

Heartland:(Forget the hearts and flowers) – Cathy Lumby:

Heartland is a touring exhibition of the work of five women artist - Kate Lohse, Mandy Martin, Margaret Morgan, Susan Norrie, Wendy Stavrianos and Ania Walwicz. According to the catalogue forward which provides some indication of the basis for curatorial decisions, the show was curated by the Wollongong City Gallery and developed out of conversations between Frank McBride, Director, and Susan Norrie, artist, around the belief that, as a consequence of 'the women's movement'(in the broadest sense), such artists "were working in a situation where abstraction was *passé* and the various strands of feminist theory were well understood and assimilated". As a result, there should be, it was surmised, a "quality and character about their work which would form the basis of an exhibition". The works are accompanied by a catalogue containing an extensive essay written by Julie Ewington which is critically informed by current feminist debate. Ed.

Within the confines of feminist art criticism, the biological essentialism espoused by Lucy Lippard for a decade or so, has been diffused rather than defused by the flood of theory from Marxism, psychoanalysis and semiotics. Feminist criticism has always remained an inside job, and the promise of pluralism has ended up reconstructing the assumptions it was intended to deconstruct. The valorisation of ambiguity and 'difference' for women, their relocation as a vanishing point in the pyramid of sexuality and representation, constitute a thin veil for an increasingly thick premise: gender.

A reading of the catalogue essay by Julie Ewington for the *Heartland* exhibition from which all quotations below are taken, is a sharp reminder of the problem inherent in viewing a Rugby League Grand Final these days. Undoubtedly, it's a moot point whether to watch the players or the video screen above their heads. Possibly there is no satisfactory solution. It is for this reason that I want initially to treat the catalogue separately from the exhibition and only then relate the two.

Sport

"For me, the interest of Heartland lies not in the excellence of the work, but in the evidence it offers of rich and diverse strands in current painting by women. "

Right from the start its clearly critical sport we're watching, and this match is being played at home. Five women made all the paintings, *"trespassing on artistic turf usually reserved for larger egos"* and flexing their love muscles. *"Admit it: wherever you've come from you expect it to be different, too. "*

This, however, is no ordinary game of football, despite its binary beginnings. The teams, it transpires, are allowed to swap colours, *"Pink is still feminine, but assertively so. It is available to men too, signifying relaxation, intimacy, affection, and is often claimed by them. "* This, then, is an infinitely subtle game full of reflex reaction, intuitive insight and inflatable discourse. The teams lurch about, only rescued from absolute ambiguity by the weird karma of sex and the full time whistle., A dialogue proposed between the "unconscious masculinism" of *An Australian Accent* occurs

only *"in a sense"* as *"no deliberate historical nor rhetorical play is being made."* It is surely only from the commentary box that such a perfect nonplay could be observed.

The Field

"Many lands and locations, actual and metaphorical are valued by women artists, by women still mapping themselves with willfully shifting sets of co-ordinates."

It's immediately clear where these artists don't stand. That place *"dominated by the virtues of heroic endeavour and laconic mateship"* is certainly out of the question. For a woman painter this enigmatic space must be cited before she can situate herself. A curious problem is that any room to move must be *"wrested from current artistic codes"*, and any ground gained presumably referred back to this Master plan. Thus, when *"a woman tackles imagery from the masculine lexicon, one must ask whether she endorses it or disputes it."*

"Diversity", on the Other hand, *"suits women."* Variety is, accordingly, just another form of order and the disparate elements of *Heartland* can be glued into the matrix of female (dis)identity with a viscous rhetoric. If women's co-ordinates are shifting, the male order is presumed to be going nowhere and remains rooted, predictably, to the spot.

In this no-man's land of sexuality there is no interest in *"rehearsing . . . the complex artistic, social, critical and market forces that have brought painting back into prominence after more than a decade of neglect."* Even a quick run-through would raise doubts about precisely what feminists have been practising for in the same period. The current self-reflexive state of painting leaves the virile *"site of the drama of national identity, the Australian landscape"* that *"has been a masculine forum"* conspicuously vacant.

