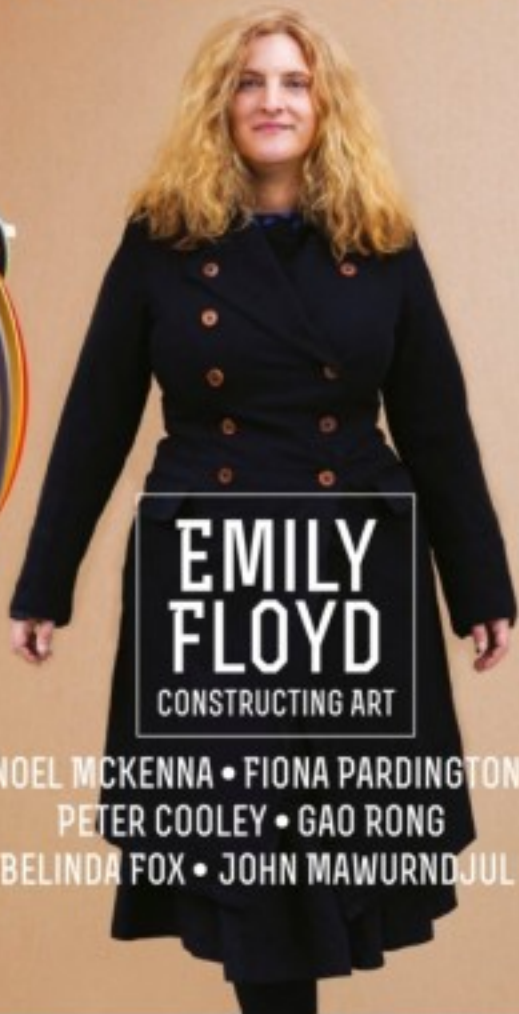


# ARTIST PROFILE



**EMILY  
FLOYD**

CONSTRUCTING ART

NOEL MCKENNA • FIONA PARDINGTON  
PETER COOLEY • GAO RONG  
BELINDA FOX • JOHN MAWURNDJUL

MELBOURNE ART FAIR SPECIAL EDITION





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# GAO RONG

STORY LUISE GUEST

Gao Rong takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary. In banal moments of the everyday - waiting at a bus stop, making a call from a public phone, collecting the mail, catching a cab - she sees a deeper significance. She re-creates quotidian things from her student days and from her life today as an artist in Beijing, documenting her existence in a dramatically fast-changing city. With her hyper-real embroidered sculptures she is recording the memories of a 1980s generation and their experiences of a transforming post-Mao China.

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Born in 1986 in Hang Jin Hou Qi, Inner Mongolia, Gao Rong graduated from Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2010. By 2011 she was included in an exhibition in New York. In 2012 her work was shown in the 18th Biennale of Sydney, and in 2013 she was selected for the Moscow Biennale, with a solo show at Klein Sun Gallery in New York in the same year. In a highly competitive Chinese artworld Gao has quietly forged her own unique path. When I met the artist in her tiny apartment high above the clogged traffic of Beijing's urban sprawl, she told me how she astonished her teachers in CAFA's Sculpture Department with her decision to use needle and thread instead of more conventional techniques. "I am not an embroiderer. I am a sculptor who uses embroidery," she said, as we drank tea in her workroom filled with spools of coloured thread and stacked fabric. Her decision to use textiles and embroidery followed her discovery of the appliqué works of Tracey Emin. She thought Emin's rebellious and nonconformist attitude in some ways mirrored her own, saying, "I liked the way her work showed her private life, and how she broke free of tradition." Gao Rong, however, is considerably less confessional than the British artist: "I don't want to reveal everything!" she says.

