

# MIRKA

23 October 2010 – 1 May 2011

Curator Kendrah Morgan



Mirka Mora painting her mural.  
Heide I sunroom October 2010  
Heide Museum of Modern Art  
Photograph: John Gollings  
©John Gollings

**This Education Resource has been produced by Heide Museum of Modern Art to provide information to support education institution visits to Heide Museum of Modern Art and as such is intended for their use only. Reproduction and communication is permitted for educational purposes only. No part of this education resource may be stored in a retrieval system, communicated or transmitted in any form or by any means.**

## MIRKA

This exhibition celebrates the work of one of Melbourne's best-loved artists and personalities, Mirka Mora, and her long friendship with Heide founders John and Sunday Reed. The selection of paintings, works on paper and soft sculptures in the exhibition date from the period of this friendship, which extended across three decades: from 1951, when Mirka and her husband Georges first arrived in Melbourne from Paris, to 1981, the year Heide opened as a public art museum and the Reeds died.

A highlight of MIRKA is a new, commissioned large-scale painting executed by the artist on the latticed glass windows of the Heide I sunroom.

Mirka and Georges Mora came to Australia to escape the threat of the Cold War in Europe, having lived through the horrors of World War II. They were welcomed by Melbourne's cultural community and made a significant contribution to the local art scene and the city's gradual transformation into a sophisticated metropolis. In 1953 they were involved in the reactivation of the Contemporary Art Society, convening the inaugural meeting at their studio residence at 9 Collins Street. This venue was a hub for Melbourne's bohemian set, which transferred to Mirka Café at 185 Exhibition Street when it opened in December 1954. Mirka Café arguably boasted the first espresso machine in Melbourne and was described by artist John Olsen as a 'tachist paradise', decorated with murals, furniture, paintings and sculpture by artists such as Ian Sime, Julius Kane, Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Charles Blackman, Joy Hester and Clifford Last, with French meals served on crockery by John Perceval. The Moras went on to open two other restaurants, Balzac in East Melbourne and Tolarno in St Kilda, reputedly as lively and similarly witness to many art world dramas.

The Moras first met the Reeds in 1952 through music critic John Sinclair. Sunday commissioned Mirka to make a dress for her and the friendship was sealed through their shared passion for art and symbolist poetry and Sunday's affinity with all things French. She and Mirka conversed in French and Mirka was given access to the many French publications in the Reeds' library at Heide.

The Moras became frequent visitors to Heide and in the 1960s they also enjoyed family holidays with the Reeds at their neighbouring beach houses at bayside Aspendale. During this period Mirka made many delightful personalised drawings for John and Sunday for occasions such as birthdays and Christmas, and these have entered the Heide collection and are included in the current exhibition.

Mirka's art is characterised by a sensuous, colourful naive style and an idiosyncratic iconography of recurring motifs that include angels, children, cats, dogs, birds, snakes, fantastical beasts, self portraits and lovers. Her imagery reveals the remarkable breadth of her sources, which range from the theatrical traditions of the Surrealists and the *Comédies Italiennes*, to the work of the European modernist masters, classical

mythology, fairy tales, child and outsider art, and the toys and dolls of her Russian folkloric heritage. The artist's three children and her love affairs have also provided primary subject matter, with Max Delany writing in 1999 that these are among the 'principal motivations of Mirka's creative imagination – the search for childhood and sexuality'. Often in her explorations of these themes there is an element of humour underscored by a note of melancholy and psychological intensity.

The works in MIRKA also give an indication of the extraordinary range of media the artist has utilised during a lifetime of technical and aesthetic exploration, including oils, tempera, pastels, watercolours, drawing, mosaic, tapestry, soft sculpture and doll-making.

### **Brief biography**

Madeleine 'Mirka' Zelik was born in Paris in 1928 to Jewish parents: a Romanian mother, Celia 'Suzanne' Gelbein and Lithuanian father, Leon Zelik. They went into hiding during the war and miraculously survived the Holocaust. In 1946 Mirka met her future husband Georges Mora, then Chef de Bureau of a Jewish organisation who had saved children during the war, at the orphanage where she worked in Saint Quay Portrieux. Georges assisted Mirka to enrol at the Jean Louis Barrault theatre school in Paris, where she trained in mime and drama. She also pursued an interest in painting. Mirka and Georges married in December 1947 and their first son, Philippe was born in 1949. Two years later the young family emigrated to Australia.

