

‘DESTINS CROISÉS’ IN AUSTRALIA: ART CONSERVATION WITH MIRKA MORA

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Introduction

Mirka Mora is a Melbourne icon, whose artworks feature in many Australian public and private collections; her art is particularly evident in Melbourne where she has lived and worked since her arrival from France in 1951. Now a long integrated and celebrated immigrant, she is a powerful incarnation of the cross-cultural fascination exerted by a young and free spirited French artist on Melbourne’s conservative society of the time. Although her art and lifestyle would hardly qualify as ‘avant-garde’ in today’s Australia, it is for introducing and incarnating throughout her life this quintessential French *bohème* that she remains one of the most cherished celebrities in Melbourne.

Today aged 84, Mirka still paints daily and is currently represented by her son’s gallery, William Mora Galleries, in Richmond. Her work spans a wide range of media: pen and ink drawings, oil paintings, mosaics, soft sculptures, embroidery and even a tram decoration design. During her career she has received several public commissions that over time have become heritage-listed city landmarks. The National Trust listed her large mural at Flinders Street Station in 1994 (shortly after its completion) and in 2009 the Heritage Council added St Kilda’s Tolarno Hotel with her famous murals to the Victorian Heritage Register, in recognition of their artistic and historic significance.

This article relates my encounter and subsequent relationship with Mirka through the conservation of several of her public artworks in the city. An art conservator born and trained in France, I moved to Australia in 2000 after working for more than ten years in French museums and have set up here professionally. The conservation projects developed in close collaboration with Mirka Mora were marked by a constant dialogue with her and reflect the evolving nature of the discussions and the integration of the artist’s creative mind into the process. Collecting the social, technical, historical data that inform every conservation decision (in other words, questioning why we conserve the



Figure1 Mirka at Tolarno restaurant in front of her mural paintings

artwork and what we conserve in it) is to me the most fascinating aspect of my profession. This paper intends to illustrate the complexity of parameters that needs to be considered around an artwork's conservation and how working in Australia but having a common French cultural background helped us to build the mutual understanding necessary for the successful completion of the projects.

Biography

Born Madeleine Mirka Zelik in the France of 1928, Mirka Mora grew up in Paris. As a member of the Jewish community she was arrested by the Nazis in 1942 and sent with her mother and sisters to Pithiviers transit camp, a first step to the concentration camps. Miraculously saved after three weeks, thanks to her father's connections in the Resistance, they moved into hiding outside

Paris. In 1946, aged 18 and working in an orphanage in Brittany, she met her future husband Georges, then the director of a Jewish rehabilitation home for children. Coming back to the capital the following year, she began her training in drama and mime with Marcel Marceau at the Jean-Louis Barrault theatre school, shifting gradually to visual arts, which was the start of her lifelong artistic career.

In 1951 the couple and their baby son Philippe moved to Melbourne. Mirka Mora, a woman of extraordinary vitality, already had an artistic practice and, over the years, she made a name for herself as a painter, playing also a very important part in the history of the city. The Moras played a key role in reviving the artistic scene in the quiet Melbourne of the 50s. The newly re-formed Melbourne Contemporary Art Society (which included artists Arthur Boyd, Joy Hester, Albert Tucker, Sidney Nolan, Charles Blackman, John Perceval and art patrons John and Sunday Reed) convened its first meeting in 1953 in Georges and Mirka's home/studio at 9 Collins Street. The studio quickly became a meeting place for artists, with many lively discussions going through the night. Barbara Blackman (wife of the artist Charles Blackman) credits Georges and Mirka for inspiring the group:

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, 294–295)

Inspired by the long evenings hosted in their studio, Mirka and Georges opened the first café in the city ('Mirka Café') in December 1954, where artists and patrons could come to discuss, drink and eat (French family cuisine of course!), surrounded by artworks. Two other restaurants followed ('Balzac Café' in East Melbourne and 'Tolarno' in St Kilda), where the entire Melbourne art world

regularly met (Mora 2000, 45–73).¹ In the late sixties Georges Mora also opened an art gallery at Tolarno, where Mirka held two solo shows in 1967 and 1969.

