

**Love and Longing, Death and Desire, and Feminine  
Place: a contemporary practice informed by  
Victorianism and Colonial Tasmania.**

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## **Abstract**

This research project investigates the lives of three women, Louisa Anne Meredith, Anna Maria Nixon and Mary Morton Allport as protagonists in a narrative about feminine place within the history of Colonial British immigration to Tasmania. These three women who self recorded their lives, are intended to represent the many colonial women whose lives have never been recorded.

These women lived within a milieu of Victorianism, in which the contained genteel interior contrasted with the darkness and wildness beyond. The Tasmanian wilderness became an actual and symbolic place where longing and desire could be released and where the "feminine" iconography starts to take on an erotic nature, away from the closed concealment of the domestic. This erotic, sensual nature is identified in the project from the feminine perspective, rather than the feminine description prescribed by men as in the Victorian "woman's mission"; a climax of restraint and repression for women.

Through working with textiles, doilies, embroideries and other media that refer to what was historically 'woman's work', the project aims to conjure a window/mirror effect that reveals both constraint and concealment; and the process of relinquishing restraint to embrace the erotic/sensual and wilder self. These ideas have been realized through the construction of a thirty paneled work, embellished with decorative elements that allude to the concepts, and refer to my own work history as a fashion designer. A second work of ten larger panels refers to the concept of "the window", which was a pervasive theme in Victorian painting that described the confined feminine experience to interiors, and is also intended to act as a device to look in and out and through time. This second work, of textile and mirror/glass, is less decorative than the first, and has a reflective relationship with the body.

Two collaborative projects by the artists Anne Ferran and Anne Brennan were of interest: the first *Secure the Shadow* (1995) at the Hyde Park Barracks, researching the fragments of evidence left behind of a group of Irish colonial migrants. The second project, *Twice Removed* (2004) referred to the “Lacemakers of Calais” and three connected dates through history, 1848, 1909 and 2004. Other works by Anne Ferran are also important to this project, most particularly a ‘survey exhibition’ *the ground, the air*, (2008) which dealt with concepts of how ‘the past haunts the present’ and the importance of addressing and ‘locating the gaps and silences in recorded history’ regarding feminine place. Sally Smart’s installations utilizing felt cut-outs were of great interest to this project, and to a lesser degree Kara Walker’s work. Kate Just’s concepts, imagery and combination of materials provided some helpful connections. I also found inspiration in Joseph Cornell’s earlier work with eclectic boxes, describing a feminine ‘place’ that dealt with issues of longing, desire and mystery.

Influential texts for the project are: *The Sacred and the Feminine* (2007) edited by Griselda Pollock and Victoria Turvey Sauron, 15 essays by various authors that assist in gaining an understanding of feminine place. *On Longing...* (1993) by Susan Stewart, particularly the last chapter *Objects of Desire*, a semiotic and psychoanalytical analysis of the nostalgic object through time, and *Birds, Cages and Women in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Art* (1990) by Elaine Shefer which gives a fascinating insight into the position of women in Victorian society and therefore an understanding of the psyche of the colonial women.

Through the two works I have sought to create a feminine space that evokes a narrative of history, its constraints and repression, longings, hopes and desires; and an acknowledgement that through this unwrapping of secrets

comes the recognition that although opportunities now exist in the external world for the female, her interior secret world still remembers the past. I have drawn on a background of fashion and painting to develop a language that describes aspects of the sacred and erotic feminine from the female perspective.

## **Chapter One - Introduction**

This research project investigates the lives of three colonial women, Louisa Anne Meredith, Anna Maria Nixon and Mary Morton Allport as protagonists in a narrative about feminine place in the history of Tasmanian colonial British migrants. The stories of Louisa Meredith and Mary Allport are reasonably well known, to a lesser degree Anna Nixon. These three women in different ways self recorded their lives and therefore act as an historical record for many colonial women in similar situations whose lives, loves and longings, work and struggle remain silent through lack of record. The project does not include the convict migrant women; research is confined to the British genteel migrant women as they are closer to my own ancestral history.

Meredith, Allport and Nixon settled in Tasmania in the first half of the nineteenth century, bringing with them (and constantly being influenced by) the social conditions of their homeland, Victorian England. By including these three colonial women in this study, it is hoped that their lives and those they represent contribute to an ancestral story of the feminine through a piecing together of fragments of histories, attitudes and events, factual and imagined, that construct a narrative of feminine place through time, providing for contemporary women an historical framework from which to refer and build upon.

By looking at our colonial past and constructing an ancestral feminine history, contemporary women can assess not only what has changed and what needs to change but also what needs to be valued and respected in the construction of feminine place. Within the freedom of an art practice, history can cease to be a linear selection of patriarchal facts and instead become an inclusive, empowered imagining that stretches through time locating identity and place for the feminine.

As a consequence of time, death and desire, the space between the dead and the living, the past and the present, and between the colonial women and myself, are integral to my project. These concepts provide a physical and philosophical foundation of meaning that brings the past into the present, a contemplation of what dies and what lives, remains or lingers.

Most importantly, this project endeavours to contribute to the construction of a feminine 'place' that is described by women, rather than the male prescribed model of the nineteenth century, and it explores the previously disallowed feminine aspects of the genteel domestic woman; the wilder, sensual, erotic and sacred feminine against the backdrop of the Tasmanian Wilderness.

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The Australian artist Anne Brennan who has collaborated on several occasions with fellow artist Anne Ferran, wrote of their project *Twice Removed*:

As artists, we are at liberty to interpret the past with a freedom the historian doesn't have; our connections with the story can be as selective and partial as we want them to be. Working with the story gives us a particular kind of claim on it. It is not the direct claim ... it is more like an imaginative shadowing. If this is somehow permissible, it is because of the way individual histories have of flowing through time, rippling out to touch the wider community, becoming part of everybody's history.<sup>1</sup>

Brennan's writing, suggesting how an artist might approach artwork based on selected histories, resonated with me and provided a philosophical approach for me to begin work in the studio.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Brennan, Locum Services, *Twice Removed*, Maitland Regional Gallery, 2004. <http://www.merryngates.com/article.asp?ald=214> [accessed 10 April 2009]

I began by collecting and collaging, images and information about the lives of the three chosen women. Reading their diaries, letters and in Meredith's case, her books, was revealing; providing insights into not only their lives and the lives of other colonial women, but also their relationship with the untamed landscape, rough travelling conditions and their often rudimentary first homes. This information produced a desire to express a suppressed wildness in the work under a camouflage of gentility in the collage/femmagages that were being made at this time. I began collecting doilies and embroidered pieces from second hand shops and this expanded to an assortment of decorative printed cloths. At this time I was responding to the historical elements in the work of the Australian artist Sally Smart, and the feminine decorative references in the work of the Wilma Tabacco and Irene Barberis. *The ground, the air*, Anne Ferran's survey exhibition at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, was pivotal in empowering my own research at this stage of the project. The hauntingly beautiful show encouraged my own work based around similar concepts of how 'the past haunts the present' and the importance of addressing and 'locating the gaps and silences in recorded history' regarding feminine place.<sup>2</sup>

As the process progressed, literal interpretations of the women's lives and set notions of Victorianism and its effects were expanded, and the work moved to a more abstract, 'objective' position. Carefully selected mass produced fabrics became something 'other' by the addition of beads, stains, doilies and other various materials, or by simply placing these fabrics in the context of this project. I selected certain patterns that I thought suggested imagined memories or lingering traces, sensual and soft, or a mood of lament and longing. Selection was also made according to a lush suggestive texture or strong symbolic colour such as the use of red in the 'Window Concept' symbolising menstruation. Joseph Cornell's mysterious boxes and

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<sup>2</sup>B. Bleatman and N. Frankham. Introduction, Anne Ferran, *the ground, the air* Tasmania: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 2008.  
Anne Ferran, *the ground the air* exhibition, 13 December – 22 February, 2009.



collages also became a source of inspiration for me. The strange beauty and moods, the longing and unresolved desires in his work resonated with my aspirations for the project and provided another work process.

After working for many years in an art practice of pure painting, the return to fabrics and textiles marked a cyclic evolution of materials. Previous to an art practice that spanned the last twenty years, was a twenty year career in Fashion Design. A three year Fashion Design Diploma, from East Sydney Art School, was followed by seven years working as a designer in various companies in the Sydney 'Rag' trade. Choosing a range of fabrics every season for the company was an important part of the job description of a designer; and knowledge of the properties, performance, appropriate texture and movement on the body and the visual effect were essential. Developing a passionate love for quality fabrics became inevitable. Later, after moving to Brisbane and creating my own label, the focus of the design range was the fabric; the fabric was painted, beaded, pieced together to create a visual texture and sensual feel on the body. This history of working with fabrics aided the production of work in the studio, producing a confident feminine language that asserted the right for a more dominate place for the decorative and the feminine.

The textiles and patterns produced by Morris and Co. during the late Victorian period have been a great influence on this project. Most particularly because William Morris's wife Jane Morris (Burden) and their younger daughter May Morris were involved in the production of the embroideries and in 1881 May Morris studied embroidery at the National Art Training School, London, and later became the director of the embroidery department of her father's enterprise Morris and Co. This development and change in the location of feminine place from muse to creator was a symbol of hope for women at the approach of the twentieth century. Jan Marsh's book *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story*, 1986, and Janis Londraville's compilation of letters between May Morris and John Quinn *On Poetry, Painting and Politics*,

1997, provided me with valuable information about the Morris women and the difficulties they faced as they attempted to live a creative life.

The textiles chosen for the artworks sought to conjure up notions of the feminine within the confines of domesticity and/or gentility, but are tempered by subtle references to loss and lament, as well as the suppression and then liberation of sensuality and wildness. Although feminism has done much in past decades to adjust and make visible feminine sensibilities, there still remains a large imbalance in the recorded history of Western civilization in terms of feminine place, as opposed to the 'narrow account of the deeds and institutions of men and of the monuments that have been erected to celebrate them.'<sup>3</sup>

This research project only starts to interrogate the large topic of feminine place. But in the vast 'sea' of the five thousand year long patriarchal reign, every 'brick in the wall' is helpful. The project has selected certain individuals or writings to be studied and referred back to the pivotal Victorian period; not only because it is the birth of Western feminine place in Tasmania (and Australia), but also because it appears to be the climax or watershed of Western female suppression from which grew the beginnings of the 'women's rights' movement.

Chapter Two deals in detail with both the historical and contemporary context to my project, and reference is made to literary texts and storytelling that provide an appreciation and understanding of the concept of the Tasmanian wilderness as an actual and symbolic place where longing and desire could be released; a 'place' where the feminine iconography begins to take on an erotic nature, away from the closed concealment of the domestic, interior environment of the home.

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<sup>3</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (ed.), *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), p.2.

Chapter Three deals in depth with the chronological overview of how the work evolved in the studio, and the pursuit of evoking a feminine 'place' that acknowledges the lingering traces from the past of previously held secrets and the process of release and revelation in the present. The earlier experimentation with collage/femmage<sup>4</sup> lead to a focus on textiles that produced two major bodies of work *The Window Concept* and *Interiors and Secrets 1 and 2*.

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<sup>4</sup>Femmage'... a term created by Miriam Schapiro to define her work, as a 'variant' of the 'high art' term 'collage', with a feminist emphasis.  
Norma Broude, Mary D. Garrard, 'Miriam Schapiro and "Femmage".' *Feminism and Art History*, (New York:Harper and Row,1982), p320.

## **Chapter Two: Context.**

What does it mean to remember? It is not merely a journey to revisit a trace of the past, a way to reconnect to a bygone era. No matter what, an event will form a trace and such traces inevitably become imagined borders with the present. Nevertheless, such borders are often blurred. Perhaps we can perceive our relationship with events in the past as a kind of play between trace and aura, between distance and closeness.<sup>5</sup>

Indonesian artist Fx Harsono

This Chapter concentrates on the historical stories that became the catalyst for my body of work in the studio; and the historical context that inspired me to imbue the artwork with 'trace and aura'<sup>6</sup> and a lingering, haunting quality that was suggestive of feminine longings and secrets. Also discussed are the contemporary artists and literary texts that aided and influenced the way I considered and approached the work in the studio, (detailed in Chapter Three).

### **Victorianism and the Colonial Woman: in search of feminine place.**

The constructs of Victorianism formed not only the background but the perpetual yardstick from which the colonial women measured and built their identity and sense of place in their new home Tasmania.

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<sup>5</sup> Fx Harsono, 'Surviving Memories', *artasiapacific*, 62 (2009)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

## The Three Women



Figures 1. 2. 3. Louisa Anne Meredith, Mary Morton Allport and Anna Maria Nixon.  
(see index for details)

Louisa Anne Meredith (Twamley) arrived in Tasmania (then Van Dieman's Land) in 1840. She was born in Birmingham, England on 20th July, 1812, the daughter of a 'well to do tradesman' Thomas Twamley and a genteel mother also Louisa Ann Meredith, 'who raised the child to ladylike accomplishments and education.'<sup>7</sup> Although typically Victorian in her attitudes to class and culture, Meredith was exceptional for a woman of her time, her personal achievements as writer, poet and artist in Victorian times were unusual. Before marrying her cousin Charles Meredith and sailing for New South Wales on the *Letitia* in May 1839, Meredith had published several books including: *Poems*, *The Romance of Nature* and *The Annual of British Landscape Scenery*. She would continue to write and publish as a colonial woman in New South Wales during 1839 and finally in Tasmania from the 1840's onwards, providing rare first hand insights into the thoughts and lives of colonial women of her class.

Mary Morton Allport (Chapman), like Meredith, was a well educated and artistic young woman from Birmingham, England. She arrived in Van

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Grimshaw and Ann Standish, 'Making Tasmania Home: Louisa Meredith's Colonizing Prose', *Frontiers*, 28 (2007), 1&2 (p.2).

Dieman's Land in July 1831 on the *Platina* with her husband Joseph Allport (a solicitor), and their small child. Allport was an accomplished artist and a diarist. She kept a diary twice after arriving in Tasmania; the first journal 'lasted just six months, during which she lived in a bush hut in Broadmarsh and rented rooms in Macquarie Street, Hobart Town.'<sup>8</sup> She concluded the journal in February 1833 when Allport and her husband purchased 'Fairy Knowe', a cottage in Liverpool Street. The second journal began twenty years later when her eldest son Morton left for England in 1852. 'Her first' entry began with his ship sailing down the Derwent River and she kept the journal for him over the next two years, stopping just prior to his return home.<sup>9</sup> It appears that Allport kept these journals at periods of anxiety and longing, providing insightful records of her personal life and others like her.

The third protagonist used in this colonial narrative is Anna Maria Nixon (Woodcock), she was the second wife of Frances Nixon (the first Anglican Bishop of Tasmania). They left England for his appointment on the "Duke of Roxburgh" on March 13<sup>th</sup> 1843. Nixon wrote many letters to her family members in England while she lived in Tasmania, fortunately they survived and in 1953 were collected and compiled by a family descendant Norah Nixon. Nixon's letters reveal a deeply religious, genteel and pious woman, who appeared to dedicate her life to her husband's strong opinions and ideals, and although she was a keen painter and sketcher she often referred to her work as 'poor efforts' and deferred to her husband's 'superior' artwork.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Picturesque and the 'Woman's Mission'.**

The ability to form a feminine identity and 'place' in Tasmania at the time of the arrival of these three women depended largely on the establishment of

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<sup>8</sup> Joanna Richardson, 'An Annotated Edition of the Journals of Mary Morton Allport' (PH.D. thesis, University of Tasmania, Australia, 2006), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Norah Nixon, *The Pioneer Bishop in Van Diemen's Land 1843-1863: Letters and Memories of Frances Russell Nixon, D.D. First Bishop of Tasmania*, (Hobart: Walsh & Sons, 1953), p. 40.

home and hearth, a crucial signifier of the Victorian 'women's mission'; but this was not readily available to them and this produced an identity dilemma.

