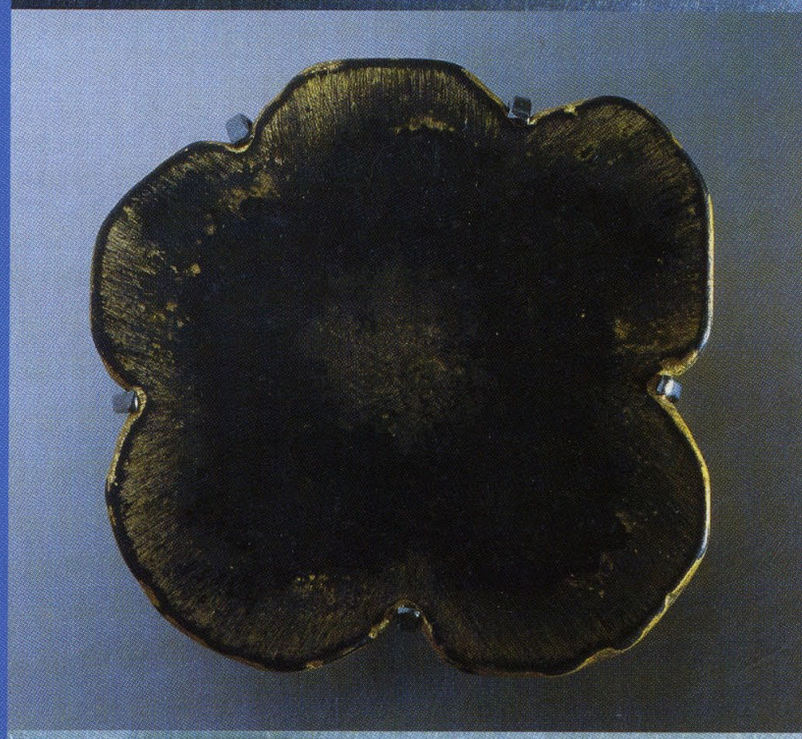
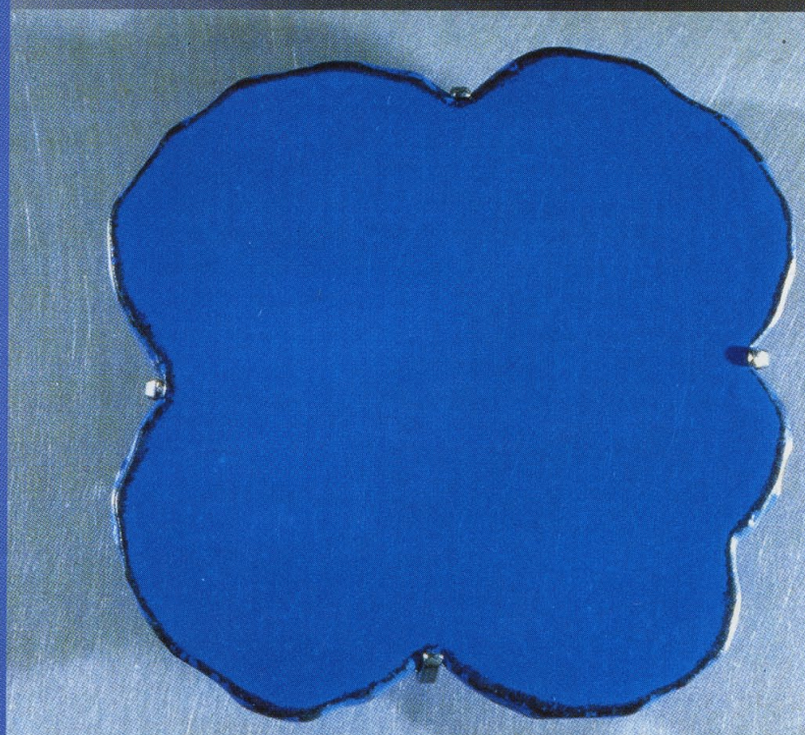
Wide (true) blue yonder

JULIE EWINGTON LOOKS CLOSELY AT THE GRANITE AND MARBLE—AND THE POETRY—IN THE RECENT JEWELLERY OF **MARGARET WEST**





A NECESSARY PROLOGUE: FIND A STONE AND TAKE IT IN YOUR HAND. FEEL ITS DENSENESS, its smoothness, its weight, register, above all, its irrefutable imperturbability. This stuff has seen millennia roll by, dinosaurs come and go, empires rise and then crumble into dust. It does not care, and the name for its defining quality, obduracy, is only lent to other materials or to people. Margaret West has taken on this tough stuff, making a sustained series of new works from stone and marble. While you are reading what follows, I want you to remember the feeling of that stone in your hand.

