

COLLECTOR'S DOSSIER

MARION BORGELT'S UNIVERSAL NATURE

MARION BORGELT HAS BECOME AS MUCH A SCULPTOR AS A PAINTER WRITES **JOHN McDONALD**. BUT THROUGHOUT HER EVOLUTION ONE THING HAS REMAINED CONSTANT – HER EYE FOR THE ELEGANT FORMS, BOTH PHYSICAL AND ABSTRACT, FOUND SO CONSISTENTLY THROUGH THE NATURAL WORLD. PORTRAIT BY **STEPHEN OXENBURY**.



Marion Borgelt, *Lunar Swell: No. 1*, 2010-11. Hoop pine ply, gold leaf with satin varnish, MDF, polyurethane, 35 x 178 14cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY

Marion Borgelt's survey exhibition at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra in May 2010 was a timely recognition of the consistency of the artist's work over the past 15 years. This has been a boom time for Borgelt, who has branched out into large-scale public art projects, installations and many forms of three-dimensional work. In the earlier part of her career Borgelt was known as an abstract painter working in a vigorous, gestural manner. Her recent works are largely optical and geometrical abstractions, but there is still the same strong personality, the same propensity for motifs to virtually leap off the wall.

Borgelt was born in 1954 in the Victorian country town of Nhill, near the South Australian border. She studied in Adelaide at the South Australian School of Art, where she was identified as one of the most promising artists of her year, being awarded the Harry P Gill Memorial Medal in 1976. Within two years she was showing with Bonython Gallery in Adelaide, and by 1982 with Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney.

Borgelt left SASA with a travelling scholarship that enabled her to enrol at the New York Studio School in 1978. She would stay on in New York undertaking postgraduate studies until 1980. When she returned to Australia it was as a sophisticated and confident painter. In 1982 her work

would be included in the 4th Biennale of Sydney *Vision in Disbelief* and in 1985 in the *Australian Perspecta*. The following year she represented Australia at the 6th Indian Triennale along with **Jenny Watson**.

Borgelt's paintings of the 1980s, such as *Athenian Netherworld* and *The Night Eye*, were often compared to skin cells or webs. Their organic, biomorphic overtones suggested a relationship with the natural world, but her forms remained ambiguous. There were suggestions of landscape, and a ragged touch that revealed the influence of **Cézanne**, but it was as though she had delved beneath the surface of appearances to expose an underlying structure. These were complex paintings that sent the eye on a slow journey around the canvas, weaving in and out of roughly defined planes, or brushing across rippling, shell-like surfaces.

In 1989, after being awarded a French Government Art Fellowship, Borgelt relocated to Paris, where she would remain until 1998. Over these years her paintings became much simpler, concentrating on ellipses, spirals and similar motifs. On one hand these pictures were reminiscent of the central core imagery of 1970s feminist art. On the other they owed a debt to the Italian modernist **Lucio Fontana**, known for emphasising the physical nature of the canvas itself by means of slits and holes.

Yet Borgelt's paintings were much more sensual – dare I say, more





feminine – than Fontana's. In their use of a highly restrained palette of little more than red, black and shades of grey, they presented images that might be encountered far out in space, or through the lens of an electron microscope. Such ambiguities had become Borgelt's stock in trade. Although her paintings were rigorously abstract, they related to a limitless range of physical and organic phenomena. The triptych *Bloodlight Series: Gesture I, II, III* of 1995 may be taken as representative of her interest in conflating the macrocosm and the microcosm. Other works such as *Quadrant lore* (1996), or *Anima/Animus: Splitting into One No. III* (1994), are more rigidly geometrical but animated by an inner light that emanates, Rothko-like, from the depths of the picture.

Over these years Borgelt continued to exhibit with the Christine Abrahams Gallery in Melbourne and from 1994 with Sherman Galleries in Sydney. In 1996 she became the first Australian artist to receive a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Award.

