

VEST: late M.E. [Fr. Veste. It. Veste - garment, L. vestis - clothing , attire]

- (i) a knitted or woven undergarment for the upper part of the body worn next to the skin
- (ii) also to dress (a person) in a robe or garment esp. as a formal act of ceremony (1)

Judith Durnford is pre-eminently a maker, from diverse materials diverse things, always at play with the relationship between the organic and the man made, the natural occurring and the manufactured. Note the man, not M-A-N and should be W-O- man but manus hand , hand, finger, thumb, wrist, arm- made. She finds things discarded, left over and creates contemporary relics from the work of weaving, knitting, sewing, twisting, bending, cutting, shaping, pulling apart, unraveling and reassembling. She fabricates in that other sense of fabrication, making up something. Such fabrication is almost a sleight of hand; making from something, something else not thought of, or thought possible before.

An individually made garment is a ritual offering, (1) be it a handknitted jumper, a baby's layette, a wedding dress or socks and scarves knitted for soldiers gone away. These vests although they relate to the body of the artist in scale are like ritual clothing intended to adorn a statue or an idol. They have the simplicity of form that gives them a universality, no back, no front, no gender, no age, they could be worn by a child, a soldier or a corpse. Essentially a continuous wrapping , an encircling tube, these vests enfold and enclose, forming a boundary between the exterior and the interior. They trap and capture that which moves, swims or flies into them. To a greater or lesser extent they protect, cover, shield, hide the most vulnerable part of the body- the chest, heart, soul, the back- the part that reveals itself too readily if exposed too brutally.

These vests contain traces of the artists' experiences and observations as she traveled between Darwin and Indonesia. In Darwin Durnford felt captured, wanting to leave, but captive to her commitments. In Lombok she saw an antique garment made of segments of bone joined by metal links to form armour. Its simple vest form appealed to her, it was easy to identify with and an appropriate vehicle to express the many different senses of capture she wanted to explore.

The construction and appearance of BROKEN WORK made from rectangular tiles of coconut shell replicates the bone, hard and organic but more benign. It is a dense carapace fit to protect vulnerable flesh. The curved surface of the shell has been cut to make flat tiles and then they are joined to make a rounded form that surrounds the body. The smooth inside of the coconut shell makes the exterior armour of the vest. Coconuts are found in both Darwin and Lombok but were introduced to Australia and naturalized in the tropical north. Is Durnford hoping to pass as a native as she moves between places?

WALLACE LINE GRID uses acacia pods found both in Lombok and Darwin and similarly the pods are burst open, their insides exposed, the seeds long gone and their emptiness reveals beautiful markings, a pattern of almost parallel troughs. Yet paradoxically the vest itself seems full bodied, its roundness, bursting with fullness and fruition as if there is still life left in it and it might burst apart from the heart at its centre. The ends of each pod make sharp points in a border of pickets at the edges of the garment, perhaps to protect that heart.

String is a continuous surface no inside or outside and WE HAVE, WE USE is made from Palm string used in Lombok to bind almost everything. Here it makes a continuous form reversible and loosely woven as much defined by its presence as its absences, the spaces between let light, and air pass with ease. In form it is delicate writing; the hairpin turns of the weft visible, the knots on each strand of the fringe full stops in the text. It recalls Aboriginal fish traps and net bags.

From human hair Aboriginal people have always made a string used in ritual objects. Durnford has made LONG HAIR, LONG LIFE from long black hair, not her own which is short and light, but someone else's. Anyone's hair separated from the skin, from the body is disturbing in its intimacy. The hair in the vest is delicately matted and then subtly sewn together. It is not combed through but massed in tendrils like underarm hair or pubic hair. Its sparseness, there is light visible through it as if we are seeing through to the skin beneath which we would be if the vest was worn, makes it particularly and tenderly exposed, like the hair left on the pillow.

DRONE preserves the cicadas like specimens in amber, it keeps these delicate insects in, inside forever, out of the garden trapped. Their papery wings and frail bodies are captured and displayed in the plastic pockets. It stops air but makes light dance, the wings make filigree shadows and the flywire ripples with moiré patterns. Gathered from her garden where they mass in droves, for Durnford they presage the Build Up and the crazy noise of their incessant drone plays on the mind waiting for the relief of rain.

In Lombok the sound of roosters crowing is ever present, like the cicadas in Darwin. They call up the bustle of daily life in villages. KUKURUKUK refers to roosters which have a particular place in society much more important than mere chooks; they feature as the protagonists in gladiatorial duels that give meaning to men in traditional Indonesian societies and they are a potent symbol of masculinity. Their everyday beauty is the glittering prize and they are cosseted in a society with few luxuries. This vest is puffed up with vainglory like the warrior on display.

CUT OUT & CAMOFLAGED juxtaposes the extreme of soldiers' battledress and the fragility of the paper doll cut out by or for a child, the simple repetitive form that never fails to delight when all the people are revealed, holding hands. Is Durnford uncomfortable with the militarism of Indonesia, and the military relations between Australia, particularly Northern Australia and Indonesia? She has painstakingly oversewn the edges the doll chains in a perverse labour of love to protect them from unraveling.

