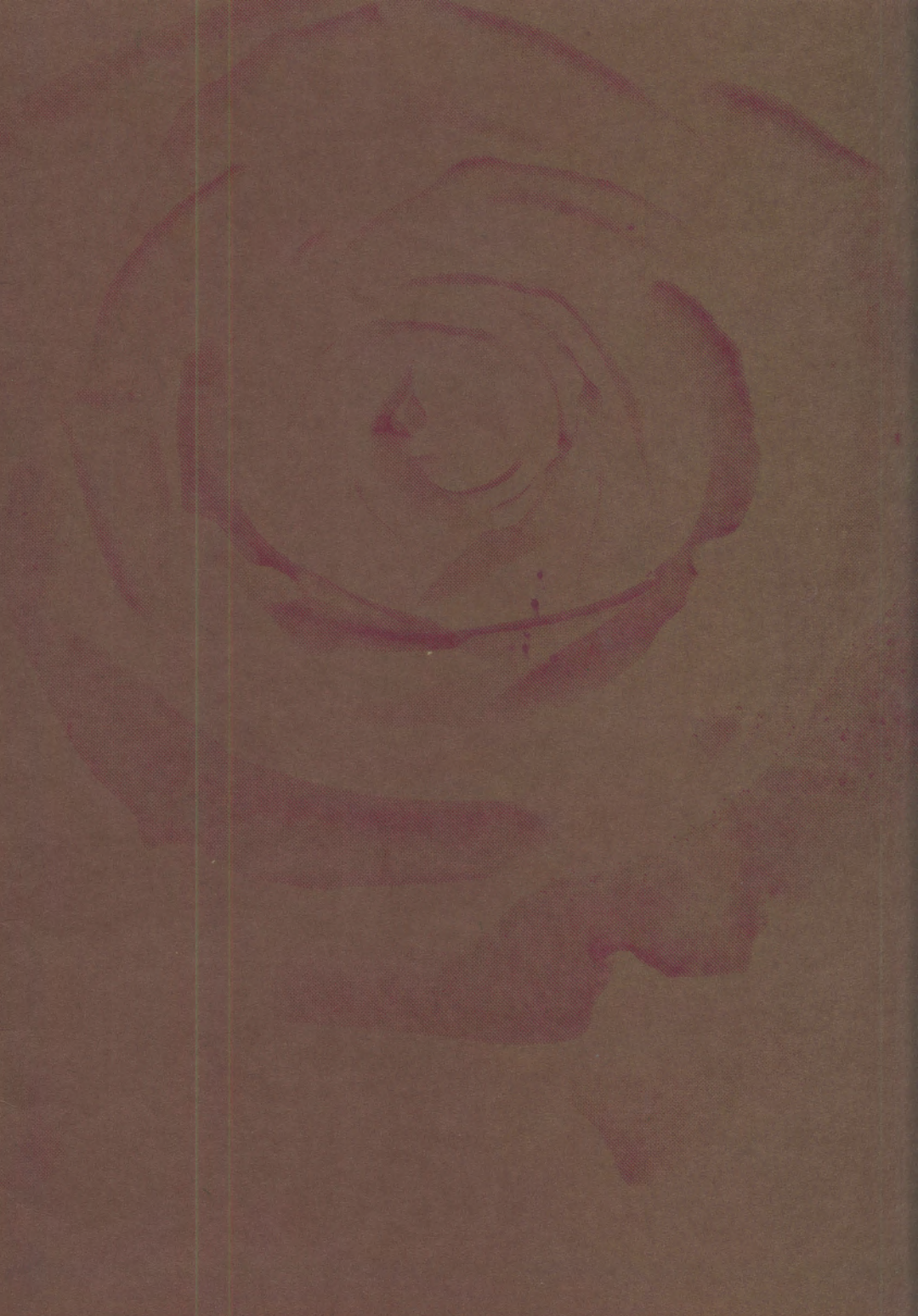

The Flower

Christl Berg

Kit Hiller

Jo-Ellen Jackson

Anne MacDonald

Sally McGillivray

Janine Miller

Mary Scott

Foreword

The commercial use of the flower image is so common and pervasive that we have lost sight of the potent symbolism of that image. The intention of this exhibition is to restate and reaffirm the power of that symbol through the work of seven artists using a range of media who look beyond and extend the popular cliches associated with the familiar image of the flower.

