Art in the making: Mirka Mora’s techniques and materials, and their meaning in conservation

Sabine Cotte

Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor in Philosophy

Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation
School of Historical and Philosophical Studies
Faculty of Arts
University of Melbourne
PhD (Arts) dissertation, September 2016
Abstract

The study of an individual artist’s practice and agency is central to the conservation of contemporary art. The oeuvre of French-born Australian artist Mirka Mora (b. 1928), with an artistic production spanning more than sixty years, presents a range of contemporary conservation challenges ranging from the breadth of materials and diverse technical approaches to the preservation of access and use of the works. Mora moved to Australia in 1951 and became a major figure in Melbourne’s social and artistic history. Arguing that an understanding of the significance of materials and the agency of the artist is essential for art conservation, this research explores Mora’s choices in artistic materials and her idiosyncratic modes of making, in close collaboration with the artist, with access to her studio and private diaries. This material-based focus brings a unique perspective to Mora’s oeuvre, highlighting the place of her creative processes within their social and artistic context. While embracing the whole of Mora’s oeuvre, the research project places special emphasis on her production of soft sculptures, which to date have not been studied but are beginning to show signs of damage from ageing.

The methods of research combine oral history with detailed analysis of primary and secondary sources, visual examination of works of art and the making of replicas with regular feedback from the artist. Adopting methods of qualitative analysis from social sciences, the thesis also takes inspiration from material culture studies to examine the relationships between Mora’s techniques and the broader context of twentieth-century feminism, the craft movement, public art policies and practice. Mora’s sense of performative dress, her way of communicating by using material culture, or by sharing her modes of art making with her students during her long teaching career, as well as her innovative twists on conventional techniques, all participate in the building of her artistic identity. These concepts of tradition, knowledge, emotion, gender and innovation, are all embedded in Mora’s various working processes, and traceable in the material envelope of her works. Investigating the meaning of materials from a conservation perspective, the thesis examines various models of decision-making currently in use in the profession, and how these frameworks can be applied to the new knowledge acquired on Mora’s materials and techniques. Applying these models into
practice, the thesis makes recommendations regarding the conservation of Mora’s works, and examines three artist-sanctioned case studies focused on the conservation of soft sculptures to provide a wider perspective of these works. This research highlights the importance and the limitations of conservators’ collaborations with artists. It demonstrates how conservation can enhance viewers’ interactions with works of art, illuminate the skills that are brought into play in their making, and contribute to a broader access to them in present and future. Demonstrating the key role of conservation research that acknowledges the theoretical underpinning of the social sciences, this thesis illustrates the changing face of conservation in contemporary period, and the changing role of conservators in contemporary art.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the except where indicated in the preface;

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and

(iii) the thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices or that the thesis is [number of words] as approved by the Research Higher Degrees Committee.

Sabine Cotte
Preface

The first time I met with Mirka Mora in 2003, we discussed art materials— not hers specifically, but Arthur Boyd’s, who was a good friend of Mirka in the 1950s. I had been asked by the director of Heide Museum of Modern Art to conserve a recently acquired painting by Boyd and I was intrigued about the pigments he had used. At the same time, I was reading Mirka’s autobiography, where she describes Boyd sharing some of his home-made paint with her. I wrote a letter to her and we met for an interesting discussion on paint and friends.

A few years later, when the National Trust Public Art Committee contacted me in order to undertake the conservation of the Flinders Street mural, I naturally involved Mirka very closely into the process, and we had many conversations on making and conserving art, as well as many other topics such as love and migration. Two other conservation projects related to Mirka Mora’s practice followed, the mural in Readings Bookshop in St Kilda and the mosaic seat, also in St Kilda, which were the opportunities for more exchanges, as we were working together on conserving these works of art. During these encounters, Mirka and myself developed a relationship and a nuanced understanding of what is the nature of conservation work when executed in collaboration with living artists. Mirka participated in the whole conservation process, by describing her modes of making and her materials, by giving advice on the choice of conservation materials and on the technique of filling losses and even providing materials that were in her possession, and sometimes repainting missing parts herself.

These shared experiences were very interesting for me. As a conservator, I find that my new country, Australia, offers exciting opportunities to participate in the making of history, with an easy access to the ‘actors’ of the recent past. More than in Europe, the influence of artists from the many cultures that shape Australia’s life is palpable. It makes it all the more important to understand their art in all its aspects, including materiality and its meanings, in order to preserve and transmit their work. Therefore, the project of studying Mirka’s practice, encompassing her many different media, came almost naturally out of our shared professional relationship, language and trust. As
Mirka is an iconic artist in Melbourne, it is only fitting that her techniques should be the subject of a systematic study, and she enthusiastically embraced the project, as did all the people I met during the course of this research. This study has turned to be much more than a description of techniques; the long collaboration with Mirka has uncovered the many links between her modes of making and the central place she holds in the city’s recent history, when it was slowly becoming the vibrant artistic community it is today. I hope that through its examination of a key artist’s work from a material-based perspective, this study can contribute to a more complete record of the artistic practices of this period, now at the interface between history and the contemporary, and enhance the role materiality plays in our understanding of an artist’s work.
Acknowledgements

Undertaking this research would not have been possible without the help of many people, and I wish to thank them sincerely here.

First and foremost, I wish to thank Mirka Mora for her generosity with her time, knowledge, sharing of private documents and all round joie de vivre. Working with her has been a privilege and a wonderful journey, for which I am very grateful.

I wish to thank also:

My supervisors, Dr Nicole Tse and Associate Professor Alison Inglis for their sound advice, help in keeping focus and critical reading during the time of this research,

Louise Bradley for her always innovative suggestions and the fabrication of the display stands for soft sculptures,

William Mora, Emma McCowan, Carrillo Gantner, Max Delany, Jeanette Fry, Kendrah Morgan, Katarina Paseta, Robbie McGregor, Nicola McGaan and Marzena Walicka, who kindly agreed to being interviewed and to provide access to Mirka’s works in their collection, which greatly contributed to my research,

Genevieve Turnbull, for a much enjoyable tour of her extensive collection of works by Mirka Mora; Hugh and Elizabeth Morgan, for providing access to the beautiful ‘Mirka room’ in their residence,

Paul Swain, for his warm welcome, his time and his help to access and document the 6 large panels of the Perth mural by Mirka Mora, kept in storage in his residence,

Trish Stokes, Manager, Collections and Information Systems at Arts Centre Melbourne, and Lucy Spencer, from the Performing Arts Research Centre, for kindly organizing a
viewing of the archives and of the masks and costumes made by Mirka Mora for the play Medea,

Rose Montebello and Micheline Ford, from National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, for organizing a viewing of the masks and costumes made by Mirka Mora for the play The Bacchae,

Maggie Fletcher, Visual Arts Curator, Adelaide Festival Centre, for providing access to the extensive archive on Mirka Mora’s painting of ‘Circus’ in 1982,

Claire Marshall, Art Curator, National Australia Bank, for providing access to the bank’s tapestry “Curlews in the Garden’, 1980,

Antonia Syme, director, and the team of weavers at the Australian Tapestry Workshop, for providing access to their archive and answering my questions about the making of Mirka Mora’s tapestries,

Jeff Busby for providing access to his historic photographs of a mask-making session in Mirka’s studio, and of the performances of Medea and The Bacchae, and for kindly authorizing their reproduction in this thesis

Isobel and Lyn Williams for their helpful advice on researches into artist’s private documents,

Sean Bridgeman (National Film and Sound Archives)
Alaina (Chapman and Bailey),
Juliet Stuart Smyth (ABC Library Sales Coordinator),
Carol Campbell (textile conservator), Helen Weidenhofer (Artlab) and
Tom Molomoby, for taking the time to answer my inquiries

Mirka Mora, William Mora and Anna Mortley, Jane Zweibel, Charissa Davies (Adelaide Festival Centre), Nick Nicholson (NGA), Kendrah Morgan (Heide Museum of Modern Art), Jana Shenefield (Niki Charitable Art Foundation), Dominique Gagneux (Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris), Nicole Murnane and Gus McAllister
(Tippler and Co, former Balzac restaurant), Manuela Furci (Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive), for the authorization of reproducing works of art in this thesis

GCCMC staff and colleagues PhD students for providing a serious but relaxed atmosphere that proved perfect for the final writing stages of this thesis,

My husband David and my children Basile and Anika for their patience during this research.

Sabine Cotte
August 2016
# Table of contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 2

Declaration ............................................................................................................................................. 4

Preface ................................................................................................................................................. 5

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................... 7

Table of contents .................................................................................................................................. 10

List of tables ......................................................................................................................................... 14

List of illustrations ............................................................................................................................... 16

List of third party copyright material ................................................................................................. 23

Introduction .......................................................................................................................................... 25

Part A. Methodology and history ........................................................................................................... 42

Chapter 1. Methodology ....................................................................................................................... 43

Introduction .......................................................................................................................................... 43

1.1 Material culture and conservation ................................................................................................. 50

1.2 Technical art history and artists’ interviews .................................................................................... 51

1.3 Oral history and ethnography .......................................................................................................... 53

1.3.1 Interviewing Mirka Mora ........................................................................................................... 54

1.3.2 Working with Photovoice .......................................................................................................... 58

1.3.3 Customising workbooks ............................................................................................................ 59

1.3.4 Making soft sculptures and artist’s collaboration ...................................................................... 61

1.3.5 Verifying data ............................................................................................................................ 62

1.4 Description of sources .................................................................................................................... 66

1.4.1 Books .......................................................................................................................................... 67

1.4.2 Diaries .......................................................................................................................................... 68

1.4.3 Media sources: press articles and audio visual archives ............................................................ 70

Chapter 2. Being an artist, restaurateur and woman in post-war Australia ........................................... 74

2.1 Historical timeline ............................................................................................................................ 74

2.1.1 Growing with objects ............................................................................................................... 74

2.1.2 Theatre studies ........................................................................................................................ 76

2.1.3 Melbourne, Australia. A seamstress named Mirka ................................................................. 78

2.1.4 A circle of artists ....................................................................................................................... 79

2.1.5 The first murals ....................................................................................................................... 81
Chapter Seven. Case studies and recommendations ............................................. 270

7.1 Background to the three case studies ............................................................. 272

7.2 Case study No 1. ‘Lady with horns’. Interventive conservation ..................... 275

7.2.1 Description of the work ........................................................................... 275
7.2.2 Existing condition ................................................................................... 276
7.2.3 Decision-making process ........................................................................ 278
7.2.4 Replica and treatment ............................................................................ 283

7.3 Case study No 2. ‘Dancing girl on the sea’. Non-intervention ......................... 291

7.3.1 Description of the work ........................................................................... 291
7.3.2 Existing condition ................................................................................... 292
7.3.3 Decision-making process ........................................................................ 293
7.3.4 Treatment ............................................................................................... 295

7.4 Case study No3. Display/storage stands. Preventive conservation ................. 296

7.4.1 Description of the works ........................................................................... 296
7.4.2 Existing condition ................................................................................... 298
7.4.3 Decision making process ................................................................. 298
7.4.4 Treatment ..................................................................................... 300

7.5 Comparative analysis ......................................................................... 304
7.5.1 Case study No 1 ............................................................................. 304
7.5.2 Case study No 2 ............................................................................. 307
7.5.3 Case study No 3 ............................................................................. 308

7.6 Recommendations for conservation of Mora’s art ............................ 310
7.6.1 Murals ............................................................................................ 311
7.6.2 Oil paintings ................................................................................... 312
7.6.3 Masks and costumes ...................................................................... 313
7.6.4 Embroideries .................................................................................. 315

Conclusion ............................................................................................ 317

References ............................................................................................. 326
Primary sources; texts about Mirka Mora .............................................. 326
Art History and Social History ............................................................... 335
Oral history, ethnography and interviewing techniques .......................... 342
Conservation ......................................................................................... 346

Appendix 1. Murals. Techniques, condition and recommendations for conservation ................................................................................................. 359

Appendix 2. Oil Paintings. Technique, condition and recommendations for conservation ................................................................................................. 376

Appendix 3. Masks and costumes. Technique, condition and recommendations for conservation ................................................................. 379

Appendix 4. Embroideries. Technique, condition and recommendations for conservation ................................................................................................. 383

Appendix 5. Tentative technical timeline of Mirka Mora’s works ............ 384
Appendix 6. List of interviews ................................................................. 385
List of tables

Table I  Technique of mosaic
Table II  Technique of tempera painting
Table III Technique of papier mâché
Table IV  Technique of trapunto quilting
Table V  Benefits of soft sculptures reconstructions
Table VI  E. Pye decision-making guidelines
Table VII B. Appelbaum decision-making guidelines
Table VIII B. Appelbaum characterization grid
Table IX  D. Eastop decision-making guidelines
Table X  S. Cane model of movements of objects
Table XI J. Taylor model of interrelationships of the four factors
Table XII Conclusions from replica making process
Table XIII Summary of case studies

Table 1.1  Mirka room, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.2. Tolarno murals, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.3. Ardmona mural, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.4. Dr Smyth’s mural, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.5. Tympanum, QAG (QLD)
Table 1.6. Painted tram, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.7. Adelaide frieze (SA)
Table 1.8. Perth mural, Perth (WA)
Table 1.9  Burdekin Library mural, Ayr (QLD)
Table 1.10 Burdekin Library courtyard mural, Ayr (QLD)
Table 1.11 CAE mural, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.12 Cosmos Bookshop mural, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.13 Flinders Street mural, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.14 Dog’s Bar mural, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.15 Mosaic seat, St Kilda (VIC)
Table 1.16 Heide mural, Melbourne (VIC)
Table 1.17 Mural, Balzac restaurant, Melbourne (VIC)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Oil Paintings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>Masks for Medea, PAM, Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.2</td>
<td>Masks for The Bacchae, NGA, Canberra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.3</td>
<td>Puppets for Bennelong, Melbourne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Embroideries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of illustrations

Figure 1   Diagram of methods used in the research
Figure 2   Page of a workbook, on the theatre masks for *The Bacchae*
Figure 3   A reconstruction of soft sculpture
Figure 4   Mora in 1955 in Collins Street, Melbourne
Figure 5   John Howley and Mirka Mora, *Untitled mural*, Balzac restaurant
Figure 6   Mirka Mora, *Untitled mural* (detail), Tolarno restaurant
Figure 7   Mirka Mora, *Untitled mural*, (detail), Tolarno restaurant
Figure 8   Mora in her studio, 1967
Figure 9   Mora with one of her dolls, March 2014
Figure 10  Mirka Mora, *Painted tram*, 1978
Figure 11  Mirka Mora, *The enchanted garden*, 1978, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Crafts Board Collection donated by the Australia Council 1982, © Mirka Mora
Figure 12  Mora with the masks she created for *Medea*, at the Performing Arts Centre, September 2013
Figure 13  Mora and one of the puppets she created for the opera *Bennelong*
Figure 14  Mirka Mora, *Mirka room*, 1970, (detail), private collection
Figure 15  George Baldessin, Les Kossatz Andrew Sibley Roger Kemp Mirka Mora Collaborating artists *Tympan* 1977 Oil on canvas Four panels: 424 x 630cm (overall, irreg.) Purchased 1991. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation, Collection: Queensland Art Gallery, © QAG
Figure 16  Mirka Mora, *Perth Festival Mural* 1983, synthetic polymer paint on tin, 6 panels, each 120 x 280 cm (approx.). detail right panel. Heide Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Paul Swain 2015
Figure 17  Mirka Mora, Flinders Street mural, 1986-1998
Figure 18  Mirka Mora, *Untitled mosaic*, St Kilda Pier
Figure 19  Mirka Mora, Dr Smyth’s mural, oil on canvas, Peter McCallum Cancer Centre Collection
Figure 20  Explanatory drawing of the Tolarno’s low relief
Figure 21a  An extract of Mora’s diary from 1983, comparing hers and Velasquez’ colour palette for painting a dog

Figure 21b  Mirka Mora, The Caress, 1963, pencil, pastel and charcoal on paper, detail showing the scratching technique

Figure 21c  Mirka Mora, untitled mural, Balzac restaurant, Melbourne, oil (?) and charcoal on painted wall, detail

Figure 21d  Mirka Mora, untitled mural, Balzac restaurant, Melbourne, oil (?) and charcoal on painted wall, detail

Figure 22  Mirka Mora, Painting for a nostalgic traveller, mixed media on paper, 1966, Collection W Mora Galleries

Figure 23  Mora at work on the Flinders Street mosaic, 1986

Figure 24  Mirka Mora, Circus, acrylic and casein paint on plastic foil, made in public during Adelaide Festival, 1982 archive, actual location unknown

Figure 25  Mora making the mask of the Messenger, 1979 (photo Jeff Busby)

Figure 26  Mora making the mask of the Messenger, 1979 (photo Jeff Busby)

Figure 27  Mora painting a soft sculpture in her studio (photo F Bottrell)

Figure 28  Mora painting one of her semi rigid soft sculptures with oil (still from P. Cox 1974, This film is called Mirka, Prahran College of Advanced Education)

Figure 29  Mirka Mora, mask of Medea, 1979, (detail), Arts Centre Melbourne, Performing Arts Collection

Figure 30  Mirka Mora, Untitled, embroidery (detail)

Figure 31  Mirka Mora, Untitled, embroidery (detail)

Figure 32  One of Mora’s sketchbooks with preparatory work for the St Kilda mosaic

Figure 33  Mirka Mora, The bunyip's paradise 1978 (detail), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Crafts Board Collection donated by the Australia Council 1982, © Mirka Mora

Figure 34  A page of Mora’s diary of 1983, showing the detailed preparation for Ayr mural

Figure 35  A page of Mora’s diary of 1986, showing the detailed preparation for Flinders Street mural

Figure 36  Mirka Mora, Flinders Street mosaic, detail
Figure 37  A page of Mora’s diary of 1986, showing the reworking of details in Flinders Street mural

Figure 38  Flinders Street mosaic, detail showing the precise cuts of tiles according to shapes

Figure 39  Flinders Street mural, detail of the low relief in 1986

Figure 40  Flinders Street mural, same detail after repainting in 1998

Figure 41  Mora at work on *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 20 November 2013

Figure 42  Mora at work on *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 20 November 2013.

Figure 43  Mora at work on *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 20 November 2013.

Figure 44  Mora at work on *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 5 February 2014.

Figure 45  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 5 February 2014; the signature was saved from the previous state

Figure 46  Mora at work on *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 5 February 2014

Figure 47  Mora at work on *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 5 February 2014, reworking lines in blue

Figure 48  Detail of the reworked lines

Figure 49  Detail of the texture

Figure 50  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014

Figure 51  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014. Signature partially repainted

Figure 52  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014. The texture of the fence is visible through new composition

Figure 53  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014. Mora adds decorative pattern…

Figure 54  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014 …and recovers it

Figure 55  Mora at work on *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014. The white covers the blue

Figure 56  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014
The central figure is modified
Figure 57  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 13 February 2014. The central figure has disappeared

Figure 58  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 13 February 2014 (detail)

Figure 59  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 13 February 2014. Signature reworked

Figure 60  *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, final state, May 2014

Figure 61  Eye painted with oil paint

Figure 62  Eye of a soft sculpture, painted with casein paint

Figure 63  Eye in embroidery

Figure 64  Eye of a mask. Arts Centre Melbourne, Performing Arts Collection

Figure 65  Eye in charcoal

Figure 66  Eye in mosaic

Figure 67  A large crab in Mora’s studio

Figure 68  A soft sculpture with a figure painted on the dragon’s body (private collection)

Figure 69  Mora’s signature with several dates until painting’s completion

Figure 70  Mora’s signature in mosaic tiles (Flinders Street mural)

Figure 71  Mora’s signature under a soft sculpture

Figure 72  Mora’s signature woven in tapestry

Figure 73  Mora’s signature embroidered

Figure 74  *The Bacchae*, 1980, Playbox. Masks, costumes and set by Mirka Mora (Photo Jeff Busby)

Figure 75  Mirka Mora, *Perth Festival Mural* (detail) 1983, synthetic polymer paint on tin, 6 panels, each 120 x 280 cm (approx.), Heide Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Paul Swain 2015

Figure 76  *Tympan* 1977 (detail by Mirka Mora)
Oil on canvas  Purchased 1991. Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Collection: Queensland Art Gallery
© QAG

Figure 77  Mirka Mora, Dr Smyth’s mural, 1977, (detail), Peter McCallum Cancer Centre, Melbourne
Figure 78  Mora with her $800 book *Needlework through the ages*, by Symonds and Preece

Figure 79  Mirka Mora, *Curlews in the garden*, National Australia Bank, Melbourne

Figure 80  Mirka Mora, *Curlews in the garden*, detail with metallic threads

Figure 81  Mirka Mora, Flinders Street mosaic, detail with gold tiles

Figure 82  Mirka Mora at work on the Flinders Street mural, 1986 (photo courtesy © Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive / State Library of Victoria)

Figure 83  ‘Mirka Mora at the unveiling of her mural at Flinders Street Station’, *The Age*, 20 September 1986, p.6

Figure 84  Mirka Mora, *Untitled*, circa 1959, (detail), artist's collection

Figure 85  Mirka Mora, *The bunyip’s paradise* 1978 (detail), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Crafts Board Collection donated by the Australia Council 1982, © Mirka Mora

Figure 86  Annette Messager, *Doomestic*, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, © Adagp, Paris, Credit photographique Philippe Joffre/Parisienne de Photographie

Figure 87  Niki de St Phalle, *Le Rêve de Diane*, Santee, Niki Charitable Art Foundation

Figure 88  Jane Zweibel, *Midlife Mermaid #4*, private collection, Photo courtesy of the artist

Figure 89  A page of Mora’s diary from 1983

Figure 90  Mirka Mora, *Lady with Horns*, private collection

Figure 91  Mirka Mora, *Lady with Horns*, private collection, other side

Figure 92  Mirka Mora, *Lady with Horns*, private collection, detail of the base

Figure 93  Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*. Before treatment, partial collapsing towards the blue side

Figure 94  Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*. Detail before treatment, with creases and paint losses

Figure 95  Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*. Detail before treatment, with creases and paint losses

Figure 96  Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*. Detail before treatment, with abrasions and grime

Figure 97  Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*. Detail before treatment, with artist’s fingerprints
Figure 98  Making a replica, step 1: drawing on the fabric and cutting; step 2: turning the shape over

Figure 99  Making a replica, step 3: stuffing the bust; step 4: stuffing the skirt with plaster

Figure 100  Asymmetry in the space

Figure 101  Making a replica, step 5: first coat; step 6: painting the surface

Figure 102  Testing treatment: creating paint losses, opening slit in the loss and inserting filling

Figure 103  Testing treatment: closing slit and filling with gesso

Figure 104  Testing treatment: after in-painting the loss, final state (general view and detail)

Figure 105  Treatment: restuffing through a slit in the waist

Figure 106  Treatment: restuffing the base of the horns through small slits

Figure 107  Treatment: closing the slits with adhesive, filling the losses

Figure 108  Treatment: closing the slits with adhesive, filling the losses

Figure 109  Mirka Mora, *Lady with Horns*, after treatment

Figure 110  Mirka Mora, *Lady with Horns*, after treatment

Figure 111  Replica and original after treatment

Figure 112  *Untitled* (Dancing girl on the sea) 1971, fabric, paint, foam stuffing, 70 x 49 x 10 cm, Heide Museum of Modern Art Archives, Gift of Marzena Walicka 2010

Figure 113  *Untitled* (Dancing girl on the sea) 1971, fabric, paint, foam stuffing, 70 x 49 x 10 cm, Heide Museum of Modern Art Archives, Gift of Marzena Walicka 2010. Other side

Figure 114  *Untitled* (Dancing girl on the sea) 1971, fabric, paint, foam stuffing, 70 x 49 x 10 cm, Heide Museum of Modern Art Archives, Gift of Marzena Walicka 2010 (detail)

Figure 115  *Untitled* (Dancing girl on the sea) 1971, fabric, paint, foam stuffing, 70 x 49 x 10 cm, Heide Museum of Modern Art Archives, Gift of Marzena Walicka 2010 (detail)

Figure 116  Angel

Figure 117  Crab

Figure 118  Mermaid
Figure 119  Bird
Figure 120  Hotel bell boy
Figure 121  Angel on its display/storage stand
Figure 122  Angel, display stand, rod and base in a storage tray
Figure 123  Bird on its display stand (detail)
Figure 124  Hotel bell boy on its display/storage stand
Figure 125  Mermaid on its display/storage stand
Figure 126  Crab on its display/storage stand
Figure 127  Mora looking at the display stands prototypes, September 2015
List of third party copyright material

Mirka Mora, *The enchanted garden*, 1978, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Crafts Board Collection donated by the Australia Council 1982, © Mirka Mora (Figure 11)

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery, © QAG (Figure 15)

Mirka Mora, *Perth Festival Mural* 1983, synthetic polymer paint on tin, 6 panels, each 120 x 280 cm (approx.), detail right panel. Heide Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Paul Swain 2015, © Mirka Mora (Figure 16)

Mirka Mora, *Painting for a nostalgic traveller*, mixed media on paper, 1966, Collection W Mora Galleries, © Mirka Mora (Figure 22)

Mirka Mora, *Circus*, acrylic and casein paint on plastic foil, made in public during Adelaide Festival, 1982 archive, actual location unknown, © Mirka Mora, (Figure 24)

Mirka Mora, *Mask of Medea*, 1979, (detail), Arts Centre Melbourne, Performing Arts Collection, © Mirka Mora (Figure 29)

Mirka Mora, *The bunyip's paradise* 1978 (detail), National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Crafts Board Collection donated by the Australia Council 1982, © Mirka Mora (Figure 33)

Mirka Mora, *Perth Festival Mural* (detail) 1983, synthetic polymer paint on tin, 6 panels, each 120 x 280 cm (approx.), Heide Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Paul Swain 2015, © Mirka Mora (Figure 75)

Mirka Mora, *Curlews in the garden*, Tapestry, National Australia Bank, Melbourne, © Mirka Mora (Figure 79)

Rennie Ellis, *Mirka Mora at work on the Flinders Street mural*, 1986 (photo courtesy © Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive / State Library of Victoria) (Figure 82)

Mirka Mora, *The bunyip's paradise* 1978 (detail), National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra, Crafts Board Collection donated by the Australia Council 1982, © Mirka Mora (Figure 85)

Annette Messager, *Doomestic*, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, © Adagp, Paris, Credit photographique Philippe Joffre/Parisienne de Photographie, (Figure 86)

Niki de St Phalle, *Le Rêve de Diane*, Santee, Niki Charitable Art Foundation (Figure 87)

Jane Zweibel, *Midlife Mermaid #4*, private collection, Photo courtesy of the artist (Figure 88)

Mirka Mora, *Untitled (Dancing girl on the sea)* 1971, fabric, paint, foam stuffing, 70 x 49 x 10 cm, Heide Museum of Modern Art Archives, Gift of Marzena Walicka 2010, © Mirka Mora (Figure 112)

Mirka Mora, *Untitled (Dancing girl on the sea)* 1971 Other side, fabric, paint, foam stuffing, 70 x 49 x 10 cm, Heide Museum of Modern Art Archives, Gift of Marzena Walicka 2010, © Mirka Mora (Figure 113)

Mirka Mora, *Untitled (Dancing girl on the sea)* 1971, detail, fabric, paint, foam stuffing, 70 x 49 x 10 cm, Heide Museum of Modern Art Archives, Gift of Marzena Walicka 2010, © Mirka Mora (Figure 114)

Mirka Mora, *Untitled (Dancing girl on the sea)* 1971, detail, fabric, paint, foam stuffing, 70 x 49 x 10 cm, Heide Museum of Modern Art Archives, Gift of Marzena Walicka 2010, © Mirka Mora (Figure 115)
Introduction

Art conservation is a dynamic field constantly questioning its relation to art and artists. Having recently expanded from a scientific, materials-based discipline to a more meaning-based activity that includes social and anthropological perspectives on works of art, the conservation profession offers several new trends of reflection, amongst them the study of individual artists’ practice (Munoz Vinas 2005). A key tool in the conservation of contemporary art is the artist’s interview. It provides opportunities to improve our knowledge of all ‘intangible’ aspects of works of art, such as the choices made by artists in terms of materials, their meaning into the creative process and in the future life of the work. The story of the creation of art within a personal, social and historical context also becomes an increasingly prominent aspect and source of information for the conservation decision-making processes (Beerkens et al. 2012). Informed by oral history’s techniques of ‘life interview’ as framed by Kelly (2004) and Trapley (2004), and by ethnographic practices as described by Coffey (1999) or Madden (2010), the ethical practice of conservation has begun to include respect of the artist’s intent and of the meanings of works as an integral part of the preservation of cultural heritage. Such an approach is well cited in the conservation literature, particularly by Mancusi Ungaro (2005), Beerkens et al. (2012) and Wharton (2010).

This thesis explores the materials and techniques of French-Australian artist Mirka Mora, born in Paris in 1928, one of Melbourne’s best-known artists, and will examine the broader implications of her material choices and practices. Mora’s unique place in the city’s social and artistic circles has much to do with her European migrant status, her central role in Melbourne’s artistic world since the 1950s, together with her important production of public works that have become city landmarks,¹ and her extensive public engagement through workshops, classes and artist talks. For example, Mora’s painted tram, commissioned by the Ministry of Transport in 1978 as part of the Painted Trams Project, ran in the city until 1986. The murals in Flinders Street Station in the city of Melbourne, or in Tolarno Hotel, Readings Bookshop and Dog’s Bar in the Melbourne suburb of St Kilda, as well as the mosaic seat at the Pier entrance, also in St

¹ Murals in Flinders Street Station, Melbourne; Tolarno murals, St Kilda; Acland Street Readings bookshop, St Kilda; mosaic in St Kilda Pier, St Kilda; Dog’s Bar mural, St Kilda
Kilda, illustrate Mora’s public presence; her notoriety is reinforced by her regular exhibitions at Heide Museum of Modern Art and at William Mora Galleries, Melbourne. Mora’s work features in several public collections across Australia, such as the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), National Gallery of Australia (NGA), Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Art Gallery of Ballarat (AGB), Ararat Regional Gallery and Heide Museum of Modern Art (Heide). Her work also figures in numerous private collections, in Australia and overseas. Her art resists classification within any single artistic movement, and is immediately identifiable by its distinctive imagery, which involves a myriad of human figures and mythological creatures, angels, animals, trees and plants interlaced in an imaginary space. Some of Mora’s public works are registered with the National Trust of Australia—the Flinders street mural has been registered since 1994 to National Trust Regional Register (No B3006); Tolarno murals were registered at regional level in 2009 (VHR H2207), which marks their historic and artistic significance at regional and national level.

Because of her Jewish background, Mora’s life and her education were disrupted in 1942, when she was deported with her family to a camp on the outskirts of Paris, from which they were saved by her father. After the war, she trained in drama for two years in Paris, and married at the age of nineteen. At twenty-two, she immigrated to Australia with her husband Georges Mora and their baby son Philippe. The couple would become a feature in the Melbourne arts and culinary scene of the time. While actively contributing to the revival of the Contemporary Artists Society (CAS) and the creation of a dynamic artistic culture in Melbourne, alongside arts patrons John and Sunday Reed, Georges and Mirka Mora ran successively three cafes and restaurants that became meeting points for the local art world. The first one was Mirka café, located in Exhibition Street, from 1954 to 1956; this was followed by Balzac restaurant in East Melbourne, from 1957 to 1965; and then Tolarno hotel and restaurant, from 1965 to 1974, the latter venue including also an art gallery. But the Mora couple eventually separated in 1970 and pursued their respective careers as an art dealer (Georges) and an artist (Mirka).

---

2 Education par le Jeu et l’Art Dramatique, Paris, 1946. Created by Jean Vilar, Jean Louis Barrault, Roger Blin among others, its aim was to lead students to self-control for their personal creation (from Page,C. Pratiques théâtrales dans l’éducation en France au XXe siècle: Alléniation ou émancipation? - Études littéraires : Artois Presse Université, 2010,
Now aged eighty-eight, Mora continues to paint daily in her home-studio in Melbourne. Cherished by the media for her bohemian personality, she regularly features in Melbourne’s media – on radio, television and newspapers. But she has also participated in projects of social activism, as when she was one of the interviewees in a series on Jewish survivors of Nazi camps (Mora 2012b), and when she embraced public causes in her neighbourhood’s local life, where her presence always attracted public notice. This rich life that encompasses the many facets of Mora means she is a very important character in Melbourne’s history, recognised by institutions and community alike: she was made an Officier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government in 2002, and selected as one of Victoria’s twenty five ‘living treasures’ by the Herald Sun (4 October 2014), alongside other artists, arts patrons, and sports and media personalities.

As a hard working artist, Mora’s artistic output is considerable. Her imagery develops across a broad and innovative range of materials and techniques, from painting and drawing to soft sculpture, embroidery, tapestry and mosaic, and on a scale from small to very large. Such a wide range of media denotes her curiosity, her facility in navigating across techniques, and her ability to successfully combine technical processes in her artistic practice and works of art. Despite this, while her socio-historical role and her contribution to the arts in Australia have been the subject of many publications, her works have been less examined from a cultural material perspective that seeks links between artistic practice, material choices and usage, and cultural context. A review of the literature on Mora highlights the limited scholarly engagement with the materiality of her work and its critical analysis by researchers.

It is the intent of this thesis, therefore, to explore this significant feature of Mora’s art from a material-based perspective on her creative production. By linking the media employed and the processes of making art to the broader context of Mora’s life and the

---


4 L’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (Order of the Arts and the Letters) was created in 1957 by the French Ministry of Culture. It rewards persons who significantly contributed to the enrichment of the French cultural inheritance. It has three grades, in increasing order; Chevalier (Knight), Officier(Officer) and Commandeur (Commander).
historical period, the study intends to explore the meanings carried by the materiality of the works, and how they can contribute to a better understanding of Mora’s art. For conservation, this has implications at the decision-making level. Conservation decisions not only depend on the works, but also on contexts, and on a range of influences such as social and political movements, artistic fashions, theoretical ideas and the state of current scientific and technical knowledge. Decision making in conservation thus requires frameworks to assess the works’ significance and determine how best to preserve it.

As a method of inquiry, this research has developed an object-based collaborative method, using the making of reconstructions of works of art and their assessment by the artist as a way of knowing about the fabrication of the works. Although making processes and verbal exchanges are by nature heavily influenced by personalities, the central place of objects such as existing works of art and replicas made during the research, and their use as material evidence throughout the discussions, assists in locating a greater degree of objectivity in this approach. The material evidence provides a framework to evaluate the links between the artist’s modes of making and the social and artistic movements of the time, which in turn influences the future decisions about the conservation of these works and of what they embody. It will be argued that this material-based perspective greatly contributes to the existing biographical and historical knowledge of the artist, and is essential for the conservation of her works in the present and in future times.

There is no shortage of research material on Mora’s life and career, generated in the media throughout her life by her active role in public representation. The archival sources include newspapers articles dating from the 1950s to the present, audio and audio-visual interviews from the 1960s to the present time, exhibition catalogues (group and solo) and three books: a monograph called *Mirka*, written by Ulli Beier in 1980, the artist’s autobiography *Wicked but virtuous* (2000), and *Love and clutter* (2003), a book she wrote on her personal collections of objects. Mora has kept all press clippings relating to herself in a large-format scrapbook, which was consulted in addition to documentation held by the State Library of Victoria, the State Library of Western Australia and the Adelaide Festival Centre. Press articles from the 1950s wove their stories around the youthful and pretty French migrant, reviewing Mora’s exhibitions
more seriously over the years as she developed artistically through the 1970s. These reviews give greater insight into the critical reception of her work at the time, and into the historical context of the art scene.

Reading them with hindsight shows their frequent gender bias and the prevalence of clichés about techniques perceived as feminine, a point discussed in Chapter Five. Starting even before she became a significant figure of Melbourne’s artistic and social scene, the feature articles about Mora often celebrated her as a person, focusing on her life more than her work. Examples such as ‘Innocent and ‘orribly naughty’ (Graham 1973) or ‘Mirka Mora: the indelible artiste’ (Romano 2012) mainly focus on her bohemian life in the 1950s and 1960s and on her famous artist friends. The same happens in television interviews such as George Negus Tonight on 15 July 2004 (Mora 2004), or Enough Rope with Andrew Denton on 23 July 2009 (Mora 2009), which are interested in her personal history. Newspapers often refer to Mora, for example in The Age series ‘What I’ve learnt’, where she appeared on 8 March 2003 and 6 March 2004 (Beck 2003; Blashki-Marks 2004) with a series of short anecdotes illustrating moments of her life. She also appears in magazines such as Frankie (Francis King 2013) and in online magazines such as The Design Files (Feagins 2014) or Samara Magazine (Romano 2012), where the focus is mostly on her personality. Other articles such as ‘Warehouse fantasia’ (unidentified magazine clipping) centre the story on her house/studio, with its unusual amount of furniture, books, dolls, works of art, and art materials. However, there are also portraits that seek more insight into her work. An example is ‘A morning with Mirka Mora’, a long article in Melbourne Chronicle (Fein 1990-91) that includes her reflections about the act of creating art, which are interesting to compare with her autobiography, written 10 years later. There seems to be a consensual opinion between curators Kendrah Morgan and Max Delany, and art dealer William Mora about the fact that this focus on Mora’s personal life and its perpetuation through the public eye is at the expense of a critical appreciation of her artistic practice (Morgan 2013, Delany 2014, Mora W 2013).

A number of audio interviews with Mora, held in the archives of various libraries, are of a different nature. Most of them are about 25 minutes in length and belong to the National Library of Australia’s Oral History program, which also includes a 1983 interview with Georges Mora (Mora 1965a; Mora 1965b; Mora 2012). In this group of
interview, one very lengthy account stands out, recorded over several sessions in 1984 and 1987. Mora talks for 13 hours to Barbara Blackman, a close friend who was married to the painter Charles Blackman (b. 1928) during the 1950s and 1960s (Mora 1984). This interview is an informal and fluid conversation, with both participants reminiscing and sometimes contradicting each other, and is oriented by the emotive responses of Mora and Blackman. The interview provides an example of a narrative embedded within a specific historical and social context. It also contains several instances of precise technical information, these details being sought out by Barbara Blackman. This indicates that Blackman, who aimed to cover all the important aspects of Mora’s life and artistic practice, had already touched upon the central place of materials and techniques in Mora’s art. In all these interviews, which will be described in greater detail in Chapter One, the focus is mainly historical, but they are also enriched with many anecdotes, some of which also feature in press interviews, thus forming the ‘architecture’ of Mora’s public image.

Apart from the popular press and print and television media, the corpus of written sources relative to fine arts and exhibition catalogues is relatively sparse. It includes two solo exhibition catalogues by Max Delany (1999) and Kendrah Morgan (2010), and a monograph by Ulli Beier (1980). Mora also features in historical accounts on Melbourne in the 1950s and 1960s period in Melbourne (Catalano 1981; Clark 1997; Hart 2001; Heathcote 1995; Kirby 1992; May 2001; McCaughey 2003). Most of these accounts however focus on the Moras as a couple, and on the influence of their European cultural background on the artistic circles of Melbourne, where they championed bohemianism and ‘art on the edge’ (Palmer 2004, p. 223). The Mora couple’s historic role in reviving the CAS or in the emergence of Melbourne’s culinary scene is the object of study, while Mora’s artistic practice is only mentioned in these sources.

Barbara Blackman gives an insider’s perspective in her essay ‘The Good Ship Mora, Melbourne in the fifties’, published in Meanjin in 1996, while the following year,
Deborah Clark (1997) recounts the story of the couple’s gallery, cafes and restaurants, in a book chapter abundantly illustrated by photographs of Mora. Critical analysis of these essays shows their reliance on the artist’s word as a main source of information. Authors who have interviewed Mora in the past (Beier 1980; Clark 1997) became the secondary sources for later historical accounts such as May’s history of Melbourne’s coffee culture, *Espresso!* (2001), which also uses Mora’s autobiography as a source. The relatively limited group of sources available to reconstruct and cross-verify information is formed by Heathcote (1995), Catalano (1981), the papers of John Reed (1905-1980) kept in the State Library of Victoria, and newspaper clippings of the period, which underlines the active role Mora plays in her own public representation.

Mora is nevertheless included in a number of art historical studies framed around feminist issues. Sandy Kirby’s *Sight Lines; Women’s art and feminist perspective in Australia* mentions for instance ‘her pursuit in the field of fibre art’ as ‘particularly important’ (Kirby 1992, p. 92); for Kirby, this was remarkable in the context of the period, which she describes as particularly detrimental for women artists, who were scarcely visible and ignored by most major texts (Kirby 1992, p.9). Mora is also the subject of a chapter in Margaret McGuire’s publication about Australian art, *All things opposite*, which notes that her art is ‘misread, subsumed by the spectacle of her personality’ (McGuire 1995, p. 83). The text highlights Mora’s achievements as an artist, woman, mother, muse and lover, and the development of a style ‘based on metamorphosis and the everyday realities of motherhood and work…[that]… flew in the face of contemporary fashion’ (McGuire1995, p. 92). Similarly, Susan Sheridan mentions Mora extensively in her essay *Cold war, Home front: Australian women writers and artists in the 1950s* (Sheridan 2002). This distinctively feminist recognition has influenced this thesis’ orientation in investigating Mora’s materials’ significance in relation to social and political context, as explored in Chapter Five.

Two art historical MA theses, by Pamela Irving (1986) on the imagery of angels and Diana Fagan (1987) on the painted tram scheme in Melbourne, have provided unpublished interviews with the artist. In each case, the interview with Mora is complemented by interviews with other artists or personalities, which gives a wealth of information about Mora and her art. They also attest to Mora’s willingness to make herself available to researchers and her active role in her public fashioning, as noted
earlier. Fagan’s thesis examines the project ‘Transporting Art’, initiated by the Victorian Ministry of the Arts in 1978, which saw thirty-six W-class trams painted by artists over a period of fifteen years. The first tram was painted by Mora. The project has been revived in 2013; each year since then, eight selected artists have decorated trams for the period of Melbourne Festival, but these projects are now digitally printed on a film, and only temporarily adhered to the trams.

In 1978, the artists painted the trams themselves. By focusing on the specific circumstances of the commissions to the artists, Fagan’s thesis gives useful insight into the conditions and context of a major art commission for Mora, with a series of questions about her inspiration, the technical realisation of the concept, and the financial conditions. The same questions were posed to different artists, which provides interesting comparisons between their various approaches. Irving’s thesis has a greater focus on images, and the interviews in it offer oral history accounts of the 1950s and 1960s and the Heide circle by some of their key actors (Barrett Reid, John Yule, and Mora). Irving’s thoughtful visual analysis of Mora’s iconography and sources is combined with insights into how she was perceived within her contemporary artistic milieu.

Following Mora’s 1999 retrospective exhibition at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, the curator Deborah Hart wrote a scholarly article in *Arts and Australia* that examines the close relationships between the artist’s art and life, particularly the influence of the war years and the legacy of Mora’s interrupted childhood (Hart 2000, p. 249). She traces the influence of mythology, folk art and the idea of metamorphosis in Mora’s art through the various media used by the artist, and highlights the poetic invention characteristic of her works (Hart 2000, p. 251). A year later, Mora was one of six painters in the group exhibition *In Context; Australian Women Modernists*, with a catalogue written by Paula Furby (2001). However, apart from Bianca McCullough’s catalogue of *Australian Naïve Painters* (McCullough 1977), Mora is absent from major books on Australian art history; she is not mentioned in any of the successive editions of the seminal *Australian Painting* by Bernard Smith (1st edition 1962, updated 1971, 1992 and 2001), while her husband Georges is cited twice as a major and influential art dealer. More surprisingly, she is also absent from Janine Burke’s *Field of Vision, A Decade of Change: Women's Art in the Seventies* (1990). These omissions confirm the
curatorial opinion mentioned earlier that Mora’s art has not been addressed critically until recently, with issues of gender and celebrity possibly playing a role in this situation.

The repetitions and gaps into these primary and secondary sources reveal an emphasis on certain perspectives used in representing Mora’s life and career. The ‘French migrant’ and the ‘pretty and mischievous woman’ are often referred to in writings, while her artistic contribution to the period since 1970 is not so widely acknowledged, apart from the authors mentioned above. This point will be discussed further in Chapter Five. Whilst the critical review of the press and audio-visual sources shows that they are often centred on the artist’s personality, her use of techniques and materials is examined in the context of the feminine, which again appears to be a selective representation of Mora’s art. This biased portrayal has prompted greater inquiry into feminism and gender theory shaping some of the ideas developed in this thesis.

When assessing this representation of Mora as an archetypal bohemian artist, a notable exception is the series of videos realised by Yad Vashem in 2012, entitled ‘Holocaust survivors’ testimonies’. In these videos, Mora is considered in her capacity as a witness and actor in the history of Jewish deportation in France. This part of her life has been examined more fully in recent years, as the artist has been more willing to discuss a period that she actively suppressed for many decades. This also occurred at a time when there is a shift in interest towards Mora’s artistic practice, which is balanced more equally with the public’s perception of her social persona, even if her work continues to somewhat lack commercial value compared to her male modernist peers. For example, in 2016, Menzies Art Brands’ database of artists shows differences in recorded auction prices that are up to one to nine, for comparable oil paintings by Mora and Charles Blackman (Menzies Art Brand 2016).

Mora has contributed to the literature on her career with two books. Her autobiography ‘Wicked but virtuous; my life’ is not a chronological account of her life but is instead

6 Trevor Graham’s movie Monsieur Mayonnaise, which premiered at Melbourne International Film Festival on 1 August 2016, recounts the inquiry by Philippe Mora on his father Georges Mora’s life as a member of the French Resistance. His mother Mirka Mora features in many sequences and recalls her own experience of deportation, linking it to themes in her paintings. The film’s future career will probably trigger more interest in this period of Mora’s life.
structured around themes deployed across time: ‘my restaurants’, ‘my Melbourne’, ‘my Paris and St Quay Portrieux’, ‘my men’, ‘my children’, ‘my work’, and ‘my workshops’ (Mora 2000). These chapters contain autobiographical facts mixed with personal reflections, memories of historical events and persons, and technical information about some particular works or about her general artistic practice. As with any autobiography, it needs to be read critically, due to the tensions raised by the private construction of identities (Sandino 2007), and the author’s curated vision of his/her life that may conflate the narrated self of the past with the narrating self of the present (Portelli 1998, quoted in Thomson 2011).

However, Mora’s autobiography is not only based on her recollections, but also on her diaries, which helped her to refresh her memories with a reasonably accurate representation of the true facts, as they are daily reports contemporary to the events (Mora 2013, pers. comm., 15 April). It is equally interesting to examine Mora’s personal selection of events for this book, and what events she omitted. Her second book, *Love and clutter* (2003) consists of themes such as cats, dolls or handbags that are dear to her heart, and which she actively collects. The book is illustrated by drawings and photographs of her personal objects, with the text recounting the stories attached to them (Mora 2003). Such themes provide a comparative point of reference and are useful when verifying other similar stories from different sources.

Ulli Beier’s monograph *Mirka* (1980) expands on the iconography and symbols that appear in Mora’s work, with an interesting chapter titled ‘Mirka at work’. It details her creative processes, specifically Mora’s use of sketches, diaries, books and images, and contains a wealth of anecdotes taken from the author’s conversations with the artist. Limited in time to the period preceding 1980, it is more focused on the soft sculptures and embroideries that were Mora’s primary activities at the time. Richly illustrated with general and detailed photographs of works, as well as passages ‘deciphering’ the symbols used in the artist’s work, this is the first serious study of Mora’s work in her career, and has certainly contributed to her increasing recognition and fame. As this book predates Mora’s autobiography by 20 years, it is worthwhile re-examining both sources to see the consistency and variations around recurrent themes.
The reference to some key events, such as the release from the deportation camp or a lovers’ meeting, in Beier’s monograph, as well as the autobiography and press interviews past and recent, underlines their importance in Mora’s life. The link to her artistic production resides in the imagery, such as the fences that divide the compositions being reminiscent of the camp’s fence, or the lovers’ embraces occurring as a recurrent theme. According to oral history researchers, persistent memories are consolidated through storytelling; while time and memory impact on the facts, and create some discrepancies, this does not necessarily alter the narrative, but instead contributes to the making of myths around the facts (Thomson 2011). This description aligns well with Mora’s talent for storytelling, and her manner of blending together her own personality and the various mythologies she studies in her art. Her personal myths, as an artist, a child-wife, a mischievous animal-lover for example, are also consolidated in most of her media interviews, underlining her agency in the building of her own public image. The concept of agency as raised here is an important feature of Mora’s artistic practice, and will be fully examined in Chapter Five of this thesis.

The three exhibition catalogues devoted to Mora’s career, by Delany (1999), Morgan (2011) and Smith & Morgan (2014) are detailed studies of her art, highlighting how ‘Mirka’s art plays between the poles of intuition and experiment on one hand, and erudition and intelligence on the other’ (Delany 1999, p. 31). Delany sums up Mora’s art with an appropriate choice of words that highlights how techniques and materials are intrinsic to her art: ‘Embroidered through Mirka’s art is an elaborately discursive tenor, a questioning self-portrait sustained over fifty years in styles as various as her mediums’ (Delany 1999, p. 37) (author’s emphasis in italics). Delany’s catalogue includes essays by other artistic figures, including Mora’s son Philippe (b. 1949), and many photographs informing Mora’s practice such as sketches and drawings for bigger realisations.

Drawing links with local history, Morgan’s catalogue includes an interview with the artist about her relationship with John and Sunday Reed, founders of the Museum of Modern Art, which provides an insight into this early period of Mora’s career (Morgan 2011). The third catalogue, printed for the exhibition From the home of Mirka Mora shown at Heide in 2014, includes a short essay by Jason Smith and Kendrah Morgan underlining the diversity of her literary inspirations and her ‘boundless technical
explorations’ (Smith & Morgan, p. 7). These catalogues begin to engage with processes and materials, and already allude to their place into Mora’s artistic practice, which shows the timeliness of this research, which will explore the topic more comprehensively.

All the primary and secondary sources presented so far provide a comprehensive overview of Mora’s life and art but in no way embed this knowledge into the works’ materiality. It is appropriate to now re-evaluate these studies for their perspective on the art’s materiality, which will require an in-depth investigation of the modes of production of Mora’s works of art, along with object-based documentation and analysis, and Mora’s active participation in the re-evaluation of her artistic practices. Mora is a highly suitable subject for such a study, due to the range of her media, and to her idiosyncratic way of using materials that often takes liberties with conventional techniques. In addition, material issues of degradation are beginning to arise in her oeuvre, notably in her soft sculptures and in her public works of art that mostly date from the late 1980s. To address this, one of the thesis arguments is that an interpretation of the meaning of materials in Mora’s oeuvre can greatly assist future conservation decisions.

In the fields of conservation and art history, it is now well established that understanding an artist’s working processes is as important as identifying the materials themselves (Carlyle 1995; Beerkens 2012). Therefore, a material-based interpretation of Mora’s works of art is proposed, closely involving the artist in a participatory approach that includes in-depth interviews, access to the artist’s studio and the consultation of private diaries never seen previously by researchers. Through a transparent documentation process, this thesis records Mora’s materials, and how they were transformed to meet the needs of her creative mind. The study’s material-based focus brings a different perspective to Mora’s oeuvre, illuminating the creative process, the physical engagement that characterises the act of making art, as well as the way her works relate to their social and artistic context. Mora is strongly committed to her work and its legacy, and was thus fully willing to participate in a research project that reconstructs her practice from the works’ materiality. Furthermore, collaborating with Mora at this time of her life has had many benefits. At 88 years of age, Mora has a
holistic vision of her career in terms of achievements, her desires for future creations and her artistic legacy, which helps to provide a broader understanding of her work.

The research is oriented towards conservation, intending to gather a comprehensive body of technical knowledge about the artist, related to the time and place of production, and to demonstrate how this knowledge is embedded in the works’ materiality. The thesis’ argument is that conservation needs to acknowledge the web of relationships and emotions linked to works of art, and take them into account in the decision-making process, in order to insert material conservation into the cultural history of a place and time. Although the conservation sources have not been presented and discussed to their fullest at this point, they will be discussed in Chapter One, showing the benefits of a study into an artist’s material practices in the conservation of his or her oeuvre.

This research is not intended to be a catalogue raisonné of Mora’s work; however, a significant number of her mural works have been investigated, shedding light on that distant but very intense period of creativity in her mid-career up to the 1990s. This investigation has rediscovered one large work of public art dated 1983, which had been kept in private storage for the next 30 years and almost forgotten. This painting has now been donated to Heide Museum of Modern Art, where it will enhance the corpus of works by Mora, mainly dating from the pre-1980 period. At the end of this research, another mural from the late 1950s was rediscovered during renovations in the former Balzac restaurant in Melbourne. Other murals from the 1970s have been documented in the thesis, and the technical information about them collated and verified by the artist, which allows a better and more complete vision of Mora’s production of mural works.

This project places special emphasis on Mora’s production of soft sculptures, which to date have not been studied in detail, but are beginning to show signs of damage from ageing. The methods of research adopted combine oral history with technical reconstructions of sculptures, conservation documentation, technical examination and regular feedback from the artist. Borrowing methods of qualitative analysis from the social sciences, the thesis also takes inspiration from material culture studies to examine

---

7 The work is a frieze made of 6 panels of circa 1.5 x 3.2m each, the entire work being nearly 20m long
the relationships between Mora’s techniques and the broader context of twentieth-century feminism, the craft movement and public art policies and practice. In addition, some sections of this thesis are inspired by phenomenological studies of the act of making, in order to argue that Mora embeds many concepts linked to tradition, knowledge, gender and time in her various modes of making art, as well as using material culture to construct a public image that has proved extremely effective in terms of reputation building.

The thesis is structured in three parts: Part A explains the methodology and gives an historical timeline of Mora’s life, and of the Australian art scene during the same period; part B, ‘Reading through materials’, explores the significant themes carried by the materiality of the works, determined by this research, and supports them with evidence. Part C relates this interpretation to the conservation of Mora’s works of art.

In part A, the first chapter of the thesis establishes the methodologies used for this research, centrally framed around cultural materials conservation and object-based technical examination and documentation; the methods of investigation are borrowed from the fields of ethnology, social and oral history, art history, material culture studies and conservation. The second chapter examines Mora’s life and career and relates them to the historical artistic and social context of the time, in order to better understand the importance of autobiography in Mora’s art. It also looks at the artist’s public reputation, in its historic and geographical framework, through the existing written and audio-visual sources. This chapter provides a framework for cross verification and re-evaluation of material perspectives and the impact of the artist’s personal historic or economic context upon her choice of technical processes.

Part B (Chapters Three, Four and Five) offers a new reading of Mora’s artistic production, drawing on material culture studies to establish the essential role played by the technique and materials in her oeuvre. In these three chapters, some of the artist’s materials and working processes are explored in more detail. Diaries entries and quotations from interviews provide evidence of the creative processes, their meticulous preparation and execution, and their interdependency, which underlines how these techniques inform each other and are part of a broader theme of colour exploration. Chapter Three explores the role of materials in relation to the artistic traditions
embraced by the artist, and how technical knowledge still allows creativity through idiosyncratic merges of processes. It also investigates the function of materials in Mora’s personal historic and economic context, and the multiple purposes they serve, across many realisations that range from the prestigious to the intimate.

The relationships between the techniques and their interactions with the artist’s physical body are explored in Chapter Four. Mora’s artistic versatility is illustrated by her choice of different materials for her realisations, adapted to the intended use and united by a sense of colour. Although fiercely defensive of her creative autonomy, Mora has been able to tailor her practice to accommodate greater access and use, producing masks light enough to be worn by actors and sustain a season of performances, but beautiful (and resistant) enough to be collected by museums. Likewise, she has created painted puppets that have performed around the world, a painted tram that was part of the city’s landscape for several years, as well as painted soft sculptures that all make up part of people’s lives. The list also includes mosaics, embroideries and friezes painted on plastic, and is witness to Mora’s constant preoccupation with interweaving art and life, communicating through her art in its multifaceted materiality, within the broader context of community arts in the 1980s.

In Chapter Five, Mora’s use of materials as communication tools is explored more closely; they were essential to Mora’s identity making and in the construction of her artistic and personal self. The chapter examines how their omnipresence in Mora’s places of work and life is a clear indicator of their primary role in her definition as an artist. In particular, the symbolic meanings of textile materials and the impact of gender on her creative process are outlined, drawing on feminist history to seek better understanding of the significance attached to the act of making art with textile, the impact of the materials chosen on the process, and the related public perception of the artist’s production.

As noted earlier, Mora has strong agency in making a performance of her life through materiality; this trait is compared with other prominent women artists, and similarities are drawn with her contemporaries, the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and the French artist Niki de St Phalle (1930-2002). Examining other women artists such as Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), Annette Messager (b.1943), Tracey Emin (b.1963) or
Jane Zweibel (b.1959) will highlight the significance invested in materials traditionally perceived as ‘feminine’ but intentionally used in a subversive manner to address these women’s vision of art and life. In the same chapter, Mora’s involvement with the community during her teaching career will also be explored through the lens of materiality, particularly the way she engaged with people by sharing her techniques, a communication skill that greatly contributed to her reputation as a charismatic teacher and archetypal artist.

The last part of Chapter Five examines Mora’s verbal characterisation of her materials. A close attention to the language employed to characterise her techniques will illuminate some inaccuracies, whose significance will be explored in regard to Mora’s oeuvre. The artist’s vocabulary reflects the historical context of the time, for instance referencing the renewed interest in public murals, which became a prominent artistic insertion into the urban landscape in the 1980s. Likewise, the feminist movement and interest for folk art prompted the rise of textile works in the arts. The choice of words used by the critics and curators in their written descriptions of Mora’s works will sometimes be found inaccurate, referring to the appearance of the works or their most spectacular traits rather than to the actual materials and techniques used. This paragraph examines the role played by this particular use of language in the building of the artist’s reputation.

The third part of the thesis, Chapters Six and Seven, explores the way in which this interpretation of the meaning of Mora’s materials can assist in the conservation of her works of art. After reviewing the existing literature on material significance in the field of conservation, Chapter Six examines the specific contexts in which conservation practice is challenged, such as living religious heritage and art in use, and how this reflection could be relevant to Mora’s case. The practice of making reconstructions, a research tool used in technical art history, was adapted to the analysis of Mora’s soft sculptures; the results are evaluated in terms of their benefits to conservation and to technical art history, drawing positive conclusions in both categories. These findings are evaluated against models of decision-making in conservation that illustrate the current

---

8 The murals were often carrying mixed artistic and political messages (Geoff Hogg’s Builders Workers Mural in Cato St, Hawthorn, Elizabeth Mc Kinnon’s Marybyrnong mural in Footscray).
international approaches in this professional field. Five models of reflection are discussed, in terms of their relevance and usefulness for the case of Mora’s work.

Applying models into practice, Chapter Seven addresses the degradation problems of the soft sculptures through three case studies that trace three different decision-making pathways. These provide potential options for the current and future care of this part of Mora’s oeuvre, recognising that works of art can be approached from different perspectives, each of them having a different implication for their predicted future conservation, the context of which is presently unknown. These three case studies, all reviewed and approved by the artist, show the importance of structuring the process of decision-making within a strong theoretical framework. At the same time, they illustrate the open-ended range of options that conservation can provide, and the fact that vastly different outcomes can all be sanctioned by the artist, provided that the proposal is well structured, creative and adaptable to each particular case. Overall, this layered analysis of the meaning of materials in Mora’s work provides new knowledge that will greatly assist future conservation approaches and decision-making frameworks. By broadening the vision of Mora’s art and bringing out the complex links between the materiality of the works and the cultural context of their production, it is intended to stimulate a conservator’s curiosity and imagination, and to provide best outcomes for future conservation of contemporary artists’ works.
Part A. Methodology and history
Chapter 1. Methodology

Introduction
The aim of this research is to address an important gap in the critical study of Mora’s work; there has been very little research on the wide range of materials and techniques that she has used over her career, a characteristic that differentiates her from many of her artist contemporaries such as Joy Hester, Charles Blackman or Laurence Hope. With conservation interest as a focal point for researching Mora’s materials and working processes, the aim of this thesis is to establish a material-based knowledge and interpretation of her art. Largely overlooked until now, this perspective can contribute to a better understanding of her artistic production. As this research is taking place within the broader conceptual framework of cultural materials preservation, the core methodology is grounded in the conservation discipline. Yet the thesis’ approach is also informed by related fields that provided theoretical and method-based frameworks. It will be shown that methods used in oral history and ethnography are very useful resources for fieldwork and for organising research in shared capacity, as well as for critical insight into the implications of building relationships with the subjects studied. The techniques used for in-depth interviews and for collaborative research into written sources and art collections also draw on these disciplines. The study also benefits from the recent reflections and literature on participatory conservation, which Dean Sully (2007) advocates as an engagement in the wider social network around conservation and likewise Glenn Wharton (2010) describes as an exploration of different versions of the past, to inform conservation decisions.

While these methods form a large part of the research, in this thesis they are mixed with other approaches such as technical art history and its study of realia\(^9\) and of works in progress in the studio, which have been closely observed and documented from a technical perspective. The making of replicas, or reconstructions,\(^10\) which are used for

\(^9\) Realia describe the objects found in artists’ studios that are related to their work; they generally comprise tools, art supplies, pieces of furniture, books, and artworks completed or in progress.

\(^10\) Replicas generally reproduce an existing artwork. The soft sculptures I made are perhaps better called ‘reconstructions’ as they reconstruct the making process, but produce a personalised work of art, albeit similar in size, appearance and shape to Mora’s works.
various purposes in conservation, such as understanding technical particularities, testing treatments or replacing decayed originals in gallery display, has also been employed in this study, for the section on the soft sculptures (Fernandez Villa and Juncosa Darder 2008; Gottschaller 2012; Russell, Perry, Singer and Bacon 2012). The process of replication aimed to clarify their techniques of fabrication, and particularly emulate their semi rigid and shiny surface appearance, as well as to test a proposed treatment and to model prototypes of display stands. Applying and testing these methods while developing the research has led to re-evaluation of their use and their adjustment to the artist’s personality. This has inspired working tools such as evolving illustrated workbooks, which evoke the artist’s particular way of maintaining her diaries.

In order to embrace the whole dimension of Mora’s works of arts and their materiality, the artist was solicited to participate in several ways. Mora provided oral, visual and written technical information, was the subject of observation while at work, and gave feedback on findings derived from other sources and on the conservation treatments applied on original and replicated works. She also revisited some of her previous works of art, such as theatre masks, embroideries and many soft sculptures, in the author’s company. This proved quite illuminating with respect to the fabrication processes, as object-based evidence brought back the details that had sometimes escaped the artist’s memory. The study of selected diaries provided an enormous source of information on the making process of major public works such as the painted murals of Ayr, Perth and the combination of mosaic and low relief in Flinders Street mural, Melbourne. All findings were cross-verified in multiple ways: oral technical references were correlated with either archival or realia sources, to validate facts, while the visual observations collected from the study of realia or from the construction of replicas during the research process, alongside archival findings, were submitted to the artist for comment and further discussions.

For the conservation component of the research, both reflective texts on conservation approaches and direct treatment reports concerning Mora’s works were consulted. Keeping in mind the conservation focus of this thesis, Mora’s production of works of art on paper was only acknowledged but not investigated in depth, because they involve ‘classical’ techniques of pen and ink, charcoal and pastel and have already undergone
stabilisation treatment in the recent years. The accent in the thesis was put on the unexplored technical aspects of the artist’s production.

The artist always occupied a central position in the study, and her different facets - celebrity, woman, author and artist- were all considered. Mora provided feedback on most of the methods proposed and contributed additional information when she found imprecisions or errors. A diagram illustrating graphically the methods employed for the research project, with the artist at the centre, is provided in Figure 1.

![Methodologies / Tools of research](image)

**Figure 1.** Diagram of all methods employed

In the analysis and interpretation of the research data, the existing theoretical challenges raised by embedding and personal relationships, as well as the issues of integrity that exist when working with living artists are acknowledged, alongside the inevitable biases of the researcher (Yow 1998; Moffat 2009). While the subjective and interpretive nature of the resulting narration is recognised, the theoretical framework, the clear and articulated approach and the evidence-based methods provide a strong basis from which research outcomes can be developed. The primary evidence, either diary entries,
other written or visual references or interview quotes, as well as the visual documentation that supports them, contributes to a relative objectivity. All these primary and secondary sources and references are reproduced in the text for the reader to scrutinise.

In line with the standard technical art history approach, the thesis employs technical examination and documentation of object-based sources but limits this to visual analysis. It does not include scientific analysis of the materials, but acknowledges its potential importance should an opportunity arise in the future to extend the findings of the thesis. The research work concentrates on the artist, considered as a ‘living archive’, and develops many pathways of investigation that require the artist’s participation, such as intent, emotional investment in making processes, social relationships through artistic production and personal context at the time of creation. All visual, historical and social aspects of Mora’s art are linked in an organic relationship through the works’ materiality, and the research examines how conservation can contribute to enhance these aspects.

