

jo darbyshire

the floating world

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The Floating World
Paintings by Jo Darbyshire

2009

www.jodarbyshire.com

Johnston Gallery, Perth, Western Australia
11 March–1 April 2009
and
Summit Gallery, Calgary Alberta, Canada
22 May–20 June

Acknowledgements

I very gratefully acknowledge the Western Australian Department for Culture and the Arts for supporting this project by awarding me a Mid-career Fellowship. I wish to especially thank Alana Culverhouse and James Berlin for their encouragement.



Also I wish to thank the Australia Council for the Arts for supporting me to visit the Banff Centre for the Arts in 2007. Thank you to the staff and participants in the Imaginary Places residency, especially David Hoffos and Melissa Levin and the people who took me to the frozen lakes: Barry Underwood and Jen Rae.

My gallery directors Felicity Johnston and Emily Barnett.

Mark Stewart from the Murdoch University Collection, Gary Dufour from the Art Gallery of WA and David Forrest for generously sharing his shunga reference books.

Ben Fereday from Fereday Pollard for kind use of his studio, George Atzemis, Jim Tsigalis, Greg Radin, Andrew Pratt and Graham at Lease Equity for kind sponsorship of studio space in Plaza Arcade, and Adam Derums and Guildford Grammar School Art Department for the kind use of their studio space.

Thanks also to Tula from the RAC and the special team: Jo and Tony, Andy Hayim de Vries, Michele Elliot, KB, Lucy Monte, Lizzy Wood and Shingie Ruzengwe.

Special thanks to Christian Geyer from Interface Creations who has created my website:
www.jodarbyshire.com

Lastly thanks to writers Helen Idle and Gail Jones.

Designer Lauren Wilhelm and Photographer Eva Fernandez.

Gail Jones

the erotics of immersion

responses to *Floating Life*

Calenture

Art is given to the affirmation of misrecognition. It is the task of the artist to see things awry, to entertain the strange, to cast vision and knowing into foreign zones.

Early sailors, made vulnerable by long sea voyages in which they spent months on the ocean without sighting land, occasionally succumbed to a peculiar form of delusional misrecognition – called calenture – in which they believed the ocean was a kind of green rolling field. They so desired land, stability and the earth-beneath-their-feet, that they would fling themselves overboard in ecstatic delirium. This is a pathology, a confusion of haptic and psychic lives, but it is also an experience of the fabulous, and was often written about in a tone of awe and wonderment, as though what was being enacted was a kind of irresistible *return*, sometimes to the maternal. William Wordsworth, for example, wrote in 1820 of the ocean as a “breast” and a “couch” in which one sank “enflamed” (since calenture was also linked to heat) into “the depth of limpid floods.” Herman Melville (writing in *Moby Dick* in 1851) described calenture as the product of a “mystic mood” in which “fact and fancy ... interpenetrate, and form a seamless whole.”

The delusion of calenture comes to mind in the viewing of these paintings, not because they are about death or wild-flinging madness, but because they envision the ocean as a congenial, inviting space, one in which imagination is intensified and profoundly lives. Jo Darbyshire’s sea-spaces suggest a wish to inhabit the submarine – artistically, at least – as surely as we do the land, and to find in it forms of arousal, pleasure and aesthetic experience. *Gage Roads*, *Leeuwin Currents*, *Rottnest Reef*: these are all images of submersion that are deeply seductive: there are no horizons here, only dreamlike, drifting and dimensionless apparitions, gorgeous in their palettes and engulfing in their manipulation of planes and spaces. The forms are both familiar and unfamiliar: submarine life is the fantastic other to the terrestrial (as night is to day); so that there are efflorescing blooms, semi-transparent entities, organic flotsam and jetsam streaming away in invisible currents. These have an iconic attraction, but are also mysteriously impalpable, as if we know they are finally a vision and unable to be touched. So the first response is a kind of gratitude at being reminded of the apparitional life – in which one might dissolve, see anew, be taken by the soft vast force of another element, down, deep down, into a new imaginary sensorium.

Ukiyo-e

The term for the genre of figure paintings of the ‘floating world’, Ukiyo-e refers to images from the Edo period (1603-1867) of which Hiroshige and Hokusai are perhaps the best known practitioners in the West. Centred in the Yoshiwara district of what is now modern Tokyo, the images were often of urban pleasure seeking – teahouses, kabuki, brothels, well-dressed encounters and so on, nothing at all like the asocial and otherworldly realms Jo Darbyshire paints. Yet what she has derived from Japanese art is the redolence of the phrase *floating world* as a description not of ephemeral

middle class pastimes but as a totalizing experience and point of view. What would it mean to see from the position of floatation, drift and watery sensibility? What would it mean to literalize this metaphor?

The result is images gained by sea-diving and contemplating the allotropic states of water – its capacity to steam and condense, its anamorphic effects, its filtering of light rays, particles and reflections. Particularly captivating for Darbyshire is the special-effects lighting that produces bright illumination against a very dark background, or the repetition of lozenge shapes or peak-shapes, such as occur when light strikes ripples or filters through undulations. In earlier paintings this was signified by bioluminescent sprinklings, or with strings of pearls becoming hoops of light; here parallel wave-lines and chrysanthemum-like patterns, such as figure in the blue and green designs of traditional Japanese body tattooing (*irezumi*) also occur in a shimmering radiance.

So although these are dark images, over all, they are also sparkling and oddly illuminate, reminding us of elements intersecting – water, light and the material body – and the sumptuousness of marine forms and reef-life, glimpsed in situ. One of the great pleasures of diving is to see the light patterning one's own body, to stretch out an arm and see it lined in fluctuating ropes of light, shifting as the body shifts, in a fleeting photography.

Ama

Among Hokusai's 30,000 extant prints are *shunga*, erotic images typified by fully clothed couples in the act of sexual congress, with their genitals gigantically oversized and pornographically visible. A special genre of *ukiyo-e*, much treasured by connoisseurs of erotic art, *shunga* include images of Ama, female abalone divers, clearly a source of fantasy for male Japanese artists. Depictions of Ama, often figured on the sea-shore or diving in pleated waves, include explicitly lesbian scenes (sometimes with dildos, such as sea-cucumbers), and all celebrate the ocean as a kind of female space. The most famous of Hokusai's *shunga* is that of an octopus performing cunnilingus on a prone Ama, her head thrown back and her eyes closed in luxurious exhaustion. It is an image directly quoted in one of Darbyshire's largest works and its translation is a homage to the mystery of this image; although bizarre it is not, curiously enough, utterly monstrous or repellent, but suggestive of the license and creativity of dream-work and fantasy. *Shunga*, though a male form, includes images of female pleasure, both in intercourse and self-pleasuring solitude, and these too form a set of physical references in the collection of *Floating Life*. Edo women, often sexually transported, are superimposed on the under-waterscapes.

The effect is to heighten the metaphoric connections between women's bodies and sea-life. Suddenly the labial crevices of the images become apparent, the convolvulus shapes, the anatomical tendrils; there is a wonderful complication of the boundaries of bodies and sea-visions. In this context the use of abstract pink and orange shapes seems also sexualized: Jo Darbyshire is a truly brilliant colourist and these points of visual pause and captivation betoken the psychaesthetic confusion of bodies and surrounds and the collapse of inner and outer spaces. What is being attempted here is a suggestion of the eroticism of immersion; the sense that floatation in silken water, painted in glints of light, subject to powerful buoying and blooming and wave-like motion, is a model for both female sexual pleasure and general aesthetic experience. That the images are beautiful to behold – formally intelligent, wisely painterly and gloriously executed – confirms the intuition first announced by Sei Shonagon in her *Pillow Book* of 996 AD – that sensual pleasure consists in attention to “things that make the heart beat faster.”

Life/Death

When one dives or snorkels one enters an enwreathing paradox: there is a kind of pacific quietness to deep underwater, but also the rhythmic amplification of one's own breathing. So too there is a sense of emancipation, entering a space of caress, released from air-gravity and the impediments of the land, and also of transgression, danger and even death. We are seeing the kingdom of the drowned, as well as of sea-life; we are witnessing the lovely

and the creepy, the generative and the derelict. Non-euclidian maths deals with spaces that are curved and boundless, but actually not infinite: in underwater diving there is this sense too, of space made round and enwrapping, an altered physics of the body and the eye.