Paul Zika, Curator.

The Flower

This exhibition features the work of seven female artists who address the theme of "the flower". While they each approach this theme from quite different perspectives, their work can be illuminated by viewing it within the wider tradition of flower painting.

The flower, as a theme in its own right, is one which has occupied artists since the seventeenth century when flower painting first emerged as an independent genre. Prior to this time, the depiction of the flower occurred in various contexts, but generally, it was of secondary importance to the main theme. Some of the main situations within which depictions of the flower occurred were herbal books dealing primarily with the medicinal properties of various herbs; as borders in illuminated manuscripts; in the backgrounds of tapestries, paintings and mosaics; as garlands (known as "grotteschi") surrounding frescoes and portraits and in "floreligia", which were books designed to show the decorative possibilities of flowers arranged in vases and other vessels.

As can be seen from this list, the portrayal of the flower served a multitude of different functions ranging from the utilitarian and decorative to the symbolic. While, depending on the context, one of these functions may have been emphasized more than the others, generally speaking, the utilitarian and symbolic functions of flowers were indissolubly linked. Thus for example, the plants and flowers depicted in medieval tapestries were chosen not simply for their decorative qualities but because of their symbolic significance and this in turn was often closely related to the practical functions which that particular plant served. The walnut tree for instance, from whose wood one could make "chests for keeping and preserving possessions and strong cart wheels that [would] last a long time" was used as a symbol of durability. An examination of the herbal manuals of the middle ages also reveals this close association between the practical and symbolic functions of plants. While these manuals were ostensibly concerned with the culinary and medicinal uses of plants, nevertheless it is often difficult to distinguish these from the various mystical and magical properties attributed to plants. Thus for example, sage was not only considered to be a flavoursome seasoning, a cure for many ills and a good antidote against poisons but also served as a talisman for warding off evil.

This close association between the practical and symbolic functions of plants is indicated by the fact that their depiction in these herbal manuals was not governed by the principle of "scientific accuracy". Rather, medicinal plants were frequently portrayed in genre scenes that bore little relation to their practical function. These scenes were often inspired by the miniatures and tapestries of the time, which represented subjects from the life of the nobility against a floral background.

It was during the seventeenth century that the practical and symbolic functions of plants became increasingly differentiated from each other. This can be seen in the changing modes of representing plants. On the one hand, one finds the emergence of a distinct genre of flower painting (based mainly in Holland and Flanders) in which the flower was no longer subservient to the main subject of the painting but became a theme in its own right. It was within this genre that the symbolic functions of flowers came to the fore. At the same time, the seventeenth century also saw the emergence of the botanical manual devoted to the scientific analysis of plants. While each of these two approaches to the depiction of flowers did influence each other, nevertheless, they represented two quite distinctive modes of portraying the flower in which the symbolic and utilitarian functions of plants were much more clearly differentiated from each other than ever before.

To begin with the genre of flower painting as it developed in the seventeenth century, the main function of the flower in these works was to serve as an allegory of vanity and the cycles of human life, birth, blossom, death and decay. These paintings, often known as "Vanitates" (i.e. Vanity painting) expressed a moral on the transience of worldly things; the vanity of earthly pleasure and the brevity of life. The seventeenth century "Vanitas" was a still-life composed of essentially transient living organisms - fruit, flowers, butterflies and other insects - sometimes with the hour glass, clock or watch to indicate the flight of time. Usually, the flowers were depicted in full bloom, carefully arranged in a vase. In addition, leaves and flowers which had dropped from the vase onto the table were included as an indication of the transient nature of youth and beauty. The flowers in these works also served as metaphors for the senses of sight and smell. As such, they represented those earthly pleasures which were only too quickly eclipsed by death. Sometimes books and scientific instruments were included,