The term 'women's mission' was used in the media and the lecture circuit (by social critics like John Ruskin) through the mid nineteenth century. But the sentiments it expressed had been around for a long time, perhaps building to a climax of intensity at this time, as a desperate attempt to hold back the rumblings of change heard from the 'women's rights' movement which was just beginning to make faint but persistent 'in roads' at this time. The 'women's mission' was fuelled by the notion that a 'wife provides her husband with what Ruskin called "sweet ordering, arrangement and decision." That ordering begins with the hearth, a source of comfort, in this case most meaningful, since the husband gains physical support from it. Her constancy as homemaker extends to the mantelpiece, where flowers have been arranged – a reference to the home as a fragrant abode.'<sup>11</sup>



Figure 4. George Elgar Hicks, *Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood*, 1863.

<sup>11</sup> Elaine Shefer, *Birds, Cages and Women in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Art*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990), pp. 23, 45-46.

On arrival, the colonial women, instead of 'home and hearth' were often confronted with raw living or travelling conditions, providing a confrontational interaction with their new and strange environment. They endeavoured to overlay what was known to them over this unknown landscape or 'place'. The Victorian ideal called the 'picturesque' was not only a familiar style or way of seeing and recording the natural world, but an appropriate genre for a genteel lady, a virtuous method of interacting with the landscape and therefore one they must employ.

In theory, the picturesque was able to slip untroubled from well known British or Continental beauty spots to anonymous colonial terrain. What was supposed to matter was the sensibility that the cultivated "pilgrim" or "wanderer" brought to the scene.<sup>12</sup>

It is evident that the power base for the colonial/Victorian woman was very small. For their husbands the prospects of a new appointment, or the dream of an adventure held excitement and challenge, but the women were forced to use the constructs of Victorian feminine place to try and befriend this foreign terrain. Until home and 'civilized' social contacts could be established, they must pursue what feminine intercourse with the landscape was available to them, which was the 'appropriate' small studies of flora and fauna with 'picturesque' sensibilities.

Mary Morton Allport recorded in her first diary (whilst living in a hut in the bush as her husband tried his hand at farming) that she drew from the landscape every day even though there was much to be done and her kitchen was an open air fire.<sup>13</sup> One can imagine how important those drawings were to a genteel Victorian woman trying to maintain her identity in such an environment.

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<sup>12</sup> Caroline Jordon, 'Progress versus the Picturesque: white women and the aesthetics of environmentalism in colonial Australia 1820-1860', *Art History*, 25 (2002), 341-357 (p.341).

<sup>13</sup> Caroline Jordon, *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artist & The Amateur Tradition*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), pp. 96-98.



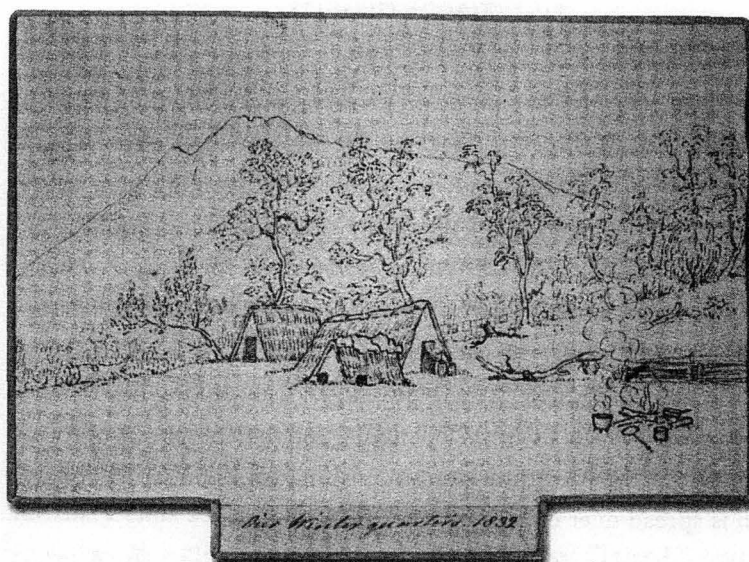


Figure 5. Mary Morton Allport, *Our Winter Quarters*, (1806-1895).

The picturesque genre encouraged women to explore the outdoors 'unlike the thoroughly feminised genres of miniature and flower painting'<sup>14</sup> which kept them controlled and constricted to the confines of the home. Caroline Jordon suggests that 'the association of any prospect of travel with the search of the picturesque became so entwined that even women artists destined for the colonies might fancy themselves as global 'pilgrims of the picturesque'.<sup>15</sup> This is very important, as not only does picturesque picturing give them an 'allowed' access to the landscape but a sense of contributing something to the body of knowledge of natural history, even science!<sup>16</sup> This was always Meredith's hope, that her studies of the Tasmanian flora and fauna might be taken seriously.<sup>17</sup> This pursuit also offered the colonial women a sense of usefulness, of contributing something to the 'discovery' of their new home; a

<sup>14</sup> Caroline Jordon, *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artist & The Amateur Tradition*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> Suggesting a division of men and women's work, with the decorative aligned to the female and science to the male, the latter seen as more serious and important.

<sup>17</sup> Louisa Anne Meredith, *My Home in Tasmania*, (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1852), pp. 1-2.

purpose, if only imagined, that existed beyond the confines of home and husband.



Figure 6. Louisa Anne Meredith, *Kangaroo Apple*, 1891

The problem was that for the colonial women the wild beauty of the Tasmanian landscape was alienating. These women who had travelled from the other side of the world, over wild seas in rough conditions (Anna Nixon lost a child on her voyage), who had left their family and friends whom they may never see again, and a culture that sustained such restricted femininity, were not in a position to accept *carte blanche* the strangeness that lay before them. Roslyn Hayes in *Tasmanian Visions* observes that 'the appeal of those scenes depended on a learnt response not an instinctive rapport. These landscapes had to become part of a cultural history, a vision of place, before

people could enter into any meaningful relationship with them.<sup>18</sup> For Meredith, Allport and Nixon overlaying their picturesque ideals onto the Tasmanian landscape was not only a challenging notion but a conundrum. Nonetheless for these women, their 'picturesque pursuits' helped to give comfort and map their identity in a strange land, 'although shrunk into the microscopic observation of natural history, the picturesque mapped the limits of feminine power within colonialism.'<sup>19</sup>

### **Wildness and Wilderness: a counter to the Picturesque.**

If the Picturesque 'mapped the limits of feminine power within colonialism', then the untamed wilderness of the Tasmanian landscape reflected what was suppressed in the colonial female migrants. In Victorian sensibilities, wilderness was a place of both fear and attraction for the feminine. In *Tasmanian Visions* Roslynn Haynes suggests that not only was it a place that beckoned little red riding hood, even though she may encounter the big bad wolf, 'but equally it was the place of female outcasts; hence its association with witches, a notion that travelled to the New World in the cultural baggage'.<sup>20</sup> The witch is a signifier for the wild, unruly but powerful feminine, and therefore something to be feared and forbidden in a patriarchal world. But repetitive themes in storytelling tell of a sensual, seductive attraction or connection between women and the wilderness.

In 1967 Joan Lindsay wrote a novel called *Picnic at Hanging Rock* which was later (1975) made into a critically acclaimed film directed by Peter Weir. The story, set in 1900 tells of a group of Australian teenage girls from an upper class private boarding school who travel to a hanging rock formation in the

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<sup>18</sup> Roslynn D. Haynes, *Tasmanian Visions: Landscapes in Writing, Art and Photography*, (Tasmania: Polymath Press, 2006), p. xi.

<sup>19</sup> Caroline Jordon, *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artist & The Amateur Tradition*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> Roslynn D. Haynes, *Tasmanian Visions: Landscapes in Writing, Art and Photography*, (Tasmania: Polymath Press, 2006), p. 268.

wildness of the Victorian bush. The excursion ends in tragedy when three girls and their teacher vanish after climbing the rock, their disappearance remains a mystery, two other girls return, but one had lost all memory of the experience and the other was unexplainably hysterical.<sup>21</sup> The story alludes to feelings of mystery, secrets and suppressed sensuality that are somehow released in the wildness of the 'bush'.

Perhaps even more evocative to this project is Patrick White's story *A Fringe of Leaves* (1973) which is set in nineteenth century Van Diemen's Land. White's character Ellen Roxburgh is 'drawn into this wilderness. As she climbs up through the forest she dispenses with the symbols of civilisation and restraint, her bonnet and pelisse. Soon she is walking through a tunnel of vegetation, caressing and caressed by the fronds of giant ferns.'<sup>22</sup> Ellen crosses the boundary from the Picturesque to the sensuality of wildness and as a result is warned 'You court disaster, Ellen. Remember this is Van Diemen's Land ...The landscape is thus an extension of Ellen's own inner wilderness, in attempted revolt against order, civilisation and enforced restraint'<sup>23</sup> Ellen is seen by a patriarchal society, to 'court disaster', for to flirt with her own wildness or power is a forbidden fruit.

Mary Morton Allport recorded in her journal on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1854, a moment of longing and anxiety to 'wander into the mountain and be lost' and in the next entry chastises herself: "I am ashamed of having written the above". Yet she does not strike out her words or remove the page they are written on, she simply begins the next entry by explaining that she had been low spirited all day'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, F.W.Cheshire, 1967.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picnic\\_at\\_Hanging\\_Rock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picnic_at_Hanging_Rock) [accessed 19 February 2010].

<sup>22</sup> Roslynn Haynes, *Tasmanian Visions: Landscapes in Writing, Art and Photography*, (Tasmania: Polymath Press, 2006), p. 187.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 187.

<sup>24</sup> Joanna Richardson, 'An Annotated Edition of the Journals of Mary Morton Allport' (PH.D. thesis, University of Tasmania, Australia, 2006),p. 7.



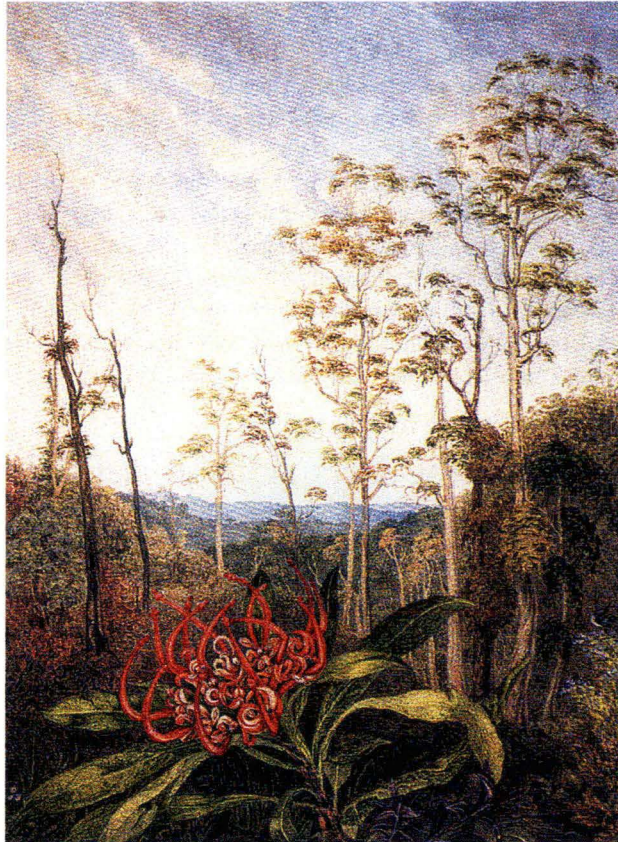


Figure 7. Mary Morton Allport, *Telopea truncate*, *Tasmanian Waratah*, 1845,

I am interested in what the female in these stories is looking for in these wilderness places. It could be argued that she is searching for a lost feminine identity, 'a place' where she may discover and explore suppressed and disallowed aspects of the feminine, such as the power contained in her own sensuality. But historically, as the stories reveal, there has always been a price to pay for those female explorers who ventured outside the restraints and confines of a patriarchally defined femininity.

Another story, this time, illustrating the ramifications of a secluded domestic life, is the American author Charlotte Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Written in the late 1880's and first published in 1892 in *The New England*, the story is written as a series of journal entries, telling of a woman who is suffering a 'nervous condition' and is confined by her husband physician to an upstairs

bedroom in a house they have rented for the summer. She is forbidden from working and hides the fact that she writes in her journal. The windows in the room are barred and there is a gate at the top of the stairs. The story describes her descent into madness as an effect of her confinement, and her obsession with the pattern and colour of the wallpaper in her room; the 'yellow smell', the moving forms of the wallpaper and the notion that women are creeping behind it.<sup>25</sup>

In 1913 Gilman wrote an article "Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*" published in the October issue of the *Forerunner*. She wrote that she had once gone to a specialist doctor with a nervous complaint and melancholia and had been given the 'rest cure' and told to 'live as domestic a life as far as possible'<sup>26</sup> and never to write again, she continues:

I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over. Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again—work, the normal life of every human being, work, in which is joy and growth and service, ... Being naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper*,<sup>27</sup>

This short story came to be respected as an early feminist piece, and feminist scholars over the years have often referred to this early work of Gilman's. Probably the most influential was Barbara Welter's 'The Cult of True Womanhood, 1840-1860', which describes the ideology of the 'cult' that produced the social conditions so evident in Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

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<sup>25</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Yellow Wallpaper', *The New England Magazine* 1892, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Yellow\\_Wallpaper](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Yellow_Wallpaper) [accessed 23 April 2010]

<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper', *The Forerunner* 1913, [http://www.charlotteperkinsgilman.com/2008/04/why\\_i\\_wrote\\_yellow\\_wallpaper-charl...](http://www.charlotteperkinsgilman.com/2008/04/why_i_wrote_yellow_wallpaper-charl...) [accessed 22 June 2010].

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

The Cult of True Womanhood, or the Cult of Domesticity as it was known, held the same male prescribed values for women as its English equivalent the 'women's mission'; which was to keep women 'imprisoned in the home or private sphere, a servant tending to the needs of the family. Furthermore, the Cult of Purity obliged women to remain virtuous and pure even in marriage, with their comportment continuing to be one of modesty.'<sup>28</sup>

In 1999 Australian artist Sally Smart had an exhibition in Japan, *Femmeage, Shadows and Symptoms*. The catalogue contained an essay by Helen McDonald (1996) *The Unhomely Body series*, in the essay McDonald compares Smart's body of work to Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, alternating between phrases from the text and a commentary on Smart's work. She begins with a direct quote from the text:

*John was asleep and I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wallpaper till I felt creepy ... the faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Deborah Thomas, 'The Changing Role of Womanhood: From True Woman to New Woman in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"', *American Literature Research and Analysis* WebSite, <http://itech.fgcu.edu/faculty/wohlpart/alra/gilman.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Helen McDonald, 'Essay on "The Unhomely Body" series', (1996), *Sally Smart: The Unhomely Body series, Femmeage, Shadows and Symptoms series*, (Melbourne: Sally Smart, 1999), p.11.



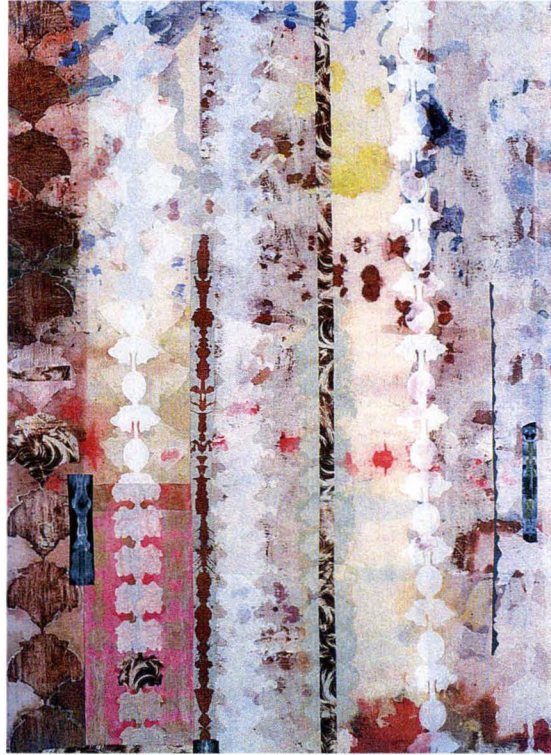


Figure 8. Sally Smart, *Closet no. 1*, 1997.