In terms of the theoretical perspective, anthropological analysis of materiality, as developed in material culture studies, has been found a useful approach to reflect on the role of conservation and its application to Mora’s art. This will be shown in Chapter Six, which discuss several models of decision making currently used in conservation and relates them to Mora’s works of art, and in Chapter Seven, which applies the selected models to concrete conservation case studies of Mora’s works. The influential notion of the ‘biography of things’, developed by Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), serves as a starting point for understanding the trajectories of Mora’s works through various contexts, with a particular focus on the soft sculptures. Alfred Gell’s 1998 theory about the agency of art objects, which according to him derives from the feelings of admiration, desire, fear or confusion that certain objects arouse in viewers, suggested the relevance of a phenomenological dimension to the research. For Gell, people act through objects by distributing parts of their personhood into them; when the artist’s skill is so great that the viewer cannot easily comprehend the making of an object, the object exerts upon the viewer a degree of ‘captivation’, which Gell defines as one of the qualities of ‘agency’. This theory of the distributed mind, scattered in the created objects, and Gell’s observation that the making of the objects is a particularly
salient feature of their agency, is of relevance to Mora's art, which according to her gallery often acts as a surrogate for her person (Mora W 2013). The thesis aims to interrogate Mora’s interactions with the materials world, and explore the reasons behind our fascination with her works, as will be examined in Part B of the study.

The act of making and its myriads relationships with persons and objects, as expressed through the materials and their transformation, is also at the centre of Tim Ingold’s research (2014). His approach, based on phenomenology, considers materials as matter undergoing constant transformation. When crossing paths with the makers, it becomes locked in objects through procurement, engagement and skills. This is highly relevant to evidence-based conservation practice and technical art history as applied in this thesis. Ingold sees making as a part of this continuous transformation, mobilising both materials’ qualities and the maker’s knowledge of their potential. In his view, artists and craftsmen ‘correspond’ with materials, using an alchemical knowledge of what materials can do, borne out of intimate engagement with them. As conservation is embedded traditionally in scientific principles of documentation that does not include record of phenomenological attributes, it is useful to explore this approach in order to comprehend works of art. This underlines the importance of tacit knowledge about making and the continuous transformations of matter to achieve a good understanding of artistic practice. Likewise, tactile embedded experiences and the way in which the act of combining materials is made manifest through traces left on the surface of things, will elicit responses from the viewers.

In a similar vein, Webb Keanes’ notion of ‘bundling’ and vulnerability are particularly interesting in the case of conservation and its relation to the future (Keane 2006). Expanding on Gell (1998) and Latour (1999) in their analysis of objects’ agency, Keane considers objects as existing independently from human experience, although he is conscious of their ‘inherent vulnerability’ that may lead to damage and destruction, which in turn interrupts their function of mediating human histories. For him, contingent combinations of physical properties and qualities are ‘bundled’ in objects, always exceeding what has been interpreted. By giving attention to the full range of qualities bundled into a single object, it is possible to open up an unpredictable range of possibilities for this object, which may not only express past intentions and interpretations but also invite unexpected responses (Keane 2006, pp. 200-201). Keane
suggests that material objects help realise human subjects by extending them, or even bringing them into existence. His analysis therefore focuses on the practical role that objects play in mediating actions, and on the traces of the production processes that they carry and that remain unexpressed if no attention is paid to their materiality. In this theoretical framework, conservation plays a role in focussing attention on the material process of production, on the objects’ material qualities that index the artist’s activity in making them, and in finding ways to enhance these qualities and their capacity for interaction with viewers.

Returning to the field of conservation, Dinah Eastop’s definition of conservation as material culture, drawing upon Gell (1998) and Kopytoff (1986) studies, provides a useful model of decision making, as will be detailed in Chapter Six. Eastop perceives conservation as a social and technical practice, mediated by language and enacted on objects that matter to people. Integral to the understanding of the social role of the objects is the analysis of the circumstances of their making and of their consumption. Her examples of the analytical examination of the objects provide a base for the three case studies of soft sculptures assessed in Chapter Seven.

In summary, this methodology chapter outlines how a qualitative analysis approach can be applied to cultural materials conservation research, using interdisciplinary methods. In the first section, the research is located within the broader field of heritage preservation, by defining conservation as a socially related discipline where decisions are made in shared capacity between different stakeholders, and by adopting a theoretical approach issued from material culture to Mora’s work. Building upon this vision of Mora’s oeuvre, the choice and use of her materials will be linked to the breadth of her production, as well as the social meanings carried by the materials and working processes and the interactions between her works and the public in various contexts. The thesis will argue that this interpretation contributes to the conservation of Mora’s oeuvre in the present and as yet unknown future contexts.

The next section reviews the current research in technical art history, particularly the use of artists’ interviews, and its role in the discipline of cultural materials conservation. The various methods of inquiry are then detailed, such as the collection of data, and its analysis, informed by technical art history, oral history and ethnography. The methods
of verification and interpretation, mainly derived from qualitative analysis, are also reported.
1.1 Material culture and conservation

Listening to Mora’s stories, consulting diaries in her company and observing works with and without her, in her studio and in private collections, greatly shaped the element of reflexivity in this research. From the original intention of undertaking a study of Mora’s materials, the research evolved and became an investigation into the interconnections between her materials and techniques and the broader context of her life story. Many diary entries highlight the relationships between Mora’s works of art; their technical and conceptual intent and purpose are explored, shedding light on how her artworks informed each other during the development of her artistic career.

This research has adopted a definition of cultural materials conservation inspired by material culture studies, as it provides a broad theoretical framework within which it is possible to link all findings. Reflections on the significance of Mora's materials finds their place within this broader context, which is concerned with the circumstances of the making of objects and with their relationship to the people and to society (Miller 2008). Taking it as part of a broader material culture approach, the thesis regards conservation as a social activity that brings to light the potential of art by caring and maintaining its materiality (Eastop & Dew 2006). Although collecting information and documenting the artist’s processes also contributes to preservation, the research has attempted to go beyond the simple description of the physical construction of Mora’s body of work, and to describe its relationship with the social context.

Based on observation, the study noted that Mora’s many materials and techniques inform each other in an organic relationship, and documented her specific choices of materials and selection of techniques across her whole oeuvre. Materials and techniques are significant socially, historically, symbolically, and in this light, both Mora’s deliberate choice of materials that are either laden with affect or intellect, and the hybridised techniques that have become her signature processes are meaningful and worthy of analysis. This new and specific knowledge, born out of the exploration of the material traces left on the works’ surface, underlines the technical complexity and
originality of Mora’s works. Through the analysis of the physical construction of the works of art, the type and sources of materials and the ways in which they are combined and assembled, the research aims to highlight the complex and multi layered meaning of the works. This knowledge is important when conservation questions arise, because the act of interventive conservation is not a neutral decision-making process, but involves selective choices based on the value systems underpinning the significance of the works of art, resulting in pathways for decision-making in conservation treatments that will be explored in detail in Chapter Six.

In the context of Mora’s work, this approach may require a choice between different options that privilege one or another aspect of a work, according to the context of the treatment, an aspect that will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven with case studies involving Mora’s original works and applying the decision-making models discussed in Chapter Six. This chapter will highlight the practical ways in which decrypting and documenting the significance of Mora’s materials and their various meanings at the present time contributes to the knowledge base about the artist, and assists with decision making for the future. The methods and tools that inform the decision making and the building of knowledge used in this research are described in the following sections.

1.2 Technical art history and artists’ interviews

Technical art history is the study of the physical aspects of works of art, and is usually seen as a source of knowledge about the authenticity, meaning and context surrounding a work of art and an artist (Bomford 2008). It develops at the interface of art history and scientific investigation, researching the conceptual process of creation and contributing to the definition of the significance of material cultural objects. Since 2005, the International Council of Museums Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) working group named Art Technological Source Research (ATSR) has published four symposia focused on Art of the past: sources and reconstructions (2005); Art technology: sources and methods (2008); Sources and serendipity: testimonies of artists’ practice (2009) and The artist’s process (2012). In the first publication, Stinjman proposes a binary classification of sources as either direct communication, which covers the textual and
audio-visual sources, or indirect communication, where there is no language involved and the material is the source (Stinjman 2005). The aim of the ICOM-CC-ATSR group is to scrutinise written archives, ‘realia’ such as existing materials, studio and tools relating to the production process, modern studies in art history, reconstructions, chemistry, and secondary literature on historical material, to produce a more complete picture of an artist’s work. In this study of Mora’s techniques, objects such as works of art, materials and works in progress in the studio were an important source of information. The method of visual examination utilised was based on the standard observation practiced in conservation that involves deconstructing the works into layers and elements, and describing various aspects of the object from surface to depth as far as possible. This involves relating surface observations with technical knowledge in order to recognise the characteristic aspects of technical processes. All observations were accompanied by a thorough photographic documentation, which resulted in an extensive photographic archive of the different techniques used by Mora in her oeuvre.

Other approaches in ATSR include comparing lectures given by an artist to visual observations of works of art, which enlightens the specific practices of the artist (Phenix, Doherty, Schoneman & Rizzo, 2009) or studying the letters of an artist and his works to point to discrepancies between them (Ormond, Meedendorp, Geldof, Megens & Pilz 2012). Artists’ writings are an essential source of information, as shown by Hermens’ close study of Whistler’s letters, which helped cast new light on his idiosyncratic practices (Hermens 2009). In other examples, scientific analysis, another central source of information, is compared with an artist’s recollections to assess the accuracy of memory (Cudell, Joao Cruz, Martins, Carballo, Calvo & Saraiva 2012). All these studies usefully informed the critical reading of Mora’s diaries and autobiography used in this research.

When studying the practice of living artists, a key method of enquiry is interviews, considered as an essential tool for the conservation of contemporary art. The interest is not new; one of the earlier examples was the ARTnews series, published in the American Journal of Visual Art Practice from 1953 to 1958. Considering that technical knowledge, if kept tacit or embedded, upheld the notion of the ‘creative genius’ by romanticising the creative act, and that publicising this knowledge enhanced the appreciation of an artist’s creativity, the aim of the series was ‘to understand what and
how, but also why’ (Whiteley 2007). The more recent Artists Documentation Program, a collaboration of the Menil Collection (Houston, Texas), the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York) and the Centre for the Technical Study of Modern Art (Harvard Art Museums), provides a wealth of knowledge through its filmed interviews of contemporary artists talking about their working processes and their preservation priorities. The interviewing technique described and used by Carol Mancusi-Ungaro (2005) served as a broad model for this research, as well as the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) recommendations for artists’ interviews (ICN 1999, INCCA 2002).

Artists’ interviews are strongly linked to anthropology and to oral history practices, and recognise the value and inherent limitations of interaction between artist and interviewer. The existing models from INCCA place the emphasis on the artist and on the information collected, keeping the interviewer in as neutral a role as possible. However, because both personalities (and their impact upon each other) shape the interview, the result is a co-produced knowledge, which is time- and context-dependent (Wharton 2014). This knowledge is very valuable for conservation, which is why interviews have a predominant place in this research into Mora’s materials and working processes. The two social sciences that provide the most useful methods for interviewing artists are oral history and ethnography. Their input into the construction of the artist’s interview is treated in the next section.

1.3 Oral history and ethnography

In this thesis, the framework for oral history inquiry is inductive research, where data collection is guided by a set of broad questions, here related to the creative processes and material choices and sources. With minimal use of pre-defined categories, responses are analysed and divided into themes, determined through systematic examination and comparison of the data, and the researcher being mindful of any predetermined bias. The theory or conceptual framework of analysis is therefore generated from what is found in the data, leaving space for unexpected ideas. Further data may be sought to fill some gaps and the themes can be strengthened through further level of analysis (Charmaz 2006). This method, commonly known as grounded theory,
requires ‘intense interrogation of the data’ (Newing 2011, p251) to constantly verify the common patterns and to determine whether the interpretation is supported by the evidence. In this research, interviews were conducted by the author with Mora and with other relevant people in her entourage such as her gallerist, her family, her assistant and work partners.

The information gained from these interviews was then triangulated with information extracted from other sources (previous interviews, written archives, visual observations, reconstructions) for critical analysis. Because the method of qualitative research involves people, with all the associated unpredictability, the researcher often needs to renegotiate the methods of interview as the research progresses. Denzin compares this process to ‘bricoleurs and quiltmakers’ (2008, p.3) assembling pieces and inventing new tools as the needs arise. This research was no exception. During its course, shortcomings of the interview-based method were identified, mainly related to loss of focus, the conversation travelling a distance from the objects and falling into recollection and anecdote. Adapting the method to address these issues, custom-made tools of research were created that allowed better precision and focus on the materiality of the works of art, while maintaining the possibility for storytelling. Several directions were explored, freely inspired from participatory audio visual ethnography described by Moffat (2011) out of which two methods were met with success. Both of them involved practical and concrete tools that evolve as the research progresses, such as custom-made workbooks and reconstructions of soft sculptures, brought to the interviews for feedback by Mora, which proved to be valuable means of collecting information. The following section will detail these methods and the interview approach used in this thesis.

1.3.1 Interviewing Mirka Mora

This study addressed Mora’s oeuvre as a whole, taking into account that the time of the research is late in the artist’s life, which makes similar and future extended research unlikely. Moreover, the length and scope of a PhD thesis allows in depth research into the breadth of materials used by Mora throughout time, unlike the isolated interviews generally undertaken by collecting institutions when works are acquired. Following
INCCA’s interview tips for discussing an artist’s œuvre, the approach adopted strived for comprehensiveness (INCCA 2002; Beerkens 2012).

As with all oral history recordings, the interviews with Mora were heavily impacted by their context and the personalities of the interviewer and the interviewee. Consideration of Amanda Coffey’s (1999) ethnographic approaches of fieldwork and of its embodiment of interpersonal relationships helped identify the challenges posed by this ‘one-person ethnography’. From the beginning, the use of French language for the interviews indicated how much this research is embedded into our shared migrant background and gender. This background and the usual related feelings of loss and elation directly informed the perception of the same feelings in Mora’s creative process and were a powerful trigger for sharing emotions, information and memories (Miller 2010).

Other shared events such as the previous collaborative experiences on the conservation of the Flinders Street mural in 2009, the conservation of the Cosmos bookshop mural in 2009 and that of the St Kilda mosaic in 2010 resulted in a friendly professional relationship that provided a solid basis to undertake this research (Cotte 2012a; Cotte 2012b). The time spent together working on Mora’s murals and the subsequent results in terms of conserved works of art had greatly contributed to building trust and mutual respect, which are essential assets for interviews (Beerkens 2012; Roberts 2013). However, these similarities and this strong reflexivity also impact on the research, placing it in a cultural and social perspective that inevitably affects the neutrality of interpretation (Coffey 1999; Denzin & Lincoln 2008). Oral historians and ethnologists often consider this as integral to field research. For Coffey, this emotional involvement should even be seen as fundamental of well-executed research, the realities of fieldwork being often predicated on trust and personal commitment. She contends that fieldwork has a greater impact on the researcher than on the host, and suggests critically engaging with both its practical and emotional production (Coffey 1999, p. 57). To address these biases, a diary was kept to record personal impressions of the interviews and of the less formal encounters with Mora. This practice helped to better clarify the cultural and temporal frame of our relations (Coffey 1999) and to analyse the information collected with a little more distance. Accepting that there was a strong emotional involvement existing with the person studied, a way of maintaining some objectivity in this research
has been to broaden sources and techniques of collecting, in order to compare and verify information.

The method chosen was in depth semi-structured conversations that included watching and commenting on works in progress, sharing anecdotes and reflections that tapped into similar sensitivities. Drawing was sometimes used as a means of communication, putting into images concepts that needed clarification. Strolling around the studio in the guise of a guided tour brought new subjects to lights, triggered by works; sometimes conservation scenarios were imagined, with role playing the proposed events. Taking inspiration from the American Artist Documentation Program’s extensive database of interviews and from Mancusi-Ungaro’s emphasis on the importance of interviewing artists in front of their artworks (2011), a theme was determined for every formal meeting in Mora’s studio, such as embroidery or dolls, and she always found on her shelves some samples of the technique to discuss on the day. For more complex works, such as the masks and costumes, a joint visit to the Performing Arts Museum Research Centre in Melbourne was organised, whose manager kindly retrieved their mask collection from storage for the visit. That particular interview mixed observation, conversation, archive study and recollections, and the session was audio recorded and photographed. This method proved very useful, allowing greater clarification of the fabrication process, and providing rich information about the social context at the time of creation.

The interviews were usually quite extensive, up to 2 hours in length, and developed over a period of three years from 2013 to 2016, with the space between meetings varying from a few weeks to a few months. In agreement with the artist, the interviews were audio-recorded for the first two years; however, after Mora indicated indirectly that she was feeling a bit of fatigue caused by this process, and after a break of a few months, recording ceased and only notes were taken during our conversations. Mora’s studio/home seemed the best location for these discussions, because it is the place of creation and because of the abundance of works and materials it contains, all of which have a stimulating impact on memories (Quinlan 2011). It was also the most practical place for Mora, as she did not need to travel, and remains the environment in which she feels most comfortable and therefore more open to discussion (Miller 2008). Mora’s studio is notoriously filled up with objects, which means that there is no shortage of
object-based prompts such as paintings, drawings, paint tubes and brushes, dolls, books, toys, photographs, letters and articles (Mora 2003; Feagins 2014). The drawback of conducting research in Mora’s home was that my visits began to feel over time as an intrusion into the artist’s privacy, thus making long pauses in time necessary for her to regain a sense of autonomy. However, as the data collection developed in numerous directions, the extended break of several months that happened mid-way through the research helped critically examine the method (Roberts 2013), and clearly integrate the research questions into the interpretation of the meanings of materials for conservation.

The interviews were completed by photography, taken in a flowing manner during the conversation, with Mora’s authorisation, in order to record the technical issues or material objects mentioned. My previous technical training, as a painter and printmaker as well as a conservator, greatly helped me to understand the material and technical topics brought up by Mora. Our respective positions in the same art world, as an active artist and as an active painting conservator, also played a role in providing orientations to the conversation and in establishing a relative complicity. The idea of video recording, envisaged at the initial stages, was abandoned for logistical reasons and because of the fatigue Mora expressed at mid-way through the research, together with her gradual loss of memory accuracy. There is, moreover, a large amount of existing filmed footage of Mora at work, filmed mainly for television, which could be located precisely and exploited in the future from a technical perspective.

All resources such as audio recordings, notes, personal diary entries and visual documentation, have been combined in the form of edited transcripts, with images and the author’s personal annotations included, which constitute the major reference documents for this research. Conversations with colleagues in the Museum of Modern Art in New York (M Duffy, E Moody and A Aviram 2014, pers. comm., 20 November), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gardens in Washington (G Ryan, S O’Banion and C Richeson 2014, pers. comm., 25 November) and papers presented at the ‘Authenticity in Transition’ Conference in Glasgow, 1-2 December 2014, suggested that edited transcripts are generally of better use for conservators than raw data. The same system was applied to the interviews with curators, Mora’s art dealer, her technical assistant, former theatre director and actors, creating a body of illustrated documentation for constant reference. From these documents, key themes that determine the principal axes.
of the research were extracted. Another less invasive method of inquiry, ‘Photovoice’, was also tested at mid-way through the research, as explained in the following section.

1.3.2 Working with Photovoice

Photovoice is a participatory group methodology combining photography with grassroots social action, and is commonly used in the fields of community development, public health, and education (Novek & Menec 2014). Developed in the early 1990s under the name of Photo Novella by American public health researchers Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, it incorporates other voices and knowledge into research, through photography and ensuing critical dialogue. Participants in projects including Photovoice use the camera to document their lives as they see them, the results being commented upon and discussed during subsequent group meetings. Frequently used with marginalised communities, it is found to be engaging and empowering for the participants, and potentially useful to reveal in-depth information that may not have been captured by other approaches (Mc Lean & Woodward 2012). Photovoice is well suited for aged participants as it does not involve much effort, since the task of writing journal entries on the pictures is optional, and provides a good illustration of a person’s experience through multiple visual sources of data.

Photovoice seemed therefore to be fitting the research with Mora, allowing the possibility of a more spontaneous and un-guided voice with no interference from the researcher. It also seemed very suited to Mora’s visual approach to life and her interest in images, as well as a reminder of the times in the 1970s and 1980s when she always carried a camera to document her work and her life (Fagan, 1987). The study’s particular interest was her oil painting working process, the multiple changes of composition and slow building of colour that she referred to in our discussions and that could be observed on the paintings in progress. However, the intervals of four to six weeks between our meetings were too long to permit complete documentation of the artistic process; concurrently, privacy issues and the potential for ‘research fatigue’ that may be caused by a researcher’s frequent presence during Mora’s creative work had to be considered.
A simplified use of the Photovoice method was deemed to be a good solution that had the potential to reveal other inspirations, methods or tools not consciously mentioned because they were too integral to Mora’s practice. In this context, Photovoice was not sought for its social interest but for its investigative potential. The idea of Photovoice was proposed to Mora who found it amusing, but did not promise to be ‘a very good student’. Aware of the impediments that may be caused by technology, a simple 20-shot disposable camera was handed over to Mora with the suggestion that she photograph stages of her work that she thought were important to document, or anything that she deemed worthy of photography. There was nevertheless some scepticism about the chances of success as the camera could be lost and quickly forgotten.

On the next visit two months later, Mora mentioned immediately -after the customary introductory remarks- that she had to give me back ‘my little machine’, which she had used to please me, and then grew tired of. Far from being lost it was kept close to her easel, although recently covered by a few books. The developed film only showed 5 photographs, two of which were details during execution of now-finished paintings, and three were individual little paintings in progress. The printed images were presented to Mora on the next visit, and she only commented that one of these paintings ‘came to her in one session, on its own volition’ and that another one was ‘a favourite of hers’.

Mora’s insistence on returning the camera showed that she considered it a nuisance, and desired its physical removal. She nevertheless made an effort to use it, which was appreciated as an acknowledgement of our ongoing working relationship. The result is limited but useful, and also marks the limits of participatory technique in her case. What is empowering for otherwise voiceless people was hampering for Mora, who is certainly not a voiceless person. While she accommodated my presence at times in her life and work, she was understandably more interested in producing art than in producing data for a researcher, regardless of the long-term relationship. Therefore, Photovoice was considered not suitable for this research and its use abandoned. It can nevertheless be an interesting research option for other studies involving artists with different motivations.

1.3.3 Customising workbooks
During the course of research, it became obvious that although any other form of interview would not be as productive as a loose conversation, there was a need to ‘centre’ the discussion visually to prevent it from straying into other less relevant realms. With this view in mind, three workbooks were designed, which were classified by the type of artistic production—soft sculptures, murals and oil paintings. Initially the workbooks contained preliminary research in the shape of many printed photographs of works’ details, all the information collected on them and the reflections/questions/ideas and associations as well as conservation issues that were raised at various points in time. The photographs came from library sources, from personal research in public or private collections or from previous visits to Mora’s studio. These workbooks were used in interviews as starting points for discussion, enabling the collection of new information or enriching the existing information. They were also useful for anchoring the discussion, which could expand from and go back to the works of art studied, keeping a central thread based on materiality.

The workbooks were annotated during and after the discussions and were enriched on the spot with more photographic material, or more findings, such as diary extracts or the results of additional research (Figure 2). Photographs and texts were linked with arrows, visually bridging the correspondences between the sources, such as diary extract and visual details of the finished work. Extra sheets of paper with additional information were sometimes attached to one particular section, a visual illustration of the non-linearity of the process of accumulating data. Visual archive and textual archive were collapsed in the workbooks, which were regularly resubmitted to the artist, to share with her the results of new searches, eliciting more comments to include and annotate and generating more directions for investigations. These workbooks became a participatory tool, constantly evolving with the research, as well as an essential source of data on their own. They appealed to Mora, maybe because they combine written text with images in a visual parallel to her diaries.
This process was inspired by the technique of PAVE (Participatory Audio Visual Ethnography), which involves showing an ethnographic film to the group being studied and gathering feedback from this projection, to be reinvested into the film (Moffat 2011). Pioneered by the filmmaker Jean Rouch in the 1970s, Audio Visual feedback challenges the ethnographer’s authority and produces compelling material. Most importantly, this shared anthropological practice offers an ethical alternative to traditional anthropology, as with this practice, powers relations are better understood and a researcher’s subjects are their critical equal (Moffat 2011, p. 6). This was exactly the relationship sought for the research in this thesis. Showing the workbooks to Mora several times introduced the notion of accountability and respect in the research process. Sharing the work provided a gauge of reciprocity in a working relationship that may otherwise become uncomfortable for Mora. Being able to visualize exactly what was being used and evaluated amongst the quantity of information she had provided acted as a measure of research integrity, and reassured Mora on her continued involvement in the study. The viewing of the workbooks at various stages allowed Mora to exert a type of control over their contents. Ultimately this was a means for Mora to control her own image, as will be shown in this research.

1.3.4 Making soft sculptures and artist’s collaboration

Stemming from the workbooks and the interviews, the reconstructions of soft sculptures were made in an attempt to gain a better perception of their technique and appearance (Figure 3). Reconstructions, also called simulations or replicas, are a common practice.
in technical art history, usually based on visual observation and on written sources such as letters and treatises (Brooks 2014; Hermens 2005; Stinjman 2005). The reconstructions of soft sculptures proceeded from a comparative approach, seeking to combine the oral or written descriptions of Mora’s techniques and the reality of making the sculptures. This method was also customised to become ‘participatory reconstructions’; photographs of reconstructions in progress and real finished products were shown to Mora in order to get her feedback, together with the asking of new questions that arose from these practical experiences. Mora’s comments were integrated and resulted in new reconstructions, each recording any additional information. These simulations were also used as mock ups to test consolidation techniques and to establish prototypes of storage and display stands, thus providing immediate outcomes for the conservation of Mora’s soft sculptures. The entire process of making the reconstructions and the information gathered from doing them is detailed in Chapters Six and Seven.

![Figure 3. A reconstruction of soft sculpture](image)

1.3.5 Verifying data

Although it is relevant that the artist herself should inform this research for a large part, it was necessary to question Mora’s personal production of reality, including the details that she does not remember, as it generally absolves the subject from being held accountable for the accuracy of the information (Trapley 2004). As mentioned previously, a means of validating the data’s accuracy was sought by widening the range of sources, giving at the same time a broader vision of the field of practice.
Conversations with other people associated with Mora’s artistic production in various capacities, such as her art dealer-son, her technical assistant, a former actor on whose head one of her masks was made, as well as collectors and curators provided additional material to the interviews with the artist. Discussions focussed on the conservation issues, both material and ethical, and on the notion of authenticity. The data collected during these interviews was compared with the information recorded from the artist, completing, confirming or contradicting it at times.

A comparison with interviews from similar artists, such as Rosalie Gascoigne (1917-1999) in the Australian Biography Project (Gascoigne 1998) or Erica McGilchrist (1926-2014) in Fagan (1987), helped to locate the oral history data relating to Mora in its historical context, namely the artistic production of the 1950s, the social impact of public policy and celebrity status and the perception of women artists in Australia during Mora’s lifetime. This contextualisation, informed by feminist studies, highlighted Mora’s contribution to Australian art and her role in creating a cultural inheritance through her personal aesthetic and material choices (Candida-Smith 1991).

A horizontal cross reading and collation of data sets, using qualitative analysis methods and based on grounded theory and the coding of themes, was paired with visual observation of the works, all the while focusing on the materiality of the works of art with a conservator’s eye.

Further comparative studies of various interviews with Mora, on the same topic of materials and technical processes but from distinct periods of time, were very useful in disentangling contradictory information. This was used to establish the accuracy and reliability of the artist’s memory. A case in point was the big mural in Ayr, Queensland, painted in 1983 and discussed as an event of the recent past in the 1987 follow up session that completes the Blackman interview (Mora 1984). When questioned about this mural in 2012, Mora stated that it had been painted with oil, and that she was almost sure of this. Common sense made it difficult to believe this, because of the impracticality of using oil on such a large surface, due to this medium’s limited covering power and its extended drying times that did not match the real time she spent in Ayr. In addition, such usage would have incurred an enormous cost, as the mural is 33.2 metres square.
Conservator John Hook, who undertook the cleaning of the mural in 2012, collated testimonies and receipts from the local hardware store where the paint was purchased. These do not mention the nature of the paint that was bought, but do not appear outrageously expensive for the time (Hook 2012, pers. comm., 15 November). However, on the tape made a year after the mural’s execution, Mora explains to Barbara Blackman that she used ‘plastic paint’ [acrylic] of the brand Walpamur to execute the mural, for its covering and quick-drying quality and because it was cheap. Yet ultimately, Mora found the result too flat, and then painted highlights with oil to give it depth (Mora 1984). The diary of 1983, when it was examined by the author, confirms this:

Went to see oil paints that I will use later for highlights. John [Young, the man who commissioned the mural for Ayr’s Burdekin Library entrance] say I can (9 May 1983)

I am suffering not to use oils on the mural but time is short (12 May 1983)

Friday 13 bought Grumbacher paints and brushes for highlighting mural as I crave for fine pigments like an addict; painting with oil do magic. Quite nice over plastic. DARING. But wood HAS DRUNK acrylic; must watch oil paints-just highlights (14 May 1983)

The visual observations made by John Hook during his 2012 conservation treatment also suggested the presence of two different media; one is used for highlights and is not always fully compatible with the other one, but the adhesion is good (Hook J, email 24 November 2012). When revisiting her diary, Mora commented that she always liked oil better and that the use of ‘plastic’ paint was only for practical reasons. This case was useful to re-center the research and it restored credit (that was under some scrutiny) to the artist’s memory. It also provided a clearer pathway of inquiry to subsequent research on other materials; at this point, it was ascertained that the core memory of the artist was fundamentally correct, there were just some specific details that warranted clarification. The research therefore had to determine the extent of that imprecision.

The examination of the materials in use in the artist’s studio, and of paintings in various stages of execution was also a useful verification tool. Observations were made informally during visits to Mora’s studio, when she showed work in progress. For earlier works, the direct visual observation was compared with sources that have been typically used in technical art history investigations, for instance Charles Blackman’s
paintings and related archives in the Heide Museum of Modern Art, compiled by Jessica Ryan (2013). For the present period, an email exchange with Mora's current art supplier indicated what the artist requires and what is provided by the supplier in response to this request (Chapman & Bailey, email, 20 March 2015).

On several occasions, Mora started to paint while discussions were taking place. Her actions moved the research laterally by one step; no longer was an oral history approach being used but ethnography practice of semi active participant observation. It was extremely precious to see the artist in action, as it added the dimension of time to the visual and verbal dimensions derived from objects and conversation. Mora is a very quick artist with a deft hand. However, she works a very long time on her paintings, returning to them repeatedly and elaborating a composition by constant changes of form and colour, a process that builds up a very thick texture made of a great number of layers. Although it was impossible to document exactly all these steps, being able to witness for a short time how they occurred and how they related to the materiality of the artwork was very useful.

This practical demonstration also allowed for immaterial aspects to be observed, such as Mora’s way of holding the brush, the hand gestures and the various effects created by different angles given to the brushes, the texture of the paint at the moment of use, the changing of brushes, the use of other tools such as palette knives to scrape undesirable effects, and the periodical covering or rewriting of the signature during the phases of the creation. Mora generously permitted photography while she was painting; these photographs are only a sketchy documentation of her complex creative process, but are a good, if limited, illustration of her profound enjoyment of the act of painting (Figures 41 to 60).

The participatory methods used extensively in this thesis have provided a wealth of information. However, while participatory methods ‘encourage negotiation, enable dialogue and create common ground’ (Moffat 2011, p. 15), juggling the best interest of both collaborators is challenging. Although the importance of collecting oral history data for material conservation is widely acknowledged, there are nevertheless limitations to this conservation approach (Beerkens 2012). One preliminary finding of this research is the impossibility of establishing set methods of working with living
artists. Collaboration with an artist ‘often involves complex dynamics and personalities negotiating, as a project progresses and evolves’ (Roberts 2013, p. 14). In particular, the notion of knowledge and ownership is essential, and needs to be reaffirmed periodically to maintain trust. Existing methods need to be tested, and sometimes abandoned, if they prove not well suited to the person. Furthermore, chosen methods have to be constantly tailored to the personality of the artist, and new tools created during this process. The methods of research used in this thesis were successful because knowledge transfer occurred across the complementary fields of creation and conservation, allowing a real two-way relationship with the artist, while clearly setting the limits of knowledge ownership. During the interviews, the elaboration of the workbooks and the building of reconstructions, the emphasis was put on the dialogue and the exchange of experiences. This meant a huge investment in contact time, but also in preparation before the interviews, involving a review all the existing documentation about Mora from a material and technical perspective. The results of this investigation are described in the next section.

1.4 Description of sources

The historiography, or study and critical assessment of all the sources available (both written and audio-visual material) on Mora, including her autobiography (Mora 2000), was a starting point for this thesis. The archival sources described in the introduction were explored from a technical perspective, in order to collect relevant information. This historiography was also the occasion to redress some minor errors about the location or the technique of works of art, which had been reprinted from one source to another. But the main outcome of the review of the literature was to reflect upon the construction of Mora’s public character over the years as an archetypal bohemian artist, which obscured many other perspectives about her art, and her own agency in this process. Reading the press about Mora is somewhat equal to following the performance of a life, inseparable from her career and intimately linked to the social history of the city, as was recently confirmed by her prominent place in the 2014-2015 State Library Victoria exhibition Bohemian Melbourne, which celebrated Melbourne’s counter-cultures and creative free spirits of the last 150 years. Mora was represented by three
panels about her life and art, along with other personalities emblematic of the bohemian era in Melbourne such as dancer Vali Myers and comedian Barry Humphries.

All elements of Mora’s life story are intimately linked to her works and their material construction. An example is the creation of the soft sculptures and painted embroideries. Initially triggered by economic necessity after her separation from her husband, they also embody the use of the seamstress skills learned from her mother that originally enabled her entry into Melbourne society (Mora 1984). For it was as a French seamstress that she was introduced to art patrons John and Sunday Reed, a meeting that would mark the beginning of a long friendship, trigger the revival of the CAS in Melbourne as well as the creation of the first Museum of Modern Art. Sewing, quilting and embroidering were also highly gender-connoted skills that Mora transformed and combined into a very personal expression and brought to the art galleries’ walls, next to her paintings and drawings. Mora’s life story therefore became an essential tool for understanding the meaning and the material integrity of the works of art, in view of their preservation.

The narrative is in several forms. Books include Mora’s autobiography (Mora 2000), her subsequent book about stories attached to her objects (Mora 2003) and Ulli Beier’s monograph (Beier 1980). Newspapers, audio and TV interviews dating from the far and recent past, form an accompaniment to the artist’s personal diaries, which were in turn completed by the interviews conducted during this research. In all these sources, the structure of the narrative is different and each group provides a specific understanding of Mora’s artistic production.

### 1.4.1 Books

As described in the introduction, Mora’s autobiography, *Wicked but virtuous, my life*, is structured around themes that she considered particularly significant when telling her own story. The technical information is interspersed within the narrative, mainly but not only in Chapter Five, titled ‘My work’ (Mora 2000, pp. 107-122). It is also important to note that reflections about art or society are juxtaposed with equal seriousness with technical indications. Mora’s division of her life story into themes that do not depend on
chronology has inspired to some extent the analysis of this research's data, which is also divided in broad themes crossing over the artist’s career. The selected themes, developed in this thesis in Chapters Three, Four and Five, do not coincide with those chosen by Mora, but are informed by them and by the other sources.

*Love and clutter* (2003), Mora’s second book, follows a similar deconstructed scheme and dwells on the stories she tells about her personal collections of toys, kitchen paraphernalia, works of art, books and antique furniture. These stories have at times been useful to confirm data from interviews, observations and diaries. The book's many photographic illustrations also provided material for visual analysis that contributed to a reading of Mora’s artistic production through the lens of material culture.

Ulli Beier’s monograph *Mirka* (1980) has a special place in Mora’s life. Researched and written at a high point in her career, when she was regularly teaching workshops while producing textile embroideries, soft sculptures, drawing, paintings, murals, theatre sets and mosaics, it gives a glimpse into this moment of intense creative production. Abundantly illustrated, the book is a mine of information about Mora’s practice and iconography, both in its text and its photographs. Although Mora now considers that it is too centred on herself and not enough on her work, it reveals the impact of her personality, then and now, upon her work, and constitutes the first serious attempt to comprehend her textile-based works (Mora 1984; Mora 2013, pers. comm., 19 October). In this respect, it is useful to compare it with the 1974 short film titled *This film is called Mirka* by Paul Cox, whose narrative and imagery almost entirely revolves around a child-like vision of the artist, with almost no attempt made to discuss the works. It is also interesting to see that Mora’s textile production relied on a strong work ethic that is also revealed by the study of the diaries entries devoted to large murals, such as Ayr and Flinders Street.

**1.4.2 Diaries**

---

11 This movie nevertheless triggered the realisation of the book; Ulli Beier was a friend of Paul Cox and expressed the desire to meet Mora when he saw the film. He then decided to make a book after meeting Mora in her studio at Rankins Lane (Mora 1984)
The study of the diaries has a particular place in the research; it can be located across the fields of history, art history and autobiography, and across time and languages as the texts are written in both English and French. The diaries can be studied visually for their creative layout; historically for accuracy of dates, events and technical information; psychologically for the glimpses of feelings that are jotted down; or from the artistic perspective for all the mentions and references to art contained within them. Diaries are useful sources for verification, as they are written contemporaneously to the activity, therefore less reshaped by memory and construction of self-image than an autobiography. They are however private documents, and this dimension is always present within the research; only relevant technical, historical and artistic references have been retained, in respect of the artist’s privacy.

Owing to the time constraints imposed by being only able to consult the diaries in Mora’s company, only certain specific years were studied. Dates were chosen because of their correspondence with significant works in Mora’s career; for instance, the years of realisation of big mural commissions, or the early years in Melbourne. These diaries were the foundation of long conversations. They acted as triggers for the artist’s memory of particular events, which added a present time dimension to the consultation of historical sources. Their consultation can therefore qualify both as a study of written sources contemporary with the works, and as an interview where historical texts were used as prompts for memory.

Being one of the first persons authorized to look at these diaries added a strong dimension to the research, with the honour of the artist’s trust paired with the responsibility to maintain the ethical foundations of the project. Mora set the pattern for their consultation from the beginning, deciding that they would be read aloud together, so she could control access to some pages. Each consultation took a very long time, up to four hours, because of the many comments triggered by the text. However, this process also proved too overwhelming emotionally for Mora, who decided after a few months that she no longer wished to consult her diaries. She nevertheless authorised the use of information taken from the consulted diaries, which was abundant enough to allow the research to develop.
The diaries were very useful when combined with other oral interviews with Mora and with other people, to verify factual and technical points, identify people or places names and highlight research themes. For example, Mora’s conversations, usually peppered with literary references and repeated mentions of the fact that she was self-taught and lacked formal training due to her early circumstances, found echo in her diaries. The presence of many references and many quotations from books and from artists confirmed this theme and gave evidence of the links between materials, technique and knowledge. The various sources were collated first through note taking and through colour coding after identification of the themes. Each theme was then organised into a table, which recorded the quotations, their date and their source, such as diary, autobiography, or interview.

1.4.3 Media sources: press articles and audio visual archives

The corpus of media sources is made up of two main groups: journal articles and exhibition reviews in one group, audio and television interviews from archives in the other group.

Journal articles and exhibition reviews

The first group of source material is the general newspapers dating from the last sixty years. They relate to Mora’s exhibitions and public appearances, or to important events relating to her public works such as the change of ownership of Tolarno restaurant and the ensuing legal dispute, and the conservation of the Flinders Street mural or of the St Kilda seat. The general tone of these press clippings has already been mentioned in the introduction; some descriptions, however, are based on Mora’s unusual technical processes and provide a certain amount of accuracy in their details, amidst romanticised sentences and quotations from the artist. ‘The girl who daubs in dough’ (Herald, 27 May 1967) narrates the story behind Mora’s process of tempera painting, while ‘You never know when you are going to meet a doll’ (Sunday Australian, 20 June 1971, p. 29) or ‘Dolls make an artistic media’ (unidentified newspaper, circa 1972) are noteworthy in terms of Mora’s process of fabricating soft sculptures. These sources are
informative, as much by their content as by their omissions, which underline Mora’s role in curating the representation of her artistic processes.

Three written interviews with the artist by Irving (1986), Fagan (1987) and Morgan (2010) have already been described in the introduction. Reading them individually and comparing them with each other helped sketch out a portrait of the artist and of her relationships with public commissions and money (Fagan 1987), with literature and religion (Irving 1986) and her long friendship with the Reeds (Morgan 2010). Another published collective interview stands apart: Ross Lansell’s extensive ‘documentary’ of the making of the Tympanum in Melbourne in 1977 by Mora, Les Kossatz (1943-2011), Georges Baldessin (1939-1978), Andrew Sibley (1933-2015) and Roger Kemp (1908-1987). Researched and written for an art journal, it captures through a questionnaire the collective and individual creative processes of this group of artists in the realisation of an important work of art, and provides useful insights into their organisation, their choices of composition and their chromatic palette, and of the reasons behind them.

Archives audio and television interviews

The several interviews with Mora conserved in the National Library of Australia (NLA) as part of the NLA’s Oral History Project date from 1965, 1984 (with a sequel in 1987), and 2012. Touching upon many aspects of Mora’s life, the 13-hour Blackman interview provides an enormous amount of historical and technical information, the women’s friendship giving an accent of sincerity to Mora’s account. Critical listening is nevertheless essential. Blackman is not herself a practicing visual artist, and she is legally blind; there are therefore a few erroneous statements, contradicted by simple observation of the discussed works. For example, reference to the paint in the embroideries as ‘oil paint’ is not supported by the examination of existing embroideries. It is also not supported by the artist, although she is heard on tape describing the embroidery as painted with oil. The existence of an oil painted embroidery cannot be excluded, but is unlikely, owing to technical impracticalities with the use of oil paint in this specific context; Mora may have misunderstood the question at the time. Moreover, some factual elements are inexact, such as the number of painted figures in the NGA’s Boxes of Mysteries. Mora described them as including ‘100 pieces in each box’ (Mora
1984), but the NGA inventory reads: ’25 dolls mounted on decorated base’ and ’55 dolls mounted on decorated base’, which was confirmed by a viewing of the works on 15 April 2015. These facts have been unconsciously altered in the artist’s memory, as part of Mora’s active construction of her personal myth.

Although some of these interviews are transcribed, they needed to be studied directly from the audio material, for two reasons. Firstly, because of the high number of inaccuracies in the transcript that may sometimes change the sense entirely. For example, at the end of the Blackman interview, a male person states that ‘if Le Petit Prince had a sister, it would be Mirka Mora’, which is transcribed as ‘if Picasso had a sister, it would be Mirka Mora’. Many other instances of technical discussion are transcribed in sentences that makes no sense to a person familiar with the subject. The transcriber was probably unfamiliar with terms used in describing art techniques. Furthermore, in the transcript the many French words peppering Mora’s speech are the pretext of imaginative and often inaccurate translation.

The second reason to revisit the audio interviews is the specific quality of audio material in the analysis of conversations (Trapley 2004). The tone, animation, laughs, persons cutting each other’s speech and pauses, are all elements that give extra dimensions to the narrative, locating them in a personal and emotive domain while the transcript ‘flattens the emotional content of speech’ (Portelli 1979, p. 33). In the conversations between Mora and Blackman, the audio document makes palpable their great degree of shared emotions, their occasional disagreements and a general feeling of pride and joy from both participants to be constructed as a living part of the history of the country.

In addition to these audio interviews, the existing television interviews generally focus on Mora’s life story, starting with her miraculous escape from deportation to her bohemian life, surrounded by artists coming to the Mora couple’s successive restaurants. Mora’s response to many television interviewers shows a desire to please by providing what they sought, for instance using cheeky words or referring to mildly shocking attitudes, generally around sex and lovers, this bohemian façade also helping to protect her intimate self. At the same time, she consistently relates her own image to the broader figure of the archetypal artist, bringing the act of painting to the forefront.
She uses many strategies to direct the conversation to painting: wearing paint-stained clothes to the television interview and eliciting comments upon them, musing about the colours that would appeal to lovers, or simply reminding people that she is an artist in order to explain some of her behaviours. These interviews only occasionally contain technical references as such, but are valuable in providing the context of the time for the creative process. They are also useful in determining the stories that are only anecdotal and moment-related, and the stories that are present in almost every interview, becoming foundations of Mora’s public image.

All the methods described in this chapter, such as material culture studies, technical art history, ethnography, oral history, and their associated tools of research such as the making of reconstructions, the elaboration of workbooks, the photographic archive and the various interviews, contribute to a large collection of data that needs to be related to the context of the creation of the works. With all these available sources, it was possible to sketch a panorama of the artist’s life, viewed from a perspective of materiality and its links to social history. This will be developed in the following chapter.
Chapter 2. Being an artist, restaurateur and woman in post-war Australia

Mirka Mora’s biography is already well known, mainly through her memoirs published in 2000. As explained in the introduction, this study needs to be informed by a biographical understanding of her art. This chapter explores Mora’s life and situate this narrative within the local historical context at the time of her arrival in Australia, particularly the role played by the Moras, as a couple, in the development of Melbourne’s avant-garde art scene and in the creation of the city’s restaurant culture. It brings a different perspective by highlighting moments that are significant in Mora’s creative journey. It focuses particularly on her increasing profile as an artist against the backdrop of art movements in the 1970s, a period strongly engaged in addressing gender issues in the arts and in examining the role of emotional connections in the building of public reputations.

2.1 Historical timeline

2.1.1 Growing with objects

Mirka Madeleine Zelik was born in Paris on 18 March 1928 into a Jewish family, to a Lithuanian father and Romanian mother. Her father Leon Zelik was born in 1898 in Vilna; fleeing persecution at the beginning of First World War, he arrived in Paris where he became an antiques dealer (Clark 1997). A very handsome man, he used to model for student sculptors at the Ecole du Louvre when he was young, something Mora speaks of very proudly (Mora 1984). She remembers fondly the rooms in their home being full of all sorts of collections, from helmets to silverware and books, and the walls being covered with paintings, which may be at the root of the passion for collecting and hoarding that informs much of her artistic practice (Mora 2003).
Her mother Tzipah (later Suzanne) Gelbein grew up in the Romanian town of Briceni, in today’s Moldavia. Leaving around 1915 with her brother, because of persecutions, they arrived in Paris, from where they hoped to get a passage to America, a plan that was altered by her meeting with Mora’s father. Suzanne was the daughter of a blacksmith and carriage painter, which Mora mentions as a type of ancestry in regard to her 1978 painted tram commission (Mora 1984). Suzanne was very talented with her hands, although she did not draw or paint, but produced a lot of sewing. She worked as a seamstress and dressed her three girls, born within 4 years, Mirka being the oldest. The family lived in various places in Paris, according to the father’s financial situation (Mora 1984, Mora 2000).

Childhood is central to Mora’s art, which is also interspersed with symbols taken from various religions and mythologies. This can be directly related to her own childhood, and specifically to her relationship with her ‘second mother’, Paulette, a friend who lived across the road from the family in rue de Crimée, Paris, and with whom Mora used to spend weekends. For school holidays, Paulette would take Mora to her mother Nouzette’s home in northern Brittany. Nouzette was a devout Catholic and introduced Mora to her religion, taking her to church and teaching her prayers, unbeknownst to her ‘very Jewish mother, who would have passed out if she knew I was praying’ (Mora 1984). Mora calls this her ‘double life’, which lasted until the war (Beier 1980, Mora 1984, Mora 2000, Mora 2004). Although Mora is now non-religious, this dual education and her subsequent readings and perusing of Christian art history account for many themes present in her painting, which blends symbols from different religions and mythologies with her own childhood memories.

Mora’s first twelve years were very happy with her two mothers and her sisters. She recalls being surrounded by lots of porcelain dolls that her father brought home for his girls, going to the Louvre to see Egyptian mummies, and to the palaces of Versailles and Fontainebleau, whose balconies were a large influence on her drawings (Mora 1984). Her school memories include studying La Fontaine fables and the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, all of them becoming later inspirations for her art. Mora’s relationship with art materials also goes back to these childhood times; as a good student, she used to win lots of prizes of art materials, which enabled her to freely paint and draw (Mora 1984).
In July 1942, during the occupation of Paris by the Germans, Mora’s mother, her sisters and herself were arrested during the ‘Velodrome d’Hiver Roundup’, a mass arrest of Jews made by the French police. They were taken to Pithiviers, a camp near Paris which served as a first step on the way to concentration camps, but were miraculously saved due to her father’s connections in the French Resistance (Mora 1984, Mora 2000, Mora 2004, Mora 2007, Mora 2012). These three weeks at the Pithiviers camp, and particularly the moment of their release, left an indelible impression upon Mora’s mind. She recalls the poignancy of seeing the people left behind, watching their cart leaving through the camp’s barriers, and suggests that these memories inspire the haunted eyes of most of her characters (Mora 2012). For the next two years, the family lived in hiding in the French countryside, where Mora spent a lot of time writing poems and painting gouaches. Unfortunately, all these paintings are lost today, as Mora disposed of them on the eve of her wedding (Mora 1984).

2.1.2 Theatre studies

Back to Paris at 17 years of age, Mora soon left school and started to frequent the Salle de la Mutualité,12 a site of political and poetry meetings; there she was introduced to extraordinary people, among them was the writer Romain Rolland, who published one of her poems in the revue Lettres Francaises.13 Her mother, disapproving of the older men courting her, sent Mora to Brittany to work for Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE), an orphanage for Jewish children, where she was to meet her future husband Georges Mora, 15 years her senior. After one year in Brittany, and having saved enough money for the fees, she came back to Paris and enrolled at the Education par le Jeu Dramatique,14 where she studied theatre and mime with Marcel Marceau, Jacques Lecoq and Jean Louis Barrault, three of the most important actors of the Parisian scene.

---

12 The Maison de la Mutualité (House of Mutuality) was built in 1930 in the centre of Paris and its various rooms were used for congresses, mainly by left wing movements. It is still used for politic gatherings and for music shows.
13 Weekly literary review founded in 1942. Lettres Francaises is now a monthly, integrated with the left wing paper l’Humanité.
14 The school was founded by Jean Louis Barrault, Marie Helene Daste, Roger Blin, and was based on unconventional methods inspired by Antonin Artaud, emphasizing mime and corporal expression. Marcel Marceau and Jacques Lecoq were teachers at the school (Solis 1999; Dunning 1999)
at the time (Solis 1999; Dunning 1999). This theatre training proved very important in her future professional life, providing relaxation techniques that she could adapt to automatic drawing and was still practicing in the 1980s (Furby 2001; Mora 1984), as well as a good understanding of the stage requirements. The performing arts were always important in her life; tellingly, she opens Barbara Blackman’s interview by saying ‘I was born in 1928, when Diaghilev was still alive’, and recalls the actor and teacher Roger Blin asking her when she left Paris ‘to make sure to do a lot for the theatre’ (Mora 1984). Many years later, Mora fulfilled her promise, when she was commissioned to create sets, costumes and masks for two plays by Euripides in Melbourne, in 1979 and 1980, as well as painted wooden puppets for an opera touring Australia as part of the Bicentenary celebrations, in 1988.

While learning acting techniques at school, Mora was always drawing and painting with gouache at home, beginning an artistic practice that continues to this day. Her first oil painting was a village landscape, realised during the Moras’ honeymoon in 1947, a painting that is still in her private collection. Life in France at the time was full of stimulations for a young artist: ‘France after the war was stunning, because it was the time of Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre, Picasso, everybody’ (Mora 2004). However, when the Cold War started in 1951, the idea of another war terrified her and she talked Georges into leaving France and starting a new life overseas (Thomas 1993). Choosing Melbourne, Australia, among the offers of employment made to Georges at the time, the couple and their baby son Philippe left Paris and their former life, with mixed feelings of elation and sadness. Mora compares this to ‘going into exile’, a feeling that had haunted her childhood, and admits she has always been interested in exploring the feelings of migrants, finding it ‘beautiful to be away from the place you are born’ (Mora 1984). This move was a complete rupture from their previous life and social circle, with the exception of the mime Marcel Marceau, a Resistance companion of Georges and a teacher for Mirka at the EPJD school in Paris. He visited the Moras several times, when he performed in Australia. During one of these visits he created three painted dolls with Mora, based on his self-portrait, one being still part of her personal collection (Mora 1984). A photograph of Marceau, Mora and the doll, was published in The Age (Carbone 2007) with text telling the story of the doll’s creation.
2.1.3 Melbourne, Australia. A seamstress named Mirka

In her early years in Australia Mora, then aged 23, started to make a living as a seamstress, in parallel to developing an artistic practice. She had always made her own clothes and was ‘a marvellous dressmaker, very exclusive, very tasteful dressmaking and embroidery’ according to John Yule (Irving 1989, p. 118). Barrett Reid, who became a close friend, also recalls that ‘she did exquisite embroidery and exquisite sewing’ (Irving 1989, p. 92). This talent in textile work was later sublimated in Mora’s embroideries and soft sculptures, which combine very detailed textile work with various techniques of painting.

This sewing business and related encounters with clients became Mora’s entree to the artistic society of Melbourne (Delany 1999). The landlord of the studio in Grosvenor Chambers, 9 Collins Street, was persuaded into leasing it to the couple after Mora told him that she was going to open a French ‘haute couture studio’ (Mora 1984). The studio was one of the few addresses in the city with a celebrated artistic history, having housed the studios of Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, Sir John Longstaff and Ola Cohn over the years (Clark 1997; Harding & Morgan 2015). Mora met Charles and Barbara Blackman through a customer interested in the decorated fur and lace collars she exhibited in the window, and who happened to be a friend of the couple (Mora 1965b). Mora then offered her studio as a venue for an exhibition of Charles’s schoolgirls paintings, which opened on 1st September 1953. According to Harding & Morgan, ‘the repurposing of the Moras’ apartment as a gallery was to revolutionise the Melbourne art scene of the 1950s’ (Harding & Morgan 2015, p. 228). It became ‘a legendary place’ for the following 15 years, with Mirka as a ‘queen bee figure, a catalyst figure of the 1950s’ (Barbara Blackman in Mora 1984) and a centre for Melbourne’s contemporary art and artists (Thomas 1993; Harding & Morgan 2015).

But the most important encounter occurred through meeting the music critic John Sinclair, during a party at the house of one of Mora’s customers. Sinclair was a friend of John and Sunday Reed, and directed Sunday to the young French seamstress, which triggered a friendship between both couples (Mora 1984; Harding & Morgan 2015).
That friendship was to have a great impact on Mora’s career and on Melbourne’s art scene for the following decades.

2.1.4 A circle of artists

The role of two couples - the Mora and the Reeds- in the revival of the Contemporary Artists Society (CAS) in Melbourne is well documented (Blackman 1996; Delany 1999; Hart 2001; Harding & Morgan 2015; Heathcote 1995; Mora 1984; Mora 2000). The CAS meetings took place in the couple’s studio at 9 Collins Street, which doubled as art gallery and family home. Barbara Blackman has written fondly of the influence that Georges and Mirka had on the artists’ circle at the time. She credits them with giving energy and impulsion to the painters’ group, as well as an aura of European taste and practices.

There we were, in Melbourne in the fifties, the new wave of painters [...] needing [...] some ship in which to sail, a destination of intent. Europe gave it to us; movers of the new force [...] Georges and Mirka Mora came from the heart of that war-wounded Europe, which we, in our protected isolation, were only slowly coming to understand. [...] Georges and Mirka offered us new sites. They were happeners, not owners. They had lost families, homes, land of birth, friendships, memorabilia of their youths, and now lived in the present and its possibilities [...] certainly [Georges] grew us up, as assuredly as Mirka never let us escape our child hearted spontaneity (Blackman 1996, pp. 294–295).

Certainly, the Mora’s sense of hospitality and their generous attitude to food and wine contributed greatly to the atmosphere of emulation, activism, creativity and exchange of experiences that developed during the 1950s (Harding & Morgan 2015, Ingram 1997, Morgan 2010, Thomas 1993). Melbourne society was still very conservative at the time and Mora’s unique style of dress, shown in Figure 4, was something new, as was the open attitude of the couple that intimately mixed art and personal life. For Mora, it was a period of intense learning from her many contacts with other artists. ‘I had an art school around me’ is how she remembers those times (Mora 1984), which highlights how much she learned by watching other artists paint or draw in her studio. According to her own words, at the time [in 1954] she ‘could not draw properly and did not
understand paint physically’, and was struggling to develop a self-taught practice, while bringing up children and cooking for the flocks of visitors (Mora 1984).

**Figure 4.** Mora in 1955 in Collins Street, Melbourne. The text* reveals the general perception of women at the time [Source:M.Mora’s personal archive]

*"Mirka Mora is a French girl who came to Australia three years ago and recently set up a typically French café in Melbourne’s theatreland. She does all the cooking and looks after her husband, George, and their two children. In addition to all this, she runs an art gallery in the basement of their tiny flat. Mirka, whose real name is Madeleine, was born in Paris. She has a gamin hair-do, big brown eyes, is a little over 5ft.’

Most of the artists who later became important figures in the art world used to drop in at 9 Collins Street to talk, view the gallery’s shows or do some drawings while conversing.15 Arthur Boyd (1920-1999) Fred Williams (1927-1982), John Perceval (1923-2000), Erica McGilchrist (1926-2014), Ian Sime (b.1924) and Charles Blackman (b.1928) were habitués. Both Barbara Blackman and Mora recalled how intense the relationships were between these people, how much they learned from each other, from constantly visiting and writing to each other (Mora 1984; Holt 1985). Artists also had the habit of exchanging materials; the young Mora was offered some homemade paints

---

15 Barrett Reid describes the group as ‘a fairly close knit group of people, based on personality rather than necessarily talent as such or shared ideas’ (Irving 1989, p 93)
by Boyd, who also ‘sharpened her quills’ while Fred Williams brought bottles of ink to their drawing sessions (Mora 1984, Mora 2000). All these artists strongly encouraged her to practice her art, already seeing her talent at this early stage of her career. It was an extraordinarily creative period for all the artists involved, and fondly remembered by Mora: ‘We were making history, and it was all about painting and sculpture, the arts we all loved so passionately’ (Mora 2000, p. 33).

Cooking for so many people gave the couple the idea of opening a little café: Mirka café, described by John Olsen as ‘a tachist paradise’ (quoted in Delany 1999, p.15), opened in 1954 in Exhibition Street, its walls adorned by works of CAS artists lent by the Reeds, while its crockery was made by John Perceval (Thomas 1993; Clark 1997, May 2001). Among the several pubs that served as gathering places for the avant-garde, Mirka café was ‘a place for Melbourne’s biggest creative egos’ (Heathcote 1995, p. 66), ‘the hangout for Melbourne’s most avant-garde artists’, where the weightier conversations happened, and the only place where women were not marginalised (Thomas 1993). The café’s exhibitions, including group and solo presentations such as Joy Hester’s show in 1955, helped enhance the Moras’ status as innovative patrons of the arts (Clark 1997). Mora’s own paintings were also displayed there, during group exhibitions of the CAS artists.

2.1.5 The first murals

Becoming too small, Mirka café gave way in 1956 to the Balzac French restaurant in East Melbourne, a great meeting place again for the art and political world, particularly after gaining its license for serving alcohol in 1958, in addition to its reputation for good food and stimulating company (Clark 1997, p.176). Mora no longer did the cooking, which allowed more time for her art practice, but was still very involved in the business and in child rearing.16 The Moras’ successive restaurants were much more than a means of living; they held a privileged point of observation, overseeing the incredibly rich encounters that happened daily and fostering long lasting friendships with artists from

---

16 Barrett Reid recalls that ‘she gave everything to the children in the first years… only later art took her whole life’ (Irving 1986, p92)
various parts of the world. First Mirka café, and then Balzac restaurant were a focal point for the art world each week. Geoffrey Dutton recalls his first meeting with Mirka in 1963, at the Balzac where he was having dinner with friends. He also talks about her intelligence, while describing the murals that she and the Annandale art group painted on the walls:

This was the first time I met Mirka. Like everyone else I was captivated by this small, dark European-Jewish woman, who still looked like a girl of nineteen. Her delicious accent, her apparent naïveté, her impulsive humour projected a plausible persona that in no way revealed the subtleties underneath. Mirka was in fact deeply read in French and English, of formidable intelligence and acuity, and of a temperament that was wicked and satirical one moment and kind and affectionate the next. Her murals were also on the walls of the Balzac, as unmistakable, droll and tender as herself (Dutton 1994, p. 293)

One of Mora’s murals at the Balzac was rediscovered in August 2016, hidden for fifty years behind a plaster wall (Francis 2016). Another mural, by Colin Lanceley, Mike Brown and Ross Crothall (1962), commissioned in exchange for meals and accommodation, and painted on three panels, is now in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery under the title ‘the Café Balzac mural’ (QAGOMA 2016).

The Mora family often spent their Sundays at Heide with the Reeds (Ingram 1997; Mora G, 1983; Mora 1984; Reid & Underhill 2001). The ongoing exchange between the Moras and the Reeds involved support for Mirka’s art and discussions on painting and French literature; Mora recalls that ‘knowing John and Sunday sharpened your sensitivity… they understood what I was trying to paint’ (Morgan 2011). According to Barrett Reid, Sunday’s support was essential in giving Mora confidence in her artistic career:

---

17 Foreign artists were often invited to open the CAS’ annual exhibition, as did British actor Ralph Richardson in 1955 or American musician Larry Adler in 1957 (Clark 199, p.176)
18 ‘Their [the Moras] restaurants were the core centres of the interested and the interesting in Melbourne, in a way that Heide, as a private home, was not’ (Reid & Underhill 2001, p. 644)
The first time I saw her being regarded as an artist was by John and Sunday, and it was through their quiet acceptance of the fact that she was an artist that others started to prick up their ears and note. Everyone had just thought that she was Georges’ wife and a lovely beautiful girl, and I think… she took quite some time to see herself as an artist… Sunday’s recognition of this fact was of crucial importance (Irving 1989, p.103)

This is confirmed by the letters Mora sent to Sunday (and John) Reed during those years, telling her about her work and requesting her advice:

I have done two paintings and a large drawing, I wonder what you will think about them (letter to Sunday Reed, 9 October 1959; Mora 1957-1976)

What I wanted to show you is a big panel with more indian ink than charcoal. It makes the black even more warm and and and [sic] like a summer sky (letter to John and Sunday Reed, 10 March 1967; Mora 1957-1976)

Mora appreciated the Reeds’ unwavering support and gave them many works of art as presents. Their collection of Mora’s works, now belonging to Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, includes drawings, paintings and soft sculptures that she offered to them over the years. The only work of art they ever bought was a life-size mermaid doll, a present from John to Sunday, today lost, but known from a photograph showing it sitting in an armchair at Heide (Morgan 2013). Mora’s letters to John kept him informed of the work’s progress (letter to John Reed, 4 April 1971) and of the small alterations she made after delivery (letter to John and Sunday, 31 April 1971).

When the building at 9 Collins Street was listed for demolition in 1965 (only the façade is preserved today), Georges Mora bought the Tolarno hotel in St Kilda, where he could have in the same place a restaurant, a studio for Mirka and a home for his family. Three years later it also became an art gallery (Clark 1997). Over the years, Mora gradually painted all the walls of the restaurant and the ground floor, to create a mural ensemble that was registered by Heritage Victoria in 2009 (Webb 2009). For Georges, it was also the starting point of his career as an art dealer, which was to become his main job in the

19 The murals that cover the four walls of the restaurant were ‘refreshed’ by Mora herself in 2007 when the restaurant was revamped by chef Guy Grossi and renamed ‘Mirka at Tolarno’. Other artworks include plaster bas reliefs and signs in the bathrooms (Coslovich 2007a, and 2007b, McGuire1995)
years to come. The Tolarno French Bistro replaced the Balzac as a meeting point for the art world (Thomas 1993) and its murals became an intrinsic part of the place:

Tolarno gallery was a phenomenon of the 1960s. Georges and his first wife, the artist Mirka Mora, had taken over an old hotel... they turned it into one of Melbourne’s liveliest bistros. Mirka decorated every surface with her angels and lovers, stray children and magical birds and beasts (McCaughey 2003, p. 79)

The mural in Figure 5, painted by Mora and John Howley, was partially destroyed during the building’s renovations. The other murals, shown in Figure 6 and 7 and are well known to Melburnians. At the Tolarno hotel, the couple continued their bohemian life as artist/gallerist/restaurateurs for a few years. But the pressures of the restaurant work, painting, family life and the complicated love stories that were common in their circle at the time took their toll on Mora, exacerbated by the stress of having to send her older son Philippe to London at the age of 17 for fear that he would be called up for the Vietnam war (Mora 1984). The couple separated in 1970 and Mora moved to a house/studio nearby, while the children remained with their father. As much as it marks the end of her long marriage with Georges Mora, although they kept good relationships until Georges’ death in 1992, this also marks the moment when Mora, then aged 42, fully dedicated her time to her art and consolidated her reputation.

Figure 5. John Howley and Mirka Mora, Untitled mural (since partially destroyed), Tolarno restaurant, year unknown. [Source: M.Mora’s personal archive]
Figure 6. Mirka Mora, *Untitled murals*, Tolarno restaurant (detail), 1965-1970

Figure 7. Mirka Mora, *Untitled Murals*, Tolarno restaurant (detail, West and North walls), 1965-1970-2007
2.1.6 The artist’s career

Heartbroken and unable to paint for a while for lack of energy, Mora began to cut up her drawings and rearrange them. At the same time, she saw some paper cut-out dolls in a shop, with cut-out clothes that you could put on them, and the idea of the dolls or soft sculptures came to her mind (Beier 1980; Mora 2000; Mora 2013b). They quickly developed into painted soft sculptures of imaginary creatures of all sizes, shapes and colours, (see Figure 9), which were exhibited for the first time at Realities Gallery in 1971 with a catalogue written by John Reed. Mora has always described her dolls as the expansion of her drawings in three dimensions (Beier 1980, Mora 1984), which allows her to solve problems of space and composition. The dolls were also quite successful in terms of sales, which by now was a necessity for Mora to make a living. Over the years she produced an enormous quantity of them, as noted by Barbara Blackman:
Mirka is immersed in her work … her drawings have turned into dolls - of all conceivable sizes and forms - and her small studio is so crammed with her work that it is literally a problem how to go through it’ (Blackman 1997, p.724)

Mora was deriving great pleasure from making dolls, writing ‘I want to make these dollsssss [sic] until my last breath’ to John and Sunday Reed (9 May 1971; Mora 1957-1976). Two years later, in 1973, she began to work for the Council of Adult Education (CAE), running workshops in doll-making, drawing, masks and embroidery (Mora 2000). This became her work for the next 23 years, for which she received a medal for her long service to the CAE. This work ensured her survival and established her reputation as an outstanding teacher, whose workshops were famous for their atmosphere which fostered the imagination of her students.

