Lyndal Osborne: Unnatural Science

[*Lyndal Osborne: Bowerbird: Life as Art.* Art Gallery of Alberta. Edmonton, 2014. 36-57.]

Coursing

chilled from sweatered shoulders down
head warming to the rising sun
wool work socks and jeaned calves
snugged into rubber boots
the artist lopes through dewed life

light mist floats, swirls, hovers
is disturbed by her passage
but soon recovers to erase her trace

less ethereal fescue bends to her will
and maintains a record of her small violence
until noon, when all is restored, forgiven, forgotten
so she imagines, to her relief

needling through settled land to restless margin
strands of colour and music weave through
remembered smiles around a campfire
footprints on a distant shore
indelible smell of an unnameable rot
thistle-down on cheek
scent of tea tree
the surprise of a mint leaf chewed for the first time

then, the one loss which cascades into a series of felt absences
sensations eddying beneath her muffled body
a rhyme for river
whose playful surface conceals deeper surges

Gleaning

Spear grass is cut and bundled. Mussel shells, bird nests, wild clematis, eucalyptus bark, fishing lures, coyote ribs and birch bark are secreted into a backpack. A gossamer wasp nest rests in open palms. Pinecones, lichen, ironbark gum, jacaranda seed pods, terebridae shells and shotgun shells are stuffed into pockets. Draped over a forefinger is a shed snake's skin. Alberta wild rose, Australian scallop, rusty nails, horsetail, illawarra flame tree flowers, sea urchin, latex, mangrove seed pods, farm implements, a termite nest, monkey rope vine, dogwood berries, wattle tree balls and golf balls are gathered, bagged and carried home over thousands of trips over four decades.

Home is an acreage on Edmonton's edge, near the North Saskatchewan River. The reaping sites are along this river and another nearly 14,000 kilometres southwest. Only the will and labour of the artist connects the two. Once in her large studio, the harvest is unpacked, sorted, dried and meticulously stored in boxes until their necessity is revealed. "Sometimes the creative process takes months but can also span many years. Often the collected materials come first and the ideas grow and develop through the process of walking in the environment and gathering materials."[i]

River

Seven thousand five hundred glass jars wind through the gallery like a crystal river. Floating on their surface are circular islands or ice disks laden with motley bounty. *Shoalwan: River Through Fire, River of Ice* (2003) evokes a fire ravaged part of the Shoalhaven River near Canberra, Australia, and a section of the frozen North Saskatchewan River near Edmonton, Alberta. The installation is composed of thousands of individual objects and over four hundred different types of natural and human-made things salvaged from these two places and set like a banquet by Hieronymus Bosch. Some items, reeds and grasses, for instance, represent themselves, while others, such as the swirl of hand-made paper bowls crowded with strange, multihued delicacies, suggest an Indian spice market, a Chinese apothecary, or Thai temple offerings. Tinted pinecones, bleached bones and burnt branches are arranged with a florist's care. Other tableaus recall the laboratory: leaves stained like biology slides; dried stalks and vines resemble enlarged capillaries; roots like nerves. Perhaps the installation is a model city designed by Douglas Cardinal's aesthetic heirs to echo the structures that shape nature's smallest and largest forms. Or, more pessimistically, this might be a *Silent Running* (1972) inspired design for remote island plant banks used to preserve the planet's biodiversity for a future generation freed from our present conceptual limitations.

> I see firsthand the dramatic changes that are taking place where I live. I read and think about the issues of global climate change and realize that it is going to take a huge shift in our lifestyle to alter the course of these events. Though discouraged in my belief that our species will be able to make this paradigm shift, my work for the past fifteen years has been driven by this central idea.[ii]

Homemade Nature

Lyndal Osborne's art practice emerges from the universal human compulsions to select, to save, to collect, to arrange and decorate, to make things different, more interesting. The cultural anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake[iii] explains that this disposition is not learned but part of our human natures. Everyone is born to improve the given, to make things special and make special things. The desire to decorate ourselves and our dwellings, embellish our tools and surroundings is inborn. But to then go on to spend a lifetime producing extravagantly beautiful, interesting but ultimately useless objects from natural and human refuse is a great leap indeed. More than just the expression of biological drives, Osborne's activity can be understood as a physical philosophy, the articulation of a worldview rendered not through abstract language but with the very things it describes.

