

7

Sandra Bridie, b. 1965
After 'The Late Works of
Paul Cézanne'
(a fiction)

1997

Interview with Sandra Bridie by B. S. Hope
September 1999

B. S. Hope: How did these works come about?

Sandra Bridie: I did the work for this show more or less as an occupational therapy project.

What was the occupational therapy for?

My hands had been badly injured in a car accident almost four years ago now. I had spent nine months in hospital recuperating and in rehabilitation. The idea of creating a show out of tapestries came out of my experiences in OT sessions.

So what will be in the show?

Five tapestries – not enough to fill the space in this gallery, but there you are. Unfinished tapestries, still in their hoops on canvas. The images to sew on the tapestry canvas are photocopy transfers of reproductions from a book titled *The Late Works of Paul Cézanne*.

Why did you select these pieces of Cézanne to work ‘after’?

I didn’t choose them so much as they chose me. It came out of the project that my occupational therapist devised.

Mmm, go on ...

My impetus to make work had been pretty much knocked about by the events of the accident and the injuries, so this project was devised by my occupational therapist, ‘to keep me going’. The project was for me to make five to six canvases. About six months after the accident, as I

wearied of making plaster bear moulds in the OT room, she – Leslie – brought in canvas with thick coloured wool and large needles for the class to work on. I began sewing just one colour at a time to cover the canvas, making monochromes. Other people in the sessions generally made stuff for kids and babies, with images of dolls, teddy bears, etc. stencilled onto the canvas to make cushions with. Later we graduated to finer canvas and cotton rather than wool, with motifs of flowers or cottages to fill in with thread. I became obsessed with sewing, but could only do a small amount at a time because my hands gave out. I was fortunate that Leslie was there as the occupational therapist; she turned out to be my saving grace because, as you know, she is an artist. She suggested that I get some of my own images transferred onto canvas, or that I draw my own image onto the canvas to sew. But at that stage, while I was still in hospital anyway, I was content to do endless monochromes. The work that will be in the exhibition came later, and is in answer to a kind of relapse I had after the court case, three months after I left hospital. In court, I was absolved of blame for the accident, but I couldn't, in my own conscience, clear myself as cleanly as was achieved legally

Can you tell me about the accident – what charges, what court case?

The accident occurred in September 1995 as I was driving up to Mallacoota, on the New South Wales south coast, for a holiday with my partner Scott. There had been heavy rains and flooding for a couple of weeks, with roads up on the southern coast of NSW being washed away in some parts. We were going up to stay with friends who lived there. As we drove towards Mallacoota through the rain the countryside looked quite eerie, with intermittent lightning flashes in the background and the land being taken over by the water. I still have a clear memory of seeing surreal little scenes like the picnic tables at wayside stops half-submerged. The water from the flooded rivers and lakes lapped at the edge of the roads and the roads were quite tricky to drive on because of their soft edges.

Anyway, it was getting dark and I remember this image of a weird phenomenon: tentacles of swirling mist seemed to be drawn toward

the car through the cone of light created by the headlights. This was happening as we were listening to Brian Eno's *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)* on the car's tape recorder. Another car had been inching its way along in front of us, and although I would have been happy to sit behind it for as long as it took, being the overly cautious driver that I am, Scott was an annoyingly impatient passenger, and his verbal goading of the car in front was getting to me. He kept on and on, 'overtake, come on, we can do it now!'. At his tenth insistence, I overtook, the road seemed clear, but the fog did obscure proper vision

So, I overtook.

... There had been a car coming towards us and we both swerved off the road into the water. We didn't collide, we ended up in the water on either side of the road. ... The people in the car we overtook managed to help a child out of the other car, but her parents were drowned. In our car Scott was unable to get out and was also drowned. He died there, but I managed to scramble out somehow.

There was a court case to determine my degree of culpability for the accident, but my representation must have been good, because the court case was not drawn out or involved and I got off. I have not been able to absolve myself though – I spend a lot of my waking hours, still, going over the event in my head. The fact is that I was the driver who caused both cars to swerve off the road into the flood and three people were drowned because of this.

What kind of injuries did you have?

Head injuries, not too bad, but lots of bruising and lacerations to my hands, cutting of tendons, etc.

Considering you suffered hand injuries, isn't this about the most intensive and painful kind of work you could choose to do? How hard was it?

