JAN NELSON

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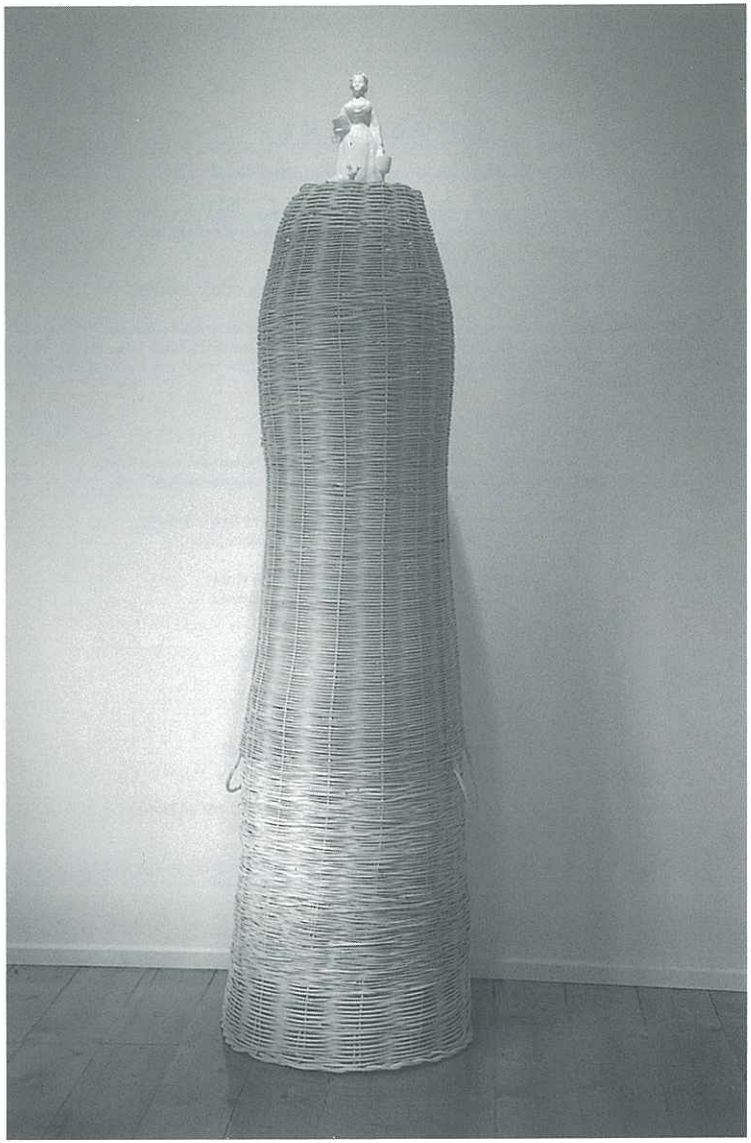

Contents

Who's afraid of Jan Nelson?

Peek-a-Boo...I can see you. An exchange between mother and child in which the Lacanian 'I' is yet to be formed. The game, in case you have forgotten, is played by the mother or the child hiding their face from the other. The idea being... If I can't see you, you can't see me. The mother or the child cannot 'be' without the other.

BOO! is an the object of the omnipotent mother. The mother whose apron strings might be a problem later in life. For now it is the playful, omnipresent mother with a bright coloured orange apron with big pockets, front and back. All the better to hop into if the game gets too rough.

The peek-a-boo game is surely the condition of the art object and the audience, too. If the audience and the art do not see each other, do they therefore not exist? Well, yes. That is the contractual relationship which is set up between the audience and the art...and....as a by-product, the artist.

Claes Oldenberg knew this. He set up his shop of floppy and plaster things to amplify the relationship of exchange and value in the trade of art; looking and purchase. Playfully, like Jan Nelson, he promoted this central idea through somewhat unlofty commodity items. Importantly, they were often consumption, comfort things; like doughnuts and cakes. BOO! is somewhat doughy... flour dusty.

At the moment Jan Nelson is playing between the spaces of pop art and post partum. It is an interesting space, one which offers unexpected opportunities. It is certainly one which invites a refreshing inventiveness of materials and objects. Perhaps even a giggle, like the child who sees because they are seen. Peek-a-boo...I can see you... Jan Nelson.

Juliana Engberg

THE FIGURE OR THE FACE?

Freud and Darwin are in conversation: a milkmaid is paid homage; a basket is woven in womanly form. A turkey baster and a bicycle seat, read through the context of the other pieces, completing a set of references to ideas about women, focused on sex and reproduction.

