

Suzanne Treister

Q. Would  
you  
recognise  
a Virtual  
Paradise?

*Q. Would you recognise a Virtual Paradise? 1993 oil on canvas 90 x 55 cms*



# “We’re not in Kansas any more Toto....”

In opposition to the strongly graphic Christian belief system, Judaism has only the vaguest picture of what the after-life may be, this haziness occasioned through there being no strong idea of the continuation of the individual psyche or the individual soul after the mortal coil has been departed. This leads to a mindframe in which the abstract is easily accommodated, as concepts exist within the abstract rather than wrapped up in the anthropomorphization of the early church, for instance, the wise old man with a white beard and extremely clean robes. In the beginning was the word. Would you recognise a virtual paradise?



Fictional video game still - *Dream Monster* - photograph from monitor, dimensions variable, 1991.

The virtual, or even the interactive operates outside the dictates of linearity - even though each individual experience does necessarily operate within the linear time-frame. However, each interaction or manipulation suggests the manifold possibilities of the other interactions that are, at the very moment of action, not embarked on. This leads to the mental model of a positively JB Priestlian tree of potentials and choices and triggers. In my beginning there are innumerable ends. Each choice makes crowd forth the ghosts of all the other possible choices that are not made, which are brought into being through not being done: this ghostly host multiplied at each stage of the progress, existing in the same space and time of the actual choices made. Thus certainties cease to exist and the text becomes one of all the other texts that can be inscribed, erased and re-inscribed within the multi-dimensional realms of the hypertext, each narrative simultaneously there/not there, this multi-generation taking place in a space that is also there/not there.

Within this complex of actualities and their others, all laws

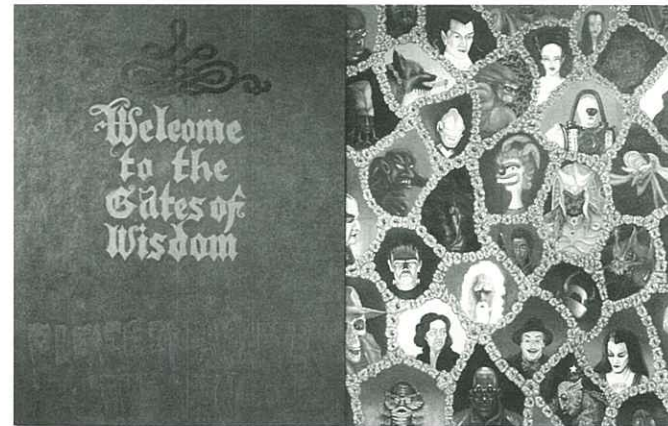
become suspended, as the antithesis of each law is also there, as well as a time in which there was no law. In this environment histories become unanchored. Everything is up for grabs, to the extent that even the matrix for this there/not there space - that of technology, the computer, whatever - becomes unnecessary or redundant. The space has floated away, surrounded, enfolded the point that at one time anchored it, to subsume that point within it. The idea, the dream (monster) is entirely enough. It is a new cliché of techno-talk that William Gibson, the creator of ‘cyber-space’ was computer illiterate when inscribing the concept in language, but in this he was prognosticating the future of this technospace, which would dissolve the machine, dissolve its own history, so that it now exists within language, within concepts, without a point of origin and with no boundaries, and which encompasses all that we have ever known. Therefore our own histories, personal and social, have to be read as the results of active choice rather than an inevitable development, which in turn demands that there be some responsibility for the choices made, as the ghosts of those routes not taken loom large.

Here/not here we have different series of works. One of computer discs/software packages that suggest/map the space and connections between the images and/or texts, there are stills from a video game that exist only outside a video game - even though puzzlingly we have to believe that they exist on a video screen- and a series of paintings that are interlinked and make up a larger work that is a representation (and only one of many possible others) of the landscape of a virtual world.

The castle in the landscape of this space is not the stone expression of The Law, in the way that castles in our present space have been considered to have been, simultaneously signifying and promulgating expressions of hierarchy and structure. Rather this castle is a law unto itself. For a start it changes size rather alarmingly, and occasionally it will/has float(ed) off to become a castle in its space. In the air. Castles in the air manage the strange trick of simultaneously existing and not existing. An exemplar of this strange state being either (and both) the castle built by mad Prince Ludwig in Bavaria which expressed concretely all the castles that had never been, which in turn became, or caused, the Disney castle which in two dimensions lived in film before popping through a third dimension to appear in the USA, then back flat for the TV screen, before it (the same castle) started hovering over France. As can be seen, once we have a virtual castle in virtual space all other ‘real’ castles that we have considered to be solid, mute, imovable, become contaminated with the virtual and start to flux, move and lose focus in a most distressing manner, almost flickering out of existence if we avert our eyes.

