

SHOES THAT MOVE judith durnford: moves, moves not

Woods Street Gallery, Darwin

12 – 19 September 2001

Takasaki, Japan

6 – 13 October 2001

when I move to other places ... will I leave bits of myself there too or will they all follow me.

Karen Sasella, '(leaving) Darwin'

Paperbark (Melaleuca) is a ubiquitous material in the Top End. It is used by Aboriginal people to make shelters, watercraft, bedding, bandages and carrying containers for food and water. It serves as tinder and tinfoil, to kindle fires and wrap food for cooking. At birth a baby is wrapped in paperbark and at death corpses are wrapped in it for burial. The Kungurakan people of the Finnis River region refer to themselves as paperbark people. However even they do not usually use paperbark for footwear, so Judith Durnford's decision to make one hundred and thirty-five pairs of paperbark shoes was an unprecedented and remarkable feat.

In her first solo exhibition, *Moves, Moves Not*, Durnford brought off a conceptual coup. In this work, she connects the memory, from her earlier time in Japan, of seeing the rows of empty shoes left outside Japanese houses and temples with the national passion for making carefully constructed containers and the artform of wrapping, again with an Indigenous Australian material that speaks quietly of the bush, in the form of the very motif of travelling—shoes.

Durnford knows the bush not as a botanist nor as an Indigenous person, but as an artist who sees colours, textures, shapes and new forms in an unlikely material for sculpture, let alone shoe making. Paperbark is of its nature friable, crumbling, falling off, falling apart, flaking, so to use it for shoes is either perverse, whimsical or inspired. The colour is absolutely right, pale pinky brown, like untanned leather creating at first glance a sleight of eye, but the very impermanence of the material makes these shoes which have never been worn and cannot be worn, look worn, worn in, almost worn out. They have been imprinted with the souls of ghosts. Empty or not, they are inhabited; there is nothing new, shiny or stiff about them; they appear familiar, lost and now waiting to be claimed.

At any time shoes are eloquent and sculptural, looking best, I have often thought, off rather than on the feet, expressing a life of their own. These shoes also tell of different cultures united by the thong, a shoe shape as quintessentially Japanese as it is Australian. Even the act of taking the shoe off has very different resonances in each culture, as Durnford contrasts 'the purity of the Japanese tradition of removing shoes on entering a building' with our ease of 'going barefoot'.

There are Western style work boots, desert boots, baby shoes, children's shoes, sandals, slides, espadrilles and thongs as well as geta, Japanese platform thongs to be worn inside when outer shoes are left at the door, court shoes based on the pattern of cardboard Joss shoes to be burnt in the temple.

Moves, Moves Not received sponsorship from Arts NT: Department of Arts and Museums, and a Pat Corrigan artist's grant, managed by NAVA with financial assistance from the Australia Council.

The soles of the shoes are all differently constructed—some are even woven, some are flat, others have heels, some are stacked in layers like wafers of rock but light as a feather. Sewn together with cotton and pandanus fibre, Durnford decorates some of the uppers with seeds and pods, but mostly they are unadorned and the shape left to reveal the shifting colours of the paperbark, the grain of the fabric which begins to suggest land-forms, perhaps the coloured cliffs of porcellanite around Darwin beaches or the desert sands of the interior.

Each pair begins as an experiment, an innovation. Can the material sustain the last, will it flex as a shoe should, how much latex will it require for tanning and dressing? As the work progresses the cobbler learns her trade and perfects her mad technique of making shoes not for wearing, walking or dancing, but shoes for looking, touching and telling. On

the sole of each shoe she stamps a red seal—an image of her own footprints. That too seems very Japanese as well as Australian—remember those crazy footprint beach towels.

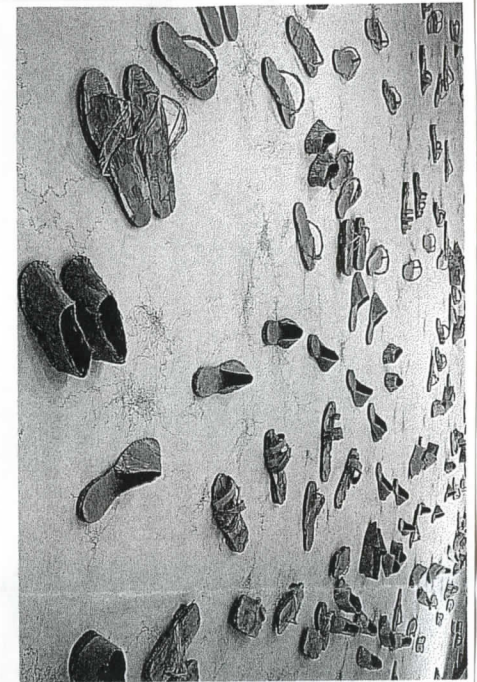
But I have been speaking as if these are shoes in a box or on a plinth: they are not. They are on the floor, all over the floor, sitting on a series of paper mats—not tatami, another paradoxical inversion, but photocopied drawings stuck down in grids of eight. These drawings are fine black squiggly lines on white, suggesting maps, seismic traces, digital radar photos, the routes taken by ants on a tree trunk or snails on the ground plotted by a computer, even the markings on scribbly gum. They tell of movement, delicately, and cushion the soft, still, silent shoes. You are invited to walk amongst the shoes but first you must take off your own shoes and leave them at the door. You are free to pick up the shoes and rearrange them; children at the opening of the exhibition took delight in finding matching pairs. As you walk among the shoes you make your own pathways, leave your footprints behind.

Durnford told me she struggled to find a resolution for the floor surface, something to 'complement but not take over the shoes'. She considered ochre and smoke but it had to be easily portable, reproducible and not give the people at quarantine any more headaches. At the end of the exhibition in Japan, should Durnford wish to bring the shoes home, even after all that time the paperbark will have to be certified free of any living creatures; they will need to be treated at 80 degrees for thirty-six hours.

Fellow artist Ken Burrige opened the exhibition, and he spoke of the Japanese reverence for their rural village crafts. The making of meticulously crafted humble things from natural materials is respected and Burrige believed they would understand why Durnford had made these beautiful fragile things.

Moves, Moves Not is both a development and a continuation of Durnford's exploration of sculpture and installation work made from locally sourced materials, which I first saw during the Festival of Darwin in 1996 in *Contemporary Sculpture* at the Northern Territory University. In *ephemere*, she had sewn painted leaves and pods onto the bare branches of some young Boab trees, while for her graduate show in 1997, *Une foret de colonnes* she threaded hundreds of Bauhinia leaves into long columns and suspended them from the ceiling. In 'Sea Escape' for *Sculpture by the Sea* in 1998 she made fibre balls of dried vines like the round floats attached to fishing nets and tethered them to the Banyan trees on the shore line so that they moved up and down the beach, huddling like family groups, in and out of the water with the tide, until they broke away and floated out to sea.

SUZANNE SPUNNER



Judith Durnford, detail *Moves, Moves Not*, 2001.
Installation Woods Street Gallery, Darwin. Courtesy the artist.