Jo Darbyshire is above all interested in the flamboyant excess of underwater life, its ardent suggestiveness, what might happen when one sees iridescence, amethyst and silver light cojoining, what hypersensitive states we might enter and enjoy. But the paintings of frozen lakes and glaciers, of icy landscapes and chilled skies, are also very beautiful. The Canadian lake images contain white shapes that seem vaguely menacing and sharp. Water gone hard is a symbol of arrested life and it is also water stratified, serrated, caught streaming by a seasonal seizure in time. The colours of the Banff images have no sexual tones but are seductive as death is – the call of quiet, of stillness of everything settled into final fixed shapes.

The virtuosity of Darbyshire's vision allows her to include these wonderful reversals of the warm sensuality of the Australian waters. Canadians like to compare our nations: here we are reminded that the relationship is a strange one, enchanted, and not simply a mirror. One thinks of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, in which every dive is into the self or towards cultural myth, or Adrienne Rich's poem, *Diving in the Wreck*, "I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail"; damage and treasures, the two possibilities of underwater.

In 1987 the Perth Rock band, *The Triffids*, produced an album called *Calenture*. There is no song by that name on the album, but it included one called Holy Water:

Blue girl in a summer dress in the greenhouse
Where she overslept dreaming of an ocean
Like a meadow, but wet,
Wet with holy water....

This is a casual, mischievous reference, but it suggests to me a thread of preoccupation (is it Western Australian?) with what submersion might mean, and why it might entrance us. There is a suggestion here too of sexual wetness and the ways in which the moment of entering under-water, seeing our own oxygen made visible in bluish bubbles, watching a vast and extraordinary world unfold, might be a fundamental encounter that reconnects vision and embodiment. The glorious suite of images of *Floating Life* recalls to us the sublimity of this particular connection.

Gail Jones is a fiction writer and Professor of Writing at the University of Western Sydney. Her publications include the novels *Black Mirror*, *Sixty Lights*, *Dreams of Speaking* and *Sorry*.

'... a suggestion of the eroticism of immersion; the sense that floatation in silken water, painted in glints of light, subject to powerful buoying and blooming and wave-like motion, is a model for both female sexual pleasure and general aesthetic experience.'



Octopus and Lady
(after Hokusai) 2008
oil on canvas
152cm X 101cm







Siren #1 2008
oil on canvas
75cm x 75cm





Floating Lady (after Hokusai) 2008
oil on canvas
3m x 1.5m (diptych)



Lake Louise Falls 2008
oil on canvas
3m x 1.5m (diptych)



Gage Roads, *Strange Flowers*
(after Terukata) 2009
oil on canvas
3m x 1.5m (diptych)



Small Black Seaweed #1 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm

Small Black Seaweed #2 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm

Small Black Seaweed #4 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm

Helen Idle

Of an underwater flâneur

My sister tells me it is both impolite and dangerous to point at artworks. You could trip and scrape your finger straight over the surface, or even through the surface. She will slap my hand down if I instinctively raise my arm to do it, protective of art and family all.

With *the Floating World* paintings I can't point. Or is it that I can't point enough? Mainly I can't point because I am falling.

I need to hold my feet evenly, no bending or leaning, no pushing a finger towards the surface. I must hold fast to the clues of material world around me – an observing invigilator, the art-going conventions – to prevent me from swinging both arms far out behind, before rushing them past my side in chorus to form a clasped point, beginning a free dive. Straight in. To disappear into her layers of oily watery worlds. I will leave this material world and fall, impolitely, dangerously, into Jo Darbyshire's *Floating World*.

Why do we write about art? What possible contribution could artwriting make to the primary experience of looking, feeling and thinking? Here I will use writing as a technique for releasing meaning from the artworks. As a process for looking more closely, engaging with the details, participating in our joint project of learning to understand ourselves in the world. Think of it as a supplement or as an additive to enhance the transformative potential of the work.

Jo Darbyshire is inspired by the Indian Ocean, the natural phenomena of the Leeuwin current running along the coast of Western Australia, and the lakes in Canada. She is also inspired by the body and sensuality, how we experience and express this multilayered part of everyday life. *The Floating World* paintings invite us to think about our sensual experience provoked by, and yet not dependent upon, particular waterscapes. The paintings allow us to be immersed in another place and time, one that may be familiar, not from physically experiencing the particular environment, but because of a call to a deeper part of the self. If you allow it, they call you to fall into your metaphysical self, to be swept along by a drifting life-current. Layer upon layer of paint are used to create the sensations of a watery environment and to make space for observation and contemplation.

The layers in *the Floating World* paintings connect us with the layers of our existence, to our physical relationship with the landscapes we are immersed in or float over, and are custodians of. We are reminded of the capacity of our own bodies to connect, and to let go, and to experience our lives more deeply.

The additional layer of graphic lines on the saturated canvas can provide many levels of entry into a painting. Here our eyes can answer to the first sharp call of a surface seaweed graphic – like the white ones found in *Floating Mountain* or similarly a black piece floating into the top of *Shallows #2*. These keep me on the surface. Uncommitted, I could float past, as they are promising to do. The Indian Ocean pulls these seaweeds from its depths and carries them upwards on currents to firstly decorate the near surface and then to dry as lacy emblems on the shoreline. They are recalling the depth at the surface and perhaps we can observe them in the same way in these paintings. We become more aware of the depths through attending the surface.

A figure placed sideways onto the surface of *Floating Lady*, refers to a print by the Japanese printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (1760 – 1849) – an image of a huge carp with a smaller clothed figure passing in front of it. This figure has been placed sideways into a seascape. She is partially transparent, at once in the world and not of the world. We have a sense of her quietly passing by, a presence similar to the seaweed graphics. The floating lady's graphic interruption

into the abstract environment is softened by her transience and creates a slightly pensive aimlessness. She looks quite benign at first, but the spill and drip of paint that falls from under her breast over the lines and folds seem to be an aggressive interference by the artist. These marks ensure she cannot float out towards the viewer and hold her back to float into a spin down and down, or hover along in the direction she is going. As big as she is in the painting, there is a sense that she is small in this larger seascape, which goes on and on to infinity.

Shallows 1 & 2 tumble us into a layer below the surface where familiar splashes of light indicate a sandy watery world. The colour of that moment just before surfacing. After being swept to shore by a wave you've misjudged, arriving disorientated and bashful in the shallows. Glimpses of bright light through the water can reassure that you will come to the surface.

Memory

One day we kids were out looking for oysters on the reefs at Kalbarri, two brothers and two sisters from a wheatbelt town making holidays on the coast. We skirted the lagoon rimmed by sand on the inland side and a cragged protective barrier of reef to the ocean side.

We were jumping from rock to rock on the ocean side of the lagoon carrying a gidgee to spear any passing fish and a screwdriver to unhinge fresh oysters and pop them straight into our unsophisticated waiting mouths. We kinda weren't really supposed to be out this far, this far along the reef rim, but ... you know the furthestest rocks were promising. Yes. Definitely oysters there. We followed behind one brother, in a line, placing one foot in front of the other on the sharp reef rocks, balancing the buckets and shoes in the other hand.

A roar from the ocean side announced an oncoming wave making its way over the reef into the lagoon. We turned to face it, lean into its power as we knew to do, allowing it to pass by before it would gather and pull back into itself. In those few moments as we waited for it to turn another rumble brought a second wave upon us. I could feel this one was stronger and deeper.

On the call of the third wave, with no evidence of the first two retreating and freeing us, we became quite frightened. Three in a row. We knew enough that these could be King Waves. We could get sucked out into the ocean.

Being one of the eldest I shouted to the others to drop their gear, to hold together and lean into this next wave.

But Dad'll kill me if I lose the gidgee!

It'll be him or this next wave!

He dropped it.

And so the third wave bore down upon us and with the most enormous unforgiving power stripped us from each others hands and tumbled us separately over and over the spiky bloody reef. Into the lagoon. The peaceful pale sandy blue water held us steady. The shallows.

I stood up in the water and looked around for the others. The brothers had landed not too far from me and were pushing themselves up limb by limb in the shallow water, to stand and look around. But my little sister was further away, and face down. I ran and ran towards her shouting her name in a panic.

