

NAVIGATIONS

DIANNE LONGLEY

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'We live, as we dream, alone.'

Joseph Conrad, 'Heart of Darkness'

One is immediately taken by the level of fine detail that fills and overflows Dianne Longley's work. Each finely wrought element is laden with meaning and each piece is imbued with thoughtfully conceived and carefully executed detail, yet the works are never overwhelmed by their own weight. There is an abundance of signs and signifiers, symbols, archetypal characters, and frames within frames behind veils overlaying meticulously prepared backgrounds. The works are not dragged down, and are never heavy. And this despite the explicit or apparent subjects being the creation and the journey of self discovery; life and death; the ending and mending of being.

On the opening page of 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being', Milan Kundera refers to Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of infinite return – the idea 'that everything recurs as we once experience it, ... that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum',¹ and that this recurrence gives the event or subject a weight, a purpose, a meaning that would otherwise have been absent in an isolated instance. Nietzsche's point is not that a single event is without moral weight, but rather that repetition or return might help us to fully grasp the meaning and value of an event that might otherwise escape us.

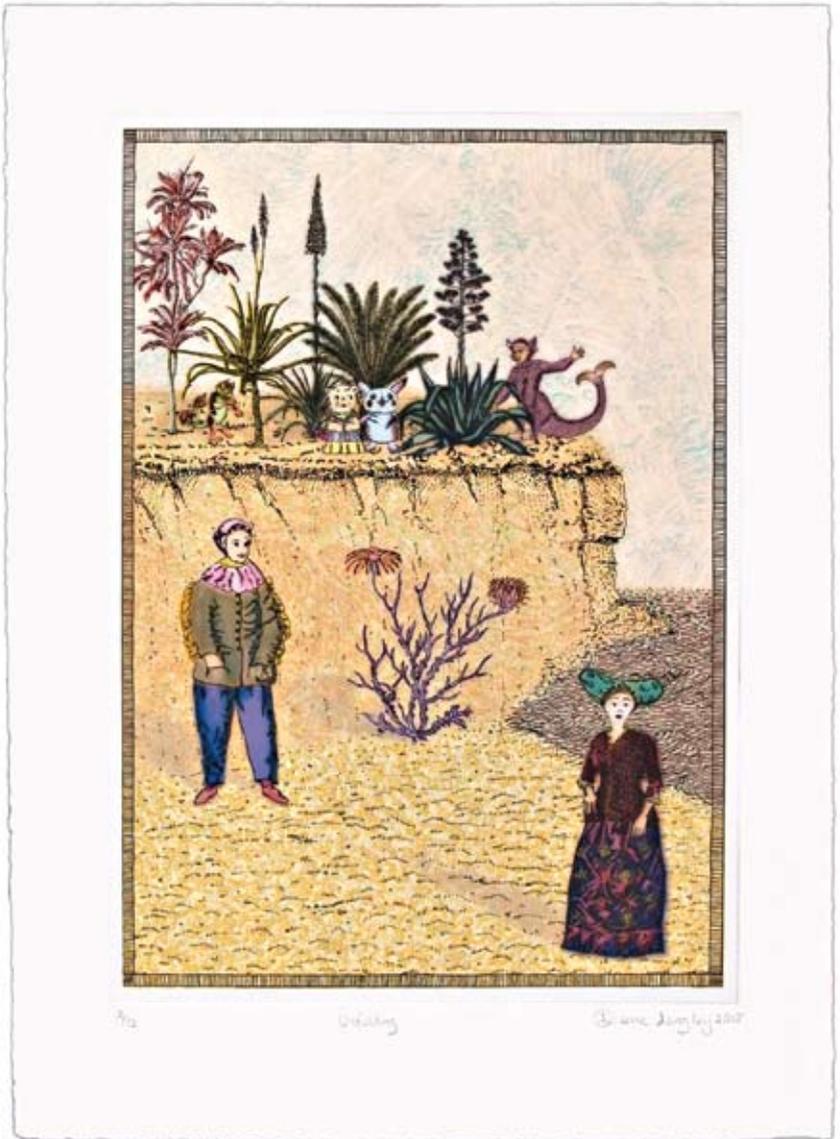
Longley's work is a practice of repetition, of seemingly infinite layering. Generously she welcomes and accepts and brings into her practice, into her making, each new technique, and each new technology. And so the layering of detail (and the detail of layering) increases along with the refinement of the subjects. It is the skill of the artist that enables the work to remain almost weightless, despite the subject matter. In the folio 'Contingent Ambiguity' (2001) each interleaved glassine veil of lace comfortably protects an image beneath, initially obscuring it, then when

