

MEET ME ON THE OTHER SIDE

*From strange grey forms resting in cages to old furniture that takes on a life of its own, through to beautiful abstract paintings made from 'liqueurfaction' silt, **Meet me on the other side** is Christchurch artist Julia Morison's evocative response to the earthquake of 22 February. Shown in Auckland in late 2011, where it was acclaimed for its 'horrifying brilliance', this body of work has been brought back to Christchurch for a special showing in a space overlooking the inner-city red zone. Here, Morison speaks to Sally Blundell about silt, shaking and spirits.*



Julia Morison *Fretful thing* 2011. Melted shopping bags, wire cage, chain

Julia Morrison Small
Triumphal thing 2011.
Melted shopping bags,
cement, silt, metal



SALLY BLUNDELL: *Meet me on the other side was clearly born of the Canterbury earthquakes—can you tell me how it evolved?*

JULIA MORRISON: At the time I was working on a series of paintings for Two Rooms gallery [in Auckland] but after the earthquake I was really distracted. It took quite a long time before I could get back into the studio so I was getting a bit panicky and even then, when I did get back, I found I was really struggling. The paintings just weren't working, they didn't seem relevant—the preoccupations didn't make sense. I was making these other things on the side, just as a distraction, then I started to develop them into an exhibition. I didn't want to be defined as an earthquake artist but I knew I had to deal with it in some way, I think it's something we have to do. Not to over-aestheticise it—I have a problem with people going into a disaster and doing that—but in dealing with the situation I found myself in.

SB: *You've used a range of materials and media in your practice. In this exhibition you've got melted plastic, silt and found objects—cages, stools, an ironing board—but to what extent are they an evocation of, rather than a commentary on, the February earthquake?*

JM: After the earthquake I was just picking up stuff on the street, finding things at Riccarton Market, in garage sales and at Watson's [auction house]—simple things, serendipitous things, things that had been thrown up, that were interesting. The boxes I found on the road—I filled them with liquefaction and silt and dated them. I guess I was saying, let's rebuild with liquefaction, let's make bricks of it! I found the wall brackets in the market—the cement is made to look as if it is sinking into the metal, then the melted plastic is just sitting on top in its own little nest. At that time too you couldn't get many materials, so I made a decision that I had plenty of stuff here in my studio to work with—I made that a parameter. After the [September] earthquake Annie McKenzie had sent me some ceramic dolls' hands. I cast them and added them on to this spiky thing—I was thinking of the vulnerability of the body, of people digging through the rubble and getting out bodies that may or may not be alive. That's a horrific piece I think. So I juxtaposed things, put things together—that way it became much less literal and formally more interesting.

SB: *That structural approach comes through in Creon Upon's catalogue essay—a series of almost random images or scenarios that somehow cohere to the work.*

JM: It's a parallel piece, a companion piece. It's not logical and

It's not really a narrative, but it picks up fragments. When I read it I can hear myself, I can hear things I've said.

SB: *In responding to a real event such as an earthquake of this scale, how important is it to avoid being too direct, too literal?*

JM: It is something I've had to be mindful of in this show and in a way that is about distance. If it feels problematic it's usually because it's too complex or too literal in its symbolism, so I'd pull away or add something to it.

SB: *The resulting sculptural works are both elegant and repellent—in their dull lumpish physicality they seem to have oozed out of the ground or be groping towards the light in some way.*

JM: I've always been interested in the abject. Awful and ugly, beautiful and ugly—I like that territory when you don't quite know. I think a lot of my work is characterised by the sensual, the visceral, the seductive in a way that transcends beauty and ugliness.

SB: *The result is a beguiling combination of the planned and the accidental, the ordered and the uncontrolled or uncontrollable.*

JM: I think surrealism and the use of juxtaposition is partly to do with that. But it is difficult—even though nothing is really planned you can't just put A and B together, there has to be a link to something else to make it coherent. You have to get the formal stuff right.

SB: *Hal Foster describes surrealism's engagement with the abject as a way of testing the sublime, yet in these works there is an interesting combination of horror and humour.*

JM: I agree. Some of them are pretty amusing, I've become quite fond of them.