As I got closer she turned slowly over to float on her back and said in a dreamy way – Oh, I was just looking into the peaceful shallows and imagining, what it would be like, to be dead. . .

We cannot ignore that these paintings are being created at a time when global warming and climate change are on the agenda of governments concerned about the future of the world's natural environments. The title on the painting *Gage Roads* refers to the Indian Ocean waters off the coast of Western Australia, where international ships lay at anchor awaiting pilot into the harbour of Fremantle. The ships are often collected in a straggle between Rottne

Island on the horizon and the beach. The surrounding ocean dwarfs these giant symbols of supranational business but their presence turns the surface of the ocean into an industrial space.

The paintings take us underneath to the natural inhabitants of Gage Roads, the currents and seaweeds. The delicate lines and layered surfaces hint at the complexity of a natural world unseen from the industrial surface. Those familiar with Gage Roads have witnessed the tension between the surface use and the ocean in local debates, and through their own bodily experience of swimming in the shallows with the ships gathering on the horizon. Especially when one of those ships is a nuclear powered aircraft carrier from the USA.

Gage Roads 1 & 2 remind us of the rich, precious and somewhat inscrutable places beneath those ships, and call on a body memory of the days of floating above and through those same waters. On occasion, swimming along like an underwater flâneur, you may be interrupted by a piercing grinding sensation as the sound waves of a passing boat washes through your body.

The title *The Floating World* calls us to draw direct connections to ideas about water, and also to the ukiyo-e printmakers of Japan. In this body of work there are works which reference the artist's interest in the ukiyo-e school of Japanese woodblock printing, and the shunga or 'spring pictures' – commonly noted in Western translation as erotic pictures.

Permission

To research ukiyo-e and shunga I went to the British Library. In the rare books room I was permitted to view Tom and Mary Anne Evans' study of the shunga prints – Shunga: the Art of Love in Japan, under restriction. This meant I had to sit at one of six desks under the direct gaze of a librarian. No gloves required. The pink slip with the brown slipcased hardback signalled that it could not be left unattended so made me a little nervous at what I might see inside this book. Glancing up from my desk I noticed my retired neighbour, a doctoral candidate in musicology. Was he going to notice me and come over to whisper hello? To peep over my shoulder and see page after page of exaggerated penis and mons veneris illustrated at various angles, in unusual surroundings, in different styles of exposure. I glimpsed the very conflict these works bring out in a Western context. At times I had to stop myself from laughing out loud at what seemed to me illustrations of ridiculous 'antics' and acrobatics. And at others I was nervous the librarian might sense an air of arousal as I turned from one page to another, lingering curiously on some. As an occidental looking at oriental shunga I was aware of the tension created by the interaction of these very different visual cultural positions. I was performing the anxiety of looking at an easily identified and commonplace human pleasure in a citadel of the academy.

Octopus and Lady takes us beyond a literal reference to an image from Hokusai's album *Kinno no komastu* to immerse us in an experience of the rapture, the pleasurable space where one is released from the materiality of the body into an internal otherworldly place.

The two octopuses we anticipate from Hokusai's image are largely occluded by the white light twinkling over the body but for a few clear drawn references to the tentacles. We are encouraged to lean in closely to the detail of the tense patterning, be transported by the ethereal translucent shape to the arched head being called away by emotion, by pleasure. Mouth slightly apart, white brush strokes pulling her chin back to her forehead, the hair falling back and laying out under the shoulder. A sense of abandon in a strange and familiar space. Embraced, held in water, drowning into a life force. One of the most familiar visual clues of woman's ecstatic abandonment is presented in lush layers of oil saturated into a canvas that explores pleasure in an intriguing and satisfying way.

Tom and Mary Anne Evans noted that:

'Despite the considerable amount that has been written about this work, all attempts to interpret and elucidate it ends up by revealing more about the writer than about the original work.'

Jo Darbyshire's 're-writing' of the Hokusai print reveals her own concerns with landscape, the body, immersion and pleasure, and also points to something that may be overlooked when interpreting the original. *Octopus and Lady* opens up ways of seeing and thinking and talking about women's pleasure and sensuality. Yes, looking closely, pointing in fact, at these *Floating World* paintings can be an impolite and dangerous activity.



Katsushika Hokusai, Japan, 1814, woodblock print from the book *Kinoe no komatsu*, 1814, British Museum Collection. OA+,0.109, AN234034

Selected References

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Inside the Floating World: Japanese prints from the Lenoir C. Wright Collection catalogue for exhibition at Weatherspoon Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, curated by Allen Hockley 2002

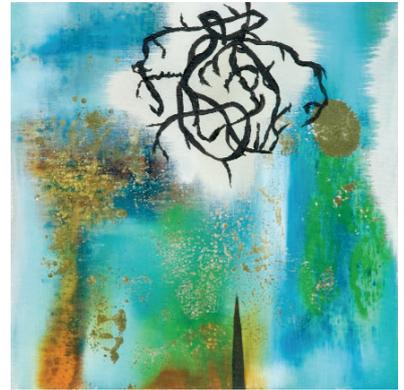
Helen Idle is a London based writer. She is an independent visual culture and communications consultant, recently working with Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts), and Moët et Chandon. She completed a MA Visual Culture, Awarded with Distinction, in 2005 from the University of Westminster, London and is currently a PhD candidate at Kings College London researching the display and reception of Australian Aboriginal Art in Western Europe.