That these are narrative paintings is indisputable, and many of the roots of the narrative, both of the paintings and the world

that they are narrating, lie within the field of *fantasy* or in fantastic fiction. This in turn draws from the dark Gothic world of the fairy-tale. Castles, dungeons, dragons, a context within which all is made animate. This realm has always been one that contains and articulates occluded hopes and fears, and which, through the suspension of *ordinary* cause and effect and the acceptance of the non-linear has mapped possibilities and nightmares. It is a commonplace of pop psychology that these stories and the terrain that these stories transverse are isomorphs of the subconscious and of atavistic structures of belief and meaning.



*Welcome to the Gates of Wisdom*, 1992, oil on canvas  
2 panels each 210 x 165 cms

The Victorians and the Romantics had a particular fascination for *the land of Faery* and for the fantastic, and it is tempting to see this as a reaction to the increasingly structured systems of capital and production that were the results of the industrial revolution and its resultant technological innovations. It is fitting that a descendant of Babbage's calculating engine has been the catalyst for the creation of a new space of hypothesis which has overlapped and subsumed many of the mechanics and images of the fantastic, and which is, like the world of the Grimm Brothers, *active*, in which all has, or has the potential of meaning, action, and animation. In virtual space or in the computer game the dungeon may speak, the picture change, and objects and events align themselves in (paranoid) matrixes of meaning that surround and enfold the traveller.

The causal link between the realms of the fantastic and the irrational and those of the technological is neither new nor surprising, one helping define the other as in a thesis and antithesis. Necessarily the two realms must also invade and duplicate each other, especially when *technology* and its developments pick up such an hallucinogenic vortex of speed to change tense as so to exist in future possibility as well as current ubiquity. This overlapping not only generates the models and languages of science fiction, but within the *real world* it produces advanced exploratory technological cultures such as that of Nazi Germany with its combinations of rocketry and the Brothers Grimm, the auto-bahn and astrology, and the

mechanisation and technologisation of blood libels, as well as the current debates and rhetorics in publications such as *Mondo 2000* which combine the languages of hi-tech with the millenianistic eschatologies of re-wiring and re-invention that are from both the drug cultures of the sixties and older mystic narratives of gnosis and the loss of the physical self. Any history of these millenianistic movements makes clear that more often than not they end in exploitation, destruction, and death. As if the drive towards a too-concrete paradise necessarily invokes the bloody termination of those who seek (or seek to impose) that paradise.

The software packages and the paintings here recognise the false equation of *technology* with *rationality*, or that technology is the inevitable fruit of the enlightenment. The use of the languages of the romantic - the seascape, the Bavarian castle, the library interior - inevitably draws us back to certain European contexts that are melancholy in their implication and in their histories, and which cast long and dark shadows over what are usually the sunny horizons of a techno-clean future. In their combinations of European romanticisms and the *new* spaces of technology, inevitably previous histories of such combinations are remembered, even if within this context these are but one of many possible histories, depending on which line is pushed on the menu-board and which choice is taken.