"Gathering Parsley"
Page from a Tacuinum Sanitatis in Medicina, second half of 14th century

Roy Lichtenstein
"Black Flowers", 1961

Georg Flegel, (1563 - 1638)
"Fritillary, Narcissus and Iris"

Jan Brueghel (1568 - 1625)
"Flowers in a tub"

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signifying the vanity of human knowledge which ultimately provides no salvation from death. Paradoxically, while serving as a warning against preoccupations with earthly things, the "Vanitas" used the illusionism of oil paint to celebrate and reproduce material possessions. Each object was accurately and sensitively reproduced as a reminder perhaps that the very strength of worldly pleasures, possessions and consumption depends upon its evanescence. Generally speaking, a wide variety of flowers appeared in the "Vanitates", many of them exotic. While great attention was paid to the depiction of each bloom so that each species of flower was clearly identifiable, the primary concern was not with scientific accuracy as indicated by the fact that the bouquets often consisted of flowers which bloomed at different times of the year. Rather, the concern was to portray the beauty and abundance of nature while at the same time indicating its evanescent quality.

Alongside the increasingly complex elaboration of the symbolic function of flowers in seventeenth century flower painting was the development of botanical illustrations of plants for scientific purposes. By the seventeenth century, an interest in the scientific analysis of plants had established itself as manifested in the advent of botanical gardens in which a wide variety of plants, brought back from voyages of exploration all around the globe, were cultivated for the purposes of scientific study. The earliest examples of the scientific illustration of plants are to be found in the flower studies of Leonardo da Vinci and Durer, though even here, the differentiation between the artistic and scientific depiction of flowers is not fully realized. Rather than being treated as metaphors resonant with symbolic meaning, the flowers represented in botanical manuals were portrayed as specimens for analysis. This is evident in the sense of objective detachment to be found in botanical representations of flowers. While both the botanical illustrators and the seventeenth century flower painters portrayed cut flowers which had been removed from their original environment, there were significant differences between the two. For, while the flower painter imbued his/her flowers with human significance by arranging them in vases within a domestic setting, the botanical illustrator usually depicted the flower as an isolated specimen independent of any surrounding context. Consequently, they appeared as inanimate objects, devoid of life. The attention to detail evident in these illustrations here is primarily determined by an interest in classifying plants according to certain morphological features for the purpose

of studying their biological functions rather than reflecting a reverence for the majesty of nature (though this is not to deny that some have interpreted botanical illustrations in this way). Significantly, whereas the preferred medium of the flower painters was oil paint which contributed to the sumptuous qualities of the flowers depicted, the botanical illustrators employed either watercolour, gouache or prints - all media which lacked the sensuous qualities of oil paint and reflected a more analytical concern with forms and structures of the natural world.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the status of the genre of flower painting, in comparison with the other genres such as history painting, declined significantly. This was to have profound consequences for the use of the flower by artists as it was no longer regarded as an appropriate vehicle for the expression of themes of great human gravity. Flower painting as a genre became trivialized and sentimentalized. Most major artists of this period did not work in this genre and increasingly, flower painting became the preserve of amateur women artists who engaged in it as a pastime suitable for the "genteel" middleclass woman. In an era where to wander unaccompanied in the public arena placed a woman's respectability in jeopardy, flowers were an "appropriate" subject for female artists since they could be painted without the artist having to venture beyond the confines of her domestic environment. Various other social and institutional factors such as the exclusion of women from life drawing classes in the art academies also contributed to the increasing popularity of the genre of flower painting amongst women.

