



Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

INDELIBLE



eX de Medici and Kelly Leonard



eX de Medici lives and works, as an artist and a tattooist, in Canberra. In her opinion tattooing addresses basic signs as part of its development as a medium. Her Spectre drawings are fundamental signs whose recurrent presence through time reflects the prevailing mythologies and philosophies of the day, resurrected over and over – a Chinese whisper through the millennia. Love gone wrong.

Kelly Leonard came to Canberra in 1994 to undertake a Graduate Diploma of Art in textiles. Viewing cloth as located at the boundary between body and society, she sees her woven fabrics as being a second skin. Both her fabric and her skin act as a filter for cultural writing; and her fabric work mirrors concepts developed during the process of marking her own body through tattooing.

Kelly Leonard

Interviewed by Jim Logan

Canberra 23/11/96

JL: You actually came to art school in Canberra with a fairly mature standpoint, and a fairly strong idea of what you wanted, would that be fair to say?

KL: When I came to art school I thought, yes, I want to work with some sort of tattoo imagery on cloth.

JL: The devoré* technique you've used so far is quite small; the individual works are quite small in size.

KL: I've done lengths of fabric produced at the same time which were probably about 3 metres, where I could run text along and combine it with image. But with the word pieces I was thinking about rearranging the words, so then they had meaning from whatever words are next to them, what

context they're in. Bigger pieces I devoré'd out and then overprinted in Puff paint, which puffs up a bit like a scab when you apply heat to it.

JL: That's almost like blistering.

KL: The techniques I was using, both devoré and printing with Puff, are very much related to the idea of burning into the skin, and also what happens with a tattoo, the fresh healing process (so, very itchy, forming a scab, and then dropping away when it's healed).

JL: So your artwork and your own body are in many ways inexorably linked.

KL: Yes, very much so. Because I had quite a lot of tattoo work done by eX de Medici at the time I was weaving and doing the devoré work.

JL: What are you trying to say about words and layering, and the reading of the words together in your devoré works?

KL: The words are very much branding words. And they have had quite a mixed

reaction, quite strong emotions either way. A few people have been really angry with me for using certain words and having them on the wall.

JL: Saying things like Fag and Bitch and Queer?

KL: Some people have been offended by it. And the argument was, Why do you find it necessary to be so up front, so in-your-face? But, you know, it's not gay people saying that; so then how do you tell someone straight all the reasons why?

JL: That of course doesn't discount gay people having individual readings that, of course, have nothing necessarily to do with sexuality in all of that. I'm quite interested in the complexity of the work, not relying on contemporary clichés of gay culture. How do you feel your work actually relates to the broader, sort of more commercial representation of gay culture?

KL: I don't particularly care. I made it from an historical viewpoint. I was very much looking at language and the way language had changed contexts over time. I was interested in the way the meanings of words had changed, so what was once a branding word or an insult would then, through acquired usage by whatever group, have positive connotations. Like, Bitch to me has a really positive punch, real fist-in-the-air stuff.

JL: Yeah, I'm a bitch, you betcha! I've been working with a number of artists for whom, while their gayness is implicit in their work, it is not necessarily explicit in the context. With your work, are you

particularly interested in making sexuality explicit? Is that a position you choose to take or not; and what do you think of the use of sexual references?

KL: I don't think my work is sexually explicit. I'm using words that probably are sexually explicit, but for another reason – the word Cunt used as a branding word, for example.

JL: So you're not necessarily meaning to say, Hey, I'm a Bitch-Dyke to everyone in the audience? That is not a necessary statement for you in your work?

KL: No. I think other gay people will read the work as being done by a gay girl, but it doesn't matter to me or not whether a broader audience registers that. It's part of how I am, but it's very much related to a whole series of other models of reference that I'm looking at.

JL: What are the more secondary readings that you think are important in your devoré works?

