

An Omen in the Bone

Catalogue essay by Julie Ewington – Curator Australian Art, Queensland Art Gallery for the exhibition 'An omen in the bone' by Leslie Matthews, February 1999

Shadow

Start with the shadow. Falling on the ground, the negative of the body blocking the light, the shadow travels as the constant companion of bright day and neon night. Indeed, the shadow self announces and notices departures, ever attentive to the stance and situation of the body. Double, doppelganger, guardian: the shadow is the other substance of the body. ('Yesterday upon the stair, I saw a man who wasn't there')

Here Leslie Matthews makes solid the insubstantial shadow on the ground. She makes the idea of the shadow, rather than its actuality, another version of the person inhabiting this flesh given back through light and shade. Silver is the perfect material for mucking about with Manichean dualities: it takes many forms. The medium of photography (drawing with light), silver may be in turn black or white, solid or liquid, thoroughly three-dimensional or perfectly flat and reflective. Or any combination of the above.

It is the stuff of moonlight and darkest night. Thus the jeweller takes the basic metal of her art and turns it to her purpose. She explores solidity, shadows and the strange silences of the body, making brooches that double back again upon it.

Special Mystery: if you look into the shadow you will see yourself mirrored but not reflected. No room for Narcissism here.



Line

Steel is the emblem of modern strength – tough, armour-plated, implacable. It also draws a fine line. Here flexible steel wire has been bent and twisted around the issues at hand. With these brooches Leslie Matthews sketches in space, creating outlines and also volumes within the boundaries of the shape. (Ever since Matisse, artists have been keenly aware that line can serve several ends simultaneously.)

This time the shapes are more like torsos than the elusive shadows of entire bodies or solid, ambiguous body parts. The torso is traditionally a big subject: the core of the body, protector of 'the vital organs', the recognisable human form of classical statuary remains when limbs are lost, even when the head is missing. Matthews treats the torso with all the reverence of the Greeks. One sees the delicate infrastructure of the body laid bare: the beautiful lines of the spine, the vulnerable hollow of the lower back, the sumptuous swelling of the pelvic girdle.

I am struck by the tension between the emphatic sensuality of these brooches, and their refined reticence, a tension embodied very precisely in the reined-in power of the wire. I find their tracteries alluring. I feel them on the margins of my own body. And that despite – or perhaps because – I find some forms feminine but others completely indifferent to gender assignment. Drawing, they say, was best when it captured a likeness perfectly. But that was in more certain times, when the evidence of the eyes and the mastery of hand were less open to dispute. (Today all the terms in the previous clause are contested.) Here the very ambiguity that Matthews proposes constitutes the virtuosity of her project.



Corpus

Dissection is always difficult. The imagined and actual unity of the body has seemed inviolable, even socially necessary. Thus myriad taboos surround not only the trauma of surgery and the challenges of dissection, and even mundane experiences of bodily piercing. These taboos are highly culturally specific, but all depend on the refusal to see the body as inanimate flesh, and on strenuous protocols and regulation about fragmenting it. It is a moot point whether the whole or the fragment has more power.

Here Matthews ventures onto dangerous territory, taking a dispassionate look at bits and pieces of the body. She cuts and moulds and pleats the silver into ambiguous shapes that, removed from the reference of the entire body or even one identifiable part of it, disturb the body images we work so hard to form. These shapes almost insouciantly recall others: dressmaking patterns – sleeves, section of bodices – the torso again – and even rather voluminous trouser legs; more ominously, the diagrams of choice cuts of meat one sees displayed by cheerful butchers. These ideas emerge unbidden from Matthews' exploration of form, suggesting that if the body is a ripe site for investigation, it is also teeming with monstrous conceptions, playful children and thoroughly adult obsessions.

The potentialities of fragmentation are well known to feminist philosophers of the body. They discuss the strategic usefulness of seeing the body as a series of fragments, the construct of multiple forces and experiences, rather than as the unified whole of traditional western philosophy. For if that body was tacitly assumed to be masculine, what use was it for women's sense of self?



Bone

Finally, when shadows are dispelled, form broken down and flesh assessed, there remains the bones. Deep within the body, sustaining all its limbs and organs, each bone is essential to the whole. Here again Matthews calmly assesses parts and fragments. (She does not need to fear a fragmented body if it is truly her own.) Once again she finds a particular potential within the silver – white almost chalky, it recalls the texture of bones washed clean. There is nothing to hide here, and no flesh to clothe deception.

In English we say “I feel it in my bones” – of physical cold, about unexpected insights into ourselves and others, about premonitions of distant events. Inside us then, is the equipment for several kinds of divination. This is perhaps what the American poet Emily Dickinson was suggesting in several verses which gave the title to this exhibition. She wrote of

*Some polar expiation,
An omen in the bone
Of death's tremendous nearness*¹

and thus neatly conjoined cold, bones, death. Indeed. For bones last the longest, when all the traces of flesh have disappeared, testifying to the past and to the body, in silence and in tacit forgiveness.

Afterword and Foreword

In the last five years Leslie Matthews has investigated images of the body including the eye, the hand, the pelvis, and the egg. They appear here again, persistent icons of her interest and keys to present investigations. I take the eye to signify the artist's searching gaze, and the hand her skill in making. The pelvis is the foundation of the (woman's) body, and is the site of sexuality. And the egg? It is the ancient image of creation, potentiality and fecundity, carrying within equally the beginning of life and the threat of destruction. From the egg – actual or symbolic – emerges all the possibilities that life holds.

In writing about the maternal body, the Australian philosopher Michelle Boulous Walker notes the ‘sexual specificity of silence’ and suggested that it can be retrieved as ‘a speaking silence’. She continues: ‘Women may attempt to articulate her desire. If she does it might propel her towards new discursive constructions, new signifying practices that shatter the law and order of symbolic prohibition’². Speaking, making eggs and breaking apart their sacred order, Leslie Matthews makes a new world for herself. And for other women.

¹ Emily Dickinson, the American poet, lived between 1830 and 1886. The exhibition title quotes from her Poem 45. Emily Dickinson, p. 65.

² Michelle Boulous Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading silence*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 129 & 130.