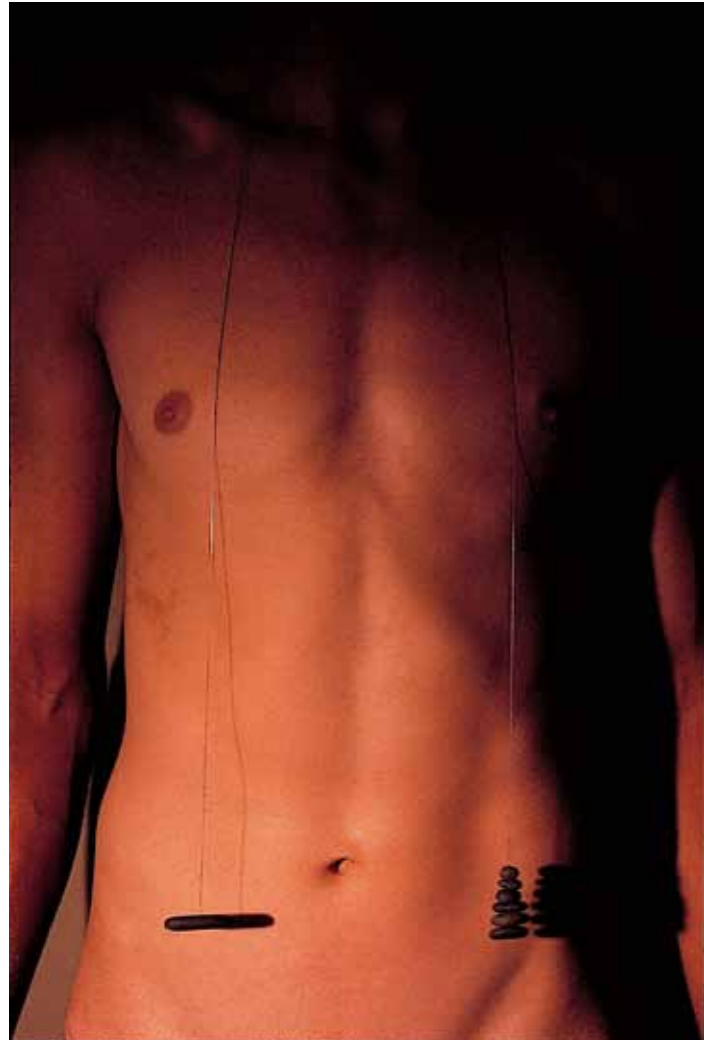


aAR's editor explores the remarkable works of an artist who has worked with silver, steel, graphite, lead, pure gold, marble, granite and pigment.

MARGARET WEST





We have only to cast our gaze across Sydney's coastal canyons of yellow sandstone, and the buildings constructed from it, to form some sense

of the eons which have deposited wind-blown, pinprick-sized particles of quartz, grain upon grain, layer upon layer, and then compressed and deformed them. Equally, every stone we pocket from a river bed, a rock pool or a desert dune has its very own history — a history we can imaginatively bring to life, should we choose.

This might be a good context for looking at the work of an artist and jeweller, Margaret West, who has, in recent years, explored the properties of granite, slate, pumice, marble and basalt in the making of a series of enigmatic objects — many of which can be worn on the body.

Around 1985, after years of working with wood, silver, lead, gold and stainless steel, West turned to found river pebbles. These were chosen for their fineness of form, their subtle

colour changes, their varieties of scale and perhaps their embodiment of the geological upheavals that led to their form and their location.

Like the Egyptian priest who weighed a human heart on one side of a scale and the feather of the goddess Ma'at on the other, West balanced these drilled stones on fine stainless steel cords and suspended them around the neck — or from perspex mounts. A number of these sombre enigmatic pieces were purchased by the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Powerhouse, the art galleries of Western and South Australia, and by some committed private collectors.

A more recent series appearing in the 1990s began with the idea of the flower, or the simplest of motifs which would embody it, such as the trefoil and quatrefoil of mediaeval churches. Why the flower? Why the mediaeval motifs? West has spent time in cemeteries where death, though concealed, is everywhere, witnessed only by the silent sentinels in stone. Flowers placed on graves wilt, but they also spring up in mischievous patches as if to assert



Previous pages:

Left: Margaret West, *STILL LIFE natura mortua*, installation, 2003, granite, basalt, marble, slate, paint, graphite, wax, 6m x 6m x 10cm. Photograph Rauno Traskelin. Collection Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Gallery.

Right: Margaret West, *Eight stones with steel*, 1985, stones, stainless steel cable. Photograph Margaret West.

This page:

Above: Margaret West, *Petal*, 1997, stone, paint, silver, largest dimension 41mm. Photograph Margaret West.

Right top: Margaret West, *Tab*, 1996, slate, paint, silver, largest dimension 52mm. Photograph Margaret West.

Right bottom: Margaret West, *Memorandum 1-V1* (detail), 1995, stone, 24ct gold, largest dimension c.8cm. Collection Art Gallery of Western Australia. Photograph Margaret West.

