















*If not bones, then stones* 2015













#### NAOMI ELLER: IF NOT BONES, THEN STONES

Naomi Eller is a Melbourne artist who makes sculptures inspired by nature, math and the human condition, translating our complex ideas and feelings into visual form. For this exhibition she presents a new body of work that marks a shift in her practice away from figurative towards the production of enigmatic and numerous objects that reference the cyclical rhythm of life.

While Eller originally trained and practised as a painter she has worked as a sculptor and specifically with clay for the past eight years. The weight of the material, its plasticity and connection to the earth are important to the realisation of her ideas, as is clay's place in the history of art. The ceramic forms seen in this installation also comprise elements found and adapted from the natural world. Patterned, joined together and reconfigured, these residues of once living things are imbued with a raw energy and psychological charge. Some are activated in a physical or literal way: the anatomical paths of ribbed bones are punctuated by long wavy ridges, while the 'hoof', with their interconnecting 'veins', become like phallics, weapons or phyllophora.

Eller's sculptures function at an intermediate level between real and imagined, natural and anthropomorphic. Produced in appearance, they carry the residues of memory and the weight of the passage of time, as well as the mystery and magic of the unknown. They deal with the 'long-term business', as Carl Gustav Jung is of death in life and the life that can be found in death.

















*Descending from the mount, they first unbind  
Their vests, and veil'd, they cast the stones behind;  
The stones (a miracle to mortal view,  
But long tradition makes it pass for true)*

*Did first the rigour of their kind expel,  
And suppl'd into softness as they fell;  
Then swell'd, and swelling, by degrees grew warm,  
And took the rudiments of human form;  
Imperfect shapes: in marble such are seen,  
When the rude chisel does the man begin;*

*While yet the roughness of the stone remains,  
Without the rising muscles, and the veins.  
The sappy parts, and next resembling juice,  
Were turn'd to moisture, for the body's use:  
Supplying humours, blood and nourishment;  
The rest, too solid to receive a bent,  
Converts to bones; and what was once a vein,  
Its former name and Nature did retain.*

— extract from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 1.

Naomi Eller is quietly attuned to the ways in which memory and heritage imprint themselves on successive generations, born as she was in Melbourne to émigré parents who left Poland during the post war diaspora. Her familial background has not affected her art in an overt way but it has, perhaps, given it a certain pathos and gravity of sensibility. Chiefly concerned with translating complex psychological states and feelings into visual forms, for this exhibition Eller considers synergies between humankind and nature that endure through time. It marks a shift in her practice away from figuration towards the production of more enigmatic and numinous objects that reference the cyclical rhythm of life.

Although Eller originally trained and practised as a painter, she has worked as a sculptor and specifically with clay for the past eight years. The weight of the material, its plasticity and connectedness to the earth are important to the realisation of her ideas, as is its effect on all the senses: 'you can touch it with your eyes', she says.<sup>1</sup> Equally important is clay's place in the history of art, and while she holds a particular fondness for Etruscan pottery, Eller cites an interest in a range of diverse sources, from the expressive and gestural work of nineteenth century artists Medardo Rosso and Auguste Rodin, through to the sculpture of 1950s practitioners such as Alina Szapocznikow and Maria Bartusová—artists with a similar cultural background whose forms and concepts speak deeply to her.

Alert to her place in a lineage, Eller is well versed in the traditions of ceramics without treating these as essential or sacrosanct. One particular point of departure is her use of paint, wax and shellac in preference to conventional slips and glazes. This enables her to produce a variety of layered textural finishes and to maintain control over colour and tone, lending her work a contemporary edge yet also a feeling of timelessness, as if the objects might be from any age. More recently she has begun integrating found objects and natural elements in her sculptures as well, though she gives them a patina that makes it difficult to determine what is 'real' and that which is made by hand.



*The Formation of Adam and Eve* 2012  
ceramic, oil paint, shellac and wax  
34 x 24 x 14 cm  
Courtesy the artist

Eller's work up until this time has had as its touchstone the classical figuration of pagan antiquity and its translation into religious art of later periods. Rendered on a small scale and drawing on Greek and Roman mythology and the Creation story of Adam and Eve—both the secular and the spiritual—her sculptures nonetheless push against the strictures of their historical antecedents. In *Woman with the Golden Snake*, 2012, for instance, the serpent from the Garden of Eden fully

penetrates Eve, emerging triumphant through her mouth. Unashamedly erotic, these figures exude a raw and libidinous energy. For Eller they play out 'our necessity to feel and find our inner and atavistic selves'.<sup>2</sup>

The new work for *If not bones, then stones* references the body with a different and less literal approach, looking internally to the skeletal components that provide the scaffold for human life. 'Bones and stones carry our stories', Eller says, 'they are part of who we are ... our own construction and destruction'.<sup>3</sup> Nature is more heavily implicated than in the artist's previous work, too, as human and natural forms coalesce. But rather than imitating or interpreting the living world she works with the physical elements that endure after death, and invests these remnants with a psychological charge.