Oh, it was painstaking, but remember I commenced this work a year after the accident. As I have prefaced it too, it was OT – it was the kind of work I needed to do for my hands to recover. I had a generous schedule for the works; I gave myself five months for each piece. So the routine was regular but not strict. At first I could only work in short bursts on these finer tapestries, fifteen minutes would do me in, but by the end I became pretty obsessed with it, still only being able to do half hour stints, mind you, but several through the day.

Could you describe the setting for your work; where did you do your sewing?

I live in a house that is quite bright, so I created a sewing corner in the living room. The tapestries were diverting work, or I made it diverting by listening to the radio. Later, I discovered ‘talking books’ at my local library so I began listening to poetry, non-fiction, some classics. And I found myself enjoying mysteries, stuff I would never have allowed myself to read before. When the work became more instinctive, when I could sew almost without looking at the thread, I found I could watch TV and videos. So the activity of making these works helped me maintain some sense of sanity; it gave me a sense of some palpable outcome at a time when, really, my concentration was very poor.

Would you say that all the aural and visual material you used while making the work served the purpose of filling in any other space where you might have been left to think about your situation?

I guess I would say that, yes.

One of the first things you notice with these works is that they are clearly unfinished, purposefully so. When did you decide that a work was finished?

The finishing, or ‘leaving off’ of a work, had to do with the overall structure of the project. The tapestries would have been impossible to actually complete, to fill up. I don’t think physically I could have finished the work for years and years. Also, I don’t think the work could have kept my interest for that long.

Describe the framework of the project or program that Leslie and you devised for this work. You said something before about a relapse, and the work coming about in response to this

Yes, after the court case I ‘lost the plot’ for a long time, couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t concentrate at all. I mean I could function insofar as I could get out of bed, go down to the milk bar, look after myself in a very basic way, but not much else. The main thing I did at that stage was sleep a lot. Friends came around, family came around, but for a very long time I was lost to them, it was like seeing everything, even those closest to me, through a fog. I now see that this feeling was the compound effect of guilt and grief – dreadful, paralysing guilt, guilt that couldn’t even let me isolate my grief at losing Scott. I couldn’t let myself miss him because I kept wanting to blame him for making me overtake that other car, but he was dead. I was alive.

Anyhow, Leslie began checking up on me at home, even though our OT sessions had finished when I left the hospital. She was good, and wasn’t put off by my remoteness. She was happy to maintain her professional role with me, on a friendship level, which is what I needed. She asked me what I wanted to do – not with my life, but with the next year, say. But even that was too difficult a question for me to answer. —

Why?

Well, as I was describing, I was in a state of severe depression, though too inert to be suicidal, if that’s possible. I couldn’t make sense out of the reasons why I had survived the accident, especially that I had survived while three others had died; I couldn’t get away from these thoughts except through a kind of drugged sleep. I could not work out how to continue to survive on a day-to-day level. Each day seemed almost impossible to negotiate, a simple decision like when to take a shower could bowl me over and confuse me and send me back to bed.

So this was the time when Leslie decided I needed a plan. She thought that by looking at some of the work I had done previously we might get some clue as to how to create a project. I think she wanted to see what kind of work I did.

The work you exhibited prior to this was quite different, wasn't it? I remember seeing a series of pastels of yours in '94 that seemed derived from quite a different sensibility. Can you talk about these earlier works? What is your perception of them now, what was your approach to the subject?

I would call the work I did 'moodscapes', that's probably a good way to describe them – isolated images or motifs that consistently occurred in my dreams, like a series of stock images. I did a lot of drawing, pastels, charcoal, dense graphite pieces; even my oil paintings used a lot of oil stick. I don't know whether these works were informed by a kind of 'Melbourne' figurative sensibility, but some of my pictures definitely had a look of, or even a familiarity with some of the Angry Penguins: Arthur Boyd, Joy Hester, Charles Blackman and later artists such as Peter Booth (at least his less apocalyptic works). But the work especially looked like Lynne Boyd's (I know this because sometimes people would confuse our works), do you know her? My iconography did not extend much beyond piers, boats, lighthouses, lakes and mountains. My pictures were very still, simplified or generalised, always single motifs in muted tones on a hazy dark field, very tonal. These works were very popular, they sold well.

