

MATTHEWS*: SENTIMENT AND JEWELLERY

Michele Beevors

"On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spiti."¹

Formless turns itself inside out, it's a moebius strip looping with crazy logic that artists seem to understand. Instinctively Leslie Matthews knows this. Her work invokes formlessness, timelessness and the loopholes of language through precision and materialises the obliteration of labour. One can only invoke formlessness, never pin it down. George Bataille² describes it as an adjective, one which gets squashed everywhere; it exists to describe metaphorically something that can't be described. Meaning is always elsewhere.

Leslie Matthews's work maps cartographically every nuance of surface. The small fragment becomes a whole world. Every anomaly of surface is smoothed over, edges rounded. Every trace of the artist's hand is obliterated by the artist's own labour.

Often when an artist leaves home it is to gain perspective on the place vacated; more important it seems, than seeing somewhere new. Leslie Matthews's work evokes a particular feeling I have about Australia, the Australian desert, a place I have never been to. *The Dead Heart* of the Midnight Oil song, a place dry, eroded and barren. A place filtered through images of cattle carcasses, bleached and crumbling, and the cracked earth, caked dry, damaged riverbeds, and the sun constantly blazing. A place of bushfires that filled summer nights with asthma wheeze, of singlets and beer; truck drivers who smelled of the thousand sheep pellets they were carting from who knows where to who knows where; of Anzac Day and the coloured medals of grandfathers past. HOME. Real and imagined, this is as close as one gets to national sentimentality and it is only distance that allows for any kind of sentiment, as 'there' you are too immersed in global hegemony to notice. It is only since leaving that I am able to declare, "I am Australian."

It's weird to think about Nationalism, because I have always thought that the television raised me, nourished, impoverished and fertilised me. Maybe Matthews's brooches in black and silver; polished and matt surfaces remind me of that flicker, of the TV screen, in black and white, of watching the parade through the black and white haze of *Graham the King*. Or maybe her brooches *do* remind

Leslie Matthews, *Untitled*, 2005,
etching on paper, image to be used
for future jewellery piece, approx.
35 x 45 cm (courtesy of the artist).



me of Anzac Day and the medals. Gone, all gone. Sentiment, tears, Australianness. What was given, the working class, for what was gained.

The idea of sentiment and jewellery is not necessarily new. *The Antiques Roadshow* is a fantastic television programme. The participants in some quaint English village line up with their most precious possessions to be appraised; they fall into one of two categories. They show me the money brigade (they think *The Price is Right*) or the sentimental fool who has inherited the object of affection from uncle/aunty so and so and who would not part with it for all the money in all of the world. The 'Price is Righters' are largely uninteresting, except when their objects are undervalued and their disappointment registers all over their faces. The sentimental fool is diametrically opposed to this kind of behaviour, because they know in their heart of hearts that this object – this tea pot, this brooch – connects them to the world in a real and particular way. It ties them to their birth, to the law of the Father and to their heritage as Englishmen and -women.

In an essay called "Subjective Discourse of the Non-Functional System of Objects", Jean Baudrillard³ sets about identifying according to use (or functionality) two distinct sets of objects which circulate within modern Western culture. The first is the capitalist mode, a world where objects are accumulated according to their usefulness; and opposed to this mode is the mode of useless objects, the bygone object, the kitsch or folk object, the gadget – who really needs an electric garlic press? Art could be added in this category, and on the Roadshow, often is. But with one difference, Art is not functional in terms of needs but is jumbled in together with teapots, dolls and trinkets then ordered in terms of scarcity.

Like all of the objects on the *Antiques Roadshow*, progress has left these objects behind, forgotten them, discarded them, tarnished their surfaces, chipped their edges. All that remains is their tenuous link to the past; to works in a series; to the labour that went into their making; to the very important

marks made by the maker; to the stamps of industry which equate to value; and to date. Value and authenticity rely on these marks. Value is accrued according to the celebrity status of the maker. These objects are the once useful, now forgotten, momentarily remembered, then slipped back into a drawer for another quarter of a century, until it's someone else's turn to worry about them, and to make the decision: to sell or not to sell.

This extra special thing, this piece of jewellery, this fragment of work – evidence of hands polishing and forming a piece of metal to look like a fragment of bone – remains. All of this meaning emanates from a small brooch. The surface is plain, there are no detailed engravings, it is all form, but within this simple form lies a gamut of emotional intensity moving between the artist and the viewer. The viewer often overlooks this, and forgets the artist's drive to obliterate her own trace – like those bones, in that desert, empty only of life, but not of time. The crafts know this the way that the arts don't: the maker's hand becomes timeless when not overshadowed by the relatively recent cult of celebrity attached to mega-stardom on the circuit of contemporary art.

Matthews's employment of simple natural forms also hides this intensity and complexity through a small metal brooch that can evoke the desert, nationalism, and the systems we live with but take for granted everyday. *Waves of My Brother Jack*⁴ cause nausea and sentimentality floods the land, for this desert, this Australia, is not the desert of our childhoods, or the desert of our fancies. It is now the desert of the Woomera detention camp. Nationalism is not as it was when George Johnston wrote it in the fifties. Australia is much altered. It is hard to forgive successive liberal governments for the rampant greed you see palpable on the streets of Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide. In this political climate, the waves of Aussie larrikinism, of generosity and happy times are tainted. It will never be the same.

* Adelaide-based Leslie Matthews worked at the School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand as artist-in-residence from February to April, 2005. Her residency was supported by Creative New Zealand and the Otago Polytechnic Education Foundation.

- 1 See Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).
- 2 See Georges Bataille, *Formless*, reprinted in Krauss & Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide*.
- 3 See Jean Baudrillard, "Subjective Discourse of the Non-Functional System of Objects", in *Revenge of the Crystal* (London: Pluto, 1993).
- 4 See George Johnston, *My Brother Jack* (London & Sydney: Collins, 1964).

Michele Beevors trained on postgraduate level at the Australian National University in Canberra and at Columbia University in New York. A sculptor who exhibits widely in Australia and New Zealand, she is a senior lecturer and head of Sculpture at Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin.