

Snorkeller's dreaming

I have known Robyn and her work since her first solo exhibition in 1982 - *Snorkeller's Dream*. Anyone who has snorkelled a coral reef has experienced the unforgettable thrill and sheer operatic luxuriance of it all - like that exhibition 34 years ago and this one now!

Snorkeller's dream is a perfect metaphor for Robyn's work. It is a poetic reverie, not only of the wondrous Great Barrier Reef, but a sort of paradise of all that is marvellous from her life's journey. Yes, drifting through coral gardens crowded with marine creatures, but also through markets laden with foods and spices, temples with gems and offerings, streets of people adorned in fabrics and jewels. This is her recurring reverie, the celebration of life's sensory delights. These qualities resonate through her artworks, studio, notebooks and of course her crowded imagination.

Rituals bind these nature/culture entanglements. And a love of ritual guides Robyn's way of working, ever searching, scanning, sensing, sorting and assembling the secret life of things. Like the snorkeller's mask, her artistic vision creates an imaginary boundary to focus on an intimate cluster of things excluding peripheral vision of the immensity beyond. She calls her clustered assemblages 'tokens' of experience - an ocean of experience in a wearable rockpool.

Riotous Reef 2006 is the epitome of these early body adornment works in polymer clay, her distinctive medium to shape bizarre reef forms. Another major necklace, *Ravishing Reef Overture* 1985, has subdued colour palette but explodes in sensual materiality. Shells, pearls, textiles and metals are combined with consummate skill and sensibility into cohesive entanglements. *Reef Daydream* 1987, a major permanent art installation commissioned for the Great Barrier Reef Authority Aquarium in Townsville, was a significant recognition of Robyn as artist, educator and environmentalist on coral reef ecology.

Robyn's major travelling exhibition *On the Edge* 1988 not only broadened her environmental activism from reef to coastal ecosystems, but extended her art from body adornment to gallery installation. *On the Edge* featured a series of carved wooden panels painted and 'polymered' with abstract marine forms, such as *Night Dive - Reeflections* and *Magic Marine Nocturne*. These bold forms, and the paintings that followed, have a Fauve quality, not only seeking radical spontaneous use of colour but evoking intensely emotional reactions. Ambiguities of materials and forms are created through all manner of flotsam and jetsam. And biodiversity is extended to a variety of art forms - body works, boxed, wall works, mixed media sculptures, collages, paintings and prints.

The mid 1990s saw the introduction of another bold departure into bronze and pewter works. *Recurring Dream Reef Offering* 1994 is a metal sculpture for the wall while *Structural Gathering* 1993 is for the body. A new encounter with Beijing and a renewed infatuation with Paris emboldened her to create what she called 'extreme wearables' - talk about baroque hyperbole! *Synergic Shoals* 1992-2001 is a good example from this time and several richly-layered works continue the fascination in this 2016 exhibition. Here is a way to express her own chic, coquettish and playful nature through glorious fabrics and gems from the couturier's trove.

Over the past decade Robyn has produced a series of exhibitions at Wilson St Gallery and Janet Clayton Gallery. The reef painting *Ecological Barometer* 2010 is a good example from these shows. She is continuously inventive, always creating new works with personality, conviviality and generosity to adorn body or home. They are products of Robyn's own generosity of spirit, demonstrated by giving her entire archive to the National Gallery of Australia. She is a prodigious archivist herself, her notebooks a microcosm of her inner world and a welcome exhibit in this exhibition.

On the Edge Revisited references the 1988 exhibition *On the Edge* - with an emphasis on 'revisited'. The wonderful exuberance of colours and textures continues in such works as *Reef Flat Graphics* and *Cascading Marine*. But there is a change of mood. Many works are more subdued with only two colours or two materials, as in *Weedy Sea Dragon into the Blue*. Here elements are seen in isolation rather than baroque profusion. These series of simple neckpieces have a subdued elegance. They are more jewel-like, as if we must preserve these isolated specimens and not presume they are tokens of abundance beyond. This is of course her message on the fate of the Great Barrier Reef!

There have always been formal, abstract qualities to her work. But here is something else again - a new sombre mood. This quality is best conveyed in a new series of circular canvas works. *Ghosts of their Former Selves* has a monochromatic eerie quality. *Underwater Fantasia Survival in Question* has colour and her familiar marine forms but they are disconnected, without that familiar entanglement.

The snorkeller has been 'revisited' too, in the mask-like character of these circular works, the ghostly imagery so different from her earlier works. Is this a lost paradise, as only it can be? Has the child's enchantment become the disenchantment of the adult? For Robyn there is disenchantment with human-induced damage to the marine environment but certainly not disillusionment or detachment. On the contrary her works express a sense of urgency for its vulnerability, for it is now 'on the edge'.

Barry Lopez articulates this predicament of contemporary naturalists like Robyn. Their curiosity and intense observation reveals nature's intimacies as pieces of an inscrutable mystery, the more knowledge gained the greater becomes the mystery. This spirituality is perhaps no more than the residue of awe which modern life has not yet erased plus the grief and outrage at this loss. But while depressingly aware of the planet's shrinking habitats contemporary naturalists feel compelled to do more than merely register the damage. They seek a way of getting back in to nature! Scientifically grounded, politically attuned, field experienced, library enriched, they now bring an empirical immersion to this wisdom. Artists as contemporary naturalists pay acute attention to this mystery and make the invisible visible through their art. Keep snorkelling Robyn.

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