

https://dspace.org/

Christian thematics in the work of Jane Alexander

Couldridge, Fiona Sharon Kemsley

2014-04-04
http://hdl.handle.net10539/14504

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

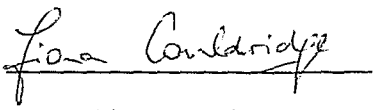
CHRISTIAN THEMATICS IN THE WORK OF JANE ALEXANDER

A RESEARCH REPORT
SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ARTS,
FACULTY OF ARTS,
UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

Fiona Sharon Kemsley Couldridge
February 1999

Supervised by
Walter Oltmann

I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (Fine Arts) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.



Fiona Couldridge
23 February 1999

Acknowledgements

I would like to gratefully thank my supervisor Walter Oltmann for his assistance in structuring and preparing this paper, as well for his help and interest in my practical work; Jane Alexander for her interest in my research and practical work, for kindly reading a draft of my paper, for her helpful comments and for supplying me with necessary information; my family for their support; Sharon Couldridge for assisting with the typing; and Kemsley Couldridge for taking a number of the photographs.

Abstract

In this research I investigate the use of certain Christian thematics in selected examples of the work of contemporary South African sculptor Jane Alexander, specifically those which relate to the depiction of the female body. The primary aim is to examine the evocation of ambivalence through her problematising of relationships between violence and sexuality, pleasure and pain/persecution within specific Christian themes, and how this may be viewed as suggesting both a subversive intent as well as a promise of potential transcendence. In doing this, I consider how her works may be seen to articulate a concern with subjectivity and identity formation as a constantly ambiguous and shifting process. Selected writings of Julia Kristeva as well as other feminist critiques on the subject of the depiction of the female body within a religious context are looked at in relation to Alexander's work. Evocations of feelings of ambivalence are likewise related to my own practical work submitted for this degree.

Contents

Acknowledgements iii

Abstract iv

List of Illustrations vi

1 Introduction 1

2 Process and Subject Matter 7

3 The Interrelation of Human and Animal; Imperfect and Ideal 31

4 Violence and the Female Body; Persecution and Veneration 57

5 *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*; Drawing Connections between Sexuality and Death 77

6 Evoking Ambivalence - A Discussion of My Own Paintings 95

Bibliography 129

List of Illustrations

1 Alexander, Jane, *Untitled*, 1982. 9

2 Alexander, Jane, *Butcher Boys*, 1985-6. 12

3 Alexander, Jane, *Integration Programme*, 1992. 14

4 Alexander, Jane, *Integration Programme: man with TV*, 1995. 14

5 Alexander, Jane, *Fragmented Group*, 1995. 16

6 Heartfield, John, *For the establishment of the State Church the Cross was still not heavy enough*, 1933. 20

7 Alexander, Jane, *Ford*, 1986. 22

8 Alexander, Jane, *Self Defence and Stability Unit*, 1994. 23

9 Alexander, Jane, *Die Ewige Flamme*, 1995. 26

10 Alexander, Jane, *Lustgarten*, 1995. 27

11 Alexander, Jane, *Für Deutsche Geschichte*, 1995. 28

12 Alexander, Jane, *Museum Boy*, 1986. 29

13 Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement: Charon's Boat.* 33

