



seductive evidence

the work of Patricia Harper





Previous page, top: Patricia Harper, *Beaded Heirloom Keepsake Pouches*, semi-precious stones, metals, glass, sand, polymer clay beads, thread, wax, 1991 – 1998. Photo: © the artist.

Previous page bottom: Patricia Harper, *Acrylic Disc Beads* (lighting feature detail), acrylic, glass, crystal, stainless steel wire, wood, lighting, 2003. Photo: © the artist.

Above left: Patricia Harper and David Forbes, *Neon Beads* (detail), glass, argon/mercury gas, 2003. Photo: © the artist.

Above right: Patricia Harper, *Large Glass Beads* (detail) and *Beaded Heirloom Keepsake Pouch*, hand-blown glass, semi-precious stones, metals, glass, sand, polymer clay beads, thread, wax, 2003. Photo: © the artist.

Stop the world I want to get off, is the title of a 1960s Broadway musical.¹ I can still see the album cover in my mind's eye—a cartoon drawing of a man dangling off the edge of a spinning globe. Whether or not the image exists as I remember it, the album, belonging to my parents, is long since gone in a garage sale. The title however has remained in my head, becoming at times a personal mantra; my own silent shout to a world that goes too fast, is too much, and keeps on spinning out of control. Historically, it is a significant catchphrase used by many and while the context of the phrase varies, its sentiment remains the same. As web author, Sylvia Roff-Marsh, declared: “‘Stop the World, I want to get off’ was the cry of the last century. But the world cannot stop. We are in charge of our own lives. It is us, who must take control, apply the brakes, (and) regulate our speed’.”²

Patricia Harper is a multimedia artist whose work encourages a slower, more intimate and contemplative experience. Despite working concurrently in photography and beading and exploring mutual concepts, *Seductive Evidence* offers the first opportunity for Harper to exhibit both forms together.

Harper's work allows the viewer to take time: time to engage the mind fully and be bewitched by her objects of coloured glass beads, and time to admire the intricate patterns formed by the play of natural and artificial light upon them. There is time also to peer closely at her photographs, and be enthralled by the imperfections in patterns and the infinite possibilities contained within shadows. While Harper's work actively encourages the viewer to slow down and relish their experience of her art, she poses a simultaneous challenge to control the speed of our lives through what she terms passive experiences. These include distractions such as movies, books, shopping and television, which she believes often allow us to avoid the intensity and directness of reality. As she explains:

‘In contemporary society there appears to be an unending absorption with predictable forms of experience such as the order of shops and the predictability of their contents. I suspect the rise of these types of experiences stem from a need to control the overwhelming speed and intensity of our lives. They allow us to be elsewhere rather than be overwhelmed by the bombardment of direct sensation.’

For Harper, direct experience comes from encountering objects or nature through all the senses. For her there is particular emphasis on touch and the authenticity of the tactile experience. In being able to authenticate the object through touch, it becomes part of the body of evidence she collects as proof of existence and a search for meaning. However, she says this pursuit for evidence also goes beyond the tactile experience. She collects empirical evidence of a spiritual energy. Having experienced only unexpected and fleeting moments of this energy, she endeavours to capture its magic in her work.

‘When I experience these transitory moments, like fluid shadows in nature, the way light sparkles or moves and clouds shift across the sky, I feel more solid, more present, more real.’

The process of making art and the search for meaning in life have fused for Harper—it is both a personal and artistic journey.

‘Initially my concept of journey was that there would be something at the end. People would often tell me that the journey was more important than the end but I still wanted to get to the end sometime. I think that lead me to patterning—putting things in a metaphorical box—wanting some structure to understand what was happening in the world. Patterning and the search for an end ultimately lead me to the philosophical/spiritual questioning that most people seem to go through. This in turn brought about the realisation that my pursuit of putting things into “boxes” or organising them, has really been about collecting evidence that I exist—that my existence is enough, that other people exist and that their existence is enough. It’s a science thing—you have a theory and you go about trying to prove it. I am now trying to find out more about the conventionally imperceptible and transitory, without adopting alternative or conventional philosophies, which I am wary of.’

The discovery that the focus is on the journey and not the destination has impacted as much on Harper's art as it has on her life. Her art is now lead by ideas not by conclusions.

As Harper's views coalesce, she still continues to collect evidence as before—through the ordering of material into groups or patterns. This may be through the arrangement of beads in colours and stitches when making a vessel, the careful placement of an object to cast patterns of light and shadow, or the arrangement of photographic images into a collage of disrupted designs. This fascination with groupings (patterns) is, in part, her former training as a scientist being brought to bear upon her art practice.