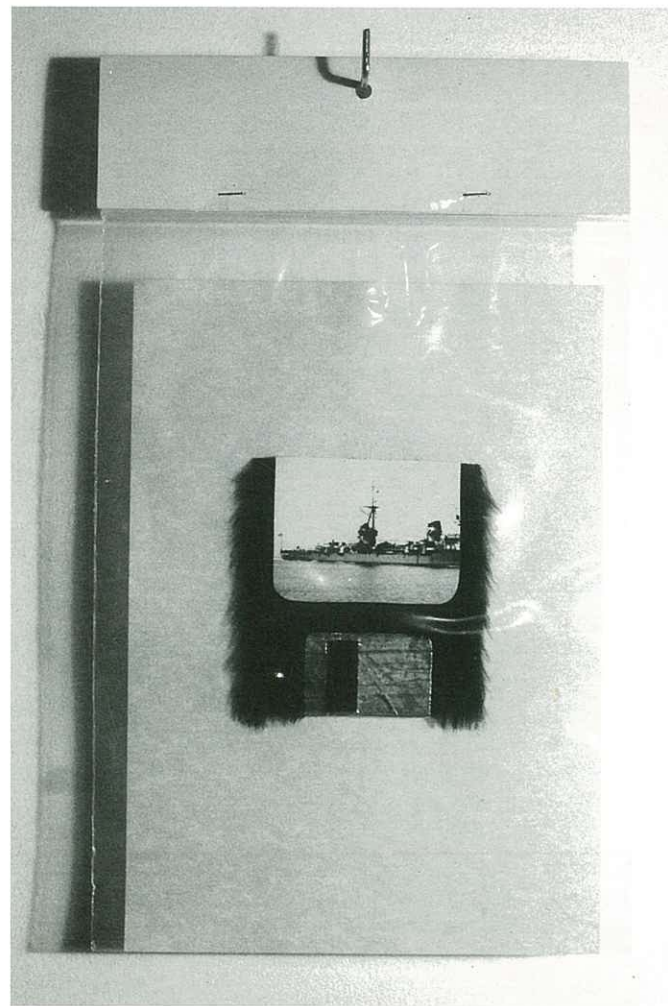
This is not to say that these works are dystopian. That is too easy and clichéd a reaction. The works map out areas of love and desire, even if love morphs in the space into a Gothic articulation. Rather they celebrate the possibilities of this space, that is now all around us, but remind us that slates are never wiped clean. Currently there is a great temptation to see the possible spaces presented as a value-free zone, one which offers the possibility of escape from the specifics of a certain narrative. An example of this is the way that *techno-porn* is currently popular, as if the fact that the *newness* of the format somehow eradicates or erases the previous structures of value and power inscribed in the pornographic, whilst it becomes only too clear - as if it had not become clear before in various histories of various revolutions, from the Beghards through to the play-power generation - that structures rebuild themselves in different contexts if the structure is merely forgotten or ignored, rather than actively dismantled.

A virtual paradise is a complex thing full of contradictions, ambiguities and monsters. It is not the uncomplicated idiot nivarna of the techno-dorks with smart drugs and disease-free virtual sex, neither is it the necessarily evil dehumanised space of the two-culture dystopians to whom any innovation defines a space of anxiety, plotting how bad things have gone since way back when. Rather the virtual-paradise – which we may not recognise to be a paradise at all – is a space of play, but a space in which play has to be taken



seriously since all decisions have their actions and reactions and nothing is without implication. The dungeons have their dragons, and the dragons have teeth, and dragon's teeth when cast to the ground grow into soldiers as Jason found in pursuit of the Golden Fleece. The virtual world is also not virtual, it is actual. In both, the bodies of action that constitute play have shadows; a virtual paradise is the product of various actions, reactions and interactions, as well as containing and reproducing these. Technology has too often been a final solution, and Suzanne Treister's work, in suggesting the many possibilities that this space has generated – and in mapping its spread into and over and within the realms of language and imagination and articulating some of its various histories and narratives – also articulates the ambiguity and danger of Heaven in both the *real* and the *actual* world.

Richard Grayson.



*Floating Driver (software)* 1993, mixed media, 30 x 20 cms

## Suzanne Treister

Surveying Suzanne Treister's recent oeuvre it would be all too easy to reach for a quote from the annals of cyberpunk fiction. William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, perhaps even J.G. Ballard: all of these authors apparently trade in the same cybernetic hallucinations and futuristic paradoxes as Treister. Indeed, it's such well-worn turf now, this techno-art scenario, it's almost possible there's a computer program lurking out there which could write this catalogue essay itself. Just feed it some notes on the artist and it could do the rest – jargon-laden hyped-up prose, quasi-mystical discussions of time travel, a little high-tech millenarianism, a preference for simulation, obligatory paradoxes... The writer's dream: a readymade catalogue essay, a simulation which would doubtless amuse the artist even as it entirely missed her point.

Unfortunately for writers dreaming of automatic essays, Treister's work is an arch reminder that our dreams of the future are still wired firmly into the present. Indeed, as Richard Grayson noted in a previous catalogue, her "visions of potentialities and babbled towers are built in a space that is in fact the virtual space of our language and our desires, not the computer".<sup>1</sup> The familiar prison-house of painting and catalogue writing.

Back to the keyboard, then, and some old-fashioned manual research. A less obvious, but ultimately more fruitful departure-point for examining Treister's work might be the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, whose wonderfully brief stories detail imaginary, symbolic worlds floating outside time and space. Like Treister, Borges was an admirer of science fiction and detective novels, which he used to explore a range of metaphysical paradoxes concerning the self, knowledge and time. In Borges's stories, fact and fiction and the real and the virtual are blurred: part, as one critic put it, of the same continuous being.