Small Black Seaweed #7 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm



Small Black Seaweed #8 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm

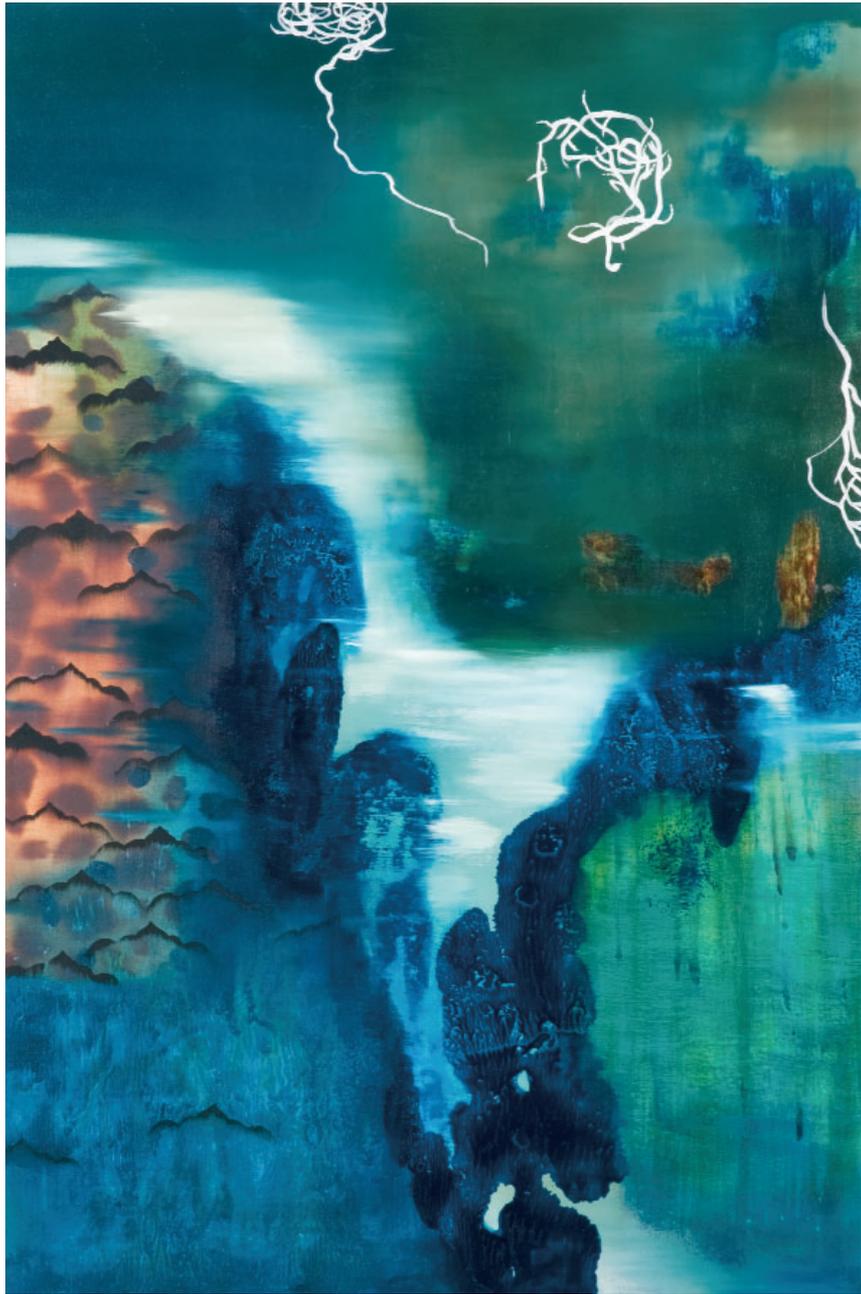


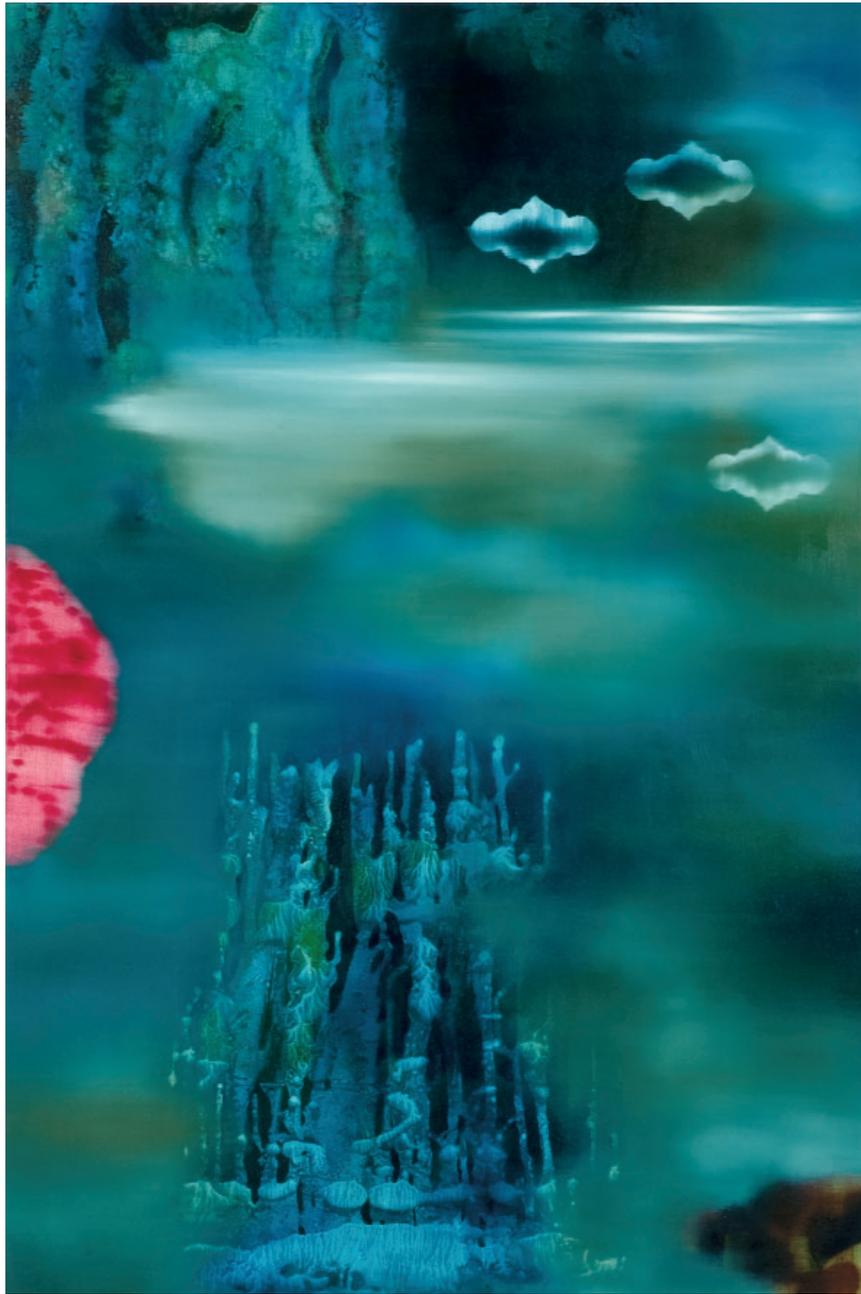
Small Black Seaweed #10 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm



Shallows #1 2008
oil on canvas
90cm x 90cm









**Leeuwin Current #1,
Rottneest Island 2008**
oil on canvas
180cm x 180cm





Moraine Lake #2 2008
oil on canvas
90cm x 90cm



Imaginary World #3 2008

oil on canvas

36cm x 28cm oval



Biography | Jo Darbyshire

Born 1961, Perth, Western Australia

Education

- 2004 Master of Creative Arts in Cultural Heritage, Curtin University, Western Australia
- 1991 Post-Graduate Diploma of Art, Canberra School of Art, Australian Capital Territory
- 1981 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Curtin University, Western Australia

Recent Solo exhibitions

- 2009 *The Floating World*, Johnston Gallery, Perth WA and Summit Fine Art Gallery, Calgary Canada
- 2007 *Sapphire Paintings*, SPAN Galleries, Melbourne Victoria
- 2005 *Ghost River Paintings*, Gallery East, North Fremantle WA and SPAN Galleries, Melbourne Victoria
- 2003 *The Gay Museum*, while artist in residence at the WA Museum

Selected Group exhibitions

- 2008 Finalist in the *Fleurieu Biennale*, South Australia, the *ABN AMRO Emerging Artist Award*, Sydney NSW and the *Inaugural City of Albany Art Prize*, WA.
- 2001 *Wide Open-space* and *Belonging in Modern Australia*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of UWA, Perth WA
- 2000 *Haynes to O'Connor, Western Australians & Water*, John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University Perth WA
- 2000 *Imaging: Art of the Twentieth Century*, Art Gallery of Western Australia

Awards

- 2009 Mid-Career Fellowship Grant, West Australian Department for Culture and the Arts
- 2007 International residency *Imaginary Places* at the Banff Centre for the Arts Canada, Australia Council Skills and Arts Development Grant.
- 2006 Artwork featured in Artbank's 2006 Calender
- 2005 Winner of the BankWest Contemporary Art Prize, Perth WA
- 2004 New Work Grant, Australia Council
- New Work Grant, West Australian Department for Culture and the Arts
- 1993 Artist Studio, Cite Internationale des Artes, Paris; Australia Council

Selected Curatorial projects

- 2003 *The Gay Museum*, WA Museum, Perth WA
- 2005 *Until There's a Cure, 20 Years of the WA AIDS Council*, Perth Town Hall WA
- 2008 *Perth City Council 1939-1945*, Perth Town Hall WA

For more details please visit www.jodarbyshire.com





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01

Cover **Floating Lady** detail
2008
oil on canvas
3m x 1.5m (diptych)



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Gail Jones

the erotics of immersion

responses to *Floating Life*

Calenture

Art is given to the affirmation of misrecognition. It is the task of the artist to see things awry, to entertain the strange, to cast vision and knowing into foreign zones.

Early sailors, made vulnerable by long sea voyages in which they spent months on the ocean without sighting land, occasionally succumbed to a peculiar form of delusional misrecognition – called calenture – in which they believed the ocean was a kind of green rolling field. They so desired land, stability and the earth-beneath-their-feet, that they would fling themselves overboard in ecstatic delirium. This is a pathology, a confusion of haptic and psychic lives, but it is also an experience of the fabulous, and was often written about in a tone of awe and wonderment, as though what was being enacted was a kind of irresistible *return*, sometimes to the maternal. William Wordsworth, for example, wrote in 1820 of the ocean as a “breast” and a “couch” in which one sank “enflamed” (since calenture was also linked to heat) into “the depth of limpid floods.” Herman Melville (writing in *Moby Dick* in 1851) described calenture as the product of a “mystic mood” in which “fact and fancy ... interpenetrate, and form a seamless whole.”

