

Antonia Perricone-Mrljak | This Must Be the Place

Antonia Perricone-Mrljak is standing in her new studio in Alexandria, her work propped along walls, face in, face out, laid out on the floor, and wrapped for dispatch to New Zealand. Morning light floods in from large industrial windows. A big, slightly battered, club armchair in tan leather is pushed to the edge of the workspace – a place to pause and consider. “I’ve always been creative,” she says. “Seriously, it’s genetic. If you could pick any type of career that involves being creative, you’ll find one in my family, all the way back to Sicily. My grandfather was a shoemaker. My grandmother was the village seamstress. So, it’s just an inheritance that I have and that I’ve pursued through painting.”

A first generation Australian, hers is an immigrant story. She grew up in Sydney’s western suburbs in a close-knit family clinging to fellow European and Sicilian communities and isolated from mainstream Australia to the extent that she didn’t realise she was Australian until she was 10 or 11 years old. An example of that disconnection is the story she tells of the Australian family who lived across the road. Because her parents couldn’t speak English, they didn’t understand their culture, so the children weren’t allowed to socialise. “So, we didn’t.” Antonia laughs somewhat wryly at the memory. Instead, they rode their bikes up and down in front of each other’s houses, threw balls to each other and talked, all the while staying on their own side of the street.

Her immigrant story is also one of poverty in a culture of making and doing and relentless hard work. “We lived in a very poor area but the reason we lived there was because there was land. In Sicily they all farmed, and they brought that farming tradition to Australia where it was also a necessity. Everything was grown at home. Everything was timed to seasons. I remember waiting for things to grow, waiting for things to be made to be able to eat. Even clothing was made, furniture was made, tools were made. The list goes on. “I was an unusual child. I wanted more than the very low-grade expectation of life. I had this wild imagination that was beyond what my parents could even fathom. I dressed wildly; my hair was wild. My aunty thought I was possessed!” She woke one night to find them sprinkling water and olive oil and praying over her as they attempted an exorcism. “It obviously didn’t work,” she laughs. Instead, she found her own way out. She called what she thought was the “classiest place in town”, David Jones. It was also in the city. “I thought if I could get a job there or work experience, I could escape where I was living.” The company placed her “randomly” in the advertising department and her 16-year-old world exploded. “I was like, ‘wow, this is what life is all about!’ People were educated. They were doing things I would never have experienced before. I’d never been to a restaurant independently where the utensils were placed in order. I had to learn all these things.” It was the first step to a very successful career in fashion styling.

But there came a time when she felt old patterns re-emerging. She’d watched other women who’d grown up with similar experiences to her return to the old cultural mindset as their own children arrived. “I had all these amazing experiences doing all these amazing things and then I kind of plateaued. I had my children, and then I realised I was just creating the same groove that my parents handed down. I couldn’t do that.” She asked herself a series of questions: How will I get out of that groove and how will I get my children out of that groove? How can I be an example to them, that life is not just about doing and surviving? It’s about creating. She needed to create a new version of herself. She had already begun painting at a friend’s suggestion.

In a bold and risky move for someone with almost no formal education, she applied and was accepted to do a fine arts degree at the University of Sydney. "I nearly died, I think," she says now of the challenge of learning a whole new environment and culture. But she figured it out, slowly, slowly. By the time she earned her Bachelor of Visual Arts in 2017, she didn't want to leave this exciting new world.

"It was like sitting in the restaurant for the first time. It was like an explosion of how much there is in this world to learn. Unbelievable. I had never made time for that because all I did was work, and work, and work. I suddenly realised my mind is a muscle and it needed to be exercised. I started using my brain in a different way."

In 2018 she gained her BVA (Hons). Her practice has evolved and matured since then as she has grown in confidence and understanding of her work.

"Even though people don't want to think abstraction follows rules, I do. I think it comes back to the process of making things in my culture. There is a rhythm and there is a pattern and there's also a standard and a quality that you need to maintain. And I think in the action, even though it's free and expressive, I maintain an academic level of painting. In the process I understand what it is and what it means to create a mark and how to use paint.

So, I guess if you want to describe my work in any way, I would say it's intuitive and learnt behaviour in a sense, because I've been doing this all my life as far as I'm concerned." She comes back to her current exhibition, 'This Must Be the Place' with its many metaphors. There is, she says, a lot of meditation in painting, how paintings sometimes seem to make themselves. "It's like I'm working from the inside out and there's this huge separation between me and the direct mark. And then I keep working with the composition and where I want things to lie."

Mark making is a very strong element of her work, and layers, and layers in the mark making. Her painting comes with equal layers of passion and grief, of hope and memory. The work and its creator open unflinchingly to the viewer's gaze.

"I definitely leave myself open," she agrees, "and I don't mind because I only have one life. If I'm going to shut shop on the emotional expression in my work, then how do you talk to the audience in an authentic way? You can't. You have to be open otherwise there is no authenticity in the practice. I love difficulty, I love the challenge. My work comes from a very humanist and extremely raw and authentic place. It's not something done by machine. It's very, very organic. It's something I'm proud of. It's very powerful. It is a way of me not feeling isolated."

- Louise Callan