

Rivers of silver

Article written by Stephanie Radok, published in Object Magazine 1999

STEPHANIE RADOK finds some comfortable links between Emily Dickinson, Jean Arp and Leslie Matthews' *An Omen in the Bone*.

The poetry of Emily Dickinson and the sculpture of Jean Arp are important keys to *An Omen in the Bone*, an exhibition of silver and steel brooches made by Leslie Matthews. Dickinson wrote much about death and mortality, not with gloom but calmly and clearly:

Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me.
The carriage held but just ourselves
And immortality

She is known as a poet of brevity and obtuse surprising metaphors. In the elegant colour catalogue that accompanies Matthews' show, in addition to an insightful essay by Julie Ewington, are many quotations from Dickinson's poetry.

Jean Arp's artwork developed alongside Dadaism and Surrealism. In it he sought to represent "the secret ways of nature". His soft rounded forms are emanations of the breath of existence rather than structures. In them we see a morphology in which the energy of the life force buds and bulges, fans out or rises in exultance. In discussing comparative anatomy in 1796, the German writer and philosopher Goethe suggested that all forms in nature are modifications of a few basic forms, a notion taken up by Arp and pursued over many years.

Matthews' silver forms, in their fluidity, evoke the shapes carved in stone by Arp. The clear, calm precision with which Dickinson used words is reflected in Matthews' technique, and the poet's obsession with death also finds a reflection in the *memento mori*, the 'omen in the bone' of the title which plays itself out in Matthews' attention to the layers of the human body. Hamlet reflected on a skull, but Matthews takes five views of a torso and presents them in four different ways as *Shadows*, *Lines*, *Shards* and *Bones*, each of which is linked to a line from a Dickinson poem.

The five blackish torsos of *Shadows* resemble lead, that metal of death, whether directly through ingestion as white lead paint or because it is used to line coffins. Yet at the same time the *Shadows*' soft meniscus-like edges make them like mercury or quicksilver, that motile mineral that many people remember holding flowing in their hands as school children in the science block. It, too, is poisonous. Here the pressed shapes of silver seem only momentarily held as torso shapes before they morph into other shape or precede back to formlessness. Thus the active transmigration of matter, a kind of transubstantiation, is almost present in these forms.

Using steel wire the *Lines* works take the same five shapes of torsos from knee to neck and give them an erotic tension by drawing lines as a hand might from pudenda to collarbone, from sex across hip curve and waist, along shoulder and over the back to the neck. A line traced by touch,

an electric line, that links the works back to archetypal images of the body such as the swelling curves of the *Venus of Willendorf*. The violin or cello body-shapes produced by Henri Matisse are also referenced here. Matisse's *joie de vivre* in the arabesques of the human form is tempered in Matthews' manifestations by the reflective soberness evident in her embrace of Dickinson's poetry. This reticence is celebrated by Ewington as related to the work of feminist philosophers of the body such as Michelle Boulous Walker who speaks of retrieving 'a speaking silence'.

In *Shards* Matthews has made something like a puzzle by dissecting the five torso shapes into 20 curved irregular pieces of silver on which fragments of engraved lines appear. We do not see the whole shape and we are not easily able to discern that each line of the torsos is present. This part of the exhibition, a display of silver pottery shards, speaks of the hierarchies and systems of museums. This association underlines the vessel-like nature of the body. The way that the shards are placed in rows also intimates that they can be seen as being like the words of a poem.

In *Bones* we find three shapes but while two are from one form family, a third is from a different family altogether. The two contrast the rough repousse surface; silver that shows the marks of being beaten, with a smooth pressed surface. They evoke the interior and the exterior of a bone by making us aware of the blood-producing interior of a bone, and the smooth ivory-like exterior. The central piece in this group moves to another register in being less literally a bone and more a sign for a bone. Almost a striped arrow this pierced pressed form steps away from the story of the body being told by the silver brooches towards its own domain, less amorphous, more autonomous, it introduces the bone as independent ornament and decoration.

Matthews closes her tightly conceived show with four silver brooches which recapitulate some of her past and present concerns. *A Hand* that is like a cactus in its patterning and elongated fingers, *A bony cradle* which is a miniature pelvis, *Shell* (my favourite), a trembling cup of space, and *Eye*, a stylised form with links to the spiral of a shell. Matthews is about to travel to Japan to study traditional methods of metalwork. To see the exhibition or indeed an omen, is to detect a certain momentum in the work. There are two main trajectories in Matthews' work, a narrative approach in which the work is tied to its origins in body parts, and a more design-oriented approach in which narrative is transcended and technique and abstract potential carry the work into uncharted zones. After this exhibition and after Japan her work may continue to be a marriage of these two tendencies or it may move towards an unbounded assertion of vitality and jouissance.

Endnotes

Leslie Matthews' exhibition *An Omen in the Bone*, was exhibited at:
Object galleries, Sydney, 13 – 21 March 1999
Jam Factory, Adelaide, 10 April to 23 May 1999

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