

AN ARCHITECTURE OF SKIN

Robert Bridgewater's practice is characterised by conceptual agility, formal inventiveness, slowness and a weaving together of various branches of knowledge and poetic association. Concerned with the energy of form in relation to the space in which it interacts, his work shares the minimalist interest in structural formality, geometry, seriality and truth to materials while reflecting on the natural environment and phenomena. He presents us with a reasoned universe, but one which avoids the restrictive logic that defines the man-made and natural worlds in oppositional terms. An openness to natural forms and celebration of the possibilities inherent in the material suffuse his work with organic and sensuous references.

Bridgewater's vocabulary of form and motif allude to the patterns, rhythms and processes of ritual and nature to encompass a myriad of associations from the secular to the sacred. The works recall primal totems and monumental columns where history is wound around the object: displaced and devotional objects, sea creatures and seed pods, the movements of water and wind, archaic instruments, ancient temples, features of the landscape, late Baroque and Rococo architectures, and the body. Bringing together oppositional elements and fusing references to past, present and future enables Bridgewater to map a particular hybrid territory—creating a morphology of space in which form, process, material and reference converge.

The interaction between volume and surface forms a phenomenological structure at the heart of Bridgewater's creation. Looking at the work involves entering its space. His deliberately ambivalent sculptural forms intimate a kind of admittance or ingress and the viewer responds to the physical, sensual, material presence of the object, and to its resistance. It is an encounter which involves the body—many of the forms may be viewed as correlates of the body.¹

His sculptural objects are like fragments of an ancient lexicon in which formal singularity contrasts with

Baroque agglomeration; minimalist aesthetics with ornament. A magnification of shape is played against the methodical process of hand carving the pattern into the wooden surface. It is a surface in which each formal relief motif seems to unfold out of a preceding one – in which the materiality of the surface envelops the whole form to create a fluid space of slippages of context – ‘a folding into thought’.²

Bridgewater’s work articulates a space of relations and mobility. It is a space where ‘the physical, natural, phenomenal, contingent world is plunged entirely in the infinite repetition of open linkages.’³ His process manifests a Baroque translation of form into a mutating rhythm of energies, like systems of relay or trace, created from patterns of darkness and light. This architecture of skin acts like an interface between the object and the world infusing the material with a lightness of spirit; an energy that seems to press into the present.

Bridgewater’s early work has its origins in the aesthetic of Arte Povera and the ‘ready-made’ object. Works like *Rush* 1994, and *Plenty* 1995, are pseudo-organic forms made from weathered wooden planks roughly attached together in circular segments to form an outer shell or casing. Like a primitive shelter or the whorls of the ear, these wooden shells create a hollow interior space which closes, tapering from view as it nears the ground. Opening into darkness and silence, these solitary constructions appear discarded and emanate a sense of disquietude, of waiting – unformed, and reforming like the shape of the imagination. Sited outside the gallery, these disintegrating forms almost seem to be merging back to origins, swallowed into the landscape. These artifacts reference a history of form and language in which agriculture and landscape intersect.

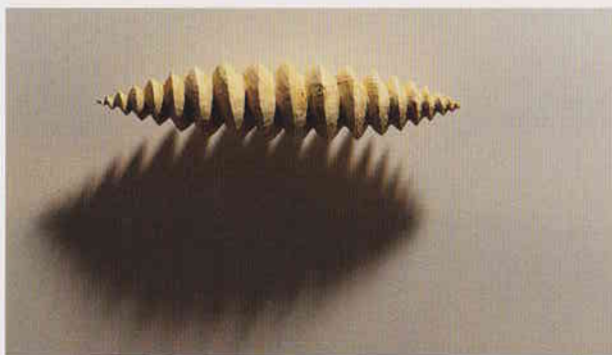
A more holistic, minimalist approach is reflected in later works carved from solid sections of truncated logs and branches. In *Conical suite* 1998, Bridgewater accentuates the natural taper of the branches by alternating the direction of scale-like flows and introducing geometric

forms. The pieces are laid on the ground in a serial format as though in the path of a riverbed. The seriality injects a musical rhythm to the relations and spaces between forms – a predetermined patterning which reflects temporal modes of continuity and recurrence. Singular works like *Scarified* 1995, and *Catastrophe* 1996, demonstrate a plural aesthetic in which macro and micro seem to blend. In these isolated, unitary forms a spirit of silent reflexivity suggests the relation of man and nature is characterised by destructive forces and resiliences.

