

# art & australia

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DANI MARTI

## DANI MARTI The semiology of weaving

In Dani Marti's Sydney home studio, huge spools of industrial rope in a kaleidoscope of colours dominate the living and working space, transforming it into a miniature textile factory or fabric atelier. On the walls, Marti's pristine minimalist artworks incorporate strips of nylon, rubber and polypropylene hand-woven into rhythmic abstract patterns. Thick textural ropes in dazzling pigments are repeatedly intertwined and stretched over protruding wooden frames, their tactile surfaces both painterly and sculptural. The artist's love of the clean, smooth durability of urban plastic materials combined with traditional weaving methods make for an unlikely meeting of craft-based practices and a sleek modernist aesthetic.



DANI MARTI, *Linda*, 2001 (details), polypropylene, polyester and polyamide on wood frame, dimensions variable. Gallery 4A, Sydney. Photograph Ian Hobbs.



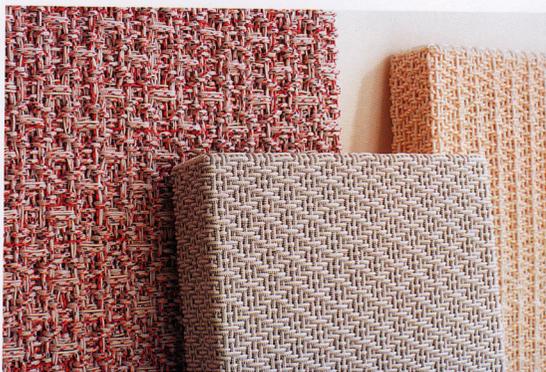
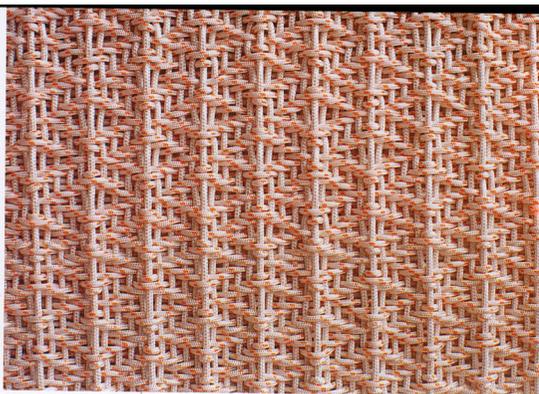
Born in Barcelona but based in Australia since 1988, Marti is a rising talent in the independent contemporary gallery scene. Until recently unrepresented by a commercial gallery and still largely undiscovered by the wider public, the artist has nevertheless built up a strong following among architects, designers, institutional bodies and critics. Over the past three years this prolific artist has held solo exhibitions in Sydney at Gitte Weise Gallery's Room 35, Rubyayre, FirstDraft, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Artspace and Gallery 4A, in Melbourne at Span Galleries, and at Galeria Alejandro Sales in Barcelona. He was also included as a finalist in the 2002 Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award.

It can be a revelatory moment when, as an adult, one reconnects with a childhood passion that again seizes the imagination. Early memories of schoolroom

macramé and tapestry classes proved inspirational for Marti nearly two decades later during his art studies in Sydney and New York. Trained as a painter, since the late 1980s this Spanish–Australian artist has developed a near-obsessional fixation with woven rope and the humble fabric swatch as the core of his artistic practice. Marti says: 'I love painting, but I

like the sensuality of the rope, the touch. Sometimes the ropes are so beautiful that they carry many messages already; they almost speak for themselves. I am really inspired by industrial materials. I like the colour and the form of artificial fibres.' Marti became familiar with fabric and textile design when he was working in the fashion industry in Barcelona: 'Now my work is less about design and all about the fabric. At the end of the day it's about the surface jumping out into three dimensions. Most of the time the works are abstract, and I tend to use the notion of the fabric as the carrier of the meaning.'

