

SALLY MILLER

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SPEAKING DRAWINGS: WORKS BY SALLY MILLER



UNWINDING is about Sally's body unwinding as parts of her brain cease to communicate with her muscles. This leads to a loss of self-esteem as one feels one is losing one's identity.

Sally Miller was born in 1949 in Melbourne, Victoria. Following her undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Fine Art at the Sydney College of the Arts in 1983, she completed her Master of Arts, Visual Arts by research, at Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria, graduating in 1995.

From 1988-93 Sally lectured at the School of Arts, Ballarat University College in Printmaking and Drawing, and from 1994 to 1998, her roles included Coordinator, Honours Program, Coordinator Printmaking, Lecturer in Printmaking and Honours Supervisor, School of Arts at the University of Ballarat. From 1999 Sally worked in the disability arts sector at Art Unlimited, Geelong, employed as an arts educator until her appointment as Art Director in 2000, continuing this position until 2009.

From 1986 until 2015, Sally Miller exhibited broadly in Australia, and internationally. Select solo and joint exhibitions include; *Zooanthropomorphism*, Art Gallery of Ballarat, Ballarat, Vic., 2015; *Skin Deep* (with Loris Button), Space 22, Ballarat, Vic, 2010; *Natural Disasters*, Geelong Gallery, Geelong, Vic, 2010; *Plus* (with Maryanne Coutts & Loris Button), Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat, Vic., 2006; *Stakes & Ladders*, Glen Eira Arts Complex, Caulfield, Vic, 2002; *Navigating*, Glen Eira Arts Complex, Caulfield, Vic., 2002; *From The Private to the Public*, Deakin University, Geelong, and The Warrnambool Art Gallery, Warrnambool, Vic, 1996; *Interpreting the Real* (with Rosalind Lawson), Horsham Fine Art Gallery, Vic, 1994; *Works on Paper*, Arden St Gallery, South Melbourne, Vic., 1988 and *Works on Paper*, Artery Gallery, Geelong, Vic., 1986.

Select group exhibitions include; The Alice Prize, Alice Springs, NT, 2012; *Tasmania 1:100,000*, *Mapping the Island*, *Ten Days on the*

Island, The IXL Atrium, Hobart, Tas., 2009; Zonta, International Women's Day, Geelong, 2008; *Island Postcards: Ten Days On The Island*, State Library of Tasmania, Hobart, Tas., 2000-2001; Geelong Acquisitive Print Award, Geelong Gallery, Vic., 1999; *Incontro Confronto*, Teatro Sociale, Società di Mutuo, Soccorso di Borgomanero, Italy, 1997; *The Artist's Book is not a Taxi*, The Adelaide Arts Fringe Festival, Main Street Editions Gallery, Hahndorf, SA & Hobart City Gallery, Hobart, Tas., 1998; *Paper Works: Works on Handmade Paper*, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat & Horsham Regional Art Gallery, 1996; *x4 Hand Prints: Four Printmakers*, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat, 1995; *There's Still Life*, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Vic., 1995; Swan Hill Print & Drawing Acquisitive Award, Swan Hill Regional Fine Art Gallery, 1993; Jacaranda Acquisitive Drawing Award (JADA), Grafton Regional Art Gallery, Grafton, NSW, 1988; Regional Artists Review, Artery Gallery, Geelong, Vic., 1987 and Sydney Printmakers, Blaxland Art Gallery, Sydney, 1985.

In 2000 Sally Miller was invited Artist-in-Residence, and guest lecturer in Drawing & Printmaking, at the School of Art, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT. In 2008, she designed and produced the set and props for *Spiral* by Stockhausen, held at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, Melbourne, Vic.

Sally Miller is represented in Permanent Collections at the Art Gallery of Ballarat, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University and Sydney College of the Arts, as well as many private collections in Australia, Japan and Germany.

Sally Miller died from a progressive neurological disorder, Multiple System Atrophy (MSA), in 2015.



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The suite of nine drawings hangs in Sally's studio a week before she dies. The white space of each page has a circular motif hovering, and resonating with pain, grief, strength and resignation. Each drawing asserts Sally's determination to reveal, exquisitely, the pain of knowing her death is immanent.

Each motif is constructed from a myriad of finely controlled lines. These lines depict the texture, form and three dimensionality of a knot of material – straw, sticks, grasses, bandages, fur, feathers, skin. The textures are so thoroughly experienced by the artist from decades of gardening, making, observing, touching and understanding the subtle nuances and details of different materials she did not need to have the object in front of her. The object emerges from her mind's eye, a roving, questing eye, ever searching for a new symbol to represent the narrative of her life, and gaining inspiration from her beloved environment.

It is painful for Sally and both painful and remarkable for the guests on that Sunday to see the care and attention to detail with which Sally honoured her subject. The foundation of this powerful group of drawings is her self and the inevitable progress of her disease with the attendant struggle against unwanted interventions and assaults on her dignity and independence. Sally's inclination was always to work with metaphor and analogy and in these final drawings there is a refinement and clarity of purpose which emanates from the symbolic motifs.

The drawings can be appreciated as personal and emotion filled expressions. They also draw on a long tradition of finely crafted and detailed scientific and narrative illustration. Sally was a perfectionist, and her attention to detail and skill with materials is revealed in the numerous series completed in her forty five years of artistic practice. She tended towards the creation of a personal mythology and narrative in order to deal with the concepts and issues which captured her attention. The big issues for Sally centred on environmental degradation, human rights and feminism. Her subjects were often purposefully hidden within symbolic forms, waiting to be teased out by the viewer. Her images and objects were brought to life by her attention to detail, careful selection of apt materials and fine craftsmanship.

