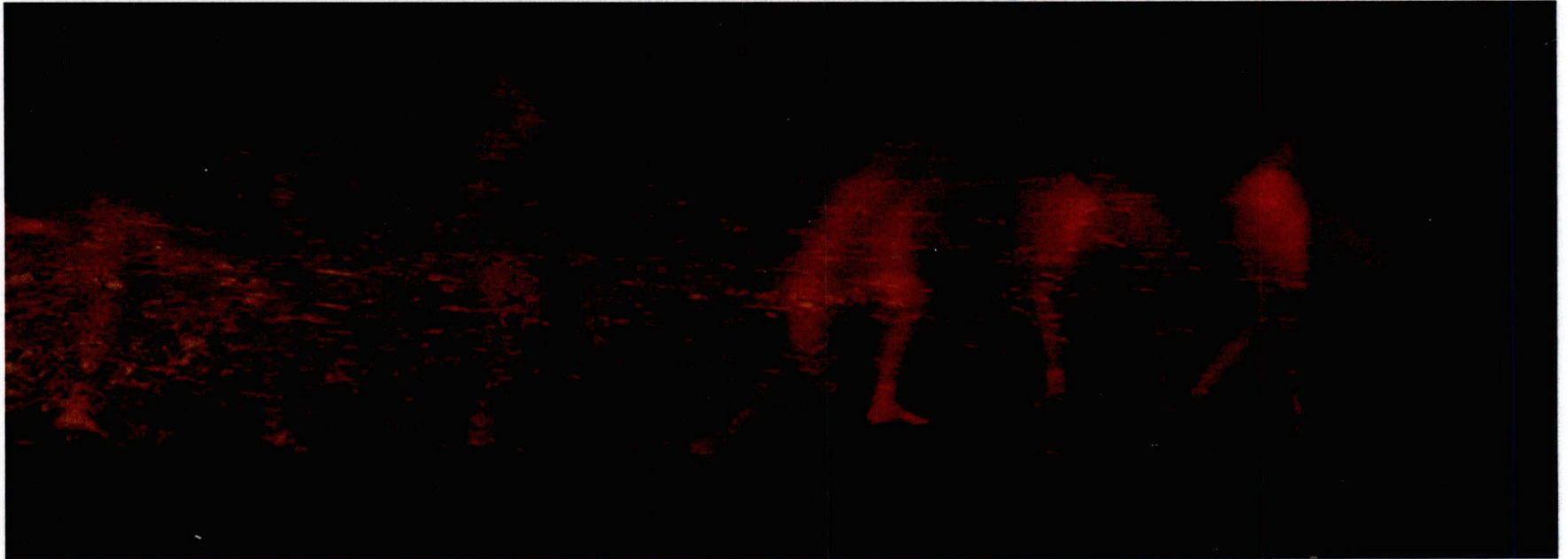


# Lured to the Surface

Exegesis by Leslie John Wright B.A. (Design)



Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts (Research) University of Tasmania August 1996

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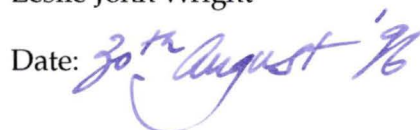
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### Abstract

*By exploring that vigorous littoral edge, via memory, I understand how the rhythms and energies of the waves of heat, of wind, of the ocean and of desire, shape the forms of my oeuvre - my drawings, objects and furniture.*

An interpretation of the ambient, metaphoric, and sociological phenomenon of a lifetime experiencing the Western Australian coastline is drawn on to develop a body of designs that respond to this context.

The regional emphasis is supported by research of the artists John Wolesley and John Olsen, and of the architects Alvar Aalto, Jørn Utzon and Carlo Scarpa. Historic comparisons of the fin de siècle with current perceptions are also made by examining attitudes of sexuality, passivity and vitality.

Focusing on the philosophy and lifestyle of our beach and surfing culture demonstrates how the trait of informality may be translated into tangible form, and how rhythms of energy may be contrasted with an expression of the contemplative. A series of impressions evolve which inform the thesis, the tangible body of work.

## Acknowledgments

The challenge of a critical environment balanced by the valued encouragement of my friends, colleagues and students, has been essential to this research. I am especially grateful to my perceptive supervisor, Kevin Perkins, for his guidance through gesticulation and analogous discourse, and for navigating the way, Associate Professor Rod Ewins, Associate Professor Jonathan Holmes and John Smith. I have been most fortunate to have Edward Colless critique my work on memorable occasions throughout my studies. His elucidation is inspiring.

Producing this thesis has necessitated accessing a broad range of craft practices, materials, processes and services. Whilst the research, design and principle making has been my own, such production relies on collaboration. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance given, either remunerated or gratis, by the following individuals and businesses who have shared their finely honed skills.

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## Introduction

'She's the sea breeze,' I say with a wave of my hand over a meandering stream of carved wood. I'm describing an unfinished table-form to friends. Like a pennant of silk she drifts over the heated sands mimicking the dune formations beneath. Teasingly, she hovers, appears to subside, and then turns emphatically back to the shore. The breeze has arrived. Another image, this time of Cathy Freeman, flags held aloft, running and turning to cheering spectators is also encapsulated within the work. It's a vivid image. Dancing behind her assured stride is a group of playful children. These elements, combined and interpreted into a linear table, materialise fluently. My friends return a quizzical glance. I reassure them that I'm not crazed, just that the metaphor is an intense one, waiting to be made corporeal since I sketched it seemingly long ago, like its siblings of steel and paper cellulose. The intervening period between the spontaneity of those dream-like concept sketches and their manifestation has been, however, a time of questioning.

To understand the broader picture I need to look back. My journey as a designer commenced around ten years earlier, soon after graduating from the West Australian Institute of Technology (Curtin University), just as I was beginning to identify those sources which could sustain my oeuvre. Running a design practice was a lesson in pragmatism, rather than soulfulness. It was like being aboard a vessel on which I found myself careering along, driven by many varied forces. The opportunity to step off the vessel at the Centre for the Arts on the Derwent River offered a much needed respite. University seemed an enlightening vantage point to survey my brief career in design and to endeavour to rediscover the sources I needed to draw upon to develop my work.

Initially this period in Tasmania stimulated my senses, though its wintry mantle soon evoked vibrant images of summer on the edge of the Indian Ocean. After several months I slid into a lengthy period of fallow as I adjusted to the realities of working within the critical and diverse environment of the art school. My productivity lapsed without the incentive of the commissions which had been the backbone of my practice and which had contributed handsomely to the hefty costs of prototyping. Further, I laboured under the misplaced notion that my designs should be viable within the commercial arena, thus thwarting an underlying desire to start afresh.

The time was ripe for a total re-evaluation of my practice to date and that of being a designer within our society generally. Is it reasonable given our dwindling resources to produce a demanding prototype just for the sake of satisfying an urge to manifest new ideas? What of all the potential waste of jigs, formwork, energy and other resources if the work gains little response? Will the piece have any relevance beyond the gallery floor? Do we really need more seating designs, or tables, or cabinets? Why not be satisfied with well executed drawings of the concept perhaps at full scale?

It wasn't until I received commissions during my studies that I really felt motivated to create new works. My efforts had otherwise been burdensome in their conception and execution.

It took some time for me to realise that I was under no obligation to generate yet more industrial products to satisfy some questionable notion of society's needs and desires. The architect and writer, Allesandro Mendini demonstrates the need for a refreshing change in design attitudes when he states, "Today, in a world reduced and deconfigured by technology and information, the Homeric task of design is all the more urgent. This is why I talk about "Design as an Odyssey" to transform the boundless contemporary catalogue of goods into a landscape to be crossed on a journey of discovery and poetry."<sup>1</sup>

Following soon after the commissioned works (the *Gymnos II* dining table with *Décolleté* chairs, the *Kimono* cabinet, and the *Settee for Jo*) came the urge to model the gesticulative metaphoric pieces representative of the sources discovered through my research. These designs, like the meandering *Then She Turns*, became responsive drawings at life scale and without the demands of the formal designs in wood and cast alloy. Once I accepted that furniture *per se* was merely the framework for my mode of expression, and that expectations of function, form, materials and finish were issues to be addressed subsequent to symbolism, then my work gained a sense of vitality, as did I. In turn, practical issues were readily resolved becoming integrated as if patterns of organic growth.

This study is a personal one with a regional emphasis, yet its outcome may ultimately be more broadly appreciated, for as the Japanese designer Kenji Ekuan stated (in broken English) "Every culture starts from the local. Local is a good spice to make the life happy".<sup>II</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mendini, A. *International Design Yearbook*, Laurence King, London, 1996. p. 9

<sup>II</sup> Speaking at the 1988 *First International Design Forum*, Singapore, 1988

In seeking to identify the sources which shape my work I made a study in three parts, broadly defined as i) spirit of place, ii) metaphoric influences, and iii) sociological factors. There is a natural overlapping of these influences which provides a wellspring from which I'm able to draw. The reward for this investment of time has manifested in my latest works, which hold the promise of things yet to come.

Identifying sources acts to rekindle the spirit, allowing the sensations and emotions of a life's experiences to resurface. My research (both historical and otherwise) has enabled me to locate my work within existing discourse and confirms my contemporary context. This exegesis acts to describe my tangible work by revealing influential factors and emphasises those cryptographic elements which are paramount to my participation in the decorative arts.

# Lured to the Surface

## PART 1

<sup>1</sup> Winton, T. *Cloudstreet*, Penguin, Australia, 1992. p. 126

### Last summer

Stony cold air touches my face as I rouse before winter's dawn. In these moments slumber seems as brooding as the sombre mountain which walls out the west of which I dream. That evocative line, "Summer came whirling out of the night and stuck fast", comes to mind and transports me far across to the other side of the continent. Drifting in and out of penumbral sleep, I wonder why I've chosen to isolate myself here.

Summer came whirling out of the night and stuck fast. One morning late in November everybody got up at Cloudstreet and saw the white heat washing in through the windows. The wild oats and buffalo grass were brown and crisp. The sky was the colour of kerosene. The air was thin and volatile ... The river sucked up the sky and went flat and glittery right down the middle of the place and people went to it in boats and britches and barebacked. Where the river met the sea, the beaches ran north and south, white and broad as highways in a dream ... <sup>1</sup>

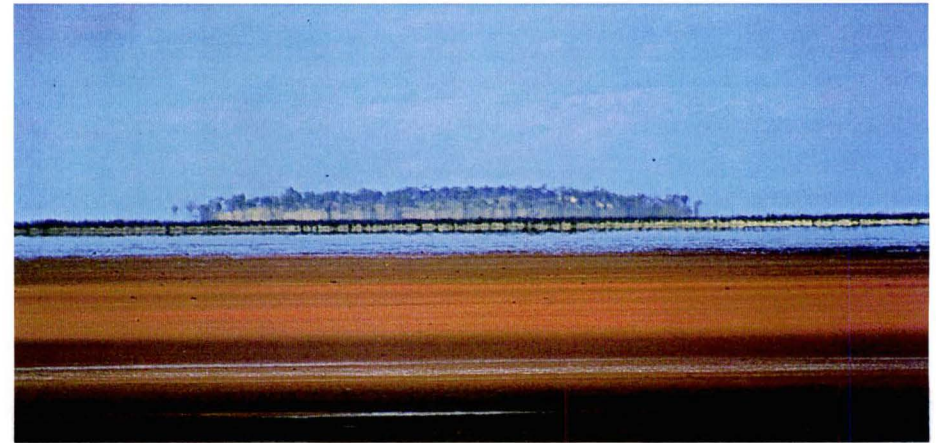
1 Coastal Scene Near Dongara  
Western Australia

This is Tim Winton's impression of summer in the city of Perth. Having spent most of my life in Western Australia, I feel it too. There you know you're on the western edge of the continent. In the unrelenting January/February/March ovenheat that edge is in flux, a blurred quivering line between the dry sandblasted land and the shimmering Indian Ocean.

By exploring that vigorous littoral edge, via memory, I understand how the rhythms and energies of the waves of heat, of wind, of the ocean and of desire, shape the forms of my oeuvre; my drawings, objects and furniture.







