

Wednesday, August 22, 2012

Dynamic Balance: Robyn Gordon at Janet Clayton Gallery, Danks Street



Robyn Gordon, 'Order in Chaos', 2012, Polymer clay and paint on canvas

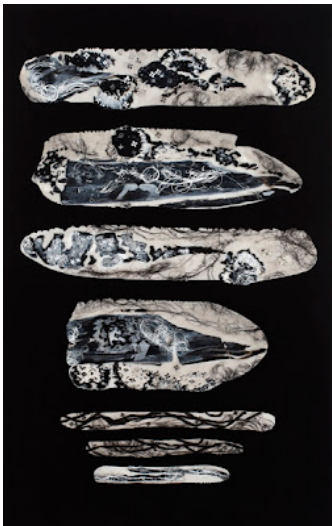
Image size: 80 x 50cm, image reproduced courtesy of the artist

First, I need to tell you that the artist featured in this post, Robyn Gordon, was my art teacher in my final year of high school, that time in everyone's life characterised by recurring crises of identity and self-belief, and a constant melancholy yearning to be somewhere else, to be somebody else. She and the other art teachers at my school represented to me the possibility of that 'somewhere else'. I thought they were impossibly cool and glamorous, sweeping into the school grounds trailing long scarves and earrings (it was the 1970s). They told us about their travels (London! Bali! Paris! Cambodia!) To a girl from the suburbs longing to get away, this was intoxicating. They introduced us to the notion that the world was a large place filled with extraordinary things. In fact, Robyn Gordon was primarily responsible for my decision to go to art school rather than law school. Bizarre though that may seem to some, I have never regretted it for a single moment.

I spent last Saturday at my own school, at our show of graduating student work. Throughout the day, mixed in with the current students and families visiting the show for a second time after the crowded Friday night opening, ex-students came to see the works of current Year 12 students. Ex-students from 1 year ago, 3 years ago, 5 years ago Some of those students are themselves now studying to be artists, art historians or art teachers. A surprising number work in galleries. And some are at law school.

I started to think about the significance of the work we do with our students, and how it resonates across time. Leaving the school, I drove across Sydney to be at the opening of Robyn's show, which was attended by a number of her ex-students, some of whom (not me) are now in exalted positions in the art education cosmos. There is a web of connection and interconnection, criss-crossing generationally and geographically, an ongoing conversation which starts in a classroom, between teacher and student. A conversation which, at its best, communicates that shared excitement about art - that 'thrilling spark' as Brett Whiteley so romantically characterised it.

That is what I remember about art classes at school. And why they mattered. Driving at breakneck speed across Sydney to see Robyn's exhibition was an acknowledgement of the importance of that connection between art teachers and their students.



Robyn Gordon, 'Silence of Space', 2012, Polymer clay and paint on canvas

Image size: 80 x 50cm, image reproduced courtesy of the artist

Robyn Gordon has worked with polymer clay as her medium for more than 30 years, most usually in the form of wearable pieces in which organic forms arrange themselves quite magically as body adornment. Her work is often highly decorative, yet informed by years spent observing nature, and by her fascination with nature's beauty and fragility. In this exhibition, a significant body of work, she presents these polymer clay forms, both invented and observed, against backgrounds of solid colour. I was constantly reminded of Japanese and Javanese textile designs in the interplay of form, line and colour. Indigo, rich purples and reds reveal themselves against quieter more neutral passages. In 'Silence of Space' the forms are ordered in almost totemic fashion against the black ground. The indigo colour reinforces the references to traditional textiles, to the arts of domestic life, to the culture of women.

Gordon's forms are mottled, scored, incised, imprinted, scarred and embossed. Arranged on their coloured or black backgrounds they evoke

an ordered display of botanical or marine specimens. A classification and codification, an aesthetic which is pared back and restrained; her practice has been refined over many years of working with these specific materials. Many of the forms evoke shields or totemic objects whose ritual significance is ambiguous or hidden. Some remind me of the coolamon vessels traditionally used for carrying newborn babies in indigenous culture. She has developed her own visual language of form, colour and mark in which her willingness to confound expectations by joining precious metals with polymer and plastics creates joyful and unexpected juxtapositions. These works are about nature AND culture.

Dynamic Balance: yes, in the works, and also in the ongoing connections between art teachers and their students. Art teachers are so often ignored in any analysis of the artworld, so often regarded as insignificant. And yet I remember the sheer pleasure and excitement of being in the art rooms at my own school, and think of it still, oh so many years later.



Robyn Gordon, 'Unity in Diversity', 2012, Polymer clay & paint on canvas
Image size: 80 x 50cm, image reproduced courtesy of the artist

Posted by Luise Guest