

GRANITE

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Prologue

On looking: some memories that seem important ...

For many years I would stand outside famous cultural institutions and carefully scan the faces of people leaving to see if they had been changed in some visible way as a result of their experiences inside.

There is a film of a performance ... I saw it a long time ago ... with two people on a beach. One stood on the circumference of a large circle inscribed in the sand, the other on a straight line nearby.

They held between them a pole, each person with an end. As the person on the circle started to move, the other, in order to maintain their hold on the pole, was obliged to move also on their line.

It became a walking dance. The pattern was simple, regular ... My enjoyment lay in that and in predicting how far one person would travel before the length of the pole or the limitation of their line obliged one to turn and thus the other.

I remember my fascination but not any attempt at meaningful 'interpretation'. It was the play between constancy and change that I enjoyed.

The back cover of a novel was extremely important to me. By reading it in conjunction with the last few pages I could get the story out of the way really quickly, thus being able to concentrate on the manner of the telling ...

Reader, viewer, audience. Pleasures such as these I describe form the basis upon which my work rests. I don't set much store by originality. But patterns, sensory pleasure, a sense of the

interconnectedness of my thoughts and ideas with those of others at both conscious and unconscious levels ... these are another matter.

In keeping with the sentiments of this manifesto, written many years ago but still pertinent to my approach to art-making, I can tell you now (and I'm writing this having completed the text) that the following will be major features of this writing project, although perhaps more embedded in the fabric of the text than as its subject matter.¹

These include

1. interconnectedness and context
2. names and the business of naming
3. feminist concerns about the insidious nature of the patriarchy in us all

There is also evidence that the author loves a good list.

As a reader, you might well take issue with this summation. Other concerns may reveal themselves to you as being of far greater importance ...

1

Granite eyes

It's the weekend and it comes with the pleasures of coffee and the papers. I read everything. Even The Weekend Australian. And I find this:

*With your ruler Venus in synergy to Saturn, you see with
– as artist Louise Bourgeois wrote – ‘eyes of granite’²*

There's an image to conjure with. Eyes of granite.

Bourgeois was clearly referring to someone important to her. Someone with hard eyes. Hard, and sea-grey and burning cold. Portentous. Still now, but with repressed cold fury just there ...

I could see them ...

But no. You've gotta smile. I looked it up on-line. The 'granite eyes' actually referred to a series of sculptures.

She had created a group of huge bulbous eyes from stone and they were scattered across a parkland. They were like small boulders, the whole round depth of an eye with both upper and lower lids and sightless holes where the lenses might have been.

In the first image I saw on my screen, they looked like the massacre of an army of giants by some otherworldly force ... gouged eyes left everywhere on the ground to rot as a warning.

But then, click, another image, and there were people actually sitting on them. In fact, I could see there were several groups of people sitting on these very dark, very smooth, homogeneous stone eyes. This wasn't just opportunistic. There wasn't a DO NOT SIT ON THE SCULPTURE sign anywhere to be seen. They were clearly available there as seats.

Apart from it seeming even more macabre and somehow sacrilegious that she would make these eyes as seats, the stone itself looked more like basalt than granite, I thought ...

Not the same though, is it – basalt eyes.

She must have known this despite French being her first language.

I think she knew.

She knew that 'granite' brings the potency of language to these stone objects ... here are eyes that are hard, sea-grey, portentous. Still now, but threatening to crash all around ... objects that were being robbed of their metaphoric power by the prosaic act of people sitting on them.

As 'granite eyes' these rock/eyes are, instead, everything to do with the way rocks are in us and we are of them ...

How do I know this? Well, because I can conjure up a pair of granite eyes. I can see them now.

It is the particular colour – the light grey, the speckles of dark ...

But there is something else too.

It's the hardness that holds no moisture. It's the completeness, the stillness that has no give – no reflection of the other ... In this case at least it's not even a coldness. That would imply disdain.

No. These are the eyes of someone who does not love, nor even care. These are the eyes, as I remember them, as I looked up as a small child, into the face of my grandmother.

2

The two grandmothers

There were, of course, two grandmothers. Nothing special in that. Most of us have two parents, each with their own mother.

But it was the difference between them that allows me to consider them more clearly now than ever before.