These are representations of ideas about women generally, not actual women, since the female appears as a figure rather than as a face. In the case of the basket – or, to put it the other way around, the basket case – the body stops at the neck. This figure is repeated in greater degrees of abstraction in piles of cushions the equivalent height of the adult human. Where the head should be we find a milkmaid, a female type who tells one story of women out of a pool of possibilities.

In the cultural imagination, the milkmaid represents a kind of sexual invitation that cannot be dissocciated from the nourishing plenitude of the milk she is endlessly on her way to get. Carrying the vessel that contains milk, the milkmaid becomes by association also a kind of vessel, the maker of milk herself or its procuress through the firm squeezing action of her pink fingers.

The phrase 'May I go with you, my pretty maid?' has always carried the undertow of sexual interest, for how could we really believe, firstly, that a man of a higher class, who deserves the title 'Sir', would contemplate marriage to a woman who is clearly a farmer's daughter, since she is going to milk the cows? 'To go' with the milkmaid in this case means 'to have', and while the nursery rhyme declares the milkmaid's hope that her face will be her fortune, its latent content suggests that her body will be her fate.

Darwin and Freud, who appear in the exhibition as faces rather than figures, have much to say about women. These eminent gentlemen are remembered to us as minds rather than bodies. Their unique facial characteristics, like their ideas, have been crisply preserved in history – as has the Wedgwood pot on which they appear, which is a reproduction from the ancient world. Darwin and Freud are responsible for the two most significant paradigm shifts in thinking since Copernicus, who challenged the presumption that the world is the centre of the universe. Darwin challenged the belief that man is invented by God and Freud the idea that man is master of himself.

Maverick thinkers who produced such ambitious theories about the survival of the species and the psychosexual development of the individual, Freud and Darwin both married women who would only produce children. Their theories endorsed such a division of labour. Both men found women ill-equipped to compete in the world – for work, for survival, or for intellectual attention. The young Freud, criticising J S Mill's 'The Emancipation of Women', (which, to his credit, he translated into German) deplored 'the disappearance of the most lovely thing the world has to offer us: our ideal of womanhood'. Darwin also criticises Mill's argument that women have formidable intellectual powers. Men, he says, have the greater measure of energy, perseverance and courage that will see them exceeding women in any competition. As Darwin points out, the competition is within species rather than between them, although in his account this is because the man has to work harder than the woman for their mutual subsistence.

As with the old chicken and egg conundrum, we can only speculate about whether the theories resulted in the marriages made by these eminent gentlemen or the other way around. Similarly, while Freud claimed his theories about psychosexual development were derived from the analysis of

people who came to talk to him, many critics - feminist loudest among them - believe Freud subsumed his analyses to his theories rather than the other way around.

Where are you going to, my pretty maid?
I'm going a-milking sir, she said,
Sir, she said, sir, she said.
May I go with you, my pretty maid?
You're kindly welcome, sir, she said.
Say, will you marry me, my pretty maid?
Yes, if you please, kind sir, she said.
What is your father, my pretty maid?
My father's a farmer, sir, she said.
What is your fortune, my pretty maid?
My face is my fortune, sir, she said.
Then I can't marry you, my pretty maid.
Nobody asked you, sir, she said.

This Mother Goose rhyme is a version, rewritten for the nursery, of a folk song recorded in 1790. In the earlier version, the sexual possibilities and dangers are more manifest.

Whither are you going pretty fair maid, said he,
With your white face and your yellow hair:
I am going to the well, sweet Sir, she said,
For strawberry leaves make maidens fair.
Shall I go with thee pretty fair maid, he said,
Do if you will, sweet Sir, she said,

What if I do lay you down to the ground,
I will rise up again, sweet Sir, she said,
What if I do bring you with child,
I will bear it, sweet Sir, she said.

A version collected by Robert Burns *c.* 1795 runs along similar lines:

O whare are ye goin', my ain pretty May,
Unto the yowes a-milkin', kind sir, she says.
What if I gang alang wi' thee, my ain pretty May,
Wad I be aught the warse o' that, kind sir, she says.

Versions collected in the 1930s refer, perhaps, to the potential for coecion that such encounters represent:

I wish you guid morning, my pretty fair maid
Thank you for going, kind sir, she says.

