

The Gentle Wash of Memory

Essay written by Wendy Walker, published in Object Magazine 2004

In a photograph pinned above Leslie Matthews' workbench, the deeply lined visage of an old woman is offset by the extreme smoothness, the sun-bleached whiteness of the partial animal skeleton she is holding. Imbued with intimations of the passage of time and therefore mortality, it is impossible not to recall the Stieglitz images of the same woman taken in her youth. Nevertheless this aged representation is a more complex and powerful image – utterly compelling in its communication of a sense of dignity and strength.

Leslie Matthews is one of the four partners in Gray Street Workshop, which will in 2005 commemorate its twentieth year as a collectively-run jewellery studio with exhibitions in both Amsterdam's Galerie Ra and in Australia. Exploring themes of identity and memory through an anatomical investigation of the infrastructure of the body, Matthews has frequently incorporated a repertoire of symbols, such as the hand, cage, bird's wing, egg, eye and pelvis, into the articulation of her narrative.

Julie Ewington made the observation in the exhibition catalogue for *An Omen in the Bone* (1999) that the female pelvis is the 'cradle of movement, but also of sexuality and fecundity.' Yet for an art-literate observer it is impossible to view the pelvic form of *A Bony Cradle* (1998) for example, without also recalling the terribly damaged pelvis of Frida Kahlo (the tragic result of a tramcar accident). This notion of vulnerability within strength (and vice-versa) is in varying degrees characteristic of all Matthews' representations of the human body. Implicit within the fragile fineness of the open, egg-like *Shell* (1998) brooch is a dichotomous potential for both creation and destruction. Similarly, the attenuated fingers of the *Hand* (1998) appear riskily slender and the eye motif may indeed signify the 'searching gaze' of the artist but it also alludes to the omniscient presence of surveillance devices in contemporary society. Even the ostensibly serene title, *The Gentle Wash of Memory* (2002), of Matthew's most recent solo exhibition at Helen Maxwell Gallery in Canberra conceals a darker subtext. Ostensibly consistent with the delicate pieces of that exhibition, it is instructive to discover that the 'gentle wash of memory' – from Drusilla Modjeska's novel *The Orchard* – is in fact a reference to the way in which we choose to selectively screen history/memory in order to falsify the past.



In a shift which was anticipated in the fragmented pieces of both the Shards (1998) and Details (1999) series of brooches, with the neckpieces, brooches and small bowls for *The Gentle Wash of Memory* (2002), Matthews leaves behind the more literal corporeal references of past series, such as the positive/negative torso shapes of *An Omen in the Bone* (1999). An enduring influence discernible in earlier work, but more pronounced in the abstracted, ambiguous forms of *The Gentle Wash of Memory*, has been the 1960s and '70s black and white photographic images of Japanese artist Eikoh Hosoe.¹ Typically, Hosoe's selectively framed, partial bodies draw attention to a muscled landscape of hollows and sinew – a snaking backbone, the cleft curve of a bare buttock. The *Embrace* (1971) series concentrated more specifically on the spaces created between the contours of these toned and muscled bodies and it is the intangibility of these gaps – also found in eye sockets, the pelvis et al – that especially fascinates Matthews.

It is interesting to note in this context that Georgia O'Keefe, who used the pelvis (and other skeletal animal remains) as both signifiers and compositional devices, stated that she was most interested in the holes within the bones. In works like *Goat's Horn with Red* (1945), these gaps resonate with the blue of the sky or the desert-red of New Mexico's arid landscape.

Prior to 2000 the surfaces of Matthews' jewellery were invariably intensively worked using the ancient hammering technique of repoussé. Representing the final appearance of this particular decorative technique, only comparatively small hollowed-out areas were delineated with repoussé in the series *An Omen in the Bone*. Foregrounding a purity, a simplicity of form, in *The Gentle Wash of Memory* (2002) Matthews has abandoned any trace of surface embellishment. The fluid silver neckpieces, brooches and small bowls are presented either open or closed as doubled shells, which afford only partial glimpses of their interiors. These sinuously curving forms recur as almost tulip-like 'petals' in the four exquisite upright chess pieces created for the group show *Chess* (2003) at Velvet da Vinci in San Francisco – an exhibition also touring the USA and Britain.

Devoid of points, sharpness, rupture, roughness, they possess a fine, smooth, bone-like quality, which is the result of a process of hammering and forming, sanding and refining – an alternative kind of weathering. Like bleached bones Matthews' silver is very white – a colour associated with purity and nuptials, but also with death and mourning in certain cultures. Writing in the catalogue for Christine Borland's 2004 exhibition at Adelaide's Contemporary Art Centre, Geraldine Barlow describes the elevated significance of bones in the mortuary practices of the Maori culture.



¹ In this period, Eikoh Hosoe worked on a series of images with Tatsumi Hijikata, founder of the Butoh dance movement and writer Yukio Mishima who dramatically committed ritual suicide in 1970

'...Special wooden receptacles waka tupapaku were carved for the bones of venerated ancestors. After death the body would be left on an exposed platform until the flesh had rotted away; later the bones would be taken down and cleaned. Greatly sacred or tapu, they were sometimes painted red with ochre and interred in the waka tupapaku before being placed in the burial cave.'²

In her next series of work Matthews intends to undertake a more external, corporeal inquiry of the epidermic surface of the body, encompassing notions of texture, touch and regeneration. It is not an original idea to invoke the metaphor of the Möbius³ strip to illustrate the symbiotic link between exteriority and interiority in the living narrative of the body, but it is a peculiarly pertinent analogy given Matthews' propensity for symbolism.

Wendy Walker, Freelance Writer, 2004



² Geraldine Barlow also cites the Capuchin monks of Santa Maria della Concezione in Rome, who decorated the crypts of their deceased brethren with 'elaborate patterns of arches and rings of matched pelvises, skulls and vertebrae.'

³ August Ferdinand Möbius was a nineteenth century German mathematician who discovered the rectangular Möbius strip, which when joined forms a continuous one-sided loop, by means of a half twist, as the outside effectively becomes the inside. It is also the name given to the Möbius bangle designed in 1958 by Swedish jeweller/silversmith Vivianna Torun Bülow-Hübe.