

Jo Darbyshire: *Islands and Rocks*

Jo Darbyshire's latest commissions are for two hospitals, the Fiona Stanley Hospital Burns Rehabilitation Centre and the Broome Hospital Paediatrics and Mental Health courtyards. It is not hard to see why these hospitals have selected Darbyshire's luminescent, aqueous paintings to grace their walls. The layers and depths of her works provide a space for contemplation. The cool marine places can soothe and cool our frazzled nerves. She creates spaces in which to take us out of ourselves.

There has been a social history perspective either underlying or at the forefront of Darbyshire's work from her early works in the mid-1990s to the present. Since 2001 Darbyshire's art has also brought forth many images of watery bodies- Helen Idle has called her an underwater flaneur.¹ Her early work, such as *Wildflowers* (1995), came from a clear feminist perspective, challenging gender power relations. It also suggested an ambivalence with her relationship with the land. Dorothea Mackellar's poem *My Country* is inscribed on the canvas, which itself is an old tarpaulin. *Is it my country and where do I belong?* are the questions she seems to be asking. Set against the red sand of outback of Western Australia, the image of two dildo-wearing women, one astride a ute, may seem far removed from her later languid water paintings, but there, between the women, is an outline of Botticelli's Venus de Milo emerging from her foamy birthplace. Rowley has suggested that the symbolism of Venus in this painting is connected with her creation story, formed as she was, from the castrated genitals of Uranus, and that these gutsy women have appropriated those genitals, and thus their symbolic power, for themselves.²

Darbyshire is also an award-winning curator, and her interest in social history has resulted in exhibitions which investigate Australia's hidden histories. The *Coolbaroo Club* documented the history of an Aboriginal club established in Perth in the 1940s. The club played a role in deflecting some of the racist practices operating at that time, by providing a space for Indigenous people to perform, dance or just congregate. The *Gay Museum*, not only examined the presence of gays and lesbians not normally documented in the history of the Perth, but also

¹ Idle, H., 'Of an Underwater Flaneur', 2009, p., 22.

² Rowley, Alison, *Wildflowers, Women and the Law*, 1996, p. 30.

provided “a critique of museum practice. In place of the grinding literalism of the object and its label, we are offered a recoding, or reappropriation of prior meanings.”³ Darbyshire presented the exhibition in a manner akin to an art installation, allowing the viewer to make connections themselves. Cakes of used hand soap sit next to a document about “treating” homosexuality, as if to cure a disease. One exhibit has all kinds of forks incongruously attached. The label reads, “Kingdom: Hard Forks, Class: Steel Objects, Order: Utensil” and so on, as a comment on the “natural order of things”.⁴

Water in Darbyshire’s paintings is emblematic of many things. Her 2004-5 series, *Ghost River*, reflects her interest in the environment and our relationship to place. The images were inspired by Perth’s Swan River. Along with her customary oil paints, she has used resin from native Marri trees, which creates a stain upon the canvas. Traces of Australia’s colonial past appear in the water. A stockman’s hat and a shimmering, submerged bathing pavilion, raise questions about European Australia’s relationship with its roots as a nation built on someone else’s land. In *Two-up*, there is a tension between the title, pointing to the colonial gambling game and the incandescent beauty, of what could be rings of fireflies or floating jellyfish.

Darbyshire’s art has become more sensual and personal over time. In 2009, she exhibited a series of work entitled *the floating world*, which referenced the *Ukiyo-e* woodcuts of the Edo period. Of the exhibition she wrote, “my work is ultimately linked by concerns with the body in the landscape and ideas of sensuality, immersion and imagination.”⁵ The bodies of water in this series were the coral reefs off the Western Australian coast. The images were conceived alongside the glacial lakes of Banff in Canada, at a six-week residency she spent there in 2007. The images are languid with splashes of scarlet heat. That they emerged out of Darbyshire’s stay in such a cold climate is perhaps surprising, but it is possible that they represent a longing- for warmth, for contact, for touch, being far from home.

Her latest exhibition, *Islands and Rocks* continues to use water as a metaphor, this time to explore the symbolic nature of islands. Darbyshire is fascinated by water, islands and lakes. She says, “both [islands and lakes] provide a stillness, a

³ Wilson, J., Jo Darbyshire: The Gay Museum, Artlink, Vol. 3, No. 22, 2003.

⁴ Wilson, J., Jo Darbyshire: The Gay Museum, Artlink, Vol. 3, No. 22, 2003.

⁵ <http://jodarbyshire.com/exhibitions/the-floating-world-2009>.

vantage point from which to take stock of the self.”⁶ It is as if they represent simultaneously, the internal and the external: “Islands also embody dualities: barrenness and fertility, wildness and sanctuary. They require a journey to visit and a journey requires imagination and engagement with both the sea and the island.”⁷ Darbyshire is also tapping into a wider discourse on islands. In ‘Islands as Arks: Nature Protection and the Preservation Ethic 1898-1918’, Christensen writes, “Islands have long been a wellspring of inspiration to the scientific imagination.”⁸ He makes the point that islands off the West Australian coast were often uninhabited until European settlement, upon which they became microcosms of the pillaging of the Australian mainland. They were explored and prized for their unusual flora and fauna, but then exploited for their natural resources.⁹

A stencilled, doily-motif appears in this series, suggestive of the European imprint on the region. Shoalwater Bay, Penguin and Green Islands are off Cape Peron, forty-five minutes south of Perth. Cape Peron was named after Francois Peron, a French naturalist and zoologist who was part of Nicolas Baudin’s expedition along the West Australian coast between 1801 and 1803. The main purpose of the expedition was outlined in Baudin’s address to the Institut National, “Natural history, which has only found new objects in the collections of animals and dried plants gathered on the coasts, desires that the same objects be transported alive to populate its gardens and menageries. It hopes as well that new researches will produce more discoveries.”¹⁰ In order to use the discoveries to “populate its gardens and menageries,” the flora and fauna would have to be removed from the virgin sites. Peron was an early anthropologist and conservationist, but paradoxically, it is the exploration of these pristine sites that can lead to their exploitation and over-use. It is this paradox that Australians continue to grapple with in balancing our use of the land with trying to retain some semblance of its pre-contact, environmental state.

Darbyshire has won numerous awards and residencies including the Mid-career Fellowship from the Western Australian Department for Culture and the Arts, the *BankWest Contemporary Art Award* and a Museum Award for *The Gay Museum* at the Perth International Arts Festival.

⁶ <http://jodarbyshire.com/exhibitions/islands-and-rocks>

⁷ <http://jodarbyshire.com/exhibitions/islands-and-rocks>

⁸ Christensen, J., *Islands as Arks*, 2011, p. 13.

⁹ Christensen, J., *Islands as Arks*, 2011, p. 14.

¹⁰ Christensen, J., *Islands as Arks*, 2011, p. 13.

This exhibition signals her maturity as a mid-career artist, cementing her place in Australian art.



1. Night Island #2 (Red Coral) Jo Darbyshire, 2012, oil on canvas.

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