A modern woman by all standards, Mirka juggled her artistic career, her work at the restaurants and the raising of the couple's three sons throughout the 50s and 60s. At Tolarno, she covered the dining room with murals that remained unchanged until 2006 when the restaurant was revamped by chef Guy Grossi; she repainted them herself at the time, and they are still a prominent feature of the restaurant now called 'Mirka at Tolarno', with her giant photo greeting diners upon arrival. A talented, elegant, pretty and lively young woman with an accent that never left her, Mirka was the perfect incarnation of the French woman artist for the conservative Melbourne society. In Barbara Blackman's words,

Mirka, with her flamboyant dress, 'sharming axont' and invitation to coffee and cakes, her desire to meet new people and her naivety, was something quite new.

(Blackman 1996, 295)

After the couple's separation in 1970, Mirka continued her artistic career, exploring new media such as painted textile dolls in parallel with her painting and drawing production, and conducting numerous doll-making workshops.² Mirka's inspiration draws on the fantastic and the poetic, mixing imaginary half-human, half-animal creatures, flowers, plants, and angels with characteristic wide and haunting eyes, in imaginary or reinterpreted landscapes (see Figure 1). An avid reader, she includes Greek mythology, *commedia dell'arte*, poetry and art history in her thematic repertoire, producing black and white ink drawings as well as bright and colourful oil compositions. Love and nostalgia for childhood's innocence are recurrent themes of her art, where humour is never far from melancholy. Her work also has a strong, and arguably French, sense of fantasy.

Few artists have such a place in the public's heart. St Kilda celebrates her with 'Mirka's Lane' (not far from Tolarno Street and Barkly Street where

¹ See Mora 2000, Chapter 3: 'My restaurants', pp. 45–73.

² Kendra Morgan, 2010, 'Mirka', Heide Educational Resources, <http://www.heide.com.au/assets/files/Education/Mirka.pdf>, accessed 10.04.12.

she used to live), a tangible witness of her involvement in the social and cultural life of the area. Her memoir *Wicked But Virtuous: My Life*, published in 2000, written in her idiosyncratic style with great openness and emotional self-exposure, gives a fantastic glimpse of this very fertile period of the artistic history of Melbourne. In 1999 the Heide Museum of Modern Art presented a retrospective of Mirka's work ('Where angels fear to tread—Fifty years of art, 1948–1998'), and in 2010–2011 held a show simply called 'Mirka' based on its own collection of her works from the 1970s. In 2002 she was named a *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government in recognition of her contribution to the promotion of French culture in Australia. She has also been a fellow of Heide Museum of Modern Art since 2008, in acknowledgement of her exceptional contribution to the institution over time. Mirka's art, with its rich visual vocabulary inspired by love and metamorphosis, is of enduring appeal, notes Deborah Hart, because 'if we engage with Mirka's work, we might find that [...] angels and devils are in us all, that even in our seemingly darkest hours there is still a possibility of enchantment' (Hart 1999, 251).

Conservation projects with Mirka Mora

While Mirka's artistic production today is mainly oil paintings and drawings, her artworks in public places in the city of Melbourne involve other techniques such as mosaic and painting on plaster. In 2009, three of Mirka's public artworks dating from the eighties were in need of conservation work: the Flinders Street Station mural, the Acland Street mural and the St Kilda mosaic seat. The National Trust Public Art Committee contacted me regarding the Flinders Street mural conservation project; it marked the beginning of a relationship with Mirka that gave a new dimension to my conservation practice.

1. The Flinders Street Station mural

BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION

Mirka won the commission for this mural in competition with six other Melbourne artists, a moment she describes in her book (Mora 2000, 175). Figures from Aesop's Fables, local characters and imaginary creatures dance

freely with angels and flowers on three registers of different heights that form a total surface of about thirty-six square meters. The artist used three different techniques in the same artwork: painting on the upper register, mosaic on the middle, larger one, and painted low-relief on the lower one. The mural was completed in 1986 and signed in mosaic on the middle register. It is quite a prominent landmark, located in the heart of Melbourne, on the outer wall of the city's main railway station. The location is very exposed, in an area bustling with pedestrians all year round. Four green metallic bollards fixed into the pavement protect the mural. A brass plaque sealed into the pavement under the centre gives information about the artist, her assistant and the themes illustrated in the work.