Figure 9. Mora with one of her dolls (March 2014)

In addition to the workshops, her artistic activity through these years was very intense; it involved experimentation with various media (soft sculptures, ink drawings, paintings, embroideries, charcoal, tempera, mosaic). Gradually emerging as a recognised artist, Mora started to get public commissions; she was the first of the fourteen artists\(^\text{20}\) commissioned to paint trams for the Transporting Art project mentioned earlier (Fagan 1987, Auld 2001), whose aim was to bring art to the streets

\(^{20}\) Other artists included Erica Mc Gilchrist, Clifton Pugh, Les Kossatz, Peter Corrigan, Gareth Samson, Howard Arkley, Andrew Southall, Don Laycock, Mike Brown, Paul Mason, Trevor Nicholls, Rosemary Ryan.
for everyone’s enjoyment, providing access to contemporary art for those people who did not form the galleries’ usual audience. Mora’s tram, shown in Figure 10, was one of the people’s favourites. It ran for a number of years in the streets of Melbourne before being auctioned in 1986 (Fagan 1987), and is now in a private residence in the Mornington Peninsula (Auld 2001).

![Figure 10. Mirka Mora’s tram, 1978](source: Transporting Art. Melbourne’s painted trams, leaflet published by Victorian Ministry of the Arts, 1980]

The same year, Mora was also involved in the ‘Artists in schools’ pilot project funded by the Australia Council’s Community Arts Board (Holt 1985; Auld 2001); this project saw artists spending one day a week in a designated school for an entire term. Mora worked in Ste Anne Catholic School in Kew and in Kew Primary School (Mora 1984), creating artworks with the children, which consolidated her deep involvement in the community. Still in 1978, an exhibition of her painted embroideries toured regional Victoria, as well as two boxes of dolls commissioned by the Crafts Board Australia, representing The enchanted garden and the aboriginal Bunyip paradise (Figure 11), now held in the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), Canberra.21 Her theatre-related works took place during the following two years, with the sets, masks and costumes for Euripides’ Medea and The Bacchae, directed by Murray Copland (Figure 12). Mora collaborated with Copland again for the opera ‘Bennelong’ for which she created 85 painted wooden puppets (Figure 13) in 1988. The production, commissioned for the Bicentennial celebrations, upheld the life of Bennelong, the 18th century Aboriginal man

21 The Boxes of mysteries are two Perspex cases with decorated bases, dimensions 141x60x70 cm. (Assemblage, cotton, filling, coloured paint); The enchanted garden comprises 55 dolls, The Bunyip Paradise 25 dolls (on line catalogue of the National Gallery of Australia, http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/mirka.mora)

![Image](160x521 to 436x728)

**Figure 11.** Mirka Mora, *The enchanted garden*, 1978, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Crafts Board Collection donated by Australia Council 1982, © Mirka Mora

![Image](159x244 to 437x476)

**Figure 12.** Mora with the masks she created for *Medea*, at the Performing Arts Centre, September 2013
From the late 1970s, murals became a big part of Mora’s production; some of them were private commissions for people’s residences, such as the ‘Packer mural’ in Armadale, the ‘Morgan mural’ in Toorak, (Figure 14) or the ‘Ardmona mural’ in Shepparton. Others were in workplaces, such as the mural for Dr Smyth’s clinic in Vermont, now in the Peter McCallum Centre Collection, the mural in Cosmos bookshop (now Readings bookshop), St Kilda, or were commissioned by a gallery, like the Tympanum (Figure 15) in 1977, mentioned in Chapter One. Mora also received commissions for murals in many states of Australia, such as a big mural on the history of the circus for Adelaide Festival Centre in 1982, which was given to a home for disabled children after the festival; a mural done in public during the Perth Arts Festival in 1983 (Figure 16), now in Heide Museum of Modern Art; two murals in the Burdekin Library and Burdekin Theatre courtyard in Ayr, Queensland in 1983; a mural for the entrance hall of the Council for Adult Education, Melbourne, in 1984; a large mural combining mosaic, paint and low relief in Flinders Street station, Melbourne in 1986, shown in Figure 17; a mural for the Dog’s Bar in St Kilda, in 1990; and a circular mosaic seat at the entrance of St Kilda Pier jetty in 1993, shown in Figure 18 (Mora 2000). Most of these murals are still in place and have become landmarks of their respective areas. To add to this immense activity, she also provided designs for tapestries, woven by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, for the National Bank, Ansett airline and the Australian Embassy in Beijing (Mora 1984, Gantner 2014).
Figure 14. Mirka Mora, ‘Mirka’s room’ (detail), 1970, private collection, Melbourne

Figure 15. Tympanum, oil on canvas laid on board, by Andrew Sibley, Mirka Mora, Georges Baldessin, Les Kossack, Roger Kemp [Source:M.Mora’s personal archive

Figure 16. Mirka Mora Perth Festival Mural 1983, synthetic polymer paint on tin, 6 panels, each 120 x 280 cm (approx.), detail of right panel. Heide Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Paul Swain 2015
In parallel to these big commissions, Mora always painted in her studios; she successively rented houses or big industrial spaces in St Kilda, Kew, Rankins Lane in the city, St Kilda again and finally Richmond where she now lives in a building that also houses her son William’s gallery and home. Never a businesswoman, she credits William for changing her status from an artist selling in commercial galleries such as Distelfink Gallery on Burwood road, which always had her embroideries or dolls for
sale, to an artist represented by an established art gallery. Her exhibition at Tolarno in 1983 and William’s 1987 inaugural exhibition for his own gallery in Windsor Place -a retrospective of 30 years of his mother’s creations- lifted her image and allowed her to do less workshops, liberating more time for her own works of art (Mora 1984).

After their death in 1981, John and Sunday Reed’s home became Heide Museum of Modern Art (Heide). It was almost a natural place for Mora’s second retrospective in 1999, titled *Where angels fear to tread*. It attracted a large number of visitors and reaffirmed Mora’s place in the heart of Melbourne, together with her family.22 Mora needs to paint daily to feel comfortable;23 her artistic activity for the last twenty years has mainly consisted of painting, drawing and watercolour, regularly shown at William Mora Galleries, which also did a retrospective of her work for the 2012 edition of the Melbourne Art Fair.

Mora is also represented in public collections throughout Australia: Heide holds the biggest public collection of her work in Victoria, the bulk of it coming from the Reeds’ estate, and a few additions from donations. During her exhibition titled *Mirka* in 2011 at Heide, Mora painted a ‘mural’ on the windows of the sunroom in the Reeds’ original house, which the museum decided to keep after the show as a permanent feature. Several public galleries and the National Gallery of Australia hold some of her work, albeit not on permanent display. Despite her undeniable popularity as a public persona,24 Mora’s artistic achievements are not very widely represented; apart from her public commissions, the bulk of her work is at the moment in private collections.

---

22 Her three sons Philippe, William and Tiriel have respectively become a reputed filmmaker, a major art gallerist in Melbourne and a recognised actor in Australia.
23 Barrett Reid describes her in 1986 as ‘a genuinely possessed and obsessed person’ (Irving 1989, p105).
24 Mora was one of the faces of *The Age*’s campaign ‘Forever curious’ that ran regularly in 2013 in *The Age* and on billboards. The photo shows her drinking tea and reads ‘just a grandmother. Bohemian. Artist. Restaurateur. Mirka Mora. Active in our cultural scene for over 50 years. What inspired such a vibrant life? Perhaps narrowly escaping the Holocaust by hiding in the forests of Western France. Remarkable stories can be found where you least expect them’.

93
2.2 Local historical context

2.2.1 Modernist artists and art academies in Melbourne

The euphoric atmosphere of economic growth before and during the second World War, and the creation of the CAS and of the Angry Penguins magazine (led by John Reed and Max Harris) fostered the emergence of many arts movements in Melbourne (Harding & Morgan 2015; Heathcote 1995). The interests of the country’s establishment broadened from being exclusively British, to encompass European culture as a whole (Butler 1997). Migrant artists having fled Europe’s wars brought their different traditions and artistic trainings to Australia and helped the ‘long awaited Australian School’ to emerge by this cross fertilisation of talents (McCulloch 1955, p. 516). Modern artists’ inspirations ranged from social realism to Expressionism and Surrealism, as they sought to explore the unconscious surges triggered by the war, often interweaving these themes in their practice. Arthur Boyd, Yosl Bergner, Noel Counihan, Russell Drysdale, John Perceval, James Gleeson, Sydney Nolan, Joy Hester and Albert Tucker were all members of this rich artistic scene, although none of them enjoyed social recognition at the time. Unfortunately, with the arrival of peace, the Australian society chose to concentrate on material well-being, and entered a phase of creative recession that Sheridan has described as ‘Australia’s cold war against political and cultural radicalism’ (Burke 1975; Heathcote 1995; Sheridan 2002).

The conservative Menzies years (1949-1966), described as an era of bourgeois moral stability, economic prosperity and material progress, went in parallel with a degree of philistinism within the arts (Burke 2005, Heathcote 1995, Sheridan 2002). For Heathcote, the period 1946 to 1953 in Australia presented ‘a parched and inhospitable cultural landscape’ (Heathcote 1995, p. 11), while Bernard Smith spoke of the ‘fossilised attitudes’ of the art establishment during these years (Smith 1997, p. 9). The indicator of excellence was firmly on European production; the artist Ken Whisson described the somewhat stagnant artistic scene, dominated by the schools of Max Meldrum and of Georges Bell as ‘just a very dark world’ (Heathcote 1995, p. 4). This

---

25 The exhibitions French Painting Today at the NGV in 1953, Italian Art of the 20th Century or Recent German Graphic Art in 1956 are some examples (Butler 1997, p9).
feeling was pervasive, summed up by the performer Barry Humphries who declared that ‘the most important thing about Australia in the 1950s was the leaving of it’ (Britain 1997). In that context, it is not surprising that a group of modernist painters (Boyd, Nolan, Williams) who were exploring new ways of expression, all departed for Europe in the 1950s.

By then, another generation of modernist artists had emerged. For the next ten years, Melbourne is regarded as leading the way in art activity (Renschler 2006). The artistic hubs were ‘Heide’, John and Sunday Reed’s house in Bulleen, and ‘Open Country’, the Boyd’s family house in Murrumbeena. In this climate, the arrival of Georges and Mirka Mora, and their willingness to participate in the creation of an Australian modern art identity acted as a catalyst in the revival of the art scene in Melbourne. Their studio at 9, Collins Street became another hub for artists and critics; the CAS society focused on ‘finding an audience for today’s art, to hang it on the walls’ (Barrett Reid, quoted in Heathcote 1995, p. 33). It quickly became the forum of avant-garde thoughts, criticizing the conservative policies of the art institutions and started to work on its own alternative stream of exhibitions, held in the studio renamed ‘Mirka’s gallery.

2.2.2 ‘Coming of age’ in the Australian art scene

Soon the CAS exhibitions found bigger venues for their regular exhibitions, such as the showroom of Preston Motors in Russell Street, while Georges Mora and John Reed worked on the project of a Museum of Modern Art and Design of Australia. It opened in Tavistock Place in the city in 1956, with the Reeds as directors, and staged regular shows until it closed in 1964, supplanted by the new Arts Centre project and its brand new building for the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). Although not a financial success, the museum played an important part in the creation of a contemporary art audience in Melbourne, and was the site of Mora’s first solo exhibition in 1957.

The 1959 Antipodean exhibition and manifesto, championing figurative art against abstract art, called ‘non-objective art’ at the time,26 contributed to the creation of

---

26 The Antipodean group was formed by Arthur and David Boyd, Charles Blackman, John Brack, Robert Dickerson, John Perceval and Clifton Pugh, with art historian Bernard Smith. The group intended to react
internal dissents within the contemporary artist community. Although not herself an abstract painter, Mora, who ordinary sat watching and listening on the margins of these discussions, became sufficiently incensed to write a letter published by *Modern Arts News*, which stated that ‘no one has the right to tell painters what to paint, not even His Highness Sir Bernard Smith’ (Mora 1984; Heathcote 1995). Although the movement was short-lived, the Antipodean exhibition nevertheless was for Mora ‘a disappointment’ and ‘a loss of innocence’, that contributed to the slow division of their group of artists (Mora 1984).

By the late 1960s the group was indeed less close; some of them had left for Europe, and some had started to earn a living with their painting, slowly gaining recognition from the establishment as mid-career artists. This was partly due to the NGV’s involvement in supporting them, but also to the development of commercial art galleries such as *Australian Galleries* in 1956, *Gallery A* in 1959 and *South Yarra Gallery* (Heathcote 1995, p. 170). By creating a growing social prestige in the act of collecting, these galleries progressively generated a demand for modern art, considered as a wise investment. In addition, the emergence of a new generation of magazines and writers saw art critics becoming more open minded and academically supported, with figures such as Bernard Smith, Patrick McCaughey, Allan McCulloch and later Ross Lansell (Heathcote 1995, p. 181). The magazine *Quadrant* was created in 1956, *The Nation* and *The Observer* in 1958, and *Art and Australia* in 1963 (Catalano 1981). The art galleries and their market gradually took over the role of tastemakers, with Georges Mora becoming one of the most influential avant-garde dealers (Smith 1992). The NGV’s 1962 exhibition *Rebels and Precursors* showed social realist, expressionist and surrealist artists from 1937 to 1947; it was followed by *Two decades of American Painting* in 1967 and *The Field* in 1968, which helped introduce Australian audiences to modern art, figurative and abstract, and to ‘institutionalise the very idea of innovation’ (Heathcote 1995, p. 209). The opening in 1968 of the NGV’s new building designed by Roy Grounds further consolidated art’s position in the society and the recognition of Australian artists in their own country’s institutions.

---

against abstraction, seen as an invasion of American imperialism in the Australian arts. Although there were originally plans for other shows interstate and internationally, the group disbanded after the exhibition and the artists pursued their own career (Blackman 1968).
The years ‘without any culture’ where no modern art could be sold, were gradually relegated to the past, as cultural life entered into ‘an adult era’ (Mora 2013c; Mora 1984). Australian art was now incorporating various new notions inspired by political idealism, activism and critical theory. Art became more entangled with political issues, such as the Vietnam War or the feminist movement (Barker 2005, p. 72). This laid the background for the expansion of Mora’s artistic career, her art being very different from mainstream art movements, in a climate where few women achieved recognition as artists. She nevertheless developed a significant success over the years, although on a very different scale to that of her male counterparts such as Blackman and Perceval. Adopting a gender perspective to study the period helps to understand the reception of her art at the time.

2.2.3 Australian women artists in the post war period

The role of women in the history of Melbourne’s art scene in the 1950s and 1960s is not easy to grasp, due to their lack of visibility. The social status that women had gained during the war by accomplishing men’s work in their absence was unfortunately not maintained through the years of peace; dominant ideologies of domesticity for women, where family and material values were reinforced, left little place for women’s emancipation (Burke 1975; Sheridan 2002). Heathcote notes that social groups such as the lower classes, non-western artists and women were systematically positioned at the margins of art history, a position that was not reassessed until the 1980s when books and exhibitions began to take account of their presence (Heathcote 1995, p. 214). Peers describes a ‘cyclic presence of women in Australian art, from a period of visibility in the pre-war years, when Grace Cossington-Smith, Violet Teague, Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston and Vida Lahey worked and gave lectures on art and art history, to a period of relative invisibility in the post war years, centred on towering masculine figures such as Nolan, Tucker and Boyd’ (Peers 2011, p. 16). In Melbourne, the general culture of the city was mainly hostile to women artists; Max Meldrum, one of the city’s most prominent art teachers in the 1930s, had formulated an unequivocal opinion that still retained currency:
There would never be a great woman artist and there never had been. Woman has not the capacity to be alone…every great painter had to be able to walk out under the stars alone, with no companion, no guide and just go along this chosen path. No woman can do that (1938, quoted in Renschler 2006, p. 122).

Even in Mora’s avant-garde artistic circle, the male-oriented order of things was not much contested. Reminiscing of the CAS activities, Mora and Barbara Blackman referred to its ‘second circle of the wives’ while Ailsa O’Connor, a member of the CAS in the late 1940s, recalled the ‘slightly invisible women members’ in the artists’ groups (Mora 1984). Noting the large and mainly ignored existence of women in the post-war art world, Furby (2001) points to the CAS’ internal contradictions between its manifestos and principles, and its consistent gender bias in favour of its male members, both in selecting works and in promoting artists. This resulted in very few women being represented in the CAS 1960 survey exhibition (Furby 2001, p. 7). Deborah Hart concludes that ‘despite [a] democratic and broadly inclusive approach to exhibitions in the CAS, the role of women in public debate was marginalised’ (Hart 2001, p. 28).

As a result, there was a complete lack of contemporary role models for Mora, apart from Joy Hester, who however was largely unsuccessful compared to her husband Albert Tucker. Hester’s choice of medium (ink drawing and watercolours, then viewed as less ‘noble’ than oil paint) probably also contributed to her lack of recognition (Burke 1983). The two women were friends for a while, and Hester strongly encouraged Mora to practise her art, telling her that she should do ‘hundreds of drawings and washes’ (Hart 2001), advice that Mora followed by drawing intensively every day (Mora 1984).

Given that the traditional imagery of Australian settler culture was mainly one of masculine labour (Peers 2011), it is not surprising that the dominant narrative in post-war Australia’s arts was focused on male artists, eclipsing the range of female creativity of that period (Sheridan 2002). Despite of the writings of feminist theorists and historians such as Greer (1979), Chadwick (1990), Kirby (1992), Hoorn (1994), Meskimmon (2003; 2013) and Collet (2005), who have redressed the general perception and given visibility to many women artists of the 1970s and 1980s, the period of modernism in the general discourse of art history is still male-dominated. This situation has led Peers to call for a reassessment of the period to provide the groundwork for any
real recognition of artists like Elsa Russell, Erica Mc Gilchrist, Jacqueline Hicks, Nancy Borlase, Mirka Mora and Joy Hester (Peers 2011).

2.3 Mora’s place in contemporary art history

What was Mora’s place at the time within the Australian artistic scene, and particularly the Melbourne’s sphere? She had always distanced herself from the political infighting, leaving it to her husband and to the Reeds. She liked to be ‘involved in everything, but as a watcher and listener’ (Mora 1984). She concentrated mainly on her drawing and painting, conscious of the necessity of work for her to overcome her lack of formal training (Mora 1984). A regular participant to the Herald Outdoor Art Show and to the CAS group exhibitions, she sold her first painting, an image of a clown, in 1954 to Melbourne social figure and collector Neilma Gantner (1922-2015), and kept working hard. In the late 1950s, she was spending 8 to 9 hours per day drawing (Mora 1984), alone or with her painter friends. With John Perceval, she shared a common mythology where angels have pride of place, and a real complicity. Perceval’s series of ceramic angels, made for the Balzac restaurant, is today famous (Mora 1984).

The local artistic context of the period included the theme of children, which has been identified by Margaret Plant as the symbol of the social victim in an urbanised post war society, and a way of questioning the society’s future (quoted in Catalano 1981, p. 54). Mora’s originality however is to locate her haunted-eyed characters, children and adults alike, in an imaginary space situated more in the dream realm than in harsh reality, and to have sustained this theme over the years to make it a very personal one. Max Harris described her as ‘an offbeat product of the Melbourne school’ (McGuire 1995), while Barrett Reid thought that ‘from the beginning, Mirka drew out of her own dreamscape… her own fairy tale’ (Irving 1989, p. 100). Patrick McCaughey described her exhibition at Tolarno in 1967 as a fantasy world, with ‘an undertone of poignancy, a sense of isolation and estrangement’, where the mixing of ‘pathos and joyousness’ shaped the figures of the lovers in hope and melancholy (McCaughey 1967). In discussing this same exhibition, McGuire (1995, p. 92) underlines how Mora’s particular aesthetic ‘flew in the face of the contemporary fashion’ of abstraction, that was showcased the following year in The Field at the NGV, concluding that Mora’s
evolution happened in the margins of the main arts movements. Echoing McCaughey, many later reviews of Mora’s exhibitions also mention the poignant melancholy that always underpins her compositions (Catalano 1987; Lancashire 1992; Harford 1994; McCulloch 1996; McCowan 2012).

While Mora’s themes broadened, encompassing mythologies, symbols and a fantastic bestiary, the same transformation happened with her technical abilities. Her lines became more and more free and with a more assertive hand came a diversification of materials and textures; oil paintings became richer in texture, drawings became larger in dimensions, mixing collage, pastel, ink, charcoal and colour. The series of very large works from 1964 to 1967, including *Adam and Eve* and *Painting for a nostalgic traveller*, described by Max Delany as an ‘artist’s investment in painting as the pleasure of the senses, drawing as the pleasure of the mind’, illustrates this expanding ‘multimedia’ practice (Delany 1999, p. 43). It also prefigures the large realisations of the following years and the future public commissions, for which Mora further extended her technical repertoire. At this stage, Mora’s artistic fame was however subsumed by her social fame, which was mainly inspired by the spectacle of her eccentric personality and her prominent position in Melbourne’s restaurant culture.27

Mora’s first public commissions in Melbourne lifted her profile in the city. The Tympanum (1977), an oil on canvas in the shape of a Romanesque church tympanum, was executed in public over one month at Marianne Baillieu’s Realities galleries in Toorak, to celebrate the French Festival in Melbourne. It was a major operation of advertising for the gallery and for the artists, and was well covered in the media (Mora 1984; Lansell 1977; Makin 1977; McCulloch 1977), with one reviewer even calling for a church to be built to accommodate this ‘iconoclastic icon’ (Anonymous 1967). Mora’s tram, painted the following year, was equally well received, Mary Eagle stating in *The Age* on 25 August that from now on, ‘waiting for a tram could also mean watching out for the latest art trends’ (Eagle 1978). In these years, Mora was constantly visible on Melbourne’s public cultural stage, with exhibitions of embroideries and soft sculptures, masks featuring in theatre, art workshops, and the book by Ulli Beier, which has today

---

27 The Moras were also quite avant-garde in their approach to restaurant management. They had one of the first espresso machines in Victoria, and in December 1954, *The Herald* announced that Mirka café would put tables in the street, a sheer innovation at the time (May 2001, p104)
become a collector’s item. By the end of the 1980s, she had become one of the more prominent artistic figures in Melbourne; McGuire noted that between 1965 and 1971 only, she had 15 individual exhibitions, more than any of her Melbourne group peers (McGuire 1995, p. 83). Her technical explorations distinguish her from many other artists of this period, with a career developed at the interface of the crafts and arts, and sustained by an avid artistic curiosity, leading her to experiment in many directions and styles. In all probability, the great variety of Mora’s media, practiced simultaneously and equally valued, gave her more resonance with various audiences than would a ‘traditional’ visual painter’s practice.

As public commissions flowed in for murals, Mora kept experimenting with techniques, mixing low relief, mosaic and paint in Melbourne, paint on plastic in Adelaide, oil paint and wooden cut-outs for the Bennelong opera and paint on metal in Perth. At this period, Mora was very well represented as an artist in Victoria and Australia with her many public works, and her murals in Tolarno restaurant, painted for the customers’ and her own pleasure. Her distinctive style was famous and immediately recognisable, reflecting her rich visual and literary culture. However, her absence from major art history studies (Smith 1962; Burke 1990) is an indicator that her art was not taken very seriously by contemporary art historians. This thesis’ study of her techniques and materials and of the significance attached to them will therefore be a useful contribution to the existing knowledge about the artist. In the following three chapters, the thesis will explore how social, historic, economic and private circumstances impacted on Mora’s artistic practice, informing her technique and processes and her exploration of new materials and creative styles. Key themes, drawn from the data collected, are developed in relation to the historic, social, economic, artistic, feminist context of her lifetime. This knowledge about the meaning of materials will then be linked to strategies of decision making in conservation in Chapter Six, while the practical implications for conservation will be explored with case studies and tables in Chapter Seven, and in Appendices One to Four.
Part B. Reading through materials
Introduction

When looking at works of art, we usually concentrate on the finished product offered to our view. However, in this research the focus is on the space and time located before the completion of the work, and in examining behind the scenes, into the story of its fabrication. That story is important, because the choice, transformation and assemblage of materials into works of art reflect the artist’s intention. The art historian Nicolas Chare deplores the fact that the materials themselves are often overlooked in art history, and seeks to redress this perception:

The various media that have been employed in art-making are perceived by many art historians as vehicles of meaning, seen as superfluous to interpretation, rather than as possessing meaning in their own right. Artists’ materials are, however, always invested with significance (Chare 2009, p. 673).

The creative processes of artists have only recently started to raise broader disciplinary interest; figures of the twentieth century like Auguste Rodin are now the subject of exhibitions that detail their techniques of modelling, casting, cutting, reassembling and mixing, which are very well received by a public curious of the labour involved in the creation of art. In a similar vein, this research uncovers and records the many creative processes employed by Mora, shedding light on the often complex and time-consuming techniques that are her signature. This part of the thesis offers a different reading of Mora’s œuvre, starting from the materiality of the works. Keeping in line with the cultural materials conservation interest, the focus is on the objects and their physical presence, from which they derive meaning. The research acknowledges that the semi structured interviews proposed by INCCA are suited for a single life interview and found some aspects of the method pertinent to the study. However, with a study developing over three years, participant observation and collaboration, as well as a direct approach to the materials in the act of making reconstructions, were found to be equally valuable methods. Using these participatory methods and the artist’s comments resulting from object based collaborations, overarching material-based themes were

---

28 Rodin: Transforming sculpture, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA, USA, July-September 2016
identified, from Mora’s rich environment and from the many interviews and conversations we had, including the consultation of her diaries.

These themes, which run across the artist’s whole production are developed in the following three chapters, supported by the evidence taken from interview quotations, from diary entries and from observation of the artist and her works. Chapter Three looks at the concept of knowledge embodied by materials and technique, and how this concept is appropriated and revisited creatively by Mora to elaborate her own hybrid processes, where symbolic meaning is often present. Chapter Four explores the interweaving of Mora’s various modes of making art and the organic relationship between them, coupled with a remarkable technical inventiveness that allowed her to constantly adapt to the commission’s requirements, be it durability, community reach, art in movement or theatrical creation. Mora’s deep investment into her art is examined through the relationship between the artist’s life and the materials she used, which shape each other in turns throughout her career. In particular, her physical investment and the ways her working processes evolved to reflect the maturation of her body are examined, as well as her ever changing material representation of the self, illustrated by her works’ signatures and its many technical guises. In Chapter Five, the manner in which the materials communicate significance is identified, sometimes through themselves and the ways they are assembled and transformed, sometimes through the artist’s way of staging them on her body and her environment, or through the sharing of her processes.

The thesis contends that the language of materials and specifically the social connotations they carry have impacted the reception of Mora’s work, as it has for many other women artists working with textile, and that the artist has at times countered or enforced these perceptions through her own verbal qualification of her work. With this detailed material-based interpretation of Mora’s work over three chapters, a new perspective on her art is proposed, embodied in the making of the works and of great importance for a global understanding of her complex production. The third part of the thesis will relate this interpretation to the practice of conservation and how it can include this new knowledge.
Chapter Three. Materials and the artist

Introduction

Mora’s artistic production spans across a very large range of materials and techniques. It is indeed impossible to describe her oeuvre without mentioning at least several of them, with oil paintings, charcoal drawings, soft sculptures and mosaics being probably the most prominent. Historically, in her solo exhibitions, she often presented works made in several media: dolls and drawings (1973, 1974), charcoals and paintings (1967, 69). Her retrospectives at Heide (1999), Tolarno Galleries (1983), William Mora Galleries (1986), William Mora Galleries at the Melbourne Art Fair (2012), and again at Heide (2014) included soft sculptures, paintings, drawings, mosaics, and embroideries. Several sources mention Mora’s broad range of techniques: Beier describes her variety of media (1980, p. 27), Philippe Mora underlines ‘the incredible range of media and techniques that she has used over fifty years’ (P Mora, cited in Delany 1999, p. 21), and Morgan mentions ‘her exceptional facility for technical exploration’ (Morgan 2011, p. 29). In Mora’s own vision of her art, there is no hierarchy between the materials, no difference between craft and art. She describes her 1987 retrospective, which comprised oil paintings, watercolours, drawings, mosaics, embroideries and soft sculptures as ‘very strong’, because it put ‘everything on the same keel’, therefore showing the true extent of her artistic production (Mora 1984). However, she repeatedly stated that everything she creates is a variation about painting and colour (Mora 1984; Mora 2000; Mora 2013c). The following chapters will show that her techniques are unified together by this exploration of colour.

Despite this, and as previously noted, her working processes have rarely been examined in detail from a material perspective. To obtain a good understanding of Mora’s oeuvre, one must consider all the media in which she has practiced. Instead of looking at them separately, her complete oeuvre was analysed, using a conservator’s knowledge of materials to examine how these media inform and support Mora’s creative process and their attached meanings. This transversal and material-focused approach has revealed different themes that run across the whole oeuvre, and in which materials play an essential role.
3.1 Materials as knowledge

3.1.1 Books and learning

Due to the historic circumstances examined in Chapter Two, Mora was a self-taught artist, something she constantly reminds her readers or listeners. After 13 years of age, her only formal artistic education was in drama at the EPJD School. But she soon had to stop this training, due to her husband’s disapproval of some of the acting exercises (Mora 1984; Mora 2014, pers. comm., 17 October). While she was already painting and drawing in her Paris years, and still mourns the loss of drawings left in her Montmartre cellar upon the family’s departure for Australia, she developed her practice enormously after meeting with other artists in Melbourne.

Mora’s method of learning combined peer learning during drawing sessions with her artist friends as described in Chapter Two, discussions about art, observation of art in galleries and extensive reading. She would go to the art gallery and look at paintings for hours to understand how great masters represented the world, looking at hands during one session, at fabrics on another visit, according to her preoccupation that day (Mora 2014, pers. comm., 17 October). Her readings, in both French and English, inform her art’s imagery, such as the detailed descriptions of the mythological story of Erichtonius, found in her diary of 1967, copied from a book by art historian Wolfgang Stechow. She went on to create a synopsis of the story for an exhibition titled The finding of Erichtonius - an ancient theme in baroque art - Wolfgang Stechow, in Watters Gallery, Sydney, in June 1968.29 The planning included relating the episodes to colours schemes, such as ‘carmin- 3. Athena taking Erichtonius to the Cicropides’ or ‘red & gold- 2-Gaea parting from her son Erichto,’ (diary 1967, original emphasis). But her diary entries also reflect her close study of the material aspect of art, researching technical treatises, recipes and tips from painting masters, and perusing art books for technical descriptions. For instance, Mora became interested in 1967 in the technique of painting Byzantine icons, and took time to write down a few remarks on how to produce similar effects using soft pastels:

29 The State Library of Victoria keeps the leaflet for the exhibition, complete with a drawing, the story of Erichtonius, and a list of paintings (oil and gold leaf on canvas) and drawings with titles and prices.
Travail à l’estompe au crayon noir ou rouge, à la craie de couleur ocre ou parfois bleue, qui se mêlent au noir et rouge en donnant des bruns et des verts, pour les chairs, les barbes et les chevelures, les fourrures ou les étoffes...
Les paupières qui souvent cernées d’un trait rouge sont comme enflammées
Parfois un estompage un peu mou et rapide qui dépasse les contours (undated paper, found in the diary from 1967).

[Work with paper stump and black or red crayon, or soft pastel ochre or sometimes blue, which blends with black and red giving browns and greens, for the flesh, beards and hair, furs or fabrics...]

The eyelids that are often lined with a red line look almost inflamed
Sometimes a blurring slightly soft and quick, overlapping the contours]

During our conversation over this diary entry, Mora remarked that this extract was probably copied from a book, as she was reading a great deal about icons and the Fayum portraits at the time, and produced works inspired by them. She maintained that interest; many years later her diary shows another reference to the same period in antiquity: ‘Look up yet again Vitruvius on the colour black. Also Plato Timaeus’ (28 July 1986).

Research into colours and techniques is a regular pattern of work in Mora’s artistic practice. Another of her long time interests is the study of matte painting. One entry from January 1983 describes the distemper technique, without mentioning the source DISTEMPER. A method of coloring surfaces. In this method the colours are prepared with a solution of water and size, or for small surface of water and gum. The method is mostly employed for coloring walls, and the distemper then consists of whiting, water, size and the colour required. (16 January 1983).

This is not only a snippet of knowledge jotted down. Months later, other entries on the same topic reoccur, showing an active pursuit of research in the technical field, as this extract shows:
Book Vuillard and Delacroix. La détrempe. Colle et raw pigments. Couleurs et tons à se rappeler- lilas, verts tendres, beiges délicieux, bleus-gris cendrés (tons) laiteux (2 August 1983)

[Book Vuillard and Delacroix. Distemper. Glue and raw pigments. Colours and tones to remember. Lilacs, tender greens, delicious beiges, ashen blue-greys, milky (tones)]

Beyond pure technical knowledge, Mora was also delighted in the chromatic harmonies of the great artists and noted down colours or combinations that caught her eye, like

  Studying painting & photography.


Mora’s eye was constantly analysing images; one day she was studying Leonardo’s thoughts about light and shadows, and how they are applied in his paintings, from an unidentified book, and noted her reflection on strong daylight outdoors:

  Chiaroscuro light and shade

  mass-shape-colour- Remember [page 133- L d.vinci on shadows p141 trees in landscape- midday pure light (17 January 1983)

That same day, she observed the various ways of introducing perspective into paintings, as in the following quotation:

  Perspective. 3 parts values 1) line drawing of bodies 2) toning down of colours as they recede into the distance 3) the loss of distinctness of bodies at various distances (17 January 1983)

In every conversation with Mora, books have a prominent presence; this packing list found in her diary, written before she taught a workshop, gives a good example:


The fact that she recorded her readings in her diary indicates that knowledge taken from books mattered a great deal to Mora; ‘Books are the best teachers’ is a statement she makes repeatedly (Mora 2013e). Her friendship with John and Sunday Reed included many exchanges of books and many discussions about them (Morgan 2011). Books
were teachers that could be consulted again and again, and symbolically represented knowledge for Mora, as shown when she remarks: ‘Tu sais c’est parce que je ne suis pas allée à l’école j’ai dû beaucoup apprendre, j’ai dû beaucoup lire’ (Mora 2013d) [you know it’s because I did not go to school I had to learn a lot, I had to read a lot].

Not only did Mora read a lot but she also selected her readings carefully with an uncompromising eye for quality, for which she makes no apologies, as in the following extract:

When you are self taught, comme je suis, self taught, je devais avoir les meilleurs livres… when you are self taught you have to know things, you have to find things
(Mora 2013b)

[when you are self taught like I am, self taught, I had to have the best books…]

Mora’s concept of an artist is of an enlightened person, curious and ready to learn, clearly influenced by the model of the Renaissance man. According to her, an artist should study his or her art but should also be aware of other research in many fields of culture. She states that ‘If you are a painter you should study many disciplines, study everything… but then all the arts are brothers and sisters, so a writer should draw and paint too’ (Mora 1984).

Mora applied this philosophy quite consistently, her readings including literature, fine arts, psychology, architecture and decorative arts. She also shared her readings with her students; the film of her summer school in 1984 shows her quoting Leonardo da Vinci to illustrate a point, or making students work on a ‘Grammar of ornaments’ that she claims is inspired by Inigo Jones’ book (Upton 1986).30 Indeed, all through her life, Mora’s first reflex when starting a new technical exploration has been to buy illustrated books so she can study from text and images alike. She did so for needlework as well as for mosaic, both techniques that require very specific knowledge. For her embroideries, she bought a very big book, titled Needlework through the ages, by Symonds and Preece, which contains many black and white photographs of historic needlework and chapters such as ‘Origin of stitches and materials’ that she studied closely and whose inspiration can be traced in her needlework (Mora 2013b and personal observations).

30 The Grammar of Ornament is in reality a famous book published in 1856 by British architect and designer Owen Jones. Inigo Jones (1573-1652), a British architect and artist, founded the English classical tradition of architecture.
She completed her knowledge with another book detailing all usual stitches, which she used extensively in her works, together with stitches she invented. William Mora recalls expert lady embroiderers visiting Mora’s exhibitions and strongly responding to her works, being delighted to identify existing stitches, common or rare, reinterpreted by the artist (W Mora 2013). This technical knowledge is of great value for her, as she believes that creating requires a solid technical base:

Oui les points on les invente mais il faut en connaître quand même beaucoup…
Parce que j’aime bien inventer des points, mais tu peux seulement inventer si tu en connais beaucoup (Mora 2013b)

[yes stitches you invent them but you need to know a lot of them... because I like inventing stitches but you can only invent them if you know a lot of them]

This remark underlines that her conception of artistic creation is firmly anchored in a traditional knowledge base, in this case a sort of grammar of embroidery, which enables and supports her freedom of creation. The same conception is valid across her various media and materials. To get a good understanding of mosaic for the Flinders Street mural, she used a similar research process. Her bible was the monumental text the mosaics of San Marco in Venice by Otto Demus, published in 1984 by University of Chicago Press and other books on the sixth century Byzantine mosaics of Ravenna (Mora 2013e; Reid 1986). Careful observation of the mural shows how she integrated this knowledge in her work, technically and stylistically (see section 3.1.3). Her diary of the time reflected her constant reference to these books:

Back to San Marco and Ravenna (7 January 1986)

Draw and watercolour. Also look at mosaic books O.Demus and Ravenna yet again
(18 January 1986)

While she researched the literature for technical knowledge, the scope of Mora’s study was broader than purely technical, including iconography, Greek mythology, philosophy, medieval imagery, decorative art, the history of arts and crafts, aboriginal art and various world folklores. Her intellectual process and cultural references were outlined in this letter to John and Sunday Reed from 31 April 1971:
A fertility doll appeared to me today all because I was rereading C Jung Symbols of transformation, but the picture which is giving me the doll is really called the regenerative symbol of the Haloa festival from a Greek vase by Pan Painter (…..)

Yesterday I did a double tail sea monster which I found in my dictionary of monsters (Mora 1957-1976) (original emphasis)

The Reeds were themselves a very erudite couple, and Mora obviously took great pleasure discussing literary references with them. But her quest for knowledge went beyond these days of friendship with the Reeds; it has remained a continuous endeavour until the present day. Examples are many throughout her career; for Dr Smyth’s clinic mural (1977, Figure 19) she researched a twelfth-century bestiary ‘because it is how medicine was introduced’, and drew inspiration from Jean Louis Borges’ 1957 Book of imaginary beings (Mora 1984). Another book she owned, Romanesque tympanums of France, inspired ‘Tympan’ (1977), freely reinterpreted by the group of five artists. For her painted tram (1978) she studied the significance of colours in Africa, a knowledge she then integrated into her work (Fagan 1987). In the case of the Adelaide frieze (1982), she studied the history of the circus and represented all the main figures in her work, with their names written underneath (Archives Adelaide festival; Mora 2000, pp. 188-189). For the murals in Perth and Ayr (1983) she studied local history and chose episodes she wanted to represent in the painting (Mora 2000, pp.185-187), all the time preferring literary study to oral history research (Mora 1984).

Figure 19. Mirka Mora, Dr Smyth’s mural, Coll. Peter McCallum Cancer Centre, Melbourne

This characteristic method of researching the literature to support her creative activities is well known to anyone who has seen her at work. Carrillo Gantner, who commissioned two sets of costumes and masks for his theatre performances, and always
followed her career closely, underlined how ‘she works very hard and she is quite scholarly in her approach’ (Gantner 2014). This view was echoed by Max Delany, curator of Mora’s 1999 retrospective at Heide Museum of Modern Art, who described her as a ‘very well read, intelligent, serious worker, the archetypal artist’ (Delany 2014, pers. comm. 25 June). Mora herself agrees with this definition, making her aspirations clear when she comments with humour: ‘Because I am not a scholarly person, but I could have been, couldn’t I?’ (Mora 2014a). As a consequence of this scholarly research practice, Mora’s library is extensive and ever expanding. Books are physically omnipresent in her life; they literally surround her, are permanent sources of inspiration and act as technical support during the creative process. But the artist’s constant reference to them also fulfils other aims. This point leads to further discussion on what may lie beneath Mora’s quest for specific literary knowledge such as the techniques of ancient painters.

3.1.2 Inspired by the Old Masters

She studies all that sort of stuff, as you know her book collection is phenomenal
she has a lot of books on the technique of the Old Masters (W Mora 2013)

This quotation is a perfect summary of the cultural heritage that Mora claims through her technical research. In the previous section, the extent and place of literary research in Mora’s creative process has been explored, which underlines her strong work ethics and complete dedication to her art. This leads logically to an exploration of the function of the many technical and cultural references informing her art, and her ways of communicating that research to the public. Mora’s constant sources of inspiration and of technical information are the paintings of the Old Masters. This is not new; the quest for the allegedly ‘lost secrets of the Masters’ has fascinated Western artists in the USA and Europe since the 1920s. Treatises such as Mayer’s The artist’s handbook of materials and techniques, or Maroger’s The secret formulas and techniques of the Masters, published in New York in 1940 and 1948, contain many recipes for artists to experiment. Mora and her circle of artists friends were avidly reading everything about art, and there is evidence that Blackman, a close friend of Mora’s and also a self-taught artist, was actively looking for a copy of Maroger’s book in 1959 (Ryan 2013, p24). The
revival of interest in tempera painting, a technique discussed in many of these treatises, may have triggered Mora’s interest in this medium. In her diary, she notes that ‘the yolk of egg take [sic] away the shine which is the oil and that’s what I have discovered and love as it creates stillness’ (10 August 1983). While it is difficult from this quotation to know whether she refers to her actual experience or to visual observations of oil and tempera paintings, many diary entries show her putting new knowledge into practice, spending a lot of time experimenting with materials in order to recapture the textures or processes that she liked. She collected recipes in technical treatises and tried them until she was satisfied with the result, or discussed with the tradesmen to get the best possible preparation for her murals. A selection of quotations from interviews and diary entries from over the years shows this never-ending quest for all types of techniques (this author’s emphasis in all quotations):

The experts showed their technique… They prepared the wall like the Old Masters did, so you get the same beautiful surface prepared for you by plasterers. Once it was prepared to my liking I did the design on the wall (Mora 1984)

What you don’t know you have to find out. I asked the tiler men, they were beautiful Italian men, knew all the tricks of the trade, it was transmitted into the family (Mora 1984)

Relearning the old technique dammar white undercoat wax (8 January 1983)

Medieval women artists (embroidery) I really would love one day to have a school of embroiderie (5 January 1983)

She is very involved in all these techniques of the Old Masters, many years ago she did all these tempera paintings where she made a dough, she’d dip it in the pigment with a bit of egg yolk and she’d dab it on like a pastel … finish things, she did many of them they were beautiful, egg tempera colours that she learned from books on Old Masters techniques (W Mora 2013)
A flurry of plaster is *a very old technique*. I had two plasterers, men who prepared the wall. Now a flurry is a technical term, it’s to add plaster to make shapes and you cannot go further than four centimetres or one inch outside the wall. So it’s like a bas relief (Mora 1984)

I am working on a big mural at Flinders Street Station … it will be … *in the true tradition of the mural* and will include *a mosaic from Venice* and a painted frieze on top (Anonymous 1985)

These quotations show how important it was for Mora to make frequent references to the past, to the ‘Old Masters’, to the secrets of the trades. She always mixed intellectual knowledge, learned from classical texts, with traditional technical knowledge, as seen in the explanatory drawing she made of the Tolarno low-relief mural (Figure 20). For her, knowledge should be applied and practiced, and should remain linked to this tradition. Whether grappling with the material herself, either with a mixture of varnish and sun-dried oil, with egg tempera, or with threads and needles, or employing specialists to produce a surface ‘to her liking’, such as the plasterers for Flinders street mural or Tolarno restaurant, or the weavers from the Australian Tapestry workshop, she always remained extremely involved in the technical realisation. While some artists delegate the entire material process to technicians, giving most value to the creative idea, for Mora the act of making art is extremely important, and she insists that her specifications be followed, in order to achieve the perfect effect. From the choice of materials to the process to the final result, she controls every single step of the creation of a work of art.
Mora’s efforts did not stop with the realisation of the work; she communicated about her research in every media interview. By publicly emphasizing the technical and cultural references that inform her art, she added a legitimacy to her work that contributed to her recognition within the broader artistic tradition. This was very important for Mora, her quest being fuelled by her sensitivity about her lack of formal artistic education. For her, being an artist meant total involvement, which included many facets; amongst them, her public persona and a specific language, which will be examined in Chapter Five. But above all, she sought acknowledgement of the enormous personal work that allowed her to reach this status, through years of practicing her art, reading, and studying pictures in books and galleries. She had set very high standards for herself from the outset, and had not wavered since; and while she recognised that her Australian artist friends were a great help, her inspirations always came from the Europe’s greatest artists. Stating in her autobiography that ‘letters and writings from painters are great sources of knowledge and comfort’ (2000, p.110), she also revealed the pleasure she gained from reading these texts:
Got to go back to John Gage’s book, especially Chapter 9, ‘Colour under control: the reign of Newton’. It describes the palette of great artists … It is so good to read and see palettes of great masters through the centuries (p. 111)

Quoting Vuillard, Cezanne, Titian and Velasquez or making reference to the twelfth century San Marco mosaic artists as her masters, Mora described the artistic ancestry, the technical lineage to which she wished to belong. Highlighting the commonality of techniques between her artistic masters and herself, she used materials as pathways of integration within this broader artistic family, from Rubens to Rembrandt. The link might be a brotherhood of the mind, as shown in this extract from her diary dated 10 August, 1983, which states that ‘Ron is with Rubens- transparent. I am with Vuillard and detrempe’. At other times, it can be a practical achievement such as when she states ‘I have discovered the secret of Rembrandt. The greys’ (Mora 2013e). Her sense of artistic comradeship can also reside in the reality of practice, as mentioned in the following quotation, which recalls sharing materials belonging to a great contemporary artist:

Tu sais Sunday m’avait donné la dernière boîte de Ripolin et j’ai fait mon self portrait, est ce que je t’ai montré mon self portrait fait avec du Ripolin, c’est le Ripolin que Sidney Nolan avait utilisé, c’est pas croyable hein ? (Mora 2013e)

[you know Sunday gave me the last tin of Ripolin and I did my self portrait, did I show you my self portrait made with Ripolin31, it is the same Ripolin that Sidney Nolan had used, incredible isn’t it ?]

This symbolic gift by Sunday Reed to Mora of a Ripolin tin previously belonging to Nolan was also underlined by William Mora, as a sign of Sunday’s early trust in her artistic abilities (W. Mora 2013). As such, it is a good example of how materials and techniques were used as a means of entry into art history, both past and present. Arguably Mora was carving her place in history of art by self-creating a trans-generational ‘brotherhood’, sharing techniques with the masters and adding comments in her diaries alongside their writings:

31 This self-portrait belongs to the collection of Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
Cézanne: ‘as one paints one draws; the more harmonious the colour becomes, the more precise is the drawing (au fur et à mesure que l’on peint, on dessine, plus la couleur s’harmonise, plus le dessin se précise) TRUE but il faut avoir quelque chose à dire= des images de la pensée (11 August 1983) [TRUE but you need to have something to say=images of the thought]

Vuillard: ‘quand les tons sont justes les traits (“forms”) se dessinent comme d’eux-mêmes’. Oui, oui oui (18 July 1983) [when the tones are right, the lines (forms) get drawn just by themselves’. yes yes yes]

Reaching across discipline fields, she also highlighted philosophical reflections that she found relevant to her own practice, all of this being consigned in her diary for memory and to be consulted again if required:

Symmetry disposes of the problème [sic] and answers the incalculable- or the not yet calculated. Hugo from Hofmannsthal. Symmetry inform same happens with colours (sense of order) (1 August 1986)

In her 1983 diary, next to a drawing of a dog, she compared her palette with that of her favourite master, Velasquez, when they paint a similar subject (Figure 21 a). The diary does not expand further; however, the juxtaposition of hers and Velasquez’s dogs on terms of equality, analysed from the strict point of view of their colour palette, reveals the seriousness and professionalism Mora puts into the research for her painting: ‘mine: scarlet, raw umber, jaune brillant [shiny yellow], orange, pale blue, light umber. Velasquez: rosy carmine, deep carmine, silver grey blue white, brown *(13 March 1983)*

Figure 21 a. an extract of Mora’s diary from 1983, comparing hers and Velasquez’ colour palette for painting a dog
Mora was very conscious that artistic research is a continuous process and she enjoyed being able to learn new things about painting in her mature years. She liked being part of an artist circle, valued the stimulating exchange of ideas and studying the work of her ‘brothers and sisters of the brush’ (Fagan 1987), whom she aptly identified by their common tool, in a manner reminiscent of the medieval painters’ guilds. While some artistic movements in the second half of the twentieth century (such as Arte Povera and Conceptualism) would reject or entirely deconstruct traditional academic knowledge to define themselves in new perspectives, Mora craved a place in the centuries-long tradition of art, and actively used technical knowledge to reach her goal. A confident relationship with materials was for her a clear indicator of artistic status; she summed it up when I asked what prompted her to choose plaster for the Tolarno bas-relief (1977), by this self-explanatory statement: ‘Tous les grands sculpteurs ont travaillé avec le plâtre!’ [all great sculptors have worked with plaster!] (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 13 January).

However, Mora’s intimate relationship with the techniques of the Old Masters did not take over her art. Rather, she used it as a way of anchoring her practice in a solid base, a starting point from which to explore creation freely. The following section will examine how she reinvented technical means to define her own original method.

3.1.3 Creativity and tradition

Mora’s approach to the Western tradition of art was ambivalent. She strove to learn and to belong through her technical knowledge and achievements; but technical knowledge was to her art what vocabulary is to a writer, the stepping stone from which to jump into the creative realm. She constantly sought to break the rules in order to imprint her own personality on the work. Being familiar with materials and techniques, she was equipped with a solid knowledge that ultimately allowed her to distance her working methods from conventional practice. For her, technical knowledge was not static but alive, something to be acquired and then added upon, twisted and reinvented in the course of the creative process. Her way of working was made clear in this public statement: ‘If you are a painter you have to think why you break all the rules, you’ve got to break all the rules’ (Mora 2009).
This rules-breaking attitude was not limited to painting. The same attitude applied to her iconography, which she reinterpreted using figures from classical books of imagery. When in need of an allegorical image for instance, she resorted to her illustrated book by Cesare Ripa *Iconologia. Baroque and Rococo pictorial imagery 1758-60*:

I think of a word, ‘say ‘intelligence’, and there it is in the book as a lady with wings on her head, and off I go *and do it my way*’ (Mora 2000, p 182) (This author’s emphasis)

Tackling a wide range of materials was a way to expand her vocabulary. Her ‘customisation’ of techniques was clear in many of her realisations, from the early charcoal drawings to the textile and mosaic works of her mature years, and always provides a challenge to anyone wanting to label her works of art.

*Charcoal drawings*

In the 1950s, Mora trained by drawing daily for six to eight hours. As drawing became easier, she exploited the possibilities of mixing charcoal, ink, pastel and tempera in increasingly larger dimensions, producing between 1963 and 1967 a series of four large scale drawings, made of panels measuring 244 x 122 cm each, combined as diptychs or triptychs. *An angel is passing by* (1967) and *Painting for a nostalgic traveller* (1966) are example of the former. *A friendly devil* is a triptych (Beier 1980, pp. 49-54; Delany 1999, p. 62). These large panels, exhibited for the first time at Tolarno galleries in 1967, were celebrated by *The Age* as ‘sumptuously decorative’ and illustrating ‘the magical side of her art’ (McCaughey 1967), while *The Australian* claimed they had ‘an almost Persian beauty of decoration’ in (10 June 1967). Thirteen years later, Beier still described them as ‘some of her most beautiful and powerful work’ (1980, p. 49). In these panels and in drawings of smaller dimensions, she used charcoal, pastel and ink in a luxury of decorative details, either drawn in black or ‘etched’ in the charcoal to appear as white (Figure 21b). The recently recovered black and white mural in the former Balzac restaurant, dating from the same period or slightly earlier, is an interesting example of Mora using oil paint or enamel in the same way she used ink and tempera.

---

32 No analysis of the medium was made. Visual observations by Vanessa Kowalski, the conservator who treated the mural, confirm the use of charcoal, and the black areas as oil paint or enamel, but a definite opinion can only be given with analysis of a sample (V. Kowalski, email, 5 September 2016).
on the black and white panels, imitating the smudged effect of charcoal, together with details made in real charcoal. It also illustrates how easily she navigated between supports, passing seamlessly from paper and canvas to wall (Figure 21c). The more confidant she felt about her drawing, the more adventurous she became technically; *Painting for a nostalgic traveller* (1966, Figure 22), is a fine example, mixing in the same diptych charcoal, pastel, acrylic and oil paint, in an ethereal overlapping of half opaque and half transparent figures. This is echoed on the walls of the Tolarno restaurant, painted during the same period with a single medium, but with an identical sense of space created by a similar treatment of figures and vegetal ornaments. In the years to come, Mora would continue to experiment with more techniques in her murals, as will be discussed below.

*Figure 21b. Mirka Mora, The Caress, pencil, pastel and charcoal on paper, 1963, detail showing the technique of scratching*
Figure 21c. Mirka Mora, untitled mural, Balzac restaurant, Melbourne, around 1958-60, oil (?) and charcoal on painted wall, detail (photo Vanessa Kowalski)

Figure 22. Mirka Mora, *Painting for a nostalgic traveller*, 1966, collection W.Mora Galleries
Mosaic, plaster and mural painting

The story of the making of the mosaic on the Flinders Street mural (1986) well illustrates Mora’s process of customisation. In her diary, she frequently juxtaposed on the same page the traditional technique and her own interpretation. This shows her deep attachment to tradition, if only to better free herself from its constraints and go on to find her own interpretation of classical techniques. A conversation with Nicola McGaan, Mora’s assistant on the Flinders Street’s mosaic, gives glimpses into Mora’s process of technical appropriation and personalisation:

She took the zigzag borders from Ravenna mosaics but put her own colours on them. Patches of different colours in plain backgrounds are a characteristic of Mirka she would put them to animate the surface … She would tilt the tiles to catch the light (pers. comm., 25 September 2014)

McGaan’s account reiterated the technical instructions given by Mora to this author in 2010 for the conservation of the St Kilda mosaic seat, when she specified that tiles of contrasting colours should be placed in the middle of blocks of plain colour, to animate these areas. For all its beauty, mosaic is a very difficult and constraining technique because of the sharpness, linear edges and non-flexibility of the ceramic or glass tesserae, and the fact that the mortar hardens quickly, blocking them in a fixed position once set. Traditional techniques of mosaic, described for instance in Ralph Mayer’s The artist’s handbook of materials and techniques (4th edition 1981) often involve preparing the work separately on a flexible support, and transferring it on the wall prior to applying the mortar that will seal the tiles together, this being called the indirect method. Mora was aware of this technique, for she told Barbara Blackman that the mural was ‘not prepared as traditional mosaists do, flat in another room and then put on the wall’ (Mora 1984). She chose to employ the traditional way of drawing in dark red on the wall prior to the application of the mosaic, as confirmed by McGaan and by photographs of the mural in progress (Figure 23). After this drawing, she then chose to work directly on the wall.
However, Mora did not follow either the traditional direct method, where the tiles are glued on the wall and the mortar placed afterwards as a grout; instead, she worked by laying a surface of mortar and pushing the tiles inside it, a technique that she described in detail to this author during the St Kilda conservation work in 2010, and that was confirmed by McGaan and by visual observation of the finished works (see Table 1 below). Mora loved the visual effect given by mosaic, and was obviously very eager to learn the technique, as her thorough research demonstrated. On the other hand, she was equally eager to ‘bend’ the method to suit her own desires. For her, the traditional technique of mosaic was a sort of ‘passport’ to the domain of art history and a guarantee of the longevity of the work of art through time. Her modifications to the tradition were subtle, but significant enough to convey her identifiable personality. From the irregular cutting of tiles to their positioning at different angles instead of evenly, her technical innovations contributed to her signature style as much as her personal iconography.

The following table shows her work’s main features compared with the traditional technique. In this and in the following tables, the column ‘Mora’s practice’ was informed by the author’s personal communications with Mora (2010 and 2013), old interviews with the artist (Mora 1984), conversations or interviews with relevant people.
and visual observations of works. For Table I, in addition to Mora, the conversation was with her former assistant Nicola McGaan (25 September 2014) and the visual observations were made of Mora’s mosaics in Flinders Street and St Kilda.

Table I. Technique of mosaic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional practice</th>
<th>Mora’s practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First render on wall, drawing with red pigment (chalk or water-based paint) called ‘sinopia’. The tesserae are all of equal size and shape, usually square.</td>
<td>First render on wall, drawing with dark red unidentified paint. The tesserae are prepared of different sizes and shapes, according to the composition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct method: the tesserae are glued face up to the wall following the drawing. The mortar is then laid quite liquid on top of the tiles, the excess removed immediately with rags. The surface is flat.</td>
<td>The surface is ‘limed’ = coated with PVA adhesive (Bondcrete)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect method: drawing reproduced on a piece of paper or fabric. Tesserae (tiles) glued face down on the paper. The finished section is transported on site and glued to the wall. The paper is removed and the grout is laid on top of the tiles, the excess removed immediately with rags. This allows a smooth and very flat surface.</td>
<td>The mortar is laid with a palette knife when it is already set enough to remain on a vertical surface. The tesserae are pushed into the mortar, tilted at various angles. The raised mortar between the tesserae is erased with a knife or a sponge. The surface is not flat but undulating unevenly, catching the light at various angles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![San Marco mosaics](image1)

![St Kilda mosaic](image2)

![Flinders street mosaic](image3)
As much as she liked the technique, Mora also liked to emphasise that for her, it was another form of painting. She underlined similarities and differences between her mosaic practice and that of the Old Masters, claiming ownership of her technique, as shown by this diary entry, written quite early into the mosaic work:

‘Painted’ with mosaic and hard to undo some tiles around nose of mother. The white I use my way is very effective. The old masters (San Marco) use it more sparingly (6 January 1986)

She confirmed this approach in her conversation with Barbara Blackman, a year after the completion of the mural, confiding that she ‘tackled it as a painting’ (Mora 1984). Her frequent mentions of transgressing the rules of many different techniques indicate how much this attitude is essential to her practice, equal to a good knowledge of the Western technical tradition. This is confirmed by her overall practice; insisting on her independence of mind, she generally refused interference in her work, had difficulties to accept assistants and was not willing to adopt any suggestions about materials (Mora 2013c; McCowan 2013; W. Mora 2013). Artistic freedom was essential for her, even if that involved revisiting her artworks later at a more favourable moment, as was the case with the plaster bas-relief at Tolarno restaurant (1977), that was made in the conventional stucco relief technique, but with a constraining brief from the architect:

The architect wanted the mural to be a certain colour It was a very tasteful colour but it put me off because it had to go with the restaurant and I did not like that. So after one year I came back and put colour in the eyes of my personages and coloured the leaves and put a bit of life in it (Mora 1984).

The traditional technique of painting murals was also reinterpreted in Mora’s terms; she pushed the materials to the edge of convention, by mixing them in unexpected ways. Painting on unusual supports like plastic (Adelaide 1982, Figure 24), wood (Bennelong opera, 1988) or metal (tram, 1978; Perth, 1983) only stimulated her creativity. Furthermore, she was keen to show that her innovations were technically sustainable, as at Ayr, where she used oil paint as highlights over acrylic paint, which she called ‘plastic’.
That was very daring because you should not normally put oil paint on top of plastic … quite a thick coat so I think it will be alright. Library is air-conditioned. I came 6 months later it was impeccable, didn’t crack (Mora 1984)

The conservation treatment done by John Hook in 2012 confirmed that the oil paint still adhered well to the acrylic under-layer after 30 years, so that the main treatment consisting of cleaning the surface.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 24.** Mirka Mora, *Circus*, acrylic and casein paint on plastic foil, made in public during Adelaide Festival, 1982, actual location unknown. [Source: Adelaide Festival Archive]

_Tempera_

Another of Mora’s technical explorations occurred in the medium of tempera painting, which had intrigued her for a number of years. Her tempera drawings, which she called ‘dough drawings’, were indeed part of the catalogue of Mora’s exhibition at Tolarno Galleries in 1967, together with the large charcoal panels. The Encyclopedia Britannica describes tempera as a:
Painting executed with pigment ground in a water-miscible medium. The word tempera originally came from the verb temper, ‘to bring to a desired consistency’. Dry pigments are made usable by “tempering” them with a binding and adhesive vehicle. Such painting was distinguished from fresco painting, the colours for which contained no binder (Encyclopedia Britannica 2014).

Technically tempera includes glue-based painting, saponified wax painting, egg and linseed oil, or any mixture that is used with water. However, the ‘traditional’ form of tempera as described by Cennino Cennini in his Craftsman’s handbook written in the fifteenth century, is egg tempera, where the pigments are bound with egg yolk and water (Cennini 1978). The paint forms a thin film that is resistant to humidity and has a satin finish comparable to modern acrylic. The egg medium dries very quickly and does not allow impasto or modelling, which explains the hatching technique used by the fourteenth century’s Italian masters. While it was the main painting technique employed in the medieval times, egg tempera was gradually replaced in the Western tradition by oil painting, which was more flexible, nicer to handle, allowed longer modelling time and gave a shinier aspect to the surface. In the Renaissance period, painters used all sorts of emulsions of egg (whole or yolk only) and oil, or finished tempera painting with oil glazes, in order to combine the properties of both mediums.

Following the centuries-long supremacy of the oil medium, twentieth century artists such as Mark Rothko (1903-1970), Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) and Lucian Freud (1922-2011) revived the tempera technique during the 1950s. Jacques Maroger’s book The secrets of the Old Masters (1948) provided several recipes for tempera emulsions, to be mixed with oil painting in order to emulate the texture of Flemish paintings. Charles Blackman was interested in this book (Ryan 2013) and experimented with tempera in the 1950s and 1960s, notably in the Alice series (Mora 1984). This seems to have slipped Mora’s memory, as revealed by her conversation with Barbara Blackman on this topic. Blackman asked Mora whether she had ever used tempera, and Mora answered that she had a lot, when she lived in 9 Collins Street. When Blackman added that this was ‘when Charles was also using tempera… in the Alice paintings’, Mora stated that she did not remember that fact (Mora 1984). It nevertheless seems likely that the two artists had conversations about the subject, each of them developing their own experimentations with tempera.
Mora’s idea of tempera involves egg, water and pigments, but also flour. The technique for her ‘dough drawings’ was inspired by the Old Masters recipes, with the difference that the egg was not mixed with the pigments and applied to the surface with a brush, but mixed with the flour to create a moist dough that was then dipped into dry pigments and used to draw on paper, giving an effect similar to pastel drawing. Mora has detailed the process during our conversations. Her recollection highlights the historic source in contrast to her own personal interpretation, underlining her link to the Old Masters; it also shows her pride and joy in both the technique and the results.

De la farine, tu sais tu fais, ah it’s beautiful to do, tu fais une pâte, un genre de pâte, tu peux mettre des œufs dedans, faut que ce soit moist by the egg, et tu mets ça dans le raw pigment, et you draw with it. C’est comme un peu, les vieux maîtres travaillaient avec des œufs, tu te rappelles ? eh bien moi je travaille avec la pâte qui est moist by les œufs

SC de l’œuf de la farine et de l’eau ?

MM oui oui, incroyable hein ? J’ai dû lire ça quelque part ; c’était très doux, très beau, comme du pastel, j’ai complètement oublié ça, c’était très beau (Mora 2013b) [some flour, you know, ah it’s beautiful to do, you make a dough, a sort of dough, you can put eggs into it, it has to be moist by the eggs, and you put this in the raw pigment, and you draw with it. It is a bit like, the old masters worked with eggs, do you remember? well, I work with dough that is moist by the eggs.

SC egg, flour and water?

MM yes yes incredible isn’t it? I must have read that somewhere; it was very soft, very beautiful, like pastel, I had completely forgotten that, it was very beautiful’]

The following table compares the main characteristics of Mora’s practice of tempera with the traditional technique. As no examples of dough drawings could be located within the time period of this research, the column ‘Mora’s practice’ is not informed by visual observation.