Flowers

For the last three years Margaret West has been dreaming and drifting in a garden filled with flowers under blue skies. This most rigorous of Australian jewellers has been cultivating what seems, on first inquiry, a surprisingly lyrical patch, given the austere and refined focus of her earlier work.[1] In four cities and on three continents she has recently exhibited a group of simple brooches and pendants whose format has hardly varied: shaped like a rudimentary petalled flower derived from the European floral lexicon, these are very simple, almost symmetrical, apparently unsophisticated blooms. I say shaped *like* because these objects do not imitate flowers but indicate them through an abbreviated notation. (Recall here the great rose windows of Gothic cathedrals, rose diamonds made into floral trysting rings, even Mary Quant's famous abbreviated flower motif from the 1960s.)

The way these flowers are indicated is always seemingly straightforward. The flowers are either painted on the surface of stone—several are flat slices of slate or basalt with a rudimentary petalled schema painted on the surface—or they are simple three-dimensional marble, granite or rock forms.[2] This simplicity is crucial to the works, whether a flat sheet or carved, whether five-petalled as in nature or four-petalled like mediaeval quatre-foil decorative motifs. A deliberate appeal to

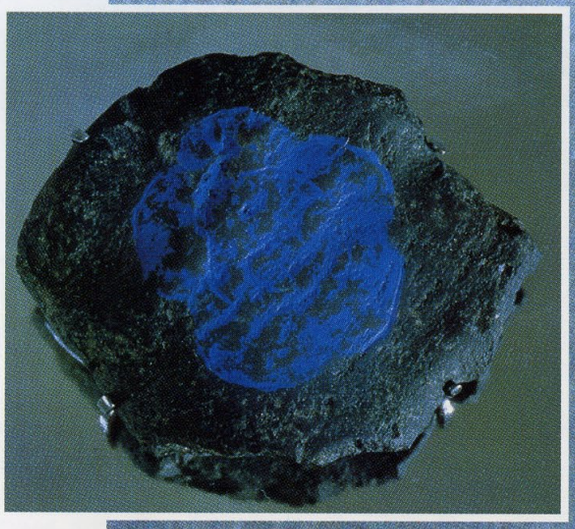
artifice distinguishes these visual mnemonics from copies of the beautiful flowers that nature, in her bounty, so plentifully supplies. 'Artifice' refers here to a rich range of cultural activities, forms and associations. Gardening and flower-breeding, for instance, are arts which coax 'nature' into new forms and uses; and flowers are central to the practice and history of jewellery itself, since brooches, and necklaces and earrings shaped like single flowers or sprays of blooms have been standards in western and oriental jewellery for centuries.

Most importantly, flowers are messengers between people, worn on the body. In many cultures flowers have carried specific meanings in poetry, song and in daily communications, both verbal and actual. Margaret West invokes here inter-twined traditions linking flowers, bodies and meanings which survive almost subliminally today but which were once far more elaborately coded and socially legible. In the 19th century, for instance, the craze for encyclopaedic (and colonising) botany led to an elaboration of traditional European associations between flowers and the passions, until a comprehensive language of flowers was commonly understood: roses stood for love, violets for remembering, and pansies, translated from the French pensées, symbolised thoughtfulness. West's new flowers are thus only the latest in several long-established lineages.

A further sign of artifice, of deliberate intervention: many of West's flowers are impossibly blue, a colour that does not occur naturally in roses but has been persistently sought by rose-breeders. The blue rose is still a horticultural phantom, however, and the striking blue of West's flowers is therefore a prime marker of her flowers' unnaturalness. Moreover, in the lexicon of flowers the blue rose occupies a special place, the place of silence. It signifies an unutterable passion, even an unknown one. It is certainly a sign of the impossible. For if a brooch in the form of a diamond rose suggests a relationship conspicuously valued in thousands of dollars, or the gift of a gardenia corsage betokens anticipation of a festive evening spent together, wearing a blue stone flower is a gesture towards the unreachable and the inexpressible, that which is beyond utterance or even imagination but no less loved for that. On the contrary, the blue stone flower might be taken as a token of hope for the future, and especially for the future of the imagination. (In 1998 Margaret West wrote in her studio notes: "The blue rose remains (and needs to remain) a mythical creature."[3]

