

*Ultima*  
SUE SAXON



Sue Saxon's work is about memory - the fragments of cultural and personal history we look to to define who we are.

Memory is the terrain where meanings connect; we make sense of the world in terms of our life-narratives. Even when we are not at home in the external world, when we feel dislocated from it, we are at home in this interior landscape, though it is not always a comfortable place.

Sue Saxon's work describes this terrain. She is forced to make sense of what is there in order to live as a human being and as a Jew. To say this is not to equate artmaking with therapy; it is to say that, for the Jew, one's history cannot be escaped, nor should one desire to escape it.

Materiality becomes a touchstone, a mnemonic key. Materials are chosen for their evocative qualities. Paprika, salt, eggshells. Silvered ghost-images on translucent paper. In Saxon's work, when materials are used in the service of memory, we feel we know the materials: they are what we ourselves are made of. We remember the essence of things, their appearance, their touch, their texture. *This is what I remember. This is what I am.* Materiality serves to focus, channel, crystallise memory. This is what we have: a handful of salt, images and maps that simultaneously distil, present and hide .... and language.

For Jews, so long an exiled people for whom a home country was a country of the mind, language is a familiar abstraction. Called as a people to respond to God's voice, His Commandments that cannot be 'seen' but manifest as language, Jews have an understanding of the abstract, the hidden, the imagined.

In *Crossing Territories*, Saxon used the Hebrew alphabet as a structuring tool. Each of the 22 panels that made up this work contained a Hebrew letter and references to an aspect of the Australian environment evoked by a Hebrew word beginning with that letter:

Many of these panels contained natural materials: sand, feathers, coal dust, fish scales, salt. In this work, she conceptualised Jewishness in terms of a collection of metaphors that structure her response to the physical environment. In so doing, Saxon attempted to depict the connections between her Jewishness, her experiences driving around the country during an eight-month trip, and a sensual and metaphoric interpretation of the landscape she travelled through. Her later work reveals a less literal approach to this project, seeing it less as a linking or 'crossing' of 'territories' than a simultaneity of experience.

During a four-month period spent in Hungary, Saxon created several installation works in her association with the Budapest Fine Arts Academy. She created a ground piece in a disused Turkish bath-house. Paprika, salt and poppyseeds were spread in the corners of the bath floor in the images of a medieval hat that identified Jews, a Turkish turban and an upturned bow and arrow insignia. Saxon took the bow and arrow from a 17th century synagogue inscription which read, "The strong man of bow will be corrupted and the powerless will be set up with power. The Lord shall bless you and hold you." Standing in the midst of Saxon's ground piece were Austrian artist Heimo Wallner's two metre metal sculptures. These sculptural works stood as sentinels in this silent space. About the figures, Wallner said to Saxon, "For you, they're golems." Golems, like us, are created from fragments, scraps of language and clay. Like us, they were formed by the materials of memory and now stand as witnesses in it.

Although at times Jews were allowed to participate in the intellectual and economic life of Hungary, blood libel accusations and anti-Semitic violence were nonetheless an enduring feature of Jewish Hungarian history. The Turks occupied Hungary for 150 years. They were responsible for bringing paprika and poppyseeds to Hungary. They traded with Jewish merchants and allowed Jews to practise their religion freely. To Saxon, this work was about strength in the face of oppression; using this disused bath as a site for her work could be interpreted as a defiant gesture of persistence. *You may bend us like the bow, but we endure.*

Invited to participate in an annual symposium organised by Wallner, Saxon used crushed eggshells, earth and small blue alpine flowers to create another ground piece. These materials were mixed together and spread in the shape of a spiralled band approximately five metres across. The wide, graceful arc described by the spiral suggested a cycle of renewal occasioned by spring. Later, Saxon was told it is a Catholic custom to collect these spring flowers on that day.

Exile provokes the desire for origins, even doubtful ones. We look to the obvious markers of faith, ethnicity or race for a sense of belonging, or at least a sense of structure. We do this, yet, when outsiders try to group us according to these same categories, we can feel this as anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia. Ultimately, even the categories of sameness in which we find refuge from our essential strangeness from one another are fictions, constructions.

When one is in exile, it is possible to feel a lasting sense of mourning. One longs for one's country. There is the belief that we can only be 'home' in this place of origin. But we are mutable creatures and forget how thoroughly we take on the shapes and colours of our new environment; so much so, that, were we to return we would feel exiled yet again. So, this construct 'identity' takes on a great significance for the exile. It is an abstraction we treat as a certainty in the practical discourses of our daily lives, though we may not be sure who we are or what we are made up of.

Engagement with these issues is not a sufficient condition for producing good art. Saxon's success lies in part in her ability to avoid the pitfalls of kitsch which yawn beneath the feet of artists attempting to make art about 'Jewish' issues and issues to do with exile or the identity of the marginalised. Without rehashing Clement Greenberg's essay on the subject, it can be remarked that, when working in this area, less is definitely more, and more than that risks becoming kitsch.