2 Island mirage

To most responsively describe my work I need to identify how the Australian coastal environment has influenced it. Architectural theorist, Gaston Bachelard confirms this need when he states:

But the related problems are many if we want to determine the profound reality of all the subtle shadings of our attachment for a chosen spot ... We would therefore have to say how we inhabit our vital space, in accord with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a 'corner of the world'.<sup>2</sup>

It comes naturally to immerse myself in the coastal region where I seek out metaphorical and ambient interpretations. A series of impressions evolve which inform the thesis, my tangible body of work. As far as I have the perspective, being the creator of the work, I will now interpret how I understand my designs are shaped by their source.

For, as Stefan Buzas wrote in his forward to *Carlo Scarpa: Architecture in Details*, "to express in words a visual process can only be peripheral and partial to the artist's innermost creative processes. Such processes are the drawings that suggest the way from innumerable ideas and a continuous flow of conceptions toward a singular and completed work".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bachelard, G. *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969. p.4

<sup>3</sup> Albertine, B. and Bagnoli, S. *Carlo Scarpa: Architecture in Details*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988. p. vii

### A state of flux

From afar, my imagination vitalises the abstract nature of the coastline, which has been at the heart of my life experience, with its essences, rhythms, patterns, textures and colours.

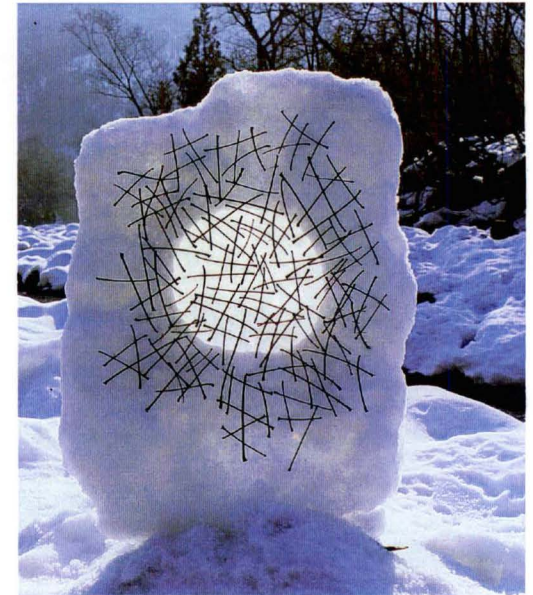
When I contemplate the rolling swell of heat on that coastal edge, the mirage over the sea, the vapour, the smoke, the dust and pollen, the flurry of children in the shore break, of waves surging and flushing the sand and limestone, it seems to me that everything is in a state of flux. I recall an insightful description of changing matter given by a priest and scholar of both Catholicism and Buddhism, Father Doug Conlan. One Easter evening, after dinner with friends in a town on the south coast, Father Conlan demonstrated his perception of objects in flux with a master's blend of eloquence and gesticulation. He explained that nothing is ever stable. Everything is decomposing, eroding, corroding, abrading, fraying or weathering away. The coveted silver vessel is not the solid object it appears but merely a more condensed matter than the air about it, gradually imperceptibly however dissipating. Stability is only apparent within the relativity of our perception of time.

While inanimate objects appear comparatively stable, plants and animals, (indeed, we humans too) are in a constant state of flux. We embody an ebb and flow of secretions, of menstruation, of saliva and sweat, and of hair and skin feathering away, of inhalation and exhalation. We inspire and ultimately we expire. We merely appear to be defined contained forms. This chemistry of secretions and emotions is interpreted through sensory perceptions and some perceive it as aura. The sculptor Andy Goldsworthy is sensitive to the aura-like fields in nature.

The energy and space around a material  
are as important  
as the energy and space within.  
The weather - rain, sun, snow, hail, mist, calm -  
is that external space made visible.  
When I touch a rock I am touching and working  
the space around it.  
It is not independent of its surroundings  
and the way it sits  
tells how it came to be there.  
In an effort to understand  
why the rock is there  
and where it is going.  
I must work with it in the area in which  
I found it <sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Goldsworthy, A. *A Collaboration With Nature*,  
Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1990. Introduction

3 Andy Goldsworthy *Slab of Snow*, 1987





The subtlety of emanation or exhalation we call aura well defines my notion of the margin or edge. (Aura, from the Latin; breath or breeze.) The breeze can act to disperse elements softening the edge of matter.

The action of the breeze hastens the transformation of the tangible into the intangible such as the way it whips at the crest of a breaking wave shedding spray and foam. It is catalytic too in assisting fire to burn matter changing it into chemicals, smoke and ash. Less apparently wind, water and sand team up to create abrasive waves which erode rocks and shells creating more sand. Similarly, wind-driven heat hastens the melting of ice into water, and water into vapour.



Tim Winton wrote his only published work of non-fiction, *Land's Edge*, while living in the fishing and holiday township of Lancelin, a splinter of fibro development squeezed between massive shifting sand dunes and the sea. He describes the effect of the off-shore breeze and its about-face into the inevitable sea breeze, that meteorological phenomenon of ephemeral trade across the coastal boundary.

4 *The Fremantle Doctor* brings cool relief

The western summer is ruled by wind. Here the wind is a despot...On a summer's morning the sea smells of the land and the dunes become airborne. Sand falls out far beyond the smoke of bushfires to become a haze in the water, a puzzlement to fish. It's morning when people are about, when the sea is bullied flat by the wind and the air is hot and dry. Just before noon the easterly mellows and becomes benign and before long cicadas and birds find full voice in the sudden quiet, the coastline briefly becomes Mediterranean. This mild interlude might last five minutes or an hour, but it is never more than a lull, an imitation of gentle weather. Before long the horizon begins to go wobbly. It stacks up mirages of boats, islands, capes, and the milky sea is streaked with lines of gooseflesh. You can see the Doctor coming in the distance, a ruffling line, an advancing front that curves in from the sou'west.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Winton, T. *Land's Edge*, Macmillan, Australia, 1993. p.15

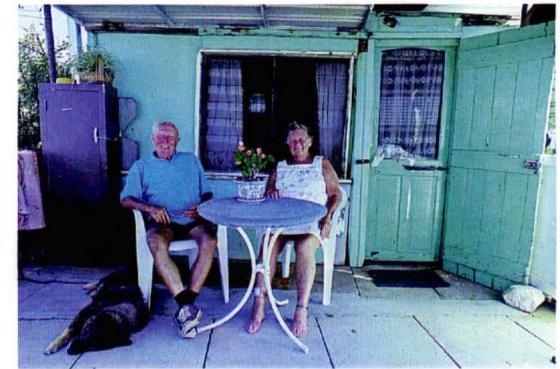


Winton's craft inspires my own. We grew up in towns which bore all the clumsy signs of rogue development brimming with post-war optimism. Such towns were settled or squatted on a whim, thankfully mostly on the fringe of some feature in an otherwise monotonous landscape: a riverbank, an estuary, forest or stretch of potential wheatbelt or, for my good fortune, the ocean's edge. Society then seemed to model its ideals straight out of the pages of *Women's Weekly*. Yet out of the awkwardness of such places and their resilient characters, Winton often creates a humorous even poetic image of life. When he turns to the land and seascape, the textures and rhythms of his writing can readily be translated into tangible form.

The artist, John Olsen demonstrates his feelings for this country through his drawings and what I particularly enjoy about his work is what I see as its vernacularity. Not only in its colour and texture but the gangly easy going calligraphic quality of line that seems to so frankly describe his subject. The other aspect is his apparent fascination with the fecund margin - particularly the edge - between land and water or water and sky.

At times it is as if the creatures and organisms in his paintings secrete a pigmented trail. At the appropriate moment - either the single arc of a honeyeater landing on a blossom or a matrix of disturbed staccato markings - Olsen captures the image on canvas or paper. For Olsen the very essence of painting is movement, "nature is never static, it's in constant flux."<sup>6</sup>

Olsen's work demonstrates the impression of movement and its continuity; that he has captured a part of the whole; that the landscape sweeps beyond as do the flights of birds. His studies of Lake Eyre being 'the edge of the void' reverses the perception we have of a nation looking out from its coastal fringe or as Phillip Drew metaphorically described it, "In Australia the beach is a verandah, a verandah at the edge of the continent."<sup>7</sup>



5 Roy and Rita, Naval Base, W.A.



6 Tom and Nora, Denham, W.A.

<sup>6</sup> Hart, D. *John Olsen*, Craftsman House, Tortola, 1991. p. ix

<sup>7</sup> Drew, P. *Verandah*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992. p.84



## Primal desires

Trying to work as the West Australian desert air pervades my studio in East Fremantle, with limestone walls retaining the heat from the preceding days, becomes unbearable. Sweat blots my drafting film. In the workshop, jarrah dust clings

and stains like rust. Outside when the Swan stills, the heat simmers my imagination inducing a primal desire to be in the surf. The urge becomes addictive; instinctual at least. With the merciless heat around midday the sea becomes milky calm, there is the urge to drop everything, to cancel meetings and steal away just to be there. Little has changed since my friends and I attended the hinterland high school. Then, the rebellious surfers we were seen to be would play truant on such scorchers of days, responding to the elemental call to migrate back to the coast. It's as if you are consumed by a crazed energy that needs relieving, but relief comes quickly once you plunge in and thrash about. It's a momentary easing however, lasting only while you remain immersed or until the cooling sea breeze arrives agitating the water and soothing the flesh.

The electric cleansing of the surf is astonishing, the cold effervescing over the head and trunk and limbs. And the internal results are a greater wonder. At once the spirits lift. There is a grateful pleasure in the last hour or so of softer December daylight. The brain sharpens. The body is charged with agility and grubby lethargy swept away.<sup>8</sup>

With the last light of the day the contradictory sea breeze, (which in its irritating persistence does, however, bring cool relief), exhausts itself ushering in a balmy stillness. This is that other margin. The evanescent margin of twilight when the fat sun becomes a molten mirage out to sea and the world around you glows, gilt by fire.

Without the fanning of the breeze the air soon becomes hot again. Back by the shoreline, the black roads and car parks, and brick pavilions on the esplanade, and the absorbing sands generate the solar energy collected throughout the protracted day. It is a spell when the bustle becomes tranquillised by the oppressive heat. Yet within, a growing sense of restlessness is aroused. Twilight seems a fecund interlude in this place.

<sup>8</sup> Drewe, R. *The Bodysurfers*, James Fraser, Sydney, 1983. p.158

<sup>7</sup> William Dobell *Bondi*, 1961





Nestled in the hollows between creamy dunes, on beach towels, under the vaults of limestone, in the calm warm indigo sea, couples stir. The close swollen atmosphere tingles flesh. The shoreline becomes a *passeggiata* and lovers meander through this theatre of titillation.

<sup>9</sup> Dutton, G. *Sun, Sea, Surf and Sand - The Myth of the Beach*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985. p. 78

Soon with the night, the still blue-black sea becomes a stage. The orange glow of sodium vapour lamps dramatically illuminates the blanched naked performers. There beneath the spread of the silken black sheet they drift with the rhythms of the sea.

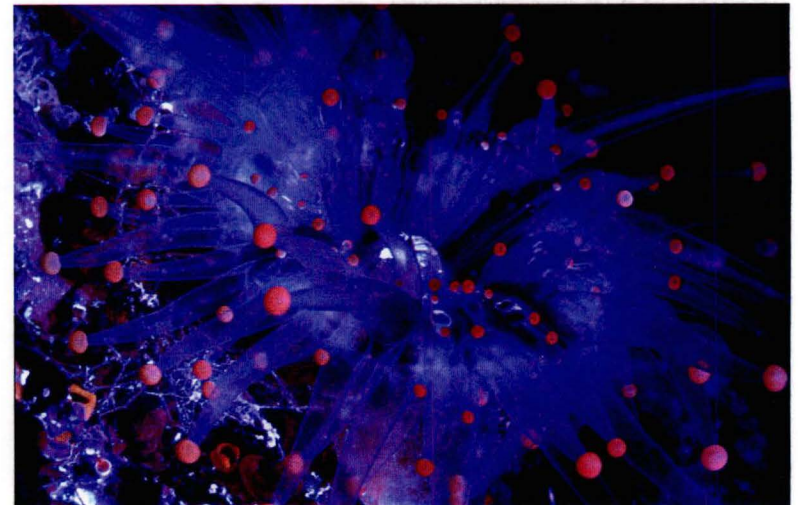
With its foaming and undulant movement, its warm and cold currents, its submarine life and suspended organic matter, the sea is a fertile fluid symbolic of birth and re-birth. Yet whilst we sense its touch it has an intangible presence. Like a bedevilled lover, as alluded to by Kate Llewellyn in her poem, *Love Affair*, the sea however remains ungraspable.

