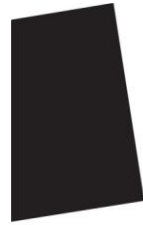


# Dorothy Cross: COMMA16

## Essay by Philip Hoare



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### **Dorothy Cross: COMMA 16**

#### ***Pearl Bones***

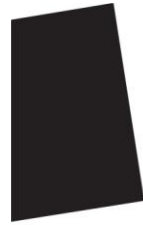
The natural process of the sea demands sacrifice. It is always somehow horrific in its beauty. This past autumn, as I walked along Herring Cove, a broad, windswept and often deserted beach at the tip of Cape Cod, I came upon the dismembered components of a great whale – probably a humpback. The deconstructed cetacean was strewn for tens of yards along the sand. Here a pair of flippers, lying in the wrack line; there a section of backbone, the huge vertebrae still connected by gristle and yellow with oil.

Ahead, the smell grew worse. Splayed on the upper reaches of the strand like the bizarre aftermath of some pagan ritual lay the whale's skin and blubber. Close by, someone had constructed a driftwood cross, as if to commemorate the flayed leviathan's demise. Meanwhile, coyote tracks and the footprints of black back gulls indicated that nature was already subsuming the rotting flesh in its inexorable process.

Feeling vaguely sick at the smell – a decaying whale has a deeply cloying odour, all of its own – I went to swim in the sea, seeking to flush the stink out of my head. But as I waded back through a temporary pool created by the incoming tide, I saw a white shape in the shallows at my feet.

It was the rest of the whale's carcass, an indefinable mass of colourless blubber and bone. Was it the animal's head? It was difficult to tell, through the shimmering curtain of the sea's surface. I moved closer to look, and was taken aback by the pallid tendrils of matter teased out of it by the current, and the blank-eyed fish that I could see nibbling at it, pecking away...

Just as the sea's exquisiteness can quickly turn to terror, so our perceptions of nature – even of the names we give it – are forever deceiving. As Mark Kurlansky notes in his book, *The Big Oyster*, pearls are produced, not by oysters, but by the animal known to biology as *Meleagrina* or *Pintada*, belonging to the family Pteridae; more closely related to mussels than the edible Ostreidae family. Until the nineteenth century – and even today – the oyster was regarded as a simple animal, barely more than a plant.



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It was a convenient deception for those who swallow the creatures whole from their hard-won shells. In fact, the oyster is a highly developed organism, possessing a brain and a nervous system; as Thomas Huxley – ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ – commented, ‘few people imagine that they are swallowing a piece of machinery (and going machinery too) greatly more complicated than a watch’.

In the strange inverted order of natural scale, both whale and oyster subsist on plankton. The whale filters its minute food through plates of fibrous baleen; the oyster swallows shellfuls of seawater to filter out its food. But the means of nutrition may also involve more mysterious processes.

Occasionally, in the gut of a sperm whale, indigestible squid beaks will lodge in its lower intestines to create ambergris. This is one of the most precious products of the sea, still prized by modern perfumers for its ability to capture the fugitive qualities of scent. Similarly, for the oyster, it is undigested food rather than a grain of sand or grit that creates the equally precious pearl.

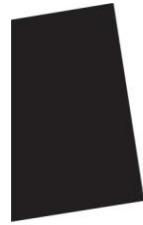
A food particle becomes trapped within the animal and is surrounded by layers of aragonite, a calcium-carbonate crystal, and an organic, horn-like protein, conchiolin - the same materials the bivalve employs to create its own carapace. In that dark, tight-clamped and encrusted secrecy – a jealous, osseous cell – these two substances combine in a magical transformation to create light-reflecting, near-translucent nacre or mother-of-pearl – named as if to mirror its miraculous, virginal birth.

Inevitably, of course, impatient human hands could not resist interfering in this painstakingly slow natural transition. To create cultured pearls, a piece is cut from the animal’s mantle or epithelium, and processed shell beads are introduced. It is the marine equivalent of factory farming.

In *Pearl Bones*, Dorothy Cross has achieved her own particular act of intervention – by introducing the finger tip bones of a human being as the foreign body; a recreation of her own species within another.

Yet in the artist’s hands – or those of the Tahitian pearl-fisherman she has engaged to undertake it – the gesture itself seems somehow legendary, a piece of myth-making rather than contemporary. The open hand – that gives and receives – versus the closed shell; while the finger tips symbolise a lost sensitivity of touch, lost in the process of death.