McDonald refers to Freud's unhomely (*unheimlich*) as it 'occurs as a domestic version of absolute terror at the sight of familiar things becoming unfamiliar'.<sup>30</sup> In regard to Smart's work she points out that 'In the Victorian era, known for its repression of sexuality, for instance, chairs were seen as women with curved legs that should be covered.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Helen McDonald, 'Essay on "The Unhomely Body" series', (1996), *Sally Smart: The Unhomely Body series, Femmage, Shadows and Symptoms series*, (Melbourne: Sally Smart, 1999), p.11.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.11.



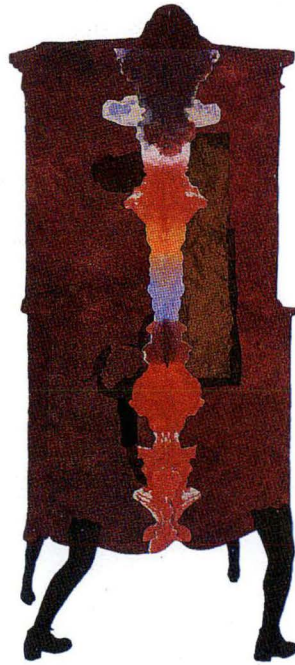


Figure 9. Sally Smart, *Unique Interior (wallpaper)*, 1997.

McDonald highlights the importance of Smart's titles, *The Shivering Room*, *The Itching Room*, *The Anxiety Room*, *The Sewing Room (Prosthetic)*, *The Living Room (Throb)*, *The Leaking Room (Spill)*, *The Pissing Room (Dream)*;<sup>32</sup> that reveal the tensions and strains of the domesticated interior life of the nineteenth century woman, albeit in a playful way.

Jason Smith curated a show at the National Gallery of Victoria, the show exhibited nine Australian artists of which Sally Smart was one, the show was named *Unhomely*, using the title of Smart's work. Jason Smith wrote about her work as follows:

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<sup>32</sup>Helen McDonald, 'Essay on "The Unhomely Body" series', (1996), *Sally Smart: The Unhomely Body series, Femmage, Shadows and Symptoms series*, (Melbourne: Sally Smart, 1999), p.11-12.

Smart's images of the home also stem from her occupation of, and alteration to, the interior spaces of a nineteenth-century house. She perceived layers of paint and wallpaper as layers of skin and staircases, cupboards and doorways as the house's internal organs. This sense of the house as a body is distilled into the collages that comprise *Tree House (The Unhomely Body)* and *Furniture piece (HouseBody) bed and web (The Unhomely Body)*. The collapse of the body into the furniture and domestic spaces of the home is part of Smart's attention to contemporary theories and practices that address the body and its representation. Her works articulate feminine experience (of the body and within the home).<sup>33</sup>



Figure 10. (left) Sally Smart, *Tree house (The unhomely Body)*, 1997-98.  
 Figure 11. (right) Sally Smart, *Furniture piece (House Body) bed and web (The Unhomely Body)*, 1997.

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<sup>33</sup> Jason Smith, *Unhomely*, (Melbourne: The Asialink Centre and The University of Melbourne, 1998), p.6.

In some ways the hardships of colonial life offered a freedom that life in Victorian England could never provide. The colonial woman was exposed to the raw experience of creating a 'civilized' existence out of a wild and untamed environment, either first hand or by witnessing the experience of friends or peers.

Louisa Meredith's husband Charles, by all accounts was a very amiable man but had limited skill in business, resulting in repeated upheavals in moving house and situation after monetary failures. Meredith assessed her husband's positive and negative traits and encouraged him to become a Parliamentarian. Vivienne Rae Ellis writes in *A Tigress in Exile*: of Charles:

He had much to thank Louisa for. "You thought you married a barn-door fowl." she once wrote to him, "but you got an eagle instead". It was as well for Charles that he did. Charles's good nature and easy going attitude to life complemented Louisa's inexhaustible energy and her implacable determination. In return for her behind the scenes' direction of his political life, her successful planning of his election campaigns and the obvious advantage of having a competent speech-writer at hand, Charles gave the love and affection of a very handsome and gentle man.<sup>34</sup>

The important message of Meredith's story for this project is that regardless of her own strengths, talents and passions, she had to realize them through her husband and that her important role in colonial events would have remained silent but for her own writing. With a more expanded description of feminine identity, women like Meredith could have expressed their love of the environment and even their own wild natures more effectively. It is this sense of lack that has inspired feminist artists and scholars in the latter part of the twentieth century and in recent years to retrieve a feminine identity that might correct this imbalance.

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<sup>34</sup> Vivienne Rae Ellis, *Louisa Anne Meredith: A Tigress in Exile*, (Tasmania: Blubber Head Press, 1979), p. 184.

## Retrieving Feminine Identity

Feminine history that has been lost or obscured by a saturation of patriarchal historical recording has created a void in the psyche of women through the ages. Thus the colonial women arriving in the wildness of Tasmania in the nineteenth century from a culture so indoctrinated with a male reckoning of what the feminine should be that an expression and appreciation of the totality of their feminine natures was impossible.

*Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* edited by Norma Broude and Mary d. Garrard refers back to matrilineal societies in an effort to reclaim a feminine wildness and authority. This collection of essays written by feminist scholars aims to question in one way or another an art historical "litany." The essays reveal and challenge an historical succession of male values that ignore or undermine feminine place, denying the female the rich ancestral knowledge that the male has taken for granted throughout art history. Broude and Garrard suggest in their introduction:

Along with the dominance of a masculine value system in art and art history has often come a blindness to female experience, or, sometimes quite literally, to female existence,<sup>35</sup>

Several of these essays search for feminine history pre the patriarchal rule. Vincent Scully in his essay *The Great Goddess and the Palace Architecture of Crete* describes architectural forms that echo the devotion in the Minoan society to the Goddess culture and the life nurturing concepts of the feminine/mother. He explains that columns of the court at Knossos

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<sup>35</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (ed.), *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), p. 5.

... may have been considered especially expressive of the goddess since it joined to its tree symbolism a specific description of a female state of being. Thus the whole palace became her body, as the earth itself had been in the stone age.<sup>36</sup>

Scully describes how the symbols of the goddess the horns/breasts and the V or 'female cleft' shapes were constantly referred to in the architecture and the essential re-enforcement of the shapes in the earth's mountains and valleys. Here was a culture that 'celebrated both men and women together as accepting nature's law, adoring it',<sup>37</sup> and in a way that contemporary culture could envy as we grapple blindly with serious conservation issues. Scully observes that:

It can make even the modern observer at least dimly perceive what it must have been like to feel wholly in harmony with nature and at peace with it.<sup>38</sup>

Scully concludes his paper with a summary of historical events post Minoan culture, of the Hellenic warrior heroes and eventually the Dorians, their cousins, who overthrew them and 'were clearly impatient of the power of the goddess and strove to curb it'.<sup>39</sup> These warrior Lords were the ancestors and heroes of the Greeks, a culture that has been said to be the 'seat of Western Civilization and produced pivotal philosophers like Plato, who aligned the male with the mind (transcendence), and the female with nature and body (immanence).<sup>40</sup> This description of male and female was to continue in Church and State for thousands of years, effectively excluded females from the sacred and therefore from power.

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<sup>36</sup> Vincent Scully, 'The Great Goddess and the Palace Architecture of Crete', Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (ed.), *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), p. 38.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> Michelle Boulous Walker, *Philosophy and Sexuality*, Lecture, University of Queensland, 1998.



## The Feminine and the Sacred



Figure 12. Edward Hopley, *A Primrose from England*.

Three women, represented as the epitome of Victorian femininity surround the 'holy' primrose to form a female trinity, all other colonial personage are partly obscured into the darkness to highlight the momentous sacred event. Pamela Gerrish Nunn has this to say in *Problem Pictures* about Hopley's painting:

It is the female presence that renders the primrose and all it symbolizes an object of worship, making of the principal motif a kind of altar in the midst of a dark chaos illuminated as it might be by an inner light which only the female can reveal.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> (England Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting*,: Scolar Press, 1995), p.131.

The Victorian notion of 'the sacred' was an extremely limited one. The Christian Church, a male dominated social institution prescribed two possible roles for women: the virtuous, self-sacrificing, sub-servient role, or that of the 'fallen woman'.

Anna Maria Nixon's letters reveal a woman who strove tirelessly to uphold the virtuous, self sacrificing model. She had little confidence in her own abilities although she sketched widely throughout Hobart and drew plans of their residences and domestic interiors,<sup>42</sup> but always deferred to her husband the Bishop for correction. She wrote to her father:

I have been very diligent in sketching for you, but I must wait to send you the result of my poor efforts to illustrate my tour till the Bishop has seen and corrected the same.<sup>43</sup>

The Nixon's had eight children together and Nixon also cared for two surviving children of the Bishop's from a previous marriage. She was therefore extremely busy with family and household commitments, her duties were extensive as Nora Nixon (granddaughter of the Bishop) wrote in her Introduction to *The Pioneer Bishop in Van Diemen's Land*:

.....as Bishop's secretary writing and copying far into the night (no typewriter in those days), showing hospitality to all and sundry, taking Sunday School and Confirmation Classes, playing the organ for church services, visiting and nursing sick neighbours, etc. her letters often show signs of great homesickness, also loneliness when the Bishop was absent on his frequent 'progresses' over and around the island,<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Roger Wilson, National Trust Tasmania, *Bishop Nixon – Drawings*, (Tasmania: Arts Tasmania, 2002), p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.11

<sup>44</sup> Norah Nixon, *The Pioneer Bishop in Van Diemen's Land 1843-1863: Letters and Memories of Frances Russell Nixon, D.D. First Bishop of Tasmania*, (Hobart: Walsh & Sons, 1953).

Anna Maria Nixon desired a 'sacred' life, but like her secular pursuits, her divinity was channelled through the life of her husband, the Bishop.

In Griselda Pollock and Victoria Turvey's 2007 version of *The Sacred and the Feminine*, they and other feminist writers describe a much more expanded view of 'the sacred'; where boundaries between the sacred and the profane blurr, as notions of spirituality and eroticism, female embodiment, the divine or transcendence, merge. 'The challenge of thinking critically the imaginary space, borderline, cleavage, alterity, that is the meaning of the sacred.'<sup>45</sup> The various writers that contribute to the book, explore notions of sacred feminine place that exist in different cultures, religions and artistic practices.

In one of the eight essays in this book, Ranjana Thapalyal discusses the 'Spiritual/Erotic Impulse in Indian Art' where 'within this aesthetic is found the multi-dimensional and powerful presence of the Hindu feminine.'<sup>46</sup> The most obvious example being that of the cosmic lovers Radha and Krishna and their metaphoric erotic relationship, often seen in the Hindu Rajput miniatures; they illustrate colourful, symbolic pictures of the lovers' erotic/ecstatic exploits, and are representations of the divine relationship, 'the soul's longing for the union with the ultimate consciousness.'<sup>47</sup> Here, both male and female participate equally and simultaneously in an expression of their sexual and sacred natures.

Another essay from this book by Celine Boyer, explores the 'sacred' as an interior or secret expression, one that is connected to aspects of longing and desire. This is important as it appears to exist in most cultural and social climates, perhaps more even so in restrictive ones, like Victorianism, where

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<sup>45</sup> Griselda Pollock & Victoria Turvey Sauron, (ed.), *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference*, (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Ranjana Thapalyal, 'Spingararasa: The Feminist Call of the Spiritual/Erotic Impulse in Indian Art', *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference*, (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007) p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 135.



desires of all sorts of unions, sacred and otherwise, must be kept secret and therefore produce a potent resonance through time.

As contemporary women look through a symbolic window back through time, constructing an ancestral history of feminine place by piecing together the traces of what remains, they may identify an interior quality of feminine place: the powerful experience of unwrapping secrets and the recognition that although opportunities now exist in the external world for the female, her interior secret world still remembers the past.

As Boyer observes in *Kathleen Raine: Poetry and Myth as Constructions of the Sacred and the Secret* "Poetry becomes a form of reminiscence, of anti-amnesia, in the Platonic sense;"<sup>48</sup>

Spun in the womb's cradle, veins  
And nerves that weave the skein of thought  
Behind new eyes unborn, in dreams  
Float into senses delicate,

And open, slowly to unfold  
In gentle flower, sheltering wings  
That brood above the painful world  
And screen the open doors of space

'Embryon'<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Celine Boyer, 'Kathleen Raine: Poetry and Myth as Constructions of the Sacred and the Secret', Griselda Pollock & Victoria Turvey Sauron, (ed.), *The Sacred and the Feminine: Imagination and Sexual Difference*, (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007), p. 165.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

## The Window Concept

In Victorian Art the notion of 'the window' was used repeatedly in various symbolic ways regarding femininity. Shefer comments that although the 'woman at the window' has been used many times in the history of art, in Victorian art 'the window became a pervasive theme,' usually a 'manifestation of the female confined to her outsized cage.'<sup>50</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites extended this theme further, challenging the Victorian woman's role at this symbolic window.

The 'woman at the window' was a repetitive theme or symbol in Victorian Art. She was often depicted waving her husband or lover goodbye or waiting for him to return; as in Sir James Dromgole Linton's painting *Waiting* 1865, or John Callcott Horsley's *The Soldier's Farewell* 1853.



Figure 13, John Callcott Horsley, *The Soldier's Farewell*, 1853

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<sup>50</sup> Elaine Shefer, *Birds, Cages and Women in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Art*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990), p.127.

Another popular composition was to arrange the woman gazing longingly out the window with a bird in a cage beside her, to emphasize her condition as a domesticated 'passive pet'. Even if the window was open the woman remained inside to indicate that her cage was not so much a physical one, but a social or cultural construct. Walter Howell Derverall alludes to this condition by naming his painting 'A Pet' (1852-3).



Figure 14, Walter Howell Derverall, *A Pet*, 1852-3.

The image is of a genteel woman standing at glass French doors that are flung open revealing a walled garden. The woman remains inside gazing into

the bird cage beside her, making a clear connection between herself and the bird. As Elaine Shefer points out; 'Unlike its use in Romantic Art, the window, even when open, did not offer freedom. Either from personal choice or social convention or a combination of both, the woman never goes beyond the window.'<sup>51</sup> This environment clearly suited the beliefs of the Victorians, who held that:

No woman can or ought to know very much of the mass  
of meanness and wickedness and misery that is loose in  
the wide world. She could not learn it without losing the  
bloom and freshness which it is her mission in life to  
preserve.<sup>52</sup>

Two Pre-Raphaelite paintings created in the mid Victorian era are at odds with Victorian convention. They reveal a suggestion of suppressed feelings and urges within the 'woman at the window'. These two paintings are John Millais' *Mariana* (1851) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-9).

In the latter painting, Rossetti uses his sister Christina Rossetti as the model for Mary and their mother as model for the virgin's mother. Although the subject matter of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* appears to be a traditionally religious one, it is clear that it also describes the relationship between Rossetti's mother and his sister. Christina had inherited the passionate nature of her Italian father, as had Dante Gabriel, but for her it was inappropriate as a genteel Victorian Woman. Her English mother is credited with teaching her self control and restraint: 'Under the wise guidance of her English-born mother, Christina slowly learned to control her emotions. Perhaps she learned too well.'<sup>53</sup> She became 'plagued by ill health, moral

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<sup>51</sup> Elaine Shefer, *Birds, Cages and Women in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Art*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990), pp. 129.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p129.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. pp. 132-133.

scruples, and an innate shyness...' She struggled with concepts of pleasure, and in one of her early poems wrote:

Ah, woe is me for pleasure that is vain,  
Ah, woe is me for glory that is past'  
Pleasure that bringeth sorrow at the last  
Glory that at the last bringeth no gain! <sup>54</sup>

Although traditional readings of this work see it as simply religious, it could be argued, given the artist's family history, that Rossetti creates a mood that is something other than religious symbolism. It is evident by his sister's facial expression that she is struggling with a strong urge to engage with what is happening outside the window; the warm sunny day and the male figure who is reaching up to pick some luscious grapes from the vine. The male figure could be seen to portray an angel, but if that be so, he is certainly an angel made of flesh and blood and Rossetti's figure *Mary* is very much aware of his presence. But the voice of restraint, her mother, sits beside her and she appears to repress her urges and maintains composure.

