

The big **M** Why do we make mosaic?



Like many people making mosaic, I came to it pretty much by accident.

I mean really, who actually sets out to become a mosaicist?

by Helen Bodycomb

The ambition doesn't exactly compete with becoming an astronaut or a nurse. Coming to formal mosaic in my late 20s, I wasn't, however, entirely self-taught, having earlier spent five years studying fine art majoring in painting. While it may have been a route of combined incident and accident that led me to mosaic, like most people I was somehow already there, because the act of making mosaics is something that is intrinsically human. This idea sits at the heart of my recently completed PhD thesis. And I am going to come back to this concept, but first I want to illustrate it through some of my own story.

I was one of those kids who was always making stuff, using cardboard and other precious scrounged materials I stashed under my bed. Interesting leaves and beckoning stones, shells, other unique scraps left by nature or culture, were all deemed to be useful stuff to make less useful objects with. I was also musical; playing piano, recorder, and flute. For a few years after I finished high school I worked as an instrumental music teacher. I loved music—both listening to it and playing it—and I loved teaching kids, but I knew there was something else out there for me. Something pivotal happened in the

Movimento nelle Foglie 2001 H60" W60"

Private collection. Glass smalti and marble on aluminium honeycomb panel

Movimento nelle Foglie (movement in the leaves) was the first mosaic I made at the Spilimbergo School in 2001. The design drew from my paintings at that time, which explored the rhythmic effects of wind or water current on

foliage. This was the first mosaic I made using hammer and hardie.

TOP: Finished work
Photo: Gary Medlicott

LEFT: Work in progress
Photo: Helen Bodycomb



“the act of making mosaics is something that is intrinsically human.”

Helen Bodycomb



Nest 2013

H40" W26"

Private collection. Glass smalti, slate, marble on aluminium honeycomb panel

Nest is one of my favourite works. It was modelled on a small, very finely woven nest found in our garden in Vaughan, complete with a few delicate strands of bright blue baling twine. Nothing quite captures obsolescence or memento mori (remember death) like the dignity and grace of a discarded nest. I sought to render the mosaic like a slightly smudgy drawing, also imposing on myself the technical challenge of resolving a chaotic series of contour lines with eventual encircling rows of andamenti. At the point where these directionally chaotic contour lines were resolved, something resembling a torn edge emerged, implying Nest as a recorded fragment of a larger narrative.

Photo: Julie Millowick

Manga Medusa 2008

H26" W26"

Private collection. Glass smalti and marble on aluminium honeycomb panel

I made *Manga Medusa* in collaboration with René Schaefer, my Project Assistant for many years. One afternoon Ren and I were working on a commission and were speculating what we might make afterwards during a fertile gap between commissions. Over the noise of fabrication and ten metres or more between us, René misheard something I said, and thought I had suggested we make a manga version of Medusa. Although it wasn't what I had said (probably I had suggested we have vegemite on toast for lunch or something similarly banal), we agreed *Manga Medusa* was a great idea. She was first exhibited as part of *Mosaic Now: Works from Italy and Australia* which was an exhibition I curated, bringing 60+ works from Spilimbergo to tour Australia in 2006. Several years later in 2011, I borrowed her from a private collection in Adelaide to exhibit at *Ravenna Mosaico* in Ravenna, Italy where she attracted the attention of *The New York Times* reviewer, Robert Conway Morris, in 'An ancient craft gets a bigger world stage', (*New York Times*, 27 October, 2011). Photo: Julie Millowick



early spring of 1986, when making things and music began to coalesce.

I was a university dropout working as a farm laborer in Cornwall, in southwest England, picking daffodils—up to 20,000 of them per day. In retrospect, the rhythmic picking process, the ritualized repetition, and precise fine motor skills somewhat resembled making a mosaic. Ironically, so did the pay scale. I remember the 'piece-rate' was £5.22 per 'lot.' A 'lot' was 72 bunches of ten flowers. That's less than a dismal US\$7 for picking 720 flowers, thumb-pinched while bent double in ankle-deep snow. (Never count your tesserae, is my advice.)

As I stoically trudged through this experience, a late wintry blast snowed us in for ten days. We pickers were unable to drive anywhere, let alone work. So my landlady dug her mother's old watercolors out of the attic and for the first time since childhood, I painted. I

painted every day and every night for ten days. Like a maniac, I painted everything I could see and then started painting things I saw only in my imagination. By the time the snow had melted and complete stir-craziness had been averted, I had become deeply altered. I was now hooked on painting. At the end of my three months experimenting as a Cornish farm laborer and self-taught watercolorist, I went to France to really see art for the first time. By now, I was an experienced maker and a new painter, ripe for the epiphany that followed.