For Borges, metaphysics is a game for the mind. He takes ideas or possibilities and asks "what would happen if this notion was taken to its logical conclusion – what kind of world would result?". Extending this notion, Andre Maurios has written of Borges, that he believes that the world itself is a gigantic hallucination, that "it is we who have dreamed the universe. We can see in what it consists, the deliberately constructed interplay of the mirrors and mazes of this thought, difficult but always acute and laden with secrets. In all these stories we find roads that fork, corridors that lead nowhere, except to other corridors, and so on as far as the eye can see. For Borges this is an image of human thought..."<sup>2</sup>

Treister's recent oeuvre describes a similarly Labyrinthine

world. Her 1991/1992 fictional video-game still set the viewer a series of impossible commands and questions. "You have reached the gates of wisdom. Tell us what you have seen!". "How long has this been going on?" "Are you dreaming?" "Have you been sentenced to a fate worse than death?" Every still is a fragment of an untold story illustrated by a series of elusive clues and red herrings.

It's a theme Treister extended in her 1992 exhibition, *Between the clues lies the Evidence*. One wall of the gallery was covered with small plastic bags, labelled alphabetically – clues to a supposed crime detailed in the series. The key work – a large figurative piece depicting a woman's hand holding a knife and cutting into a Black Forest cake – reinforced this impression. The lush dark tones and the unusual cropping of the image – the action takes place in the background of the work and the woman is only visible from the waist down – gave it a Gothic, sinister feel. The other paintings were large abstract works inscribed with camouflaged text. After a great deal of peering they gave up their laconic messages: "*Blinded by the text*", "*New Fictions*", "*Voyeuristic Deserts*" and "*A lost-last fantasy-fiction which floats on the surface of occlusion...*". The spectator-detective had only succeeded in tracking down himself.

These works are metaphors for our desire for structure and resolution in art : a desire Treister suggests contradicts the core of art's *raison d'être*. It's a notion that extends by analogy to other broader systems which structure our world. Each of Treister's pictures or objects are a piece of fictional evidence which is supposed to fit into a larger picture. The viewer sets about connecting these pieces of evidence and in the process invents a story. The truth we see is ultimately a fiction. And Treister's clues are no more nonsensical or arbitrary than any of those we use to construct our truths about the everyday world. At the end of the day, she suggests as Borges has, all our stories about the world amount to no more than a combination of possible elements arranged in the closed system of language.

To tease these notions out of Treister's work, however, is not to suggest she takes a pessimistic view of culture. On the contrary, Treister's oeuvre gestures towards a flip side of formal systems: to the aesthetic possibilities inherent in the unexpected return of the everyday, and of all that our formal systems exclude. It's a notion which is most clearly articulated in her recent imagined software packages. Each suggests a bizarre scenario: a thought bubble skimmed off the surface of the artist's unconscious. The titles say it all – *Geranium Lake monochrome: basic, Ritual and tradition - Beyond the politics of cufflinks, New mutant software 1/2/3, Death, hospitals, morgues - 200 views* – suggesting alternately the erotic, the fetishistic, the mad, the everyday: the whole landscape, in essence, of what is repressed or unrecognised by our systems of truth.

Ultimately, Treister suggests our systems are not as hermetically sealed to the human and the chaotic as the rationalists would like to think. Something turns in the gaps. Consumers (like spectators) produce something too when they consume. They invent their own tales and insert their own stories into the relentlessly productive systems of our technological era.