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<sup>54</sup> Elaine Shefer, *Birds, Cages and Women in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Art*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990), p. 133.



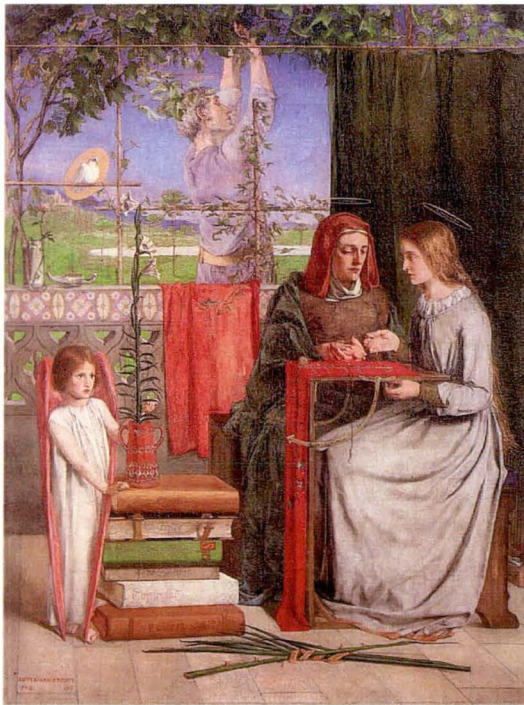


Figure 15, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, 1849,  
Figure 16, Detail.

John Millais' *Mariana* (1851) represents a very different 'woman at the window'. A pivotal painting, that offered a glimmer of hope for the Victorian woman, allowing her to acknowledge real feelings of frustration and boredom with 'her lot'. Andrew Leng points out in his study of the painting, that *Mariana*, according to reports made by William Michael Rossetti, was a great favourite with women and that he pondered 'why might this be'. Leng writes that 'The answer may well lie with Mariana's evident weariness with her embroidery,'<sup>55</sup> and he continues to point out that:

In *The Subversive Stitch* Rozsika Parker points out that the Victorian re-discovery of medieval embroidery in the 1840s coincided with the fact that 'women were increasingly voicing resentment at the contradictions that

<sup>55</sup> Andrew Leng, 'Millais's "Mariana": Literary Painting, the Pre-Raphaelite Gothic, and the Iconology of the Marian Artist', *The Victorian Web*, (modified, 2007), p.2.  
<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/millais/leng3.html>

bound their life" (17,18), a resentment that had caused Mariana to stop embroidering. Her passive but provocative resistance to the situation obviously struck a deep chord with its female viewers, justifying Ruskin's belief that it is a "representative picture" of the Pre-Raphaelites. It remains to be seen exactly what Mariana is representative of.<sup>56</sup>

Leng goes on to say that in fact Ruskin ignored the erotic implications of the painting and that other scholars seem to agree with the idea of a frustrated but erotic Mariana. Leng refers to George Meredith and points out that 'In *Subliminal Dreams* George Macbeth writes; the sensuous twist given to Mariana's body as she drowsily inclines her head- not, however, to look out for her absent lover, but to appraise the forward young angel... The meeting of his eyes, not with those of the virgin in the window, but with the hotter, more livingly lustful eyes of the girl in the room,'.<sup>57</sup> Elaine Shefer gives a similar reading;

Millais has really depicted the tension between the soul and the flesh by balancing two motifs, the Annunciation and Mariana herself.. The religious solemnity of the Annunciation depicted on the window contrasts with Mariana's sensuously twisting body; the flatness of the stain glass figures are opposed to Mariana's rounded contours; the self contained timid figure of Mary retreats against the arrogant thrust of Mariana's body.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Andrew Leng, 'Millais's "Mariana": Literary Painting, the Pre-Raphaelite Gothic, and the Iconology of the Marian Artist', *The Victorian Web*, (modified, 2007), p.2.  
<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/millais/leng3.html>

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>58</sup> Elaine Shefer, *Birds, Cages and Women in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Art*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990), pp. 136.





Figure 17, Sir John Everett Millais, *Mariana in the Moated Grange*, 1851.

### Mapping the Erotic Feminine

The commentary on Millais' *Mariana* reveals the crux of this project. It is not that the Victorian genteel woman was a non sexual being, as she was so often portrayed, but rather that her erotic and sensual nature was constrained within the confines of a prescribed domestic world. Thus, the Tasmanian colonial migrant women, whom this project is concerned with, living within a milieu of Victorianism, were therefore also contained within this ideology of a genteel domestic interior. Regardless of how humble their colonial home, its cultural constructs contrasted with the darkness and



wildness beyond, the Tasmanian wilderness. Her link between her body and the domestic was sealed, not only physically but psychologically.

Sally Smart's work *Shadow Farm* (2001), refers to a text by Angela Malone *Lucia's Measure: The Story of a Giantess*. In this story the woman befriends the 'darkness' and all it contains, in this case a giant:

....I have never seen a giant... but if I did I would hold him. I wouldn't be scared. In the dark you can see anything. You can't tell the giants from the trees and I'm not afraid of trees. I am not afraid of this dark sky.

See how my braids are as black as the burnt hollow of the tree where the wallabies hide, how I can write my name on the squiggly barks so no-one will ever find it. And stretch out my body in Petticoat Flat where they say not even the black crow flies over.<sup>59</sup>

In Malone's story (and Smart's artwork) the darkness beyond calls, and fear and alienation are left behind. The story illustrates how the woman finds a boundless abandonment in the wild retreat of 'Petticoat Flat'. This freedom found in the wilderness (if only within an imaginative wander) informs my project by allowing the colonial women to explore their unfulfilled life. The darkness beyond symbolises the expansiveness of Lucia's 'dark sky', a vast exterior where interior longings and desires can be released, and secrets exposed. In my artwork, this dark place becomes an abode for the sensual, sacred and erotic feminine, and in a project that concerns itself with textiles, it is possible to describe this 'place' as black velvet. Black velvet becomes a pivotal place for me, both symbolically and materially, ultimately a metaphor for infinite possibilities.

In the studio black velvet, satin and brocade and other textiles are used to create a series of multi-panelled canvases with embellished decorative

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<sup>59</sup> Angela Malone, 'Lucia's measure: The Story of a Giantess', (Australia: Vintage Random House, 2000), pp. 6-7,45. Sally Smart: *Shadow Farm*, (Australia: Bendigo Art Gallery, 2001), pp. 5-6.

elements, and another work that combines textiles with glass panels. By creating a visual language using the textiles the project makes reference to a history of female artists, from the twentieth century onwards, who describe a feminine 'place' from a female perspective.

In 1925 Hannah Hoch made a collage, *Bewacht*, in which an embroidered tree form dominates the image, to the left a man in eighteenth century costume, with a gun over his shoulder and a balloon for a head is dwarfed by the embroidered form, thereby elevating the age old feminine pursuit. In the *Subversive Stitch* Rozsika Parker observes that ' *Bewacht* appears more concerned with embroidery's connotations than with the art's formal qualities: the juxtaposition of shapes and objects conjures up the class and sexual associations of the art.'<sup>60</sup> Hoch and Sophie Tauber, both associated with the Dada movement were pioneers in their efforts to elevate 'women's work', but it wasn't till the 1960's and 70's that further serious challenges were made.

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<sup>60</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, (Great Britain: The Women's Press Limited, 1984), p. 194.

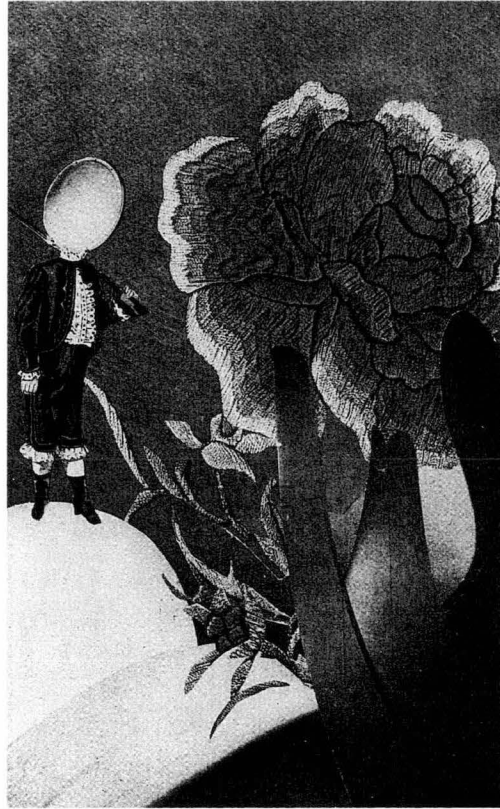


Figure 18, Hannah Hoch, *Bewacht*, 1925

During the 1960's a counter-culture was born that paved the way for 'voices' previously silent to be heard in the public forum. In the *Subversive Stitch* Parker gives a comprehensive history on 'Embroidery and the making of the feminine', from medieval to the 1960's and 70's where embroidery within the hippy era found an alternative expression. 'Embroidered suns rose over hip pockets, dragons curled around denim thighs, rainbows arched over backs.'<sup>61</sup> Men and women embroidered and wore these colourful arrangements. It was in this social climate that the feminist 'voice' was heard, but with a 'crucial difference. Feminists viewed these issues within a political perspective: it was an oppositional, not an alternative movement.'<sup>62</sup>

Parker goes on to refer to the British *Feministo* a postal art movement (1975), where women exchanged their artworks through the post with use of

<sup>61</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, (Great Britain: The Women's Press Limited, 1984), p. 204.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 204.

embroidery and other materials from domestic life (whatever was available). An exhibition of the artworks was finally achieved. 'Placing the embroidered, knitted and crocheted work in an art gallery was intended to challenge the value-laden division between "home" and "work", "art" and "craft".'<sup>63</sup> The study continues with reference made to important contributors like Beryl Weaver and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), but the most pivotal artwork from Parker's history for this project is Catharine Riley ....*in a tin*. A sardine container is painted white with the top rolled back to reveal what is concealed and contained inside; the word sex , which is spelled out in silk and flowers, 'worked in shades of white, conjuring up and cutting across the way whitework embroidery is intended to confirm the image of women as sexless, spiritual and sensitive'.<sup>64</sup>

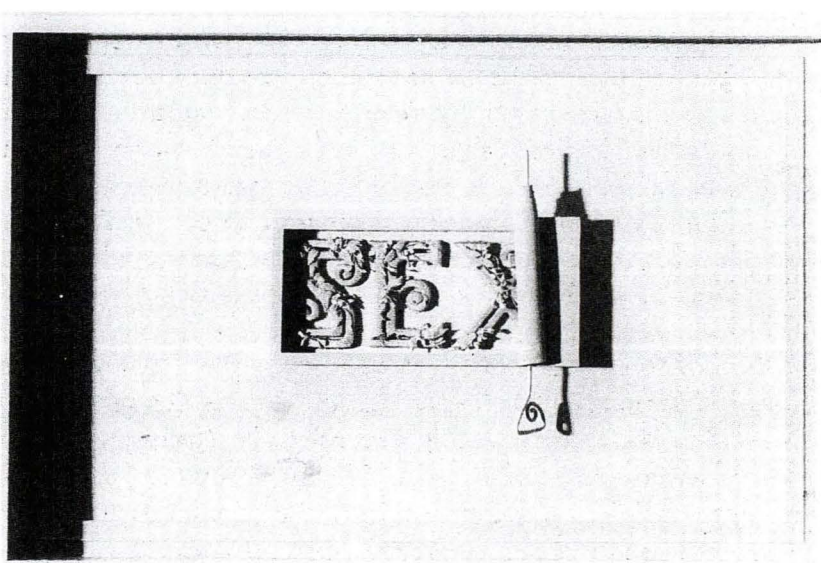


Figure 19, Catherine Riley, ... *in a tin*, 1978

The contemporary American born Melbourne based artist Kate Just uses myths, religious and art historical references as well as feminism and science fiction, in works that 'posit transformation of the body, as a metaphor for personal struggle, sexuality, birth/reproduction and creativity.'<sup>65</sup> Just is

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. pp.205-215.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. pp.205-215.

<sup>65</sup> All Kate Just Information from:

<http://katejustart.blogspot.com> [accessed, 11 April 2010].

known for her sculptural knitting practice but also uses mixed media sculpture, digital print, collage and video.

In 2006 Just showed an installation called *Paradise* using hand knitted, machine knitted and hand rug-hooked wool, clay, fibreglass, plastic and metal. She creates a scene or environment that refers to Eve and the Greek goddess Persephone 'evoking rich associations of 'the feminine' in nature.'<sup>66</sup>

She writes:

At first glance, this is modern day suburbia, safely sealed, without a hint of the wild, until we see that she is sinking into an earthen, muddy crack that has split through the grass. She has dropped her long, snaking garden hose and her eyes are closed in surrender..... symbolically this refers to a woman's journey into the dark and unknown regions of the self.<sup>67</sup>



Figure 20, Kate Just, *Paradise*, 2006

Just's installation *The Garden of Interior Delights* (2008) (detail below), is a feminine reworking of the fountain in Hieronymous Bosh's painting *The Garden of Earthy Delights* (c.1500). 'The structure as a whole, with

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.



its pink fleshiness, orifices, folds and liquid spray seems to her more of a giant totem to femininity and sexual reproduction.’<sup>68</sup>



Figure 21, Kate Just, *The Gardens of Interior Delights*, (detail) 2008.

Another work made by Just in 2008 was *Shed that Skin*. Inspired by paintings of Van der Goes, Michelangelo, Hieronymous Bosh and Teipolo illustrating the ‘serpent tempting Eve with the fruits from the Tree of Knowledge. This early story and centuries of its retelling marks snakes as dark, evil creatures and women as conniving, easily tempted, untrustworthy and dumb.’<sup>69</sup> Just hand knitted ‘that burdensome skin’,<sup>70</sup> so as to allow both creatures to shed it along with its ‘burdensome’ connotations.

<sup>68</sup> All Kate Just Information from: <http://katejustart.blogspot.com> [accessed, 11 April 2010].  
<sup>69</sup> All Kate Just Information from: <http://katejustart.blogspot.com> [accessed, 11 April 2010].  
<sup>70</sup> Ibid



Figure 22, Kate Just, *Shed that Skin*, 2008.

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Narratives matter. On some subterranean level we all know this, and live our lives accordingly. Our identities incorporate the narratives we have internalised, the stories we construct to shape from discrete moments of time a chronological pattern producing the cohesiveness we think of as self, as who we are.<sup>71</sup>

By creating a narrative around the three colonial women and those they represent, and by referring to various stories and artists who have contributed relevant knowledge, this project adds another thread to a tapestry that has been woven by feminist artists and scholars during the past hundred years. As well as bringing attention to the constraints and

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<sup>71</sup> Lucy Frost, *singing and dancing and making a noise': spaces for women to speak*, James Mcauley Memorial Lecture, September 8, 9 & 15, (University of Tasmania, 1999), p.1.

silences that exist in the history of the genteel colonial migrant women, the project, using a textile language, charts the longings and desires of the feminine domestic interior, by exposing the evidence of a deeper, darker and wilder feminine. This textile language, pays tribute to women's historic and creative relationship to the art, and also wishes to expose the oppressive aspects of the construction of femininity which have been so closely linked with textile arts.

