

Robyn Gordon grew up in Tamarama, close to some of the most spectacular positions of the Sydney coastline: Mackenzies Bay, Tamarama Bay, as well as surrounding gullies and greenspace, with its majestic views of the surging Tasman Sea. As a child, Robyn Gordon found these beaches and the cliffs compellingly fascinating as she explored the power of the waves and tides, the variety and strangeness of the marine vegetation, and most of all, the beauty and the predatory wiles of marine creatures.

Later, Robyn and her husband had a wonderful house perched between Great Mackerel Beach on Pittwater and the vast sweep of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. Her interest in the natural environment had become more nuanced and socially sharpened, as she has become deeply concerned about questions of environmental degradation and marine ecology. But she remains drawn to the sweep and grandeur of the coastal edge. And she remains enthralled by the sea's unfamiliar array of fauna and flora. This variety constitutes an engrossing alternative domain, with its own forms, its own rules, and its own vulnerabilities.

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Robyn Gordon has titled this exhibition "Synecdoche", referring to the use of a fragment to stand for the whole, or to represent a greater entity. Stemming from this notion of synecdoche, Gordon uses the textures, traces, fragments, close-ups and other details of the intimate, closely-viewed world of nature to represent the sense of the whole macro environment. Implicit in this approach is her environmental philosophy that what effects a part, will of necessity also effect the whole.

Robyn Gordon has always adopted an adventurous attitude to exploring and combining different media: painting, printmaking, assemblage, jewellery and wearable sculpture. (She has observed that her earlier career as an art educator required her to achieve expertise with a variety of disciplines.) Her current work combines low relief forms made from polymer clay and cast pewter that relate in style and media to her jewellery, with drawn and painted areas that demonstrate her inventive facilities as a manipulator of paint.

The foreground forms tend to glisten with brilliant colour and intricate pattern - sometimes the informal patterns of nature that might be found on a shell's surface or on a sea-reptile's skin, sometimes gorgeous patterns that could have come from fabrics at Versailles. A recurrent motif is the spiral and the double spiral, which Gordon uses to metaphorically represent fertility and continuum. Notwithstanding Gordon's gnawing concern about the threat to nature, to reefs and to the shoreline by spillage, oil drilling and tourism, there is a pervasive optimism in these artworks. This optimism is reflected in Gordon's references to fertility, to coral spawning, germinating plant seeds, life-generating pollen and to bird's eggs. She has written "I continue to be intoxicated by the seemingly infinite variety of forms, colours and textures visible through the cycle from germination and growth to decay and followed ultimately by regeneration and renewal."

While the foreground forms tend to be vivid and even opulent, the backgrounds are muted in colour and more mysterious in mood. They suggest the tenebrous depths, a backdrop of fluidity and rhythms. Sometimes the backgrounds are as grey as slate and as cold as a June winter wind, at other times they bulge and teem with softened, soft-focus forms which echo some characteristic of the crisp foreground elements. The compositions are never “closed”: they seem to portray only a part of an expansive marine-scape or landscape. This, too, reflects Gordon’s notion of synecdoche.

Gordon has spoken of regarding this synecdochic approach to her imagery as relating to the concept of “intimate immensity” referred to by Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (first published in French in 1957, and in English in 1964) presents poetic interpretations of enclosures and other spatial phenomena such as the nest, the forest, the shell, the corner, the attic and the basement. These “topographies of our intimate beings”, he wrote, are “the spaces we love”. Bachelard observes that in Paris people no longer live in houses that are set in natural surroundings: the relationship between house and space has become artificial and mechanical. Intimate living becomes difficult. He suggests that in adulthood we come to understand or see anew experiences from childhood and from our past that pertain to emotionally-charged, memory-laden places where we have lived and grown up, and where we have experienced feelings of joy or apprehension or terror. These places become sacred to us, central to our presence and absence.

Robyn Gordon currently lives in the pulsing centre of Sydney, high in an old, charming former industrial building. Her views sweep over an angular grey-brown cubist cacophony of inner-urban architecture. But her subject matter continues to be rooted in the “topographies of [her] intimate being”: the littoral of Mackenzies Bay, Tamarama Bay, the environs of Great Mackerel Beach - and in the broader theme of nature, the environment and our ecosystem, for which these sites are “synecdoches”.

Peter Pinson 2010