

Decoding dataspheres:

Abstract Nature at Samstag

MELINDA RACKMAN

EXPLORATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ART of the experiential state, connected intelligence and pattern recognition are most often associated with new technologies. *Abstract Nature* however, curated by Margot Osborne for Adelaide's Samstag Museum, has its central tenet of connectivity between the conceptual and the natural skilfully rendered in long-established media.

As an abstract in the academic sense, *Abstract Nature* succinctly communicates the complexity, diversity and depth of artists' embodied responses to the land, water, plants and the animal body. Utilising the visual languages of abstract art, the artists in *Abstract Nature* collectively create a sensory yet transcendent composition of beauty in surface, texture, form, colour and line. And, as an abstract idea, the exhibition opens a portal into an expansive sense of self and place in the ecosphere.

Humanity is hardwired to search for meaningful patterns or connections in our environment, and as such is at constant risk of apophenia – perceiving unmotivated connectedness and abnormal meaningfulness. In his 2003 novel *Pattern Recognition* William Gibson explores this innate animal ability – a dual desire and risk – to match incoming stimuli with already embodied concepts and experience. Basically it fast-tracks our moment-to-moment existence, with the almost instantaneous identification of faces, objects, words and rhythms into food, shelter, family, safety and culture.

Long before the mimesis of classical art, cultures communicated via abstract geometric patterns and linear forms. The most intimate and immediate pictorial language must have been the tattooing or engraving by humans on their own skin, wordlessly communicating status, position and connection. Modes of painted, sculptural and written forms developed to encode and transmit moral, ethical, historical and medical knowledge to a wider geographical and temporal audience.

Osborne speaks in her essay of the influence on non-indigenous practice of the abstraction employed by Aboriginal artists to convey their attachment to the land. Citing Yolngu artists' pigment on bark works – Djambawa Marawili's *Metamorphosis/Dhakandjali* (2006) and Wanyubi Marika's *Mumutthun* (2007) – she explains how abstraction is taken to a deeper level of *buwayak* (invisibility) 'with the sacred secret screened from the uninitiated gaze by complex abstract *rarrk* patterns of crosshatching'.

Decrypting hidden messages and abstracted information within a larger whole into a readable form is better described in any culture as 'knowing'. As I don't know what the optical rhythms of precisely inscribed swirling vortexes and fluid sea creatures signify, I refer to the catalogue to learn of both artists' involvement in obtaining



sea rights for their community; Djambawa leading the recent successful Blue Mud Bay High Court Case. For an informed viewer, this embedded narrative may be a spiritual portal into the wash of territorial waters.

Cryptography is a precise art. Abstraction of abstraction, layering and complexity can lend itself to abnormal meaningfulness. I stand mesmerised before Regina Pilawuk Wilson's *Sun Mat* (2008) – a transference of her inherited weaving designs to acrylic on linen – searching for the hidden ideas and narrative. Under my uninitiated gaze, her golden radial painting triggers personally specific embodied information. In my pattern recognition system Wilson's work sits comfortably alongside the dynamic page construction and online animations of early Austrian code artists, BLIX (1983-86), having at once flatness and a resonant energy signature.

Facing off across the expanse of Gallery 3, Angela Valamanesh's unglazed ceramic *Natural Histories G + H* (2009) formally address GW Bots's substantial cast bronze *Tree of Life III* (2009). Both these wall sculptures elegantly illustrate that the sum of the parts is more than the whole. Influenced by historical scientific illustrations of bodily organs, Valamanesh's affective works are porous and open, temporal and discrete. The muted tones of branching artery, vessel and sponge-like forms evoke a sense of recent emergence from a Victorian cabinet of curiosities. In opposition, the weighty, blackened bronze forms of Bots's *Tree* are akin to three-dimensional stenography. These fragments of a forgotten font, 'txt' messages from the organic world, are harsh yet tender, dispersed yet whole. The growth into bronze of her flowing glyphs on paper, extend the resonant language Bot sees encoded in the landscape around her – a generative conversation between life and death.¹

Equidistant between the wall works are the six painted porcelain vessels, *Tali Juta* (2010) and *Finding Mallia* (2007), by senior Ernabella artist Nyukana (Daisy) Baker and ceramicist Robin Best. Baker and Best have worked collaboratively for thirteen years, with Baker marking her traditional dimensional *walka* designs in black glaze on Best's flattened porcelain forms. Echoing the bodily organs of Valamanesh and charred tree bones of Bot, these works visually, formally and conceptually balance and ground their exhibition space – forming an aggregate pattern we can both sense and read.

