

The Meander

Issue 08

Past Issues

Blog

About

Contact

Subscribe

Catherine Evans interview

"To think that art is intrinsic to our existence is empowering." Melbourne's Catherine Evans discusses rocks and skin, science and art, and the constellations we draw to make sense of the world.

Interview by Laura Skerlj

Published June 2014



— i.

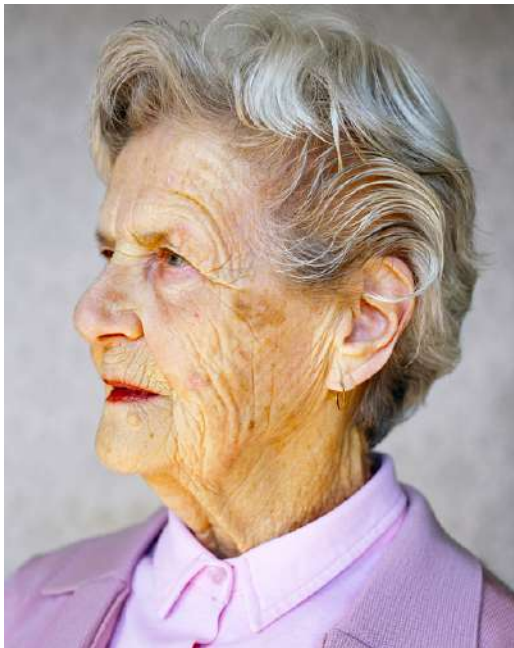
"At art school, long nights in meant you could wander the studios when no one was around, and I found Catherine Evans's space before I actually met her. It was a haven amid overarching chaos. Bones, feathers and branches were arranged in a serene and changeable museum. Images of bird species papered the walls. On the floor, glass and plaster puddles replicated a kind of wetland environment. A tiny paper clip was twisted into the shape of a swan.

This transformative poetic is intrinsic to Catherine's practice, which incorporates photography, drawing and sculpture.

I caught up with her at her Footscray studio as she prepared for her May 2014



– ii.



– iii.



exhibition, Standing Stone."

—Laura Skerlj

I fell in love with the objects and books that inhabit your workspace. Can you describe five things you feel attached to in your studio, and what these objects mean to you?

My studio space is really important to me. I'm always bringing back objects that I find or collect and moving them around the studio, sometimes for months or even years. It's the objects that I haven't used in an artwork yet that I feel the most attached to, because their potential is mostly unknown. That's an exciting feeling for me.

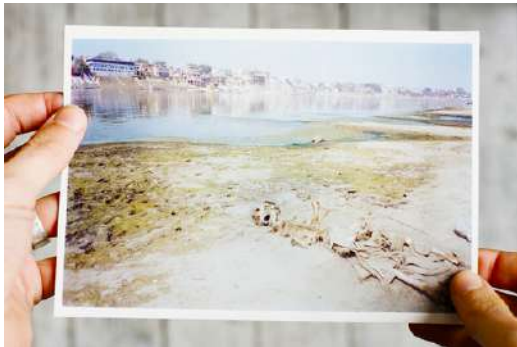
I found a dolphin skull a few years ago at the edge of Port Phillip Bay. An incredibly rare find, it was an ordeal to clean it of the dried flesh and it took a lot of research and patience to get it bone-white. I can spend hours looking at it. It's amazing that their nostrils are at the top of the head, and you could mistake the ear bones for shells—in fact, that's what I thought they were at first.

I've also paired a pelican skull and cello bow in the studio recently. Both are long, elegant structures but, incredibly, have exactly the same tip: a little elegant hook at the end.

I love old books and I have a beautiful book on loan from a friend: *The Scenery of the Heavens*, written in 1890. It has the most delicate glass prints and illustrations but what I love is its poetry. It's a beautiful example of the art of writing for the early sciences.

"When I lifted the rock the most beautiful paper bruise was left."

— iv.



— v.



— vi.



— vii.

I also have an old photography book, *Photography: Theory and Practice*, from 1937. Although without the poetry of the other book, I love that it covers all photographic techniques, including radiography. Any photography book you pick up now would omit this information. I like the glimpse it gives of early photographic practice, before X-rays became the domain of medical and other industries (and perhaps rightly so, given the health risks).

Lastly, I have a huge pile of expired photographic paper I've been slowly accumulating. Like the dolphin skull and other objects, its latent potential is completely unknown, and I really like that.

Your aesthetic is subtle, poetic and meditative. I am particularly drawn to the porcelain-pink and dawn-blue photographic papers that appear in much of your work. Can you explain the link between time and colour in these materials?

