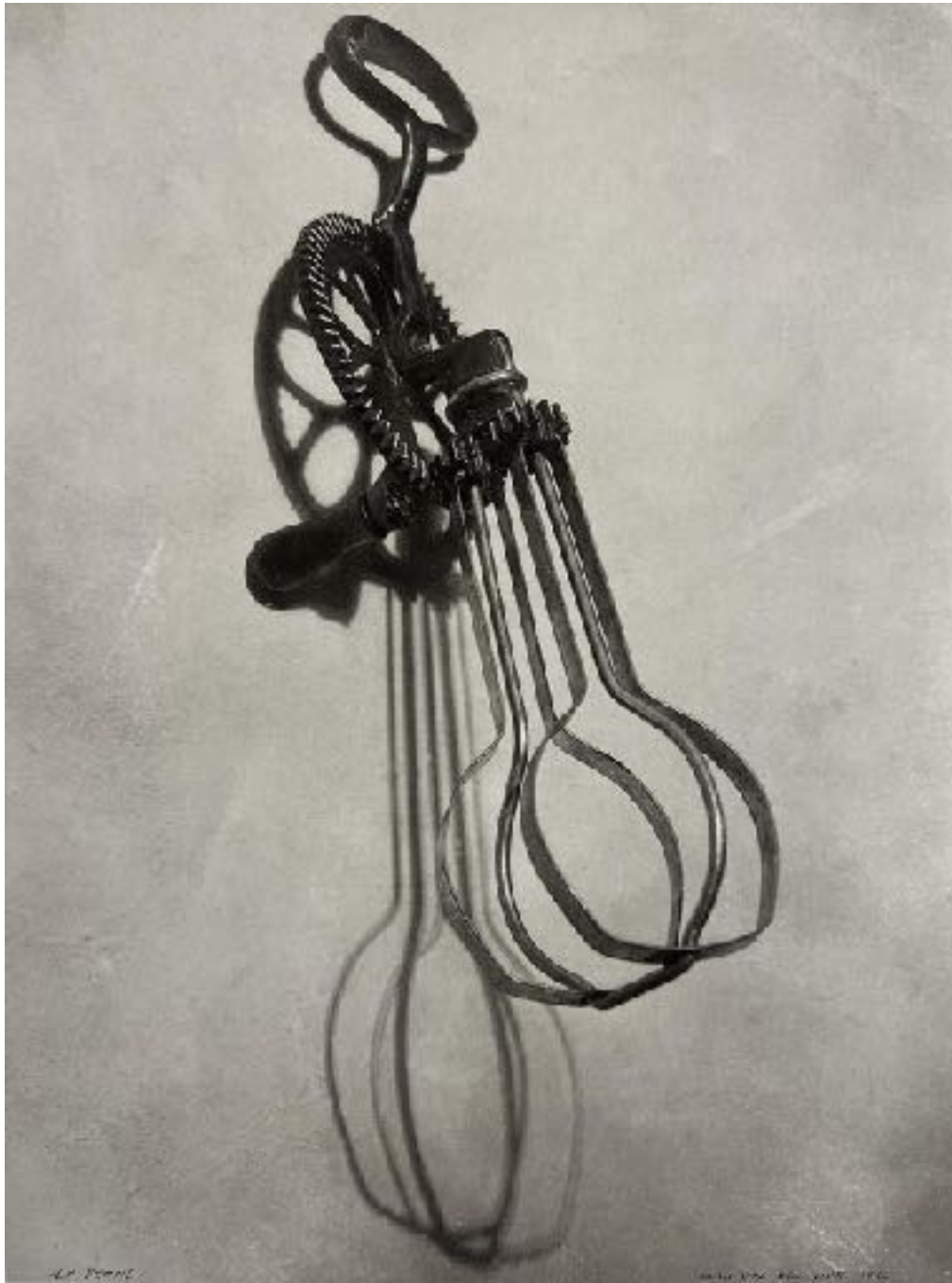




Ray, Man. *La femme (Woman)*. 1918–1920, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Nicole Voevodin-Cash: An Art of Generous Outcomes

Nicole Voevodin-Cash's work offers fresh ways to know the world, and to change our place within it. *Mapping Threads: The Makings and Markings of Nicole Voevodin-Cash* is her current survey exhibition at Caloundra Regional Gallery. One of the pleasures of *Mapping Threads*, thoughtfully curated by gallery director Jo Duke, is the chance to trace the development of the

artist's thinking and decision-making. With close observation, a viewer can locate the works along the trajectory of the artist's varied preoccupations over a period of thirty years.