set aside, revealing the next complex, delicately layered polymergravure image beneath. The theme of the work is life and death, yet still the work floats and is not overwhelmed by its own weight.

A solid object can be considered as a stack of an infinite number of two dimensional planes. Where is the weight in something with no thickness? By a practiced devotion to layers and layerings of detail and technique, method and application, concept and execution, Longley is able to create narratives of otherwise heavy subjects that, weightless, lift us. Her early prints vibrate with light detailed lines and abstracted symbolic elements which together quaver like notes in a melody. Gentle linear passages combine with whimsical terrain, and opposites join in peaceful conjunction. Metaphysical journeys form the visual landscape narratives of Longley's earlier prints.

Longley's prints compose their narrative through their resistance to the style of linear perspective that characterises western realism. Linear perspective tends to place the perspective of the viewer outside the depicted scene². In contrast, Longley's play with relative scale, and the absence of shadow-lines and architectural depth, has the effect of placing the point of perspective, and by implication the location of the viewer, somewhat ambiguously within the picture.

Longley uses this form of perspective to actively draw the viewer into an engagement with the dreamscape aspects of her scenes. In the print 'Unfolding' (2008) the female figure standing at the lowest part of the frame is equal in height to the male a quarter of the way up the print, and the medieval grotesques and Japanese kawaii³ figures on the cliff above and behind them similarly retain their equality of scale – breaking with linear perspective by resisting any decrease in relative sizes between the subjects in the foreground and those in the rear. As an emphasis of this play with scale, the centre of the visual field is symbolically dominated by a disproportionately large flowering plant. This technique challenges



'Unfolding,' intaglio print with inkjet chine collé, 41.5 x 29.5 cm, 2008.

the assumptions of hierarchy associated with and typically active in scenes constructed using linear perspective. These assumptions inevitably privilege one subject over others and all too often this also privileges the associated qualities such as the masculine over the feminine, the apparently ideal over the seemingly debased, and the dynamically active over the passive. This is the same artist who in the playing card set 'Cats, Cakes, Clothes and Cups' (1999) challenges the dominance of public politics, gender hierarchies and the abstractions of suits through their displacement with the private personalities and domestic rituals of her actively lived life. Longley is revealing her messages in each layer of her work – in the concepts, the subjects, the narrative composition, the materials and techniques, and the methods and execution.

This departure from realist perspective pervades Longley's uncanny dreamscapes. The effect is to draw the viewer into a sense of the dream experience, into contact with a layer of awareness inhabited by the archetypal beings of our subconscious, layers where meaning might be directly accessed through symbols and metaphors.

The encaustic works on wooden panels are essays in the imagined spaces of this dream-realm. Here kawaii characters cavort with demons, and a bare-arsed ass rides a rampant sphinx ('Ignoring Life's Certainties II'). A fantastical hybrid duck/ostrich/lion ('Bitter and Sweet Moments in Time') stalks wilder and more absurd beings than ever C. S. Lewis' Aslan was imagined to confront in 'The Chronicles of Narnia'. These are playful depictions of the symbolic dream creatures of our inner psyche, embodiments of our repressed selves come out to play. Here is our trickster capturing our flouncing pretence ('Cocoon of Coconut Ice'). Here is our agricultural vanity imagining ourselves profound ('Sunday Evening Sweet Potato'), and here is the inquisition of our inner selves perching its authority on outsized cacti while the congregation of our certainties sports itself in a succulent bromeliad. The dreams can themselves be layers of dreams ('Soft Monster Dreams



'Threads drawn from the past, towards a digital future..', (detail) small suitcase of postcards and memorabilia, suitcase closed 17.5 x 23 x 11 cm, 2006.

a ScallyWag') and our sweetest ideals get stuck up trees ('Cloud Garden Gathering') while wild beasts are the most cultured of folk ('Pleasure is Mine to Give')⁴.