In *Stereotype/other*, the work in the Moët et Chandon exhibition, she explores the construction of 'the Jew' as a twilight figure built from centuries of anti-Semitism. Here, the Jew is a projection, a receptacle. Of course, this 'Jew' is a fiction. Such fictions become reality when human beings are forced to fulfil the conditions this fiction needs to survive. People can and do die for ideas. Millions of Jews have died for the anti-Semite's need to maintain the idea of the Jew.

When Saxon shows us a parade of anti-Semitic images in *Stereotype/other*, it is within the context of the grouped images themselves that their potency becomes apparent. She wants these images to speak for themselves, and she wants us to see the images not once, but twice.

Through our own eyes, we look on with horror. Suddenly we realise that we are the audience for whom these images were created. Ordinary people just like ourselves looked at these pictures, hated and killed Jews. Ordinary people, not monsters, commit such crimes. Ordinary people tried to 'cleanse' the former Yugoslavia of Muslims; ordinary people in Rwanda were killing each other.

Then, we see that Saxon has not merely reproduced the images. She has carefully re-rendered them. We see the images through her eyes, as she reworks the shapes she finds in an attempt to locate meaning, to find some sort of reason where there is none. She persists in the hopeless search for an explanation, an origin. Because she knows she will never find the answer, she looks to the very stuff the images are made of. She reworks them materially, but the shapes they assume are doomed to remain the same. The search for some sort of understanding is stymied by the literalness, the dumb presence of these images.

An attempt to 'explain' these anti-Semitic images would have de-fused the work's powder-keg of hatred and the poignancy of Saxon's attempt to locate meaning in the materiality of the work. When this work toured as part of the Moët et Chandon exhibition it was first hung in the Art Gallery of Western Australia. It is interesting that viewers other than the Holocaust survivors in the Perth Jewish community understood that the images required no apology. These survivors imagined that Saxon herself was an anti-Semite because she presented the images without explanatory (condemning) remarks. To members of this community, more is definitely not enough: to scream, to wail, to cry would not be enough. What Saxon was really being accused of was not showing the proper Jewish response to anti-Semitism. If she were behaving like a Jew, she, and her work, would be screaming from the rooftops. Not to do so was evidence of a lack of appropriate feeling, or worse, an endorsement of the images' anti-Semitic content.

To understand history - and especially *not to forget*, to be a witness, even metaphorically, to history - is an ethical necessity. To abandon this responsibility means to abdicate one's responsibility as a Jew. And since a Jew can never be anything other than a Jew, this would constitute a denial of reality.

Even in the attempt to assimilate, the Jew carries history. It is carried not as baggage, though it may feel like a heavy burden, but as part of one's larger identity.

Being a Jew means to be involved in the ethical dimension of the ongoing project of history. This is the cultural identity of the Jew under anti-Semitism. In post-Holocaust modernity, this commandment to ethics shapes what we call 'personal' identity, representing a further fragmentation of the self and creating in individuals the desperate, pressing need to 'understand' one's history as a Jew. In the sense that it has left an irrevocable impact on the Jewish cultural psyche, every Jew now lives under the shadow of the Holocaust.

But lived experience feels like a seamless whole. One cannot tell what is constructed as 'the personal', what is 'the cultural', what is present as a response to anti-Semitism and what is an expression of the intrinsic character of Jewishness itself. One only knows that the imperative to speak drives one to use the tools and materials that are at hand. There is a need to continue trying to speak the unspeakable, to represent that which is beyond representation.

Saxon realises that memory is the invocation by which the dead, unreasoning stuff of history, its very materiality, can be activated. Substance can be made to speak when it is made talismanic. Never do we recall events so sharply, or feel emotion more directly than when we do so through our senses. We touch, we hear, we look, in order to gather the scattered pieces of experience back to ourselves, and we remember. We have these fragments. Out of these, we fashion our life's stories. In a world of shards of glass, scraps of cloth, and broken clock-springs, we must make a castle to live in.

MEREDITH MORSE



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## *Ultima*

1.

One of the thirty-two cards from the Hungarian card-game 'Ultima'. My father has played 'Ultima' every week for as long as I can remember.

2.

The Jews of Austria-Hungary 1867-1914.

3.

European Anti-Semitism 1917-1933.

4.

My mother's family house in Nyregyhaza, a town in north-eastern Hungary.

5.

The Jewish Death-Toll 1939-1945.

6.

The section of the Tokaj synagogue where my father's family sat. Tokaj is a small wine-growing village in north-eastern Hungary. It lies at the junction of two rivers, the Tisza and the Bodrog, and nestles among gentle hills on which grapevines flourish.

*Ultima* is a personal gesture commemorating the 50th anniversary of the deportation of the Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz.



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