The sea is deep  
in itself with love  
for the sky  
its white lips kiss  
the sky again and again  
when the sky shows itself  
naked  
The sea grows pale  
it throws sprays  
of diamonds at the sky  
and sends sighs up

The sea's will  
pushes me into positions  
it wants to tempt  
the sky  
I stroke its soft skin  
and its muscles  
caress my side  
pulling me down  
its seaweed moustache  
slides up my leg  
we frolic  
the sea licks me

everywhere  
I laugh  
and walk out  
it scatters seaweed's emeralds  
in my wake  
and its white fingers  
rush over the sand  
imploring  
they fall back in dismay  
and wait  
for the sky.<sup>9</sup>

8 Sea Organisms



## Lured to the surface

To the late nineteenth century male view, water was the symbol of woman, “totally yielding, totally flexible yet ultimately all encompassing and deadly in its very permeability.”<sup>10</sup> Painters often portrayed women emerging from the sea raised by its swelling into a wave. The body of woman became personified by nature’s sea and waves, earth, trees and flowers, sky, breeze, mist and moonlight. Like the moon, her pearly flesh was mysteriously uplifted. In pulse with the lunar cycle, the changing of day and night, the seasons, and varying weathers, she embodied a wealth of metaphor.

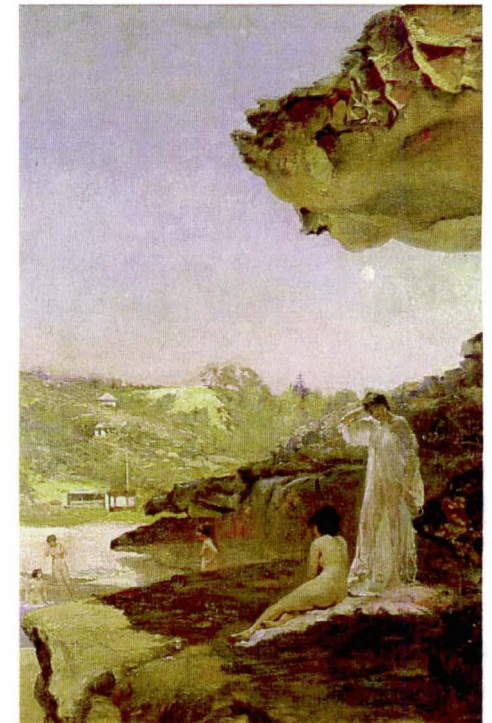
The mystical and mythical portrayal of woman by artists at the turn of the last century is worthy of comparison with current perceptions and beliefs. We come closest to identifying with the languorous sexuality portrayed by *fin de siècle* artists with the onset of summer’s subduing evenings, which instils a passiveness in the beach-goer.

Given the anti-maternal, luxuriantly autoerotic implication of the theme of the weightless woman, it was not surprising that she most often took to the air during the twilight time of day, the time most frequently associated with indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Dijkstra, B. *Idols of Perversity*, Oxford University Press, London, 1986. p.265

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p.91

9 Julian Ashton *Tamarama Beach*, 1899

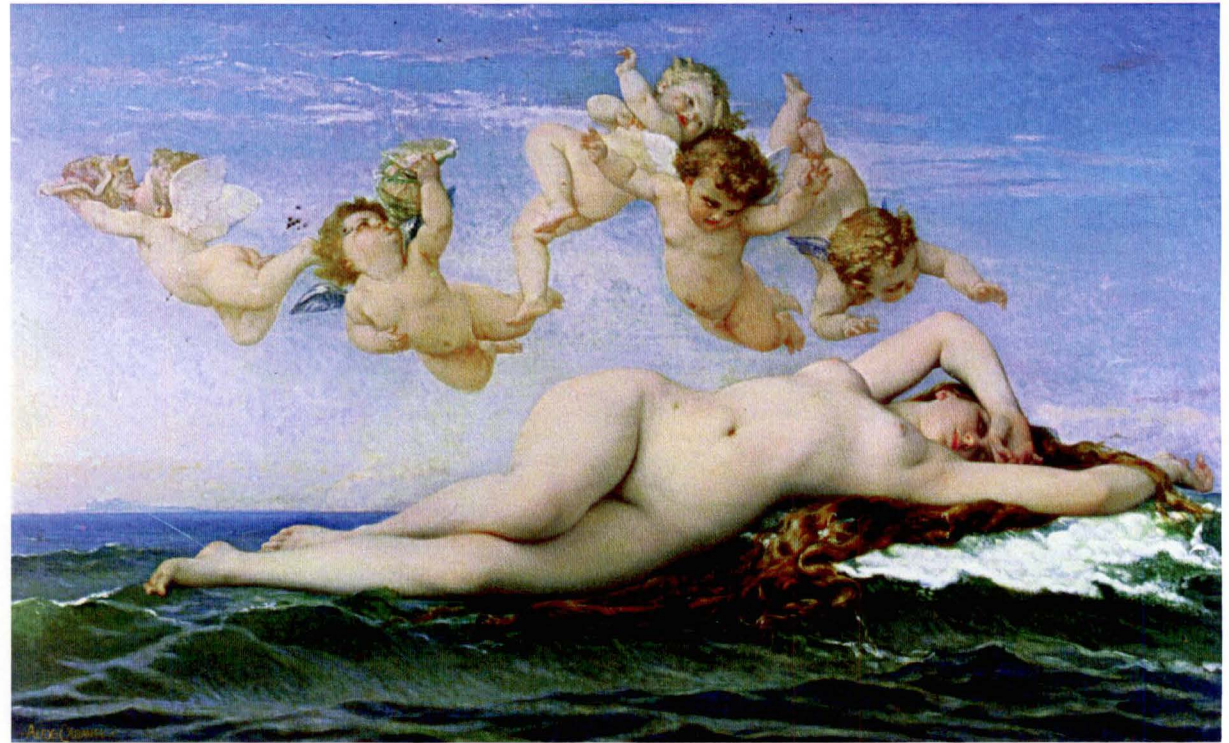




There seems to be a plethora of works which captured well the possessive and voyeuristic style of the period and are typical of the images of supine women throughout the salons of Europe in those decadent times. Adolf Hiremy-Hirschl's *Aphrodite* and Pierre Dupuis' *An Ondine Playing with the Waves*, like Alexandre Cabanel's *The Birth of Venus* portray fleshy opisthotonic women.<sup>12</sup> Inevitably painted by men, the vulnerable ondines' arching postures suggested sexual gratification and at the same time, insatiable desire.<sup>13</sup> Such works have inevitably provoked debate about female exploitation.

Scientific research of the time and its challenge to Christian theology, the influential literature of writers such as Emile Zola, Charles Baudelaire, Henry James, August Strindberg and Oscar Wilde, and the painters responding to their persuasions, created a stronghold of misogynism.

The feminist reprisal gained strength with women such as Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse but it took much of this century before any reasonable influence affected the male bastion so strongly reinforced in the last decades of the nineteenth century.



10 Alexandre Cabanel *Birth of Venus*, c. 1863

<sup>12</sup> Opisthotonic: from the Latin and Greek; drawn backwards. In medicine the spasm of the muscles causing the head, neck and spine to be arched backwards.

<sup>13</sup> Ondine: from the Latin *unda*, a wave. A female water spirit, a nymph.





The admirable 'New Woman' of the time became a paradox. Her seductiveness intrigued men of the late nineteenth century who at the same time feared what she may do to their dominating stance. Here the *fin de siècle* artists like Aristide Sartorio in his painting *The Green Abyss* show the apparently helpless mermaid tempting a naked young man from his vessel. It is a tantalising image in which, like Charles Shannon's *The Mermaid*, we recognise the young men are doomed to fate, to be drowned by their desires.

Many of the paintings of predatory sirens were grandiose narratives in their visual description of mythology. We easily recognise the implication of disaster for unwary sailors or fishermen. I perceive however the most alluring paintings make the voyeuristic viewer the potential victim. And the most erotic of these depict only tempting naked females who exhibit a sense of vitality and independence, even aloofness. Jean-Francois Aubertin's three embracing nymphs facing away from the viewer in his painting, *The Echo*, nonchalantly lure



11 Jean Francois Aubertin *The Echo*, 1911

12 Paris Vogue Advertisement 1996

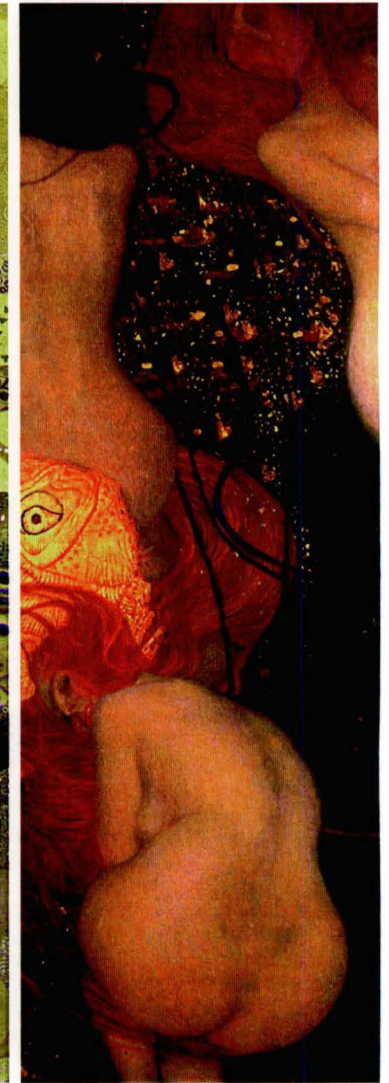
13 Aristide Sartorio *The Green Abyss*, c. 1895



the imaginative voyeur in us to submerge ourselves in the toxicity of temptation. Similarly John William Whiteley's, *A Sail* shows a party of liberated young women, their clothes removed, playing and lying about on a wave washed protuberance of rock which, given their casual and contemporary appearance could be the scene just around the point of our local beach. We can imagine ourselves with Whiteley in the seclusion of the boulders behind the party, moved by the sensuality of the occasion. With such seductive images, there's no need to drown us by dragging us down to some dark grotto beneath the sea. The submarine abyss is indeed our own agitated chemical concoction of desire and guilt which suffocates from within.

I'm intrigued by the enigma of such imagery and recognise the power of its sensuality. Gustav Klimt's allegory of the women as the sea where figures wallow like kelp in his murky *Flowing Water* (1890) is well defined by the surrealist writer Louis Aragon: "The whole fauna of human fantasies, their marine vegetation, drifts and luxuriates in the dimly lit zones of human activity, as though plaiting thick tresses of darkness."<sup>14</sup>

In later works Klimt's allegory is richly embellished with gilding and pattern such as *Gold Fish* (1901) and *Water Serpents* (1904-1907), creating a fantasy underworld. The fluidity and pattern in such paintings is made no less erotic by its decorative qualities. The figures entwined in an enveloping marine realm become complex in their ornament with structural qualities that invite translation into three dimensional works.