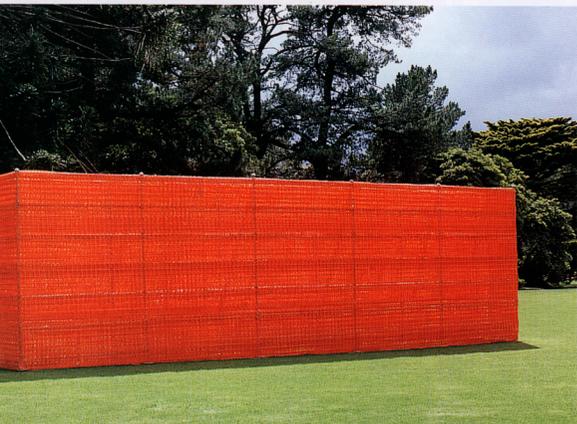
Skilfully blending sensuality with intellect, Marti's artworks rarely impart the cool austerity of pure minimalism. They inevitably possess a human dimension, with individual works often created to convey associations with particular people. In the three-man exhibition 'Rogue Plastic' held at Canberra Contemporary Art Space in



above: DANI MARTI, *Missing Spain*, 2001 (detail), 16,000 road reflectors, PVC backing, 6.5 x 9.2 m, installation view, courtesy Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney. Photograph Ian Hobbs; opposite page centre: DANI MARTI, *Variations in a serious black dress 2*, 2002 (detail), polyester and polyamide on wooden frame, 200 x 200 x 7 cm, Gitte Weise Gallery, Sydney; opposite page bottom: DANI MARTI, *How to dress a saint 5, 1, 2*, 2002 (details), polyester, polypropylene on wooden frame, 800 x 800 x 100 cm, 440 x 440 x 100 cm, 500 x 500 x 100 cm. Photograph the artist; opposite page top: DANI MARTI, *How to dress a saint 2*, 2002 (detail).



AS VIEWERS BRUSHED AGAINST THE TWINKLING BEADS TO ENTER THE NEGATIVE SPACE OF THE CUBE, THEY TRIGGERED A RECORDING OF PASSIONATE FLAMENCO CRIES THAT EVOKED AN INTENSE PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE.



2001, the artist wove specific patterns into his nylon-rope sculptures to create non-representational portraits of friends and associates, his individual coded patterns instead reading like unique DNA signatures. His most recent suite of monochromatic sculptural reliefs, 'How to Dress a Saint', were curiously motivated by a visit to L'Academia in Venice and becoming fascinated by the Old Master paintings of Catholic saints that were richly embellished with heavy drapes and elaborate costumes. Marti says: 'The fabrics themselves become in this way like little portraits.'

Plastic bicycle reflectors, fish-nets and roadside safety netting are among some of the other materials that Dani Marti incorporates into his gridded artworks. *Ruin*, his entry in the 2002 Helen Lempriere sculpture prize, was a long rectangular sculpture, its bright red form clearly defined against the green grass of the Melbourne parklands. From a distance appearing to be as solid and visually impressive as a Bauhaus monolith, at close range it became evident that *Ruin* was made from plastic street-fencing materials. The sense of grandeur dissolved as one recognised the disposable junk used in its construction.

Synthetic fabrics, unlike other more traditional artistic media, may contain the properties of surface and form, acting as both a medium and a conveyer of meaning. There is an inherent dichotomy in Marti's emphasis on the truth of his materials, as befitting a modernist aesthetic, and his desire to imbue his works with symbolic content. He explains: 'I want to use formalism for other purposes, to explore conceptual art. I like to use the modernist aesthetic as well, but push it further to convey a message.' Being a technically accomplished artisan as well as a conceptual artist, Marti often expresses these dual interests in formalism and symbolism by creating elegant geometric constructions as well as installation-based work.

Marti's deceptively simple architectonic piece *Missing Spain*, shown at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in 2001, comprised shimmering orange-red curtains of reflective discs which cascaded from the museum's lofty ceiling to the floor. The plastic road reflectors, sewn on by hand, resembled giant glistening sequins or castanets, their luxurious jewel-like shimmer ironically created from the detritus of urban streets. This spectacular red sheath could represent a Spanish mantilla or a flamenco dancer's

right: **DANI MARTI, Looking for Felix, 2000**, plastic beaded curtains and sound installation, dimensions variable, courtesy FirstDraft, Sydney, Photograph Ian Hobbs.

