

A reflection on reflection

Posted on June 24, 2019 by shruthisridhara

On the right-hand side of the front page (and the 'links' page) of Juno Gemes's professional website there is a photograph: an Australian landscape with a hillside and a couple of gum trees, rising above a shiver of tall, dry grasses. Within the golden frame of this foreground, and the black slip of a car rear-vision mirror, it is possible to make out a portrait: an image of the artist, her hands on either side of the lens-circle of the camera that hides her features. The photograph contains multiple layers of visibility and visibility. It is an image which seems to illustrate one of Gemes's favourite quotations, from the British-American Zen philosopher Alan Watts: 'You are an aperture through which the universe is looking at itself.'

Having been 'tapped on the shoulder' by the Aboriginal community in the 1970s, Gemes has spent 40 years as an aperture through which both Australian and global universes have looked at the universe of First Nations experience in this country, and her achievement as a photographer is conventionally (and quite rightly) celebrated within this context. However, the website's landscape-portrait photograph points to an important aspect of her practice beyond its socio-political dimension: a subtle, fugitive backstory, a web of fragile connections across the tradition of 20th century European-American art and its antipodean adaptations.



The landscape seen from a car is of course a persistent trope in Australian culture, and Gemes's image summons not only Max Dupain's classic photograph *Silos through windscreen* (c. 1935), but also John Brack's painting *The Car* (1955), as well as the seminal essay for which Brack's picture provided the illustration and primary case study, Ian Burn's 'Is art history any use to artists?'[1] The device of the mirror itself also recalls the tondos of Fred Williams from the mid-1960s, those circular paintings and etchings with their spotted, tilted Upwey horizons which seem to derive from the shuddering retrospective landscape vision of an EH Holden door mirror. Angled into elliptical form, the round reflector of patterned earth also appears at the heart of an earlier composition, Olive Cotton's *Girl with mirror* (1938), an image-artist thread which connects Dupain's siloed modernism to Gemes's second-wave feminist reflexes.

What I am suggesting is that if we step back from the insistent foreground of Gemes's social photography, her *Portraits from the movement* (1978-2003), we bump into another tradition, that of western modernism. After all, she has always shown her work in art galleries, not in specialist photographic venues. For Gemes, as for Henri Cartier-Bresson, 'if a photograph is to communicate its subject in all its intensity, the relationship of forms must be rigorously established. Photography implies the recognition of a rhythm in the world of real things.'[2]

Indeed, the abstract, compositional integrity and dynamism of Gemes's images not only participates in this formalist tradition, it actively salutes it. In one of her best-known images, *Where the sacred fish the Dunya & Wanra come in, Mornington Island* (1978) – recently revisited in collaboration with photogravure printer Lothar Ostenberg – the pose of the reclining man on the left calls up that of the Roman-river-god-via-Raphael-and-Raimondi lounging bohemian in Edouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862)[3]

Sometimes the connections are more tenuous, specious even, but contemporary art history can be like that.[4] It is perhaps mere coincidence that one of Gemes's great street photography exemplars, Lisette Model, with whom she undertook a workshop in Venice in 1979, should earlier in her life have studied with the French 'Salon cubist' André Lhote. Yet there is a frisson of subtle conjunction: Lhote was a critical figure in the development of Australian modernism in the 1920s and 1930s, the mentor of pioneer modern painters Grace Crowley and Dorrit Black. There are only three degrees of separation here.

What is not so coincidental is the connection to Margaret Preston, whose paintings and prints from the late 1930s celebrate the same rich mountain, bush and riverine landscape as that in which Gemes has made her home and work for the past 20 years. Preston's Berowra paintings and prints (as well as her later Shoalhaven pictures) can be compared to Gemes's photographs from *The language of oysters* (1997) or *Clear water reckoning* (2008); the post-painterly barcode abstractions of oyster beds in the Hawkesbury River matching the ridge-and-furrow striations of linocuts like *Calabash Bay* (1939), the generic, formalist Aboriginalism of Preston's pattern paralleled by Gemes's acknowledgement of local, Darug/Kurringai tracks, shell middens and rock engravings, and by her broader and longer engagement with Indigenous politics and society at the national level.