The mural had been damaged in 1998, and at the time Mirka repainted its lower part, an event she describes in her biography:

In 1998 the National Trust allowed me to redo the bottom part of the mural at Flinders Street Station, the low relief. For many reasons, the paint I had used was peeling. It was quite an emotional moment as I had to scrape out the paint and negate colours I had put much feelings into—lucky me, the carved lines sustained me and I didn't cry too much.

(Mora 2000, 196–197)

Eleven years after Mirka's 1998 intervention, a different conservation project was proposed. Given Mirka's age it would have been too difficult for her to repaint it again. The National Trust Public Art Committee, at the same time, was promoting a more 'conservation-oriented' approach than total repainting. This mural has a complex status—a public commission owned by the state but in the custody of the current tenants of the building. The project involved the many different people or institutions impacted by the conservation: the National Trust and their Public Art Committee (volunteers), the then current rail company (custodian of the artwork), the owners of the nearby restaurant, myself (in charge of the conservation) and the artist. This made it much more than a technical challenge; reconciling everyone's points of view to find a satisfying outcome and working in the public eye were some equally important components of the whole conservation project.

CONTEXT AND CAUSES OF DAMAGE

Only the lower part of the mural, which is more exposed, was damaged, as had been the case in 1998. It is almost inevitable for such an exposed artwork to sustain damage with time: the colourful mural is used daily as a backdrop for photographs, during which people lean carelessly against the painting. Little people run their fingers through the composition in the lines intentionally carved by Mirka for this effect.³ Restaurant signs scratching the paint, mild vandalism such as graffiti or chewing gum, buskers' props or bikes stacked against the painting and accidental coffee spilling combined with outdoor exposure have all caused degradation to the painting.



Figure 2 Detail of damage to the mural at Flinders Street Station

³ 'Now many lovers from all around the world come to Melbourne and have their photos taken in front of the station mural. Little children love to put their fingers in the carved lines of the low relief, as I knew they would.' (Mora 2000, 177)

I could not conceive of the project without a close collaboration with the artist. This included research on the artwork, but above all discussions of all possible options with her. Mirka and I had previously met during another conservation project, when we had discussed Arthur Boyd’s materials and methods. It was therefore easier for her to accept my intervention on one of her artworks. It is common practice for conservators to consult with contemporary artists to make decisions on the care of their artworks; the artists’ input regarding their intent, their materials and techniques is an essential part of a conservation project. These encounters can vary enormously according to both the artists’ and the conservators’ personalities: while some artists are not very interested in taking part in the conservation of their work, or even make a point of forbidding any conservation treatment at all,⁴ most of them have an interest in it, are keen to be involved and provide advice to conservators.⁵

THE CONVERSATIONS WITH MIRKA

Interviews with artists, an essential source of information for conservators, are both enjoyable and complex. Diverse formats are recommended in conservation literature and resources, particularly by the INCCA (International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art)⁶ and the ICN (Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage)⁷; the latter emphasizes that a precondition to a successful interview is ‘that it takes place in a relaxed atmosphere. The artist should not

⁴ French artist Jean-Pierre Bertrand seals his works on paper (made with honey and lemon juice amongst other materials) by welding their steel frame shut, specifying that he does not want any conservation treatment to occur. Their gradual deterioration is considered by him a part of his art, whose life unfolds with time, leading towards a final disappearance. (Personal conversations with curators at Museum of Modern Art, Paris, 1995)

⁵ Personal contacts with Daniel Buren, Jean-Pierre Raynaud, Jean-Paul Chambas, Pierre Soulages, Christian Boltanski (1995), Paul Boston (2006), Philip Wolfhagen (2010), Lara Merrett (2011) and Mirka Mora (2003, 2009, 2010).