These objects are activated in a sensual and often sexual way, too: the atrophied pelvis-shaped bones of the *Resting Limbs* series are infiltrated by long waxy sticks, while the *Tools* with their



*Woman with the Golden Snake* 2012  
ceramic, oil paint, shellac and wax  
30 x 27 x 24 cm  
Courtesy the artist

interchangeable heads are like phalluses, weapons or erotic playthings. The more 'female' of these suggest gynaecological instruments or birthing aids from another era and, seen adjacent to their male counterparts, point both to the circularity of life and to *la petit mort* that accompanies sexual pleasure. In spite of their elegance and roughened beauty, and the suggestion that what is left is capable of renewal, there remains about this work an inexorable sense of loss.

Different sentiments and ideas can be found in the rest of the display. While the installation that gives the exhibition its name, *If not bones, then stones*, 2015, combines found and handmade elements in an assemblage that could equally be happenstance or intervention, the works *Unfamiliar Behaviours* and *Entrapment* appear to be hybrid natural forms, perhaps the despoils of genetic engineering or plant life from a time in the future. Disquieting and inscrutable they could serve as premonitions, at the same time reminding us of our yearnings for 'a trust in the inevitable abstraction that is life'.<sup>4</sup>

Delving far beyond surface appearances, Eller's objects function in an indeterminate zone between real and imagined, natural and anthropomorphic. They are primordial in appearance and carry the residues of memory and the weight of the passage of time, yet also the mystery and magic of the talisman. This is the 'heavy funny business', as Eller describes it, of the baggage we each carry with us. It is the death in life and the life that can be found in death.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Naomi Eller in conversation with Lesley Harding, 16 January 2015.

2. Naomi Eller, artist's notes for *If not bones, then stones*, 9 April 2015.

3. Ibid.

4. Naomi Eller, artist's statement for the exhibition *Nothing is set in stone*, c3 Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne, 2012.

5. Naomi Eller in conversation with Lesley Harding, 28 April 2015.



## Biography

Naomi Eller was born in Melbourne, where she currently lives and works. She holds a Diploma of Education and Visual Arts (Painting) from the University of Melbourne.

Solo exhibitions include *Of Nature*, Tristian Koenig, Melbourne, 2014; *Naomi Eller*, Chapterhouse Lane, Melbourne, 2014; *To Bear Witness*, The Alderman, Melbourne, 2013; *Nothing is set in stone*, c3 Contemporary Art Space, Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne, 2012; *The fates at play*, DEATH BE KIND, Melbourne, 2011; *Matter & Memory*, c3 Contemporary Art Space, Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne, 2011.

Selected group exhibitions include *Faux Museum*, c3 Contemporary Art Space, Abbotsford Convent, Melbourne, 2014; *SMALLpieces*, Northcote Pottery, Melbourne, 2014; *Platform Art Space*, Melbourne, 2013; *The Collector's Edition*, DEATH BE KIND, Melbourne Art Fair, Melbourne, 2012; *The rest is silence*, DEATH BE KIND, Melbourne, 2011.

[naomieller.com](http://naomieller.com)

## List of works

### *Entrapment 2014*

series of 2

ceramic, oil paint, wax and shellac

dimensions variable

### *Imprints of Memory 2015*

series of 5

paper collage

76.5 x 57.5 cm each

### *If not bones, then stones 2015*

ceramic, found branches, oil paint,

wax and shellac

dimensions variable

### *Resting Limbs 1 2015*

ceramic, branch, oil paint, wax and shellac

73 x 29 x 38 cm

### *Resting Limbs 2 2015*

ceramic, branches, oil paint, wax and shellac

77 x 24 x 40 cm

### *Resting Limbs 3 2015*

ceramic, branches, oil paint,

wax and shellac

60 x 25 x 30 cm

### *Tools Group A 2015*

series of 3 with 5 optional heads

dimensions variable

ceramic, found branches, oil paint,

wax and shellac

### *Tools Group B 2015*

series of 2

dimensions variable

ceramic, found branches, oil paint,

wax and shellac

### *Unfamiliar Behaviours 2014*

series of 5

dimensions variable

ceramic, oil paint, wax and shellac

All works collection of the artist

## Acknowledgements

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*If not bones, then stones* is dedicated to her safta Sarah.

This exhibition has been supported by the Bequest of Erica McGilchrist, an artist and activist who advanced the standing of women's art throughout her lifetime.

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then stones**

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*Resting Limbs 3 2015*



