



WRITHE  
LAURA WOODWARD

ARARAT REGIONAL ART GALLERY  
18 JULY TO 30 AUGUST 2015



## DRAWING ON MOVEMENT

The first thing apparent in the works of Laura Woodward, and the most striking, is that they move. Did I say—*move*? They move as though possessed. They twitch and tremble, bounce and writhe, dancing a veritable tarantella scored for machine. They move in other ways too, but we will get to that in time. In art parlance, these works are recognisable as kinetic sculptures and thus emerge from a tradition that includes artists such as Naum Gabo, Marcel Duchamp, Len Lye, Alexander Calder, Jean Tinguely among many others. It is a tradition that Woodward is acutely aware of, and has studied to the extent of receiving a PhD on the topic. All artists owe great debts to their precursors, many try to welsh on the deal but the trick is to pay up, and move on. Woodward has honoured her debts, and it has freed her to reinvest in the tradition in highly innovative ways.

Enough of generalities, let's get to the nuts and bolts. This as a topic, if taken literally, could be quite exhausting. In *Writhe*, there really are a terrible lot of nuts and bolts and the work is a wonder of complex fastenings and joints. These shiny, perspex forms suggest the reconfigured bones of some forgotten iDevice or other, and if they seem just as precisely manufactured, the extraordinary fact is that all this precision and complexity was constructed by the artist herself. Using computer-controlled routers, CAD 3D software, hand finishing, and sourcing only a few minor pre-made components such as screws, hoses and hydraulic links, the artist designed and built everything herself. She even makes – and this is flabbergasting – the water pumps that run the damn thing. It makes previous kinetic work look like cobbled together *bricolage* which, as it happens, it often was. Within the tradition then, this represents an entirely different level of planning and production, one bound to current

technological innovation but also one that perhaps signals altered generational sensitivities regarding materials and structures.

Despite the highly material and mechanical nature of these works, with their gleaming surfaces, shiny screws, elaborate wiring and plastic hosing, there is something here that seems to insist on drawing. The artist does indeed produce articulate and very beautiful drawings in her notebooks. These marvellously precise freehand sketches are then redrafted as schematic designs in CAD drawing software. The final works echo these line drawings but also recall drawing in many other ways. Although very mechanical, *Writhe* is light, seemingly weightless, often as transparent as the water it transports, the whole linked together with squiggly plastic hoses. There are moments when the work resembles a line drawing in space. The plastic hoses evoke topographical maps, meshes, networks and even demented doddles. Caught from certain lights, the perspex edges either glow, or darken, transformed back into the vector lines etched out in the CAD software. Consider too that it is not just lines that are drawn, but many other things. Water is drawn up, time is drawn out and we, we are drawn in.

The point to all this highly skilled engineering and design is not simply to create impressive machines but to create

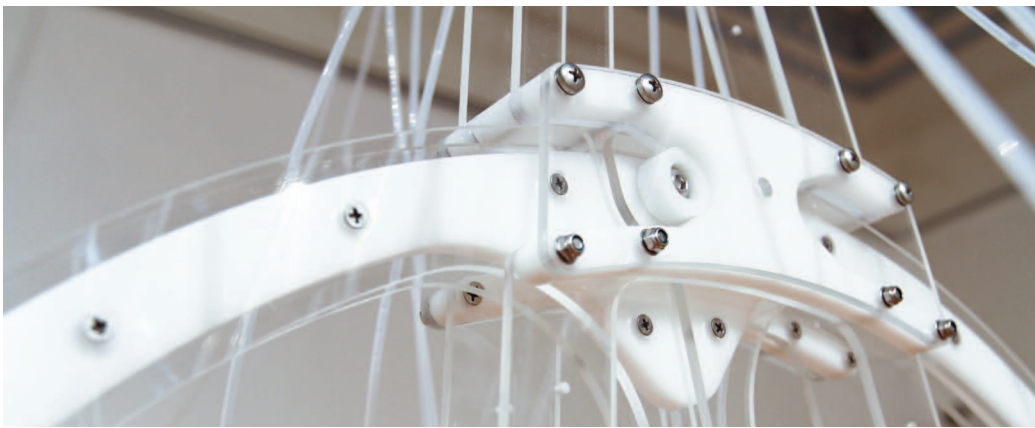
an effect—one where we are drawn into the art. We become enmeshed in the lines of logic, its tremulous movements, its uncertain rhythms and sounds. Just as the work transports water, so does it transport us. As already mentioned, the work moves in various ways but more importantly, as the work moves, it moves us. This movement is both literal and poetic. In the prosaic sense, the work compels us around the gallery space when considering it and, in this sense, *Writhe* is more properly understood as an installation since it activates the space and the bodies surrounding the work. (This contrasts to traditional sculpture that sat rather more sedately in space, awaiting adoration.) While physically moving us, this work also moves us emotionally. When viewing the twitching, jerking, flowing stutters of movement it is almost impossible not to have a sympathetic response, an *empathic* response. Isn't this writhing thing like our own bodies, with their shifting, incoherent movements, rumbles and gurgles? *Writhe* shudders and starts, switches and flows, much like our own bodies—a mixture of component machines and driven fluids.