⁶ International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), 2002, *Guide to Good Practice. Artists’ Interviews*, www.incca.org/resources, accessed 27.9.2011.

⁷ Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage/Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, Amsterdam, 1999, *Concept Scenarios. Artists’ Interviews*, www.incca.org/resources, accessed 27.9.2011.

feel as if he or she is interrogated or visited by the “restoration police”.⁸ In this case I chose to go for a free conversation with a loose thread of questions, allowing any digression that happened. This choice was made because I considered it best suited to the personality of the artist and because of cultural considerations. Only very brief notes were taken during the conversations, keeping the detailed writing for a later moment. The choice not to record the interview, although it would not help in gathering evidence for the future, was felt to be much less intimidating for Mirka and more likely to allow her to relax and speak freely. As we live in the same city, there was the possibility of further encounters to complete the information if necessary.

Discussions took place in March and April 2009 at the artist’s studio and in front of the mural before and during treatment. The railway company’s communication officer was present during the first interview, which occurred in Mirka’s home/studio. This first discussion was held in English, but we switched almost naturally to French for all the subsequent ones. During these discussions, the treatment plan progressively took shape by eliminating possibilities that were judged impractical or unsuitable. To support the discussion, we used colour prints of details of the mural’s damage during all conversations; from this point the dialogue developed in a different language, including drawing in addition to, or instead of, words to illustrate various options and concepts directly on the photos. This improvised method of visual problem solving with a pencil also guaranteed shared meanings between the people present, avoiding later misunderstandings.

Mirka saw the intervention of another person as a loss of control over her work and more crucially as a warning of her physical and artistic death; she mentioned it from the outset, stating that the mural was part of her soul, so that this project was very emotional for her.⁹ That perception of dispossession drove her to tears, to the extent that she was questioning the conservation project itself. She really needed reassurance that she was still in control of the process; being aware of this, I made it clear during the first discussion that the mural’s conservation would be done in collaboration between us. Using the

⁸ Hummelen, Ysbrand, Nathalie Menke, Daniela Petovic, Dionne Sille, and Tatja Scholte, 1999, *Towards a method for artists’ interviews related to conservation problems of modern and contemporary art*, Preprints ICOM-CC, 12th triennial meeting, Lyon, vol.1, pp. 312–317, London, James and James.

⁹ Meeting with Mirka Mora, March 2009.

language of drawings to reinforce my point, I created a character in Mirka’s style with four eyes and four hands, representing the way I imagined that we would conserve the mural. In my mind, this was illustrating the fact that even when I was physically touching the mural, she would be part of it as a second pair of eyes and hands. This graphic ‘memorandum of understanding’ proved very effective and contributed to building enough trust to allow the project to go ahead. I also clearly said to Mirka that while I preferred that in-painting (filling the accidental losses with painting to match the surrounding colour) should be limited to the damaged areas of the surface,¹⁰ she could come at any time and do it herself if she wished. She indeed came a few times unannounced



Figure 3 Mirka and Sabine working on the mosaic at St Kilda Pier
(photo Serge Thomann)

¹⁰ As prescribed by the ethics of art conservation. Australian Institute for Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM) Code of Ethics is the reference in Australia: www.aiccm.org.au/docs/AICCMBusinessDocs/CodePracticeEthics.pdf, but conservation has many national and international references such as the 1984 ICOM definition of the profession: www.icom-cc.org/47/about-icom-cc/definition-of-profession/, both documents accessed 18.4.2012.

and, as she was happy with what she saw, she did not request to do any in-painting.

Memory is one of the most important and most subjective tools. Although Mirka Mora makes notes of everything she does (such as colour and render composition, preparatory drawings, diary of the execution), she had difficulties in finding time to research them, so her memory was the main source of information. However, there is always an amount of subjectivity in one's memory and sometimes Mirka's recollection of details or colours was not completely matching reality. For example, in her book she describes pale yellow lilies as pale pink, which I found puzzling; upon reflection, I realised that the real colour of the lilies is not the important point; what matters is that they are a pale shade, therefore standing out on the bright background, with bright-coloured figures around them. Understanding this and confirming it with her led to the idea of glazing the fading areas of the background to recover this contrast, instead of leaving it as a witness of time passing over the artwork.

