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# FOCUS

17 AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FOCUS ON THE PROGRESS OF  
WOMEN IN SOCIETY OVER THE PAST 100 YEARS

TO BE OPENED BY  
ASSOCIATE-PROFESSOR SUSAN MAGAREY

DIRECTOR OF THE RESEARCH CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

FRIDAY OCTOBER 7 1994, 6PM TO 8PM.

EXHIBITION CONCLUDES NOVEMBER 1ST  
WINES BY PETALUMA

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 Women's Suffrage  
Centenary  
South Australia 1894-1994  
VOTES FOR WOMEN

ADELAIDE CENTRAL  
GALLERY

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PAST 100 YEARS**

ADELAIDE CENTRAL GALLERY

OCTOBER 7 - NOVEMBER 1, 1994

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**Women's Suffrage  
Centenary**

South Australia 1894-1994

VOTES FOR WOMEN

Proudly sponsored by

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## *Focussing Somewhere Between the Home and 'The House': Women, Art & Suffrage*

... but the garden was a continual yearning  
for what must always be lost again ..

Dorothy Hewett, *Alice in Wormland*

*According to the Lands Titles Office,  
construction on the Parkside villa in  
which I live was completed in 1894.*

Three miles down the road on December 18 of that same year, the *Constitution Act Amendment Act* was passed by male members of the South Australian Parliament, declaring women's status, once and for all, to be above that of convicts and lunatics.<sup>1</sup> Henceforth women of this small colony could vote and stand for parliamentary elections, ensuring that 'their place' would be extended from the domestic sphere, the home, into 'The House'.

*Every man has a house of Lords in his own head. Fears, prejudices misconceptions – these are the peers and they are hereditary.*<sup>2</sup>

A century on, it is customary to celebrate that achievement and to positively reflect upon the ways in which suffrage has subsequently shaped women's lives. However, merely commemorating an isolated act of parliament is to miss the point entirely; the suffrage campaign represented "... a movement which was not that of the specific struggle for the vote alone, but also of a broader debate about definitions of femininity and women's place in public life."<sup>3</sup> Vociferously asserted by suffragists was not only the concept of each woman's right to participate in full democratic citizenship, but additionally proposed were the wider social benefits accruing from that enfranchisement.

Another less acknowledged aspect of the suffragist campaign is its context of fierce, attenuated and embattled opposition; despite the fact that the *Municipal Corporations Act* in 1861 had allowed women to vote in local government elections, the 1894 legislation required seven attempts and nine long years before it was finally – and grudgingly – passed. A situation accurately described by Penny Magee as "suffrage under sufferance"<sup>4</sup>. Another eight years later, the rights of indigenous women were actually rescinded for sixty five years by the *Federal Franchise Act* of 1902<sup>5</sup>, while the election of the first non-indigenous woman to the South Australian parliament was as late as 1959. Our enthusiasm, therefore, should be tempered by the realisation that this celebration represents "only one hundred years of some women's entry into the polis"<sup>6</sup>.

*One danger of the new movement is that it will unsex women as a class. The woman who goes shrieking on the stump, and roaring, hustling and pushing at the polling booth cannot help getting rougher and coarser than if she had been home darning stockings or superintending her household. Some of the bloom must come off.*<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the heady promises of 1894, by the 1960s a concerted feminist campaign once again became necessary to foreground and continue demanding women's rights, an

ongoing project which today remains active across many complex – and sometimes contradictory – fronts. Nevertheless, despite relatively progressive legislative reforms in Australia over the last two decades, the “despotism of custom”<sup>8</sup> and entrenched social attitudes have proved tenacious in discouraging – but not preventing – advanced progress in economic, political, domestic and cultural aspects of women’s lives.

*Discourses on home ownership...invoke nation and citizenship, and are linked with the masculine...private home ownership...gives a man...a place of his own in which to keep his wife and rear a family, and a place for his family to live in when he dies.*<sup>9</sup>

*Marriage is a bribe to make a housekeeper think she’s a householder.*<sup>10</sup>

The sphere of representation, where images and definitions of femininity are culturally constructed through literature, visual and other forms of media, continues to exert a potent and enduring force for diminishing, or expanding, women’s options. Late Victorian suffragists lamented, for example, the exclusion of “old, ugly, working-class and feminist women”<sup>11</sup> from images governing appropriate feminine decorum, a discourse which, incidentally, still enjoys surprising currency in late twentieth century society. All too aware of the social power of imagery, women artists have actively contested disabling representations by, for and about women over the past hundred years; but whereas early suffrage movements mobilized specific types of pictorial rhetoric, contemporary women’s art can no longer be identified with a particular issue or ideological program. Indeed, unlike 1960s feminist slogans of ‘unity in diversity’, recent post structuralist/postmodern discourses of gender and sexuality, psychoanalytic theory, multi culturalism and post colonialism have rendered unitary concepts of cultural identity problematic, even dangerous.