Bridgewater’s process is perceptible – methodical, laborious and meditative, it acquires a certain autonomy and ritual sense. Through the process the object is inscribed with time, and bears witness to its passage and cyclical nature. In a play between truth and artifice, the artist’s considered schema oscillates with the accumulated or natural scars in the material to introduce a sense of chaos and complexity to our reading of the pattern. The myriad of indentations made by the chisel and the natural weathering and splitting of the wood remain easily visible within the inscribed design. Variations in the carving either help to define or contradict the form. These objects are surfaces like dreams that leave traces in the memory – memory terraces, reefs and shorelines which allude to the reinstatement of something lost: to that ‘natural’ body marred by civilisation – to a link of consciousness with the world.

*The tree... belongs to the world of forms that rise; like water, which nourishes it, to those forms that, left to themselves, fall to earth.*⁴

Bridgewater explores the space of the gallery to activate and engage dimensions of scale, verticality and horizontality, weight and gravity. His presentation plays with expectations regarding sculptural reading to reinforce or counter the origin of the material. The contours of *Bent rod* 1997, and *Relax* 1996 (a large scale work leaning against the gallery wall in an apparent defiance of natural response to gravity) question our



top:

Scarified 1995
wood
6 x 30 x 6 cm

centre:

Conical suite 1998
bleached wood
dimensions variable

below:

Scaled stem 1999
painted wood
95 x 650 x 85 cm

expectations and ideas regarding material, volume and wall. The pleasure of the work is the pleasure of experience confounding expectation.

The austere bleached and blackened forms of *Round wing* and *Flexible object* 1999, and *Neck and Ruffled neck* 1998, recall the alchemical colours of the landscape – colours that stretch back and reinforce the belongingness of the material to the natural world. Like relics, these severed forms are intimate, desirable, equivocal objects. The visual and tactile experience of these works is palpable yet distanced by the mode of presentation. Autonomous yet paired, they seem to float on the wall. The raspy, intricately worked surfaces imbue the material with an otherness that alludes variously to origins but remains enigmatic. They convey a sense of desire and longing – of aspiration toward other-worldliness – an almost mystical denial of physicality that evokes the unknowability of the phenomenal world.

Scaled stem 1999, is an environmental installation made specifically for the interior of Herring Island. It references the passage of time in relation to the geography of the site as an oasis or remnant of preserved nature amid urban settlement. A sheathed, fallen object – abandoned or revived – it rests on the ground touching surfaces lightly and then heavily like a smooth-scaled limbless creature or elongated vessel or bulbous stem. The smoothness and horizontality of the work reflects the shape of the island as it bisects the river flow and recalls the gradual formation and dissolution of alluvial deposits. It is a magnified form in which grotesque shifts in scale parry with readings to reference the fate of man's relation with the landscape.

Threshold 2001 was created for a specific position in an exhibition at McClelland Gallery. Carved from a single trunk bisected to form dual vertical panels – a great portal tapering to the sky – it stands to mark the verge of courtyard and landscape. In a considered architectural relation to space and the minimal aesthetics of the building, the work frames and replaces the view that

transects the glass walkway within the gallery. The carved jewel-like facets and blue plastic hue of the quilted faces mirror the expanse of sky behind and appear no less appealing or natural than the landscape around it. Looking at the work from the outside, the viewer is presented with an arching, scorched black surface – a cellular patterning, like the feathers of a water bird, which devours the light.

