

Judy Holding – Silhouette Australis

Deakin University Art Gallery

12 September – 20 October 2012

A solo exhibition of work by Judy Holding, the collaged paper silhouettes, artist books, stitched panels and laser cut steel and aluminium sculptures in Silhouette Australis all share a visual language that is a thinking through of Holding's personal experience, thoughts and commitments.

'Landscape is a cultural narrative we develop to connect with place. Indigenous creation stories or Dreamings map country and synthesise different realms of knowledge and experience to link Aboriginal groups to place. Traditional Western representational systems embed identity in the landscape differently; framing the view from the singular, distinct vantage. Holding brings together elements that allude to both systems.'

Martina Copley 2010

Judy Holding's art is inspired by her travels in remote regions of Northern Australia, but the works she chooses to create are not so much a reflection of the unfolding vistas she has witnessed but rather a meditation on how we, as members of an industrialised and modern nation state, relate to the natural environment. Are we inclined through our mythologies and our collective actions to be sympathetic and farsighted in our dealings with the earth or do we see the land as something merely to be exploited? Holding's works, which are dominated by images rendered in silhouette form, include the reductive outlined shapes of trees, animals, birds, waterholes and clouds. These act as a kind of hieroglyphic shorthand, through which Holding can both articulate her observations and explore the aesthetic dimensions of her subject. Philosophically her sentiments concerning the land and its myriad creatures and plant life have been informed by a number of prolonged personal experiences. A longstanding connection with Aboriginal families in Western Arnhem Land, especially near the region of Canon Hill, has proven significant here. Traditional perceptions of the land as a living and spiritual eco system and one in which we are also a part has clearly influenced her thinking. The symbolic and tangible relations that underscore

Indigenous culture and community are seen to be echoed in the artist's work. Added to this is Holding's more Westernised training and background, not least of all her interest in design and composition. Hence it is the tensions and concordances between these differing perspectives that delineate the content of Holding's work, the philosophical issues that drive her artistic practice and the materials she uses in her art.

To observe how these processes are entwined the artist's many sculptures of trees are an illuminating case in point. They are for instance quite iconic in the sense that their shapeliness is derived from the clear articulation of an easily recognisable form, the Eucalypt in all its singular splendour, adorned at times with a roosting flock of birds. These are rendered in laser cut aluminium sheets while the supports upon which they are mounted are fashioned from rusted steel. Eye-catching as these objects may first appear they are by no means merely decorative. As the artist explains, the choice of metals is intended to generate a series of contrasts. Superficially this occurs in the disjunction between the oxidised metal plinths and the shiny and sometimes powder coated aluminium. Equally it suggests a contrast between a perception on the one hand of the earth as a conduit for sustenance and renewal and on the other as a finite mineral resource, the iron ore we export increasingly to the world.

Similarly, in Holding's relief work sculptures, which are based on the shapes and graphic lexicon of contemporary highway road signs, a number of agendas collide. Black on funereal black, the works feature the outlines of so many endangered marsupial creatures, the road kill and animal carnage, which can be seen on most any Australian highway. These glyph-like shapes or modern pictograms are intended as a warning. Beware, they are quietly saying, be aware of your part in the order of things; just around the road bend might be the last creature of its kind and you with your motorcar will be its bloody end. Do not take your eyes off the road. But as much as these pieces stand for the animals

that may one day be extinct they allude equally to any physical terrain that human expansion displaces. Our great network of highways, along which signs like these are typically located, is a vast colonial endeavour; for us it opens up the interior, but to the interior it delivers so much that is invasive and unwanted.

In her Bird series collages 2012, the mad, humorous designs of Australian native birds are the focus. The compositions are packed with all manner of avian creatures, gathering as we might expect at a waterhole at dusk. Presented in this way however they are reduced to a wallpaper design, a simulacrum of something that might eventually be lost forever, even as their profiles are co-opted for a mythic national identity. We recognize at a glance this strange congress of creatures; their primitive outlines, which appear to our eyes like some evolutionary by-line, are quite embedded in our psyche. But what do they mean and what do our mythologies suggest if their habitat is blithely disregarded?

In 'Silhouette Australis', Holding's most recent solo exhibition, the artist has arranged these artworks in a manner that implies a journey of perception. We make our way through a forest of sculpted metallic trees, up past the deathly road signs and scenes of avian life to arrive at the largest work in the show, a floor-to-ceiling collage of a pristine native forest. 'Scribbly Gum Forest', 2012 is a depiction of the 200 year old Banksia forest at Vincenzia, Jervis Bay, in New South Wales. The area was once part of a naval installation and as such has remained largely untrammelled. Here Holding's approach has been to overlap cut pieces of paper, one over the other, to create a layered impression of the trees. As the artist explains, the layering is derived not only from her observational drawings, there are many of these, but from her studies of Aboriginal rock art in southern Arnhem Land. Typically in the rock shelters and overhangs, an artist's work will remain generally unaltered, save for the overlaying of other subsequent images that might cut across their painting, a fish gliding over a spirit figure or

other such combinations. In contrast Holding's forest is composed of serpentine paper shapes, reminiscent somewhat of Henri Matisse's scissor-cut paper imagery. The difference however is that where Matisse was generally declarative with his forms, Holding, in dealing with the entangled complexities of an Australian native forest has let the branches run wild. In pictorial terms the accumulation and chaos that constitute our forests can only be sensibly represented through just this type of depiction; a sensitive accommodation of these manifold depths, forms and spaces.

Judy Holding's work is full of observational details: the manner in which a parrot holds its bulbous and oddly shaped head, the way in which clouds and waterholes are sometimes similar in form, or the particular sinuosity of a tree branch seeking the light. Her approach to materials encompasses both the handmade and the machine cut, qualities she is particularly adept at combining. Her work however is designed to challenge our perceptions, about nature and our place in the order of things. It seeks a reconciliation of attitudes and perspectives even as it acknowledges that no such accommodation is likely to manifest soon. Seemingly therefore it is the tensions more so than the agreements that define the contours and outlines of Holding's 'Silhouette Australis'.

DAMIAN SMITH, 2012