SB: *Some of the sculptural works do evoke that kind of response. When you see them rearing up on their plinths or hunkering down in their cage or net they seem almost animate. After the September earthquake a show at CoCA included works by primary school pupils responding to the earthquake—time and again they drew monsters or vicious dogs coming out from under the ground.*

JM: You do feel you are walking on the skin of a monster—it's taniwha stuff, animalistic. And these "things" are

anthropomorphic in a way. They're emotive, they all have names—*Curious thing, Small triumphal thing, Poor thing*. But almost living? I don't know. The material itself is really important, I think. I like the tension between the melted plastic—that stuff is actually really hard—and the silt. You have one that is recycled commercial detritus, the other is like shit—earth vomit coming up from the ground. Yet in a way they are quite similar.

SB: *Looking back on your art practice—the systems of alchemy and of Kabbalism, the symbolism, the surrealism, the strong graphic-linear aspect—does an exhibition such as this, building on real disaster, need necessarily to stand outside the parameters of such a practice?*

JM: I do have a lot of different preoccupations but they all pull together and relate. It's ongoing—I don't abandon the way I process thoughts. The earthquake is a new set of materials but it hasn't changed my direction—it's just expanded it.

SB: *And the graphic element, the fine lines, that sense of beauty and order?*

JM: There is a graphic quality that comes through in the sculptures, in the parallel lines and grids, that is also there in my paintings and drawings. But with the cages and nets there's also that idea of entrapment, of being in a predicament.

SB: *And the alchemic—the paintings in the Liquefaction series appear gentle, reticent, yet they are made from the base matter of liquefaction from your own studio. How did they come about?*

JM: We were cleaning up the studio and there were these big shards of glass sticking up from the ground. They looked as if they had penetrated into the floor but it was just the sugar from broken bottles of liqueur acting as a setting agent. You couldn't move them, and as soon as you put hot water on them it just dissolved. I lost the liqueurs so I went out and bought some: crème de menthe, grenadine, curaçao—mainly for their colours—and mixed them with liquefaction.

SB: *And the smell?*

JM: They smell... sweet.

SB: *These different elements—thrown up or seeping out of the ground, remindful of the chaos of that day—how did you think the exhibition would be received by an Auckland audience?*

JM: I really wasn't sure. It started slowly but then it seemed to crescendo. [The show was extended as a result of public interest.] I was told some Canterbury people were in tears—I don't know what they were seeing but they were moved by it. I think it's the aesthetic, that grey glugginess. And probably the precariousness of it.

SB: *Now you are bringing the show back to Christchurch, to a gallery space overlooking the inner-city red zone—which is a different thing altogether.*

JM: This new space is different—it's smaller, it has beams and the walls are quite disrupted with lines. I was thinking of having very theatrical lighting but to do that I'd have to cover the windows and the fact that it looks over the city centre and all the demolition—that is really important, that is very much part of it.

SB: *The title, Meet me on the other side—how did that come about?*

JM: It was on the day of the earthquake. The cellphones weren't functioning and I kept getting this repeated text message—it was pretty disturbing. The city was like a film set—all grey, and smoky and watery. It's weird—I don't remember [that day] properly. I don't think you can. It's like if you have ever had a broken heart, if you felt that pain continually you would never venture forth again. But I was thinking about this place that we're in now and how we have to traverse this space, so 'meet me on the other side' has a number of connotations.

SB: *Emotional?*

JM: Emotional, yes, and geographic. But it's also about collectiveness—meet me on the other side, join me. Because we've got a lot to do and a lot to get through before we do meet up on the other side—the other side of rebuilding the city, the other side of traversing this space.

Sally Blundell is a Christchurch-based freelance journalist. Julia Morison: Meet me on the other side is on display in a space above NG at 212 Madras Street until 25 March. The exhibition is shown as part of the Gallery's Outer Spaces programme.

NG



Julia Morison *Curious thing son, Nestled shopping bags, stool, cement, silt*