It was amidst the powerful presence of early modernist paintings by Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, and Wassily Kandinsky that my knees went weak and I knew that after almost two years of international roaming, I would return to Australia to attend art school. And I did. That was more than 30 years ago. So as a maker since infancy and later as a trained painter, the path to making mosaic just unfolded. It was as though the route had always been there. Like the material memory within a folded piece of card that remembered its flatness and slowly unfurled, the act of making mosaic simply revealed itself. Because I had

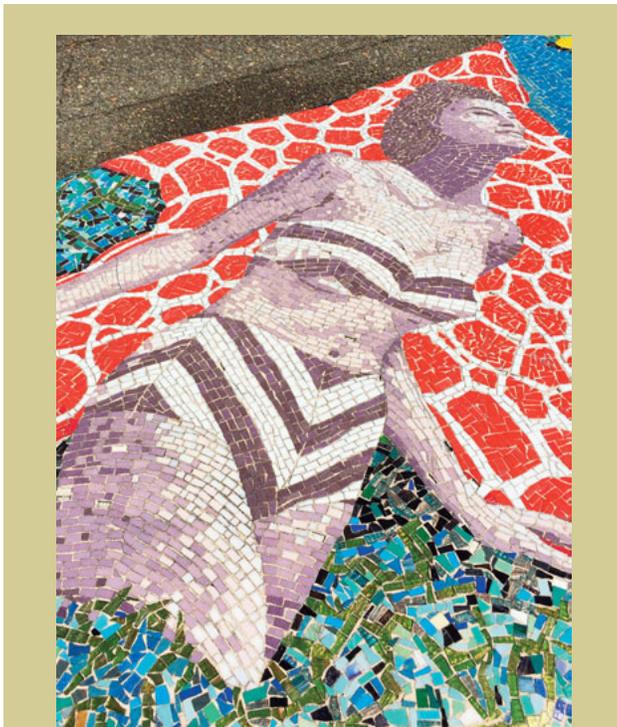


Tram Driver Table 1999

Vitreous glass on rendered cement table

In 1998 – 1999 I worked in collaboration with Turkish mosaicist Enver Camdal, making a large mosaic street installation in Sydney. The Bondi project involved 27 large pieces of mosaic street furniture which were made offsite in the indirect method, using Bisazza vitrified glass. Following a timely visit to Bondi in 2000 by the Asia-Pacific Managing Director of Bisazza, I was—somewhat by fluke—invited to do a mosaic residency in Spilimbergo.

In June 2001, I went to Spilimbergo to work under Giulio Candussio, who was Artistic Director both at the Bisazza factory and at La Scuola Mosaicisti del Friuli, the Spilimbergo School. By the time I arrived, Italian manufacturing was in freefall and the factory was closing, so my residency was solely at the Spilimbergo School. I arrived with a four-month-old baby and a patient and helpful husband, who was full-time Dad and baby courier between breastfeeds. We were in Italy for a very rich and full six months, during which time I learned how to be a mother as well as a mosaicist. *Photo: Artisticama*



Bondi Beach Babe 1999

Collaboration with Enver Camdal

Vitreous glass on rendered cement bench seat

Photo: Artisticama

been making mosaics since infancy, as perhaps you have also.

For me, the difference between sculpture and painting is beautifully blurred by mosaic. It is like a hybrid of the two. Mosaic is a process of building an artwork using both color and texture, a melding of material and meaning. In the first century, the leading Roman thinker, Pliny the Elder, called mosaics ‘paintings in stone.’¹ For many mosaic makers, they still are paintings in stone, glass, ceramic, bottle-tops—or whatever materials are used in repetition to create a larger singular work. Additionally, I strongly believe mosaic is the result of a deeper act of making, something like my own childlike pattern-making and random assemblages. The idea

¹Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*. trans. John Bostock. London: Taylor and Francis, 1855.

that the act of making is actually part of our evolutionary make-up has been extensively explored by American anthropologist, Ellen Dissanayake. Dissanayake connects play and ritual with evolutionary survival. She calls 'the biological core of art, the stain that is deeply dyed in the behavioral marrow of humans everywhere.'² For me, this idea is a revelation. Dissanayake points out that the concept of 'Art' (with a big A) is a relatively modern one, perhaps only a few hundred years old. Many artefacts we now regard as 'art' are artefacts that have been produced

Attrition 2019

Exploring materiality more deeply through mosaic encourages us to think differently about the act of making, and indeed the act of un-making, which is also what we mosaic makers do. *Attrition* is a short, looped video exploring this doing/un-doing, making/ un-making phenomenon, also questioning the truthfulness of the linear time sequence as we understand it.