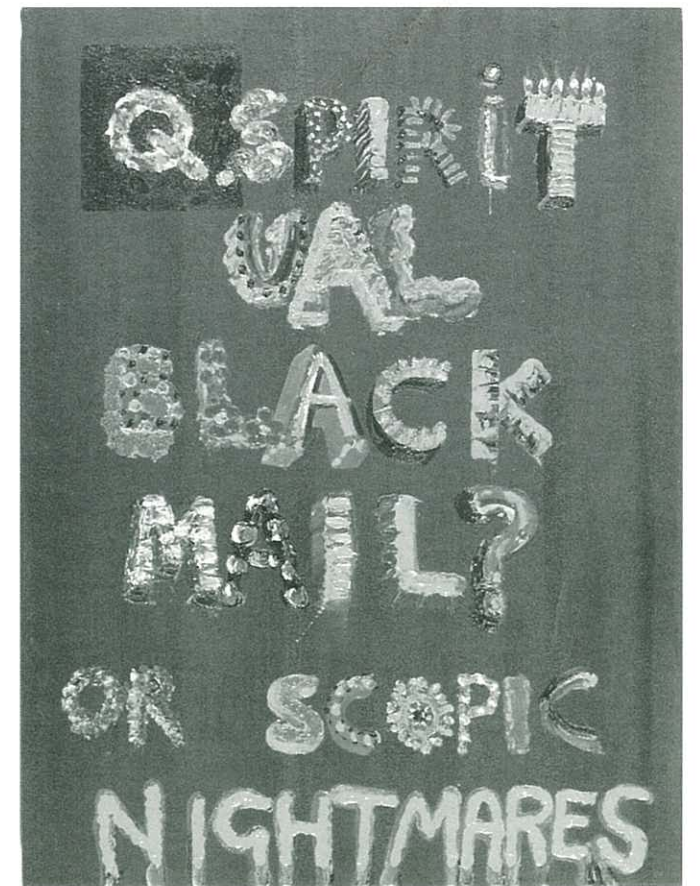
As in Borge's most famous story, *The Library of Babel*, there is more than a formalist game at stake in Treister's work. At bottom, she is an idealist who points to the aesthetic possibilities within our labyrinthine systems of knowledge. In a similar vein, James Irby writes of Borges, that he "is the dreamer who learns he is the dreamed one, the detective deceived by the hidden patterns of crimes, the perplexed Averroes whose ignorance mirrors the authors' own. And yet each of these intimate failures is turned into an artistic triumph."<sup>3</sup>

Catherine Lumby

<sup>1</sup> Grayson, R. *Software*, catalogue essay for Suzannne Treister's software exhibition, August – September, 1993, The Union Gallery, Adelaide.

<sup>2</sup> Maurois, A. Preface, *Labyrinths*, ed Yates, D and Irby, J., Penguin, 1970. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 20.



*Q. Spiritual blackmail ? or scopio nightmares*, 1992. Oil on canvas 60 x 45 cms





Software 1993, mixed media, eight programs from a series of 45, each 22 x 16 x 4 cm (x2)

## Suzanne Treister Curriculum Vitae

- |           |                             |
|-----------|-----------------------------|
| 1958      | Born in England             |
| 1963 – 77 | Educated in London          |
| 1977 – 78 | Brighton Polytechnic        |
| 1978 – 81 | St Martins School of Art BA |
| 1981 – 82 | Chelsea School of Art MA    |
- 
- Solo Exhibitions**
- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1985 | Edward Totah Gallery, London   |
| 1988 | Edward Totah Gallery, London   |
| 1990 | Edward Totah Gallery, London<br>Ikon Gallery, Birmingham: Major Arts Council<br>exhibition travelling to: Spacex, Exeter;<br>Oldham Art Gallery: The Minorities, Colchester;<br>Darlington Arts Centre; Nottingham Castle Art<br>Gallery, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin |
| 1992 | Edward Totah Gallery, London<br>post west, Adelaide  |
| 1993 | <i>Q. Would you recognise a Virtual Paradise?</i><br>Exeter Hotel, Adelaide.<br><i>Recorded Evidence : Prosthetic Speech</i><br>[RE] Gallery, Adelaide<br><i>Software</i> Union Gallery, University of Adelaide  |
| 1994 | Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia<br>Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,<br>Melbourne   |
- 
- Group Exhibitions**
- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 1981      | <i>Stowells Trophy</i> , Royal Academy, London   |
| 1982      | <i>Chelsea at Canterbury</i> , Canterbury School of Art  |
| 1982 – 83 | <i>Images for Today</i> , Touring exhibition<br>sponsored by Sainsburys  |
| 1983      | Leicestershire Exhibition for Schools and<br>Colleges<br>The Gallery, Acme Studios, Acre Lane, London<br>Gallery 39, London  |
| 1984      | <i>Whitechapel Open</i> ,<br>Whitechapel Art Gallery, London<br><i>Open Drawing Exhibition</i> ,<br>White Space Gallery, London<br>Galerie Davidson, Berlin (2 person show)<br>Warwick Arts Trust, London  |
| 1985      | <i>Nature Morte</i> , Edward Totah Gallery, London<br><i>Open Exhibition</i> , Riverside Studios, London   |
| 1986      | <i>Love, Sacred and Profane</i> , Plymouth Arts Centre<br>and Stoke Museum and Gallery<br><i>10 Painters</i> , St Martins School of Art, London<br>Forum, Edward Totah gallery, Zurich Art Fair<br><i>Living Art Pavilion</i> , Arts Council<br>at the Ideal Home Exhibition, London<br><i>Interference</i> , Riverside Studios, London<br><i>4 British Artists</i> ,<br>Edward Bates Gallery, Chicago USA |
| 1986 – 87 | <i>The Golden Thread? Classical Mythology in<br/>Contemporary Art</i> ,<br>Harris Museum and Art Gallery and touring   |
| 1987      | Edward Totah Gallery, London<br>Edward Bates Gallery, Chicago<br><i>Kunst Rai '87</i> , Edward Totah Gallery,<br>Amsterdam Art Fair  |