The effect is anthropomorphic—something of a staple within kinetic sculpture—where we vain humans see the human in practically anything. It is what 19<sup>th</sup> Century artist and critic John Ruskin called the *pathetic fallacy*, the tendency to see human emotion









or behaviour in the very things that do not have it – weather, sunsets, machines, whatever.<sup>1</sup> While Woodward’s work draws you in a similar way, it does so in a manner as off-beat as the machine’s timing. *She* doesn’t seek overt anthropomorphism—you do. Nor are these the sorts of works that sidle up to you in a friendly way for a bit of a natter, rather they seem far more stand-offish, much less garrulous, more self absorbed—introverted, if anything. Indeed, this is the very term the artist settled on to describe her work – *introverted kinetic sculpture*. It is not just that they rather shyly get on with the business of being—they are fundamentally, as well as temperamentally, inward looking. Drawing a term from the field of neo-cybernetics, the artist conceives this as a form of autopoiesis—“the term autopoiesis describes a system that is autonomous, operationally closed and self referring.”<sup>2</sup> You see, these are not just objects that move, they are systems; systems that are circular, self-enclosed,

largely self-powered and certainly self-reliant. With careful consideration you can deduce how they work and what the system is doing, but what the aim of it all is, remains far less certain. If the answer is not self-evident, or singular, so much the better—like watching ants scuttling about with their mysterious goings-on, oblivious to your presence—it is fundamentally intriguing. There is clearly a point to all this activity, but what is it? Otherwise taciturn, this is a question the work gently asks—of you.

For me though, much revolves around the idea of equilibrium. The artist looks sceptical when I raise this, quite fairly; it is far too reductive to sum up the complexity here. And yet, as I watch the teeter-totter of these mechanisms with their mysterious attempts to balance weights, only to have them slip and drain away to some other component in the system, it looks like a struggle for equilibrium. The kindred human body also relies on seeking an ever fluctuating, elusive stasis of forces. Salts, liquids,

hormones, rhythms, temperatures all alike seek biological homeostasis. And like all systems, there are extreme end-points and tolerances, which if exceeded, bring the whole system to a grinding halt. Like us, these works sometimes die.

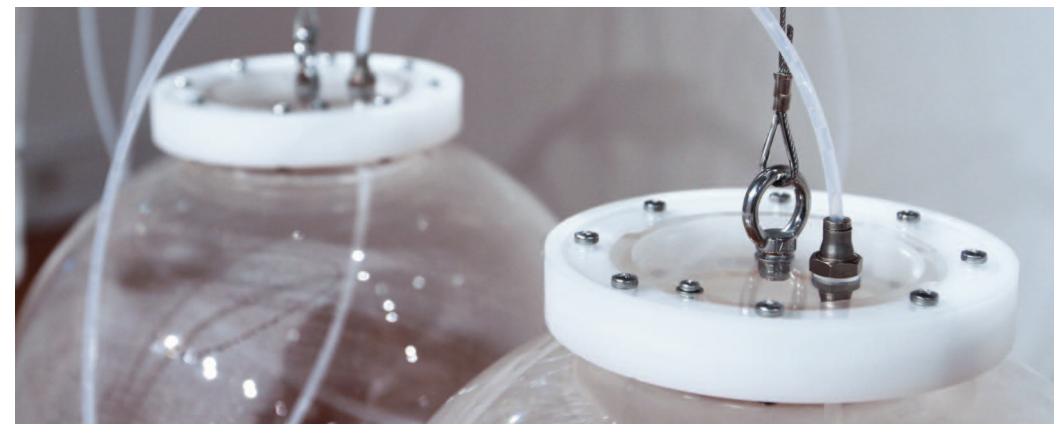
In *Writhe* there is a chain, a repetitive sequence, that seems to struggle for equivalence. As each component shifts, the balance is upset and each failed attempt at homeostasis impacts upon another element in the system. There are many aspects in the artist’s work that signal innovations from previous kinetic sculpture, but this aspect in particular shines. Prior kinetic work was most usually based around a singular, sculptural object, even when this was constructed of many parts. In contrast, Woodward’s works are networks of interrelated, often identical component machines that interact over distance, in sympathy, and are part of an autopoietic system. The work operates as a network that distributes and transports resources so that any change in one unit is a

change to the whole. To paraphrase 17<sup>th</sup> Century English poet John Donne “No one is an island, entire of itself, Every one is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”<sup>3</sup> Not only does the work embody a shift from sculpture to installation but it also shifts focus from the individual object to that of the system. It is akin perhaps to a more general contemporary shift in social feeling that places less emphasis on the singular unique individual and more on networked interactions between communities of individuals. Woodward’s works draw on movement to sketch out new possibilities in a world evermore full of elaborate self-contained systems and increasing interaction and interrelation between peers.

Stephen Haley, July 2015.

#### NOTES

1. Ruskin, John. “Of the Pathetic Fallacy” in *Modern Painters III*, 1856 in E.T Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds) *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*, Vol 5, George Allen, London, 1903–12, p201–220.
2. Lee, Pamela M. *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960’s*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004, p321.
3. Donne, John. *Meditation XVII Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, London, 1624.





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Ararat Regional Art Gallery, Town Hall,  
Vincent St, Ararat, Victoria, Australia

Monday to Friday 10am - 4.30pm

Saturday, Sunday, Public Holidays 12-4pm

**Artist Floor Talk:** 1 August 1pm

**Opening Celebration:** 1 August 1.30pm



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