Doll chain joined to chain makes a perfect net - to capture the enemy ... There is something plaintive about the outstretched arms at the straps as if beseeching, surrendering, showing us there is nothing, no weapon in their tiny hands.

GLORIFIED T TOWELS is the booty of the glory box, never used, ripped to shreds by intention, not threadbare and careworn from use. Perfect rectangles of linen, linen lasts a life time. Here skun back to their bones to make a vest that is a cage that might have trapped a little bird like Nora(2) but she escaped and ripped up the regularity that imprisoned her. The predictable domesticity of the kitchen tea has been destroyed and replaced with something lighter and more open, maybe.

MOPPED UP is made from a deconstructed mop, the sort of mop that often stands in as a sign of a female head in a crude domestic drama. Mops are not merely domestic, but total utility, hard work, constant work, dealing with spills, accidents, overflows, floods, dirt everywhere. Just as the phrase wrung out means completely exhausted. Mopping up is the military operation after the main engagement, eradicating small pockets of resistance. AWASH is made by unraveling copper mits, pot scourers and knitting them into a delicate chain mail and suggests the traps of domesticity and the difficulty of dealing with recalcitrant stains that can't be simply mopped up.

BEST SERVED WITH FRIENDS consists of overlaid sharp pointed stars made from Bintang Beer labels. It is meant to suggest easy conviviality but looks garish, forbidding even, reminiscent of razor wire, a trap for the unwary. The overlaid star weaving is similar to a pattern used for cock coops and it is also reminiscent of the Muslim star. Is religion a sticking point? Will the friends mingle, the Australians and the Indonesians? Is there a place for individual needs and desires in the complicated web of friendships within small communities?

INSTANT SATISFACTION is made from aluminum ring pulls. Looking the most precious silvery and slinky; exquisitely articulated, yet made from rubbish. It shows its surprising weight and perverse glamour in its shimmer and the sensuous fall of the material. Are the sharp stars and the easy ring pulls opposite sides of the dilemma? The seduction and attraction of difference and the attendant barbs. SMOKING JACKET is made from packets of Gudang Garam, Indonesian clove flavoured cigarettes also suggests easy conviviality. Garams are ubiquitous in Indonesia and common in Darwin like the coconut palms. Is this a refutation of difficulty and difference across the seas.

GOOD NEWS WEEK made from the Lombok Post and WAYS OF WESTERN JUNK also suggest contradictions. Good News Week is impenetrable, no light can escape or shine through, the newspaper is tightly twisted to make a paper string and then woven like a thick mat. It is the most regular and symmetrical of all the vests. Is it a comment on press censorship in Indonesia, or the language and cultural barriers that make another culture at times so alien to our own.? While Ways of western Junk is a riot of colour and confused messages, there is an extravagance, and sheer wastefulness to it, full colour gloss printing on presumably bleached paper made from forest trees, full of words and pictures signifying nothing but bare faced promises and mass consumption.

Another sequence of vests are also made of paper - and all relate to consumption and economics and the disparities between the first and the third worlds. In Australia the Rupiah notes which are woven into TRIPLE OOO are virtually worthless, you might as well make something from them as you can't buy anything with them. They won't pay the bills of PAID OUT made of bill envelopes that warn us of impending debt and potential penury. Once the bills are paid is anything left just for me, only the cheap luxury of chocolates, an antidote to depression, a personal treat, a sheer indulgence and once eaten and the pleasure taken, desire perhaps sated or merely pricked, then all that glitters is not gold but empty shiny foil wrapping woven into a gaudy night Christian -Lacroix- darlings SUMPTUOUS DESIRE.

LAST FRONTIER and BENEATH THE TREES refer exclusively to life in Darwin, at extremes. A rope net with crocodile teeth embedded is the old territory, where life is wild and must be contained, trapped, roped, bound and subdued. A masculine fantasy, a trophy vest and a companion piece to the splendid cock feathers Kukurukuk . Beneath the Trees, suggests another side to Darwin that is aware of Asia and of Aboriginal presence. The fine casuarinas needles make a soft mat with waves of palest grey green dotted by bright red bean tree seeds. The trees fringe the Northern shores that face Melville Island and beyond it, Indonesia. The red seeds have always been collected around Darwin by Larrakia people and strung into necklaces and I am reminded of the Larrakia welcome songs that talk of seeing strangers arriving on the beach.

Folded into neat packets and secured with a fine bamboo stick, made from a Laurel like leaf and used as an offering in Bali, closely pleated together onto banana string, IN DEDICATION is a propitiation to the gods for a safe journey, a happy life, a prosperous future.... Twenty one vests, a majority attained, full grown and vested to meet the next phase of her life, the artist steps out from what she has made.

SUZANNE SPUNNER

footnotes

(1) The banished princess in Hans Christian Anderson's Wild Swans must knit garments of stinging nettles to save the lives of her seven brothers.

(2) In Henrik Ibsen's groundbreaking play, The Dolls House, his heroine Nora is frequently aligned with a pretty caged bird.