My 'technique' with pastel meant that the surfaces were so dense, worked over to such a degree that the colours became a sludge and the paper either tore from being overworked or couldn't hold any more colour and the pigment flaked off. But that heaviness was a lot of the works' appeal. I would say they had a self-conscious darkness about them, a sense of impending doom. Now I see them as really rather melodramatic, which is funny because at the time I was doing this work life was pretty sweet. From the time I left art school until the time of the accident I was among the few of us who were enjoying recognition and support for their work. I was on a retainer, for God's sake! I had a gallery, got a couple of overseas travel grants, some nice

press (some not so nice), had an artist boyfriend But when I would speak about my work I would use words like, hunger, mourning, abyss, etc., etc. Maybe the only thing I really hungered for was a bit of real life *gravitas* to support the images, for in reality they came out of a dearth of tragic incidents in my life.

Prior to the accident, how preoccupied, or 'driven' were you in relation to your artwork?

I worked every day; I felt a responsibility to do this, I guess, because I was getting paid for it. I kept to a routine of about eight to ten hours in the studio a day. You could say I was 'driven' to work: occasionally I would do all night stints, and I could get pretty narky if my work was not progressing, or if for some reason I was kept from the studio.

We were talking about your program for the work in the show.

Yes. I looked at the works with Leslie, and there seemed to be an unbearably cruel irony in their image content. As I was showing the works, I felt sick. I said that I could *not* continue on that tack.

So what Leslie and I did was develop a project out of a consciously random selection of work by an artist. We went to La Trobe University, to the artist's monographs section of the library there, and I was blindfolded (God knows what people thought who could see all this), and selected a book. It happened to be this book here, Thames and Hudson's *The Late Works of Paul Cézanne*. I hadn't ever looked at Cézanne in detail, but remembered that I had tried to study him for an essay in HSC, but he seemed too difficult or formal for me to get a grip of, so I wrote about Egon Schiele instead.

The project that Leslie and I devised was composed out of time modules: a fixed time and a limited production.

Why did you choose these particular images by Cézanne? Is there a random element to that as well?

Again, with the blindfold I selected five images from the book, or I selected ten images while blindfolded and then *chose* five from those. From here we/I improvised on that limited selection by zooming in on a detail of a painting as in the still life here, and this one too, or with this monochrome, by oddly cropping the pictures on the page and using more than one image. As we went along I got into the look of using the image of the actual page from the book, referencing that by keeping the white space around a reproduction and the captions underneath. I really liked that. When the canvases came back from the photocopy shop with the transfers of these pages from the book I was very, very pleased with them. I loved the effect of the weave of the white canvas and the loss of saturation of colour that occurred during the process. I didn't want to touch them, and for a long time had these scrolls of fabric pinned up to my wall.

The time structure of the project was to spend a little over two years (five months per canvas) to get an exhibition together. Leslie made the arrangements to program the exhibition in this gallery here. When I first started, I thought getting a show together was an impossible ask, that nothing would coalesce at the slow pace I was going. In the beginning, I also expected that I could actually fill up the canvasses, and I was really disappointed when I discovered that this would not be possible. So then, in my own mind, I had to make a virtue out of the works' incompleteness, and once that was done I could continue with the whole program. In the early days, I would get to the point where I was almost in tears because of the strain on my hands, especially when I was too ambitious and pushed it too far. For a year, fifteen minutes a day was the maximum I could put into the work.

Talk about each work in turn, about choices in cropping or the layout of the compositions; what do the works represent? Together, what meaning has the process of selection of these images provided?

OK, what have we got here? Out of the original 'random' selection of ten I ended up with these. I suppose I landed on these finally out of a sense of 'Cézanne-ness'; out of a sense of the beauty of a detail;

out of a sense of portraying my process – and out of a liking for the look of the displacement of images in print and a liking the look of the image on the page.

So *Lake Annecy*, which Cézanne painted in 1896, was one of my first choices, and is the only complete image in the show, even though my sewing on it is the most discordant. I think I would have had to fill the entire tapestry for it to work, the brushstrokes and colours on the water in the lake are too involved to transpose into thread. It's a very powerful image; the water seems to pulsate towards you, while being withheld by Cézanne's surface. At a certain point I could not refer to this image in the book, or else I became too confused as to which colour to choose, which brushstrokes to follow, especially in the water of the lake. In a way, my project was devised to keep these kinds of considerations of nuance at bay; I would want to treat each piece with the comforting attitude of a monochrome. I would grow very tired trying to work 'with respect to' Cézanne's image, realising that I could not treat his source image as a monochrome, but at the same time being incapable of transposing him to thread in any reverent, or faithful, or at the very least 'interpretive' fashion.