It is within this climate of difference that *Focus* was conceived by curators, Sue Tweddell and Rosie Johnston, as an “official” opportunity to

celebrate “historic advancement”; Australian women artists from each state were invited “to submit work portraying their interpretation of the women’s movement ... over the past 100 years with a view to moving forward.” Indicative of a wide range of current feminist practice is the breadth of response by seventeen artists who represent not only regional difference, but diversity of age, ethnicity, race, class, religion, politics, media and style – including political incorrectness.

To some extent, it may be argued that such inclusivity problematizes survey exhibitions of women’s art by continuing to marginalise women’s culture within the frame of ‘The Other’. On the other hand, this opportunity for celebration and reflection offers an appropriate moment – for both the theorized and the under-theorized viewer – to pause and consider a spectrum of issues and approaches which may not ordinarily be possible within conventional art exhibition circuits. Whereas the firming up of recent curatorial practice has enabled artists’ (and curators’) work to be considered within imaginative and theoretically specific frameworks, an occasional less ‘tidy’ site of display such as this allows artists’ voices to jostle and nudge, to interrupt, seduce, harangue or ignore the viewer. Leaving some of the art theoretical ‘housework’ unfinished, therefore, might allow a wider viewing public more scope for exploration of meaning and relation.

Domestic and/or intimate themes such as those under-explored regions of motherhood, family and childhood inform *Janette Moore’s* approach to issues concerning women’s experience. Using figuration as a vehicle for emotional intensity, she literally draws upon her own ‘backyard’<sup>12</sup> as a site for inspiration in portraying the extraordinariness of everyday experience. *Helen Wright’s* world of feminine encounter has also engaged unremarkable objects like kitchen apparatus and contraceptive devices as triggers for subconscious association; in this way even domestic environments can suggest theatres of horror. Domestic objects for *Madeleine Winch* “are simply metaphors” for the entrapments and responsibilities of day to day life for women; she invites viewers “to seek their own

interpretations" of this delicate balancing act. **Helen Norton** too, acknowledges "the unnoticed bearers of babies and equilibrium" who move quietly behind, "mending, encouraging, nurturing without credit". To this sense of achievement she brings a satirical sense of humour which irreverently debunks patriarchal art historical clichés and myths. Similar deconstructions of myth – this time fairytales – are tackled head on in **Julia Ciccarone's** monumentally epic paintings where traditional female stereotypes are wittily exposed and inverted.

*Not only our memories but the things we have forgotten are 'housed'. Our soul is an abode. And by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms' we learn to abide within ourselves ... the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them.*<sup>13</sup>

The bower bird's "dream home"<sup>14</sup> is evoked in **Sally Smart's** racy and tricky appropriation of styles, techniques and subjects for her latest body of work. Here floating signifiers of veils and traces of domestic tasks suggest a quirky astral journey with some surprising stops along the way, including, for example, spectral linkages between suffragism and spiritualism. Less concerned with everyday activities of women's lives, **Anne MacDonald** invites a searching investigation of the symbolism of flowers, love and death. Her floral images evoke, indeed are sweetly haunted by, the remembrance of death, her photographs providing a reminder of how suitably positioned this medium is to quieten and make forever still its subjects.

Whether embracing or rejecting the title 'feminist', many artists pay unembarrassed tribute to female strength and the remarkable achievements of the women's movement. Thirty years on, that 1960s feminist credo, 'the personal is political', can be taken for granted. For artist and designer, **Bronwyn Bancroft**, all women may be liberated and in "control of their own intellectual, emotional and creative" lives by rendering redundant

our "guilt controlled society". **Christine Turner's** Byzantium-like icons to women's "knowledge, experience and sisterhood" revere a female legacy of dignity and determination, while **Lisa O'Keefe's** concern with relationships and emotions conveys "something of the courage and spirit that has both driven and united women over the past 100 years". *Choice* is the title of **Janette Lucas's** large scale architectural image which encapsulates the "progress and freedom women have achieved" and refers to the importance of her art process as well as her 'product'. Refusing to be defined by "a woman's point of view", **Maria Kuczynska**, through her bronze sculpture, strives to achieve a balance between "the best components of two worlds, feminine and masculine" in suggesting that artists operate as a "third sex".

Within this celebratory occasion, artists such as **Margaret Morgan**, **Lorraine Jenyns**, **Cynthia Breusch** and **Glen Hughes** provide stern or wryly astringent reminders of work that is still to be done. **Margaret Morgan's** *Model Forms (Victorine)* examines art history's exclusion of that "fugitive" nineteenth century artist, Victorine Meurent, (who was also Manet's "tarty, red-haired, blonde eyelashed" model), and invests this figure with her own "fantasies, desires and pleasures". **Lorraine Jenyns** in *Dislocation 2* critically examines the common female experience of fragmentation and displacement – the "many hats syndrome" – which has accompanied the gains of liberation. **Breusch's** collage, *A Resonance of Women*, acclaims the mutual supportiveness of women which has achieved "greater rights...and confidence" but suggests that freedom is "relative" and "there are still things to be fought for with rage, without fear". Referencing a more specific issue of social justice, **Hughes's** work deals with, no less, than the "discriminatory attitude held by the Supreme Pontiff" in excluding women from the Roman Catholic priesthood.

