

Ships — That Pass

Jo Darbyshire

Penny Coss

Ships
That Pass
In The
— Night

Ships that pass in the night, and
speak each other in passing,

Only a signal shown

and a distant voice
in the darkness;

So on the ocean of life we
pass and speak one another,

Only a look and a voice,

then darkness again

and

a
silence

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow 1874

Scylla - Bodies - Water

*I think I lost something in the ocean. I want to go back to the ocean. I want to ask the ocean, what did I lose?*¹

*Colquhoun's aesthetic practices were not meant simply to reveal the interior of the self or to explain subjective experience. Rather, they aimed...to produce a form of knowledge intimately, and almost paradoxically, linked to the local.*²

*We look out to islands, floating on the distant horizon.*⁴

It is impossible to comprehend the loss and suffering of Amal Basry. She survived the sinking of SIEV X in 2001, after spending more than twenty hours in the waters off Christmas Island. After being granted asylum in Australia and for the following five years, Amal spoke on countless occasions describing her experience. Tragically, she died in 2006 from cancer. Amal's is one of many stories of survival by people who crossed treacherous seas in order to seek refuge in Australia. Many are documented; they make for heart-wrenching reading. While on a residency at the Fremantle Arts Centre a few years back, I spent time contemplating these and other stories of survival and loss.

Fremantle sits on the edge of the Indian Ocean, at the mouth of the Swan River. Its just out there, you can walk there in a matter of minutes. If you go outside, you could probably smell the salt air, the sea. The city retains its low-rise architecture and its strong connection to the Port. Its history is visible. Out to the west and across Gage Roads, is Rottnest Island, popular holiday destination and former island prison and burial ground of Indigenous men and boys.

To begin, to stain.

The practice of staining forms the basis of Penny Coss and Jo Darbyshire's artwork. They are in fine company. Among others, Helen Frankenthaler, Pat Steir, Marlene Dumas and Judy Watson come to mind. Staining involves the dilution of pigment in a solvent and pouring of the liquid paint over a support. The materials, paint and canvas, become enmeshed, held in the body of the work.

Both artists work with intentionality, so to incorporate the stain is to evoke a sense of the abject. Seduction gives way to seepage. The application of paint in this fluid state operates as a kind of material automatism. Automatism was a technique employed by the Surrealists that 'refers to the accessing of material from the subconscious or unconscious mind as part of the creative process'³ in written and visual forms - think exquisite corpse drawings and automatic poetry.

Both artists maintain a strong connection to geography and place. Coss enacts daily walking rituals, while other journeys underpin her deeper investigations of landscape. Darbyshire's explorations of water, lakes, rivers and importantly, the sea incorporate material history and echoes of the colonial past.

Coss's immersive works are considered, restrained and raw. There is some intervention, at least in the construction, tilting, rolling, moving the liquid colour over the surface, allowing the stains to spread and settle. Then the shape-shifting begins. They become unhinged, split apart, fold in, fall down. Finally they come to a resting place, like spent bodies wrung out and resting on a shoreline.

Coss writes that the tsunami which struck Japan's east coast in 2011, sits 'at the core of all the work...this collision between nature and production.'⁵ The human cost was staggering, yet what is borne by the water is equally disturbing. Coss's work bears witness to the high levels of radiation at the Fukushima power plant and the leakage of its radioactive waste into the northern Pacific Ocean. The impossible future becomes history's stain.

*first day of spring
a man sits on a horse looking
back, the water laps his thighs*

*four pinna shells lie on the sand
at the high tide mark*

*a man runs past, red shorts
glaring*

*we are busy examining
encrusted microcosms, green
brown pink pearl*

*a gift she says, I was looking
for something*⁶

Water has been at the heart of Jo Darbyshire's practice for many years. Where Coss's artwork can be aligned to the traditions of abstract expressionism, Darbyshire maintains a continuing interest in Surrealism. The above reference to the work of British artist Ithell Colquhoun, resonates strongly with Darbyshire's ideas of intimacy, interiority and the local. Her large diptychs reveal imagined landscapes above and below the water, rich and full.

The other component of Darbyshire's work in the exhibition, part of an ongoing project, comprises a suite of her most recent interventions on old book covers. Over the last two years, she has recorded the names of ships that have berthed in Fremantle Harbour. Convergent and coincidental poetry, we now see her collection layered on to the shells of books that inscribe new meaning to containers emptied of words.

The ocean has always been a space of contention, perhaps now more so than ever. Desire and longing, now anxiety and dread. We stand on the edge, the point at which the land breaks down, shaped and reshaped by the power of the sea and by those who want to harness this power. The littoral is political.

Border force.

I keep coming back to the words of Amal Basry and although the exhibition and the works are not directed at this issue, it colours my thinking around the Indian Ocean.

'Ships that Pass' is an expansive and wondrous exhibition, abundant with stories and layered with proximity and distance. As we move through the physical and imagined space of the artwork, 'we catch sight of another visible order which intersects with ours'.⁷

If you walk outside, you can smell the salt air.