KL: For me it is the conjunction of the texts with a woven cloth, which traditionally is not used as a vehicle for punchier work. So when I was making the work I was very much aware of the text in textiles, things inherent to textiles that say something.

JL: Why woven cloth?

KL: Weaving is a really traditional medium, that has been seen as a fairly daggy thing to do; and that's why I enjoy it too. I'm happy to move it into broader contexts. I had always thought of cloth as being a second skin. The weaving and devoré is

about how I record what has happened and what I'm on about. So what was happening to my skin, I then reinterpreted onto the cloth.

JL: From a gay perspective, of course, there is also that idea of categorising or boxing – 'You're a Queer', 'You're a Bitch', 'You're a Spinster'. But those sorts of labels can also be very liberating, so I presume that's part of your agenda as well?

KL: Yeah. That second reading, the appropriation of those words by the Queer community for empowerment, especially the word Bitch. And the different readings possible then by gay boys or girls.

*'devoré' or 'burn out' technique is a 20th century style which can give the effect of machine embroidery but is achieved chemically by resist paint and acid etching fabric.

eX de Medici

Interviewed by Ted Gott

Canberra 30/11/96

TG: What is the rationale behind your large drawings? What do you want people to read in them, or not read in them?

eX: Tattoos are a litany of signs and icons which, through various periods of time, have accrued layered readings. I'd been approached by many people who wanted a 'swaz' tattoo. Ultimately I felt that their intentions were not necessarily honourable. Being a fan of the swastika as a sign I

thought I would start looking at signifiers of this type. I think it unfortunate that time and events made the swastika such an emotive one. I started looking to the signs which represented right-wing groups around the globe.

TG: Do you worry about potential misinterpretation of these 'loaded' drawings?

eX: Potentially they could be taken, if someone chooses, as signs of my fascism. I accept that this could be a problem. In my work the swastika is not on a diamond, but on a square, which basically readdresses its antiquity. The Nazis changed the swastika's dynamic by putting it into the diamond. The triskelion is now the sign of the Broederbond of South Africa. Both have their roots in Nordic tribal culture; they are a logical extension for white minority groups. Beautiful signs for ugly people! So, if my drawings are taken out of my hands, that's that. Ultimately you come back to what viewers do with works after they've been made.

TG: Do you see any readings of these works in a Queer context?

eX: Definitely. Most right-wing groups perceive Queerness as an aberration of human nature.

TG: What about the background imagery behind the symbols, the worms and the creeping foliage?

eX: Worms are speedy in decaying matter. The swastika's glowing intentions were thwarted by Nazism. The colonising acanthus flourishes among the hijacked

triskelion. I wanted a feeling of pestilence to prevail. A Decay and Renaissance. These images arrived through the culture I work within. Signs and ideologies reflect the changing environment.

TG: Where do you stand personally in relation to tattooing?

eX: To tattoo another continually challenges. It is expansive, and determined by the ocean of variety within individuals who are prepared to participate in the mapping of their human experiences. I was attracted to the tattoo because it required collaboration; it had a secretive past and I could draw. When I started tattooing in 1989, being queer wasn't a good social tool within the culture, and a kind of Invisibility and Speculation still prevails.

TG: Well, you know what interests me is the rise of queer tattooing, especially in the age of AIDS. And I guess it's true to say that you are more or less considered to be the 'official' tattooist to the gay communities of Canberra and Sydney.

eX: I guess the last 5 or 6 years have proved to be explosive years for all of us. Something big is happening when we are prepared to wear our signs indelibly, despite the cloud of fascism. It reiterates some deep commitment to being OUT. A sign etched in our very flesh. Never forgotten.

