

Inventory

Book and Art Exhibition Launch

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Melbourne's Living Museum of the West, Maribyrnong

Launched by Alice Pung

Run by charities to raise funds and provide cheap affordable clothing and household goods, op-shops are familiar and ordinary while also being places of mystery and adventure. They are frequented by treasure-hunters and artists, environmentalists and historians, as well as people struggling to make ends meet.

Victoria University lecturers Enza Gandolfo and Sue Dodd bring their combined skills as writer and artist to the production of a book and exhibition that uncover the charm of these local treasures: the community op-shop and its volunteers and patrons.

I was walking in the city when I saw this huge poster for Hugo Boss. Another one for Chanel. And Christian Dior. And I noticed one bizarre thing about the models on these million-dollar art posters. They have these awful expressions on their faces. Like someone has substituted their caviar with dog poo and they've swallowed some. They look so anal you could sharpen a pencil up their bums.

And I started thinking about advertisements I've seen recently. I realised a peculiar thing. You might get a few smiles in the Myer ads, but not many. Then you go to the Target ads – people in Target and Kmart ads are always looking happy. They look like families having a good time. Then you get the Forges and Dimmeys ads, the Lowes Ads. And people in them are ecstatic. They're wearing five-dollar bras and laughing their heads off. The men are modelling these single-use disposable drills from China and they're pretending that they've got the Rex Hunt home renovation kit.

So there's a pattern here, just from looking at ads, if you can see it. It seems the more you seek prestige above all else, the more unhappier you become, until one day you end up on a Versace ad wearing bizarre bits of plastic tubing around your torso and macaroni on your head, looking as if you've just sucked on seven lemons!

And if you aren't too fussed about prestige? You are a happy Target person. Dipper's your best friend and you go to the footy on the weekends in your Forges Western bulldogs beanie.

A number of books have been written about this phenomenon recently – Alain de Botton's *Status Anxiety* and Clive Hamilton's *Affluenza* – both wonderful books, and both about our need for prestige.

Within the whole approach to op-shops, we see a story about class. When I was writing *Unpolished Gem*, I knew that if I had sat my mother down and asked her to tell me her story, she would have said that when we first got here, we were so poor we had to get clothes from St Vinnies and shop at the op-shops and it was so terrible and tragic. That's why I did not interview my parents for my book!

Because there is another story they tell, unprompted. When Mum and Dad first came here, she was given a bag of baby clothes. One day, she took these clothes to the coin-operated laundromat and put them through the wash. When she returned, they were stolen! She can

never forget that bag of baby clothes! Nowadays my mother has clothes my father has bought for her on his business travels – designer goods from Italy and France – but these stay at the back of the cupboard.

So within this story about class aspirations, we often see a never-ending re-enactment of Oscar Wilde's famous quote – 'a cynic is a person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.'

Op-shop-shoppers are the opposite. They know the value of *everything* in the store, because in many cases, it's the first time you've owned a particular thing – whether it's a pink canister, an electric frypan, a sewing machine or an antique Japanese plate from the shopping genie. Your first is always special. My mum had a wok she used so much over 25 years, that she burned a hole right through it!

Migrants saw the op-shops as real opportunity shops. As Frank McGuigan wrote, 'my god, people worked for years to get all this stuff and kids are throwing it out!' This is also the fault of an avaricious society – now a new television is designed every month, a new mobile phone every week! My father works in Retravision, so we should know. In the past, my father tells me, they designed a toaster to last two decades. Now things are designed to last only a few years, so that people will keep buying the latest models.

When I looked at the artwork in *Inventory* it really moved me, because I could see real people – living real lives. Moments of the days were documented, moments of meaning. Not advertisements with swankers telling us to buy the Birkin bag that would cost a person in Braybrook a year's wages. I admire the blunt honesty of Stefan Schutt – 'I'm a cheap cheapskate.'

I did see one advertisement in *Inventory*, and it touched my heart. On page 34 is a photograph of a shop window, with the sign 'Known St Albans paint-by-mouth artist Jack Freeland paintings.' This photo moved me because they didn't write 'famous,' or 'eminent' or 'renowned.' They wrote '*Known* St Albans artist' – the St Albans community know Jack as a person, and they are proud of him as a person, proud enough to display his photo and his paintings in their window.

I was also humbled by the generosity of Elsie Seidel Davies – 84 years old and a volunteer at op-shops for sixteen years. Elsie says that 'it doesn't matter how much you've got, you can't take it with you when you die – there is no pocket in the shroud.' What wisdom. Maureen Marshall says about these volunteers – who spend their time consoling the lonely, helping the poor and comforting the disenfranchised – that 'you should give them honorary degrees in social work and psychology.' There are no 'sales assistants' in op-shops, because it is not about making a sale but providing a grace.

There is such goodness in the world, such generosity of spirit, such extraordinary places where lives are made, furnished and clothed. Only wankers live their lives unsmiling in sterile designer environments. And as Australians, we have a problem with being wankers. I love the honesty of this book – its lack of social or political agenda. It is just a book about op-shops, but in many ways it is so much more. It is a book about the things that have mattered, and do matter, in our lives.