

Louise Meuwissen

Of Earth and Ether (Flowers Never Bend)

30 September - 16 December 2023
Bundoora Homestead Art Centre

I sit with Louise Meuwissen on her green velvet sofa. I'm helping to sew fake flowers together, with tiny stitches, just where the tips of their petals touch. Once three-dimensional, these artificial blooms have been removed from their stems and carefully deconstructed: each layer of petal and leaf is separated, laid flat. Eventually they will form a curtain wide enough to pan a room. A lacy net of interconnected points. Louise is sewing it in sections, a long slow task. She has been working for months, growing it petal by petal, stitch by stitch.

Flowers are inherently fleeting, and – for most of human history, before the 19th century brought glasshouses and the 20th brought air-conditioning – dependent on the changing seasons. Humans have long tried to produce artificial versions, with mixed success. The Romans made flowers from wax, the Egyptians from delicate shavings of coloured horn, the Chinese from silk.ⁱ Other cultures used wood, stone, clay, metal, paper, plastic. Attempting to capture a blossom's transient beauty in solid material is something of a paradox. The petals in this work are mostly made of polyester, a plastic textile produced from oil, which itself is the ancient remains of compressed plant matter. A strange echo of nature's cycles.

Fake flowers are in some ways realer than real flowers – certainly more solid – but the truth of a flower is bound up in its inevitable decay. Anyone who has seen plastic blooms left untended on graves, their faded cloth petals cobwebbed and dirty, can see that their so-called permanence is a fallacy.

Louise's house is filled with plants – real ones, not fake. A thriving monstera in the living room is taller than me, its broad fleshy leaves reaching to the window. Scattered throughout her home are vases of fresh flowers, from the garden or other people's gardens: tree dahlias, jonquils, cherry blossom. Once I met her walking down the street, face half-hidden behind an enormous fragrant spray of freshly-cut jasmine.

Now, she has gathered these flowers of cloth and plastic from friends, acquaintances, colleagues, op-shops, junk stores. Collecting is always part of Louise's practice. She forages for beads, jewellery, fabric and clothes that have already been carried on bodies, lived other lives. Things that have been used and worn and handled can hold, as Louise says, "a connection between people – or between the self or the world."ⁱⁱ Heavy with stories, objects can reveal a glimpse of something ineffable.

In Louise's hands, these everyday materials are deconstructed and reconstructed into shimmering portals. The finished curtain divides the gallery, flowers arranged in a cascading colour spectrum – evoking a sunrise, a sunset. You must pass through an archway in the centre: once to enter, once to leave. It's a threshold. A veil.

To pass 'beyond the veil' is to go into the unknown place of the afterlife. Originally, this phrase referred to the veil in the Temple of Jerusalem that separated the main body of the temple from the sacred tabernacle; it has come to refer to a hazy boundary between life and death.ⁱⁱⁱ The only way to find out what lies beyond is to pass through, and there's no way back.

Titled *The Flower it Gleams (after Jim Hodges and Hildegard von Bingen)*, this work references the sculptural textiles of American artist Jim Hodges, who from 1995 onwards made a series of pieces constructed in similar fashion, from artificial flowers.^{iv} The title is borrowed from an antiphon – a sung

psalm – by 11th-century abbess and composer Hildegard von Bingen. This short devotional text weaves images of a gate, a flower and the dawn light into a meditation on the religious mystery of the Virgin birth.^v Like the meaning embedded in objects, these references are potent and deliberately chosen.

Flowers are interwoven with ritual. Roses for a lover; blossoms for a new baby; a wedding bouquet; a funeral wreath. The symbolic meanings shift depending on culture and context, but what it mostly boils down to is birth, sex, and death. Moments of transition; of celebration and grief. The threshold points of human lives.

Beyond the curtain, past the threshold, six intricate vessels – *A collective truth and illusion (Vessels for emotional holding)* – seek to contain some of the internal mess of humanness. Their poetic and sometimes humorous titles suggest their intended contents: worries, fears, hopes, and sadness, not to mention the ‘hollow, leaking jam doughnut’ of the ego. As with *The Flower it Gleams*, this series of bottles, boxes and jars embodies a visceral push and pull between material and immaterial. The title of one object, *A vessel to hold me, a vessel to set me free, (Self Urn)*, articulates the opposing desires of containment and freedom. This particular object is also intended “as an imagined resting place, a literal home for the burnt body after death”; a place for the body to rest, when the spirit is finally freed.^{vi}

These strange, sumptuous vessels are encrusted with beads, whose mineral names hum with a hard, cold poetry: amethyst, quartz, jasper, citrine, hematite, garnet. Their layered surfaces are beautiful and sometimes a little repulsive; like glittering scaly skin. With forms suggesting the storing of precious things – oils, spices, perfume, ritual offerings – they call to mind grave goods, sacred objects to accompany the dead.

Louise made the first object in the series, *A vessel for my worry and fears*, during Melbourne’s extended lockdowns in 2021. It was a work born of urgency. Using the repetition of stitch-work and beading to soothe her anxiety, she constructed the small lidded vessel as an external holding-place for turbulent emotion. This singular piece grew into a deeply personal collection. Like *The Flower it Gleams*, these works reflect the human desire to articulate transient experiences – and also acknowledge the impossible artifice of trying to nail down the ineffable. A polyester flower. An emotion held in a jar.

When we talk, Louise is still finishing the last vessel, titled *Containing all wounds and wishes, tears traverse, (all come from the same well)*. An extravagance of adorning arches, in shades of purple and yellow-gold, this lavish bottle is conceived to hold tears. Louise describes the act of crying as “the internal becoming external”: as tears cross the threshold of the body, they become a material object that holds both despair and joy. For a moment, the ineffable becomes tangible.^{vii}

The vessels shimmer and gleam. They hold impossible things, unanswerable questions. You pass back through the curtain of plastic flowers, and cross the threshold.

– Anna Dunnill

ⁱ Amy Harris, “Artificial Flowers Have a Long History That Continues To Blossom”, Study Breaks, September 21 2021, <https://studybreaks.com/thoughts/the-history-of-artificial-flowers/>.

ⁱⁱ Louise Meuwissen, in conversation with the author, 5 September 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, ed. Elizabeth M. Knowles, 2nd edition, online, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095503327>.

^{iv} Jim Hodges with The Fabric Workshop and Museum, *Every Touch*, 1995, silk, Philadelphia Museum of Art, accessed 28 September 2023, <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/89753>.

^v Nathaniel M. Campbell, “Hodie aperuit”, International Society of Hildegard von Bingen Studies, September 8 2014, <http://www.hildegard-society.org/2014/09/hodie-nunc-aperuit-antiphon.html>.

^{vi} Louise Meuwissen, email correspondence, 27 September 2023.

^{vii} *ibid*, conversation.