‘I am still riveted by classification in science, but for those people who are scientists, that doesn't mean I ever wanted to do classification. I am interested in looking at groupings, particularly of invertebrates. For instance, cloned anemones are supposed to be identical, yet if one has been gashed it subsequently has new/more/less cell tissue and is no longer the same. Classification, groupings, and patterning are structures to work within at this particular point in time. They are a way for us to organise our world, to try to understand it. They are not the answer, just a method, and a process. They are a framework to continue exploring. I believe we have a desire to find pattern, regularity, and predictability, especially when we want to know that something is true, and it supports our desire for security.’

As part of her challenge to the apparent absolutism of scientific classification (as it is presented to the public), and the need for human beings to find patterns as a means of understanding their world, Harper creates patterns and breaks them. She disrupts traditional notions of perfection and invites a sense of discovery; jolting the viewer out of any preconceived expectations.

‘Instead of looking for a visual perfection I realised I like what happens when things aren't exactly perfect—it gives the observer an opportunity to see how the pattern is a pattern when it is also disrupted ... this alludes to things I have seen and read about Persian carpets and

Above left: Patricia Harper, *Untitled Cacti* (detail), Photo Collage and Beaded Heirloom Keepsake Pouches, toned silver gelatin photo collage, semi-precious stones, metals, glass, sand, polymer clay beads, thread, wax, 2001. Photo: © the artist.

Above right: Patricia Harper, *Anatomy of a Tree—Part II*, toned silver gelatin photo collage, 2002. Photo: © the artist.

Following page left: Patricia Harper, *Untitled Cacti* (detail), Photo Collage and Beaded Heirloom Keepsake Pouches, toned silver gelatin photo collage, semi-precious stones, metals, glass, sand, polymer clay beads, thread, wax, 2001. Photo: © the artist.

Following page right: Patricia Harper, *Land Vessel II*, semi-precious stones, metals, glass beads, thread, wax, 2002. Photo: © the artist.



Patricia Harper

2003 *Seductive Evidence*, solo exhibition, CQ Gallery, Brisbane and other venues nationally.

2002 *Botanica 2002*, solo exhibition at Queensland Herbarium following a ten-month residency at the Brisbane Botanic Gardens, Mt. Coot-tha, Queensland. *Menacing Delicacy*, solo exhibition at University Art Museum, Southern Cross University, NSW. Received Arts Queensland grant.

2001 Work included in international juried exhibition, *Tea Time: Images of Women, Images of Tea*, House of Photographic Art, California, USA and travelling in USA and Europe through 2003.

1999 Received Arts Queensland Grant. Had work included in *Contemporary Wearables '99*, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, Queensland and other venues nationally.

1998 Liturgical Quilt Commission, Christ Church, St. Lucia, Queensland.

1997 *Shift*, Solo exhibition at Robert Hughes Gallery, Sydney as part of the Metro Arts Artist Agreement, an award for Queensland-based emerging artists.

1996 Completed Master of Arts in Visual Arts (MAVA), Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Queensland. First solo exhibition *I'll Put the Kettle On*, Queensland College of Art Gallery.

1989–93 Worked as Marine Biologist.

the concept of perfection. You take the Ardebil carpet on exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. They deliberately did not dye all the yarn for the carpet at the same time—because if you had all the green exactly the same, or the pattern exactly the same, what you were doing was an affront to God. It was a celebration of what was not perfect; and was being honorable towards that concept of perfection. I often find what appears to be perfection turns out to be banal. I want things to have discovery.'

Harper creates and allows for imperfection in her photography through the mechanical process of reproduction and hand assembly. She finds irony in the idea that mechanical reproduction produces copies and yet inherent in the process is human presence and fallibility.

When she assembles her collages it is an intuitive process that reveals interesting patterns, imperfect joins and subsequent disruption to the overall design. While visually arresting, and capturing a sense of tactility, Harper ultimately sees her photography as somehow mimicking experience. The beaded objects, on the other hand, allow for a direct encounter. The viewer experiences a range of tactile sensations including texture, tension, and temperature, as well as visual displays of light, colour, and shadow.

Harper's work either encourages or recreates a contemplative experience and contributes to her ongoing search for evidence of meaning and existence. As she calls it—shoring up a belief in her own corporeal presence.

Jacquelyn Murphy
Exhibition Curator

Endnotes

1. Written by Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newly.
2. S. Roff-Marsh, Sit and Chat, Tintota, www.tintota.com/support/sit_chat.htm

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