As a result of the growing preponderance of women working within this genre during this period, flower painting came to be indissolubly linked with femininity. While in the past, the flower had been used to symbolize what were regarded as the virtues of femininity - for example, the lily was often used to symbolize the "purity" of the Virgin Mary - in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this became one of its primary symbolic functions. The flower came to be regarded as an inherently "feminine" form and this was reflected in the ways in which flower painting was discussed. As a "woman's art", flower painting was no longer seen to contain any profound symbolic significance but was interpreted merely as an expression of the femininity of the artist who painted them. This is evident from critical writings at the time which characterized

flower painting as petty, painstaking, pretty and delicate, requiring only dedication and dexterity but no great intellectual profundity - all qualities which were thought of as being inherently feminine. The trivialization of the flower as a symbol during this period was also reflected in the advent of a genre of illustrated books of flowers often bearing titles such as"The Language of Flowers". In these books, redolent with Victorian sentimentality, each flower was chosen to represent a particular sentiment usually associated with love.

By the late nineteenth century however, there was once again a growing respect for the symbolic possibilities of the flower. As part of their re-evaluation of themes previously considered to be unworthy of great art, modernist artists began once again to employ the flower in their work. Most prominent amongst these were the artists and designers of the Art Nouveau movement as well as painters such as Manet, Monet, Renoir, Cezanne and Van Gogh. For all these artists, the flower became once again a symbol of some gravity.

The meanings which flowers conveyed in the works of these artists however, differed significantly from those contained in the seventeenth century "Vanitates". Whereas the seventeenth century flower paintings reflected a highly conventionalized set of meanings concerned with the transience of human life and the vanity of worldly possessions, the meanings that the flowers in late nineteenth century art symbolized were much more diverse. Thus for example, the floral motifs in Art Nouveau were symbolic of that movement's disenchantment with modern industrialization and expressed a nostalgia for a more "natural" form of existence. In the case of Van Gogh, his sunflowers came to represent his hopes for a meaningful, new life in the south of France. Their glowing yellow colour and large faces upturned towards the sun symbolized for him a sense of optimism and new found energy.

The greater variety of meanings which the flower came to symbolize in the work of late nineteenth century, modernist European artists was reflected in the much more diverse ways in which they represented the flower. Whereas in the Dutch seventeenth century flower paintings there was a fairly standardized set of conventions governing the depiction of flowers, the work of the modernists was characterized by a deliberate contravention of many of these principles.

Crucial to the self conscious rejection by the modernists of the European conventions of flower painting was the influence of Japanese art. Japanese art had its own rich heritage of flower painting which was governed by quite different principles to those in the European tradition. For the Japanese, the primary function of flower painting was as an aid to meditation. Images of flowers served as objects of contemplation within the context of the worship of nature. Each flower and plant had its own symbolic function within the grand scheme of things, contributing to the overall cosmic harmony of the universe. Thus for example, Japanese Taoists ascribed bamboo to the "yang" principle on account of its extraordinarily quick growth. Such rapid growth was regarded as a sign of fertility, strength and virility in contrast to the feminine "yin" principle.

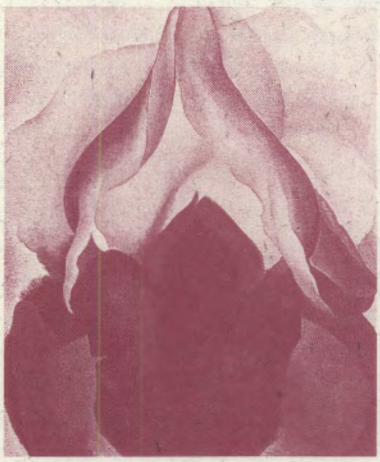
In their borrowing from Japanese flower painting, some of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century European artists drew on aspects of these symbolic meanings. Monet's series of paintings of water lilies comes to mind here. In these works, the water lilies serve a similar contemplative function to that in Japanese culture though not within the context of the same cosmology. However, it was perhaps in the ways in which flowers were depicted that Japanese flower painting had its greatest impact on the European modernists. Firstly, whereas in seventeenth century Dutch flower painting, flowers were generally portrayed in carefully arranged bouquets in vases, in modernist painting they often appear in a more random configuration. This sense of randomness in composition shows the influence of Japanese prints where the frame appears as an arbitrary cut off point. Van Gogh's famous painting "Irises" which depicts in close-up a seemingly random segment of a flower bed exemplifies well the Japanese principles of composition. It also illustrates another of the important differences between seventeenth century and modernist flower painting - namely, the depiction of flowers in a more "natural" setting rather than indoors.

