

Artist, printmaker, sculptor:

GW Bot

JAN JONES

Clouds are not spheres, mountains are not cones, coastlines are not circles, and bark is not smooth, nor does lightning travel in a straight line.

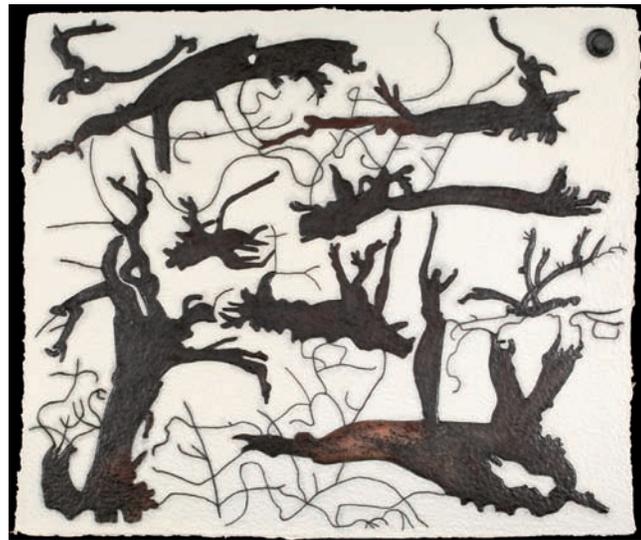
(Benoit Mandelbrot¹)

STANDING WITH ARTIST GW BOT on the banks of the Murrumbidgee a little downstream from its confluence with the Molonglo, we are in a small valley in the magnificent high country west of Canberra; that now sprawling city just a short drive away.

Two eagles and their child fly high above and indigenous grasses soft underfoot vie with a tougher, limey green introduced species. We stand here in the silence, the particular silence of this 'field of glyphs' – homeland for BOT whose own totemic namesake stems from a French document citing the earliest written reference to a wombat, or 'le grand Wam Bot'.

On the riverbank shrouded by a pristine autumn afternoon, BOT observes the multifarious shapes and forms, the glyphs that inhabit her work. For BOT, her world of glyphs is the natural world, which her unique language makes refreshingly visible. In this instance, right here in the face of refracted light skimming the river, the river stones, rocks, grasses, trees and birds, the endless patterns and irregularities of shapes and forms spread before us in the fractal field of nature. From this vast field of life she has created a language for visual explication on paper and in bronze.

The glyphs of BOT interpret the fractal geometry and form observed and brilliantly recorded by Mandelbrot in 1977 in his exegesis on the complex shape (or misshape) of our universe. His observations of the chaos of evolution have overturned Western ways of seeing based for centuries on Euclidean mathematics and structuring. Some of his observations had been made earlier by scientists such as



1/ *Crucifixion*, five-piece bronze relief sculpture, 135 x 185 x 8cm.

2/ *Muses*, 2009, watercolour and graphite on Colombe paper; 110 x 30cm

Images courtesy GW Bot and Beaver Galleries, Canberra.

Kepler and Newton in the 18th century.

And today the continuum of the inevitability of fracture in nature is here present in all that surrounds us in this peaceful and perfectly chaotic valley. And there lies the irony, this chaotic perfection – not a straight line in sight – and yet we stand in all that is balm to the human spirit, a spirit that for most of us exists mainly in the modern world urban order of design based on the grid. Soon that grid will cover the hills nearby to where we stand.

BOT'S particularised language through her mark making is all the richer, due to her intuitive knowledge of the natural Australian landscape and its flora and fauna. She has walked its breadth and depth and swum in its deep, cool water; she has been alone within its complex embrace and continues to respond to its never-ending, seeming lunacy, determined and materialised in this vibrant exhibition. There is no beginning and no end in the existence of nature for BOT, only a continuum, a never-ending cycle of life enmeshed in decay and death. Her marks imprint also an impenetrable silence.

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The loud clanging of existence for the human self surrounds us in the urban landscapes. Even on the pavement outside the coffee shop this morning, BOT pointed out the glyph shapes of shadows formed on the pavement by overhanging branches of a surviving tree, contemplating the loss of so many others in Canberra and more to come.

Glyphs are the marks we can make to delineate understanding, what and how we see the world around us. Glyph history is long and ancient and easily accessed today on the web under many headings. For GW BOT glyphs have formed her work now for over twenty years and today they appear never better than in this travelling show, *Field of Glyphs*.

