

Mirka Madeleine Mora (1928–2018)

Following is the speech delivered by Carrillo Gantner at the State Funeral for Mirka Mora, Palais Theatre, St Kilda on Tuesday September 2018.



Mirka Mora, 2001, by Greg Weight. Collection of the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra.
Gift of Patrick Corrigan AM, 2004.

Mirka Mora has been at the very heart of Melbourne's creative life and popular esteem for many decades.

Many years ago, I was sitting with Mirka in the café at the Australian National Gallery in Canberra. I asked her to tell me the story of her miraculous escape, at the age of thirteen, from the train heading across France to the Nazi holding camp at Pithiviers on the way to Auschwitz. She told me how she wrote a note with the names of the stations she was passing on a scrap of paper she addressed to her father in Paris, and pushed it out through a crack in the cattle truck in which she and many others were being transported. Someone picked it up and sent the note on to her father who worked out where she was headed. He bribed the Nazi authorities and, with the eyes of the other inmates staring out at her through the barbed wire, she was released from Pithiviers one day before she would have been sent to die at Auschwitz. Then in the midst of the café crowd, Mirka burst into wild, incongruous laughter. 'I am laughing at death,' she said. 'What else can we do?'

Those large round eyes staring out at her, the eternal eyes of innocence, wisdom and suffering, are there in so many of Mirka's paintings and other works. So is her laughter in the face of death and in her commitment to the outrageous and colourful miracle of life. You couldn't help but fall in love with Mirka. Everyone who has ever met her or who today stands before her work feels the sense of joy and of life lived to the max. Mirka made Melbourne marvellous. As my wife said to me, it is very hard to imagine the Melbourne we would have had without her. Wanting to acknowledge her extraordinary contribution to art, life, food and fun, when I was on the City Council we appointed her an Honoured Artist of the City of Melbourne, but of course Mirka was much more than this—she was a veritable National Living Treasure.

Because my mother and Mirka were the closest of friends, I was fortunate to grow up with regular injections of her sumptuous art, her delicious French accent and more delicious French cooking, her peeling laughter and her impulsive behavioural extremes. Mirka always managed to put herself at the epicentre of attention, jumping into the swimming pool fully clothed at a polite Toorak party; turning her thank you speech at the Town Hall dinner in her honour into a spellbinding dissertation on the delights of the clitoris; or hoisting her hospital gown to show me and her delighted hospital roommates her generous surgical scar—and so much more.

For my children, for any children, Mirka came almost from another planet, bearing the intense pleasures of surprise and fantasy. She would draw some strange creature for them and inspire them to repay the favour with their own imaginative scribbles. They truly loved her. Everyone loved her, from the very youngest to the elderly students at her Adult Education classes who were encouraged to imagine and to inhabit their liberated and naughty younger selves once again. Mirka believed that life should be a dance, a dance of freedom and truth and joy.

First and always foremost, Mirka was an artist. She loved to paint canvases and trams, to build soft creatures and theatre sets, to embroider pictures and to set mosaics. Her home studio was stacked head high with furniture, books, pictures, dolls, dresses, art materials, cooking implements, a bathtub and other purposeful paraphernalia. Only her adored cat PomPom could navigate this creative jungle with ease. Every day of Mirka's life and wherever she was, she worked tirelessly at her art, always sketching or pulling out her watercolours or researching images in ancient art books, always with the intensity of someone who treasured life and valued time. Even as she grew old, she told me that she had to work at her easel for hours every day, summoning from deep in her being her angels and animals, the birds and plants in vivid colours. And always, always there were those eyes.

In honouring Mirka today with this State Funeral, the Victorian Government celebrates and honours the life of a remarkable woman and her life as a truly, and deservedly, 'Honoured Artist of Melbourne'. I would like to think that it also honours the role that creativity and the arts can play in enriching all our lives, in helping us to see ourselves and our world with greater clarity and brighter colours.

As the Premier has often heard before, 'I think the eyes have it'.

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