There is, of course, ongoing debate over Preston's use in such works of a First Nations ochre palette and of particular motifs or design elements, but Gemes comes down firmly on the side of such works being sincere and valid homage, as against arrogant (neo-) colonial appropriation.[5] We should be careful that 'woke' doesn't entail choke. The power of art depends on its multivalent capacity, on creative mistranslation, on *jeux de mots*, on *jeux d'esprit*. Without this ludic dimension, we could not have Richard Bell declaring in his 2002 Telstra Award-winning *Scientia e metaphysica* (*Bell's theorem*): 'Aboriginal art – it's a white thing.' Without it we could not have Ian McLean's 'How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art', or his 'Mysterious correspondences between Charles Baudelaire and Tommy McRae'[6]

Finally, there is the whole matter of words. Throughout the 20th century there have been close parallels between the work of modern painters and poets – in concrete poetry and collage, in ekphrastic description and extrapolation, in personal affinity and in joint projects. Gemes enjoys a close and collaborative relationship with her husband of 30 years, poet Robert Adamson. Not only were the two of them directors and drivers of the Paper Bark Press during the 1980s and 1990s, and together created the harmony of words and pictures which is *The language of oysters*,[7] but their mutual engagement with each other's worlds has also provided Gemes with a whole domain of investigation: in 'The light room' project when she was photographer-in-residence at the 2009 Sydney Writers' Festival, for example, or in her folio of portraits for a special Australian edition of the Chicago magazine *Poetry* (2016), with its impressive anthology of writers' hands.

The poem in her work that I like the most is the three-word text that appears in one of the *Portraits from the movement*, a work entitled *The march for justice and hope: Gary Foley, La Perouse* (1988). 'We have survived', proclaims the protest sign stretched across half a hillside. Foley stands to one side of the banner, one leg forward, bent slightly, one hand on his thigh. Weirdly, it is exactly the same pose as that adopted by Christo in a Keystone Agency portrait taken at Little Bay, Sydney, in 1969, just before the environmental sculptor embarked on his celebrated *Wrapped coast* project. In the vibration of this coincidence there is something about mythology and identity, archetype and contingency, abstraction and figuration; something about nationalism and internationalism, White Australia and Black History; something about seeing and doing. Another of Juno's modern mirrors, I think...

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April 2019

[1] Ian Burn, 'Is art history any use to artists?', *Art Network*, 15, Autumn 1985, pp. 9-14

[2] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The decisive moment*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952, p. XXX

[3] A few years later, there is another re-visioning of Manet's figure in Aboriginal drag in Tracey Moffatt's *The movie star: David Gulpilil on Bondi Beach* (1985)

[4] See Rex Butler & A.D.S. Donaldson, 'French, Floral and Female: A History of UnAustralian Art 1900-1930', *emaj*, 5, 2010.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/49516514_French_Floral_and_Female_A_History_of_UnAustralian_Art_1900-1930, accessed 25 April 2019

[5] Juno Gemes, 'Dancing with Margaret Preston: respecting Margaret Preston's vision at Breowra', forum paper at the exhibition *Berowra visions: Margaret Preston and beyond*, Macquarie University, 22 October 2005. See <http://www.junogemes.com/exhibitions/preston/forum.htm> accessed 25 April 2019

[6] Ian McLean, 'How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art', in Ian McLean (ed.), *How Aborigines Invented the Idea of Contemporary Art: Writings on Aboriginal Art*, Brisbane and Sydney: IMA and Power Publications, 2011, pp. 333-345; Ian McLean, 'Mysterious correspondences between Charles Baudelaire and Tommy McRae: reimagining modernism in Australia as a contact zone', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, vol. 13 no. 1, 2013, pp. 70-89

[7] Robert Adamson, with Juno Gemes and John Kinsella, *The language of oysters*, Sydney: Craftsman House, 1997

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