

SOURCE:

"A contemporary feminine aesthetic"

Is There A Feminine Aesthetic?

As we enter the second decade of the 21st Century, these nine New Zealand women assert that their art practice avoids the polemics of feminism. While acknowledging the advances made by the Women's Art Movement in a previously male-dominated art-world, there is general agreement that 'good art' is not defined by gender. This is tempered however by an understanding that gender should be approached as a social construct. Feminism after all encouraged the juggling of multiple roles, Breadwinner, Caregiver, Homemaker, Mother and Nana, as well as Creative Artist. The desire to 'have it all' has resulted in women often finding themselves time-poor, isolated and still knocking on doors for representation in the contextual art-world.

The 'Source' exhibition and art project aims at celebrating gender and overcoming some of the challenges experienced by women artists today. Given the provocation 'to revisit the notion of a feminine aesthetic, a highly contested feminist art discourse of the eighties, nine Hawke's Bay women gathered at each other's studios to discuss emerging themes and provide constructive criticism as the work evolved. In some cases it has fostered cross-pollination of media practice and collaboration between parties. The women have a diverse skill base and highly individual practice. Their differing backgrounds, ages, and life experience are connected by their experiences as women, and this has manifested itself in the exhibition.

The SOURCE participants are: (in alphabetical order) Jo Blogg, Linda Bruce, Leanne Culy, Fiona Hislop, Anneliese Hough, Elaine Mayer, Jill Webster, Desna Whaanga-Schollum and Denise Wilkinson.

Reoccurring Themes

"Making Art is about objectifying your experience of the world, transforming the flow of moments into something visual, or textual, or musical. Art creates a kind of commentary"

Feminist artist Barbara Kruger alerts us to the ability art has of making social comment. All the SOURCE participants have made work that in some way discusses female lineage, nostalgia, gender stereotypes, the quest for identity and control over our bodies. It is social commentary defined by gender.

Despite the initial assertion of 'I am artist first' from many of the women, the resultant work illustrates that the personal is always political. Rather than fear gender rhetoric or biological determinism, we should celebrate the richness and integrity that embracing 'who we are' brings to the art world. This is a body of work by contemporary New Zealand women that we can all engage with and learn from.



Desna Whaanga-Schollum: Make every moment count

Attracted to the aesthetics of the fifties, robust design, great colours and objects that can be repaired rather than replaced, Desna also celebrates their metaphoric connection. A steel ironing board is one such iconic object. Desna has a love/hate relationship with this particular 'appliance'. While she appreciates its design, as a symbol for the 'housewife' it is reminiscent of domestic tyranny, and Desna clearly loathes the act of ironing.

She says that 'sharing the cleaning' is often an issue for men and women cohabitating and her 'herd' of marching ironing boards will elicit these ideas. The cold metallic surfaces of the boards have become canvases for the continuation of her powerful self-portrait series. The self, stripped down as in earlier paintings, reveals structural skeletal or muscular elements. As the artist faced the prospect of her own death to cancer, layers are peeled back, paint drips and the surface talks of body decay and its reconciliation with the spirit. Three years down the track Desna hasn't finished with this theme as she recognizes two very different people in the way she thinks. One is pre-cancer and one is post.

She says: "It was an isolating visceral experience, watching my body stop functioning as it should and slip out of most people interactions, relationships, work and conversations - my mind tuned to a static haze. The following years have been a difficult path to figuring out what is important to me in life. There's nothing like waving death under your nose to make you wake up and decide what's worthwhile and what's not!"

While this current work attempts to iron out the creases left by the ordeal she can happily assert that ironing is actually a complete waste of time in a life where every moment counts.



Anneliese Hough: Turn me inside out

With a professional photographic background, Anneliese has embraced digital tools and uses them to separate her art-making from commercial practice. Consequently her images often employ collage techniques as she builds visual narratives rather than 'takes pictures'. She also likes to collaborate, often with the subjects of her images, her two sons and more recently fellow artist, young Felix Klee from Bavaria.

The 'Source' exhibition has encouraged her to literally place herself in the pictorial frame, and this has resulted in a cathartic and highly personal visual journal. Her pages spill down the wall to the floor in acrylic blocks. The lens-like exterior causes slight fragmenting of the image and emulates the dreamy quality of thoughts and experiences of the artist, while pointing to our hunger as eager voyeurs, outsiders who have gained access to her mind.

These multi-faceted aspects of the artist in performance style communicate strong psychological overtones in the manner of artist Cindy Sherman. Vulnerability, innocence and aggression exude from these images. Anneliese says that she is "happy to show herself in this way as the content is too personal to be put into words".