So "what's at issue here? What matters. . .", the confirmation of an ideological position for which female identity is the pivot point will do for starters. Lippard may have stated the 'classic' feminist approach, *"Part of the primary transformation, then, is simply to be oneself."*¹ elsewhere referred to as *"that appalling behaviourist and sociological bog."*² While the directions have been as various as the pep-talks on other methods, the end is inevitably a mean one, dictated by the demands of muscle-bound professionals: the real of female sexuality, beside whom Lacan and his pocket-signifier look absolutely insignificant.

Team Spirit

At this point in the season there are no lack of solid theoretical heroines in reserve to strengthen this team, and it would be fair to anticipate Cixous or Leclerc on the bench. It is this that makes the addition of Meaghan/Morris and Irigaray all the less accountable. With their first grade guernseys, so immediate and destructive is their impact on morale, that it can only be suggested that they were deliberately drop-kicked from the grandstand. Irigaray's notorious indifference to team work and evident unwillingness to position the ball with any consistency makes her particularly disastrous. Morris, who everyone wants to apply but no-one knows how to use, looks

like she'd be just as happy playing cricket. It is clear, with hindsight, that even Althusser and a bit of elbow-grease would have filled the gap more constructively.

More importantly, this sort of miscalculation points to a fundamental tactical error. Indecision seems to have arisen from an impossible situation in which *"feminists resist prescriptions and limitations on diversity within women's culture"* and, yet, simultaneously recognise that *the "position of women in culture, as artists and audience, is fundamentally different to that available to men."* In this impasse, recourse has been made to 'difference', apparently in the hope of buying a little theoretical muscle. Unfortunately, such a manoeuvre amounts to little more than pumping irony, given the ultimate goal of the game.

'Difference', in fact, is invoked so often that those spectators with no sense of occasion may begin to think it's all the same thing and are continually asking *"What's the score?"*. Their confusion bears witness to the trickiness of composing a united front out of unrelated parts and tactics. 'Difference', regardless of its usefulness in other contexts, infects the ruck of female solidarity like a dose of scrum pox.

Kristeva puts in a late appearance with her *"tactics of negation"*, although it is quite unclear whose side she's on. *"Women"*, she is reported to have said, *"have nothing to laugh about when the symbolic order collapses."*³. Her past record makes her a dubious ally when the going gets rough and straightforward plays are called for. She shows none of the form of Ania Walwicz, -who, according to the commentary, *"returns the repressed with a vengeance."*

The Ball

"Put the boot in a voice from the hill.

At this time the score looks like staying nil all, with no end in sight. The combination of a muddy field and endless reserves always indicated a simultaneously torrid and unimaginative game, which could account for the fact that many spectators appeared to have dozed off. It is a simple matter to point out that football isn't what it was now that debates on *"what constitutes pleasure for women and how to snatch it from the ruling regimes of masculine desire"* clearly amount to a head-high tackle on a man without the ball. This would be a recourse to the rule book, when something more fundamental is at issue: the whereabouts of the ball itself.

Inquiries here lead past the postmortem. The disputed Subject, that odd ball of female sexuality, began to disintegrate early in the game with the wear and tear of being passed around. In retrospect, it now seems certain that it was long ago booted wide of the posts, over the dead ball line, unnoticed by either commentators or players. Even the most sophisticated of strategies amounts to a pointless gesture when the real around which the action revolves is unaccountably absent. By this account, the game would appear to have exceeded its own origins, *"Difference is crucial: feminine and masculine voices speak differently even when they utter the same."*

The inadequacy of feminism's binary logic to account for its own spectacle argues that bumping up the systems of defence or multiplying the positions in an already overdetermined match constitutes, not difference, but more of the same. The

observant spectator might conclude that as the real play has shifted elsewhere ritual gestures of self-criticism can only amount to precisely that. What remains is to dissolve the paradigm of feminist criticism, based on the real of a male order, and examine the critical possibilities such a step opens up. At this point it seems appropriate to examine the exhibition itself.

