



SPIRIT VESSELS : REFLECTIONS ON LAURA WOODWARD’S ‘THE UNFIXED’

Near the western coast of Turkey, in the ruined ancient city of Ephesus, there was once a goddess worshipped in the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the Ancient world.¹ Artemis Ephesia was a blending of the Greek goddess Artemis and two local goddesses Kybele and Hekate. She was the virgin deity of, among other things, fertility, birthing and the transition from girlhood to womanhood.² A number of statues uncovered at this site represent the goddess as a columnated figure, rigid and upright and endowed with rows of breast-like forms across her chest. Her legs are fused like a tree trunk and she wears a cylindrical crown. Although coincidental, these statues bear a striking resemblance to the statuesque form in *The Tower (Vigil)*, a new animation by Laura Woodward. In this

looped sequence we see the tower appear to turn continually on its vertical axis, trailing long filaments that sprout from nipple-like forms on the torso of the figure. The rotating tower is skeletal, but the structure forms a symmetrical pattern abstractly suggestive of human features.

This oblique historical reference to a forgotten goddess is of interest in considering the visual characteristics of the tower form and its implied hourglass or womanly figure. However, it is the resonance of the commanding fecund goddess, the life giver, that reverberates for me in contemplating this new body of work by Laura Woodward and its emphasis upon the incorporeal aspects of experience.

The Unfixed comprises three works, two projected animations and one sculpture, which have been made in the time between the artist’s early stages of pregnancy, while undertaking a residency in Finland, and now as she creates work alongside an active toddler. There is a dilemma in addressing an artist’s motherhood in a discussion of their professional work. At stake is the risk of trivialising or undermining the seriousness and commitment of the practice being discussed and the implied limitations that parenting suggests, and of narrowing the scope of the discussion. The physical and psychological experience of mothering is transformative and, I would argue in this case, informative from both the artists and the viewers’ perspective.

Previously the artist has described her works as ‘introverted kinetic sculptures’,³ moving artworks that result from each sculpture’s own internal logic. Works such as *Writhe* (2015) and *The Return* (2014) embody systems that may suggest medical or industrial processes, that move and convulse in the service of their function. Yet, as artworks their movement—their animation—becomes the subject of our attention and the function is revealed as the formation of the art unfolding through its movement.

Woodward’s new sculpture *And the Sun was filled with Salt*, suggests to me that a transformation or shift has taken place within the logic of the work. I see this shift primarily in the sculpture’s relationship to the viewer. Here the round, tondo-like form is flattened with two primary planes. In the circular structure I find myself thinking of other historical references, such as Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man*⁴ and the oculus in the dome of the Pantheon in Rome. This double circle establishes a directed point of view and physical correspondence to me as I watch the wheel rotate. The sculpture positions my body in space, as a picture might hang on a wall for optimal view, yet in this case I can walk around and look through. All of Woodward’s sculptures are expertly engineered but this one feels particularly robust, with dozens of nuts and bolts securing the rigid wheel. The work is a complete unit, rather than an assembly of many parts.

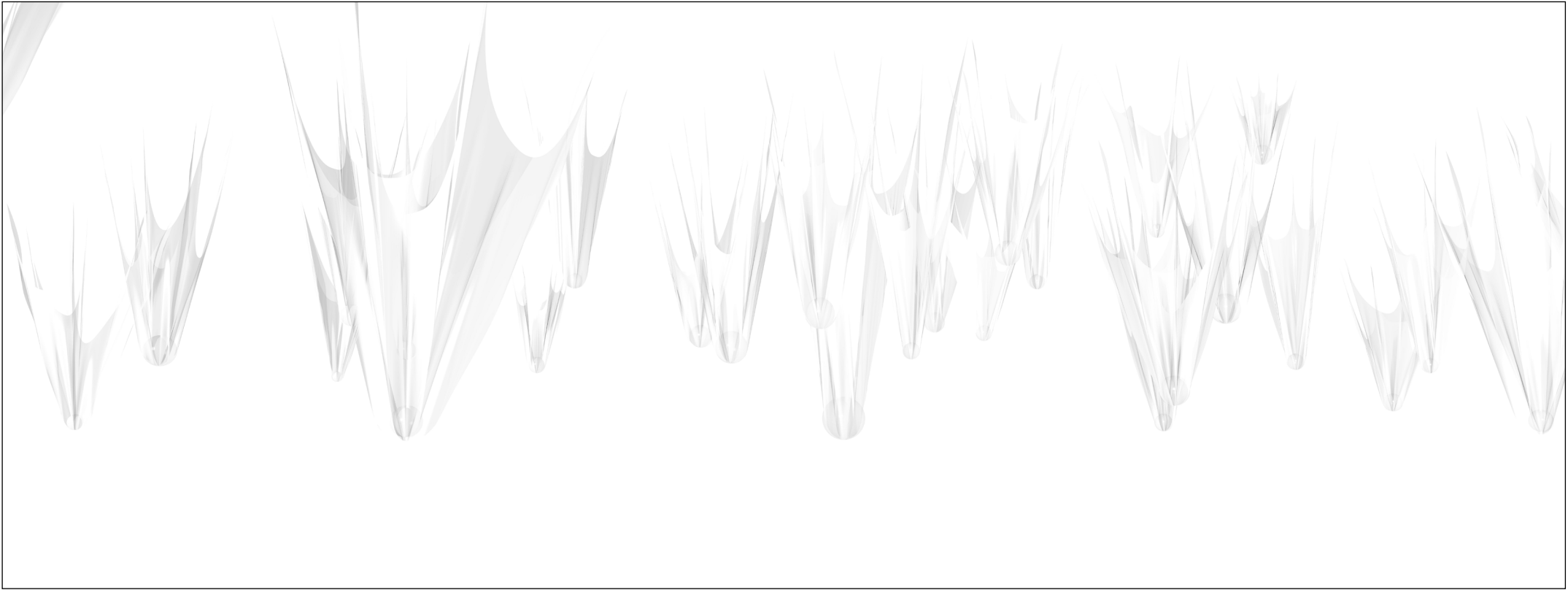
The wheel and cog are industrial, the skeleton of the factory machine, although they are not made from steel but from white acetal plastic—plastic bone—and aluminium, turning effortlessly on bearings and engineered teeth. A small motor drives the cog which transfers its rotation to the large wheel. Inside the wheel are two connected vessels, one a central circle sandwiched in clear acrylic and one a smaller bulbous form like half an oversized hourglass. Between these vessels flows crystallised white salt that pours from the small sphere into the flattened disk as it arcs overhead and then refills as it reaches the bottom on each rotation. It is within the central shallow disc that I find my gaze transfixed as I watch the salt form a level like a horizon that is constantly tipping.