❧

Freud: It seems a completely unrealistic notion to send women into the struggle for existence in the same way as men. Am I to think of my delicate sweet girl as a competitor? After all, the encounter could only end by my telling her, as I did 17 months ago, that I love her, and that I will make every effort to get her out of the competitive role into the quiet undisturbed activity of my home. It is possible that a different education could suppress all women's delicate qualities - which are so much in need of protection and yet so powerful – with the result that they could earn their living like men. It is also possible that in this case it would not be justifiable to deplore the disappearance of the most lovely thing the world has to offer us: our ideal of womanhood. But I believe that all reforming activity, legislation and education, will founder on the fact that long before the age at which a profession can be established in our society, Nature will have appointed woman by her beauty, charm and goodness to do something else. - *Freud, in a letter to his wife, criticising J S Mill's essay,* The Emancipation of Women.[1]

Darwin: Woman seems to differ from man in mental disposition, chiefly in her greater tenderness and less selfishness; and this holds good even with savages...Woman, owing to her maternal instincts, displays these qualities towards her infants in an eminent degree, and therefore it is likely that she should often extend them towards her fellow creatures...

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than a woman can attain – whether requiring deep thought, reason or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music, – comprising composition and performance, history, science and philosophy, with half-a-dozen names under each subject, the two lists would not bear comparison... - *From* The Descent of Man, *in a chapter on the mental powers of men and women. In this chapter Darwin refutes a point made by Mill about women's potentially superior intellectual powers.*

Reproduction

In this exhibition, references to ideas about women are crafted, appropriately, in materials suitable for the endless reproduction of objects. Felt and cane are the readily available everyday materials used in cottage industries and sheltered workshops to produce such useful domestic items as cushions and baskets.

Plaster casting not only permits infinite reproduction, but the manufacture of the mould recalls some of the mechanical aspects of sex. The positive cast of the object is produced by pouring wet plaster into a latex-protected space, this being the negative of the object that results when the plaster hardens. The latex must be lubricated to permit the two parts, positive and negative, to be disengaged.

References to conception - if not coition - abound. The pure white figure of the milkmaid, placed so the eyes must rise reverentially in contemplation, invokes the image of the ideal woman who conceived immaculately. Gazing down upon the turkey baster, we are reminded of less immaculate – but equally sexless – methods of conception.

The bicycle seat, cast in plaster, is reborn as the fragment of a girlie bedroom, complete with diagonal quilting and ruffle. This innocence can be set against the sinister connotation of the object: town bike, a term used to describe the girl viciously or wistfully ascribed as possessing an excess of sexual eagerness or compliance.

Read literally as a physical entity, the bicycle seat is also a cast of the space

between the legs. That space between the legs of women leads, disturbingly, to the womb.

❧

As Darwin has pointed out, the most primitive and simple life forms originated in water. We learn in biology lessons at school that the reproductive systems of the amphibians, insects, birds and mammals must replicate the watery conditions of the swamp or sea to provide the medium in which the sex cells may unite. Hence, as we learn from pornography and from the behaviour of our bodies, wet is better than dry. Woman, then, is not so much the dark continent but the inland sea, one into which man's tributaries might flow. While courting Emma Wedgwood, Charles Darwin wrote in his diary: "Sexual desire makes saliva to flow [,] yes certainly...one's tendency to kiss, & almost to bite, that which one sexually loves is probably connected with the flow of saliva..."

A long line of philosophers since Aristotle have found that the feminine principle is cool and moist, the masculine warm and dry. According to the ancient Greeks, the father provides the formative principle, the real causal force of generation, while the mother provides the matter that nourishes the received form. Aristotle reasoned that those of moister and more feminine states of body are more likely to beget females and the more liquid is the semen, the more likely its issue will be female.

This account of reproduction conceives of the female body as an economy of so much juice. In Aristotle's scheme, women who suckle children do not menstruate. Nor do they conceive - or if they do, the milk dries up. According to Aristotle, this is because "the nature of the milk and of the menses is the same, and nature cannot be so productive as to supply both at once; if the secretion is diverted in the one direction it must needs cease in the other, unless some violence is done contrary to the general rule."

This view of women as the more liquid of the two sexes was consistent with the table of ten oppositions set down by the Pythagoreans in the 6th century BC. In this table of oppositions, which includes male/female, good/bad, limit/unlimited and rest/motion, maleness is aligned with active, determinate form, and, femaleness with passive, indeterminate matter. Hence, for the Ancients, and for the modern philosophers who came after them, women's incapacity to reason is directly linked to their reproductive function, their association with Nature rather than Culture.

