

Printmaking Today

A quarterly journal of contemporary international graphic art



- Artists' profiles, interviews and appreciations
- Galleries, exhibitions and collecting
- Research, education, resources and new techniques

Volume 7 Number 2

Summer 1998 £4.50

US\$ 10.00 Can\$ 12.00

ISSN 0960 9253

Identities: Gillian Armitage, Lisa MacLean, Brigitte Potter-Mäl and Marie Price

edited by Gillian Armitage and Marie Price

In the spring of 1997, four artists from Malaspina Printmaker's Society in Vancouver, Canada, launched a body of work surrounding the theme of personal identities. Working variously with the techniques of lithography, intaglio and mixed media, Gillian Armitage, Lisa MacLean, Brigitte Potter-Mäl and Marie Price each presented a distinctive biography that speaks eloquently on the inter-relationships and influences shaping her own identity. As a vocal quartet, the works resonate and harmonize over a bass note of unity, linking the individual expression of each artist's voice with the common thread of universal distaff experience.

In two installations titled *Relative Pieces A* and *B*, Gillian Armitage has created a unique family portrait, which, when first viewed, was a crowd of faces staring up from the metal prison of the drying rack. What were they doing there?

Using a stack of family photos mined from a drawer, where her mother unceremoniously stores her 120-year-old collection, Armitage selected photographs of blood relatives in their early adulthood. Scanning them into a computer, she focused on their faces, cropping the non-essentials to likeness such as hairstyles and costumes. For each 127 x 152 mm (5 x 6 in) face she made four positive and three negative images; layers of colour, seven new layers of skin. These were transferred onto a lithographic stone and printed on Arches Cover for the wall piece, *B*, then individually on silk tissue and collaged onto wooden blocks for the floor piece, *A*.

Hanging in rows of generations, *B*, Armitage's immediate family is brightly framed while the frames of those she knew less well fade appropriately. *A* shows an ancestral link differentiated by the height of the wooden block. The highest depicts twin babies; the artist is on the left.

Because the portraits all record faces of approximately the same age, one can reflect on their similarities. It prompts this fantasy: if only they could have seen and known each other at that age, or we had known our parents and grandparents at the age we are now. If only.

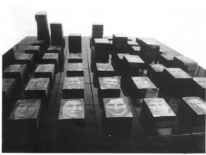
While in the 17th century flower painting had been a major genre of artistic expression, by the 19th century, the status of such work had declined.

Lisa MacLean writes: 'By the 19th century an understanding of the complex iconography of still life painting had been lost. Flower painting was seen then primarily as a genre of expression particularly suited to women because the floral images were presumed to be apt metaphors for the ephemerality and fragility of the female artist. In an interesting transvaluation of those values, however, early 20th century suffragettes used the iris as a symbol for female sexuality and strength.'

Like those earlier women, she elevates the importance of images that represent home, family and domesticity. Recalling her grandmother, the embroiderer, and her mother, the gardener, she writes: 'The lives of women have historically been constrained, limited to their private sphere'. MacLean incorporates items such as lace, embroidery and flowers with portraits of long-dead girls and women in poses of constrained stillness; their faces and bodies become the objects of the camera's engrossed gaze. 'Their silence and impenetrability reveal nothing. They ask only for attention.'

Brilliantly coloured viscosity rolls enrich these stunning photo-based etchings. Constituting a visual archive of compelling strength, the images speak of loss and retrieval, and are invitations to identify with the history and conditions out of which the images were born.

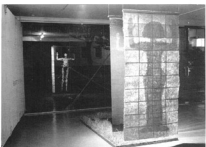
'My personal history is only interesting in as far as I try to play



Relative pieces A, 1997, by Gillian Armitage. Lithography, acrylic paint, wood and ceramic tile.



Enclosure, 1996, by Lisa MacLean. Intaglio, 450 x 900 mm.



Portrait of myself, 1996, by Brigitte Potter-Mäl. Various materials.

with my life and person as a tool,' Joseph Beuys.

Large vertical panels of handmade paper incorporating seeds, petals, grasses and Xeroxed inlays of botanical texts and writings from Brigitte Potter-Mäl's own journal form the backdrop to each of six installations. Life-size phototransparencies hang in front of each panel. On one transparency she lies naked on her back in a bed of clover, her arms in a

'hands-up' position, a gesture of offering and vulnerability. At its base, and surrounded by grass sod, is a shallow void of water mirroring the shape of the artist's body. In others, leaves, grass clippings and rose petals blur the edges between flesh and earth and cascade over her in a sensual intimacy.

Potter-Mil speaks of the harmony and interdependence of the whole structure (earth) and all of its living parts. Although this work is intensely female and personal, it transcends self-portraiture to embrace all human kind. The gathering, collecting and cultural layering are focal to Potter-Mil's concerns, an expression of periods of passage, turning points, life cycles. In this mid-life re-examination of self, she speaks of both a private and universal discovery in search of a personal identity.

For thousands of years, in Western tradition, human intellect was associated with masculinity, the body and its unruly appetites with femininity. In her work, Marie Price focuses exclusively on the heads of women, suggesting that an increase in women's power and influence will occur only when her intellectual contributions supplant her obvious corporal capability.

In two suites of drypoints, etchings/monoprints, *Winter People*, and *Flamingo Women*, women look out at the world from wrapped, swathed heads. Their facial features obscured, they are reduced to a pair of eyes and a nose. With no ears or mouth they lack the power of speech and are unable to articulate their own experience or write their history. The work is full of silence, articulating women's historical condition.

In a suite of lithograph/monoprints, *Eve's Legacy*, Price invests the Judaeo-Christian symbol of evil, the serpent, with new meaning. While Genesis links Eve and the serpent in their responsibility for bringing death and sin into the world, other cultures have presented the snake in a more favourable light signifying royalty, fertility and healing. In a coronation of femininity, the artist reverses the historical association of the covered head with a women's powerlessness and instead celebrates it by crowning the head of her Eve woman with a snake's head.

Without loudly proclaiming a position or politics, Price asks us to meditate on women, power and history.



Flamingo Woman #3, 1995, by Marie Price. Drypoint and monotype, 610 x 460 mm.

Contact: Gillian Armitage, 517 West St James Road, North Vancouver, British Columbia V3A 5L4, Canada. Tel: 604 985 8756; Fax: 604 985 00735.