In mid 1952 the Moras settled at 9 Collins Street in Melbourne, a studio residence where they lived for the next fifteen years. Second son William was born in 1953 followed by Tiriël in 1958. 9 Collins Street was a hub for the city's cultural community and for a time the headquarters of the newly re-formed Contemporary Art Society. During this period the Moras opened a string of successful restaurants, beginning with Mirka Café, in Exhibition Street in 1954, followed by Café Balzac in East Melbourne, then Tolarno in St Kilda, which opened in 1966. Georges began working as an art dealer in the late 1960s, soon after which he and Mirka separated, in 1970.

During the 1950s and 60s Mirka combined working in the restaurants and raising her family with her career as an artist. She held her first solo exhibition 1956, at the Gallery of Contemporary Art, established by John and Sunday Reed as a venue for Contemporary Art Society exhibitions. She also held solo shows at the Gallery's successor, the Museum of Modern Art of Australia (1958–66), which John Reed and Georges Mora ambitiously modelled on MoMA in New York. In 1967 and 1969 Mirka presented two shows at Georges' gallery, Tolarno, and in 1971 she held her first exhibition of dolls, at Realities Gallery, Toorak, subsequently teaching numerous doll-making workshops. Since 1987 she has been represented by William Mora Galleries and she has now held more than fifty exhibitions in total. She has also contributed several large-scale commissions to the visual fabric of Melbourne, including the mosaic murals at Flinders Street Station and St Kilda Pier.

In 1999 Mirka had a major retrospective, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, at Heide Museum of Modern Art which was seen by 16,000 people. In 2002 she was made Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government. She was made a Heide Fellow in 2008, one of small number of individuals who have been honoured and officially acknowledged for their exceptional contribution to Heide over time. Other Heide Fellows include inaugural Director Maudie Palmer, artist Albert Tucker, sculptor Inge King and photographer John Gollings.

Mirka now lives in Richmond, Melbourne near the gallery run by her son William. She continues to paint daily and exhibit regularly.

Kendrah Morgan  
Curator

### Further information

Watch the video of Mirka at Heide, interviewed by Heide curator Kendrah Morgan.  
[http://heide.com.au/mirka\\_video](http://heide.com.au/mirka_video)



*MIRKA*, exh. cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2010.

Mirka Mora, *Wicked but Virtuous: My Life*, Penguin, Australia, 2000.

*Mirka Mora: Where Angels Fear to Tread: 50 Years of Art 1948–1998*, exh. cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 1999.

Fiona Holt, *Australian Women: Successful Lives; Interviews by Fiona Holt 1988–93*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 88–93.

**Choose** your favourite Mirka Mora artwork and use your imagination to write creatively and pretend anything you want about it!

Title

Year

Materials

---

---

---

---

**Who** is it about?

---

---

---

---

---

**What** happened (what's the story)?

---

---

---

---

---

**When** did it take place?

---

---

---

---

---

**Where** did it take place?

---

---

---

---

---

**Why** did it happen?

---

---

---

---

---

**How** did it happen?

---

---

---

---

---

**Sketch it;**

## MIRKA wordfind

W U S Y A D I L O H C D N E I R F M G  
 Z P Q O Z Q K O V F T X A X G D M K B  
 R T C T S L L O D E M O V C A E W H O  
 G G N I W A R D G U H Z H B R K Z D H  
 S E R P E N T M S Q C A A Z D C D U E  
 H P X L H W B D V C R X R J E I S G M  
 L U F R U O L O C C V J O K N W Y F I  
 T N N H D M I D O F E U M B X Y H A A  
 F T B A C J H A M E R M A I D H E M N  
 D G N O U N L Z L P G Z K G B G F I C  
 M M C O R A I N B O W O R O I Z A L K  
 N P G H I Z Q E N K T S I T R A C Y P  
 U A N V I T L N J T R A M I L V P E B  
 E R I P M L I C Y M Y T H O L O G Y I  
 S I T K U E D B L A R U M H Y H C E Y  
 R S N B S V Y G I B K V P E L E G N A  
 A G I I E O L H V H Y G W I V U I U X  
 L K A R U L W V V P X D Z D W O A E M  
 N W P D M F H E B Z O E E E M E L D M