The water courses and seasons miniaturized and conflated in *Shoalwan* (*Shoal*haven/North Saskatche*wan*) occur through the act of imagination, will and craft called art. A will, in this case, that surges from Osborne's deep need to connect, to be connected, understand and show connections. "The diverse elements allow me to construct a visual experience which can suggest different levels of meaning: nature/culture, fragility/power and preservation/extinction. I sense the wholeness that comes through the disparate elements, and it is this which helps me understand our lives on this planet."[iv] Her work is an amplified expression of universal aesthetic drives marshalled to articulate her deep understanding of the interrelatedness of people and our shared eco-system. The artist condenses the world into a manageable scale, filters it through her empathetic sensibility, and re-visions it as a fusion of things as they are, how they are related, and how they might yet be. Each work is a tactile poem coded with the patterns that knit the universe. And, taken as a whole, Osborne's art is an attempt to repair the tear that separates people from nature and from a holistic philosophy/ecology.

Civilization has estranged many of us from nature and from aspects of our own natures. Though we derive pleasure from wilderness, it tends to be occasional, a trip rather than a cohabitation. A great deal of art is devoted to providing our domesticated spaces with images of the uncivilized, semblances of what we have escaped from, displaced or lost. While Lyndal Osborne is a nature lover, she also loves people. Consequently, she has difficulty erecting barriers between the two. The understanding of nature expressed in her art is not as a pristine otherness but as a shared reality. She is not interested in representing or preserving the non-human as a separate sphere to be observed at a distance, but in exploring immersive moments of overlap, collision and mixing between people and their environments.

Osborne's installations are *nature morte* compositions consisting of both wild and cultivated detritus: dead plants and animals, and human-made garbage. Hers is not the painter or photographer's delight in reproducing landscapes; her joy comes from transformation—nurturing the deceased, desiccated, discarded, lost, and ruined into new forms and meanings. She is less engaged in celebrating the inherent properties of these found objects than in exploring their future possibilities as expressive vehicles. "I often feel I want the material to transcend its history through my manipulation and become another form. That's what artists do—us[e] mundane materials to create imaginatively something that can be sensuous, evocative and compelling."[v]

Neither a natural scientist nor an environmentalist, but an artist, Osborne is curious about what these things might become when released from their original locations and functions. *Surge* (1995- 2008), for example, is just lake reeds, harvested, dried, bundled, and bowed. This simple gesture, repeated, implies purpose, but a metaphoric rather than a natural or a utilitarian one. Are they anthropomorphized stooks? Do they represent people: old, cold, and gathered for warmth and companionship? Do they evoke gleaners, wind or river currents, or a community of sea worms? Whatever they are, they are no longer themselves, no longer natural. They are changed by intention, craft and relocation.

If pictured nature is a window, Osborne's installations are emersions—not into nature, exactly, but into the artist's tangible imagination, into her thoughts, feelings and sensations about and with her environments. *Shoalwan: River Through Fire, River of Ice* is not a literal representation of these places but her sense of them, her memories and concerns expressed through materials ready to hand. Jars become water, but also symbols of the containment and commodification of natural resources. Glass also suggests the fragility of water systems. The platters brimming with

exotic offerings may suggest nature's resources yet unknown. While pictures and texts can convey these ideas, their messages feel mediated, less immediate. The transformation of real things into unreal things that evoke the original things is an operation beyond symbolism and toward transfiguration. By using salvage from the very sites they call to mind, the artwork seems to embody rather than just represent those rivers. Osborne's synecdochic magic not only conjures these environments but also the caring, laboring being who transmuted this abject waste into beautiful experience.