Anthropologist Christine Yano sees the supposed absence of threat in kawaii cuteness as the very intent of the commodified fetishes: 'so no one questions things that lurk below the surface. Perhaps it speaks to the child we once were – but it can be a Trojan Horse'⁵. This is a key to reading the psychological carnival of internal archetypal characters that populate Longley's oeuvre. We can be easily betrayed by our sweetest and most cherished ideals, by the illusions of our most positive beliefs about ourselves, while what we think ugliest about ourselves may in fact be our true gold. The juxtapositions of the 'grotesque' and the 'beautiful', the masculine and the feminine, and the foolish and the wise, throughout Longley's works quietly reiterate the need to come to terms with the conundrums and contradictions of our inner life. We should not hastily reject anything because it appears ugly, and not accept without examination something simply because it appears to be beautiful.

Carl Jung, one of the earliest and deepest influences in Longley's work, called this process 'individuation' and conceived of it as a personal journey towards a psychological maturity that prepares us in later life for death and nothingness. The tableaux of the prints, the encaustic wood panels and the on-glaze porcelain images capture moments in this process. Each moment depicts a single layer in the process or a summary of the process. In the ordered layers of Longley's artist books and folios we find depicted the fully formed narratives. The journey of individuation is examined, developed and reworked through narrative and poetic works such as 'Deanin's Dreams', (1981) and 'Quest' (1989). Other books and folios use allegory ('A Passage Illuminated', 1992) and symbolism ('The Golden Rose', 1995, and 'Apperception, a symbolic narrative', 1991 & 2001). In a unique departure, 'Threads drawn from the past, towards a digital future...' (2005) constructs its investigation of the nature of personal memory via documentary

realism – through a collection of ephemera, and personal memories of a past.

'Apperception, a symbolic narrative' is a bold statement of a journey from emotional darkness to a potential resolution where intellect and intuition each struggle like elemental forces for domination. By efforts and chances wisely taken, a reconciliation can be forged for a new state of inner harmony.

Each of the individual images of Longley's prints, wood panels and porcelains, and each leaf of each of the artist books, places before us another layer, another moment, another step in this process towards emotional maturity. Each layer adds its individual lightness to the foundation of Longley's work.

And then there are the solitary bronzes – the primordial plants (and the occasional ladder) cast in cuttlefish bone. Solid bronze is a strange new visitor amidst the dreamscapes. The three dimensional forms offer us a new perspective, a new layer of sensory perception, with each piece possessing an individual gravity. Whether plant or object, the natural force within each lifts upwards. Finally there is solid mass; a gentle ascent.

The cuttlefish casting marks are traces that gesture backwards to the two dimensional flatness, the planes and surfaces of the mould, to the fine linear grain within the shell, as well as to the infinite layers of work and the works that precede it. Each now stands as an independent, solitary, strong and unique, three dimensional mass. The bronze object may be a ladder, or a cactus or agave, or some utterly unique primordial plant of pure imagination, but the symbolic individuality is resonant within each. This is underscored by the names of recent individual bronzes: 'Poetry of Independence' for a work of three separate plants: arranged along a slate base, and for three separate plants 'Unique', 'Sentinel', and 'Continuum'.

Along with Jung, Longley was also influenced early on by the Kabbalah, a Judaic

mystical tradition rich in metaphysical allegory. Medieval alchemists used the Kabbalah's system of esoteric and arcane symbols as a guide for supposedly refining the base metal lead into gold. Unpolished, bronze can look dull grey and heavy like lead. Polished it is a warm rich yellow not unlike gold, and so this alchemical process is evoked and engaged. The alchemist's process has been philosophically interpreted as an allegory of the evolution of the individual into an ever more highly evolved being – or in Jungian terms, into a more psychologically mature person. From the very beginning Kabbalistic symbols have formed layers in the rich detail of Longley's work. The recent appearance of these solid bronze sculptures, these primordial symbols from a psychological dreamscape, marks an important new layer of weight and development in Dianne Longley's autobiographical journey of (artistic) individuation.