This is consistent with the understanding of hysteria, determined by its etymological origin in the Greek word for uterus. Hysteria, a set of inexplicable and deviant behaviours, was recorded in Egypt as early as1900 BC., when it was attributed to the flight of the uterus up and away from its normal position. Hysteria would be associated with women until the mid-nineteenth century, when the French neurologist Charcot, under whom Freud studied, shifted its cause from the uterus to the nervous system.

Reason and Revolution

Man's ability to reason became the founding justification for the rights of man, proclaimed during the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. While there were some individuals, men among them, who claimed that women also deserved equal social and political rights, most Enlightenment thinkers regarded women's powers of reason as limited, due to a view of

women's capacities as oriented towards the reproductive function. In the 1770s, for example, an Encycopedia entry found 'Woman' to be defined by her softness and her dampness, being 'uterine in temperament' and subject to specific sicknesses such as vaporous conditions.

The women who campaigned for equal rights during that period, then, were marginal figures. By arguing for women's capacity to reason as well as men, they defied Nature. Appearing in public, they also cast their own morality into doubt and their political views, even those who supported the popular Revolutionary cause, were regarded as suspect. For the supporters of the old régime, the word 'Revolution' was associated with 'debauch', and the term 'Liberty' with 'libertinage'. The Rights of Man were likewise likened to the rights of the sexes to do as they wished. As a consequence, every 'free' man was a man who enjoyed the favours of women, and every 'free' woman a woman who enjoyed the favours of men.

Ann-Joseph Theroigne was one such woman. A minor celebrity in the French Revolution, and one of its victims, her extraordinary life testifies to the dangers and difficulties confronting women during that period. The exile and vilification she suffered as a result of her involvement in politics sent her to the Salpetrière, where she spent the last twenty-four years of her life.

The story of this woman is one point of departure for the work in this exhibition. But her face does not appear, as the faces of Freud and Darwin do, because her ideas counted for less than the ideas others had about her: as a kept woman, as a free woman supporting the revolutionary cause, and finally, as a madwoman confined to the Salpetrière.

Theroigne de Mericourt was born in 1772 to a well to do peasant family. As a girl, she worked as a cowherd, then as a governess. At 20, she was seduced by an English infantry officer who promised to marry her but instead gave her money, whereupon she embarked on a déclassé existence in Paris and London as a kept woman. A daughter born to her, unacknowledged by the father, died of smallpox. Ill with venereal disease, Theroigne was treated with mercury.

As the historian Roudinesco points out, the early life of this woman was one that would make her thrill to the promises of liberty and equality held out by the Revolution. Renouncing men to devote herself to its cause, she attended the Constituent Assembly where the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was proclaimed. Her political activities included founding, with others, the Society of the Friends of the Law, for which she was the archivist. These activities earned her the abuse of the Royalist press, who represented her as a diseased and wanton woman.

Abducted and questioned by royalists, Theroigne de Mericourt was confined in exile for a year before being allowed to return to Paris. There she resumed her active involvement in the Revolutionary cause, initiating a Festival of Liberty and making a speech at one of the Societies about the need for battalions of Amazons to help the cause of the Revolution. Becoming embroiled in its factional politics, she was publicly whipped by Jacobin women in front of the National Convention.

A year after that public humiliation, Theroigne de Mericourt was arrested for making 'suspect remarks', and made to appear before a Revolutionary Tribunal. She was, at that time, manifesting the signs of delusions of persecution, and at the request of her brother, she was released from arrest into his care. A few months afterwards, he committed her to a madhouse.

Theroigne De Mericourt spent the last twenty four years of her life in the confinement of madhouses, the last ten of them in the Salpetrière.

MADNESS

For Roudinesco, the periods before and after the French Revolution can be characterised as psychic states giving expression to the afflictions of the social body as a whole:

Just as, in the aftermath of the 'traumatic shock' of the Commune, hysteria – a condition theorised by Charcot – was to become the chief illness of the closing years of the century, so too did melancholia seem, on the eve of the Revolution, to be the main symptom of the ennui produced by the poisonous atmosphere of the old society... Where women were concerned, melancholia was often linked to the famous illness of the vapours, which was sometimes blamed upon the spleen, sometimes upon the uterus, the imaginary locus of sexuality.

The simple and minimal appearance of this exhibition appears to treat its subject - ideas about women - with dry amusement. In the place of the face of the basket case, we find the figure of the milkmaid, traditionally an image of appealing but vulnerable sexuality, but rendered here as a proud strong woman in a pose evoking portraits of female revolutionaries. This hybrid creature testifies to the weird and bloody progress of women's claim to reason in a flow of ideas, solidifying - like so many pools of spilt milk - into history.