A son in his twilight years who precariously balances on books and a surreal still life are just some examples of the dark and beautiful visual poetry that encourage the viewer to look for further clues in the text. Extracted from women's magazines, words whisper contradictions "we are beautiful just the way we are" (with enhancement from the product we are selling). "We can have it all" (but don't know what we really want). Messages suggest the ambivalent female experience but encourage us to gather close and collectively piece together all the fragments, until we get to know this woman artist inside out.



Linda Bruce: The 'Blooming Family'

Community and family are important to this artist, as she sees strength in belonging. Appropriating found objects and re-contextualising them to communicate a new narrative, (along with an obvious love of ceramic craftsmanship) defines her practice.

Rurally based, Linda's signature calf ear-tags are now printed with seventies floral pattern, in shades of purple that read as five generations from nana Violet. Assembled as multiple flowering forms, the ear tags surround a suckling teat anchored by a brass ring. In multiple, these act as an erotic mammalian mix of human and flora. A gender tug of war is visually implicit in much of Linda's work, as medium often confronts form.

Her current series illustrates this with antique totemic farm implements used to anchor plumage made from the printed fabric of fellow artist Jill Webster. The bloom stands erect on the end of a shovel-like implement, suggesting the attractive and ubiquitous Scottish thistle. While gender associations are obvious, the work is metaphorically rich because of the many narratives embedded in her chosen materials, and the literal flowering of form.

Linda says she wants to "break down the pretty to create beauty". Perhaps she draws our attention to beauty with her material virtuosity and desire to connect us with nature.

Nature holds the promise of fecundity or what she calls "The quickening". This sensuality emanates from her delicate slip-cast ceramic seed pods swaying on an unfathomable wind above us. These beautiful objects are literally 'source' itself. Their seductive exterior invites us in to examine an internal gift, a new life form, a new grandchild perhaps. This is an artist who has happily married family with art practice, and both are blooming.



Jo Blogg: Shut the %^&*& up - I'm not mad!

The monstrous feminine stereotype is offensive to Jo. She is tired of being told her mood swing is hormone-related and asks the question "why can't I just be pissed off, angry...not Mad! Her recent body of work focuses on society's propensity for silencing the angry voice of women. The most beautiful mandala's made from concentric rings of pills decry the medical profession's ability to placate women with pharmaceuticals, and allude to the obsessive compulsive disorder indicated by the making of the work.

Semaphores created by the artist silently assert "I am not mad!", while the viewer engages in other signature circular signs created by the eccentric drawing with hundreds and thousands. Decorations from a childhood birthday, laugh cheerlessly with the command to 'shut up'.

The viewer, gasps at the sheer 'madness' of the artist's labour and seeks refuge in the anthropomorphic symbols she has chosen to 'speak' for her. A Brown Bear seems benign, but perhaps a false sense of security is posed next to White Rabbit, a nervous stressful character, whose restless twitch is exacerbated by the accompanying Black Dog of depression. These three-dimensional animals are covered in the artist's obsessive circles, this time raised up and warty. The colours and symbols are repeated on hospital green circular table tops alluding to her earlier road-sign series.

Ultimate physical control is generated by the artist's drawing hand, resulting in a seething monochrome of cells, as if emerging from sand. The poetic triptych of visual metaphors for the opposite gender, collectively pack a punch. The centre skull gapes at us without jaw, and on either side the crowing cock and cocked pistol act as silencing forces to the speechless.

While this work is all about being quiet, Jo Blogg is certainly making a very big noise.



Fiona Hislop: One is not enough - ever

Fiona likes to cook. If you are ever fortunate enough to dine at her table you will know she is very good at it. Her art practice resonates with the same finesse. Instead of baking cakes, she's individually casting glorious curved spheres that resemble large cookies cooling on racks. Once painted, they appear to be edible, smooth and shiny like candy coated chocolate.

Fiona has always worked with multiples, often casting from her own moulds, and often working in collaborative process. She invites intervention from other artists and crafts-people so that the end product is greater than the sum of its parts. Fiona celebrates craftsmanship which she sees has a direct relationship with common sense, something she values and is also defined by. Her plum-bobs meticulously anchoring a vertical line act as exclamation marks exhorting us to stand up straight, be straight up and get it right!

Fiona's installation common thread- common sense also explores this tension. Multiple embroidered hoops, predominantly sewn with white thread on white fabric entice the viewer to closely 'read the image' and acknowledge the craft. Despite the scale of the undertaking, (a collaborative effort with local embroidery guild), there is personal nostalgia evident as the artist has used transfers belonging to previous generations of Hislop women.

A connection to her female heritage has been a common theme in Fiona's work and like many women artist's, her home is also studio, a creative space where domestic essence pervades her work. A childhood of disciplined organisation, and a spic and span home has left its traces and the scale of her undertaking is startling, this is serious work. With repetition comes perfection. Or as Fiona asserts, "Once is never enough!".