Farley Wright, Adelaide 2008

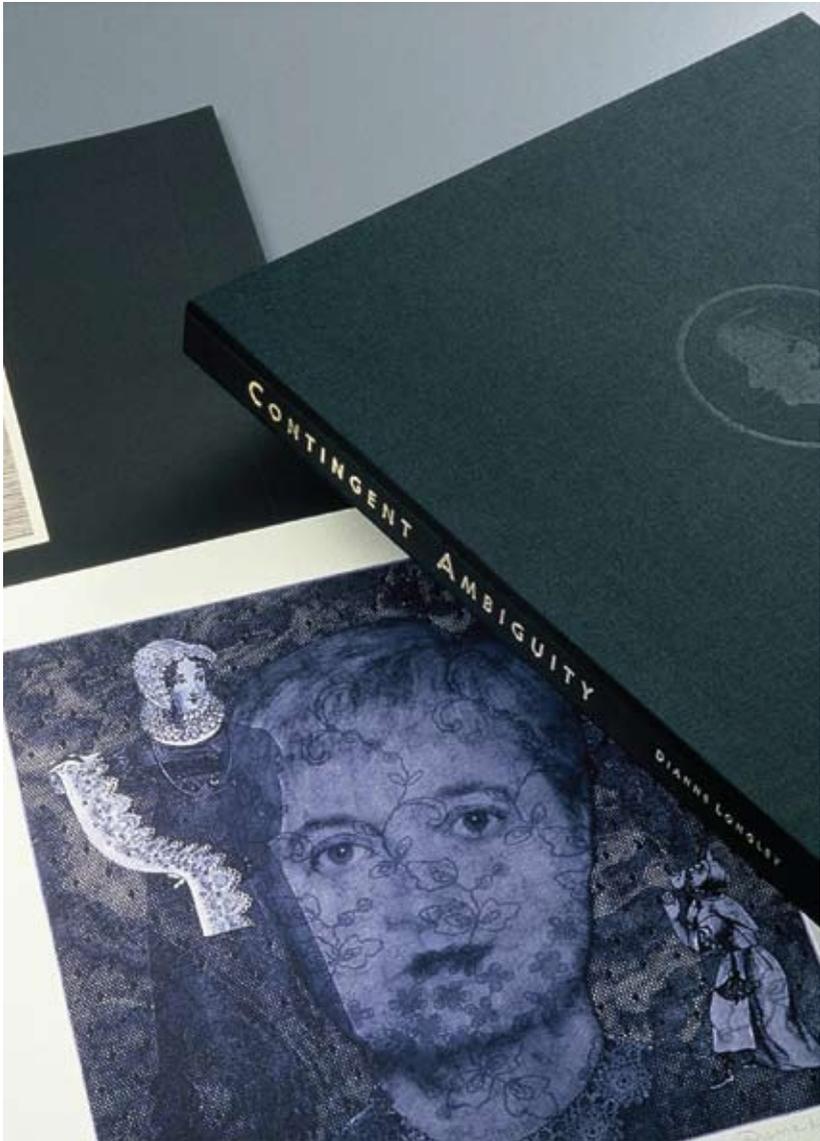
¹ Milan Kundera, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being', Harper and Row, New York, 1984, p.3

² John Barrow, 'The Artful Universe', Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p.7

³ Kawaii is a Japanese techno phenomenon of 'cuteness' that abounds throughout their commodity culture, readily recognised in the Pokemon character Picachu, or the pink and white of Hello Kitty products.