The use of salt in the sculpture and the titling emphasises a significance in this choice of material, and the confounding idea that there could be salt in the sun. Welsh Jungian psychologist Ernst Jones wrote that “in all ages salt has been invested with a significance far exceeding that inherent in its natural properties...” adding that salt is often associated with fertility.⁵ There are many examples of the ritual, historical and biological significance of salt. As an inert mineral it is both essential to life and destructive. The use of salt is

visually neutral and culturally loaded. Unlike the water that Woodward has employed in previous works, salt holds traces of recent movement: alterations in density alter the reflective and translucent qualities of the surface and vary the tone, revealing subtle lines and swirls. Patterns reveal themselves and it is possible to contemplate each grain as it falls or tumbles.

In conversation Woodward has shared with me that the origin of the sculpture was the idea of creating an aperture to control light, but that this shifted as the work evolved. The concept of an aperture, a tool for focusing our view and attention remains palpable here. This machine’s role is to create our view—to direct our internal aperture that focuses and isolates our thought, slows our mind, tuns us inward as we watch a landscape of shifting grains forming mountains of salt, tipping and flattening into a horizon of white salt or desert or snow.

In is notable that all three works depict vessels, containers for holding. The animated drawing *Nest (The Horizon)* describes pendulous weighted forms drifting past in an endless





procession. In this case the holding is physical but also an emotional holding, perhaps a spiritual holding—something incorporeal like a hope or belief, a holding of attention, holding an otherwise fleeting thought, holding time, holding a focus, holding oneself.

Early pregnancy is a strange time. In processing the transition of your body into a vessel, every aspect of identity and experience is infected by this new knowledge—and in the absence of overt evidence, it is secret. For Woodward this time coincided with a residency in Finland, in the quiet dark of winter, with imposed periods of silence and only a few hours of daylight. I cannot think of a more internalised set up for arguably the most inwardly-focused weeks of growing a child for the first time and contemplating the biological surrender of your body. The growing of a baby, cell by cell from nothing—a moving of atoms in the world into new structures.

Grains of salt, goddesses, vessels, apertures and transformations—all seem like the mechanisms of alchemy, a discipline bound in the belief that sludge could be transformed into gold and that inert substances hold spiritual or magical properties. There is a fascinating paradox in this artist's practice—the use of contemporary technologies and materials, whose engineering and physics are mathematically calculated—in order to make movement. It is the movement, the life force, and not the machine itself, that gathers agency and draws empathy. This agency and life is not unlike that invested in a deity or a goddess statue, sculpted 'in the round' to bring the worshipper face to face with their idol. This is a connection with a force beyond oneself. Growing, birthing and nourishing a baby is perhaps the most potent experience of a life force that is other to us, and it is astonishingly overwhelming. Strangely this internalised and transformative experience also anchors us differently in the world, forcing an outward attention, directness and economy of expression.

The three works in *The Unfixed* are stripped of unnecessary complexity and, for me, the sculpture particularly squares off and meets the viewer. There is an openness and directness that quietly holds me. The playfulness and introversion, the internal logic remain central in these new works, but it is the incorporeal agency that lingers in my mind when I depart the gallery.

Words by Celeste Chandler.