14 Massacio, *Expulsion from Paradise.* 34

15 Alexander, Jane, *Untitled*, 1985-6. 36

16 Alexander, Jane, *Untitled*, 1985-6. 36

17 Alexander, Jane, *Untitled*, 1985-6, detail. 36

18 Alexander, Jane, *Landowner*, 1995. 38

19 Heartfield, John, *The Old World has its vultures of bankruptcy*, 1934. 40

20 Heartfield, John, *Madrid 1936*, 1936. 41

21 Alexander, Jane, *Goose*, 1984-5. 42

22 Alexander, Jane, *Erbschein: An den Bergen*, 1995. 43

23 Alexander, Jane, *Erbschein: An den Bergen*, 1995. 43

24 Alexander, Jane, *West Coast African Angel*, 1985-6. 44

25 Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, 1993. 45

26 Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, 1993. 45

27 Alexander, Jane, *Pastoral Scene*, 1995. 47

28 Bosch, Hieronymous, *Bearing of the Cross*. 50

29 Schongauer, Martin, *Ecce Homo*. 51

30 Alexander, Jane, *Hit (poor Walter)*, 1995. 54

31 Alexander, Jane, *Hit (poor Walter)*, detail. 54

32 Alexander, Jane, *Integration Programme: man with wrapped feet*, 1994. 55

33 Alexander, Jane, *something's going down*, 1993-4. 59

34 Alexander, Jane, *Black Madonna*, 1991. 62

35 Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, 1993. 68

36 Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, 1993. 69

37 Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, detail. 69

38 Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, detail. 70

39 Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, detail. 70

40 Alexander, Jane, *Belief and Ritual/Geloof en Ritueel: Respecting*, 1995. 72

41 Alexander, Jane, *Pastoral Scene*, detail. 74

42 Alexander, Jane, *Pastoral Scene*, detail. 74

43 Alexander, Jane, *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*, 1995. 82

44 Alexander, Jane, *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*, 1995. 83

45 Alexander, Jane, *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*, detail. 88

46 Alexander, Jane, *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*, detail. 88

47 Bernini, *Ecstasy of St Theresa*. 89

48 Quirizio of Murano, *The Saviour*, fl. 1460-1478. 91

49 Cornelisz, Jacob, *The Man of Sorrows*, ca. 1510. 91

50 Alexander, Jane, *Convention*, 1995. 93

51 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (caterpillars)*, 1998. 102

52 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (caterpillars)*, detail. 102

53 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (caterpillars)*, detail. 103

54 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (moths)*, 1998. 105

55 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (moths)*, detail. 105

56 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (moths)*, detail. 106

57 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (scorpions)*, 1998. 107

58 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (scorpions)*, detail. 107

59 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (scorpions)*, 1998. 108

60 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (scorpions)*, detail. 108

61 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (wasps)*, 1998. 110

62 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (wasps)*, detail. 110

63 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (wasps)*, 1998. 111

64 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (wasps)*, detail. 111

65 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ladybirds)*, 1998-9. 113

66 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ladybirds)*, detail. 113

67 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ladybirds)*, detail. 114

68 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ants)*, 1998. 115

69 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ants)*, detail. 116

70 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ants)*, detail. 116

71 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ants)*, detail. 117

72 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ants)*, detail. 117

73 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, 1998-9. 119

74 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, detail. 119

75 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, 1998-9. 120

76 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, detail. 120

77 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, detail. 121

78 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, detail. 121

79 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, 1998. 123

80 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, detail. 123

81 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, 1998. 124

82 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, detail. 124

83 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, detail. 125

84 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, detail. 125

85 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (lizards)*, 1999. 126

86 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (lizards)*, detail. 126

87 Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (lizards)*, detail. 127

Chapter 1

Introduction

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply
thy sorrow and thy conception, in sorrow thou shalt
bring forth children; and thy desire *shall* be to thy
husband, and he shall rule over thee.
(Genesis 3:16)

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail
thou that art highly favoured, the Lord *is* with thee:
blessed *art* thou among women.
(Gospel according to St Luke 1: 28)

The above quotations from the Authorised King James Version of the Holy Bible (1956: 3 and 798) reflect the way in which Christianity has both persecuted woman as Eve and venerated her as the Virgin Mary. A seeming contradiction, but one which has permeated Western society for centuries, it is not surprising that many feminist writers and artists have sought to challenge Christianity's explicit and implicit ways in which the female body has been regarded.

In this paper I investigate the use of certain Christian thematics in selected examples of the work of contemporary South African sculptor, Jane Alexander[1], specifically those which relate to the depiction of the female body. My primary concern is to examine the evocation of ambivalence through her problematising of relationships between persecution and veneration, violence

[1] Jane Alexander was born in Johannesburg in 1959. She received her BA Fine Art degree (1982) and MA Fine Art degree (1988) from the University of the Witwatersrand. She has work in many public collections, won the Standard Bank Young Artist Award in 1995 and has been represented on many exhibitions including the '5th Havana Biennale', 1994; 'un art d'Afrique du Sud', Paris, 1994; 'Identity and Alterity' at the Venice Biennale, 1995; 'Fault Lines: inquiries around truth and reconciliation', Cape Town, 1996; 'Lifetimes: an exhibition of Southern African art', Munich, 1997; the 'Dakar Biennale', 1998 and 'Bringing up Baby: artists survey the reproductive body', 1998. She is currently lecturing at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town.

and sexuality, pleasure and pain within specific Christian themes, and how this may be seen to suggest both a subversive intent as well as a promise of potential liberation and transcendence.

Alexander focuses on the human body and its evocation of disquietude[2] and since many of her sculptures originate from life casts she sets up an ambiguous relationship between the 'real' and the artificial, as the sculptures still bear traces of actual individuals. The human body is in itself highly ambivalent in the way in which it has been regarded throughout history and in various cultures. In his introduction to *The Perfectible Body - The Western Ideal of Physical Development*, Kenneth Dutton writes, "[t]hroughout history the human body has been an object of inexhaustible fascination for its possessors [. . .] [i]t has been one of the chief objects of attention and speculation since man emerged from among the hominoid apes [. . .] It has been attired, decorated, mutilated, revered, pampered, mortified, and imaginatively interpreted by artists as everything from an obscene assemblage of flesh to an image of the divine spirit" (1995: 11). Dutton pinpoints an important dualism which Western society has created between body and soul, flesh and spirit and which has informed many aspects of our society, particularly Judeo-Christian religion.

