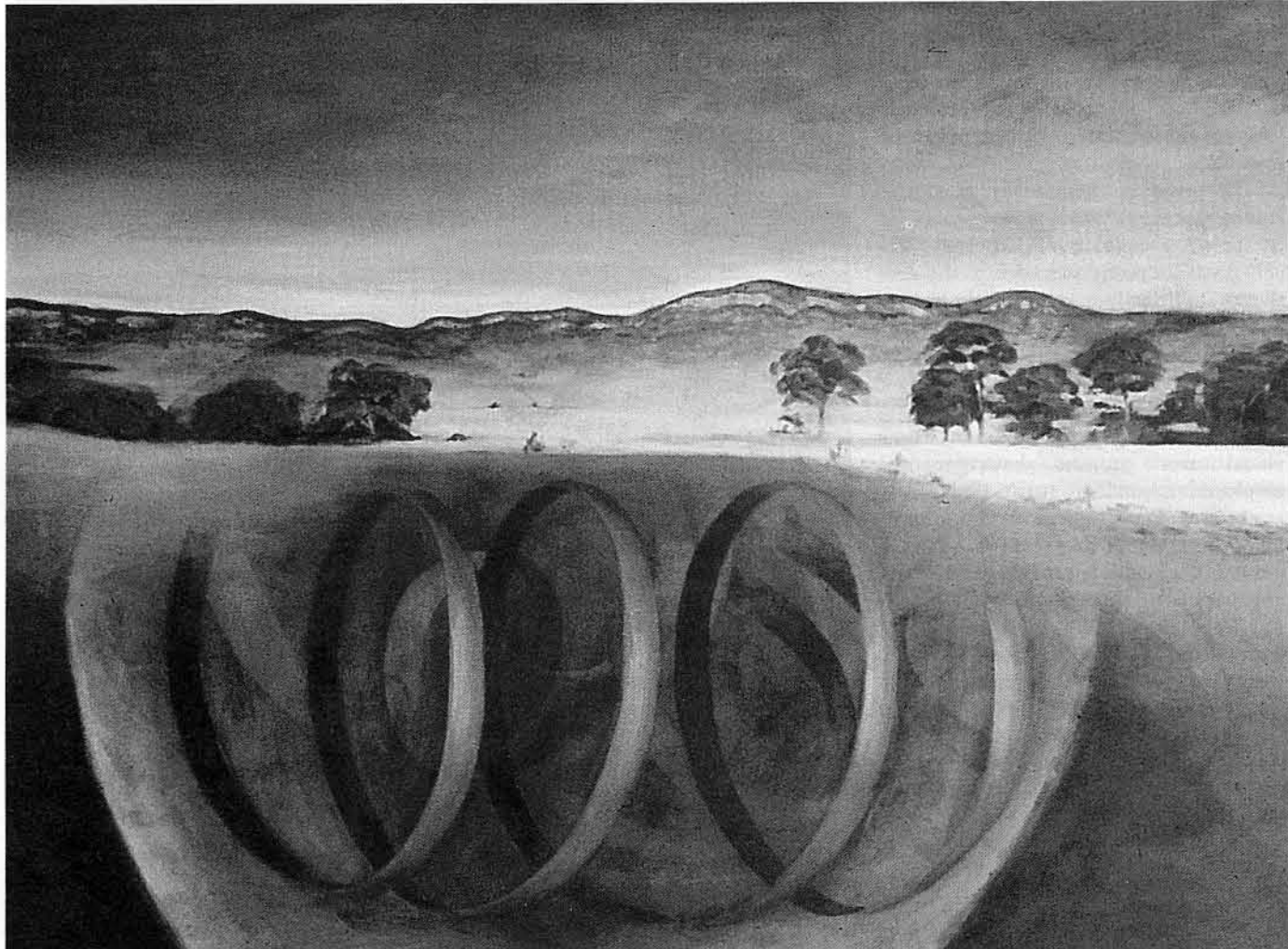


Feminising art practices

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THE THIRD IN A SERIES OF SIX ARTICLES EDITED BY IAN BURN, WHICH EXPLORES THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ART AND POLITICS IN THE 1990s



Megan Evans, *Self Scape* 1989, acrylic on canvas, Melbourne Remand Centre

Two major factors in the development of postmodernism have been the critiques of imperialism and of patriarchal society that took hold in the 1970s. As questions around the issues of postcolonialism, race, gender and class were explored, a plethora of new and revised social, political and cultural histories began emerging. Accounts of modernism and the artistic avant-garde were found to be fraught with problems of omission and interpretation.