Through working with the notion of interiors and secrets comes the recognition that although opportunities now exist in the external world for women, by looking through the window/mirror of time, her secret interior world still remembers the past.

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## Chapter Three: How the work was developed.

### In the Studio

Prior to beginning this Master's project I had been living in Tasmania for only three months, having lived in Sydney and then Brisbane for many years. A natural desire to find 'one's place' in a new environment led me to an interest in the British colonial women and their experiences as they attempted to settle in their new home Tasmania. This particular group of women were of special interest to me as they resembled my own heritage in terms of place of origin and social position. I found that I was in a position in my new home, to empathize and imagine their feelings of alienation and to appreciate their struggles, longings and desires.

Whilst reading their letters and diaries, and in Meredith's case her books, I began in the studio by collecting images of the three women and any reference to the Victorian items they might have treasured. I drew their faces from images of old portraits, and created narratives, based on reading between the lines in letters and diaries and generally enjoyed the obsession of the 'nostalgic object'. In a similar vein Susan Stewart observed the power of narrative and nostalgic objects to connect us with the past. In her book *On Longing* she writes:

I am particularly interested here in the capacity of narrative to generate significant objects and hence to both generate and engender a significant other. Simultaneously, I focus upon the place of that other in the formation of a notion of the interior.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. xi.



Figures 23 & 24, Images of the Interior of Runnymede, Hobart, 2010.

Runnymede (Bishopstowe) in Newtown, Hobart, was Anna Nixon's home for some years and is now under the care of the National Trust. I made many visits to Runnymede, with particular interest in the interior of the house. The plan of the rooms (an official plan of the house was obtained from the National Trust) gave some insight into Nixon's lifestyle. Walking through the various rooms I could imagine Anna Nixon consulting with her housekeeper in her small room of domestic business (the corner of which is illustrated in Figure 24), attending to her many children in the nursery, and within the confines of the main bedroom, imagining her loneliness (alluded to in her letters)<sup>73</sup> when Bishop Nixon was away on his long and frequent trips. Of particular interest was the dining room (Figure 23), and the large music room that was added by the Nixons during their years in residence (1850 – 1862). Both rooms still maintain the original wallpaper from the Nixon period; in my imagination, holding the memory of the Nixons and all those that have lived in the house since. Also the furnishings and treasures brought from 'home'

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<sup>73</sup>Norah Nixon, *The Pioneer Bishop in Van Diemen's Land 1843-1863: Letters and Memories of Frances Russell Nixon, D.D. First Bishop of Tasmania*, (Hobart: Walsh & Sons, 1953). pp. 18,19,25.

were of interest. One particular object of fascination was a decorative wooden piece that resembled an enclosed writing desk; but when the doors were opened they revealed the interior of a private miniature chapel, with a checked floor leading to an altar. While I was not permitted to take a photograph of the object, I was able to take the memory of this diminutive 'place' of sacred interiors and secrets, at which one could sit, into the studio with me.

That sacred/secret object from Runnymede and the memory of some of the old stained wallpapers, marked through various experiences and the passage of time, created images that lingered in my mind and inspired me to make several collage/femmages about the imagined secret lives of these women: and brought to mind Griselda Pollock and Victoria Turvey Sauron's revised edition of *The Sacred and the Feminine* (2007).

Also at this time I was renewing an interest in the early work (box constructions and collages) of Joseph Cornell, the contained interior 'places' that he made, often for women from the ballet, theatre, film or the distant past. Time was irrelevant within Cornell's worlds and this philosophy seemed appropriate to my project, as I delved into the past to retrieve from the lives of these colonial feminine ancestors, information that might resonate with women in the present.

In an attempt to process the information gleaned from the colonial women's stories, the collage/femmages gave form to a saturation of diverse ideas produced in my mind from the numerous stories read at this period. The paper based works became mini narratives, endeavouring to express these ideas. One work became a tower of women with an image of Anna Maria Nixon place on top of the pile, my reaction to her self effacing view of herself (witnessed in her letters).<sup>74</sup> In another work I collaged a rather happy

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<sup>74</sup> Refer to footnote 10.

looking skeleton with mock Victorian nosegays <sup>75</sup> (cut from floral fabrics) and a crocheted heart, in my mind bringing news from the past.



Figure 25 and 26, *Collage/Femmage 1 and 2*, 2009.

The last of the collage/femmages (Figure 27) was a work on two large sheets of paper that was a build up of drawn forms that resembled a vaginal shape, layered with floral patterning in drawn media and delicate cloths. On one paper piece I wrote the text *I'll lead a lush life*, which is a line from an early twentieth century American jazz song that sings of a jaded but elegant romance lived amid the 'dives' of New York.<sup>76</sup> In my mind it became an imaginative idea, suspending time and space, offering the colonial women in the project a change of lifestyle.

<sup>75</sup> A Victorian term for a small posy of flowers, usually given as a gift.

<sup>76</sup> Billy Strayhorn, lyrics and music, *Lush Life*, 1933 – 1938.



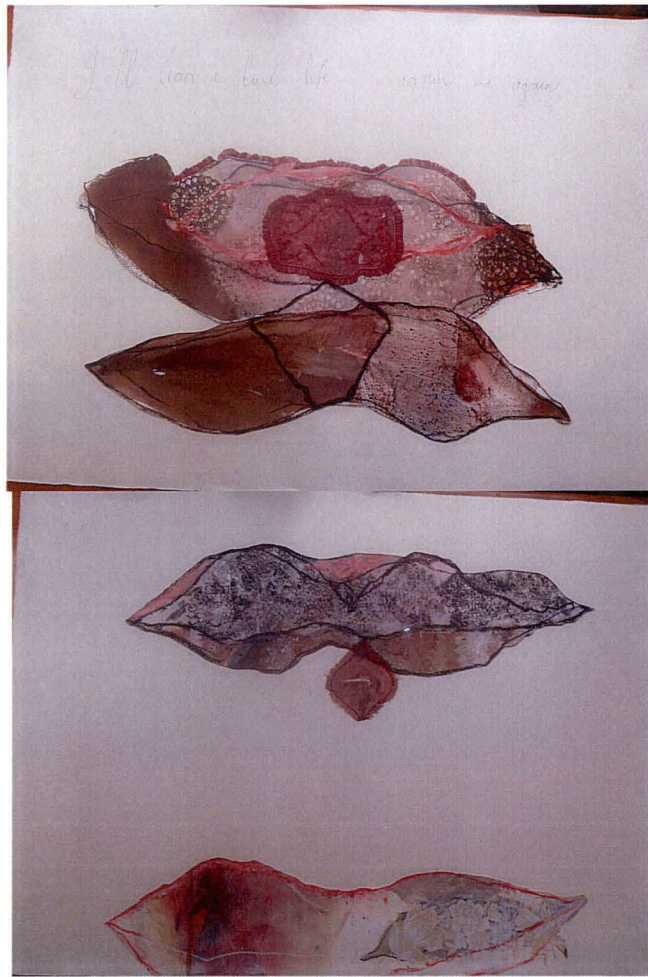


Figure 27, *Lush Life*, 2009

Whilst this period of making collage/femmage had been helpful in assisting me to consolidate various conceptual directions, it nonetheless began to feel unsatisfactory as a medium with which to continue. This dissatisfaction was connected to a minor dilemma in the studio regarding the immersion in the past and how I might make work that would strongly carry echoes from the past but still be relevant to the present. Viewing Anne Ferran's survey exhibition at TMAG, seemed to justify my delving into the past, and my desire to contribute by filling some of the 'gaps and silences' that exist in any history of women. Ferran's work created a ghostly atmosphere, where the silences and absences of the unrecorded women's lives became a tangible haunting presence; this potent response to the notion that 'the past haunts

the present' <sup>77</sup> encouraged my own endeavours to represent my particular group of women.

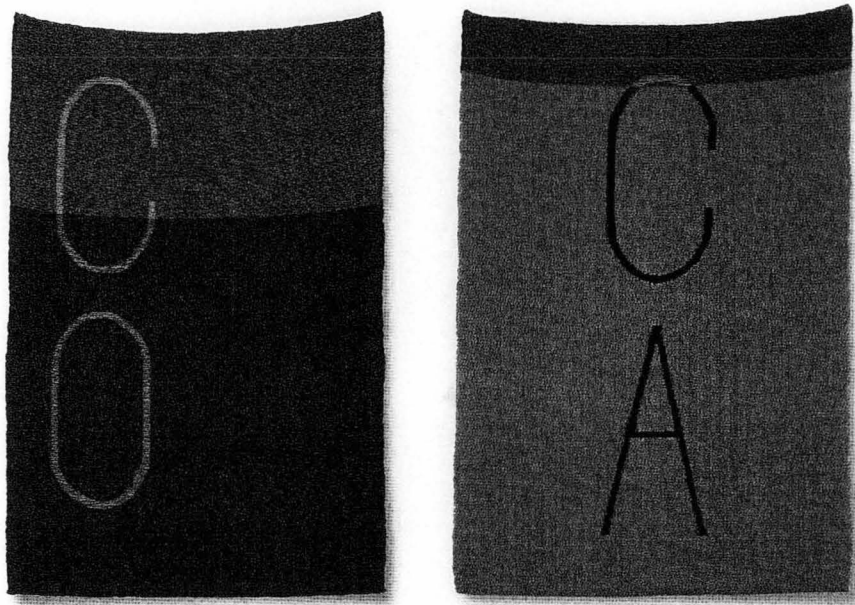


Figure 28, Anne Ferran, *In the Ground on the Air*, 2006

The notion of haunting, (a presence that cannot be ignored) which so appealed to me in Ferran's survey exhibition, and was a strong experience that remained with me from my Runnymede visits, became a quality which I hoped would be present in this body of work: which was at this stage still unformed.<sup>78</sup> Ferran's use of textiles encouraged me to begin working with textiles again, as a medium that communicates something that lingers or

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<sup>77</sup> Bill Bleatman and Noel Frankham. Introduction, Anne Ferran, *the ground, the air*, Tasmania: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 2008.

<sup>78</sup> This idea of a haunting and lingering presence is discussed further, with regard to several of my works later in the chapter.

haunts by its' ability to hold stains and traces of life through time. As explained in the introduction, I hold a long interest in textiles and in their use in different historical periods and cultures.

I began collecting crochet doilies and embroidered pieces from Op shops and other paraphernalia that connoted 'women's work' from the nineteenth century: particularly any kind of textile handicraft that women have been making within domestic situations for a long time. These objects included knitted, crochet, embroidered and sewn pieces functioning as table runners, head rests, cushion covers, small rugs and pieces made for personal accomplishment to be framed and displayed in homes. I was considering the work of the late nineteenth century artist Henrietta Ward, who challenged the exclusively male high art genre of history painting, by painting everyday feminine subject matter like women caring for children; insinuating that here was something more worthwhile than another war hero. In her book *Problem Pictures* Pamela Gerrish Nunn, reminds us that even though such feminine sentiments make perfect sense now:

that such a view did not prevail within the artists' own lifetimes raises telling questions about the Victorians' view of the past and their understanding of heroism, and about women's access to cultural authority in a society ambivalent about their historical and contemporary worth.<sup>79</sup>

I liked the idea explored in Nunn's book, concerning the female 'history' painters of the late nineteenth century who elevated the importance of women's lives through the traditional history painting genre. With this in mind I stretched two traditional painting frames with a sarong that I had often worn in Brisbane whilst housekeeping. Stains were enhanced with gouache paint to encourage the notion of the marks and traces left by the body on cloth, this time my own body, metaphorically closing that gap between the colonial women and myself. Other patterned and floral

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<sup>79</sup> Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting*, (England: Scolar Press, 1995), p. 112



fabrics were chosen to accompany the sarong and brought to mind the wallpapers that attracted my attention in Runnymede. Conceptually then, completing a cycle of wall to body and then finally back to the wall again in the Gallery, suggesting concerns with death and connections, and what remains and lingers. The four panels were combined and exhibited in a group show *Work in Progress* in the Plimsoll Gallery 2009/2010, the piece was called *Linger* (Figure 29). It was beneficial for me to see the work hung at this early stage of the project, and confirm for myself that the textile panels were a workable format. I felt pleased that the staining I had done onto the shiny damask surface of what was my old sarong, had become quite luminous when lit in the gallery: and that combined with the other printed cotton cloths, also stained and scrubbed back into a duller finish, suggested an old tarnished object which might resonate with the title of the piece through a mysterious, haunting expression. The addition of the two doilies, placed centrally within the two printed panels acted as a dial or control panel with symbolic feminine 'control' buttons, another thought was that the transformed doilies acted as a sacred feminine symbol, a mandala. These four panels became the beginnings of what was to become *Interiors and Secrets 1 and 2*.

I felt that I had reached a pivotal moment in the development of the project, and was confident enough to order twenty six more stretcher frames to make a total of thirty, and began collecting various cloths and textiles with which to furnish the frames.

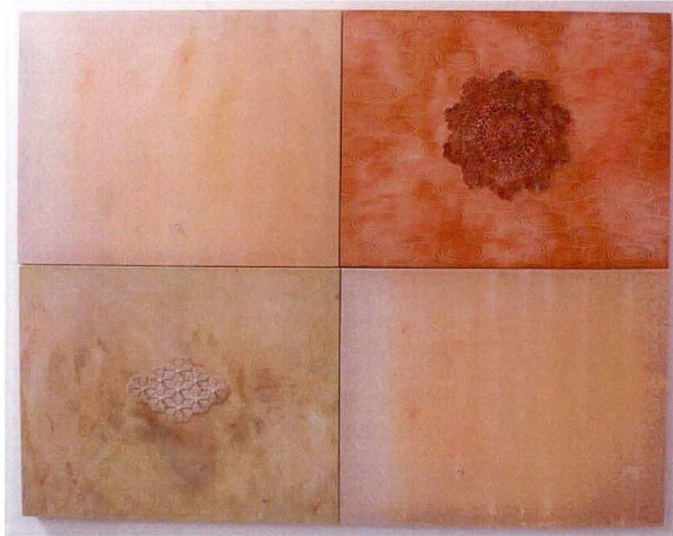


Figure 29, *Linger*, (a work in progress,) 2009

At the same time another related work was forming as a response to the 'window concept', referred to in the previous chapter. This second work was concerned with what I began to refer to as the 'window/mirror effect'; as a device or medium that might allude to the idea of connecting the past with the present. Firstly, it addressed the popular nineteenth century idea of the woman always waiting at the window, so commonly portrayed in Victorian painting, that was discussed and explained in Chapter Two, and the reference made to the suppressed and unfulfilled sexuality of this figure at the window. As I was making the first panels for this work, there was the realization that large parts of these women lives remained unfulfilled; their wilder selves, most particularly their sexual/sensual natures.

I began to seek out textiles with dark red backgrounds and all over delicate black or dark grey prints or surfaces that suggested to me deep, dark erotic feelings with polite exteriors, the red also connoting themes of blood, the most obvious being menstruation. Although in early pagan times and various other cultures menstruation is honoured as a sign of fertility and a rite of passage; sadly through most of Western history it was regarded as a shameful thing, even dirty. In Victorian times, the very existence of

menstruation would have been denied and never referred to. It is ironic that a condition that is responsible for producing something as creative as a child should carry so much shame. The idea that a woman could be a passionate, sexual being was also a shameful notion; if she exhibited passionate, sexual behaviour, she was seen as a 'scarlet' woman. Although the initial idea for this work came from the censures and restrictions of the past; as the work developed I felt inspired to make the red panelled work more liberating than restricting in its presentation, with some fabric motifs acting as a subtle reminder of the past, (eg the black cage like grid on one of the panels). The mood in Joseph Cornell's work *Toward the Blue Peninsula (For Emily Dickinson)* is a relevant influence here and will be discussed later in the chapter.

