



Philip HUNTER, *Seabed – Inland*, 2007, oil on linen, 122 x 213 cm, private collection, courtesy Tim Olsen Gallery, Sydney

The Nature of Things: thoughts on organic abstraction, beauty and immanence

Essay by **Margot Osborne**, guest curator of the *Abstract Nature* exhibition for the Samstag Museum

It seems an understatement, however biologically correct, to describe humans as animals, just as it is hubris to see ourselves as gods or as a superior life-form to which the rules of nature do not apply. Humanity's self-image in the Western world has oscillated between these extremes in response to surges of new scientific knowledge or philosophical shifts in world views. It is a paradox that our sentience — our cerebral capacity to recognise our own animal mortality and, hence, our connection with the whole biological universe — is inextricably connected with our momentary perception of the wonder and beauty of being alive in the world. At these times we feel closest to glimpsing an immanent beauty and meaning that was once seen as divine but in the 21st century of secular and scientific knowledge may be simply the nature of things. Such fleeting moments of sentience often occur in the midst of nature, or when looking at art.

In the last decades of the 20th century it seemed that many contemporary artists either lost interest in investigating a connection to the natural universe as the well-spring for their art or could not find a fresh contemporary artistic language to embody that connection. The formal language of art as a source of affirmation, of bearing witness, and of veneration is inevitably going to be very different to the language of art as a source of provocation, shock, alienation, and subversion of the status quo.

Sometimes the momentum of art movements slows through entropy, lacking new information to re-energise it. Then there is a pause — a lacuna. Quite possibly, the past decade has witnessed this slowing-down as the old art tactics of the 20th century have worn out their shock value. In Australia, this pause has been marked by a small and barely noticeable gravitation towards reconnecting with the natural world as the subject for art. In part, this can be attributed to attention being newly directed to artists who have been probing their relationship with nature, landscape and biology over many years, often away from the white heat at the epicentre of contemporary art.

Several disparate threads have interwoven to stimulate this renewed interest in the connection between the human psyche and the natural world. Aboriginal art has played a powerful part in opening the eyes of non-Indigenous Australian artists to the use of the abstract organic language of paint to bear testament to this connection. The impact of Aboriginal art has been disseminated to other artists in many tangential and subtle ways rather than by direct imitation or appropriation. It may be viewed as a fresh stimulus so desperately needed to breathe new life into both painting and contemporary art in general.

Fresh stimulus is coming also from the various branches of science and the social sciences, in particular from the fields of evolutionary biology, neurology, linguistics and anthropology. From the convergence of this cross-disciplinary knowledge an ever-more complete picture of human nature is emerging. Philosopher Denis Dutton has presented the evidence for a bio-aesthetic position in his book *The Art Instinct*.¹ He argues that the instinctive dimension of our response to nature and to art was formed in the Pleistocene era and is a universal attribute of human nature. This instinctual hard-wired response, however, is just one layer of the way we respond to landscape. Primal instincts are overlaid with so much cultural and individual memory; our encounter with nature is mediated by our cultural understanding and lived experiences:

*...the field of natural languages resembles the field of art considered cross-culturally: both exhibit an interplay between, on the one hand, deep, innate structures and mechanisms of intellectual and emotional life and, on the other hand, a vast ocean of historically contingent cultural material — the styles, vocabularies, and idiosyncrasies that give both language use and art their individual cultural and personal meanings. No philosophy of art can succeed if it ignores either art's natural sources or its cultural value.*²

Scientific methodology coupled with the harnessing of new technology may take us closer and closer to an understanding of how the mind works, but creative embodiment of the complex relationship between instinct, intellect and emotion that feeds a sense of connection with the natural environment is the domain of artists. This experiential state, this sentient connection between self and nature is the source of the works of art in *Abstract Nature*.

Beauty has the power to unleash that complex mix of emotional responses to nature, landscape and art. In his essay 'The Aesthetics of Art and Nature', Arnold Berleant argues that moments of apprehension of beauty in nature are not disinterested, as Kant has claimed. In comparing a sense of immersion in natural beauty with the state of engagement with an art object, he states:

...the aesthetic mark of all such times is not disinterested contemplation but total engagement, a sensory immersion in the natural world that reaches the still uncommon experience of unity...

*Such appreciation requires a radically different aesthetic from 18th century disinterestedness. I call this an aesthetics of engagement, and it is one that environmental appreciation especially encourages...transcendent no longer, we still retain the quality of numinousness in the sense of immanence we sometimes obtain in nature and art. And this is the fulfillment of artistic engagement.*³

Abstract Nature includes artworks in a wide range of media by twenty notable Australian artists who employ various permutations of organic abstraction as an artistic language to embody a connection between self and the wider biological universe. This abstraction is grounded in forms, patterns and textures found within nature at both the micro and macro level. Rather than being geometric or purely non-representational, it remains partially tethered to the representation of things in the natural world, whether seen or unseen.