So, turn to the north, then west, and north again.

This is the place Amal talks about.

She is gone now and the question remains for us to ask what was lost.

Look closely, maybe it is here.

¹ Zable, A., **Violin Lessons**, Text Publishing Melbourne, 2011

² Morrison, Mark S.: "Ithell Colquhoun and occult Surrealism in mid-twentieth-century Britain and Ireland." *Modernism/Modernity* (21:3) 587-616, 2014

³ **Automatism**, Tate, <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/a/automatism> (accessed 20 Feb 2017)

⁴ **Author's notebook**, 2 September 2016

⁵ Coss, P., e-mail message to author, 9 February 2017

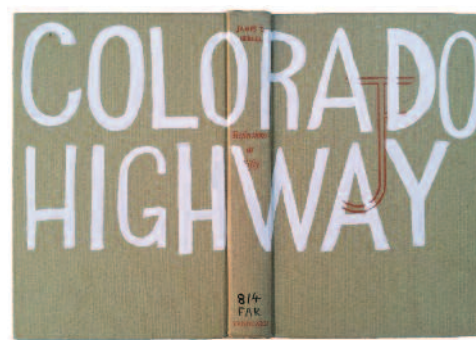
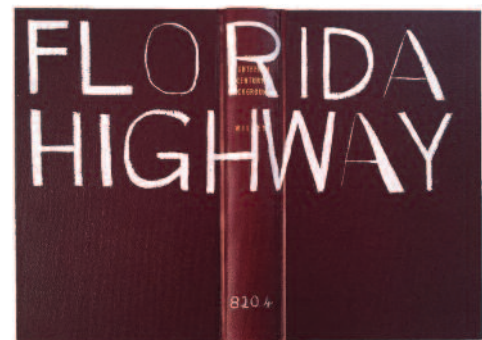
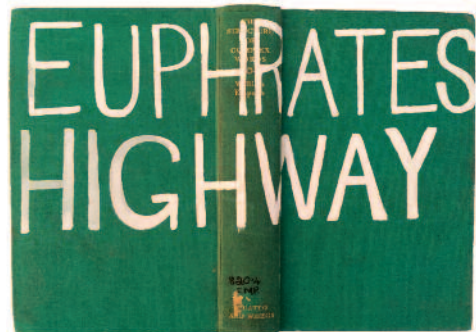
⁶ **Author's notebook**, 2 September 2016

⁷ Berger, J., **The Shape of a Pocket**, 2001, Bloomsbury London

Michele Elliot February 2017

Michele Elliot is an artist, educator and occasional writer, whose practice includes drawing, sculpture, installation and textiles. In 2009, she was awarded an Australia Council New Work grant for a residency and exhibition in Kolkata, India and in 2014, a Skills and Arts Development Grant for a research residency at the Fremantle Arts Centre. For more info on her work, please visit www.micheleelliot.com

- Jo Darbyshire



Highway Series 2017
Various sizes
Acrylic on cloth book covers



Pinna Shell #2 2016
Diptych 200 x 300 cm
Oil on canvas
Photograph Eva Fernandez



Wallenius Wilhelm Ships Names Series 2017
Boheme Singapore
Acrylic on cloth book cover



Morning Ninni 2016
90 x 90 cm
Oil on canvas



White Pinna Shell 2016
Dptych 150 x 180 cm
Oil on canvas
Photograph Eva Fernandez



Pinna Shell #1 2016
 Diptych 200 x 300 cm
 Oil on canvas
 Photograph Eva Fernandez

– Penny Coss



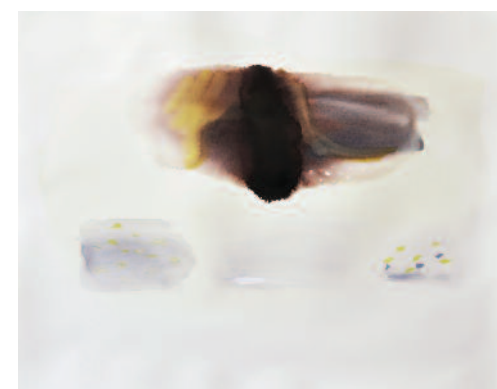
Black Stain over an Undetermined Field 2017
160 x 150 cm
Acrylic on canvas



Lo and Behold 2017
198 x 350 cm
Acrylic on canvas



Water Stain over an Undetermined Field 2017
160 x 156 cm
Acrylic on canvas



Black Water Series 2017
69 x 87.5 cm
Acrylic on paper



Drowning Island 1 2014-16
100 x 100 x 50 cm
Acrylic on canvas and paper mache

*“We stand on the edge, the point at which the land
breaks down, shaped and reshaped by the power of the
sea and by those who want to harness this power.
The littoral is political.”*



Water Wall 2017
240 x 300 cm
Acrylic on canvas panels

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www.jodarbyshire.com
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