*It is clearly absurd that it should be possible for a woman to qualify as a saint with direct access to the Almighty while she might not qualify as a curate.*<sup>15</sup>

The exhibition, *Focus*, thus allows an insight into how contemporary women artists are subverting, deconstructing, recombining or ignoring that cherished Victorian ideology of 'separate spheres' which once demarcated the (masculine) public arena from (feminine) domestic occupation; in the 1990s the right to work beyond the realm of home duties is taken for granted. But while we might congratulate ourselves that despite some extraordinary barriers, a social transformation seems to be taking shape, current statistics reveal that women's full participation outside the home – and their responsibility within the home – remains thwarted. They still hold only 1.3% of executive positions<sup>16</sup> and most significantly, hold but a minute percentage of seats in Parliament – the big 'House' – despite the grand gestures of one hundred years ago. So "exceptional" are women politicians regarded in this country, Federal M.P. Dr. Carmen Lawrence reminds us, "they are regarded as freaks".<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly, Australian women do 70% of housework<sup>18</sup> and despite equal pay legislation twenty two years ago, they still only receive 83% of male earnings,<sup>19</sup> a figure which does not, however, apply to those women choosing to work full-time as a homemaker! For the many unemployed and homeless women, of course, such statistics have very little relevance.

*You cannot have everything and certainly cannot dust everything. To cite Conran's Law of Housework – it expands to fill the time available plus half an hour: so obviously it is never finished.... Keep housework in its place, which, you will remember, is underfoot.*<sup>20</sup>

Against any modest gains is set a media 'backlash', the kind which, as in the 1890s and 1970s, attempts to destabilize political achievements and more insidiously, to alienate young women from their own feminist history; as with household duties and gardening, constant, and often thankless, vigilance is required to maintain those hard won rights. As a result, Eurocentric emphasis upon political, economic and domestic activity often means that critical time for reflection, renewal and redirection – inner enfranchisement – is overlooked. *Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Bauman*

reminds us of the need for that quiet place of resistance in the midst of unavoidable political struggle. "Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up, but let them follow their natural course – like the seasons. We hope that the people of Australia will wait. Not so much waiting for us to catch up – but waiting with us, as we find our own place in this world." Homes, whether they be in the form of houses, rooms or more inner realms of abode, offer that refuge and the space for 'catching up' which is so critical to moving forward.

*I often wonder how the first woman who moved into this new Parkside home received the news of suffrage and what events at 'The House' really meant to her. Did she regard the prospect of casting her vote at the next election with excitement? Probably not; she still had to wait another two years. In the meantime, I suspect that my predecessor was more caught up with the pressing matters of a new house and garden than the remote promise of electoral liberation, no matter how ground breaking we now hold this event to be.*

*But I must get on. There is much to do. A century on, for all its charm, value and heritage, this same house now requires drastic renovation.*

**Pamela Zeplin**

September, 1994



## HELEN NORTON

"The unnoticed bearers of babies and equilibrium have been responsible for the faint hope of any compassion within our very aggressive, warring, masculine fronted society.

My impression is that the universe and all creation is female in its cyclic form and so all women are to be celebrated for their connection to the life force itself.

They move quietly behind, mending, encouraging, nurturing without credit. They gentle the beast and file his teeth, deserving a front seat in the design of our future as a race, if we are to survive."

Born 1961, Melbourne

Working from Broome since 1986

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1989 Broome Regional Art Gallery
- 1990 42 Weld St Gallery, Broome
- 1990 Bay Gallery, Perth
- 1992 Adelaide Arts Festival
- 1992 Framed The Showcase Gallery, Darwin
- 1992 Kimberley Fine Diamonds, Kununurra
- 1994 Focus, Women's Suffrage Centenary Exhibition, Adelaide Central Gallery

### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1988 Broome Regional Art Gallery
- 1990 Kimberley Kreations, Broome
- 1991 Perth Mint 60 works
- 1991 Kimberley Kreations, Broome
- 1992 Kimberley Kreations, Broome
- 1993 Reflections of the Kimberley Gallery, Derby
- 1993 New Collectables Gallery, Fremantle
- 1994 New Collectables Gallery, Fremantle
- 1994 Kimberley Kreations, Broome

### RECENT AWARDS

- 1988 Kimberley Art Prize, Derby, 1st Prize Oil
- 1990 Kimberley Art Prize, Derby, 1st Prize Watercolour
- 1990 Broome Shinju Art Comp, 1st Prize Oil
- 1990 Broome Shinju Art Comp, 1st Prize Acrylic
- 1990 Broome Shinju Art Comp, 1st Prize Portrait
- 1991 Broome Shinju Art Prize, 1st Prize Oil/Acrylic
- 1991 Broome Shinju Art Prize, Phillis Knox Memorial Award
- 1992 Broome Shinju Art Prize, 1st Prize Sculpture
- 1992 Broome Shinju Art Prize, 1st Prize Watercolour
- 1993 Broome Shinju Art Prize, 1st Prize Oil/Acrylic

### COLLECTIONS

Work is represented in many private collections interstate and abroad