Let me try to put my memory into words.

My mother's mother – we called her Nana – had a vast bosom. And she seemed, to this small child, to sail around with her bosom moving ahead like the prow of a boat cleaving the air.

Her name was Marguerite. She was a King in name but clearly also a Duchess in her demeanor.

I used to visit her in her apartment on the North Shore – an annual holiday in Sydney for a little country girl on my part, an opportunity to introduce this uncultivated child to an education in civility on hers. Or at least in keeping her busy. (Although, if she had checked she would have found that television, in particular the Mickey Mouse Club every evening, would have been more than enough.)

She would wear a hat and we would both wear white gloves when she took me into the city to some cultural event or other (a theatre matinee for

instance, or the ballet, or lunch in a restaurant). Wearing white gloves was apparently a necessary part of this training – as though culture required careful handling and no evidence of fingerprints. Her exotic status was enhanced hugely in my eyes because she spoke French as her first language – I suspect it was accented as she had learnt it in Brussels as a child. But it sounded like bona fide French to me at the time.

I could go on and it's all very interesting, but I must confess her inclusion is a way of attempting to justify avoidance. Because, in writing this I realise I don't know very much at all about the other one. The one who was my father's mother.

Except this. Ethel. Her name was Ethel. And, although now a Jones, her maiden name was Gordon. She was a Presbyterian, and her family was from Scotland. Embarrassingly, I can't even tell you whether she arrived as an immigrant herself or was born here.

She was tall, gaunt, with rimless glasses and crinkly grey hair that was pulled back with bobby pins. And I seem to remember a permanently pursed mouth that she would constantly touch with a handkerchief held tightly and equally permanently in her right hand.

You can probably tell that I didn't like her.

There were stories, probably my father's, that she had punished my beloved grandfather for years for gambling on the horses (I guess he lost). That she had played the violin very well but one day broke it over my father's head, she was so angry with him.

I could believe it. They had a truly volatile relationship. And he was a master of provocation.

Many years later I remember my mother telling me she and my father had driven for nine hours to visit his mother when she was ninety-six and in hospital. When they arrived, she apparently accused him of stealing her money, so he walked out. He got straight back in the car and drove the nine hours back to their home. And he refused to ever see her again.

I must say at the time I sided with him on this one matter.

She certainly had form in making outlandish accusations and provocations. She would tell me frequently how the male was the important one in the family because he was there to provide income and security. Therefore, his needs (yes, even those of the young boy) should come first because he was the male. It drove me mad having to listen to this, even as

a young child. As a result, with regard to my whole family, I think my personal motto from very early on must have become RESISTANCE IS EVERYTHING.

I remember resting on a narrow bed with her one afternoon as a very small child. Perhaps five. So, my brother, who was on the other bed must have been seven.

It was sunny. And there was the absolute delight of swearing out loud, one inflammatory word at a time (a clearly potent list of words learnt from the shearers). And both of them, my grandmother and my brother, exclaiming in horror at each word. I loved their horror, I remember. It was a great game. I remember laughing each time at their joint reaction.

And then, much later – I was in my twenties – I phoned her as I was nearby. Perhaps I would call in, I thought. Right after she said hello, though, I knew it was a mistake. There it was. There was the question.

Are you still living in sin with that man? And then, before I could even reply ...

When are you going to marry him? And then, before I could even reply...

You will go to hell you know. And then as though this would do the trick...

Your brother is married and has a wonderful wife and family ...

That was enough. I said goodbye. There was no visit. There was no visit ever again, actually. I cut her out of my life just as my father was to do many years later.

It's the hardness. It must be there in all the Joneses.

Well, no. My grandfather wasn't hard at all. So let me correct that. She was a Gordon before marrying.

That hardness? It must be there in all the Gordons.

Because surely there was something of her in my father and then my brother and then myself. We all surely had granite somewhere deep inside, despite my father, my brother and I all having brown eyes rather than the requisite granitic grey.

3

On Hell and damnation

Give her a break, I can hear you say. When she insulted your father for the final time, she was ninety-six after all. And she was not only of another time but also Scottish and Protestant. Those Presbyterians were tough. Must have been horrible growing up with Eternal Damnation everywhere to be found. She must have learnt how to be tough in turn.