

Dancing Through Darkness And Light

Australian artist Marion Borgelt has passed through numerous dramatic cycles and shifts in her art practice. The passage of time and rhythms of life are central themes in her work, though her uncompromising art is ultimately about strength and beauty.

By Victoria Hynes





In early June, when I visited Australian artist Marion Borgelt's spacious inner city Sydney studio, it quietly hummed with activity. Borgelt and her assistant were working intently on a dramatic low-relief-wall work commissioned for the Shangri-La Hotel in Burma. Around us is a remarkable array of her art from the past two decades—from fluorescent abstract paintings to low-relief-wall pieces and freestanding installations. It is a feast for the eye. To my left is a canvas energized by undulating lines and patterns, entitled *Moondance* (after the Van Morrison song.) To my right, a dramatic tondo, sliced with circular patterns in the artist's signature black and red pigments, like the iris of the eye. Before me, a rhythmic formation of timber spheres covered in fragments of duck eggs; and, behind me, delicate glass orbs of her *Venetian Tsukimi* series.

The scope of Borgelt's multi-disciplinary practice is grand. She moves from painting to sculpture to installation and large-scale public art with ease and without compromising her vision. Borgelt makes elegant minimalist works meticulously based on natural forms, so there is an emphasis on the range of materials in her work: wax, felt, beeswax, and wood; stone, stainless steel, glass, and Perspex.

Borgelt is drawn to fundamental shapes: the circle, the crescent, the sphere, the spiral, the oval and the grid. Diverse as her practice is, there is a common thread in her work—the interplay of polarities—the organic and the man-made, light and shade, the conceptual and the sensual, the cosmic and the primordial, the micro-cosmic and macrocosmic. Her dynamic is derived from the shifting balance of dualities.

Since the 1980s, Marion Borgelt has been a major force in Australian art. Her breadth and range as an artist continues to grow. She was born in 1954, in Wimmera, in the regional Victorian wheat belt of Australia. When she was a child, she recalls, she was fascinated by nature's forms. "I was always



Marion Borgelt, Blue Moon Cascade, 2016, solid glass spheres, white ft, duck eggshell, timber, perspex, 41 x 200 x 21 cm.

interested in the formation of things. I collected things such as cocoons and nests. I thought they were just marvelous creations: the homes of living creatures. They were very beautiful things."¹

The artist left her country upbringing as a teenager, when she moved to Adelaide to study at the South Australian School of Art. Her early art life was as a painter. Her abstract canvases were in-

formed by her rural childhood. "I think it's inevitable, growing up on a farm in distant Victoria until the age of 18, that it influenced me in all formative thinking. I would go back to the farm and do abstract work based on the landscape."

After leaving art school, Borgelt developed a minimalist painting style that avoided figurative elements, yet was based on biomorphic forms. As diverse as her practice has been over the years, this still applies to her work. After art school, where she was awarded the prestigious Harry P. Gill Memorial Medal, she taught briefly until she received a travelling art scholarship, which allowed her to leave Australia for the first time. Arriving in New York was a thrilling experience for her.

"It was a really big shock but I loved it," she says. "At that period of my life it was so influential. What it did teach me is that art could be a full-time endeavor and that was a blessing, because up until that time, I hadn't really experienced making art full-time. After being at the New York Studio School, I saw it as a way of life and I came back and it became my way of life."

However, after Borgelt returned to



Above foreground: Marion Borgelt, Tsukimi Variation: No.1, 2007–2008, Empress white marble, Chinese black marble, gold-etched rim, recycled red ironbark plinths, 85 x 146 x 180 cm; **background: Marion Borgelt, Liquid Light: 44 Degrees, 2006**, canvas, acrylic, pins, timber, 148 x 302 cm. **Previous pages foreground: Marion Borgelt, Venetian Tsukimi No. 2, 2007–2009**, 16 solid Murano glass spheres on mild steel and perspex plinth, 57 x 340 x 20 cm; **background: Marion Borgelt, Lunar Arc: Figure D, 2007**, hoop pine ply, aluminum leaf, shellac varnish, French polish, polyurethane, 146 x 364 x 16 cm (installation size of 10 pieces). All images: Courtesy of the Artist, Dominik Mersch Gallery, Karen Woodbury Gallery, and Turner Galleries.