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 1988 | <i>New Brits: Contemporary British and Scottish<br/>Painting</i> The Contemporary Arts Center,<br>Cincinnati, Ohio, USA and tour<br><i>Object and Image: British Art in the 1980s</i> ,<br>City Museum and Art Gallery Stoke-on-Trent<br><i>Figuring Out the '80s</i><br>Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne<br><i>Something solid</i> ,<br>Cornerhouse Gallery, Manchester<br><i>Whitechapel Open</i> , London<br><i>It's a still-life</i> ,<br>Arts Council Collection, London and Tour.  |
| 1989 | <i>XVI Festival International de la Peinture</i> ,<br>Cagnes-sur-Mer, France<br><i>Whitechapel Open</i> , London<br>John Moores, Liverpool   |
| 1990 | <i>Decoy</i> Serpentine Gallery, London<br><i>Global Art</i> , Brent Gallery and Galleria,<br>Houston Texas<br><i>London, passim</i> , Casa Veneta, Trieste<br><i>Whitechapel Open</i> ,<br>Whitechapel Gallery, London<br><i>Homage to the Square</i> , Flaxman Gallery, London   |
| 1991 | <i>A Painting Exhibition in Two Parts</i> ,<br>Todd Gallery, London  |
| 1992 | <i>Whitechapel Open</i> ,<br>Whitechapel Gallery, London<br><i>Blast from the Past</i> , Minorities Gallery, Colchester<br><i>New Voices</i> , British Council Exhibition,<br>Centre de Conférences<br>Albert Borschette, Brussels<br><i>Walls 1</i> , Union Gallery, Adelaide University<br><i>20th Century Women's Art</i> ,<br>New Hall College, Cambridge University<br><i>Presumed Innocent</i><br>(collaborative installation with 8 artists)<br>post west, Adelaide<br>Edward Totah Gallery, London<br><i>Nothing is (Hidden)</i> (collaborative installation<br>with Pamela Golden, Andrew Renton and<br>Linda Levinson),<br><i>Rear Window</i> , London |
| 1993 | <i>New Voices Jeunes Artistes Britanniques</i> ,<br>Musée National d'Histoire et d'Art à Luxembourg<br><i>Hit and Run</i> A presumed Innocent collaborative<br>event, [RE] Gallery Adelaide<br><i>Moving into View</i> , work from the Arts Council<br>Collection, Royal Festival Hall, London<br><i>The return of the Cadavre Exquis</i><br>The Drawing Center, New York, USA<br>VITAE: A.I.P.#7, Fifth Sculpture Triennial,<br>RMIT Faculty Gallery, Melbourne   |
| 1994 | <i>Flat</i> Union Gallery, University of Adelaide  |
- 
- Collections**
- |                               |
|-------------------------------|
| Leicester County Council      |
| Leeds City Council            |
| Arts Council of Great Britain |
| Saatchi Collection            |
| British Council               |
| New Hall, Cambridge           |
| Nordstern Köln, Germany       |



Teaching  
1983 – 1992

Visiting lecturer: St Martins School of Art  
Chelsea School of Art  
Trent Polytechnic  
Bath School of Art  
Coventry Polytechnic  
Royal College of Art  
Goldsmiths College  
Kingston Polytechnic  
Glasgow School of Art  
Ruskin, Oxford

Awards  
1992

British Council Travel Grant

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*Time Out*, 18 – 25 April 1990  
*City Limits* 3 – 10 May 1990  
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Schlieker, Andrea

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*Time Out* 2-9 May 1990

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Feaver, William

'Landscapes of the Video Age',  
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*The Independent* 15 May 1990

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Hubbard, Sue

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14 Feb 1992

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16 February 1992

Searle, Adrian

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18 February 1992

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May/June 1992

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