

'Spun Stories', Lisa Sowards

A recurrent motif running through the work of Lisa Sowards is that of the parachute. It's a personal thing – an image and symbol deeply imbued in her nostalgic psyche.

It started with a photograph – that of her Belorussian mother taken as a child during her internment at a displacement camp in northern Germany during World War II. The image led to the story of the discovered silken parachute, abandoned in the forest surrounding the camp. Put to good use, the discovery helped save lives, sanity and a sense of humanity for those interned in the camp for an extended period.

It's hard to imagine the impact of such a connection to such a story can have. Living in Melbourne, Australia, the daughter of migrant Europeans (Belorussian and Italian) who themselves left a continent scarred by war, now married and the mother of two young adult children, Sowards talks of growing up in the northern Melbourne suburbs light years away from the struggles of her parents at the same age.

But from that moment when the dreams of a young girl that were symbolically captured in a photograph were revealed to Sowards, a part of her family history became the context to a wider narrative in her innovative storytelling and art practice. There developed a need, almost a compulsion, to tell or connect to this narrative. But her's is not storytelling on the processes of war – instead it's emotive, reflective, nostalgic; it's non-linear, non-judgemental. There's no talk of taking sides – it's a nurturing montage, a, dare I say it, feminine politic on the positions of war, a commentary on the more personal impact on family along with a celebration of unsung or unknown heroes.

In her imagery, Sowards creates a gentleness and stillness falling from the sky, a magical airborne canopy. These wistful evocations of time and place, with their layered imagery and layered meaning, are pictorial performative narratives with a compositional sense of staging. With the subtle variance and repetition of plates, parachutes drift en masse or singularly from one image to the next, unidentified men or supplies suspended. There is a stillness and gentleness, a wistfulness of uncertainty where, inspired by the work of American/Italian artist, Frank Dituri, it's a form of storytelling 'where dreams transcend reality and material facts and the ethereal often merge.'¹ Their ambiguity is their isolation, the lack of text or caption an absence of context resulting in 'a poetic stillness that suggests notions of reflection and passiveness.'²

As Sowards says herself: 'I see so much beauty in the parachute object, from its pure functional form to its rich association with past stories I have uncovered. To many people, myself included, they provide a universal symbol of hope, survival and strength.' Yet, ironically, a parachute is also a vulnerable veil, a gliding flight of silk, isolated in its drift over an expansive sky, exposed.

From early solo exhibitions ('White Parachute' (2013) and 'Flight From Silence' (2015), both at fortyfivedownstairs, Melbourne) through to the present day, Sowards has continued her want to tell stories and use of narrative in her art both as a painter and a printmaker. Her printmaking practice includes traditional methods of intaglio etching with zinc and copper plates but she has, more recently, diversified to include the use of non-toxic photopolymer solar plates. The Print Council of Australia showcased solar plate etchings by Sowards (along with fellow-Melbourne printmaker, Trudy Rice) at PAPER CONTEMPORARY at the 2018 Sydney Contemporary Art Fair: the majority of works included in *Editions 19* were solar plate

etchings taken from hand drawings, many of which were specifically created for the exhibition as Featured Artist.

Whetted by the story of the parachute (and explored in depth in the 'White Parachute' exhibition), her love for research led Sowards to a broader exploration on flight in war. But she did not look to the mechanical mastery of the air and its destructive powers. Instead, always fascinated by birds and their symbolic power, she began a visual investigation into the role pigeons played in World War II.

Birds are considered by the Ancient Egyptians as winged souls with transcendent powers representing thought, imagination and bearers of celestial messages. The story of war pigeons is a remarkable one. Due to their homing ability, speed and altitude, pigeons were often used as military messengers. Unsung (and frequently reviled) heroes, they contributed to the saving of countless lives. No less than 32 pigeons have been awarded the Dickin Medal – the highest wartime accolade given to an animal. Two have been presented (both in February 1947) to Australian birds. It was their quiet courage, symbolic of so many other discreet acts of compassion, which appealed to Sowards.

'Purple Poppy' (2018) is an etching supporting the issue of the purple poppy by the Australian War Animal Memorial Organisation, to be worn alongside the traditional red to remember animals that died during conflict. Many more works in the exhibition integrate pigeons with parachutes/parachutists – bringers of hope from the sky as imagery becomes interchangeable. And, specifically for this exhibition at Tacit, Sowards has created 'The Messengers' (2018) in celebration of these gallant messengers of the sky.

Incorporating 36 individual etchings creating an individual framed work 164 x 120 cm, 'The Messengers' is an assembled series of portraits with the text SOS in deep rouge de cadmium scored across the bottom panels. In majestic isolation, the work singles out each bird as a hero, an etched portrait, some more detailed than others, one or two merely a feather.

Mirroring 'The Messengers' is a second assemblage of 36 individual etchings created specifically for the exhibition. 'The Maritime Parachutes' (2018) celebrates the latest narrative developed by Sowards – that of Operation Hailstone in February 1944. Home of Japan's Pacific naval stronghold during the war, the Chuuk Atoll (Caroline Islands) and the might of the Japanese fleet were destroyed by the American Operation Hailstone – transforming the lagoon floor into a graveyard and macabre miasma of twisted metal. But, over time, a flourishing marine ecosystem has healed the scars. Thrusting jellyfish, 'parajellys', invade Sowards' plates, pulsating through the darkened waters, long tendrils trailing into the inky blackness. Fractured imagery of the lagoon floor, parachutes, parajellys, coral and pigeons intermingle and interchange, an immersive process of transcendence that, with its limited tonal range, creates a meditative moment. Though deep below the water's surface, like her earlier works, tendrils, parachutes, coral drift en masse or singularly from one image to the next.

Narrative remains the lynchpin of Lisa Sowards' art. 'In my mind, art equates to creating a memory, a time, a place and as a result a form of storytelling.' Whether it's the invention that keeps the gravity-bound body aloft through a slow and safe descent (ironically, initially made of spun silk from domesticated silk moths that lost the ability to fly as a result), the heroic exploits of the war pigeon or the tendril-trailing medusozoa, each motif, each image, each plate carries a contribution to that wider picture Sowards is creating. In her stability, she is talking of fragility – of the delicate, the vulnerable, the compassionate. In her research,

she is exploring support mechanisms – the supplies, the messages. Combined, they bring new understandings of the past – an untold history, a shared history that, as Sarah Tomasetti writes in a review of an earlier Sowards exhibition, ‘the practice of making follows the moment of telling, honouring and settling memory into shared history for both narrator and listener... [inviting] the viewer to enter their own stories.’³

1: Frank Dituri

2: Dr Julie Cotter, ‘White Parachute’ exhibition essay, (2013)

3: Sarah Tomasetti, ‘Thoughts on Flight From Silence Exhibition’ (2015)

Keith Lawrence

Director, Tacit Galleries

Lisa Sowards was the Featured Artist at Editions 2019, Tacit Galleries, Melbourne, 13 - 24 February 2019.