Elaine Mayer: Dear Liza

Dug up and coated with decades of earth, artist Elaine Mayer excavates eleven calf buckets from a local farm with the excitement of an archaeological dig. A City Girl now rurally based, Elaine sees these relics with their buckled and arthritic form, rusted and mouldy exterior, as objects of great beauty. They are cleaned and preserved with lacquer and now presented on the wall as art object for us to admire too. They are grounded by a row of 11 numbers, printed tags from some stock sale perhaps. These have been kept in the artist's possession, waiting for the right outing.

Elaine collects things and puts things together. She says that while attending Art School as an adult student, she was inspired by Rosalie Gascoigne who apparently once asserted "I may not be able to paint and draw, but what I can do is see".

The 'Source' exhibition has given Elaine an opportunity to utilize her cool aesthetic to communicate irony in regards to gender stereotype. Referring to the eleven verse childhood ditty "There's a hole in my bucket dear Liza" we are reminded of the questioning Henry, and the common-sense Liza. Changing over time, the original German version had the roles reversed. Another work about ironic role reversal is a lovingly handmade collection of boxes. Intricately labelled with a personal code denoting nail or screw shape and size, and straight out of some blokes shed, this collection of male taxonomy is placed horizontally on a highly lacquered shelf more at home with High Street retail. Red ram horns above give clear gender reference, yet these too have been categorized, numbers etched into the horn itself. Animal or inanimate, all surfaces are branded, making this a cool comment from a sophisticated conceptual artist.



Denise Wilkinson: What are little girls made of?

Volumes lining the walls of her home indicate this artist's love of books. It's unsurprising to discover that her first job was in a library, as Denise's art practice could be seen as a consistent illustration of autobiography.

The provocation of the 'Source' show has encouraged reflection. Recalling a time Grandmother, mother, aunt and herself worked together at the local picture theatre, she says a lineage of independent women has defined her.

Mother created fancy dress costumes, from beloved fairy tales and at five years old, adorned in gossamer and tulle, Denise can still taste the disappointment in a wand that clearly has no magic. Aside from these difficult childhood lessons, the obvious construction of gender implied by the female characters of fable has been of interest.

Eric Winter's paintings in the children's ladybird books of the sixties are coveted examples of potent archetypal images that have stayed with Denise. Snow white preserved in a 'glass coffin' and the prized pea that defines a princess, are particular favourites.

Snow White and Rose Red, (who have appeared previously in her work) run down a Napier service lane. Representing two sides of the artist, they are now located in her own photographic landscape. The images are intentionally created without digital intervention. The camera becomes a drawing tool. Denise states that she "makes photos, not takes photos".

Working in series, personal objects are photographed and physically cut out and placed in juxtapositions that allude to 'self portrait'. They are given the status of relic in the manner of the encased Snow White. Denise's visual narratives are intensely personal, highly metaphoric and invite the 'reader' to ponder what this woman is made of, and perhaps recognise themselves for a moment.



Jill Webster: Makeshift for shape shifting

Jill Webster identifies Alice in Wonderland's world as the female psyche, something intuitive and illogical. Her rite of passage is to bridge the gap between this sensual experiential world and the predominantly quantitative logical one she finds herself in. Many makeshift Alice figures form a gathering cloud, dense with potential. Some Alice's are coded with pattern that alludes to states of change, flow, or puzzle, encouraging us to read the figures and ponder their collective meaning.

As an art educator Jill Webster enables students to deconstruct their process so that they can become aware of what they are doing and why. This dialogue regarding process has become the basis of her artistic practice. She explores visual ideas that communicate change and mutability and her work has become about the process of making. Consequentially her practice features reconfigurable and reoccurring components like Alice that can shift in shape.

Encouraging thinking rather than appreciating technical virtuosity is a goal. She says "this confronts the notion of ownership. People value objects far too much and measure their worth by their material possessions".

Jill's work often speaks about these core values and the body of work made for Source is no exception. Wooden folders are open to reveal a series of stages where female characters play out the well-known Chinese maxim: Hear, See and Speak no evil. Apparently in some texts a fourth character emerges with arms folded over belly or genitals, preventing the action of evil. This character is depicted again as Webster's signature 'Alice'.

She must negotiate the logic of an illogical world, something the artist sees woman having to do every day. Jill suggests women struggle with a constantly changing identity, thus her female players ironically test the boundaries of good and evil on an ever changing stage.



Leanne Culy: The Ultimate Gift

Homebase is an apt name for the Culy Art and Design Company, as their whole house sparkles with the attention to detail good design brings. In Leanne Culy's studio, a plethora of visual stimulation suggests a commitment to nostalgia and is decidedly feminine: doilies, cake decorating manuals, first aid charts and sheets of buttons, all from an era when aesthetic and function were happily married.