Our perception of the artist's intention, although it is crucial in making decisions for conservation, is also subject to interpretation. The same artist can have a different perception of his/her own intentions at a different time of life. During the conversation it became evident that Mirka's own vision of the mural and of its place within her body of work had varied with the passing of the years; what was her masterpiece at the time had now become a milestone in her career, and this was followed by other artistic realisations in various mediums that were equally important to her artistic legacy. Her vision of the conservation process was modified and became less focused on this specific artwork, embracing now a holistic view of her career. Mirka constantly emphasised the fact that she built up her colours in many contrasting layers when she painted on any support, and how important it was for her to let the environment impregnate her art and to let the colours play free. When asked to consider her artwork from a conservation point of view, she felt that preserving its joyful atmosphere was the most important thing.

The protection measures were also discussed with Mirka and the railway company, Metro Trains Melbourne. Mirka did not want any coating or transparent sheeting that would stop people having a tactile experience of the mural, and it would have been technically impractical (mainly for cleaning and condensation reasons). She was however concerned that people resting

their feet on the mural damaged it and felt that the actual protection was inadequate. After discussing various possibilities, keeping also in mind public safety regulations, she agreed that a chain placed between the bollards at waist height would minimise accidental damage due to careless behaviour, while not being visually too intrusive. In November 2010 a chain was installed as recommended. So far it seems to be a quite effective protection for the mural, as there is only minimal damage to the paint.

SOURCING THE MATERIALS

Conservators generally do not use the same materials as the original artist in order to allow for future identification of the conserved parts by use of simple technological examinations.¹¹ However, in contemporary art conservation, it is often the case that no perfect visual match can be achieved without using identical materials. Mapping the damages and documenting the interventions is then used as a means to establish the different parts that impact on the authenticity of the conserved artwork.

Mirka has described the original materials (mineral colours based on potassium silica¹²) in her book (Mora 2000, 197). However these particular colours are no longer sold in Australia, and researching them on the European market was not possible, given the short time-frame imposed by the client; it was then necessary to select other materials. Mirka stressed that her main criteria were brightness, saturation of colour and matte finish to provide a contrast with the shine of the mosaic.¹³ I chose various acrylic-based and casein-based colours (commercially sold or home made) for their matte aspect that would match the mural, and because they satisfied reversibility criteria for the conservation project. The colours were laid in squares on made up plaster surfaces, combined with different suggestions to recreate the rough texture of the cement. With samples in hand Mirka and I stood together in front of the mural, compared the textures and shine from different angles and eventually agreed on the best brand and the best way to create texture to match the grainy original render.

¹¹ Such as ultra violet light examination, where the additions give a different fluorescence from the original paint.

¹² <http://www.keim.com.au/page/products.html>, accessed 4.10.11.

¹³ Personal conversation with Mirka Mora, March 2009.

This serious preparation proved crucial for Mirka to understand that her work was respected and that she had control over it, even through another person's hand. Discussing other topics such as books, children, food, men and many more also helped greatly. She progressively relaxed and ended up giving merely general indications. Her constant recommendation was to respect the character and spirit of the painting, by matching the texture and the stratigraphy of colours and letting the hand go free. Always a media darling, she was present to give her seal of approval to the conserved mural during a press conference in the presence of the National Trust and the executive officers of Metro Trains Melbourne. With hindsight it is obvious that during the whole process she realised (with some relief) that satisfying ways to conserve a mural (other than repainting it) existed. This was made clear to me when, to my surprise and pleasure, I received a letter from her after the completion of the project:

Dearest Sabine Cotte, to see you work on the big mural at Flinders Street Station with your paint '*dans le creux de votre main et un petit pinceau dans l'autre*'¹⁴ was sheer poetry. I was so honoured to see you work on my mural with so much love of your work of restoring it that my tears were quenched for a little while as I faced my own *mortalité*. Thank you for your messages. Love, Mirka.