An early highlight of most artist's biographies is the moment that the young artist realizes that their obsessive making is not only intrinsically satisfying but might also have a wider value as 'art'. It is the turning point when a subjective preoccupation evolves into a desire to make a cultural contribution, to enter into the history, discourse and the practice of art. Interestingly, Osborne explains that her introduction to art was through museums rather than art galleries, and what attracted her were not European masterworks but Indigenous objects.[vi] And, as she explains in many interviews, she witnessed some of these things being made: "I may have been influenced by the Australian Aboriginals who I observed frequently in my childhood as they sat on the ground and fashioned small objects. While they did this they told stories and laughed."[vii] Osborne's art emerges from the example of Indigenous Australian creative practices and worldview, parental encouragement of her compulsive childhood collecting and making, and a restless search for home.

Osborne was born in Newcastle, New South Wales, in 1940. Because her father, Hubert Bailey, was a district engineer, the family moved frequently, mostly to rural settings throughout New South Wales. Many of these places—such as Moree, Narrabri and Murwillumbah[viii]—had significant Aboriginal populations. Unusual for the time, her (non-Aboriginal) family interacted with these folks and held them in high regard. Particularly memorable were her years at Coff's Harbour on the east coast of Australia.

> I often observed the Aboriginals [Gumbainggar people] camping in the sand dunes at the top of the beaches. My father knew many by name so we often stopped and talked to them. They were often in small family groups gathered around little campfires. I don't think they lived there but spent many hours by the water as did everyone else in town. I also saw many rock shelters on the sandstone cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean where I either saw them there or evidence that they had been using these sea caves for shelter.[ix]

The Gumbainggar relationship with the environment and their making intriguing things from natural refuse encouraged the young artist who often imitated their work.[x] These efforts led to elaborate bedroom installations. "I had a very large room, and I was always moving stuff around, hanging a variety of organic materials in groups. I made a theatre, in a way, out of things that I would drag back from the beach…shells, seaweed, all kinds of discarded objects."[xi] Her passion for nature was shared by the whole family. Her father, her mother, Jean Carlson, and sisters, Margaret and Helen, were frequent beachcombing companions. The girls had free reign to roam and Osborne's creations were supported: "As an adolescent, I collected bamboo and kelp that I used to create evolving installations in my bedroom. (My mother was very proud of these creations and often took houseguests in to admire them)."[xii] This was followed by rigorous and conventional art training: a Bachelor of Arts from the National Art School, Sydney (1961), a

Master's from the University of Wisconsin (1971) and a professorship at the University of Alberta (1971- 2004).

For a quarter century (1971-1996), Osborne pushed her collecting and Indigenous-inspired making to the background. While she continued gathering and crafting her unusual harvests, they were the subjects rather than objects of her art. Her highly wrought prints pictured these mysterious forms, but the maquettes themselves were not displayed as work of art until the1990s. A transitional work is the hybrid *Nature of Matter* (1996) which includes five tiered rows of thirty, multi-layered lithographs with their source objects arranged in steel trays below. While the prints are wonderful, the enigmatic rocks, stalks, eggs, kelp, and grass baskets threaten to eclipse their representations. This led to a flood of print-free sculptures and installations.

The amount of space used for the presentation of Osborne's installations in this survey exhibition suggests that her three-dimensional work is her most important contribution thus far.[xiii] While the prints are accomplished and absorbing, her installations—with their novel materials, inventive designs, and deeper content—have achieved greater public and critical notice. About her practice prior to the mid-1990s epiphany, Osborne claimed, "I am not trying to say anything in the work, but rather to take inspiration from objects and phenomena which exist in reality and recreate my own reality through organization and reconstruction of these elements. I hope what emerges is believable within its own reality but also contains the energy, beauty, mystery and intensity of my feelings" (1984).[xiv] Her words outline a remarkably consistent aesthetic approach: the prioritizing of intuition over reason, physical doing over language, felt experience and value over theory, and the need to transform the real into a convincing fiction that welds real things to subjective experience in a palpable and comprehensible way. It seems that in 1984 Osborne was confident of the internal logic of these realities, and was intuitively certain that her prints were in accord with both the world and her feelings, but was not quite ready to make the leap that her later installations and artist's statements communicate, which is a direct engagement with the political aspect of her ecological concerns and a critique of science at the service of industry.