Throughout her oeuvre, Voevodin-Cash acts as a sly provocateur, gently attracting viewers to her work and ideas by combining inventive, curious, and skilful use of materials with insightful wit. Her sculptural installations function as unscripted social collaborations: they instigate and welcome interaction, prompting the viewer to ask, *Can I touch this? Can I sit here? Am I part of the art?* At once elegant and inviting, her three-dimensional forms and active social reciprocities break through norms of what art can be, and ask to be met more through touch than through the eye.¹ A viewer also responds to form, shape, action and reaction internally, through emotion and thought as well as through the senses, so that the body is activated and engaged. With access to works spanning three decades, it is now possible to trace and connect aspects of Voevodin-Cash's output, and to place her work within the context of some of the artists and art historical movements that ground her inquiry.

A good place to start is her 1997 MFA thesis show, ... *so you want to be touched*, at Brisbane's Metro Arts, which included hybrid bedside tables transformed by the artist into humanoid figures. The title, with its loose reference to an unknown inquiring source (who is asking, and who is being asked?), evokes an entangled relationship among artist, viewer and artwork, linked to early twentieth-century Dada and Surrealism. By signalling the subjecthood of inanimate objects, both of these art movements innovated visual, theoretical, aesthetic and psychological spaces that, in their time, produced confronting imagery and confounding conundrums. In their art, human identity became deeply entangled with the material world. Works such as Man Ray's 1918 black-and-white photograph of a metal eggbeater, entitled *La Femme (Woman)*, embodied

an aesthetic of blurred meaning and boundaries, transforming relationships between humans and nonhumans into challenging emotional and psychological terms and upending social norms. For Dada and Surrealism, rebellion centred on protest against rigid middle-class values the artists felt were dominated by goals and instrumentalised beliefs inevitably leading to the horrors of World War I. As art historian Susan Laxton argues in her 2019 book *Surrealism at Play*, "The quality of the everyday [these artists] sought to reshape demanded that modern culture acknowledge the limits, rather than the unchallenged benefits, of rational thought and useful action".²

It's fair to say that Voevodin-Cash's means and objectives build upon, yet part ways with Dada and Surrealism. Their embrace of chance and play enabled representation and dissemination of antipathy toward procedural communication and action. What chance and play offered were means without ends: gestures, actions, and ways of relating whose aims were left open, with unpredictable outcomes averse to bourgeois values of efficiency and capital. While comparably employing chance and play through synthesis of human and nonhuman agencies, and searching for ways to tease out more relaxed responses to life, Voevodin-Cash begins to activate a parallel aesthetic of care and empathy, seeing chance and play to be necessary, restorative, comforting, and satisfying, in contrast with the earlier artists' anger and hauteur.

As a result, in *so you want to be touched*, Voevodin-Cash compresses the intersection of human and nonhuman entanglement into a central motif that she will continue to employ in later work. Namely, she interrogates the way we take for granted the objects of everyday life; their omnipresent forms, and our cultural and aesthetic interactions with them that say everything about being human. Here, by shaping her works to resemble human forms, and by creating holes

and touchable areas that the audience could transact with as if the works were bodies, she suggests not only sanctioned public spaces but also secret, inner landscapes.

She continues her intervention into furniture-as-usual with the sculpture *Into You!* (2004), which is included here in *Mapping Threads*. It was originally created and installed in the foyer of the Judith Wright Theatre for her solo exhibition *Lobby Play* at Brisbane's IMA. Fabricated from upholstery textile and aluminium, this shrewd take on serviceable, shared objects embodies her inquiry into planned public spaces and how we move and act in them. The artist's intent was to subvert and de-fang the manner in which corporate reception areas become fraught and transactional. With *Into You!*, one imagines the artworld front and centre, with all its networking, social cues, status, competition and ambition. As she has said, she was

replac[ing] standard furniture with interactive, playful, and minimalist social sculptures... that spilled out of the gallery walls [of the IMA] and directly into the foyer spaces of the building, inviting visitors to physically sit on, balance, and interact with the unusual hybrid furniture.³