14 Gustav Klimt *Water Serpents I*, 1904-1907

15 Gustav Klimt *Goldfish*, 1901-1902

<sup>14</sup> Aragon, L. 'Le Paysan de Paris', 1924, extracted from *In the Nouveau Style*, Haslam, M. Thames and Hudson, London, 1989. p.7





16 Natalie Makarova *The Fugitive Gesture*

Art Nouveau decorative arts were imbued with the same suggestion of inner force and ornamental structure as evident in Klimt's *Water Serpents*. I feel an affinity with such forces, such passions, as with the earlier but related movements of the Baroque and Rococo. For example, I'm intrigued by the enigmatic ways of women, their sense of composure, gesticulation and suggestive mannerisms. I respond most assuredly to these characteristics when challenged by an apparent underlying confidence or when the performance becomes dynamic.

The painters of the *fin de siècle* practising in European cities far from the coast must have enjoyed a fertile imagination to paint so graphically. Evidence suggests however that occasional travel to the comparatively exotic Cote d'Azur or Costa del Sol enabled artists to return to their London, Parisian or Viennese studios fired up with the essence of their sojourns.

## Dislocation

Being away from a place in which you have had an enriching experience or in which you have been immersed for much of your life helps to identify its values more easily than when you are a part of it. Away from the crowding of sensations it seems easier to elucidate and the stirrings of nostalgia further enhance the imagination. Writing here in Tasmania, I feel as if in exile from Western Australia where I have invested my life.

"You desire to embrace it, to caress it, to possess it" Henry James wrote. "I can't tell you with what affection I think of Venice and how at this distance my whole stay there takes on a semblance of a beautiful dream. Happy you to spend your whole life in such a dream."<sup>15</sup>

I have been seduced by Venice too and have sought inspiration there, and solace. This city on water exhibits on a grand scale the patterns and signs of ephemeral nature. It is as if a cloak of luxurious *Rubelli* fabric is veiled by layers of delicate muslin; a moire of salt hazed light and the mingling of the undulating lagoon.

As the waters of the lagoon enter into Venice's architecture so the water and atmosphere pervade its art. Some of my earliest passions for painting were watercolours or the water impressions of translucent oils, especially the paintings of J. M. W. Turner, who became known as the English Venetian.

In *Eccentric Spaces*, Robert Harbison writes eloquently of the Venetian painters Piazzetta and Tiepolo who:

distil us such pure essences of the city that they are not easily recognisable as landscape painters. In their efforts to break down or dissolve walls both of them paint not in lines but in colours and come more and more to prefer pastel shades, getting an effect of speed, ease, and transparency like watercolour ... Piazzetta ... is about colours, their coruscation, evaporation, dissolution, transubstantiation.<sup>16</sup>



17 J.M.W. Turner *Venice with the Salute*, 1840-45

18 Venice from Ponte del Accademia

<sup>15</sup> James, H. Extract from a letter to Mrs Bronson in 1881, as quoted in Hibbert, C. *Tourists and Exiles in Venice 1871 - 1913*, Collins, London, 1988. p.295.

<sup>16</sup> Harbison, R. *Eccentric Spaces*, Knopf, New York, 1977. p.61



The sounds emanating from Venetian canals, the movement of its waters, the reflections and staining of the stone buildings etch memorable impressions. Often without podia, palaces appear to be partially submerged in a flooded city. The mystery of its depths is made more puzzling with the knowledge that its grand buildings of masonry are elevated by a labyrinth of timber pylons driven into the mud of the estuary up to twelve centuries ago.

A study of the work of the Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa has taught me much about a regionalist's translation of his local elements. Scarpa's understanding of the traditional materials of Venice such as its stone, mosaics and glass, and his collaboration with local artisans who are so conversant with these materials, has been eloquently crafted into the tones and textures of his architecture. Buildings such as the Querini Stampalia, Fondazioni Masieri, and Olivetti showroom pay homage to the "great text of decomposition"<sup>17</sup> of Venice and to its historic oriental influences, which Scarpa has further enriched with his knowledge of Japanese culture.

Scarpa has transported his Venetian repertoire into many projects throughout northern Italy including the Banca Popolare di Verona, the Castelvechio Museum in Verona and his definitive work, the Brion tomb. These buildings demonstrate well his obsession with detail such as denticulated mouldings, texturing, and material juxtaposition, creating a lyrical homogeneity of decorative formal composition (*bel composto*). His Venetian sensibility reaches a sublime condition in the restrained *Monument to the Women of the Resistance* at the water's edge near the Giardini della Biennale Int le d'Arte. Here a cluster of cubes of Istrian stone appear to float, as if having broken away from the retaining wall, from the very substance of Venice. On one of these larger stones at the high water mark lies a cast bronze figure by A. Murer. The lagoon waters lap away at the draped figure leaching its green patina over the ivory coloured stone. This monument lies low. It is an appropriately solemn statement to the ravages of war and the decay of civilisations.

During a lull, earlier on my journey as a designer and maker, I was directly influenced by facets of Carlo Scarpa's designs. I have come to recognise that what I respected in his works were those elements with which I also identified. Sources that contributed to his regionalist's vocabulary were comparable with aspects of my observations and experiences on our distant shores. Such elements, more so than an historic text, are the effects of nature's mellowing of

<sup>17</sup> Dal Co, F and Mazzariol, G. (eds)  
'Carlo Scarpa: The Complete Works',  
Mazzariol, G. and Barbieri, G.  
*The Life of Carlo Scarpa*, Electa  
Editrice, Milan, 1984. p. 20.

19 Olivetti showroom detail, by Carlo Scarpa

20 Venetian pattern of decomposition

21 Venetian facade





surfaces; of the bleaching and staining of earth coloured render, marble and wood; of the water-marked textures and light play. The juxtaposition of weather-worn surfaces with restored detailing, and especially the dramatic contrast with the lavish interiors and vibrant social fabric, further enrich the imagery of Venice.

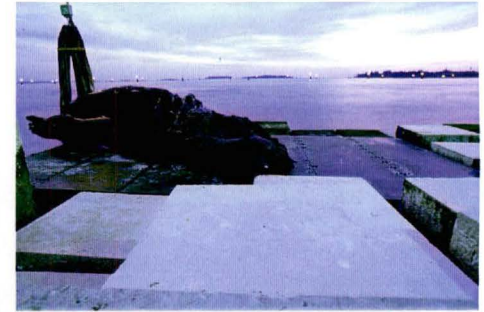
While the lagoon waters lap against the marbled facades of centuries of Venetian culture, the seas rolling against the shores of my own region erode nature's formations slowly over millennia. And while Scarpa enjoyed interpreting the texturing and colouration of erosive forces on civilisation, I am moved by such forces on the reefs, cliffs and dunes of the Australian shore.

All too often in crafting new furniture I've been impatient to polish surfaces, endeavouring to create a sense of refinement while ignoring the seductiveness of the coarse and weather-worn. Some of my current work, particularly those pieces finished in paper-like cellulose, bring into play qualities all too often lost in contemporary furniture, such as the embellishment of colour, coruscation and textural variation in surface finishes. I anticipate that designs for furniture and objects ensuing from this research will reveal such qualities.

When visiting Venice a student of architecture there challenged me by asking what I was expecting to discover from her region. Her perception of Australia was of a colourful, rich country where nature still dominated. I came to recognise that my passion for the Venetian culture was a diversion from the comparative freshness of my country and the potential for drawing from a life experienced in its midst.

Freedom! That's what they always say. You feel free in Australia. And so you do. There is great relief in the atmosphere, a relief from tension, from pressure. An absence of control of will or form. The sky is open above you, and the air is open around you, not the old closing-in of Europe.<sup>18</sup>

Just as I came to realise my appreciation of the unique Australian character from Italy, I find myself thinking similarly while in Tasmania. This suggests to me that my regional focus is less broad than I had thought. Not only is the heat and energy of summer a determining factor but so is the stretch of coast which needs to have the pulse of waves on its shore. I work with the spirit of such regions; with the society, topography, textures, colour, light and the energies there. This vitality is my passion. My work is shaped by the torque and tension, the essence of such spiritedness.



22 *Monument to the Women of the Resistance*,  
Carlo Scarpa

23 *Grotto-esque center table*. Late 19th Century  
following in the Baroque tradition.  
Possibly manufactured by Pauly et Cie,  
Venice & typical of Venetian grotto furniture.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence, D. H. *Kangaroo*, Secker, London, 1923. as quoted in Dutton, G. *Sun, Sea, Surf and Sand - The Myth of the Beach*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985. p. 22

# Lured to the Surface

## PART 2

Once again I stand at the edge

Just as the bronzing summer rays break over the escarpment stretching Norfolk Island pine shadows all the way across the rippled sand into the surf, once again I stand at the edge. Here I pull my flippers on. Ungainly, I shuffle backwards into the water and swim rapidly as if in fear, across to the solitary pylon. This sentinel and lap marker and diving pole and shag perch once secured the shark net. Then the beach was all sepia, with bathing pavilions, a dance hall, tearooms and deck chair hire.

As the day becomes hot, brash young guys and their girlfriends will inevitably swim out here and be challenged to climb to the top of the tapering shaft. The girl's slick lithe bodies melting and reforming in the distorting sea will tease and be teased by the boys as they leap and bombie from above.

I stroke around to the westerly side of the truncated column out of the sun's brightness. An obscure vantage point to contemplate and study the activity back on the beach while taking a breather. This place is especially relevant to my life and work as it epitomises the energised beaches I know all around this country. I can most truthfully respond to my experiences, my emotions, my cognition of the contemporary Australia in which I live, if I seek to harness the spirit of such a place. Immersion here will potentially yield my most promising concepts.

The undulating swell heaves me gently up and in and down and out. I grasp the weedy encrusted flank of the pylon. The oyster smelling mantle of organisms secretly chatter and click and the pearly green water washes the glistening barnacles of mauve and violet. And with the tiny scuttling crabs I'm looking into a bustling lubricous cityscape. A magnetic island to a fertile Indian Ocean.

24 Cottesloe, summer's late afternoon





## In response to landforms

But I have found, as I expect many have, that in all my explorings I have so often come to a particular place that feels so good for no accountable reason. Or has a particular flavour or beauty about which I feel particularly animal ... There are hollows and eminences and cave mouths which invite some peculiar mix of sybaritic pleasure.<sup>19</sup>

So writes John Wolseley in his essay *Landscape-Inscape*. Wolseley is an artist who has lived and painted all over the Australian continent seeking to express his interpretation of the land forms with which he has become intimate.

Wolseley describes 'learning' to see, feel, smell, and hear these subtle geographies, then we enter into the sumptuous weave of structures which are a sand dune, a spinifex plain or a forest.<sup>20</sup> Further, he describes painting as being "about the shapes of things and it is not until one has learnt about the shapes of things that one can go and use these shapes as metaphors".<sup>21</sup>

There are times and special places when smooth dunes seem as if the robe worn by a reclining woman has fallen aside, partially exposing her nakedness. Here the wind and waves have sculpted the ridge of a hip, rib-like crescents, or the swelling of a breast, and folds lead to shadowed hollows and tracts of spinifex.

The architect Richard Leplastrier articulates from a depth of regional experience his understanding of traversing the landscape and seeing beneath the surface to "the bones of place".