Think of Chinese embroidery and you tend to imagine dragons, phoenixes, and blossoms applied with tiny, delicate stitches – a feminine craft from the imperial past. Gao Rong subverts this notion of decorative "women's work", creating large-scale 3D works in stitched fabric wrapped around an armature of sponge, steel frames and wire. Exact representations of peeling paint, mouldy shower rooms, electrical fuse boxes, public telephones and bus timetables replace the traditional motifs. Embroidery has become her visual language. 'Level 1/2 Unit 8 Building 5 Hua Jiadi Bei Li' simulates with extraordinary exactitude the entry to the shabby apartment in which she eked out an uncomfortable existence as a student. With its rusty water pipe, fuse box, security door, stencilled advertisements and footprints on the wall, it appears astonishingly real. On closer inspection you see that every single detail is embroidered fabric. Evocative and nostalgic, it's an elegy to her student days.

Historically, Chinese art has never been about realism for its own sake – even the ancient tradition of 'gongbi' painting with its technically meticulous approach to representation is narrative in intent. Likewise Gao Rong presents us with her life's journey, and the experiences of her generation, "adrift in Beijing". A set of battered green apartment mailboxes focuses on something so mundane that it's often overlooked. In a statement for *Material Object*, her 2011 show at Eli Klein, she said, "Mailboxes are familiar but neglected, especially now in a digital world. Handwritten letters...are dying. The mailbox has been digitized and virtualized." Works such as this, and her private and public telephone, represent her homesickness on first arriving in Beijing; her eagerness for news of home. She stitched an actual letter into one of the mailboxes, where it remains, invisible to the viewer. One day, she says, "the letter may or may not be opened."

In the mid-20th century boundaries between high art and ordinary life became blurred, as mundane objects such as soup cans and Brillo boxes became legitimate subjects for artists. Where Gao Rong departs from the Pop sensibility of artists such as Warhol or Oldenburg is in her exacting, painstaking simulation of the real. The term *trompe l'oeil* is usually associated with the illusionistic effects of academic painting. Gao Rong's intention, however, is not to trick us or astonish us with her cleverness, rather to make us look anew at the quotidian. To watch audiences encounter her work is to see the power of her form of hyper-realism. *Do you like it when audiences mistake your work for the real thing, and you can see them do a double take in the gallery?* I asked. "When people do that it makes them pay more attention to these things, which is what I want," Gao says. "My education [at CAFA] made me focus on representing and showing reality. I want to show an illusion of reality because sometimes just to be realistic is not real enough. Being hyper-real is not just about the form or the surface but it's on a much deeper level."

Every dent or stain of rust and mildew on the objects that have seized her attention is reproduced in precise detail. They are often things that have become, or are about to become, obsolete, obliterated in the





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tsunami of change that has transformed Chinese society. Gao Rong wants to “record things from daily life that may not exist in the future.” Her artworks delight and intrigue audiences internationally, but they are also a social document. “The passage of time is not always recorded but it can be recorded through art and through this kind of embroidery,” she says.

In recent works Gao Rong casts a critical eye on the world in which she lives. ‘Guangzhou Station,’ shown at the 2013 Moscow Biennale, satirises the materialism and brand obsession of contemporary culture. “This phenomenon is objectionable to me,” she says. She embroidered fake designer handbags with realistic food, coffee and make-up stains. Inside each bag, in bizarre juxtapositions, are stuffed surreal replicas of daily necessities. Thus a Louis Vuitton “knock-off” is filled with a giant tube of toothpaste, and another with an outside tub of instant noodles. They comment sardonically on girls who blindly follow fashion, collecting such bags as evidence of social status and success, but they also remind us of the “factory girls” in southern China who make them. “My work has always been concerned with the living conditions of people around me,” says the artist.

Gao Rong identifies Duchamp as a significant influence. Her work, with its thousands of tiny stitches, is as far from a readymade as one could imagine, yet the connection is not so far-fetched. She, too, brings the “low” of ordinary life into the rarefied realm of the gallery. Her bus stop is covered with stencilled phone numbers advertising every possible kind of service in the shifting Chinese economy of back-street entrepreneurialism. Her sewn simulation of the battered blue corrugated fencing from construction sites is “a very Beijing thing - old and battered,” she says. “The history of objects is on their surface. I make a creative choice when I see a surface that lends itself to embroidery. I want to use embroidery to represent the tracks of time passing by on wood and steel.”