Borgelt's return to Australia at the end of the 1990s saw her work expand in many new directions. The *Bottled Histories* series (1998-2000) paired small paintings with decorated bottles and her *Personae Suite*:

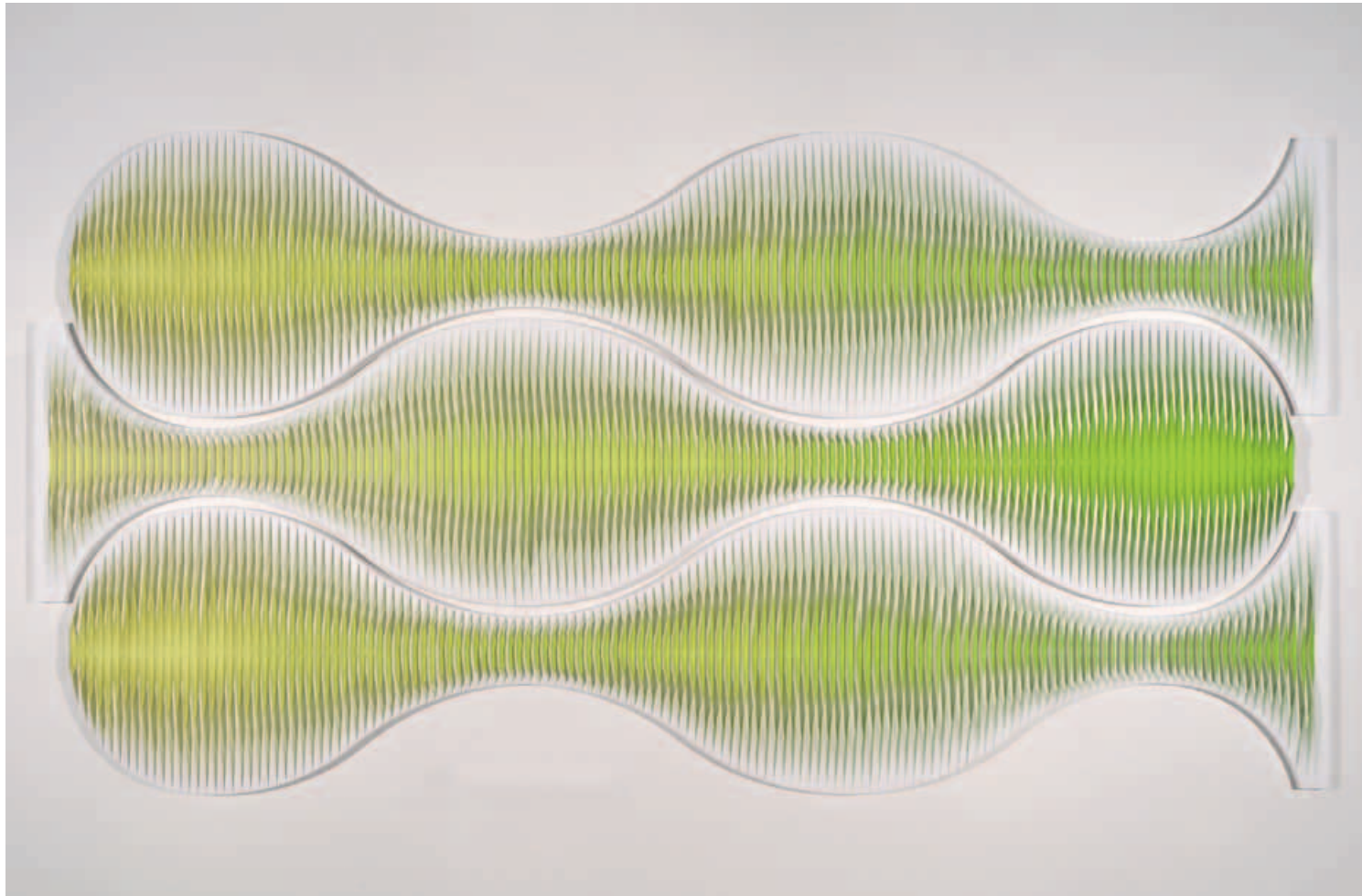
“These pulsating canvases never allow the viewer to settle, playing on the ever-changing nature of light itself, which Borgelt – following the physicists – recognises as both wave and particle.”

From above left:

Foreground, Marion Borgelt, *Tsukimi variation 1*, 2007-8. Empress white marble, Chinese black marble, gold-etched rim, recycled red ironbark plinths 85 x 146 x 180cm; and background, Marion Borgelt, *Liquid light: Asian sun trilogy*, 2009. Belgian linen, canvas, acrylic, wood, pins 135 x 300 x 4.5cm. PHOTO: EVA FERNANDEZ COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND TURNER GALLERIES, PERTH

Marion Borgelt, *Liquid Light: Butterfly No. 11*, 2010. Canvas, acrylic, timber, pins, diameter 114.5cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY





No. 1-17 (2000) went even further, arranging a set of large wooden pestles from Rajasthan in front of an eight-panel painting. The interiors and rim of each pestle had been coated with bright red beeswax, echoing the colours of the picture, in which red arabesques danced on a black background.