128
Table II. Technique of tempera painting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional practice</th>
<th>Mora’s practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support must be rigid (panel). The support is coated with gesso which is then sanded to get a very smooth surface. Sometimes a canvas is added to the gesso, and recovered with several layers of gesso before sanding.</td>
<td>Support is paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw pigments are mixed with egg yolk directly on the palette before painting, and the mixture is diluted with a few drops of water to be applied immediately with a thin brush. Drying time is very short. The painting is solid and waterproof after drying.</td>
<td>A dough is made with flour, egg and water. It is dipped into the raw pigments and used to paint, in the same manner as a soft pastel. Resistance to water after drying unknown.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Photo dough drawing unavailable*

Even if her tempera mixture and process appears to be quite an idiosyncratic recipe, Mora was prompt to add that she did not pursue its use for very long. She also acknowledged the practical limitations that caused her eventually to abandon this technique:
Tu travailles seulement avec le jaune … mais je n’obéis jamais les recettes … mais ça ne m’a pas intéressée vraiment … mais c’est beau, les résultats sont très beaux … mais c’est trop lent, les résultats sont trop lents, et je ne suis pas sûre si j’avais bien fait le mélange … je ne comprenais pas ce que je faisais, mais c’était très beau (Mora 2013e).

[You work only with the yolk … but I never follow the recipes … but it did not really interest me … but it is beautiful, the results are very beautiful … but it is too slow, the results are too slow, and I am not sure whether I mixed it properly … I did not understand what I was doing, but it was very beautiful]

Unfortunately, no visual observation of a work made with this technique was possible during this study. However, Mora’s description of them as looking like pastel drawings indicates well that their appearance did not match the hatched modelling of the early Italian painters. Nevertheless, Mora’s very personal interpretation of tempera had a certain amount of notoriety at the time, as it provided journalists with an unusual topic to discuss. For example, in the article titled ‘The girl who daubs in dough’ the process is described in a somewhat romanticised manner:

She read where old masters used dough with charcoal for drawings and worked out the process herself. After three months mixing plain flour, milk and eggs in a kitchen bowl, she discovered the secret was using plenty of eggs, to keep the dough moist. Her new painting form is like the 15th century Florentine medium of egg tempera. But Mirka’s brush is a dob [sic] of dough, dipped in powdered, coloured pigment and painstakingly rubbed on paper in swirls. (Anonymous 1967).

Mora certainly advertised this technique very efficiently. In the same article, she claims ‘I will show Melbourne a new art form’. Technically anchoring her art in the past, she also projected it into the future, arguing in the same article that ‘because of the eggs, her drawings will last forever’. The mixture of originality, ancient techniques, romantic ideas of ‘lost secrets’ and art lasting ‘forever’ was of great appeal to the public. Together with the quality of her works, it contributed to the growth of her reputation as a very erudite artist.

**Papier mâché masks**

Mora negotiated the same duality between traditional knowledge and creative freedom for the Medea theatre masks. We examined the masks together at the Arts Centre in
Melbourne in 2013. The internal surface layer of the masks, visible when one is handling them, is made of plaster gauze over a metal wire framework, with the occasional addition of foam and masking tape. The exterior layer of the masks is a thin and firm material, covered in layers of paint. At the time, my aim was to identify this upper material; in the Arts Centre database, the masks were described generically as ‘gauze and plaster in papier-mâché styled mask’. However, Mora emphatically denied ever making papier-mâché, and she did not remember the plaster gauze phase, saying that she would never use such a material because she thought it too ‘classical’. But she remembered the personal technique she developed after the gauze strips, which consisted of thin layers of tissue paper and glue (not unlike the papier-mâché technique) completed with layers of paint, as described in the following quotation:

>You know I am a self-taught person so I don’t follow any rules, so…I would not do anything classic, I wouldn’t use plaster gauze, I don’t remember doing it…I wouldn’t have done anything that you would do normally… I would not use masking tape, I would have used glue and silk paper… tissue paper! Everything had to be very light for the actors, I had to take that into consideration; I do use very thin paper, like you see here, very thin paper, du papier de soie, avec un peu de colle, et alors la peinture, et c’est ça qui est ferme, la peinture [tissue paper with a bit of glue, and then the paint, and that is what is firm, the paint] (Mora 2013c)

Jeff Busby’s series of photographs of Mora making the mask of ‘The Messenger’, directly on the actor Robert Forza’s head, shows the precise process of building and adjusting the masks, using strips of paper dipped in glue, and how the stuffed textile components were made beforehand. They were then attached with more strips of paper and glue, and the whole construction was then painted (Figures 25 and 26).
Mora’s approach to the masks was again to take an existing technique and bend it to fit her desires, seeking a particular effect, in this case a large scale, combined with lightness and the capacity to catch the light. Drawing on her theatre background and her painter’s sensibility, she selected the materials that seemed the most suited to achieve the visual effects she sought. Mora brought great care into the masks’ realisation, slightly exaggerating their scale so their expression could be well appreciated from the audience viewpoint (Mora 2013c); she covered the masks with many layers of paint so that they will always appear coloured even when some surface chips fell off with use (R. McGregor 2014, pers. comm., 22 April). She chose the paint for its optical qualities, the whole mask being thought of as a work of art, as much as a theatre prop:

I used the Plaka, you know, the beautiful paint? On all of them…it’s matte, and it catches the light… because it has to catch the light on the stage you see…

I did not follow any classic…, which I should, but I did not. [They are] paintings in three dimensions… (Mora 2013c)

The masks, now held in public collections, were indeed recognised as works of art in their own right. Robbie Mc Gregor, the interpret of Medea, notes thirty-five years later that:

I have had quite unique experiences in my career as an actor, but I never had this type of experience in creating costumes and masks since. When I did Creon in Antigone I used the experience I had with her but it did not come with the same finesse that Mirka brought to the process (McGregor 2014, pers. comm., 22 April).

There is no doubt that Mora’s specific sensitivity, supported by her knowledge of materials and her clever use of them, led to an outstanding result, both for the critics and
for the actors. The following table outlines the technical features of Mora’s papier-mâché technique compared with a traditional practice. This time the column ‘Mora’s practice’ is informed by visual observation of both sets of masks and by conversations with Playbox theatre director Carrillo Gantner (2014) and Robbie McGregor (2014).

**Table III. Technique of papier-mâché**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional practice</th>
<th>Mora’s practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A mould is made with an existing shape wrapped in plastic or a balloon</td>
<td>A supporting frame is made with wires moulded around the head and face of the actor, including frames for the eyes and mouth that are not to be covered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layers of paper strips coated with transparent glue are laid on top of the mould</td>
<td>The frame is coated with a few layers of plaster gauze, still on the actor’s head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After drying, the shape is sectioned in the middle, the matrix is removed, and the shape is reassembled and consolidated with further layers of glued paper strips. If a balloon was used, it is removed by deflating it.</td>
<td>The surface is then worked with further layers of tissue paper and glue; extra pieces are added: very thin paper sausages, or paper coated flat shapes made of wire, or stuffed fabric three dimensional shapes. These shapes are integrated during the building up of paper layers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The surface can be painted as desired</td>
<td>The surface is painted with several layers of craft paint</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mirka Mora, Mask of Medea, 1979, Gauze and plaster in papier mache styled mask, Arts Centre Melbourne, Performing Arts Collection. General view and detail of the*
This survey of Mora’s personal interpretation on conventional techniques would not be complete without her extraordinary embroideries. Her needlework could be related to the quilting technique of ‘trapunto’, originating from fourteenth century Italy and characterised by monochrome three-dimensional quilt (Museumlink Illinois 2000), or to the tradition of seventeenth century English decorative embroidery that uses a variety of materials and stitching techniques to provide sculptural relief (Douglas 2015). In Mora’s world, a simple drawing, made on a white piece of fabric folded in two, is transformed into a complex three dimensional work by stitching around the shapes and stuffing them with acrylic wool. In traditional embroidery, the raised shapes are sometimes embroidered, while the background is usually animated by randomly placed little stitches (‘stippling’) to flatten the background and make the raised shapes stand out more. It can also be enlivened by embroidered elements of landscape (Douglas 2015). Mora’s quilts are different, because she introduces paint into the needlework; the embossed characters and the background are partially painted, then embroidered, decorated with knots, beads and ribbons mixed together to form an intricate and exquisitely detailed work of art that sits between two and three dimensions and between textile work and paint work. She describes in simple terms her creative agency in needlework:

In my case because I paint embroidery, … the paint might be wet, the personnages are embossed… I have already added ribbons and embroidery. I am building up like you build a painting. You see I might put another set of ribbons all around it… it depends (Mora 1984)

The few embroideries that were closely examined for this study are impressive, with a complex surface adorned with layers of paint, stitches and ribbons. In a number of these examples, not only some figures in the centre but a fictitious frame also is embossed, then embroidered, creating hybrid works that play on the illusion of space and space limits, and draw the eye closer to the details of execution. Four photographs by Rennie Ellis, taken in 1985 in Mora’s studio, show close ups of some embroideries that allow

---

33 English and American quilters usually call the technique stuffed work. The background quilting stitch for stuffed work is often a stipple. (Museumlink Illinois 2000)
34 State Library of Victoria, online archive on Mirka Mora.
a better appreciation of the technical work. Together with the illustrations from Beier’s book, these images further contribute to our understanding of the extent of Mora’s experiments with colour, material and space. Mora’s customisation of technique and iconography produces works that sometimes include a cheeky sexual element, like the angel holding his raised penis in the Ballarat embroidery; the irony of adding such details in a medium that was traditionally taught to girls to perfect their education as wives and daughters is not lost; the gently subversive message even gains strength because of the impeccable technical execution.

The main features of Mora’s embroidery technique, when compared with traditional technique are recapitulated in the table on the following page, informed by visual observation of several works in progress in the artist’s studio, by interviews with the artist and visual documentation from books, galleries and libraries.
## Table IV. Technique of trapunto quilting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional practice</th>
<th>Mora’s practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The support is made of two layers of coloured fabric (usually linen) with batting sandwiched inside. The patterns are stitched through the three layers with running stitch</td>
<td>The support is made of two layers of white fabric with no batting inside. The patterns are drawn and stitched with running stitch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra batting or stuffing material is added inside the outlined motifs from the reverse through a slit or in between the threads with a stiletto (pointed tool)</td>
<td>Stuffing material is added from the reverse through a slit. The raised shapes are embroidered again on the perimeter and in the centre with coloured threads and various stitches. Part of the raised shapes is painted around and inside the stitches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The background is quilted with a stipple (random placed little stitches that create a dotted texture). Because of the many stitches the background lies flatter than the rest, making the stuffed parts stand out even more</td>
<td>Sometimes the background is painted in places. The background is heavily embroidered with threads, beads, sequins, ribbons added. A frame is created as an embroidered frieze with ribbons and stitches, or as an embossed and embroidered shape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quilt is used as decorative household item. Sometimes parts of a garment only are quilted this way (collar, wrists)</td>
<td>The work of embroidery is presented on the wall, under glass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This overview of Mora’s production in various artistic media highlights her characteristic feature, an approach that could be described as a ‘classic technique with a twist’. She views traditional ways of making art as solid bases indispensable to creation, but believes that these time-honoured practices should never hamper the creative process. Her innovations however never stray far enough of the conventional technique to make the work unstable. Furthermore, as Mora sought to gain recognition within the artistic pantheon through the use of these techniques, she made sure to keep them identifiable at a glance. Only with closer scrutiny can people realize the myriad tiny adjustments that she has added in order to completely appropriate the method and make it part of her own artistic identity. Yet Mora does not only customize conventional methods of making art; she went further along this technical route, all the way maintaining her dual desire for tradition and originality, and elaborated hybrid processes that often involved lengthy amounts of time to arrive to the final work.

3.2 Techniques and processes

3.2.1 Merging techniques and materials

As explained in the previous section, Mora’s hybrid works of art resist classification in pre-existing artistic categories. In her hands, materials that are usually associated with one technique find another use, combined with other media imported from other practices. This hybridisation of processes owes much to Mora’s intellectual and practical curiosity and to her ‘hands on’ attitude to creation. She could not always afford to buy expensive materials, but always wanted her artworks to last through time, and therefore tried to choose long lasting products. Examining her various periods of production shows a constant research and experimentation with techniques, an exploration into the materials’ possibilities and a selection of the most satisfying results, aesthetically and physically. Works were rarely discarded, but some techniques were abandoned, because they were too time-consuming, like the ‘dough drawings’ (Mora 2013e), or because they did not fit Mora’s aesthetic criteria, such as filling the soft sculptures with isolyte beads, which resulted in undesirable shapes on the surface (Mora 1984).
Samples found in her studio attest to the vitality of this research: on Mora’s shelves or in her drawers lay articulated clay puppets, dolls made on painting canvas or box-like folded cardboard dolls, which are just examples of ideas that were not pursued. Mora’s attitude towards the creative process is entirely open; she likes trying new things with ‘no strings attached’, taking creative risks and pushing boundaries constantly (Mora 2011b). The soft sculptures, a large part of her production from the 1970s until the late 1980s, were a physical embodiment of this attitude. Born out of a period of personal and economical stress, this new artistic expression became a feature of the artist’s career, emblematic of her spirit. Their idiosyncratic techniques, that were refined over the years, are detailed in the following paragraph.

The soft sculptures encompass many different techniques that reflect Mora’s continuous investigations. After cutting her drawings, to isolate the shapes of the small creatures populating them, she transferred this vision onto cloth and used her sewing skills to turn them into three-dimensional stuffed characters. The designs were drawn directly with paint on fabric, but sewn after turning the fabric inside out. After sewing, the shaped is turned again inside out, so the linear drawing with its details of face and limbs would appear on the surface of the sculpture (personal observations of works). The fabric shapes were then stuffed with various materials including synthetic foam, synthetic wool and polystyrene beads. The process can be very long for complicated shapes, as described in this letter from Mora to John and Sunday Reed dated 9 May 1971:

> I have just made an erichtonius doll … the serpent tail is almost alive. It is quite uncanny. About a yard long the dolls about a feet high[sic] … It took me 2 hours to fill the serpent Because of the curves it takes a long time. It is the first time I timed myself and my left hand hurts –no wonder. I mean what wonder’ (Mora 1957-75)

Just as she had mixed gouache or acrylic paint in her charcoal drawings, she applied colours to the stuffed creatures by painting on the fabric. Asher Bilu introduced her to the Plaka brand, a water based painting made of pigments bound in a casein medium, producing flat and dense colours. This paint was sourced from craft suppliers and originally not meant for use on textile.35 Mora employed it extensively, on theatre sets.

---

35 Plaka casein paint, made by Pelikan, are opaque craft paints used for decorative purposes that ‘dry velvety matte, are water-resistant and light-proof.’ Source: www.pelikan.com, viewed 7 March 2015. (http://www.pelikan.com/pulse/Pulsar/en_US_INTL.Store.displayStore.121359/plaka--and-hobby-varnishes,
costumes, dolls and embroideries (Mora 2000, p.177). In confirmation of this, Plaka tins can be seen on several photographs of Mora at work, including during her realisation of the Adelaide Circus frieze in 1982. Mora painted directly on the fabric (Figure 27) and observed attentively the effect of paint on fabric to select the effects she liked more, as she states:

Tout dépend de la qualité du tissu, je ne prenais pas toujours le même tissu, et le tissu boit la peinture de différentes façons, la peinture rentre dans le tissu ou reste sur la surface’ (Mora 2013b)

[Everything depends on the quality of the fabric, I was not always using the same type of fabric, and the fabric absorbs the paint in various ways, the paint goes into the fabric or it stays on the surface]

Figure 27. Mora painting a soft sculpture in her studio. The tins of Plaka are on the floor, as is a piece of fabric with a painted drawing, ready to be sewn [from Fay Bottrell 1972, Artist craftsman in Australia, aspects of sensibility, Melbourne, Jack Pollard P/L]

While continuing the ‘Plaka line of production’ throughout her years of creating soft sculptures, she explored other ways to make them more rigid and more shiny. To this aim, she imported directly from her oil practice the process of preparing of the canvas with gesso, to obtain a smooth surface ready to be painted with oil,

First coat of white, toujours a first coat of white, comme je fais, comme peindre sur des toiles; et toujours la meilleure peinture, de la meilleure qualité (Mora 2013 b)

[always a first coat of white, as I do, like painting on canvas; and always the best paint, the best quality]

The specific medium she used to paint her soft sculptures was composed of dammar varnish and stand oil (linseed oil heated and thickened in the sun) in equal parts, a recipe that was given to her by John Perceval (Mora 2009, pers. comm., 12 July). She also explained her method to Barbara Blackman:

I use oil, Plaka, watercolours… anything that would remain on cloth. Sometimes I put clay inside the doll, and work with watercolours outside, very interesting. Two years later, I treat them more like icons on wood, I covered the cloth with glue size and plaster then I painted with linseed oil that had been dried in the sun so that they all look shiny (Mora 1984).

Stand oil is much thicker than the oil normally used in paint media and has a much slower drying time. It is normally used for glazing (diluted with a solvent), and produces a shiny finish. Mora added her varnish/stand oil medium to oil paints taken directly from the tube to obtain an enamel-like effect, proudly noting that Fred Williams questioned her about it because he liked the shine (Mora 1984); her personal recipe produced semi-rigid sculptures with a high gloss finish that were nevertheless very light and easy to handle (Figure 28). She developed them over the 1970s and most of the 1980s, putting them on an equal standing with the rest of her artistic creations. The quantity of produced sculptures and the diversity of sizes and techniques are remarkable; it implies an enormous amount of time dedicated to the soft sculptures compared to the other forms of art she was making at the time (Beier 1980). Mora enjoyed that busy period and recalled how she derived great pleasure from creating these works despite the lengthy process:

Un travail monstre !! Tu n’as pas idée ce que c’était difficile [de faire toutes ces poupées], parce qu’il faut les retourner tu sais il faut les remplir... mais la joie de les peindre c’était incroyable ! (Mora 2013b)

[A huge work! you don’t realise how difficult it was to make all these dolls, because you need to turn them over you know, you need to fill them... but the joy of painting them, that was incredible!]

Apart from highlighting the labour involved in the construction of the soft sculptures, which echoes the letter to the Reeds cited above, this comment underlines that Mora’s
ultimate pleasure in making the dolls was the act of painting. This is a common point in all of Mora’s realisations in every medium; they are all participating to a research of colour, and all include painting, to the exception of mosaic, which Mora however described as ‘painting with tiles’ (Mora 1984).

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 28.** Mora painting one of her semi rigid soft sculptures with oil (still from P. Cox 1974, *This film is called Mirka*, Prahran College of Advanced Education)

In her soft sculptures, Mora borrowed elements from oil painting technique but also from mosaic; to make the works rigid she used a very thick gesso,$^{36}$ made from a commercial canvas primer mixed with plaster of Paris (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 13 January; Mora 1984). This practice is better related to mosaic than to oil paint, and also aligns with her mask-making technique and its use of plaster gauze. But the relationship goes both ways; Mora includes soft sculpture elements in her masks, such as the headpieces for Medea’s and the Messenger’s, which were small painted soft sculptures, attached on top of the paper masks (Figure 29). The mixing of techniques continued with Jason’s crown, made of stiff painting canvas stuffed and coated with gold paint, and provided separately from the mask (Mora 2013c).

$^{36}$ In the reconstructions of soft sculptures, it was found that coating the fabric with painter’s gesso only did not produce a hard enough surface. The amount of plaster to include in the mix is also essential: if too much plaster, the coating becomes too porous, absorbing the oil/varnish medium and resulting in a matte aspect overall.
Mora called these hybridised techniques ‘lateralised thinking’; for her, everything derives from her painting practice. While dolls are ‘her paintings in three dimensions, treated and regarded as paintings’ (Mora 1984), she also ‘paints with the thread’ (Mora 2013b) in her embroideries, ‘paints with the tiles’ in her mosaics (Diary, 6 January 1986) or tackles [a large mural in Ayr] ‘as an eighteenth century tapestry’ (Mora 1984; Diary, 15 May 1983). She does not make hierarchies or separate the materials in her practice, allowing a fluid circulation of ideas from one medium to another. She typically would work on one or two paintings in the morning, then do some watercolour, embroidery or soft sculpture in the afternoon, for days on end (Mora 2013, pers. comm., 8 April; Beier 1980, p. 21). Techniques inform each other in a seamless manner, as illustrated by Mora’s statement that ‘Having a lot of dolls is like having a lot of tubes of paint; it’s just like having materials’ (Beier 1980, p. 64). Mora’s hybrid works of art can be read as a physical embodiment of the many facets of her life and her practice; they also encompass her habit of reassessing and reworking constantly her realisations until she is satisfied. In the following section, these lengthy and time-consuming working processes will be more closely examined.
3.2.2. Fast work, slow work

‘Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre ouvrage
Polissez-le sans cesse, et le repolissez,
Ajoutez quelquefois, et souvent effacez’
(Nicolas Boileau, *L’art poétique*, Chant 1, 1674)

[Twenty times on the loom, put back your work
Polish it always, and then repolish it
Sometimes add to it, and often erase
Nicolas Boileau, *The art of poetry*, Song 1, 1674]

Mora likes to say that she is a fast worker, which was confirmed by personal observations during this research of her great dexterity and bold approach to art, betraying years of practice. For example, she completed the murals on the four walls of a room in the Morgan family’s residence in a week, the Ayr mural in three weeks and the Flinders Street mural in about eighteen months. However, her work is not quick and spontaneous. Regardless of the technique used, a feature was always present: the constant revisiting, reassessing and reworking many times on each artwork. This trait took many forms according to the many techniques employed; for example, in her charcoals and mixed media paintings, the surface was re-worked in ink or tempera, layer after layer, spaces were filled with decorative patterns that were also sometimes scratched into the surface (Figure 21b). The embroideries, soft sculptures, murals and oil techniques are equally reworked over several sessions.

Mora’s embroideries are revisited by adding new elements; the initial running stitches are covered with one or more layers of thread, combining several colours and textures; the raised surface is systematically covered in coloured threads combined with one another, the remaining areas being covered with paint (Figure 30). Mora considers some very detailed pieces as unfinished, because areas were left with a plain background colour (Figure 31), as she explains by saying: ‘Il faut toujours tout couvrir. C’est pas fini, on ne peut pas tout finir, peut être que je voulais les peindre, I don’t know (Mora 2013b)

*you must always cover everything. It’s not finished, you can’t finish everything, maybe I wanted to paint them, I don’t know*
For other realisations, the process of reworking is done beforehand, in drawings. The National Gallery of Australia keeps many studies for the masks of ‘The Bacchae’, none of them being exactly the final work, but all of them contributing to the final realisations. There are many drawings leading to the Flinders Street mural or to the St Kilda Pier mosaic, for the many vignettes of the local life that compose the artworks. In a sketchbook, Mora explained how she translated drawings into mosaics following ten principles that include condensations [of the details], compositional and stylistic changes, but quickly added that in her case, most is in her head (Figure 32).
The same technique applied to dolls; according to Mora, drawings were made for their own sake, some of them becoming dolls almost naturally, the others just developing on their own. She commented that usually it requires lots of drawings to eventually find one that becomes a doll (Mora 1984; Beier 1980), a process that differed only for the *Bunyip paradise*, one of the two *Boxes of mysteries* commissioned by Craft Australia in 1978 (Figure 33). For this work, she took inspiration from a book of aboriginal drawings, and she noted that they became dolls very easily, while underlining the literary nature of her inspiration:

> Box 2 was based on a book of rare drawings by Aborigines. They were directly transposed from the book to the cloth, no need for other drawings. Normally many many drawings before a drawing wants to be a doll. The Bunyip paradise was from the book by Charles Munford. My work is informed by books, not by travels or encounters (Mora 1984)
Soft sculptures, in the other hand, were not reworked in a strict sense, the technique making this difficult on the same piece. The adjustment process took a different form; one sculpture led to another, resulting in many versions of an image, such as mermaids, jesters, crabs and dogs, in which the shape, the size and the painted decoration varied slightly on each work. Mora developed an idea through several pieces, such as her Charles Blackman-inspired schoolgirls sculptures, with a hat covering or not the eyes, and the legs placed in different positions. Another example was the sculpture made with Marcel Marceau, designed and painted by the mime himself and sewn by Mora, and titled ‘self-portrait as Bip’. According to her, it exists in three versions (Mora 1984), one of them belongs to Mora and the others to Marceau. Soft sculptures were often worked on in groups, in sewing sessions, followed by stuffing, coating and painting sessions. Each face was different from the other one, and decorative patterns were added over several sessions. It is not uncommon to recognise a doll’s shape or pattern on a painting, mask or embroidery. As mentioned previously, Mora was creating simultaneously many artworks of various techniques over long periods of time, so logically the works shared aesthetic features.

Only when Mora worked on a big commission did she more focus on a single project, although she sometimes allowed lateral work such as drawing or stitching. She frequently mentioned not following pre-established working schemes for her artworks, regardless of their size (Fagan 1987; Mora 1984). There were no specific preparatory
drawings for her large mural realisations, although there were many drawings done in preparation of the final artwork. Two diary entries even show her reversing the process by recording her large mural of Ayr in drawing when it is near completion

  Draw picture of large mural on large drawing book (19 May 1983)

  Draw my painting, take big drawing book; was very hard to do this morning (20 May 1983)

Mora worked fast, but she then came back to the work and modified it until she was happy with the result. Her diaries describe in great detail the process of creation of large projects such as the Ayr mural or the Flinders Street mural (Figures 34, 35 and 36).

![Figure 34. A page of Mora’s diary of 1983, showing the detailed preparation for Ayr mural](image)

---

37 Mora showed me that big watercolour drawing in 2012, commenting that it was probably not a preparatory drawing because she never did such a thing
Even if the techniques were different, namely acrylic and oil painting for Ayr, or mosaic and painted low relief for Flinders Street, her approach to work was similar, and involved constant reworking. The 1983 diary covering the making of the Ayr mural shows how meticulously she recorded her progress, including drawings of the details she was happy – or not happy- about. It also shows a methodical mind, with lists of things to do on the painting, written in the morning and then ticked off when done:

- Re-coat orange face and hands white and repaint yellow and then orange… light up around crab… three leaves bottom left still not exciting enough in design; snakes bottom left also have to be more animated (8 and 10 May 1983) [all ticked]
- put 2 wallabies in by pouch rabbit (only one) [written in different ink]
- paint bottom frieze again over the white
- paint bottom of two freezes at top (1/2 today) [written in different ink] (9 May 1983)

Aside from showing a methodical approach, this diary entry is also informative regarding the time spent per item of painting, which in this case was obviously longer than planned. Reworking is more difficult with the mosaic technique; what can be
scraped or recovered on a painting needs to be removed with chisels and hammer when it is done in tiles and cement, and such removing is delicate and time consuming. This was mainly the task of her assistant Nicola McGaan, who recalls how she often had to remove entire parts of the mosaic that did not satisfy Mora (McGaan 2014, pers.comm., 25 September). No detail was too small to correct, even if they had taken a long time to make, if the result did not please her. One diary entry showed her planning to replace two small pieces that she thought were spoiling the effect and ‘take away some of the blue obviously’ (17 January 1986). This type of event occurred regularly, as evidenced by these two entries, taking place a month later, one week apart. Re-doing small details such as one eye, in the middle of a 45m squared mural, was not an issue:

Day went fast. Undid eye and beak ask Nicola to take it off with chisel (24 February 1986)

3 faces. Reworked on black face made one eye smaller. For angle (2 March 1986)

All these entries underline Mora’s attention to details, her strong work ethic and the consistency of her process across media, regardless of technical difficulties. She did not ignore the hardship; for example, during the making of Flinders Street mosaic, the issue of how to cut tiles properly to suit the job kept her mind very occupied. Diary entries describe with a drawing ‘these two pieces uncomfortable [sic] (5 March 1986) (Figure 37) and record how she sketched specific cuts to accommodate specific shapes, noting for the hexagonal shapes that ‘It is very difficult the angles to cut right’ (7 June 1986). This last entry takes place well into the mosaic’s execution, indicating that she has been grappling with this difficulty for the whole duration of the work. The drawings accompanying the text help visualise what Mora was talking about, and one can identify many samples of such cuts on the actual mosaic.

Figure 37. A page of Mora’s diary of 1986, showing the reworking of details in Flinders Street mural’s mosaic
Asked by Barbara Blackman about the specifics of the mosaic process, Mora described cutting the original 2 x 2 cm square tiles in 4, sometimes in 8 (Mora 1984), which is visible on the wall for small details such as eyes, mouths, beaks or insects legs (Figure 38).

![Figure 38. Flinders Street mosaic, detail showing the precise cuts of tiles according to shapes](image)

Although it is necessary to have an assistant for such a big task, Mora reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of having to delegate parts of the work:

> Gold and orange inside was so wrong. But I had told Nico to do it. It is not easy as when I create myself I can change as I go along. From now on I can’t let this happen again the size of the orange was wrong. Design of gold was wrong. all my fault (5 March 1986)

Her difficulty in delegating tasks is intimately linked to this working process that includes a large part of improvisation. McGaan confirmed that artistically, she did not have much input, although every decision, ultimately made by Mora, could be discussed beforehand with her (McGaan 2014, pers. comm., 25 September). William Mora also confirmed that although her family always encouraged her to take assistants on big projects to relieve the physical strain, Mora was always reluctant because she preferred doing things in her own way (W. Mora 2013). She nevertheless had assistants on a number of works: Flinders Street mosaic, Perth mural or the repainting of the Tolarno murals.

Flinders Street mural was a multi-layered technical enterprise, not limited to simply mosaic. Mora started the lower register, made in painted low relief, after the completion of the mosaic middle register, and employed the same working methods. She did not need McGaan’s assistance for this, but she delegated the making of the render to
stonemasons. The render was done in several batches, as in the traditional fresco technique, where painters cover with fresh render only the surface they can finish in one day, dividing the work in ‘giornate’ (days of work) that can be seen on the wall after completion. Usually, the render is cut along a shape at the end of a days’s work, to make the joint less visible, but it can also cut across large areas of background. For example, giornate are clearly visible in the background of the Sistine Chapel’s ‘Last Judgement’ by Michelangelo. The Flinders Street lower register is made up of four parts, but the vertical joints are barely discernible, uniquely on the top edge. Mora’s diary shows her grappling with the carving technique, reworking in the fresh and semi fresh render until it sets, and expressing frustration at the fact that she could not modify her carving anymore after it hardened:

Between July 11 and 16, 1986: I am also very troubled with images for the bas-relief. What one carve is not what one draws or paint
16 July 1986: Wall 2 drying. Wall harder but SOFT at 15mm deep. Men helped me a little to “scratch” carve.
17 July 1986: I wonder what I will carve. Because I have to do at a given time I feel hampered. Wall commands, got to be ready if I like it or not. imagination harnessed by force I suffer
29 July 1986: Sometimes I find more carving to do but the finality of it. That is the cement set and dry and HARD makes it impossible unless I would use other tools but I do not want to do it for that mural (all emphasis original)

However, Mora eventually found a solution to her problem; she reinforced the carving with paint, even if it was at the expense of the render’s natural colour and also forced her to repaint the background and parts of the composition to match the new black outline.

---

38 Diary entry 9 July 1986 “Gino working on wall, attached wire by nailing it into the wall”.
Diary entry 10 July 1986 “ Start of rendering wall. Hope I don’t knock against nails. Have asked Gino but there is 10 mm over each nails. So I have to remember that’.
Diary entry 17 July 1986 “wall #2. Another wall waiting for me to carve…” July 23 “work on wall #3, one body, two heads…”
Diary entry 24 July 1986 “work on wall#4 who was put on yesterday so it was quite soft to work on”
39 This author was trained in the technique of traditional fresco at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts, Paris, The Summer School of Fresco in Arcumeggia (Italy) and the International Centre for Conservation in Rome (ICCROM).
Recapturing my carved line with black paint for strengths though loved the stone so much but had to sacrifice it for the all effect which has to be imposing then repainting back ground and motifs (emphasis by Mora) (29 July 1986).

When she repainted the low-relief in 1998, because of flaking and loss of paint, Mora used different materials, the casein-based commercial colours Keim, which she had recently discovered (Mora 2000, pp. 196-97). In this process, she also changed the colour palette completely to a more muted one, all colours now matte and containing white, this new harmony deriving from the Keim palette, where the casein milk component adds a shade of white to every tone. According to the new palette, the carved line was ‘recaptured’ this time in pale yellow with black highlights (Figures 39 and 40). History shows that Mora never compromised her own style whatever the material, thus the paler colours were probably chosen because they fitted her evolved style better.

Figure 39. Flinders Street mural, detail of the low relief in 1986 (from B Reid 1987, ‘Art for everyday; Mirka Mora and Elizabeth McKinnon’s public art in Melbourne’, This Australia Magazine, Vol.6, No 4, 1987)

Figure 40. Flinders Street mural, same detail of the low relief after repainting in 1998

40 Keim Avantgarde nuance book, obtained from Keim Australia in 2014
Although Mora stated that murals allowed a great freedom of gesture and composition, she acknowledged that they were constraining in terms of materials, because of their often large dimensions. The most ‘re-workable’ material for smaller scale in two dimensions is clearly oil paint, and unsurprisingly this is Mora’s favourite material. Oil paint allows a long modelling time and can be covered up again and again, provided that the surface is sufficiently dry. To address this issue, Mora still has the habit to work on several oil paintings at the same time, in order to let one dry while she reworks another; according to her, this practice was constant throughout her career, and evidence confirms this. In her studio, two easels are always constantly in use; Beier (1980) also mentions them, as do newspaper articles illustrated with photographs showing them in situ. Mora generally paints layer upon layer in semi fresh paint, creating the thickly textured paint that characterizes her late production of oil paintings. Occasionally she scrapes off unwanted lumps of paint, using a palette knife (personal observations in Mora’s studio). Reading her diaries informs on her ‘intellectual’ research process, as they essentially record her experiments with colour. The following examples, taken from her diary, show her working for at least three months on the exploration of mid tones and taking much pleasure in it:

Because I mix red white and green to get a demi-tone it links all- but the surface is great (9 May 1983)

One day I will reach bright colours but now I can’t for the pleasure of my eye is mid-tone. I am going to various palette today emerald green, vermilion, Prussian blue, white, alizarin, transparent brown, lemon yellow, notice absence of venitian red therefore less warmth but more light (13 August 1983)

In her writings, Mora talked about her working process, explaining that a painting will take many months to achieve (Mora 2000, p 112) and sometimes years for the images to be processed by her brain and ‘crystallize into paintings…other painters have other ways… mine is slow but sure and remains wondrous’ (Mora 2000, p. 121). Her working method is well known to her entourage, as her son explains:
It’s all drying out, scratching over the dried surface underneath…she works on a number of works at once, at the same time, so when that’s drying she works on that and when it’s dried she goes back to that and you’d get that texture effect over
(Mora W. 2013)

As with mosaic or murals, Mora delegates the preparation of the oil painting’s support to professionals; her stylistic identity is derived from her construction of the paint layer in a texture that has become quite recognizable. She has developed over time a relationship with her suppliers, who know how she likes her canvases to be prepared (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 13 January; W Mora 2013; McCowan 2013; Chapman and Bailey, email, 20 March 201541). From all these sources, confirmed and extended by participant observations, the sequence of Mora’s working process with oil paint can be detailed as follows:

Firstly, the canvas (always linen) is commercially prepared in white. The supplier (currently Chapman and Bailey, Abbotsford) knows Mora’s taste and prepares a smooth surface for her to work upon. Canvas is stretched on expandable stretchers of all sizes, sometimes recycled from exhibitions of Indigenous art where unsold paintings have been dismounted and rolled before being sent back to the community art centre. William Mora galleries will supply her with an assortment of sizes from which she will pick freely. Because the stretchers have been previously supporting paintings that were displayed on the wall, they already have a hanging wire, however Mora never checks them and more often than not paints upside down in relation to the wire (W Mora 2013).

Secondly, Mora draws the composition freely with diluted oil paint, but with no preparatory drawing. She then places the main areas of colour in relatively fluid paint, slightly diluted, covering entirely the white background. She outlines the details such as eyes, petals and leave structure. At this stage, the composition is generally signed (‘Mirka’) and dated by year, usually in the lower right corner.

---

41 The following information is provided by Mora’s current supplier: ‘We stretch Mirka Mora’s linens with two different Belle Arti Linens, 35U and 68U. Both linens have been sealed with synthetic size and then prepared with a universal primer. Both linens have had 3 coats of primer applied. The weight of the 35U is 523 grams and the 68U is 498 grams’; (Alaina [surname unknown], Chapman &Bailey Arts Materials, Abbotsford, email 20 March 2015).
Thirdly, Mora adds texture with oil paint straight from the tube to all parts of the composition, redrawing the shapes and lines and modifying them constantly. Entire parts of the composition are cancelled or added. Lines are moving on each side of their initial place, details are added, colours are changed. When a detail that the artist does not want to conserve is too thick it is slightly scraped with a palette knife, so only unnecessary texture is removed. The area is then reworked for a while, the artist changing brush occasionally (most of the time she uses round brushes), brush strokes continually adding texture to the paint.

Mora stops when she cannot continue without blending the colours and brushstrokes too much, and then works on another painting with the same process. Her technique seems to proceed from trial and error; she paints spontaneously and corrects as she goes, rather than thinking over the composition before painting each line. In the same session she can draw decorative patterns on a dress with black paint, decide not to keep them and cover them to end with a plain black colour, then move the eye lower in the face, augment then shrink the volume of a head, and so on (personal observations). Entire areas of colour can change several times, figures can be added and then subtracted, or turned to face another direction. The background is reworked over and over in the same manner, except a small rectangle where the signature and date appear. However, should the difference of texture become too disturbing visually, Mora recovers the signature entirely or partially (for example, keeping the name but writing the date again) with another signature, a process that can occur several times according to the texture.

Lastly, the covering of earlier paint layers, the moving of lines, the process of reworking over and over continues until Mora is satisfied with the texture, composition, harmony and lines. Mora works the shapes from inside out, refining their outline, seeking the perfect line (‘It must be vibrant... my line must be dark but not too hard’ (Mora 2014, pers. comm., 10 February). She also works them from outside in, letting the lines be devoured by the background in places. Shapes or figures are suppressed when they do not work well or when they disturb Mora’s sense of composition. Mora explains that ‘Il ne faut pas être dirigée par les formes, il faut les diriger... enlever cette barrière a été une libération, j’ai nettoyé mon esprit’ (Mora 2014, pers. comm., 10 February).[you can’t be directed by the shapes, but you have to direct them...removing this fence was a liberation, I cleansed my mind].
The texture is cleverly created by the continuous brushstroke work in semi fresh paint, the occasional scraping of high crests and the alternate directions of the brushstrokes that result in a grainy and vibrant surface (Figure 49). The rough texture also allows for a more vibrant line, made with a non-diluted paint, therefore printing the surface irregularly due to the hollows and crests. Mora is not very disturbed by ‘pentimenti’ or ghosts of previous forms; she paints over them continuously until they are absorbed by the general texture of the background. All her colours, especially the whites, are built up gradually with many layers of various tints. The oil paint material has a limited covering power compared to acrylic for example, so under-layers are always discernible. The final result is a very vibrant surface animated chromatically and texturally by all the previous layers.

Mora’s continuous reworking of shapes and lines is selectively different according to the areas of the composition, so that some lines might appear almost carved into the surface because many layers have been added over time to the colours they separate. The surface of the painting is therefore not an even one but of very variable thickness and textures. The stratigraphy apparent on the edges of the paintings only partially reveals this process, as it only shows work in this particular area. Figures 41 to 60 show the successive states of *The girl with the red head bow and her friends* (2014), documented in Mora’s studio over several months in 2013-2014, providing a walk through the creation of this oil painting that illustrates this creative process.

![Figure 41](image_url)

**Figure 41.** Mora at work on *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 20 November 2013. The background is recovered with grey.
Figure 42. Mora at work on The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 20 November 2013. The tin in the foreground holds the grey made of a mixture of leftover paints and white.

Figure 43. Mora at work on The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 20 November 2013. Scraping unwanted texture with a palette knife.

Figure 44. Mora at work on The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 5 February 2014. The grey was recovered with white, a second fence came in the composition, the figures are smaller, the birds changed and a snake appeared.
Figure 45. The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 5 February 2014. The signature was saved from the previous state.

Figure 46. Mora at work on The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 5 February 2014. Covering shapes with white.

Figure 47. Mora at work on The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 5 February 2014. Reworking lines in blue.
Figure 48. Detail of the reworked lines

Figure 49. Detail of the texture

Figure 50. The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 10 February 2014
The white is covered with blue; the fences have disappeared
Figure 51. *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014. The signature was partially repainted.

Figure 52. *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014. The texture of the fence is visible through the new composition.

Figure 53. *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014. Mora adds a decorative pattern…

Figure 54. *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014. …and recovers it immediately with plain black.
Figure 55. Mora at work on *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 10 February 2014. Mora covers the blue with white

Figure 56. The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 10 February 2014. The central figure is modified, the neck is thicker, the skull higher

Figure 57. *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, 13 February 2014. The central figure has disappeared and been replaced by a plant
**Figure 58.** The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 13 February 2014. Detail

**Figure 59.** The girl with the red head bow and her friends, 13 February 2014. Signature reworked

**Figure 60.** *The girl with the red head bow and her friends*, final state, May 2014 (collection William Mora Galleries)
This practice of continuous reworking is not specific to Mora; among contemporary artists, Ian Fairweather (1891-1974) is renowned for a similar way of building up his paintings. Future scientific approaches of Mora’s work could include taking cross sections of her oil paintings, which would no doubt be interesting samples due to the variety and number of layers composing them.

This chapter has shown that Mora’s materials embody her scholarly references to Old Masters, whose techniques she modifies with her personal interpretation. It has also examined her manner of merging technical processes, resulting in idiosyncratic ways of making art. The artist’s characteristic of constant reworking until the desired effect is achieved was noted as a characteristic of her practice regardless of the technique employed. The next chapter will study the relationships between Mora’s different techniques, the importance of the symbols embodied by certain materials and the practical impact that technical choices had on Mora’s life and physical body.

---

42 For example, cross sections taken from Ian Fairweather’s painting ‘Shalimar’ (1962) and examined at the National Gallery of Australia showed about 70 layers (J McNaughtan 1996).
Chapter Four. The challenges of making art

Through her career, Mora adapted to various challenging commissions, and always found innovative solutions, establishing material relationships between the variety of techniques she employed. Mora’s clever use of expensive and symbolic materials reinforces the impact of her technical choices of media. However, in some instances, such as the execution of large murals or for her oil paintings, she is willing to delegate parts of the process to professionals, keeping her energy for the actual painting. Stonemasons have laid the render for the Flinders Street mural and the St Kilda mosaic seat; art suppliers have prepared the panels for Ayr and Perth murals. She admits rarely having stretched a canvas, mixed a varnish or ground pigments in a medium, preferring to use prepared canvases, commercial varnishes and oil tubes. There are nevertheless many material challenges to be overcome in order to make art, such as adapting the object to different contexts and uses, sometimes at the price of a very physical engagement. The manner in which Mora weaves together her different processes and uses technique to connect her various creations, while all the time maintaining unity of style and iconography, is central to the discussion developed in this chapter.

4.1 Looking across materials

4.1.1 Relationships between techniques

Images across media

When observing Mora’s oeuvre, a striking feature is the consistency of the themes across all media, and the way the images bear the distinctive trademark of the technique used, when they shift from one material to another. Conscious of the impact of the materials on the final artistic result, the artist exploited their properties in all possible ways to achieve the final outcome. This is made clearer by following specific images of Mora’s personal iconography through several media. The heavily delineated eyes, for example, are an omnipresent feature of her art. In oil paintings, they are made with a brush, tracing flexible lines of various densities, strong and vigorous, which retain the memory of the gesture in the brushstrokes. In charcoal and pastel drawings, the texture of the line is velvety, made with a thick and soft stick of material. On the soft
sculptures, the eyes are painted and vary in aspect according to the selective absorption of the fabric and the texture of the paint and background. To gain the same intensity in the embroideries, the artist exploits the three-dimensional properties of the cotton thread; the eyelids are translated into several lines of stitches next to each other and several layers of threads overlapping, becoming raised from the painted faces, themselves stuffed and in relief from the background.

![Figure 61. Eye painted with oil](image1.png)

![Figure 62. Eye of a soft sculpture, painted with casein paint](image2.png)

The challenge is even bigger for the masks, which have hollow eyes that allow the actors’ own eyes to shine through. This time the eye contour is determined by a wire, recovered with layers of gauze, paper and glue. The artist then uses colour to achieve the strong effect desired. Two contrasting colours such as red and black, blue and black, or gold and black delineate the eyes, enhanced by a white or very light flesh tone. The photographs of the performances show the strong visual impact of the masks’ eyes, despite their physical absence. Finally, in mosaic, delineating the eyes has been rendered by cutting many tiny narrow pieces of black and/or red tiles to achieve the contour effect with slightly angular curves; Mora exploited the optical presence of the white mortar to add an extra white line in between the red and black lines, with an effect quite similar to that of the masks (Figs 61 to 66).
Figure 63. Eye in embroidery

Figure 64. Eye of a mask

Figure 65. Eye in charcoal

Figure 66. Eye in mosaic

Other images are the complicated long-limbed animals that can be found throughout Mora’s works. Multi-legged crabs or insects crawl freely on the mural paintings, drawn in undulating lines with Mora’s usual deft hand. In mosaic, the insects become bigger
due to the size of the tiles; the long and curvy legs deploy in slightly broken lines, ended by pointy claws made of minuscule pieces, while the bodies have the solidity of several rows of tiles. She also uses the physical density of dark tiles to visually link two registers through an insect's body crawling from one to another, a visual trick often encountered in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Dutch still-life paintings. Growing into the three-dimensional world of Mora’s embroideries, crabs and insects are constructed in needlework by stuffing their bodies and legs, and enhancing them with a richly textured embroidery pattern in strong colours. The finished embroideries impress with their appearance, ‘like jewelled sculpture in miniature, far and away the best works in the show’ (Miller 1983). In the Boxes of mysteries, crabs and insects are little stuffed sculptures displayed horizontally or vertically, made in one piece despite the number of legs, with richly decorated bodies. Still growing in volume, large crabs emerge as three-dimensional creatures made of cloth and paint, their legs and antennae being treated individually so they can move. This implies long hours of work sewing, turning over and filling narrow sleeves of fabric, which were then decorated individually on both faces. In her studio, Mora keeps a very large crab sculpture that she made for an exhibition in Tasmania (Figure 67); she acknowledges the amount of work behind the sculpture, by explaining that she always refused to sell it because it cannot be done another time (Mora 2013b).

![Image of a large crab sculpture](image)

**Figure 67.** A large crab from 1976, in Mora’s studio

---

43 Mora also used that device in her thickly textured oil painting for Dr Smyth’s clinic in 1977 (oil on canvas, circa 350 x 150 cm, now in PeterMac Callum Cancer Centre, Melbourne)
Weaving processes together

Various methods of making art informed each other in an organic relationship, with the artist exploring the artistic possibilities opened by a material and pursuing the reflection in another one. Max Delany says that ‘[Mora] learns from one technique and applies it to another’ (Delany 2014, pers. comm., 25 June). This was made possible by her practice of working simultaneously many techniques (Beier 1980, p. 21; personal observations; W Mora 2013). By juxtaposing artworks of various media made within the same time frame, one realises how Mora worked through artistic challenges, be it the relationship between two colours, explored in watercolour, oil and pastel, or the research of a perfect shape in two- then three dimensions. This artistic quest is never ending, each medium allowing particular developments (Mora 2014, pers. comm., 16 April). Even for large compositions, preparatory drawings were only propositions for a general outlay, always opened to change, or research of details that were never considered definitive. This explains why no squaring of a drawing was ever made to transfer it on the wall; instead Mora drew directly on the wall at the moment of execution, and modified the composition during the realisation process (Mora 1984; Fagan 1987; McGaan 2014, pers. comm., 25 September).

The most typical two-way process occurred between the soft sculptures and the oil paintings, each one feeding the other in terms of texture, shape, colour and composition. This transfer of technical knowledge is what places Mora’s soft sculptures apart from most other textile art of the same period. She used on the sculptures the same materials that she used on mural or on paintings; to enable this, she found ways to make the fabric stand stiff and retain this type of paint. This was not without challenges, particularly in the creation of the details in volume. In traditional techniques of sculpture, such as clay modelling or stone carving, volume is created directly by adding or cutting material. In contrast, stuffed sculpture is an indirect three-dimensional technique; the shape is drawn on the folded fabric, and then sewed along the lines; the stitched ‘envelope’ is then turned over and stuffed with material. There is always a loss of definition between the first drawing on fabric and the final volume, particularly in the acute angles. Although Mora’s sculptures were very detailed, with dragon’s teeth shaped one by one, or crab’s antennas and legs all precisely shaped individually, she was nevertheless limited in how
minute these details could be. Observation of the works shows that she solved this technical difficulty by adding the finer details such as hands, jewellery, and hairdos in paint, highlighting how the two processes were intimately linked.

The soft sculptures’ relationship to the surrounding space is ambiguous; most of them are two faced instead of being a single image all around the volume’s surface, and in that sense, they are still attached to the two dimensional realm. Yet sometimes, Mora created an extra space on the surface of the sculpture, painting a human head on the body of an animal for example, thus including a two-dimensional illusionary space within a three-dimensional one (Figure 68). On the other hand, shapes refined in three dimensions could find their way into paintings, as well as groups of figures that Mora has investigated by placing her sculptures next to each other. The same creatures that developed in three dimensions are also populating the paintings, placed in semi abstract landscapes, showing the two-way relationship at work between the two techniques. While paintings and soft sculptures can be displayed separately, viewing different types of Mora’s works next to each other is enlightening and provides a better and broader understanding of her art.

Figure 68. A soft sculpture with a figure painted on the dragon’s body (private collection)

Signature across media

There is no better way to realise Mora’s investment in her various processes than by looking at her signature across her art. She almost always signed with her first name ‘Mirka’ and the date. Only a few prominent works such as the Flinders street mural or the Perth mural were signed ‘Mirka Mora’ followed by the year. The main characteristic of this signature is that it is always made in the same medium as the work. Oil paintings
are generally signed in oil with the same size of brush as the one used in the composition, as soon as the first layer of colours is applied. As seen in Chapter Three, this signature may be reserved until the end or recovered with another one. In the case of paintings that have been re-worked over some time after their creation, the signature may be accompanied by several dates (Figure 69).

![Image of Mora’s signature with several dates until painting’s completion](image)

The large mosaics are signed and dated in mosaic tiles, cut in one colour like in the St Kilda seat, or in several colours like in Flinders Street (Figure 70) and assembled in the same manner as the rest of the composition. Due to the material’s rigidity, the signature became quite angular. The murals were generally signed in paint, while the signature on the plaster relief at Tolarno hotel was etched in the plaster, then highlighted with paint; the title, *A mystery*, and the commissioner’s name, ‘Massoni’, here called ‘Massoni Medici’, were also etched but not painted. The same technique (etching highlighted with paint) was used for a series of ceramic plates, potted by Tom and Chris Sanders in 1967 and 1970, and decorated in sgraffito by Mora. On the soft sculptures, the signature was painted under the base if there was one (Figure 71), or along the side seam. The tapestry’s signature was woven (Figure 72), and on the embroideries, the signature was embroidered in majuscules, on the inside of the image or on the lower right corner, under the embossed frame (Figure 73). This versatility in signing is not unique, but the range of different media makes it unusual; it can be argued that Mora’s variety of signatures, offering a multifaceted image of the artist, shows her as fully immersed into her technical research and embracing her various modes of making as representations of herself.

---

44 The plaster low relief may have been repainted in white, although this is not a verified information
45 Plates and vessels shown in the exhibition “From the home of Mirka Mora’ at Heide Museum of Modern Art in 2014.
Figure 70. Mora’s signature in mosaic tiles (*Flinders Street mural*)

Figure 71. Mora’s signature under the base of a soft sculpture

Figure 72. Signature woven in a tapestry

Figure 73. Signature embroidered
4.1.2 A flexible and creative mind

Versatility is a characteristic feature of Mora’s artistic production. As Deborah Hart observes, ‘Mirka’s output as a whole reveals a vital, inventive theatre of the mind’ (Hart 1999, p. 246). When entering her studio one is struck by the abundance of materials of all sorts that surround her at all times; she needs them to stimulate her creation (Beier 1980 p. 22) and to feel able to switch to any of her favourite techniques at any time. However, throughout her career, she never hesitated to embrace techniques that she had never used before. The aim was always to create works of art that were the best possibly suited for the intended purpose. For example, she approached the theatre masks, costumes and sets as a painter, all the while fully aware of the technical requirements of the commission due to her theatre background. Carrillo Gantner, the director of Playbox, remarked that Mora was one of the rare painters that had understood the three-dimensionality of a theatre stage space (Gantner 2014). Her masks, light and wearable painted sculptures, with their simple accompanying costumes decorated with painted friezes, enjoyed a positive critical reception. One review for Medea is titled ‘Costumes hold the play together’ (Melbourne Times, 8 August 1979). Two other reviews, by Leonard Gluckfeld in an unidentified newspaper (1979) on Medea and by John Larkin in the Sunday Press, (27 July 1980) for The Bacchae, also single out her work

In so staging Medea, Copland is fortunate in having Mirka Mora as his designer. She supplies masks in papier mache. Sometimes they give the character a comic look, sometimes suggest their bestial primitivism, sometimes they make their agonies look like they are wrought in the timelessness of stone, and always they prevent the play from lapsing into melodrama (Gluckfeld 1979)

Much of the production also owes its success to the skill of Melbourne artist Mirka Mora who did the design. As Mr Copland himself says, about half of the whole influence in the play is hers (Larkin 1980)

The colour photographs of The Bacchae give further insight into what seems to have been an intense experience for the eyes, the acting of the performers being enhanced by the strong physical presence of the masks (Figure 74). In confirmation that these were more than ordinary costumes, James Mollison, Director of the National Gallery of Australia at the time, acquired the entire collection of masks, costumes, props and preparatory drawings at the end of the Bacchae’s season.
As mentioned in Chapter Two, the successful Mora/Copland collaboration also included a puppet opera in 1988, for which Mora produced 85 large-scale puppets. This time, Mora’s works, manipulated by puppeteers, were themselves the acting characters, and therefore required solid and noble materials. They also had to sustain extensive travelling and use, as the opera was touring Australia and Europe. Mora’s diary shows that she met with Copland in March 1986 and starting reflecting about the task and financial considerations, writing ‘Murray Copland 6pm and dinner. 30 or more puppets in one year.Knows not fees yet. Expenses for puppets $200 for material only I thought’ (20 March 1986).

Mora adapted to the brief by using wood and oil paint, ‘following puppet’s tradition with oil painting’ (Mora 1984); the puppets are larger than life, made of several pieces of plywood, with articulated limbs and heads, and painted in oil; Mora’s diary suggests that they may have embossed parts, (diary 19 August 1986), although this is not supported by the puppet she keeps in her studio, or by the photographs of the puppets illustrating a contemporary article. Mora designed, cut, sanded, coated with gesso and painted the puppets ‘with three coats of brilliant artist oil colours’ (*Australia Post*, 5 March 1988), with the help of an assistant and a gigantic palette the size of a table (Mora 2000, p. 181). There was no extra fabric on the puppets as their costumes were painted, which prompted the opera’s composer Barry Coningham to call them ‘moving paintings, living paintings’ (Mora 1984). The whole process took her in a new state of
mind, which she describes as ‘being inside a painting, being a painting painted, and painting at it, it’s very bizarre (Mora 1984). Technically, these puppets were also a development of the 1982 painted cut outs she made (together with the frieze on plastic) in Adelaide for her exhibition on the theme of ‘Circus’. Such re-visiting of materials is typical of Mora’s various technical investigations throughout her career. It is instructive to observe them through time, and to draw parallels between her materials and her stylistic evolution, particularly in the case of her larger scale works.

4.1.3 Large scale paintings and their technical connections

The scale of Mora’s creations spans from delicate miniature embroideries and small paintings under glass domes to very large murals. She credits herself with an innate sense of scale, which has helped her in the realisation of many large public works (Fagan 1987). Scale in fact played an essential role into the development of her practice, as she reflects in hindsight

Mural versus canvas. When you do murals everything is possible. Canvas you always have limitations space wise and material wise. The scale of my work has moved vastly because I could not draw then [in the 1950s] … your work expand when you do large surfaces (Mora 1984)

Maintaining the focus on materials, this research will now examine how Mora negotiated her artistic evolution technically, looking at the materials used for her large public works to see how their choice relates to the artist’s experience and maturity.

Enamel

Mora and her peers often used enamel paint in the 1950s, mainly because of its affordability. A few of her first paintings were enamel, such as the already mentioned 1958 self-portrait made with Sydney Nolan’s tin of Ripolin or The sky is full with stars, also from 1958, both in Heide Museum of Modern Art collection. She used enamel or oil or a combination of the two for the murals in Tolarno restaurant, painted mainly from 1967 to 1970. There, she explored various ways of creating volume with the same medium, according to the support she painted on: flat tones for the terracotta bar tiles and wooden panelling with their own regular spatial rhythm; elaborate spatial effects for
the plain walls, decorated with semitransparent creatures strangely superimposed with each other, or with geometric friezes that create the illusion of the third dimension.

Enamel was the medium required by Melbourne Tram Company for the series of painted trams in 1978. This time, workers prepared and coated the trams in the colour chosen by the artists (Fagan 1987). From her own account, Mora overcame easily the difficulty of using enamel, a thin and runny paint, on vertical metal walls because of her previous experience with this medium. She described her personal way to prepare and use the paint, which meant always leaving the tin lids open so that the paint would thicken slightly in contact with air (Fagan 1987). For a ‘moving picture’ like the painted tram, no texture was needed, so the thinness of the medium was not problematic. Mora chose to create space in the composition by exploiting the power of colours and contrasts, this time not exploiting the relative transparency of enamel.

A very similar support and medium were used for an outdoor ‘mural’ project for the 1983 Perth festival. The mural was in reality a 20m long frieze of metallic panels painted with enamel paint.\(^{46}\) The technical similarities of support to the tram enabled Mora to further exploit the possibilities of enamel. She used the thinness and gloss of the paint and built the images in several layers, selectively letting the ochre background visible through the final tones. Using the optical properties of the glossy paint over an opaque coating created an illusion of depth and space, with a minimum of technical means. The very plain surface and low viscosity of the paint does not allow for many textured effects. But Mora made the most of this surface’s flatness by drawing lines of great fluidity, using to her advantage the thin properties of the medium (Figure 75). She seems to have enjoyed the experience of this support, as she noted in her diary after completion that she ‘should find out how much the panels cost. They were well made’ (24 February 1983).

\(^{46}\) The support of the Perth panels is made of zinc sheets nailed on wooden strainers and coated prior to her execution (personal observations)
However, it does not seem that Mora made any other panel paintings using a similar technique. She used house paint (probably enamel given the shiny aspect) again for the frieze in the upper register of the Flinders Street mural, well above eye level, but painted it flat with no effect of depth, as its function was to serve as a frame to the middle register. It was possibly also the medium used for the low relief at the base of the same mural, which has since been covered by the artist, using a different paint. The photographs of the low relief in 1986 show a shiny surface, which may have been obtained with enamel paint. During the conservation work in 2009, Mora suggested that I look at the Dulux exterior paint colours, an indication that this may have been the original medium. However, Mora’s taste shifted towards matter paint, which she used for her later murals, including the second version of the low relief in Flinders Street.

*Acrylic and casein*

Acrylic and casein have been employed in a number of Mora’s murals. Examples range from the most recent Tolarno murals (2007) that are velvety and matte compared to the earlier murals in the same place, to the Ayr library with its 33.2-square metre mural painted in 1983 on wooden panels with acrylic Walpamur paint (Mora 1984). The 1974 Ardmona mural, in reality acrylic on canvas laid on panel, is made with Aquatec, a water-based commercial acrylic paint (Mora 2000, p. 194). In these early years, Mora did not particularly like matte and flat layers of paint; the choice of acrylic resulted mainly from economical and time constraints. (Mora 1984). In Ayr, the preparation of the support was delegated to workers, who attached the assemblage of plywood panels to the wall and prepared them on Mora’s specifications (Mora 1984). However acrylic on such a scale does not allow the creation of depth and volume as much as would
enamel or oil that are more transparent. This did not satisfy Mora who accommodated by negotiating the purchase of high quality oil colours for highlights, as was mentioned in Chapter One:

And after three weeks I had enough of the house paint and I decided to buy oil and highlight everything...where, say, I had put green Walpamur, which is a beautiful quality paint - first class quality plastic paint - it was not matte but not glossy, I would get some beautiful emerald green and virgin green and liven up the green of the plastic with oil (Mora 1984).

This was the best compromise for Mora, allowing her to cover big surfaces with an opaque and affordable paint, but also to use the medium she loved best, oil paint.

A few years later, Mora systematically sought a strong, saturated and matte surface for her mural commissions. Acrylic and oil gave way to casein paint, which provides a very matte aspect while maintaining the intensity of colours, apparently fulfilling Mora’s expectations of a matte medium. Plaka had been one of her media of choice for the soft sculptures since 1970, and used in the Morgan family’s ‘Mirka room’ that same year; in the 1990s she employed it more in her large realisations. For example, the large erotic panels commissioned by Carrillo Gantner in 1990 were coated with Plaka (Mora 2000 pp. 194-95), the 1993 Cosmos mural, very matte, is probably also made with Plaka, while the 1998 version of the Flinders Street low relief was made with Keim casein colours (Mora 2000). Mora explained the reasons of her choices for these murals in her memoirs; Plaka casein paint was selected for the four walls of the Mirka room because it was ‘easy to apply, [offered] lively colours and they dry fast’ (p. 193) while Keim casein paint was chosen for Flinders Street because of the problems encountered with the previous paint and the beauty of these colours:

The new paint was especially made for architecture...the colours were very saturated...no pure red was needed as red was already in the colours I chose. I used [them] plus fixative and undercoat, ravishing to me (Mora 2000, p. 197).

This brief overview shows how Mora supported her work with her materials in her large paintings, seeking depth in Perth and Ayr through enamel or a combination of acrylic and oil, and three years later exploring mosaic and low relief in Flinders Street, for the same purpose. With her later large works, she created the matte and flat surface that responded best to her mature style with the casein paint systems. However, there were
instances early in Mora’s career where she still used oil, her favourite medium, even for large scale realisations.

*Oil paint*

Because of the economic cost, oil was not a medium of choice for murals. However, in 1977, Mora painted both *Tympanum* and Dr Smyth clinic’s mural with this medium. Dates and availability do not seem to impact on her choice of materials; acrylic paints had long been on the market at this time, and Mora had used them for other works such as *Mirka’s room* and the Ardmona mural; in 1977, she chose oil for its specific qualities, and because it was possible financially. The support of the *Tympanum*, whose overall dimensions are 4.24 x 6.30 metres, is made of four pieces, that assemble into the arched shape of a Romanesque tympanum. The canvas is laid on board for the three arched pieces, while the long horizontal base is a canvas on stretcher. A large oil painting in true academic tradition, although unvarnished, it is an exercise in a restricted palette, a decision reached collectively by the five painters working on the commission. Mora painted the long base and the smaller arch, the other arches and the central space being allocated to the four other painters (Roger Kemp, Les Kossatz, George Baldessin, Andrew Sibley). The observation of the canvas and her recollections of the work reveal that she specifically used the tooth of the canvas and a thick, non-diluted paint to obtain a dynamic brush effect that added even more strength to her images of intertwined fantastic creatures (Figure 76). Dr Smyth clinic’s mural, in reality a large (circa 3.50 x 1.50m) oil painting on canvas, also exploits the capacity of the oil medium for texture. The vignettes at the centre of the painting depict a medieval bestiary; they are treated in thick oil impasto, possibly made with a palette knife at times, while the vegetal frieze surrounding them is thinner, painted with quick and nervous brushstrokes (Figure 77). Such textures combined with depth of colours would have been difficult to obtain with another paint medium and Mora fully exploited her knowledge of oil paint in this instance.
This technical review of the mediums used in Mora’s large scale realisations shows how her stylistic evolution is paired with a constant research into materials and techniques, in order to best support her aims. The timeline in Appendix 5 shows her starting in the 1950s and 1960s with ink and charcoal drawings, then adding enamel painting, oil painting, pastel and tempera to the works; the 1970s saw her exploring many materials such as textile, mosaic, ceramic and painting; the last part of her career sees a return to oil, watercolour and pastel drawing. Mancusi Ungaro noted that artists often explore more materials as they mature, which provides a framework for investigation into their work, as was adopted for this research (Mancusi Ungaro 2011). The next paragraph will show that using this material based framework to examine Mora’s oeuvre has also revealed throughout her career an unambiguous relationship with wealth, used in literal, intellectual and symbolic manner to enhance the quality and status of the works of art.
4.2 Spending on materials and using symbols

4.2.1 Always the best quality

Mora’s economic circumstances have undergone many upheavals through her life. As a young couple with a child freshly arrived in Melbourne in the 1950s, the Moras had very limited finances (a common trait among the CAS artists’ community at the time). However, this never stopped them from entertaining and feeding dozens of friends at their studio in 9 Collins Street. They gradually became more comfortable financially with their restaurants, enjoying the relative luxury of a beach house in Aspendale in the 1960s, although a few years later they were nearly declared bankrupt, their managing of the Tolarno hotel apparently lacking the business skills necessary for such an enterprise (W Mora 2013). Chapter Two related how Mora started a new phase of life after their separation, as a self-supported woman artist, who progressively developed a financially viable career through teaching workshops, public commissions and art sales. ‘Re-positioned’ in the art world by her art dealer son William in the mid 1980s, she later abandoned teaching to dedicate her time entirely to her art. Today, being a recognised senior artist, the association family-gallery still works to her advantage, leaving her free of financial burden and able to concentrate only on her art.