TG: Well, this is what intrigues me about your large drawings. As they are symbols of fascism and fear and death, we are now as queers tattooing ourselves with symbols that mark us indelibly as targets. And we

are embracing our status as the Other. And marking it forever. And so, you know, I'm on the 'list', and so is every other person tattooed with the Rainbow Flag, or a pink triangle, or a black triangle, or an HIV+ sign, or the Bear. And I think it's wonderful that we're doing that. Like, I can't go to the swimming pool without everyone knowing I'm a poof. It's just physically impossible for me to take off my shirt without declaring, Yes, I am the Other. And that's cool.

eX: Tattooing is inscribing blood – it's a pact. And has immense psychological value. The fact that a queer symbol is inscribed and engraved in blood is also a sign of a much deeper kind of commitment to those kinds of ideals. We could probably have a Rainbow Flag sticker on our car, but that is removable; if things get hot, then you take that one off.

TG: It reinforces our commitment to being permanently OUT. It's not a phase we're going through!

List of works

eX de Medici

Spectre #1 (Swastika) 1995-96
coloured pencil on paper, 9 panels

Spectre #2 (Triskelion) 1996
coloured pencil on paper, 9 panels

Untitled (Full metal jacket) 1989

Untitled (Anchor) 1989

Untitled (Corset) 1989

Untitled (Wilde lieber) 1989

Untitled (Horns) 1989

Untitled (Bra) 1989

Untitled (Your face your disguise) 1989
all ballpoint on paper

I N D E L I B L E

eX de Medici and Kelly Leonard

Guest curators: Ted Gott and Jim Logan

Exhibition dates: 24 January - 2 March 1997

Part of midsummafestival

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Contemporary Art.

Design: Ian Robertson. Printing: Econoprint

Untitled (Dagger with snakes and red
wave) 1995, pencil on paper

The blood of 144 others 1989-96
blood on paper towels in 145 plastic
sandwich bags

Selected sketchbooks 1995-96

Kelly Leonard

Body Text 1995-96

stitched double cloth, devoré, cotton,
polyester, multi-panel installation

mum said don't bring home a girl with
tattoos 1995, cotton, polyester, woven
double cloth with devoré text

marked two yards of skin 1995
cotton, polyester and monofilament with
devoré text and Puff paint

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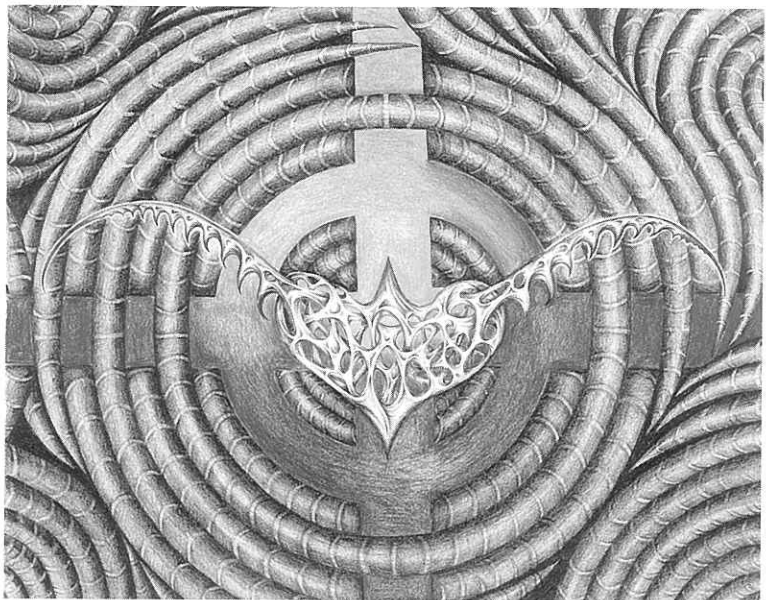
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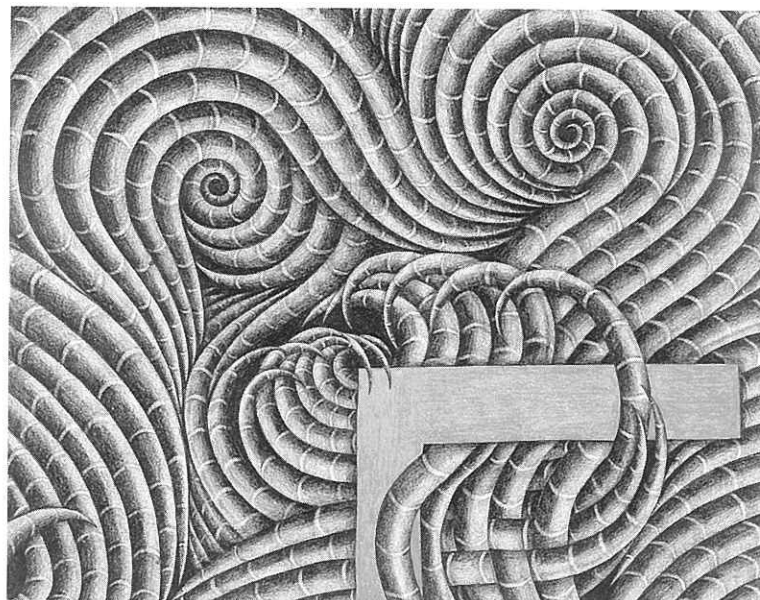