Another distinctive feature of late nineteenth century portrayals of the flower is the move away from realism. Whereas seventeenth century Dutch flower painting exhibited a fastidious fidelity to nature, in the work of the late nineteenth century European artists, it is sometimes difficult to identify the species of flower depicted. This relates to the very different purposes which the flower served for these artists in comparison to their seventeenth century counterparts. Impressionists such as Cezanne for example, used the

flower primarily as a pretext for their experiments with the portrayal of subjective experiences of light. Consequently, faithfulness to reality mattered little to them. In Art Nouveau, the move away from realism to a more stylized, ornamental, two dimensional representation of flowers was a direct result of the influence of Japanese art and once again, can be related to the particular symbolic function which the flower served for them as an antidote to the soulless mechanization of the modern industrial age.

In more recent times, the flower has continued to be a significant theme for a number of artists. Characteristic of many of these recent treatments of the flower has been a self reflexive examination of the symbolic meanings which flowers have had in the past. Whereas the modernists of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century sought a radical rejection of their European heritage, artists in our present age have sought for a critical engagment with that past. In the work of many of these artists, reference is made to the meanings which flowers have traditionally symbolized but not in a naive way. In these works, the symbolic meanings of flowers can no longer be read in an automatic manner. Rather, one is required to consciously reflect on what the flower has symbolized and what it may be made to symbolize today. For these artists, the central issue is whether the flower can still serve as an appropriate symbolic vehicle for the concerns of the present age and if so, what it can be made to symbolize. This is particularly clear in the work of the Pop artists and in some feminist art work. Each of these two groups of artists however, respond to these issues in a different way.

For the Pop artists, the flower has been reduced to a banal cliche through its commercial exploitation by mass culture. In our consumer culture, flowers have been used widely in advertisements, magazines, on cards and chocolate boxes bearing vacuous sensory messages suggestive of "perfumed freshness", ""allure","romance" and "glamour". The work of the Pop artists draws attention to the hollow sentimentality of this commercial language of flowers where the flower is depicted as a stereotyped icon drained of any profound emotive or symbolic significance. This is clearly seen in Roy Lichtenstein's painting "Black Flowers" of 1961 in which tulips - a favourite flower of seventeenth century Dutch flower painting - are portrayed as a tasteless and machine-produced image - the Woolworth's contribution to the art of flower arrangement. Any suggestion that these black tulips might have emerged from some refined atmosphere of exotic



Georgia O'Keeffe

"Black Iris No. III", 1926

Judy Chicago

"Female Rejection Drawing", 1974

Ando Hiroshige (1797 - 1858)

"Irises"

Van Gogh

"Irises", 1889

blooms and elegant gardens is at once destroyed by their similarity to cheap, plastic imitations. The implication of works such as this is that the flower is no longer an appropriate symbolic vehicle for artists due to its trivialization by contemporary consumer culture.

Feminist artists who have made use of the image of the flower however, have reached a different conclusion. They believe that the meanings traditionally associated with the flower can be reworked in ways which make it relevant to present day concerns. More specifically, some feminist artists have sought to reinterpret the traditional association of flowers with femininity as it emerged in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries. Whereas at this time, the interpretation of flower paintings as expressions of the femininity of the artists who produced them served to devalue these works, some feminist artists have sought to use the flower as a positive celebration of femininity. Perhaps the most well-known example of this treatment of the flower is the work of Judy Chicago who has employed the flower as a symbol of female sexuality. Her aim is to produce a new, positive image of female sexuality which is not regulated by patriarchal representations of it. In this way, she hopes to reverse the traditionally negative associations of flowers with femininity.

