

Spirited Away

“Spirited Away... to be taken without being noticed... marks gradual change... change from one theory to another, change in the use of technologies, change in public perception, change in aesthetics.” Sue Lorraine¹

Through examining “the other” one learns about one’s own culture, values and aesthetics. Like a mirror, “the different” has the ability to reflect the self, and to reveal what is deeply embedded... we win doubly understanding another culture and our own as well”. Joan Laage²

To experience Japan is to experience new ways of seeing and knowing; oppositions at once in conflict and harmony; city and mountain; skyscraper and waterfall; neon and cherry-blossom; past and present; grace and deformity; repression and sexuality; speed and stillness; solitude and crowd; shadow and light; longing and peace.

As vast as the contrast between Noh and Anime, Japan reflects a dichotomy of forces that embody the wisdom and tradition of the ancients and the adventurous innovation of a brave new world. These dualities co-exist in an enigmatic, at times inscrutable, place of shadows that seduces and transforms the sensibilities of every



Catherine Truman, *Eye Carvings*, (detail), Chinese boxwood, mother of pearl, acrylic, paint, Mint Pattie wrapper, 2007.

western visitor. To experience Japan is to experience a powerful, transforming spirit, at once strange and familiar; a place where material and spiritual worlds converge.

This title of this exhibition was inspired by the Academy award-winning animated film *Spirited Away* by Hayao Miyazaki (Studio Ghibli, Japan, 2001) which explores an allegorical journey of transformation as the young

heroine, Chihiro, has to fend for herself after her parents are transformed into pigs. Chihiro journeys through a strange spirit world of mythical creatures, learning to trust others in an attempt to free herself and release her parents.



Sera Waters, *home of a tree kami #2*, acrylic, cotton, crewel, linen, felt, found objects, MDF, 112 x 56 cm, 2007.

Being *spirited away* was my experience when, in Yokahama, I attended practical master classes on Japanese theatrical traditions. I had experienced Japanese Theatre in Adelaide - the mesmerising butoh of Sankai Juko, the industrial force of Mizumachi and the crazy, urban avant-garde of Dumb-Type - but none compared with learning from grand masters in a school at the foot of Mount Fuji, the seasonal beauty and stillness of Noh, the coarse humour of Kyogen, the vibrant theatricality of Kabuki and the ferocity of Dairakudakan’s butoh. The workshops were strange and confronting. Yet, strangeness sharpens the familiar, and exposure to another cultural lens reveals the beginnings of new understandings.

As a theatre teacher working in Adelaide, the experience continues to resonate. Memorably, in 2005, one of my students offered a butoh interpretation of the suffering of a hibukusha (bomb affected person) to commemorate the bombing of Hiroshima. With a bolt of lightning he

drained to a void; welcomed the painful spirit of the hibukusha, stamped with the force of a thousand bomber planes, collapsed onto the Zen garden then as a blinded survivor, rose and stumbled towards a greater recognition of self. An Adelaide schoolboy was *spirited away* by the deep and transforming experience of otherness and the audience travelled with him.

Dianne Longley, Catherine Truman, Sue Lorraine, Shaw Hendry and Sera Waters are South Australian artists who have been inspired by the transforming experience of living and working in Japan. This exhibition, illustrates the unique preoccupations of each artist and the impact of their Japanese experiences in imagery, craft and choice of materials. Yet, the work also reveals a subtle expression of how gently and imperceptibly both artist and audience might be *spirited away* by changing techniques, broadening cultural understanding and shifting aesthetics in a memorable encounter with “otherness.”



Dianne Longley, *Gesture*, pokerwork, oil paint, mastic varnish, gold leaf, Jelutong panel, 30 x 42 cm, 2007.

In this exhibition, Dianne Longley’s own hands, carved into jelutong wood, reflect the traditional role and power of the “makers” in Japanese tradition. Hands wear human experience and represent artistic enquiry and imagination, striving to understand the nature of all things. Here, hands combine with other symbols reflecting Longley’s interest in the Renaissance historia animalium of Gesner, contemporary Japanese ‘kawaii’ figures and the strange history of the grotesque. Natural images of Australian foliage and the Shinto Tree Spirit (ko-dama) are juxtaposed with Japanese and European mythical creatures and monsters that reveal the world of darkness or act as spirit guardians and protectors.

