

# Censuring the censors

JOANNA MENDELSSOHN reviews a major exhibition on moral censorship which tells us the way we were — and, sometimes, still are

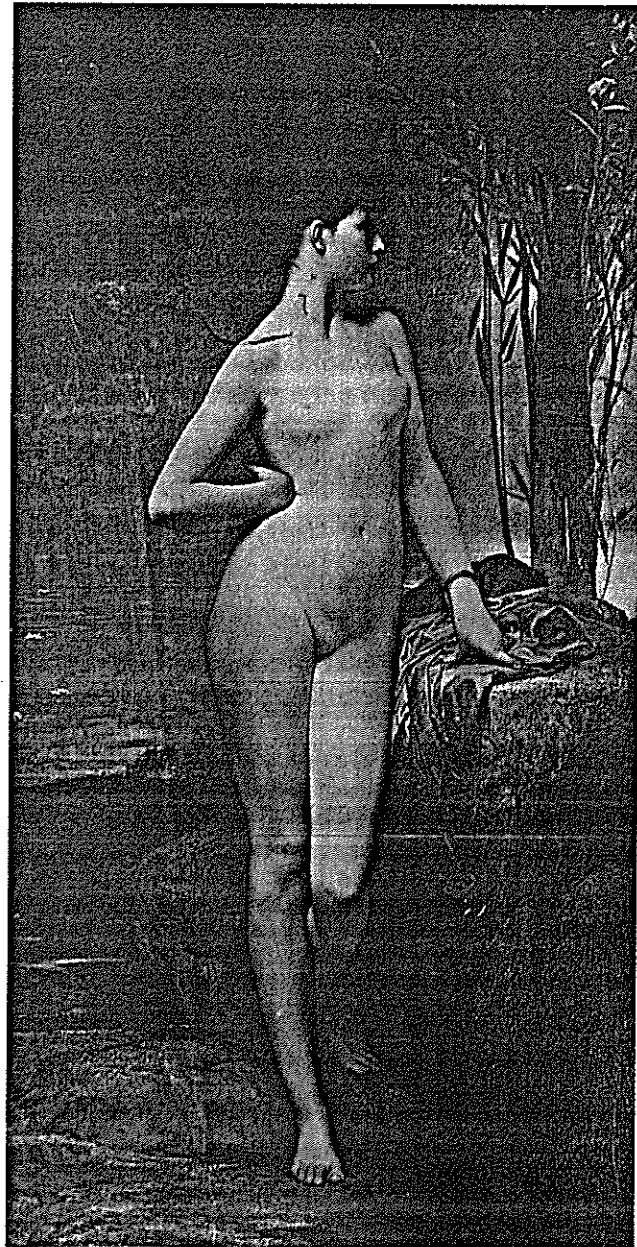
When censorship is raised in Australia we usually think of books and films, not to mention the heavily political use of defamation laws to inhibit discussion. The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art is celebrating its fifth anniversary by taking a different tack: every work in its exhibition, *Moral Censorship and the Visual Arts in Australia*, has been criticised or mutilated because of perceived obscenity.

The exhibition's curator, Alison Carroll, has taken a thorough and cool look at the way civic authorities and moral guardians have tried to correct the sensibilities of artists. As a historic survey, it is fascinating; as a supposed record of progress, it is depressing.

Moral censorship is revealed as an absurd and random act. Prurience survives, candid expressions of emotion or anatomy are damned. And — just in case we think we live in an age of sexual liberation — Carroll reminds us that last year was the first time that an artist, Catherine Phillips, was actually imprisoned for exhibiting sexually explicit art. More recently, the Queensland State Library shredded a book of photographs by Robert Mappelthorpe.

The most famous painting in the show is *Chloe*, Melbourne's favourite pub art. It was withdrawn from view at the National Gallery of Victoria because of its "shocking" sexuality. Its owner, a Dr Fitzgerald, then hung it in his house but had to move it from the drawing room as it was "visible from the street when the room was lighted".

The earliest work in the exhibition is a copy of Hiram Power's statue *Greek Slave*, exhibited without comment in London's Great Exhibition in 1851 but removed from a Melbourne shop window in 1855 because "of the danger to which public morals were exposed". Nude statues have con-



*Chloe*: going public again in *Moral Censorship*

tinued to be a problem for moral guardians. Replicas of ancient Greek and Roman statues in the Fitzroy Gardens outraged many sensibilities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As well they might. They were, after all, an inspiration for the classical subject matter of Norman and Lionel Lindsay as well as being the

place where Norman Lindsay seduced Katie Parkinson at the turn of the century.

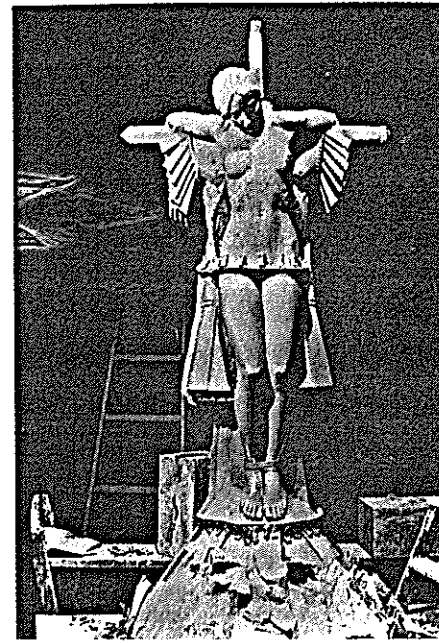
You cannot look at moral censorship in Australia without stumbling across the Lindsays. Lionel and Norman both worked on a magazine, *The Free Lance*, which ran for a while in 1896 funded almost entirely by discreet advertisements for condoms and other aids which could not be mentioned in the mainstream press. Norman's early drawing *Pollice Verso* was bought by the National Gallery of Victoria which then got cold feet and placed it in storage. For the rest of his life Norman was good copy for any newspaper wanting a beat-up on questions of art and sex. Even the sedate magazine *Art in Australia* managed to be seized by police when it ran a special issue on his art.