But the process of 'filling in the gaps' in modernism did not simply provide an enriched, more diverse tradition than originally thought, it changed perceptions and practices in fundamental ways. These can be seen, for instance, in the reappraisal of women's creative traditions

and in an awakened interest in non-western cultures, of both ancient and contemporary indigenous peoples. The centrality to postmodernism in Australia of race and gender has been largely shaped by the Aboriginal land rights and feminist movement over the last twenty years or more. These in turn have given rise to the two most impressive and interesting groups of artists to emerge since the 1970s. It is no coincidence that their political struggles for equality were accompanied by cultural developments giving voice to new sets of demands and aspirations. Grounded in experiences of discrimination and of being 'the other', feminist and Aboriginal artists have in common a direction and purpose, the release of energy and new ideas, the sense

of liberation which comes with shared struggle.

Although the issue of class also received renewed attention, it is notable that it was not accompanied by a 'class movement' as such. Certainly many of the race and gender-related issues being raised were class based — for example, unemployment and equality of pay — but the impetus for change was originating with socially progressive groups at the fringe of the trade union movement. Similarly, it was the 'radical art' movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s which gave rise to the commitments leading to the cultural activities subsequently sponsored by the unions. Thus there is room for speculation about the nexus between political and/or cultural

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art and its radical advocacy in understanding the viability and direction of a program like Art and Working Life.

During ten years of Federal Labor governments, with wage accords, the recession and high unemployment, the trade union movement has played the role of partner working with rather than against the government. One could argue that the ACTU's approach in tune with a world where the old oppositional categories of capitalist and communist have collapsed and where 'left' and 'right' no longer denote clearly defined political, social and economic programs.

The question then arises as to the extent that these developments may be paralleled artistically. What has happened within postmodernism to the aesthetic, politically-inspired dichotomies which were played out in terms of abstraction vs social realism; form vs content; collective vs individualistic expression?

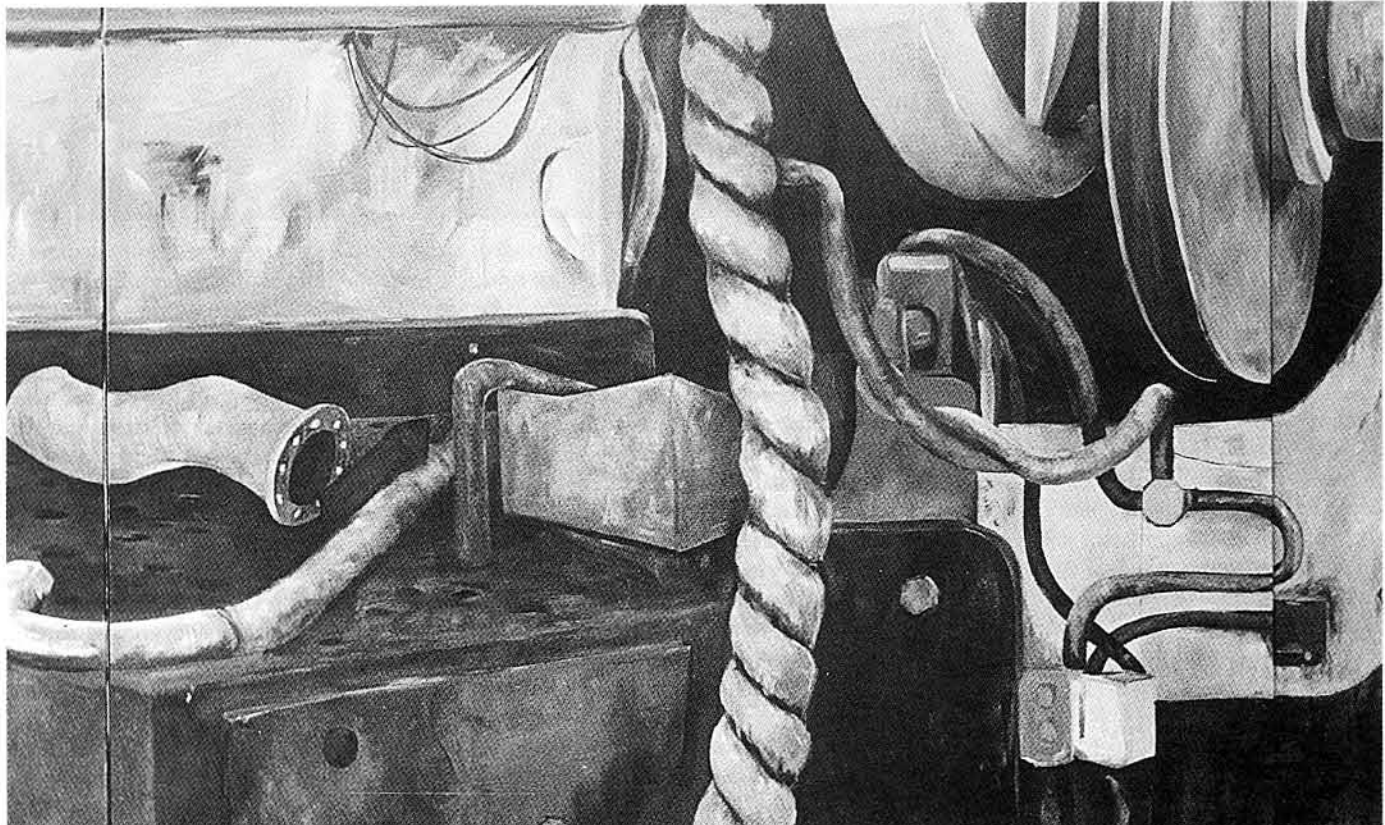
Community and trade union based visual arts projects have mainly employed naturalism (with illustrative tendencies) to depict a particular group's history and aspirations. This association of naturalism with 'art for the people' has an historical precedent in the Workers' Art Clubs of the 1930s and the Studios of Realist Artists in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s this connection was reinforced by those artists looking for alternative