The delusion of calenture comes to mind in the viewing of these paintings, not because they are about death or wild-flinging madness, but because they envision the ocean as a congenial, inviting space, one in which imagination is intensified and profoundly lives. Jo Darbyshire's sea-spaces suggest a wish to inhabit the submarine – artistically, at least – as surely as we do the land, and to find in it forms of arousal, pleasure and aesthetic experience. *Gage Roads*, *Leeuwin Currents*, *Rottneest Reef*: these are all images of submersion that are deeply seductive: there are no horizons here, only dreamlike, drifting and dimensionless apparitions, gorgeous in their palettes and engulfing in their manipulation of planes and spaces. The forms are both familiar and unfamiliar: submarine life is the fantastic other to the terrestrial (as night is to day); so that there are efflorescing blooms, semi-transparent entities, organic flotsam and jetsam streaming away in invisible currents. These have an iconic attraction, but are also mysteriously impalpable, as if we know they are finally a vision and unable to be touched. So the first response is a kind of gratitude at being reminded of the apparitional life – in which one might dissolve, see anew, be taken by the soft vast force of another element, down, deep down, into a new imaginary sensorium.

Ukiyo-e

The term for the genre of figure paintings of the ‘floating world’, Ukiyo-e refers to images from the Edo period (1603–1867) of which Hiroshige and Hosokai are perhaps the best known practitioners in the West. Centred in the Yoshiwara district of what is now modern Tokyo, the images were often of urban pleasure seeking – teahouses, kabuki, brothels, well-dressed encounters and so on, nothing at all like the asocial and otherworldly realms Jo Darbyshire paints. Yet what she has derived from Japanese art is the redolence of the phrase *floating world* as a description not of ephemeral

middle class pastimes but as a totalizing experience and point of view. What would it mean to see from the position of floatation, drift and watery sensibility? What would it mean to literalize this metaphor?

The result is images gained by sea-diving and contemplating the allotropic states of water – its capacity to steam and condense, its anamorphic effects, its filtering of light rays, particles and reflections. Particularly captivating for Darbyshire is the special-effects lighting that produces bright illumination against a very dark background, or the repetition of lozenge shapes or peak-shapes, such as occur when light strikes ripples or filters through undulations. In earlier paintings this was signified by bioluminescent sprinklings, or with strings of pearls becoming hoops of light; here parallel wave-lines and chrysanthemum-like patterns, such as figure in the blue and green designs of traditional Japanese body tattooing (*irezumi*) also occur in a shimmering radiance.

So although these are dark images, over all, they are also sparkling and oddly illuminate, reminding us of elements intersecting – water, light and the material body – and the sumptuousness of marine forms and reef-life, glimpsed in situ. One of the great pleasures of diving is to see the light patterning one's own body, to stretch out an arm and see it lined in fluctuating ropes of light, shifting as the body shifts, in a fleeting photography.

Ama

Among Hosokai's 30,000 extant prints are *shunga*, erotic images typified by fully clothed couples in the act of sexual congress, with their genitals gigantically oversized and pornographically visible. A special genre of *ukiyo-e*, much treasured by connoisseurs of erotic art, *shunga* include images of Ama, female abalone divers, clearly a source of fantasy for male Japanese artists. Depictions of Ama, often figured on the sea-shore or diving in pleated waves, include explicitly lesbian scenes (sometimes with dildos, such as sea-cucumbers), and all celebrate the ocean as a kind of female space. The most famous of Hosokai's *shunga* is that of an octopus performing cunnilingus on a prone Ama, her head thrown back and her eyes closed in luxurious exhaustion. It is an image directly quoted in one of Darbyshire's largest works and its translation is a homage to the mystery of this image; although bizarre it is not, curiously enough, utterly monstrous or repellent, but suggestive of the license and creativity of dream-work and fantasy. *Shunga*, though a male form, includes images of female pleasure, both in intercourse and self-pleasuring solitude, and these too form a set of physical references in the collection of *Floating Life*. Edo women, often sexually transported, are superimposed on the under-waterscapes.

The effect is to heighten the metaphoric connections between women's bodies and sea-life. Suddenly the labial crevices of the images become apparent, the convolulus shapes, the anatomical tendrils; there is a wonderful complication of the boundaries of bodies and sea-visions. In this context the use of abstract pink and orange shapes seems also sexualized: Jo Darbyshire is a truly brilliant colourist and these points of visual pause and captivation betoken the psychaesthetic confusion of bodies and surrounds and the collapse of inner and outer spaces. What is being attempted here is a suggestion of the eroticism of immersion; the sense that floatation in silken water, painted in glints of light, subject to powerful buoying and blooming and wave-like motion, is a model for both female sexual pleasure and general aesthetic experience. That the images are beautiful to behold – formally intelligent, wisely painterly and gloriously executed – confirms the intuition first announced by Sei Shonagon in her *Pillow Book* of 996 AD – that sensual pleasure consists in attention to “things that make the heart beat faster.”

Life/Death

When one dives or snorkels one enters an enwrathing paradox: there is a kind of pacific quietness to deep underwater, but also the rhythmic amplification of one's own breathing. So too there is a sense of emancipation, entering a space of caress, released from air-gravity and the impediments of the land, and also of transgression, danger and even death. We are seeing the kingdom of the drowned, as well as of sea-life; we are witnessing the lovely

and the creepy, the generative and the derelict. Non-euclidian maths deals with spaces that are curved and boundless, but actually not infinite: in underwater diving there is this sense too, of space made round and enwrapping, an altered physics of the body and the eye.

Jo Darbyshire is above all interested in the flamboyant excess of underwater life, its ardent suggestiveness, what might happen when one sees iridescence, amethyst and silver light cojoining, what hypersensitive states we might enter and enjoy. But the paintings of frozen lakes and glaciers, of icy landscapes and chilled skies, are also very beautiful. The Canadian lake images contain white shapes that seem vaguely menacing and sharp. Water gone hard is a symbol of arrested life and it is also water stratified, serrated, caught streaming by a seasonal seizure in time. The colours of the Banff images have no sexual tones but are seductive as death is – the call of quiet, of stillness of everything settled into final fixed shapes.

The virtuosity of Darbyshire's vision allows her to include these wonderful reversals of the warm sensuality of the Australian waters. Canadians like to compare our nations: here we are reminded that the relationship is a strange one, enchanted, and not simply a mirror. One thinks of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, in which every dive is into the self or towards cultural myth, or Adrienne Rich's poem, *Diving in the Wreck*, “I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail”; damage and treasures, the two possibilities of underwater.

In 1987 the Perth Rock band, *The Triffids*, produced an album called *Calenture*. There is no song by that name on the album, but it included one called Holy Water:

Blue girl in a summer dress in the greenhouse
Where she overslept dreaming of an ocean
Like a meadow, but wet,
Wet with holy water...

This is a casual, mischievous reference, but it suggests to me a thread of preoccupation (is it Western Australian?) with what submersion might mean, and why it might entrance us. There is a suggestion here too of sexual wetness and the ways in which the moment of entering under-water, seeing our own oxygen made visible in bluish bubbles, watching a vast and extraordinary world unfold, might be a fundamental encounter that reconnects vision and embodiment. The glorious suite of images of *Floating Life* recalls to us the sublimity of this particular connection.

Gail Jones is a fiction writer and Professor of Writing at the University of Western Sydney. Her publications include the novels *Black Mirror*, *Sixty Lights*, *Dreams of Speaking* and *Sorry*.

'... a suggestion of the eroticism of immersion; the sense that floatation in silken water, painted in glints of light, subject to powerful buoying and blooming and wave-like motion, is a model for both female sexual pleasure and general aesthetic experience.'