*I Live in Beijing*, her 2013 solo show, featured stained packing boxes, a shower room with mildewed tiles, and a water-damaged battered sofa. She was just recording the apparently unimportant details of

her life, she says: “The shower room is rust-stained because it is so cold in Beijing that sometimes the pipes explode in winter and everything is stained by rust.” ‘What Type of Car Can A Motor-Tricycle be Exchanged For?’ is a nostalgic memorial to cheap three-wheeled vehicles called Beng Beng Taxis disappearing in the drive for modernization. The title alludes to her half-joking ambition to sell enough pieces to buy a car. ‘The Static Eternity’, seen at the 18th Biennale of Sydney, re-creates her grandmother’s tiny traditional home (now demolished) in Inner Mongolia. To replicate it accurately she visited relatives living in similar houses, taking precise measurements and making drawings. She pored over old photographs, interviewed elders, and examined bricks. The work is a faithful simulacrum of “home” in which everything is embroidered fabric, from the ‘kang’ with its flowered quilts to the enamel mugs and thermos flask and ancestral portraits. It speaks of the strength of memory and the importance of family.

It was Gao Rong’s grandmother who first taught her to embroider in the traditional techniques of her native Shaanxi Province. Reviled as a landowner, she was sent to Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution, supporting seven children by exchanging embroidery for food. Gao says, “Heritage is not just a technique, but a spirit of survival handed down from one Chinese woman to another.” The artist’s mother assists her with her projects at times, and she has taught embroidery to rural women whom she sometimes employs when they can be spared from work in the fields. But unlike many contemporary artists in China, who revel in cheap labour and fabrication costs to produce work on an enormous scale, Gao wants all her work to bear the marks of her own hand. “I want to put my heart into every stitch,” she says.

The city Gao Rong came to know as a student is being erased. Old certainties have been swept away by a tidal wave of development and demolition. No wonder then that her work lovingly recreates, in painstaking detail, the ordinary objects of Chinese life, from telephones to bathroom fixtures; mailboxes to bus stops. In the exacting verisimilitude of her embroidered sculptures she immerses us in her

own experience, focusing our attention on the unexpected beauty of the everyday. ■

Gao Rong is represented by Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

EXHIBITION  
New Works  
18 September to 11 October, 2014  
Dominik Mersch Gallery

[www.dominikmerschgallery.com](http://www.dominikmerschgallery.com)

- 01 Communicate by phone 1, detail, 2012, sponge, cloth, wire, board, big, 20 x 48 x 28cm
  - 02 Portrait of Gao Rong
  - 03 The Static Eternity, 2012, cloth, wire, sponge, cotton, steel support and board, 516 x 460 x 2 x 70cm
  - 04 Communicate by phone 2, 2012, sponge, cloth, wire, board, small, 20 x 23 x 12cm
  - 05 What type of Car can a Motor-Tricycle be Exchanged For? 2013, embroidery, cloth, wood, foam, iron shelf, leather, and plastic, 180 x 195 x 95cm
  - 06 Station, 2011, fabric, threads, sponge, metal frame, 255 x 100 x 3cm
  - 07 1/2 Level, Unit 8, Building 5, Hua Jiadi North Village, 2010, Cloth, cotton and sponge, 260 x 166 x 184cm
  - 08 Communicate by phone 1, 2012, sponge, cloth, wire, board, big, 20 x 48 x 28cm
  - 09 Mailbox, 2011, Embroidery, cloth, and foam, 68 x 70 x 21cm
  - 10 Guangzhou Station, 2013, copy bags, cloth, embroidery, sponge
- Courtesy the artist, Dominik Mersch Gallery and White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney