An hospital: the velocity of drops
Christine Borland

Attending moments passed

So beautiful are the bones of Christine Borland's *Conservatory* [2004]: these porcelain fragments of barely recognisable human-ness. Each one its own small piece of wreckage, a treasure such as those gathered walking on a stormy beach, cast up from the mysterious depths of the sea, into the bright of day and the happenstance path of our footsteps. There is a guileless democracy to the methods of the sea, the strange operations of currents and tides as they give up, give over and endlessly circulate the flotsam and jetsam of our material world. And yet it is not only devalued remnants that the sea circulates but a vast *wunderkammer* of matter, a treasury of the wondrous and ghastly: unclaimed contraband, the dislocated remnants of unknown creatures of the deep, treasures from other times and the remains of countless bodies and vessels. So many bodies and bones have been lost to the sea, making it a place of tragedy as well as mystery. In exploration, commerce and warfare the sea has been a voracious widow-maker and disaster broker.

For they have heard evil tidings … there is sorrow on the sea; it cannot be quiet.
Jeremiah 49.23

The sea, it seems, has tales to tell in what is offered from the depths.

It is under the sea's strange agency of poetic narrative that Christine Borland presents her work *Conservatory*. *Conservatory* consists of fragments of white Limoges porcelain incised with a pattern of seaweed: vegetable whorls and tendrils unfold and enfold these fragments that we come to recognise as bones. Here, in many worn down parts, we have a human skeleton. This is us, this is what we share, the foundational structure of our human-ness. And yet in Borland's work where weed and bone are one – we are not alone. Fauna is intimately accompanied by flora; animal and vegetable are profoundly intertwined. As an artwork, these glazed fragments have reached a momentary evolutionary stasis, a brief respite from the process of inevitable decay. They are emblematic of an ecological cycle of co-dependence, of regeneration and renewal. As human beings we live symbiotically with the vegetable world, we rely upon it for our survival. We are of the same matter. We too will pass from bones into dust, we will fertilise the land and enter the world of the plants. Since the universe began we have been of the same molecules – endlessly shared and recycled.

Borland's exhibition at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia includes both *Conservatory* and photographs from her series *The Velocity of Drops: X Ray Room, Surgical Ward, Middle Ward, Staircase, Dispensary, Operating Theatre* [2003]. Both projects draw upon her 2003 residency at Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute off the west coast of Scotland. This stately home has been the residence of the Stuart family, successive Marquises of Bute since the thirteenth century. The present grand gothic residence was begun in the mid nineteenth century and is only being finished now. During the First World War the estate was offered by the Stuart family for use as a naval hospital and received patients recovering from the great sea battles of the day. The conservatory at Mount Stuart was the location of the operating theatre at this time, a detail of history that creates in Borland's work another point of congruence between the repair of the human body and the nurture of the world of plants.

Borland's research also draws upon time spent on Orkney, a group of Islands at the top of Scotland, far to the north of Bute. Here the German naval fleet of the First World War was impounded, before the captured sailors scuttled the bulk of their ships and made a daring escape from captivity. Scapa Flow Harbour still gives up fragments of porcelain and debris to those who fossick the shores and dive the wrecks of the sunken German fleet.

Conservatory and *The Velocity of Drops* join with several other projects by Borland that are strongly based upon research: archival, material, historical, medical, pharmacological and forensic. To this comprehensive research Borland adds elements of emotion and intuition. With an artist's sense of material she brings into being the distilled consideration of all these processes. Borland's artworks are a form of concrete poetry, spare and yet loaded. In her 2001 project for the Melbourne Festival, *Fallen Spirits*, Borland offered a simple circle of white bleached leaves, tiny skeletal bodies from a plane tree descended from that under which Hippocrates taught his students – a fragile monument of extraordinary beauty and understatement.

Another project connecting vein, plant and body is *Bullet Proof Breath* [2001], in which a suspended glass branch catches the light like the magical form of a snowflake under a magnifying glass. Anatomy-like we see the form of a congested bronchial tree, with several of its glass branches wrapped in spiders' silk, a sight both sinister and beautiful. To harvest these fine filaments a spider is knocked unconscious by a breath quickly exhaled through a straw and then milked of its silk, a material so strong that the US military are presently trying to reproduce it synthetically for use in bullet proof material. An ongoing project of Borland's investigates the bullet-stopping properties of common materials.

Borland's artworks often unfold from each other. In 1997 she exhibited a constellation of diamonds embedded into the floor at Lisson Gallery, London. Nearby was the paperwork that revealed that the twelve cut diamonds that made up the installation were purchased for the same amount Borland was earlier able to spend to secure a mail-order skeleton. Ironically both 'skeletons' are made of precisely the same foundation material – carbon. In a further project, Borland went on to commission forensic reconstruction experts to painstakingly rebuild the features of the unknown Indian woman whose skeleton Borland had purchased; this work was the foundation of Borland's *From Life* project, exhibited at Tramway in 1994.

Borland brings an intense attention to moments in the history of very particular places. Her process is fuelled equally by a keen interest in research and an absolute attention to the world of the emotions. Her projects operate as both emblem and enigma. As emblems we are able to clearly read the imagery used as a sign pointing the way to a clear set of references. The works distil and summarise, they bring together complex realities to sit side by side and offer fragile moments of truth. The works are like grand banners that step light-footed through time and symbol: we see something new and yet we understand its language, we gather our thoughts to something that we recognise. As emblems Borland's works generously offer us rich and absorbing texts.

The function of enigma in Borland's work is less about offering recognition and introducing a richness of new information as it is about rocking the boat, opening new doors. As enigmas her works contain something uneasy, unsettling, a hook or spike – we are drawn to them and yet wary. We experience the dynamic ricochet of attraction followed by unease.

In *Conservatory* Borland has created fragments of dense and compelling poetry; each has been engraved with a pattern of seaweed based upon botanical studies found in the library of Mount Stuart. Replicating the action of the sea over time Borland has shattered and weathered the fragments, before applying to them a translucent crimson glaze, visible only in the engraved hollows of the seaweed design. Like the pieces of glass or porcelain we find on the beach and gather into our own personal collection of treasures, Borland's fragments are precious to us by reason of their beauty, their fragility and their play with history: their link to another time and another world. Found porcelain fragments bear traces of the intimacy of their use, the meals they carried, the hands that washed and packed and cleaned them. Borland's fragments are not just intimately made in the manner of those used by humankind; they take on the form of our substance. Like venerable relics these bones have been collected and may be cherished according to whatever meaning we choose to inscribe. Historically we have not been uncomfortable with the veneration of bones, as long as they are properly presented. Captured by our intrigue we will gaze upon bones set aside from the usual processes of decay: the finger of Galileo mounted under a glass dome or the rib of a saint on a bed of red velvet.

We treasure not only the bones of the distant, the great and the holy, but also the bones of those who are nearest to us. We lay down the remains of our dead to honour them and cherish their memory. We build monuments over the bones of our loved ones. Most often we keep our distance from the bones themselves, the disintegration of the flesh being too much for us, but at certain times and in certain cultures our affection and regard will allow great intimacy. The Capuchin monks of Santa Maria della Concezione in Rome payed homage to their departed brothers by finding a place for their remains in the decoration of the crypt beneath the main church. Elaborate patterns of baroque excess were constructed from arches and rings of matched pelvises, skulls and vertebrae. The holiest and most intimate spiritual sanctuary of the monks allowed worship amongst the bones of their own community.

In the culture of the Maori, special wooden receptacles *waka tupapaku* were carved for the bones of venerated ancestors. After death, the body would be left on an exposed platform until the flesh had rotted away; later the bones would be taken down and cleaned. Greatly sacred, or *tapu*, they were sometimes painted red with ochre and interred in the *waka tupapaku* before being placed in the burial cave.

Talking with my father, he reminded me of a story I dimly remember my grandfather telling many years ago. As a young boy my grandfather attended one of the last funeral services or *tangihanga* where the body was subsequently interred in one of the traditional burial caves on the mountain above the family home at Whirinaki. Burial in one of the graveyards attached to the various small churches of the valley was much more common at this time, with churches of three denominations in close proximity, Christianity had been enthusiastically received by the local community. Later in life my grandfather was able to retrace the path he took as a boy to assist our *kaumatua*, or elders, in relocating this cave. Soon after the bones of our ancestors were gathered up and taken to one of the valley graveyards – a matter of convenience according to my father. Now, the bones of my ancestors are collected in a two-metre square grassy plot surrounded by a simple cast iron fence. The other graves are generally single graves, each with a name plaque and memorial. It is a deeply affecting place to visit: the green hill overlooking the valley where the river flows slowly by, children play and old farm machinery rusts. Behind is the mountain, nearby a small church with red roof and white weatherboards. Throughout the graveyard are the names of people I have heard tales of since I was a small child. I imagine the bones of my *whanau*, my family, that lie there stretching back perhaps to the time of the arrival of the first canoes from

Polynesia. There has been a continuous tradition of care for the memory and ways of our ancestors. Sadly I am now a passing visitor, child of another diaspora, I barely know the proper ways in which to pay my respects; only in recent years did I understand that I should wash my hands before and after entering the cemetery. Still, I am fortunate to be able to visit land and bones so deeply interconnected.

