

*Exhibition Review of Olga Cironis: "Today I am what you want me to be" held at Turner Gallery.*

*By Jen Pitch.*

Olga Cironis loves blankets. Or perhaps it's not so much blankets that she loves, but the idea of covering things to change their purpose. Maybe it's about protection; we as humans enjoy masks. It doesn't matter if we admit it or not- we enjoy hiding ourselves from each other. Cironis' current exhibition, "Today I Am What You Want Me To Be", is all about taking off your masks, admitting your secrets and accepting who you are.

The first thing you see as you step into the gallery is a wall almost touching the ceiling and both walls of the space. It is completely covered by checkered blankets Cironis has collected over the years, each one representing a different period of time by its colour or design.

The piece is massive; it overwhelms the viewer as they walk into the room. It is awkward and out of place, but the juxtaposition of the bright colored blankets that cover the huge wall and the seemingly careless stitches that hold the blankets together evoke a warm familiarity. It reminds me of the motels I used to stay in when I traveled between Queensland and Victoria with my family as a pre-teen. And that awkwardness I feel when I look at the work feels familiar too-as if it triggers a memory of me myself feeling out of place.

To the right of you is a reupholstered old chair that sits alone and to the left are two footstools covered with fabric. These three pieces are embroidered with words; one footstool says "slut", the other footstool, "frigid" and the lone chair, "passive aggressive".

The way the wall partitions the gallery space, and the placement of the three furniture pieces on either side make the viewer feel like they have stepped into a hallway in someone's home. Like the wall, these somewhat insignificant objects fill the viewer with a sense of nostalgia.

Behind the wall is the next room – or living room. In this much larger space, an armchair and footstool occupy the center of the room, facing the blanketed wall. Like the previous works, both armchair and footstool are also covered with the checkered blankets and sewn together with the same dark stitches as the wall they sit in front of. On the footstool, the words "Today I am what you want me to be" have been sewn on. This is the title of Cironis' exhibition, so the particular placement of this piece has obviously been considered carefully.

Hanging on the gallery walls on either side of the title piece are over one hundred works of framed pieces of blankets and other fabric like felt and woolen scarves. The frames are antique-looking and vary in size, from 10cmx10cm to approx 40cmx40cm. The colors also vary from subdued browns and peaches to blues and reds.

Some of the blankets are cut to reveal a picture underneath like a boat or bird. Some pieces have text embroidered on them. Words such as “passive”, “bitch”, “me”, “love”, “hussy”, “whore”, “wife”, “mother”, and “lover” have been chosen— some in contrasting colors to the blankets they are sewn on, others so close in color to the fabric that you wouldn’t notice the text if you were standing some distance away from them.

Each of Cironis’ work effectively inhabits the gallery space as individual pieces as well as a single installation, a house full of history with no secrets. The viewer is asked to question Cironis’ past, which is shared in the fabric of the furniture and the images on the walls.

There is a clear sense of feminism in the work; all the pieces are void of the masculine. Some frames have photos of women on them that, oddly enough, do not smile back. Although the words Cironis has chosen are used to describe herself, the viewer begins to question whether she is using these words to label all women in general. Perhaps she is using these words in the same way a male would impose them upon a female or- even more disturbing- the labels a female would impose on another female because of how conditioned we are to believe that we live in a male-dominated society.

As someone who is familiar with Olga Cironis, I personally think it is clear that she is celebrating the feminine. Her works aren’t so much about how things just don’t change- that all women are just born to run a household, but more about how all women are so many things. It is not about wearing different masks to hide ourselves, but about how adaptable we are as humans and – more specifically - females. She is promoting self-acceptance; to take control of the words and labels that are imposed on us and to be proud of who we are as women.