

SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF BARBIE KJAR'S EXHIBITION, "THE SEA, THE SEA",
IN THE BETT GALLERY, 5 SEPTEMBER 2014

The Sea. The most primal of planetary scapes. The dimension from which all life flowed. The *most* elemental of the planet's elementals.

The sea cradles life on earth, sustaining it, regulating it, fine-tuning the atmospheric processes that enable life to exist. As a friend of mine, the great scholar of islands, Godfrey Baldacchino, observed: 'the ocean inhabits us. Living things are made essentially of water. All living things emerged, evolutionarily, from the sea. We inhabit Planet Ocean, *not* Planet Earth.' In fact, we humans seem to have emerged from the sea twice. Out of it we came. We flopped around on land uncertainly for a period of time. Then back we went, only to re-emerge subsequently 'for good'. Though whether the rest of evolutionary life would deem this 'for good' is another matter.

The sea contains within it an infinite, shifting array of ecotonal boundaries. But it is the *primary* boundaries between land and sea, and atmosphere and sea, that are of greatest import. These are the two most significant boundaries on the planet. And yet, their very status as boundaries is much debated. These are boundaries that deny some forms of life (and some living processes) permission to translocate beyond their adapted realms. And yet. And yet. Even these most elemental boundaries – the skin of the ocean, and the wave-lined shore – are more in the nature of porous membranes than sealed borders. These are sites of complex interaction; they are less credible as boundaries than as media of rich dialectic exchange. This is how a poet put it – a somewhat mediocre poet, but his words will do for our purpose:

The ocean butts and nuzzles the beach,
a vast mystery slapping back, forth,
a metronome tuned in space.
This fluxful edge configures the earth...
land-sea-air in restless interchange.
Yet here, in fruiting, tidal dynamism,
is the most *emphatic* of the planet's bounds.
Surely this is the greatest paradox –
how, then, to know, to render abstract,
this hard yet porous meniscus, the skin of the sea,
the light lamina that divide life, that mesh life,
that construct such irreproducible
biologies, geographies.

Thus speaks the woolly-brained poet, but thus, too, speaks the voice of science. The processes most crucial to the maintenance of life on earth, James Lovelock reminds us, are those that take place within inshore waters below the surface of the sea. Destroy the seagrasses and we destroy the keystone interchange on which all life rests. It is as simple as that.

What is more interesting to me is how *people* respond to this.

I've been reading some American research – hard, respectable science – that describes what happens when our most complex organ – the brain – meets the planet's most pervasive feature – water.

It found that we are irresistibly drawn to water; that we seek its proximity. In that reductionist way that scientists have, they surmise that this may be because we are still proto-oceanic creatures. Human foetuses still have gill-like structures in the early stages of development, and the young human brain is 80 percent water.

Well, okay – but creative people have always known this. Rachel Carson, simultaneously the greatest scientist of the sea and one of the twentieth century's finest literary stylists, wrote this: 'Contemplating the teeming life of the shore, we have an uneasy sense of the communication of some universal truth that lies just beyond our grasp. The meaning haunts and ever eludes us, and in its very pursuit we approach the ultimate mystery of life itself.'

Some of humankind's fascination with the ocean comes from its very vastness (the 'vasty ocean' of the ancient bards), some from its inchoate restlessness, some from the paradox that it appals just as it beckons – that it can round on us with destructive fury. 'Never turn your back on the ocean', Tim Winton was told by his father. And some comes from its mystery – it has been estimated that about 95 percent of the world's oceans remain unexplored. It is the planet's last great unknown.

And then there's us, living here on an island, and, therefore, much more attuned to these matters. On islands we live enhanced elemental lives. Which is why the Bett Gallery's decision to bring together Barbie's 'The Sea, The Sea' with Paul's 'The Island' is such an inspired one.

Well, I've been banging on for some time now, and you'll be wondering whether you've strayed into an introductory lecture in Oceanography 101 rather than the art exhibition opening you meant to go to. No need to worry – you're in the right place. These themes, those that I've been banging on about, are all explicated – *brilliantly* explicated – in the artworks on the wall. 'The sea', Barbie said to me when I was talking to her earlier, 'is a huge force, undefinable'. But she seeks to *provide* it with definition by telling visual stories, some referencing her ancestry (also discussed in her artist's statement), some drawing on legend, some entirely contemporary and politically engaged – over here, for example, is a work that draws on Barbie's recent teaching experiences with an Afghan asylum seeker, a traveller *by sea*. And out there in the shopfront is a piece that pointedly comments on the crisis in which the Great Barrier Reef currently finds itself, a work that references the vivid colours and species diversity in that threatened wonderland.

And the artist's island upbringing, on the North-West Coast with the ocean ever-present, is made powerfully explicit in these works. Why 'the sea, the sea'? 'I

feel stranded if I'm away from the sea for too long', Barbie told me earlier: 'I always seek it out whenever I go away.' I must introduce her to a marvellous poem by that greatest of island poets, Derek Walcott; a poem entitled 'Missing the Sea'. Its opening line is brilliant: 'Something removed roars in the ears of this house'.

Barbie is too complex an artist, though, to merely give expression to the lyrical. The sea's skin might be a porous membrane, but it is not a transparent one. We can never be sure what's below the surface. Barbie was once stung by a jellyfish while night swimming off Majorca: she knows the sea can appal; that it hides mysteries, some of which you don't want to get too close to. One of her artistic inspirations is Bosch's 'The Garden of Earthly Delights'. Well – here's the central image from 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' [speaker points to his t-shirt!]. If I stand here you'll get a little inkling of what she means!

I have spoken of the biological fecundity of the oceanic inshore, and there is evidence in abundance here of the extent to which Barbie, too, is drawn to those extraordinary worlds. In some of the works she symbolically crosses the most important of the planet's internal boundaries, the boundary we prosaically call 'the shore'. Over here, for example, we have figures half in water, half out.

And, yes, there *are* figures.

We are accustomed to the prominent role of the human figure, and the human face in particular, in Barbie Kjar's work. This signature preoccupation is maintained here, and so, in important ways, the work presented here constitutes both a departure and an extenuation.

And, of course, given the interest that this fine artist has always had in the human form and the human condition, it will not surprise to find in these works, maritime themes deployed as metaphor for how it is to be human. This striking work here, for example, 'Lulu at the Helm', portrays the complex struggle for mastery over our choice of futures – the tension between the extent to which you can steer your own destiny, and the extent to which the tides and currents and tempests decide it for you.

It is a landmark exhibition, and I congratulate Barbie, on my behalf and yours. It was my brief to address Barbie's work, but given the complementarity of theme and the closeness of his concerns to my own, I would like to extend my congratulations to Paul as well.

To close I'm going to return to the inshore sea, that emphatic, life-crucial boundary, and give the last word to the somewhat mediocre poet:

The sea is muscled and relentless,
hiding thick life
and spent, tide-slopping things.
They slap along,
seeking the earth's limen, its erratic seam.

Nowhere is our fragile weave more apparent,
nowhere truer to its purpose
than here, where the great elements
face off.

The artwork you see around you also engages with the great planetary themes.
It is brilliant, Barbie. Here's to you.

Pete Hay