audiences and work practices at a time when abstract art dominated the galleries and art market. Abstraction became associated with art's failure to engage in contemporary social and political issues and, as such, it was seen as a politically inappropriate form of communication. The feminist movement in the 1970s contained this tension between figuration and abstraction as women such as Lesley Dumbrell and Liz Coats chose to continue working in non-figurative ways which seemed then to be at odds with the 'issue oriented' art of most feminist work.

However, because feminism was open-ended and inclusive it encompassed a great diversity of artists in terms of age as well as aesthetic and political backgrounds. It never resulted in a program of artistic censorship or rules. On the contrary, the reality was one of offering support to women artists and their exhibitions, because any success for women was of general benefit. The rewriting of art history to include women's work also introduced contradictory notions. For example, the emphasis on feminist 'content' in contemporary work was not a major criterion in the recovery of women's arts and crafts. Abstract designed quilts were marvelled over with little concern for anything other than their decorative beauty, their affirmation of a female art form and its rich social history.

Thus, within the feminist art movement there were mixed messages because form and content were alternatively praised depending on the particular works and their contexts. Similarly, the individual achievements of women were celebrated while at the same time group activities and communally-based projects were advocated as alternatives to isolating work and hierarchical/patriarchal structures. The point in indicating that there were contradictions is twofold. On the one hand it might elucidate difficulties in the Art and Working Life visual arts programs by showing how a coherent but possibly narrow range of options was adopted and, secondly, suggest why a way forward may lie in the acceptance, if not the resolution, of traditional contradictions offered by postmodernism.

If there is a current hesitancy over direction in the Art and Working Life program, then this may be related to the need for more imaginative approaches to projects. The situation has been exacerbated by the reduced activities of the dynamic silkscreen poster workshops which had so forcefully given expression to radical ideas. Health issues and economic factors are to blame for this state of affairs, but so too is the changing cultural and political environment of the 1980s which favoured theoretical discourse and 'national consensus'. By the second half of the 80s, work inspired by



Mary Rosengren, *Boilershop Cockatoo Island* 1986, Amalgamated Metal Workers Union National Office, Sydney

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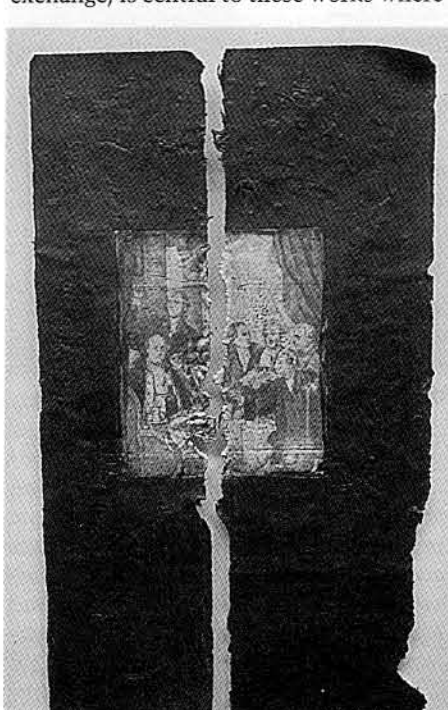
audience. Over the decade of inventive banner designs (which includes the innovative use of textiles by women) has revitalised this traditional art form but inevitably, and necessarily, they are produced to particular, and sometimes narrow, guidelines. The banners typically produced for trade union organisations serve to identify their groups' skills, aspirations and history. Montgarrett was not subject to such directions and her imaginative and sensitive solution proved to be enormously successful, given the responses received from grieving families and its permanent display in the Aberdeen Town Hall. Painted at the top of the banner is an oil rig set between the melancholy sea and sky of north Europe. Below the sea, the graveyard of the men killed, the names of the dead can be found on close inspection shrouded in textile veils. As with the paintings discussed earlier, Montgarrett produced a personal response to a collective, and in this instance, tragic situation. With each of these Art and Working Life examples, strong and purposeful work has been the result.