Within the works selected for *Abstract Nature* affinities become apparent in approaches to form, mark-making and use of materials. These affinities may involve the manipulation of found natural materials or intuitive responses to tones, textures, patterns and structures in the natural world. Layered glaze and paint tones, overlaid with organic linear marks, evoke an intermeshed landscape and mindscape. Abstracted features of plants and landforms hover between abstraction and representation, signifying the permeable separation between an invisible, abstract inner life and the tangible physical environment.

Many works are suffused with a discernable sense of place. They reflect the artists' deep responses not merely to the natural world in general but to those specific places in the Australian environment that are, for them, imbued with beauty, meaning and spiritual sustenance. In her influential book on sense of place, *The Lure of the Local* (1997), Lucy Lippard argued for a personal relationship with place, defining landscape as the external world mediated through human subjective experience:

*The intersection of nature, culture, history and ideology forms the ground, on which we stand — our land, our place, the local. The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies.*⁴

In the artworks in *Abstract Nature* this relationship takes the form of abstract embodiment of an immersive response to landscape, rather than representation. A deep sense of connection to particular, intimately known landscapes permeates GW Bot's organic calligraphy. Below an organic surface order there are other transfigured realities where nothing is fixed or static and where there is space for the meditative, the metaphysical and the spiritual. Similarly, Philip Hunter's paintings from his *Lines In The Dirt* series are partially abstract yet geographically accurate meditations on the complex resonance of the Wimmera as a site of personal and cultural memory.

Tim Burns' richly layered paintings encapsulate a sense of place grounded in Tasmania's wilderness and infused with more universal allusions to harmony, balance and beauty. Jenny Sages' luminous abstract paintings in encaustic and mixed media, based on many years of trekking in the outback, convey a fusion of inner life with an intimate experience of the minutiae of the natural Australian landscape. Through her pigmented markings in the translucent encaustic she creates a subtle textural palimpsest that is imbued with a rhythmic meditative aura.

Ceramicist Pippin Drysdale has stated, "I see in an abstract way so I can't really draw the landscape; I draw emotion and feeling from the landscape".⁵ The fine meandering linear engravings, warm earth tones and undulating rounded forms of Drysdale's ceramic installations are an abstract echo of the tones, textures and contours of the Kimberley and Tanami Desert.

Silversmith Julie Blyfield was initially inspired to make her *Pressed Desert Plants* and *Paris Collection* series after encountering an old album of pressed desert plants in the archives of the South Australian Museum. She draws inspiration from the arid landscape of South Australia and has developed her delicate silver forms in *Abstract Nature* from plants collected on field trips both to the Simpson Desert and to the ravaged landscape of Kangaroo Island after the 2007 bushfire.

The dissolving cellular patterns in Giles Bettison's murrine glass are rich in allusions to the stony landscape of the Gibber Plain on the one hand and to the semi-arid croplands of the mid-north of South Australia on the other. They may be viewed simply as wondrously complex abstractions or as aerial vistas of the arid landscape as the artist, in his mind's eye, moves from far above to close up, from cosmos to microcosm.

In the collaborative ceramic works by Robin Best and Anangu artist Nyukana Baker, the organic designs are abstractions of aspects of Baker's material culture, its lore and its narratives. The mesmerising woven patterns of Regina Wilson's paintings may be viewed both as an evocation of the Indigenous material culture of weaving mats and fish nets in the Northern Territory's Daly River region and an abstract embodiment of her inherited knowledge of customs and practices.



Catherine TRUMAN, *Ongoing Being* (detail), 2010, mixed media, 80 x 204 x 83 cm, courtesy the artist

One of the sources of inspiration for several of *Abstract Nature's* artists comes not from within the recent history of art itself but from early scientific representations of organic forms. Ceramicist Angela Valamanesh has researched pioneering illustrations of microscopic life as the basis for her *Natural Histories* series of ceramic relief sculptures. Her biomorphic forms hover between abstraction and the representation of an invisible microbiological world. Catherine Truman's carvings are informed by her research into the history of anatomical illustration. Her tactile tableau of organic objects, *Ongoing Being*, includes natural and man-made found objects as well as forms created by the artist. This work intrigues the eye through subtle shifts from natural to artificial form, overlaid with anatomical allusions.



Jessica LOUGHLIN, *an ever changing constant III*, 2010, each panel 81 x 111.5 x 4.5 cm, kiln formed glass, courtesy the artist

Shona Wilson's sculptures and miniature assemblages of diatoms pay homage to 19th century biologist and artist Ernst Haeckel, who, in his lavishly illustrated publication *Art Forms in Nature* (1899), was the first to use the term 'ecology'. Her arrangements of delicate natural materials are imbued with allusions to the fragility of nature and to the beauty of immanent patterns in the biological universe.