Even though Osborne was a printmaker for most of her academic life, the heart of her art is a more direct relationship with her environment. Her recent works are the elaborate continuation of a trajectory that began with her bedroom installations and coursed beneath her prints. Perhaps, to the formalist and masculinist Edmonton art academy of the 1970s and 80s, printmaking was the acceptable face of her underground practice, and it was only after Osborne had done her duty to her professional art training, and was secure in her job (full professor), that she felt free to return to the pre-art world source of her work, pull back these screens and engage the deeper, more affective content that was there all along.

As a Métis artist with ongoing dialogues with Indigenous contemporary artists in Canada and Australia, and who has followed and written about Lyndal's work since the late 90s, I find many affinities between her work and methods with Indigenous practices and worldviews. As her childhood recollections attest, the resemblance is not accidental or incidental. In addition, she has since had many encounters with Aboriginal artists that have reinforced this connection. In 1978, Osborne helped Anmatjera artist Dinny Nolan Jampijinpa with a print in Melbourne. The next year she spent two weeks with him and his extended family in Papunya, Northern Territory. That same year, she spent two more weeks with the Tiwi people of Bathhurst Island, north of Darwin

(NT), in the Timor Sea.[xv] While there is no single Indigenous worldview, there are features common to Indigenous belief systems: an emphasis on the relatedness of all things; a holistic view of people and their environment that does not picture humans at the top of a hierarchy or the center of the universe; no division between the mind and body, people and things, the material and the metaphysical. All this can be found in Lyndal's work and thinking.

Osborne moved a great deal in her childhood and there was much travel and changing houses in her adulthood until she finally settled into her current, semi-rural home in 1990. The one constant was her grounding relationship with nature and her drive to collect and refigure it to express her understandings and needs. One of these needs is for home, to be at-home. As a non-Indigenous person living in two colonized Indigenous territories, her homing interest raises larger questions. How do settlers make themselves at home in the lands of another? Osborne's childhood and adulthood were spent near Indigenous presence. As an immigrant, the sense of being not at home and yet being able to see so many similarities between Indigenous realities of home (Australia) and here (Edmonton) must have been strongly felt. Her answer was/is two-fold: acknowledging, respecting and being with original peoples, and listening to the land.

While there is a clear Indigenous influence on Osborne's practice, I think this is more of an affinity arrived at through aesthetic appreciation and natural research than a question of following direct teachings. Because she has devoted so much time to being with the land—various lands, but usually the same narrow strips, beaches and riverbanks, over and over—Osborne has listened to these places, learned them, watched them change. Elders have told me that there are two kinds of knowledge. There are teachings passed down from time immemorial and there are visionary teachings that come to an individual but are for the good of everyone. The second category includes teachings that come to the person from the land.[xvi] Home is not just a place but a respectful relationship. "I believe that walking, collecting, classifying, and day-to-day living in an attentive way can have positive results."[xvii] Osborne's affective engagement with the land has altered her being, or at least encouraged her natural being to emerge and express itself. This self was there on the beaches of Australia and in parallel with the Gumbainggar folks she admired and is a self she returned to once she individuated beyond the academy to a basic, grounded, grassroots practice.

Like *Shoalwan: River Through Fire, River of Ice*, *Tracing Tides: A Topographical Investigation* (2001) condenses and amalgamates two distant territories, in this case, part of the Murramarang National Park in New South Wales, Australia, with the Gros Morne National Park in Newfoundland. Perhaps the only thing they have in common is the artist. But by pulling these spaces together, she is asking us to consider other forces that course through all things. Osborne has had an intimate relationship with the land surrounding her semi-rural home for nearly a quarter century; "I know a lot about one place."[xviii] A qualitative relationship with a specific bit of land can lead to a greater empathy with quite different other bits. This can further engender a feeling of a universal care/eco-consciousness that rhymes with Indigenous holism. Her homey research allows Osborne to extrapolate from this microcosm knowledge and methodologies that can be carried and applied to other sites, as she has done.

