

Robyn Gordon: *Coastal Paradox*

Newsletter material re exhibition at Wilson Street Gallery

Third draft, 28 January: 1090 words

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Robyn Gordon – Coastal Paradox

*Contemplating the teeming life of the shore, we have an uneasy sense of the communication of some universal truth that lies just beyond our grasp
The meaning haunts and ever eludes us, and in its very pursuit we approach the ultimate mystery of Life itself.*

Robyn Gordon insinuated these lines into the lower panel of her mixed media artwork “Merging Memories from the Edge of the Sea”. They had been written half a century earlier, by aquatic biologist Rachel Carson for her book *The Edge of the Sea* (1955). Carson’s book vividly portrayed the mesmerizing vibrancy of the nature of the shoreline, its creatures and its plant-life. Robyn Gordon shares Carson’s passion for the ecology of the shore, and that passion is at the heart of the works in her current exhibition.

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Gordon grew up in Carlisle Street Tamarama, close to the beach. As a child, she explored the tidal pools and honeycomb rock platforms and cliffs of Tamarama Bay and Mackenzies Bay, immediately south of Bondi Beach. Occasionally, huge Christmas/New Year king tides would deliver tons of sand deposits over rocks at Mackenzies Bay to form a small intimate beach at the feet of the cliffs and hillside – then, after a time, this beach would disappear into oblivion, to appear again erratically over the years. She photographed the marine life she found around the rocks, and collected marine debris of chitin, bone and shell. She still does.

The littoral, where land and sea came together in an adversarial and sometimes tumultuous relationship, harboured a complicated ecosystem that Gordon found

enthraling. Animal and plant life in these rock-pools was seething and abundant. Here, strange forms went about their desperate strategies of survival, pitted against the blunt and raw force of waves, the irresistible rhythms of tides, and the wiles of predators.

Her instinctive enthusiasm for the life of temperate and tropical seashores was intellectually buttressed by William J. Dakin's analytical *Australian Seashores* (1952) and later by Isobel Bennett's *The Great Barrier Reef* (1971). Gordon shared Bennett's admiration of the beauty and delicacy of coral reef zones, but she also shared Bennett's unease about the future of the reef in the face of the Crown of Thorns starfish, oil drilling and spillage, the dumping of silt, the impact of tourism, and more recently global warming. Gordon wrote in a notebook of the reefs and the shoreline being "intoxicating, seductive, enigmatic ... and in perilous danger". Her works in this exhibition reflect, in differing degrees, all of these properties.

Gordon has also written of being beguiled and influenced by the spectacular colours and textures of reef and shore life: "I'm inspired by the sponginess, the perforations, the transparencies, the illusory movements, the flickering light, the transient flashes and probably above all else, the rhythmic linear interplays".¹ She has been inspired, too, by the bizarre life-forms to be found in coastal waters, by their behaviours and their interactions.

Working within the overarching theme of maritime ecology, the work in this exhibition falls into three groupings: "boxes", graphics, and wearable sculpture.

Gordon's shallow boxes contain and frame assemblages of marine debris she has collected, such as Gorgonian (sea fan) skeletons, fragments of coral, cat-fish skulls, turtle bones, and hammer-headed oyster shells. Some of these natural forms may be looped together with bleached twine, as if they have already been adapted into talismanic body adornments or into tokens of trade. Bones and shells are often placed alongside metal elements – copper, for example, which has developed glowing turquoise verdigris. Gordon discovered these crumpled metal fragments embedded in reef flats of coral atolls such as Heron and Lady Elliot Islands, at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef, off Gladstone and Bundaberg. They carry associations with perilous seas, shipwrecks, and terrible deaths.

Each box also includes something made by Gordon herself: a piece of polymer clay incised with marine motifs perhaps, or an elegantly designed form that resembles cloisonné. They take their compositional place amid the detritus of nature, like the shards of treasures from another time, testifying to the futility of mankind's over-reaching schemes. Yet Gordon is not prepared to write-off mankind's lofty aspirations; these "lost treasures" are conceived as redeemable, and designed to be able to be detached from their boxes and worn as sculptural ornaments.

Gordon has little patience for the monkish restraint of minimalism. Her works echo the abundant and fecund life of the tidal pools that inspire her; they employ a baroque extravagance of form and complexity of rhythm.

Her practice of conjuring with assemblage within a box-format may recall the work of American sculptor Joseph Cornell. But there are decisive differences between their ways of working and thinking. Cornell's juxtapositions brought together objects **which** didn't belong in each other's company in the vernacular world. That is what gave his arrangements their bite, and their capacity to surprise and perplex. On the other hand, Gordon knew that in the strange, alternative universe of the rock-pool's floor, her disjunctive juxtapositions were entirely plausible. This does not diminish their capacity to astonish.

Cornell's boxes constructed a poised, calibrated, enclosed world. Gordon's boxes imply that they are a fragment of a sprawling, informal, shifting, layered and complicated world. What Cornell and Gordon have in common is their capacity to distill poetry and drama from everyday fragments.

Gordon's graphics seamlessly **combine** a wide array of painting and drawing techniques, including collage. They have few parallels in Australian art. Perhaps only James Gleeson is comparable in imagining other-terrestrial landscapes that so convincingly combine forms that we dimly remember, forms we have never imagined, forms that fire our wonder, and forms that arouse our fear.

Gordon's marine- and insect-inspired wearable jewellery reminds us of the glorious decorative nature of the bodies and articulations of sea-anemones, jellyfishes, crustacea,

brittle-stars, and so on. Yet Gordon is also aware that for all their elegant decoration, these creatures crawl and spawn and strike and poison. In rock-pool and coral reef societies, as in ours, all is not always what it seems.

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Rachel Carson dedicated her book *The Edge of the Sea* to two people “who had gone down with me into the low-tide world and have felt its beauty and its mystery”. Robyn Gordon similarly leads us into the low-tide world and, like Carson, she reveals its beauty, and its mystery. Gordon revels in this domain’s splendour of colours, its density, and its surreal juxtapositions. She hints at its dangers. Most important of all, she alerts us to its brittle vulnerability.

¹ Robyn Gordon, “Veiled Immensity: Intimate Memories of Place”, *China Gems Magazine*. 2003.

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