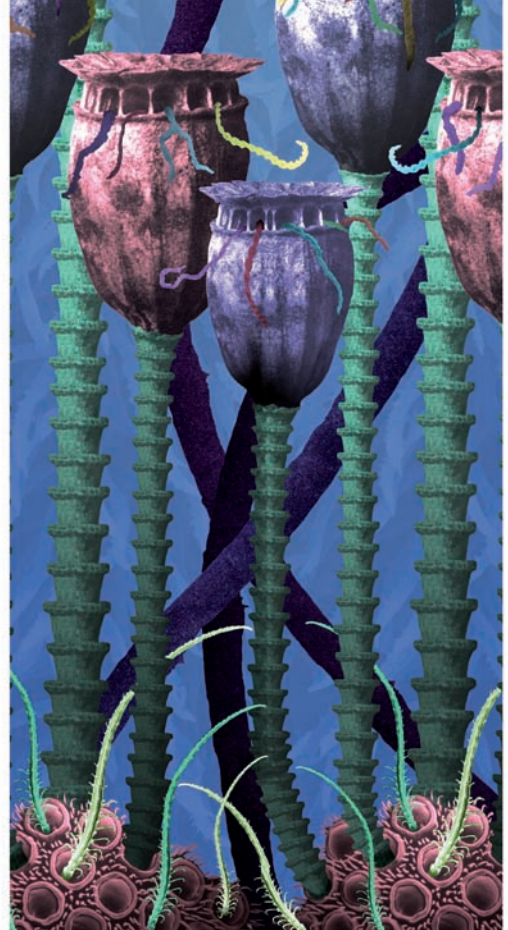


Downstairs Pippin Drysdale's precisely incised porcelain vessels and closed forms allude to termite mounds, message sticks and the domed hills of the Kimberley. The two separately installed formal arrangements speak of the cyclic nature of the Australian landscape, from bushfire to regeneration. Contemplating the fifteen sombre toned vessels with vivid burnt orange and blue interiors of *Embers and Ash* (2006-2009), hyperlinks me into a Japanese cemetery in Kyoto. My reminiscence is of precisely engraved grey-stone surrounded by offertory strips of wood covered with elaborate inscriptions including a *sūtra* – a thread or line of text that literally holds things together.

Meditative inscription is echoed in a series of Jenny Sages's abstract landscapes, which includes *Fragments Remembered* (2008). The scratched and gouged encaustic wax, coloured with powdered pigment, conjures the gnarled bark of an ancient tree; scrimshaw fragments on long dead bone; the textured skin of grandmothers' hands – surfaces proudly weathered by time. Sages's immanent surface, line and pattern evade literal translation – there is no need to decrypt what we already know.

When Osborne makes note of the 'artists' sense of connectivity between mind and Nature', is she referring to biological, cosmic, cognitive, or essential nature? This nature in *Abstract Nature* is a tangled web of connected and opposing concepts. 'Nature's Latin root, *natura*, literally means 'birth', or coming from darkness into light, and sees no distinction between the natural and the artificial brought into being by human consciousness. In fact it has been several millennia since we have been able to conceive of a purity in either human or non-human nature.

Artefacts of nature – discrete objects brought into being by extraordinary technical skill, like those of silversmiths Julie Blyfield and Leslie Matthews, play with our default conception's nature. In *As patterns swim* (2008-2010) Matthews works in a generative way, somewhat like a programmer. Using wax castings from three bones to create shape templates, which are repeated and progressed to produce finely detailed, leaf-like works, his forms hover between the two original kingdoms of



Nature, *Animalia* and *Plantae*.

Echoing these silver, leafy forms, Blyfield's *Windfall* takes on an ecological fragility not seen in the fleshy substance of her *Paris Collection* (2007). The materiality of the earlier desert plant vessels, enhanced by waxed patinas and coloured enamel, speaks of resilient nature; while the open leaf patterning of her silver bowl, *Drought* (2010), portrays our fears around nature's sustainability.

Less successful is the depiction of microscopic nature in Julie Ryder's *Metamorphosis* (2010) and Catherine Woo's *Lachrymal Lake* (2010). Although Ryder's silk montages of hybrid plant imagery sourced from electron microscopy visually vibrate against the intimate black walls of Gallery 3, their rigid form is seldom found in biology. Similarly the delicate crystalline salt lake surfaces of Woo's poesies of sorrow left me unmoved.

The snaking lines of rivers and escarpments and dots of scattered trees in Richard Woldenorp's inkjet print *Macadam Plains catchment area for the Gasgoyne River, Western Australia* (2004) have become patterns too well recognised. Our embodied relationship to nature has shifted in the age of Google Earth, where the flick of wrist accesses minute photographic detail of the remote regions our planet. Conversely, the palpable four-metre oils of Tim Burns exemplify new nature. Like a long-legged fly upon the stream. His mind moves upon silence (2009-2010) is uncomfortably overlaid with the seductive colours and forms of the Orient – nature in progress.