Unnatural Scientist

For thirty-three years, Lyndal Osborne was a professor working in a research university that, at least in recent years, would have encouraged her to see her art as a form or expression of research. Although fascinated by science, her initial relationships were more with the subjects of science rather than with the disciplines themselves. Sculptures and installations from the 1990s, such as *Tableaux for Transformation* (1998), demonstrate an interest in taxonomy, but a playful one. However, within a decade her work expands to take on the activity of science from within.

ab ovo (2008) imitates a laboratory and archive.[xix] Against the wall are five sets of four thick, white, flush-mounted shelves. Each holds five large bell jars, for a total of one hundred. Each hand-blown vessel nests gigantic seeds made of polyurethane and natural substances. The jars are lit as if on display or under grow lights. The pod colours range from ochres and pastels to exotic reds and deep blues. The installation also has a real, anaerobic glove box, one of those Plexiglas chambers fitted with rubber gloves to allow participants to feel the 'seeds'.

The rainbow wall of pods is a surreal confectionary. The shapes are both familiar and exotic. Some are reengineered and decorated organic real things (sunflowers, large, dried seeds, etc.), but most are cast foam enlargements of tiny seeds, whose forms have been made visible by electron microscopes. Osborne's artist statement refers to seed banks. Her goal is to call attention to their good work and the crises that make them necessary. There is also a hint about the hazards of genetically modified organisms. *Endless Forms Most Beautiful* (2006) is more specific about GMOs and her critique.

> The setting is a laboratory and the nine forms represent enlarged seedpods in the process of genetic modification. In GMO science three main techniques are employed for implanting genes into the seed cell – developing tumors, electricity, or a gene gun. In this imagined lab my forms reference these processes through the shape of the seedpod (with growths on the form), the materials used (pierced by electrical capacitors) and scientific equipment (pipets injecting DNA)….The coloured liquids in the glass flasks and plastic tubing represent both an aspect of this genetic modification process and, more importantly, the interconnections we humans have with the plant world. I wish, as co-inhabitants of this earth we might agree to negotiate more checks in how far we go in our manipulation of the natural resources of the planet.[xx]

Art is a fluid practice. While it contains disciplines—painting, ceramics, printmaking, video, etc.—the activity, as a whole, is undisciplined. There is no definition of 'art' the satisfies most people. Art has virtually no borders; almost anything could be art. Art usually represents other things, and contemporary art practices often imitate other disciplines. There are social relation artists who work like psychologists, sociologists, and social workers (Linda Duvall), and cooks and party planners (Rirkrit Tiravanija). And there are artists who blur the borders between art and science.

The irony of much critical art is that in order to critique something that thing must be evoked. So, some feminist artists, for example, find themselves producing sexist images in order to show what is wrong with them. Creating alternative representations is more difficult and can often be misread. A second problem comes when the artist's critical engagement is sustained, thoughtful, and open-minded. In many cases, the artist gets won over or at least less dogmatic. This is especially the case for artists working with science and scientists. Because of its more defined

and rigorous nature, science is rarely disturbed by art. But because of its undefined and fluid nature, art is profoundly affected by science.

Lyndal Osborne's most recent 'science' installations are perhaps the most intriguing of her career. While as aesthetically engaging as her other works, they include mechanical elements (laboratory tubing and glass flasks) that threaten easy visual pleasures. Some of her products, like the giant seeds of *Endless Forms Most Beautiful* (2006), are gorgeously monstrous. Though she means to suggest "a darker side to the shrinking of seed biodiversity," [xxi] she clearly takes pleasure in inventing these unusual creations. Like a gene-splicer uninhibited by ethics or real consequences, Osborne re-engineers nature just to see what will happen. She plays God to reveal science's hidden, non-utilitarian, creative face. You can see in these restless works a struggle between Osborne the romantic formalist and Osborne the critical environmentalist. Her good intentions are unraveled by the pleasures of the studio, making *ab ovo* less a monument to seed banks, and *Endless Forms Most Beautiful* an essay about GMOs, than works of art that express the anxiety of creative people, be they artists or scientists, who intervene in nature.

