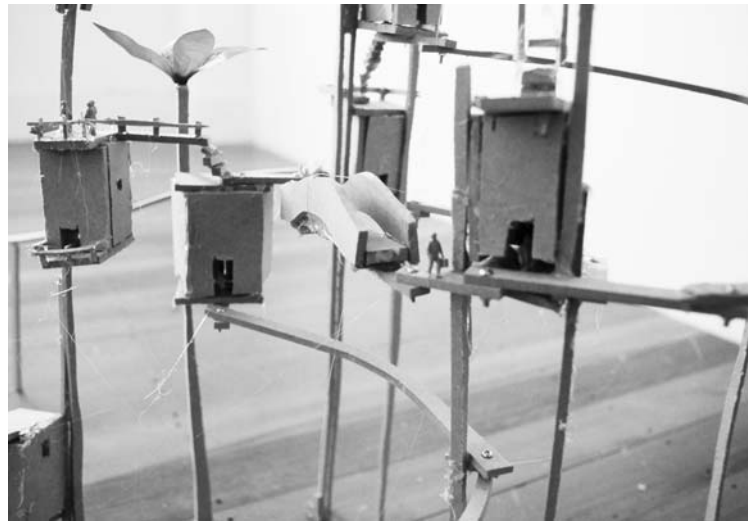


SAMPLER
JOANNA LANGFORD



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The Flower People

*Once upon a time two king's sons set out to seek adventures,
and fell into such a wild kind of life that they did not return home.*

Excerpt from *The Queen Bee, Grimm's and Andersen's Fairy Stories*

Welcome to Joanna Langford's world – a surreal kingdom of miniature roads, bridges and buildings. Access to Langford's magical place is gained through the imagination, a mind altering exercise that moves the viewer beyond the physical space of the gallery, to a land of adventure and endless possibilities. Seemingly fragile, viewers wander cautiously around Langford's world as not to tread on a Lilliputian, forever conscious of proportion and the secret lives that exist within the artist's structures. Tiny dwellings beg looking, inviting viewers to crouch and tip toe around this constructed landscape of rough cut MDF, globs of glue and artificial flowers. Stumble upon Langford's world and you just might recognise your own childhood fantasy unravelling.

The world of *The Flower People* is placed in *The Physics Room* nearby the gallery's back window where High Street apartments offer a suitable backdrop to Langford's towering scene. Across the road at the Jonathan Smart Gallery, the Land of Sweet, an MDF and icing world is suspended from the gallery's ceiling. Further down the road a delectable house of Hundreds and Thousands and pink wafer biscuits lures onlookers to *The Kiosk*. Langford conquers all these spaces as though colonising new land, arranging and developing townships with ease. These communities represent the private and imaginary worlds of both the artist and the viewer, continually shifting between the real and the make-believe.

The meandering flow of *The Flower People* might be likened to a neural pathway where memory is stored. Motorised artificial flowers are strategically placed at various points along Langford's fairytale highway, serving as junctions or perhaps a mental pit-stop where thought is evoked. The uncanny twitch of these rotating flowers is so slight that it could be imagined. So too is the gentle tick of these botanical beauties; a hypnotic rhythm trapping the viewer in the realm of this mini world. Each fragment serves as a place for exploration; an Enid Blyton inspired adventure or an Alice in Wonderland journey. Found objects transcend their everyday purpose, just as a cardboard box might become a boat, car or house when in the creative mind of a child. Langford's flowers become glorious forests blooming among flimsy buildings and a roller coaster freeway.

Structures weave and wind throughout the site, drawing the eye up and over this magical land, transporting the viewer between two worlds: the real street scene as glimpsed through the gallery's window and the day-dream world of *The Flower People*. This diorama moves the viewer beyond the confines of perceptual reality, extending well beyond model making to resurrect a landscape of childhood memories, crafted with imagination and delight.

While the act of looking first connects us with such mystical worlds, the sensory nature of Langford's material pervades. Objects trigger a series of associations which connect the viewer with childhood memories, be it the sweetness of confectionary or the playful found materials the artist collects and blends into fantastical installations. The very process of making lends itself to the spontaneity of childhood. Langford does not prepare drawings or models nor does she painstakingly construct her mythical lands with unnecessary detail and finish. Free of inhibitions, Langford works quickly describing this evolution of ideas as having a 'snowball' effect on her practice.¹ Wonky structures and rickety stairways expose raw edges and awkward interlocks. Segments are pieced together with screws and trails of glue, their naive quality liberated from architectural perfection.

Like a rush of blood to the head, Langford bombards the viewer with a series of triggers, unleashing a mass of experience, emotion and lost worlds, some informed by stories others by play: Dr Seuss, Jack and the Beanstalk, Milly Molly Mandy, Dinky Little, and personal narratives of a childhood forgotten are retrieved from depths of the mind. Langford persists in unlocking the subconscious, devising tactics to unleash the abandoned heroes and heroines of private worlds. With a sense of wonderment, I arrive at my destination – the swamp.

Many a gloomy day was spent indoors where the darker patterns of the carpet in my family home were to become imaginary stepping stones. Traversing the living room became a ritualistic journey where I balanced, leaping from one blotch to another, mindful of the surrounding crocodile infested waters. The impressed patterns on the wallpaper metamorphosed to become jungle creatures watching my every move – an Indiana Jones adventure which shifted my reality beyond the confines of the living room walls. I never lost my footing and thankfully, my other make-believe lives were nowhere near as dark or treacherous. There were shapes in the clouds, pixies, the Pohutukawa tree hut, potions and spells. Even the peeling paint on my parents ceiling resembled a cavernous landscape blanketed in snow.

Langford recalls her own childhood with glee. Her eyes sparkle when she shares stories of building huts, exploration and the like. Memories are honest, joyful and most importantly these accounts of childhood are accessible and easily identified by Langford's viewing public. Now, several years on, Langford resurrects her experience and invites others to 'play' her game of recollection. Pieced together as a train set might be, Langford's mythical interlocking landscapes will be de-installed and reused to build future worlds. They exist forever in the imagination amongst the stories of little people and faraway lands where the mind is free to wander and happiness rules supreme.

Gina Irish

¹ Joanna Langford in conversation with the author, 11th May 2004.

Joanna Langford graduated with a Masters of Fine Art in early 2004 from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, having completed her undergraduate degree at Wintec in Hamilton. Langford exhibits with Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch.

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