May Lam

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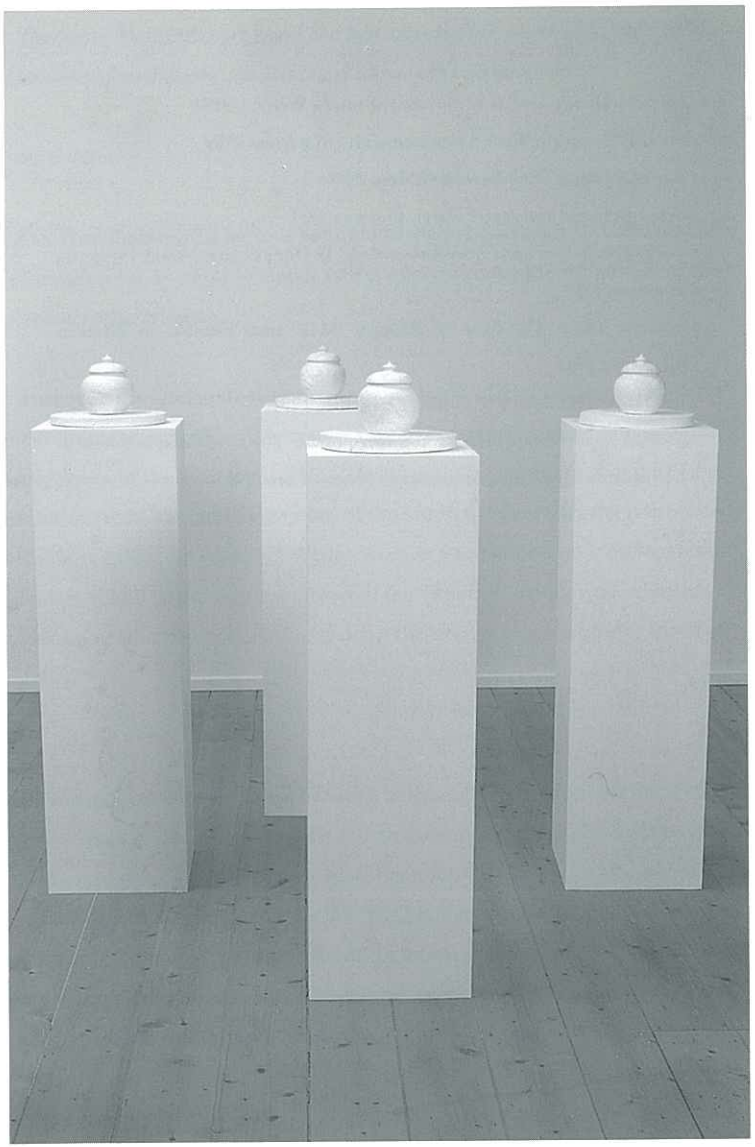

THE CHILD IS FATHER OF THE MAN

My first response looking at *Conversation between Freud and Darwin* was pleasure at seeing these bearded men of science together adorning the same scene. They're both writers I still turn to for insights about human nature - not so much the grand passions, but minor acts that give texture to everyday life, such as smiles, tears and even blushes. It's not a completely innocent pleasure I get from their knowledge. From the distance of several generations, Freud and Darwin both appear as patriarchs instituting a natural logic for what today are considered social constructions. Freud has his 'penis envy' and Darwin his 'survival of the fittest' - both are instruments for engineering sexual and social inequality.

Freud's *Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis*, published in 1917, constructed a genealogy of revelation which sandwiched Darwin between Copernicus and himself as a man whose 'biological research destroyed man's supposedly privileged place in creation and proved his descent from the animal kingdom and his ineradicable animal nature'. While in Freud's time he lined up with Darwin at the barricades of science, now the victory has been won, we might think of other contexts in which they join hands.

Eramsus Darwin proposed that an infant's joy at the breast was the origin of the highest aesthetic undertakings. This was confirmed by his grandson, Charles, who presumed from the 'swimming eyes' of his own son at the breast the first sensations of pleasure. In his *New Introductory Lectures* (1933), Freud expressed the hope that his own theories would win the same consensus as Darwin's *Origin of the Species* had achieved since it was published when Freud was three years old. Darwin played Polybus to Freud's Oedipus: the world of science promised to redeem Freud from the suffering assigned to his race. Horizontally, these men of science pass the

shuttle of knowledge, but vertically they are held by their own place in the warp as their own father's sons.