Opposite page:

Top left: Margaret West, *Thy Name is Being Writ*, (Luminaries series), 2005, Carrara marble, paint, silver, largest dimension 8cm. Photograph Margaret West.

Top right: Margaret West, *Limit*, (Luminaries series), 2005, largest dimension 8cm. Photograph Margaret West.

Bottom left: Margaret West, *STILL LIFE natura mortua*, detail from installation, 2003, slate, paint, graphite, wax, c.10cm. Photograph Rauno Traskelin. Collection Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Gallery.

Bottom right: Margaret West, *Rosa incensa*, (Fatal Flowers series), 2004, basalt, paint, silver, largest dimension, 7.3cm. Photograph Margaret West.



new life. Gravestones, like the cathedrals of the mediaeval world, are always made of stone — and of course the mediaeval world was obsessed with death and decay.

West has quietly conflated the enduring nature of stone with the ephemeral nature of flowers and their presence alongside stillness and death. She initially favoured blue — a colour with associations since Sumerian and Egyptian times with the heavens and life- giving water, and red with its intimations of life and blood — and indeed of life ebbing away.

One of the earliest pieces in this series, dated 1997, was a small smooth quartz river pebble — into which had been scratched a rudimentary floral form. These incised lines were then enlivened with blue pigment rubbed into the grooves of the stone. The satisfying contours of larger stones, redolent of the millions of years it took to produce their smooth forms, were given

a new focus (not unlike the coast of little Bay trussed in fabric in 1969 by the Bulgarian artist Christo) by wrapping them in the one metallic element which is incorruptible: gold.

More recently, she has taken not pebbles, but pieces of stone and reshaped them, slicing them into two-dimensional surfaces which are worked to assemble (in some of her series) a specific narrative with a humanist core.

If the paintings on the walls of caves, the figurines and the engraved stones embodied the impulse to create some kind of symbolic order over chaos, to impose some pattern on crowded perceptions, then perhaps we have a template for an examination of an extraordinary body of recent work. One might even suggest that West's current work represents some kind of exorcism of the conflicted feelings that arise from surveying the wreckage of man indulging in his favourite pastime: carnage.

West's work began, and has remained, at the furthest edge of contemporary jewellery concerns. Her pieces can mostly be worn, but they are finely tuned to a range of emotional extremities — like sound frequencies which are almost, but not quite, out of the range of our hearing. Contributing to an exhibition called *Luminaries* in 2006, West mounted fifty-two carved and painted brooches from marble and silver in a work entitled *FRIEZE: Ecce Homo (précis)*. Aesthetically, they were related to an earlier series with the resplendently optimistic title *The Sky is a Garden*. However, these works were far darker in spirit and were driven in part by body images from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Scored and marked marble forms shadow, in the most abstracted and formally compelling fashion, a poetry of horrors: dislocations, flayings and puncturing. If anything, apart from their formal beauty, they might represent the



long march out of the cave and the short march back into it.

In 2003, West produced a remarkable installation which travelled to Finland in 2005 and was exhibited along with the work of Paula Winokur (USA) and Kristina Riska (Finland) at Helsinki's Design Museum. The exhibition she took part in was called *3 + 3 = Three Voices, Three Continents, One World*.

West's floor installation *Still Life (natura mortua)* — six metres square — was composed of hundreds of elemental flower forms shaped from granite, marble, slate and basalt. Tonally they were sombre, even funereal, and yet as they had been burnished with different coloured pigments, graphite and wax, they appeared to hum with the mystery of a solar system alive with stars. Thus was the delicate microcosm of the work transferred into something endless and universal. In 2008, this installation was

exhibited at, and ultimately acquired by, The Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Gallery.

Another body of eloquent works, produced in 2004, was titled *Fatal Flowers*. The viewer could viscerally intuit these works as either crimson flowers, as the entry point of a wound to the body — or explosions of blood. Individually they had titles like *Rosa contusa*, *Rosa excruciatata*, *Rosa cruoris* (wound with clotted blood) and *Rosa scissa* (torn, rent).

Last year, West delivered some thoughts on working with stone in the online metalsmith and jewellers' site Klimt02 (31 July 2010), where she described the unique challenges of working with stone. "Notice, I don't say worked in stone. To work with stone is a uniquely collaborative venture. Almost all other materials I've used have the potential to be controlled absolutely. As might be expected, I have other reasons for working with that obdurate and temperamental

substance, simultaneously so adamant yet so fickle; unyielding, yet liable to crack without warning. I am drawn to the history it carries in its very atoms, not only the history of its role in the formation of our own world — the solid world beneath our feet, but the history — perhaps romance is a better word — the romance of its use from human time immemorial, from the advent of the first use of stone tools by homo faber (man the maker) and since, from Paleolithic times to the present. Stone is a venerable material. One that elicits respect. One that demands it. There are numerous adages spruiked at makers about respect for materials, and tools. They are superfluous when confronted by a piece of stone." □