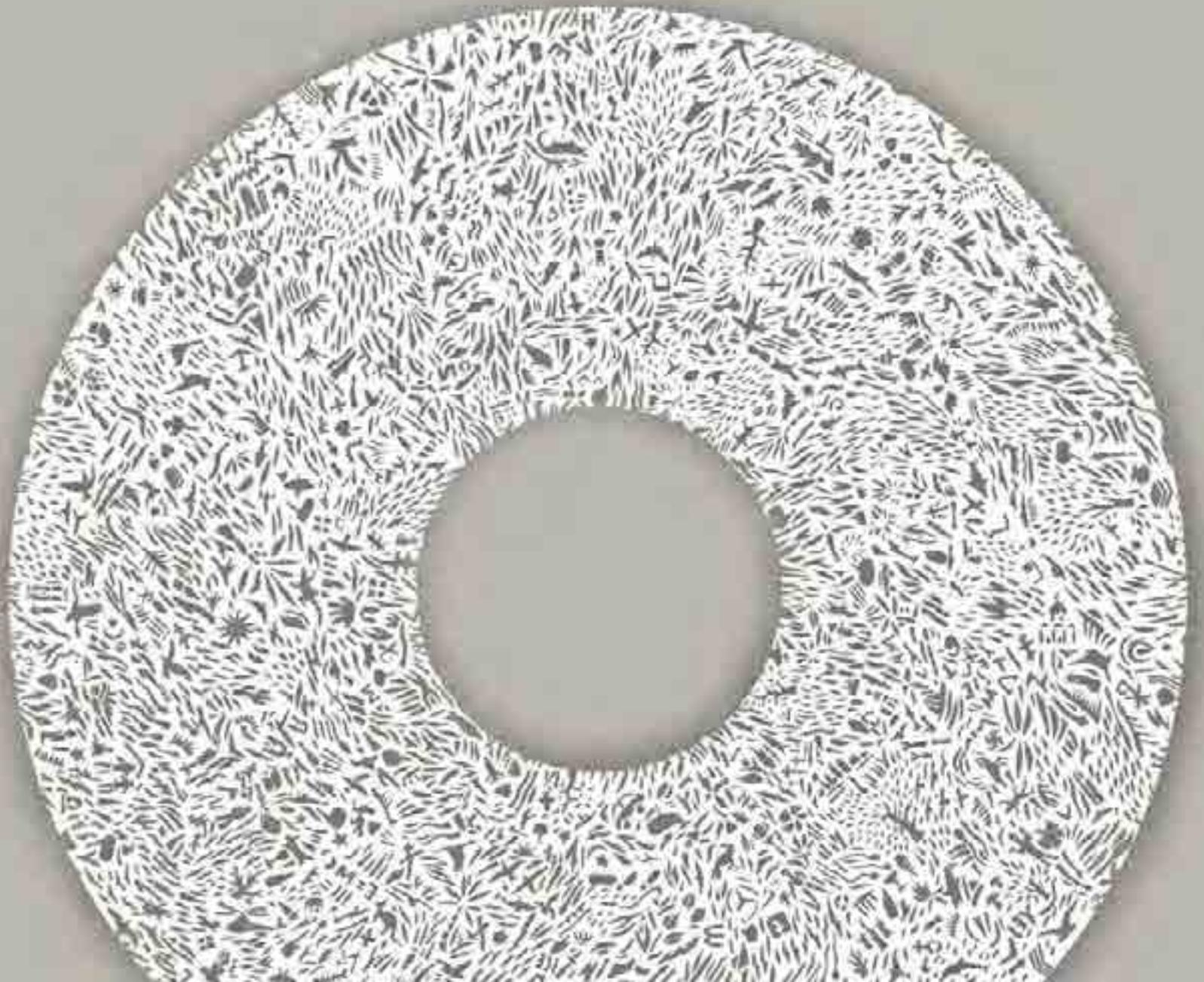




MICHAEL RIPOLL

Fallen Angels and Paper Ghosts

'It was not supposed to be like this. A career in the fine arts was never in my plans...'



I WAS GOING TO MEDICAL SCHOOL and had just completed the first year of a pre-med degree. One day, while waiting for second year enrolments my father asked me to join him for dinner where he gave me the bad news – I had to quit university. We just could not afford the tuition.