This section examines the impact of these economic circumstances on Mora’s creative process, and highlights her constant striving for the best possible quality materials, even at the less affluent periods of her life. In the early days, when Mora was dividing her time between sewing, drawing, painting, raising children and cooking for her friends, she adopted the general approach of her fellow artists, making do with house paint because it was affordable compared to artist’s paint. She even pilfered some industrial paint from work sites at night (Delany 1999, p. 35; Mora 2009, pers. comm., 15 April). Masonite, a commercial particle board, was often the preferred support for paintings, because of its affordability; in fact, most of the early paintings by Mora are made with enamel (house paint) on Masonite (Delany 1999; personal observations in Mora’s studio). Sometimes compositions were painted on top of previous ones, which had either been painted by herself or by another friend (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 8 May).
After these early years, however, Mora compromised less with her materials and always managed to buy art supplies, at the expense of other commodities. William Mora remembers how she used the cash flow from the restaurants to buy artists materials, much to the dismay of his father (W Mora 2013). The general consensus by her entourage, herself included, is that she is very extravagant with her materials, as William explains:

A twelve hundred dollars brush I remember once she bought and said ‘with this brush I can earn tens of thousands of dollars, that’s the Rolls Royce of brushes, made with the tail hair of the minks from Russia and all crazy things’...I numbered a hundred she had a hundred brushes in a box, she loves spending money on materials, yes she’s always had a lot of art materials (W Mora 2013)

Mora has repeatedly stated and written that ‘one must have good brushes and good paints’ (Diary, 18 January 1983). The same exigency applies to all her other materials that have to be of the best possible quality. The following quotation shows her absolute uncompromising attitude in that regard, considering the amount of money represented by $800 in the 1970s.

J’ai acheté un livre de broderie, une merveille. Je crois qu’il coutait $800, je n’avais pas d’argent mais je voulais ce livre, il faut que je te le montre, pour savoir tous les points de broderie… J’utilisais du beau coton à broder... la meilleure qualité... (Mora, 2013b, Figure 78)

[I bought an embroidery book, a marvel. I think it costed $800, I did not have money but I wanted that book, I have to show it to you, to know all embroidery stitches... I used beautiful embroidery cotton yarn, the best quality]
Good materials are for her a precondition to the production of quality art. Her books, embroidery supplies, paints or mosaic tiles have a common point, their high quality; the more expensive they are, the more quality is warranted, and fully exploited, as when choosing the tiles for the Flinders Street mosaic: ‘I wanted the best…Manganese blue was very expensive but I know the effect’ (Mora 1984). Excellent materials generally allow for easier use, better quality of colours, better flow of paint or better capacity for modelling and ultimately more beautiful results. Mora rewards herself by indulging in expensive materials that openly represent the artistic and social status she considers to be hers, saying ‘When I buy paints I don’t want to know how much it costs. They are mine to work with’ (Mora 1984).

Mora also transmitted this philosophy to her students. The CAE’s video *Summer school with Mirka Mora* shows a student relishing the experience of working on a very good quality paper that Mora supplied, while the artist explains that for her, the quality of materials impacts on the quality of the work, saying that ‘You are as good as your materials to start with. You should not look at the price; you can always skip dinner but you must have the best materials’ (Upton 1986). Her family and gallery concur, explaining that while she might have changed of favourite brand over time, she never compromised on quality:

In those early days she was into Winsor and Newton paints, she went through a Schmincke phase but she always thought that she had to have the best quality materials, she always bought good quality watercolour paper, linen and paint (W Mora 2013)

The choice of best quality materials reflects Mora’s desire to ensure the longevity of her productions, which she acknowledges readily. This was discussed previously in relation to her place in the broader history of art. All her life, she has preferred to compromise on her personal comfort, rather than restraining herself with art materials. For example, she lived quite frugally for a few years in a former printers’ workshop in Rankins Lane, explaining to Blackman that ‘CAE just paid rent [for Rankins Lane], you can always ask for food to friends, it was my turn after I had fed so many people’ (Mora 1984), quite a relaxed approach to her personal conditions of life.
Mora likes to refer to the price of the materials in her conversation or writings, as a proof of their quality and of the monetary value embedded in her art. During our conversations, she mentioned several times the high quality of Plaka craft paint, and showed me a 500ml tin, that she thought was valued at $100. Plaka casein paint by Pelikan is effectively a good quality all-purpose opaque craft paint, sold in 25ml and 500ml. Nowadays difficult to find in Australia, it can be bought from the United Kingdom or the United States for an average price of $35 for a 500ml jar. While not as expensive as Mora remembers, it is still an expensive craft paint. It is also possible that Plaka paint was more costly at the time that Mora used it, in the 1970s and 1980s; the Adelaide Festival reports an expense of $915 in materials for the frieze, exceeding their provisional budget by $115 (Adelaide Festival Centre 2014).

These frequent mentions of price underline how, in Mora’s eyes, the materiality of her work embodies the respect she feels for her art, and the deep pleasure she has from these high-quality supplies. The following extracts from her diary show her very tactile and sensuous response to the qualities of her materials:

- Brushes no8 Isabey most delicious to use… Hazes on painting $37 a tube Daring (13 August 1983)
- Friday 13 bought Grumbacher paints and brushes for highlighting mural as I crave for fine pigments like an addict…Grumbacher is a beautiful paint, they are very expensive paints, fabulous (Mora 2013d, reading her 1983 diary)

Since money is a universal language across all cultures and fields, the artist’s investment of money into making her art may be seen as a means of giving legitimacy and respectability to her practice and her works. Producing artworks made out of the best quality materials can also be read in terms of the artist showing consideration for her public, as happened with the tapestry commissioned by the National Australia Bank’s collection.47 Once again Mora distinguished herself by an uncompromising attitude towards materials, being entirely focused on the beauty of the final result regardless of the cost (Figure 79):

---

47 The large tapestry Curlews in the garden is still hanging in the National Australia bank’s headquarters in Melbourne.
For the National Bank I wanted to mix the wool with silver and silk and gold. So I wasn’t very popular because it became more expensive, but it was made (Mora 1984)

This statement was confirmed by a research in the archives of the ATW, who kept the correspondence exchanged at the time with the bank. The bank was obviously surprised at the cost; the workshop’s director acknowledged that the price was high because of the complexity of the design and committed to examine strategies for diminishing the costs for the next tapestries as seen in this letter:

We have given extensive consideration to the design which Mirka Mora has prepared for a tapestry (…) Mirka has been to the workshop to discuss the design with the weavers and we are all greatly excited by the rich and decorative possibilities it presents for tapestry (…) after talking with Mr Mora [Georges Mora was advising the bank for this collection] about the cost of this tapestry we realise that the next tapestry will need to be of a less complex nature and hence less costly (letter from Sue Walker, director of the Tapestry Workshop, to C. Abbott, National Bank of Australasia, November 7, 1980)

The tapestry was successfully woven, closely involving Mora during the process, which is the method usually employed by the ATW. The samples made before execution to test the difficulties, conserved by the workshop, show the use of metallic threads as well as many nuances of colour that require many different threads and dyes. (Figure 80). The final tapestry impresses both by its complex composition, reminiscent of the layered figures of the large paintings of the late 1960s, and by the preciousness of its materials, the glittering metallic threads contributing to the colourful image.
Mora received two other commissions for tapestries, by Ansett Airlines, which were also woven by the ATW; they are smaller and do not seem to include as many materials than the Australia Bank’s tapestry. Another commission for a tapestry came in 1986 from Carrillo Gantner, then Cultural Attaché to the Australian Embassy in Beijing; Mora supplied the carton for the composition and Gantner had it made in silk in China. Silk is a very expensive material that allows many nuances of shine according to the way the fibres are oriented and catch the light. The technique of silk weaving is time consuming, and according to Gantner, it would have been totally unaffordable to have the tapestry made in Australia, assuming that any workshop would actually practise the technique (Gantner 2014). The resulting silk tapestry, held in Gantner’s collection, is a
precious artwork that holds a prestigious place in Mora’s work, as well as a prominent place in the economic scale of her artistic materials. However, Mora’s most powerful statements in this domain were made with a material that embodies the idea of wealth better than any other. Gold, and how the artist used it, will be examined in the next section.

4.2.2 Precious as gold

Mora has always been well informed by her scholarly readings, and is fully aware of the symbolic charge of the materials she uses. Amongst them, gold has the greatest power of evocation and meanings. In addition to its stunning visual quality, gold carries symbolic significance of eternity and perfection, and has connotations of transcendence derived from alchemy, with its legend of vulgar metals transmuted into gold. Gold and silver are also symbols of affluence and richness. In Mora’s work, the choice of gold was infused with these symbolic connotations that strengthen the importance of the commission in the public’s eye. She used it mainly in masks and mosaics; a brief review of this use reveals her layered intent.

For Medea’s mask, Mora used gold and silver cleverly. On the white background of the face and skull, Medea’s hair ornaments and headpiece are painted purple, blue and green, with the attached feathers, leaves and snake bodies delineated in gold. Medea’s eyes, cut hollow in the white flesh toned mask, are lined with black and silver paint (see Figure 29, p 145, and Table III, p 136). On stage, the mask of Medea, a character tormented and always in movement, would have caught the light in many different places, creating an extraordinary shimmering effect, and thus visually embodying Medea’s powers as a magician.

Silver was also used for the mask of the Messenger, a character carrying news between the mythological beings fighting each other, and who wears an elaborate headpiece decorated with silver patterns. Silver is one of the three base metals of alchemy and

48 For the Bacchae, Mora did not use any gold or silver in the masks and costumes, which are much simpler in execution. Unfortunately, she does not remember whether the budget was smaller or whether she decided to use less time-consuming techniques for another reason.
traditionally symbolises the moon energy and its serenity; mercury, an element characterised by swift movement, shares the same colour, hence the name ‘quicksilver’ given to the material mercury in the Middle Ages. The God Mercury is also the messenger of the Gods in Greek mythology, and wears characteristic winged sandals. Mixing these references together, Mora has embellished the top of her unnamed Messenger’s mask with wings (an echo of the winged sandals?) and decorated it with silver, black and blue, symbolically referring to his swiftness through the use of colour, while choosing a different and colder harmony than for Medea. The symbolic use of gold and silver is validated by the fact that the other masks in the play, all of human characters, do not include gold or silver in their colour palette, to the exception of a few curls. Jason, Medea’s husband, has a golden painted crown separate from his mask, a reminder that he is a mere mortal, different in essence from his magician wife. It is therefore clear that Mora, very well versed in Greek mythology, used these colours not solely for their chromatic qualities but also for their symbolic significance, particularly relevant to the divine characters in the play.

Mora also used gold in her mosaic in Flinders Street. Mosaic is historically considered as an indicator of wealth and prestige, because it is a time-consuming and expensive process, and survives mainly in imperial and high status religious buildings (James 2006, p. 29). It carries therefore meanings linked to permanence, grandeur, lavishness and commemoration (Lloyd and Inglis 2009, p. 488). Being the laureate of the competition for this mural, Mora opted for this technique, ensuring that her work would make a lasting impression, and reinforced the message by using magnificent Venetian glass tesserae with resplendent colours, the gold or silver foils sandwiched between layers of glass giving them an incomparable depth. Byzantine mosaics, her models, have golden backgrounds that evoke ideas of the infinite and of a sacred space symbolically distinct from the mundane world of humanity. She was aware of the symbolic and religious charge of the materials, commenting in 1980 that ‘gold is life; it’s undiluted, lasting….to me gold does not signify physical but spiritual wealth’ (Beier 1980, p 36) and explaining to Deborah Hart:
Helas, being a non-religious except when I paint and love, I must trust my sensitivity and style and fall into the temptations of icons....1970 I started my life alone and needed to pray. I painted little icons, still have one....[in the 1980s again when she was sick] I had been given a batch of very gold leaves and I was a goner; byzantine art got me by the throat –gold and paint and mosaic (Hart 1999, p. 250)

Although not placing her figures on golden backgrounds, Mora used gold liberally in the Flinders Street mosaic, highlighting eyes, garments and plants with the shiny tesserae (Figure 81). Her specific choice of Venetian tiles for such an important commission links the mural to this tradition ‘redolent of symbolic meaning as well as liturgical and civic performance’ (Lloyd and Inglis 2009, p. 491). Combining the symbolic aspect of the materials with the inherent visual shine and weightiness of the mosaic, Mora’s highly publicised use of the pricy tesserae betrays her intention to impress with the Flinders Street mural; it had to evoke monumentality, resplendence and eternity, and the reviews show that it fully succeeded in that endeavour (Ryan 1986; Reid 1987).

![Figure 81. Mirka Mora, Flinders Street mosaic, detail with gold tesserae](image)

In many realisations of lesser importance, Mora equally showed a will to make the work more precious by adding ‘noble’ and expensive materials: as noted before, she used expensive oil colours on the Ayr mural; she included sequins and beads on embroideries; she painted her stuffed sculptures with shiny oil paint; she designed golden ‘frames’ with paint or with mosaic in her oil paintings. For Mora, spending money on materials -and showing it- was a public celebration of the act of making art,
which was often accompanied by the artist spending money on herself. For example, she decided to stay in an expensive hotel (the Windsor Hotel in Melbourne) for three nights to prepare drawings for the Flinders Street competition (Mora 2000, p. 176).

Other examples exist of the artist’s use of costly materials being paralleled by personal luxuries in her private life, such as buying expensive hand creams and perfumes to alleviate the roughness of the mosaic job (Mora 1984); treating herself and her assistant to expensive food and wine in nice restaurants after spending long hours each day on a public commission (McGaan 2014, pers. comm., 25 September); and drinking champagne throughout the lengthy task of making masks on the actors’ head (McGregor 2014, pers. comm., 22 April). This took on an element of personal myth-making: by publicizing her ‘extravagant’ spending, on her art and on herself, when on a large project, Mora arguably contributed to the building of her self-worth.

But beyond the public promotion of the artist’s attitude and lifestyle, which was mainly confined to the realm of Melbourne’s artistic society, the message can be read by all in the works’ materiality. They transmit it through the complex texture of their surface, an experience both visual and tactile which often implies lengthy and difficult processes representing real physical challenges. The manner in which Mora negotiated her bodily engagement with artistic achievements, at all stages of her life, is the subject of the next section.

4.3 Life with materials; physical engagement, practical adaptations

4.3.1 Practicalities of materials

Mora had many upheavals in her life, during which times her physical or emotional state had an impact on her creative processes; in fact, in many occasions, she seems to have transformed these life experiences into works of art. The embroidered collars that she made at 9, Collins Street during her pregnancy with William, explaining that she could not physically draw on large pieces of paper, are one such example (Mora 1984).
Elaborating the soft sculptures came from her emotional state after her separation from Georges, another example of transforming a life hurdle into an art form.

Her main job for more than twenty years was teaching workshops, which took up a lot of her time and involved many travels. For example, in 1983 she went to Tasmania, Western Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania again within a few months, which did not facilitate her oil painting practice. However, even though teaching took up a lot of her energy, Mora always felt the need to produce work; therefore, she adapted her practice to materials more suited to travelling, such as textile embroidery and watercolour. Entries in her 1983 diary show lists of items to pack including watercolour box and sewing kits ‘Bring a doll – book - embroidery and an embroidery in progress’ (6 March 1983). All these materials are light, flexible and can be transported in a handbag immediately after execution. Watercolours pack up easily in a box and the paintings have almost no drying time, allowing the creation of artworks on the spot that can be kept within their drawing pads with no need of spacing implements, therefore requiring minimal volume. Watercolour has indeed long been the material of choice for travelling artists, from Delacroix and Turner to Australian Ben Quilty during his recent war assignment in Iraq. Mora therefore fits easily into this tradition, complementing it with her embroideries, not unlike a Victorian lady carrying her tapestry bag for a visit to relatives. Watercolour and embroidery were a good and relatively cheap alternative to oil painting for the periods away from home, maintaining the continuity of her creative flux at the same time as enabling the production of artworks for future exhibitions.

But if Mora’s life at times determined her materials, there were occasions where the materials impacted on her life. The making of the mosaic in Flinders Street station is one of them. In her follow up interview with Barbara Blackman in 1987, Mora explained that mosaic is difficult because you cannot mix the colours (Mora 1984). The making of the mural involved many other challenges; it was a very long process that including the preparation and research unfolded over nearly two years. Mora discussed it at length in her interview with Blackman (Mora 1984); it is also related in detail in her 1986 diary. The artist’s physical and emotional involvement in her work is well

49 Artists making oil sketches while travelling use spacers (small devices made of wood or plastic fixed in the corners) to separate the supports because otherwise sketches would stick to each other due to oil paint’s long drying time.
illustrated by the numerous entries detailing the continual reworking of the composition, and the meticulous building up of complex parts such as the friezes. These accounts also emphasize the many technical learning curves she had to negotiate, such as adapting her drawing style to mosaic or to carving in a render that sets after only a few hours.

In addition, the tools and materials for mosaic are heavy and cumbersome. Preparation included cutting tiles daily with a pair of cutting pliers to have a ‘palette’ of different colours ready to use. This palette consists of many boxes of cut tiles organised by colours, while the bulk of uncut tiles was also organised the same way, as documented by historic photographs of Mora at work on the scaffold. The tiles’ weight was considerable; the toolbox was large and heavy, with pliers, chisels, hammer, spatulas and cleaning brushes. The mortar’s ingredients were equally heavy (sand, lime, water) and preparation required utensils and vessels.

Mora described in her memoirs (2000, pp. 176-177) the custom-made scaffold built for her by the Government’s Ministry of Arts, complete with working benches, sofa, lights and small windows so she could be seen but not disturbed (Mora 1984; McGaan 2014, pers. comm., 25 September). Ronnie Ellis’ photographs held at the State Library of Victoria show Mora at work on this state-of-the-art scaffold with the mural in progress behind her (Figure 82). Nicola McGaan recalled how Mora locked all materials in the small room on top of the stairs leading to the Yarra bank. McGaan would go there regularly to collect refills for the boxes of tiles, using a trolley to carry the heavy materials from this room to the scaffolding, where she would lift them with a rope.
The logistical and physical constraints imposed by such a demanding technique did not deter Mora from using it again at all. Some years later (in 1992) she recounts the making of the St Kilda Pier mosaic seat, in an open place at the end of the jetty where she did not have a luxurious scaffold or room to stock the materials. Working on a fixed architectural site such as a mural or a seat means that the artist has to go there every day in order to execute the work. Mora did not drive and lived on her own so there was no possibility of reaching the site with a car, unless in a taxi, which she admitted having considered but rejected for economic reasons (Mora 2000, p. 183). Having decided on mosaic, amongst many reasons because she likes the effect of light on it, she then had to devise creative way of carrying heavy and sharp materials to the site every day from her nearby home in St Kilda. She did this by using a large and deep pram filled to the brim with tiles, tools, cameras and all her paraphernalia. This time the length of realisation was shorter, but it was a moment of total physical investment, determined by the materials employed, that was felt intensely within her body. Working herself to exhaustion, which seemed to be common for Mora during her big commissions, demonstrated her energy, commitment and the importance of an able body in her practice, which is the subject of the next section of this thesis.
4.3.2 The body as another tool

In the previous section, the mosaic technique was described as difficult and time-consuming. In addition, working with this technique for long periods of times, in Mora’s case an entire year, had physical consequences, related to certain materials or to repetitive gestures. Mora described in detail in her 1986 diary the physical toll that cutting tiles or manipulating lime mortar had on her hands, stating:

8 hours work, no pain but cut my thumb (27 January 1986)
Sore fingers so no scaffold, but I am doing some charcoal - but sore fingers and too small for me just one page (15 March 1986)
Sore wrist at cutting (8 April 1986)

The dates span three consecutive months and show how constant was her discomfort. Cuts, blisters and burned skin due to the lime, and stiffness of wrists and fingers are a direct consequence of the technique chosen by the artist and of the scale of the work. The discomfort also came from her mind, as Mora noted that she felt physically ill when the image was too symmetrical in construction, and ventured a tentative and humorous explanation:

[X] thinks my bordure goes up 3cm but this is what I wanted=the oddness of irregularity it comforts me. Regularity makes me literally ill particularly the little triangles to fill in spaces (drawing here). I am amazed to feel so ill- perhaps one of my ancestor suffered doing mosaic under orders (17 January 1986)

Mora literally collapsed her work and her person into one unit, during this large project. When she wrote about the work’s composition in her diary, she treated it almost as her own body, speaking of the image’s strength as her own: ‘Started to paint by recapturing in black my lines, my strength’[sic] (25 July 1986).

Although these periods tested her endurance, Mora had great pride in her ability to overcome these physical challenges and likes to recall them in conversation (Mora 1984; Mora 2015, pers. comm. 26 June) and in writing (Mora 2000). For her, physical pain proves her intense investment in the work, even at the expense of her social life, as shown in this comment, where she describes her stay in Ayr:
You see, it's total involvement with a mural and I have such a limited time, and it would distract me [going in the countryside]. I would go out of the spell and it's a pity because I miss out on lovely invitations and lovely dinners. I think I did go out once to a beautiful dinner where that famous fish was cooked, but I warn the people that I am not sociable and I can't. I am just totally exhausted and I cannot function when I am in the middle of a job (Mora 1984)

Mora recalls the same physical investment for all her large-scale works, from the Tympanum and the tram commission to the murals in Ayr and Flinders Street. She consistently considered her body as one of her tools, that needed to be well managed and cared for when making large scale works of art. As a remedy for her ailments Mora would pamper herself, and ‘spend hundreds of dollars for my hands’ buying cosmetic creams, something she then ‘had to explain to the taxman’ (Mora 1984). She also recounts that she ‘would stop at Jean Jacques restaurant to have a good meal and go straight to bed when home, after preparing the next day’s work ‘(Mora 2000, p. 183).

The impact on her body from the process of making large works, such as having sore arms for six months after making the tram decoration, is not entirely surprising. When the dates are compared with Mora’s age, it appears that she was fifty years old when she painted the tram, fifty-five for the mural in Ayr, fifty-eight for the Flinders Street mural, and sixty-four when she made the St Kilda mosaic seat. Given Mora’s very petite stature, it is no wonder that many onlookers were surprised by her short timeframe for these big works. But despite conceding the physical toll of making large scale realisations, Mora acknowledged that she could not refuse these exciting commissions, stating ‘I would paint the sky if I was offered it’ (Fagan 1987).

Moreover, Mora did not always perceive these interactions between her body and the work of art as negative. Despite her life and body being shaped by her art over long periods of time, she described the rejuvenating effect on her face of this creative physical ordeal in this 1986 diary entry:

Big event- 2 days ago when I realised I was near completion of mural. I looked in the mirror and found my face of 1958. I had lost the last 25 years (August 1986)

Indeed, the press clipping conserved by Mora shows her photograph at the inauguration of the Flinders Street mural by Race Mathews, Victoria’s Minister for the Arts, on 19 September 1986. The fifty-eight years old artist looks absolutely radiant (Figure 83).
4.3.3 *The maturing artist*

The previous sections have described the impressive array of techniques used by Mora and related them to her social and economic personal context. It has been argued that a given technique was selected either for being the most affordable, most symbolic or most practical, or a combination of these. The following section will examine how the ageing of her body corresponds in her practice to changes in technique and style. Mora’s production in the early years included delicately embroidered fashion accessories as well as drawings in charcoal, pen and ink or felt tip pen, and painting in enamel and oil on boards. The level of detail in the drawings and paintings from the 1950s and 1960s is very high; the compositions often include many figures, interlocked together in long friezes or in multiple scenes arranged in small compartments. Figure 84 shows the tiny decorative patterns outlined on the body of the snake. The backgrounds of drawings of the same period are often filled with repeated straight or looped lines forming a patterned texture.
From the late 1960s we see these techniques continue but on a bigger scale with large charcoal drawings that are incredibly detailed, evoking medieval tapestries and Byzantine icons, ‘but much more agitated than either’ (Beier 1980, p. 49). Her paintings also construct a rich abstract space adorned by a luxurious ornamentation reminiscent of Gustav Klimt (Delany 1999, p. 43). Despite of their scale, the same treatment of forms can be detected in the Tympanum (1977) with its entanglement of fantastic creatures, and also on the tram (1978), where elaborate decorative friezes frame the figures on all sides. In the same period, Mora developed her extraordinarily detailed embroidered quilts and her soft sculptures, sometimes heavily decorated with intricate patterns, sometimes arranged in great quantities in complicated assemblages as shown in Figure 85. The level of detail in Flinders street or St Kilda mosaics is also worthy of note, considering the technical difficulty of such precision.
From the late 1980s, however, Mora gradually abandoned her works of art in textile. The main reason may be the increasing financial value of her paintings, which made teaching unnecessary, and another might be the reduction of vision related to age. Mora does not wear glasses, preferring to use a magnifying glass to read, and she paints without anything to assist her sight. With age, it becomes difficult to thread the needle, work with the sewing machine or thread beads and sequins onto cloth. Age preoccupies Mora, she has frequently commented upon it since reaching her sixties, although often analysing its impact on her work in positive terms and definitely not seeing age as a reason to slow her activity. This is made clear in the following two statements, made twenty years apart from each other:

You never finish your work… as you grow older you have bigger aims, see more possibilities. Colour for example is something you understand much better later in life. As you get older you can’t enjoy the wine and sex as much. Painting you can… read the lives of all the great painters, you’ll see they painted right through their lives (Fein 1990-91, p. 45)

People suffer being old, but I think it’s fabulous. I work sometimes to the limit, till I can’t move! I don’t wear glasses because they make me look stupid- I have a magnifying glass on a chain instead. But it doesn’t affect my work… I can still see the slightest tonal mistake (Francis King 2013, p.52)

Other than no longer riding a bicycle or a scooter anymore, replaced by pushing a pram that functions both as a walking stick and a storage for her handbags and various purchases, Mora seems little affected by ageing in regard to her work. Her careful management of age and her awareness of her physical capabilities ensured that this was the case. Her work has evolved stylistically and technically to fit her changing physical capacities, while her methods have not changed. She often works to her limits, although this occurs earlier than before. She has relinquished physically demanding or eye-straining techniques such as murals, mosaic and embroidery, but still moves between other mediums for two-dimensional work, such as oil paint, charcoal, watercolour and pastel. Her trademark imagery is still present but with much less decorative details, which can be read as a direct consequence of failing eyesight but also echoes the maturation of her artistic language towards greater monumentality.
As the scale of her figures has increased, so has the scale of her paintings. While her pictorial use of line is vibrant and alive, the line itself is thicker, outlining large and full shapes devoid of the intricate decorative patterns that have become unnecessary in her mature imagery. This process was witnessed during one of our conversations when Mora began painting patterns on a figure, only to cover it immediately with plain colour (10 February 2014, Figures 53 and 54). The palette of her recent paintings is made of ‘coloured whites’, seen as a colour encompassing all others, delineated by strong dark red or blue lines, in a vibrant composition that evokes the sgraffito facades of the European Renaissance (Figure 60). Her colours are still vivid in the early stages of a painting, before being covered over with grey, re-emerge over the grey, be recovered with other colours, then with white again, a process she explains as being a constant research of perfection (see Figures 41 to 60): ‘Je cherche, je cherche… je dois tuer les couleurs, tout doit être blanc. Je ne sais pas ce que je cherche, mais je sais quand j’ai trouvé (Mora 2014, pers. comm., 5 February) [I am fumbling; I am fumbling… I have to kill the colours, everything must be white. I don’t know what I am looking for, but I know when I have found it].

As Mora builds monumental shapes and strips her painting of decorative ornamentation, her images tend towards plenitude and serenity. Once again taking the Old Masters as her overarching models, she cites ‘the great master Titian, who did his greatest work in his 90s. That’s something I am aiming at’ (Freedman 1996).

A few other features of Mora’s work have gradually been abandoned with time, such as diary writing, which she practiced regularly from the late 1960s to the late 1990s. As she is recognised as a major cultural figure, she admits not needing today the security brought by daily writing (Mora 2014b). Totally dedicated to her art, Mora has always claimed that she needs painting for her mental health, saying that ‘I would die if I could not paint… I would become a vegetable’ (Mora 1984). Daily painting practice now absorbs most of her energy and she feels the urge to paint even more with age (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 13 January). As this chapter has shown, her artistic flexibility and her seamless travels between technical processes are very alive. From her own admission, she is still discovering and still learning; her paintings of the last decade show a much thicker texture than previous works, directly related to her lengthy working process. Less preoccupied than before by life financial realities (overseen by her gallery/family), Mora can now entirely focus on her painting. Her liberation of life’s
material things has allowed her to indulge in a lengthier process, containing more and more stages of the same painting. Mora enjoys this process so much that she tends to forget about the final achievement, sometimes obliterating marvellous paintings by revisiting them again and again (W. Mora 2013). In the current phase of her career, almost excluding anything else from her life, Mora is thoroughly delighting in the act of painting itself.
Chapter Five. Materials as language

5.1 Modes of making and artistic identity

The previous chapters examined Mora’s technical versatility, her aptitude to move from one technique to another and how she merged various modes of making art to create her own idiosyncratic process. The intentions expressed through her choice of materials were described, as well as the way in which she actively participated in the insertion of her work into the broader history of art by continually referencing the Old Masters in her readings, writings and artistic production. The present chapter examines the historical perception of Mora’s work and sees how her engagement with specific materials impacted on its reception. It will also describe how her work’s perception is linked both to her person and to the way she communicates through material culture.

5.1.1 Gender and materials

While materials in themselves are neutral, the use of specific artistic media has historically been interpreted as an articulation of historical, social and psychoanalytical ideas about gender (Chare 2009). The traditional associations of women with nature and men with culture are articulated in art history through a gendered perception of materials and modes of making art (Chare 2009, p. 666; Parker & Pollock 1981, p. 58). Chare (2009, p. 673) notes that the importance of the physical artistic endeavour determines the perceived gender of the material; thus, materials of hard substance, such as metal and stone, that require physical force to work them, are traditionally regarded as masculine, while malleable and less physically challenging materials are regarded as feminine. But although such categorisations can be socially prevalent at a given period, these meanings are shifting with time. An example is Michelangelo’s dismissive view of oil painting as ‘woman’s art’, compared to the physically challenging technique of fresco painting. However, we see a shift in view when a century later, painting with oil became associated with manliness, as opposed to watercolour, which was regarded as more feminine (Chare 2009, p. 673).

Regardless of these changes, gendered identity is materially encoded within the history of art. Some specific materials and making methods do not vary much in their meaning
and are thus very strongly anchored in the collective psyche. Such is the case with textile work, and particularly embroidery. Although practiced indifferently by monks or nuns in the twelfth century, embroidery later became the uncontested embodiment of a specific ideology of femininity, which included social attitudes expected of women, and a symbol of the separation between arts and crafts (Parker & Pollock 1981, p. 59). In the patriarchal system of nineteenth century Western culture’s, embroidery was seen to belong mainly to the realm of domestic craft and was less appraised than art, thus linking gender, place of production, and value. This indelible association of feminine identity with textile crafts, which has continued in the twentieth century, may be perceived as detrimental to an artist’s image, as noted by Parker and Pollock who state that ‘any association with the tradition and practice of needlework and domestic art can be dangerous for an artist, especially when that artist is a woman’ (1981, p. 78). By ‘dangerous’, the authors mean that for an artist, there is a real risk of falling into a ‘feminine stereotype’, associated with the crafts and the realm of domesticity, against which ‘the fine arts’ have become defined as the complete antithesis. The continuous relevance of Parker and Pollock’s statement is obvious when one considers the recent interview of the Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota (b.1972), known for her monumental thread installations that can fill entire rooms. When asked to comment on her choice of materials, Shiota states

I began to weave and use yarn at some point after having finished university – at the time I was starting to feel that painting on a two-dimensional surface wasn’t sufficient. The reason I use yarn has nothing to do with handicrafts – yarn allows me to explore breadth and space like a line in a painting. (Chan 2015)

Shiota is not mistaken in feeling that she should ‘justify’ her use of craft-like materials. Such material choices by women often had for consequence that they were overlooked by the critic, as reminded in the presentation text for the exhibition Pathmakers at Museum of Art and Design, New York in 2015:
Pathmakers: Women in Art, Craft and Design, Midcentury and Today considers the important contributions of women to modernism in post-war visual culture. In the 1950s and 60s, an era when painting, sculpture, and architecture were dominated by men, women had considerable impact in alternative materials such as textiles, ceramics, and metals. Largely unexamined in major art historical surveys, either due to their gender or choice of materials, these pioneering women achieved success and international recognition, establishing a model of professional identity for future generations of women (Museum of Art and Design 2015).

This link between professional identity and the choice of creative materials is the subject of this chapter. Mora’s critical reception over the years, examined in detail in the third section, lends some credit to Parker and Pollock and to the museum’s contentions. Yet if Mora is a pioneering woman who has indeed achieved success in a male-dominated environment, her attitude towards feminism remained ambivalent; never a militant or a politically involved person, Mora has just developed her art quietly, as remarked by Max Harris:

Mirka Mora came to the scene a little later; after the adrenaline of Georges Mora had been injected into the cultural organism … she found her place in the small complex of art originals. It took time. She didn’t bother with feminism (Harris 1983)

Harris acknowledges that while their social circle was unconventional, the women he describes as ‘sisters of sensibility’, namely Mary Boyd, Joy Hester and Mancelle Kirby, all worked within ‘a male-dominated revolution in the arts’. For him, the important point defining them as artists was that they were part of Sunday Reed’s circle, whose idea of femininity seemed quite precise as he explains:

Sunday Reed was not a feminist. But she had, within the context of the times, an advanced idea of feminine function – that is, the full utilisation of sensibility and responsibility (Harris 1983)

Mora appears to have largely shared Sunday Reed’s idea of femininity in her approach to art. She exploited fully her own sensibility through a great variety of media, including those traditionally perceived as feminine, such as stitched dolls and embroidery. Although she never limited herself to these media, her idiosyncratic interpretation of them and the connections she established between these techniques and her personal imagery contributed greatly to her reputation. They also locate her art within the broader movement of feminism that developed at the time.
5.1.2 The rise of feminine techniques in the arts

The time was right socially and artistically for such practices. The feminist wave of the 1970s opened up tertiary education and work to women and championed equal pay and rights, which had an impact also on the arts. Amid the debate surrounding the ‘International Year of Women’ in 1975, and the visit to Australia of feminist art historian, Lucy Lippard, a number of feminist activities flourished. This included the establishment of the Sydney Women’s Art Collective in 1974; Erica Mc Gilehrist founding of the Women’s Art Register in Melbourne in 1975; and the formation of the Adelaide Women’s Art Movement in 1976. Art historian Janine Burke organised in 1975 an exhibition titled Australian Women Artists, while Germaine Greer’s writings such as The obstacle race (1979) began to change Australian attitudes to women’s cultural production, which often used media traditionally assigned to the domain of craft (Rentschler 2006, p127). Resistances to these developments existed, however, particularly within the cultural institutions. Although the Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism movements had paved the way for revalorisation of crafts by seeking no difference between applied arts and fine arts, Rentschler (2006) has shown that the enduring hierarchy of visual arts and crafts, with crafts at the lower end, was a real factor in the marginalisation of women’s artistic contribution in the twentieth century.

The Women’s Suffrage movements in Britain in the 1930s may not have had a significant impact on Australian women artists, but it contributed to the creation of a higher consciousness of feminine status (Burke 1975). Materials and modes of making art were one means for the expression of this status. The British suffragettes, for example, consciously exploited the symbolic content of materials, by combining painting, considered as masculine, with embroidery, collage, raised work and appliqué, all techniques considered as feminine, in their marching banners inspired from the tradition of trades banners (Parker 1981, p. 199). Women’s artistic production often exploited the potential of the materials to convey their makers’ own experience and sense of the world (Speaks 2011). This can include found materials, which were modified, reassembled and given a new interpretation, as in the works of the late artists
Louise Nevelson (1899-1988), Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), or Rosalie Gascoigne (1917-1999), who are Mora’s immediate historic predecessors.

But Mora chose a different path, and deliberately used traditional crafty materials to make art. This selection of materials, unconventional in the arts at the time, and her themes largely inspired from childhood and mythology came in addition to the challenge of being a woman artist, maybe particularly so in conservative post war Melbourne. While recent developments in textile industry have seen a remarkable uptake of these materials in works of art, which are not anymore considered as crafty, this approach to the material was still experimental in the 1970s, when Mora started her textile realisations. Moreover, the materials she chose did not include the modern synthetic fabrics explored by other contemporary artists such as Lee Bontecou (b 1931) or Eva Hesse (1936-1970). Mora’s materials consist of cotton threads, cotton fabric, beads, sequins, ribbons and craft paint, all traditional craft materials, usually associated with femininity, domesticity and leisure time. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Mora did not seek to promote any political or feminist message that could have modified the perception of her works by her contemporaries. As a consequence, her textile work was not initially regarded as fine art but was often categorised as craft or at best as a hybrid between craft and art.

Mora combined these ‘feminine’ techniques with painting and sculpture and transformed them into a sophisticated and very personal form of art that has become one of the trademarks of her artistic identity. The thread and needle, far from confining her socially to the domestic sphere that she had rejected in favour of creative freedom, provided Mora with exactly the opposite. Her textiles gave her the means of succeeding as a single woman, through her sales of embroideries and soft sculptures, and her workshops, and strongly contributed to the construction of her artistic identity. This was also made possible by Mora’s family and social network, comprising of her ex-husband Georges, founder of Tolarno galleries, and of Marianne Baillieu, director of Realities gallery. Both gallery owners were risk-takers, who gave her space to show her work. By introducing sewing, stuffing and embroidering into Melbourne art galleries, Mora gave the materials meanings of her own, and slowly gained recognition as an artist using ‘the very mediums intended to inculcate self-effacement’ (Parker 1981, p. 215). However, the perception of women as domestic goddesses being still quite entrenched at the time.
in Australia, her use of traditionally feminine materials appears also to have reinforced the stereotype, which is evident when one looks from this perspective at the critical reception of her work throughout her career.

5.1.3 Critical reception of Mora’s work

The Australian media of the 1950s and 1960s, although generally acknowledging the presence of women in the arts, presented these artists’ contribution to cultural life as something unusual. For them, art was something women artists were doing in their spare time, a secondary activity to their domestic duties (Sheridan 2002). This is clearly shown in The Argus’ review of the CAS’s 1954 group exhibition, titled ‘20 women in contemporary art exhibition’ and illustrated with a photograph of Mirka Mora and Erica Mc Gilchrist. The core of the article spoke essentially of the women’s time management skills or their husbands’ jobs:

Ms Mora does all her paintings at night because it is the only time she has…Another woman exhibiting is Mrs Erica Mc Gilchrist, in private life Mrs Georges Pilley; her husband, a factory director… (Anonymous 1954a)

The article went on, expanding on the women’s family circumstances but saying little about their actual work. The same pattern occurred a few months later when Mora was again featured and photographed in an article, this time focusing on life tips for women:

Versatile housewife has a word of advice for all mothers: Relax! … a GAY Parisienne wife, mother, artist, teacher, and outstanding cook and hostess, wants to teach busy Melbourne housewives the art of relaxation (Anonymous 1954c)

These statements suggest that Mora being an artist was considered a curiosity, alongside the fact that she was Parisian. The Age took a similar perspective for its own review of the CAS exhibition:

French born Mirka Mora…the mother of 2 small boys …. this artist is a dressmaker by the day and does most of her painting in the evenings and at weekends (Anonymous 1954b)

Again Mora, identified as a woman, was only described in terms of her status as a mother, who is remarkable for her time management skills because she practices painting outside of her full time feminine roles of mother and dressmaker. But there are
some exceptions; an unidentified article probably dating from 1955, and focused on Mora’s singularity as a French person living in Melbourne, stated that

Mirka and her husband started an art gallery in Collins Street two years ago and have already held seven exhibitions of contemporary art… the Contemporary Art Society, of which Georges is a secretary, has been revived… (Anonymous, circa 1955)

However, the portrait of the couple illustrating the article is captioned ‘Mirka Mora pours coffee for husband Georges’, as if to re-balance the genders’ roles.

At this time, the materials and techniques that Mora employed were not different from her male artist counterparts. As discussed in the previous chapters, she shared drawing inks or paints during sessions with Fred Williams or Charles Blackman amongst others, and also shared some of their themes such as big-eyed children. Nevertheless, the gendered reading of her practice is still very present nine years later in critical reviews that focus on her dress, her looks and her life more than on her art:

Mirka Mora looked like a little girl, sitting on the floor…her eyes, as wide and as innocent as those of the children she draws…she wore a lacy, frilly blouse… she did not look 35, and the mother of three boys…’I work when the children are at school’ she explained…. And housework? Mirka loves it …. this week a collection of her whimsical, essentially feminine drawings is being shown at the Douglas Galleries in Brisbane (Anonymous 1963)

For the unknown reviewer, the priority is again that the mother’s role in the family should not be disturbed. If Mora can find some spare time once her motherly duties are accomplished, then he is ready to applaud her ‘essentially feminine drawings’, described in terms that would be better suited to a hobby than to a genuine artistic production. As her career developed, the Bulletin acknowledged her as ‘a talented artist’ in an article in 1967, but still identified her as ‘Mirka Mora, wife of Georges Mora, the Melbourne restaurateur’ (Wood 1967). This public commentary persisted even through the couple’s separation, as is shown by the following quotation which gives a clear priority to her roles in life: ‘She is the mother of three, separated from her husband Georges, and an artist (Sydney Morning Herald, 23 November 1972).

As late as the early 1970s, it therefore seemed necessary to locate a woman socially by her maternal and marital status before considering her profession. It is worth noting that
at no time during his life was Georges ever publicly described as Mirka’s husband or former husband, even after she had achieved recognition. The male oriented writing of history is evident in Bernard Smith’s celebrated book *Australian Painting 1788-1990* (revised 1992). While Mora is entirely ignored, Georges is mentioned in Chapter Ten as a migrant that ‘has become an influential patron of, and dealer in, avant-garde art’ (Smith 1992, p. 340). Clearly, being a recognized artist, as Mora was in the 1990s, was of less importance than being an art dealer championing the avant-garde. Or was it because the artist happened to be a woman? Since many male artists of the same period were mentioned in Smith’s book, the question seems relevant. Even the book’s section on Women’s Art Movement, which mentions Jenny Watson’s materials as being those ‘used in women’s work (taffeta, velvet, cotton)’ and cites Erica McGilchrist as the founder of the Women Art Register, ignores Mora, while ironically lamenting ‘the glaring lack of recognized women artists’ (Smith 1992, pp. 485-86).

As she gained in popularity, Mora’s work was nevertheless often reviewed in slightly patronising tones and even sometimes in derogative language. Her mural paintings at the Tolarno hotel, today on the Victorian Heritage Register, were called ‘very romantic and original’ in *Newsday Living* (10 November 1969, page unknown), or ‘amusing and colourful’ in *Vogue Living* (May-July 1970, p.8), while her style is qualified as ‘highly personal, rather sweet, gentle and at times whimsical’ (Anonymous, 1967b). Her personality is generally described in unequivocally gendered terms, be it ‘eccentric, childish, intelligent and feminine’ for *The Herald* (27 May 1967, page unknown) or ‘with a childlike charm’ and adjective that is also bestowed to her embroideries in the same article (Clarke 1979, page unknown). Mora certainly contributed to this perception, by both her behaviour and her sense of dress, which will be discussed further in this chapter. However, it is telling that the writers were, and to some extent still are, willing to see this aspect of her character almost exclusively.

When she developed her production of soft sculptures, the critic did not take them very seriously, even when Mora explained her choice of medium and shapes in a scholarly manner, showing the extent of her literary knowledge. It was recorded in this interview with Sarah McGrath, conducted during a children’s workshop in Sydney:
Dolls satisfy all the experiences; they embody painting, sculpture, design and sewing. I call them ‘dolls’ because they capture one aspect of childhood. Back in history the origin of the doll was to replace the departed; it was used in ancient religions to express feelings; the doll captures the soul’ (McGrath 1978)

Despite her precisions, or explaining in *The Herald* (31 March 1980) that she was making dolls because they satisfied all her experiences, embodying painting, sculpture, design and sewing, these explanations and the historical context for the dolls’ imagery are more often than not overlooked. At times, the reviews reflect annoyance; Holloway (1983) ponders over Mora’s ‘highly calculated images of fantasy...but then Mirka is a bit like that too’ and describes her artistic output as ‘the inimitable Mirka stuff- little cloth dolls, wide eyed heads, embroidered and sequinned unicorns made of clay on linen, angels, ducks and birds’ (Holloway 1983). Neither in size nor in quantity does the word ‘little’ accurately convey Mora’s dolls production. In some photographs of that time, Mora is shown in her studio, surrounded by an extraordinary number of dolls of all sizes, some of them larger than herself. But it better suits this description of a lady’s hobby-like exhibition of ‘little’ animals that are made of ‘clay on linen’, eminently craft-like materials, even if this technique only exists in the writer’s imagination.

This account is nevertheless curious, as the review takes place three years after the publication of the book *Mirka*, which adopted a rigorous approach in its study of iconography, style and technique, and sold well, contributing to the establishment of Mora’s fame (Mora 1984). Another three years after this review, an article in *The Age* (2 September 1986, p.24) still focuses on her person, describing her as

An enchanting mature age child-doll, with wonderful chalk-white skin and enormous and heavily made up eyes … she could be the model for her pastel or painted or embroidered children, for which she is so well known’ (Woodfall 1986).

This sentence acknowledged to a degree the variety of materials and techniques employed by Mora; however, such a description of the artist seems cursory, especially taking place two weeks before the inauguration of the Flinders Street monumental mural, a major public art commission made in public in Melbourne. Although a few critics fully focused on her work, it was not until a few more years had passed that a reviewer stated that ‘Mirka the painter is much more active than Mirka’s professional and media charmer’ (Lancashire 1992).
If the significance of her soft sculptures was not fully recognised by the critics, their technique attracted attention. Mora was happy to provide details, and to point to its link to the oil painting tradition, which would not necessarily have been obvious to the average viewer, as is shown in the following quotation:

Mirka Mora, artist, works with a medium of her own – painted cloth figures. They are first sewn on canvas or calico, firmly stuffed with plastic beads and foam and brilliantly painted all over, often to present two different faces…Mirka uses oil paints. She achieves a very high gloss by exposing the oil she mixes with the pigments to the sun for 6 months- a trick centuries old, she says (Ross 1974)

Making painted dolls was apparently slightly challenging in the art world of the early 1970s. Today they are beginning to appear in auction houses and achieve reasonable prices, but this was not their status at the time of production. Artists were supposed to make art, and for the artistic establishment these outcomes did not include dolls. A 1973 portrait of Mora in Southern Cross (21 November 1973, p.7) states that ‘she is an artist and also makes unusual dolls, which the students say are more work of art than toys’. Clearly dolls and paintings could not both be considered as work of arts, to the disadvantage of the dolls. The critics were nevertheless intrigued - and charmed - by her choice of materials, for their poetic associations, which shows Mora’s great talent for story telling:

She takes one bed sheet, turns it inside out and sews it up. Then she fills it with isolyte beads and paints it. I can only use bed sheets, she explains, because this is where you sleep, where you dream. And the sheet is the beginning of the doll. And the dolls are dreams (Anonymous 1971).

Mora’s paintings, especially when discussed in isolation from the dolls, were reviewed in more neutral terms, without the gender emphases of her decorative work. The critics did not use the same type of language for the Tympanum (1977) and the tram (1978), the scale of the projects and the collaboration with other (male) painters being the probable reason for this shift, as well as the use of ‘noble’ materials such as oil and enamel paint that can better qualify as fine arts. Nevertheless, it took years, and the concerted efforts of William Mora to exhibit all Mora’s works in their diverse media in a formal art gallery, for people to gain a better grasp of the breadth of her production and consider her as a serious artist. Gary Catalano’s review of this 1987 exhibition alludes to the variety of materials employed by Mora to trace the main influences back
to Hester and Blackman, comparing her children and animals locked in embraces to Hester’s characters, in paintings and in the dolls. He added that ‘the technique may well have altered over time but the emotion has been the same for thirty years’ (Catalano 1987, p.14).

With her many contributions to public art, Mora’s work became better known and recognised. She was included in Fiona Holt’s 1985 book titled Australian women: successful lives, which describes her achievements in ‘tapestries, paintings, dolls, theatre costumes, teaching, and a unique, angelic Melbourne tram … still running in public service’ (Holt 1985, p. 91). However, she is still perceived much less seriously as an artist than other painters from her generation such as Charles Blackman or John Perceval (W. Mora 2013; Morgan 2013). Her public personality, her gender and the materials she used all participated in this general perception. As William Mora states,

People don’t see past Mirka’s personality to her art; even when she’s had exhibitions people write about Mirka not about the art; I don’t think critically her work has been properly examined… I mean it’s a common problem for a lot of women artists, that she is not taken seriously as an artist (W Mora 2013)

The general imbalance between female and male artists is still a very contemporary issue, in visual arts as well as in music and cinema. In the broader international context, established women artists have a specific image, even more so when they express their creativity with textile and related techniques. The next section will position Mora and her work within this larger framework.

5.1.4 Women artists and textile work

Mora’s career started relatively early, compared to other senior female artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Rosalie Gascoigne and Louise Nevelson, who became involved with art in their middle age, after fulfilling their family duties. Mora grew progressively into the mature artist she is today by years of intensive practice, managing the roles of woman, mother, artist, and restaurant owner until the early seventies, then combining artistic creation with teaching in the following two decades (McGuire 1995). However, the previous section has shown that her gender, her flamboyant behaviour and her
decision to practice textile, embroidery and painting simultaneously impacted on her critical reception.

Mora did not wish to be active in the feminist movement, stating that ‘Once a woman does this sort of thing [women’s lib] she is losing her charm’ (Dunstan 1971), joining in this Rosalie Gascoigne for whom the important thing was to be an artist regardless of the gender (Gellatly 2008). Despite this personal non-political stance, Mora epitomizes freedom for a woman, quietly making the choices that suited her best without needing political resonance. At the same time, as society slowly integrated feminism, the language employed in Mora’s reviews changed in the late 1990s compared to the 1950s. From ‘essentially feminine’, ‘romantic’ or ‘amusing’, her work became appreciated as ‘dramatically simple and so provocatively female’ (McGuire 1995, p. 89) or ‘very female and provocative’ (McCulloch 1996).

Even unconsciously, Mora was very much an actor of the times in her choice of textile materials. Other prominent women artists also elected textile and associated crafts as means of communicating their own expression, sometimes almost exclusively like Annette Messager (b.1943), sometimes in combination with other techniques (painting, sculpture, drawing) like the previously mentioned Bontecou and Bourgeois, and more recently Niki de St Phalle (1930-2002), Tracey Emin (b.1963) or Jane Zweibel (b.1959). In her classic 1994 study of gendered vision, art historian Whitney Chadwick re-examined women artists’ contribution to the international art scene, and the ways in which it has been perceived as marginal, often in direct reference to the artist’s gender. Chadwick argues that materials play an important role in this perception, and are emblematic of women’s different perspective on art, challenging hitherto admitted supremacies in art history:
The use and development of non-traditional materials in art, combined with feminist consciousness about the relationship between certain materials and processes and women’s cultural and historical traditions, led to an intense questioning of art’s traditions...the idea of using fabric as an art material both summed up the iconoclasm of the 1970s and establish a context to mount a feminist challenge to the way art history honoured certain materials and processes instead of others (Chadwick 1994, p. 332).  

These comments had much in common with Mora’s preoccupations, especially with making art accessible, something that she put into practice by teaching workshops and being part of the ‘Artists in Schools’ project in the early 1980s (Mora 1984). While not delivering explicitly political messages with her textile creations, unlike her contemporaries Miriam Shapiro or Judy Chicago, whose famous ‘Dinner party’ was made in the same years, Mora nevertheless participated through her media and her attitude with art to the general movement that aimed to ‘de-sacralise’ art. Indeed, Mora’s artistic production fits many of the criteria set by Shapiro as a way of characterizing ‘femmage’, a conflation of textile art and painting that she developed in the 1970s, as shown below:

---

50 This extract can be interestingly compared to the introduction to the 2015 exhibition Pathmakers cited previously, showing that the issue has been present for a long time and is still worth noting.
Definition of "Femmage:"

1. It is work by a woman.
2. The activities of saving and collecting are important ingredients.
3. Scraps are essential to the process and are recycled in the work.
4. The theme has a woman-life context.
5. The work has elements of covert imagery.
6. The theme of the work addresses itself to an audience of intimates.
7. It celebrates a private or public event.
8. A diarist's point of view is reflected in the work.
9. There is drawing and/or handwriting sewn in the work.
10. It contains silhouetted images which are fixed on material.
11. Recognizable images appear in narrative sequence.
12. Abstract forms create a pattern.
13. The work contains photographs or other printed matter.
14. The work has a functional as well as an aesthetic life. (Brooklyn Art Museum 2014)

Mora however never had much interest in theorizing her art, and did not seek to unsettle intellectually the viewer with her work, as for example did Bourgeois, who used textile materials in her sculptures to translate deep emotions and traumas. Mora’s works of art could be compared more successfully to the creations of St Phalle or Messager, both of whom used stuffed creatures and the archetypal doll image to convey messages that bear similarities with Mora in their apparent joyfulness. Messager’s working procedure is to:

Appropriate things or activities that have been devalued, investing them with supreme value; inventorying the most anodyne private practices and catapulting them into the public sphere; translating childhood games into the adult world (Grenier 2001, p. 45).

This has much in common with Mora’s practice, although Messager’s vision is at times more tragic or ironic. The doll, which can be read as the female archetype par excellence, is often used to refer to artificiality, lack of maturity and even malevolence, supposedly inherent to female personality (Grenier 2001, p. 51). Messager uses this choice of object to ‘unsettling effects’, to produce creatures that ‘suggest the complexity of life as well as the mythologies, superstitions and vanities that underpin it – the shadowy “other” within us all’ (Kent 2014). Kent highlights that Messager’s materials,
mostly derived from fibre, are also carrying meaning because of their association with the feminine, stating that ‘equally significant are the historically overlooked practices, materials and techniques of women artists, which she has explored over decades’ (Kent 2014).

Both artists share a love for collections, which fuels their exploration of a great variety of materials; Figure 86 shows how both create hybrid creatures mi-human mi-animal, made with hybrid processes. Mora and Messager equally use stories as a starting point for their work, and similar materials and techniques. For instance, Messager’s 2005 piece for the Venice Biennale, ‘Casino’, a billowing sea of red silk covering small objects installations, was based on the story of Pinocchio. Mora’s approach to stories is very different; she adds paint to the textile work and recreates stories such as Punch and Judy, The Enchanted Garden or The Bunyip Paradise, sometimes with great technical complexity, distancing herself from sadness and deliberately choosing to transmit the innocence and joy of life. Her practice and inspirations are almost contemporary to St Phalle’s series of works titled Nanas, painted assemblages of fabric, toys, plaster, wire netting in the shape of over-dimensional curvy women happily jumping and dancing, celebrating the female power. St Phalle’s Le Rêve de Diane (1970), an assemblage of brightly coloured painted polyester figures illustrated in Figure 87, can be contrasted to Mora’s Boxes of mysteries (1978), similar combination of small brightly painted stuffed textile figures, both of which convey a poetic vision of the world, using materials and language that belong to the feminine and the world of dreams.

![Figure 86. Annette Messager, Doomestic, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, © Adagp, Paris. Credit photographique Philippe Joffre/Parisienne de Photographie](imageurl)
The relationships and connections between works of art and themes explored by women artists can be very strong. This is the case between Mora’s work and the work of American artist Jane Zweibel, whose *Stitched Identities*, started in 2006, are soft sculptures or ‘stuffed paintings’ that allude to childhood’s stuffed animals and dolls, and are extremely similar in technique to Mora’s. Zweibel has used the following words to describe her pieces, that resonate uncannily with Mora’s words (this author’s emphasis):

> I make figure silhouettes out of canvas, which I stuff with cotton and sew. I then paint narratives on the facades of each form. *I see them primarily as three-dimensional paintings.* I love the idea of merging painting and sculpture, and fusing them into a new, hybrid medium and mode for self-expression…Each stuffed painting is a hybrid character, which embodies conflicts, losses and connections between childhood and adult, and factual and fictive lives (Zweibel 2014)

A major theme in Zweibel’s work, that encompasses painting, drawing, printmaking and stuffed paintings, is an ongoing exploration of issues of identity, in particular female identity. Her 2013 series of stuffed paintings, *Midlife Mermaids* (Figure 88) used the mythical figures of sirens, which the artist sees as simultaneously a personal feminine icon and an image emanating from a collective female (and male) imagination, to address issues of gender and identity (Ritter 2013). The strong connections between Zweibel’s and Mora’s works, and to some extent to Australian Sally Smart’s 2012 installation of articulated *Artist’s dolls*, made of cardboard and fabric hanging from the
ceiling as puppets, illustrate how female artists of different generations may choose similar techniques and materials and draw inspiration from similar themes, to give very personal responses to broadly shared concerns.

![Figure 88. Jane Zweibel, Midlife Mermaid #4, private collection (courtesy of the artist)](image)

Also recently, Tracey Emin gained notoriety as an artist for her exploration of feminine issues such as sexuality, love and ageing, using diverse techniques including painting, drawing and embroidery. Explicitly feminist in their often provocative message, like *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (a tent with the appliquéd names of, literally, everyone she had ever slept with, but not necessarily in the sexual sense), her works can also be deciphered through their materiality:

Emin employs the lightness of ‘traditional women’s crafts’ like sewing to explore what Bourgeois classed as ‘the volcanic unconscious’. ‘That’s why I use a lot of embroidery’ she says, ‘I take this craft but I don’t treat it like a craft, but like high art’ *Independent*, 19 June 2010

When Emin talks about her practice, she emphasizes the importance of the making process. Because the volume of sewn work exceeds what she could produce on her own, Emin employs other people to sew and embroider. However, she is adamant that outsourcing is not her means of overcoming technical difficulties but a way to overcome time constraints. Her rationale is that she cannot justify any work that she could not have produced herself, time permitting (Emin 2015). She describes how she is reworking her paintings, sometimes for ten years, talks about having difficulties in

---

51 ‘Artist’s dolls’ was commissioned by the Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art for the exhibition ‘*Contemporary Australia: Women*’ (2012) which among other themes explored the return to everyday materials and the place of personal and intimate sphere in women’s art.
parting with them or sometimes ruining them by adding more and more. She also
mentions being influenced by ancient art and creatures such as mermaids. When talking
about public images of artists, she admits that ‘stepping out of the ivory tower and
becoming mainstream’ may sometimes have been detrimental to her generation of
British artists, not taken seriously enough because ‘they were having so much fun’
(Emin 2015).

Although Emin is thirty years younger than Mora, her themes, attitude and words
strongly resonate with Mora’s practice and public perception. Tackling themes such as
eroticism, that were more traditionally men’s domain, both artists embrace provocation
within their own time period. Mora’s erotic drawings were ironically exhibited
alongside her painted dolls in an exhibition at Realities in 1975. The erotic theme was
developed across media, and some dolls were representation of stuffed penises or
couples engaged in sexual acts, which certainly did not fit the critics’ classification of
Mora’s art as naïve or childlike. These works did not resonate well with a critic, who
did not feel comfortable with the amalgam of dolls and sex and wrote acidly that ‘when
the sexuality grows most rampant, her paintings are at their sweetest, which is not so
much cloying as unnerving’ (Unidentified newspaper clipping, undated). A woman
artist’s evocation of sexuality in a delicate and feminine media seemed challenging, and
this critic obviously did not share Mora’s sense of humour.

Twenty years later, the mixed reception of Emin’s controversial tent in 1995 shows
that these perceptions have crossed generations, and are still relevant today. In 2015, Emin
is a recognized artist, still controversial, and continuously producing autobiographical
and provocative work made in several media. Interestingly, she describes her recent
sculpture practice using exactly the same language as Mora and Zweibel (this author’s
emphasis)

I use clay for sculpture, I like the touch feeling, then they are made into
bronze...basically what I am doing is turning my drawings into tri dimensional
works, which is very difficult, but I am happy to spend the rest of my life doing
that (Emin 2015)
When looking at Western art practice from the mid twentieth century, working with soft materials in three dimensions appears to be a very feminine practice, even if historically Claes Oldenburg may be considered as the creator of soft sculpture (Ward 2009). As the art historian Marsha Meskimmon has declared: ‘the question is not “what is a woman artist?” But how women’s art comes to articulate sexual differences in its material specificity and at its particular historical locus’ (Meskimmon 2003, p.2). ‘Swapping the paint brush for needle and thread’ was one way of making feminist statements (Rosenberg 2007). Parker noted that for feminist artists, embroidery was ‘the perfect medium to give form to consciousness-raising’ (Parker 2012, p. xiv). She cited Bourgeois as an artist whose work ‘brings out the deeper meaning of textiles’ and Emin as an embroiderer who breaks some taboos by exhibiting sexuality. However, Parker also wonders whether in the global art history Emin is a token woman, just as whether male embroiderers such as Jamie Chalmers, who calls himself a ‘manbroiderer’ are isolated phenomena. In Emin’s case however, the continuous exploration of the materiality of her works of art is appreciated by the public, as during her recent London exhibition (2014), where what seemed to be large line paintings revealed on closer scrutiny to be in reality embroideries. An online review underlines that ‘this double meaning...conveys how what seems simple is more textured, slow and complex, and forces the viewer to look closer, at what they initially took for granted’ (Geddes 2014).

This rapid survey of contemporary women artist figures working with textile has underlined the role and significance of this type of medium in their creation. Important and meaningful as they are, though, materials are not found only within works of art. In the modern understanding of artists’ practice, the artist him/herself, as a person, can be a part of their own oeuvre; their life, sense of dress, their working and living spaces are all elements contributing to an artistic identity. Mora’s career is a particularly interesting case study in that respect. Her way of using material culture to create an artistic identity that goes well beyond her work is regularly commented upon by reviewers, and will be analysed more closely in the next section.
5.2 Communication via materiality

5.2.1 Mora, Kahlo, St Phalle: material culture and persona

As examined previously, the complex identity of women artists depends in large measure on history circumstances and social construction. In order to define their style and artistic personality, women artists often devise strategies to carve ‘spaces of freedom’ within their own lives, where they can create and reinvent themselves, sometimes outside socially established norms (Rohlfson-Udall 2000, p. vii). One of these strategies is the use of material culture, which is often a prominent element of self-definition for public figures, and one that the anthropologist Daniel Miller calls an ‘unspoken form of communication’ (Miller 2010, p. 10). Among a selection of women artists of the twentieth century, Mora (born 1928), Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Niki de St Phalle (1930-2002) are good examples of this approach. Embracing the cult of celebrity, all of them have made remarkable use of material culture in relation to their personal narratives to create iconic images of themselves. A comparison of these artists shows that they share a number of characteristics related to dress, space and attitude that have been key determinants in their image building.

All three women have a significant personal narrative, marked by drama. Kahlo had poliomyelitis at six, a terrible bus accident at eighteen and lived a tumultuous love life with Diego Rivera against a background of Mexican political turmoil; St Phalle’s childhood and early adult life, in American bourgeois society, was tainted by a father’s sexual abuse and followed by a complete self-reinvention in France; Mora’s childhood in France was brutally interrupted by deportation and a miraculous rescue, followed by an early marriage and migration of the couple to Australia. The three artists have cultivated a flamboyant public personality together with their artistic creation, having repeatedly reframed their personal narrative to help them become the artists they aspired to be. In personal but different ways, they have tested the limits of ‘what it meant to be a woman and to be a painter’, sometimes at considerable expense to their personal life (Rohlfson Udall 2000, p. 1). For these women, this construction of their personal selves
in the public eye included a conscious appropriation of material culture to build their identities (Pankl & Blake 2012).

Clothing is one of the strongest materials for expressing the self and mediating relationships with other people. Miller argues that far from being superficial, clothes make human beings what they are -or rather what they think they are and want to project (Miller 2010, p.10, 22). Of relevance to this study is the sociologist Sophie Woodward’s description of a woman’s wardrobe as ‘the palette from which women paint themselves daily’, while dressing is claimed to be a ‘daily creation of artworks’ (Woodward 2005, p.23). Woodward draws upon Gell’s notion of ‘distributed personhood’, where selfhood is externalized and distributed in space through various material objects, in order to explain clothing as a two ways process. Interpreted from inside out, clothing communicates the intentions of the self, while from outside in, clothing interiorizes the anticipated judgment of others. From this perspective, the three artists’ chosen styles of dress, be it hyper-femininity (St Phalle), deliberately ethnic (Kahlo) or Victorian girly (Mora)52 make strong statements that need to be understood in the historical context prevalent before the feminist movement of the mid 1970s.

Dossin (2010) argues that the model of the very feminine woman was one among the several attitudes available to women in the 1970s to compensate for their success in male activities. According to her, posing as this type of woman was a way of diminishing the perceived threat to the traditional social structure, by asserting publicly that the person was still a woman despite of her success. Dossin views St Phalle’s hyper feminine style and provocative image as a deliberate strategy to gain public traction, using the attractive appearance that allowed her to make a living as a model in the early 1950s in an unconventional way to attract attention and gain a voice. In Mora’s case, the feminine demeanour, made all the easier in Australia by her French heritage and the associated cultural clichés, went together with an original sense of dress and a bohemian attitude to construct an ‘old fashioned’ girlish image of the modern day woman.

