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Reflections: Remade, Reworked, Reimagined: Sally Brown talks about place [1]

Sally Brown, Ray Norman and Bill Boyd

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Abstract: For quite a long time it has been claimed that cultural production in Tasmania has an inimitable and idiosyncratic place within the scheme of things. Sally Brown, a young Tasmanian designer, maker, artist, is unlikely to make this kind of claim for her work. Nonetheless, there is a particular sensibility evident in her work that it is doubtful that one might find anywhere other than in Tasmania – or made by someone of an older generation. This paper attempts to unpick, through four reflections upon Sally's work, some of the thinking to do with the placedness, the vernacular social paradigm, the subliminal politics, the 'crafting' and the cultural savvy that gives Sally Brown's work its presence. The questions that hang in the air around a collection of Sally Brown's work are those to do with the ways local cultural imperatives might shape and make places they are found in, and in what ways might places shape the cultural realities that inhabit them. The following reflections on Sally's work are distilled from email and blog conversations.

[1] This paper is a contribution to the *Placescape, placemaking, placemarking, placedness … geography and cultural production* Special Issue of *Coolabah*, edited by Bill Boyd & Ray Norman. The Special Issue is supported by two websites: http://coolabahplacedness.blogspot.com.au and http://coolabahplacedness-images.blogspot.com.au/.

Reflection 1 – Ray Norman

In many ways when you think about the work that you make, and you start rifling through the catalogues of your work, there is quite a bit there that is counter intuitive there in regard to your materials and their 'placedness'.

One supposes in Tasmania that 'wood' might form an important part of the materials larder for a 'maker' like yourself. Instead, we find that you are an eclectic maker who uses a lot of different material and not so often wood. In fact there seems to be some kind of antithesis here. Is there?

Since we are talking about the place of 'place' in cultural production, and the making of things, your use of metal seems to pose a few questions. For instance, for whatever reason, and it is refreshing to see, you do not seem to pay homage to a particular metal technology, say like one of the 'smithings' – black, tin, copper, whatever.

From the little you tell us about your childhood visiting relatives living in isolation from town, does metal, or any other material figure in those kind of memories. That is, the kind of memories that subliminally pop up from memory, and that provide solutions, or perhaps even giving a permission to do things in some way.

Traditions are often 'place centred'. For instance, maker in a particular place traditionally, or is it habitually, use particular material in particular ways. You seem to be inventing or invoking you own kind of traditions and technologies.

Reflection 2 – Sally Brown

Tasmania is well and truly branded and perceived as an island of wood and woodworkers. When I am introduced to someone as a Tasmanian designer-maker, there is an immediate assumption that I make lots of tables and chairs out of native special timbers. I have hardly made any tables or chairs and very rarely use special timbers, or much timber at all.

I was surprised and pleased recently to be invited to take part in an exhibition which will focus on Tasmanian metalworkers for a change. Of course woodworking is perfectly valid and it stands to reason that a place renowned for this beautiful natural resource would produce craftspeople skilled in using it. Indeed Tasmania seems to attract fine woodworkers in a kind of cultural exchange, replacing those interested in industrial or product design who leave for mainland cities.

When I began my studies in Furniture Design at university I suppose I too assumed I would pop out the other end of the course and become another woodworking designer-maker. The truth is, I really don't like woodwork. I also don't like the look of the special timbers; I find a lot if it far too gaudy, especially highly figured and coloured timber.

I also happen to really, really like working with metal. I love the strength, durability and

malleability of metal. I love the way it feels to work with and the enormous creative potential it offers. I have used a lot of different materials in my practice but looking back I can see it has been a process of elimination; a search for the right medium.

I have fiddled about with wood, plastics, fibreglass and lots of fibre and fabric before realising that my passion is for metal. I still incorporate other materials into my work, but usually in a supporting role, as a means to an end, such as the 'stone' bowls shown above; there is a wooden substrate to give the bowls a nice solid feel, and to provide something to nail into.

I also 'borrow' techniques and ideas from other disciplines. I have come to realise that my long held passion for fibre and textiles is about technique, not material. I frequently use these and other techniques, unconventionally, with metal. Gradually, over about 10 years, I have more or less abandoned woodwork and now define myself as a metalworker.

Antithesis? Not on any deliberate, conscious level. It is simply a matter of preference. But why? Why would someone from the Land of Wood have a preference for metal? I suspect it does come ultimately from my upbringing and family.

Tasmania (indeed Australia), is also the land of two other things of significance; mining, and 'Making Do'. Ingenuity and the ability to 'make do' with whatever is to hand is seen as a quintessentially Australian trait; ingenuity born of necessity.