Marion Borgelt, Lunar Swell No.4, 2013, aluminum leaf, tinted varnish, MDF, polyurethane; 37 x 179 x 15 cm.

Australia, she struggled to find a new means of artistic expression. “There was a time when I felt quite lost,” she says. “How do I find my voice back here after such an extreme hothouse of teaching and learning from New York? Step by step I gravitated back to the landscape and nature. For a while, I was doing very organic worlds, painted worlds that really had a sense of energy trapped inside them. They may have been about foliage coalescing, wind and movement and energy forming, something that suggested a recognizable form but they stayed abstract; just on the cusp of becoming.”

In 1986, along with fellow artist Jenny Watson, she represented Australia at the *Indian Triennale of Art*. In 1989, she received a French Government art fellowship to live and work in Paris. This was a defining moment for Borgelt for during this time she branched out into three-dimensional work.

Struggling with a new language, Borgelt began to explore linguistic symbols and semiotics in her art. In *A Cryptologist's Memoir*, she created ‘books’ on literature, science, religion, and medicine with arcane symbols carved out of wax and preserved in resin like ancient tomes.

Her eight years in Paris heightened her interest in conceptual art and metaphysics: “The Australian landscape didn’t belong in

Paris; there was such a gulf between the two cultures; there still is an enormous gulf,” she says. “The French think very cerebrally so I can see a strong conceptual thread running through French art. The landscape isn’t terribly important because it’s very manicured and the natural world isn’t that profound in their thinking.”

During her time in Paris, Borgelt continued to exhibit with Christine Abrahams Gallery in Melbourne. She returned to Australia permanently in 1998. Soon after her return, she was the first Australian artist to receive the prestigious Pollock-Krasner Fellowship in the

late 1990s, which was followed up in 2001 with a two-year fellowship from the Australia Council.

Throwing herself energetically back into the local art scene, Marion Borgelt began to make large-scale corporate works (most significantly her *Primordial Alphabet and Rhythm* piece commissioned by Rupert and Anna Murdoch for News Limited’s Sydney foyer in 1999). In 2001, for the Australian National University in Canberra, she also constructed the major wall piece *Pulse*—a rhythmic grid made out of stainless steel that simulates gravitational waves. Additionally she began making installation pieces for exhibition, which included *Personnae Suite: No.1-17* (2000), which centered on a cluster of wooden pestles from Rajasthan covered in a black-wax sheen with deep-red interiors. These vessels are arranged in front of a monumental, paneled painting, its hovering banded patterns executed in the same striking color palette.

Moving between painting and sculpture, Borgelt challenges herself with land works, of which her most ambitious project has been the *55 Ring Maze* (2000), a cornfield maze constructed on a farm at Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula, for the collector Michael Savage. “The maze fitted in nicely with what I was working on with grids—using Celtic



Marion Borgelt, Pulse, 2001, stainless steel comments set into rendered brick wall; 540 x 260 x 9.5 cm. Gravitational Wave Theory Research Building, ANU, Canberra.

patterns to overlap and underlap and play with rhythms. It was a crop maze—it was ephemeral. The corn was then fed to elephants at the Melbourne zoo. So it did have a life after death. There should be more ephemeral art. I don't see why everything should be made to last forever. I feel strongly about it. I would love to do more land art pieces."

Another major shift in direction saw Borgelt working with glass after visiting the Venetian island of Murano. Working there with the master glass artist Adriano Berengo, she made groups of exquisite glass orbs that reflected the Japanese tradition of *tsukimi* (moon viewing), a time when ritualistic offerings are made. "I was one of the only Australian artists to work in Murano and that happened by sheer coincidence. I met Adriano at an opening in Sydney. He runs a glass studio over there and said he was interested in meeting an Australian artist to work with. He came to my studio; he probably couldn't imagine how I could work with glass. But when I went over there, I had an idea of metamorphosing form. It was too hard to change the shapes, which were spheres, but what we changed was the relationship between the crystal glass and the black glass. I was the first artist who worked



Marion Borgelt, *Eternity*, 2008, South Australian granite—mirror polished and honed, 120 x 630.7 x 333.2 cm. Private property, Hunter Valley, New South Wales.

with him in a progressive way."