2. The little bird on the Acland Street mural

The conservation of the mural inside Readings bookstore (previously Cosmos bookstore) in Acland Street, St Kilda, took place a few months later in 2009. This much smaller mural is not accessible at night (which protects it from vandalism) but it is nevertheless located in a busy place. A postcard rack had badly damaged the paint and plaster in the middle part, while people's feet or pram wheels had rubbed off the paint on the lower part.

This time there were fewer technical specifications to discuss with Mirka, but there was an interesting dilemma. A little bird had lost its rear part in the damage, and the missing part had to be recreated. Due to time constraints we had no photographic documentation of the painting prior to damage.

¹⁴ 'In the palm of your hand and a little brush in the other.'



Figure 4 The bird (in the centre)
whose tail was recreated by Mirka on the Acland Street mural

To do this, I suggested two options to Mirka: draw the bird herself on the mural after everything had been prepared for her, or draw it on a colour photo, for me to reproduce on the painting. She made up her mind only in the last days and came to draw the bird herself; this gave me a privileged position from which to admire her drawing dexterity, as she worked very naturally and quickly. It is possible that the bird's tail is somehow different from the original one as Mirka admits that she can't remember every detail from artworks made nearly thirty years ago. It is nevertheless an original bird painted by the artist herself, playing in an interesting way with a conservator's notion of authenticity as defined by the profession's code of ethics (see Figure 4). Most importantly, Mirka's completion of the bird made the mural sing again, and also made her the most important actor in the conservation project, to which she had just given the final touches.

3. *The mosaic seat at St Kilda Pier*

The conservation of Mirka's mosaic at St Kilda Pier in 2010 was my third collaboration with her. Located at the entrance of the pier, along the promenade, it is a horizontal artwork made of concrete seats surrounding the three-meter long oval mosaic centrepiece; created in 1993, this mosaic, about which she talks at length in her book, is dear to Mirka's heart (Mora 2000, 182–184).

It represents a 'map' of the area, with landmarks and characters she considered to epitomise the St Kilda spirit: Luna Park, the bell tower, the theatre, penguins, seagulls, dogs and rollerblade-shod feet. Originally situated under a pavilion that was removed during the promenade's renovation in 2007, the artwork is now only about 55 cm high due to the raising of the ground; this explains how a truck reversing into it accidentally damaged it the same year. Since then it had been covered by a wooden construction, to protect it while waiting for the conservation work to be undertaken.

The conservation treatment involved different actions for several phases that included lifting the dislodged central part of the mosaic and repairing the grout base, repositioning the fragments and recreating the missing parts with new grout and tiles, replacing the broken concrete seats surrounding the mosaic and finally creating a circular garden around the seat, surrounded by low shrubs that would act as a passive protection both against skateboarders damaging the edge of the seats and against similar accidents with vehicles.¹⁵ By then Mirka was feeling very much at ease with me and happy to start another collaboration. We had numerous discussions about the techniques she used and the best ways to remedy the damage.

TECHNIQUE

Mirka's mosaic technique is spontaneous, and she was adamant that all tiles should be placed at different angles so that the work would catch the light and 'scintillate like the sea'.¹⁶ This is quite different from traditional mosaic

¹⁵ See Higgins & Bicknell, 2011, 'To us these things are more: skateboarding and public art', *AICCM Bulletin*, vol. 32, pp. 163–170.

¹⁶ Mora 2000, 183, and personal conversations with Mirka Mora, March 2009 and June 2010.

technique where flatness of the surface is a requirement; a mosaic lesson was given on the spot and we then faced up to the task of matching the broken pieces as you would a jigsaw puzzle. Soon Mirka realised that a lot of very small pieces could not be fitted in. In addition, a few fragments had construction cement adhered very strongly to their backs and were now too thick to be placed on the new base ground. All attempts to separate them resulted in the breakage of the glass tile surface. Faced with these technical difficulties, she adapted to the situation and requested me to recreate some parts rather than try to accommodate every single broken tile; here again her recommendation was to respect the spirit, the rhythm and not to try too much to hide that it had been broken. The result is a recomposed mosaic with original and new parts, all blending in a general feeling of circular dancing on this map of the 'streetscape's soul'.