These days we call it 'thinking outside the square', and mostly leave it to 'designers', probably because the essential ingredient of necessity has been more or less removed.

My grandfather was an engineer, and operated a small alluvial tin mine in a remote part of Tasmania. He often worked alone. He had to rely on his ingenuity, making do with whatever was available for repairs and maintenance both of the mining equipment and general requirements of a remote existence. I greatly admire this particular brand of ingenuity/problem solving, and I guess it was significant in my upbringing.

I have never been formally trained in any specific technical discipline, which is perhaps why I don't adhere to one. I have never learnt the 'rules' so I don't feel bound to follow them. I learn various techniques as I need them or as they interest me, and add them to my eclectic set of skills.

I experiment. I use a variety of metals in a lot of different forms, often salvaged. An array of materials demands an array of techniques. I invent my own way of doing things, with whatever materials I have to hand and whatever skills I have, just like my grandfather did. It seems to me that in a way I am following place centred traditions, just not the woodworking tradition that is apparently expected of me.

Rather, I follow a family tradition, or a rural and remote tradition, of working creatively with the materials that are available.

Reflection 3 – Ray Norman

In the discussions leading up to this interview you question the notion that your work's 'placedness' is clear for all to see. From the inside looking out that is a reasonable question to posit. After all there are no unambiguous 'signposts' the place/s that inform it. Yet somehow the proposition that it 'belongs' to a place in some ways is almost inescapable.

If one didn't know your background, then maybe they would not know that you work in South East Tasmania. Nor perhaps, would they detect an hint of your family background or your family's connections to remote places that few, very few, people visit. But it is quite likely that they would very soon start asking themselves questions like, "what kind of place do these objects spring from?"

Clearly, this work is not made in a big city – say like New York, Paris, London .... Hobart even – nor informed by any kind of 'international metropolitan' sensibility. So, as soon as one says that to oneself, the next question in line to be answered is ever likely to be something link what kind of place would spawn such work – and it looks as much like it has been 'spawned' as it has been made. In a way, in this day and age, it is very likely that with the maker's name in hand a curious observer would very soon be able to answer such questions at some level.

So from your perspective, in the making of the work, how much are you are conscious of the place/s that it seems are subliminally – perhaps overtly even – informing the work and the 'making'?

Reflection 4 – Sally Brown

From my perspective, I don't feel at all conscious of the place that is informing the work. There is no deliberate attempt on my part to make my work look as though it comes from somewhere, or belongs to a particular place. In fact, there is no attempt to make my work look like it was made by Sally Brown, and yet it seems that I have a

quite distinctive style. I don't deny though that it does come from and belong to a place – Tasmania, or southern Tasmania even- however it is not at all contrived to be that way; rather, it happens organically.

It seems to me to be a simple matter of having spent 30 years growing up surrounded by the particular brand of nature that this part of the world has to offer. I make my art objects in a way that looks pleasing to me; my idea of what is aesthetically pleasing comes from an appreciation of my natural surroundings, and thus the place is expressed through the art.

When I spoke about my work last year (in a floor talk/discussion about my exhibition Remade) I was asked that if I were to be plonked into a totally different environment say, New York City, would my work change to reflect those surroundings. The answer is no, my art making is not such an immediate response as that (some of my pieces have had a gestation of up to 10 years) and more importantly, if I were 'transplanted' my 30 years of Tasmanian influence would still form the basis of my aesthetic sensibility.

If I'd lived all my life in New York City, however, I suspect I'd be quite a different person and who knows what I'd be doing. This raises the question then, not whether or not the environment (or place) influences my work, but how. When I am making art, the thing I am conscious of is the material I'm using; what I can and can't do, how I can manipulate/transform it.

All the while I am making unconscious decisions about form/colour/scale/composition etc. which arise naturally and automatically from my personal aesthetic preferences. While I am making a piece, or often not until it's made, I'll look at it and recognise something familiar, maybe there's a pattern like sand ripples, or lichen, or a geological formation.

Sometimes it's bleedingly obvious and I can't believe I hadn't noticed earlier. Sometimes it's more ambiguous, or it might be reminiscent of two or three things simultaneously. These natural similes provide the titles for my art pieces, and sometimes influence the way the piece is finished, but they are not the starting point for my work. Rather, they are my interpretation of the object I have made.

I believe it is human nature to recognise, or even to seek out, something familiar in an unfamiliar or seemingly abstract object. We search our internal catalogue of imagery for a good match, and say "Oh! it looks like ...". Other people, therefore, can (and do) interpret my work quite differently, drawing on their own experiences. I have sometimes been quite taken aback by others' interpretations.