Alexander complicates and problematises such constructed binaries in both her sculptures and her photomontages, as I will argue throughout this paper. While more recent works (from the early 1990s) explicitly engage with Christian thematics, my discussion will not be limited to only these works. In

[2]'Disquietude' is a term Alexander frequently uses in her 1988 MA thesis, and figures in the title *Aspects of Violence and Disquietude in Late Twentieth-Century Three Dimensional Human Figuration*. She defines the word as "the deprivation of tranquillity" and suggests that it may be "the by-product of violence" (1988: 1).

chapters two and three I look briefly at some of her earlier work, arguing that many of these may be viewed as precursors to the concerns in her later works. Earlier works such as *Butcher Boys*, 1985-6, for example, already draw on binaries of spirit/flesh, human/animal, with reference to Judeo-Christian concepts of shame and guilt and in chapter two I examine more fully such expressions of guilt and shame in the form of the naked body in selected examples of Alexander's sculptures and photomontages. Her *Triumph over Capitalism* series, for example, depicts a naked boy in all of the images which sets up an ambivalence between evocations of the holocaust on the one hand and the innocent, youthful nude on the other with an oblique reference to the adoration of the youthful nude as the Aryan ideal by the Nazis[3]. The naked body thus becomes the site of both assertion as well as the denial of identity, thereby introducing an unresolved confrontation between persecution and veneration. The reading of the image thus remains ambiguous[4] and is charged with a sense of failure of finding meaning in the face of historical events both past and present[5].

In her sculptures and photomontages from the 1980s Alexander has frequently interrelated human and animal characteristics. While animal characteristics may evoke brutality they also evoke vulnerability and a sense of victimisation. Such ambivalent allusions are revisited in a later work, *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl),* 1995, in which a crucified woman is portrayed as sacrificial victim yet also appears to participate in the violence performed upon

---

[3]The *Triumph over Capitalism* series refers also to communist Germany. The background images and some of the components of the images were photographed by Alexander in East Berlin in 1982 (personal correspondence with Jane Alexander 1999).

[4]William Empson writes that ambiguity "can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings" (1947: 24).

[5]In this context it is of interest to note Bakhtin's view that ambivalence can be bi-valent (both One and Other), "[t]he logic of ambivalence is not restricted to the limitation of binary oppositions which set limits, but is equivalent of the power of continuum" (Lechte 1994: 9).

her body, thus continuing the concern with veneration and persecution discussed more fully in chapter four in relation to *something's going down*, 1993-4, *Cake*, 1993, *Black Madonna*, 1991, and *Pastoral Scene*, 1995. These works all have religious references and, with the exception of *something's going down*, they explore the relationship of religion to women. The image of the madonna features in a number of Alexander's works whereby she revisits the conventional image of the madonna as idealised virgin by placing her in the realm of the everyday contemporary world. In this way the notion of the ideal is rendered absurd. Depicted as ordinary, black, situated within a local context, dispossessed or pregnant, and as potentially tragic, the madonna sculptures and photomontages also speak of the way in which Christianity has both venerated and persecuted women, unmasking the conventional, idealised images of the madonna, and making us aware of the antithesis of the idealised virgin. The ideal of the Virgin Mary with her attributes of purity and humility could not exist without the opposite of a sexually brazen woman, namely Eve or Mary Magdalene. Writing about Mary Magdalene, Edward Mullins in *The Painted Witch* notes: "[h]er only means of redemption [. . .] lies in renouncing her sexual nature altogether". He continues, "[t]he Magdalene is not a figure in European painting who is confined to a few hysterical years of the Counter-Reformation. She has always been with us. Like the Virgin Mary, like the virgin martyrs" (1985: 36 and 28). Through their ambiguity, Alexander's figures complicate conventional divisions between Virgin and whore, offering a more humane understanding of the Madonna figure as one who experiences both joy and suffering.