The press articles about Mora are full of these allusions to her dressing style, either purely descriptive such as ‘she has a gleeful smile and she still wears little girl dresses

52 Mora herself uses the adjective Victorian when describing some of her dress (Mora 2013d)
and little girl shoes’ (Age, 5 October 1985) to a bit uncanny as this Weekender article from 1973:

> At 48 she still has the soft face of a teenager, huge black eyes ringed \*with kohl, long crinkly hair like a doll left out in the rain and clothes like carnival costumes (Graham 1973)

Yet when reviewers reflect on Mora’s sense of dress, they suggest it has strong correspondences with her life, particularly with the fact that she studied theatre and therefore knows how to express herself through her body and her looks, as in this comment:

> The theatre of her early life is an obvious influence on her costume, in the expression of her thoughts, her ideas, through eye, hand and body; her attire is bright, her eyes alert, understanding (Foster 1983)

Mora’s image and bohemian style have evolved throughout the years; but however unconventional and informal her appearance may be compared to the mainstream style, her image has always been carefully curated, as different as possible to the scruffy and stained appearance associated with artists like Pollock or Bacon. Mora’s agency in the self-construction of this public persona is undeniable and was noted by critics

> She is I’m sure totally conscious of the effect she gives. It is as if the seven or eight hours she spends on her art each day is started by recreating Mirka Mora. The Mirka we see is as much a product of her art as the paintings and embroideries and dolls. The result is always intensely cheering (Clarke 1983)

Indeed, conversation with Mora confirms that her style is very conscious and reflects her tastes; she still wears the same long flounce skirts that she favoured in the 1950s, and boasts ‘I love looking at myself, I love looking at my work, and myself… I like myself a lot!’ which is obviously comforting for her self-esteem (Mora 2014a).

A few diary entries confirm the care she puts into her appearance. For instance, on 29 August 1983 she was planning her look for the workshop with a drawing of herself, elaborating on the stories associated with each garment, such as the ‘white jumper Mof doesn’t like’ or ‘I am taking my travelling blanket to be warm, black cumberband I bought in Sydney in 1968’ (Figure 89). The obvious attention she puts into her appearance is shown in another diary entry, dated 1986, which simply details her clothing and make up and notes that she could take more advantage of it, but decides
not to: ‘Wearing silk and lace and Christian (?) shoes and bag. Should accentuate my make-up but enough is enough’ (24 July 1986).

This carefully elaborated personal style became a trademark image; for example, Mora’s love of hats is regularly mentioned in the press. In one article, her ‘sequinned hat’ and ‘dark, exotic eyes’ were contrasted to ‘neat and sleek Japanese women’ coming for a workshop in Yokohama, Mora’s appearance apparently epitomizing Melbourne’s bohemian culture (McAsey 1990). This sense of ‘performative dress’ goes back to her very early years in Australia. Already in 1952, she had a felt skirt, now lost, upon which everyone who came had to embroider his or her name (Mora 1984). Wearing this skirt was a public celebration of her place in the artistic community, with her garment being a performance of her life and its friendships. The parallels between this example and Emin’s tent are quite striking, although Mora’s skirt was a work of art devoid of sexual innuendo. Of course, even frilly girlish costumes can provide glimpses of sexuality, while ‘embarrassing’ moments sometimes occur, to satisfy Mora’s quest for attention and certainly enliven her personal narrative:

Figure 89. A page of Mora’s diary from 1983
Tu sais à l’époque je m’habillais toujours dans des petticoats and Victorian dress, et des culottes... mon hôtel était en face du mural et un jour j’ai complètement oublié ce que je portais, et je travaillais sur le mural et je me garde… et j’étais dans mon petticoat, et le petticoat victorien est completely open… oh ! J’étais tellement embarrassée, et moi je ne m’embarrasse pas facilement, mais je ne m’étais pas rendue compte que j’étais déjà au travail, que j’avais quitté l’hôtel, et que je n’étais même pas habillée… j’étais à moitié nue dans la rue! (Mora 2013d)

[you know at the time I always wore petticoats and Victorian dress, and ‘culottes’... my hotel was across the road from the mural and one day, I completely forgot what I was wearing, and I was working on the mural and I looked at myself... and I was in my petticoat, and the Victorian petticoat is completely open...oh I was so embarrassed, and I don’t get easily embarrassed, but I did not realize that I was already at work, that I’d left the hotel, and I wasn’t even dressed... I was half naked in the street!]

Mora also made use of ‘props’ to build her bohemian image: her prams and her scooter were famous in St Kilda and were given pride of place in the papers, with images of her riding her scooter with her frilly dress, girly shoes and hat, titled ‘Arty grandma Mirka loves taking it to the streets’ (Anonymous 1985). She derives satisfaction from this celebrity and the fact that she is different from the mainstream, commenting with pride

J’adorais ma trottinette, je disais à tout le monde d’en acheter, c’est tellement agréable, et puis c’est devenu une fashion c’est moi qui l’ai commencée…mais à St Kilda ! I am good at publicity aren’t I? I do nothing really, they just all come to me… I always make a good story as they say (Mora 2014a)

[I loved my scooter, I told everyone to buy one, it is so nice, and then it became a fashion, I started it, but in St Kilda !]

She reinforced her image with an eccentric behaviour, which attracted public attention but was always totally devoid of any nastiness. Acting in such a way obviously procured her great satisfaction; her recollection of the opening ceremony of the Flinders Street mural is particularly telling:
Tu sais ce que j’ai fait, j’étais bien habillée, bien française avec un petit chapeau, une petite tight skirt, et je sais pas ce qui m’a pris il y avait un monde fou, et j’‘ai fait une pirouette! et je me suis excusée auprès du prime minister, comment il s’appelait Race Matthews je lui ai dit ‘I am sorry that I did a pirouette’ et il m’a dit ‘ I wish I could have done it too’! (Mora 2013e)

[You know what I did, I was well dressed, very French with a tiny hat, a tiny tight skirt and I don’t know what happened to me, there was a lot of people, and I did a pirouette! and I apologised to the prime minister what was his name Race Matthews, I told him ‘I am sorry that I did a pirouette’ and he told me ‘ I wish I could have done it too!’]

All these eccentricities and moments of provocative behaviour are a trademark of Mora, as they were for St Phalle and for Kahlo, and very different from the somewhat stern image conveyed by the word ‘feminism’; for these three women, to be feminist does not mean renouncing feminine material culture’s attributes, but involves adding a different discourse to the classical image of women.

To the public display of their elaborate personae, both Kahlo and Mora add the exhibition of their home, which doubles as their working place. Both private houses are crammed with objects, pots and pans, and lots of toys; Kahlo, just as Mora does today, had an extensive collection of dolls and dollhouse furnishings in her ‘Blue House’ (Casa Azul), today a place open to the public. In her home, Mora paints the windows with decorative patterns and mixes her toy collection with art materials and her own works of art. This exuberance of material culture and artistic creation, coupled with the spaces’ bright decoration, contributes for both artists to the invention of their lifestyle, intrinsic to their public image. Ambivalent early memories resulted in both women creating personal spaces where toys have a prominent place, which reclaim their lost or interrupted childhoods, and which according to Rohlfsen-Udall (2000, p.232), function as metaphors of the self.

Daniel Miller remarks that ‘stuff matters’, and that its absence or presence is a definition of either poverty or experience (Miller 2010, p. 125). Among other

53 St Phalle articulated that eloquently: ‘No, I am not renouncing anything from my femininity; I like dresses and hats and primping. No, I don’t want to relinquish anything. I want to add everything!’ (Morineau 2014, p. 44)

54 For example, see ‘This artist’s home is a living work of art’, Home, August 18, 2001, p. 31.
interpretations, he reads material culture as a ‘technology of attachment’, which can provide support during difficult times in one’s life (Miller 2008, p. 89). Miller’s powerful image of people’s possessions as sediments, which are laid down as ‘foundations for material walls mortared with memory’ applies beautifully to Mora’s home, where every object has a story attached, their accumulation being of great comfort to the artist (Miller 2008, p. 89). Mora speaks of her clutter as ‘the thread of my memory wanting to have its own continuity through familiar objects’ (Mora 2003, p.1). This environment is equally reflected in her art, both in subject matter and in her style, that borrows from folk art and mythology, with an abundance of decorative and vegetal patterns.

Although summary, this overview of the importance of material culture in Mora’s life, as an artist and as a woman, reveals the extent of her own agency in the making of her public persona. Over the years, she has developed a very effective strategy to control her public image; or more accurately, she is in control of ‘the version of the self to project and the version of the self to protect’ (Rohlfsen Udall 2000, p. 279). It is all the more important for Mora to protect her private self in that she is so generous publicly with her personal time. But she is also very generous with her techniques and materials, transforming them into a means of communicating with people, a practice that will be discussed now in more detail.

5.2.2 Sharing techniques and materials

As mentioned previously, personal and economic circumstances have turned Mora from an artist/mother/wife/restaurateur into an artist/teacher. Teaching is not an uncommon way for artists to make a living in addition to sales of their own work. Most artists teach classes in an academy, but Mora chose to teach her own working processes such as doll-making, embroidery, watercolour and painting. Sharing one’s own techniques is an uncommon and very generous attitude for an artist, and Mora’s workshops, mainly given to adults through the CAE, quickly became very popular events. Either in block sessions or one day a week for a term, the workshops were the occasion for the participants to create their own works of art, inspired by but not copying Mora’s technique. The workshops students figure in good place in the Paul Cox’s 1974 film
This film is called Mirka, and her teaching also attracted press attention, with articles titled ‘It’s fun to learn’ (Anonymous 1979) or ‘Painter adds a professional touch’ (Anonymous 1990). One workshop in Japan was even described as ‘An exciting new way of breaking the cultural ice’ (McAsey 1991). Former participants fondly recall the feeling of joy and of creative stimulation in these workshops, and how proud they were of their creations, ‘sensing that their tutor had confidence in them’ (Anonymous 1990).

From her own analysis, Mora’s enduring success as a teacher is due to her ability to bring out the artist in every person (Anonymous 1993). She did this by making everything technically accessible for students and strongly encouraging their creativity. She aimed to establish a festive atmosphere, where everyone thought that they could be great artists (Mora 2013d). To encourage this, she brought less and less examples of her own works to the workshops, because she had noticed that they influenced the students too much and bridled their creativity (Mora 1984). One of her particular teaching’s traits was Mora’s ability to communicate through the materials. She privileged communication over status, explaining that she had to simplify her art to make it accessible for the workshops (Mora 1984).

This was the key to the students’ success, because Mora’s actual technique is more difficult than meets the eye. While she herself paints most of her sculptures after they are stuffed and sewn, she instead taught the students to paint and decorate them with embroidery or beads when in the flat stage, before stitching and stuffing, because she recognized the difficulty involved with painting in three dimensions, which could impede their progress (Fry 2015, pers. comm., 13 May). Mora was very well prepared for the workshops, sending beforehand a list of materials needed and bringing examples and photographs. Students have fond memories of these moments of shared creation and pleasure, where she spent time discussing over their works. One of her former students recalls her free spirit and how ‘she was encouraging ideas, pushing us to break the traditional craft rules’, all the way being resourceful and helping them to produce a beautiful finished object (Fry 2015, pers. comm., 13 May). Mora did not hesitate to invest a bit of herself by bringing to the fore her own favourite materials, tools and related paraphernalia, creating a complicity over shared techniques and tools, and providing tips for self confidence:
Oh j’ai une boîte à couture que je montrais toujours à mes étudiants, je la garde toujours parce que j’en suis folle, il faut que je te montre ça. Je les garde toujours mes boîtes à couture, je montrais à mes étudiantes de mettre des jolies choses dans leurs boîtes… je montrais à mes étudiantes, il faut acheter des choses rares et anciennes et ça t’inspire (Mora 2013b)

[oh I have a sewing box that I always showed to my students, I always keep it because I am crazy about it, I have to show it to you. I always keep my sewing boxes, I showed my students how to put pretty things into theirs… I showed my students, you have to buy rare and ancient things, and it gives you inspiration’]

Mora’s generosity and gift for sharing her art is in no small way responsible for her immense popularity, making people even more appreciative of her works of art because they can relate to them on a personal level. She is conscious of her talent in communication through making, and also of her own pleasure in doing so.

Elles étaient très fameuses mes broderies. Elles étaient fameuses parce que j’ai montré aussi aux étudiants j’ai partagé mon art avec tous les gens… il fallait que je gagne ma vie, oui… mais aussi j’aime bien montrer les choses aux autres personnes (Mora 2013b)

[They were very famous my embroideries. They were famous because I showed also to the students, I shared my art with all the people… I had to earn a living, yes, but also I like showing things to other people]

The same feeling informed the many instances where she worked in public on her murals, with or without public participation. Mora admits always enjoying the attention (Mora 1984); however, she also explains that showing the ‘making of an artwork’ and what happens during the execution is a means of communication, to better share the difficulty of the task; in doing so she seeks to derive status from her endeavours

People get to see how hard it is, how many hours it takes to put the pieces together. To see the early design and the progression of the work. How ‘it proceeds (Ryan 1986)

Her practice shows also instances where materials were just another way of nurturing relationships. Nicola McGaan recalls that friends such as Barry Humphries or Noah Taylor would frequently come up the scaffold, and make a small section of the mosaic, which Mirka would ask McGaan to remove once they had left (McGaan 2014, pers. comm., 25 September). This sheds light on Mora’s kind way of drawing the line
between her friendships and the ownership of her art, but also her manner of ‘making together’ to impart extra value to friendships.

Communication also resides in the materiality of her artworks, which are often made to be touched. Therefore, it seemed natural to her, during our interviews, to insist that we should make textile work together, either making a doll or meeting for an afternoon of embroidery (Mora 2013b). This illustrates how she is continually investing the materials and processes of her art with the task of mediating relationships between herself and those around her. Mora truly takes pleasure showing, sharing and simply talking about her materials, she loves the physical sensuality of touching and looking at threads, sequins, tubes of paint or pastels sticks. This contributed to make this joint research into her materials a pleasurable moment for her, even though it was temporarily taking her away from her painting. Being surrounded by her materials is comforting for her, creatively and aesthetically. This is why she prefers as much as possible to go to an art shop, looking and handling the paint tubes or the watercolour cakes before buying them, rather than ordering them on catalogue (McCowan 2013).

Even now that she is no longer teaching and sharing her techniques, Mora still uses her materials’ power of communication in a different way. She is frequently featured in the press, most photographs being made in her studio. Artists’ studios have always exerted a fascination for the public, as ‘conjuring places of new concepts, styles and forms’ (Lebourgais 2016). This romantic vision is disputed in books such as Inside the artist’s studio (Fig 2015), a collection of interviews that aims to shed light on the real day-to-day process of the artist, requiring time, hard work, and persistence to succeed. Either way, an artist’s studio speaks powerfully to the imagination, and in Mora’s case, there is no doubt that her image, surrounded by materials and artworks, very effectively communicates to the viewers her status as the archetypal female artist.

Through her materials and her personal material culture, Mora actively mediates the many relationships she entertains with her friends and her public, in a perfect illustration of Miller’s theory of material culture as a site of expression and communication. But this material way of communicating through things, by working on a visual and sensorial level, also depends on the essential communication tool, language. The artist’s archetypal image, in front of her easel and surrounded by brushes and paint tubes, is
completed by the language used to talk about her art, be it Mora’s own language or others speaking and writing about her. The next section explores how the spoken and written language about Mora’s works of art contributes to establish their significance in people’s minds, especially how technical language is used to this purpose.

5.3 Materials in the language

Most of those people who have spoken or written about Mora are not themselves practising artists. As the common approach for a non-specialist is to reproduce the specialist’s words, there is no marked difference between the language used by Mora and that used by her reviewers about her artistic processes. In this section, a conservator’s knowledge about techniques and materials will be employed to analyse the way Mora translates her works of art into words and gives them meaning, and how that contributes to the creation of myths about her art.

Mora chooses her words carefully when she speaks about her work. Words evoke places and things, and technical words evoke particular styles or works of art. The word ‘mural’ is among those; it is quite powerful in calling to mind images of large scale endeavours, set in the heart of a city, which can employ techniques varying from fresco or mosaic to modern paints. Undoubtedly, the idea of tackling a wall and the associated permanent status of the resulting artwork appealed to Mora. Mora aspired to paint murals and leave a tangible and visually magnificent trace of her work in many geographical places, another reference to the Old Masters and their frescoes located in significant places of the social and religious life of the time. Unfortunately, she could not always do this because of her patrons’ wish to retain possession of the works of art after they moved from these places (Mora 1984). Thus she had to compromise some aspects of the works’ materiality and provide large scale but movable realisations.

Of the seventeen surviving ‘murals’ by Mora, seven are murals in the true sense; Balzac mural (before 1965), Tolarno paintings and low relief (from 1967 to 2007) are true murals, executed on the wall; the paintings in the foyer of Playbox theatre in Melbourne (1980), lost in a fire, were possibly also murals. St Kilda’s Cosmos bookshop (1987), Dog’s bar (1990) and Flinders Street (1986) are also murals, made in paint, mosaic and
low relief, while St Kilda Pier mosaic seat is a horizontal and immovable artwork, and Ayr’s Burdekin Library painting (1983) is an almost immovable painting, made on wooden panels fixed to the wall.

The other ten ‘murals’ are movable works, made with various techniques: Dr Smyth’s ‘mural’ (1977) is a large oil painting on canvas; The Ardmona ‘mural’ (1974) is a large acrylic painting made on cotton cloth laid on board; The Tympanum (1977) often referred to as a mural, is a very large scale oil painting in four pieces, made on canvas either mounted on stretcher or on board; the Perth ‘mural’ (1983) is a series of large enamel paintings made on prepared zinc panels laid on wooden strainers; the Adelaide ‘mural’ (1982) is a very long frieze of transparent plastic painted with casein paint. CAE’s ‘mural’ (1984) is a large oil painting on wooden panels, now hung in a different CAE’s building from the original location, while the tram (1978) is by nature a movable painting, made with enamel on the steel panels of the vehicle.

What Mora could not provide in her work’s physical construction, she compensated with in her language. She routinely referred to her large artworks of the 1970s and 1980s as murals, and in doing so, she created the dimension she aspired to in her art, by putting her personal word on the line. For her, a mural refers to a large-scale, two-dimensional work of art, which fills an empty space and redefines it, making it a central point of attention and interaction with people. The journalists and the art world followed her lead, adopting the word ‘mural’ for big works of art, which also testified to the presence of the artist in the urban fabric, oblivious to the real meaning of the word.56

The term ‘mural’ was used to qualify some of Mora’s works, regardless of their size. The Ardmona and Dr Smyth’s ‘murals’, for example, are smaller than her work Painting for a nostalgic traveller and the series of large charcoals drawings made in 1967. However, the latter were never referred to as murals, as they were viewed in the context of an art exhibition and did not have any ascribed location. ‘Mural’ is not a technical description per se, but refers to a work’s social status, anchoring Mora’s

55 Dr Smyth also owns one of the large charcoal panels, of dimensions comparable to a mural, photographed in his house in Beier (1980, p.49)
56 The leaflet for a talk given by Mora at the Tasmanian School of Art (held in the State Library of Victoria collection) boldly states ‘Mirka has had 28 exhibitions and has painted a mural on a tram’ (my emphasis).
position within the art scene of Australia. Dinah Eastop suggests a definition of materiality as the interaction between the object as a thing and the object as a word in social use (Eastop 2006, p.40). In that sense, Mora’s large realisations, whether or not technically murals, are used socially, talked about and enacted with as murals, and therefore can qualify as having a mural’s materiality, almost entirely created by language.

The same twists and modifications to language apply to other parts of Mora’s oeuvre; Chapter Three has detailed how she merges existing techniques and adds her own personal touch to traditional ones. However, these hybrid works of art were described with words, either by the artist or by the viewers, and these words carry technical meanings that sometimes prove inexact. The embroideries, complex constructions of raised work, ribbons, pearls, embroidery and paint, are described alternatively as ‘embroideries’ or ‘padded and painted embroideries’; the masks could be ‘papier mâché’ or just ‘bold masks and painted costumes’, while the ‘soft sculptures’ can also be called ‘dolls’, ‘firm but malleable figures’, or ‘fantastics’. Mora generally uses the term ‘dolls’ for her sculptures, and the word was used for her exhibitions invitations in the 1970s57 and 1980s. In 1984, however, she taught her students how to make ‘soft dolls which I call soft sculptures’ (Upton 1986). Fifteen years later, in his catalogue for Mora’s retrospective at Heide (1999), Max Delany uses the term ‘dolls’ and ‘sculptural dolls’, while Deborah Hart speaks of ‘doll-like soft sculptures’ in her article on Mora (1999).

The term ‘soft sculptures’ appears again in the 2011 catalogue of the exhibition ‘Mirka’ at Heide, in a text written by Kendrah Morgan. But two years later, a 2013 Leonard Joel’s auction catalogue refers to the work as ‘handmade painted doll’ by Mirka Mora. These choices of word are important; ‘dolls’ appeals to a specific area of the mind, carrying high affective and emotional significance and drawing upon sensory forms of the memory, associated with childhood, comfort and nostalgia. It also situates the works in an intellectual space different from the paintings and drawings, even though they were exhibited in an art gallery in the first place. The conflicted messages conveyed by

57 Mirka’s Dolls at gallery 111, 111 Musgrave Road, Red Hill, 5-24 December, 1971; Mirka Mora’s dolls, Realities gallery, 60 Ross Street, Toorak village, 4 August 1971; Mirka Mora, painting, pastel, embroidery, watercolour, drawing, dolls, Tolarno Galleries, 98 River Street, South Yarra, 26/11-20/12 1983. (Sources: Mora’s personal papers and State Library of Victoria)
the word and by the exhibition context illustrate the soft sculptures’ ambivalent status in the artist’s mind, and therefore in the public’s perception. The qualification of these works as ‘soft sculptures’ brings them into the realm of high art, associating the objects to the Surrealists. For instance, the term is applied to Meret Oppenheim’s *Breakfast in fur* from 1936, as well as to Claes Oldenburg’s stuffed textile replicas of mundane objects dating from the 1960s. It gives the objects a different status, more prestigious, in accordance with the public’s changing perception of their value, and with their new location in museum collections. Moreover, such a qualification (from doll to soft sculpture) has repercussions with respect to the potential choice of approach to their conservation, which will be discussed in Chapter Six of this thesis.

Mora’s words may also reflect the material’s historical context, as is the case with the ‘plastic paint’ [water-based house paint, probably acrylic] that she used in Ayr, which echoes the contemporary fascination for plastic and other synthetic materials in the 1970s and 1980s. In general, Mora and her critical reviewers use fairly traditional words to describe her fairly unconventional works of art, even though they are technically quite complex. In these cases, words are just a sketch of the material reality, a perception of the physicality of the artworks that evokes a broad technical type that remains superficial for the uninformed viewer, but will reveal more to the attentive onlooker. Whichever term is chosen to describe her works, Mora’s practice of blurring boundaries between techniques ensures that the reality is going to be more complex than what is described in words. These are works that invite to a closer look, to enter into their material complexity and gain an insight into the artist’s engagement with time and space during their slow construction. Ingold and Hallam compare making things with telling stories (Ingold & Hallam 2014, p. 1); Mora’s hybrid paint and textile works of art tell us the story of their creation, of the skilful manipulation of many different materials to slowly compose a precious surface, of the engagement of the artist with her materials and the skills involved in their making, and of the memories associated with their fabrication.

---

58 Heide Museum of Modern Art has 11 soft sculptures, described in the database as ‘synthetic polymer paint on calico’, ‘mixed media’ or ‘oil on papier mache’. National Gallery of Victoria has 1 soft sculpture in its collection, described in the online catalogue as ‘Doll; cotton, paint’ in the database.
Part C. Conservation
Chapter Six. From the meaning of materials to conservation

6.1 Summary of findings

The previous three chapters have discussed the importance of artistic materials in Mora’s oeuvre, intentionally choosing a material-oriented perspective that draws on both oral history accounts -from the artist and from surrounding persons-, private diaries and object-based evidence as sources for the technical study of her work. The numerous conversations with the artist have illuminated many areas of her professional life, clarified the general perception of her career and revealed some previously undocumented methods of making. Completing and comparing Mora’s spoken memories with other people’s accounts, studying visual and written evidence and reconstructing soft sculptures have given a view of her oeuvre from several vantage points, and enabled the provision of a more detailed account of some of her unexplored processes.

Given Mora’s age and that of many of her contemporaries, it was timely to collect available information from the people through spoken accounts, participative research and shared observations as a means to maintain the significance of her works. Contrary to scientific analysis, which ‘can only ever say what a material is, never what its purpose was’, this information is time dependent (Daly 1993, p. 57). The present risk for Mora’s oeuvre is what Michalski calls a ‘loss of personal narrative knowledge’ (Michalski 2005). This concerns the potential loss of contextual information associated with artworks that, if not collected, might be blurred or occulted with time. It is affecting the whole of contemporary art production, at the point in time (specific to each work) where it faces the transition between contemporary and historical. Michalski argues that in order to inform conservation present and future, it is essential to record the contemporary perception of the artworks as well as the artist’s intention.

After examining the multiple narratives generated by Mora’s materials and methods of making art, having seen how her works can be read from their physical characteristics
and their intimate links with her life story and its broader social context, it becomes evident that Mora’s works of art communicate much more than aesthetic pleasure. This emphasis relates well to current approaches in the conservation field, developed among others by Jan Marontate, who encourages conservators to research the ‘polysemy of cultural works of art’, because of the rich insights they impart on social dynamics and cultural values, which in turn impact on decision making in the discipline (Marontate 2013, p.11). She advocates for the use of models inspired from pragmatic sociological research, and describes the interpretation of meaning and subsequent decision making as ‘a complex interplay of material practices, social values, politics, economics, aesthetics… that shape and are shaped by historic and artistic works’ (Marontate 2013, p.11). This is particularly true for works of art such as Mora’s textile sculptures that do not fit neatly into any given fine art category, and are perceived as sitting at the interface between art and crafts, and thus not necessarily worthy of cultural heritage status. British conservator Joel Taylor remarks that things only come to be perceived as heritage when values are transmitted (Taylor 2015, p.66); therefore, identifying values beyond the sole aesthetic dimension and acknowledging the intangible dimensions of such works is integral to any conservation approach. This implies recognition of the importance of the context in which the work of art was created and its interactions with society over time, including the new meanings these interactions have created for the artwork. Taylor notes that

Heritage sites [in the sense of anything that embodies what is valued in heritage, be it a monument or an object] change through their relationship to value and discourse and vice versa. One consequence of this relationship is that the role of material is not just about the materials present at that site and their properties, but also how and why they were chosen (or not) and the reasons why they have changed (Taylor 2015, p75)

These are precisely the questions explored in this research on Mora’s artistic production. By reading the artist’s whole production through the lens of her various materials and creative processes, the thesis has underlined their organic relationships and technical interdependence, highlighting the connections between them in Chapter Four. Exploring in Chapter Three ‘the processes and practices through which matter comes to matter, or becomes meaningful’ has also exposed how Mora’s idiosyncratic merging of techniques takes its roots in the traditional processes (Meskimmon 2003, p.3). The thesis has shown how Mora places emphasis on using the materials of the Old
Masters, which gives a solid physical and textual basis to her realisations. To study her techniques, the thesis has adopted an interpretative approach that draws on technical art history research, and on the anthropology of techniques, to uncover what the anthropologist Pierre Lemonnier calls:

Socially pertinent choices resulting in the recourse to a given material, the use of a particular tool, the application of a sequence of actions and the mobilization of specific technical knowledge (Lemonnier 1986, p. 153)

This exploration of Mora’s materials and their meanings has also benefited from Tim Ingold’s reflection on materiality and the process of making, which pays attention to the body and mind’s engagement into the technical process, reintroducing the actor into the study of techniques, as highlighted by Lemonnier (2012). Studying the ways in which the materiality of things is involved in the thoughts and actions of the objects’ makers, Ingold underlines the fact that artists or craftspeople do not express the properties of a given material, but its qualities, borne out of a sensory perception and a practical engagement with physical matter (Ingold 2007, p.13). He draws a distinction between the processes of growing, which occurs naturally and organically, and that of making, which from the outset is the expression of an idea. For him, making things is quite close in conception to telling stories; making develops through the acts of preparing and manipulating materials, and through bodily engagement with them (Ingold 2014, p. 1). This description resonates with many aspects of Mora’s practice, and with her own memories of creating works of art, as described in Chapter Four.

From an anthropological perspective, objects and material actions participate to create a ‘non-verbal communication of sets of ideas important for people who manipulate them, (...) creating in the actor’s mind simultaneous references to various domains of social life and social relations’ (Lemonnier 2012, p. 99). This approach is also true for works of art, which can be considered as specific artefacts concentrating information of many types (personal, social, technical, psychological), or in Lemonnier’s words, ‘an obvious display of skills but also accumulated energy’ (Lemonnier 2012, p. 122). Looking at Mora as a storyteller and object maker, this doctoral research has tried to identify the social and emotional references that she elicits in people’s minds, and how they are connected to the materiality of her works.
These perspectives inform the research for this interpretation that goes beyond a mere description of the operational sequences resulting in Mora’s production of artworks. Arguing that describing techniques and trying to ‘relate the manner by which people act on material to the way in which they behave in society’ (Lemonnier 1986, p. 151) can bring up significance in artworks, the thesis critically appreciates the distance that Mora creates -or the liberties she takes- with the traditional modes of making art inherited from the Old Masters. By engaging with traditional materials and techniques in her personal way, Mora redefines them to her benefit, while reinforcing their belonging in a long line of tradition. Her personal interpretation of mosaic, tempera painting, mixed media, papier-mâché or textile is formed through the act of making, and takes each of these processes to a new level, creating more processes on the way, which extend over several of the classical fine arts categories, as examined in Chapter Three. In doing so, Mora equally contributes to give status to materials and techniques that may have been previously considered as humble, and belonging to the craft realm instead of the fine arts realm. Her engagement with these materials showed new artistic possibilities for them, which are continuously explored by today’s artists.

Looking at the impact of economic circumstances on Mora’s choice of materials has revealed the pride she takes in their monetary value, a fact reflected into her practice by her use of expensive materials whenever possible, or her constant choice of the best available quality in the case of more affordable processes such as textile creations. Mora’s choice of craft-associated techniques not only responds to her personal economic circumstances but also to a broader movement in the arts of that period, especially art made by women.

Chapter Four has also explored the symbolism of Mora’s materials, which embody her self-taught knowledge, her gender and her personal history, as well as transmit meanings such as preciousness, femininity, historicity or durability. In Chapter Five, the consideration of her materials into the broader context of feminism and art of the 1970s and 1980s, and their resonances in the oeuvres of her female contemporaries and of younger women artists, has proven important in the analysis of Mora’s oeuvre. It has also shed light on the impact her artistic techniques had on the critical appreciation of her work, revealing a gendered approach from many critics. The same chapter has explored how Mora’s use of material culture in her own public persona, which finds an
echo in other prominent feminine figures of twentieth century art history, and in the language she uses to describe her work, has become an important factor in the perception of her oeuvre.

To be useful in the future conservation of Mora’s work, the conclusions drawn from these findings are best framed within the current view of conservation, its use of artist’s interviews and the experience of collaborative approaches in various contexts of the discipline. The next paragraph will briefly examine recent approaches on the meaning of materials in the conservation field.

6.2 Material significance and conservation

Cesare Brandi’s seminal 1963 book *Theory of conservation*, translated into English in 2005, articulated the dialectical links between aesthetic and historical value in conservation and the difficulties of balancing both values in decision-making. The book has led to considerable reflection in the field (Brunel 2009; Munoz Vinas 2015). Brandi’s philosophical analysis considers the objects’ materiality as the support that allows the image to be formed inside the conscience and differentiates it from a mere physical matter. In the case of autographic objects, which are entirely made by the artist, like Mora’s art, material integrity matters because it is ‘the place and time of conservation’, the only thing that can be restored (quoted in Brunel 2009).

Informed by the vast expansion of the range of materials used by artists, and by the increase of allographic art, that is works not made by the artist, conservators have refined their reflection on materials and how they transmit meaning. As noted by the art historian Rebecca Gordon, the significance of materials to an artwork’s identity is ‘anything but straightforward’ (Gordon 2013, p. 2). Determining not only which material was used but also their role in the identity of the artwork is essential to better understand the significance of the work and its attributes. Gordon points that it is important to discern the function of the materials as it informs the care of the work into the future; she distinguishes between ‘materials as structure’ and ‘materials as signifiers’ (2013, p. 1). For her, material structure carries no deliberate significance other than as a support for expression, like the paper on which the drawing is made,
while materials as signifiers have a symbolic function of providing significance, intended by the artist. This point is illustrated by the example of Zoe Leonard’s *Strange fruit* (1992-97), made of fruit skins sewn back together; because of natural degradation of the skins, a reflection started about the work’s conservation options. Only after attempts were made to stabilize the decaying skins did Leonard realise that for her, the essence of the work was in its capacity to decay and the fact that it was fragile and perishable; this in turn shaped the conservation strategy of mainly documenting the work and slowing, but not stopping, the decay process.

This type of analysis is useful to examine Mora’s art, particularly her textile production, and determine which materials have symbolic significance. However, the analysis needs refinement, mainly because there is no such thing as a given significance per material: every time an artist works with them, materials are invested with a new significance (Hummelen 1999). In this approach of Mora’s art, it would be interesting to add to Gordon’s and Hummelen’s reflection the unconscious significance carried by the context of creation, which can shape the perception of a work in a notable proportion, not intended consciously by the artist but of no less importance. For example, it could be argued that the prepared canvas carry only structural significance in Mora’s art; however, the moment she passed from particle boards to canvas also indicated the time when she started to take her artistic career very seriously and decided to afford canvas; canvas also signifies a reinforcement of her technical connection to the Old Masters, in order to confer more value to her art.

Before considering the conservation of Mora’s art, the next section will examine firstly why acknowledging that Mora’s works are often inseparable from her person leads to view her materials and methods as embodying concepts broader than merely technological. Adding the ‘celebrity factor’ as an extra dimension will impact on the conservation of her work by recognising both the importance of the public scrutiny and affective engagement, and Mora’s own agency on the public’s appreciation of conservation work done on her art.
6.3 Materiality as a representation of the self

In the public domain, Mora’s person, works of art and their modes of making are intimately linked in a two ways relationship, constantly referencing each other. For a generation of Melbourne art lovers and buyers of her works of art, Mora’s personality influences their motivations to purchase her work, as described by William Mora:

It’s funny often when I sell a Mirka I think the people are buying it for their own reasons in the sense that they buy it because that is like getting a little piece of Mirka (W. Mora 2013)

In Mora’s case, the link between her works and what people say about them is notable with her soft sculpture’s production, because she shared their technique with so many people. Former workshops students, grateful to Mora to have helped them access their own creative side, have in turn developed personal connections and increased appreciation of her works of art (Upton 1986; Fry 2015, pers. comm., 13 May; Turnbull 2015, pers. comm., 17 March). A blogger posted images of her Mirka-inspired dolls after visiting her exhibitions, a designer named her as the artist that best captures their sense of Melbourne city (Orpin 2013) and her interview with the daily online The Design Files in May 2014 drew countless comments from people stating how much they loved her, and how lucky Melbourne was to have her (Feagin 2014). Mora’s soft sculptures embody people’s personal memories of happy creative moments and self-pride, as they materialise a sense of proximity with the artist and the privileged instances of creative experience that she facilitated during her workshops. It is suggested that the workshops conducted over a period of twenty-three years, and her unique way of teaching created so much sympathy for Mora that the two concepts of artist and person are totally embedded in her artistic production.

This gives a specific quality to her artworks, which is important for conservation considerations. For example, the act of conserving one of Mora’s public works, if generally welcomed by the community, is also watched with a certain level of scrutiny.

---

59 This is confirmed by the relative lack of Mora’s artworks on the secondary market. Mora’s buyers usually tend to keep their artworks.
for its impact on the artist’s image. Personal experience of conserving three of Mora’s public works of art was enlightening. Passers-by would come and volunteer anecdotes about Mora at the time of the work’s creation, often involving interactions between her and the public. They would also provide advice on the best way to promote or display the work, including critical appreciation of past interventions on the artwork’s context ⁶¹ that have modified its original perception.

This sense of collective ownership of Mora’s public works, and by extension of her public person also warrants an approach to conservation that demands close involvement with the artist. Mora personally believes that any treatment on her works of art intrudes upon her physical self (Mora 2009, pers. comm., 25 March). It is therefore argued that collaboration and the artist’s sanction is necessary for any conservation treatment to proceed, because of the intensely affective links between the general public and the artist, represented by her works of art.

While embracing the whole of Mora’s oeuvre, this research project places special emphasis on her production of soft sculptures, which to date have not been studied but are beginning to show signs of damage from ageing. The next sections will examine how reconstructing soft sculptures and seeking the artist’s feedback has informed a shared reflection between artist and conservator about the care of these works, which can be related to other experiences of collaborative conservation with communities. This approach of Mora’s practice will then be located within the contemporary reflection upon conservation, drawing a parallel between her producing soft sculptures intended for handling and the notion of living heritage. This lead to the study of several models of decision-making currently discussed in the profession, and to see how they can be applied to Mora’s works of art and potentially inform the conservation of her soft sculptures.

---

⁶¹ That was the case during the conservation of St Kilda Pier’s mosaic; people direct or online comments filled the gaps in historical documentation and revealed details of the recent history of the seaside promenade, complete with a rise of ground level and removal of the built pavilion during the revamping of the promenade from 2004 to 2008.
6.4 Soft sculptures

6.4.1 Definitions

This intimate public connection between Mora’s person and her works of art provides strong justification for the participatory approach chosen for this research. The close collaboration with the artist was particularly useful for the reconstructions of her soft sculptures. Given the diverse meanings of the word ‘reconstruction’, the practice that was implemented in this research will be defined.

Reconstructions, replicas or mock-ups are usually copies of existing artworks, or creations of artworks that were described by the artist but never constructed in the first place. The size varies from small objects to the replica of the Altamira cave; the scope varies from understanding a technical detail to providing access to an artwork otherwise too fragile or non-existent. Reconstruction’s research is generally based on contemporary information (texts and images), realia (tools and materials found in the artist’s studio), artworks themselves, direct or indirect artist’s statements, and modern studies in art history and science. Stinjman (2005) has noted that some of these sources, such as the objects themselves, or certain materials and tools specific to a given technique, can only be properly understood by a specialist possessing good knowledge of the technique. Wallert has also recognized that ‘important technical sources may be hidden in the guise of ephemeral or casual remarks’ (Wallert 2005, p. 40); this applies to Mora, whose work’s technical specificities may be either sourced from press articles or interviews, or in a running conversation with the artist.

The aim of such research is a better understanding of the material aspect of the artworks, and of the associated historical sources, such as testing the workability of the recipe found in technical treatises. Reconstructions or ‘study copies’ help to understand the full extent of the original working processes and uncover the complexities of apparently simple constructions (Beerkens 2007). They can also be made to answer specific questions in conservation research, either to model treatments or to visualise the result of analysis (Carlyle & Wilcox 2007). In such instances, they do not need to be
fully accurate in terms of materials\textsuperscript{62} but rather respect the layers’ stratigraphy or the specific modus operandi.

As they do not replicate any existing artwork, the reconstructions of Mora’s soft sculptures made for this research do not fit exactly into this category. Instead they replicate the technique of making them, their technical qualities, mechanical properties such as flexible or semi hard, and their surface characteristics, such as shiny or matte. Their iconography is heavily inspired by Mora’s imagery. The reconstructions could be qualified as ‘free interpretative reconstructions’ of Mora’s soft sculptures. It is not within their scope to be substituted to Mora’s work in any circumstance. They were made strictly for the purpose of research into the process and the conservation of Mora’s work, keeping in line with the playful spirit of the originals’ creation. In this reconstruction practice, an extra dimension was introduced by regularly seeking the artist’s participation and feedback, in order to produce soft sculptures that are reasonably technically accurate, compared to the originals.

The intended use of these reconstructions is to gain better understanding of the various techniques Mora used for her soft sculptures and the likeliness of their degradation through handling, as well as being samples for experimentation of storage systems. Most of the materials used in the reconstructions, the cotton fabric, oil paint tubes, stand oil, dammar varnish and craft paint, are identical to those used by Mora. There are a few differences such as the filling material, where common synthetic wool is used instead of the foam or plastic beads used by Mora. For coating the sculptures, Mora’s use of a commercial acrylic gesso was replicated, but as a contemporary product was sourced, its formulation is likely to be different, as well as the associated physical and chemical properties. Not ‘historically accurate reconstructions’, in the sense defined by Carlyle & Witlox (2007), the samples nevertheless meet the goals of the research as they are representative of the original soft sculptures’ behaviour in presence of external physical stress.

\textsuperscript{62} On the other hand, when the aim of reconstruction is the understanding of degradation processes, the nature of the pigments and binders employed needs to be as close to the original as possible.
Scott (2015, p. 4) recently qualified the benefits of participatory practice in three different domains, namely an increased professional relevance of the research done in this capacity; a wider range of expertise to draw from; and therefore, an improved quality of information and knowledge that expands beyond the limits of the conservation field. She underlines that sometimes, it is necessary to gain knowledge from non-conservation specialists, which continues Carlyle’s earlier advocacy for looking outside our immediate discipline to enrich the interpretation and understanding of the material ‘facts’ (Carlyle 1995, p. 4). This attitude has informed the practice of artists’ interviews in conservation for the last decades. When discussing technicalities over reconstructions, conservators view the artist in two complementary roles: the author of the work, whose intent can be articulated, but also the maker, with all relevant views and knowledge being shared and valued for conservation practice.

6.4.2 Replicas, reconstructions and participation

The participatory method used in this research allowed space for the artist and the conservator’s expertise, which helped to develop a clearer understanding of both Mora’s processes and her intentions for the preservation of her artistic legacy. The knowledge derived from this reconstructive practice is multifold.

Firstly, it illuminates unspoken parts of the technique in a time-effective manner, with the artist’s comments helping to accurately assess the work in progress. Just like following a cooking recipe rarely produces the aspired result immediately, because certain steps are mainly ‘felt’ and can only be shown, not written, expanded questions about the soft sculptures’ fabrication came only through the experience of making them. Informal conversation with the artist over the reconstructions provided most of the answers, with a focus on sharing experience rather than on harvesting knowledge. This made the tone of the conversation less investigative for the artist and more cooperative. For example, the surface of the soft sculptures samples made following Mora’s instructions were not as hard as hers, and therefore not as prone to cracking. Only when she manipulated them did Mora understand the discussion point and was she able to
remember that plaster may have been added to the gesso.⁶³ Ongoing experiments produced much better results, however it was still difficult to obtain the correct proportion of plaster to achieve the level of surface hardness preferred by Mora, and permit the application of oil and varnish retaining a glossy finish.⁶⁴

Secondly, it allows a better understanding of the constraints of creation and the motives behind the making of the artworks in a specific way. As underlined by Carlyle & Witlox, ‘carrying out reconstructions with old recipes provides surprising insights into workshop practices, which would have been obvious to artists and their studio assistants in the past’ (Carlyle & Witlox 2007, p. 4). In Mora’s soft sculptures’ case, although the past is relatively recent in historical terms, the exercise brings to light the physical extent of the artist’s practice and the network of production involved. Drawing shapes on fabric and cutting them takes time and space, sewing and turning over complicated shapes is very time consuming, and Mora was sewing extremely detailed shapes with her manual sewing machine.⁶⁵ These complicated fabric envelopes have then to be filled, which Mora did meticulously, regardless of the size of the doll. She filled them by taking only a tiny amount of filling at one time and pushing it with a thin tool such as a crochet hook (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 28 September).

The sculptures then need to be sewn closed by hand, with extra steps for the ones with flat bases, where the cardboard bases are glued and sealed with another piece of fabric glued above. The coating with gesso is an equally long process that has to be made in separate sessions for both sides of the non-freestanding dolls. Finally, when painting takes place in several sessions, drying time between the base layer and the layer of decorative patterns is needed. Even the flat bases of the sculptures are painted, which implies another session for this specific purpose, followed after drying by a signature and numbering session (at least for the 1974 Realities show). Mora often alludes to the time and efforts that she put in the fabrication of the soft sculptures, deceptively simple at first view. Her effort, as well as her organization in producing soft sculptures is better

---

⁶³ Plaster was also mentioned in the Blackman interview, a point that was overlooked initially.
⁶⁴ Too much plaster in the gesso makes a very absorbent layer, which ‘drinks’ most of the oil and varnish and results in a matte surface.
⁶⁵ Paul Cox’s movie shows Mora at work, operating her sewing machine with one hand while pushing the fabric with the other, with remarkable dexterity (Cox 1974).
appreciated with the reconstructions, which informs greatly the perception of her work from an art historical perspective.

Thirdly, the reconstruction of Mora’s soft sculptures contributes to the building of a relationship with the artist in a way that is familiar to her, as with her workshops Mora regularly practiced sharing knowledge and emotions through the act of making together. The reconstructions are different from replicas, because they do not replicate any existing sculpture by Mora. They use Mora’s technique and seek to replicate it, but their shape, size and colours are personal creations, in the spirit that Mora established in her workshops. However, they have a different purpose than the student’s dolls made in Mora’s workshops; creating proximity by making objects, handling them and looking at them triggers conversation and helps gathering information that is helpful for future conservation. By breaking the boundaries between conservation professional and artist, and creating a support for assessing conservation propositions by a non-professional (Mora), this practice contributes to give a positive profile of conservation to the artist and through her, to the public in general (Saunders 2014).

Finally, it informs the conservation practice, in many ways. Ongoing discussion with the artist over the reconstructions are an opportunity to clarify what are for her the key components of the soft sculptures, therefore providing answers to future interrogations about the sculptures’ intended appearance (Haiml & Epley 2008, p. 279). These conversations also provide information on the beliefs held by Mora and in the artistic community at the time, which influenced her practice: for example, the stand oil recipe was given to Mora by Perceval, as a method used by the Old Masters. She mixed it with varnish for extra shine, but maybe also because there was a common belief among artists that adding varnish to a medium ensures homogeneity of materials and avoids cracking (Carlyle 1995, p4). Mora probably shared this belief, as she advised the owner of one of her large paintings that had started to crack to put a layer of varnish on it (Turnbull 2015, pers. comm., 17 March). Furthermore, the dolls reconstructions provide material references that can be used to demonstrate characteristic links between surface features and medium used, to appreciate how one of Mora’s soft sculptures might have originally looked, to evaluate the extent of change in the course of the dolls’ history and appreciate when these changes developed through time (Carlyle & Witlox 2007, p. 1).
The soft sculptures reconstructions also inform conservation practice by providing samples that can be used for treatment testing. Such samples are useful tools for conservation research, notably for contemporary art, because materials used are often particular. Most recently, this method was used by the conservators of the Tate Gallery in their preliminary research for the conservation of a large painting by Mark Rothko, vandalized in 2012. Ormsby & Barker prepared a ‘representative sample’ of Rothko’s painting, informed by archival interview of the artist’s assistant and scientific analysis of the painting’s cross sections. The sample is considered representative when it uses materials and techniques representative of the artist’s technique, even if not historically accurate original materials, and produces a surface as close as possible visually to the original (Barker & Ormsby 2015).

Likewise, the last series of reconstructions of Mora’s soft sculptures, informed by interviews with the artist, careful visual observation and selective trial and error process, were considered indicative of the behaviour of the original soft sculptures. These reconstructions were subjected to various stressors to recreate the damages recorded on the original works such as flaking, cracking and paint loss. They were then used for evaluating consolidation methods, re-filling methods or the display/storage proposals, and therefore heightened the respect of the artist’s intent in the various options presented for the conservation of Mora’s work.

Some ethical questions also arose from the reconstructions. These were linked to conservation practices and various levels of intervention, to the notion of collaborative conservation and the role of the artist in this practice. As noted by Barker & Ormsby,

> Technical research can be viewed as an exposure of an artist’s materials and practice, sometimes against their express wish. Hence, the value of revealing a once guarded process should be carefully weighed against the benefits it can bring to any necessary conservation treatment and subsequent dissemination of this information (2015, p. 2)

Mora’s case is different from Rothko’s. Where Rothko sought secrecy and silence, Mora was very forthcoming with her techniques, and taught a simplified version of them in her workshops for years. The question of breaching trust and confidence is therefore not relevant. However, in view of the occasional appearance on the auction market of painted soft sculptures wrongly attributed to Mora, the issue of fakes needs to
be taken seriously. While different stylistically, the reconstructions made for this research are deliberately inspired by Mora’s originals, so they can be useful for the specific purpose of creating customized storage/display solutions. Therefore, the layered surface with decorative patterns and the complicated shapes with difficult angles and elongated limbs in several directions were imitated. To avoid any confusion in the hypothetical case of misplacement of these samples, they were all signed and dated ‘sabine sample 2014 or 2015’ with thick permanent marker.

The following table summarizes the problems and benefits of making soft sculptures reconstructions for this research on Mora’s materials and working processes.

**Table V. Benefits of soft sculptures reconstructions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General benefits</th>
<th>Benefits for conservation practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better understanding of the material aspect of the artworks; understand the full extent of the original working processes and uncover the complexities of apparently simple constructions</td>
<td>Clarify what are the key components of the soft sculptures to Mora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illuminates unspoken parts of the technique in a time-effective manner</td>
<td>Information on the technical beliefs held by Mora and in the artistic community at the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better understanding of the constraints of creation and the reasons behind the making of the artworks in a specific way.</td>
<td>Provide material references that can be used to demonstrate characteristic links between surface features and medium used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributes to building relationship with the artist</td>
<td>Provide appreciation of how one of Mora’s soft sculptures might have looked like originally in terms of surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helps evaluate the extent of change in the course of the sculpture’s history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing samples that can be used for treatment testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing samples that can be used for storage/display proposals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Problems related to reconstructions of soft sculptures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical issue. Breach of confidentiality. Risk of encouraging fakes</td>
<td>Technique was already explained publicly by the artist and taught in a simplified manner during workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical issue. Risk of samples being displaced and sold as fakes</td>
<td>All samples are signed and dated “sabine sample 2014 or 2015” with permanent marker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.5 Art in use and living heritage

6.5.1 The making and lives of Mora’s soft sculptures

When approaching Mora’s textile production, it is logical to investigate what was these artworks’ use -whether real or intended-, as it has long-term implications for their conservation. The soft sculptures, made of soft materials and painted with acrylic or casein paint, were not originally planned with long-term preservation in mind (Mora 2009, pers. comm., 22 April). However, rapidly their technique evolved to include semi hard materials such as gesso and oil/varnish paint that were intended to make them last longer. Today, due to Mora’s fame and because she ceased production in the late 1980s, her soft sculptures are increasing in value. Some are in public collections and in the recent years a few of them have appeared at auction.

Mora pursued the production of soft sculptures using these several techniques simultaneously. At her show in Realities (1974), she displayed her soft sculptures hanging from the ceiling or free standing. Contemporary photographs show that the soft sculptures belonging to the Reeds were integrated into their everyday life, either standing on the mantelpiece or, like the big mermaid doll bought by John Reed for Sunday in 1971, just sitting in an armchair at Heide. This accessibility might explain the later disappearance of the mermaid, which does not figure in the Reeds’ legation to Heide Museum of Modern Art. Mora’s relaxed explanation is that the Reed’s dog, Gogo, probably destroyed it, confirming the casual attitude of both the Reeds and Mora herself towards this giant doll. Mora was also frequently pictured hugging her sculptures, even sleeping with them. At home, she continues to keep them on her bed, stored together with other toys and antique dolls in wooden and glass showcases, arranged in little scenes or simply in a heap in prams or shelves. Other collectors of her soft sculptures have displayed them for years hanging on the wall or in front of windows, possibly emulating the original display in the gallery. Because the dolls are double sided, they may also be turned periodically to show the other face.
These physical manipulations have not always agreed with the physical stability of the soft sculptures. Mora used a synthetic foam made of polyurethane ether, widely available in the seventies, as stuffing material for her sculptures (personal observations). Over time, this foam oxidizes and breaks up into small crumbs, losing volume in the process (Sashoua 2015, pers. comm., 23 July). This loss of volume in turn causes creases and folds to the sculptures, damaging the surface coating of paint. As a result, many of Mora’s soft sculptures, especially the ones painted with thick and matte casein paint, which is brittle and prone to cracking, have suffered from cracking, powdering and loss of paint, as well as fading due to light exposure. A few collectors, very attached to their soft sculptures, have expressed a desire to take them back to the artist to be repainted or refreshed (Walicka 2013, pers. comm., 13 December; Gantner 2014). They view the fading and repainting as a normal state of affairs, and a simple maintenance measure that is usually characteristic of all things in use, as opposed to museum objects.

These observations show the diversity of people’s attitudes to Mora’s soft sculpture production. On one hand, there is a relaxed attitude towards dolls purchased in a gallery but that were made for use, the very term of ‘doll’ conveying the artist’s intention of physical proximity of the object with its owner. On the other hand, the careful manner of placing the dolls in a showcase preserves their integrity in texture, shape and colour, but does not permit access to their physical and tactile qualities. Many conversations with the artist during this research have also shown that Mora’s attitude to her soft sculptures has changed with time. In earlier statements, Mora said that she liked the dolls to be part of people’s life, to be handled and cuddled. However, in response to the present condition of certain dolls, she is also very happy to see pieces that have been carefully conserved and praises the care shown by their owners. This response may also be in view of the fact that she is unlikely to either repaint or produce new ones at present. In her personal collection, she regularly handles and moves dolls, taking them out of their shelves or showcases or window sills and placing them in another spot where she can look at them for a while. Many of these dolls are in ‘homely’ condition, bearing the traces of frequent manipulations just as favourite toys show wear and tear. This physical intimacy with her soft sculptures inspired an investigation into similar attitudes to heritage, in order to better approach their conservation. It is argued that living heritage and the reflection around its conservation appears to be best suited to the soft sculptures’ case.
6.5.2 Conservation of living heritage

‘Living heritage’ as a term encompasses religious sites and objects accessed and used for ritual purpose, as well as musical instruments, costumes or furniture still in use. In the case of community-used religious buildings, conservation may include maintenance, that often draws on traditional skills sets and procedures. An example of this is the yearly repair by the local people of the great mosque’s mud walls in Djenne, Mali, or the regular whitewashing of stupas in South East Asia (Holden & Jones 2008, p. 24; Byrne 2014, p. 57). The debate between heritage professionals on whether popular religion practices such as repainting murals or rebuilding shrines is appropriate conservation practice or not, and according to whose principles, is complex. Although slightly different, the same debate exists for objects now in institutionalised context such as museums and public galleries or secular private collections (Byrne 2014; Cotte 2007; Wisejuriya 2007). Discussions centred on whether or not to retain the use value of movable heritage within these contexts, leading to the exploration of ways to convey the objects’ specific use and permit access and close contact in display and storage systems. Other considerations make reference to the type and extent of intervention desirable, either structural or aesthetic, and how sympathetically it aligns with the object’s significance and originally intended use (Peters 2007).

The ethical issues surrounding the conservation of Mora’s dolls can therefore be compared to those related to the conservation of living heritage movable objects. Soft sculptures can be placed into this category, most of them having been regularly handled and often displayed in open access conditions. Some of Mora’s murals also qualify as living heritage, being in a public or semi-public environment dedicated to a specific use such as a train station concourse, and a restaurant and hotel, that is unchanged since the origin. In past decades, Mora would maintain her own work if necessary, much like living religious heritage is maintained by communities, until her age prevented her to physically repaint large-scale works. For example, she partially repainted the tram in 1979; she repainted the low relief of the Flinders street mural in 1998; she repainted some of the Tolarno murals in 2007, and painted the newly created surfaces in the same location. The collectors’ reflex to ask Mora to repaint their dolls stems from both the
nature of the dolls and from the artist’s previous instances of repainting her own works. Mora’s repainting of her works also parallels living heritage practices where craftsmen participate to the conservation process, in order to respect the traditional or ritual way of making. This has been the case for objects originating from Native American, Tibetan or Maori communities and has been the topic of several articles in conservation journals (Johnson et al. 2005, Smith 2006, Cotte 2009). In these instances, conservators stabilized the cultural objects (respectively Native American bags, Maori eel trap, Tibetan scroll painting), while the missing parts were woven, knotted or painted by traditional craftspeople with the appropriate skills. The whole process was thoroughly documented to ensure a clear understanding of the various stages in the objects’ material history. These collaborative approaches acknowledged the community’s cultural ownership in the conservation decision-making and subsequent treatment, which resulted in recovering complete objects retaining their full significance, according to the wish of the cultural community (Johnson et al. 2005; Smith 2006; Cotte 2009). A similar approach is also practiced in conservation of contemporary art, where the artists are involved in the care of their works, for example the successive settings of installations works or the replacement of obsolete parts (Hummelen 2003).

In the long-term vision, however, living heritage practices cannot apply to Mora’s works of art, as they are of different origin and produced in different circumstances. In a general sense, unlike the anonymously produced works of art made for places of worship, where materials things were considered as ‘eminently renewable’ by the worshippers, Mora’s works have no faith or cultural practice attached (Byrne 2014, p. 206). They remain unique and irreplaceable works of art, which should be conserved in accordance with the artist’s intent. Although she has repainted her works in the spirit of traditional maintenance, such practice cannot be enacted by any other person without compromising the authenticity of the works.

In 2009, the framework of living heritage was applied to the conservation of one of Mora’s murals, located inside Readings bookshop in St Kilda, Melbourne. While the small losses were integrated visually by the conservator, the large loss at the centre of the composition that encompassed half of a bird, was repainted by Mora, once the area had been stabilized, filled and coated with the background colour (Cotte 2012a). Most probably Mora modified the bird’s tail to some extent, which is difficult to ascertain as
there was no visual documentation available at the time of conservation. However, the alleged change did not cover any previous material, and is made by Mora, making the case of a living artwork maintained in collaboration with the artist. This earlier conservation treatment undertaken prior to the thesis inspired the collaborative approach adopted in the three case studies described in the next chapter, although this time, Mora’s participation is more consultative than hands-on, due to her age and lack of desire to revisit her artworks at present. Since 2009, her experiences and associated discussions on conservation have broadened her views on the various aspects of this discipline, and encouraged her to develop trust and voice any concerns to the conservator.

Having established a vantage point for Mora’s soft sculptures, located between living heritage and continued use alike contemporary art, it is logical to use frameworks from both fields to inform a reflection about their conservation. With this in mind, this research aims to holistically examine Mora’s oeuvre and provide additional knowledge derived from the artworks’ materiality. The next section will detail how this research is located in different methodological models underpinning conservation decision-making.

6.6 Models of decision making in conservation

6.6.1 Reference models

The role of conservation in relation to heritage and its importance in society has been actively questioned in the last decade, bringing to the fore new concepts of heritage, previously not much considered in making decisions for its preservation (Avrami et al. 2000; Munoz Vinas 2005; Smith 2006). Conservation today is expected to integrate cultural differences, socio-historical categories of heritage and to connect with discussion in related fields such as archaeology, ethnography and sociology. Various approaches to heritage in a broad sense have led to the establishment of frameworks designed to help decision-making. In Australia, the current curatorial practice is to write significance assessments for objects, sites or collections, which helps to determine policies for collections’ management. The Burra Charter (Australia-ICOMOS, 1999)66

---

set up the principles for this approach, by writing the sequences of the decision-making process, based on recording, assessing and writing the significance of the place. It introduced the notion of obligations arising from significance, which give direction to the policy development and the management plan of a site.

To adapt the practice from sites to objects, the Collections Council of Australia published the guidelines for writing such an assessment, in *Significance 2.0* (2004, updated in 2009), which has become a point of reference. This booklet details all the steps to make a significance assessment, which include consulting knowledgeable people, exploring the context of the items, describing their fabric and condition (Collections Council of Australia, 2009). Their significance is assessed against one or more primary criteria such as social, artistic or historic significance, and comparative criteria such as rarity, interpretive capacity and condition. The ideas of *Significance 2.0* have since been analysed and a similar way of thinking has developed in conservation, which reflects the broader interest for social values across the heritage field. Discussion forums about decision making such as ICCROM’s *Sharing Conservation Decisions* course have underlined the need to refocus the reflection on the cultural values of heritage, to position conservation as a bridge between objects and people past and present, and to foster a plurality of approaches in the field of conservation (Varoli-Piazza 2007).

These ideas are particularly relevant for the conservation of modern and contemporary art, where the meanings of the works are often not easily shared and agreed upon. As early as 1999, the Netherland Institute for Cultural Heritage/Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art published a model of decision making for contemporary art. This was based on the ‘traditional’ model for classical art, where meanings are not usually discussed, but included additional reflective steps, such as the establishment of meaning, the examination of eventual discrepancies between the object’s physical condition and its meaning, and the consideration of the consequences of potential conservations options (ICN 1999b). Mainly question-based, the steps include the importance of the materials and the production processes in the meaning of the work, or

---

67 available online at http://significance.collectionscouncil.com.au

---

notions such as authenticity, artist’s opinion, cost, historicity, aesthetic value and legal aspects. This pathway, still valid as a whole, was refined and adapted to specific fields in the following years.

For this research, five recently published theoretical frameworks were selected, that show the principal strands of current reflection in the conservation profession, from didactic models offering a step-by-step procedure to follow, to more open and question-based models of negotiating the way to decision. The research approach developed in this study was compared with each of these frameworks, examining what could be derived from each of these perspectives in terms of conservation of Mora’s oeuvre. The models that were considered best adapted were used for three different case studies of conservation of Mora’s artworks.

6.6.2 Pye E 2001, ‘Caring for the Past’

In this book, and in her subsequent article co-authored with Dean Sully (Pye & Sully 2007), Elizabeth Pye understands the conservation’s mission as: assessing the state and meaning of objects, and applying a procedure that will mitigate damage and change (Pye 2001, p. 24). Acknowledging that the working context for conservation is now different from the mid twenty century period, when most charters and codes of ethics were written, she notes the broadening categories of heritage including ordinary or industrial objects, the simultaneous widening of audiences and the subsequent questioning of authority’s ownership over heritage. To accommodate these concepts, she suggests a ‘management approach’ to conservation, which should accept and work with change in a positive way. To do so, she proposes a checklist with several steps to assess the works and determine positive ways of managing change over time (Pye 2001, p. 96). Pye’s assessment and decision making framework was summarised in a table as follows:
Table VI. E. Pye decision-making guidelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of physical state of object</td>
<td>Use different sources of information: visual examination;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>surface investigation in different lights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of object’s material significance</td>
<td>Move into its structure from visible to invisible (using</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sophisticated vision techniques)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of object’s conceptual significance</td>
<td>Consultations, discussions and visual examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(lays in its role and in the artist’s intent)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define treatments’ objectives</td>
<td>Can be preventive, remedial or aid to interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define the constraints</td>
<td>Museum policies, health and safety, code of ethics, cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List options for conservation</td>
<td>Informed by the five previous steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk assessment</td>
<td>Informed by nature of object; technical literature; object’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost benefit analysis</td>
<td>Particularly necessary in the case of entire collections or complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision</td>
<td>Options narrowed by the two previous steps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pye underlines the fact that conservation is not absolute, and not the same for all objects (Pye 2001, p. 124). Levels of conservation may therefore differ according to significance, fashion or politics, making the conservation decisions highly context dependant and subject to various social and economic pressures. Pye and Sully recognize that it implies negotiations and agreement-seeking with a wider range of people, aiming at a wider range of results spanning from celebration to political statement and social healing. Conservation is thus seen as a social practice, encompassing notions of inclusivity and communication in order to be sustainable and gain public support (Pye 2001, p. 184). Conservators are encouraged to acknowledge the subjectivity of their decisions, the necessity of a strong framework to support them, and even to rethink the principles of the profession when they seem to have become inadequate to an evolved society or context. Pye and Sully recognise the plurality of motivations underpinning conservation and the broadening of skills necessary to work effectively in this field, which has expanded from material and scientific to cultural and social.
Applied to this framework, this research on Mora mainly informs the second and third step, separate to the context of conservation and its period in time. The research’s value resides in the fact that it is not time-dependent. It provides information that will remain true in future to assess meanings carried by Mora’s work, which does not exclude the addition of extra meanings derived from future context or time period. However, although it seeks external input such as the artist ‘s and the user/historian’s views to define the role of the object, this framework is focused mainly on the physical integrity of the finished artwork and does not leave enough space to the significance of the materials and making processes. It seems more informed by archaeological practice and also essentially concerns works of art conserved in museums. At present a large part of Mora’s production is kept in private collections, and therefore, it is worth considering other models that might be more suited to this type of collections.

