

# Inferno Wonderland

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Martin Johnson







*INFERNO WONDERLAND*, 2012. Mixed media installation;  
wood, cotton, ink, 4.6m x 6.4m



## ***Inferno Wonderland* a world caught somewhere between hell and heaven.** Agnieszka Golda

*Inferno Wonderland* is a collaborative installation that explores the complex set of relations between the felt, social-political and mytho-sacral spheres involved in migration and intercultural living in Australia. Through this installation we investigate some of the ways in which migrant and non-migrant artists can engage installation art in generating a space for negotiating the *institutional politics of boundaries*: mechanisms of control in the hands of powerful institutions used to exclude and restrict access to certain spheres including the visible and invisible as well as inner and outer territories. More specifically, *Inferno Wonderland* is concerned with responding to the divisive political practices that emphasise and claim control over the borders between the secular and sacred worlds, as well as between emotion and thought, rationality and irrationality as well as animate and inanimate.

This installation draws on our experiences and movements between Australia, Poland and Japan. Motivation for this collaborative project began with the intersections between Polish and Japanese animations, folktales and ritual practices. It was further solidified with the scholarship from contemporary studies of philosophy (Masumi 2002), anthropology (Howes 2005, 2007; Classen 1997, 2005) cultural theory (Ahmed 2004), human geography (Thrift 2004; McKay 2005) and art theory (Bond 2006; Bishop 2005; Bennett 2005; Carter 2004) based around the topics of affect, emotion and the senses. It then expanded into the realm of futuristic projections concerned with the socio-political implications that accompany animist belief systems and female anthropomorphic bodies.

Central to the conception of *Inferno Wonderland* is the view that feeling arises out of the mediation between bodies and the power structures of place. As a result, feeling and sensing are vital for unbolting the past and for prefiguring the future and taking small steps to affect futurity. Moreover, expressions of political resistance and epistemological criticism of power politics including the *politics of emotion* (Ahmed 2004) and the politics of gender (Classen 2005) are dependent on the registration of empathy through the felt (affective, emotional and multi-sensory) capacities of the body and installation art (Bennett 2005). Notably, installations have the capacity to generate critical spaces and to instigate a plurality of responses rather than producing sites only for mediating didactic and linear messages about politics or political agendas. The conjunction of these perspectives with the concepts of *total installation* (Ilya Kabakov) *social sculpture* (Joseph Beuys) and *animism within* (Anselm Franke) provided a platform for evoking a cross-cultural mytho-sacral territory, a space situated on the edges of visible and invisible worlds that allows for encounters with otherworldly presences separated by time, geography and the politics of exclusion.

