

Karen Boulden The Bones of angels

Inside out

We're all part of the stone

That makes up the mountain

And harbours the bones

Karen Boulden and I share a country property. It is rocky and mountainous and harbours bones, so it's hard to imagine a more apt quote for her new work than these lyrics by Chris Rea. Apparently his words were inspired by a visit to the spectacular Gothic Cologne Cathedral. Boulden's inspiration comes from the mountain, a stone edifice of a different kind but also a keeper of mysteries.

In these granite ranges, Karen Boulden began collecting found materials, initially the rusted detritus of past human habitation. Reminiscent of Rosalie Gascoyne, the artist began reshaping and rearranging these corroded elements. From there it seemed a natural step to utilise the rusted metals to create mysterious patterns on Chinese habutai silk using dyeing methods recognised among textile artists. She wrapped the high grade silk around pieces of corrugated iron, rusted barbed wire, jam tins and old star pickets still standing by the roadside. But Boulden took the process a stage further, combining organic dyes and recognising the unique formal structures that arise through particular kinds of manipulation.

One afternoon on the mountain she chanced upon the perfect skeleton of a wombat beside a gravel road. With some care, she collected the bones, skull, teeth and claws and took them to her studio where they were treated and dried. Thus began a new body of work. Further raw material involved the collection of more roadkill – kangaroos, wombats, echidnas. They were moved to the property and protected from scavengers while the various species of beetles, flies and bacteria completely consumed the skin and flesh (an ecosystem of its own). Boulden then retrieved the bones requiring little more than good gloves and a good constitution.

Karen Boulden's background is in medicine having first trained as a nurse, delivering babies and working in endocrinology. She later became a manager in the pharmaceutical industry and, with further study, joined the Royal Melbourne Hospital, first as a diabetes educator, later moving to diabetes

research. She won the Jane Bell Travelling Scholarship to research developments at world-class centres in the UK, Italy, Sweden, Denmark and Switzerland before presenting a paper in Helsinki, Finland. This research also took her to remote communities such as the Tiwi Islands.

All this is relevant. Artists have a tendency to study only art and very often what they make is predicated upon other art and other styles. This can have an unfortunate closing effect: very obvious to the trained eye, much "new" art, for all its grand objectives, is simply a version of other people's accomplishments, an approximation of things we've seen before. Disappointing, if nothing else.

Rarely do we come across art that sparks our interest anew. In these new works by Boulden, we are uncannily drawn to mysterious associations: arrangements of bones (within us all) that appear to suggest something else entirely along with traces of residual markings that hint at alchemical processes. There is also the wizardry and beauty of silk (another animal bi-product) along with the richness of handmade organic dyes, the use of which has connotations deeply embedded in other cultures.

Who can explain it? Freud could write upon it; Hermann Rorschach would approve. Some viewers will see futuristic, science fiction elements, others will sense the medieval or Gothic; still others might recognise the shroud and mortality. These works are both elemental and mystical; both carnal and spiritual. There are clear references to land, nature, art and culture, less obvious are the traces of stigmata and cicatrix – the scars left from wounds.

Yet there is also an underlying symmetry – nothing appears as if by accident. Intelligence is at work, drawing on deep psychological associations of birth, life, death and decay, presenting bone configurations like hieroglyphs that might even have interested our stone-age forebears. Yet those ancients would not know of our natural world in rapid decline, overrun by technology and a speeding culture. There may be no better symbol of this than the bones of nocturnal native animals slain beside a busy road.

The bones of angels

That showed us the way

You can feel them at night

While they sleep through the day

Robert Hollingworth