

## Half metal she stayed

Catalogue essay by Christine Nicholls for the exhibition 'The gentle wash of memory': recent work by Leslie Matthews 2002

*Clean as a lady  
,cool as glass,  
fresh without fragrance  
the tulip was.*

*The craftsman, who carved her  
of metal, prayed :  
Live, oh thou lovely !  
Half metal she stayed.*

*-Tulip,*

Humbert Wolfe

In this exhibition, 'The gentle wash of memory', Leslie Matthews photographs of the body's contours are captured in a complex play of light and shadow, juxtaposed against her scalloped silver brooches and larger sculpted bronze objects. Matthews work reveals a genuinely poetic sensibility. Light begets form in Matthews photographs. In these photographs the human form seems to take on the solidity of rock or stone. Conversely, form begets the vital force that flows from Matthews jewellery and sculpted objects. The word that springs to mind in relation to her work is the Sanskrit word prana. Prana, literally meaning breath, is a fundamental principle in the Vedic and Hindu religions, referring to the way in which life moves in and through the human body.

It is apparent that some kind of exchange is taking place among the works included in this exhibition. Perhaps this is not so different from the exchange or dialogue that a poet conducts with her imagined reader. In this exhibition, a gentle, though persistent three-way interlocution or conversation ensues, flowing back and forward between the objects and the photographs on display here.

The folding, overlapping, soft curves of the silver jewellery exhibited here vivify the body of smaller metallic works. These objects are uncommon in their delicacy, like seashells or perhaps ears. Notwithstanding the energy that flows through her metallic creations, Matthews silver brooches of course remain insentient. Half metal she stayed.



The sensuous curves of the silver jewellery, placed alongside the apparently rock-hewn sculpted body-photographs and the larger bronze objects for the wall have been cleverly juxtaposed in a kind of continuing conversation with one another. The larger bronze objects talk back to the smaller silver objects, in turn articulating with the photographs of sections of the human form.

Oddly perhaps, the subject of Leslie Matthews photographs, a woman's body captured in an eerie light (because at the time she was taking these photographs an electrical storm was building up), is barely discernible as human. The seemingly inorganic, stone-like texture of this androgynous body, and the fact that it is never photographed in its entirety, but in close-up, in bits or parts, adds to the mysterious appeal of Matthews photographs. The body part photographs, partly because of uncertainty about which specific section of the body one is actually looking at, exert a kind of magnetic power, repeatedly drawing the viewer back into their forcefield.

Matthews has set up a multi-levelled dialogue here between the artistic genres, between the animate and the inanimate, the organic and inorganic, between dimensions – the three dimensions of the objects and the two dimensional photographs – and the larger and the smaller objects on display. These different art forms address one another across the space in a strangely compelling discourse. Fluidity and subtlety mark the relationships between these different elements and materials. In much the same way, memory flows between past and present, imagination and documentary reality, fact and fiction, making connections, but simultaneously leaving gaps, interstices.



Poetry, as curator and art critic Julie Ewington<sup>1</sup> has astutely observed, may be the key to understanding Leslie Matthews artistic work. Matthews especial engagement, as a young girl, with the oeuvre of American poet Emily Dickinson perhaps provides further insight into the work on display at this exhibition. Why connect Leslie Matthews approach to her visual art to Dickinson's poetic art?

Arguably, Emily Dickinson's poetry concerns itself to a greater extent with form than with content. The meaning of the individual poems is often cryptic, elliptical and elusive. The meaning is never transparent, but remains tantalisingly and perpetually just out of reach. At the precise moment it all appears to come together and make sense the meaning seems to vaporize, again eluding the reader. If meaning is grasped it usually only happens at an instinctual or intuitive level and only fleetingly. This brief moment of insight inevitably passes, leaving one feeling that what has been intuited has been lost once again. For those who desire certainty or closure in life or art, this can engender a sense of frustration. But it ensures the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ewington, Julie 2000:10 & 13

reader goes back to the work, to the poetry, to continue searching for what lies behind that mysterious obliquity.

The same sense of unfathomability applies to Matthews jewellery, bronze sculptural objects and her recent photographs, fascinatingly juxtaposed in this exhibition. One senses that these works are connected in ways that go beyond any immediate or overt visual relationship. But what, precisely, is the nature of that interconnectedness?

Certain words and phrases come to mind. Curvilinear. Flotation. The space in between. Intangibility. Fluidity. But the meaning of Leslie Matthews works, like that of her literary mentor, Dickinson, resists facile, prosaic explanation and ultimately defies logic. The sense of transience, ambiguity and unnameability of Matthews work serves to increase its power.

Like Emily Dickinsons poetry, Leslie Matthews metallic and photographic creations seem to speak to a nameless, mysterious and intense personal struggle, and perhaps, to a sense of personal isolation. Yet at an intuitive level one can respond to the work of both artists without needing to know details of events at the mundane, documentary level. Perhaps, by calling this exhibition 'The gentle wash of memory', Leslie Matthews is encouraging the imagined viewer to bring her own range of interpretations to the work.



It is however useful to know that Matthews starting point is almost always the human body. She begins with drawings, before the making begins, and is fastidious in working and reworking these drawings before taking her work through to the next stage, into the three dimensional sphere. Leslie Matthews search for perfection is founded in her respect for the body:

*...My jewellery starts with forms and shapes of the body, not just the human body...Ive always been fascinated by bones, but particularly what I would describe as the negative parts, where there is a gap, like, for example, the inside of the skull, the eye sockets, or the pelvis...A lot of my jewellery and my work references the pelvis, the pelvic bone, the hollow forms of the bone, the empty spaces...I work on the form of my jewellery, my sculpted objects, always striving towards simplicity, working towards a beautiful, almost satisfying shape. There are more complex elements in my work now the layering Ive achieved, for instance, but at the same time, the refining I do with my work becomes less and less. I strive towards simplicity, because ultimately simplicity has more depth.<sup>2</sup>*

The paradox that less may be more is apparent in Leslie Matthews body of work, 'The gentle wash of memory'. Like memory, and like poetry, the interstitial spaces, gaps or absences are significant in her work. Drawing on the body as her primary source of inspiration, Leslie

---

<sup>2</sup> Personal Communication, Leslie Matthews to Christine Nicholls, 16th July 2002

Matthews has assembled a corpus of work in this exhibition that is beautiful, intellectually challenging, and engages our senses.

- **Christine Nicholls, August 2002**

Christine Nicholls is a writer, curator and Senior Lecturer in Australian Studies at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia.



References

Ewington, Julie, February 2000, Sharing the Self ten years of jewellery by Leslie Matthews, in Gray Street Workshop Celebrating 15 years, an anthology, February 2000, publ. Gray Street Workshop and Object, Australian Centre for Craft and Design, Adelaide and Sydney.

Gray Street Workshop Celebrating 15 years, 1985–2000, an anthology, February 2000, publ. Gray Street Workshop and Object, Australian Centre for Craft and Design, Adelaide and Sydney.

Wolfe, Humbert, 1924, Tulip in Kensington Gardens, Ernest Bent Ltd., London.