The way we animals move through the terrain is a telling clue in the understanding of landform. They (the Aboriginal people) knew very well to 'stick to the ridges' for they showed this to our explorers. There is an easy continuity in the routes via this region's ridge-lines - whereas the valley route tends to terminate against the scarp.<sup>22</sup>



<sup>19</sup> Wolseley, J. 'Landscape - Inscape' in de Gryse, J. and Sant, A. (eds), *Our Common Ground*, The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (Tas) 1994. p86

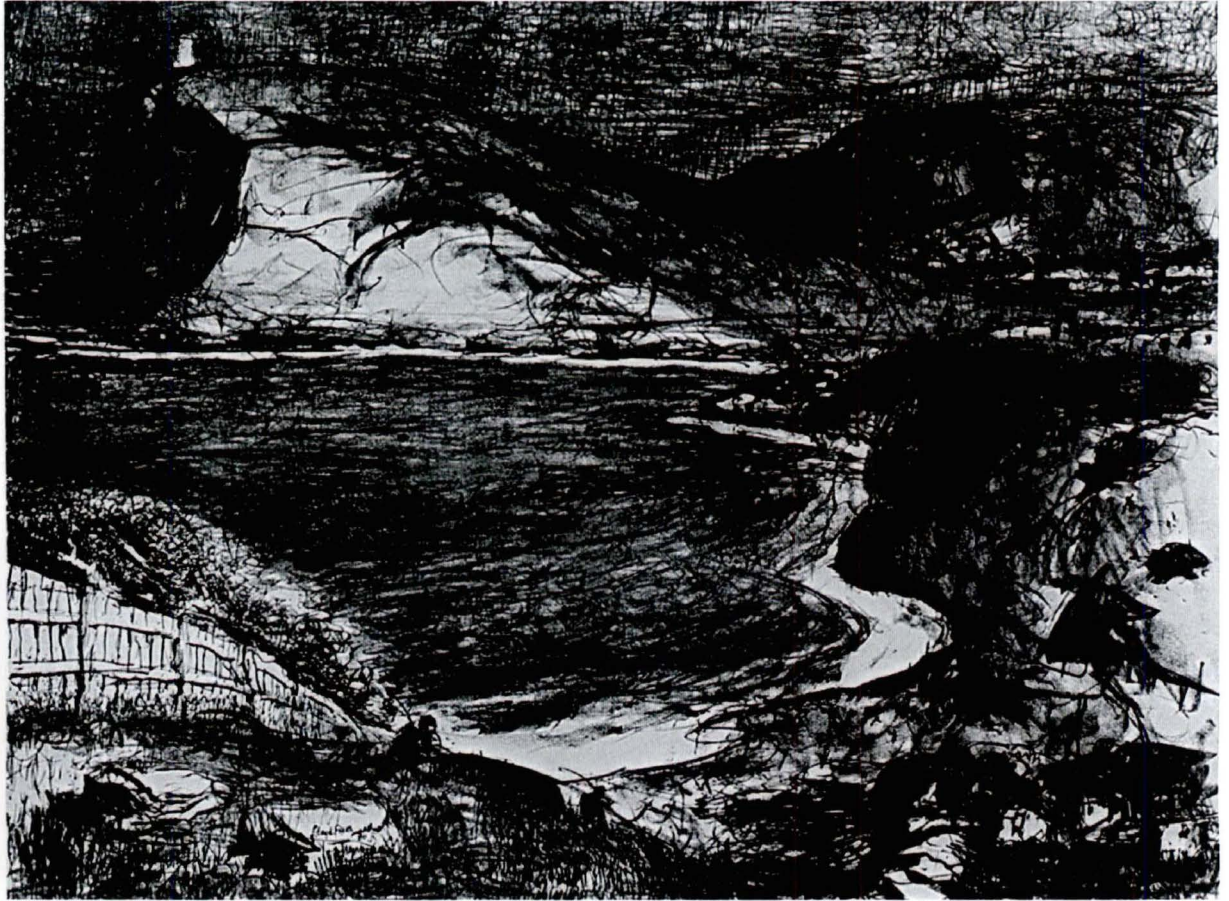
<sup>20</sup> Ibid p. 87

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 83

<sup>22</sup> Leplastrier, R. 'Architecture and Place', in de Gryse, J. and Sant, A. (eds) *Our Common Ground*, The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (Tas) 1994. p.87

25 Boulders at Sleepy Bay, Freycinet





Whether drawing the figure or landscape I'm inclined to follow the sweep of contours and ridges delineated by bone form and muscles. The hand, the fingers making the line moves as if massaging the body. Softly then firmly, finely, broadly, twisting, punctuating, sculpting. Markings drawn from the apparent edge over swellings down into concavities, across and back. Gradually a matrix of contour lines surveys form and the landscape emerges so that bare mounds and valleys are suggested by the weight of tone around these regions. The hand draws tracks shaping form.

26 Lloyd Rees *The Great Rock*, 1977

27 Lloyd Rees *Storm at Sunset*, 1980



## Anima mundi

The rhythm of the surfer tracking with the wave relates to John Wolseley's description of how landscape can be seen "not in terms of solid objects called sandhill, mountain or valley but as extraordinary three dimensional space in which weave and sing and spin and float all manner of forces and vectors in a continual dance."<sup>23</sup>

The surfer draws impulsively on liquid energy. There is nothing quite like human energy working with (or against) the unpredictability of nature's forces. The surfer weaves across the translucent wall of water, sometimes able to remain within the womb of its peeling cylindrical form, sometimes gliding beyond, floating over its foam, re-entering, side slipping and turning again, hard, up under the lip of the breaking wave.

In describing a work of the architect Alvar Aalto, Carlo Ludovici Ragghianti wrote:

The stepped projecting interior structure takes shape as if it were a plastic mass, with an irresistible animal-like force on the fringes of the muscular and organic, stemming from the pregnant energy of reality of the whole *anima mundi*. The drawings and some of the 'preparatory' sketches showed clearly, in a few rapid strokes, the network of interconnected, flexible bearing and stressed forces.<sup>24</sup>

This is why metaphor is essential to shaping new designs. Spirited form is moulded by the layering of ideas, of forces beyond the physicality of materials, of intellect, of function. These other values suggest qualities of line, of texture, of colour, of appropriate materials and expressive issues. This is the seed that should be planted and its initial growth is often best achieved through drawing on paper, in the sand, with clay, or wire or fabric. The concept needs to be 'drawn-out' in the most responsive manner and media. It is better that the spirit of metaphor is at the heart of design. Like form with good bone structure, while surface values may change, beauty (truth) remains apparent.

<sup>23</sup> Wolseley, J. 'Landscape - Inscape' in de Gryse, J. and Sant, A. (eds), *Our Common Ground*, The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (Tas) 1994. pp. 48, 50

<sup>24</sup> Ruusuvuori, A. 'Alvar Aalto's Creative Imagination', *Alvar Aalto*, Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki, 1978. p. 129

28 Wave track, Tom Curren



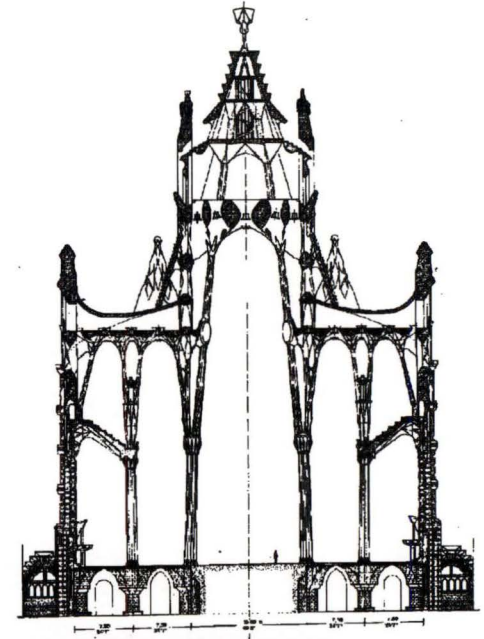


As with surfing however, there is a time when conditions inspire unleashed performance over the wave, when the energy and shape demand a thorough 'working-over'. Other occasions invite a more passive approach. One is demanding and proactive, the other relaxed, even meditative. There is a balance here. A dramatic comparison could be made in the architecture of Jørn Utzon. The Opera House in Sydney, for example, is architecture for place and people. Its monumental dynamic sculptural shells thrust out over the harbour. By comparison the home he designed for himself in Majorca is appropriately restful with its understated cubes of local stone linked in a horizontal sweep along cliffs at the edge of the sea.

I find myself shifting from restrained considered designs, which I tend to develop through small sketches or to scale at the drafting board, to free organic forms which I draw more responsively at full scale. Such designs seem liberated and evolve comparatively easily. To draw at full scale quickly necessitates tapping into the spring of intuition. Drawing this way relates to the organic nature of Art Nouveau where surface, form and ornament is determined by underlying forces.

Since by its very nature ornament [in Art Nouveau] is always flowing, its structure must reveal itself full of movement too. Horta's fragile and elegant linear framework of architecture is ornamental, producing, so to speak, vibrating structures. Tiffany and Galle's vases, with or without ornament on their curved surfaces, are ornamental bodies in what appears to be a continuous flowing movement; the masses swelling like sand dunes or humped like a camel's back, that provide the forms of Gaudi's houses and cupolas, are architectonic ornamental bodies developed in space, animated from within by an almost vital morphology.<sup>25</sup>

While the architect, Antoni Gaudi's buildings may appear as massive sculptural bodies, a sectional study - say of *Sagrada Familia* - reveals a linearity around which the planes are infilled like muscle and membrane over the skeleton. When teaching at the Bauhaus in 1921, Oskar Schlemmer noted his attitude about drawing from the nude and related the human body to the structure of a building. "Understand the nude as, so to speak, the highest nature, the finest articulation and organisation, as an edifice of flesh, muscles, bone."<sup>26</sup> If we consider such decoration as if it were the patterns of reflection and ripples on the surface of the sea we observe that these patterns are soon transformed from a flat two dimensional surface by the rolling swell which heaves into a wave. In the same way as muscles flex flesh or wind bellows the battened sail, so surfaces react to the energies within. These energies may be transformed through such linear formation as plant stems, bones, muscles and sinews.



29 Antoni Gaudi *Sagrada Familia* cross section

30 Antoni Gaudi *Calvet Chair*, 1902

31 Antoni Gaudi *Promenade Columns*, Guell Park

<sup>25</sup> Schmutzler, R. *Art Nouveau*, Thames and Hudson, London 1964. p. 9

<sup>26</sup> Schlemmer, O. *Man: Teaching notes from the Bauhaus*, Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, London. p. 41



## Fecundity

"Don't think of form, think of forming. Forming is a growing, developing pro-cess, like a plant or a living organism,"<sup>27</sup> comments the artist John Olsen whose brush marks draw out his subject like an animated performance, creating nar-rative.

When designing furniture, particularly those forms which invite associations of landscape such as the dining table, I'm able to identify with the layerings and animistic expression of the artists John Wolseley and John Olsen. Here the surface and edge of a table may be likened to a living landscape, even though there are practical limitations in giving life to a table!

The metaphorical notion of the plane of a table being likened to a plain about which there is interaction however extends the metaphor into reality.

... the flat plane for us as a human animal ... has become a very important thing ... and the table represents that flat plane off which we can work. So the sources of the table go back a long way and I think that when we're making the table it's a wonderful thing to have those things in mind.<sup>28</sup>



32 John Olsen *Lake Eyre*, 1975

33 John Olsen *Still Life Influenced by the Desert*, 1982

<sup>27</sup> Hart, D. *John Olsen*, Craftsman House, Tortola, 1991. p. ix

<sup>28</sup> Leplastrier, R. 'Some Sources of Inspiration', *Hobart Design Triennial: Critical Visions Symposium*, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 1991. p. 29



In the modern home the table at times becomes the family hearthstead, the nucleus of communication. Its elevated plane focuses our view to the language of the body 'above the belt'. At the dining table we are able to relax and read, write or enjoy casual chats over coffee or boisterous debates at indulgent dinner parties. The shape of the table can create a democracy if, for example, it is round or oval, or if rectangular, it invites authoritarianism. When it is not being used the table becomes an island in interior space which channels our patterns of movement. Its shape may determine a pattern of fluid movement or it may disrupt the flow. It may instil a sense of tranquillity in a space or one of disharmony.

During the past two years my preference has been to work with furniture forms which have a horizontal proportion, which I feel is evocative of our landscape, of the desert, beach or sea. These forms tend to be low and flat or gently undulating, such as the *Settee for Jo*. Similarly, the composer, Peter Sculthorpe, describes the sustained horizontal sounds of the didgeridoo as evocative of the Australian landscape.

I see the table as an upthrust slice of landscape and may give it a depth of body sufficient to suggest the subterranean; as if the earth is torn and elevated like a slither of beach or riverbank, with stiffened roots or stalactites seemingly elevating its crust rather than being suspended under it. At other times I imagine these linear forms personified, and the table plane becomes the tensioned surface of the sea beneath which dancing figures stretch and arch upwards, unable to break through their inhibiting membrane. These 'figures' when carved in wood with alloy connectors, are refined and appear elegant; their sinuous bodies like ballet dancers suggesting a composed formality. More recently, however, I have chosen to forge shapes as if they were contorted figures entrapped in a wild dance by the sea's turbulence. These skeletal forms, skinned in cellulose, appear like the legs of a lean athlete.

