

## **Of an Underwater Flâneur**

### **Helen Idle**

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 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 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.'

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

Clark, Timothy with Anne Nishimura Morse, Louise E. Virgin, and Allen Hockley. *The Dawn of the Floating World 1650-1765 Early Ukiyo-e Treasures from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston*, Royal Academy of Arts, London 2001

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](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.