6.6.3 Appelbaum B 2007, ‘Conservation Treatment Methodology’

In this book, Barbara Appelbaum states that although conservation is material-based, many dilemmas are non-material (‘what we should do’ instead of ‘what we can do’, p. xviii). Positing that the meanings of objects, sociologically variable and susceptible of shifting through time, ultimately affect the desirable goal of conservation treatment, she states plainly that decisions inevitably involve value judgments. It is therefore essential that these values are assessed critically, and in a positive way that focuses on the values that the object has rather than the values it lacks (Appelbaum 2007, p. 266). Appelbaum considers that conservators have a unique responsibility, as they deal with the physical integrity of objects. They need to be aware of the potential altering effect they have on them (as opposed to altering people’s ideas about them) and thus strive to enhance objects’ meanings by understanding the interactions between their material and non-material aspects (Appelbaum 2007, p. 5). For her, optimal practice is as much in the conservators’ minds as it is in their hands (Appelbaum 2007, p. xxix), and she provides theoretical tools borrowed from social sciences as well as from materials’ knowledge, to help rationalize the conservator’s reflection. Appelbaum’s advocates an eight-steps methodology (Appelbaum 2007, p. xix) to address all issues relevant to decision making. This methodology has been summarized in the following table:
Table VII. B. Appelbaum decision making guidelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characterize the object</td>
<td>See table below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstruct a history of the object</td>
<td>Historic sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine the ideal state for the object</td>
<td>Includes context and artist’s intent; a fundamental interpretation. Defined by time, not necessarily original state. Draw a timeline and values history of object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide on a realistic goal of treatment</td>
<td>Evaluate distance between ideal state and present state. Technical achievability of goal. Awareness of consequences of chosen state on interpretation/perception of object.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose the treatment methods and materials</td>
<td>Informed by previous steps, + testing, enhancing knowledge by peer consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare pre-treatment documentation</td>
<td>Photographic and written documentation. Treatment proposal and justification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carry out treatment</td>
<td>Variable according to treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare post treatment documentation</td>
<td>Record methods and materials used, written and photographic documentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While all are equally important, Appelbaum details mainly the first four steps, as they underpin the reality of decision-making process, the last four steps delineating what surrounds the execution of this decision. To characterize an object, she relies on a four quadrants method, described in the table on the following page, reproduced from Appelbaum’s book, p.11:
### Table VIII Appelbaum’s characterization grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Material aspects</th>
<th>Non-material aspects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Object-specific</strong></td>
<td>1 (\text{Information: Observed phenomena, materials identification, determination of structure} ) (\text{Source: object} ) (\text{Strategy: Physical examination, analysis, imaging, testing} )</td>
<td>3 (\text{Information: History of the object, current values, projected future} ) (\text{Source: custodian, others} ) (\text{Strategy: Interview, consulting institutional records} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-object-specific</strong></td>
<td>2 (\text{Information: Methods of manufacture, material properties, deterioration studies} ) (\text{Source: history of technology, material science, conservator’s knowledge of similar objects} ) (\text{Strategy: consult conservation literature} )</td>
<td>4 (\text{Information: about related objects, art history, general cultural information} ) (\text{Source: allied professions, conservator’s prior knowledge} ) (\text{Strategy: review literature, consult allied professionals} )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The novelty of that grid is that it emphasizes the equal importance of all types of information. Appelbaum urges conservators to use critical thinking for this characterization work and specifically to acknowledge unconscious biases such as looking at the past with the mind frame of the present. The four-quadrant table is completed with an object’s timeline recalling all the important stages in the object’s life, and the values associated with each of these stages, which may shift over time. For example, a silver teapot, of high monetary, aesthetic and use value at the time of its making, becomes associated to a major historical person through an accident at a point of time, which renders it improper for use but highly valuable historically. The treatment decision will then be based on the assessment of the current values held by the object, informed by the characterization grid. According to Appelbaum, the organization of elements in grid and timeline facilitates collaborative investigations, while the fact and value based decision-making model discourages unbalanced, arbitrary or politically loaded decisions (Appelbaum 2007, pp. 208, 210). The model is also general and inclusive enough to be applied to most objects studied in conservation, at least as a base framework, giving a general direction that takes into account several perspectives as well as the tangible and intangible aspects of the object considered.
Using this framework for a work of art by Mora would be useful. The research done in this thesis contributes information about manufacture, history of the object, history of related objects, art history and general content, which would inform the quadrants two, three and four of the grid. However, Mora’s idiosyncratic techniques are not entirely covered by this grid; the methods of manufacture from quadrant 2 cannot be understood by general research in similar technology, but only by interviews and observations, i.e. methods of inquiry from quadrants one and two. The practice of reconstruction, which sits at the interface of the quadrants, informs equally on the objects and on their context of creation. In a broader sense, the research informs any other artworks produced by Mora, even if the technique, format and period is different. The thesis provides information relevant to the object’s timeline but also related artworks’ timelines, travelling across objects’ biographies and technical examination to draw links between them and insert them in a global artistic and social context. Appelbaum’s model confers use value to this thesis for the whole of Mora’s production. It is worth noting though that the information provided by this thesis represents a point in time in Mora’s career. It has capacity for evolving through time according to the artworks’ lives, by addition of period-related associative value, historical value or financial value, or by extracting educational and research value applicable to the artworks concerned.

Rational and simple, this model might however be better suited for specific objects than an artist’s entire oeuvre, and not offer enough reflection space about the social aspects of objects and their embodiment of the artist’s person, which has emerged in the previous Chapters as a very important part of Mora’s art. Furthermore, Mora’s techniques, linked to her personal material culture, are often located half ways between fields of conservation knowledge, particularly between painting and textile. Considering the particular place textiles hold between commodity and works of art, a textile-inspired framework of reflection around decision-making has been sought.

6.6.4 Eastop D 2009, ‘Stuff happens’

Dinah Eastop’s PhD thesis is made of a selection from her published articles, with an introductory essay. With it, Eastop offers a new perspective for textile conservation,
which can be extended to conservation in a broader sense. Her triangular model of conservation is based on material culture and the theories of object’s biography (Kopytoff 1986). Privileging the interaction between material and social, Eastop argues that material culture is the relationship between things, people and language, each aspect of the triangle mediating the relationships between the others (Eastop 2009a, p.18). Across time, objects are mediating the relationships between different groups of people, according to context, and using language for information, communication or persuasion. Materiality is viewed as the site of interaction between the object as a thing and the object as a social element. Eastop defines conservation as processes of preservation, investigation and interpretation (Eastop 2009a, p.15). She deliberately questions conservation and recognises that establishing the significance of objects requires the collation of competing viewpoints from various fields, which emerge from the object’s analysis rather than being fixed in advance. She believes that the process can be questioned and tailored to every case, and that however well supported, decisions reflect only points in time. Therefore, rather than a strict model, she uses Kopytoff’s life cycle approach and guideline questions that help to determine what is believed to be the stage in the object’s life at the time of conservation. For clarity of comparison between the different approaches studied in this chapter, these questions have also been placed in a table as follows:

**Table IX. D. Eastop’s decision making guidelines**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why this object?</td>
<td>Significance of object in a period, collection, places. Historical and social context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why conserve it now?</td>
<td>Significance of object in relation to the present time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where is it displayed?</td>
<td>Geographical, social, environmental context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What role does the object have in this display?</td>
<td>Collection context, exhibition context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determination of point of historical significance for this object at time of conservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision of which aspect will be enhanced at time of conservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determination of treatment accordingly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the answers to these questions (and others if necessary as the list is not exhaustive or systematic), a decision can be made about what is considered the historical significance of an object at a particular time, and therefore the aspects of the object enhanced by their conservation.\textsuperscript{68} Examples include the display of deliberately concealed garments in their found bundled, creased and soiled form, only stabilized for exhibition. This decision enhanced the anthropological value of the garment as a tangible witness of a still-current practice of house protection, but was accompanied by an unfolded replica which helped to visualize its quality as a rare item of dress. Another concealed garment was cleaned, mended and stabilized, as a historic and artistic witness of daily dress at a certain time. In a different domain, the internal structure of petticoats in Grace Kelly’s wedding dress was replaced with new ones, in order to recreate its tulip-shaped appearance, lost because of the physical condition of the internal layers. This decision acknowledged the symbolic importance of the dress, which is kept in the actress’ home town of Philadelphia.

Most of this research into Mora’s creative processes can be inserted within this flexible framework. The additional question ‘What is it made of?’, placed before the last step, helps determining technical treatment options, and is answered in large part by the parts of the research recording Mora’s creative processes. Eastop’s approach confers value to the information related to the context of creation, whether personal or a broader social and artistic context, that precede the questions asked at the time of conservation. It can also integrate the symbolic significance of the materials chosen by the artist, the impact of the artist’s person upon the perception of her artistic creations and the dual position of the dolls/soft sculptures, half way between craft and artworks. But it also provides a strong theoretical frame to reflection, supported by the overarching question articulated by Cane “Why do we conserve?” studied next.

Exploring the multiple meanings carried by Mora’s choice of materials and creative processes ultimately contributes to decision making in conservation for the whole of her oeuvre, provided that these interpretations are accessible to the heritage profession, which makes the case for good communication of conservation research. In a reflexive

\textsuperscript{68} The question of who makes the final decision of what features to conserve is an ongoing point of discussion in the profession as it obviously has enormous consequences on the treatment. Eastop rightly points that conservation interventions provide sites for debate and contestation (2010).
manner, Eastop’s approach, focused on the interface material/social, has inspired personal reflections and facilitated engagement with various other fields, to document and interpret Mora’s modes of making art. Using Eastop’s flexible model helped to organise the findings of this research in a way that can be useful for future conservation decisions. Eastop’s questions are located at the time of conservation, while this research provides context related to many different ways of looking at Mora’s process of making art. Not knowing yet the context of future conservation interventions, and indeed not focusing on any particular object, this thesis provides a wealth of knowledge that helps locate the objects to be conserved in their broader cycle of production within the artist’s oeuvre, and appreciate their role in the artist’s own assessment of her oeuvre. Elements of significance that may not be noticed upon simple examination of a single object’s condition are brought to light by this placement into context. They can strengthen the object’s potential significance and support the assessment made prior to decision-making.

However, this collaborative research with Mora, where the artist’s input in the decision making has a prominent place, does not entirely align with Eastop’s approach that is tailored to textile conservation, where individual makers are often unknown. The essential element of artist’s intent (and its corollary artist’s sanction of the conservation decision) is not included within Eastop’s framework and can indeed compete with the other meanings generated by the works. While the artist’s voice is not the unique one considered for elaborating strategies in the conservation of her works, it certainly has some significant weight in the final decision making. In addition, the socio-geographic location of Mora’s works has some importance in the potential choices of approach for their conservation. Mora’s work occupies three distinctive spaces. The majority of her work is kept in private collections, or in institutions not necessarily related to culture, and used daily (Peter McCallum Cancer Centre; Home for disabled children, Adelaide; Readings bookshop, Melbourne; Tolarno restaurant, Melbourne).

The second space, in volume of artworks- but arguably the first in significance of these artworks- is the public space. Mora’s public commissions are landmarks of the cities of Ayr (Queensland) and Melbourne (Victoria). The third space is the museum and galleries space. Apart from Heide Museum of Modern Art (Melbourne), Queensland Art Gallery (Brisbane) and the NGA (Canberra), Mora’s work is not well represented in
public collections. Although this situation may change in time, it is worth considering a model contemporary to Eastop’s, but which takes into account the non-museum or non-cultural spaces.

6.6.5 Cane S 2009, ‘Why do we conserve?’

In this book chapter, Simon Cane (2009) develops an understanding of conservation as a cultural construct, and identifies the need for conservation to engage further than the traditional microphysical level, citing the change in conceptual values that conservators cause, through their interventions. Reinforcing Villers’ challenge of the principle of ‘minimal intervention’ as a guide for decision-making, on the grounds that it has no specific aim and does not take the ‘activities of the viewers moving about’ into account (Villers 2004, pp. 7-8), Cane also situates the conservation process in social terms, and interrogates its function, position and value (Cane 2009, p. 164). For him, conservation is an important element in the establishment and maintenance of cultural value, which leads him to deplore its invisible position within the cultural field, as these notions of use and social value perfectly integrate into the actual discourse of engagement with art. Building from this reflection, Cane proposes a model embracing more systems than the sole ‘arts-culture’ system, and mapping the complex movements of objects between them. In his model, the conservation process fits within different constructs and influences the value increase or decrease of an object according to its journeys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 Conservation construct</th>
<th>2 Art-culture construct</th>
<th>3 Museum construct</th>
<th>4 Everyday/ non art-culture construct</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table X. S. Cane’s model of movements of objects
Cane observes that the movements of objects are usually from box four to either box two or box three. From these two boxes, they move back and forth to box one, resulting generally in a positive change of value, be it financial, cultural or aesthetic or all of these values together. The usual way is for objects to move from box two to box three, while it is rare to observe the opposite movements. Privately owned objects are located either in box four or in box two; the exchanges between boxes four and one are increasing with recent media interest for private treasures and the rise of TV programs about such discoveries in people’s homes. This model, while in constant flux, points to the value of conservation as a positive change that either facilitates or results from movements of objects between social realms.

While not per se a model for decision-making, Cane’s model allows a wider vision of artworks’ journeys across various spheres of society. It is relevant to Mora’s art, at present dispersed between boxes four, two and three, but considered from all these places for a return journey to box one, complete with increased cultural value. If, as Cane suggests, ‘conservation of cultural materials is an intrinsic part of our need as a society to collect, organise and display’ and is ‘essential in defining and maintaining cultural value’ then this research on Mora’s materials and techniques imparts new cultural value to her work, making them more likely to undertake the journey to box one regardless of their initial position (Cane 2009, pp. 174-175). It is also likely to impact positively on the conservation process itself; by defining more areas of cultural value in Mora’s artworks, based on the study of their materials, this research will broaden the range of conservation options at the time of decision-making. In a broader context, it is also widening conservation’s input into the general discussion about use of and access to cultural heritage. As Munoz-Vinas remarked in 2005, conservation has constantly evolved in relation to social needs by redefining its field of operation, as well as refining its techniques; therefore, dedicating time to an analysis of the significance of an artist’s materials contributes to the scope of conservation of contemporary art.

The four previous models were concerned with various types of ‘objects’ or movable heritage, located in different social spheres and considered from different perspectives, and proposed several thinking frameworks to make decisions for their conservation. With Mora’s production including objects that are regularly manipulated as part of everyday life, but also public sites being an integral part to city’s life by being touched,
lived with, sat upon and used as photo background, it is relevant to examine models of decision-making tailored for immovable heritage but centred on the possibility of access. A recent model has been selected, more concerned with archaeological sites and heritage policy, but useful to integrate the dimension of access for the conservation of both Mora’s public art and her soft sculptures.

6.6.6 Taylor J 2014, “Conservation and access”

Joel Taylor proposed this model of reflection addressing the dilemma of conservation versus access, at the ICOM-CC 17th triennial meeting in Melbourne (2014). Noting that restricting access is often the default policy that people resort to in order to enable preservation, and the inherent contradictions in the act of conserving without well-defined access policies, Taylor borrows political scientist Harold Lasswell’s definition of politics ‘who gets what, when and how’ to build a model of reflection that takes into account these factors and their interactions upon each other, as shown in Table XI next page. He suggests that long term thinking and consideration of different forms of access may allow several groups of people with diverging interest to benefit from cultural heritage, avoiding the dominance of one specific group and one specific period. Although this is a broader political vision that applies best to collections or sites, it is still relevant in Mora’s case because of the use practice of her public artworks and soft sculpture production, and can help clarify the thinking about their preservation in general. Expanding the reflection on decision making from the particular to the monumental, and from object to site, helps with reframing the objectives of conservation in terms of context, not limited to a public or private collection, and encompassing the risks and benefits of access to the works. It is worth noting that Mora’s work stretches across the spectrum between movable and immovable, and that the research has illuminated the place she gave to accessibility and interactivity in her art.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing factor</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>How</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who</td>
<td>The values that people hold may involve different kinds of use, such as ceremony or study. The values identified in conservation will impact kinds of access.</td>
<td>Different groups may have influence on when heritage can be conserved and accessed, such as government targets to increase accessibility or passing on information.</td>
<td>How access is prioritised is largely through stake holders. Resources required, such as conservation or visitation, may be affected by the people involved in access.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What</td>
<td>The varied availability of different kinds of access, due to fragility, will impact certain values (and therefore people). This includes loss of components or whole objects.</td>
<td>Certain objects are vulnerable or ephemeral, so may not easily be able to provide all kinds of access over time. Conservation’s role of prolonging access is vital to this.</td>
<td>The kind of heritage, and what people want from heritage, will have a huge influence on the modes of access and the kinds of conservation that are applied.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>The longevity of heritage will impact the number of generations that have access to it. Storage for the future may impact present users.</td>
<td>Considering historic material as a finite resource distributed over time, not all material will be able to facilitate all kinds of long-term access.</td>
<td>Access may change in the future, depending on the impact of access. The kinds of access may change over time, including impact from developments in conservation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How</td>
<td>The kinds of access will influence which people engage with heritage. How an object has been conserved will affect the values it embodies.</td>
<td>Changes in the kind of access and conservation have a direct impact upon what is accessible over time.</td>
<td>Some kinds of access are not sustainable, like mass tourism to a site or handling of vulnerable object. How access is managed will affect future possibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This research can inform mostly the ‘Who’ and ‘What’ boxes, with insights into the ‘How’ boxes. It also finds affinity with Taylor’s consideration of heritage as a communication site, where conservation lies at the interface of change and medium, and needs to interpret possibly distorted messages in order to find the best way of communicating them (Taylor 2015, p. 73). Mora’s wish for people to enjoy access to her work, be it touching the dolls and seeing both their faces (most of them have no
designated ‘front face’) or putting their fingers into the carved lines of the Flinders Street low relief, informs and impacts on the decisions made about their conservation. Within this framework, the artist’s role, as it was designed in this research, can be integrated as an active contribution, in parallel with the audience, to the ‘performance of heritage’, creating new values and meanings in the process.

The need to encompass Mora’s life as well as her work into the factors influencing conservation decisions is also taken in consideration in this model; in a long term and non-object-specific perspective of conservation of Mora’s murals and soft sculptures, it seems essential to consider the social aspect of Mora’s art and how it impacts on making decisions about her work. Considering Mora’s work as a site, we can remark that the manner (how) and the period when Mora’s artworks are conserved and displayed will potentially allow access to her world and personality to more groups than the one who had personal contacts with her, or lived at the same period. In this sense, a conservator might be inclined to a more interventionist attitude in order to convey the feeling wanted by Mora, such as interactivity, proximity and social role, rather than treating her murals and soft sculptures in an archaeological manner and limiting the intervention to minimum. This would illustrates the concept of ‘minimal loss of potential meanings’ recently coined by Munoz-Vinas, and defined as the concept underpinning the choice for intervention rather than the expression ‘minimal intervention’ (Munoz Vinas 2009, p. 55). In such a case, the intervention would not be minimal, which would betray the artist’s intent, but just enough to keep the meanings intended by the artist. Taylor’s model, however, is giving less consideration to the ‘why?’ question, which he acknowledges does not fit the descriptive nature of the definition, but is important to be aware of (Taylor 2014, p. 3). In this sense, it can be seen as complementary to Eastop’s model, adding the notion of access to the questions about the significance of the work.

This brief review of current models of decision-making shows that this study on Mora’s materials and techniques has relevance in contemporary approaches of conservation. Mora’s production showing extraordinary technical variety, as well as encompassing public and private works, it is difficult to find a single model valid for all types of works. Therefore ‘loose’ models of decision-making based on cross-disciplines thinking
seem more suitable, as they are more flexible and take into account the social aspect that is an integral part of Mora’s art.

For the next chapter, the scope of study is limited to the soft sculptures, because they are technically complex, and sit between sculpture, textile and paintings, fine art and objects in use, and most of them are also at present in a damaged condition. Furthermore, prior to this research there was limited available material knowledge related to Mora’s soft sculptures. People’s desire to see them displayed is strong, which highlights their past importance and future value in continuing Mora’s image. Due to their hybrid character, this group offers pathways to various conservation sub-disciplines, concerned with materials types and functions, and most notably, reflections about heritage in use and living heritage as discussed. To link these reflections with practice, the next chapter will describe three conservation cases studies of Mora’s soft sculptures, where the reflection is placed on decision making within Cane’s perspective of contributing to increase cultural value. Eastop’s and Taylor’s approaches will be combined to assess Mora’s work and explore several options for the future conservation of Mora’s textile production, seen alternatively as a collection or as isolated objects.
Chapter Seven. Case studies and recommendations

Introduction

The three case studies presented in this chapter have all been discussed with the artist, and provide potential options for future treatments. The emphasis is placed on the decision-making process and the comparative assessment of the treatment’s result. The aim is to show that enacting conservation treatments on specific objects always embody deducted or researched knowledge about the making of the objects, and their significance to people. In this chapter, the newly acquired knowledge about Mora’s art is integrated into the decision-making processes. This type of evidence-based treatment reports is useful, especially for fragile objects such as Mora’s soft sculptures, because they show a practical way to unlock the collective value of these objects in society, and to display this value during their limited lifetime. Through the process of enactment, these conservation treatments provide a better understanding of the issues of significance, access and value discussed in Chapter Six, with tangible examples of the consequences of decisions on the materiality of the objects, and how these issues can be shared with the public.

The three different conservation treatment outcomes have all been approved by the artist, which does not preclude other possibilities for future treatment. As recently underlined by Glenn Wharton, what artists say about their work is never absolute or unchanging, which highlights the limitations to the concept of ‘artist’s intent’ (Wharton 2014). At the 2015 conference of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), Wharton proposed to use the term ‘artist’s sanction’ instead, reflecting that the word “sanction” encompasses context and objectivity, as reported by conservator Eileen Moody.
Sanction’, unlike “intent”, doesn’t claim to reclaim an earlier, potentially unreachable, state of mind. Just as the once ubiquitous term “reversibility” is now being replaced with the more apt, “retreatability” to describe what we often aim for with our conservation interventions, “artist sanction” is a result of our discipline’s evolution. The artist’s sanction is simply what an artist says about her work in the time she said it, nothing more (Moody 2015)

These case studies are thus not intended as exclusive models for conservation of Mora’s soft sculpture even if the artist sanctioned them. Rather, they represent some propositions that she agreed with, in a given research context and at a particular point of time, and that are documented to be useful to future decision making in conservation of her work.

The three case studies all focus on the soft sculptures. Two of them (no. 1 and no. 2) involve original soft sculptures made by Mora; the last one (no. 3) is a result of reflections about the most common alterations encountered in Mora’s soft sculptures, but the objects physically used in the study are reconstructions of these soft sculptures.

The three case studies raised three different questions about conservation; for the first one, how to maintain the aesthetic and social value of a soft sculpture which slowly collapses and loses paint because of the shrinkage of its stuffing (as exposed in Chapter 6.5.1)? The discussions with Mora have shown that for the artist the free-standing character allowed easy display of the sculpture on a shelf; in addition, Mora made clear that her sculptures were not meant to be battered-looking (Mora 2013 a), and stressed it again the day she donated this sculpture.

For the second one, the question was how to address the extreme fading of a soft sculpture, probably exposed to light for years, which has only a ghost of the original paint layer ‘printed’ in the fabric? This was a delicate problem, given that Mora has indicated that she wants her sculptures to be looking good, but at the same time is very protective of her authorship and had until recently repainted her own creations (although no example of repainted soft sculptures was brought to this author’s knowledge). Our previous conservation collaborations have resulted in a certain level of trust from the artist; however, both the extent of the damage and the context of ownership by a public collection made this case very challenging.

For the third one, the question was how could non-free-standing soft sculptures, including some with internal shrinkage, be presented in a safe way that would also
allow both faces to be seen? In addition to the previous statement about the intended aspect of Mora’s sculptures, the study of her practice has shown that she also valued the possibility of handling the sculptures and of seeing both faces.

Case study no.1 involves the making of a replica, to understand the fabrication process and to enable a trial of the proposed treatment. After assessment, this treatment was implemented on the soft sculpture, and the artist was consulted about the result. Case study no.2 involves a consultation with the artist that resulted in the decision to not intervene; in this case, the conservator’s role was to document the work and the consultation process, at the exclusion of any action on the object. Case study no.3 involves making reconstructions (freely inspired from Mora’s iconography) that share the physical and technical characteristics of Mora’s soft sculptures, and creating for them visually friendly display/storage supports that would reduce handling while still enabling access to them. The artist was also asked for feedback on the final prototypes.

In the three case studies, the description of the objects and a condition report are summarized as key points. This chapter’s focus is on analysing treatments as practical outcomes of the decision-making process, and as tangible developments of embodied knowledge about the artist and the works. The chapter details the decision rationale for each treatment, which is then described briefly; this is followed by a comparative discussion of the three treatments. The chapter concludes with practical recommendations for the ongoing care of Mora’s other types of works such as murals, oil paintings, embroideries and masks.

### 7.1 Background to the three case studies

It was fortunate for this research to have access to two original soft sculptures, and for both to have the possibility to discuss conservation treatment options. The first sculpture, the *Lady with horns* 69 presented as case study no. 1, was part of Mora’s personal collection until 29 April 2015. During a discussion on the conservation of her dolls, she retrieved it from a studio’s corner, assessed its condition and offered it as a treatment trial sample. This donation went with a request to see the treatment result

---

69 Given title. Mora generally does not give titles to her works and leaves it to her gallery.
when completed. She would sign it if she was happy with the outcome (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 29 April).

The ethical conflict between doing valuable research in an independent manner and accepting a donation was evaluated by considering the motivations, and the potential outcomes of this situation. The nature of that donation, a small doll, and its physical condition limited its financial value. The donation was conditioned to the conservation of the doll. However, the doll’s small dimensions and its moderately damaged condition made the transaction acceptable for both of us in economic terms and in terms of work involved. Since she parted from the object, Mora was not seeking either free conservation work. She nevertheless retained some control over the conservation process, by requesting to assess the doll after treatment, and put an economic value to her appreciation by saying that she would add her signature if she approved the treatment’s outcome. Therefore, choosing and implementing a treatment that fitted into the research framework but may not meet Mora’s approval was possible. Because this doll would become the conservator’s property, the roles of conservator and owner were combined and therefore the decision-making process was simplified. In mid and long term, if sanctioned by Mora, the conserved doll could have a pedagogical role, illustrating a potential approach to conservation issues in professional publications.

For Mora, mid and long term benefits included renewed interest in this part of her production, an interest often compromised because of the physical condition of the dolls; the sample treatment would potentially provide solutions to damage that could enhance the value of the dolls. In addition, by donating this doll at this moment of the research, after nearly three years of regular encounters and feedback on the research work, Mora kept the risk of not being satisfied with the outcome, in which case she would have given a semi damaged doll for no benefit, to a minimal level. Considering that all parties had a clear understanding of the risks and benefits associated with the transaction, and that they were equitably balanced, the donation was accepted with its conditions as a proof of Mora’s interest in further participating in the conservation research on her work, and of her original and generous way of doing it.
The second sculpture (presented as case study no. 2), *Dancing girl by the sea*,\(^{70}\) is a relatively large piece (70 x 49 x 10 cm overall) that originally belonged to a private collection. The owner lent this work and many others to Heide Museum of Modern Art for their 2011 exhibition titled ‘Mirka’, and subsequently donated some of these works to the museum, including this soft sculpture; the owner had previously hoped that it could be restored by Mora, which never eventuated (Walicka 2013, pers. comm., 13 December). She also provided a drawing by Mora representing a very similar creature, published in the magazine *Meanjin*\(^{71}\) as an illustration for Paul Valery’s poem ‘*Le Cimetière Marin*’ (*The marine graveyard*). Heide Museum of Modern Art was more inclined to keep the doll as part of Mora’s archive, rather than accession it to the permanent collection, given its very poor condition (most of the paint layer has gone).\(^{72}\) Because of this research and associated regular access to Mora, it was decided to consult her on the issue of its conservation. Regardless of the direction of Mora’s recommendation, the final decision would remain Heide’s.

The third case study involves reconstructions of the soft sculptures. Looking at Mora’s soft sculptures highlighted their specific surface textures and their often worn out condition; this point, already mentioned by William Mora, prompted the making of reconstructions, with the aims to understand the fabrication process and to find supports that would minimize the damage caused by handling and display. Two different types of reconstructions, matte painted and oil painted, were made, according to the two main types of soft sculptures produced by Mora; the technical details of the process are described in Chapter Six. Complicated shapes and structural defaults caused by ageing, such as floppy legs or wings, were also intentionally recreated in order to address this issue in the prototypes of support.

---

\(^{70}\) Mora’s title, given to a drawing very similar to this sculpture published in 1976. Mora dedicated a copy of this drawing to the original owner of the sculpture, giving it a title.

\(^{71}\) ‘The marine graveyard’, by Paul Valery, translation from French by Ian Reid, *Meanjin*, 35 (3), 1976, p265-271. Mora produced several illustrations for the poem, as well as another one titled ‘Lagoons’ in the same issue of *Meanjin*, p311

7.2 Case study No 1. ‘Lady with horns’. Interventive conservation

7.2.1 Description of the work

*Lady with horns* is a small (30 x 20 x 6cm overall) freestanding soft sculpture, which features on p. 92 in Mora’s 2003 book *Love and Clutter*. Painted both sides, it represents a purple haired lady with two long and intricate horns painted with yellow and purple stripes (Figures 90 and 91). While the colours of the face are identical, the lady’s expression is different on both sides; one awake and one sleeping. The skirt has a tartan pattern, yellow on the ‘awake’ side, blue on the ‘sleeping’ side. The paint layer is matte and thin, probably the casein paint Plaka, extensively used by Mora at the time the soft sculptures were created.

The sculpture differs from other free standing examples in the way it is stuffed: while the upper part of the figure (head, horns, bust) is filled with synthetic foam, the skirt is filled with plaster, visible on the base, which does not feature a painted cardboard base, as often seen in Mora’s freestanding works (Figure 92). Technically, this is a ‘soft sculpture’ in its upper part and a ‘hard’ sculpture in the lower part. This is not a unique case, but is not very common in Mora’s production.

![Figure 90. Mirka Mora, Lady with horns, private collection](image)

Figure 90. Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*, private collection
7.2.2 Existing condition

Structure
Due to the ageing of the foam stuffing, which loses volume and becomes crumbly with time, the upper part of the sculpture has partly collapsed (Figure 92), causing creases and paint loss. The same has happened to the horns which have creased and fallen towards the blue side (Figures 93, 94 and 95). The plaster base of the sculpture is in good state of conservation.
Surface
The surface is dirty and abraded in many places due to handling and rubbing (Figure 96). The collapsing of the bust and the horns has caused cracking, flaking and numerous paint losses in the areas along the folds, leaving the bare fabric visible. The skirt area, filled with plaster, is well conserved and only affected by grime and light surface abrasion. The plaster traces on the painted surface fit the position of five fingers and
were probably made by the artist handling the sculpture with plaster stained hands (Figure 97).

![Figure 96. Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*, detail before treatment with abrasions and grime](image)

**Figure 96.** Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*, detail before treatment with abrasions and grime

![Figure 97. Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*, detail before treatment with artist’s fingerprints](image)

**Figure 97.** Mirka Mora, *Lady with horns*, detail before treatment with artist’s fingerprints

### 7.2.3 Decision-making process

For these three case studies, a combination of Dinah Eastop’s and Joel Taylor’s models of decision making discussed in Chapter Six was applied. The very first element in the decision process is the assessment of the object, in terms of its materiality, existing physical condition and aesthetic appearance; this was described in the previous two paragraphs. The next step, in both models, is to identify the stakeholders. Eastop then recommends to identify the brief, and use Kopytoff’s notion of biography of objects (Kopytoff 1986) to determine the point(s) of historical significance chosen for the object, in this particular context. The issue of access is also considered at this point, as it equally influences the decision. Upon determining which aspect of the object will be enhanced at the time of conservation, and which type of access will be provided, the treatment is developed accordingly.
Stakeholders

Every conservation decision involves at least two stakeholders (owner and conservator); for contemporary art, it also involves the artist as a maker and as a producer of intention. In this case, the stakeholders are conflated: the owner was the artist up to the point of conservation, when it became the conservator, by virtue of a donation. That donation was inspired by the act of conservation; Mora donated this doll because it could be conserved, and because she was interested in the treatment’s outcome.

Brief

The brief is generally given by the owner, either a private person or a public collection represented by a curator, to the conservator; it states the owner’s expected (or wished) outcomes of the conservation process (Eastop 2009, p. 18). In this case, the brief comprised of an oral agreement between Mora and the author, subjective and rather vague in its wording: to please the artist. This was the opportunity to use the findings of this research work with Mora, which provided a solid base for assessing the doll’s significance. The challenge was to show her that it could be conserved to her satisfaction, in other words to write a ‘manifest for sensitive conservation’ through this doll.

Point(s) of historical significance

The assessment of the doll’s significance was based on the findings explored in this research, which helped capturing an idea of the artist’s intent at this point of her life. Thoroughly documented, this definition of the artist’s intent provided a knowledge-based secure pathway for decision-making. Using Eastop’s list of questions, the significance of the doll could be assessed against various criteria such as the period of its creation, its place in a collection, the time of its conservation, the context of its display and the role of this object in that context.

The precise time of creation is not known, and not remembered by Mora; it can therefore be located broadly between 1971 to the late 1980s, the period of production of the soft sculptures. This doll belonged to the artist’s personal collection since its

---

73 Eastop’s non-exhaustive list includes: Why this object? Why conserve it now? Where is it displayed? What role does the object have in this display? See chap 6 259 for more details.
creation. In Mora’s studio, most works are in rotating display, appearing on the shelves for a while, then disappearing from view and being replaced by others, not necessarily in the same place. The photograph of this doll featured in *Love and Clutter*, published in 2003 (Mora 2003, p. 92), is taken in the same location, suggesting that it has been on display constantly for the last twelve years. However, as Mora did not mention anything specific related to this doll, and chose to part with it, the work has no particular place in her collection, other than being witness to this period and being part of the artist’s visual surroundings. All the works in Mora’s studio are in various states of preservation, which does not seem to alter Mora’s willingness to display them.

The decision of conservation is contingent to this research on Mora’s materials. Our presence that day in the back corner of Mora’s studio where the doll was displayed prompted its choice as a potential candidate for conservation. One of the doll’s horns was folded against the window, which did not show in the photograph from 2003 (Mora 2003, p.92) and indicate further degradation since that date. The change of ownership at the time of conservation implies new conditions of display after treatment; as the work now belongs to a conservator’s private collection, it is likely to be on permanent display, in good conditions, and has more chances to be loaned for future exhibitions. Because of the doll’s use as a case study in this research, and possibly in later publications, it will potentially have more resonance in the world of heritage conservation, changing its role from personal to semi-public.

In light of these considerations, the following points were selected as being significant in the doll’s life: the time of its production and the moment of its conservation. The rationale for choosing these points is developed below.

*Time of production*

Materially the doll is not typical of Mora’s general production of soft sculptures, although not a unique case. There is no reference to this method of filling with two different materials in Mora’s writings, nor in the literature about her soft sculptures. Mora identified the material, plaster of Paris but did not elaborate on the technique, only

---

74 The recent exhibition at Heide ‘from the home of Mirka Mora’ (2015) showed many of these unseen pieces
saying that ‘sometimes I used plaster’ in conversation without detailing when or how, and added that she did not use it very often.75 Another example of a doll partially filled with plaster is held in Heide’s collection.76 It is a not freestanding figure, with a plaster-filled sea-bird on its head. In both examples, the shrinkage of cloth due to the plaster’s initial moisture content and the contrast between the two filling materials have created internal tensions, exacerbated by the shrinkage of the synthetic foam over time while the volume of plaster remains constant. In Lady with horns, this has resulted in the collapsing of the bust; in the Heide collection’s doll, the thin fabric had torn, and the sea-bird’s head and fins became separated from the rest of the body. Mora explained that she constantly tested new ideas for the soft sculptures, as she needed to keep her workshop students interested (Mora 2014b). She would then reuse and refine some of these processes in her own artistic production, or discard them. The doll illustrates this experimental practice, and can be seen as an illustration of the twenty-three-year period of Mora’s teaching career. More broadly, the doll reflects the arts policies of the 1980s and 1990s that encouraged artists to work with the community in public works, schools’ workshops or adult education.

The conservation treatment of Lady with horns is therefore an opportunity to explore the mode of production used in this hybrid soft sculpture, by recreating the process of making with similar materials and examining the artist’s skills that are brought into play at the time of production. These questions were addressed by making a replica, which will be described further in this chapter, before considering any conservation option.

Moment of conservation

The opportunity of conservation treatment is directly linked to this research on Mora’s materials. Due to the conservation focus of this research, Mora offered this work, which otherwise would have stayed in her collection. This donation attests to the artist’s wish for her dolls to be conserved, and not left to degrade, a wish actively mediated by her providing a sample. At the present time, there are diverse attitudes amongst collectors about whether these dolls can be conserved or not, because of their fragility and of their status, hovering

75 In her studio, Mora keeps another -much smaller- example of soft sculpture combining ‘soft’ stuffing and plaster, which seems in good condition. Almost all the soft sculptures observed in her studio are stuffed with foam or beads; the plaster experimentation did not seem to satisfy her as much as the other techniques.

between works of art and playing toys. Mora’s gallery has indicated that it is difficult for them to display the dolls because many of them are in bad condition. The collapsing of their structure due to the foam’s shrinkage and the resulting flaking of their painted surface makes them extremely fragile to handling: every time there is a movement in their structure, which inevitably happens when they are handled or when one tries to get a sense of the original shapes, the sculptures keep deteriorating and losing more flakes of paint.

**Options**

An option would be to consolidate the painted surface and present the doll flat on a horizontal surface. However, while it respects the physical integrity of the doll, this would not allow both faces to be seen easily, and therefore not entirely agree with the original intent. Mora refers to the soft sculptures as dolls, which evokes the tactile dimension of access to the works, and the sensory proximity to the sculptures, made not only to be looked at but to be held in people’s hands.

Therefore, to allow a better structural solidity, it would be necessary to refill the doll in order to provide proper support to the painted surface. Mora has indicated that she would agree with this (Mora 2013 b). Given the collapsing of the figure’s bust and horns, this sculpture is a good candidate for re-filling, especially as it is a free-standing sculpture, a feature compromised in its present state. Unfortunately, like all of Mora’s freestanding sculptures, there are no final stitches that can be undone to re-open it; the works were filled through the base, which was subsequently closed and sealed with cardboard and paint. In the case of *Lady with horns*, the plaster filling closed the base, providing rigidity at the same time. Thus, there is no access to the interior, which would call for more experimental solutions. The possibility of injecting a liquid foam that would then swell and solidify was explored but no material was judged to meet satisfactory conservation criteria such as chemical neutrality and time resistance. It may be a possibility to explore further in the future.

The ‘experimental’ character of this doll in Mora’s production and its new context of ownership makes it a good candidate for ‘experimental’ conservation, a process that requires both the artist’s and the owner’s agreements, and the conservator’s willingness. Because the doll will remain in the conservator’s possession, its future role will be that of a case study, within the framework of this research. The treatment becomes a means to demonstrate the value that conservation can add to this type of objects, considered
un-displayable at this stage of deterioration, and a means to promote conservation in
general through a particular and very popular aspect of Mora’s production.
As we have seen in Chapter Six, Mora’s attitude has changed over time from being
almost careless with her soft sculptures to valuing both the usability and the appearance
of the dolls. *Lady with horns* can then be viewed as an example of the artist’s present
attitude towards conservation, triggered by an academic research on her materials.

7.2.4 Replica and treatment
The shrinkage of the stuffing only concerned the top part of the doll. As mentioned
previously, there was no external stitches that could be re-opened. However, the
alteration itself provided the solution, by giving the means of access: the fabric was
uncovered where the paint losses have occurred and could be cut locally to make an
entry point for the filling. Doing this implied that in order to mask the cut, the paint loss
would then be filled with ground layer and toned. As this proposal was quite
interventionist, it was decided to test the treatment’s potential results and risks on a
replica, before making the decision for the original, in line with current conservation
practice (Barker & Ormsby 2015). The treatment therefore unfolded in two phases that
address the two points of significance determined above (time of production and
moment of conservation). First a replica was made, informing the understanding of the
time of production, and providing an experimental sample for the conservation
treatment. After assessment of its effect on the replica, the treatment was applied to the
original sculpture, integrating the knowledge gained in the first phase; the treatment was
documented thoroughly. The documentation and sharing of the whole process
(assessment/decision-making/ replica/ treatment) illustrates the decision to enact
conservation at this point in time.

Making of a replica
Three years of research into Mora’s materials and processes had already provided a
body of knowledge on the soft sculptures’ conditions of production, through interviews,
literary research, and in practicing reconstructions. Mora made the soft sculptures in
several stages; she drew them directly with paint on flat fabric and machine-sewed
them, filled them with foam and/or beads, and either stitched them close or glued a
cardboard base to close them. When she used plaster in the coating or the filling of the
sculptures, it was very fine and liquid; the dolls were either painted with oil paint mixed with a stand oil/dammar varnish mixture, or with commercial casein paint, thick or diluted with water, often without prior ground layer.

For this specific sculpture, making a ‘replica’ had two aims: to understand a specific aspect of the technical process, namely the use of plaster associated with foam in the stuffing, and to provide a sample for testing the proposed method of refilling. Figures 98 to 101 illustrate the replica-making process implemented for this research, from drawing onto fabric up to the final result. Replicating the horns was deliberately omitted, because of the very long time necessary to sew and stuff them, with no benefit to the topic of investigation. However, an inquiry was made to Mora about her technique for stuffing such tiny shapes; she revealed that she used a very tiny hook similar to a crocheting hook, inserting very small amounts of stuffing at a time, and confirmed that it was extremely time consuming (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 28 September). The head and the bust of the replica were stuffed with acrylic wool, the rest being filled with plaster. The latter operation was difficult: the weight of plaster is considerable even in small quantities, so the proper positioning of the sculpture prior to filling is essential to avoid it toppling over. Finding an efficient setting to pour the plaster into the fabric shape was not easy. The chosen setting involved the fabric shape to be hung from one side to the top of a heavy container; as a result, it ended up with a flat back and bulky bust (Figure 100). Obviously, Mora had a different technique, letting her sculpture hang evenly from both sides, and she managed to do this without damaging the fragile horns. This was not investigated further due to time constraints, but is an important remark to note, because it gives insight into the complexity of the process.

**Figure 98.** Making a replica, step 1: drawing on the fabric and cutting; step 2: sewing and turning the shape over
During the filling process, it was observed that the water from the liquid plaster totally impregnated the fabric and dripped through it, causing internal tensions. The regularity of the place of contact between the plaster and the synthetic stuffing was also difficult to
control: the sculpture is placed upside down for plaster filling, and plaster is in a liquid state which allow it to infiltrate through the acrylic stuffing beneath. Indeed, the bust of the replica ended up rigid on one side and half-soft/half-rigid on the other. The final texture of the waist and bust is therefore a bit unpredictable. On hearing about this predicament, Mora commented that she used very fine plaster, but poured it in steps, only a tablespoon at a time; this probably allowed her to control the penetration of plaster more effectively. It is also a proof of her good knowledge of her materials and their behaviour during fabrication.

After drying of the plaster, the sample was coated lightly with gesso to mimic the original, and painted with acrylic based craft paint (Figure 101). It was then manually squashed and folded, in order to create losses; this was a bit more difficult with a recently painted doll, as the materials were still quite flexible. The resulting flakes around the loss were consolidated with acrylic adhesive, a slit was opened in the uncovered fabric in the neck, stuffing was removed to mimic the collapsing of the original. The acrylic wool was then reinserted gradually with a bamboo stick, and the slit partially closed with adhesive (Figure 102).\textsuperscript{77} The area was then filled with semi-liquid filling (which prevents any fraying and effectively closes the opening) and inpainted with watercolours (Figures 103 and 104). The conclusions from this replica-making phase are listed in the following table.

\textbf{Figure 102.} Testing treatment: creating paint losses, opening slit in the loss and inserting filling

\textsuperscript{77} Initially it was thought that it could be stitched close using a semicircular needle; it proved unsuccessful as the needle would come out too far from the cut and make holes in the adjacent painted area. A lack of experience with circular needles might also be a factor.
Figure 103. Testing treatment: closing slit and filling with gesso

Figure 104. Testing treatment: after in-painting the loss, final state

Table XII. Conclusions of the replica making process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding creative process</th>
<th>Testing conservation treatment proposal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long and relatively tricky realization, requires quite a few props that have to be ready because of limited time frame before plaster sets. Relatively long drying times.</td>
<td>It is possible to open a slit in the fabric uncovered by losses and use it to insert more stuffing with minor damage (old artworks’ materials might be less flexible though). Dentist tools or small crochet hooks are useful for pushing the stuffing, must be inserted very tiny amounts at a time. A surprising amount of stuffing needed at the waist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight is a factor to take into account in the realization settings. It also affects storage and travel possibilities.</td>
<td>Stitching the slit close with a semicircular needle too risky. More damaging than practical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty process; requires lots of cleaning, as opposed to soft stuffing.</td>
<td>Alternative is to put adhesive on the sides of slit to stop fraying. Filling will stabilize the area and prevent fraying completely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The process would be quite difficult to manage for complicated and narrow shapes (horns) where risk of bubbles and uneven filling is high. If horns were successfully filled with plaster the result would be very fragile.</td>
<td>Filling needs to be relatively liquid to be used with a small round brush to match broken contours. Needs several coats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No example of an entirely plaster filled sculpture (for these reasons?)</td>
<td>In-painting with watercolours gives good aesthetic result. (use varnish colours in case of oil-painted doll).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The replica process brought to light the technical constraints of production, which are potentially the reasons why Mora did not use this technique very often. The cycle of soft sculpture production is already very time-consuming when employing the ‘dry’ techniques (stuffing with foam or beads), as mentioned in Chapter Three. Using plaster did not seem to add significant benefit to the final appearance of the dolls; rather it seems to impede the creative process by limiting the complexity of shapes and creating excessive weight.

The replica sculpture also performed well as a sample for testing treatment. The test on the replica gave satisfactory results aesthetically and was considered safe for implementation on the original work of art with only minor adjustments (abandoning the needle stitch and replacing it with adhesive ‘stoppage’). Although the replica has not been artificially aged and therefore probably behaved better than aged materials, it was submitted to a much more severe ‘damaging treatment’ than what happens in reality, so the experiment was considered to provide a sufficiently clear understanding of the feasibility of this treatment.

_Treatment on the original_

The soft sculpture was surface-cleaned, consolidated and the loose flakes secured. A 1cm slit was cut in the bare fabric, exposed by the losses at the figure’s waist, to provide an entry point for refilling. The blue side was chosen because it presented a larger paint loss so the operation was less risky for the original paint on this side. Very small quantities of synthetic filling were inserted one at a time using a thin bamboo stick, until the volume was satisfactorily recovered (Figure 105). Smaller slits were also cut at the base of each horn to allow refilling (Figure 106). The openings were then sealed with adhesive; the losses, now raised to level on the refilled volume, were recoated (Figures 107 and 108) and in-painted with watercolours to match the surroundings (Figures 109 and 110). With the aim of keeping the ‘homely used’ aspect, only the largest abrasions were toned down on the body of the sculpture.

The conserved doll is now structurally sound as it can stand on its own, without collapsing at the waist or the horns and damaging the paint layer in the process; it is
cleaner and the largest losses have been in-painted, but it retains a patina of age that differentiates it from a newly made doll (Figure 110). It remains delicate due to its inherent structural fragility and its shape, the long horns in particular are very susceptible to shocks. Nevertheless, it can still be handled with care, without damage.

Figure 105. Treatment: restuffing through a slit in the waist

Figure 106. Treatment: restuffing the base of the horns through small slits

Figure 107. Treatment: closing the slits with adhesive, filling the losses
Figure 108. Treatment: closing the slits with adhesive, filling the losses

Figure 109. Mirka Mora, *Lady with Horns*, after treatment

Figure 110. Mirka Mora, *Lady with Horns*, after treatment
7.3 Case study No 2. ‘Dancing girl on the sea’. Non-intervention

7.3.1 Description of the work

The sculpture is a creature with a large oblong shaped body, from which two short legs emerge ending with hooves, as well as a long, curving and spiky pointed tail and four bird heads on long necks. Two of the bird’s heads face in one direction and two heads face in the opposite direction. In the central body shape, an angel with open wings is painted on both faces. There is no coating on the fabric, and the paint layer is probably casein craft paint. (Figures 112 and 113).
7.3.2 Existing condition

The doll is extensively faded and flaking on both faces. Most of the paint layer has fallen off, with traces remaining locally, indicating that the original paint layer was thick and matte. The tail seems unfinished, with the original blue drawing visible and no traces of colour; the body, wings and face of the angel seem to have been only partially painted; the birds’ heads and necks show traces of vivid colour, which also appear on the legs and hooves. The remaining traces on the head are relatively thick (Figure 114), while the central part only retains the ghost of the angel, impregnated in the fabric (Figure 115). The articulations of the legs, tail and necks are creased and loose due to the shrinking of the foam filling. As a result, the sculpture is not self-supported, and cannot be handled safely.
Figure 115. *Untitled* (Dancing girl on the sea) 1971, fabric, paint, foam stuffing, 70 x 49 x 10 cm, Heide Museum of Modern Art Archives, Gift of Marzena Walicka 2010 (detail)

7.3.3 Decision-making process

*Stakeholders*

Using the framework detailed in the first case study, the stakeholders involved in this decision can be identified as the original owner (a private individual), the actual owner (Heide Museum of Modern Art, a public collection), the artist and the conservator. All stakeholders recognized that the actual state of the soft sculpture was not compatible with its display in a public collection. However, the advices differed concerning the potential options. While a private individual and an artist have their personal intellectual framework, the public collection and the conservator are bound to operate within museum conservation ethical guidelines, which usually discourages extensive recreations of works of art, except in specific contexts such as industrially made works.

*Brief*

The brief, or what was expected from the conservation process, was multi-layered and contradictory. The original owner wished the sculpture to be repainted either by the artist or by a conservator; in other words, she wished the treatment to return the sculpture to a ‘new’ appearance, erasing the visual effects of time. From a legal perspective, the previous owner’s wishes have only consultative value, since the work was donated to Heide Museum of Modern Art. The new owner (the museum) did not seek treatment at this point and wished to keep the sculpture as part of its Mirka Mora archive, as a sample of a technical line of production in Mora’s oeuvre and of the variety of shapes that make up her artistic vocabulary. However, they were happy to
consult with the artist to have her opinion on this case, reserving the right to make a treatment decision following Mora’s input.

**Point of historic significance**

The significance of the sculpture could be assessed on various levels. Technically it is one of many examples of Mora’s matte painted dolls, its partly unfinished/partly degraded state providing information about the creative process, such as the evidence of drawing on the tail, and the absence of render. The long necks and tails and the relatively large size of the sculpture illustrate Mora’s facility to translate her drawings in three dimensions regardless of the inherent technical limitations of the sewing/stuffing work.

On a visual level, even though most of the paint layer has disappeared, the traces present on the sculpture’s body makes it an interesting example of ‘painting within a painting’, where an extra character is added in two dimensions on top of the existing three-dimensional character. In another soft sculpture seen during this research, a human face is floating on the neck of the main creature, a two headed dragon, dated 1974 (Figure 115). Mora used the same process of superimposing shapes in her drawings and paintings from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its use in three-dimensional artworks dating shows the continuity of her artistic research and the fluidity of circulation between the technical processes used by the artist, already mentioned in Chapter Four. The date of the work is unknown, but could be close to the drawing published in *Meanjin* in 1976; by Mora’s own admission, not all drawings let themselves become sculptures; this one probably belongs to the successful category, and is also linked in iconography to the dragons, crabs and other multi legged or headed creatures that inhabit the artist’s production in these years.

The reasons for choosing this object as a case study are diverse and match the competing narratives that it carries. Firstly, it answers the original owner’s query. Secondly, it provides the museum with further insight into Mora’s opinion on its conservation, and contributes to Heide’s continuing relationship with the artist. Thirdly, it provides the opportunity to discuss with Mora some possible treatment options for a very altered soft sculpture, and gain insight into her attitude towards this type of problem.
To record the artist’s opinion, the sculpture was brought to her studio and her advice requested on what should be done. Mora’s first reaction was to say that it should be repainted, because she does not like to see her sculptures in a damaged state; but, when asked if she was ready to take up the task, a possibility that would then need to be discussed with the museum, she admitted quickly that she was unwilling to do this, having moved to other types of creative realisations. Her next suggestion was that the conservator should repaint it. However, there are little indications about the original surface colours, what is left being mostly the drawing. When this was pointed out, she said that she trusted me to do something in the spirit of her soft sculptures. In this case, Mora was evidently trying to find a quick solution to the problem, without anticipating ethical questions. At this point of the discussion, it was necessary to share with her some of the overarching issues that arise in conservation practice, such as authenticity and authorship, even though these are not always part of artists’ preoccupations. Should such an intervention take place, the extent of the existing damage would have led to extensive re-creation work, directly pointing to these essential issues. Mora was also made aware that a conservator would not feel comfortable to do this.

Upon reflection, Mora admitted that should this re-creation happen, she could no longer be the sole author, which was unacceptable for her. She therefore concluded that the only satisfying solution was to document it and do nothing else. This was the solution favoured by both the museum and researcher, thus reaching consensus between owner, conservator and artist. The historic significance of the sculpture was thus located at the moment of the donation, in the current degraded state, which justified the decision of non-intervention.

7.3.4 Treatment

In this case, the treatment consists of documenting the object and the decision-making process with the date, for future reference. Options of display are always possible even in a degraded state, but not considered at present by the museum, in agreement also with the artist’s wishes.
7.4 Case study No3. Display/storage stands. Preventive conservation

7.4.1 Description of the works

The series of reconstructions is made up of two different groups illustrating different concerns: a group of four acrylic- painted soft sculptures, and one oil-painted soft sculpture. All are painted on both faces and none of them is free standing.

The series of acrylic painted soft sculptures includes a large angel (46 x 27 x 4 cm, Figure 115), a crab (22 x 10 x 5cm, Figure 116), a mermaid (40 x 18 x 6cm, Figure 117) and a small bird (9 x 8 x3cm, Figure 118). The crab and bird are heavily decorated on both faces. The bird is made in the U shape frequently used by Mora for winged angels’ heads (the head of the angel sits in the centre of a U-shaped set of wings framing its face; Figure 119).

The oil painted soft sculpture, of small dimensions (24 x 8 x 5cm, Figure 120), represents a standing bell boy, painted on both faces, one side with plain blue jacket and orange pants, one side with green and yellow chequered jacket and grey pants.

Figure 116. Angel, view of both sides
Figure 117. Crab, view of both sides

Figure 118. Mermaid

Figure 119. Bird
7.4.2 Existing condition

The mermaid and angel are intentionally under-stuffed. Because of this, one wing and one leg of the angel are sagging, and the mermaid needs support when handling to avoid creasing. The hotel bell boy is structurally sound but, because it is not freestanding, it has to be displayed laid flat; only one face can be seen at a time, the characteristic display dilemma for Mora’s soft sculptures. The crab and bird have no structural problem but share the same display problem as the bell boy, with added concerns; for the crab, a near horizontal display is desirable for purposes of realism. For the bird, a near vertical display is desirable for the same reasons, in order to respect the ethereal character of the creature.

7.4.3 Decision making process

Stakeholders
Mora’s dolls were originally displayed hanging from the ceiling with a string (W Mora 2013). When exhibited in this manner, people could have access to both sides of the dolls. The dolls observed in Mora’s house are kept in prams and showcases, showing one face at a time, the other one being easily accessible by handling. Mora has roughly
repaired some of the dolls in her collection, for example a dragon’s leg repaired with packing tape, probably maintaining a creased and sagging leg. In the houses of private collectors, the display varies from simple nails supporting the dolls on the wall to individual showcases. Heide Museum of Modern Art exhibited some of Mora’s dolls lying flat in showcases in her 1999 retrospective, as well as in the 2011 and 2014 exhibitions. All these display choices privilege one face over the other, and all either ignore the structural problems if the dolls are shown on the wall, or are heavily constrained by them at the expense of a ‘lively’ display. This author’s personal experiences of handling the dolls, either at Heide or in Mora’s house, have highlighted the difficulty of doing so safely, because of their lack of self-support and the fragility of certain articulations or assemblages.

**Brief**

Using Eastop’s framework again, various viewpoints from dolls’ owners were collected, revealing people’s perception of the dolls’ condition, and the way in which it affected their interaction with the dolls and potentially altered their significance. Heide museum would like to display its collection of dolls more often, because people love to see them, but is concerned by the bad condition of most of them. Three of them were conserved for the exhibition *From the home of Mirka Mora*, and displayed in a window case. Likewise, private collectors who have not chosen a ‘museum like’ display deplore the state of their dolls and would like to see them restored (Gantner 2014; Walicka 2013, pers. comm., 13 December). William Mora acknowledges the popularity of the dolls but deplores the poor physical state of many of them, which prevents them from being displayed in Mora’s exhibitions. From these statements, it can be deducted that the unformulated brief would be to find a treatment for the dolls that enables their safe handling and display.

**Point of significance**

Having established that the condition of the dolls often prevents their display, a survey of the alterations was conducted on the examples viewed for this research. The most common ones were identified as being structural solidity and access. To simplify the

---

78 Conservation done by University of Melbourne Cultural Conservation Services in 2013.
process, a decision was made to consider the whole production of the dolls as one doll, and to place significance broadly at the time of display in its owner’s residence.

**Options**

Having identified the conservation issues, several options of display were considered, for example hanging display with silicone tubing, or stands with supporting forks at selected strategic areas; however, all these propositions meant handling of the dolls after display, to place them back into a safe storage that needed also to be designed. Quite rapidly it became obvious that the best solution would be for the sculptures to remain permanently on their display support; the brief was then redefined as follows: to mitigate the conservation issues by designing display supports that would easily transform into storage devices, providing constant support to structurally unsound dolls and allowing access to both faces with minimal handling, and without damage.

With these supports, the main goal is to prevent unnecessary movement, which can be damaging to the paint and cloth, in a sustainable manner. The essential criterion is protection: the support must allow handling of the dolls without causing any tensions to the fabric body and paint layer; this can be achieved if the support, instead of the doll, is manipulated. The second criterion is versatility: these supports must be able to be partially disassembled without affecting the integrity of the dolls, and placed into simple storage trays next to the dolls, ready to be remounted for display. The third criterion is visibility: they must allow visual access to both sides of the dolls and preferably allow display in a manner sympathetic to the character represented.

These supports were designed to accommodate reconstructions of dolls rather than original works, because a number of them could be provided, and the research could proceed by trial and error without risk for the original works. In their final version described in this thesis, the supports are object-tailored prototypes that can be used as models for supporting original dolls.

**7.4.4 Treatment**

After exploring several directions for supports, the idea of a transparent and rigid acrylic sheet cut to the shape of the doll was retained. The shape is schematic and cut slightly smaller than the original form, to avoid visual disturbance. The design was made in collaboration with a museum framer colleague, because of her experience in designing
supports for fragile objects, such as large tapas and bark paintings, and her familiarity with the materials generally used for stands (wood, acrylic sheets).

The doll is attached to the cut shape by transparent silicone tubing (diameter 1.3mm), at strategic points to provide maximum support. A small piece of acrylic of the same thickness, bent to create a sleeve that is closed at the top end, is glued on the shape’s reverse. An acrylic rod that will act as a column is inserted into this sleeve, while its other end is inserted into a wooden base. In this way the doll can be displayed standing up, with one face in plain sight while the reverse is visible through the acrylic sheet. The wooden base and the rod are easily disassembled (Figures 121). The base’s thickness is not excessive so it can fit within a storage tray with the object (Figure 122) The materials and size of the base and rod can be changed, should someone wish for instance for a higher upright presentation or a transparent base.

Figure 121. Angel on its display/storage stand, view of both sides
Different shapes have been made for the support structure, according to the objects. The bird (Figure 123) and the angel can have long rods to float in the air. The hotel bell boy’s rod is cut to match exactly the doll’s length so that the boy’s feet are just touching the base, giving him some foundation (Figure 124). The placement of the silicone tubing responds to the need of support at specific points while trying to be as less intrusive visually as possible. In the case of the mermaid, a transparent acrylic sheet was bent as a cradle base, its depth calculated to both support the doll and to allow flat storage in a tray next to the sculpture. The mermaid is a frequent theme in Mora’s oeuvre, and this is an easy and aesthetic solution to display these figures in a ‘realistic’ way, while allowing support along the entire length as well as visibility of both sides. The mermaid can be secured on the cradle with silicone tubing or left free, according to its condition (Figure 125).
The crab was supported on a transparent acrylic sheet bent to form a 30 degrees’ angle (Figure 126). The horizontal side sits on the display base; the other side, cut to the crab’s shape, supports the sculpture, secured with silicone tubing. A mirror is placed
under the crab, on top of the horizontal side, to allow viewers to see the other face. In this manner, the crab is displayed ‘realistically’ but both of its faces are in view. Another mirror could be placed strategically to reflect the first mirror, and have both faces visible ‘together’.

7.5 Comparative analysis

7.5.1 Case study No 1

Mora was very happy with the result of the conservation treatment for Lady with horns, commenting with a certain degree of incredulity: ‘it’s like I had just finished it!’ (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 28 September). Given the care put into respecting the slightly worn out aspect of the doll, it is hoped that she refers broadly to the time before the deterioration went beyond an acceptable point. She liked the fresher look, immediately noticing that it had been cleaned and adding that ‘it look[ed] so good’ (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 28 September), the fact that the doll could now proudly extend its horns and stand tall, in comparison to its previously sagging look, and the fact that there were no more losses to the paint surface. This latter point is noteworthy, because there were still a number of small losses left untouched at the end of the treatment; it highlights how the term ‘losses’ may have a different meaning for an artist, who generally means ‘visually disturbing losses’, and a conservator, whose meaning is more literal. Mora’s attitude confirms the accuracy of the notion of ‘minimal loss of potential meaning’, a concept proposed by Munoz Vinas (2009, p55). This notion refers to the action of recovering just sufficient meaning for the artwork to retain its original and ongoing significance. In this particular case, the artist herself validates the significance; Mora’s reaction to the Lady with Horns (‘It’s like I had just finished it!’) attests to the fact that the conservation work has respected the artist’s intent (Figure 127).
Conservation in general is ‘a response to demands to address change’ (Eastop 2009, p 30); in this case, the author of the work demands that it should be conserved. In responding, the conservator makes choices that privilege some aspects of the work over others, capturing the social and professional thinking of the time. Mora did not try to influence the manner of treatment one way or another; however, we both recognized that the structural condition of the doll was a threat, either to its conservation (this author’s view) or its display and handling (Mora’s view) and that it should be addressed. In the conservator’s response, the degree of intervention was determined in relation to material and social concerns. In other words, the degradation of the materials, which made the doll too weak to be handled or displayed was addressed while integrating the desire to retain the social role of the doll. This role includes:

1. the doll as a companion to be looked at and to be handled
2. the doll as an experimental moment (the use of plaster and foam combined for stuffing) in Mora’s career
3. the doll as evidence of Victoria’s community arts culture of the 1990s
4. the doll as evidence of an artist’s exploration of a theme across a range of different techniques (horned figures appear in paintings, drawings, soft sculptures, embroideries)
5. the doll as a donation (under the condition of treatment)
6. the doll as a didactic example of ‘artist’s sanctioned’ conservation treatment.
In the current context of ownership, the two roles of owner and conservator were combined into one, simplifying the usual negotiation process. The change of ownership adds a new history and new meaning to the doll, and opens new perspectives for its future access and interpretation. Here Taylor’s approach (‘who gets what, when and how’) is useful (Taylor 2014). In terms of access, the situation can be described as: A fragile object (what) came from the artist’s private ownership to the conservator’s private ownership (who), during a collaborative research project on this artist’s materials and their conservation (when and how). The choice was made to restore the structural integrity of the object (what and how) by interfering with its material integrity, such as cutting into the original fabric and adding extra stuffing. This choice resulted in a conserved object that can now be accessed and even handled with some care (who, what, when and how). How many people do so (who) will depend on the future life of the object, but the possibility has been opened for renewed access to the values embodied in this object (when and how). There are of course other potential choices, as discussed in paragraph 7.2.3, and case study No 2 offers another approach to a relatively similar problem. This present option potentially restores the possibility of access as intended originally by the artist. By doing so, it enhances the possibility of renewed interactions with the doll, a mission that is increasingly included in conservation’s goals, as noted by Saunders:

> Contemporary interactions have a valid place in history and the lifetime of an object does not need to be halted at the time of acquisition…. It is already customary to understand preservation in the context of ensuring access, and likewise stewardship can permit a degree of interpretative intervention… This flexibility is essential for the high-access demands of public engagement, outreach and inclusion, which are increasingly common (Saunders 2014, p7).

Making its treatment the subject of a chapter in an academic dissertation and possibly subsequent publications adds another layer in the soft sculpture’s history; it equates to ‘communicating’ it to an audience broader than the two people initially involved in the transaction. The decision to adopt an interventive treatment relies heavily on the interpretation of the meaning of Mora’s materials and processes, and on the interview-based knowledge that she would agree to a structural and aesthetic modification of the doll’s present state. The narrative privileged combines preserving the artist’s creative intention and highlighting the moment of research and interpretation of the meanings in
Mora’s techniques. While such a choice may not be regarded appropriate in a museum context, it can be argued that it accurately reflects the doll’s past history, with its multiple meanings and associated relationships (Eastop 2000), and enables this history to be passed in its present life.

7.5.2 Case study No 2

Compared with the No1, this case highlights the ethical limits of conservation, articulating the difference between conservation and re-creation. On *Lady with Horns*, it was possible to recreate missing parts in the surface decoration without invention, because of their repetitive pattern. Although the intervention concerned both structure and surface, there was no doubt about the authorship and authenticity of the conserved sculpture. On *Dancing girl on the sea*, the amount of re-creation work that would be necessary to regain a satisfying aesthetic appearance was deemed incompatible with both the ethics of conservation and the question of authenticity. This dilemma is common in contemporary art and elicits many different answers according to the context. Works made of ‘perishable’ materials can be left untouched in the name of authenticity, replicated in order to evoke the initial appearance that conveyed a meaning now disappeared due to physical alteration, or even re-created by replacing some or all of the work’s elements, particularly technological parts such as electric bulbs or industrially made objects (Beerkens 2007; Giebeler 2014; de Roemer 2014; Schadler Schaub 2010). However, in Mora’s case, the artist is the producer of the work and she made it clear, after consequent reflection, that her role cannot be substituted.

