Words and symbols are dangerous: the banner works of Raquel Ormella

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Raquel Ormella is an artist with unique insight into our national popular consciousness, one that is viewed through the lens of contemporary suburban Australia. Coming from Western Sydney, a place that many consider perpetually ten years ahead of other national urban centres in terms of foreshadowing eventual social and cultural demographic developments, Ormella understands the very real and everyday impact government policies and initiatives have on individuals, communities and suburbs, and how that connects across broader Australian culture. Ormella knows this because she has walked down that street and squatted in its buildings, looking in some ways for a utopia – perhaps not a suburban utopia, but a utopia nonetheless, brief but definitely uniquely her own.[1] Ormella's own form of protest is to represent, to make visible, to isolate those unique points that define us and the actions of others and their repercussions.

In the three major banner works included in Ormella's exhibition *She went that way,* Ormella appropriates three political terms that were coined by the Howard Government and since fixed in the popular lexicon: 'Mutual Obligation', 'Practical Reconciliation' and 'Core Promises'. It is hard to believe, so omnipresent are these terms today, that these words and the ideas they signify came into existence only a little over a decade ago when there was a major shift in national politics that continues to define our national character and experience. An essential part of this shift was the readjustment of the question of responsibility: what we think and believe our responsibilities are to ourselves and to others in social and, perhaps more significantly, moral terms. It is through a reckoning

with the complex question of responsibility and contradictory emotions of nationalism, both fervent and fraying at the edges, that Ormella's work prompts us to really think about how we respond to those in power and how mere words are in fact powerful ideas connected to their respective moments in history with real participants and lasting consequences.

In Ormella's banner work *Australia Rising #1* (2007) the words 'Mutual Obligation' are spelt out in the patriotic sporting colors of the green and gold. The principle of mutual obligation as it manifested itself in the Howard Government sits archived and defined on the website of the former Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, David Kemp:

> *The principle of mutual obligation is based on a simple proposition: that unemployed job seekers, supported financially by the community, should actively seek work, constantly strive to improve their competitiveness in the labour market and give something back to the community that support them.*[2]

It sounds harmless really. But in this 'simple proposition' rests an uneasy potential for state control over self-determination (hence, the 'obligation'), something perhaps hinted at by Tony Abbott, the current Leader of the Liberal Party, who has been quoted as saying, 'some people who live in poverty spend their money on anti-social and unnecessary activities such as drinking, smoking or gambling'.[3] The inference in Abbot's view was that some people cannot be trusted with money, especially taxpayer's money, so if the government was to continue welfare payments, it would make increasing demands on recipients to qualify for welfare. Government policy changes that resulted from the entrenchment of the principle of mutual obligation resulted in 250,000 Australians losing part or all of their social payments as a result of breaching their obligation to attend an interview for a job, a training course or failing to meet other requirements.

In Australia at the time there was popular support for the policy of Mutual Obligation. This communicated a lot about our general attitudes towards advantage and disadvantage, and in *Australia Rising #1* Ormella prompts us to question our own position on this social scale of privilege. Is she cheering it on? Or protesting against it? Are we? Is this advocacy,

militancy, parody, or something else? Or is it perhaps a tribute to the handmade aesthetic of the popular protest tactics of the past – most notably the form of the banner held aloft down street marches – in the age of the almost infinite reach of web-based activism like GetUp!, an aesthetic that moves through Ormella's work, repositioned through the language of contemporary art.

The colours of green and gold hold a treasured place in the Australian imagination. Long associated with sporting achievements, the green and gold are the colours of the golden wattle, Australia's national floral emblem, and have been used as a symbol of patriotism since the late nineteenth century, later formalised in 1984 by the then Governor-General Sir Ninian Stephen who proclaimed the green and gold our national colours. In *Australia Rising # 1* the green and gold ribbons unfurl onto the floor like frayed edges of bad policy. These ribbons have an uncanny way of making one recall that while at the time that the policy of Mutual Obligation was being effected, medals were being placed around the necks of our Olympic champions at Sydney Olympic Stadium, a venue that stands representative of the hundreds of millions of dollars poured into our national Olympic 'dream', with no corresponding request of 'obligation' from their recipients, lest sporting success be considered a compulsory demand rather than the feel-good gold at the heart of Australians' self-perception. In this regard, it is a dislodged and confused patriotism that Ormella presents back to us.

Ormella's aim with this series of work is not to create nationalistic objects of dazzling extremity, but to question our individual and collective relationship to the state and to expose political doublespeak for what it is. *Australia Rising #1* has a satirical edge and an over-the-top materiality. The shift from a rights-based income support for all Australians to a system of conditional participation support is too big a step to take, especially when the capability to administer such a policy fairly across the various strata of our society remains elusive and when our thinking on the issue remains so muddled and tainted by misinformation and prejudice.[4]

If we were already feeling unsteady, Ormella's *Australia Rising #2* (2009) with its Australian flag-soaked statement 'Core Promises' continues to shake us. After winning the 1996 federal election John

Howard slashed spending on education, health and social welfare, blaming a budget deficit left by the previous Labor government. When it was pointed out to Howard that he had promised not to cut spending on these areas as part of his election platform, by way of explanation he told the nation that some promises are 'core' and some promises are 'non-core', the clear implication being that some promises just don't count. In his election campaign Howard had also given an undertaking that he wouldn't break any promises. The statement 'Core Promises' was important in the way that it significantly undermined Howard's relationship with the Australian public – 'mean and tricky' was the overall impression revealed by polling by the time Howard was ousted by Rudd – but also in the way it shifted the electorate's engagement with the platitudes of electioneering by bringing into the open what everyone already knew: the inevitability of promises being made and broken just as soon as we moved from the election campaign to the main act.