He was visibly upset and I knew enough not to argue on the spot. After dinner, he suggested that we not wait for the lift and instead take the stairs. At the entrance to the staircase was a poster announcing a cartooning contest, the first prize being a scholarship to a degree in Fine Arts. 'Why not?' I thought, 'how hard could it be?'

I won. Nobody was more surprised than I was when a few months later I found myself starting a Fine Arts degree. To this day, I suspect that my father had a hand in it – he must have called in some favours to get me that prize. After all, it was his idea not to wait for the lift.

The College Dean congratulated me on choosing to become an artist and asked which of the art disciplines I was most interested in. I had not previously considered that, but remembering the hours I spent as a little boy carving tiny figures out of bars of laundry soap, I said 'sculpture'. Suspecting that jobs for sculptors were few and far between, I added '.. and graphic design!'. And that was that.

It was 1965. The Rolling Stones could get no satisfaction (though they tried and they tried); Bob Dylan wondered how it felt to be like a rolling stone; the Beatles needed help but could work it out; Elvis was crying in the chapel, and the Supremes wanted everything to stop in the name of love.

The Vietnam war was in full swing. The Summer of Love was less than two years away and I was a teenager in art college soaking up all the sights and sounds of the 60s. There was op art and pop art and Lichtenstein and de Kooning and Warhol. Picasso was still around. As was Dali. And Dylan. The Harvard Psychedelic Club ('turn on, tune in and drop out') with Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert (Ram Dass), Huston Smith and Andrew Weil would profoundly change how we viewed our bodies, religion and the world around us.

I was born of Spanish parents in the Philippines, a predominantly Catholic country. I was educated in Catholic schools and even went to a Catholic university. In fact, it was both a Royal and Pontifical university – you can't get any more Catholic than that without joining the priesthood! I always wondered why we were taught Latin...

Did I mention that I was 16 and Mary Quant had invented the miniskirt soon after the creation of the contraceptive pill - arousing apoplexy in religious ranks? We expected priests to leap out from behind trees telling young people to stop thinking what they were thinking under threat of eternal damnation. I'm not just reminiscing, I'm describing much of my jewellery and most of my drawing.

One of the benefits of a Catholic education was the endless source of myths, stories, symbols and seriously weird rituals. These are displayed on



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Good Fridays when penitents would crucify themselves (crown of thorns and all) or have themselves actually flagellated.

The native belief in ghosts and witchcraft together with celebrations and vigils in cemeteries during the 'Dia de los Muertos' is another source of tales and images. I recall many hours listening to ghost stories and tales of 'aswangs', 'multos', 'mangkukulams' and other scary creatures. Not to mention myths about devils and tortures in hell.

Christian symbols, decaying cities, fallen angels, winged serpents and biblical references appear regularly in my work – mostly on purpose but every now and then an accidental confluence of light and shadow creates an image I never intended. Or did I?

I am aware of a recurring narrative in my work – the raging, intricate mass of humanity and machinery in our decaying environments.

JEWELLERY Fast forward thirty years or so and I am a graphic designer and creative director in Sydney when I first come across the stunning enamel jewellery of William Harper. When a girlfriend asked me to make her a piece of jewellery I took it to be good enough reason to learn how to. So I joined a jewellery class. It did not go well.

Left: Centre, *No Prime Minister*

Below: Genesis: *The Second Day*

And God said, 'Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.' ... and it was so. God called the vault 'sky'. And there was evening, and there was morning – the second day.

a weathered skeleton / in windy fields of memory / piercing like a knife
Matsuo Basho



I did not last long in that class. It was 2001, the Tampa children overboard affair was in the news. One evening, several very well-dressed and bejewelled women in class were admiring a couple of solid gold rings while talking about the Tampa and the consensus was 'they should tow the boat out to sea and burn it with everybody on board'.

'What kind of people are you?' I asked, knowing I would not be staying long. 'You must be a leftie liberal' said a particularly over-jewelled blonde. No point arguing with haters, I thought, so I left and never returned. That night I learned that beautiful things can be made by heartless people too.

Eventually I joined master silversmith Val Aked's silver studio. I was not a good jewellery student. I disliked soldering, hated polishing, had no real interest in gemstones, did not want to make earrings (because that would involve making two pieces), never attempted to make a chain and made too many weird pieces with tortured scrap silver and pregnant angels. Sound familiar?

