

ART CRITICS and WRITERS VIEWS on ROBYN GORDON'S WORK

TERENCE MALOON Art Gallery of New South Wales - Public programmes, special exhibitions curator

Writing when Art Critic, Sydney Morning Herald newspaper:-

Ringed weird and wonderful changes in necklaces and earrings may be thought to be a modest ambition, but Gordon's sense of colour and spectacle can match some of the best painters around. She can amalgamate the most unlikely assortment of materials (shells, polythene, silk threads, plastic barnacles) into dazzling little confections. In a good week for visiting galleries, hers is easily the most pleasurable in town.

Craft Arts magazine No 12 - Article, Metaphors of Natural History

Robyn Gordon's art has conducted an ecstatic celebration of marine phenomena, returning to the seas as the cradle of life. Natural science has legitimised her poetic metaphors. It gives a rational basis to her (and our) awe.

RG's interest in natural history and her insights into the function of body adornment, convinced her that the difference between culture and nature was overestimated.

There are many language-like aspects of social life - bodily adornment is one of them - which find a parallel in the underwater society of the coral reef. All human communication involves "image" and display to some extent. We use signals to attract, conceal and ward off the attention of others all the time.

.....her sense of nature's unity in diversity is symbolised by her exquisite harmonies and counterpoint of colour, texture, shape, lustre and pattern - the matching of parts is so painstakingly exact that the work seems based on transition and mutation, as if one primary substance has transformed into all the details.

RG's necklaces and brooches become complex microcosms and true works of art.

NEIL BROWN - Professor in Art, Design and Education and Co-Director iCinema, Dean's Unit, College of Fine Art, UNSW

> From article written for catalogue, Australian Perspectives '85 , Art Gallery of New South Wales

Re ROBYN GORDON'S small sculptures:-

..... yet the relation between the formal configuration of these pieces and the objects of the seashore is best described as empathy rather than one of obvious representational intent. It is as if Robyn and the ocean itself had united in the formation of her artistic schema. This sense of dynamic collaboration is suggested within the works by certain formal resolutions that appear to have been achieved through the structural intervention of the sea. Even the material selected for these pieces reflects the colour, surface and scale relationships of those found in the layered accretions and stranded organisms of tidal pools. In these works the sea and the artist seem to begin with interchangeable stuff.

..... the artist has understood how the manifold of natural forms and their derivatives, which have been her obsession, are merely the agents of a wider expression..... the more universal meanings that begin to emerge in these delicate and vulnerable sculptures, evoke a complex personality. They remain light and flirtatious. Colours flash, surfaces flicker and dart, forms compound and spring forth but always to retreat into a closed and enigmatic core..... behind their outward attractiveness lies the prospect of a sting, a barb for the less circumspect viewer. The coquettishness of her jewellery is enlarged to an almost neurotic ambiguity which renders the pieces both compelling and disturbing.

..... Gordon's concern is to produce in the spectator a willing suspension of perpetual disbelief - the artist tries to balance the technical problems of schematic invention against the quality of expressive character the schema represent - often, to the spectator the image is unambiguous while the technique of its formal management is kept artfully obscure. It is a realm of the making process where the precision of a realistic image is often belied by the remote abstraction of its formal means.

The works are far from transparent and show a complex synthesis of ideas - secondary meanings emerge indirectly as part of their painterly form. Noticeable are the quiet centres, the private crevices whose recesses are defended by almost lethally rich encrustations. These objects signal changes in expressive mood which range from the delicately vulnerable to the poisonously hostile.

Gordon's work has from its inception, an intuitive post modern rather than modernist intent..... her works have side stepped the mistake of an anarchic kind of post modernism which denies the object. But neither are her works modernist essays of aesthetic refinement, nor retreats into formalist reduction. On the contrary, are often brazen, nearly always baroque and sensually in touch with the material. Yet in their combining of found objects her works acknowledge the metaphoric translucency of meaning which the layering of texts lend to the whole.