Next came the detail from *Still Life with Apples and Peaches* from 1905. I don't know ... this is a classic isn't it? I suppose the two coloured oils (*Lake Annecy* and this one) were chosen because of their 'Cézanne-ness'. I could not *not* have chosen a still life. The sculptural qualities in this detail made it very satisfying to render.

I'd like to ask you about this one here, it looks like a very delicate and decorative border. What was the original image that this detail comes from?

If you look closely, you will see that the title of the image is *Three Skulls*, done around 1900. I guess it was the discrepancy between the delicacy and – as you say – decorative qualities of this watercolour and its subject matter that was interesting to me. I chose a detail of the border because of its lightness, its floweriness. The isolated floral cloth does not mark itself out as a work of Cézanne, it could be done by any watercolourist, it does not omen, in any way, the

objects sitting on it. As a tapestry I liked working on this piece because of the prettiness and paleness of the colours and because of the horizontal form.

The last two black and white works were taken from the front of the book, from the chapter ‘The Last Motifs at Aix’, written by John Rewald.

I was going to say that these pieces mark the project, don't they; they source it? The references to the page, indeed to the book, bring into the work issues of appropriation, bring to the viewer a sense of your process of selection. Without these two pieces the viewer might not ask themselves ‘why did she choose these pieces, what is the reasoning behind this choice?’. The work would have been more about a straight homage to Cézanne, about the transposition of an artist's work into another medium, pure and simple.

I don't know how conscious I was about the way my selection would read to a viewer, actually. In the end I was just choosing the images, or compositions, that pleased me. I liked the look of the print on the canvas. The white space around the images meant that I could, after all, practice, in bits, my liking for zoning out on monochromes. And by doing these tonal works I could enjoy working in key with the source images, my threads don't jump out so much. As untouched canvases the black and whites were very evocative. The chapter from the book is very interesting: ‘The Last Motifs at Aix’ ... follows Cézanne around a more and more confined area in Aix en Provence as he paints his last paintings. John Rewald, the author of the chapter, spent years of his life in the 1930s tracing down and photographing the motifs in the landscape from the point where Cézanne had stood to paint them. I had to include somewhere in the selection an image of the central motif for Cézanne – the motif of Mont Sainte-Victoire. But you are right, by including these odd pieces, which are not the usual subjects for tapestries (the others could, at a stretch, be) the viewer can glimpse the process behind the project, the activities of selection behind the work.

You haven't spoken yet about the choice of subject of the works. Was there, after all, some hidden impulse behind using certain images? I am thinking particularly of Lake Annecy and Three Skulls?

I guess you can read whatever you like into the work, if you want.

You don't want to talk about it?

I don't know how interesting it is, really.

You have said, in a number of ways, that this work came out of a deep sense of despair. Is that where it leaves you now that the project has finished?

Have I said the word despair? I guess the work came from there. I definitely needed assistance to create a task that was ongoing, that kept me going on. The aims of our task were not ambitious, merely to 'keep my hand in', so to speak, as an artist. All we could come up with – seeing I could not bear to begin where I had left off with my own art career – was an activity of refracted or 'second-degree' creativity. This work has been sustaining as an activity, not painful to 'create'. It has filled in my days where, without it, very possibly I would have been beyond 'despair', if you know what I mean.

The quality of the work is uneven isn't it? How important is that to the look of the work, the uncertainty of the hand?

Well, they had no choice but to be clumsy. The work ended up being more a record of progress than a display of virtuoso tapestry-making. This progress included wrong choices in colour, glitches in surface tension, wrong direction (a couple of times) of diagonal stitches, too-thick cotton (I started out using six strands of cotton and then realised three gave the right tension and was easier for my hand to pull through the canvas). And all this is on the fronts – you should see the backs of the canvasses!

You have spoken about needing to create a project to sustain you through this crisis, but why did you need to make an exhibition out of these works?

Yes, I know what you mean; it's hard to place this type of show within my own past exhibiting history (perhaps I'll be able to do this later). The work, I have to admit, doesn't seem to fit anywhere within the aesthetics of my previous work. To viewers the exhibition of these tapestries may appear a bit eccentric and clumsy. I don't know how prepared I am to deal with responses to it, because I am used to a consistent-looking output and a responsive and familiar audience for my work. I don't know what answers I will be able to provide to questions about the work, what reasons I can give for making it and showing it. Perhaps the best reason that comes to mind for making an exhibition out of this work is that it's habit, habit formed from almost twenty years as an artist – I am used to exhibiting my output, I rely on that process to place my work. I don't know, does that sound feeble? My instinct is that by not having a show of this convalescent work, I would not be able to go on and produce the next lot.