The Work

If feminism is a fat issue, then *Heartland* recollects the frequent failure of art to account for theory. Having approached this exhibition via the lengthy critical detour of the catalogue, the viewer could be the victim of oppressive expectations. If, however, the critical activity surrounding the show is a case of more jobs than men, the exhibition itself can hardly be accused of excess; rather, as a curatorial exercise, it is overwhelmingly thin. An immediate overview suggests immediately that an overview is inappropriate, given the runny consistency of this particular mixture of painters.

Mandy Martin's canvases demonstrate a strident faith in the activity of painting, departing from the tradition of painterly figuration and abstraction of the '40s and '50s. They bear no trace of the tongue-in-chic commonly associated with neo-expressionism, on the contrary, the artist has denounced this sensibility as "*fashionable, powerful and dangerous*." ⁴ The paintings, rather, define themselves on the level of pictorial association, before surfacing in some pretty serious paint. *Great Divide 1984* elicits a strangely stage-struck sublime from some large mountains split by a ravine. The forms invoke a powerful natural order, while the unnatural colours and intense brushwork specify the cultural fissure across which we supposedly gaze.

Martin is the classic, bed-ridden romantic holding forth on a diseased environment. Her work is predicated on a utopian landscape to which the dystopic visions refer. The distorting effects of the factory structure in *Strata 1985* implied in the grotesque environment and the unnatural palette, are the reciprocal writing of a natural, real world from which we have erred.

Curiously, the viewer may find that something more interesting than the desired effects of the works is at play in them. In the viewing the dynamic of abstraction undermines the system of expression so faithfully constructed. The history of disfiguration has its own expressivity, its own real which tends to naturalise the denatured forms. The paintings, by dint of the history they solicit, arrive pre-digested in the cultural stomach of abstraction and ultimately fail to invent any figures by which the viewer can determine the degree of disfiguration. Contrary to the artist's expectations the spectator is seduced from the hunt for a lost nature by the thrill of the chase itself. Any absence of a real world in the works is overwhelmed by a cultural presence: abstraction itself.

The inclusion of Ania Walwicz in *Heartland* looks perverse from every point of view except that of her own work. The least painterly artist on display, she might well be the most modern painter. The three works representing her are short, clean, tasteful and perfectly vague. As frozen moments from the artist's image-repertoire, they are delivered with such queer aphasic economy that they seem barely there. Yet the silence which frustrates the viewer speaks willingly for critical fiction. Along these

lines the catalogue approaches the post-modern in an entirely self-styled assessment of Walwicz's work, "*Walwicz delights in disappointing expectations that women take-women only as their proper subject.*" The works offer little in the way of argument but their buried character makes them unlikely candidates for any broad polemical project.

On the other hand, the insular, laconic nature of these images suggests the imaginary realm of the pre-adolescent girl,. The vitality of *Fluorescent Girl 1984* is somewhat undermined by its inclination to coy naiveté. This preciousness occasionally mars the force of the aphony in Walwicz's work. In fact, in terms of contemporary feminist criticism Walwicz might approximate, not an ethic of "*fascination with the public proving-grounds that young men seek out for themselves*", but the form of a feminine hieroglyphic.

Similarly, and to entirely different ends, Kate Lohse solicits a personal iconography in her large figurative works. Visionary, nightmarish scenes are executed with agreeable immediacy, carried by the showy, glossed-over look of enamel paint on cardboard. The pleasure of these paintings is in instant apprehension, notwithstanding the menacing subject matter. Taken at their own self-estimate the titles indicate the lack of self-consciousness that mistakes a ride on the ghost train for a journey to the underworld. In comparison, the laboured refinement of *New Land Discovered, 1984* a suite of twelve etchings, invokes not the void of the unconscious but the vortex of art history. Intended forays into *terra incognita* end up oddly bogged in well-charted ground.

Margaret Morgan's large, visually complex works are among the exhibition's best. An uncertain balance struck between artless simplicity of line and the studied, allusive quality Of composition grounds a pleasing pictorial opacity- *Interior, 1985* which depicts a figure viewing a landscape through a window, restages the viewing of the work itself, through the eyes of the figure. She looks on to a ,scene at once full of reality, crowded with detail and function, and yet disreal, exterior and alien in its generalised Plenitude. Morgan manages to convey just this sense of ambiguity in her work, creating a space for the collision of identity and alienation, a place inflected by broader terms than sexuality.