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Drawn together by his *sūtra*, a thin red line, Philip Hunter's rhythmic brush strokes relay three complex and dark landscapes, the central being his three-metre oil-on-linen *Salt Creep with Fence No. 2* (2008). Imaginings of ancient seabeds and allusions to fencing and salinity degradation, question the nature of nature itself. Is a yearning for nature passed a false memory, when nature present, with its overlay of human intervention, offers a temporal connection to a landscape whose strata have formed over millennia?

In *Pattern Recognition* Gibson speaks of the 'electric twilights' and the 'fluid crystalline medium' of our datasphere, which precisely describe the works of glass artists Giles Bettison and Jessica Loughlin. Four flat kiln-cast glass panels of Loughlin's *an ever changing constant I-IV* (2010) command Gallery 1. Suspended between earth and sky their mirage-like reflections shimmered on the polished floor – simultaneously watery vapour, crashing wave crests, sand blowing across dunes, and cloud peaks drifting on endless desert skies. Liminal and minimal these translucent white and grey scapes of crystalline salt lakes appear to be illuminated from within, transcending their materiality. This is essential nature.

Grounded by plinths, the vibrant colour and rhythmic patterns of Bettison's exquisite fused murrine glass panels *Gibber Plain*, *Great Sandy Desert* and two *Mid North* forms (all 2010) merge the desolate outback with Venetian islands. Surface beauty fuses with depth of field, shifting and morphing as one moves reverently around these distillations of nature. As interactive works they resonate with the field of generative 'glitch', where pixels, rather than glass tiles, are compressed and extruded into complex patterns and rhythms. My viewing pleasure magnifies each time I am enfolded within their potent presence.

The more mimetic works of Shona Wilson and Catherine Truman evoke nature's ecological adaptation, pattern mimicry and species migration. Wilson's five fragile constructions of microscopic prehistoric forms reference the Germanic romantic ideal of progressive perfection in a universal plan of creation. A piece of plastic is discretely inserted into each elegant, anatomically precise *Diatom* (2009) to remind us that it is we who create nature.

Merging the boundaries of the artificial and the natural, Catherine Truman expresses the abject visceral in carved and found English Lime, Chinese Box, Eucalypt and an assortment of plants, minerals and plastics. In *Ongoing Being* (2010), the collection of black, orange and white externalised organs and marine detritus are laid out under the glass skin of a specimen table. Defying classification, this poetic embodiment is the future of humanity – augmented seamlessly with other nature.

Abstract Nature needs to be experienced rather than viewed. It resonates and fascinates with significance, surface pleasures, curious constructions, poetics of place, and depths of attentiveness. Even if we do not wish or know how to decode them, every image, landscape and object in this exhibition radiates information streams that we can sense, analyse and recognise. Their knowledge permeates us, becoming part of us without our conscious reception, as we humans are nature abstracted. o

1. On GW Bot's glyph-based imagery, see Jan Jones, 'Artist, printmaker, sculptor: GW Bot', *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 234, October 2010, pp. 34-35.

Abstract Nature, curated by Margot Osborne, was shown at the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, 30 July to 8 October 2010. An e-catalogue, video of the exhibition, and online and radio interviews with Margot Osborne and several of *Abstract Nature's* artists can be accessed from Samstag's website. <http://www.unisa.edu.au/samstagmuseum/exhibitions/2010/abstractnature.asp>

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P46: Regina Wilson, *Sun mat*, 2008, acrylic on linen, 200 x 200cm. Image courtesy the artist.

P47: 1/ Catherine Truman, *Ongoing Being*, (detail), 2010, mixed media. Image courtesy the artist
2/ Julie Ryder, *Metamorphosis 2*, 2010, digitally printed silk, 250 x 62cm. Image courtesy the artist.

P48: (clockwise from top): 1/ Pippin Drysdale, *Sap rising*, 2006-2009, installation of 19 porcelain vessels and closed forms from *Tanami Traces Series IV-VI*, *Kimberly Series II-III* and *Tanami Mapping I*, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Robert Frith Acorn Photographic Studio.

2/ Shona Wilson, *Diatom No. 8*, 2009, twigs, seeds, seed pods, plastic, 62 x 62 x 5cm. Image courtesy the artist and King Street Gallery, Sydney. Photograph by Moshe Rosenzweig.

3/ Angela Valamanesh, *Natural Histories G* (detail), 2009, unglazed ceramic, 56 x 221 x 6cm. Image courtesy the artist and Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide. Photograph by Michal Kluvanek

4/ Robin Best and Nyukana Baker, *Finding Malila*, 2007, cast coloured porcelain with wirraku walka painted in black glaze by Nyukana Baker; four vessels: 29 x 91cm. Collection: Richard and Trish Ryan. Image courtesy the artists. Photograph by Grant Hancock.

5/ Giles Bettison, *Great Sandy Desert*, 2010, glass, 40 x 48 x 6cm. Image courtesy the artist and Sabbia Gallery, Sydney.

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