Attrition Video still (Above)

Videography: Jessie Boylan

Attrition and Helen (Below)

Mosaicism: Thinking in Mosaic

Lot 19 Gallery, Castlemaine, Victoria, Australia

Photo: Martin Wurt



² Dissanayake, Ellen. *The Core of Art: Making Special*, Chapter 4, Homo Aestheticus: Where art came from and why. New York: Free Press, a division of Macmillan Inc., 1992.



Jester 2013

H19" W30"

Glass smalti and marble on Datsun 200B rear side mirror

Jester is a marble and glass smalti mosaic modelled from a magpie skull found in my garden. The car window on which it is mounted came from a Datsun 200B, a behavioral match between the bird and the archetypal adolescent driver of this late 1970s car. Photo: Julie Millowick

through decorative or cultural processes of ritualized worship, for reasons of politics or as assertions of power. I find Dissanayake's view deeply comforting because my own experience mirrors it. I make, therefore I am.

By now you have probably guessed that I have always functioned a little out of the box. Not surprisingly, when I went back to university a few years ago to do my PhD, I hardly found myself amongst a cast of thousands (of mosaicists doing research projects). However, I was not entirely alone. International colleagues like Lillian Sizemore and Marcelo de Melo were in the UK, broaching similar challenges in their respective academic mosaic journeys, while Nancie Mills Pipgras has continued to fly the MAN flag for the benefit of all. I take this opportunity to thank them all for their collegiality and support. Meanwhile, many folk from the mosaic world have asked me why I went to university to do a PhD. It's a really good question.

My answer is that I want mosaic to be positioned firmly within contemporary art practice. I believe there is a cozy little spot for it to be nestled somewhere between painting and sculpture. All it needs is a few more determined mosaic soldiers to create some wiggle room for it. In a nutshell, unless we, as mosaic makers, position our work within that higher critical context, then we cannot complain or express disappointment if it is written off as a merely decorative hobby craft. I hasten to say

500 Lives 2018

H3' W15' (Detail at bottom)

Aluminium venetian blind louvres, chicken wishbones, beeswax, Japanese rice-paper, PVA

500 Lives was a sculptural memorial I made to honor the lives of 500 hens. (Do I eat chicken? Free range, yes.) I described the work on an adjacent wall plaque:

"The custom of drying the wishbone from the Sunday roast on the kitchen sill was common to many Australian childhoods.

Some bones ended up being munched by a mouse or layered with dust and forgotten. Others were inadvertently smashed by

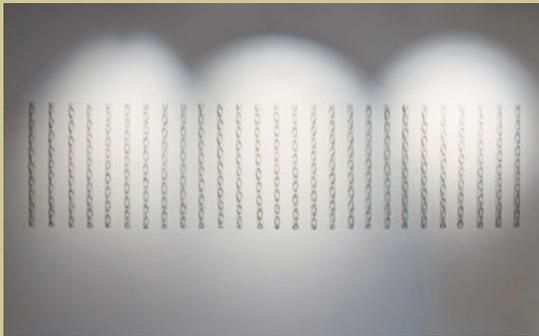
the drop of the venetian blinds before the ritual game of luck could be played out.

Two opponents each form a secret wish, and then tug apart the wishbone. Only

the person holding the sternum center after the wishbone is splintered into two, will have their secret wish come true. This game of luck seldom considers the hen, whose life and death have enabled both the meal and the game."

-Helen Bodycomb

Photo: Ian Hill



that I am not putting down decorative hobby craft either because it absolutely has its place. However, mosaic is not this by definition. Essentially, I returned to university to defend and assert mosaic practice within an academic and contemporary art context. Because mosaic does not warrant apology for not being painting or sculpture or another art form. It simply needs higher practice and further explanation of what makes it special.