*Each material thing contains within its future, the inevitable narrative of the loss of its past.*⁵

Designed to be viewed together in the rarefied space of the white cube, the recent works share the ground with the viewer to form elements of an artificial landscape. There is a strong sense of obsolescence and immanence in these landlocked forms. Suspended between the world of the earth and the universe of air, they appear transposed in space and time, like a night garden or sacred site.

Walking around the sculptures, the viewer glimpses fragments of the objects. Like moments in a floating choreography, the spatial experience becomes a meditation on the relation between memory and perception. The focus on a partial view creates a kind of negative space in which the intangible can be apprehended. There is a structural connection between seer and seen, movement and stasis. Anthropomorphic elements introduce a sense of consciousness and hermeticism. The works dialogue. The landscape listens.

Traveller 2002, is a work about transition and time travel. Resembling a sarcophagus or capsule, the stasis of this upright form is countered by the worked surface. It is a frontal piece encased with flame or flows of air that express directional movement and speed. The pattern peels open from a central line like a spinal cord or slit to conjure a birth of sorts; an unveiling or release; an opening and closing. There is the suggestion of an interior in the stylized moulding of negative space that creates a recess for the body.

The elongated, flattened, symmetrical form of *Red tree 2002*, is totemic and cultivated like a topiarised plant. It is potent and sensual, with curves echoing the swells and sways of the body. There is a want to touch it like a body at breast, shoulder, hip and waist. The pattern broadens at the base to suggest ascension, abundance and weight. The colour suggests another reading that plays with scale and anthropomorphism – that of a stamen, laden with pollen grains.

In *Island 2002*, the embedded pattern licks the scorched surface in an explosion from the central focus like a lotus bloom or a lion's mane. It is a self-contained form that floats on a pale blue band of rippling water. Like a raft or life preserver, this work appears as a timeless, symbolic vessel – a carrier of souls – that finds contemporary reference in the experience and histories of cultural and geographical displacement.

Basket 2002, is both a solid block and a pictorial skin. An immovable impossible container – an exoskeleton, inside out – it is an impenetrable form wrapped in a folded woven surface. In reference to the minimalist forms of Donald Judd, the inaccessibility of this object contrasts with the way in which the surface interacts with changing conditions of actual space. This object is remarkably responsive to the play of oblique light upon the surface. The skin takes over. In the delicacy of the patterning the interplay between natural flaws and dictates of weave run as part of surface and eye. The raw wood appears like streaked marble through a fine layer of white paint. It is a whiteness that recalls our invisibility.

The verticality of *Door 2002*, challenges the viewer to walk around it or confront it face to face, like a precipice or monolith. An iconic bearer of significance and portent – an everyday memorial witness which has been immortalised in the museum context – this futuristic work prompts the viewer to question what these mysterious and ethereal objects carry within them.

Its face is studded strident yellow on white – a white which softens and turns to rose in afternoon light. In vehement contrast, the undersides swallow the light into blackness. The carved motifs fuse an aesthetic of the machine, the handmade and the 'natural', cherishing the lowly while referencing a future in which these values may not be manifest. Breathing darkly with hope, the object stands at the threshold. The memory of rivers sings in the carbon.

Martina Copley 2002



1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Theory of the Body is Already a Theory of Perception', 1945, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Trans. Colin Smith, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1962
2. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold; Leibniz and the Baroque, What is Baroque?*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.28
3. Michel Serres, II, 762, in Gilles Deleuze, op.cit.
4. Italo Calvino, *The Mighty Sculptor: Time, Written in a Garden*, 1980, pp. 197-200
5. Susan Stewart. *Art and the Experience of Time*, LIKE, Melbourne, 1999, p.3

Quilted trunk 2000
painted wood 160 x 65 x 65 cm
Winner of the Central Goldfields Art Prize, 2002