Here are some examples. This 3 panel, hanging organza and pebble screen is titled 'Lapping Screen', partly because the panels pivot and overlap, and because the stitched pockets which contain the pebbles look to me like lines left in the pebbly sand by a receding tide. Imagine my surprise to hear someone interpret it as towering office blocks in a city, with each pocket an office and each pebble an office worker!

Reflection 5 – Ray Norman

If you have spent any time at all in southern Tasmania, and outside urban Hobart, when you enter Sally Brown's exhibition at Launceston's Design Centre you might well sense a hint of, a memory of, reminiscences of a southern Tasmanian placescape. Its presence is implanted in the objects. However, there're no Taswegian clichés, there's no Huon pine, there're no Tassie devils, no apples nor anything of that ilk. So, just what is it that invokes this placidness and that seems to have scorched itself into these objects?

Sally Brown says that her work, her style, her practice, is informed by her 'natural' environment but somehow one senses that there is something more to it than that. There seems to be a kind of Zen sensibility and a spareness that suggests that her practice is more than 'informed' by her placedness – its embedded in it perhaps. In a way the

'wabi-sabi' idea comes to mind but as convenient as it may be to settle there for an allegory, somehow that's not quite it or even enough.

The Japanese architect Tadao Ando says, "wabi-sabi is flea markets, not warehouse stores; aged wood, not Pergo; rice paper, not glass. It celebrates cracks and crevices and all the other marks that time, weather, and loving use leave behind. It reminds us that we are all but transient beings on this planet that our bodies as well as the material world around us are in the process of returning to the dust from which we came … Pared down to its barest essence, [its] the Japanese art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in nature, of accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay, and death."

Yes, yes, Sally Brown's brand of placedness is not a million miles away from wabi-sabi yet it has a kind of hereness, a nowness, and a smell of rawness about it that sets it apart somehow. There are vernacular hallmarks that announce a distinctive and idiosyncratic authenticity. The sensibility is insightful, more than it might be romantic; its intuitive and reflective; and it comes across as being instinctive. It is far away from being slick, chic or trendy – yet it is nonetheless elegant and quite polished in its own way. These 'Tasmanian' objects pose questions to do with the making of place and 'things'. Questions like, do cultures shape and make the places you find them in? Do places shape the cultures that inhabit them? What makes a homeplace? 'Place' is an illusive and intangible idea. Its especially so when 'place' and 'home' come together as 'homeplaces' are imagined and deeply rooted in inherited perceptions – the kind of insight that is quiet, private and instinctive.

Interestingly, this exhibition is entitled "Remade," that is remade rather than recycled or reused. Sally Brown says that there are "no rules" yet somehow there seems to be some even if they may not be sacrosanct – or anything that would disallow play. There is a contemporaneous sensibility at work here that draws on the 'scrap yard', the 'opshop' or the back shed rather than 'the bush', 'the forest' and clearly not a warehouse. This 'remade' sensibility here seems to bring with it a narrative of a kind but not one that is by necessity overtly fettered to, or adherent to, some political dogma. It is often said that Tasmania's landscapes are being exploited – mined? – but there is a different kind of 'mining' going on here that is intelligent – conceivably something that's gentle, insightful and sensible. Rather than some hardnosed pragmatism and the uniformity of the international disconnect that 'dislocates' much current cultural production – there is space in this work for poignancy ambiguity and private contemplation. Rather than being invited to look at blended, and blanded, panoramas we are invited to spend some time looking at the world through that lens that the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot's fractals alerted us to – the part, the fraction, the place(?), that represents, embodies and invokes the whole. Sally Brown's work is spare, pared back and 'crafted'. The playful and often poetic conversations she had with herself, and that went on between her head and her hands, and that you find in her 'drawing' and journal, is audible in every piece.

Sally Brown and the late Rosalie Gascoigne seem to share not only an explicit connectedness to place that is intensely local but also a vernacular and colloquial sense of materiality. Rosalie Gascoigne said of her materials that she liked "getting things in from the paddock. They've had the sun, they've had the rain, it's real stuff, it's not like stuff you buy from a hardware shop, I find that very inert and I remember Rauschenberg said once, it's been somewhere, it's done something, you know when he gathered in all

his rubbish and did things. And it's got life essence in it, vitality even and dead stuff looks very dead to me."