The result is an absurd yet stylish situation in which bright red upholstered shapes on wheels, each with a cash box on a vertical aluminium support, require a gold coin donation from anyone wishing to sit on them. Each red "chair" is self-belted and sports a brass buckle, transforming the "chair" into a "person". The hybrid nature of the six moveable hassocks thus flickers between personhood, agency, transaction and a comfortable place to sit. In the Dada tradition of drolly overturning convention, the installation asks the viewer to accept equally *Into You!*'s endearing likeability, the irony of its transactional aura, and its potential for movement, play and chance occurrences. As the artist intended, people sat on the pieces in the theatre foyer, dropped a gold coin into the slot, and activated the chair that then vibrated for three minutes while they enjoyed

a beverage and conversation. People moved the seating around, sometimes creating small cliques and sometimes positioning themselves as single seats/spots. The money collected was used to keep the batteries stocked for the duration of the installation.

Elements of chance are at the crux of the 2014 work *M.A.D.E. Walking Billycan Project* (i.e., Many Adventures Directly Experienced). An unscripted walking initiative created during several years when the artist was without a studio, this collaborative social investigation took place outdoors, in the open air, during Covid. Each participant was given a closed billycan with a biro pen hanging by a string from the underside of the lid, and a circle of paper covering the bottom of the can. The drawings made inside the billycan, produced by the biro's chance contact across the paper's surface, depended on each participant's unique movements through space, whether walking, running, swinging the can, or holding it smoothly and gently. A participant's choice of where and when to walk, along with the drawings, became a study of walking, and how it can become a sculptural medium/entity/activity. Now, in *Mapping Threads*, a section of wall is covered with a grid of many of these drawings, composed on pages torn from Voevodin-Cash's father's old *Reader's Digest* books, most of which expound upon health issues. The work is titled *Stay Calm and Stay Healthy* in reference to the pandemic. The artist's intent is to offer the public a creative, playful way to cope with lockdown's isolation and stress, and to enjoy fresh air, movement, and safe, creative social interaction while contributing to the artist's investigation into walking as a performative, sculptural action. The work has been transformative for Voevodin-Cash's inquiry, as it literally progressed her interest in "understanding a space as a site, an artwork as landscape".⁴

She has said

Ideally the emphasis in my work has always been to enhance and to experiment with our lack of use for the tactile and dependence on the optical. I have always aimed to create an awareness of the body, its experience and sensations, and strive to create stimulations that ease rather than stress, as a direct response to our overstimulated public and private lives.⁵

During the years 2011-22, she created a series of works entitled *Mounges*, some of which have been included in *Mapping Threads*. These odd, organically shaped pillow-like forms, fabricated with shaggy green artificial turf in a range of shapes and sizes, have been installed in multiple, differing venues. She refers to this progression in her work as moving toward what she has called ‘social sculptures’. On *Mounges*, people sit, move, and interact, with the sculptures’ inviting tactility and sensual forms being the motivating force to bring participants together in play, comfort and novel places. Certainly, *Into You!* is the *Mounges* precursor, and it’s interesting to compare these two works. The comfort level (for humans sitting or reclining on them) has improved in *Mounges*, while emanating the artist’s now more relaxed sense of confidence in simplicity, and in making less that has the potential to become more. The material construct of *Mounges* relies on the tactile, inviting nature of the artificial turf and one’s curiosity for touching the somewhat zany surfaces, as well as the irresistible, almost natural colour and texture. Conceptually mounges recall *Star Trek* tribbles with their cute, slightly monstrous appearance. *Into You!* is a more buttoned-up, formal work and relies on that formality for its conceptual punch at psychologically loaded social situations. In one iteration of *Mounges* installed at Eagle St in Brisbane’s CBD as part of *Escapespace* (commissioned by the Museum of Brisbane for the exhibition *INHABIT – Ideas for Better Living*), the mounges remained in the street for 6 months as requested by local users. Another installation, titled *XOXO Mounges* and situated along the shoreline at The Ridgeline in the hinterland with a coastal view of the mountains, was the winner

of the Sculpture on the Edge Prize 2022. This lounge setting truly melded into the landscape with its undulating, mountain-like silhouette and extra-large sofa scale.

