

Speech for Robyn Gordon opening by LUISE GUEST at Janet Clayton Gallery Sunday August 14, 2016

When I first saw the circular paintings and mixed media works that we see around us in the gallery, I immediately and quite unconsciously thought of them as shields. It might seem far-fetched at first to think of Robyn Gordon, that maker of beautiful and decorative body adornments, as a warrior (although I do know she loved a good street march, back in the day, and never shied away from a political argument). But a warrior woman? Actually, I think artists share much with the traditional ethos of the warrior – courage, persistence, fortitude, strength in adversity and sheer stubborn refusal to give up. To use a Chinese phrase, artists are often ‘romantic revolutionaries’. And I would like to think the same qualities are present in art educators and teachers, as well.

We could also see these works as emblems, or as talismans. Whether as emblems or as shields they are a testament to a life committed to art and to activism, to communicating her beliefs about what is important. Given my job, you probably won't be surprised if I quote a Chinese artist: The Beijing painter and new media artist Wu Junyong says that art is like a thermometer that takes society's temperature. Robyn has been doing so for 35 years, and her works are a call to action, a reminder to us all that we must not take the world's natural beauty for granted. Her explorations of nature and the marine world, of ‘what lies beneath’ reveal much that is magical and enchanting, but they are also intended to reveal its fragility.

When Robyn asked me to open her exhibition I was honoured to have the chance to, in some small way, repay a debt owed from a long time ago. Robyn was my art teacher, in the distant far off days of the 1970s, at Sydney Girls High School. She brought with her into the classroom an intoxicating sense of adventure and possibility – a pretty rare commodity for girls in those days. She told us about her travels, in Asia and Europe, and inspired in all her students the desire to get out there and see the world beyond the Sydney suburbs. More importantly, for me, she and her colleagues showed me that to be an art educator was a meaningful and significant vocation, and inspired by Robyn I chose that teaching life for myself.

Now, having taught art in Sydney schools for 35 years before moving on to the role I now have at White Rabbit, I have seen the wheel turn full circle, and many of my former students are artists, art educators, curators and art writers, just as Robyn's are. It is a most wonderful circle, driven by passion and dedication, and I am so glad to be able to publicly thank Robyn for the influence and guidance she provided to a hopelessly confused 17 year old. When I travelled to Europe the year after I finished school, and walked into the Rothko room at the Tate Gallery in London, moved and overwhelmed, the first person I wanted to send a postcard to was Robyn. I imagine she must have collected boxes filled with such postcards over her teaching career, an indication of the impact she had as an educator. 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. What Robyn brought to her teaching was her own sense of curiosity and wonder about the world, and her desire to communicate that to others.

But we are here today, of course, because of Robyn the artist – an artist whose life's work is filled with that same curiosity and wonder and that same ‘thrilling spark’ of discovery and invention. In this distinguished ‘second career’ she has had well over 30 solo exhibitions, starting with ‘Snorkeller's Dream’ in 1982, and has featured in many group shows. There is a thread that links her two careers: in all of her beautiful, vividly coloured and wildly patterned works we see a lifelong commitment to a politics of justice and a passion for environmental sustainability. Robyn works with colour, form, texture and pattern with a poetic sensibility, inspired by landscape – especially coastal and marine landscape – but also by the cultural artifacts witnessed and collected on her travels throughout Asia, Europe and the Middle East, that same sense of the extraordinary richness of both nature and culture that she conveyed to her students.

Growing up in Tamarama, Robyn's first explorations of the world were of that liminal zone between swelling ocean and sandstone cliffs – intertidal zones, rock pools, the edge of the shore. Through a lifetime of travel and exploration, she has always returned to that first love, extending it to an examination of the fragile – increasingly fragile – Australian coastal environments and ecosystems. Coral reefs, mangroves, tidal lagoons, rock platforms – all these are to be found in her works. Paintings such as ‘There is a Reachable Point of No Return’ and ‘Ghosts of Their Former Selves’ communicate her disbelief and anguish at the possible destruction of The Great Barrier Reef. She

reminds us of the delicate beauty of the marine environment. Beyond the decorative, and her commitment to the aesthetic of the hand-made, such works are a call to action. 'Underwater Fantasia, Survival in Question' creates a sense of urgency, as if every tiny living creature depicted in her signature vivid colour is on the verge of being swept away. A work such as 'Ecological Barometer' encapsulates this – it's gorgeously lush and decorative, a setting for mermaids, a reminder of the awe on the faces of children watching darting tropical fish and the unfurling of marine creatures at the Aquarium. But despite its Baroque exuberance, it's a dark warning of what we creatures of the Anthropocene are about to lose.

Other recent paintings are topographical – we see the meeting place of fresh and salt water, the erosion of sandstone cliffs and the falling away of beaches. Others, such as 'Littoral Zone Traces', recall the microbial world of a microscope slide, cellular organisms dividing and re-dividing. Robyn's practice has been so consistent over this last 35 years in her focus on the mysteries of the universe, in both her painting and of course the body adornments and jewellery for which she is best known. The other constant element of her practice has been her inventiveness and experimentation with form and technique – from paint and her signature use of polymer clay to bronze, pewter, silver, coral, turquoise, pearls and other semi-precious stones, she has explored an extraordinary range of techniques: embossing, printing, rolling, rubbing, incising, collaging. Neil Brown once described her necklaces and brooches as 'lethal encrustations', and indeed she has gone out of her way to challenge tedious notions of 'good taste' or a fashion for minimalism. She herself has said,

'I could see what a strong vehicle for expression from ancient times body adornment had provided – tribal, transient, tokens of wealth or place, fulfilling a basic desire felt by all people regardless of age, race or status to adorn their bodies for many purposes – spiritualism, ritual, tokenism, identification, individualism, sheer pride and joy in decoration – a visual language worn like a badge.'

The delight of her wearable works is in the sense we have of her joyful experimentation with the possibilities of her chosen medium. Her jewellery is a visual language of delight, but once again the medium is the message, and the message is clear. The wearer becomes the gallery for the display of these objects, taking her art, literally, to the streets. These works are about nature AND culture, and about the relationships between humans and the natural world at a time that seems as if it may be a tipping point.

Brought together here in the gallery space, Robyn's distinctive work, produced over so many years, becomes a cabinet of curiosities. Like the wunderkammer of the Renaissance, regarded as a [microcosm](#) or theater of the world, Robyn invites us to experience the world with awe and wonder. Unlike those Renaissance explorers who plundered the resources of the world as a symbol of their patron's status and wealth, Robyn's work compels us to think about the consequences of our unthinking consumption.

Perhaps they are not shields at all, those circular works, but rather portals into an alternate world where coral reefs are not endangered and the mysteries of the universe are treasured.