I've been using photographic paper as a raw material, exposing it to ambient light over time without developing or fixing it. Usually you would only expose black and white paper under a red light, or colour paper in total darkness. When you develop black and white paper, the silver-halide crystals that have been exposed darken. When you fix the image, you are washing away all the undeveloped crystals so it will no longer be photosensitive. I'm skipping all that and looking at the light qualities of the raw paper. In ambient light, photographic paper continues to change colour, at first becoming more vivid, then slowly fading, moving through beautiful hues of greens, blues, pinks and reds depending on the type of paper and its age.

Last year I left a volcanic rock sitting on a piece in my studio for six months. The paper had almost lost all colour, but when I lifted the rock the most beautiful paper bruise was left.



— viii.



— ix.

"My grandmother told me that when the earthquake came it sounded like 100 Harley-Davidson motorcycles—first in the distance, then circling her right in her own kitchen."

In the past, you studied science. I am curious as to how these studies feed your creative research.

I studied the life sciences as an undergraduate and loved it, although when friends were preparing for honours I was shocked by how small an area of enquiry had to be for research—my interests are much more free-ranging.

My interest in science is still very strong and undoubtedly it comes through in my artwork, but not consciously. It's not something I set out to do.

Sometimes I like to rave on to artist or scientist friends about the similarities between the two. One example is that some of the best science or most compelling artworks can come out of mistakes in the lab or studio. In both disciplines you have to be continually alert so that you can recognise them when they occur.

In your 2013 show, Batholith, the aged face of your grandmother is juxtaposed with the ancient quality of rock. In their magnification, both surfaces become intimate and prehistoric. Can you describe the process of pairing, or

- i. *Studio work I*, 2014
- ii. *Studio work II*, 2014
- iii. *Batholith Portrait*, photograph, 52 x 42cm, 2013
- iv. *Batholith I*, photograph, 42 x 42cm, 2013
- v. *View of Varanasi from the other side of the Ganges with skeleton in foreground*, photograph, 2003
- vi. *Standing Stone (installation view)*, aluminium, steel, volcanic rocks, sticky tape, 2014
- vii. *Standing Stone (installation view)*
- viii. *Standing Stone (detail view)*
- ix. *Bruise II*, photograph, 51 x 76cm, 2014

All images courtesy of the artist.

Standing Stone installation documentation by Matthew Stanton.

comparing, within your work?

I like to think of the objects in my studio as incubating—waiting while I find a way to use them. I spend a lot of time shifting them, looking for different aspects that might only be triggered in a certain combination. For example, the pelican skull and cello bow that are in my studio at the moment both trigger something in one another that's not there when they are on their own.

For *Batholith*, I had taken a portrait of my grandmother in her home in Christchurch, New Zealand. Following the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes, her house is one of the few remaining on the street. I stayed with her for two weeks and spent the afternoons wandering the red-zoned suburbs in the city's east. I was shocked at how much damage was still apparent almost three years after the quakes. Whole suburbs of people have been evacuated or relocated and their empty houses are still standing, or if the house has been demolished and cleared, there is just a house-shaped patch of dirt with a wild garden growing at the edges.

I was thinking a lot about the geology of the area and how seemingly solid earth can undulate like an ocean, enveloping houses and roads. My grandmother told me that when the earthquake came it sounded like 100 Harley-Davidson motorcycles—first in the distance, then circling her right in her own kitchen. She said the sound alone was terrifying.

By the time I was back in the studio it was an easy connection to make between the texture of her skin and the cut face of a rock. Through chance alone, *Batholith* opened on her 86th birthday.

"My time in India allowed me to look at Australia with fresh eyes. We too

have complex layers of history..."

Ten years ago, you spent some time living and studying in Varanasi, India. Varanasi is bound to be one of the most intense, and mind-blowing, spiritual places in the world. Can you talk about your experience, and the impression India (for all her madness and wonder) left upon you?

I studied Hindi at Benarus Hindu University for a year. I would describe it as life set to maximum. Varanasi is the oldest living city in the world, built on the edge of the Ganges, which is also one of the most polluted bodies of water in the world. The lives of the people are intimately linked to the rhythms of the river—those in low-lying houses move out every wet season when it bursts its banks. Then as it recedes, tons of mud and silt are manually cleared from the banks. Incredibly, despite the water quality, fresh water dolphins still survive. I was lucky to catch a glimpse of one once on an early morning walk along the river.

The layers of ancient history in the architecture are breathtaking. It's like each age of the city has been built between the gaps of the last, with Islamic minarets pressed beside Hindu temples. It's the sort of place where you can accidentally stumble upon an ancient well, with steps spiralling down to the water's edge, crystal clear and teeming with tadpoles, then—after the most incredible experience—pass a bloated human corpse floating in the river on your way home. It's a place that never lets you settle; it's full of contrasts and contradictions.