I am usually somewhat apprehensive when I make jewellery. Sometimes there are moments in the process when I am cruising and everything is going along swimmingly but most of the time it's the opposite – a sense of apprehension that my skills are limited and sooner or later I will be found out – outed by the silver I am trying to shape. I am told that this is a good thing, that it shows I am outside my comfort zone. I must have a very narrow comfort zone – after all, that's the easy part – nothing that practice and dedication can't correct. Right? It's the narrative that is so much more elusive and for me, much more difficult because in many ways it is unconscious until it finally crystallises. I may be mixing my metaphors here but to quote TS Eliot: 'having undergone a long incubation, we do not know until the shell breaks what kind of egg we have been sitting on'.

Top: *Wings of Time*
Right: *Tower of Babel*
Below: *Jazz*





I am reluctant to call myself a jeweller; I have no interest in keeping up with the latest fashion (Mary Quant excepted), I could not resize a ring or set a gemstone and I do not do 'shiny' and 'pretty' with any real conviction. Instead I go out of my way to allow the workings to show. I usually choose materials that have a history or at the very least show evidence of mistreatment – materials with a past.

It took me a while to understand that jewellery can be much more than mere decoration – that 'shiny and pretty' is not compulsory and that it can also be a narrative art form capable of comment.

The jewellers I admire make jewellery that touches on social and political issues, tells stories, expresses emotions or simply questions what is going on. I am drawn to jewellery like that – which speaks of personal experiences, childhood memories and things learned along the way. I guess that puts me in the narrative jewellery genre, although I do meander around the genres a lot, often delving into symbolic and tribal jewellery.

I had not made any jewellery for several years when I was invited to join a jewellery exhibition with the Mountain & Metal Jewellers in the Blue Mountains where I live. The theme: our response to or interpretation of a poem.

I was determined not to be merely illustrative but to actually respond to the poem





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Above: Dingo Lament
Right: Ghost in the Machine



I needed a change and I wanted to do something simple without hundreds of tools, materials and techniques....

*Left: Inspired by Carl Sandburg's Bones
'And I shall be song of thunder, crash of sea'*

a little deeper. I was having difficulty when I came across two poems:, Carl Sandburg's 'Bones' and Matsuo Basho's 'Weathered', both of which painted such clear, powerful images that I could not possibly miss either: I walked around the house reciting poetry out loud noting my reactions and visualising what they might look like in silver.

DRAWING AND PAPER CUTTING (each of which only use one tool) provide relief from the hundreds of tools, materials and chemicals involved in jewellery. My drawings are arguably my most personal work and including several drawings in this article is a leap of faith – I've never shown them before.

I start a drawing without first sketching it out – in fact, I almost never sketch it out at any stage, mainly because I usually don't have a concept to begin with. I am looking for something to reveal itself, something that demands my attention. Sometimes it's just a particular quality of a line or a faint shadow and sometimes it's fully formed and detailed. I seldom draw what I see.

I think of it as two landscapes – the external and the internal interweaving. But what do I know? You should hear what a psychologist friend of mine says about that.

A few years ago, I took a sabbatical from making jewellery, wanting to concentrate on doing something simple. Little did I know that I had just vacated the frying pan and jumped into the fire. I took up paper cutting because it looked simple. I quickly discovered that this seemingly simple process belied the concentration needed to keep from cutting one link too many or one stroke too close, all the while ensuring that every cut piece of paper is connected to at least one other piece, preferably two – which in turn are connected to other pieces... and so on. Paper cutting requires only one





decision to be made: cut or don't cut, yet the binary nature of the process forces some clever problem solving or at the very least, good anticipation.

I started with something really simple – the Sydney Harbour Bridge (I had delusions of grandeur even then). The next piece was 'Ghost in the Machine', which was inspired by my reading Descartes. I wanted it to be part ghostly x-ray, part positive space interweaving with empty space. Many years later, 'Ghost in the Machine' remains one of only two self portraits.

'Hands over Night Sky with Dark Energy' is a much later piece. It was inspired by the sky on a crisp, clear night with a blood moon. I held up my hand against the sky and thought of a peoples who lived on the land for thousands of years looking up at the same sky and of the living creatures whose existence hangs by a thread.

And of how we seem not to care about either:

Left: Hands over Night Sky with Dark Energy





Michael Ripoll
Illustrated Man, cut-out

ripoll