The table top, say of figured wood, echoes (at a reduced scale) patterns of the landscape. Here nature's markings in wood, such as sap-runs, hob nail, cat's paws, borer holes and gum veins become geological features, seen from a bird's eye view. Turbulent grain markings as found in burls, root-stock, the crotch of a tree, or occasionally the trunk we give such terms as fiddleback, quilted, tiger pattern or rain drop. Such patterns as these are suggestive of sand drifts in the desert or especially the ocean bed or tidal flats. These elements invite enhancing

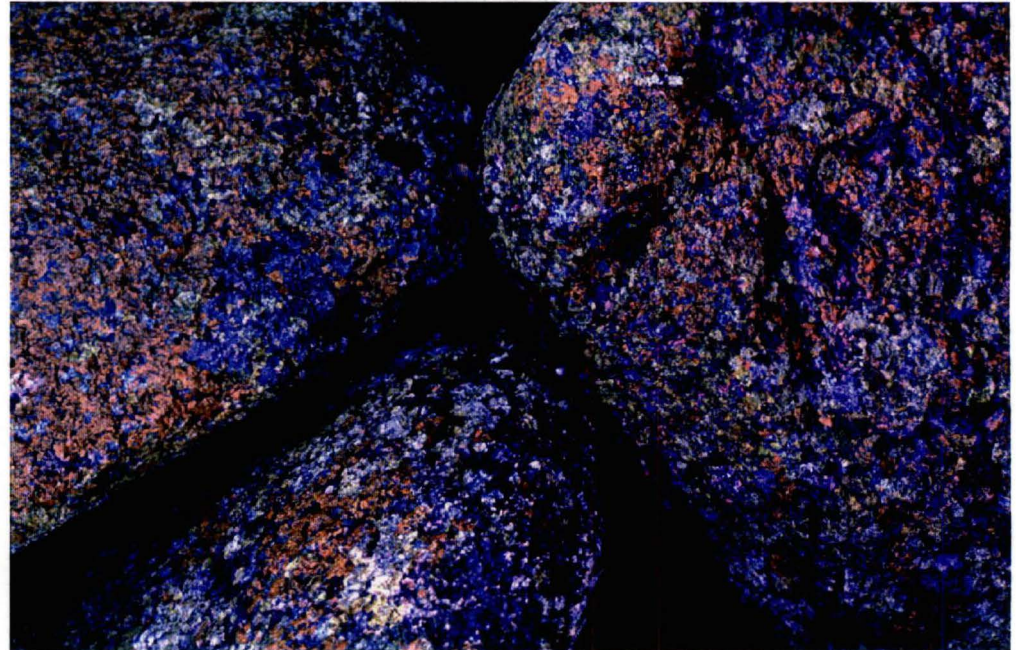


34 *Lured to the Surface* console table



35 *Lured to the Surface* detail

through inlays of wood veneer (*marquetry*) or semi precious stone (*pietra dura*) or with glass, ceramic or mother of pearl. Here there is potential for introducing decorative embellishment which compliments the surface and form.



36 Granite lichen, Sleepy Bay, Freycinet

Highly figured woods are most often only available as veneer stock sliced to 0.6 mm. This, fortunately, increases the resource of a rare material, but creates other problems, particularly ecologically, related to the mass production of substrates such as medium density fibreboards or plywoods.

Further, using veneer for the surface sets up a challenge in resolving the edge of the veneered board. For the tables produced during this study I finished the edges using solid wood of the same species as the veneer. As the edges are curved, sawn laminae of solid wood has been glued to re-form a delineated edge. I prefer to shape and finish this bone-like rim to prompt our tactual sense. Like the sandstone shield along our shores, the table edge invites carving of undercuts, concavities, swellings and twists.

My work is informed by my knowledge of the beach as a marginal zone and I seek to translate the metaphorical associations of the beachscape embedded in that environment.



# Lured to the Surface

## PART 3

### Beachscope

If we are confronting in these times the reality of our evolved independent Australian character, then the beach is an ideal stage to study behavioural patterns. There is a frankness here, an egalitarianism which constitutes a carefree democracy. It hasn't always been that way however and its liberation from a Victorian prudishness over the earlier decades of this century is analogous to the growing acceptance of a more informal down-to-earth Australian culture. As the 21st century draws closer we are increasingly recognising that this country invites a way of life which corresponds to its unique environment and people.

It has been my goal to develop a body of designs which are responsive to an Australian context and should it so evolve, recognisably so. By comparison I've always admired the restrained elegance of the blond furniture of the Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto which evokes a Scandinavian aesthetic. I recognise, however, that it would be an error to approach the notion of regional design too objectively. Aalto designed buildings which articulated his cognisance of the northern land and people he knew so well. His furniture became an extension of this context. I could only hope to reflect an aspect of our diverse country and I've chosen to do so through my life experiencing our coastal margin and the way we interact in this stimulating environment.

Acclimatising to Australian conditions with the onset of European settlement meant coming to terms with a comparatively raw country and for many, the social environment has been equally rough. It meant having to pioneer and, given our haphazard beginnings, has resulted in a confusion of attitudes and styles most aptly symbolised by the individuality of suburban homes and gardens. With sprawling suburbia too came the loss of social interaction so prevalent in the piazzas and plazas of European villages and cities.

37 Alvar Aalto furniture showing *fan* leg



What is more hopelessly uninteresting than accomplished liberty? asks Sommers in D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*. Great swarming teeming Sydney flowing out into these myriads of bungalows, like shallow waters spreading undyked. And what then? Nothing. No inner life. No high command, no interest in anything finally ... It was still a raw loose world. All Sydney would be out by the sea or in the bush, a roving unbroken world.<sup>29</sup>

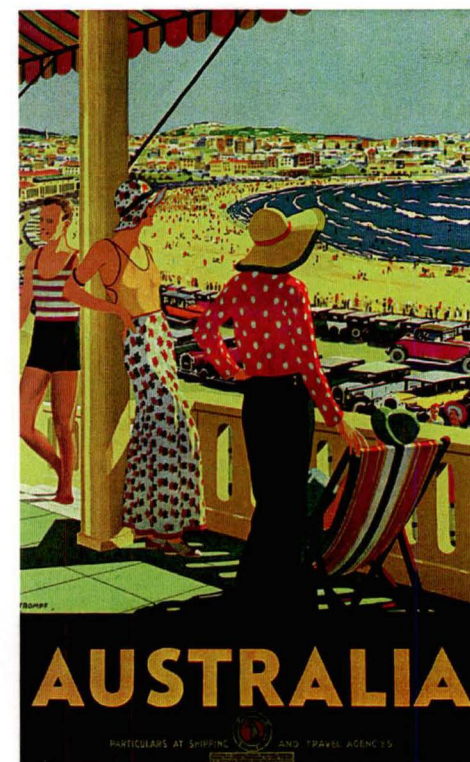
Lawrence's perspective has proven prophetic as today's city planners try to reverse the suburban sprawl by urbanising the core, the dispirited hole in the doughnut.

Paradoxically, as the urbanisation of our cities swelled so did the desire to go back to nature which necessitated travelling out to the bush or heading for the coast on weekends or for vacations. The bush, however, is not as well encapsulated as the beach and could echo the isolationism for some that an introspective suburbia of quarter acre subdivisions had created. The need to congregate saw the popularity of the beach increase along with mass transportation and liberated bathing laws.

The authors of *Myths of Oz*, John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner focused their research on the Australian urban beach. However they may have gained similar findings of our contemporary culture by studying the scene at a football game or cricket match, local pub, shopping plaza or the main street of town. They wrote:

... out of a sense of puzzlement ... from all sides we had been hearing the long established traditional criticism bewailing the lack of an Australian culture. Yet this wasn't at all how we felt as typical enough denizens of Australia. It wasn't that we saw nothing to criticise in Australian life and culture. But the Australia we lived in had a richness and diversity that was incompatible with the Australia of the culture critics. There are other definitions of culture that are more populist and more comprehensive. These definitions see culture as concerned with the whole way of a people, their customs and rituals, their pastimes and pleasures, including not only the arts but also practices such as sport and going to the beach.<sup>30</sup>

The research of Fiske, Hodge and Turner has established a platform from which I further analyse this aspect of our popular culture from the perspective of a surfer and beach goer. The beach offered the best of both worlds, of culture (suburbia) and of nature (the sea and shore). It didn't take long for the early Australian beachgoers to adapt to the social and natural laws soon established in this paradoxical environment. "This new paradigm is the characteristically Australian beach which is urban and natural; civilised and primitive; spiritual and physical; culture and nature."<sup>31</sup>



Bondi Beach Poster

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence, D. H. *Kangaroo*, Secker, London, 1923. p. 21-22

<sup>30</sup> Fiske, J., Hodge, B., Turner, G., *Myths of Oz*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985. p. VIII

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 55



In Australia's summer the beach becomes what the piazza is to Europe, albeit a wilder more abrasive one. The piazza with its sectors of *al fresco* dining through to its gatherings of youth outside the *gelateria*, like the beach, are places to observe and to be observed. Having established the parameters of their plots (with towels, umbrellas, eskies, etc.) beachgoers plunge energetically into the surf or go for long walks to the end of the beach traversing their territory. This becomes our version of Italy's *passeggiata* but a far less formal one; rather than dressing up they dress down. Notwithstanding their minimal attire their class status remains evident by their walk, mannerisms, the cut of their bathers, hairstyle, make-up, jewellery, sunglasses, footwear, hat, book, sports equipment or perhaps tattoos or body piercing.

Semiotically the beach can be read as a text ... Like all texts, beaches have readers. In their choice of each, people use beaches to seek out certain kinds of meanings for themselves, meanings that help them come to terms with their usual off-beach lifestyle.<sup>32</sup>

Natural social laws prevail where beachgoers congregate which determine appropriate proximities. This depends on the population density on the beach at any given time. On a hot crowded day it is almost acceptable to lay towels down side by side. On such occasions group camaraderie can develop. For those preferring solitude, body language determines a desire for privacy, and not unlike the cinema, bus or cafe this is surprisingly easily achieved. As the beach population thins out the laws adjust proportionally. To break these unwritten laws can be viewed as a form of trespassing or perversity. These natural laws are remarkably protective of the individual's rights.

The beach, like the verandah, welcomes social interaction yet acknowledges the need for privacy. It is an interval between the conventional expectations of the suburb or city and a carefree life. On the beach, umbrellas, hats and sunglasses provide a verandah-like, shaded screen from which we gaze, contemplate or survey the activity beyond to the sea. Here we most often turn our backs to the land, facing away from the responsibilities of civilisation. Our desire for such a lifestyle, with a preference for leisurely sportswear, for the weekender beach shack, for camping or boating, continues however to be curbed by social expectations of formality. Perhaps our aspirations for an informal lifestyle could not be fully appreciated without a balance of the constraints of convention. Gradually, however, the practicalities of casual living are permeating our way of life.



39 In recline, Bondi Beach

<sup>32</sup> Fiske, J., Hodge, B., Turner, G., *Myths of Oz*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985. p. 59



The verandah symbolises a place which, like the beach in summer, is refreshingly uninhibited. Furniture, in this place of respite, tends to be practical and unpretentious. It is preferably portable, yet strong with an emphasis on comfort and adaptability. The cool breezy materials of wicker (rattan, cane, reed, sea grass and other woven fibres), combined with wood and canvas have been preferred since early settlement. Here practicality and a modest cost suits the carefree life of the verandah where the concerns of maintaining formal upholstered furniture are waived for the sake of relaxation, and of children (and pets) at play.

Settees, chaise longues, settlers' chairs and deck chairs with loose cushions and throw-overs create a free and easy nomadic space which seems to suit our lifestyle more than the custom of, say, the traditional lounge room. On the verandah, a little staining, sun bleaching or weathering from the rain deteriorates the furniture but enhances its time worn associations and invites taking our ease.

