

BURNING DESIRE

Emma Coulter has the lucky but challenging conundrum of being talented in two creative professions. She speaks here with *Marg Hearn*.

Many artists fall back on casual employment to make ends meet, but not Emma Coulter, a painter with a penchant for the abstract medium, and an accomplished senior interior designer. Commercially pragmatic from the outset about the financial insecurity of relying solely on art sales, Coulter completed two degrees at Queensland University of Technology – a Bachelor of Visual Arts, followed by a Bachelor of Built Environment (Interior Design), graduating with a distinction.

During the past 11 years, Coulter's breadth of design experience has encompassed significant projects in a range of sectors, including senior design roles at both Geyer (2005 – 2010) and more recently BVN Architecture (2010 – 2011). The intensity of the architecture and design industry saw Coulter (a self-confessed perfectionist) place her

art on hold for several years after initially trying to juggle the two.

However, from the ensuing experience of loss of a part of herself that she discovered was, "essential to her purpose in life", she resumed her art practice concurrently with design.

While conceding that certain synergies exist between art and interior design – for Coulter, one does not inform the other – she believes her experience as an artist has given her an "edge" as a designer. In return, design has provided exposure to audiences, networks, knowledge of strategy, marketing, presentation, business and the people skills needed to interact and engage with people on a professional level – opportunities not usually the domain of artists.

Learning to challenge her own creative process – and the ability to recognise when an idea wasn't working and to discard it – is a skill Coulter has acquired over time in design and that she now applies to her painting process every day.

"Whilst creativity links both design and art, to some extent, the two operate in completely different contexts as very separate entities. For each to retain their integrity, they must be treated separately," she says.

Each of Coulter's artworks is founded on conceptual ideas and approached intuitively. Although external influences bear a subliminal presence, full creative control is retained by the artist. There's also the ability continually to refine and develop a body of work. By contrast, a design outcome is driven by a combination of client and functional requirements, budget, timelines, materiality, buildability, site conditions, team dynamics and politics, she says.

With the right mix of ingredients falling into place in mid-2011, and the philosophy that experience of other cultures and building a global network is imperative for artistic development, Coulter took a break from design to accept a three-month international residency at Takt Kunstprojektraum, in Friedrichshain, Berlin, negotiating an exhibition, *Viscerality*, as part of the arrangement.

The ability to work full-time on her art practice has availed, "more time to investigate ideas and be more informed about my art."

Akin to Coulter's approach to painting, her next moves are works in progress. She ponders an ideal world that might involve freelancing across projects as a creative professional interspersed with periods of focus on art. Further study is also on the radar, as is New York.

"Amazing things can come from the cross-fertilisation of ideas. We live in the era of multi-tasking, instant technology, global connectedness and redefined and challenged gender roles. Technology has enabled people to lead multi-dimensional lives, so maybe we just need to let go of old paradigms and embrace things as they are," she says.

At times, feeling external pressure to choose one discipline, she remains unconvinced as to why, instead suggesting that the apparent categorical need to pigeonhole people into stereotypes and boxes could be challenged.

Having two lines of work does not make Coulter any less of an artist, or less committed to either profession. And, certainly, for Coulter, to make art is not a hobby, but a burning desire. ●

EMMA COULTER
emmacoulter.com.au