Continuum (2026) and *Presence* (2025-ongoing), are both shown for the first time in *Mapping Threads*, and make use of digital technologies. *Continuum* employs a phone app that visitors to the gallery download to track and map their movements while visiting the exhibition. *Continuum* is similar to *The Billycan Project* in that it maps out chance movements during playful (not goal-oriented) activity, giving rise to new forms of performative sculpture that simultaneously act as landscapes. Thus, drawing, sculpture, performance, mapping in space, and corporeal experience are synthesised into awareness of one's own body's movement through space. A documentation unique to each individual is an entry into an archive of community members who have had the embodied experience of being a part of the artwork, and who are perhaps no longer able to separate where their corporeality ends and the artwork begins: in *Continuum*, they are one.

Presence is a table setting and a memento for her mother. It's a work made using the Japanese *shibori* technique of wrapping, but instead of dyeing cloth, Voevodin-Cash uses heat to cast domestic objects in white produce netting. *Presence* can be thought of as a grouping of machines. Here the jump from Man Ray's 1918 photographic piece, *Femme*, has progressed from an image used to rename and assign agency to a simple mass-produced metal eggbeater, and to fetishise loss of fleshly humanity in an age of industrial production. With Voevodin-Cash's *Presence*, fabricated over a century later, the artist enters new territory of memory, loss, and autobiography. Ghostlike, see-through domestic objects – knives, forks, spoons, cups, saucers – play with emotion and ephemerality. Several of the objects are mechanised, and motion sensors

placed within them cause movement when a viewer passes by, establishing a dance between objects and humans.

As various artistic movements continued to build upon tenets of Dada and Surrealism, the Fluxus artist Alison Knowles, beginning in the 1960s, made works that celebrate what one commentator describes as the "immersive scale and functional spaces of everyday life",⁶ exemplifying Knowles' determination that art be composed to be lived *in*, not just looked *at*.

Chance, in this lineage, is not a mere technique but a philosophy: an openness to the unplanned, and a conviction that art is part of ordinary experience rather than separate from it. What can be said of Knowles' can also be said of Voevodin-Cash's work, that it involves "a poetics of touch, sensation, and texture – sentient knowledge in [these artists'] hands – translated to a form of sociopolitical engagement... a politics of form amidst the tremendous complexity of social life".⁷

Voevodin-Cash inherits these modes of thought and creativity, but makes them her own. Much has been said, by the artist and by those who have written about her work, concerning the more obvious, central concerns of her practice: her choice and use of materials, experience of space, the importance of touch over sight, her outside-the-box inventiveness, and her instigation and questioning of social exchanges and conventions.

Her practice also persistently examines how we know and sustain the material world, how our bodies are inscribed in a process of object-subject formation, and how these interventions are negotiated between public and private spheres. Chance, space and nonhuman agency are natural partners to such questions. If objects and subjects are formed through encounter, then the

outcome of any encounter cannot be fully determined in advance. The artist builds situations, and then she lets them go.

There is generosity in that release, and a kind of quiet optimism about our capacity to adapt. Yet there is some bite here too. A work that can go several ways can also go wrong, and the same openness that delights us reminds us that we are never fully in command. The humour has an edge, and the friendliness carries a faint, productive unease. Beneath the beauty and decoration lies a recognition that chance is not always kind, and that the stability we rely on is more provisional than we like to admit.

This double quality, the inviting and the unsettling, connects to the *Mapping Threads*' broader interest in inner and outer states. The exhibition explores the various ways in which our representations of landscape give rise to the threshold between interior and exterior. Chance operates precisely at that threshold. External events arrive unbidden, and internal responses take shape in reply: a flicker of anxiety, a burst of amusement, a decision made in half a second.

Voevodin-Cash's works place the viewer at this meeting point, where our environment and what happens within us cannot be cleanly separated. To touch an object and to feel something in response is already to cross the line between outer world and inner life. With this in mind, Voevodin-Cash interrogates and expands the differing landscapes in which we live, offering potent alternatives to the status quo.

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¹ Voevodin-Cash looks to the French philosopher of phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as the basis for her sense of the primacy of the body and touch for knowledge of the world.

² Susan Laxton, *Surrealism at Play* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), p.1.

³ “Interaction as strategy”, Kevin Wilson interview with Nicole Voevodin-Cash, in *Shaped by Behaviour* (catalogue), p.5.

⁴ “Interaction as strategy”, Kevin Wilson interview with Nicole Voevodin-Cash, in *Shaped by Behaviour* (catalogue), p.7.

⁵ Personal email to author, 2 October 2026.

⁶ Nicole L. Woods, *Performing Chance: The Art of Alison Knowles In/Out Fluxus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2026), p.23.

⁷ Woods, *Performing Chance*, p.47.