08

Biting #1 2008
oil on canvas
75cm x 75cm

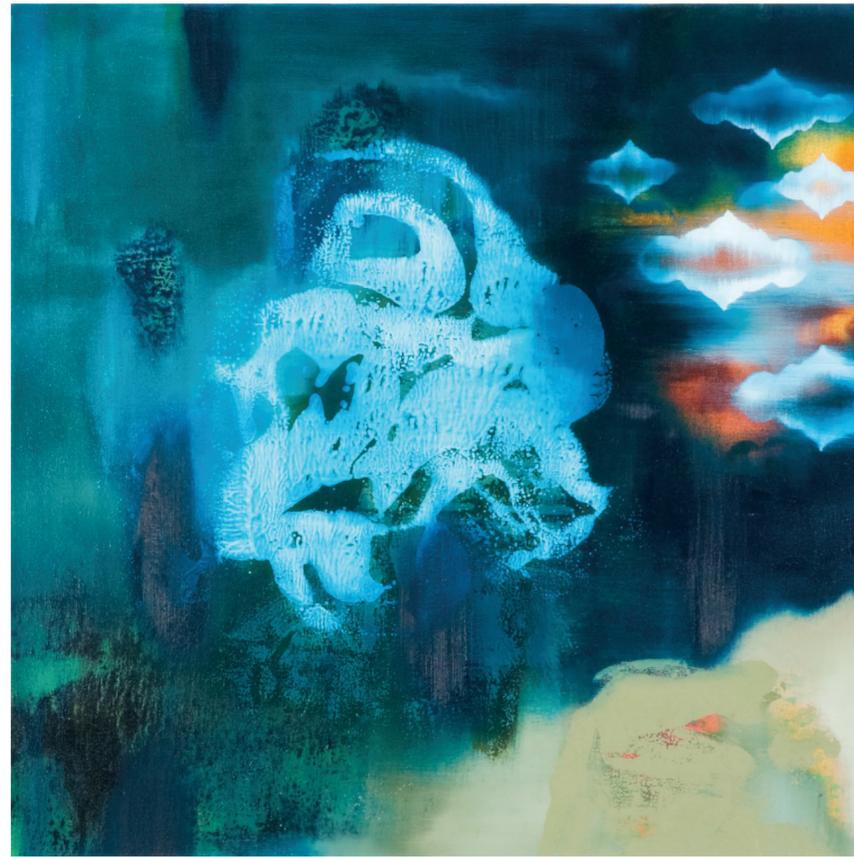


09

Biting #2 2008
oil on canvas
75cm x 75cm



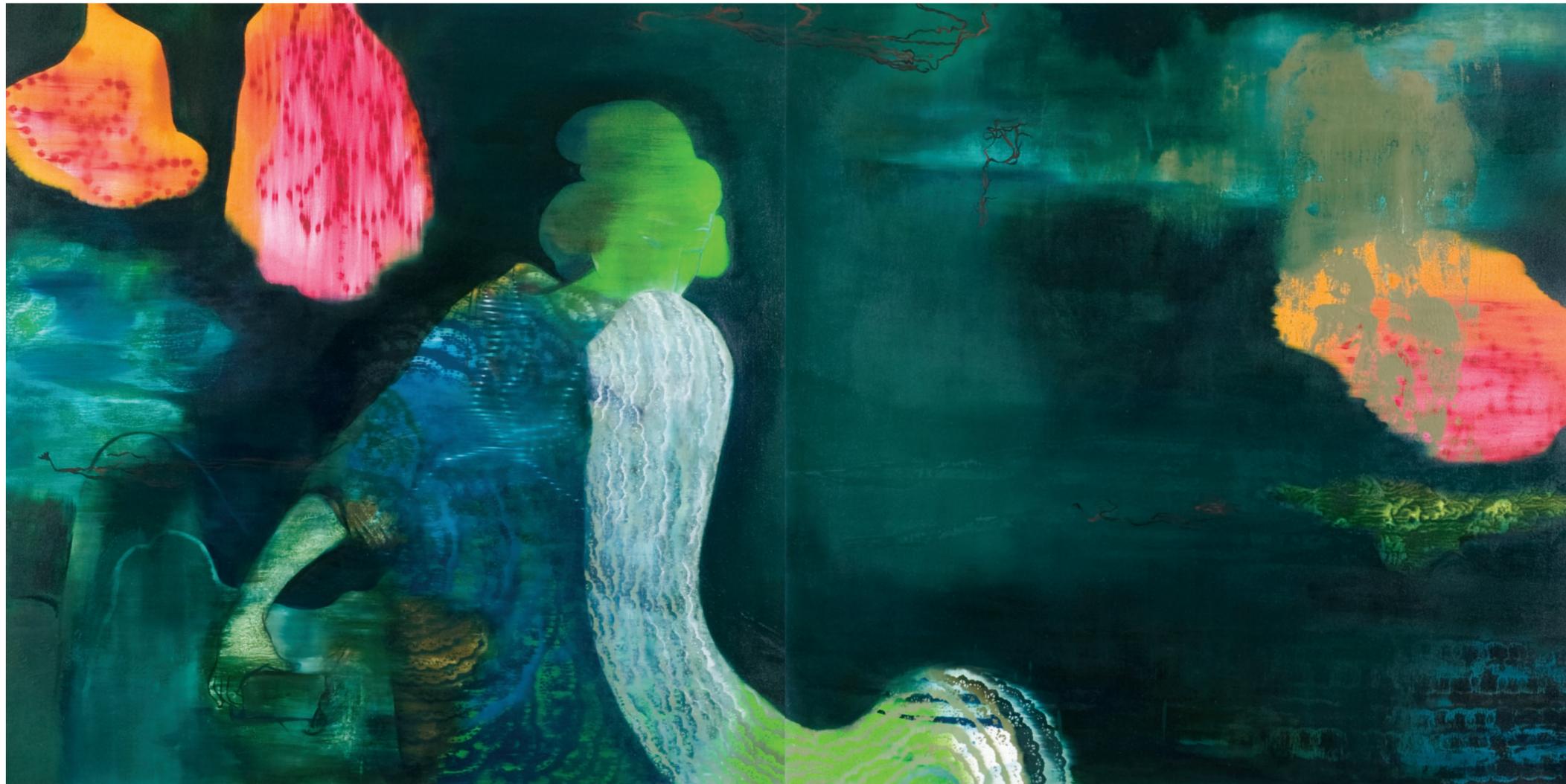
Siren #1 2008
oil on canvas
75cm x 75cm



Siren #2 2008
oil on canvas
75cm x 75cm









Small Black Seaweed #1 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm

Small Black Seaweed #2 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm

Small Black Seaweed #4 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm

Small Black Seaweed #7 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm

Small Black Seaweed #8 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm

Small Black Seaweed #10 2008
oil on canvas
30cm x 30cm



20

Shallows #1 2008
oil on canvas
90cm x 90cm



21

Shallows #2 2008
oil on canvas
90cm x 90cm

Helen Idle

Of an underwater flâneur

My sister tells me it is both impolite and dangerous to point at artworks. You could trip and scrape your finger straight over the surface, or even through the surface. She will slap my hand down if I instinctively raise my arm to do it, protective of art and family all.

With the *Floating World* paintings I can't point. Or is it that I can't point enough? Mainly I can't point because I am falling.

I need to hold my feet evenly, no bending or leaning, no pushing a finger towards the surface. I must hold fast to the clues of material world around me – an observing invigilator, the art-going conventions – to prevent me from swinging both arms far out behind, before rushing them past my side in chorus to form a clasped point, beginning a free dive. Straight in. To disappear into her layers of oily watery worlds. I will leave this material world and fall, impolitely, dangerously, into Jo Darbyshire's *Floating World*.

Why do we write about art? What possible contribution could artwriting make to the primary experience of looking, feeling and thinking? Here I will use writing as a technique for releasing meaning from the artworks. As a process for looking more closely, engaging with the details, participating in our joint project of learning to understand ourselves in the world. Think of it as a supplement or as an additive to enhance the transformative potential of the work.

Jo Darbyshire is inspired by the Indian Ocean, the natural phenomena of the Leeuwin current running along the coast of Western Australia, and the lakes in Canada. She is also inspired by the body and sensuality, how we experience and express this multilayered part of everyday life. *The Floating World* paintings invite us to think about our sensual experience provoked by, and yet not dependent upon, particular waterscapes. The paintings allow us to be immersed in another place and time, one that may be familiar, not from physically experiencing the particular environment, but because of a call to a deeper part of the self. If you allow it, they call you to fall into your metaphysical self, to be swept along by a drifting life-current. Layer upon layer of paint are used to create the sensations of a watery environment and to make space for observation and contemplation.

