn to is very much based on your mental space. So sometimes people are drawn to colours that are a bit more subdued because it lets them stand back a bit in society. It's like a passive thing for me, how I use colour. But then I also know you work really well with colour.

Emma: I like colour, I'm not afraid of colour, it's just sometimes I don't feel like it's necessary for me to use it. I actually wear a lot of colour, just not today... I feel like the reason these images are all black and white is not about colour, it's about taking the work out of the 'real' world. It's like an erasure method. We're removing information because we feel that the images speak more to what we're saying when they are in black and white.

Erin: In classical times, colour was regarded as a distraction, an illusion. If you look at what actually happens when we are viewing colour it's occurring inside of our brains and how we are interpreting different light waves. Using only a chiaroscuro technique, forms are shaped through light and shadow. It's interesting because historically there is this association that colour lies but black and white actually creates something that we can rely on, that is more truth-telling.

Emma: I have a lot to say about that, these (photos) are all lies. I think everything that's photographed is lies because it's not real anymore.

Erin: Of course, the whole notion of photography as telling us the truth has long ago been dismantled. I think a long time ago we stopped looking at images as giving us an objective, overall image of what's happening.

Erin: In this history of painting though I think colour has been looked at as something that is manipulative and is an illusion to a degree.

Ómra: And the photographs are so different emotionally when they are not rendered in black & white.

Erin: At what stage do you pull the colour out, are you photographing on film?

Ómra: No, we are photographing digitally, and just straight off the bat before we look at them properly, we change them into black & white.

Erin: So, you don't want to see the images in colour?

Emma: We do see them in colour.

Ómra: When we arrange the images in order of the emotion. Like there's one of these photographs where you're (Emma) helping me (Omra) into the cage.

Erin: Oh wow, now you're in the cage, ok.

Ómra: This one (photograph), the hand movements, and this is a really amazing image for me, because Emma's sort of balancing, and I'm about to hold her and she's about to hold me, and we're about to go into something together.

Erin: A lot of what you're doing it seems is about the latent potential of objects. There is the potential of a gesture that hasn't been completed yet, but you don't want to complete it and give that resolution to the viewer or to yourselves, and you want it to still be in that space of unfolding and still happening, it's not finalized.

Emma: I feel like that directly relates back to therapy as well.

Erin: That it's an unfinished process.

Ómra: That's really lovely.

Erin: Do you know what you will be doing for the remainder of your residency? Are there any other objects you want to bring in?

Emma: I think we're at a critical point where something is going to turn around and everything is going to change really drastically. Because that's what happened with our previous work, and we were working on this project for months and months, and then 2 weeks before the show, we just turned it around and did something completely different.

Ómra: Yeah, it just wasn't working.

Erin: I mean it's good that you can recognize that, and I think that's part of what a collaboration can offer people, insights that you cannot have by yourself sometimes.

Erin: Thanks for talking to me today, it's been such a treat to learn more about what you are doing.

Emma: Thanks for coming to visit the studio today.

Ómra: You have given me, us, a lot of insight today.

Erin: Me too (laughing).

Ómra: I'm glad it's mutual.

END OF THE CONVERSATION.