According to the catalogue, Wendy Stavrianos, "*summons up a preindustrial land of natural balance and harmony claimed for the feminine.*" With their loosely layered surfaces, waxy texture and fleshy tones, the works offer a valorisation of the physical world, implying an inversion of the traditional Western obsession with the metaphysical. The uncertainty of the natural world is asserted in the use of miscegenated materials, curdled colours and baggy appendages. Visually, however, this uncertainty summons up the aesthetic limitations of staring into a swamp. Despite the clearly complicated contents the canny viewer is deterred, on first glance, from further exploration .

Susan Norrie is the most established artist of the group, an assertion not borne out by the work included in *Heartland. Determined, 1985* a work in thirty parts, reinvents the anthropomorphic forms of her larger canvases in miniature. The depth and richness of these images, evident in her larger works, is lost on reduction, and they look at once fussy and vacant. The overall composition fails to compensate for the

slightness of its parts, working as it does on a principle of decomposition. While the desired effect might be the visual equivalent of throwing a spatial spanner in some carefully constructed works, the affect is simple incoherence. The presumed sufficiency of each fragment is insufficient to sustain the contradiction of an incomplete whole and, in the final analysis, the work looks unresolved.

On the face of it, both groups of works approximate the feminist/feminine aesthetic proposed by Lucy Lippard in *From the Centre*, "*overall texture, often sensuously tactile and repetitive or detailed to the point of obsession . . . inner space . . . layers or strata or veils.*"⁵ The pregnant promise of the catalogue that "*you'll search in vain here for the 'central core' imagery seen by some as an unconscious metaphor for women's sexual identity*"⁶ is not so easily kept as the viewer will find it difficult to escape the resonance of a rhetoric which has informed such a large section of women's art practice and criticism in the last decade.

The preponderance of a 'feminine aesthetic' in both Stavrianos' and Norrie's work argues more than the consequences of being down so long it looks like up. The visual assertion of a metonymical, maternal relationship between forms has developed its own rigid vocabulary, a matter precisely demonstrated by the ease with which a 'feminine' visual code can be reworked in more sophisticated contexts. From this viewpoint, central core becomes, in the work of Susan Norrie, one point of departure for elaborate bad form, bending the original impropriety of cunt art neatly back into the slicker formula of kitsch. Simultaneously, that deadly serious body of art which unambiguously pleads biology, remains critically intact to be dug up for the quickie like, "*Femininity has its visual codes identified and developed in the last decade with enthusiasm and esprit de corps*". The perfect vagueness of this gesture in the direction of a feminine lexicon assures that women can have their history and eat it too.

Footnotes

1. Lippard, L., "At the Edge of a Feminist Criticism: An interview with Lucy Lippard", *Meanjin Quarterly*, Summer 1975, 383.
2. Morris, M., "The Pirate's Fiancee", *Power, Truth, Strategy*, Feral Publications, 1979, 150.
3. Kristeva, J., *About Chinese Women*, Urizen Press, 44.
4. Martin, M., "Different Strokes", *Art & Text*, Winter 1984, 82.
5. Lippard, L., *From The Centre*, New York, 1976, 49.

Touring schedule of *Heartland*: Wollongong City Gallery February 13 March 13, Newcastle Region Gallery April 5 - May 12, Hyde Park and Art Gallery May 27 - July 1, Ivan Dougherty Gallery July 20 - August 10.

Images:

Susan Norrie *Knotted* detail from *Determined* 1985 Installation in 30 parts, oil on plywood Courtesy Mori Gallery

Kate Lohse *Heartland Trespass* 1984 Enamel paint on cardboard laid down, 6 panels 153x307.5cm (overall size)

Mandy Martin *Great Divide* 1984 Oil on canvas 180x244 Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9

Margaret Morgan *Allegory after the School of Fontainebleau*, 1985 Acrylic on canvas 180x150cm Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales

Ania Walwicz *Panther Done In* 1984 Synthetic polymer paint on calico 100x200

Wendy Stavrianos *Skin Canyon* 1983 (Synthetic polymer paint and wax on canvas 180x225

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