In her work as an unnatural scientist, Osborne applies her empathetic methodology to inhabit the skin of her subject. What she discovers is that artists like her and scientists are not that far apart. (They probably shared similar childhoods, collecting interesting things on the beach!) They are both creative people who are curious about the elements of the world and what they might become. This theme is most evident in *Darwin and the Arc of Time: Barnacles to Volcanoes* (2010). The installation is at once a fantastic 19th century laboratory and cabinet of curiosities. Osborne explains that she made it to "celebrate the journey that Charles Darwin made in 1831 on the Beagle."[xxii] It is not critical of science. In fact, it honours the scientist when he or she is most like an artist (or at least like this one): exploring, collecting, arranging, displaying, appreciating, seeing grand designs through small details. Darwin, like Osborne, was intimately thorough with his various patches of earth—his home and extensive gardens near Kent, England, and 10,000 kilometers away, in the Galápagos Islands. In retrospect, her critique is not of pure science, but of applied science—any technology that might cause harm to systems not fully understood.

Lyndal Osborne reaches back to Darwin, I think, because he represents pure scientific research. Like the Gumbainggar folks making things on the beach of Coff's harbor and outside of the art industry, Darwin engaged in independent intellectual inquiry before the harness and spur of professionalization and industrialization. Similarly, Osborne found her own methods of research and making that are both inside and beyond the art world. This exhibition is a life's work, the work of a unique life. It provides evidence of a being-with-the world that anyone can learn from, and none can copy.

[i] Briar Craig. “Evolving Installations: An Interview with Lyndal Osborne.” Lake: a Journal of arts and environment. Issue 6, 2011. 48-57. 53.
[ii] Craig. 55.
[iii] Ellen Dissanayake. *Homo Aestheticus*. University of Washington Press. 1995.
[iv] Osborne. Artist Statement for “Shoalwan: River Through Fire, River of Ice.”
[v] Craig. 57.
[vi] In conversation. July 14, 2013.
[vii] Lyndal Osborn. Artist statement for “Tracing Tides.” Exhibition brochure. Gros Morne Discovery Centre, Newfoundland and Labrador. 2012.
[viii] Roger H. Boulet. “Lyndal Osborne: Songs of the Stones.” Catalogue essay. The Edmontong Art Gallery. 1990. 7.
[ix] Osborn. Email correspondence, Sept. 16, 2013.
[x] Boulet. 7.
[xi] Boulet. 8.
[xii] Lyndal Osborn interview. “Evolving Installations: an Interview with Lyndal Osborne by Briar Craig.” *Lake: a Journal of Arts and Environment*. Issue 6. 2011. 51.
[xiii] While Lyndal Osborne is a renowned printmaker, it is the work of her later years that has had the greatest public impact and critical response. She has had many more solo exhibitions of the sculptural work made in the past twenty five years than she had of the prints made in the first quarter century of her long career.
[xiv] Boulet. 19.
[xv] Osborn. Email correspondence, Sept. 16, 2013.
[xvi] Among others, Elder Jerry Saddleback shared these teachings in Edmonton, Sept. 28, 2013.
[xvii] Craig. 57.
[xviii] In conversation. July 14, 2013.
[xix] Some of the sentences in this section are adaptations from a review I wrote about this work: “Lyndal Osborne: ab ovo.” *Vie Des Arts: English Edition*, #218, 2009. 16.

[xx] Osborne, artist statement, 2006.
[xxi] Osborne. “Endless Forms Most Beautiful” artist statement.
[xxii] Osborne, artist statement, 2010.