

Many I love are here

The imaginings of our childhood selves live on in all kinds of interesting ways.
(Natasha Mitchell, in conversation on Ratio National, sometime in October 2016)

I married a man who loves minerals. He looks at spectacular specimens online with an intense appreciation of their extraordinary diversity, but he prefers to go fossicking, becoming equally excited about the sometimes apparently mundane - especially when he examines what he finds through a magnifying loupe, speculating and wondering about geological origins.

His father ran a jewellery store. When Stephen was very young he thought his father went off every day to work in the mines. He thought it was immensely exciting and looked forward to doing the same thing when he grew up. It didn't seem odd that his father left every day in a suit and tie.

At university Stephen started studying geology, then transferred to art. If you know his work I don't need to say any more, though equally, nothing is as simple as the neatness of this anecdote.

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The stones in this exhibition come from a wide variety of sources: many of them found by my children, by Stephen, by my father-in-law and by friends of both me and of my parents. A few were friable and fell apart as I drilled them; if I really loved them, I glued them back together and kept on working. Two belonged to my great, great grandfather. I bought the quartz briolettes, star ruby cabochons and the emerald cut pink tourmalines years ago; and many of the crystal specimens over the last year, from mineral shops. I used opals and Brazilian agate previously set into jewellery stock in Stephen's families' store. I joined the Nunawading Lapidary Club where I learned to cut, grind and polish stones; I found some off-cuts next to the trim saw. At their recent annual Gem Show I bought gems cut and faceted by club members. I met a sparkling little girl called Tissili who, when she heard about what I was working on, brought me pebbles from her garden.

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This work is the same as what I have always done: except maybe this time I have allowed myself to be quieter, to see how close I can get; to know the many I love and have loved and how they are here, or not here, and not to be frightened or distracted by what I find.

At times I felt somehow exposed by the pieces that began to emerge. Not that there is anything confronting about them, in fact they are probably closer to a traditional conception of 'jewellery' than ever before; many are quite small, the work is full of stones, the connections are cast in silver and gold. But I found it hard to pin down the swirling range of emotions. I was sometimes perturbed by sensations of nostalgia or sentimentality; I also felt oddly excited and spent even longer than usual observing, handling and moving stones and works in progress around on the bench. I felt closer to something intense I'd wanted for a long time, but was vaguely confused by how unquantifiable it seemed, as if I was worried I was somehow stealing, or returning to, something a bit illicit. Was I making a claim, observing a logical evolution, filling in some gaps or just glad to be in the studio making work?

There was something to do with time: of ancestors, peers, family and friends, and a blurring as if they were collapsing together. Something to do with longing, something about childhood, wanting to be part of a group – relationships and connections – and of playing this out again and again through the safety of objects.

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For a long time a number of thoughts or preoccupations have repeated or never quite been resolved satisfactorily in my work:

An atmosphere I can only describe as being embodied in the books of Hermann Jünger or Dorothea Prühl (absorbed in my student days, long before the internet or actually seeing their work); a palette of colour, texture and feeling.

Ambivalence about, but wanting to get really close to, something; wanting to really pay attention. Wanting to do as little as possible, or as much as is necessary, or whatever is needed according to what is already there, hopefully without too much repetition.

The rightness of scale.

Everything about the circular link on Otto Kunzli's Cozticteocuitlatl pendants (1998) and the (same sized) jump ring on Warwick Freeman's Cross Bones (1995).

And, stones: wondering how I could use them, what I could bring that might make them mine when I know they can never be anything but perfectly themselves.

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