I hoped this red panelled work would act in several ways. Firstly, providing the viewer with a sense of release or even joy, the bliss of an orgasmic sexual experience, opposing the restrictions of the past for women mentioned in the previous paragraph. I hoped that the immediate impact of the colour and length of the piece might 'wash over' the body as one passed by. But on closer inspection some of the motifs would remind the viewer of the restrictions of the past.

Secondly, I wanted this piece to become a window /mirror that acted as a viewing bridge between the present and the past, the notion of looking through the window of time, but because it was a 'mirror' glass, seeing a reflection and thereby placing oneself within the history/story. I was able to source a mirror/glass with an all over rippled effect in dark red and dark grey and had them framed in grey steel to allude to a window and at the same time be consistent with the textile panels.

The completed work, *The Window Concept* (Figure 30), consisted of ten panels, three glass and seven textile, hung as one work; the hanging level being both window and eye level for the optimum visual involvement.

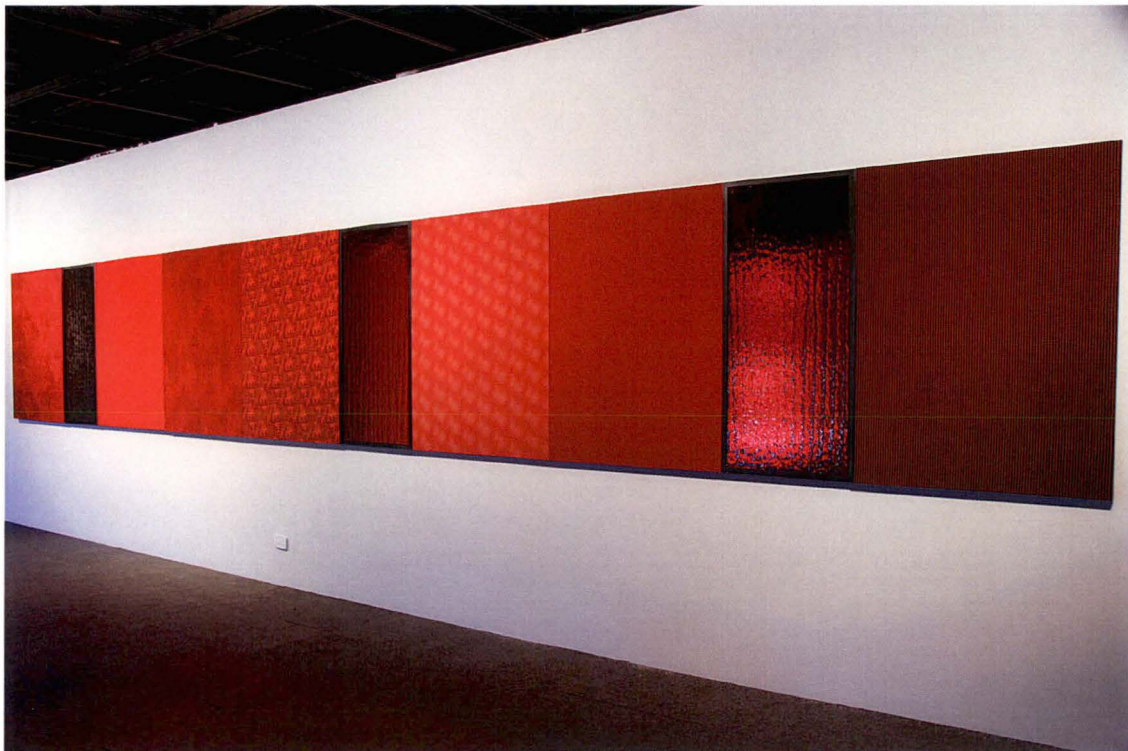


Figure 30, *The Window Concept*, 2010.

Meanwhile the thirty panels of *Interiors and Secrets* were progressing in clusters of three or four, reflecting various ideas or thoughts within the broader concept. These were often triggered by information I had read or other artist's work that resonated with the project. Working with one group of three panels I was influenced by the American artist Kara Walker's black silhouettes, as a device to communicate issues that remained in the shadows, and with regard to my work, providing an effective way to combine the female black felt imagery with a reference to blinds and shades and what goes on behind them. Walker's concerns with black American women and their history of slavery, required a more open and transparent approach, to reveal extremely painful situations concerning slavery. While the two histories are very different, an acknowledgement of respect and a feminine solidarity for her work seemed appropriate.



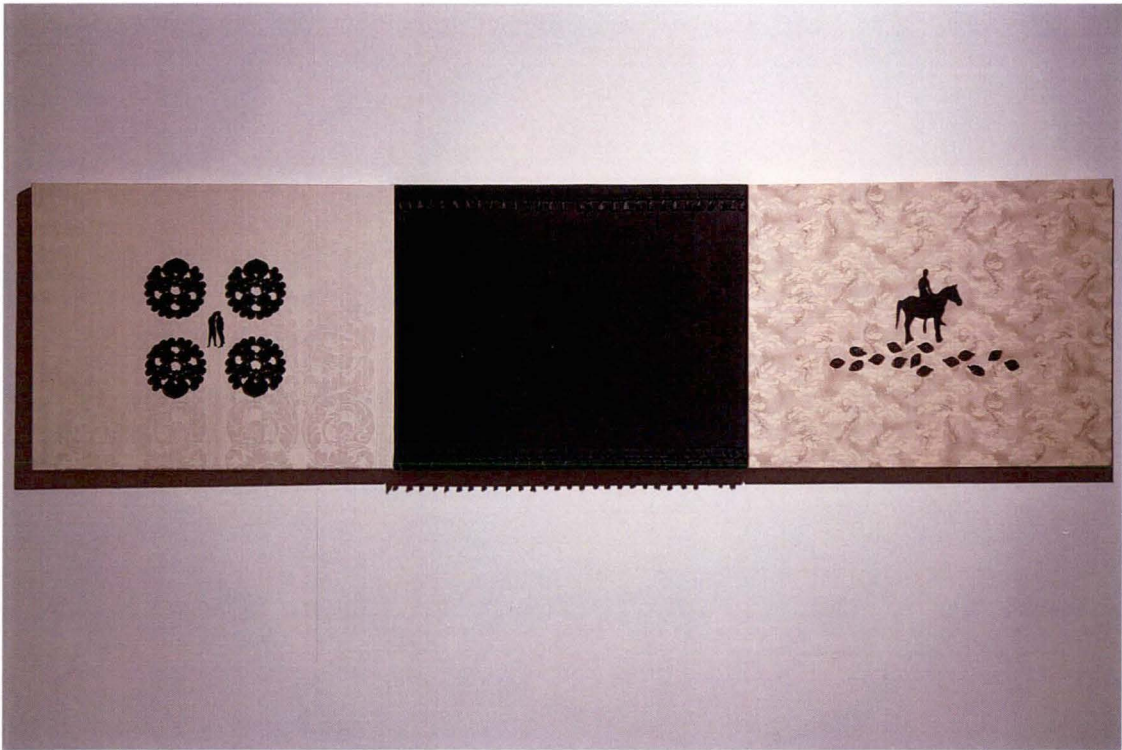


Figure 31, *Interiors and Secrets 1, Icon*, 2009.

The resulting work *Icon* was made using three panels, the centre panel was covered with black felt and trimmed with a black tasselled braid that reminded me of the trimmings used on old shades/blinds mounted on the windows of nineteenth century carriages or homes; drawn down to conceal the activities within the interiors. Felt cut outs and found objects were combined to create mini narratives. The panel below displays a felt cut out of a romantic liaison surrounded by four 'wheel-like' motifs. There appears to be nowhere for the lovers to go (within the visual narrative), they are locked in; but the third panel of a naked woman on horseback suggests a release from concealment and the ability to move freely.

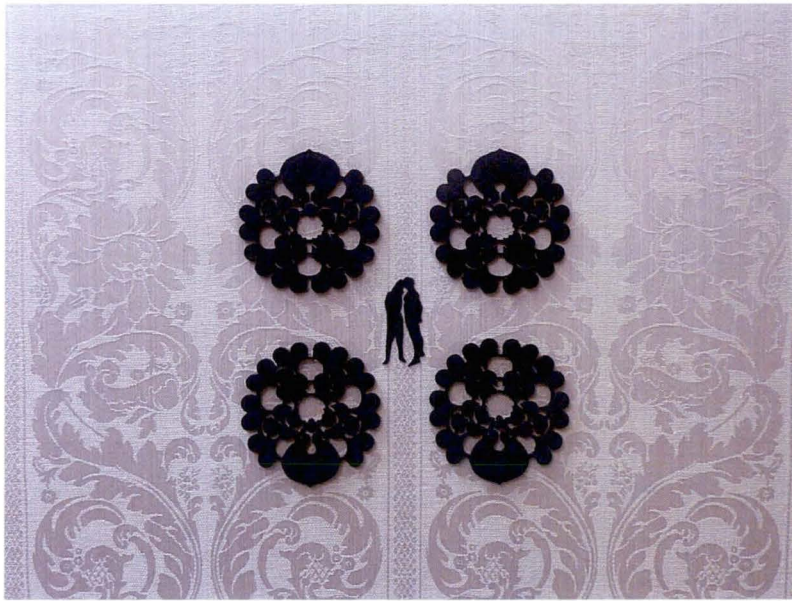


Figure 32, Icon (detail), 2009.

Joseph Cornell's boxes continued to be a source of inspiration. For me, the suggestion of mystery and secrets contained within his artwork, the narratives that weave in and out of time and occasional works of freedom and release, were all elements I was interested to include in my own work. Whilst constructing these panels/objects in the studio, I often considered Cornell's work and the writing of Susan Stewart in *On Longing*; for me they both dealt with issues of longing, desire, mystery and secrets, and the power of the nostalgic object. Stewart writes extensively about the notion of 'the miniature', the doll and the dollhouse, the notion that a person may die and be removed from space but the doll (or miniature object) continues to consume space. These thoughts bring to mind Cornell's miniature worlds.





Figure 33, Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Bebe Marie)*, Early 1940s

A doll dressed in nineteenth century clothes peers through some bare sticks or branches which conjures ideas of a dark, leaf-bare forest on a winter's night, or even from another world, where the doll acts as a substitute for a young woman from another time and place. The following quote from Stewart connects with Cornell's *Bebe Marie*:

The miniature, linked to nostalgic versions of childhood and history, presents a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version that is domesticated and protected from contamination.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 69.



Inspired by *Bebe Marie* and Stewart's ideas, I photographed some images of nineteenth century dolls and transferred those photos onto cloth; I built up one particular doll image with padding and beading and positioned it in the centre of a felt covered panel. The panel didn't work formally with the other panels so I encased the image in a net or web made of a pink wool doily, and the doll image remained 'domesticated and protected from contamination' in its contained environment (Figure 34). I became interested in using the notion of the web or net further and attached some web/net like constructions to the previously made 'sarong' panels, in which the faux fur (with its wild connotations) were placed, ensnared in the 'trap'. The original work of four panels *Linger* began to change and expand, and eventually was hung as a six piece work. This group of works was heavily influenced by my personal reading of several of Joseph Cornell's boxes.

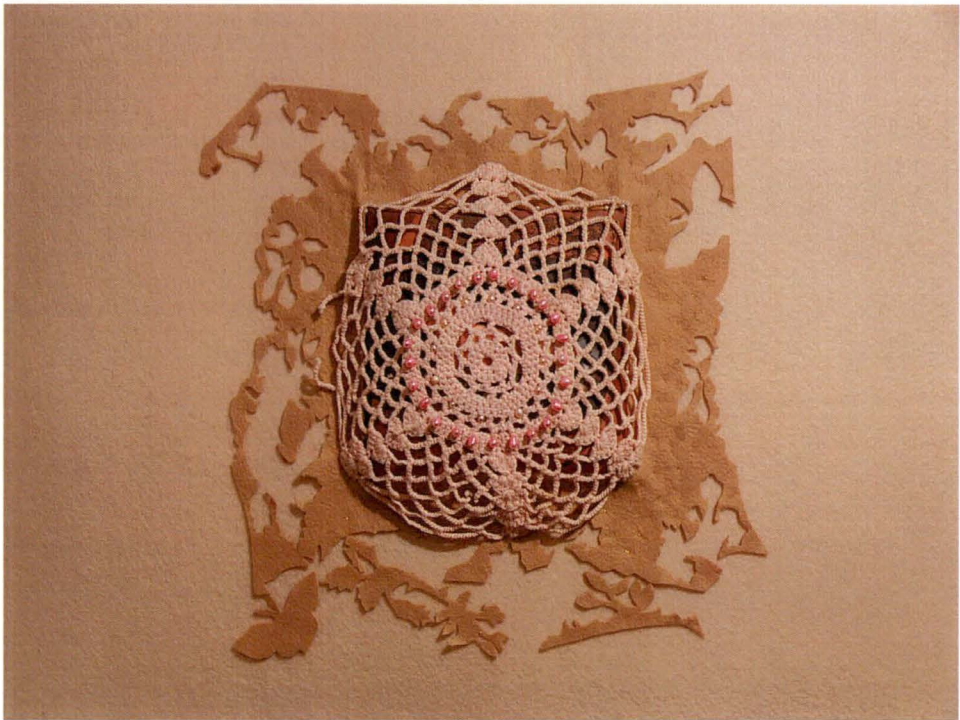


Figure 34, *Interiors and Secrets 1, Linger*, (Detail), 2009.

Two other Cornell boxes were of particular interest to me; *Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall* (1945-46) and *Toward the Blue Peninsula (for Emily Dickinson)* (Figures 35 and 36). In the former work Bacall looks at us from the past enshrined behind layers of glass in a window box. In 1999 Jodi Hauptman wrote of this work:

The blue scores fragment Bacall's features into separate fascinating parts, and the glass and wood door of the arcade machine splits off and locks away her multiple threats – femininity, sexuality, impurity- and keeping them not only hidden but under strict control.<sup>81</sup>

Whilst this may be a valid reading of the work, I found I identified with the mystery and the sacredness of the box, as Walter Hopps describes it "a Renaissance altarpiece"<sup>82</sup>. The idea that Cornell had created a homage to a feminine icon, was a symbol of hope as was *Toward the Blue Peninsula (for Emily Dickinson)*. Here Cornell offers Dickinson (the nineteenth century poet) not only homage but also the gift of freedom, as quite clearly the bird has flown and the cage is empty.

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<sup>81</sup> Jodi Hauptman, *Joseph Cornell: Stargazing in the Cinema*, (U.S.A.: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 82.

<sup>82</sup> Walter Hopps, (commentary), *Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay Eterniday*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), p. 70.

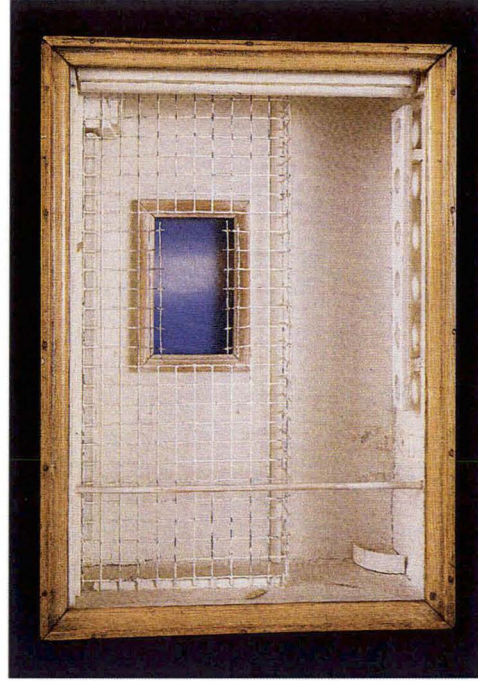
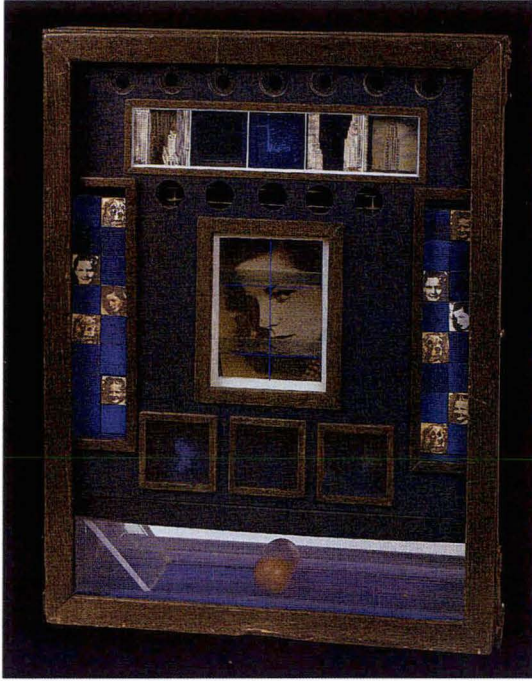


Figure 35, Joseph Cornell, *Untitled ( Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)*, 1946.