This willingness to go beyond the flat canvas had already appeared in some of Borgelt's earlier works, but from the late 1990s she becomes as much a sculptor as a painter. The new works were designed with exacting precision, often requiring industrial fabrication processes. She also began to work on large-scale public art projects, the most ambitious being *55 Ring Maze* (2000) on the Mornington Peninsula. In the following year came *Pulse*, a stainless steel wall piece for the Australian National University in Canberra. In 2005 she would create another maze for the Outback Museum in Hay in the form of an open stock pen, 60 metres in diameter. These gigantic pieces were usually made in collaboration with specialists who could assist Borgelt with the engineering requirements, but the designs were very similar to the motifs she was exploring in her paintings at that time.

Borgelt's exhibitions of the early 2000s were unpredictable blends of painting, sculpture and installation. One of her most startling creations

was *Orchestre des Promeneurs* (2002), an installation of 33 leather shoes transformed by oil paint, pigment and beeswax, arranged in a circle on Victorian-era shoe stands. There was no precedent for the whimsical nature of this work, which may have been a tongue-in-cheek comment on the fascination with design that had seen her work grow increasingly stylised. On a tiny label inside the shoes, one could read the artist's name printed in a cursive script like a high-class fashion house.

From this point, Borgelt becomes preoccupied with light, creating paintings and installations that deceive the eye, apparently changing form as one walks past. Her *Strobe* series (2008-9) featured blurred horizontal lines of colour, with sudden hiccups that might be the beat of a human pulse or the movements of a seismograph. The *Liquid Light* paintings

From above left:

Marion Borgelt, *Liquid Light: Horizontal Triptych No. 1*, 2010. Canvas, acrylic, timber, pins, 152 x 298cm.

From left, Marion Borgelt, *Lunar Ebb & Flow: No. 3*, 2011; and Marion Borgelt, *Lunar Ebb & Flow: No. 1*, 2010. Both works hoop pine ply, duck egg shell, beeswax, MDF, polyurethane, 167 x 30.5 x 12cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY





Foreground:

Marion Borgelt, *Venetian tsukimi no. 2*, 2009. 16 solid murano glass spheres, steel and perspex plinth, 57 x 340 x 20cm.

Background, from left to right:

Marion Borgelt, *Liquid light: Asian sun trilogy*, 2009. Belgian linen, canvas, acrylic, wood, pins, 135 x 300 x 4.5cm.

Marion Borgelt, *Lunar arc: red eclipse 1*, 2009. Hoop pine ply, polyurethane, MDF 128 x 315 x 13.5cm.

Marion Borgelt, *Strobe series: no. 11*, 2008-9. Oil on canvas, MDF on shaped timber frame.

PHOTO: EVA FERNANDEZ. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND TURNER GALLERIES, PERTH

“There are few Australian artists so capable of occupying an impossible middle ground between spirituality and science, between microcosm and macrocosm, the corporate foyer and the cathedral.”

were made from carefully painted canvases that had been sliced into precise vertical strips, and gently twisted to produce the illusion of a visual pulsation for the viewer in motion. The most dynamic of the series was probably *Liquid Light: Asian Sun Trilogy*, which used her familiar palette of red, black and white in three interlinked ellipses that seem to throb with energy. An even larger variation, *Liquid Light: 54 Degrees*, allowed the elliptical shapes to double back on themselves in serpentine fashion, creating a complex array of ripple effects. This piece was shown in 2009 at Dominik Mersch Gallery, where Borgelt went following Sherman Galleries' metamorphosis from a commercial dealership into an art foundation.

Mersch has had a good deal of recent success showing Borgelt both in Sydney and at international fairs. A large-scale version of one of the *Liquid Light* paintings may now be found in the hotel lobby of Macau's City of Dreams. Her *Strobe* paintings feature in a major installation commissioned by Mirvac for 101 Miller Street, North Sydney.