Gordon's works give precedence to the internal coherence of their colour above all other considerations - there is evidence that the making of the work has been modified by intellectual insights into colour and related compositional convention.

Both surface and colour owe their range and quality to the remarkable versatility of Gordon's ubiquitous plastic medium. Like oil paint to the 15th century Flemish painters Gordon's plastic is able to fix a surface character of its own yet is responsive enough for the representation of images. More than oil paint her plastic is able to mimic the graphic qualities of other materials, literally hold found materials in a matrix and record their imprint. Her use of plastic represents the model agent of collage which, from the grammatical perspective is exemplified through its flexibility in accommodating past texts in quotation..... she uses the matrix of the plastic medium to form allegories of her processes set within other materials and wider texts. (e.g. her objects are often doubled up both as quotations of her previous works, and of texts from other cultural idioms.

Spectators are being told about the very process of telling and, as a result feel themselves participating irresistibly in her works in her works. Each pearl and each shell is vicariously ushered to its place by spectators in a sort of recreational sympathy.

..... retiring defensiveness of some of the 3D pieces - the sense of a vulnerable creature hidden from view, a hermit sheltering privately within the barbed and electric reef, suggest an ambiguous world. It is a world where colour and surface carry a loaded significance - the more subtle world of implicit creatures have an objective presence, not denoted but rather connoted in the imagination of the spectator and enlarged through the complexity of poetic suggestion.

ELWYN LYNN (1917 - 1997) Australian artist and art critic/ writer.

The Australian newspaper:-

Robyn Gordon proclaims a modern tribal of the body and the walls of the cave that is so bright, optimistic and adventurous.....converts taste by challenging sweetness with elegance.....above all, Gordon's works are a consumer's decoration that assists one to recognise the profundity of even primitive idols and weapons and the Australian art held to be akin to them. Some, without any discernible reference, have a primitive positiveness and formal economy.

.....she has created a marine heaven..... how can she be so extravagantly sweet without being gaudy and vulgar? something rich and strange..... we can only compare her to a summer's day like the ones we've had in Sydney lately.

JOHN McDONALD Art Critic, Sydney Morning Herald newspaper

..... artists like Robyn Gordon inhabit that twilight zone between art and craft with the greatest of ease, taking obvious delight in blurring the distinctions.

.....she mimics nature's virtuosity in coral reefs and rock pools..... Gordon's works are rich in fantasy, with probably the ultimate conceit being that so many of them can actually be worn.

Even though Gordon's confections look wildly extravagant at first glance, they pursue a kind of internal logic which keeps even the richest pieces away from kitschy excess.

There is a pleasure in reconstructing the fastidious craftsmanship in these works and the thousands of tiny decisions that have gone into their construction. You can see Gordon thinking through her materials, working where each little component would be best suited according to its colour, texture or history. She calls these pieces "daydreams".... but where such moments usually produce idleness, Gordon's reveries have proven intensely fertile.

**ROBERT BELL Curator, Decorative Arts and Design
National Gallery of Australia**

From IMPULSE and FORM, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
RG..... a spontaneous way of working resulting in fresh and seductive works, baiting the viewer into closer contact. Some pieces encapsulate bizarre combinations of materials in plastic, the matrix becoming a story about a place or time as encrustations, tangled marine flotsam and bush accretions evidence subtle changes in environment.... With a wit as fresh as her materials she attacks conventional notions of 'good taste and value' in jewellery, returning it again to the wonder of tribal ornament which celebrates beauty of course, but also curiosity, wonder, and a way of seeing and knowing the world.

Robyn Gordon and the Barrier Reef - a coral reef is a fiercely competitive world, entirely about life and survival - restraint is a non-existent element here. Australians sensitive to their environment are well aware that, while it is the grand scale and vivid interplay of raw elements that captures the immediate attention, it is the small scale elements with which we often gain the most intimate and personal pleasure of the environment - the micro world at our feet.