Figure 36, Joseph Cornell, *Toward the Blue Peninsula (For Emily Dickinson)*, 1953

I felt that Susan Stewart's phrases: 'The Secret Life of Things' and 'Objects of Desire' beautifully described Cornell's boxes; and both inspired me to find in my making, particular 'places' of desire and secrecy within the confines of the panels.



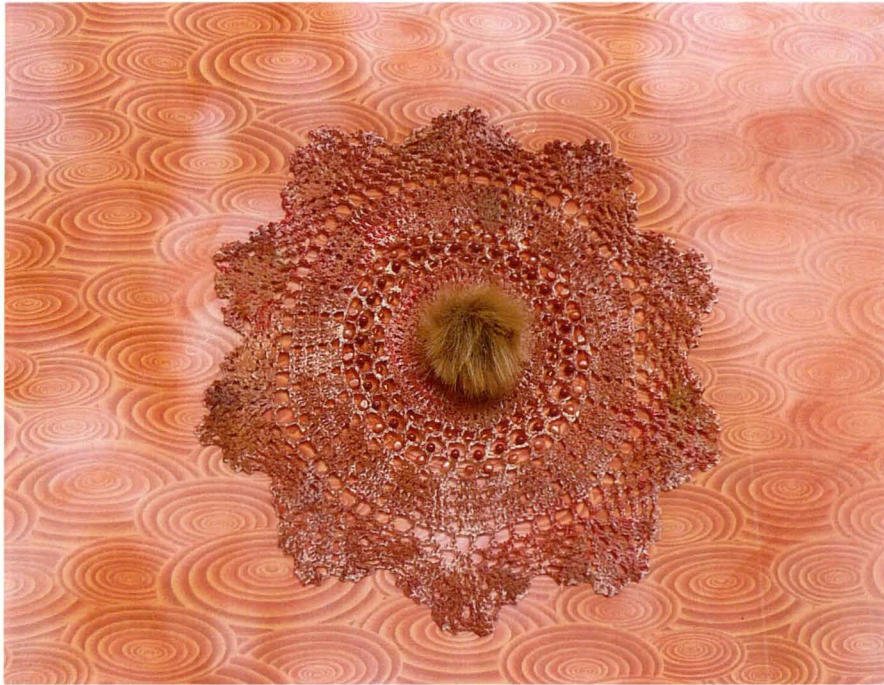


Figure 37, *Interiors and Secrets 1, Linger*, (Detail), 2009

The design or the texture of the fabric was naturally important, with certain lush textures signifying aspects of desire and sensuality, either draped or pleated or sewn into forms that alluded to anthropomorphic erotic forms, even if they existed only within contained and concealed interiors. Woven and printed designs were chosen to allude to wallpaper, furnishings and interiors; places of lived experience and the idea that textiles, whether they form clothes, furnishings or flocked wallpaper, absorb the lived experience and hold it through time.

One particular texture that became a dominant element in the work was the introduction of faux fur into the collection of textiles. The fur served to communicate three important aspects of the project. Firstly, the notion of the Tasmania wilderness that lay just outside 'the window' and offered the colonial women the possibility of abandoning their 'Picturesque Pursuits'. Even if social conditioning was restrictive, a narrative of wildness could penetrate their psyche. The second concept is the idea of new 'skins'; a

constant theme in the project, where skins or coverings connote various meanings, with the fur (as a new skin) suggesting a wilder option from the generally prescribed polite domestic. The third idea is simply the lush appearance and feel of the fur; the silky sensual sensation of the pile, like stroking a very soft cat, the perfect medium for communicating notions of feminine erotic forms that takes one back to Meret Oppenheim's fur pieces. The faux fur was chosen, rather than real fur, as a contemporary construction (availability only in recent years) and still remained under the umbrella of textiles. In the panel below, from the final work *Linger* ( *Interiors and Secrets 1*) the faux fur is manipulated into the shape of a vulva, with a fur interior, suggesting the three ideas previously mentioned; of fur as wilderness, fur as 'new' skin and the lush texture of the erotic feminine.



Figure 38, *Interiors and Secrets 1, Linger*, (Detail), 2009.



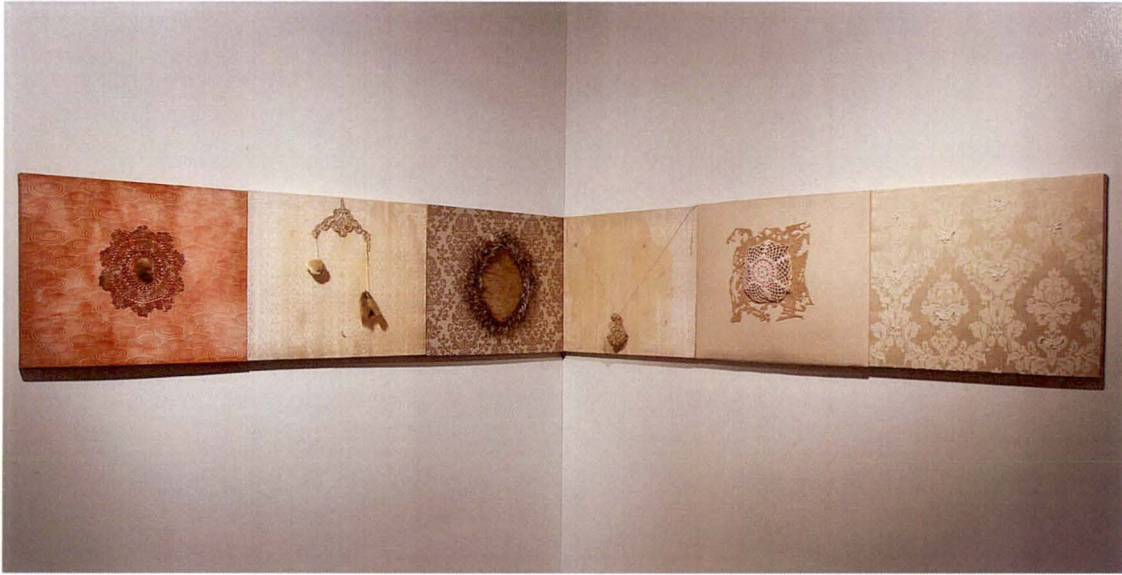


Figure 39, *Interior and Secrets 1*, Linger, 2009.

As I progressed with the construction of these panels, I enjoyed allowing the work to become more decorative and to draw influence from my previous work in fashion design, keeping in mind the notion that clothes are a form of skin or covering, a concept that was discussed previously.

The late British fashion designer Alexander McQueen was admired as an exceptional talent in his field, particularly with his catwalk collections where he could give free reign to the dark drama and enigmatic moods in his designs. Several of his pieces (between 2007 to 2009) strongly influenced my desire to incorporate small parts of costume or textile forms into the work: in particular McQueen's use of heavy pleating and deep folds creating a mood that combined restraint and concealment as well as power, challenge and daring.





Figures 40 and 41, Alexander McQueen, Autumn Collection, 2007.

McQueen's decorative but sometimes disturbing designs had a profound influence on both my choice of fabrics purchased at this stage in the development of the work, and also the way I chose to manipulate them.

Moving from the more pastel and soft colours that were chosen for the panels of what subsequently became *Interiors and Secrets 1*. I began to seek out bolder and stronger colours and motifs which alluded to a more liberating investigation and discovery of a wilder sensual femininity, discussed in Chapter Two. Working from McQueen's fashion influence, I began to produce anthropomorphic forms that I felt morphed from fashion as a skin, cover or sign to a series of narratives alluding to an assertive and erotic feminine; including suggestions of the struggle inherent in that journey. These later panels, discussed in the following pages became *Interiors and Secrets 2*.

The first of this second series to be discussed is the three panelled work called *The Yellow Wallpaper*: which referred to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story discussed in Chapter Two. Her story of the wallpaper that tormented her in a time of confinement, with imaginative images of roving floral designs, protrudences and women trapped behind the wallpaper and distorted floral forms that moved between the floral and the erotic feminine iconography. The story is one of feminine struggle and angst but for the author eventually became a vehicle of triumph and personal resolve.

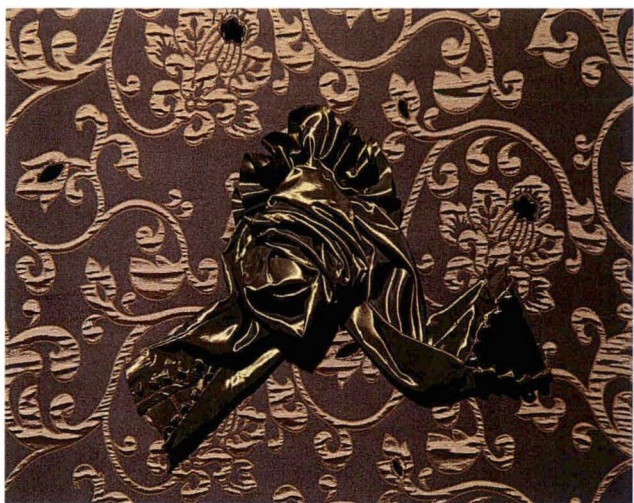


Figure 42 and 43, *Interiors and Secrets 2, The Yellow Wall Paper*, (Details) 2010.

I found a length of black taffeta with a dusty gold coloured floral design, which suggested Gilman's 'stained yellow' and stretched it over two panels. I dissembled a taffeta dress also of 'stained yellow' purchased at an Op shop, and used the gathered waist, with zipper intact, to create a floral form with a black velvet 'void-like' centre. On another panel the sleeves were manipulated into distorted floral forms, with the opened buttoning revealing black velvet voids. A third black velvet panel became a comment on the nature of the void itself. The black velvet brought to mind an experience when viewing Anish Kapoor's *Void* in the Queensland Art Gallery. Standing in



front of Kapoor's black void I was overwhelmed by the experience of losing oneself into it, being 'sucked in' and surrendering to the darkness; this experience influenced the inclusion of the black velvet. The second hand Laura Ashley evening dress, dissembled and reformed, is intended to illustrate a narrative, whereby a contemporary evening dress is transformed into an artwork that questions the limitations placed on the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the notion of helpless womanhood that she represented, whilst acknowledging her struggle. The historical feminine struggle of gain and loss, projection and hope and then withdrawal and retreat into the past; this retreat is represented by the black velvet void. Happily, this feminine void or place of retreat, like most imagined 'places', has its' magical qualities, and is not only a place of becoming lost, but also found, though the ecstatic nature of surrender.



Figure 44, *Interiors and Secrets 2, The Yellow Wallpaper*, 2010

In the six panelled work 'Black Velvet' (Figure 46), I combined the lush textural black fabrics of velvet, faux fur, glossy spandex and flocked taffeta. I stretched them over the panels and manipulated the fabrics into often protruding forms to suggest and communicate several ideas. Firstly, by allowing the forms to protrude from the rectangle I sought to suggest a 'breaking out' from the confines and restrictions of the rectangle and the past, conjuring up a bolder more erotic feminine, mentioned so often in this paper.

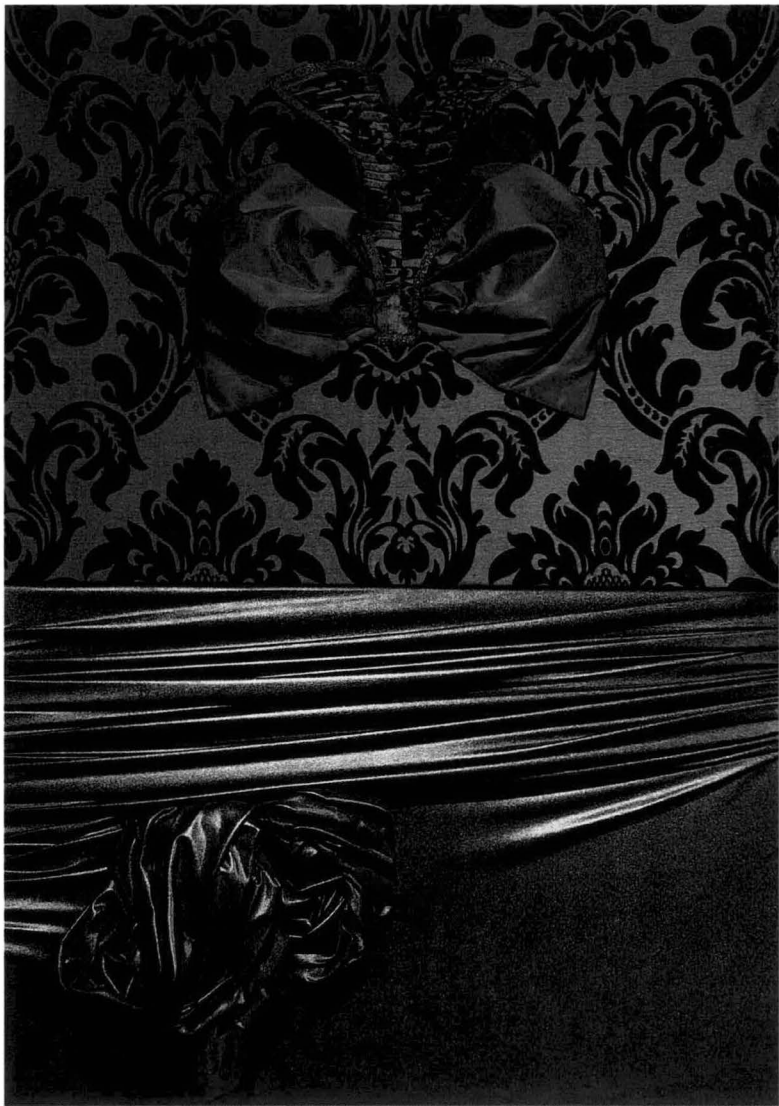


Figure 45, *Interiors and Secrets 2, Black Velvet*, (Detail), 2010.

Secondly, I hoped the work would act as a potent memorial to the ancestral feminine, the death of the body but the lingering of memories and secrets, the spandex panel was twisted into a knot-like construction and sewn securely, supposedly holding in those secrets and memories, reminiscent of McQueen's Figure 40, which I perceive as an outrageous mourning outfit, a potent memorial to the ancestral feminine.

Thirdly, I intended the work to act as a tribute to an invented feminine 'place' previously described as 'black velvet'. Reference had been made in Chapter Two to the 'darkness beyond', as a wild place where the erotic feminine could project her longings and desires that could not live or survive inside the confines of her domestic interior. What is contained within these dark places of experience? The answer lies in Sally Smart's reference of Angela Malone's story *Lucia's Measure*,<sup>83</sup> where the woman in the story befriends that 'darkness beyond' and finds a boundless abandonment in its embrace. This 'place' can be a physical one, in this project the Tasmanian wilderness, but more importantly it becomes a symbolic place of experience.

Into the cave  
So very dark  
But  
Beautiful  
Black velvet<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Angela Malone, 'Lucia's measure: The Story of a Giantess', (Australia: Vintage Random House, 2000), pp. 6-7,45. *Sally Smart: Shadow Farm*, (Australia: Bendigo Art Gallery, 2001), pp. 5-6.