⁴ Images of these works can be found on Longley's website <http://www.diannelongley.com.au>

⁵ Cited in Frances Atkinson, 'Purrfect Storm', The Age Saturday liftout, August 16, 2008, p.12



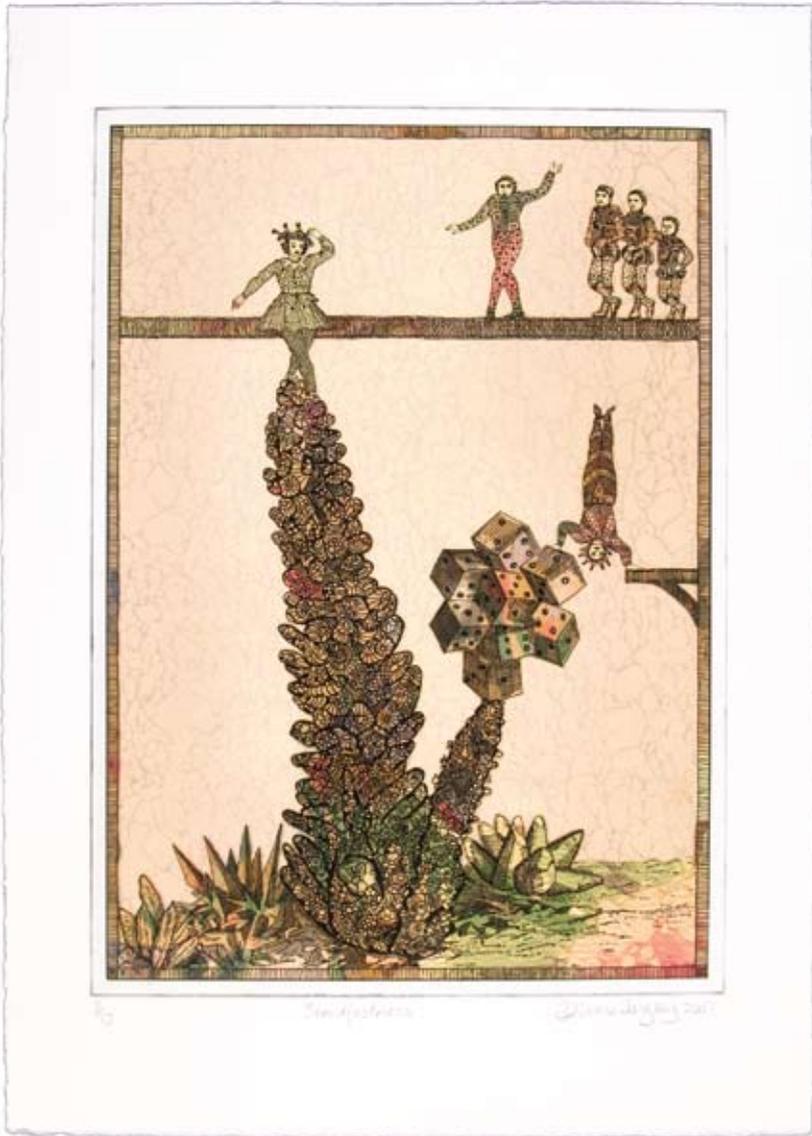
'Contingent Ambiguity', (detail) folio of polymergravure and chine collé images; essay, colophon and glassine interleaves printed letterpress, folio 40 x 39 x 3.5 cm, 2001-02.



'Cats, Cakes, Clothes and Cups', (detail) boxed set of inkjet printed playing cards, booklet and a silk playing card table cover, box 21.5 x 16 x 4 cm, 1999.



'Balance and Counterbalance', intaglio print with inkjet chine collé, 41.5 x 29.5 cm, 2007.



'Steadfastness', intaglio print with inkjet chine collé, 41.5 x 29.5 cm, 2007.



'Theatre of Embarkation', concertina book with inkjet prints on handmade Barcham Green paper, box 11 x 8 x 3 cm, book open 9.5 x 72 cm, 2008.



'Curious and Fantastic Creatures', concertina book with intaglio prints, box 9.5 x 9 x 3 cm, book open 8 x 84 cm, 2007. 'Remember to Die, Remember to Live', (detail) concertina book with inkjet prints, book closed 21 x 21 x 1.5 cm, book open 21 x 378 cm, 2008.