While Rosalie Gascoigne described herself as "an assembler" rather than as a 'maker', Sally Brown seems to be right at home in her studio; in her workshop; or at her workbench; or wherever it is that she does her making. Like Rosalie Gascoigne's "stuff" Sally Brown's materials arrive invested with histories. Sally Brown says she thinks of herself as an artist cum designer who creates and makes "objects that are both functional and sculptural." However one suspects that imaging her simply as a maker might not be at all insulting. One suspects that in those private conversations that one has with oneself away from the artworld, Sally Brown might be rather careless about artworld labels. Sally Brown's attentiveness to materiality gives her work substance – as do the processes that are informed by her sense of materiality. Likewise, the patterns, textures and colours that inhabit her 'objects' nurture her apparent bonds to 'her place'– and it shines through in its omnipresence. There are stories and histories invested in these objects. There are narratives there too but like all good narratives they're the ones we construct in front of the kind of object Sally Brown makes and with our memories and consciousness in top gear. We are all inveterate storytellers and we need very little prompting to get us going.

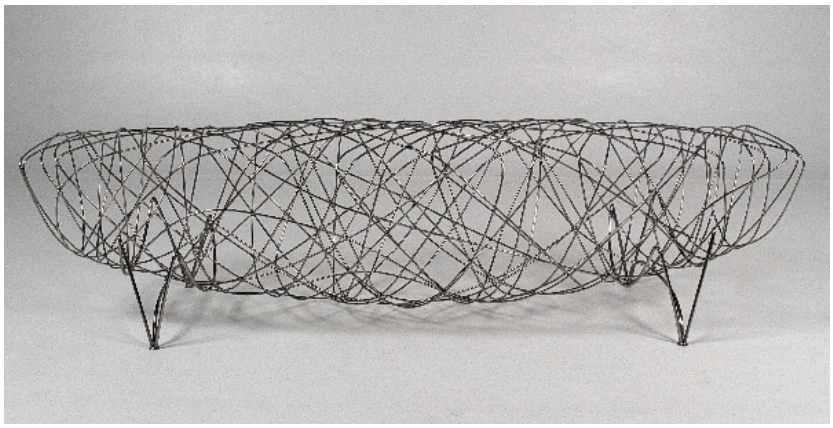
While we can sense that Sally Brown is talking about her homeplace, in doing so, as often as not, she invokes our own places in the world, wherever they may be. There are layers to Sally Brown's narratives. Some are ubiquitous and to some extent are not so place specific. Even though they may be constructed in another 'homeplace' many of these stories land right on our own doorstep. In the end, confronted by one of Sally Brown's 'objects' we are almost unavoidably engaged with its placedness and perhaps thinking about the ways objects invoke such cultural memories and underpin our placedness.

Reflection 6 – Bill Boyd

I have just had a run through Sally's web sites, and this isn't the usual chuck-it-together stuff, is it? The word 'crafted' comes to mind. I get overwhelmed by a sense of respect of the sources and of the source materials in her objects. Maybe this – respect – is an angle on understanding the links to place. Places are not just thrown together, they grow and they mature and, in doing so, they necessarily eschew stereotype. Except, of course, if they are designed as tourism fun parks or shopping malls or theme retirement residential estates or ... (all the things absent in Tasmania??). Likewise, place art (is there is such a thing?) can't just be thrown together, it can't be given instant age or the patina of ageing, despite the plethora of old fencepost touristic ticky-tack that mascarades as rural/bucholic/pastoral art/souvenirs, supposedly evoking the lost world of a Tasmanian (insert any other rural place) past or present other-worldliness.

There's no blithe pre-stressed weathering in Sally's work either, but a depth and honesty of texture and colour that evokes the true weathering (*sensu* maturing, rather than washing out) of an ancient land. Sally's tables and chairs could sit on a weathered cobble beach and be comfortably at home, respected by the cobbles as one of them, and respected by beach visitors as being of them. This is rich weathering, not wearing-away

weathering; it adds to the objects rather than removes from the objects, it is not erosion but accretion. Sally's creations seem to me to reflect a rich maturing thoughtful land, not a washed out or worn out land. It reminds me of the leathered skins of the bog people of Europe ... you can almost hear them – both her objects and the bog people – still smiling.



Links

http://www.sallybrown.com.au/
http://www.designcentre.com.au/exhibitions.php?exhibition_id=64
http://www.designcentreshop.com.au/2011/08/12/sally-brown/

This continuing discussion can be followed at the COOLABAHplacedness blog spot (http://coolabahplacedness.blogspot.com.au/)

Acknowledgments

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Tasmanian-born artist **Sally Brown** lives and works in Cygnet, in the Huon/Channel region of the state. Sally has a Bachelor of Fine Arts with Honours from the University of Tasmania, where she studied Furniture Design between 2000 and 2004. Since 2000 Sally has participated in numerous group exhibitions both in Tasmania and nationally. Sally's work is represented in collections including The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG), The Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), and The Tasmanian Wood Design Collection (TWDC). Her work can be seen at her web site. (Independent Object Artist. Email: http://www.sallybrown.com.au)

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