It's very easy to romanticise though, especially when my time there feels like a lifetime ago. In reality, life can be brutal in a place where there is very little infrastructure, affordable public health care or education. I (too quickly) became accustomed to seeing things that I thought were unimaginable—not human corpses, but the pain that can be endured by living people. I was only

in my early 20s at the time and I came away with an overwhelming sense that we're all so similar; it doesn't matter which part of the world we live in, we are all concerned about the things that matter most to us—family, friends, health, environment and having a roof over our heads.

I'd love to reconnect with the place and its people. I know that Varanasi has changed enormously since I was there. I even heard that a MacDonald's has opened, which I guess in one way is just another layer of history, another symbol fighting for space in the city skyline.

My time in India allowed me to look at Australia with fresh eyes. We too have complex layers of history, some of them many thousands of years older, but unfortunately in Australia these sites and their stories are often overlooked or undervalued.

I know you are fan of the writings of feminist and cultural theorist Elizabeth Grosz. In her book Chaos, Territory, Art (2008), she discusses how art can be seen as a 'mode of sensation' that enables our bodies to experience and transform the universe: 'Art is the opening up of the universe to becoming-other, just as science is the opening up of the universe to practical action, to becoming-useful and philosophy is the opening up of the universe to thought-becoming' (23).

I like this idea—that through something physical we make or do, a larger set of events shifts and moves. Can you discuss this idea with respect to your own practice?

I first discovered Grosz through her most recent texts, where she applies Darwinian theory of evolution and sexual selection to the origin of art. She isn't the first to cross these ideas but she caught me at a time when I was revisiting Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* around the 150th anniversary of the publication. Her writing draws me in; it has a poetic rhythm, not unlike Darwin's entangled bank.

Grosz gives me a philosophical context for making artwork today. To think that art is intrinsic to our existence is empowering. As artists we are momentarily borrowing from the excess of materials and sensations available to us, extracting something from the chaos just long enough so that, as it is transformed, we unleash a new set of sensations into the world.

"By mapping out a constellation made by the marks on my own body, I want to give a sense of this flipping between what we can and can't hold, between the largest scales of the universe and the most intimate..."

You have just finished a mentorship with sculptural artist Susan Jacobs. Susan's work was recently shown in exhibitions Melbourne Now (NGV, Melbourne) and the 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (GOMA, Brisbane). Can you describe some of your interactions?

Susan is a formidable artist and is incredibly generous with her time and ideas; I couldn't be more grateful.

Late last year, she was visiting me in my studio in Footscray and dropping past the markets to buy bags of pig blood to make her work *Wood Flour For Pig Iron* for *Melbourne Now*. We've

had a few laughs about the things we get up to. On another day, we even inadvertently swanned around a crime scene without realising it, because the police hadn't put up their tape yet.

Working with her has really solidified my approach to art making. I've become much more critical in choosing materials. I've also become more aware of those materials that I already have, such as sticky tape or rocks. As artists, everything we need is already at hand; it's just a matter of nutting out what they can do.

I was lucky enough to talk to you in depth about your work when I was writing the catalogue essay for your show Standing Stone at BLINDSIDE in Melbourne. You exhibited a sculptural assemblage of rocks that you found on the Western Victorian Volcanic Plains near Geelong. The rocks are assembled to replicate a formation (or 'constellation') of moles and freckles on your back. What does the image of a constellation evoke for you?

The constellation doesn't exist. They represent an attempt by us to try and make sense of the world, to fit it into patterns that we recognise—the shape of a little pot, a horse or an emu. The actual fact that the stars are millions of light years apart, slowly shifting across tens of thousands of years, is disempowering; we don't actually have any control over these forces. We can just measure them, draw our patterns and tell our stories. I think it's good when we are reminded of these things; it makes us more humble.

Indigenous Australian astronomers drew their patterns from the dark areas between clouds of stars, rather than the points of light. I like that this flips what people from a European tradition expect; it forces me to question my assumptions on how I perceive the world. The two ways of looking at the skies are like the negative and positive—who's to say that one is right over the other?

By mapping out a constellation made by the marks on my own body, I want to give a sense of

this flipping between what we can and can't hold, between the largest scales of the universe and the most intimate—a mole on my own back. My own body becomes an expansive landscape, and by using the volcanic rocks to mark the points, I'm referencing the cycle of material itself. One day I'll also be dirt on the Western Victorian Volcanic Plains.

You are travelling to Berlin for a residency later in the year. What are your dreams for this trip?

I'm equally excited about missing out on a Melbourne winter and exploring a new city and its history. If I can drink a beer in the sun and talk about art and life and everything that spans the two, my needs will have been met.

catherineevans.com.au



©2014 The Meander