Neoclassicism offers an aesthetic complement to this forgetting. Joshua Wedgwood developed jasper-ware as a very precise science that gave him absolute control over the work of his individual technicians. Looking at these hairy men of reason, spoken for in the decorative language of flora and fauna, it is possible to feel the tension between canonisation and desire.

Kevin Murray

Images

1. Homage to a Milkmaiden 1993
plaster, wicker basket
170.5 x 50 x 50 cm
collection: the artist

2. BOO! 1994
plaster, felt, white pedestal
122 x 30 x 40 cm
collection: the artist

3. Homage to a Milkmaiden 1993
plaster, felt cushions
170.5 x 35 x 35 cm
collection: the artist

4. detail
Conversation between Freud and Darwin 1992
plaster
15 x 26 x 26 cm (including base)
4 pieces on white pedestals
collection: the artist

5. Spill 1994
plaster, felt
153.5 x 194 x 200 cm
collection: the artist

6. Conversation between Freud and Darwin 1992
plaster
15 x 26 x 26 cm (including base)
4 pieces on white pedestals
collection: the artist

7. Turkey Baster 1993
plaster
9 x 36 x 18 cm
collection: the artist

8. Untitled (Bike seat) 1993
plaster
14 x 37 x 27 cm
collection: the artist

9. Milk Pale 1993
plaster
35 x 40 x 33 cm (including base)
collection: the artist

JAN NELSON

born 1955 Melbourne, Australia

selected solo exhibitions

1984
Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne
1986
Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne
1987
70 Arden Street, Melbourne
1989
Loss and Faith, Realities Gallery, Melbourne
1991
The Long Century, Realities Gallery, Melbourne
1994
Australian Centre for Conrtemporary Art, Melbourne
Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne

selected group exhibitions

1985
Australian Perspecta '85, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
1986
What Is This Thing Called Science?, University Gallery, University of Melbourne, Melbourne
Voyage of Discovery, Dallas, Texas
Quiddity, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne: Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide
The Gothic: Perversity and its Pleasure, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne; Chameleon Gallery, Hobart
Backlash, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1988
Phillip Morris Collection, Australian National Gallery, Canberra
Loti and Victor Smorgon Collection of Australian Art, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
1989
Recent Acquisitions, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
re:creation/ Recreation, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne
1990
Installation Publication, Studio 10, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne
Platform, Spencer St Station, Melbourne
1991
Recent Acquisitions, Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane
Contemporary Landscapes, Deakin University, Victoria
1992
Inherited Absolute, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
Skin, Contemporary Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
1993
A Collaborative Project - Jan Nelson & Stephen Bush, Temple Studio, Melbourne
Interim Space, Smith Street Post Office, Melbourne
Confess and Conceal, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
1994
The Aberrant Object: Women Dada and Surrealism, Museum of Modern Art at Heide

selected bibliography

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Memory Holloway, *Shipwrecked*, catalogue text, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, 1986
Robyn McKenzie, *The Gothic: Perversity and its Pleasure*, catalogue text, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, 1987
Ted Gott, *Backlash*, catalogue text, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne 1987
Naomi Cass, *What is this Thing called Science?*, catalogue text, University of Melbourne, Melbourne 1988
Louise Neri, *Quiddity*, catalogue text, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, 1988
Merryn Gates, *re-creation/Re:creation*, catalogue text, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, 1989
Brenda Ludeman, 'Loss and Faith', *Agenda: Contemporary Art Magazine* No. 7/8, 1989, pp.4-6
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Stuart Koop, *Contemporary Landscapes*, catalogue text, Deakin University Gallery, Victoria, 1991
Jude Adams, 'Something Borrowed, Nothing Blue, Something Old, Nothing New', *Artlink* No.2, 1992, pp.73-7

Confess and Conceal, catalogue text, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 1993
Juliana Engberg, Robyn Mckenzie, Kenneth Wach and Anne Marsh, *The Aberrant Object: Women Dada and Surrealism*, catalogue texts, Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne, 1994
Barbara Creed, 'The Aberrant Object: Women Dada and Surrealism', *Art Monthly*, May 1994 No. 69

collections

National Gallery of Victoria
Art Gallery of Western Australia
Queensland Art Gallery
Monash University Collection
Loti and Victor Smorgon Collection
BHP Collection
Shell Collection
ACTU Collection
IXL Collection
Monash Medical Centre Collection
private collections

Jan Nelson is represented by Robert Lindsay Gallery

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