Two Lionel Lindsay etchings in the exhibition show the insidious effect of persecution by moral guardians. One originally showed a woman breastfeeding, the other a naked child. When Lionel was preparing for his first London exhibition, he was persuaded to clothe the child and turn the nursing mother into a seamstress — all because of his brother's notoriety.

Sir William Orpen, who described Norman Lindsay's work as "vulgar" and "extremely badly drawn", also figures in the exhibition as a victim. His painting *Sowing New Seed* was bought for the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1913. When the good citizens of Adelaide saw it, they did not believe the full title: *Sowing New Seed for the Board of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland*. They knew Ireland was too cold for springtime nudity.

Orpen's alternative explanation that it was an allegory in praise of the newly-formed Sinn Fein was dismissed as unlikely. The painting was returned to Orpen but later came to Australia as part of a

Rayner Hoff's model for *Crucifixion of Civilisation 1914* for Sydney's Hyde Park Anzac Memorial: exhibited in 1932, work never completed after general outcry



Left: Rosaleen Norton's *Lucifer*. She was charged with showing obscene work, at Melbourne University in 1949. The drawing, removed by police, has since been lost. Above: Mike Brown's collage *Mary Lou as Miss Universe II*. He withdrew it from exhibition in 1963, following complaints. The original work has been lost

private collection and was bequeathed to the Mildura Arts Centre. This is appropriate as Mildura has a special place as a centre of censorship. The private and public battles fought over its innovative Sculpture Triennales have become legendary. In 1978, after the enforced departure of the Arts Centre director, the council issued a grim warning: "It is up to the artists not to cross an indefinable line of public acceptance in Mildura; otherwise, they could earn the wrath of the community."

Last year was one of wrath. Young sculptor Phillips placed a small "building" in the open-air park which is the sculpturescape. Entering the "building" was a matter of choice; those who could be offended were not likely to walk in by accident. Inside Phillips' *Butch Maison: the Palace at Femme*, she placed the script: "She ran her tongue like fire across my nipples. She slipped her hand in my cunt and grinned." Phillips was charged with showing an obscene work and fined \$400. After refusing to pay, she spent two days in the Mildura lock-up. Lesbianism is not illegal but describing it may be.

The Art Gallery of NSW also features as a star in the censorship parade. In 1973, gallery attendants arrested one of the naked performers in a piece by Tim Burns and police preferred charges when he left the enclosed performance space to go to the toilet. Gallery employees had detained him but it was another gallery employee, Daniel Thomas, who defended the piece in court and the case was dismissed.

A similar piece of censorship by art gallery attendants is not included in the exhibition, presumably because Carroll did not

know about it. Soon after the Burns affair, Clyde Packer placed Brett Whiteley's *Alchemy* on long-term loan. Whiteley is an uneven artist but *Alchemy* is one of his best, most overwhelming works. In spite of the decision of the trustees to accept the loan and the curators' wish to place it on public view, it was never shown. The gallery attendants threatened industrial action and the gallery capitulated.

Other examples of censorship at the Art Gallery of NSW include Juan Davila's *Stupid as a Painter*, banished from the main exhibition of the Biennale of Sydney in 1982 and sent to a secondary venue because the work was considered to be too raunchy for the general public. But the Festival of Light still called out the Vice Squad for a public furore. That was resolved by showing the painting in the naturally decadent environment of Sydney University.

In 1984, the gallery was involved in an even more disturbing case. Nigel Thompson's *Children's Rites* was a finalist in the Sulman Prize. Thompson's paintings are rarely pretty; they are disturbing, awkward and thought-provoking. This time, the subject was children doing a ritual dance around a naked man. The predominantly male trustees voted to remove it from public view.

In 1985, gallery Director Edmund Capon ordered that sections of Anne MacDonald's *Love I* and *Love II* be covered. The work deals with fellatio and an oversized male member. Gallery staff say visitors went to a great deal of trouble to uncover and view the offending panels.

In 1976, the Queensland Art Gallery gave the Trustees Prize to Richard Larter.

When the politician who was to present the cheque realised the painting included a woman sucking a penis, he declined to be photographed beside it but the work stayed on view. In 1985, the then Director of the National Gallery of Victoria defended Ray Richards' performance work *Long Poles*.

One of the worst aspects of the moral censors is their secrecy as much as randomness. Careers have been threatened or blighted because citizens of country towns or provincial centres thought the curator wanted to show too much sex in art.

The irrationality of censorship is best seen in the attacks on Michelangelo's *David* in the 1970s when David Jones and Myer had to cover the private parts of a replica of a sculpture which had been public for centuries. The offending piece is on view, along with the posters that were seized by an ever-vigilant Vice Squad in 1973.

The exhibition is a treasury of art likely to give offence to the Rev Fred Nile and is a delight to visit. The detailed catalogue includes an account by Natasha Serventy of what is most likely to offend, as well as Carroll's history of visual censorship. And, for those who find the notion of erotic art too awful to contemplate, Michael Kirby gives a warning in his foreword: "Attempts to suppress pictorial representations of the human form and of human sexuality merely create an underworld which caters for the insatiable appetite of the community, over the generations, for such material." ■

*The moral censorship exhibition is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, until October 15.*