However, in using the flower as a metaphor for female sexuality, Chicago treads a fine line between subverting conventional notions of femininity and reinforcing stereotypical associations of flowers with the feminine. As my discussion of the history of flower painting has shown, there is nothing inherently feminine in this genre and the assumption that there is has been used as a way of devaluing this particular genre. The danger of Chicago's celebration of the association of flowers with femininity can be seen if we examine the critical writings on the flower paintings by the American artist Georgia O'Keeffe whom Chicago quotes as a precursor of her own work. While Chicago and many other critics have interpreted O'Keeffe's flower images as metaphors for female sexuality, O'Keeffe always resisted such interpretations. This raises questions about the validity of the assumption that flower images done by female artists automatically are a reflection of their femininity. While in some cases this may be so, it should not be assumed that there is some intrinsic connection between flowers and femininity. Such an association is the product of historical convention and not an expression of some supposed "natural" predisposition of women for the image of the flower.

It is important to keep these comments in mind when we come to consider the work of the artists in this exhibition. All the artists represented here are female and some critics may be tempted to suggest that this indicates an intrinsic association of flowers with femininity and to interpret the works in this light. However, if justice is to be done to the variety of concerns with which these works deal, then the assertion that they are all expressive of some essential femininity is far too glib. As with the other recent artists whose work I have discussed, the artists in this exhibition are all concerned in various ways to examine the possibility of reinterpreting the traditional meanings associated with the flower in ways which make it relevant to the context within which we find ourselves today. Generally speaking, unlike the Pop artists who remained sceptical about the possibilities of revitalizing the flower as a viable symbol, these artists believe that the flower can be invested with a symbolic significance which goes beyond the purely decorative or sentimental. Though they may make reference to these uses of the flower, the way they employ the flower transcends this reduction of it to a banal cliche.

Llewellyn Negrin

Christl Berg

Born 1944, Friedrichsgmünd, Germany
Currently lives and works in Hobart

Flowers play an important part in my memories of childhood. Now I sell flowers one day a week in town, to lovers, husbands, wives, office workers, hospital visitors, birthday wishers, dinner guests, bridesmaids and funeral parlours.
When I photograph flowers, I am in awe of the stillness they hold; I delight in their open sexual displays, their sensuousness; I savour their rich scents and I watch them thoughtfully open, bloom, wilt, die and transform.

** "No 6" from the "Myopian Suite" 1991*
Silver gelatin print
34 x 28 cm

"No 7" from the "Myopian Suite" 1991
Silver Gelatin print
34 x 28 cm

Courtesy the artist

Kit Hiller

Born 1948, Hobart
Currently lives and works near Burnie

David Paul is a potter who lives quite close to me. My linocuts show a number of his vases filled with flowers, leaves and berries. Unfortunately it was mid-winter when I did the lino-cuts and flowers were almost impossible to find. Some came from my garden and others came from friends' gardens. Flowers demand a fair amount of patience in their portrayal if they are to maintain their individual natures.

** "David Paul's Vase No.5" 1992*
Handcoloured linocut
46 x 46 cm (image size)

"David Paul's Vase No.6" 1992
Handcoloured linocut
46 x 46 cm (image size)

Courtesy the artist

Jo-Ellen Jackson

Born 1956, Melbourne

Currently lives and works in both Longford and Far North Queensland

The fruits, flowers, eggs, bottles, ornamental and sculptural objects represent various meanings. Books, bottles and ornamental objects symbolize culture, myth and art, the life of the mind, soul or senses. Pears, apples, grapes, sun coloured fruits, cut flowering and fruiting branches are read as symbols of devotion, Birth and Rebirth, professional commitments and devotion to the artistic spirit. Lilies, Cornflowers and Daisies are symbols of constancy and purity, spiritual or heavenly realms.