Catherine Truman’s eye carvings in this exhibition demonstrate carving techniques studied in Japan and

reflect her interest in visibility and invisibility. “The interior of the body is a concealed territory. The less we see the more we imagine.”³ This has particular resonance in cultural contexts, for the degree of transparency and concealment differs between people and cultures. Truman’s curiosity with the nature of the human body and the way in which it is translated through artistic process and scientific method sees these works exhibited in a studio-like installation as a series of working images drawing on both western and Japanese imagery and historical anatomical engravings.

Sue Lorraine’s work builds on her interest in natural history collections and the recent debate on Evolutionary Theory. Some scientists suggest that the new theory of Evo-devo (marrying evolutionary and developmental biology) may supersede other theories as conventional views are *spirited away*, almost imperceptibly, by emerging ideologies and reasoning. In this exhibition, Lorraine presents a Diorama on evolution with three similar works, representing Darwin’s Theory of Natural Selection, Intelligent Design and Evo-Devo, almost indistinguishable. Each piece consists of a white metal branch with moths attached. Shadowed on the rear



Sue Lorraine, *Evolution*, (detail), painted mild steel, transparencies, wig pins & rare earth magnets, 2007.

wall, additional moths appear suspended, reminiscent of a ghostly cherry blossom branch. The moth wings are fragile, transient and impermanent, suggesting the shifting nature of both Scientific Theory and Japanese culture and aesthetics.

Shaw Hendry’s work reflects a distinctly Japanese aesthetic and an appreciation of Japanese techniques, colours and materials. His work in this exhibition is a natural progression of his practice, which relates to form and the meanings that can be derived from form. Distinctive cursive designs, like wave patterns reflect

the spirit of movement and strength of wind or water. Uncharacteristic in such formal compositions, flowers also appear, fragile, yet strong against the force of the waves. The use of natural imagery reflects the Shinto view of the natural world as sacred. Wittily though, the flowers are soursobs suggesting a fusion of Japanese and Australian experience in Hendry's work. The red/gold variegated colour of the carved squares reference



Shaw Hendry, *Sour Sobs*, (detail), gouache on carved plaster, Western Red Cedar, *Pinus radiata*, 44 x 44 cm, 2007.

lacquer ware and are mounted on clean, natural wood reflecting Japanese appreciation of natural timbers and wood grains.

Like Japanese printmakers, Hokusai and Hiroshige, and Romanticist, William Morris, Sera Waters has developed a "respect for the shape and reliability of trees",⁴ creating stylised, patterned views of trees and nature. The work for this exhibition presents a series of three large painted and embroidered Australian Gum trees on linen. Hung high and distorted, they reflect a childhood imagination of trees as powerful, magical spirits, referencing Shinto animism, exploring contemporary colours, textures and patterns of traditional Japanese embroidery. At their base, as in Shinto shrines, animals appear as guardian spirits, but these guardians are, distinctly Australian, appearing as Koala and Kangaroo.

In the exhibition, *Spirited Away*, the artists present work that has been inspired, conceptually and technically by their experiences of living and working in Japan. In a successful meeting of cultures, the one informs and transforms the other as almost imperceptibly, paradigms shift, perception alters and new aesthetics emerge.

As Butoh Choreographer, Yumiko Yoshioka once wrote. "The dance changes as everything is changing. Yet, as its unchanging principle, it connects."⁵

It is not possible to live and work as an artist in Japan and not be transformed, for to experience Japan is "to encounter the other and celebrate the spirit of difference that the other can make."⁶ To experience Japan is to be imperceptibly *Spirited Away* then on returning home to a more familiar world, "to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."⁷

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- ¹ Sue Lorraine, Artist Statement *Spirited Away*, August 2007
² Joan Laage, Artistic Director of Laapin Butoh' in Seattle. Cited in Fraleigh, Sondra Horton, *Dancing into Darkness - Butoh, Zen and Japan* (Pittsburgh 1999)
³ www.charonkransenarts.com/artists/Truman/artist_truman.html
⁴ Sera Waters, Artist Statement *Spirited Away*, August 2007
⁵ Yoshioka, Y. cited in Fraleigh, *ibid.*, p. 246
⁶ Fraleigh, *ibid.*, p. 1
⁷ Eliot, T. S. *Little Gidding, Four Quartets*, Harvest Books, 1968

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SUE LORRAINE

DIANNE LONGLEY

SHAW HENDRY

SERA WATERS

CATHERINE TRUMAN