It is a gesture more anthropological than anthropomorphic; more primeval than manufactured. In Cross’s mind, it is a ‘poetic process’, more important in its making than in its final product – whatever that might be. A moment of alchemical exchange, a hit or miss affair, transcended by time and chance.



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Will the oyster take to the pearl? The end is almost incidental, although it may resemble a baroque pearl – the word itself was invented for the misshapen yet still beautiful pearls, so favoured by Renaissance royalty.

It is this magical creation that grips the artist's imagination, and our own. To me, it is clear that her manipulation of nature reflects our own greater efforts to influence our world, for good, or ill. As Cross observes, the technique of making pearls involves a kind of gynaecological intervention – the prizing open of the shell, the insertion of a seed, the slow birthing of this mother-of-pearl.

And in the fatal effort of production, the predestined animal itself becomes a victim, a sacrifice to beauty transformed from the mundane, like the maternal pelican of myth, who feeds her young by allowing them to draw blood from her breast, or like the silkworm being boiled alive to produce its fine thread.

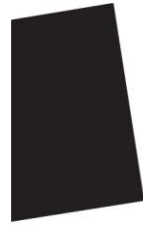
It is indeed remarkable that we should so value such excretory by-products of marine nature: from the faecal extrusions of a sickly cetacean, to the nacreous sphere, its complex layers of silken minerals creating an almost translucent depth. Such colourlessness actually contains the colours of the rainbow, as does the colour 'white' itself. Its appalling whiteness rivals the opal in its own mythology.

In the Qu'ran, pearls are associated with heaven, and handsome young boys; in the Bible, the gates to heaven are made of them. We speak of pearls of wisdom; but there are other deathly associations, too – a powdered pearl was held to be an antidote to poison (just as the tusk of the narwhal, the sea-unicorn, was claimed as an antidote to both poison and to melancholy).

But most obvious to humanity is not the abstract beauty, but the exceeding value of the pearl, ever since it was first retrieved from the ocean floor. It is why, in one of history's most lavish feasts, Cleopatra offers her lover, Mark Anthony, a goblet of wine in which a pearl has been dissolved. Dorothy Cross was particularly inspired by the knowledge that in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the pearl was the most valuable object in the world. – not least because of the dangers involved in its gathering. Pearl divers risked their lives to retrieve these baubles; women and men died to adorn noble necks.

Indeed, by the seventeenth century, Elizabeth I's taste for extravagant ropes of pearls had denuded the artist's native land of Ireland of almost all its precious freshwater pearls. Now, in the context of this 21<sup>st</sup> century gallery, set in the tight heart of the City, one of the great financial centres of the world, Cross's pearls become a symbol of intense and protected value, surrounded by the layers of commerce which turn ordinary commodities into untold riches.

But why do we value one object over another? A gristly bone – like the eternally vibrating vertebra of a minke whale in her film, *Ossicle* – may be considered gruesome and worthless. A perfect pearl, lustrous with iridescence, is beyond worth.



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Between these two – in the darkness of the sea’s depths – we may imagine their terrible guardian, *Relic*, the shark of our dreams, rendered here in its skin, a brutal piscine flaying, as if eviscerated by our own regard, or as a hanging fin in a Tahitian palm tree, *Mobile* – an evocation of the appalling trade in shark’s fins, in which the dorsal is sliced from the captured creature, which is then thrown back alive, to swim aimlessly to its slow death.

Here, suspended from the ceiling like a fishy aeroplane, so sleek and hydrodynamic, and yet so ultimately impotent, the shark – the ocean’s oldest evolved fish – and its physical decay is ironically counterpointed by a delicate layer of 21.3 carat gold; another of the natural products our species so arbitrarily declares to be so valuable, and one on whose standard this city’s currency once depended.

Thus coated and priceless lined, the sandpaper-skinned shark becomes a reliquary of itself. It too withholds something precious and unseen – just as a handful of crawling crustaceans nestle in the artist’s fingers in *Hermits*, momentarily disturbed from their safe shell houses, like a palmful of shifting change.

In those dark and unknown depths, we forever fish for illumination, as if in their fathomless and profound blackness, we might yet find enlightenment. But we never will. For all our science, nature will ever defeat us. The precious prison of the oyster will ever resist our curious gaze, the primeval shark will circle, and the whale will keep on its appointed course.

Philip Hoare

Philip Hoare is a writer based in Southampton. His book, *Leviathan or, The Whale*, (Fourth Estate) won the 2009 BBC Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction.

All the materials used in this exhibition have been ethically sourced.