The dominant presence of female artists in the Art and Working Life program is intimately related to the radicalism of the social protest movements of the late 1960s and 70s — of which feminism was an important part. However, alongside the involvement of women in community and trade union arts in the 1970s and 80s there has been a growing visibility of women in mainstream art. Not only is it becoming easier for them to exhibit, they are consistently producing much of the most innovative and fecund art being shown. Again, we might ask why?

The answer lies in the role played by feminism, in the revelation of the pervasiveness and experience of discrimination. 1970s feminist art responded directly to this new understanding, but inevitably began to change with time and evolved with the ascendancy of postmodern theory. However, given that postmodernism draws significantly on feminist debates, it follows that women artists, whether or not they have closely followed the theoretical discourses, continue using their personal experiences to confront patriarchal values and to explore aesthetic and representational questions from a feminist perspective. One strategy has been to deepen the knowledge of how women are continuously subject to reconstruction as 'the other' and, as the same time, resist the historical pattern of subordination which has followed their achievements whenever they have improved their position in society.

Having directly experienced the selective histories of modernism through the insights offered by feminism, women are better placed, and on the whole more willing to reveal that which remains silent or invisible, to take up the challenges of 'the other' as also expressed in the lives of indigenous people and ethnic minorities.

The themes of colonialism, postcolonialism and the creation of cultural identity, for example, are the subject of Narelle Jubelin's impressive installations. The notion of trade, of cultural exchange, is central to these works where



Katarina Versterberg, *Sir Joshua Reynolds 'The Society of Dilettantes' (1877)*, 1991, synthetic polymer paint on textile

collected and recreated objects reveal complex historical interactions between the sites of exposition and local, national and international economic, social and cultural networks. In *Foreign Affairs*, shown at South Carolina's Charleston Spoleto Festival in 1991, Jubelin recreated the slave tags that identified the ultimate trade product — human beings. The anonymity of the slaves, identified only by the tag numbers they were obliged to wear, contrasts with Jubelin's version of the decorative, miniature portraits on ivory of the Charleston families whose wealth depended on this human trade and on the importance of the city as a major port. In the centre of the slave tags are two American coins, the one of lesser value bearing the head of an unnamed Indian, and the other, George Washington's famous profile. By giving

equal voice to the imported black slaves and the local indigenous peoples, Jubelin points to the silence surrounding their histories and that lying behind Charleston's economic prosperity. Rendered in petit point, Jubelin's work operates on yet other levels where gender-related issues are challenged by the strength and seriousness of her ideas in this nominally fragile, poorly regarded art form.

Katarina Versterberg's work at the 1992 Adelaide Festival took up the question of postcolonial science in the South Pacific through the presentation of meticulously contrived artifacts. These objects imply a critique of the construction of this region by European explorers, scientists and ethnographers, in order to reveal the inadequacy of the European heritage in a world where 'others', indigenous peoples, are laying claim to alternative histories. By copying and re-presenting fragments from colonial expeditions Versterberg's work reconstructs this history and in the process undermines aspects of its authority.

Jubelin and Versterberg are just two of the many female artists currently producing work that is both critical and political. As the 1991 comprehensive feminist 'Dissonance' exhibition showed, and as one would expect, women are working in many diverse ways and are engaged with a broad range of subjects. The representation of women, for instance, is just as much on the agenda now as in the early days of feminism, although these days it also incorporates the 'postmodern' debates about representation. Anne Zahalka's photographic series of artists' portraits, for example, eloquently articulates its own construction as a group of portraits.

The resource of feminism has given women direction, strength and confidence. In the final analysis this may be the vital element in explaining the breadth and quality of current art by women. However, it has also provided a framework for the exploration of a range of ideas, even though these may often seem to have little to do with feminism. No matter what the focus is, feminism — together with other aspects of postmodernism — has altered perceptions of the world. In a patriarchal society it is clearly not in men's interest to embrace those changes which undermine their power. Not surprisingly, a lack of this complex engagement may often be reflected in their art. In contrast, it is only by taking up the challenges offered by these new visions, by exploring new possibilities, that women's work has come to the fore. ♦

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