MATERIALS

This time again, the preparation included sourcing matching materials. Mirka had kept buckets of tiles in various places in her lovely and very cluttered home/studio, which is described in her second book that recalls the stories attached to her objects and defines them as representations of love. She very generously donated the tiles that she had in her possession for the conservation work. However quite a few colours were missing, so we went to the shop where she originally bought them and managed to find almost every colour, with slight variations.¹⁷ Mirka did not consider the differences (that will probably attenuate with time) to be disturbing. In the same spirit, she instructed me to imitate her manner of scattering one tile of a contrasting colour every now and again in the blocks of colour, to create animation in flat areas, and left the choice of that extra colour to me. She also explained the way she had 'customised' the original bathroom glass tiles for this work. Mosaic is a demanding technique that can be damaging for the hands. When I told Mirka that I got blisters from cutting tiles during an entire evening to have a 'conservation palette' ready to use on the project, she was very pleased, as she saw it as another shared experience between us.

¹⁷ Signorino Tile Gallery, Richmond, very kindly provided the tile colour sample sheets free of charge.

The importance of a French connection

It is the common way in France to discuss work projects over food and drinks, and it is obvious in her life that Mirka has always valued this and even made it marketable in Australia. Because we share a cultural background, it was natural to follow this tradition and we spent a lot of time talking in cafés and restaurants. Mirka was very generous with her time, knowledge and materials, and I felt that taking her to nice places for work discussions was a good way of reciprocating her generosity. It was also a way of creating a relaxed atmosphere where apprehensions recede and trust is built.

Language was a turning point: we naturally switched to French from the moment we were on our own. However, the French we converse in would horrify a purist, although every French immigrant in Australia would recognise it: a French base scattered with English words and idioms, well illustrated (in reverse) by her letter quoted above. Encompassing cultural images embedded in the words of both languages, it nevertheless conveys the intended meanings that are most intelligible from one immigrant to another, while reinforcing a sense of complicity in shared bi-cultural values.

Some nuances in the French language are impossible to translate into English. For example, it is significant to me that we used the formal pronoun 'vous' during the first project, gradually shifting to the more familiar 'tu', reserved for friends and family. Among many other signs, this relaxation of the language and the many digressions of the conversation (to books we both liked or recommended to each other, tips about bringing up children, anecdotal memories from her childhood and comments about anything erotic, from lingerie to men's bodies) were to me the indicators of a less formal relationship.

The work-related discussion about Mirka's materials and her artistic process took place simultaneously, interspersed with seemingly unrelated comments; it might have been more superficial had we not been of the same cultural background and had we not spent so much time talking about other things. Sharing this cultural background with Mirka meant that I naturally could allow as much time as necessary for our meetings, without worrying about not getting quick answers to my questions. This 'side' time (crucial for the projects' smooth running) might be considered as wasted time by a non-French conservator, while in reality it paved the way to a successful outcome. Cultural habits in this case were useful tools for my professional practice. Our

common artistic background was equally important; the use of drawing in discussions about conservation matters was one of the keys to Mirka’s trust, as was the discussion about painting in general and our respective perceptions of the colours’ relationships.

Developing and maintaining a trusting relationship with Mirka (using linguistic and cultural tools as well as professional ones) was beneficial to both of us; Mirka Mora was happy that her art legacy would be properly cared for and presented to the public in its best condition, which in turn allowed for an easier running of the conservation projects. Beyond the anecdotal effect of our shared French/Australian stories, this partnership has reinforced both our professional identities and, above all, has contributed to the renewed public enjoyment of a unique and poetic artist’s work for the years to come.¹⁸

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¹⁸ I wish to thank Mirka Mora for such an inspiring professional relationship. Thanks are also due to Tom Dixon, Member of the National Trust Public Art Committee, for facilitating the conservation of the Flinders Street mural, to Mark Rubbo, Managing Director of Readings bookshop, Scott Noble, Manager of Readings St Kilda and Louisa Scott, Curator, City of Port Phillip, for the opportunity of stimulating conservation projects.