It's difficult at this point in time, when we look at Ormella's *Australia Rising #2*, not to think about the changes in expectations that have occurred since the turn of the century in our relationship with our public representatives, but also how our relationship with the symbolism of the national flag has significantly shifted. When it comes to the use of national symbols, some Australians regard themselves as more entitled to fashion and revel in those symbols than others. It is now commonplace to associate the popular appropriation of the Australian flag with sun-kissed (white) skin, tattoos, beer and young people at the beach, the football and rock concerts, coalescing in a parade of Australian flag board shorts, bikinis and capes draped superhero-like around shoulders. In fact, we no longer question or deplore the fact that Ormella has cut up and reconfigured the flag since this is now an accepted practice in certain contexts, perhaps not in public protest *against* the nation (burning flags would still scandalously offend), but certainly the case when used as an emblem to signify one's patriotism (think here of the board shorts and bikinis). *Australia Rising #2* makes us rethink our relationship to the flag and its transformation as a symbol of nationhood that no longer exists in the way it once did. Ormella understands this in the present context while at the same time recognising that she cannot guess the shifting

meaning of these works through time. She will continue to provide insight into the psychogeography of a place or a nation, but it is from the unique perspective of contemporary suburban Australia – an 'Australianess' that is something that contemporary art and artists sometimes sidestep in favour of a smoother international aesthetic. Ormella's work is the suburban and the Australian at its most local and its most international.

Howard used visual symbols to unite and divide as much as he relied on public statements. In Ormella's 2009 work *Things which have not changed #1*, Ormella spells out 'Practical Reconciliation' over the reconfigured Australian and Northern Territory flags. Only a section of the Northern Territory flag, the stylised representation of Sturt's Desert Rose, is allowed to be seen, the remaining design obscured by a contemporary fabric decorated with the lyrics of 'Waltzing Matilda' in an 'Aboriginal design', with motifs such as a boomerang and koala, the Sydney Opera House and Uluru. Also sewn into this banner is a T-shirt whose original design by an Aboriginal artist Ormella has removed, retaining only the text 'Aboriginal Art Australia'. Ormella was attracted to this T-shirt because of the complexity of the economic, political and aesthetic judgments that surround the broader Aboriginal arts industry, including the ways in which Aboriginal artists choose to represent themselves, and the use and abuse of Aboriginal imagery in tourism, which has long been contested ground. Ormella brings these commercially produced materials together to achieve an aesthetic beauty that emerges from the handmade quality of the work.

The words 'Practical Reconciliation', writ large in *Things which have not changed #1*, was a term that was used by John Howard in June of 2005. He stated:

> *Reconciliation is about rights, as well as responsibilities. It is about symbols, as well as practical achievement. It can speak very bluntly; I think some of the problem with some earlier approaches to reconciliation was that it left too many people, particularly in white Australia off the hook. The government does not seek to wind back or undermine native title of land rights. I say in the name of the government that we reach out, we will meet the Indigenous people of this country more than halfway if necessary.*

From 2001 to 2007 Practical Reconciliation was the official policy of the Australian Government under John Howard, a policy underpinned by a belief that government should focus on achieving practical outcomes which improve the living standards of Indigenous people, rather than establishing so-called symbolic achievements, most notably illustrated by Howard's refusal to offer a national apology to the Stolen Generations on the ground that what's past is past and that nothing practical would be achieved by such an apology. The key criticisms of this policy have been that it has resulted in more funding being delivered to mainstream agencies rather that culturally specific services managed by Indigenous people, and that the ideological heart of the policy itself is based on a regressive welfare model and not one that is focused on rights and self-determination.[5] Of course, in making this work Ormella would have been keenly aware that practical reconciliation led us down a path to the 'Intervention', which received broad national and international criticism for undermining important principles established as part of the legal recognition of Indigenous land rights in Australia.

In this ongoing series of banner works Ormella puts these statements forward like a set of unachieved platitudes, like historical moments removed from the people whose lives they significantly affected and changed. Ormella is reminding us not to forget that the words and symbols of government are the beginning of actions that have cause and effect, that make us who we are as a nation, that have the ability to make us more conservative, more insular and sometimes less caring for the communities and individuals around us. Engaging with these works forces us to think about what our political position is; to show us that sometimes we need to pick a banner, hold it aloft and walk in the street in our attempts to effect and receive change. Ormella's banners are like a dictionary of historical moments, one whose meanings aren't fixed but ambiguous, contested and ultimately lead us towards the sometimes-uneasy realities of our political and social legacy.

NOTES

1. Raquel Ormella and Lucas Ilhein painted the words 'Brief Utopia' on the front of the SquatSpace building on Broadway in response to the South Sydney Council building being developed by Australand.
2. Minister Archive, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, www.dest.gov.au/archive/Ministers/kemp/kqa_mo.htm, 2005, current 2 March 2010.
3. 'Mutual Obligation', *Compass*, television program, ABC Television, 22 July 2001. Producer Roger Bayley.
4. Pamela Kinnear, 'Mutual obligation, ethical and social implications', *On Line Opinion*, www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=1985, 15 December 2000, current 2 March 2010.
5. Lowitja O'Donoghue, 'Practical reconciliation a dismal failure', *The Age*, 11 December 2003.