opposite page top: **DANI MARTI, You make me feel like love, peace and happiness, 2001**, polypropylene, polyester and polyamide on wooden frame, dimensions variable, installation view, Gallery 4A, Sydney, Photograph Ian Hobbs.

opposite page bottom: **DANI MARTI, Ruin, 2002**, temporary plastic fencing on scaffolding, 3.5 x 13 x 1.5 m, installation view, The Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award 2002, Photograph the artist.





above: **DANI MARTI, *I am forever blowing bubbles*, 2001**, white towels, white PVC pot scourers, white vinyl, dimensions variable, installation view, courtesy Gitte Weise Gallery, Sydney. Photograph Ian Hobbs.

below: **DANI MARTI, *Thin wall PB/I-S*, 2000**, road reflectors, PVC pot scourers, dimensions variable, installation view, courtesy ArtSpace, Sydney. Photograph Brenton McGeachie.



shawl, its underlying intent remaining ambiguous, with Marti using non-representational means to evoke a subtle sense of longing for his homeland.

Similar themes were addressed in his earlier works *Looking for Felix*, 2000 (FirstDraft), a light-hearted and slightly camp homage to the Cuban artist Felix Gonzales-Torres. Marti created a cube-like structure from curtains of red plastic beads, typical of those used in the doorways of many Latino households. As viewers brushed against the twinkling beads to enter the negative space of the cube, they triggered a recording of passionate flamenco cries that evoked an intense physical experience.

Always tactile and sensuous, Marti's installation works often become more physical and visceral through direct associations with the human body. *Orifices*, 2001 (Span Galleries), featured a long brown 'umbilical cord' made from netting and polystyrene balls that snaked its way through fleshy islands of red PVC pot scourers, suggesting intestinal organs, orifices or excreta. They presented, in the artist's words, 'a beautiful process, as almost idealistic gestures of common humanity'. A darker, more complex installation, *Thin wall PB/I-S*, 2000 (ArtSpace), used banal materials such as plastic scourers and traffic reflectors to create an immersive environment that

played out the reality of the AIDS virus. Probably his most directly personal artwork, Marti sewed together clumps of ruddy nylon sponges to create amorphous floor sculptures that resembled enlarged blood corpuscles. Bounded by a florid membranous curtain of circular reflectors, viewers could enter into a parallel chamber with a wall of ghostly white reflectors mirroring the healthy red discs. The split between the robust red environment and its shadowy counter-space contained direct and potent associations with disease and death on a primal cellular level, yet the experience was cathartic and healing rather than melancholic.

Issues of physical purification were also reflected in the more playful installation, *I am forever blowing bubbles*, 2001 (Room 35, Gitte Weise Gallery). Along the walls of the empty space Marti hung rows of white bath towels, each of which had been used by someone whom he had invited to participate. These individuals were as diverse as the artist's Spanish family priest, a street prostitute, museum directors and art critics. Each towel was embroidered with the name of its user, their associations with the naked body implying a kind of covert eroticism described by the artist as 'soft pornography'. Accompanied by a central mound of bleached pot scourers sewn together like foam, bubbles or enormous skin cells, the installation invited the viewer into an intimate space, where vestiges of bodily contact were implied rather than shown.

Paradoxes abound in Dani Marti's art practice, from the often carnal nature of his installations to the clean industrial materials he employs; from his traditional craft practices to the manufactured fibres that make up his inherently beautiful, woven constructions. Informed by both modernist and theoretical concerns, his mood often runs from the fanciful and libidinous to the darkly disturbing. With an almost obsessive intensity and meditative application, the artist acts like a contemporary urban shaman, transforming prosaic materials into visually seductive and conceptually challenging abstract works that always reveal a human trace.

Quotes taken from the author's conversation with the artist on 10 May 2002.

Dani Marti is represented by Sherman Galleries, Sydney and ARC one at Span, Melbourne.

Victoria Hynes is a Sydney-based arts writer and columnist for the Sydney Morning Herald.



**DANI MARTI, *Orifices*, 2001**, netting, polystyrene balls, PVC pot scourers, dimensions variable, installation view, courtesy Span Galleries, Melbourne. Photograph Greg Elms.