Do you see this work as an exercise in deconstruction? Would you use the term 'appropriation' in relation to this work?

I wouldn't, but someone else might. I need some distance to ascertain my relationship to Cézanne in the work. I found Cézanne through a kind of game of random selection, I found Cézanne because I could not draw on my own output: there might be something contemporary about that sense of disillusionment.

Is this art?

I don't know, is it?

It seems that as a young artist your sense of commitment, or vocation if you like, was very strong. This would have been supported by the recognition you gained and the opportunities that came your way from the very first. Since your convalescence have you had difficulty keeping this connection to an image of yourself as an artist? Has it changed or been transmuted into something different? Is your sense of identification as an artist still as strong?

In my previous work I was convinced of the authenticity of my visions. This sense of vocation was validated by those around me. I had a very strong sense of being an artist, and that I could sustain myself indefinitely; I never questioned that that was what I should be. After the accident, all that fell apart. When I looked at my earlier work, all I could see was its shallow mimicry. This left me with a crisis of what to do, how to see myself. If I had no sense left of myself as an artist, what was remaining for me to do? That sense of absolute panic has subsided, and now I am left with the question of ‘what will I now do as an artist?’. Somehow I feel it is possible for me to continue, but I cannot return to the type of work I did before – I don’t see how that is possible.

Do you see a difference between something that comes from an external source and an image that seems to arise from your subconscious?

I think formerly I distrusted work that was processed; work that I felt didn’t come from direct expression. I used to feel sure of my transpositions of dream motifs as truly felt, original, straight from my subconscious. With the accident, I could not bear work that pertained to such saturated states, it was too reminiscent of the actual scenes and landscapes the accident occurred in.

These tapestries, done under supervision, began with a very consciously selected ‘external source’, looking at the distillation that Cézanne achieved in his work over a lifetime. They have made me realise that going about your work in a way that is not so immediate allows space for a resonance of effects. I am not saying this resonance will be what viewers perceive in the work (mainly, I guess, they will be perplexed), but for me it means that the experience of the work, though less intense and immediate, may linger more broadly.

How much did you get into Cézanne while doing this work; did you read up on and look at his work a lot?

I enjoyed learning about the passage Cézanne went through as an artist – that was heartening. He began as a clumsy draftsman, was

crudely passionate in his early works – unconstrained – and then as time went on he began channelling these instincts into work that became structured. Yet there is still this sense of controlling violent or powerful urges. To me the surface tensions of Cézanne’s work, when he first came into his own, are like webbing, containing something that might surge through or erupt from the rhythms within. His later work, particularly those beautiful watercolours, are elusive and magical, but they move within the frame – never beyond it. In the course of the project I did not become a Cézanne scholar, but I enjoyed finding out about him and looking at him more and more as time went on. I feel that, in an odd way, over the past two years I have taken Cézanne ‘into my heart’. I suppose that is the purpose of homage, to appreciate something through assimilation.

Would you say you have come out of this prolonged period of convalescence? How do you feel about the future? What work is in store?

I haven’t fully recovered yet, but I’m getting there. Having shown this work, I feel I want to have another show, perhaps in a year or eighteen months. It will be new work; as I said, I don’t think I can return to my early approach to image-making, and I don’t think I can repeat this project, which came out of very specific circumstances. So for the present I am in a very strange situation for me, not knowing what my next work will be.



The Last Motifs at Aix, 1999

Tapestry hoop, canvas, thread, needle, dimensions variable, 1997

After 'Lake Annecy', by Paul Cézanne, 1997

Tapestry hoop, canvas, thread, needle, dimensions variable, 1997



From page 89, 'The Late Works of Paul Cézanne' by John Rewald, 1998
Tapestry hoop, canvas, thread, needle, dimensions variable, 1997

From 'Three Skulls' by Paul Cézanne, 1999
Tapestry hoop, canvas, thread, needle, dimensions variable, 1997



From 'Still Life with Apples and Pears' by Paul Cézanne, 1998
Tapestry hoop, canvas, thread, needle, dimensions variable, 1997