As part of my research, I cast my focus on three contemporary mosaic makers. I chose three artists whose work may not be conventionally regarded as mosaic: African American, Jack Whitten; Iranian, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian; and Ghanaian, El Anatsui. Whitten's works evolved from modernist painting to his customized making of tesserae, while Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian created large complex mirrored works drawing on geometric abstraction and Persian architectural mosaic skin. El Anatsui is best known amongst mosaic makers for his large fabric-like wall works made from many thousands of alcohol bottle tops, woven tightly together using copper wire.

When I started my thesis, all of these artists were relative outsiders, experiencing only intermittent wider critical attention. I argued that their ethnicities and gender—being other than white Caucasian men—made them inherently less likely to experience artworld hero status. This position echoes the 'othering' of mosaic, itself a poor cousin of more heralded art media like painting and sculpture. Interestingly, since I began my research, unprecedented levels of contemporary critical acclaim have emerged. Jack Whitten's first solo exhibition in a European institution was held over for six months in 2019 at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, Germany. Sadly, he died just two months before it opened. Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian—who also died in early 2019—had had a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim in 2015 and has garnered plenty of attention from *Mosaic Art Now*, yet remains little known more widely. And in an ever growing trajectory, El Anatsui's installations at the 2019 Venice Biennale blew people away, inspiring a fantastic article written by eminent Ravenna mosaic maestro, Marco de Luca, for the October 2019 edition of *Mosaïque Magazine*. Meanwhile, MoMA is planning a massive exhibition of

The Material and The Immaterial

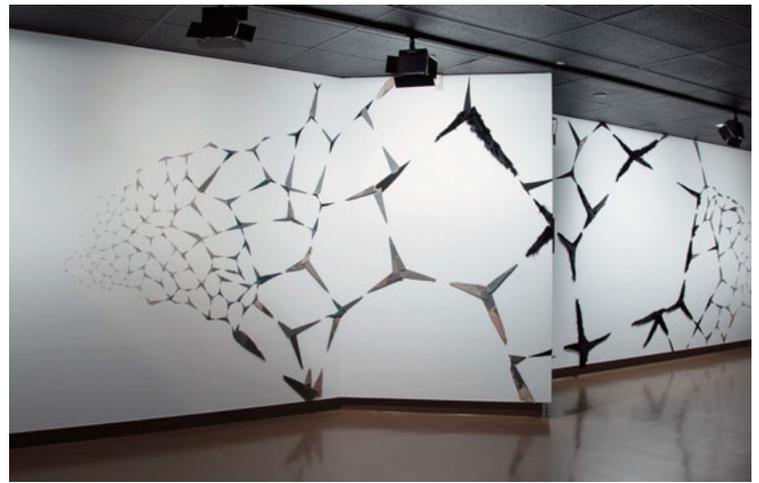
Versions # 1,2,3

During my recent research I sought to overcome what I see as three of the greatest obstacles facing the mosaic maker: weight, cost and time. Conventionally made mosaics are hungry for all of these. Also exploring notions of materiality versus immateriality, *The Material and The Immaterial* began as a kind of exploded, mosaic as non-permanent artefact installation. Crucially, it was lightweight, inexpensive and fast to make. I used media of varying scale and material weight to express a feeling of growth and subsidence. The work has now had three different installations. The first was an experimental version in 2016; the second, as part of the 2018 group mosaic exhibition, *Transitions*; and finally, at my end-of-PhD exhibition in July 2019—*Mosaicism: thinking in mosaic*.



The Material and The Immaterial #3 (Detail)

Photo: Martin Wurt



The Material and The Immaterial #1 2016

Paper, woollen felt, slate, fake fur

Phyllis Palmer Gallery,

La Trobe University, Bendigo, Victoria, Australia

Photo: Ian Hill



The Material and The Immaterial #2: Transitions 2018

Paper, woollen felt, slate, fake fur

ACT Craft & Design Gallery, Canberra, ACT, Australia

Photo: Brenton McGeachie



The Material and The Immaterial #3:

Mosaicism: thinking in mosaic 2018

Paper, woollen felt, slate, corflute, reflective glass beads, fake fur
Lot 19 Gallery, Castlemaine, Victoria, Australia