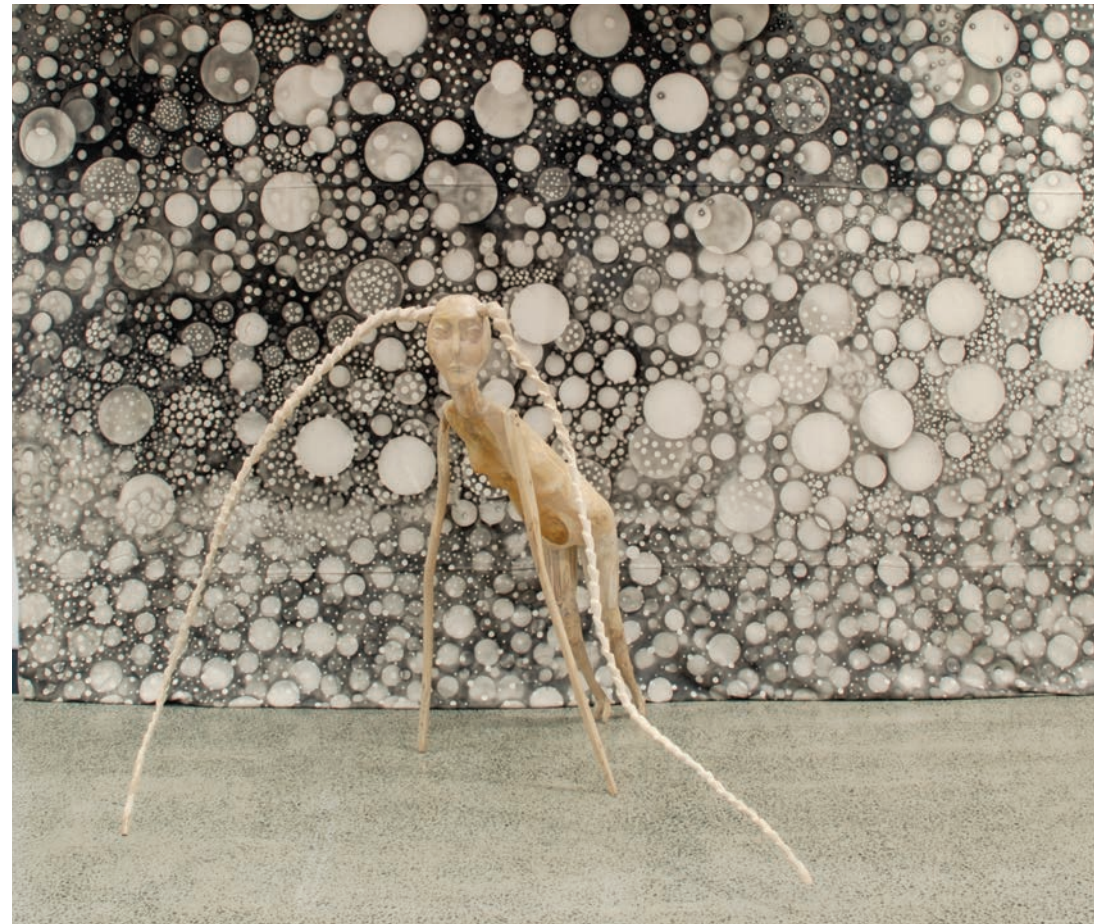
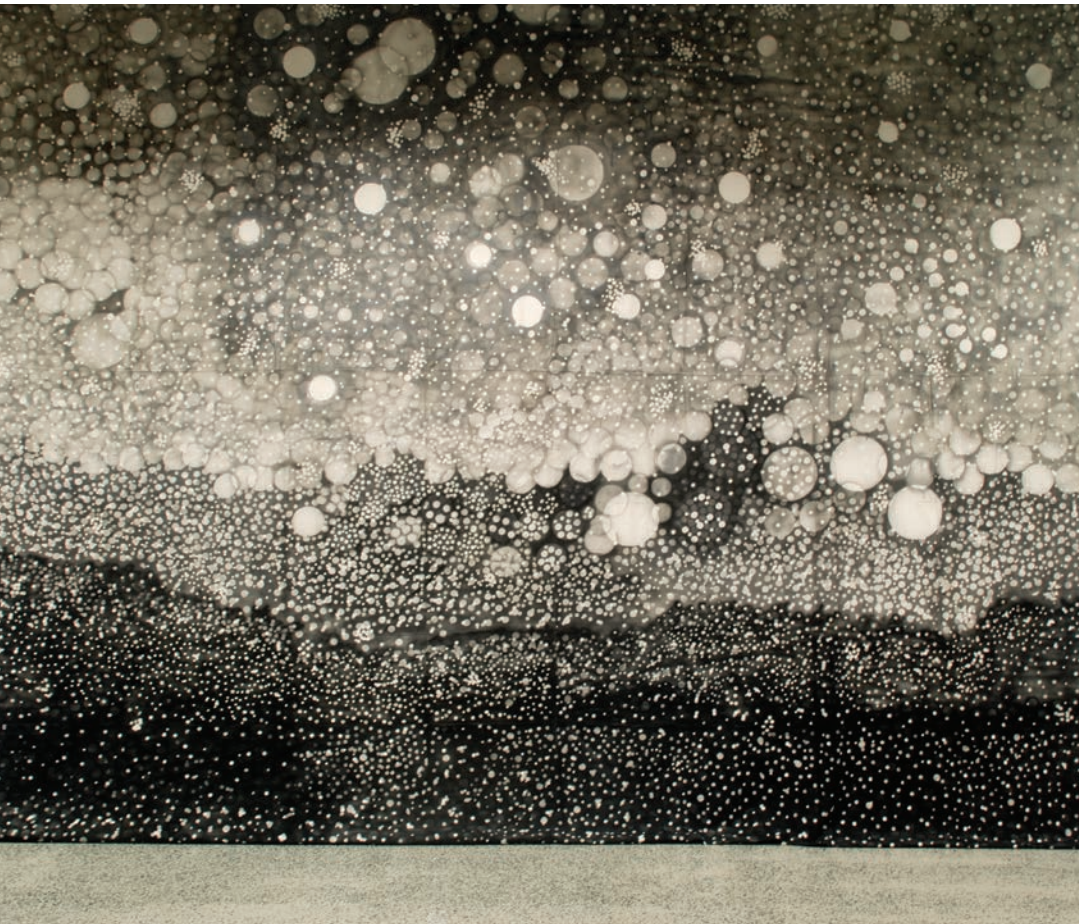
To do this we deploy immersive, ritualistic and fragmented narrative modes of installation art. The function of these modes is not to impose any specific ideology or faith, or to achieve a balance of power or a utopian liberation for a particular community. Rather, the intersection of these modes is central to the recognition that transacting political action is tied to multi-sensory, affective and emotional qualities and the registration of empathy. In this context, the felt dimensions of installation art form a device for critical inquiry in re-addressing imbalances of power and the *institutional politics of boundaries* that impinge upon certain bodies in the present. The mixture of interconnected objects, including paintings, textiles and wooden sculptures depicting orb scenes, anthropomorphic creatures and votive like forms is used as a strategy for shaping an imaginative and speculative space that also acts as a place of refuge for “*los atravesados* (the crossed) [...] those who do not fit the dominant categories; those whose presence shocks. Not from here; not from there” (Rivera 2004, p187). In the broader migratory and intercultural living contexts, this project calls for the modification of some systems of containment and constraint to allow spaces for contact with the unknown and unfamiliar.

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