Matisse himself could well be envious of BOT's work titled *All Hallows glyphs* (2009), its primitive vitality made vibrant through the use of linocut technique. Its virtually hewn out of the 'soil', which BOT terms her printing papers – those papers which have themselves evolved from the soil over centuries, inherent here in the richly unrefined Korean hanji paper which has its own life and depth, its beauty and imperfections analogous with the natural world from which it came.

These glyphs seemingly have a life of their own and that is what BOT is interested in – they cannot be pinned down, controlled, shaped into formality; they appear to our structured minds formless, lacking convention, free, natural, spontaneous, and here convivial. An invitation to join perhaps Matisse's *Dance of Life* painted one hundred years ago. Both works suggest emotional freedom or liberation. Both succeed equally in their time.

For GW BOT, glyphs transform life into allegories of timelessness. For the viewer they can require time to 'read' but once read they are made real and tangible. We can see them clearly wherever and whenever we care to look. Armed with our own glyph alphabet we too can travel into the bush, into our suburb, and regenerate our own visual perspective. Glyphs are on the ground, up in the air, in the trees, the sky; shadows redolent with life and death, witness to our existence and the encroachment of the 'grid'.

The artist also honours the integrity of the Korean *hanji* paper by giving it space to breathe. The marks delineated again by cutting into the imperfect, unrefined paper come to life. But it is the empty spaces in between the marks in BOT's *Resurrection Glyphs – midday* (2009) that suggest a paucity of life, death, something of nature bereft, saved only by the promise of new life in the glyphic form of a single red tree and its smaller reflection looking toward the midday sun. The work exists as an allegory for destruction and rebirth, the story of evolution; chaotic and mutable.

GW BOT began her journey with other Australian artists in the early 1990s and like them formulated her own unique mark making, abstracting the world with her determined language in an effort to understand and describe what she saw. Eons before BOT and other 20th

century artists started out, Indigenous Australians had naturally developed their unique markings to replicate their world. Intuitive understanding of the fractal shapes of nature ensured that their artistic expressions, their 'abstracted' marks were integral to their spiritual and daily life, to record their stories on no better place than the surface of their land, their painters' soil.

In *Muses* (2009), BOT has dug up the 'soil'-paper surface with her graphite pencil and embedded strong marks deeply into its being, with the extraordinary result of heavily tactile, textured shapes tampered down into the paper to suggest relief sculpture – embossed and purposefully inviting to touch. The markings appear archaic, as if re-discovered on an archaeological site, and some exude the colours and feel of bronze that relates to BOT's other work as a sculptor in that medium. In her bronze relief sculpture, *Crucifixion*, for example, we feel the natural world will die as surely as day follows night. Within the sculpture's five forms lies a plainly beautiful allegory of our existence in the natural world to which we are bound. Like the tree of life here represented, we too will wither and die and be replaced – completing another cycle ... we are but small stuff within the vastness of an indefinable universe.

Cliff Spirits (2009) culminates a dazzling coming together of the artist, her medium, her techniques, her experience of art making and her life. Fecundity is present in the working up of the paper surface, responsive to what it can offer. The irascible, indefinable, illusory spirit markings creating mayhem appear familiar and yet altered, their shapes too numerable to count. And we have to ask ourselves, why the familiarity? Are these the spirit of life possible, the spirit of life not lived, or the spirit of perceived afterlife, wished-for afterlife, rather than the possible/probable black nothingness of the inevitable and final compost? Whatever, whoever they might be, these markings called glyphs are indeed worth celebrating and thinking about – an allegory of life embedded, imprinted in all the works of GW BOT. ❀

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1. From Polish-born mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot's *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, W.H. Freeman, New York, 1982.
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GW BOT'S exhibition titled *Field of Glyphs* opened at Beaver Galleries in Canberra, 6 May, 2010, as a prelude to the exhibition *GW Bot: the long paddock*, a 30-year survey which begins its regional galleries tour of NSW and Queensland at Goulburn Regional Gallery, 9 October to 20 November 2010. The artist is represented by Australian Galleries in Sydney and Melbourne; Beaver Galleries, Canberra; Grahame Galleries + Editions, Brisbane; Arts d'Australie, Paris; and Hart Gallery, London.

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