



## guerrilla ice

THE HOTHAM STREET LADIES MAKE ART WITH ICING: ON CAKES, WALLS, GALLERIES AND THE OCCASIONAL PUBLIC TOILET.

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Sharehouses. They're a delicate business. Buildings that sigh and crumble. Taps that need to be jiggered just so. Stains that could be anything. Don't open that cupboard! Just ... don't. They're the houses many of us grow up in. Oh, physically we might grow up with the 'rents, but the real growing up – the real life lessons, the long dark nights of the soul and the general getting together of shit – well, these things happen on wobbly stools, sitting around the op shop dining table with an ever-rotating cast of co-tenants.

Housemates start out as the people who share the bills, but they end up being the people who share your life. They see you. The real you. The you who just got dumped, fired or thrown out of the pub. There's not always a whole lotta love. Especially when the Virgin Mary starts to appear in the bathroom scum. But when there is, when a community of friendships is forged over the stovetop, over pizza boxes, over tears and cups of tea and cheap red wine, it can transcend the boundaries of the property and the term of the lease. It can make for something legendary.

At Hotham Street in Melbourne's Collingwood, in a sagging weatherboard sharehouse like any other, five ladies in the twilight of their twenties forged a special bond. "I remember one time at Hotham Street we were all sitting around and everybody was talking about times they'd lit fires," Lyndal Walker says, giggling over her cup of Earl Grey. "One of them was a field. One of them was deliberately setting a sculpture alight."

Inspired by their common love of craft, cooking and general silliness, the ladies put together their own Country Women's Association styled series of cookbooks. "What was really cute was we asked people to give us a recipe and then just write a paragraph about it," Cass Chilton says. "We just got some hysterical recipes from our friends. Like there's one all about jaffles. They were just these funny little snapshots, but we felt like they really captured the kind of social life around the house."

The books, printed at home on their HP Bubble Jet, celebrated the flipside of food culture – the mistakes, the messiness – and unwittingly anthologised life in Melbourne's inner north. One formal art piece later (a cake of the Hotham Street house itself, intricately rendered in icing, showcased at the Margaret Lawrence Gallery) and the art collective better known as the Hotham Street Ladies was born.

Over the past six years, the ladies' artworks have expanded to include gallery installations at the National Gallery of Victoria, controversial (even banned) cake submissions to the Royal Melbourne Show and street art, all using their medium of choice: icing. "We love icing and we love cooking," Lyndal says. "But we are definitely interested in making it a bit clever and a bit naughty. And it doesn't always have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be the way they do it in the *Women's Weekly*. That's quite important. Women are under this enormous pressure to be a particular way. Be a particular type of woman – supermum. We definitely want to challenge that."

And what better way to challenge female stereotypes than by rendering a colossal menstruating uterus in icing on the wall of a men's toilet cubicle? "We just thought, 'What's the female equivalent of the cock and balls?'" Cass says. "And there's sort of nothing, because people don't really draw vaginas as a funny thing. It's not a 'funny thing'." The iced uterus, part of an exhibition at the Victorian College of the Arts, dribbled icing blood down the wall and into a drain hole, complete with clusters of Jaffas and chewy raspberries. "They were clots," Cass explains, smiling politely.

"We've worked with spew a bit, and I think we might keep working with spew. That's really got some possibilities," Lyndal says, recollecting the ladies' iced vomit with sprinkles outside Melbourne gig spot The Tote – one of the ladies' many street art installations. "Chicks on Speed were playing, so it was quite a good context. And one of the really funny things about it was that people walked past and picked bits off and ate it."

But not everyone has gobbled up the Hotham Street Ladies' output with the same relish and abandon. Their entries into the Royal Melbourne Show's cake decorating competition – a cake made to look like empty pizza boxes with an ashtray full of cigarette butts and a decayed, Miss Havisham-themed effort riddled with icing spiders and rats – were considered "in poor taste" by the powers-that-be. The former scored poorly, the latter was disqualified. "It makes me laugh, quite frankly," Cass says. "Because it is in poor taste! But that doesn't mean that it's not a valid exploration of a cake in icing. We thought [the Miss Havisham cake] was really quite a melancholic cake with literary references and that it was a perfectly valid entry. It wasn't our intention to offend them. It was just to try and extend this conversation of what cake decorating can actually be about."

"We want to provoke," she says. "The fact that we're using these women's crafts to open up new discussions about feminism and what it means to be a mother and a contemporary woman living in a city, expressing how we feel about our friends, about our social milieu – that's what our work is really about."

The group's latest installation at Melbourne recording studio Bakehouse is twofold. Inside, the ladies have iced a trompe l'oeil piece resembling the south of France onto the wall of one of the rehearsal rooms, while outside posters of their iconic bleeding uterus adorn Hoddle Street. Although only three of the five members were on hand to ice the wall (photographer Lyndal, landscape architect Cass and product designer Sarah Parkes), the others (Darwin-based social policy worker Molly O'Shaughnessy and London-based jeweller Caroline Price) remain vital contributors to the group's work, whether it be via Skype or whenever they hit town. "It's been a great way for us to stay friends," Lyndal says. "When we first started, our meetings would take a lot longer than they do now. Now we can develop an idea in an hour and a half, before the kids crack it."

It's been a decade since the Hotham Street Ladies first banded together and set off on an unexpected creative journey, cracking open a torrent of feminist and consumerist dialogue through their trails of iced puke and various homages to grunge. Yet time, distance, partners and the birth of little Hotham munchkins (three of the ladies are now mums) have in no way impeded the group's growth or sense of ribald absurdity.

"We'd love to do a road trip around Australia in a Tarago, visiting important cake decorating sites, staying at CWA hostels, but also checking out street art and bands, probably eating bad Chinese food in country towns," Lyndal says. "We'd do projects on the way," Cass adds. "Icing-bomb the towns. Maybe do a bit of op-shopping." ❄️