The layers in *the Floating World* paintings connect us with the layers of our existence, to our physical relationship with the landscapes we are immersed in or float over, and are custodians of. We are reminded of the capacity of our own bodies to connect, and to let go, and to experience our lives more deeply.

The additional layer of graphic lines on the saturated canvas can provide many levels of entry into a painting. Here our eyes can answer to the first sharp call of a surface seaweed graphic – like the white ones found in *Floating Mountain* or similarly a black piece floating into the top of *Shallows #2*. These keep me on the surface. Uncommitted, I could float past, as they are promising to do. The Indian Ocean pulls these seaweeds from its depths and carries them upwards on currents to firstly decorate the near surface and then to dry as lacy emblems on the shoreline. They are recalling the depth at the surface and perhaps we can observe them in the same way in these paintings. We become more aware of the depths through attending the surface.

A figure placed sideways onto the surface of *Floating Lady*, refers to a print by the Japanese printmaker Katsushika Hokusai (1760 – 1849) – an image of a huge carp with a smaller clothed figure passing in front of it. This figure has been placed sideways into a seascape. She is partially transparent, at once in the world and not of the world. We have a sense of her quietly passing by, a presence similar to the seaweed graphics. The floating lady's graphic interruption

into the abstract environment is softened by her transience and creates a slightly pensive aimlessness. She looks quite benign at first, but the spill and drip of paint that falls from under her breast over the lines and folds seem to be an aggressive interference by the artist. These marks ensure she cannot float out towards the viewer and hold her back to float into a spin down and down, or hover along in the direction she is going. As big as she is in the painting, there is a sense that she is small in this larger seascape, which goes on and on to infinity.

Shallows 1 & 2 tumble us into a layer below the surface where familiar splashes of light indicate a sandy watery world. The colour of that moment just before surfacing. After being swept to shore by a wave you've misjudged, arriving disorientated and bashful in the shallows. Glimpses of bright light through the water can reassure that you will come to the surface.

Memory

One day we kids were out looking for oysters on the reefs at Kalbarri, two brothers and two sisters from a wheatbelt town making holidays on the coast. We skirted the lagoon rimmed by sand on the inland side and a cragged protective barrier of reef to the ocean side.

We were jumping from rock to rock on the ocean side of the lagoon carrying a gidgee to spear any passing fish and a screwdriver to unhinge fresh oysters and pop then straight into our unsophisticated waiting mouths. We kinda weren't really supposed to be out this far, this far along the reef rim, but ... you know the furthest rocks were promising. Yes. Definitely oysters there. We followed behind one brother, in a line, placing one foot in front of the other on the sharp reef rocks, balancing the buckets and shoes in the other hand.

A roar from the ocean side announced an oncoming wave making its way over the reef into the lagoon. We turned to face it, lean into its power as we knew to do, allowing it to pass by before it would gather and pull back into itself. In those few moments as we waited for it to turn another rumble brought a second wave upon us. I could feel this one was stronger and deeper.

On the call of the third wave, with no evidence of the first two retreating and freeing us, we became quite frightened. Three in a row. We knew enough that these could be King Waves. We could get sucked out into the ocean.

Being one of the eldest I shouted to the others to drop their gear, to hold together and lean into this next wave.

But Dad'll kill me if I lose the gidgee!

It'll be him or this next wave!

He dropped it.

And so the third wave bore down upon us and with the most enormous unforgiving power stripped us from each others hands and tumbled us separately over and over the spiky bloody reef. Into the lagoon. The peaceful pale sandy blue water held us steady. The shallows.

I stood up in the water and looked around for the others. The brothers had landed not too far from me and were pushing themselves up limb by limb in the shallow water, to stand and look around. But my little sister was further away, and face down. I ran and ran towards her shouting her name in a panic.

As I got closer she turned slowly over to float on her back and said in a dreamy way – Oh, I was just looking into the peaceful shallows and imagining, what it would be like, to be dead...

We cannot ignore that these paintings are being created at a time when global warming and climate change are on the agenda of governments concerned about the future of the world's natural environments. The title on the painting *Gage Roads* refers to the Indian Ocean waters off the coast of Western Australian, where international ships lay at anchor awaiting pilot into the harbour of Fremantle. The ships are often collected in a straggle between Rottnest

Island on the horizon and the beach. The surrounding ocean dwarfs these giant symbols of supranational business but their presence turns the surface of the ocean into an industrial space.

The paintings take us underneath to the natural inhabitants of Gage Roads, the currents and seaweeds. The delicate lines and layered surfaces hint at the complexity of a natural world unseen from the industrial surface. Those familiar with Gage Roads have witnessed the tension between the surface use and the ocean in local debates, and through their own bodily experience of swimming in the shallows with the ships gathering on the horizon. Especially when one of those ships is a nuclear powered aircraft carrier from the USA.

Gage Roads 1 & 2 remind us of the rich, precious and somewhat inscrutable places beneath those ships, and call on a body memory of the days of floating above and through those same waters. On occasion, swimming along like an underwater flâneur, you may be interrupted by a piercing grinding sensation as the sound waves of a passing boat washes through your body.

The title *the Floating World* calls us to draw direct connections to ideas about water, and also to the ukiyo-e printmakers of Japan. In this body of work there are works which reference the artist's interest in the ukiyo-e school of Japanese woodblock printing, and the shunga or 'spring pictures' – commonly noted in Western translation as erotic pictures.

Permission

To research ukiyo-e and shunga I went to the British Library. In the rare books room I was permitted to view Tom and Mary Anne Evans' study of the shunga prints – Shunga: the Art of Love in Japan, under restriction. This meant I had to sit at one of six desks under the direct gaze of a librarian. No gloves required. The pink slip with the brown slipcased hardback signalled that it could not be left unattended so made me a little nervous at what I might see inside this book. Glancing up from up from my desk I noticed my retired neighbour, a doctoral candidate in musicology. Was he going to notice me and come over to whisper hello? To peep over my shoulder and see page after page of exaggerated penis and mons veneris illustrated at various angles, in unusual surroundings, in different styles of exposure. I glimpsed the very conflict these works bring out in a Western context. At times I had to stop myself from laughing out loud at what seemed to me illustrations of ridiculous 'antics' and acrobatics. And at others I was nervous the librarian might sense an air of arousal as I turned from one page to another, lingering curiously on some. As an occidental looking at oriental shunga I was aware of the tension created by the interaction of these very different visual cultural positions. I was performing the anxiety of looking at an easily identified and commonplace human pleasure in a citadel of the academy.

Octopus and Lady takes us beyond a literal reference to an image from Hokusai's album *Kinoe no komastu* to immerse us in an experience of the rapture, the pleasurable space where one is released from the materiality of the body into an internal otherworldly place.

The two octopuses we anticipate from Hokusai's image are largely occluded by the white light twinkling over the body but for a few clear drawn references to the tentacles. We are encouraged to lean in closely to the detail of the tense patterning, be transported by the ethereal translucent shape to the arched head being called away by emotion, by pleasure. Mouth slightly apart, white brush strokes pulling her chin back to her forehead, the hair falling back and laying out under the shoulder. A sense of abandon in a strange and familiar space. Embraced, held in water, drowning into a life force. One of the most familiar visual clues of woman's ecstatic abandonment is presented in lush layers of oil saturated into a canvas that explores pleasure in an intriguing and satisfying way.

Tom and Mary Anne Evans noted that:

'Despite the considerable amount that has been written about this work, all attempts to interpret and elucidate it ends up by revealing more about the writer than about the original work.'



Katsushika Hokusai, Japan, 1814, woodblock print from the book *Kinoe no komastu*, 1814, British Museum Collection. Ok+, 0.109, AN234034

Jo Darbyshire's 're-writing' of the Hokusai print reveals her own concerns with landscape, the body, immersion and pleasure, and also points to something that may be overlooked when interpreting the original. *Octopus and Lady* opens up ways of seeing and thinking and talking about women's pleasure and sensuality. Yes, looking closely, pointing in fact, at these *Floating World* paintings can be an impolite and dangerous activity.