Photo: Helen Bodycomb

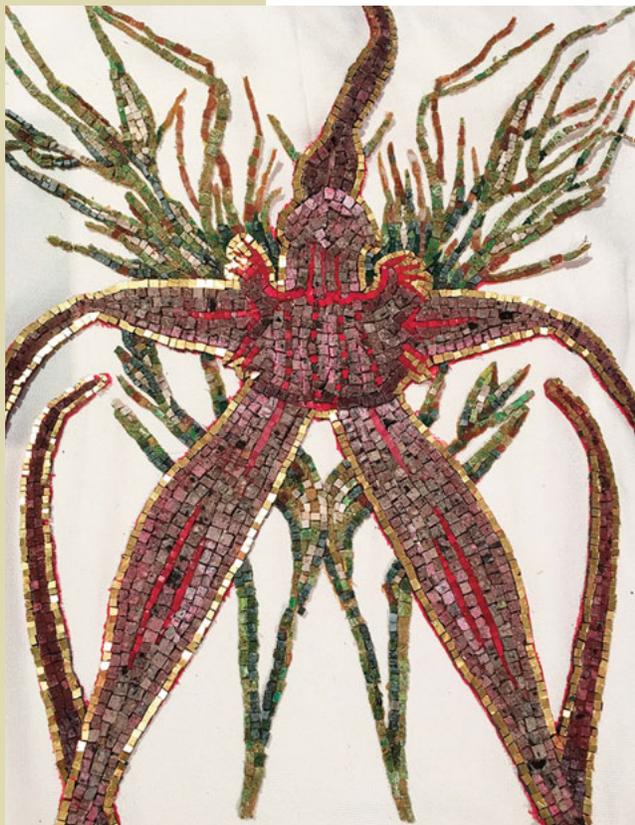
Shroud 2016

Mosaicism: thinking in mosaic
H70" W19"

Wood ash, human hair, dog hair, coconut fibre, bamboo, gold leaf glass smalti, latex, PVA

Shroud is a largely biodegradable work, an intentionally non-permanent mosaic embracing material obsolescence and memento mori. I fabricated most of the tesserae using wood ash, human and dog hair with latex and PVA as the binder. The only non-biodegradable tesserae are the gold leaf Orsoni smalti that border the indigenous spider orchid motif.

This is my intended funeral shroud (although I'm in no hurry to use it). One day I will be the final tessera, the last ingredient. My eventual encasement within *Shroud* will hasten its material dissolution, and with it, deliver the symbolic repatriation of gold to the central Victorian Goldfields of southern Australia. *Photo: Jessie Boylan*



Shroud (Top: Detail. Above: Full view)

works by Niki de Saint Phalle, April – September 2020. So clearly, people, this is our time. Mosaic (with a big M) is arriving on the big stage.

While we might celebrate this wonderful big picture development, it also draws us back to the touchstone, the do-re-mi of mosaic. What is mosaic and why do we make it? Well, as our own intuitive—for some compulsive—assemblage efforts show, and, as described by Ellen

Dissanayake, the act of making mosaics is intrinsically human. So, as this evolutionary act of making grows further through contemporary culture and Art, it becomes another language, another way of enriching the viewer experience. Mosaic is now so much more than paintings in stone. Mosaic is surface texture and meaning through material. Just as a vase of daffodils now conjures (for me and perhaps now empathically for you also) memories of hard slog in the snow and my first watercolor paintings, each tessera symbolizes something unique. My research taught me that like Jack Whitten, who fabricated his own tesserae—making them from the materials his art works actually spoke of—mosaic is about materiality. Not just the process, but also the stuff of life.

So perhaps, not so surprisingly, mosaic is starting to make big waves out there. It is becoming better understood as a process of making as well as the resulting artefact.

And as mosaic makers we all have a role to play in aiding the further development and elevation of its profile. Because Mosaic (big M) belongs smack bang in the middle of human existence—where it has always been.

Helen Bodycomb is well known as one of Australia's few contemporary artists working primarily in mosaic. She is widely professionally active; exhibiting, fulfilling commissions, guest teaching and presenting her work in conference presentations, nationally and internationally. After initially training as a contemporary painter, Helen consolidated her mosaic skills under the mentorship of Maestro Giulio Candussio in Spilimbergo. After 25 years of professional practice working predominantly in glass and stone, in mid 2019 Helen completed her PhD with La Trobe University. Her research topic was 'Mosaic: Classical Principles and The Act of Making in Contemporary Works.'

Helen is currently launching 'Eastern Beach Art House,' a new arts residency program at her home in Geelong, Australia. She is also writing a book exploring some of the philosophical implications of making mosaic, provisionally titled *Mosaicism*. The book will be available in late 2020. www.helenbodycomb.com