The notion of a verandah style of furniture suits my mode of expression and I anticipate amalgamating the strengths of this research towards such works in the future. Verandah furniture sits well in buildings designed by those who have an empathy with the Australian environment and our way of life. It satisfies our desire to feel comfortable, moving easily in and out of doors.





## The surfing experience

The democracy of the beach caters easily to an extraordinary breadth of society. Within this society there are two distinct groups whose sport/lifestyle earns them some rights of ownership. These are the surf lifesavers, with their formal discipline and competition; and the surfers, with their inherent maverick status and abandonment of formalities. I was initiated into the surfer (not surfer) fraternity before becoming a teenager. The passion and independence of surfing has always suited me. It has, however, caused me to feel at odds with the established cultural mainstream, but like many of my mates I've enjoyed the creative enterprise and lateral approach to life that such independence attracts. Not that surfing (particularly surfboard and body-board riding) is without its codes of conduct. But these are unwritten laws and one qualifies by devout participation, ability and mateship.

The surfing experience, while blatantly indulgent, creates an opportunity for circumspection and with it an alternative perspective on life. The surfer has to work with the rhythms of nature and learns to be patient, tolerant and either selfless, or aggressively selfish and greedy in the process, though the latter soon results in ostracism.

Patience and circumspection comes with the need to wait for the next set of waves which can at times seem interminable. During this period you need to calculate the best position in which to be, in readiness to be on the 'inside' when the next wave peaks. This can mean paddling strenuously against rips and being prudent enough not to position yourself in too precarious a position for take-off, especially on a point/reef break. Tolerance enters the arena when the surf is good and consequently competitive. Understanding the conditions, communicating well with fellow surfers, most effectively riding the wave, and generally being at one with nature's forces and beauty presents many analogies for life's experiences.

The surfer is altogether different historically and semiotically ... surfer's adopted dress and behaviour that challenged the conventions of good manners and the politics of the occasion/lifestyles that by their frank hedonism exposed the hypocrisy of the materialist parent culture. The surfer in Australia has articulated and developed the most coherent and continuous discourse of opposition to the dominant and is unique amongst the sub-cultures of youth.<sup>33</sup>

The lifestyle of surfers is an adaptable one, ideally demanding less in a consumer society and falling into balance with contemporary ideals, culturally, politically and socially. I identify with such values which are not stifled by tradition and anachronistic behaviour.

preceding page:

40 Verandah furniture, *Barambah* homestead, Goomeri

41 Cressida Campbell *The Verandah*, 1987

42 Elioth Gruner *Beach Scene, Bondi*, 1925-3

<sup>33</sup> Fiske, J., Hodge, B., Turner, G., *Myths of Oz*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985. p. 66

## The sport of designing

To approach designing too analytically, particularly in the conceptual phase, could affect the spontaneity or spirit of intuition. It would be better to remain immersed in the subjectivity of ambience and of metaphor and to allow the processes of drawing with appropriate media to shape the work if it is to demonstrate integrity.

I've desired developing a wide variation of designs for furniture and objects. If, however, I consider the achievement born out of the relatively brief evolution of a related practice, namely surfboard design, I realise it would better suit my oeuvre if I was to focus on designing a collection of closely related forms.

Furniture designing, however, doesn't enjoy the benefits of performance which catalyses the design of surfboards, yachts or, say, musical instruments. When, in the early eighties, Australian surfing champion Simon Anderson made a significant breakthrough in surfing history by producing the three-finned or 'thruster' surfboard, he was able to enjoy the act of fully testing its potential.

With every new board he made Simon's accuracy was improving and through constantly surfing his shapes he was eliminating the variables he found undesirable. He finally came down to a clean, simple rounded tail that is his preference to this day ... Slowly boards became thinner, narrower and sleeker, with channels both deep and shallow giving the boards lift and direction.<sup>34</sup>

The evolution of the modern surfboard and the impact it has had on the surfer's performance inspires me as a designer. Within twenty five years surfing has gone from a leisurely, relatively passive pastime, to a powerful unleashing of vitality and performance. Refining the surfboard has taken on countless variations yet within subtle parameters, such as the sizes of fins, their number and positioning, tail, nose and rail shapes, thickness and length, etc. And all these modifications have occurred in boards of foam and fibreglass with lengths varying between little more than six to seven feet.

<sup>34</sup> Young, N. *The History of Surfing*, Palm Beach Press, Angourie, NSW, 1994. p. 207

43 Simon Anderson with Thruster surfboard





## Contexture

I have a preference for contemporary design in architecture and the decorative arts which is in step with current and anticipated needs and desires. Concerns about environmental issues and technologies need to be addressed concurrently with an evolving cultural perception.

<sup>35</sup> Drew, P. *Verandah*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992. p. 209

It has always been important to me, when designing, to work within a context; a setting. Like the architect with any sensibility, I'd prefer to draw from the environment and from those who use that place. To draw from and then, to draw for. This is responsive designing and place is especially relevant. The meaning of the word context (to weave together) defines this relevance. Materials, proportion, scale, colour, texture, shape, etc. are better determined in context. The elements that constitute place, together with life forces, create a synergy.

Jørn Utzon, the Danish architect, described the importance of understanding place with reference to the Sydney Opera House:

When I start, I say to myself: put yourself in this place. I always start from the very beginning, under the conditions of the place. I can't use theories and the experience of others. This can be unbelievably tiring. But when I stand on a site I can sense its particular ambience, one could almost say, its mood. I must work and work with this, see where the sun falls, in a special way, where it would be pleasant to sit, I continue gathering impressions and working from there. When I have absorbed it and have it in my head, I can then describe it with my hands.<sup>35</sup>

While it is my preference to work in context there are times when designing needs to be performed in isolation, such as speculative prototyping for production, and ultimately for use in a broad range of places. At such times I rely on my imagination to create a site, to sense its ambience and particularly to explore metaphor more than usual. While new designs are rarely waiting at my fingertips they are certainly conceived more readily when there is a place and a purpose.

44 Windsurfing/Opera House



There is a need to be responsive to the desire to evolve, to accept a down-to-earth frankness as characteristic of a unique Australia. For those other than the indigenous peoples, who were already attuned to their land, the evolved condition sees us coming to terms with our environment and becoming less reliant on our colonial heritage. The quality I've come to respect as a consequence is unpretentiousness. Furniture without pretension doesn't negate lyricism or even embellishment but it recognises that those values are intrinsic to the spirit or philosophy that inspire a work. And essential to manifesting work, given a sound philosophy, is sincerity. Sincerity of purpose, of context, of materials, of form; but principally, sincerity of the spirit that gives rise to these values.

Emerging from this research, aside from coming closer to understanding the unique characteristics of the littoral fringe, is a recognition of our evolved social and dynamic interaction in this zone. This has been an invitation to compare attitudes; of passivity or vitality, and to consider designs that translate rhythms of energy rather than express the static. For example, of notions of the supine woman of the *fin de siècle* to those a century later of the assertive woman participating in aggressively competitive sports; or of the laconic style of surfing before the short board era compared to the 'power surfing' of today.

If my perceived world is an energetic one then such life forces and actions will be translated either by drawing with charcoal, pastels, pencil or brush, or directly, three dimensionally, with other appropriate materials. But here is a potential obstacle in translating the concept into form. Designs inspired by activity, by a sense of poise, are not so readily achieved in say, wood or marble, as with plastic mediums such as clay, wire, forged steel or blown glass. The concept can become stilted if the processes don't allow for spontaneity of expression.

Responding to vitality demands, for me, a comparable spirited action and an appropriate medium. Drawing at an arm-sweeping life-scale is possibly the most effective means of responding to an idea. This can be equally effective with charcoal on a two dimensional medium as with steel rod three dimensionally. So, the rhythms of the active subject inspiring the concept must be responded to in a comparatively vital way.



45 Midget Farrelly classic '60's Cutback



46 Christian Fletcher '90's Aerial



I have had a tendency, when designing chairs, to consider such forms as maternal, embracing and comforting. I consider, however, such current forms as the *Settee for Jo* as more sexual than maternal. They are muscular, naked bodies whose sensuality doesn't embrace as much as invites caressing.

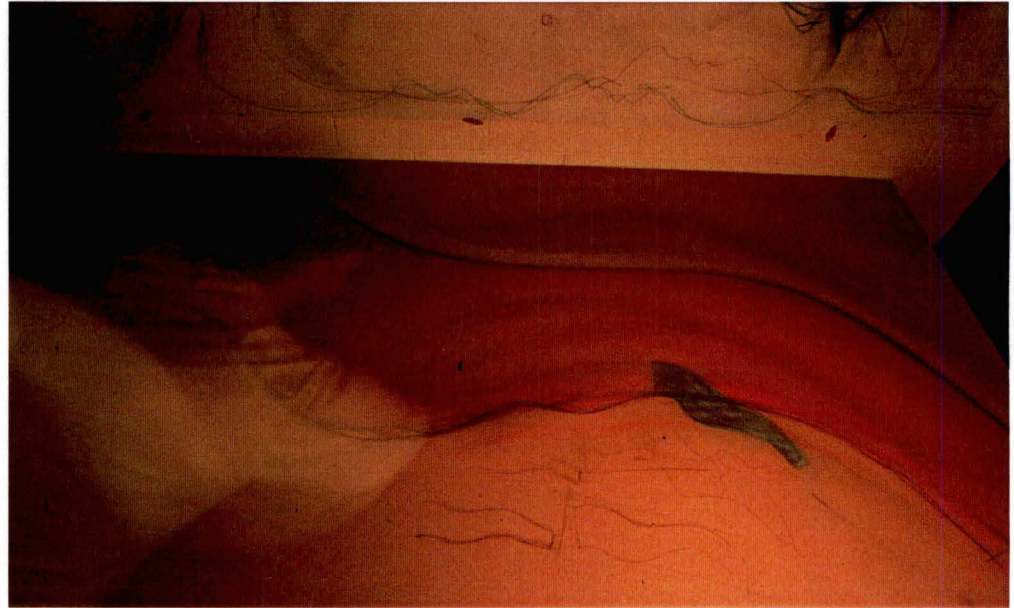
These forms, however, anticipate a yearning for more gracious designs as Gaston Bachelard describes:

the poet ... when he goes to live in the loop of a scroll to seek warmth and the quiet life in the arms of a curve ... Why is it worse for us to say that an angle is cold and a curve warm? That the curve welcomes us and the oversharper angle rejects us. That the angle is masculine and the curve feminine?<sup>36</sup>

The furniture I have produced during this study demonstrates two principle streams of endeavour and I have moved from one to the other in response to the influences, moods and confidence of the time. For the purposes of review I'll term these streams 'formal' and 'informal.'

The formal designs I have titled the *Gymnos* series (*Gymnos*; from the Greek, naked) after a related table of the same name which I produced several years ago. The pared back construction with its poised legs of carved wood, secured like sinew and bone to the table with cast connectors, connotes gymnastic in the original sense. Included in this series is the eight seater dining table with *Décolleté* chairs, the *Kimono cabinet* and console table, all of Tasmanian ash; together with the *Bronze Wing* extension table in huon pine and the *Lured to the Surface* console in Tasmanian myrtle.

This work is relatively pragmatic in design, materials and process, employing mellow-toned eucalyptus woods with cast alloy components to retain a strong, though minimal, structure. The pieces have a refined finish to satisfy the practicalities and aesthetics of production oriented furniture. In consideration of the metaphoric influences addressed in this research they appear restrained. They are designed not to confront, but to be viable in the making and enjoyable in their use. Their symmetrical, elemental and curvaceous forms allow the lively characteristics of the figured ash to stimulate our visual and tactile senses.