It is one of the qualities of Borgelt's work that it can fit seamlessly into public and corporate environments without ever becoming mere decoration. These pulsating canvases never allow the viewer to settle, playing on the ever-changing nature of light itself, which Borgelt – following the physicists – recognises as both wave and particle. Neither is she indifferent to the spiritual associations of light, which have played on artists' minds since the middle ages. She says she is looking for “a view of the cosmos”. In practice this translates into a love of ideal, harmonious forms that are never allowed to be static. She is seeking her own version of the music of the spheres – an ancient astrological concept that imagined

the heavens laid out as a kind of silent music.

More than most artists, Borgelt's works have proved peculiarly resistant to the secondary market. “It seems that people like the works and do not want to sell them,” says one of her dealers **Dominik Mersch**. This is a congenial thought, even if it does come from a source that could hardly be called disinterested.

In Borgelt's exhibition with Mersch of 2009, small paintings and objects could be acquired for \$2,000 to \$3,000 each, while larger paintings and installations ranged between \$19,000 to \$34,000. These are relatively modest prices for an artist who has spent much of her career living and working overseas, and whose pieces have no distinctively Australian features. Hers is an art for all times and places, an art that concentrates on the universal qualities of nature, and the symbols with which we record our deeper understandings of the world. There are few Australian artists so versatile or so creatively ambitious; so capable of occupying an impossible middle ground between spirituality and science, between microcosm and macrocosm, the corporate foyer and the cathedral. •

Marion Borgelt's next exhibition, *Heartbeat*, will be staged at Dominik Mersch Gallery in Sydney from 28 April to 28 May 2011. She is also working on an exhibition for Jan Manton Art in Brisbane, scheduled to take place in October 2011.

Marion Borgelt, *Lunar Circle: Figure H*, 2011. Hoop pine ply, MDF, high gloss polyurethane, diameter 150cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY





TONY BOND

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR CURATORIAL SERVICES, ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

It was in the 1980s that the Art Gallery of New South Wales acquired two of Borgelt's paintings, when the artist was recognised as an abstract painter. **Tony Bond**, whose expertise is in contemporary international art, included Borgelt's painting in his 1981 *Mindscales* exhibition, along with work by **Susan Norrie, Rodney Pople** and **Ken Unsworth**. Borgelt went on to be included in *Abstraction* in 1990 and *Contemporary Australian Drawing* in 1991, both at AGNSW.

By this time, having been awarded a fellowship from the French Government, she was settled in Paris, a city she worked in for eight years. Bond notes that when Borgelt returned to Australia her work referenced nature and became noticeably erotic, as she worked more with objects and less with painting. "Some artists come back to Australia after being away and do the same thing but Borgelt has continued to evolve and develop. She hasn't gotten stuck," he says. This evolution was evidenced in her impressive 15-year survey exhibition *Mind & Matter* in 2010.

"Borgelt has continued to grow and experiment which is essential to being an artist because artists that we will remember, say, in the next 500 years are artists that have broken new ground," says Bond.

Courtney Kidd

DOMINIK MERSCH

DIRECTOR, DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY

Dominik Mersch first sighted **Marion Borgelt's** work at Sherman Galleries and was drawn by its "presence and strength of its abstract qualities". Sherman then closed as a commercial gallery paving the way for Borgelt's first show with the European director and his stable of Australian and international artists. That was in 2009 and, says Mersch, "despite the recession climate we managed to sell 90 per cent of the paintings and sculptures".

Visit Borgelt's studio and there is a definite order and discipline about the way she works with materials. "Marion is professional and 100 per cent reliable," says Mersch. "It's excellent when negotiating commissions, augurs well for the longevity of her work and is, I suspect, why we rarely see any of it enter the secondary market." That said, the highest price at auction in Australia for a Borgelt was \$6,000 paid at Christies in 2000.

Borgelt's recent commission at 101 Collins Street, Melbourne is evidence, says Mersch, of the artist's adeptness in working with installers, architects and technicians to realise a project, evidence too on a commission of equal magnitude in Sydney for the foyer of News Limited.

Her April exhibition includes an oil painting measuring 280 by 390 centimetres with a price tag of just under \$100,000. In the spirit of other work in the exhibition – paintings and sculptures, some with entry level prices of \$3,000 – it continues Borgelt's ongoing explorations of sequential movement.