Selected References

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Evans, Tom and Mary Anne. *Shunga: The Art of Love in Japan*, Paddington Press, 1975 p256

Lenehan-White, Anne. *Shunga and Ukiyo-e: Spring Pictures and Pictures of the Floating World* http://www.stolaf.edu/people/kucera/YoshidaWebsite/evolution/essay_pages/anne_lenehan_white.htm (accessed 11 January 2009)

Inside the Floating World: Japanese prints from the Lenoir C. Wright Collection catalogue for exhibition at Weatherspoon Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, curated by Allen Hockley 2002

Helen Idle is a London based writer. She is an independent visual culture and communications consultant, recently working with Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts), and Moët et Chandon. She completed a MA Visual Culture, Awarded with Distinction, in 2005 from the University of Westminster, London and is currently a PhD candidate at Kings College London researching the display and reception of Australian Aboriginal Art in Western Europe.



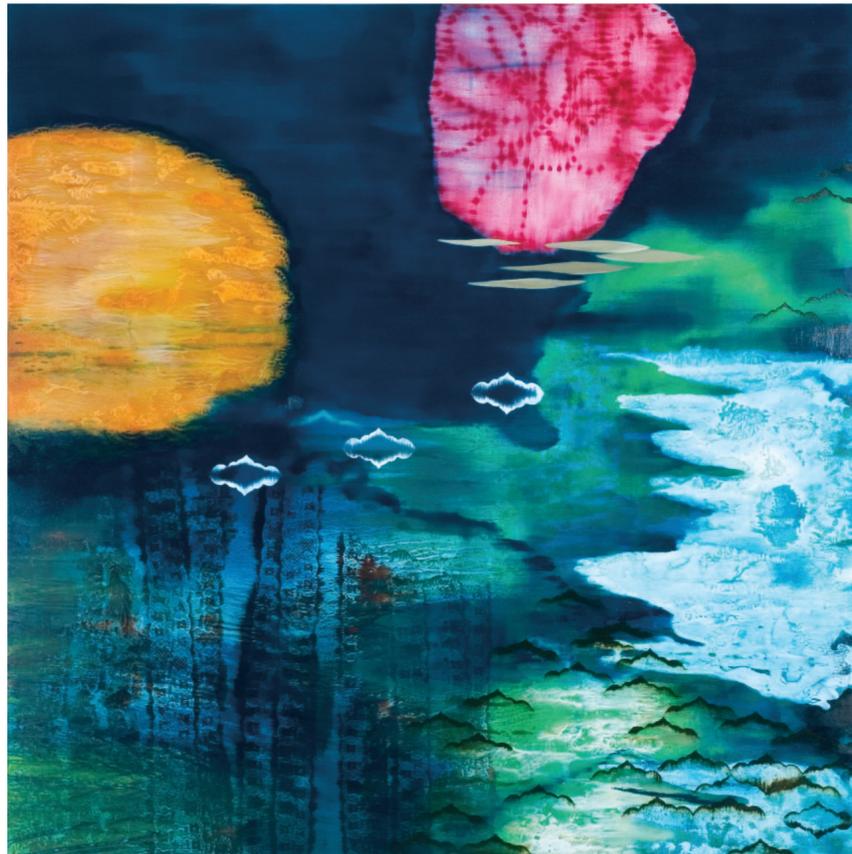
26

Floating Mountain 2008
oil on canvas
152cm x 101cm



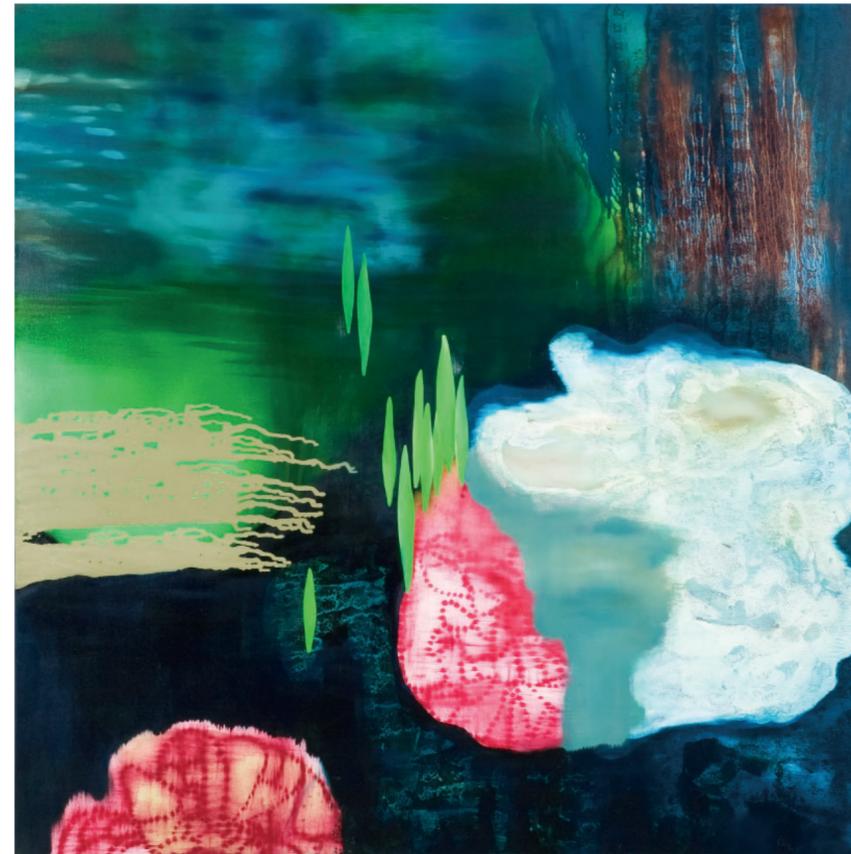
27

Castles Down There 2008
oil on canvas
152cm x 101cm



28

**Leeuin Current #1,
Rottnest Island 2008**
oil on canvas
180cm x 180cm



29

**Leeuin Current #2,
Rottnest Island 2008**
oil on canvas
180cm x 180cm



30

Moraine Lake #2 2008
oil on canvas
90cm x 90cm



31

Johnson Lake 2008
oil on canvas
90cm x 90cm

Imaginary World #3 2008
oil on canvas
36cm x 28cm oval



Biography | **Jo Darbyshire**

Born 1961, Perth, Western Australia

Education

- 2004 Master of Creative Arts in Cultural Heritage, Curtin University, Western Australia
- 1991 Post-Graduate Diploma of Art, Canberra School of Art, Australian Capital Territory
- 1981 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Curtin University, Western Australia

Recent Solo exhibitions

- 2009 *The Floating World*, Johnston Gallery, Perth WA and Summit Fine Art Gallery, Calgary Canada
- 2007 *Sapphire Paintings*, SPAN Galleries, Melbourne Victoria
- 2005 *Ghost River Paintings*, Gallery East, North Fremantle WA and SPAN Galleries, Melbourne Victoria
- 2003 *The Gay Museum*, while artist in residence at the WA Museum

Selected Group exhibitions

- 2008 Finalist in the *Fleurieu Biennale*, South Australia, the *ABN AMRO Emerging Artist Award*, Sydney NSW and the *Inaugural City of Albany Art Prize*, WA.
- 2001 *Wide Open-space and Belonging in Modern Australia*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of UWA, Perth WA
- 2000 *Haynes to O'Connor, Western Australians & Water*, John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University Perth WA
- 2000 *Imaging: Art of the Twentieth Century*, Art Gallery of Western Australia

Awards

- 2009 Mid-Career Fellowship Grant, West Australian Department for Culture and the Arts
- 2007 International residency *Imaginary Places* at the Banff Centre for the Arts Canada, Australia Council Skills and Arts Development Grant.
- 2006 Artwork featured in Artbank's 2006 Calender
- 2005 Winner of the BankWest Contemporary Art Prize, Perth WA
- 2004 New Work Grant, Australia Council
- New Work Grant, West Australian Department for Culture and the Arts
- 1993 Artist Studio, Cite Internationale des Artes, Paris; Australia Council

Selected Curatorial projects

- 2003 *The Gay Museum*, WA Museum, Perth WA
- 2005 *Until There's a Cure, 20 Years of the WA AIDS Council*, Perth Town Hall WA
- 2008 *Perth City Council 1939-1945*, Perth Town Hall WA

For more details please visit www.jodarbyshire.com