47 Drawing for *Then She Turns*

<sup>36</sup> Bachelard, G. *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969. p.146





48 Settee for Jo



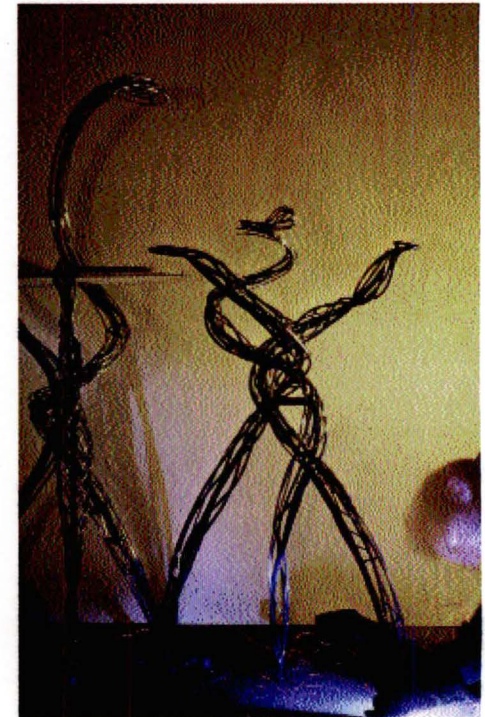
Those designs which I believe are the more fluent manifestations of my principles, are the comparatively liberated, asymmetrical forms such as the *Settee for Jo*, and the 'dancing tables': *Last Summer*, *Incandesce*, *Beneath the Indigo Sea* and *Then She Turns*. This stream of forms constitutes my drawings in steel rod, and given sinews and flesh of cellulose or leather. They are conceived with a flourish compared to the production oriented works such as the *Gymnos* series of dining and console tables, and the *Décolleté* chairs. While the making of the 'informal' works is more forgiving than the *a priori* approach to the 'formal' works, the process is equally challenging. They could be likened to the sport of surfing in wild conditions. For every jubilant ride one has to struggle back out against rips and the surge of breaking waves.

Importantly, they are intuitive works; poised biomorphic studies. While they demand planning in order to satisfy our predilection for comfort or ergonomics, they seem to grow organically. Their asymmetry, colour and texture is evocative of the metaphoric influences which inspired the pieces.

Of all responsive lines there is one which inspires me greatly. This is a fluid transient line. A moving track over a field of liquid energy. This is the track carved by a surfer sweeping across the face of a breaking wave or that of a windsurfer riding both wind and wave,

He scribes an arc  
An ecstatic crystal gouge.<sup>37</sup>

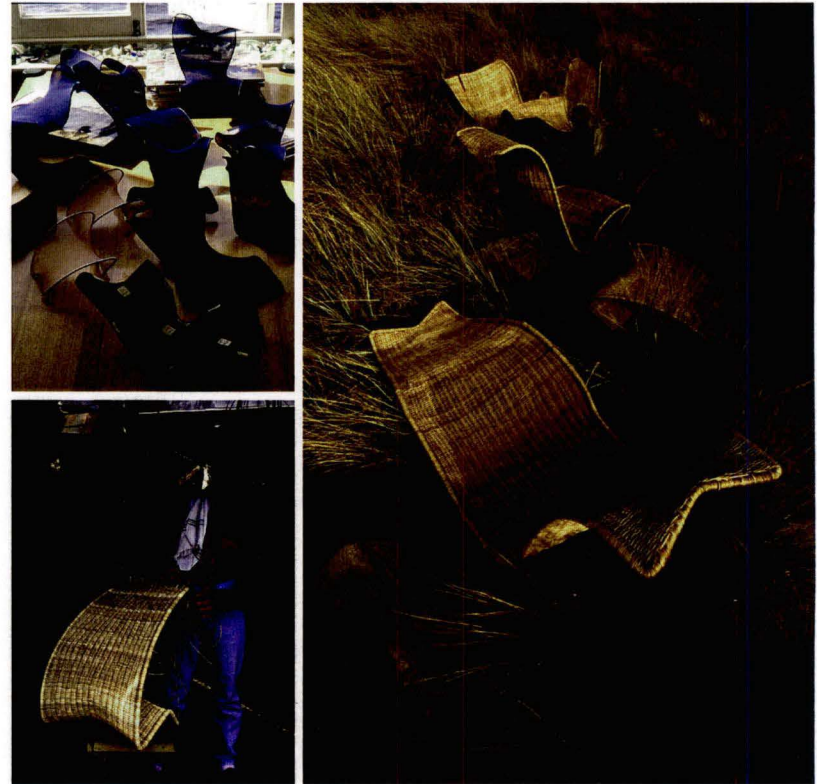
When the rhythms are of the sea or the shore, its swells and surges, its currents, its evanescence, its sounds, textures, scents, and its refreshing colours, my senses are heightened. I must return to this realm if I am to be rejuvenated.



49 Steelwork for *Incandesce* and  
*Beneath the Indigo Sea*

<sup>37</sup> Kampion, D. *Surfer Magazine* c. 1970

### Selection of works in progress during research



50 At the outset of this research I developed designs for seating based on the notion of buckling a two-dimensional plane to produce a functional three-dimensional form. The initial concept stemmed from the complex shapes of drying eucalyptus leaves.

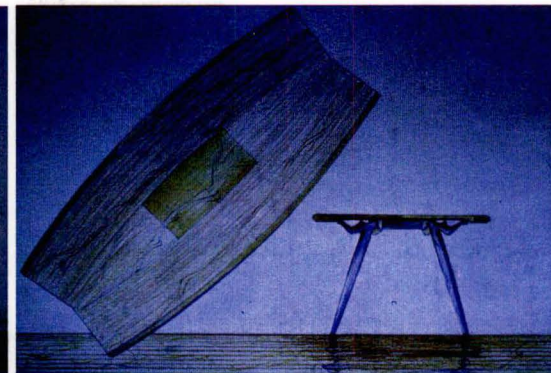
51 Rattan seemed an ideal choice of material, woven over high-tensile aluminium rod. I travelled to the Phillipines to produce the prototypes but found the company recommended to me was incapable of producing the designs as proposed. In short, the attempt was unsuccessful and I made the decision to let the project lapse and to develop prototypes locally using indigenous materials.

52. Wicker prototypes, without leg assembly.





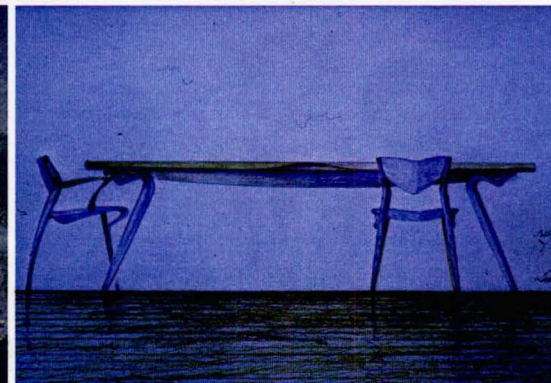
53 G'd dining chair plan and elevation



54 G'd table plan and elevation



55 G'a dining chair front and back elevation



56 G'a dining table with *Décolleté* chairs in elevation



57 *Décolleté* prototypes

58 Sandcasting; aluminium legs for *Décolleté* chairs





## Selected Furniture for Exhibition

Proposed as of 26th August, 1996

1. *Settee for Jo*. Steel, *Enduro* foam, leather, Tasmanian myrtle.  
1850(L)x500(D)x750mm(H)
2. *Last Summer II* centre table. Steel, abaca and alpha cellulose, mdf.  
1170x760x820mm
3. *Incandesce* occasional table. Steel, abaca and alpha cellulose, mdf.  
600x470x850mm
4. *Beneath the Indigo Sea* occasional table. Steel, abaca and alpha cellulose, mdf.  
700x550x1580mm
5. *Then She Turns* foyer table. Steel, abaca and alpha cellulose, mdf.  
1700x450x850mm
6. *Tess* occasional table. Huon pine, Tasmania ash, cast alloy.  
600x420x830mm
7. *Afterglow*, lamp. King Billy pine.  
380x180x100mm
8. *A Light Caress*, lamp. Huon pine.  
380x180x100mm
9. *Gymnos II* dining table. Tasmanian ash; solid and veneer, mdf, cast alloy.  
2400x1120x715mm
10. *Décolleté* dining chairs (set of eight). Cast alloy, ply, *Enduro* foam, leather.  
480x500x900mm
11. *Gymnos* sideboard. Tasmanian ash; solid and veneer, mdf, cast alloy.  
1500x430x850mm
12. *Kimono* audio visual cabinet. Tasmanian ash; solid and veneer, glass, mdf.  
1000x510x1610mm
13. *Bronze Wing* extension dining table. Huon pine; solid and veneer, mdf., cast alloy.  
1500-1800x930x710mm
14. *Lured to The Surface* console table. Tasmanian myrtle; solid and veneer, cast alloy.  
1200x360x820mm

## Illustrations

1. Richard Woldendorp photo., Coastal scene near Dongara, Western Australia.
2. Richard Woldendorp photo., Island mirage
3. Andy Goldsworthy *Slab of Snow*, 1987
4. Leslie John Wright (L.J.W.) photo., *The Fremantle Doctor brings cool relief*.
5. Trish Ainslie and Roger Garwood photo., Roy and Rita
6. Trish Ainslie and Roger Garwood photo., Tom and Nora
7. William Dobell *Bondi*, 1961
8. The Image Bank photo., Sea organisms
9. Julian Ashton *Tamarama Beach*, 1899
10. Alexandre Cabanel *Birth of Venus*, c. 1863
11. Jean Francois Aubertin *The Echo*, 1911
12. *Paris Vogue* advertisement, 1996
13. Aristide Sartorio *The Green Abyss*, c. 1895
14. Gustav Klimt *Goldfish*, 1901/02
16. Max Waldman photo., Natalie Makarova, *The Fugitive Gesture*
17. J.M.W. Turner *Venice with the Salute*, 1840-45
18. L.J.W. photo., Venice from *Ponte del Accademia*
19. L.J.W. photo., Olivetti showroom, Carlo Scarpa
20. L.J.W. photo., Venetian pattern of decomposition
21. L.J.W. photo., *Monument to the Women of the Resistance*, Carlo Scarpa
23. Grotto-esque centre table, late 19th century following in the Baroque tradition. Possibly manufactured by Pauly et Cie, Venice and typical of Venetian grotto furniture.



24. L.J.W. photo., Cottlesloe summer's late afternoon
25. Alice Donnelly photo., Boulders at Sleepy Bay, Freycinet
26. Lloyd Rees *The Great Rock*, 1977
27. Lloyd Rees *Storm at Sunset*, 1980
28. Sylvain Cazenave photo., Wave track, Tom Curren
29. Antoni Gaudi *Sagrada Familia* cross-section
30. Antoni Gaudi *Calvet Chair*, 1902
31. Antoni Gaudi *Promenade columns*, Güell Park
32. John Olsen *Lake Eyre*, 1975
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35. John Farrow photo., *Lured to the Surface* console table detail
36. L.J.W. photo., Granite lichen, Sleepy Bay, Freycinet
37. Alvar Aalto furniture showing 'fan' leg
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40. Verandah furniture, Barandah Homestead, Goomeri
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43. Peter Crawford photo., Simon Anderson with *Thruster* surfboard
44. Peter Crawford photo., Windsurfing/Opera House
45. Ron Perrott photo., Midget Farrelly in classic '60's cutback
46. Sylvain Cazenave photo., Christian Fletcher '90's aerial
47. L.J.W. photo., drawing for *Then She Turns*

48. L.J.W. photo., *Settee for Jo*
49. L.J.W. photo., L.J.W. welding for *Incandesce and Beneath the Indigo Sea*
50. L.J.W. photo. Models for wicker seating.
51. L.J.W. photo. Rattan artisan completing footrest prototype
52. L.J.W. photo., Wicker prototypes without leg assembly
53. L.J.W. drawing *G'd* dining chair plan and elevation
54. L.J.W. drawing *G'a* table plan and elevation
55. L.J.W. *G'd* dining chair front and back elevation
56. L.J.W. drawing *G'a* dining table with *Décolleté* chairs in elevation
57. John Farrow photo., *Décolleté* prototypes
58. John Farrow photo., Sandcasting; aluminium legs for *Décolleté* chairs
59. L.J.W. photo., *Settee for Jo*



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