The scope of her work seems to have no limits. Her more recent *Liquid Light* series (2014–2016) plays on the boundaries between the two- and three-dimensional. She makes canvases painted with waves that are then meticulously and rhythmically slashed for dynamic opti-

cal effect. A work from this series hangs in the reception lobby of the Macau's Crown Towers building at *City of Dreams*. Other commissions include *Time and Tide (waits for no man)* (2004), an outdoor installation for JP Morgan Chase, and the *Strobe* series (2008), a foyer installation for Mirvac, both in Sydney,



Marion Borgelt, *55 Ring Maze*, 1999–2000, corn field maze with timber bridge and poles, height:250 cm x width 80 m x length 110 m. Arthur's Seat, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria.

and a commemorative installation at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, Canada (2005). Another recent site-specific work, *Candescent Moon* (2011), was made for the lobby of 101 Collins Street in Melbourne: it is a beautifully simple arc of circular shapes emulating the cyclical phases of the moon.

Borgelt loves the collaborative process of working with a corporate or private collector: “When you form a relationship with an incredible collector, it helps you grow. I have had some, who have encouraged me to think bigger and would love more because I really love large scale. It has been the wonderful collectors and people who have commissioned me who have encouraged new growth and new areas of development.”

Borgelt says that large-scale work necessarily involves careful preparation and collaboration with various skilled craftspeople/makers. “When I work with assistants, I need people who are skilled in very different areas, because there isn’t another me. I can turn my hand from power tools to fashioning wax, but there isn’t another person who can do all this, so I have to look at people with particular skills in one area or a couple of areas and then form a small collection of assistants.”

Over the past decade, Borgelt has been more drawn toward corporate and public projects that allow her to work on a monumental scale. This reflects her growing interest in architecture and design. Nevertheless, her love of making smaller groups of work for exhibition has not diminished, as she skillfully moves from one medium and scale to another. “I love that, for not only am I the *chef d’orchestre* but I do everything. I choose what free-



Marion Borgelt, *Liquid Light: Honeycomb No.1*, 2011, canvas, acrylic, timber, pins, 190 x 360 cm.

doms I give myself or don’t. But a public or private commission will challenge me in a different way, so I like them both. There have been public commissions I haven’t taken on because the restrictions were limiting. You’ve got to match yourself with the brief, but not compromise it or not water it down.”

At the core of Marion Borgelt’s art is her ability to challenge herself in her art practice. She is not afraid to experiment. However, her underlying themes remain the same: “My work has really remained about metaphysical subjects and the sense of time, how time impacts, cycles, what are the cycles that we experience that impact and define our life, natural cycles. Our own lives are a natural cycle.”

Perhaps the *raison d’être* for her art remains connected to her early experiences of the natural world. Borgelt works on a number of projects at the same time. When we met, she had a show due at

Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne, in September and another at Turner Galleries, Perth, in May 2017. (She is also represented by Dominik Mersch Gallery in Sydney.)

The artist’s energy, vision, and output are undiminished. When asked about her legacy, she laughs. “I’m just a little bee in the beehive collecting the pollen. Perhaps what I see is that my art will offer the legacy of beauty. I love things that are beautiful, but also have strength. There is strength in the pieces. They are done with a no-holds-barred attitude. The work is without compromise.” Δ

Note:

1. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from an interview between the writer and the artist in Sydney on June 1, 2016.

Victoria Hynes is a Sydney-based arts writer and editor.



Above left: Marion Borgelt, *Cryptologists’ Memoir: Generation 2*; 2007; books, wax, pigment, ribbon, perspex box, timber; dimensions variable. **Above right:** Marion Borgelt, *Personae Suite: Nos 1–17* (foreground), 2000, Rajasthani wooden mortars, pigment, beeswax, timber plinths; configuration variable.