



Beguiling, lignum vitae, 14" x 14" x 8". 2011.

The Radiant Combs of Laura Facey

By Anne Errey

Photographs by Melinda Brown and Laura Facey

'*Radiant Combs*', the latest body of work from sculptor Laura Facey, departs depiction and begins to express her artistic world conceptually. The artist's increasing spirituality is the natural by-product of intense studio outpourings, moving into a more experiential space with the work unfurling transformational gifts upon the artist. As this phenomenon flows, it creates greater adaptability, gratitude, joy, optimism and peace, a sought-after state in a world of upheaval. The aim of the work is to inspire similar transformation in others.

Personal spiritual alchemy, healing and adaptability are central in Facey's art practice. They position the artist as transformer, taking life in and breathing love – manifested in the form of art – out. As Maya Angelou says, "Nothing will work unless you do," and emphasises that in this process, "courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently."

When I questioned the artist on where she thought love in her work came from she replied, "Crisis... life became an open prayer and I finally surrendered." Facey began to meditate and found the experience profound, as body, spirit and consciousness came together, leading to an interest in comparative religion and spirituality.

Facey grew up with the Christ principle of love, but now has a growing interest in the Veda and Buddhism. Healing was personal; initially her family and those closest were the beneficiaries, and then it filtered into her work.

A seismic shift from her figurative works began around the time Facey met artist Melinda Brown in 2005, after Brown moved her studio from Manhattan to downtown Kingston, Jamaica. A cross pollination from another island began and Brown curated the next six years of exhibitions. Woven into their conversations were the kinds of ideas and meanderings that produced 'Where I Stand' (2008), 'Propel' (2010) and 'Radiant Combs' (2011).

Laura Facey lives on a farm, so perhaps it is not surprising that so much diversity of subject should be birthed in her studio. In 2010, she began the series of works that became 'Radiant Combs', which she exhibited in 2011 and continues to work on. Is this the artist's unconscious fertilizing of the landscape, tilling the soil, ploughing, furrowing and seeding for man and beast?

Herein lies abundance.

Prongs, pricks, picks and pluckers, teeth, fingers, nipples, teats, tools of cultivation, forks and bird combs are re-invented. Some works present the hardest teats in the lactating world, carved from *lignum vitae*, but somehow seem tenderly nourishing. These combs mean to work a mysterious magic, to untangle, clear, align, centre, nourish, vanquish, till and harmonize. These are the 'Radiant Combs'.

The Combs' genesis can be traced to a previous body of work, 'Propel', which had a certain symmetry, with subjects beginning to move, vibrate and writhe. 'Propel' felt like arms with hands catching life and death in various guises. Where 'Propel' received and captured, 'Radiant Combs' became transmitters, already loaded with precious energy.

With metaphors from fullness to farm tools, 'Radiant Combs' has been a watershed for Facey and one she feels most at home with. Rooted in reductive formalism, this work becomes conceptual simply because it explores so much terrain. Here, there are combs for all quarters of life and many for no reason at all, save the joy of form and associated ideas.

These works are comb-derivative and step into new alignments, not necessarily functional. *Beguiling* is positively unctuous; its bovine teats at maximum fecundity. *The Hand of Love* is reminiscent of the delicate *Hand of the Winged Victory of Samothrace*, the Hellenistic masterpiece that greets you as you ascend the stairs of the Louvre. The fingers of this work gently move the air around while *Mythic*, preferring to be part rake, remains strong and unbreakable.

We are reminded of Claes Oldenburg's 1970's objects rescaled to the gigantic, such as a safety pin, a giant baseball bat in a roundabout, shuttlecocks, spoons and apple cores. Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968) began the re-contextualization of objects with the ready-mades, and Oldenburg played with them. 'Radiant Combs' is another step in the evolution towards re-contextualization, re-spatialization and re-assigned meaning in Facey's oeuvre.

Louise Bourgeois has been an influence throughout Facey's artistic life. There are numerous variations of breast themes throughout Bourgeois' work and often we feel a little uncomfortable with her aggressive psychology. With Facey, any reference to the body seems, in contrast, to be generous, beckoning or sharing. Facey's combs gravitationally feed the earth, or open to the atmosphere, so sure is she of the nature of the timbers she works with.

Night Mist (mixed media on cedar) is a response to the verdant hills the artist is surrounded by. Floating in a world above mist lines that hug the valleys and hang over its rivers, the landscape gives Facey the feeling of living in Oriental mountains. Here she is inspired by Taoist and Buddhist painting, where the message of spiritualizing matter becomes more readable the higher up the picture your eye travels. In these works, we experience a kind of poetic editing, allowing the viewer transcendent gaps where pondering is savoured and silence beheld. These monumental mixed media pieces are the breather the artist works on as the more three dimensional comes together.