angel  
 artist  
 bird  
 bohemian  
 cafe  
 charcoal  
 child  
 colourful  
 dolls

drawing  
 exhibition  
 garden  
 family  
 friend  
 heide  
 holidays  
 love  
 mermaid

mirka mora  
 mural  
 museum  
 mythology  
 painting  
 paris  
 rainbow  
 serpent  
 wicked

**MIRKA Colouring-in**



© Mirka Mora

## Heide Education Programs

Heide Education offers a stimulating range of programs for students and educators at all levels to complement Heide's exhibitions, collection, history and gardens. Programs range from tours and art-making workshops to intensive forums with artists and other arts professionals. Designed to broaden and enrich curriculum requirements, Heide's programs and online resources aim to inspire a deeper appreciation of art and creative thinking.

### Excursions: Exploring & responding

Excursions at Heide are educational tours tailored to meet individual student group capabilities and needs across all year levels, from K-12 and tertiary groups. These tours can be taken as stand-alone Excursions: Exploring and Responding, or combined with a Creating and Making Workshop.

#### Heide History

Students learn about Heide's unique history as the birthplace of Melbourne modernism with guided tours of the 16-acre site, including the 'scar' tree, Heide I heritage-listed farmhouse and Heide II modernist building and Sculpture Park. Looking at highlights of the Heide collection, students gain an insight into the Australian modernist art movement through to contemporary art practice. Students develop an understanding of the contribution of John and Sunday Reeds' art patronage and the lives and practices of the artists who became the centre of the Modernist art movement in Melbourne.

VELS: Personal learning, thinking processes, civics and citizenship  
ARTS DOMAIN: Exploring and responding  
VCE ART: Analytical frameworks, art and cultural context, interpreting art, discussing and debating art  
VCE STUDIO ART: Developing and interpreting art ideas, styles and materials. Professional practice, art industry contexts

### Excursions: Creating & making workshops

Build on observations made in the galleries with art-making in the Sidney Myer Education Centre. Practical programs are modified to meet student group capabilities and needs, across all year levels from K to 12, and tertiary groups. Practical workshops can only be taken with a contextual museum tour.

#### Exhibition in Focus

Create an artwork as a direct response to the artworks viewed at Heide. Teachers may select from a range of starting points, both inside the galleries and in the Sculpture Park, in guiding students to create artworks. Students may work individually or collaboratively to produce ephemeral or take-home artworks.

Workshop adapted to suit the different year levels.

VELS: Physical, personal and social learning, communication, creativity  
ARTS DOMAIN: Creating and making  
VCE ART: Art making, cultural expression and personal meaning  
VCE STUDIO ART: Exploration of materials and techniques

## Bookings

Bookings are essential for all programs.

For more information, visit [heide.com.au/education](http://heide.com.au/education) or contact Heide Education: T 03 9850 1500  
[education@heide.com.au](mailto:education@heide.com.au)

Teachers are encouraged to visit Heide prior to a booked school visit (complimentary ticket available) to familiarise themselves with the exhibitions and facilities.

Heide is committed to ensuring its programs and activities are accessible to all. Schools recognised as having a low overall socio-economic profile on the Government School Performance Summary are eligible to apply for a reduced fee. Please contact the Heide Education Coordinator for more information.

Prices and programs may change without notice.

---

Keep up to date with the latest Heide Education news and special offers by subscribing to the Heide Education e-bulletin at [heide.com.au/subscribe](http://heide.com.au/subscribe)

---

### **Heide Museum of Modern Art**

7 Templestowe Road

Bulleen VIC 3105

T 03 9850 1500

[education@heide.com.au](mailto:education@heide.com.au)

[heide.com.au](http://heide.com.au)

Open daily 10am–5pm

Closed Mondays (except public holidays)