eX de Medici

Spectre #1 (Swastika) 1995-96 (detail)

coloured pencil on paper, 9 panels

Photography: Brenton McGeachie

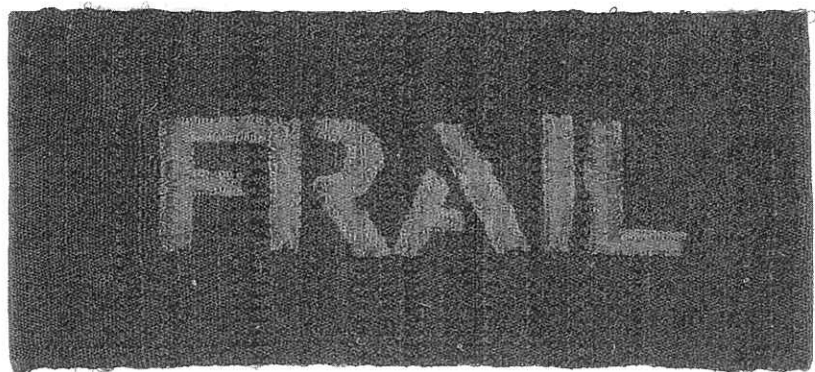


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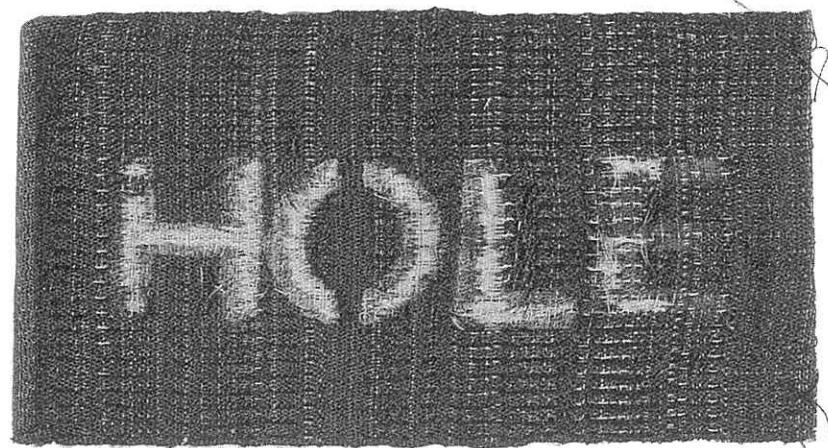


Kelly Leonard

Body Text 1995-96 (detail)

stitched double cloth, devoré, cotton, polyester

photography: Brenton McGeachie



Kelly Leonard

Body Text 1995-96 (detail)

stitched double cloth, devoré, cotton, polyester

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