White and red, white and crimson offer a spare palette of potent symbolism. The white bones and liquid crimson glaze of Borland's *Conservatory* tap into a vast number of cultural codes and customs. In India and China, white is the colour of mourning; it is white, and not black that would be worn to a funeral service. In medieval Christian art white was commonly employed to represent purity, red charity and love. Later, white and red used together would symbolise the resurrection and transfiguration respectively. Both colours convey a complexity of both positive and fearful associations. In *Moby Dick* Herman Melville tells the tale of an epic quest for vengeance, as Captain Ahab hunts down his nemesis, the white whale Moby Dick, the creature he holds responsible for the loss of his leg. The narrator, Ishmael, ponders the fearful whiteness of the whale:

There yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than the redness which affrights in blood. [1]

In their whiteness the bones of Borland's *Conservatory* are deathly *momento mori*; as symbols they have reached a point of purity and a simplicity of existence beyond the turmoil and possibly violent end of their human assignment. And yet for this work Borland accompanies the absolute purity of white with the mark of the red seaweed. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, like Borland, works in shades of white and crimson to describe the edge of this mortal world. Coleridge tells of the passing on of the crewmates of the ancient mariner, he who shot the albatross and by this ill-omened deed set in train the destruction of his ship and the loss of all other hands. Before the sea claims the bones of the unfortunate crew they rise up from the ship as a collection of crimson coloured spectres. They surround the narrator on all points of the compass and acting as one ghostly body, they raise their hands in farewell:

And the bay was white with silent light,
Til rising from the same,
Full many shapes, that shadows were,
In crimson colours came [2]

One of the photographs in *The Velocity of Drops* shows a watermelon shattered into two halves on the white marble stairs of Mount Stuart, another play of crimson against white, the messy spill of the corporeal against a more eternal white. *The Velocity of Drops* is an ongoing series of photographs in which Borland sets up a kind of forensic study of a moment of trauma. The shattered watermelon becomes a stand-in for the damaged human body; spilled liquids and sprayed pulp are abstractions of the traces of past or potential violence. In the Mount Stuart series of photographs it is only the staircase that maintains its current descriptor of place. The other locations are named according to their use at the time of the First World War when this stately home was a most unusual naval field hospital. Borland recovers this history not only in the title of the series but also through her interest in the shattered body. Looking at the fragmented red pulp and spill of pink-stained fluids upon the marbled stairs we wonder at the nature of the injuries treated almost a hundred years ago in the Operating Theatre which has again assumed its

role as Conservatory, the X Ray Room now returned to its use as the Purple Library and the Surgical Ward once again the drawing room.

Nearby, the 'Marble Chapel' at Mount Stuart also makes use of Carrera marble – veined like a body with faint lines of grey. At the right time on a sunny day the marble-lined chapel glows blood red when light strikes the crimson-paned windows.

Borland is fascinated by the complexity of humankind, by our substance and by our behaviour, by both the grand and the intimate narratives of our existence. In both the porcelain fragments of *Conservatory* and the *Velocity of Drops* she creates a powerful and intriguing lens through which we see clearly both the violence and fragility that mark our humanity. We understand that despite our apparent separation we are enmeshed, linked to each other, linked to our environment through cycles of violence and acts of care and grace.

Amongst the archives of Mount Stuart, Borland came across a series of glass plate negatives dating from the First World War period. Captured on glass like a tissue sample in a jar these moments leave a residue held apart from the ever-always flow of time. Their capacity to endure is intrinsically linked to their requirement for a moment of our attention in order to exist. Borland creates a context for us to bring these past moments into our present-day reflections. Held up to the light, black and white read in reverse, ghostly x-rays of moments passed. We see a nurse waiting in profile; head covered like a nun, the steel framework of the conservatory is a fragile point of separation between interior and exterior. A table of instruments laid out beside a raised bed frame covered in sheets – the operating table perhaps… Crisp sheets that were no doubt white now read in the negative as black, a void at the centre of the image. There is no body on the sheet, the place prepared for the body is empty, and yet the very quality of this image seems to locate it uncannily within a body. Just as we are offered in the projects of Christine Borland, here we have an uncannily corporeal trace of a passed moment.

Mount Stuart 2003

Notes
1 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, New York: Norton, 1967: 164
2 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, London: Penguin, 1994: 96 [lines 480–483]