

Shadows hold their breath

Catalogue essay by Margot Osborne for the exhibition 'Signs Taken for Wonders, Gray Street Workshop Celebrates 20 Years' 2005

Leslie Matthews has found the source for her graceful abstract vessels and body ornaments in the delicate organic sculpture of bones. Over many years she has built up a collection of bones from small creatures to provide the basis for her research into sculptural forms that are translated first into wax models and then into silver. The fragile beauty of bones, their miniature sculptural detailing, has been an enduring source of fascination for Matthews as a metaphor for the body, its strength and fragility. She has distilled this fascination into refined organic shapes, whose nebulous beauty is tinged with a whisper of mortality.

In developing her current body of work Matthews has written:

I am constantly drawn to studying the forms of the body in the development of my work. Within my own practice the concentration of imagery has been focused on the physical body, exploring the skeletal structure and outer layers. There has been a concern with expressing the strength and vulnerability of the body, and the power it holds through its sensuality.

In her earlier jewellery allusions to female anatomy, and to the pelvic bone in particular, were more explicit. In her recent work Matthews has refined the fluid abstraction of her forms and attained new levels of accomplishment as a silversmith. Allusions to the body have become more subtly ambiguous, and imbued with an amplified poetic resonance.



The abstract contours of the scapula of a small animal are transmuted into the cast silver folds of a cup, where Matthews has allowed the enveloping folds to find their position. These bone vessels are elegant deceptions, suggesting a sense of lightness that belies the real weight of solid silver from which they are fabricated. When held there is a tactility in the weight and

contoured forms that opens up new experiential dimensions. There are allusions to flower petals in the way the vessels enfold space, some partly closed while others are open. These vessels declare a poetic rather than utilitarian status, as containers of the spirit rather than of substances.

The gentle undulations, soft curves and fluidity of Leslie Matthews' range of body ornaments both evoke and respond to the contours and textures of the body. Sheet silver has been embossed with a fine rice paper to create an illusion of skin texture. In some pieces she painstakingly brushes and pumices the surface until she has created a luminous brushed sheen, while others are patinated black silver.



Matthews states:

I have found that the physical process of producing work and the materials used are essential to the making. In many ways when producing the forms the act of making is just as important, if not more important than the final object. Decisions are made in the process of fabrication, these decisions quite often are intuitive, to this end, the process of making is as essential as drawing breath.

Negative space becomes part of the poetry of form. Sensuous lines and smooth curves overlap to create a subtle interplay of shadow and light. Silver becomes an evanescent spectrum of permutations. There is finely judged tension between the tangible and intangible effects of Matthews' fluid forms, between the allure of surface and the darker allusions implicit in their shadowy contours.

- **Margot Osborne 2005**