NOTES

1. For the full list of the seven wonders of the Ancient world see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Seven-Wonders-of-the-World>.
2. The Statue *Artemis Euphesia*, 2nd Century AD, is included in the Phaidon publication 'Body of Art', 2015, Phaidon Press Limited, London, pp154-55. This and other versions are housed in the Euphesia Archaeological Museum, Selçuk, İzmir Province, Turkey.
3. Woodward, Laura, *The Introverted Kinetic Sculpture*, PhD Dissertation, 2013, The University of Melbourne.
4. *The Vitruvian Man*, Leonardo da Vinci, drawing, c1492. For a concise discussion of the purpose and significance of this work see <https://mymodernmet.com/leonardo-da-vinci-vitruvian-man/>.
5. Kurlansky, Mark, *Salt A World History*, 2011, Random House, p2-4. Here he discusses the writing of Ernst Jones about salt.



Exhibited artworks:

And the Sun was filled with Salt, 2019

Salt, acrylic, acetal, aluminium, motor, fasteners, wire rope, electrical wire, 120x120x30cm

The Tower (Vigil), 2019

Digital animation, 1 minute, looped projection

Nest (The Horizon), 2019

Digital animation, 4 minutes 30 seconds, looped projection



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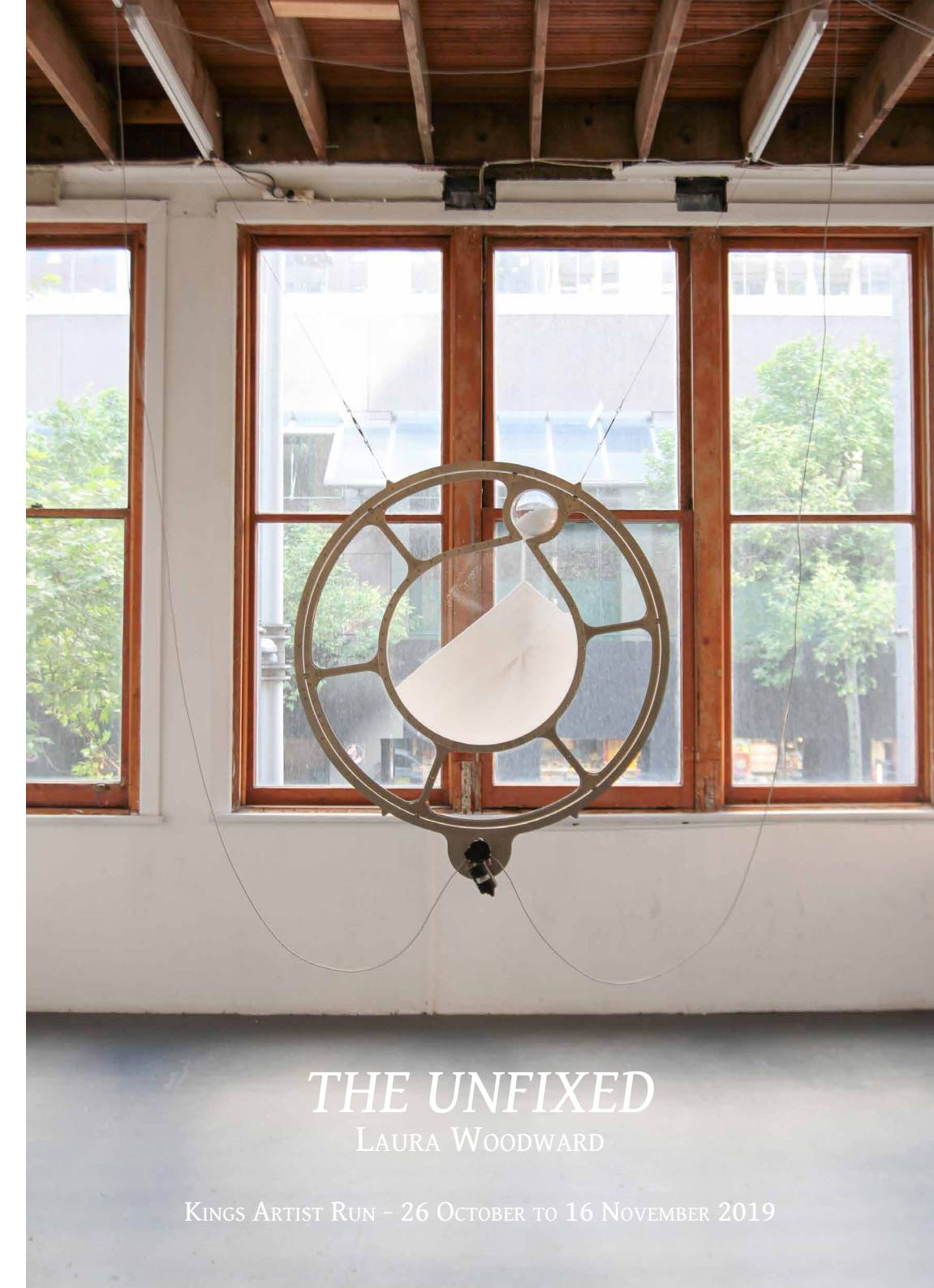
Lvl 1 / 171 King St.
Melbourne
Victoria 3000
Australia

Wed-Sat 12-6pm
kingsartistrun.org.au

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THE UNFIXED
LAURA WOODWARD

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