'Soft Monster Dreams a ScallyWag', (detail) pokerwork, mixed media, & encaustic on hoop ply, 30 x 40 cm, 2006. 'Pleasure is Mine to Give', (detail) pokerwork, mixed media, & encaustic on hoop ply, 30 x 40 cm, 2006.



'Sweet, Sweet Monsters', (detail) pokerwork, mixed media, & encaustic on hoop ply, 30 x 40 cm, 2006.
'Cocoon of Coconut Ice', (detail) pokerwork, mixed media, & encaustic on hoop ply, 30 x 40 cm, 2006.



'Lamentation of Deeds Past and Reluctant Farewells', intaglio print with inkjet chine collé, gold and silver leaf, 15 x 21 cm, 2004. 'Keeper of the Golden Apples', intaglio print with inkjet chine collé, gold leaf, 15 x 21 cm, 2004.



'Round and Round, Curious Discussions Abound', inkjet print and mixed media, oil paint, pokerwork, and gel glaze, 32.5 x 46 cm, 2007. 'Up and Down, Through Time and Telling, Friends are Found', inkjet prints and mixed media, oil paint, pokerwork, and gel glaze, 32.5 x 46 cm, 2007.



'Continuum', cast bronze, 11.5 x 4.5 x 2.5 cm, 2001 and 'Unique', cast bronze, 13 x 5 x 2 cm, 2004.



'Wayward', cast bronze, 10 x 4.5 x 3 cm, 2003 and 'Sentinel', cast bronze, 11 x 4 x 2 cm, 2003.



'Celebration of Kind Deeds', intaglio and inkjet chine collé, 21 x 15.5 cm, 2004.

Biography

Dianne Longley grew up on a sheep and wheat farm near Forbes in rural NSW, later moving to Newcastle where she completed a Diploma in Art at Newcastle College of Advanced Education. Since 1979, she has been based in Adelaide, South Australia. She received her Masters degree from Flinders University in 2000 and is currently a PhD candidate at Australian National University.

Longley works across a range of media including printmaking; encaustic, oil painting and pokerwork on wooden panels; artist books, on-glaze porcelain, and small scale bronze casting. She runs an access printmaking studio, The Print Studio, teaches at Adelaide Centre for the Arts, and has presented workshops and classes in photopolymer printmaking in Australia, USA, Japan, and the UK.

Her work is held in numerous public and private collections in Australia and overseas, and she has undertaken international residencies in Japan, Scotland, and USA.

In 1998 Longley published 'Printmaking with Photopolymer Plates', a book about a new, safe versatile printmaking technique. A second edition was printed in 2003. Further information, including curriculum vitae, is available from her website: www.diannelongley.com.au



'Archibald Pipe-Dreamer Pondering Abstractions', on-glaze porcelain, 14 cm star, 2005. 'Little Sweet Potato', on-glaze porcelain, 11 cm diameter, 2005. 'Cordial Good-Gracious & Pikachu', on-glaze porcelain, 14 cm star, 2005. 'Beastie-Bear Solitary Serenade', on-glaze porcelain, 10 x 7 cm oval, 2005.

This catalogue was published in conjunction with the exhibition 'Navigations: artist books and folios, and mixed media works' held at Barratt Galleries, Alstonville, NSW, September 2008.

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The artist would like to thank the following people and organisations who assisted in the production of this catalogue and the organisation of 'Navigations: artist books and folios, and mixed media works':

Essay	Farley Wright
Photography	Michael Haines: Kevin Killey Photographics (p. 11, 14-15, 23) Grant Hancock (p. 6,10) Michal Klivanek (p. 4, 12-13, 16-22)
Design	Dianne Longley
Printing	Knowlton Coudrey, Hyde Park Press
Gallery	Barratt Galleries 5 Bugden Avenue Alstonville NSW 2477 phone: (02) 6628 0297 www.barrattgalleries.com.au
Acknowledgements	Farley Wright, Shaw Hendry, Julie Barratt, Anthony Zammit, Beth Evans, and Jan Davis
Funding	Dianne Longley gratefully acknowledges the support and assistance of Arts SA



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Arts SA

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