

## Leslie Matthews: contemporary jeweller and object maker

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Leslie Matthews has always been drawn to and fascinated by visual art. As a child and teenager she spent a lot of time drawing. 'My passion for art and my interest in skeletal, anatomical and scientific connections, and possibly for making "small things" is partly a result of seeing and experiencing my father work', explains Matthews. 'But, more importantly, my grandparents had a great love of art. They collected as much as they could during their lives and encouraged my passion throughout my childhood.'

Matthews was born in 1964 in Puerto Rico, where her father worked as an entomologist. The family emigrated to Australia a few years later and, in 1970, settled permanently in South Australia, after her father took up a research position at the South Australian Museum. As Leslie grew older, her grandparents simply assumed that she would continue on to art school. This she did, graduating in 1985 with a Bachelor of Design in Jewellery and Metalsmithing from the School of Design at the University of South Australia, and later, in 2006, with a Master of Visual Arts from the same institution. She has come full circle and since 2007 has been Studio Head of Jewellery and Metal at the South Australian School of Art.



The starting point for Matthews's marvellous jewellery and objects is almost always the human body. Its contours and its structural elements, including bones, have a sometimes perceptible influence on her *oeuvre*, but more often it exists at a subliminal level. Equally intrigued by what she describes as the body's 'gaps'—those hollow spaces or cavities within bodies such as the

interior of the skull, the space beneath the pelvic ridge and the eye sockets—Matthews also references these in her work. The concept of corporeal lacunae also influences Matthews's predominantly small-scale sterling silver and bronze jewellery, mostly brooches and neckpieces, to which she brings highly skilled fabrication, metalsmithing and lost wax casting techniques. Occasionally she works with felt, creating abstract, sculptural works on a larger scale than her jewellery. The fetching floppiness of the fabric animates these felt works, imbuing them with the breath of life. The objects that she creates using this ancient fabric stand in fascinating contrast with the works that she crafts from precious metal: the numinous presence of Matthews's sterling silver jewellery represents the flipside of the humble everydayness of her felt sculptures. Matthews's fascination with the interior structure of the body extends beyond the human. She is a collector of small animal and avian bones, and has made a number of beautiful sterling silver works indirectly evoking tiny, fragile bones. Included among these are several examples of very fine sterling silver works shaped to resemble small scapulae. She has also created gorgeous bronze scapular objects, as in her 2006 work, *Scapula Vessels*, comprising an interconnected series of small scapula-like elements.

Drawing on the body as her primary source of inspiration, sub-themes of Matthews's work relate to narrative, personal and familial memory, as well as cultural dislocation and a sense of being 'out of place'. No doubt her family's history of migration from one exotic place in the world to a distant, unknown land has had some bearing on these continuing artistic preoccupations. While Matthews does not cite flora as a specific influence, many of her small silver and bronze works resemble tiny clusters of flower petals, sometimes inwardly turned, sometimes open. An example is her delicate, lustrous, black patinated sterling silver *Vessel*, which she displayed in her 2005 exhibition, *When it comes, the landscape listens, the shadows hold their breath*. That exhibition's title comes from a poem by Emily Dickinson, whose works have had a particular influence on Matthews' work over the years. She has named several exhibitions after Dickinson poems and indeed, her artworks embody a poetic sensibility akin to that of Dickinson's, in which fragility and robustness co-exist. Matthews's unexpected visual juxtapositions, choice of idiosyncratic artistic imagery, and her unique visual 'vocabulary' evince certain other affinities with the 19th century American poet.

Another consistent and significant influence on Leslie Matthews's work has been her long-term association with the Gray Street Workshop, Jewellery and Objects Cooperative, in which she was a partner from 1986 until March this year. Over the years she has, on many occasions, exhibited her work there, as well as in other local, national and international venues. Matthews has also ventured, on a number of occasions, into the field of public art and has undertaken several architectural commissions.

In her 2009 jewellery exhibition, *Than oars divide the ocean too silver for a seam* (another Dickinson poem title) Matthews introduced kaolin clay and sterling silver to striking effect. It was by sheer happenstance that she stumbled upon the idea that informs these lovely works: *'A few years ago I walked into an antique collector's shop in Amsterdam and found a beautiful collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century Dutch clay pipe bowls simply gathered together in a dish near the counter. I was drawn to these small delicate forms. Each resembled fragile bones or avian eggshells lightly placed in a nest. The weathered surface of the clay, having absorbed the colours of earth where it lay, gave each a burnished painterly finish. Referencing these clay bowls the*

*sterling silver forms were created, each inspired to complement the other. The surface of the sterling silver has been lightly embossed with Japanese rice paper. This fragile impression hints at the tenuous, protective layers of our bodies. This series is a continuation of my interest in creating work that embodies an emotional response, a trace of the body, a memory.'*



Matthews' most recent jewellery exhibition, *By Example, Contemporary Australian Jewellery*, is currently showing at the Museum of Arts & Crafts—ITAMI, in Hyogo, Japan. To this she has contributed more clay and silver work. This exhibition represents a new departure for Matthews in another respect too, insofar as it is premised upon mentoring others. Matthews has acted as a mentor for two promising younger Australian jewellers, Kath Inglis and Sally Mahony, whose works appear in the same exhibition.

Today, this prominent mid-career artist's work can be found in the collections of The Art Gallery of South Australia and the National Gallery, and in other prestigious public and private collections. Leslie Matthews's distinctive objects and exquisite jewellery show that this quietly spoken, unassuming artist has the potential to become a national treasure.

Christine Nicholls, 2010