I asked: "Since you departed the figurative works, has the landscape become more important to you?" Facey responded: "My partner is an explorer and a cattleman. Here on the farm, we still muster with horses. From his journeys he brings bits from the natural world, which both inspire and nourish."

Cows pass her studio at the farm, their lactating teats swelling and pointing to the earth. The udders, heavy with milk, push the teats into a particular fullness, the same fullness that *Beguiling* has, the shapes of fingers when air is blown into a disposable glove. In the same picture, *Beguiling* is being worked on and is on its back, teats pointing up. It paints a bucolic picture.

Daughter of Comb (2010), carved in lignum vitae, was cast from the sculpture in bronze, its prongs energetically burying deep into earth like mangrove roots, as the body twists and grows. This work speaks of the wisdom of being well-grounded. The patina of the bronze is used to effect, the golden sunlight engages with it and glimmers into the darkness of the prongs. The work, in fact, sits poised en pointe, but the feel is one of descending energy into the earth. *Daughter of Comb* is the roots of the earth and mangrove, the twists of nature, ever compromising and evolving within its environment, yet never losing sight of its integrity.

For the artist, water is a healing balm, allowing one to be washed, cleansed and renewed. *Intoxicating Comb*, (2011) has the quality of a selkie, the Northern Hemisphere mermaids made famous in both the ballet *Ondine*, and the Hans Christian Anderson story, *The Little Mermaid*.

Sometime during the creation of this body of work, Facey began to feel her artistic strength. Technically masterful for some years, she had created enough works for her reputation to be irrefutable and her growing sense of self-worth was beginning to make sense. She was conquering her demons and now understood that she was creating her whole life as she wanted. There was no such thing as victim; she

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was at the centre, the cause of her life. The combs became a personal metaphor for fecundity and her growing strength as an artist, mother, partner.

Radiant Red, the last of the 'Radiant Combs' works of 2011, began life leaning against the wall, combs down, quite a flat work and almost one of light relief. These two giant 'picks' were originally inspired by an African comb discovered when Facey moved into her house, a relic left behind by the previous occupant. Melinda Brown inverted the works and instantly they became tuning forks, Aeolian harps awaiting their strings to be awakened, harmonized by wind. They were placed on plinths and taken outside the built environment so that they took on the spatial awareness that applies to landscape architecture.

Around this time, Facey was intrigued by the ladder forms of Martin Puryear and was reminded of the many ladders she had observed when she lived in New Mexico. She began making ladder maquettes in plasticine. Here, Facey steps into powerful archetypes. The ascending to heaven, for example, or up the ladders and down the snakes in another, a game in which every child recalls such dynamics experienced within themselves. The works were titled *Ascent 1* and *Ascent 2*. These ladders are strong, immovable, their rungs unbreakable since they are carved, not constructed: they will last for lifetimes.

The 'Radiant Combs' of 2011 was extensive, exploring singular and plural forms that conduct, collect, funnel and share energy – from small, hand-sized works such as *In the Beginning* and *In the Very Beginning* to monumental carved works such as *Memory* and *Radiant Comb*.

Daughter of Comb, a bronze work cast from the original timber carving, is one of many where the artist bent and stretched the forms downward. Others where the timber walked or scurried across the floor such as *Eager*, have the ergonomics of Bauhaus-influenced Scandinavian design, whilst those such as *Fervent* stretch as though in a yoga pose. Works have one to seven extensions, prongs, filaments or fingers. *To the Point* is an exception with 132 pieces, resembling a crystal amethyst forest of wooden points. The diversity is great, the exploration thorough, and the viewer given a feeling of generosity and joy that seem encoded in these works.

The radiant combs in this body of work may spawn separate genetic lineages; such is Facey's flow. Great art often happens accidentally when artists are in conduit, taking themselves and their works on new paths far from where they began. Halfway through 2012, new combs find themselves leaning against the walls and littering the studio floor. Their energies are not static; they move through Laura Facey and momentarily pause for capture.



Radiant Comb, lignum vitae, 61" x 38" x 22", 2011
Image by Melinda Brown.



Mythic Comb, lignum vitae. 9.5" x 6" x 6". 2011.



Top: *Radiant Red*, tinted mahogany combs, cedar base, 96" x 20" x 11". 2011.
Bottom: *Intoxicating*, lignum vitae, 24" x 63" x 27". Images by Melinda Brown. 2011.