In contrast, Julie Ryder works with advanced electron microscope scanning as the basis for her digital montages, printed on silk. She samples microbiological forms and juxtaposes these to create artificial landscapes imbued with a weird, exotic beauty. Leslie Matthews works from wax castings of fish and marsupial bones to create her intimate silver forms. Through her wondrous arrangements of individual components she creates intricate miniature sculptures which seamlessly blend beauty drawn from nature and beauty of artistic form.

As the 21st century enters a phase where the Earth's ecological balance is threatened by humanity's short-term economic imperatives, there is an increased poignancy to our sense of connection with the natural landscape. The imminence of loss casts a shadow over the pleasures and deeper spiritual sustenance we derive from the natural world. The fragile encrusted surface of Catherine Woo's alchemical, multi-panel work contains poetic allusions to the evaporating salt lakes of the interior as tears of sorrow for the land. Other artists have been inspired by the metaphysical dimension of the dry salt lakes and by the memories of a long-vanished inland sea. Hunter's monumental painting *Salt Creep With Fence No. 2* is suffused with a bleak, elegiac beauty. The rhythmic linear movements and overlaid translucent tones exert a powerful, immanent presence. Richard Woldendorp's aerial photography captures the evaporative patterns of salt lakes and of tributaries meandering in organic patterns through the arid landscape as abstract compositions. Jessica Loughlin's abstract glass panels evoke a fusion of the landscape and mindscape. In her new work, *an ever changing constant*, evaporative patterns of powdered white glass leave vaporous trails across translucent grey.

Pattern recognition is a feature of buwayak, or 'invisibility', in recent bark painting by Yolngu artists Wanyubi Marika and Djambawa Marawili. Buwayak is a tendency towards greater abstraction and away from figuration, with the sacred secret screened from the uninitiated gaze by complex abstract *rrark* patterns of cross-hatching. The turbulent abstract energy of their bark paintings bears testimony to the spiritual significance of their territorial waters bounding Yirrkala in the far north-east corner of the coast of Arnhem Land. Will Stubbs has written that:

...in some Yolngu songs this state of water is equated with the ecstatic peace achieved when justice is wrought between disputants through law. At the moment of resolution this liquid Peace spills through the universe rendering it Heavenly. Yolngu words for law can also mean 'secret' or 'beautiful'.⁶

Pattern recognition and beauty... Immanent meaning and abstraction... The invisible within the visible... These core ideas permeate *Abstract Nature* in the works of Indigenous and other Australian artists. In the much-quoted words of EM Forster, "only connect".

Philosopher John Armstrong was expressing a similar sentiment from a European perspective when he wrote:

*The experience of beauty, we may then say, consists in finding a spiritual value (truth, happiness, moral ideals) at home in a material setting (rhythm, line, shape, structure), and in such a way that, when we contemplate the object, the two seem inseparable.*⁷

Embodiment — the synthesis of sensibility, skill and material form — is at the heart of beauty. The artists in *Abstract Nature* share an approach to making art that is based on the long practice of gradually acquired skills, fused with a sense of the interpenetration of material and immaterial dimensions in art. This distillation of mature vision and understanding of their medium imbues their art with a luminosity and resonance.

In the 21st century beauty continues to exert its pull despite every simplistic attempt to dismiss it as trivial, decorative, elitist or ‘in the eye of the beholder’. In the spirit of Forster, I wrote for an earlier curatorial project, *The Return of Beauty* (2000):

*Perhaps the answer to the eternal conundrum of whether beauty is in the mind or in the object perceived is that it is in both — that immanent principles of order and genetic memory are to be found both in nature observed and in the mind, and that a certain beauty resides in art which evokes a sense of the connectedness between the two.*⁸

Margot Osborne

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Endnotes

- 1 Dutton, D, *The Art Instinct*, Oxford University Press, 2009
- 2 Dutton, p 31
- 3 Berleant, A, ‘The Aesthetics of Art and Nature’, in Kemal, S and Gaskell, I (eds), *Landscape, natural beauty and the arts*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp 237–240
- 4 Lippard, Lucy R, *The Lure of the Local, Sense of Place in a Multicentred Society*, The New Press, 1997, p 7
- 5 Bromfield, D, ‘Tanami Desert Traces’, in Snell, T, *Pippin Drysdale: Lines of Site*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2007, p 130
- 6 Stubbs, W, ‘The Meaning of Buwayak’, in *Buwayak Invisibility*, Annandale Galleries (in association with Buku-Larrngay Mulka), 2003, p 11
- 7 Armstrong, J, *The Secret Power of Beauty*, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 2004, p 163
- 8 Osborne, M, ‘A Certain Beauty’, *The Return of Beauty*, JamFactory Contemporary Craft and Design, Adelaide, 2000, p 7