The vehicle for Sally's expression is imagined but these imagined forms gain life from the exquisite detail drawn into them by the artist. The spheres are more than real, held together by impossible forces, and rent by opposing forces. These motifs express the extremes of experience that Sally endured. She creates a reality formed out of a vivid quest for understanding the finality of death after an extended battle with a relentless disease.

The viewer can sense Sally's desire to leave these works as memorials, a visual legacy which communicates "...don't forget me, don't forget what I spent my life imagining and making..."

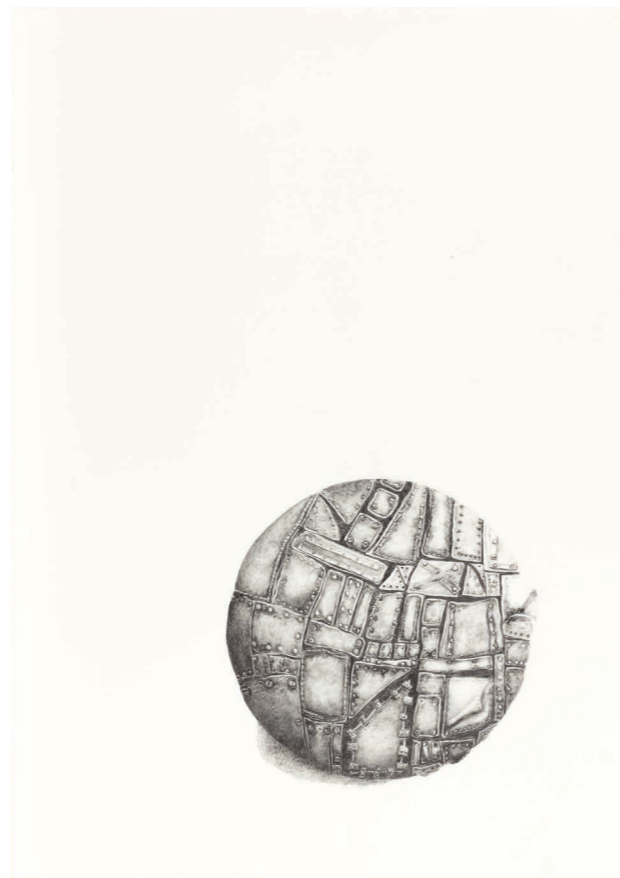
The narrative of a life is encapsulated, the knowledge that this is the last body of work clearly articulated by the artist. Her voice speaks in these drawings asking us to remember.

Each mark is a breath, a moment of struggle to control intransigent muscles and tendons, to force the pencil to leave its trace across the toothed surface of the page. Leave a mark, make it heavy, let it be light, allow the beginning and end of the mark to suggest the slight movement of a grass as the wind moves across the paddock. Let the darkness suggest a shadow where thoughts and little creatures can hide.

Each form is a sphere, a world or a self contained universe, marks being left as the artist in her chair moves her arm constantly tracing and drawing, tracking her thoughts and finding the form to carry their weight.

Each sphere has different density and materiality as Sally thinks of yet another metaphor to convey the complexity of her five year struggle with a sickness that eluded classification. The illness subtly affected the way she occupied her world and acted upon it, and affected her capacity to make determined, concise actions — there was a crippling of her independence but not of her intellect and passion.

Patsy Payne
February 2016



SUPERFICIAL ARMOUR is about the fact that no matter how Sally prepares herself, the disease progresses at its own rate and she has to contend with the changes to her body. Although she is mentally aware through her research and from discussion with her neurologist of the likely progression of the disease, gaps in her armour inevitably appear.



PATCHED UP SYMPTOMS is about the reality that there is no treatment for MSA. There is available only management of the physical symptoms caused by the atrophy of the brain. Hence the ineffectual lacing and riveted tab that only partly hold the wounds together.



FRAGILE STICKS is about the fragility of Sally's existence. Her not knowing when or how the next challenge will arrive is indicated by the fragmentation of the structure. The increasing vulnerability of her body and its complete demise are reflected in the use of breakable twigs only held together by a fine membrane that is breaking down.



BANDAGE is looking at the way many people now respond to Sally, as the illness (MSA) rather than seeing her. Underneath all these signs of disabilities her cognitive powers remain the same. Although her speech is slurred, and her facial expressions are somewhat frozen, and her mobility is impaired it is still Sally that peeps out from those eyes. The wrappings represent crepe bandages that in turn represent the medicalisation of her by others. The screw holding the bandages on the sphere is representing the deep brain stimulator that she had installed into her head while the diagnosis was that of Parkinson's disease, this is in fact true medicalisation of the body.



DISSIPATION is about the sense Sally has of her body disappearing as it lets her down through the disease's progression. The feathers in this work denote the fragility of her body and as the feathers fly off, an empty space is all that is left behind.



INSIDEOUT is the acknowledgement, of the damage caused by MSA to the body. Although the damage is internal (in the brain) Sally feels she has the evidence all over her body. Changes like frozen face, weakened legs that don't hold her up and loss of dexterity to name but a few.



UNWRAPPING PAPER is about the ripping away of Sally's dignity as more assistance for the caring of her body is required. It is about the exposure of her body and soul before strangers.



WOUNDS is about the internal damage that is done by MSA which manifests outwardly as physics disabilities, such as incontinence. Fur is used to convey the vulnerability of the body and the indentations represent those wounds below the surface.