The eye of the considered graphic designer is at work. An early newspaper career in the days of Letraset and hand-drawn models is evident in the carefully rendered folk art miniatures that adorn her well known oars.

While these addressed historical and environmental concerns, the 'Source' exhibition has initiated a deeply personal journey. Engaging with her childhood adoption, Leanne has a renewed sense of gratitude towards her parents who she says were the 'right' family. A sense of expanding self has resulted from learning about similarities with her biological parents. While her birth mother's death has meant they can never meet, Leanne has enjoyed discovering that she too was a keen conservationist and creative individual.

"If I had met her, I know we would have connected as we have so much in common" says Leanne.

For Source Leanne has sliced native logs, painted white like iced cake. They are multiple stage floors of concentric rings echoing her placed iconic memorabilia in the manner of cake decorations of old. At times a splitting surface suggests schisms in a less than perfect world. This installation resonates with the expanding aspects of her character, providing us with a rich mix of complimentary metaphors for biological determinism and sound parenting. As a parent herself Leanne sees this as the ultimate gift. It's great to see the nature/nurture discussion in action. We get to have her cake and eat it too.

A Female Practice?

In the 1981 Women's Studies Conference, New Zealand feminist artist Juliet Batten said that unlike other movements in art, (defined by style) the Women's Art Movement was defined by content. The themes she listed are comparable to those that have emerged in the SOURCE show. They were: domesticity, sexuality/spirituality, redefining the self, our female heritage, female relationships, political art, personal disclosure and collaborative/collective work. These days this content is mainstream and shown across the public sector. Previous access was marginalised to an audience that frequented Women's art festivals or possibly visited the short-lived Wellington Women's Art Gallery. New Zealand women artists still practising from that heady era. have evolved too. In the recent book 'Look this Way' writer William Dart comments on the universal narratives now evident in Jacqueline Fahey's paintings:-

"Her attention to and cataloguing of the minutiae of life was always what gave her domestic visions their grunt; and now the issues have expanded"

The Source women also see their practice as divergent.

While it's obviously unhelpful to impose universalities regarding aesthetics or even content to describe the variety of women's art practice, one could venture to suggest there are indeed commonalities with process.

Over the duration of the project, it became clear that all nine women artists worked in series and all felt comfortable working with multiples or components. It has been suggested that this could be purely a reaction to the scale of the venue for the exhibition. However what is fascinating is the measure of comfort evident from the multiple which present artists with a myriad of options.

While many male artists work in a controlled linear environment with planned purposeful endpoints, the opposite can be said of much of female practice. If the SOURCE artists are anything to go by...everything is about the process! Out of the chaos, clutter and often divergent conversations with self and others comes clarity. Is this search for such serendipitous moments also common among male artists?

These women are adept at multi-tasking. They seem to like a lot of things going on at once. Is this because it enables them to edit out the detritus and simplify, like watching a reduction sauce reach its essential flavour?

Singular work often requires context and in this case is provided by association with other works. There's more to it here than power in numbers or a Rosemarie Trockel comment about mass production. SOURCE is the 'writing' of visual sentences that the lone noun or adjective cannot achieve. Perhaps Trockel is a good example to use: her famous sentence "Every animal is a female artist" in response to Joseph Beuys "Every man is an artist" has perhaps defined the Women's Art Movement and certainly has currency here.

The SOURCE exhibition raises many more questions than it answers, and that is surely the signature of engaging contemporary art. These women are empowered, productive contemporary New Zealand artists, worthy of following, watching and collecting. They lay bare their most personal politics, struggles, histories and love of life, so that you might consider them as more than the human condition at its source.

Maree Mills Jan 2010

- i Juliet Batten, one of the most active members of the women's art movement in this country, addressed the Women's Studies Association annual conference in 1980, she spoke under the title "Women Artists: Is there a female aesthetic?"
- ii Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *As a Woman I Have No Country*, A paper given at *Transformations '07: Composing the nation: ideas, peoples, histories, languages, cultures, economies*, the Congress of Te Whāinga Aronui The Council for the Humanities VUW, Wellington, 27-28 August 2007.
- iii http://www.humanitiesresearch.net/news/as_a_woman_i_have_no_country
- iv Barbara Kruger in *Women Artists*, ed. Uta Grosenick, Taschen 2003
- v The Women's Gallery in Wellington operated between 1980 and 1984
- vi Evans, Lonie and Lloyd eds. *A Women's Picture Book: 25 women artists of Aotearoa*. Wellington GPO 1988
- vii Sally Blundell, ed. 'Look This Way: New Zealand writers on New Zealand Artists Auckland University Press, 2007
- viii Uta Grosenick, ed. *Women Artists*, Taschen 2003