

## The Gravity of Clouds: A Reflection on Works by Margaret West at Funaki Gallery

by Emma Fielden

I woke this morning surrounded by stone clouds, stone flowers and stone torsos—body parts, torn petals and shadow shards rendered in stone. Hasty scratchings in basalt (fingernails clawing?) There is nothing soft or pliable here.

I spent the night in Melbourne at Funaki Gallery surrounded by the work of Margaret West (1936-2014), one of Australia's most important contemporary jewellers. *Moments from Small Journeys* is an exhibition of works from West's estate, focusing on her carved stone brooches alongside a selection of her drawings, notebooks, poetry and a pendant. It's moving to be here alone with West's pieces. I've recently started working with a collection of materials from her studio, left behind when she passed away and generously gifted to me by her dear friends Valerie Odewahn and Julie Ewington. It's a weighty, precious inheritance, and I inhale vast mouthfuls of air as I stand here contemplating the artworks I might create with it.

As a jeweller, poet, teacher and mentor with a career spanning some fifty years, Margaret West profoundly impacted generations of Australian makers and artists, including me. I first encountered her work in 2006 as part of the group exhibition *Luminaries* at Sydney College of the Arts Galleries. Her work in that show was a series of sixteen brooches titled *Frieze: Ecce Homo (Précis)*, 2006, made from Carrara marble, basalt, paint and silver. Later that year, I was fortunate to see these works again and hold them when I visited Margaret in her studio at Blackheath (NSW). Nine pieces from this series are currently on show at Funaki. West made these weighty brooches in response to the Abu Ghraib tortures of the Iraq War, working through processes of life drawing, stone carving, painting and metalwork. I remember them being heavy, almost too heavy to wear (too heavy to bear). However, holding them now, I am struck by their lightness. These are not a favourite for some familiar with West's work. They're visceral and disturbing. Who would want to wear a bloodied, tortured body part on their lapel? But this is their profound effect. These works are about tortured human bodies, to be worn upon the body, made from stone—a material historically so connected to representations of the body (think of Michelangelo's Carrara marble Pietá). The Latin in the title, *Ecce Homo (précis)*, translates to Behold the Man (pray). These works cry out in protest at the atrocities of war, weighing as heavily upon the wearer as they do upon the viewer.

Alongside these deeply political works is a further selection of brooches from four more series: Notes (the sky is a garden), 1997-1999; Fatal Flowers, 2004; Memos, 2007 and Seven Brooches, 2009. Here, we find flowers, clouds, torn petals and shadows rendered in stone. These works are more subtle and poetic but still carry weight, darkness, austerity and grief. Flowers carved from black basalt and painted bright red carry titles such as *Rosa cruoris* (Rose of blood) and *Rosa vulnerata* (Rose wounded). In her text for Memos, West writes, "Flesh falls from cheeks as petals fall from flowers... However, the flower, as a holder of seeds and a harbinger of fruit, also symbolises regenerative optimism."<sup>1</sup> And it's optimism that I find in her series Notes (the sky is a garden)—Margaret's time in her garden which she loved, fresh air and deep breaths, the impossibility of a 'shocking blue'<sup>2</sup> flower, a cloud solidified in sparkling Thassos marble.

As I stand by the window at Funaki—blue sky shining, Margaret's cloud in my hand—I am drawn back to my own deep breaths and the task ahead of me. In 2017, Julie Ewington wrote, "Today, Australian

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<sup>1</sup> West, M. (2007). Memos. *Margaret West: Moments from Small Journeys*, 13. Funaki Gallery. <https://galleryfunaki.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Moments-from-small-journeys.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Margaret West's description of an Australian blue sky. From Ewington, J. (2000). Wide (true) blue yonder: Recent jewellery by Margaret West. *Object*, no.1, 2000, pp. 28-31.

feminists have a wealth of information about women's historical artistic practices: they have a plethora of exemplars and, most importantly, teachers, mentors and collaborators amongst preceding generations of feminist artists. The question is: what are they doing with these inheritances?"<sup>3</sup> For me, the inheritance at hand is one of materials—stone, silver, gold leaf and tools. It is also an inheritance of the body and working with the body. And it's an inheritance of gazing, seeing, contemplating and attempting to comprehend the immense gravity of a cloud.



Emma Fielden is an Australian visual artist working across drawing, performance, sculpture and video to explore ideas concerning material transformation, cosmology, human connection and disconnection.

Portrait by Jacquie Manning

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<sup>3</sup> Ewington, J. (2019). Recurring Questions, Cyclical Energies: A History of Feminist Art Practices in Australia. In Robinson, H. & Buszel, M. E. (Eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Art* (pp. 17-31), Wiley Blackwell. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9781118929179.ch1>