<sup>84</sup> From my private journal, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2009.



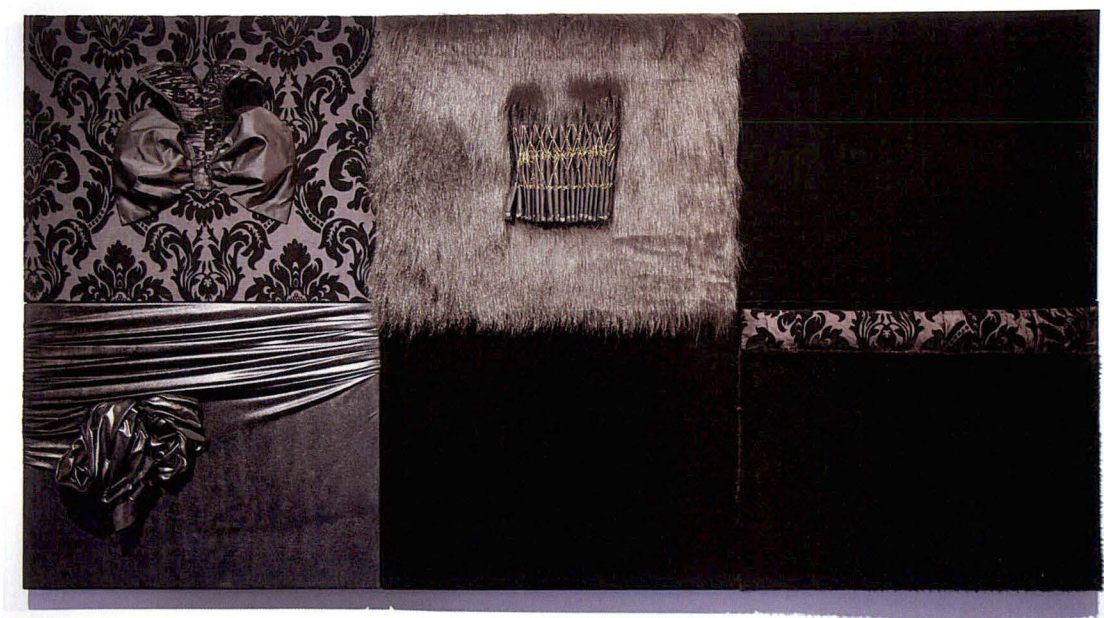


Figure 46 *Interiors and Secrets 2, Black Velvet*, 2010

The black velvet and related lush fabrics, were eventually partnered with a deep scarlet red velvet and flocked taffeta and cotton. By combining the colours black and red and brown, and the various textures, forms and decorative designs, I was able to extend the narrative of the passionate and erotic feminine concealed within the powerful undertow of the past, by exhibiting cuts, cracks and transparencies of secret longings in the works *Veil* and *Cover*. With the three panelled work *Veil* (Figure 47), I used semi transparent organza and flocked netting to only partly

conceal the forms and patterning that represented feminine secrets. I hoped these panels might conjure mysterious and haunting qualities (that I so admired in Ferran’s work) from the past but existing in the present.

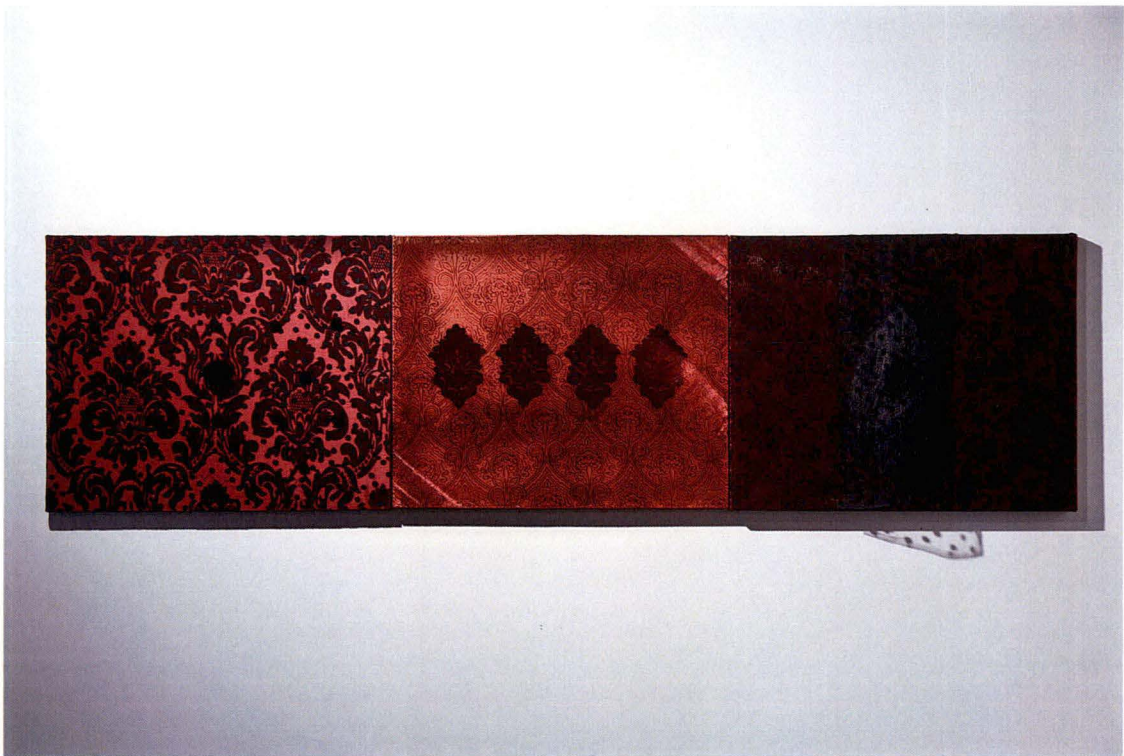


Figure 47, *Interiors and Secrets 2, Veil*, 2010.

The work *Cover* (Figure 48), as the title suggests, is concerned with motifs that have for years covered walls and furnishings within the interiors of homes, and have ‘held’ their private stories. Within the context of the whole *Interiors and Secrets 2* suite, this work also suggests the covering of feminine secrets; but by cutting into the fabrics or covers and making decorative transparent cracks and breaks in the covers, I hoped to reveal a breakthrough, or tiny window of opportunity, amid the covering and concealment.



Figure 48, *Interiors and Secrets 2, Cover*. 2010.





Figure 49, *Interiors and Secrets 2, Fur*, 2010.

Finally, one red velvet panel *Fur* supports a form that breaks through the concealment and reveals a shape that suggests a powerful black fur and velvet vulva, hung low on the wall to correspond with that part of the female body. It is hung in close relation to *Cover* as a reminder of the process through time of female liberation, struggle and fulfilment, but stands alone as a symbol of respect and hope.

## Overview

The project began with a literal interest in the three colonial women, what their lives may have been like, but more importantly, imagining what secret desires may have been contained within their domestic interior places. These thoughts manifested in the studio by 'literally' collecting and transcribing the imaginative traces, auras and stains that lingered within the history of the women. The stories of the three women and what they represented, continually acted as a catalyst or springboard from which I could bounce information and inspiration into the work in the studio. They acted as a personal imagined history, and the space between them and my self informed my choice of materials and how I manipulated them.

At the beginning of the project, I painted, stained, drew and collaged onto paper to create what I called collage/femmages. These works acted as a journal to enable me to clarify how I wanted to respond to the historical context of the project and how I intended to approach the formal aspects of the artworks. After this process a shift in materials occurred, from the collage/femmages to textiles. I collected various floral printed cloths that suggested Victorian clothing, wallpaper and furnishings, influenced by the historical information and stories, and my visits to Anna Nixon's old home, the National Trust Property 'Runnymede'. I used doilies, wool and beads to create transformative forms such as mandalas, and forms that referenced imaged secrets caught and held in the passage of time. I bleached, painted and stained the cloths, allowing these marks to be totally immersed into the fibres of the cloths to allude to the layering of 'lived experience' of the colonial women held through time and history. I then stretched them over traditional stretcher frames, with the idea of elevating the 'feminine textiles' within the 'frames' of the historical 'high art' genre. These panels became *Interiors and Secrets: Series 1*.



At the same time that *Interiors and Secrets 1* was forming, I was also working on another larger work based on the Victorian idea of the 'woman at the window', discussed in Chapter Two, this work was to become *The Window Concept*. I began collecting lengths of red cloths with small black prints that subtly described or suggested narratives of 'love and longing, death and desire'.<sup>85</sup> These were stretched over wooden frames (approximately window size) and later glass/mirror panels were added to the group of textile frames. An awareness of the movement between past and present became stronger, as I worked with the *The Window Concept*. Thoughts of how information morphs and changes when brought through time; the 'wisdom' of retrospectivity; considerations of what lingers from history or the effects of a lack of history; and the location of this resonance or echoing from the past within the psyche of women. Toward the end of the project my intent for this work moved from suggestions of struggle and restriction to a release of desire and longing, and the work was hung in the gallery with this 'release' in mind.

Having identified these key issues I was able to confidently move to a more ambitious application from *Interiors and Secrets Series 1* to *Interiors and Secrets 2* with the building up of form and symbol; where the decorative is no longer passive, genteel, but assertive. I selected textiles that were lush and tactile (faux fur, velvet, flocked brocade and satin) reflecting the sensual/erotic realizations in the work. I manipulated these textiles into forms that suggested the struggle, containment, and finally the release of feminine desire. These forms were often placed centrally on the panels to emphasize their importance, or my focus of intention for these forms. I began to make these later textile forms more sculptural and demanding of attention, I experienced a sense of urgency for their 'voice' to be heard and they began to protrude from the containment of the rectangle. By making forms that broke free from the boundaries of the rectangle, I felt the work suggested, both physically and conceptually, a release from the constraints

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<sup>85</sup> Except from the project's title, cover page.

of the interior. The decorative nature of the work also became bolder and more assertive in defence of the overtly feminine position with which it concerned itself. I became aware of a subtle humour entering the work and a sense of 'play' with the juxta-positioning of the textile pieces, perhaps as a result of the freedom found in the making of this later work.

I enjoyed the liberty to transform any object into another form thereby allowing a statement to be made by performing that process. The work 'The Yellow Wallpaper' within the suite *Interiors and Secrets 2* is a good example of this process: where the dress was dissembled and recut and formed into flowers that were themselves reforming and changing. The intention was to reflect the changing paradigm from the past to present of women's roles and 'place'. From restriction to release, a birthing and dying back process that often involves both pleasure and pain, a theme which I hope was evident through all the works in *Series 2*.

Work from the earlier stages of the project is importantly not rejected, (*Interiors and Secrets 1*), but with *Interiors and Secrets 2* and *The Window Concept* create a body of work that is intended to offer not only an overview of the two year project, but also an expanded view over time: whereby all notions of the feminine are accepted and respected. Restrictions are acknowledged, and viewed beside other choices that offer release; the soft and the 'pretty' are not dismissed but are expanded to include the strong bold and assertive options, to enable women to define for themselves the fullness of their own 'place'. Although the work creates a place that is not altogether comfortable or straightforward, I hope nonetheless it contains beauty; the beauty of the enigma of the sacred and erotic feminine.

## **Chapter Four: Conclusion.**

Through researching the lives of the three colonial women and all they represented, and through making the work in the studio that was fed by this information, I have come to appreciate the potency of the notion/idea of 'interiors' in a history of women and the speculation of secrets that may be held there. The body of work produced through this project is intended to reflect upon the difficulties and restrictions as well as the desires and longings of a particular feminine place or history in colonial Tasmania: and to identify what still echoes or resonates from that history and how that affects contemporary women. It is my desire that the work from this project may add to the body of knowledge regarding what it means to be feminine and how such a 'place' might be visualized and mapped.

This project has provided a personal learning experience that is multi-faceted. Firstly, the information gleaned from the research far exceeded my expectations as a topic worthy of study, and I realized that I have only 'scratched the surface' of the topic of retrieving from history a 'feminine place' from which to build a holistic model for the present and future. The concerns of the project have opened a 'Pandora's box' of material and sources from which my art practice can draw from for many years. I particularly enjoyed the fact that under the umbrella of the research title I was able to bring together diverse areas of thought that have always been of interest and present in my practice. These include issues relating to the movement of time, feminist concerns, interiors, secrets and mystery, death and desire and how these things leave their mark on the environment, both natural and 'man' made. Moreover, I found it gratifying that these concerns found a relevance and connectedness to each other as the project developed.

The other area of satisfaction was the increase in confidence in regard to materials and their application in the studio. The previous chapters mention my earlier career as a fashion designer. Reference to this prior work had

been previously excluded for two reasons: firstly, some time was needed to allow the work done during those earlier years to 'breathe' as new knowledge was acquired through study and practice in fine art. Secondly, I was aware of a slight stigma attached to the idea of fashion as reference within the fine arts as both too decorative and feminine. As the project dealt with issues relating to the decorative and the feminine, returning to textiles as a chosen medium for the project became appropriate allowing me to include direct fashion references and to enjoy the medium again with a very different emphasis, intermingled with the knowledge and wisdom in retrospect.

As the issues of the project became clearer, reinforced with a stronger narrative, my artwork naturally gained confidence. Work that at first described the nature of the 'genteel domestic', paying tribute to feminine ancestors, became more assertive. By bringing issues from the past into the present, a third form was developed, something 'other' than past or present, a bolder, more assertive form that often protruded from the work, asking questions of its own 'becoming'. This transformation moved the work from passive to active. Inspired by the 'story telling' nature of the project, the textile forms offer an open ended narrative that allows for an expanding description of feminine place and its sensual/erotic iconography. It is this recording of colonial Tasmanian feminine place and the transformation that the project documents that contributes to not only my own art practice but also to the collective body of knowledge in its field of research.

The installation of the work in the gallery became the final transformative process. Being able to see all the work together for the first time was illuminating. After several attempts to hang the work it became clear that my original plan to hang the 30 panelled work *Interiors and Secrets* as one work was not going to be successful. Instead I realized they needed to be divided into two separate but related works and were hung on either side of the large work *The Window Concept*, which then acted like a conduit between the now divided works *Interiors and Secrets 1 and 2*. The latter works were hung in

small groups and were given separate titles to allude to specific ideas within the whole of *Interiors and Secrets 1 and 2*, like paragraphs that build a complete story. These small groups of works were hung in various configurations and heights in direct relation to the actual height of a body, or to stress various ideas such as struggle and resolve. For example, *The Yellow Wallpaper* which was hung both vertically and horizontally suggesting a type of “bind”, or the hanging of *Black Velvet* into a strong, solid and central rectangle to emphasize it’s resolve as a confident feminine ‘place’. Some panels within *Interiors and Secrets 2*, such as *Veil* (Figure 48) and *Cover* (Figure 49) and *Icon* (Figure 32) from *Interiors and Secrets 1*, created wall shadows from over hanging lace, net and trimmings. I had considered the notion of shadows during the project and I felt these shadows (in the final Installation) reinforced the idea of a haunting presence, left by those that have died but have left a trace or aura behind.

What started as essentially a painting and drawing project, shifted into a wholly manipulated textile body of work. In future work, I am interested in bringing paint back into my image/objects, either by accompanying textile pieces with a painted image or by combining both mediums into the one form. Originally the compositions were primarily symmetrical, however I would also hope to pursue stronger aspects of asymmetry in my compositions, along with a range of different size components, or breaking completely with the rectangle and the idea of the frame.

It has been very challenging and insightful for me to, firstly, investigate the factual and imagined lives of the group of colonial women around which the context of this project is based; and secondly, to allow the research to build and culminate to a contemporary ‘projection’ of their existence and my visualization of ‘Love and Longing, Death and Desire, and Feminine Place’,<sup>86</sup> through constructing *The Window Concept* and *Interiors and Secrets 1 and 2*.

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<sup>86</sup> Excerpt from the project’s title, cover page.



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