* *"Aphrodite" 1991*
Oil on canvas
76 x 55.5 cm

"Still Life with flowers" 1992
Oil on masonite

Courtesy the artist

Anne MacDonald

Born 1960, Launceston
Currently lives and works in Hobart

I find that much of my imagery comes from the graveside, from derelict memories of the anonymous dead. At Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, I stole like a thief into private familial crypts in order to photograph the floral tokens of remembrance placed within these, eternally dark and oppressive enclosures. There is a kind of trespass involved in appropriating sentiments of love and loss. That is an important element in my artistic expression; it insinuates a dark morbid quality to my images of gifts to the dead. I like to think of these fragile flowers as poignant symbols of passion which have been turned to the cold and rigid form of inconsolable loss.

* *"Untitled No.5" from the series "Inconsolable" 1992*
(Crypt interior, Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris)
Type C colour photograph
34 x 38 cm

"Untitled No.6" from the series "Inconsolable" 1992
(Crypt interior, Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris)
Type C colour photograph
34 x 38 cm

Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Sally McGillivray

Born 1964, Melbourne
Currently lives and works in Melbourne

By abstracting and synthesizing the forms and colours of nature, I am able to produce a rich, fluid and expressive surface on which to paint.
A rampant growth of sunflowers, tulips, lilies and leaves cover the vessels, stems curling organically, celebratory in their decorativeness.

* *"Sunflowers" from the series "Grow" 1992*
Ceramic, steel, acrylic, oil and gold leaf
212 x 26 x 18 cm

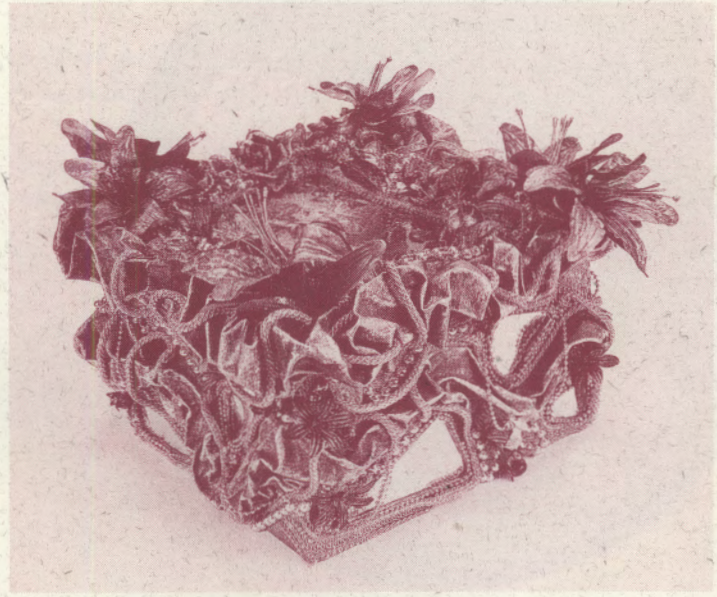
"Lilies" from the series "Grow" 1992
Ceramic, steel, acrylic, oil and gold leaf
218 x 36 x 36 cm

Courtesy the artist

Janine Miller

Born 1954, Hobart
Currently lives and works in Hobart

The container and the flower are both symbolic of fertility. As feminine symbols these enclosing forms are interpreted as a manifestation of the subconsctous and of the Great Mother in her aspect of protection, sheltering and nourishment. As such they always contain a certain mystery or secret: that which is precious, fragile or dangerous.
These works each celebrate, nurture and shelter, a certain secret.



** "Grace" 1992*
Mixed media
24 x 40 x 35 cm

"Desire" 1992
Mixed media
15 x 30 x 30 cm

Courtesy the artist

Mary Scott

Born 1957, New Norfolk
Currently lives and works in Hobart

Beauty and sexuality are desirable exactly to the extent that they are idealized or unobtainable. Desire is never satisfied precisely because of the abyss that separates the real from the imaginary.

"No.1" from the series "Tinsel" 1992
Oil on wood
3 panels each 24 cm in diameter

"No.2" from the series "Tinsel" 1992
Oil on wood
3 panels each 24 cm in diameter

Courtesy the artist

Acknowledgements

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