Skies, clouds

Now I want to look up from the garden to the sky. To southern skies. For the particular blue of West's flowers is exactly the blue of bright Australian skies, the hard, intense, unforgiving blue first captured by Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton in their paintings of the late 19th century. This is the blue that early cultural commentators thought 'unnatural', even improper in the Heidelberg School painters' accounts of the Australian landscape, precisely because it did not conform to the tonal schemes of European art nor to the atmospheric perspectives of northern skies. It was a blue outside the experience of Europe and the European palette. Today that blue is specially manufactured in Melbourne for the use of Australian painters, but for durability West uses tough, commercial, weather-resistant paints, manufactured either for outdoor or automotive uses.[4] These paints



Above: Margaret West, *Nonce*, 1996, rock, paint, silver, 45 x 55 x 17mm.

Previous page (top to bottom): Margaret West, *Attar of Morning*, 1999, Thassos marble, paint, 925 silver, 70 x 70 x 5mm. Collection: the artist. Margaret West, *Sign*, 1999, Zimbabwe granite, 24k gold leaf, 925 silver, 50 x 50 x 5mm. Collection: private, USA. Margaret West, *Blue Prodigy*, 1999, Zimbabwe granite, paint, 925 silver, 67 x 68 x 8mm. Collection: the artist.

are UV-resistant, an important aspect of her choice since the paints therefore resist the physical impact of the bright light of the Australian skies they so nearly resemble. (When I quizzed her about the colour West called it a 'shocking blue'.[5])

If this is the true blue of Australian skies, West's flowers are patches of blue heaven. They are flower-shaped holes in the cloud-cover overhead through which brilliant light suddenly appears, like a bolt from the blue, heaven-sent inspiration. This is where the gentle ambiguity and associative logic of these works begins to take effect: if blue scraps of sky are flowers, are they positive or negative forms? Are they sections from the whole or flower-shaped interruptions in it? Is this one single flower or the field on which a thousand bloom. Brilliant white Thassos marble brooches are certainly clouds, but the same questions persist: which is the figure and which the ground of this firmament? And are the black granite and marble clouds, darkly lowering with portent or at least with the promise of rain, an aberration of nature or an integral part of its splendid array? (Surely the latter.)

The motif of the cloud has a long history in western art. Once the set-dressing of Baroque heavens, clouds later became important in English Romantic painting. From the late 18th century the developing science of meteorology exerted a powerful influence on conceptions of landscape, and the painters Alexander Cozens, and later John Constable, obsessively studied how to depict clouds in paintings. Tempests were the staple image of power and mutability in Nature, and clouds the principal focus of these meanings, not least because they themselves are inevitably ephemeral and changeable, the very pattern of ambiguity. Thus the fugitive character of clouds confirmed but also simultaneously challenged the certainty of scientific observations of the natural world, as Shakespeare had observed in a famous throw-away line: in the allegorical exchange about perception and certainty, Hamlet and Polonius spar about "yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel", could be a weasel, and is eventually agreed, for the purposes of argument, to be "very like a whale".[6]

Stone

This cultural baggage is not too much for Margaret West's brooches to bear. I said before that these works are mnemonics. Like the compacted stone and marble from which they are made, West's brooches and pendants contain, even compress, a lifetime of allusion, as the stones themselves carry in their very substance the hidden histories of geology. When I came to write about these works it struck me that I must, as West has done, take her materials seriously. The basic qualities of stone: heavy, hard, resistant, strong, dense, tough. Cutting and polishing stones is arduous, requiring knowledge, skill and physical strength, as well as the will to coax from them their different meanings. Each stone has peculiar physical qualities which must be respectfully attended to: granite is much harder than marble, for instance, and basalt very dense and homogenous. West calls it neutral, since she sees it as more austere and subdued, less pretty, than the other stones.[7]

West treats the surface of some stones with paint, playing off the assumed three-dimensionality of the material with lines, blobs or colour rubbed into the surface and polished until it is made almost one with it. These works return to a line of inquiry West pursued in the early 1980s, when she made a group of stainless steel brooches marked with bright primary colours. At the same time, the shape of the works—flowers, clouds, sky-filled holes—is secured by the profiles West cuts out of the greater wholes of her marble, granite, basalt. This is, in one sense, a drawing around a shape, rather than the creation of a fully-rounded object. It reminds me of Matisse's way of using one undulating mark along the perimeter of a figure, simultaneously creating both profile and volume. The impenetrability and heaviness of stone—remember the one I asked you to hold?—is thus at striking odds with the imagery West conjures out of their surface and substance. There is an essential play here between solidity and lightness, surface and depth, which ultimately poses an unanswerable question: how can stones float, or flowers become as lasting as geological time?

