**Linda Marrinon**

Brunswick, Melbourne

I’m convinced that in 50 years’ time, people – the academy, fellow artists, the populace at large – will look back on Linda Marrinon as one of the most significant artists of her generation. Not just in Australia but worldwide. There is a sublime weirdness to her work. This perverse turn is best summed up by Chris McAulliffe when he writes that “the core of Marrinon’s work lay in her ability to be simultaneously out of whack and on song.”[[1]](#footnote-1)Her exhibition next year, at Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA), curated by Charlotte Day, will only secure this admirable position.

I first came across Marrinon’s work in 1984, when I had a painting studio at the Cite des Arts in Paris. It was a few years before my first trip to Australia, but I was a loyal subscriber to the great *Art Network* magazine published and edited by Ross Wolfe in Sydney. I still remember ripping open the envelope and pulling out a particular edition that featured on its cover a Marrinon painting depicting a young woman carrying a cross on her back, crawling across an orange and green landscape. On the arms of the cross the words “MISUNDERSTANDING” and “PREJUDICE” were written. It was quintessentially of its time. Typical of painting’s Grand Hurrah in the early 80s, known variously as neo-expressionism, the trans-avantgarde, or simply “bad painting”. The parameters of this movement were set variously, and at different times, by Achille Bonito Oliva in Italy, Tony Godfrey in England, and Thomas Lawson in New York through his *Artforum* essay that defined the Zeitgeist, “Last Exit Painting.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Linda Marrinon was then producing work at least as seductive as Francesco Clemente in Italy, Stephen Campbell in Scotland, Marlene Dumas (a few years later) in The Netherlands, and her compatriot Imants Tillers in Australia. While some saw strands of Hester or Nolan in her work, and others (wrongly) Vivienne Shark LeWitt or even the cartoons of Leunig, I saw only a unique and compelling imagination accompanied by a personal skills-set that was totally of her own making. I still see this in the wonderful sculptures she has moved on to fashion in her Brunswick studio, and in the perversely beautiful watercolours and architectural models she creates – small scale blueprints for imaginary monuments.

We catch up at Counihan Gallery, and move to Maddox Cafe on Sydney Road. It’s only the second time we’ve met, the first being at Monash Gippsland in 1990. Of the many questions competing in my head I lead with, “I noticed on the CV Roslyn Oxley sent me, that you won a Samstag Scholarship around 2000. Where did you travel with it? Where did you study?”

“I went to New York,” she replied, “to study at The New York School of Figurative Art.” A double whammy of confusion for me, as I would not have thought that city meshed with her personality, nor that such a conservatively skills-based art school could have offered even the slightest addition to her own supremely developed visual language.

“Why?!?” I heard myself exclaim, as the huge Klimt print on the back wall wobbled in and out of focus around her head.

“I wanted to test if I’d been on the wrong track all along. And to see if there were figurative skills of drawing, chiseling, or casting that might help me in the future. It took me a week to realise I’d made a big mistake.” All of my prepared questions were discarded now, as I travelled down this rabbit hole of memory and intrigue.

“What did you do?”

“I remember I was on the subway travelling from my tiny apartment down to the art school. I was thinking, ‘how can I leave after a week, and go home to Australia? How would that look? What would the Samstag people say? And then the train stopped at a station and we were told there had been an accident and we had to get off. Out on the street there was dust and ash falling, and there were thousands of people marching up from Lower Manhattan, all covered in ash. I saw one of the towers go down and headed East on foot. And somewhere inside me I knew it would be OK, to travel back to Australia the following week. No one would blame me.” At this point her classic painting *Sorry* crashed into my consciousness. Bizarrely, our Brunswick conversation was taking place on September 11, 2014 – exactly thirteen years later. But even more bizarre were the images, and the whole narrative of Marrinon’s adventures in America. Strange occurrences in the deserts of life. Juxtapositions. Fragmented stories. Another early painting of a happy, waving, sailor beside a boatload of women flashed into my head. The text on the canvas reading, “I SAILED TO TAHITI WITH AN-ALL GIRL CREW’.

Back home, and concentrating on sculpture, drawing, and watercolours, Chris McAuliffe recounts in his monograph how, “An apparent fascination with undergarments, earlier articulated as a Dadaist gag, now reappears in the delightful *Man in long johns*, 2006, while works such as *Woman with a head scarf*, 2006, shows Marrinon’s abiding fascination with the decorated body. Disproportionate, elongated, and sinuous, these sculptures returned to the convoluted elegance of the mid-80s…” [[3]](#footnote-3)

At this point, having surfed her backstory, I was curious to know what she was planning for 2015 at MUMA.

Curator Charlotte Day was the person to ask. “The exhibition will be called *Figure Sculpture*,” she told me. “It will bring together close to 60 of Linda’s plaster figures and busts, all produced over the past decade. She has such a wonderfully idiosyncratic language when working with figurative sculpture. Her whole repertoire of historical and figurative sculptures will be there to see – from Voltaire to MC Hammer, alongside Edwardian ladies and Emergency Service Workers. Such a large body of her work has never been brought together before in a solo exhibition, and it’s drawn from many private and public collections.”

I look at the images and salivate in anticipation. Here is a *Man with shorts* (2005), here is a *Pink sailor* (2005), and (joy of joy), there is *Woman with bustle listening to her watch* (2005). Orbiting closer to the present there is *Cosmonaut with Moondust* (2010), *Woman with Shoulderbag on Base with Jerusalem Stone* (2011), *Joan Sutherland* (2012), *Toulouse Lautrec* (2012), and (pulling me back to our earlier conversation in Maddox Café) *Twins with skipping rope, New York, 1973* (2013). And finally we end with *Revolutionist* (2014) from Monash University’s own collection. I’ve only drooled over it on my iPad, but it looks remarkable, memorable, and weirdly, excitingly, dignified.

Marrinon has been both an insider and an outsider to the world of commercial dealing and the world of museums and public galleries. As McAuliffe says, “Linda Marrinon has been courted by the art world, but has never fully succumbed to it. Her relationship to art might be likened to a very long engagement. If, in the end, she is wedded to art she’s hardly sworn to love, honour, and obey it. She skipped that bit and went straight to the part about ‘in sickness and in health.’”[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Vault*

1. McAuliffe, C *Let Her Try,* Craftsman House (2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Artforum,* October, 1981 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. McAuliffe, C *Let Her Try,* Craftsman House (2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McAuliffe, C *Let Her Try,* Craftsman House (2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)