

## Review: Spirited Away

The exhibition *Spirited Away* at the Adelaide Central Gallery (September 14<sup>th</sup> to October 6<sup>th</sup>) was curated by Dianne Longley.

It is a collection of works by a group of friends, Sue Lorraine, Catherine Truman, Shaw Hendry, Sera Waters and Dianne Longley. And there would seem to be a theme, a nod to Japan and the master of anime Hayao Miyazaki, a tip of the hat to the otherworld, the denizens of grottos and damp gardens, a flipping of the spectator into the spirit world.

That was my first impression, some sort of whimsy.

I wanted to have a good look so I went up on tippy toe - I am short and the exhibition is hung rather too high for my line of sight - perhaps I should have put Japanese pattens on my feet. As I was having a good look I started to see how this lovingly crafted work was perhaps not just about whimsy or memories of Japan, I began to wonder was there another theme here? Maybe I was imposing my own reading of the work too strongly, but that, I suppose, is the risk artists take when they go public.

I started to see a subtle anxiety, an anxious, urgent calm built into much of the work. Perhaps I was spirited away by the allusiveness of the works, by the meaning immanent in the skilful, delicate manufacture. For me meaning was trembling within, there was nothing brash here. The meaning was about all our fragile worlds, needy now and wanting compassion on so many levels.

Each artist composes their work from diverse materials; Shaw Hendry carves and gilds plaster, an underrated chemically inert material which he encases in wooden boxes. A wall installation, a



Dianne Longley, *Gesture*, pokerwork, oil paint, mastic varnish, gold leaf, Jelutong panel, 2007

sequence of calm, curved, carved elegances, detached, finely finished, contained and gleaming, movements of air and earth and water.

Of her installation Sera Waters says 'This series of work is dedicated to tree kami...a kind of natural spirit, [that] exist in a multitude of places sometimes causing havoc and sometimes keeping a watch on us.' I should think they might be kin to the Australian Mimi. The tree images are made of paint on linen canvas with stitchery and they loom up and over the spectator, jolly and gracious but hugely heading for the heavens. Below them on wall consoles are Australian porcelain niceties, birds and animals, emblems only of watchfulness.

There are eyes peeping from within the installed litter of Catherine Truman's creative process. Catherine Truman has carved from Chinese boxwood single human eyes lively with mother of pearl and paint and completely knowing within the wrinkly bags of their flesh. The installation has a didactic air, teaching us to see how other people see.

Sue Lorraine's sculptures seem at a distance to be glittery elegant ornament, close up they are serenely hovering moths; for me they became emblems of loss, of the future, of the now. After seeing them I whisked out to my garden to count the butterflies and was almost panicky with relief when I saw four bright wanderers. Sue Lorraine says 'I'm interested in the museum culture of pinning down the passage of time, preserving and cataloging ideas in an effort to prevent them being lost forever.'

Dianne Longley's accomplished works are complex and tantalizing. She has carved her own hands into panels of jelutong, a close grained and amenable Asian hardwood. These hands are open, almost a gesture of stoic acceptance, held out to be a perch for the unknown. All cultures seem to have a world of spirits: in Italian garden design of the renaissance and in 20th century Japanese film animation the entrance to that otherworld is through the mouth of a Grotto. Ornamented with stucco, shells and dripping with mosses in the Boboli gardens or an enticing tunnel such as those in Hayao Miyazaki's animations *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Spirited Away*, grottoes are the dwelling places of the grotesqueries that Dianne brings out to the light of day and causes to dance and prance around her fingers. In pokerwork, paint, varnish and gold leaf these images remind us of our hope that we are not alone, that perhaps we have spirit guardians.

I took fright at the messages I felt emanating from the show; I consulted Shakespeare as some people were wont to consult runes and wondered shall we need to call on Angels and ministers of grace to defend us or will the spirit of the time teach us speed? Or shall we chat calmly about the complex and charming warnings we see now coming from the artists?

*Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear,*

*Or like a fairy trip upon the green,*

*Or, like a nymph, with long disheveled hair,  
Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen:*

*Love is a spirit all compact of fire,*

*Not gross to sink, but light and will aspire.*

Shakespeare *Venus and Adonis* 1.145

Maureen Gordon

## Abstruse - Somewhat Obscure

Review of exhibition at the Tin Cat Café September 2<sup>nd</sup> to 30th.

I visited this exhibition of abstract paintings at the Tin Cat Gallery recently.

The artists were all from the Adelaide Central School of Art, had all taken Mary Jean Richardson's course in Abstract Painting and were all very skilled in the intelligent creation of paintings without obvious subjects or narratives, paintings about nothing we might say.

I suppose the first thing many people notice about such abstract paintings is how attractive they can be to the eye of the beholder.

Now why is this?

When we look at a thoughtfully made abstract painting that has caught our eye, even if we only look long enough to wonder why we are looking at this picture of nothing, if we allow ourselves to look with an imaginative eye then we won't be looking, we will be seeing.

Seeing, and controlling the ways of seeing, is part of the kit bag of tools that artists cart around. Over the years, centuries, millennia artists have been aware of their tools and know that a little bit of red or detail in the picture will catch the eye; the artist's many tricks of composition are about how artists use their skills of seeing to lead people to see what the artist wants them to see. In my experience abstract painters tend towards giving the eyes a sensuous pleasure.

But just suppose your cultural preference for naturalistic representation is so strong that it causes you to look only for the skills of illusionism - there is really no need to fall to the floor and froth at the mouth about the apparent lack of skill, the lack of real work - just relax, and if the work doesn't actually cause you to have vertigo or any of the other severe visceral responses that artists are capable of conjuring up, then relax, stop looking with your mind, let your eyes do the seeing.

Even Leonardo da Vinci commented on the way our eyes can be seduced by a seemingly unpromising surface such as a rough wall. He said:

*if you look at any walls spotted ... with a mixture of different kinds of stones... you will be able to see in it a resemblance to various landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and various groups of hills. You will also be able to see ... an infinite number of things ....* (Selections from the *Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*). Leonardo was suggesting that eyesight is insight, that the imaginative eye allows