In Borgelt's 2009 solo exhibition, works 50 centimetres in diameter sold for \$2,000 to \$3,500 while a triptych 210 by 210 centimetres sold for \$26,000. Sculptural wall installations, such as her lunar cycle of pearlescent wooden discs, as seen in her 2010 survey at the Australian National University Gallery, sell from \$15,000 to \$20,000.

Borgelt's work is housed in over 50 institutional and corporate collections from the AGNSW and Goldman Sachs to Visy Industries and Wesfarmers.

Courtney Kidd

Far left:

Marion Borgelt, *Tsukimi Slice*, 2011. Radiata pine, duck eggshell, polyurethane, MDF with display, 34 x 24 x 24cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY

Timeline:

1988: Marion Borgelt, *Mouth of the Furnace*. Oil on canvas, 152.5 x 198cm. NGA Collection. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY

1993: Marion Borgelt, *Anima, Animus: Splitting into One*. Oil & pigment on jute with woven jute, 197 x 182cm. NGA Collection. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND JAN MANTON GALLERY, BRISBANE

1995: Marion Borgelt, *Bloodlight Series: Gestures I, II, III*. Triptych, oil & pigment on jute, 226 x 346.5cm. Private collection. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND JAN MANTON GALLERY, BRISBANE

1998: Marion Borgelt, *Primordial Alphabet and Rhythm*. Jute, oil, acrylic, pigment, fibreglass, metal, 1450 x 910 x 40cm. Commissioned by News Limited, Sydney. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY

2000: Marion Borgelt, *Bloodlight Arabesque (foreground, Personae Suite: No. 1-17, and background, No. 1)*. Pigment on jute, Rajasthani wooden mortars, pigment, beeswax, timber plinths, dimensions variable. Private collection & collection of the artist. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND JAN MANTON GALLERY, BRISBANE

2001: Marion Borgelt, *Pulse*, 2001. Stainless steel components set into rendered brick wall, 540 x 260 x 9.5cm. Commissioned for Gravitational Wave building, ANU, Canberra. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY

2004: Marion Borgelt, *Time and Tide (wait for no man)*. Sandstone, mirror polished & shot glass bead stainless steel, onyx pebbles, 123 x 370 x 317cm. Commissioned by JP Morgan, Sydney. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND JAN MANTON GALLERY, BRISBANE

2005: Marion Borgelt, *Round Up Maze*. Red gum, cyprus pine, steel gates, bolts, Buzzacot spray dip, signage, diameter 6000cm. Commissioned by Shear Outback Museum, Hay. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY

2006: Marion Borgelt, *Nothing is invisible*. Canvas, oil, pigment, sand, wood various dimensions. PHOTO: VICTOR FRANCE. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND TURNER GALLERIES, PERTH

2011: Marion Borgelt, *Candescent Moon*, 2011. Timber, MDF, polyurethane, gilded leaf with shellac varnish, 571 x 1370 x 120cm. Commissioned by 101 Collins Street, Melbourne. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND DOMINIK MERSCH GALLERY, SYDNEY

<p>1954 Born in Nhill, Victoria</p>	<p>1973 Begins studying at the South Australian School of Art</p>	<p>1976 First solo exhibition in a private home in Adelaide</p>	<p>1979 Undertakes postgraduate studies in New York</p>	<p>1982 William Wright curates her work into the Biennale of Sydney</p>	<p>1988 </p>	<p>1989 Secures French Government artist residency then moves to Paris, where she lives for the next nine years</p>	<p>1993 </p>	<p>1995 </p>	<p>1996 Curated into <i>Spirit + Place: Art in Australia 1861 – 1996</i> at the Museum of Contemporary Art</p>	<p>1997 <i>Marion Borgelt</i> monograph published by Craftsman House</p>	<p>1998 Moves back to Sydney to work on a commission for News Limited</p>	<p>1999 Inspired by the News Limited commission, begins to move more seriously towards sculptural work</p>	<p>2000 </p>	<p>2001 Begins two-year Australia Council fellowship</p>	<p>2001 </p>	<p>2004 </p>	<p>2005 Encounters old world timber-crafting skills leading to series including <i>Lunar Circle</i>, <i>Lunar Arc</i> and <i>Candescent Moon</i>.</p>	<p>2005 </p>	<p>2006 Returns to large-scale painting</p>	<p>2006 </p>	<p>2010 <i>Marion Borgelt: Mind & Matter</i>, a 15 year survey, staged at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra</p>	<p>2011 </p>
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