Poetry

Margaret West writes poetry—the true domain of unanswerable questions—which is published in newspapers and magazines.[8] I do not say that she '*also* writes' poetry. For the best way to see her jewellery and her poetry is as two facets of one broad and shifting enterprise. This is not, however, the expressive project memorialised by artists' biographies, with the artist's personality, passions and intentions as the key to understanding. I wish rather to draw your attention to the transformative potential unlocked in West's work by an on-going dialectic between apparently contrary materials and methods: obdurate stone and insubstantial words.

Margaret West in her Sydney studio, 1999.

The history of writing, especially poetry, helps us prospect beneath the surfaces of these works. Stringent limitations, eagerly embraced by West, recall the deliberately sparse means of the English sonnet or the Japanese haiku. I have already referred to Romantic painting and now acknowledge the pertinence of the opening line of the best-known poem by William Wordsworth, the most celebrated of all English Romantic poets. Margaret West allows herself, and invites us, to "wander lonely as a cloud"; and the titles of many works are an aesthetic movement litany: *Alba* (white), *Aubade* (dawn song), and a wonderful poem by the English poet Edith Sitwell, *Sable note*. They acknowledge the sensual immediacy that late nineteenth century poets sought in the experience of nature, and their Pantheistic hopes for a new non-conventional spirituality.

But Margaret West's jewellery is, after all, the product of a Modernist rather than a Romantic or Pantheist sensibility, delighting not in florid elaboration but in a creative economy that sets the reductive refinement of materials against their expanding potential for multiple, and therefore paradoxically rich, meanings. The poetry of her practice comes precisely from this creative tension, between rampant sensuality and stringent simplicity.

On possibility

In 1995 in her notes on studio practice West wrote: "Consciousness is a cloud—drifting, transformable, transmutable, transient." In the course of this meandering and unpredictable progress towards an unknowable destination, artists make works which are markers of a sort, or perhaps the 'notes' of the titles of West's exhibitions. These notes are, eventually, hostages against oblivion, what West has called "more substantial evidence to acknowledge some particularity of my consciousness, to affirm my state of 'having been' there or then".[9] The wide blue yonder of my title is Margaret West's blue skies and the clouds that drift across them. It is also, evidently, the field of potentiality, the space beyond the known world that artists play in and dream about. This is always open.

endnotes

1. See, for example, *Four Australian Jewellers*, National Gallery of Victoria, 1987, with an essay by Judith O'Callaghan; the catalogue for West's selected survey exhibition, *Interstices*, Canberra School of Art Gallery, 1992, with an essay by Julie Ewington; and Helen Drutt English and Peter Dormer, *Jewellery of Out Time*, Thames and Hudson, 1995.
2. This work has been show in: *Notes*, Crawford Gallery, Sydney 20 – 31 May 1997; *Notes 11: the sky is a garden*, Gallery Funaki, Melbourne, November 1998; *Margaret West: Contemporary jewellery: Australia*, Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia, 17 March – 17 April 1999; *Margaret West: Contemporary jewellery: Australia*, Kotelna: contemporary jewellery gallery, Prague, 7 April – 28 April 1999.
3. Margaret West, unpublished document, 'Footnotes to Practice', 1995-1998, 4 pages.
4. Since the early 1980s the Melbourne company Art Spectrum has manufactured a range of artist's colours based on the specific colours of Australian earth, skies and seas. Their bright Australian sky blue is called 'Tasman Blue'. West's blue is almost identical.
5. Personal communication, September 1999.
6. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2.
7. Personal communication, April 1999.
8. West has published poetry in publications as diverse as *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Poetrix* (Issue 7, Western Women Writers), and the poetry anthology *Eat The Ocean* (edited by Liz Murphy), Literary Mouse Press, 1996. She is also a distinguished writer of prose on issues relating to her own and others' practices. See, inter alia, 'The Constant Mineral', catalogue text for the exhibition by Julie Blyfield, Jam Factory, Adelaide, 1994; 'Touching hands and other values: The Social Implications of Craft' in *Making Culture, Crafts, Communication and Commerce*, 1995 National Crafts Conference Papers, Craft Australia; and 'The Feminine: Five Patterns', *Object*, No. 4, 1998.
9. Margaret West, unpublished document, 'Footnotes to Practice', 1995.

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