The soft sculpture retains significance as an original work. It is an historic sample, a sample of iconography, of technique, and a case for preventive conservation, illustrating the potentially rapid degradation of matte soft sculptures in inadequate conditions of display and storage.79 In terms of access, the fact that the sculpture is retained as part of an artist’s archive insures that researchers can access it should there be an interest in its technique or iconography. Repainting it would have prevented access to the original

79 The same private collection includes works in good condition and works displayed in full daylight in the window, having lost all colour; the display conditions seem therefore to be the important factor in the degradation of this soft sculpture.
surface by covering it, which was not deemed an acceptable solution (aside from concerns about ethics, authenticity and authorship). In its current state, the sculpture provides information on the artist’s technique, clearly visible through the extensive losses, on the impact of display conditions upon its physical state and on the artist’s opinion on what is unacceptable change with age on one of her works.

7.5.3 Case study No 3

This case focuses on the issue of preventive conservation in relation to the soft sculptures, and on physical access to the objects. As in case study No1, Taylor’s definition of access (‘who gets what, when and how’) is relevant, helping to determine how to facilitate long-term access to these fragile objects (when and what). Conservation has an essential role in providing means to access the dolls visually (seeing both faces when displayed) and physically (handling them). But different types of conservation privilege different kinds of access. In case study No1, interventive conservation was chosen as an option, in order to prolong direct access to the doll; in case study No 3, a less invasive option was explored, still seeking to prolong access to the dolls, although in a less direct and more systematic manner.

All supports have been shown to Mora, who appreciated them and gave thoughtful feedback on the design, such as advising that the acrylic support should not be seen at all (from one face) when the doll is presented in a vertical display. She also immediately re-positioned the mermaid with its head lower than its tail on the cradle base, an alternative that had not been envisaged; in doing so, she gave her personal touch of creativity to the dolls’ supports, re-appropriating them along the way.

In conceiving and elaborating these supports, the concerns of the soft sculptures’ owners were acknowledged, as well as recognizing that handling and inappropriate storage are detrimental to their conservation. By using reconstructions, suggestions for storage and display are provided that can be used as guidelines and tailored to single objects’ needs. This is intended to provide long term access to objects that otherwise would not be viewed because of their condition, or would have a limited remaining time of display and access because of their already damaged state. Collapsing in the same
support both the functions of display and storage drastically limits direct physical contact with soft sculptures, while allowing safe access, safe viewing and safe handling. The specificities can be refined and the support can adopt different visual features, as long as the principle of continually supporting the object is respected equally with the visibility of both faces. The object on its support, the rod and the base can be stored flat in a tray or a box. This is also valid for the mermaid’s cradle support or the crab’s triangular support.

These suggestions for display and storage consider both real and anticipated material changes to the dolls. They situate the dolls as heritage objects that can be displayed both for their aesthetic appeal and their social value (people love seeing them) and therefore strive to provide a non-direct but visually friendly access to them. The economic aspect has also been considered; these supports are relatively inexpensive, which makes them affordable to private collectors, providing a possibility for long-term conservation of Mora’s soft sculptures that acknowledges their many social locations.

The findings of the case studies are summarised in the following table.

**Table XIII. Case studies summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study No</th>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Decision and rationale</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Artist’s sanction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case study No1 ‘Lady with horns’</td>
<td>Structural degradation</td>
<td>Interventive treatment. Restore structural integrity. Prolong access and handling possibilities.</td>
<td>Re-filling through cuts practiced in paint losses. Close cuts, re-coat and in paint losses.</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donated by artist to the conservator</td>
<td>Paint losses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case study No2 ‘Dancing girl on the sea’</td>
<td>Structural degradation</td>
<td>No intervention; issues of authenticity, authorship, conservation ethics</td>
<td>Documentation of object and decision making process.</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donated by private owner to Heide Museum of Modern Art</td>
<td>Near total loss of paint layer, with ghost impregnated in fabric</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case study No3 Hotel Bell Boy, Bird, Mermaid, Angel and Crab Reconstructions</td>
<td>Find a way to prevent damage to Mora’s soft sculptures</td>
<td>Preventive conservation. Protect sculptures and enable access,</td>
<td>Creation of display/storage supports that stay permanently with sculptures</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These three case studies show the various options open for the conservation of Mora’s soft sculptures, according to three contexts of ownership and of treatment, as well as three different physical states of the sculptures. Care has been taken to consider significance and access in all three cases, and the artist’s sanction has been sought and obtained for each case (Figure 127). These cases are not exhaustive of all conservation options. They are not intended as models *per se* but rather as guides for decision-making processes in the future, with the knowledge that very different types of decision can gain the artist’s approval. To conclude this research, the practical issues of conservation affecting the other parts of Mora’s artistic production will be addressed in the next section.

### 7.6 Recommendations for conservation of Mora’s art

This final section will evaluate the findings of the research against their practical consequences for the conservation of Mora’s work that do not fit the category of soft sculptures. The other areas of Mora’s work that were investigated are her murals, oil paintings, embroideries, and masks, costumes and other props for theatre. For each category, the findings are outlined and evaluated in the following paragraphs; more detailed information and recommendations for future conservation is organized in tables, placed in Appendices One to Four, at the end of this thesis.

This section is brief, as it intends to be used for practice-based conservation. Therefore, the decision-making process that has been applied for the recommendations, mainly based on Eastop’s framework detailed in Chapter Six, is not described in detail. The aim is to be both user friendly and pragmatic, keeping the focus on the practical questions that may arise in the preservation of these categories of works. The corresponding tables in Appendices 1 to 4 proceed from the same logic and intend to be broad guidelines to be used in the eventuality of conservation treatments, in a practical approach.
7.6.1 Murals

Over the three years of this research, most of the known murals by Mora have been investigated. Whenever possible, I personally observed and documented them; I had access to the artist’s diaries corresponding with three important realisations (Perth mural 1983, Ayr mural 1983 and Melbourne Flinders Street mural 1986), which gave valuable insight into the creative process viewed on a daily basis. This account could also be compared with the actual works and with Mora’s memories of it thirty years later. All these findings were recorded in the workbooks described in Chapter One, and each of them was discussed with Mora. The highlight was the rediscovery of the Perth mural, dated 1983, in perfect condition, in storage in Adelaide and its subsequent donation to Heide Museum of Modern Art by its owner. Another rediscovery of an earlier black and white mural from the late 1950s, also in very good condition, in the site of the former Balzac restaurant, occurred at the end of this study, and provided a broader vision of Mora’s mural practice. The most interesting realization was that only some of these works were actually murals in the literal sense of immovable compositions made on a wall, either with paint or with mosaic or low-relief plaster. The other ‘murals’ are in reality paintings on various supports (canvas, metal, board) characterized by their large dimensions and qualified as murals by Mora, as outlined in Chapter Five.

In conservation terms, each mural with its specific technique is therefore a specific case. They are brought together under the sub-heading of ‘murals’ because Mora describes them in those terms and it has become the common way of labelling them. However, because no two murals are made with the same technique, and because of the diversity of information collected (in nature and in quantity) they are organized into separate tables. Each table concerns one mural only, and includes - across five columns- the work’s description, a small photograph, its location, technical description, existing condition report when relevant, mention of previous treatments if relevant, and additional information provided by Mora, her entourage, or the work’s owner. The last section of the table consists of recommendations for the conservation of this mural, derived from its condition and the existing information, including the artist’ advice when relevant.
These recommendations vary from considerations on the overall aspect and well-being of the work, including preventive conservation measures, to more specific technical details such as monitoring selected areas with existing risks. All tables are in Appendix One.

### 7.6.2 Oil paintings

Mora’s oil painting practice spans more than six decades and has evolved over time, her paintings’ texture becoming thicker in the last twenty years. This research concentrated on the late period (2000-2016), as it was possible to get access to material evidence in the form of realia (materials and artworks, finished or in progress), observation of the artist at work and conversation with the artist. Two specific paintings were observed during the process of execution between November 2013 and February 2014, in several encounters with Mora, during which she commented while working on them, providing invaluable insight into her studio practice. These encounters were not tape-recorded; as mentioned before, it was felt at the time that Mora would prefer a less formal approach. She was photographed while working, and her comments were noted down. These observations were completed in May 2014, by examining the finished paintings in William Mora’s gallery storage. This gave sufficient material to document a sequence of paintings from nearly beginning to completion.

Information was also gathered from Mora’s actual canvas supplier and from her immediate entourage (family and gallery staff). This information is valid for the current period, from the time Mora moved in 2000 to the building she shares with her son/gallerist and delegated most of her supplies purchases to him. There is very little precise information about Mora’s habits and art suppliers prior to this time, although her usual pattern was to go shopping close to her studio and choose materials herself; some of the shops have since closed, or Mora ceased to use them because they were now out of walking distance (McCowan 2013).

According to Mora, some features of her painting process have not changed throughout her career, such as her lack of preparatory drawing (instead, she sketches directly on the white background with diluted oil paint), or her habit of signing works immediately
after the first layer of colours is applied (Mora 2015, pers. comm., 18 May). Other features cannot be extrapolated across the whole oeuvre, such as the endless superposition of layers, characteristic of the later years, although the process can be traced back to the 1980s -with a smaller number of layers (personal observations). This information is important for future authentication issues, conservation issues and technical art research. All the observations are summarized in Appendix Two.

7.6.3 Masks and costumes

The series of masks, props, costumes and stage sets date from 1979 and 1980. The entire set of props and masks for Medea is held at the Museum of Performing Arts in Melbourne, as well as written and photographic archives, including Mora’s contract with the theatre, press clippings of the plays’ reviews, professional photographs, programs of the performances and some preparatory drawings. The archive also keeps records of the transaction between Playbox and National Gallery of Australia’s then director James Mollison, who bought The Bacchae’s entire stage set shortly after the play, together with the preparatory drawings. Although the drawings belonged to Mora, she generously donated the money to Playbox as a gesture of support for the theatre (Mora 2013c; Mora 2014a).

The Medea masks were viewed in Mora’s company at the Museum of Performing Arts’s research centre, together with an illustrated inventory of the rest of the objects (costumes and props) for the production, which helped to visualize the technical features and elicit memories from the artist. The bulk of information about these objects came from that conversation with Mora, in presence of the masks, and the black and white photographic documentation of one mask’s fabrication, kept at the PAM archive. This information was extended by a telephone interview with Medea’s lead actor Robbie Mc Gregor (April 22, 2014).

80 Performing Arts Collection Accession numbers 1980.179.032 to 046 for the costumes and 1980.179.001 to 013 for the masks.
The masks for *The Bacchae* were examined with a selection of the props during a visit to the off-site storage of the NGA.\(^{81}\) The rest of the costumes and props were not viewed because of their number in excess of one hundred; it would be too time-consuming to bring all these items out of storage just for one viewing. The NGA’ inventory is not illustrated; however, the colour contact sheets of the performance were located in the photographer’s studio in Melbourne, which allowed a glimpse of the masks and costumes in action.\(^{82}\)

Because both sets of theatrical props were donated to museums, they are remarkably well conserved, considering the fragility of their materials. They are not on permanent display, but some of the masks are occasionally lent for exhibitions, to which they travel in state-of-the-art boxes. This excellent condition greatly facilitates the understanding of their technique of fabrication. The masks are a fine illustration of Mora’s agility of mind and problem-solving abilities. She chose to mix several techniques (papier mâché, gauze plaster moulding, textile, quilting, netting, collage, painting), which could be customised for the purposes of acting, with its demand for quick changes of costumes during the play.\(^{83}\) The masks’ construction is both deceptively simple and very complicated. Each mask for *Medea* was made in situ on each actor’s head, fitted to their measurements and adjusted precisely, due to the physicality of his role in the play, so that they could jump or fall without losing them. The technique evolved with experience; for instance, Mora must have found the wire structure unnecessarily complicated, and chose a simpler way with no internal rigid structure to make the masks for *The Bacchae* the following year. Unfortunately, it was not possible to locate any actor from *The Bacchae* cast, and Mora was not present during the viewing of the masks, which explains the relative lack of specific information concerning this set. Without the presence of the masks, Mora’s memories on this topic are rather general, and she does not remember the reason for abandoning the wire structure. However, careful observation of the items provides a lot of information about their fabrication.

---

\(^{81}\) National Gallery of Australia, Hume repository. Hume Small Objects Store (HSOS)

\(^{82}\) The reproduction of photographs of the performance in this thesis is kindly authorized by Jeff Busby (www.jeffbusby.com), a photographer specialised in show business photography. His archive work of live stage productions is a lasting document of recent Australian cultural history.

\(^{83}\) In both plays, each actor of the all-male cast was playing several roles and had to change several times during the performance (except the two children in *Medea*).
These sets of masks and costumes are a good example of the necessity of interdisciplinary conservation; textile conservators routinely approach objects with an understanding of the role of wear marks, while object conservators are skilled in supporting any type of structure in storage and display, and painting conservators are experts in issues related to cleaning and consolidating surfaces. While there is no recorded conservation intervention on the theatrical works at present, it is recommended that future treatments should be based on collaborative consultation. All tables relating to these works are located in Appendix Three.

7.6.4 Embroideries

The embroideries were produced at about the same time in Mora’s career as the soft sculptures. A mix of quilting, embroidery and painting, these works are incredibly sophisticated objects, technically and visually. At the time of her frequent travel in Australia, embroideries were a practical way for Mora of making art on the move without carrying weighty or cumbersome materials. An exhibition of eighteen of them toured Victoria in 1978. The exact location of this touring set of embroideries is not clear, apart from the fact that some are in Mora’s collection, while a few are in public collections, including the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney and the regional galleries of Ararat and Ballarat, Victoria. Some embroideries are in private collections (not all identified, including one sold at auction in 2012).

For this research, Mora provided access to two embroideries conserved in her studio, which are not framed, leaving access the back. She also showed two unfinished works of embroidery, giving insight into the very first steps of the process. Another embroidery, framed, was examined in a private collection; several small ones, also framed, in William Mora’s gallery, and another unfinished embroidery, belonging to a private collection, were also viewed. Other embroideries were only seen on photographs, either found on the concerned museum’s catalogue, or in Beier’s 1980 book *Mirka* that has a Chapter dedicated to the embroideries’ iconographical themes. The State Library of Victoria keeps several photographs of embroideries in their Mirka Mora archive, made by the photographer Ronnie Ellis in Mora’s studio in 1985. Although they do not allow a close view, these photographs were useful to verify the
presence/absence of certain features such as the padded and embroidered frame, the painted background, the addition of galons and ribbons, or the embroidered signature and date that was observed in the real works.

Embroideries are an interesting example of how the perception of a work impacts on its conservation. Contrary to the soft sculptures, the embroideries viewed for this research are well conserved; they are generally treated as works on paper, framed and displayed out of direct sunlight, which accounts for their excellent condition. The painted parts, made of the same paint as the matte soft sculptures, are much better conserved than the latter, because these works are protected, not manipulated and not hung in full light, therefore eliminating almost all the risks for damage that affect the sculptures. The works in Mora’s possession are also kept out of light, stored flat in drawers, and therefore in excellent condition. Thus, the recommendations for conservation are minimal. For these works, see Table in Appendix Four.
Conclusion

This thesis has investigated Mora’s materials and modes of making in detail, using a conservator’s knowledge to uncover the layers of significance informing her selection of materials, the techniques of fabrication and the physical engagement of the artist in the creation of her works. In this light, the thesis aimed at critically examining decision making processes in the conservation of Mora’s oeuvre, specifically her soft sculptures, in order to establish patterns of reasoning that can be adapted to other works and other artists’ oeuvres. This implied rigorous and critical assessment of relevant knowledge domains such as social sciences and their application to this research and more broadly to the conservation of contemporary art. With the researcher’s privileged position coming from a shared language, gender and migrant background, as well as past successful conservation experiences, it was possible to establish a genuine collaboration with the artist. With oral history as a starting point, the research included many in-depth interviews with the artist over a period of three years. These interviews were cross-referenced with interviews of Mora’s entourage, detailed study of the existing sources, consultations of some of the artist’s diaries, observation of existing works and technological reconstructions of soft sculptures, to ‘unlock’ a narrative constructed over time through memory processes and repetitions of anecdotes (Rivenc 2016). Participatory research techniques inspired from ethnography, such as interactive workbooks, physical reconstructions of works and regular artist’s feedback on both processes also provided a vast amount of new information about Mora’s techniques, as well as a better awareness of the experiences associated with the making of the works (Madden 2010). The research was also an opportunity to question some prevalent myths about the artist, mainly linked to gender and craft, to rectify factual errors of media and technical attributions, and to discover details in existing works that were previously unseen. It led to the rediscovery of a large scale frieze painted by Mora in 1983 during the Perth Festival, and kept in storage in South Australia since then; the work, in perfect condition, was donated to Heide in 2015.

The research did not include scientific analyses of Mora’s works, as the focus was on the living relationships and the valuable knowledge derived from direct contact with the artist, her family, collectors and former students. This knowledge, combined with the
results of empirical techniques such as observation and ‘making’ practice, has proven to be quite extensive; the fact that it was collected with non-destructive methods is also of importance. Sampling and scientific analysis of Mora’s works, as they are not restricted to the artist’s lifetime, may still occur in the future, should it become necessary to confirm the findings of this thesis. Existing case studies of other works by Mora, involving different technical processes, could also be expanded to include new materials or new contexts of ownership.

There is still information to be collected about Mora’s creative processes, particularly from her diaries. Given the level of detail encountered in the diaries consulted, and how this reading contributed to the understanding of the major works covered in these periods, it will be very informative to consult other diaries, for instance those dating from the beginning of the soft sculpture making period, in the early 1970s. Similarly, a systematic study of Mora’s personal photographs will certainly be of high interest for social, technical and art history.

However, this research has illuminated both the benefits of working with artists and the limitations of this practice. The artist’s privacy is paramount, and for aged artists in particular, time is precious. Therefore, it is necessary to prioritise the research questions and accept that not everything will be answered in order to respect the artist’s time and to preserve a good working relationship. The strength of this project was the privileged contact with Mora, and the access to her private documents and her studio for a long period in time. However, even with this relatively easy access to information, it is important to be aware of the politics and realities of doing fieldwork, to recognise when it reaches saturation point, i.e. when the benefit of gaining extra information outweighs the ethical gain and may upset the positive relationship.

The theoretical and methodological frameworks seeming most relevant to the topic were chosen among many potentially available for this research. Folklore, migration or trauma also had some relation to Mora’s art; however, gender theory, ethnography and phenomenology seemed more pertinent to approach materials and making, and have been helpful in this case to perceive the layers of meanings behind Mora’s processes. Ingold’s theory of making as a transformation of matter, mediated by the maker’s engagement and knowledge, was useful to understand the emotional processes at play
during the act of making, and how it influenced the creation of artworks (Ingold 2014). Gell’s notion of the agency of objects and Keane’s theory of qualities ‘bundled’ in the objects, which carry potential for new interpretations, invited me to see works of art as complex assemblages of emotional traces (Gell 1998; Keane 2006).

Read from the materiality of art, these traces reveal the narratives of the maker’s life, its emotional texture, embodied by the work’s physicality. Sensory relationships and memories ‘bundled’ into works of art often intersect with history and the emotions of the past, via the feelings experienced by the artist at the time of creation. Material culture studies also provided a structure to the research, with Kopytoff’s notion of the biography of things shown in Chapter One present as a backdrop for the investigation (Kopytoff 1986). Applied to Mora’s art, these frameworks of investigation led to the exploration of the relationships between her techniques and the broader contexts of feminism, craft movement and public art policies in the twentieth century, and the culture of celebrity in the beginning of the twenty first century. The artist’s life story, the lives of the works and their complex creative processes revealed to be intimately linked to each other. Understanding these links illuminated how the artist created things in a manner that impacted on her social behaviour, and how social movements impacted on Mora’s creation. These frameworks and their applications to the meanings of artworks, together with a reading of the works inspired by material culture studies, notably the importance of the networks of relationships linking people to objects, have helped me to broaden my perspective of conservation, and to include new concepts into the materiality of works, as a pathway to make decisions in conservation.

Methods of qualitative analysis borrowed from social sciences were employed to analyse the information collected, extracting three broad themes characterising Mora’s approach to her art, and colour-coding the findings to classify them accordingly. Chapter Three described the relationship between the artist and her materials, supporting with evidence the idea that traditional materials and techniques, learned from the Old Masters, represent Mora’s self-taught knowledge, but also serve as a stepping stone for her creative mind and are appropriated by the artist through innovative technical twists. This chapter also examined Mora’s lengthy creation processes that bear witness to her professionalism and hard work ethics, regardless of the scale of the work and the technique employed.
Chapter Four explored how Mora’s techniques informed each other constantly, and how 
she managed to maintain a continuity in her iconographic themes through various 
technical processes, each time slightly reinventing her imagery. The example of Mora’s 
signature, declined in as many guises as there are materials in her work, illustrates the 
multifaceted character of her talent. The chapter also demonstrated how Mora overcame 
the challenges posed by making art commissioned for specific usages (theatre costumes, 
festival animations), served by the great flexibility of her mind, and by her remarkable 
knowledge of the versatility of materials; these qualities allowed her to adapt to every 
context, by exploring new techniques, new materials and combining them into hybrid 
works of art.

Examining over time these technical connections between her large works of art 
illuminated the way Mora’s processes inform each other in a fluid and organic manner. 
As alluded to in the previous chapter, Mora’s exploration of materials is both an 
intellectual and a physical experience, encompassing mind and body. After analysing 
how Mora used in her art the symbolic charge held by the materials or the techniques, 
enhancing her imagery with textures and colours that she knew would create powerful 
effects on the mind, her involvement of the body in the creative process was also 
explored. Throughout her career, Mora strongly engaged physically with her materials, 
which impacted on her lifestyle as much as her lifestyle impacted on her choice of 
techniques; this two-way exchange, explored in the last part of the chapter, revealed her 
constant and uncompromising desire to create art, negotiated at every stage of her life 
regardless of the logistical circumstances. In her old age, Mora’s working patterns have 
not changed; the observation of the artist at work and her comments about age 
demonstrate that she is adapting her techniques to her older body, in a constant pursuit 
of the joy she derives from the act of painting.

Chapter Five explored another aspect of Mora’s physical engagement with her art, 
which is her clever use of material culture to build an identity of archetypal bohemian 
artist. Carefully curated, her image was achieved by posing often in her studio, 
surrounded with the tools of her trade, but also by dressing in a particular way that 
attracted notice and made her unique. This sense of ‘performative dress’ locates Mora 
within the broader frame of female artists in the twentieth century, a time where, for 
women, getting a voice on the art scene was not an easy feat. The chapter compared her
strategies and those developed by two other artists of the twentieth century, Frida Kahlo and Niki de St Phalle, in order to communicate through material culture, which led them to achieve a unique status that drew the attention to their persons and ultimately to their work. This chapter also examined the impact of gender-connoted materials, mainly textile related, on the perception of female artists’ work at the time, and how working with threads and needle became a militant statement within the feminist circles. Although Mora never sought this label and stayed clear of the movement, her actions, processes and modes of making definitely belong to this period, with elements of mythology and folklore that are also connected to a textile tradition. The chapter then explored the original way in which Mora used materials and techniques as tools of communication during her teaching career; through the act of making together and engaging with the materials, she created strong relationships with her students that also fostered her artistic reputation. This attitude further demonstrates Mora’s investment in her materials, always considered by her as another type of language, which she liberally used in her workshops, with her generous sharing of her processes and discussions about artistic media and supplies. In the final paragraph, Mora’s personal use of language to identify her works from a technical perspective, with its approximations and imprecisions, was characterised as an important indicator of Mora’s agency in the building of her own image, and the role the making processes play in it.

Mora’s materials have revealed themselves to be much more than just inert substances animated by the artist; using Ingold and Keane’s frame of thinking, the analyse of Mora’s approach to materials and of her manner to handle and transform them into works of art revealed her attention to context, her intense professionalism and unwavering commitment to her art. Locating these choices within the historical and social context of creation has helped understanding ‘hidden’ meanings in the selection of a given material or technique at a specific point in time. The thesis contends that Mora’s materials and idiosyncratic modes of making art contribute to assert her position in Australia’s pantheon of artists, as much as her public image that ensures her visibility in the social scene, but can be detrimental to the recognition of her art. The concepts that Mora embeds into her creative processes range from tradition and knowledge to gender and eternity, and an enduring meditation on the act of transforming various matter into art through constant technical innovation. Her work and its technical virtuosity, particularly in her textile-based works, clearly fits Alfred Gell’s theory of an
agency of objects exerted as an ‘enchantment’ or ‘captivation’ of the viewer’s mind by works technically so complex that they sit beyond immediate comprehension (Gell 1998). Gell’s description of the ‘distributed mind’ of the artist, scattered through their works, and Hoskins’ argument that objects challenging our senses or our comprehension have their most powerful effect on our imagination applies well to Mora’s body of work and its appreciation by the public (Hoskins 2006, p. 82). From this perspective, the thesis has demonstrated that Mora’s works resonate strongly in the viewers’ minds because they combine the symbolic power of materials with the agency inherent to their sophisticated modes of making and their mythological imagery. In all of Mora’s artistic endeavours, materials can be seen as an embodiment of the artist, transformed through processes invested with her personality, and becoming a representation of the self. This research has thus contributed to our appreciation of the qualities of Mora’s works, by uncovering the complexity of her various interactions with materiality.

This interpretation of Mora’s art, although inevitably including a degree of subjectivity due to our social and geographical correspondences, naturally relies on materiality, a main area of expertise for conservators. Mostly object-based, this research ventures into various related fields but constantly returns to the works’ physical manifestations, ultimately enhancing our understanding of them, and of Mora’s career as a whole. Bringing back the conservation focus of this thesis, Chapter Six sought to abridge that interpretation with conservation’s best practice, underlining conservation’s role in enhancing or hiding the objects’ meanings. Taking Mora’s soft sculptures as a practical basis, a technological research involving reconstructions was developed, while seeking inspiration from the recent reflection on conservation of living heritage, which places issues of access and use at the centre of conservation’s practice.

After examining different models of decision-making currently in favour in the conservation field, a combination of the propositions made by Dinah Eastop and Joel Taylor was retained as the most suitable to establish a decision-making framework for Mora’s soft sculptures. In Chapter Seven, this framework was applied to three case studies that highlighted how varied the options are for objects that may appear similar at first view, and showed that the artist had a very open mind to well-justified propositions of treatment. This participatory research highlighted the essential role plaid by direct
contact, which is a timely reminder to undertake these investigations during the artists’ and their immediate contemporaries’ lifetimes, in order to benefit from personal narrative knowledge that would otherwise be lost through time (Michalski 2005).

What emerges from this study is the fluctuant nature of the significance of works of art, changing over time according to the historic, artistic and social context. These meanings are nevertheless revealing parts of the histories of the works and of their makers, and should be brought to light in order to offer a fuller understanding of the works. In the particular case of Mora’s soft sculptures, tracing their biography shows that they went through cycles of production, consumption (acquisition by collectors), gradual oblivion and partial disappearance from the public scene, when the artist decided to concentrate on oil painting and when they started to deteriorate. This thesis did not seek to construct an alternative history of Mora’s works but to complement our appreciation of them, by uncovering the works’ unspoken history, which in the soft sculptures case would quickly fade away, should they not be displayed because of their condition. Only then can informed choices be made when the question of conservation arises, and can we ensure that the meanings that are not privileged at that time will not be compromised for the future.

From a conservator’s perspective, Mora’s soft sculptures are also viewed as fragile objects at risk of loss, and as documents about many things: the practice of artists-run workshops, Mora’s technical curiosity and dexterity, the rise of feminine techniques in the art and also, for a category of people, as surrogates for the artist. The personal significance of Mora’s works being strongly expressed through their materiality, particularly their hybridized modes of making, engaging with their conservation is in reality taking part in the conservation of the ‘Mora icon’ in a broad sense. The many layers of significance uncovered in this research have led me to rethink the artist’s relationship with materials and techniques, which in turn impacts on conservation’s decision making process (Rivenc 2016). For the soft sculpture production, the direct consequence of conservation would be the display of previously unseen works, and would almost certainly benefit socio historical research by eliciting public participation from an age group closely connected to these objects. From these interactions, new meanings and new qualities can emerge, hitherto unexploited but expanding the impact of these works (Keane 2006).
In summary, by proposing various solutions for the conservation of soft sculptures, and implementing a rigorous decision making process to support them, I have sought to facilitate decision making for their preservation and future interactions with viewers. Wharton (2004) recently noted that heritage and its industry gets often criticized for being too scientific, and exclusive of lay people. To address this, critical theory frameworks were used to propose a more sensitive and pluralistic approach to conservation, which reflects current interests for processes of fabrication of art, taking distances with the long dominant image of the artist as genius and replacing it by a more human approach to the artist as an innovative maker, as in the recent exhibition on Rodin’s creative process mentioned in this thesis’ introduction.

By decrypting significance in the materiality of Mora’s works, a new perspective was proposed that also highlights how conservation can enhance viewers’ interactions with these works, illuminate the skills that are brought into play in their making, and contribute to a broader access to them in present and future. The benefit of discussing materials and techniques with an artist cannot be underestimated; with their knowledge and understanding of materials, conservators are equipped with the skills to steer these discussions and engage the artist from a different angle, uncovering significance that lies in the artist’s choice of techniques and is important for the future of the works. This demonstrates that conservation is justified by the benefits it brings to the study of objects and, through a practical engagement with their materiality, to how we understand the social world of a given place and time (Tilley 2006). Some outcomes of this research such as the layered making of the signature in oil paintings, inform future questions regarding the authenticity of Mora’s works. Other parts of the research such as the function of the freestanding dolls and the extra work involved in making them structurally sound, highlighted the importance of this feature, and how any other type of display would be less fitting to the artist’s intent. Although in-depth research such as this thesis is not always possible, this study has demonstrated the benefit of drawing bridges between material study and social history, and encouraged conservators to actively seek not only the nature of the materials employed by an artist, but also the significance carried by the very materiality of these artworks. Meaning comes for example from the personal context of the artist at the time of creation, the social context surrounding it, the comparisons with broader art history, the various encounters made.
by the artist and their resonance in their oeuvre, the personal affinity of the artist for
certain materials and techniques and how it reflects the social backdrop of the time;
adopting the material angle for discussion or for research is already a common practice
in conservation, which can only benefit from a bit more lateral thinking and bridging
with social sciences. Because conservation as a process is concerned with a never-
ending reconstruction of public and private memory, which is anchored in the material
objects and their significance (Wharton 2004), actively seeking significance can only be
beneficial, particularly during artists’ lifetimes. In contemporary art, the dialogue
conservator/artist, read critically, can uncover many of these meanings and their wider
resonance in the domain of emotions, and link them to a richer understanding of history
of art.

This thesis, with its many methods or collecting, verifying and deciphering information,
is also a valuable contribution to the current practice of artists’ interviews, and brings to
light the potential and the limits of conservators’ collaboration with artists. It has also
demonstrated the key role of interpersonal skills and relationship management in this
type of conservation research, and how it contributes to the establishment of a more
common language between social studies and conservation. As such, this thesis
illustrates the changing face of conservation in contemporary period, and the changing
role of conservators in contemporary art.
References

Primary sources; texts about Mirka Mora


Anonymous 1967b Untitled press clipping about Tolarno exhibition, Australian, 10 June 1967


Coslovich, G 2007b, ‘St Kilda restaurant row takes a priceless turn’, Age, 6 March 2007, page unknown.


Cox, P (dir.) 1974, This film is called Mirka, videotape 18mns, Prahran College of Advanced Education.


Dunstan, K 1985, ‘Mirka Mora has a wall’ Age, Good Weekend, 4 October 1985.


Gantner, C 2014, Interview with Sabine Cotte, 10 April 2014.


McCaughey, P 1967, ‘Fantasy key to the world’, *Age*, 7 June, p. 8.

McCowan, E 2013, Interview with Sabine Cotte, 16 August 2013.


Mora, M 1965a, *Interview*, sound recording, Fisher Library, National Film and Sound Archive, #771203.

Mora, M (undated), ‘Interview’, in Women artists of Australia, a series of 5 episodes, South Australia TV, National Film and Sound Archive, ref 138502, viewed 12 August 2013.

Mora, M (1957-1976) ‘Correspondence with John and Sunday Reed’, Papers of John and Sunday Reed, State Library of Victoria, series IX, Box 2, File 20 and series X, Box 8, File 4.

Mora, M 1967, Diary, in possession of the author.


Mora, M 1983, Diary, in possession of the author.

Mora, M 1984, Mirka Mora interviewed by Barbara Blackman, sound recording, restricted access, National Library of Australia, Canberra, Oral History Project.

Mora, M 1986, Diary, in possession of the author.


Mora, M 2007, Interview with Henry Greener, The Shtick, television program, Channel 31, 10 July 2007, segment 2, viewed 5 November 2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Tq0eVQ1Brk>.


331
Mora, M 2011a, ‘Mirka Moira (sic) and Rebecca McIntosh (aka Aphrodite)’, *Love Byte* 14, viewed 5 November 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xKMtu41lwA>.


Jews in France Under the German Occupation, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3UM6uFWYxE, (Mirka Mora starts at 0’44)
The Vel d’Hiv Roundup, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRN15hAspJE, (Mirka Mora from 0’00 to 1’00 and from 4’30 to 5’11)
Concentration Camps in France, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etUPgnblBnA, (Mirka Mora from 0’00 to 1’08, from 2’21 to 3’15, from 4’44 to 4’50).

Mora, M 2013a, ‘*Our City Stories - Mirka Mora— from the National Trust, Our City app*’, viewed 5 November 2013 < ‘http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQiOOzfP7tQ’>.

Mora, M 2013b, Interview with Sabine Cotte, 19 August 2013.

Mora, M 2013c, Interview with Sabine Cotte, Patricia Stokes and Lucy Spencer, 17 September 2013.

Mora, M 2013d, Interview with Sabine Cotte, 9 October 2013.

Mora, M 2013e, Interview with Sabine Cotte, 20 November 2013.

Mora, M 2014a, Interview with Sabine Cotte, 28 March 2014.

Mora, M 2014b, Interview with Sabine Cotte, 28 May 2014.

Morgan, K 2013, Interview with Sabine Cotte, 14 August 2013.


Reid, B 1987, ‘Art for everyday; Mirka Mora and Elizabeth McKinnon’s public art in Melbourne’, *This Australia magazine*, vol.6, no. 4, pp. 72-75.


Velik, G 1971, ‘the black and white world is not for Mirka’, *Sunday Australian*, 1 August 1971.


Art History and Social History


Adams, J 2013, ‘Looking from within; feminist art projects of the 70s’, in Outskirts: feminism along the edge, no.29, pp. 1-13.


Blackman, B 1997, Glass after glass, Autobiographical reflections, Viking, Melbourne.


Dutton, G & Harris, M 1968, *The vital decade, ten years of Australian arts and letters*, Sun Books, Melbourne.

Dutton, G 1994, *Out in the Open, an autobiography*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.


Hoff, U 1953, ‘Content and form in modern art’, *Meanjin*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 449-450.


Thomas, D 1993, ‘Creative displacements’, *Art and Australia*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 482-83.


Zweibel, J 2014, artist’s website, viewed 15 October 2014
Oral history, ethnography and interviewing techniques


Yarnal, C, Son, J, Liechti, T 2011, ‘She was buried in her purple dress and her red hat and all of our members wore full ‘Red Hat Regalia’ to celebrate her life’: Dress, embodiment and older women's leisure: Reconfiguring the ageing process’, Journal of Aging Studies, no.25, pp. 52–61.


Conservation


Brandi, C 1963, Teoria del restauro, Turin, Einaudi.


Cotte, S 2012b, ‘‘Destins croisés’ in Australia: Conservation with Mirka Mora’, 
_Explorations, a journal of French-Australian connections_, no 53, December 2012.

Cotte, S 2014, ‘Listening, watching, making and reading to better conserve: a 
collaborative project with the artist Mirka Mora’, Poster presented at _Authenticity in 
Transition Conference_, Glasgow School of Arts, University of Glasgow, 1-2 December 
2014.

and processes of Pedro Cabrita Reis: the artist’s memory versus material analysis’, in J 
Townsend, S Kroustallis, M Clarke & J Nadolny (eds), _The Artist’s Process, 4th 
symposium of the Art Technological Source Research Working Group_, Archetype, 

De Roemer, S 2014, ‘Conserving authenticity in transition’, public presentation, in 
_Authenticity in transition, changing practices in contemporary art making and 
conservation_, University of Glasgow and Glasgow School of Art, 1-2 December 2014.

Drysdale, L 1999, ‘The language of conservation: applying critical linguistic analysis to 

Dykstra, S 1996 ‘The artist’s intention and the intentional fallacy in fine arts 

Eastop, D & Morris, B 2010, ‘Fit for a princess? Material Culture and the conservation 
of Grace Kelly’s wedding dress’, in F Lennard and P Ewer (eds), _Textile Conservation: 

Eastop, D 2009a, The cultural dynamics of conservation principles in reported practice, 
in A Richmond & A Bracker (eds), _Conservation: principles, Dilemmas and 
Uncomfortable Truths_, Elsevier, Oxford, pp. 150-162

Eastop, D 2009b, _Stuff happens: a material culture approach to textile conservation_, 
University of Southampton, Faculty of Law, Arts and Social Sciences, School of 
Humanities, Textile Conservation Centre, PhD dissertation, 317 pages.

Eastop, D & Brooks, M 2006a, ‘Matters out of place: paradigms for analyzing textile 

Eastop, D 2006b, ‘Conservation as material culture’, in C Tilley, W Keane, S Kuchler, 
M Rowlands & P Spyer (eds), _Handbook of Material Culture_, Sage, London, pp. 516-
533.


Getty Conservation Institute 2009, Modern and Contemporary Art, GCI Newsletter, Fall 2009.

Getty Conservation Institute 2010, From start to finish, de Wayne Valentine, Grey Column, CD rom of the exhibition at Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles.


Gotschaller, P 2012, Lucio Fontana, the artist’s materials, Getty Conservation Centre, Los Angeles.


Holden, J, Jones, S 2008, It’s a material world; caring for the public realm, online publication, DEMOS, London <www.demos.co.uk>.


Levy, J 2008, From sharks to sugar: addressing conservation issues of non-traditional/contemporary art, MA thesis in Museum Studies, JFK University, San Francisco.


Poloni, O 2005, Life doesn’t last, art doesn’t last, it doesn’t matter, MA in Art Curatorship, University of Melbourne, unpublished.


Tuchman, P 2008 ‘Two or three things I know about artists’ interviews’, *Arts Journal*, vol. 67, no.4, pp. 33-37.


Appendix 1. Murals. Techniques, condition and recommendations for conservation

This category comprises the works of art described as murals by the artist. The names of the works are those given by the artist; sometimes she has named them after the original owner and commissioner of the work. They are in chronological order of execution.

The tables (Tables 1.1 to 1.15) summarize this research’s main findings for Mora’s murals and recommendations for the future conservation of these artworks. These tables are very schematic, the detail of these techniques can be found in Chapters Three and Four.
### Table 1.1 Mirka room, Morgan family home, Toorak (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970 Morgan family home, Toorak</td>
<td>Plaka casein paint</td>
<td>Very good Underground room so generally kept in the dark Now used as photo storage room and desk</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Painted in one week, Mirka could adapt to these oddly shaped surfaces (conversation with Mrs Morgan) Featured in Paul Cox movie ‘This film is called Mirka’ as a background for the birthday party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

A fine example of a perfectly conserved mural ensemble by Mirka Mora in her early career.
## Table 1.2 Tolarno murals, St Kilda (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965-70 and 2007 Tolarno Murals, Melbourne (Fitzroy Street, St Kilda). Painted over the years by Mora during her ownership of the restaurant. Several walls and other surfaces in restaurant, bar, corridor. Dimensions unknown but probably circa 100m2 Listed Victorian Heritage Register, No H2207, since 2009</td>
<td>House paint of various compositions on plaster wall, terracotta tiles, wooden panels and Perspex</td>
<td>Some areas flaking around heating/air con system. A few other instances of semi detachment and small losses of paint. Otherwise satisfactory used condition with scratches, wear and tear</td>
<td>Partially repainted by Mirka Mora and Carlo Grossi in 2007 (signed Mirka, Carlo, Ana 2007 in doorway)</td>
<td>Conservation treatment by Sabine Cotte September 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Both stages are original. (2nd painting covered the damaged areas; called ‘refreshment’) Characteristic of an attitude to own work.
- Always a background for a restaurant, represents a socio-historically important place in the 60s.
- ‘Signature’ Mora place, renamed “Mirka at Tolarno” after her in 2007 (branding place?) ‘the Mora chapel’ (The Age)
- Living heritage, still in same use today.
- Keeping the used homely condition is desirable (MM)
- Preventive conservation measures to avoid damage from furniture
- Investigate low sheen protection coat
Table 1.3 Ardmona mural, Hawthorn (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974&lt;br&gt;Painted for the Turnbull family’s house, Ardmona, in Shepparton.&lt;br&gt;Now in Melbourne, Hawthorn, private collection of original owner.&lt;br&gt;circa 90 x 250cm</td>
<td>Acrylic paint on canvas laid on board. Reinforced by wooden strainer and metallic vertical plates</td>
<td>Extensive cracking of certain colours. Thick and shiny and discoloured varnish. Seems stable. [personal observation]</td>
<td>‘I used Aquatec’ (Mora 2000). [Aquatec is a water based, solvent free industrial paint (source: <a href="http://www.aquatecpaint.co.uk">www.aquatecpaint.co.uk</a>)&lt;br&gt;Canvas laid on board with Glusage (commercial adhesive); not enough drying time before painting. Cracking and deformations happened quickly and were stabilized with varnish [owner’s testimony]&lt;br&gt;Panel reinforced with wooden stretcher by owner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

Aesthetic treatment is an option. Condition report provided to owner in 2014
### Table 1.4 Dr Smyth’s mural, East Melbourne (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977 Painted for Dr Smyth clinic in Vermont</td>
<td>Oil on canvas Thick impastos</td>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Mentioned in autobiography and in B. Blackman’s interview. Considered as a mural even if on canvas. Should be kept matte.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now in Peter McCallum Cancer Centre, East Melbourne circa 3.50 x 1.50 m</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Not to be varnished,
- No frame to keep the intent of a mural.
- Not to be hung with other paintings on same wall to maintain the mural effect
**Table 1.5 Tympanum, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977 Painted for Marianne Bailleu’s Realities Gallery, in public, to celebrate the French month in Melbourne. A collaboration between 5 artists Mirka Mora Andrew Sibley Georges Baldessin Les Kossack Roger Kemp Queensland Art Gallery 4 panels overall dimensions 6.30 x 4.24 m (arched shape)</td>
<td>Oil on canvas mounted on stretcher (base panel) or laid on board (three top panels). Canvas rebates very short in some panels.</td>
<td>Very good. Minor damages in corners</td>
<td>Base panel (canvas on stretcher) was re-stretched and partially loose lined at time of acquisition 1991</td>
<td>Built and painted in about a month; canvas ordered from Sydney; built by the artists; used blown up photos of real tympanums for inspiration; Restricted palette (brown, red, white, black decided by Sibley, Kemp brought in the blue); importance of unity of work, seamless joints between artists; areas assigned by L.Kossack. “proclaim the faith in mankind, in love, in working together…erase fear from the monsters who still dwell in our subconscious and our body” (<em>Mora’s personal notes</em>)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Not to be dismantled.
- Keep the matte and monumental aspect.
- Importance of the relationships between colours and the ‘stony’ aspect.
- Composition done on assembled panels, joins perfectly; re-stretching will compromise the joints visually (maybe already the case for lower panel?)
### Table 1.6 Painted tram, Melbourne (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978 Painted Tram, in public use 1978-1986, now in private collection, Mt Eliza(?) Dimensions unknown (circa 25 m2)</td>
<td>Enamel paint on prepared metal panels</td>
<td>Unknown (not viewed)</td>
<td>Partially repainted (front part) by Mora within a month of being on the road due to car accident.</td>
<td>Considered as ‘kinetic art’. Made to appear white from a distance and coloured when close. A church in movement with the congregation inside. Trams should have been kept together, probably need a clean after years of use. Should not be on the seaside because of salt damage to the metal and paint. Enamel paint used ‘like honey to avoid it sliding down. Never close paint can’s lids so it would dry a little. [from thesis D.Fagan] They should be careful keeping it next to the sea, it might damage it [conversation with artist]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Possible irregularities in texture and clumps are original, derived from the working process and the drying of paint.
- Overall composition to be kept in good condition. Degradation further than wear and tear not intended.
### Table 1.7 Circus frieze, Adelaide (SA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982 Painted in public for the exhibition “Circus!” Adelaide festival, given to home for disabled children, Adelaide circa 1.50 x 48 m</td>
<td>Enamel paint and Plaka paint on plastic sheets (from photographic documentation and materials dockets)</td>
<td>Unknown (not viewed)</td>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>Considered as ‘disposable art’ by the artist [documented in contemporary newspaper clippings]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Consult with artist
Table 1.8 Mural, Perth (WA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1983 Painted in public for the Perth Festival  
Now in private collection, Adelaide  
6 panels, each panel circa 1.50 x 3.20m  
Donated to Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, in August 2015  
(image) | Enamel paint on 6 prepared metal panels nailed on wooden strainers | Very good, minor scratches on perimeter | none | Included a lot of local history. Studied local colours during 2 days field trip. Worked iconography as a sequence [Mora 1984; conversations with the artist] |

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**
- A sequence of images not to be separated. Keep as frieze.
- Outdoor covered setting preferable
Table 1.9 Mural, Burdekin library, Ayr (Qld)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1983 The painting of life, Ayr, Burdekin Library mural 6.1 x 5.7 m (detail)</td>
<td>Acrylic paint (Walpamur) + oil paint (Grumbach) on prepared wooden panels</td>
<td>Good (recent conservation treatment and refurbishing of the space including removing of the pond) Not viewed</td>
<td>Conservation treatment (cleaning, consolidation) John Hook 2012</td>
<td>Included a lot of local history. Oil paint for highlights to create depth, acrylic paint judged too dull and flat [Mora 1984, conversations with the artist, diaries]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommendations for future conservation treatments
- Preserve the sense of depth in colours.
- Check adherence oil/acrylic periodically

Table 1.10 Mural, courtyard Burdekin library, Ayr (Qld)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1983 Ayr, Burdekin theatre courtyard dimensions unknown (circa 1.50 x 4m) (detail)</td>
<td>Acrylic paints on corrugated metal fence (prepared?)</td>
<td>Bad (from J.Hook’s observations) Not viewed</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Made with public participation. [conversation with the artist]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommendations for future conservation treatments
- Extensive treatment required. Not planned at present
### Table 1.11 CAE mural, Melbourne (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984 Melbourne, entrance hall of <strong>Council for Adult Education</strong>, Flinders Lane (now in Degraves Street building, corridor of office space) circ. 1.5 x 4 m (detail)</td>
<td>Oil on wooden panels (3 pieces) Thick local impastos</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Intended as mural, not to be varnished
### Table 1.12 Cosmos bookshop mural, St Kilda (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987 Readings Bookshop (previously Cosmos), Acland Street, St Kilda</td>
<td>Matte paint (maybe casein paint Plaka?) on plain plaster on semi circular internal wall</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Cleaned, small inpaintings in lower part scratches; large paint loss infilled (conservator) and inpainted by the artist (Sabine Cotte and Mirka Mora 2009)</td>
<td>Like in Flinders Street, made to convey joyous feeling through bright colours. mentioned as being a pleasure to paint (Mora 2000) No tactile access intended, flat surface, matte to allow viewing on circular volume</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Respect matte surface
- Respect continuity of image
- Do not put shiny coating. Investigate matte coatings
Table 1.13 Flinders Street mural, Melbourne (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location, dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1985-86. Melbourne, Flinders Street Station mural, corner Princes Bridge and Swanston Street Competition organised by the Ministry of the Arts circa 4.50 x 9 (m) | Three registers:  
Upper register: house (enamel?) paint on rendered wall  
Middle register: mosaic  
Lower register: mineral paints on previous layer of house paint on render low relief | Good. A few graffiti and paint losses. Scheduled for regular maintenance but decision not effective. | Partially repainted by M. Mora 1998  
Cleaning, consolidation and inpainting (Sabine Cotte 2008)  
Removing graffiti, consolidation and inpainting (Sabine Cotte 2010) + installing of a chain between the bollards (Metro trains 2010) | No particular information on upper register  
-Mosaic done directly on the wall with tiles pressed into the render, all at different angles, to get a moving surface reflecting light at various angles. Importance of line and lively surface in texture and colour  
-Lower register: lines carved in semi fresh render made by a plasterer. Painting on top of dry render. Paint flaking (no cause explained) so lower register repainted with Keim mineral paints in 1998 with change of colour scheme. Caseine in the colours gives the milky hue. Importance of vivid background to enhance light colours. Importance of sustained line around the forms, importance of matte aspect recalling fresco; importance of access for children to touch and feel the low relief. No coating that would compromise the matte appearance. An overall joyous feeling with a lively line and colours. [conversations with the artist, diaries, Mora 2000, pres clippings, personal observations] |

Recommendations for future conservation treatments

- Advocacy for regular maintenance, using existing maps of mural (low register)
- Chain installed 2010 quite effective for most of the accidental damage. However small damages occur. Yearly maintenance recommended and agreed upon in principle, but not implemented since 2010.
- Use the same technique for loss compensation,
- Avoid flat surface in losses anywhere in the mural
- Keep the balance of colours. faded background on the left side (affected by direct sun daily) should be glazed if necessary
- Respect strength, continuity and fluidity of the line
- Respect matte appearance and rough texture for infillings
- No protection impending access
- No shiny coating
- Keim colours now available in Australia. Use for loss compensation?
- Test Keim coating PFS20 on mock up tile kept inside and outside undercover for a year, started December 2015
Table 1.14 Mural, Dog’s Bar, St Kilda (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990 Archway to kitchen, behind the bar</td>
<td>House paint (or Plaka casein paint)</td>
<td>Surface soiling, grease and fingerprints</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Painted with assistant Patricia (signed on mural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimensions circa 6 m²</td>
<td>(detail)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Cleaning and low sheen protection to allow future cleaning
- Owner’s inquiry for cleaning July 2016
Table 1.15 Mosaic seat, St Kilda (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1993 Melbourne, St Kilda Pier mosaic seat | Mosaic on cement render, concrete seats surrounding | Good. Surface not entirely planar (due to internal metallic plate remaining slightly distorted) and uncovered position result in water pooling in centre. Usually dries relatively quickly but should be monitored for mould on joints. | - Truck accident in 2006 that destroyed partially seats and mosaic.  
- Faced, partially lifted, metallic support reshaped. Replaced on more planar render and pieces reattached.  
- Reconstitution of missing pieces in collaboration with Mirka Mora (Andrew Thorn, Sabine Cotte, Cathedral Stone, Mirka Mora, June 2010).  
- Semicircular garden planted as a protection from vehicles. Not protected on sea side due to council regulations. Minor repair to the seat May 2016 (City of Port Phillip) | Originally covered and a place to rest. The ground has been elevated and the cover structure was removed during promenade landscaping. Would like to see it covered again for better use by people. (that would solve the water problem also) [conversations with artist, press clippings] |

Recommendations for future conservation treatments

- Advocacy for regular maintenance
- Advocacy for construction of roof (existing quotes at council)
- Garden and bollard provide quite effective protection from trucks and skateboards
Table 1.16 Mural, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011 Painted on the windows of the sunroom, Heide 1, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen as a temporary artwork for the exhibition “Mirka” Since then, kept by the museum</td>
<td>Acrylic paint on glass</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Painted with assistance from family and museum staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommendations for future conservation treatments
Table 1.17 Mural, Balzac Restaurant, Melbourne (Vic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Around 1960</td>
<td>Oil (?) and charcoal on painted wall</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Conserved August 2016 by University of Melbourne, GCCMC Commercial Conservation Services.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balzac restaurant, now Tippler and Co, 58 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne</td>
<td>Circa 220 x 110 cm</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovered August 2016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**
Appendix 2. Oil Paintings. Technique, condition and recommendations for conservation

This table is based on observations in Mora’s studio, and interviews during the period 2013-2016.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Paintings 2013, 2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technique</strong></td>
<td>Oil on canvas mounted on stretcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additional information given by the artist or by other persons</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| WM: William Mora | • Canvas prepared by Chapman and Bailey (WM)  
| CB: Chapman and Bailey | • Two different Belle Arti Linens, 35U and 68U. Both linens have been sealed with synthetic size and then prepared with a universal primer. Both linens have had 3 coats of primer applied. The weight of the 35U is 523 grams and the 68U is 498 grams (C&B). Universal primer usually contains calcium carbonate and titanium dioxide.  
| EmC: Emma McCowan, former manager of William Mora Galleries | • Used at least from 2011 onwards  
| MM: Mirka Mora | • Special requests from Mirka sourced by Emma and showed for approval before purchase; but generally provided a selection of 20-30 canvas of various formats to pick up from at will (EmC)  
| | • White preparation, Mirka likes it smooth (WM)  
| | • Occasional recycling of indigenous paintings’ stretchers, explains the variety of formats (WM, EmC)  
| | • Not interested in suggestions of materials or products (EmC)  
| | • Likes to go to the shop and see the tubes she buys, rarely orders paint from catalogue (EmC)  
| | • Sydney Nolan’s remnants of Ripolin paint used for the self portrait in a chair from Heide (WM, MM)  
| | • Mirka goes through phases with materials: Windsor and Newton, Schmincke, (WM)  
| | • Big tin of white regularly used (WM)  
| | • Big tin of white ordered and never used, she prefers tubes (EmC)  
| | • Big selection of brushes, some very expensive (WM;EmC)  
| | • Orders at local shop. Previous shops over the years according to home location  
| | • Likes Michael Harding paints (EmC)  
| | • Buys supplies available from local shop Swan street, M Harding too expensive (MM) |
- Always the best materials (MM)
- Never any preparatory drawing, direct start with paint (drawing with thin/medium round brush) (MM)
- Builds up the colours and the texture gradually (MM)
- Works on two paintings simultaneously so one can dry to touch while she works on the other (MM)
- Search for the right line, vibrant and lively, from the external or internal shape or working on the line directly (MM)
- Cover up or add elements during execution. Painting is not pre planned. (MM)
- Not too much emotion, has to kill it if too present. Painting is not psychoanalysis (MM)
- Always strong autobiographical background (MM)
- Mix all leftovers from the palette in a tin to get a beautiful grey (MM)
- Difficult to know when a painting is finished (MM, WM)

**Observations of the artist at work**

- Drawing directly with paint and medium round brush
- Gradual build-up of the colours and the texture.
- Oil used direct from tube (emptied with pliers) or thinned with turps.
- Texture comes from multi layering on semi fresh paint
- Occasional scraping of surface with palette knife to get rid of impastos or lumps
- Main tools used are round brushes, various sizes
- Signature appears with the early layer of colours, then may be kept, recovered, repainted and kept again several times
- Works on lines by either drawing and redrawing them or redefining them by adjacent shapes
- Regular covering of large areas with one colour (white, blue, grey) then reworking each shape in different colour.
- White usually covering large areas of colour in the final stage, creating vibrancy of the white areas

**Observations in the studio**

- Large amount of materials available
- Many different brands of oil paints available in various forms (tins, tubes, artist’s mix)
- Free mixing of brands of oil paints on the palette with the brush at the time of painting
- Presence of books acts as a visual and intellectual stimulant. Books regularly consulted during execution, books in use propped against or near easel
- Act of painting grounded in classical technique, references to texts (kept in memory) a constant leitmotiv
- Presence of dolls creates stimulant visual environment. New dolls appear or disappear regularly, some large ones stay throughout

**Recommendations for conservation**

- Extreme thickness of the paint layer. Will be sensitive to keying out. May require reverse padding over time to avoid sagging and breaking.
- Thickness of paint layer makes external edges susceptible of breaking within frame. If framing, house with felt tape
- Usually good adherence between layers because of semi fresh technique and rough texture (brushstrokes, paint clots, etc); however existence of late reworking of some paintings and possibility of internal splitting of layers
- Cross section would be a great visual document
- Practice of early signing and reworking of the signature needs to be noted to avoid wrong interpretations of the presence of superimposed signatures
- No varnish intended on the latest paintings
- Pentimenti visible (from their texture), gives a glimpse of the artist’s creative process at work
- Changes during execution a trademark of later works, reworked and reworked, etc. way of authentication?
Appendix 3. Masks and costumes. Technique, condition and recommendations for conservation

Tables 3.1 to 3.3 are based on the observations on some of the props for the theatre sets and interviews with M.Mora, R. McGregor and Carrillo Gantner.

Table 3.1 on observation of the masks and one of the props for Medea (1979), and photos of the Medea costumes; all courtesy of the Museum of Performing Arts, Melbourne, visited in July 2014 and September 2014 (with Mirka Mora). The photographs of the making of the masks in Mora’s studio and of the performance were kindly supplied by Jeff Busby.

Table 3.2 on the observation of all the masks for The Bacchae (1980) and a few selected props (2 legs decorations, 3 arms decorations, 2 pectorals, 1 crown), courtesy of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, visited in April 2015. Table 3.3 is based on the observation of one puppet (one version of Bennelong) in Mora’s studio, in September 2014. The other puppets are conserved in private storage and have not been viewed.
Table 3.1. Masks for Medea 1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description and location</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Previous treatment</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1979, 10 masks for Medea (Playbox company, formerly Hoopla) | Masks: Wire structure, plaster gauze, paper and glue, stuffed fabric, canvas, paint, foam, masking tape | None recorded | Good, traces of wear and tear (three weeks show in 1979) | - Made on each actor’s head, fitted precisely. No need to be attached  
- Plaka casein paint and gold craft (acrylic?) paint. Stuffed fabric integrated within paper layers and painted.  
- Dark make up underneath to avoid interference with lights  
- Intentionally larger than life to catch attention and convey expression  
- Very light to fit actor’s requirements  
- Multiple layers of paint to prevent showing of paint loss  
- Masking tape and foam for internal comfort  
[Observations and conversations with the artist in front of the masks; conversation with Robbie McGregor, actor for Medea] |
| 1979, Costumes and props for Medea (Playbox company) Museum of Performing Arts, Melbourne | Fabric painted with casein paint  
Chicken wire for internal structure of props, wood? for altar panels | None recorded | Only one viewed, not worn during the play but used as prop | - Designed by Mirka. Sewn by a seamstress and painted by Mirka  
- Mainly long tunics, with painted borders |

**Recommendations for future conservation**

- Preventive conservation, packing with padding and boxes (done within individual boxes at Performing Arts Museum)  
- Matte paint absorbs skin oil. Wear gloves  
- Light structure, fragile and sensitive to shocks and compressions. Internal padding desirable.  
- No varnish or coating; must retain matte surface
### Table 3.2. Masks and costumes for The Bacchae, 1980

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description and location</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Previous treatment</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1980** 12 masks for The Bacchae, Playbox company, formerly Hoopla, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra | Gauze, paper and glue, paint (casein paint Plaka?) fabric strips, light cardboard, bells, metallic wire, cotton wool, foam | None recorded | Good, traces of wear and tear. The masks with long paper and gauze trains are more damaged by use with a few creases. | - Same principle of covering the whole head, but no wire structure and not fitted on actor’s heads, (maybe made on balloon shapes); some in trapeze shape are attached by strips of gauze stemming from top of mask (internally)  
-Less detailed faces than Medea masks. More invention on hairdos (plaited paper, crushed paper, cotton wool under gauze, strips of fabrics with bells, paper and gauze train); all fashioned materials are painted quite roughly except for one mask (Chorus purple)  
-Gauze sometimes left covering the eyes and nostrils (and painted over) sometimes cut hollow roughly. |
| **1980** Costumes and props for The Bacchae, Playbox company, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra | Painted and padded fabric, elastics, metal hooks, wood. Possibly other materials in unseen items. Casein paint Plaka? | None recorded | Fragile, traces of wear and tear (only four items viewed) | -Bright colours, elaborate costumes with shoulder, arms, lower legs pieces, and with locally raised shapes (stuffed)  
-More elaborate than Medea costumes  
-Painted after sewing, sometimes roughly  
-Sketches kept at PAM Melbourne explain technique (wooden frame covered in cloth and painted; painted doll stuck on wheel). Other sketches kept at NGA, not viewed. |

**Recommendations for future conservation**

- Consult paintings, textile (and possibly object) conservator. Surface is characteristic for paint, approach of soiling and wear is part of textile’s conservation criteria.  
- Preventive conservation, packing in boxes with padding (already done in individual boxes with sliding trays for the masks that have been loaned)  
- Add visual documentation to understand how the complex costumes were worn. Photos of the play available from Jeff Busby private photographer studio, Melbourne  
- Matte paint absorbs skin oil. Wear gloves. No varnish or coating, matte surface
- Light structure, fragile and sensitive to shocks and compressions. Internal padding desirable.

**Table 3.3. Puppets for opera ‘Bennelong’, 1988**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1988 85 Puppets for the opera Bennelong. One in Mirka’s personal collection; others are in storage (organised by Serge Thomann with Lindsay Fox, in unknown location).</td>
<td>Cut plywood, springs, wire, string, oil paint Simple mechanism of articulation.</td>
<td>Only one viewed. Good condition.</td>
<td>None recorded</td>
<td>Several layers of oil paint. Maybe touched up (not by Mirka) during tour in Europe. Assistant Lucy Mora. [Source: conversation with MM; Mora 2000]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Should probably be conserved flat or lying on the longest side to avoid warping. (storage not viewed)
- Keep articulating mechanism functioning
- Intended as bright and expressive
# Appendix 4. Embroideries. Technique, condition and recommendations for conservation

This table is based on detailed observation of two unframed and unfinished embroideries in Mora’s studio, 3 small framed embroideries in William Mora’s storage, and on a framed embroidery in a private collection. Other embroideries have been observed indirectly, in photographic reproductions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date, description, location and dimensions</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Existing condition</th>
<th>Previous treatments</th>
<th>Additional information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small square embroideries, William Mora collection. Date unknown Dimensions: approx. 10 x 10cm each</td>
<td>Embroidered cloth, casein paint, stuffed and raised parts, ribbons, framed under glass</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>None recorded</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Two large rectangular embroideries, Mirka Mora’s personal collection One undated, ones signed (embroidered) Mirka 1989 Dimensions: approx; 55 x 55 cm each | Embroidered cloth, casein paint, stuffed and raised parts, beads, sequins, ribbons | Very good | None recorded | - Unfinished; there should not be any unpainted or undecorated surface  
- Back should be lined to hide all threads  
- Some stitches made using two threads of different colours at the same time  
- Embroidered signature  
- Painting on raised parts, done after stitching [Conversations with the artist] |
| Large rectangular embroidery, private collection 1979 | Embroidered cloth, casein paint, stuffed and raised parts, ribbons, framed under glass | Excellent | None recorded | Bought from the exhibition. Painting in background and in stuffed parts Painting done after stitching  
Stuffed and embroidered frame within the image |

**Recommendations for future conservation treatments**

- Line with light fabric, frame under glass with light tension on mount board or stretcher
- Avoid high lights levels.
## Appendix 5. Tentative technical timeline of Mirka Mora’s works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enamel painting on wall, board or metal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(includes Tolarno murals)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Perth frieze)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil painting on board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(includes Dr Smyth’s mural, Tympanum)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil painting on canvas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acrylic painting on wall, board, plastic, glass</td>
<td>(includes Ayr mural, Adelaide frieze, Ardmona ‘mural’)</td>
<td>(includes refreshing Tolarno murals, Heide sunroom mural)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosaic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ink drawings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charcoal/pastel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed technique (charcoal, oil, ink, tempera)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dough drawings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embroidery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil painting on soft sculptures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casein painting on soft sculptures and textiles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casein paint on wall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan family mural, Cosmos mural (?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casein paint on paper masks and textiles</td>
<td>Medea, The Bacchae, Melbourne</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaster relief</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolearno restaurant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tapestry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 6. List of interviews

Interviews with Mirka Mora, audio recorded with transcripts
19 August 2013
17 September 2013
9 October 2013
20 November 2013
28 March 2014
28 May 2014
Others conversations with Mirka Mora from 2014 to 2016 were not recorded, but notes and photographs were taken.

Interviews audio recorded and transcribed
Katarina Paseta, registrar, Museum of Modern Art, Heide, 11 October 2013
Kendrah Morgan, Curator, Museum of Modern Art, Heide, 14 August 2013
Emma McCowan, Manager, William Mora Galleries, 16 August 2013
Carrillo Gantner, director, theatre founder, philanthropist, 10 April 2014
William Mora, 20 November 2013

Interviews with note taking
Max Delany, Curator, National Gallery of Victoria, 25 June 2014
Robbie McGregor, Actor, 22 April 2014 (telephone interview)
Nicola McGaan, Mora’s assistant for Flinders Street mosaic, 25 September 2014
Marzena Walicka, collector, 13 December 2013
Jeanette Fry, former participant to Mora’s workshop, 12 June 2015
Author/s: 
COTTE, SABINE

Title: 
Art in the making: Mirka Mora’s techniques and materials, and their meaning in conservation

Date: 
2016

Persistent Link: 
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/167261

File Description: 
Art in the making: Mirka Mora’s techniques and materials, and their meaning in conservation

Terms and Conditions: 
Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.