In reviewing Alexander's use of Christian thematics in relation to female figures, I draw extensively on writings by Powell and Arnold both of whom have written insightful texts on Alexander. Feminist writings by Mullins, Ockenden and Bynum on the relationship between women and religion and

how patriarchal views concerning the female body have been formulated are also looked at. Chapters four and five deal more fully with patriarchal views of the female body in relation to both religion and psychoanalysis and how Alexander's works may be seen to engage within this discourse. In my examination of her works alongside these texts I argue that her works point towards the possibility of potential liberation and transcendence in the way in which they challenge conventional expectations of what constitutes (female) identity, and share in an aim "to bring about a situation where subjectivity is an 'open system', or a 'work in progress', a becoming 'open to the other' which at the same time can bring about a revised form of one's own identity" (Lechte 1994: 143). In formulating this argument selected writings of French theorist Julia Kristeva will be looked at, in particular where she has reviewed and challenged the patriarchal and phallocentric theories expressed by the psychoanalysts Freud and Lacan. I do not intend to argue that there is a direct correlation between the writings of Kristeva and Alexander's work, but I do believe that similar concerns are engaged with in both their challenges to traditional idealised notions of the Virgin, as well as the connections drawn between sexuality and death.

In questioning idealised concepts of motherhood, and the way in which women and religion have traditionally been connected, both the writings of Julia Kristeva and Alexander's sculptures offer a more ambiguous, multivalent concept of identity. Kristeva's studies on the individual subject and identity formation suggest that a kind of harmony needs to be achieved between identity and the heterogeneous, potentially poetic elements capable of tearing it apart. She thus presents a subject which is never entirely analysable or static, but rather one always incomplete: the subject as the impetus for an infinite series of elaborations (Lechte 1994: 143). Alexander's work similarly sees identity as an 'open system' with any number of possibilities.

In examining Alexander's works I do not wish to prescribe a particular reading but rather to provide insight into the possibilities of interpretation. Alexander, understanding the ambiguous nature of her work, is quoted as saying, "Part of the reason I make things realistic is that I don't really want to have to explain my work [. . .] What I wish to communicate is done so most readily, I think, through this type of realism. People can make their own interpretation, and if it's different to my idea it doesn't matter" (Williamson 1989: 42).

Chapter 2

Process and Subject Matter

In *Women and Art in South Africa*, Marion Arnold writes "[r]epresentational sculptures of people, clothed and specific or nude and idealised, contain multiple realities: they are art but they evoke life" (1996: 106). This is true of the sculptures of Jane Alexander which are in many ways akin to the super-realist and hyper-realist[6] figurative sculptures of the 1960s and 1970s such as works by Duane Hanson, Malcolm Poynter, John De Andrea and Mark Prent as well as works by John Davies, George Segal and Ed Kienholz which are often cast life-size and painted to resemble life[7]. The result is a startling and often deceptive lifelikeness which is further heightened by the inclusion of clothing and accessories. Alexander's works are similarly startling in their life-like verisimilitude, although some recent figures are reduced to miniature scale, but they also insinuate a disturbing surrealism which is perhaps more reminiscent of Kienholz's tableaux. Kienholz's works are powered by a savage social indignation resembling the satirists of the Weimar period in Germany and his personages are often monstrous hybrids (Lucie-Smith 1987: 63). Alexander's works (especially the earlier ones) share a similar haunting dream or nightmare quality which is heightened by the frozen impassive/immobile setting of her figures and the placement of them in the viewer's space.

---

[6] In her MA thesis *Aspects of Violence and Disquietude in Late Twentieth-Century Three-Dimensional Human Figuration*, Alexander describes 'hyper-realism' as referring "to the illusionistic representation of the natural form", and 'super-realism' as referring "to the stylistic trend of the 1970s of hyper-real painting and sculpture [which] emphasised the priority of the image". Alexander further notes that "[t]he sculpture of Duane Hanson is associated with this movement with reference to technique" (1988: 1 and 3).

[7] In her MA thesis Alexander engages in a discussion of selected examples of the sculptures of Duane Hanson, George Segal, Edward Kienholz, Nancy Reddin Kienholz, Mark Prent and Malcolm Poynter, considering "the capacity for both the artist and the viewer to relate to violence and disquietude in a particular manner and medium" (1988:2).

The awareness that they engender of one's body and personal space is not only generated by scale but also by virtue of the sculptures' heightened realism and physicality. Alexander's works are, however, ambivalent in nature; in both the reading of their subject matter (the figures often being predators and victims simultaneously) and in their apparent naturalism which is undercut by certain devices - such as the distortion of the body and the inclusion of a halo. In this way Alexander's sculptures appear to shift from the realm of art to life and back again, emphasising a dissonance and disquietude through their ambivalence. In order to gain insight into the way in which Alexander achieves this, it will be necessary to examine her processes of construction as these form an integral part of the meaning of her artworks. Ambivalent messages are often created through her technique. This is equally true of Alexander's photomontages, which are often closely related to the sculptures and frequently introduce images of the sculptures themselves into the fictional settings.

Various writers, such as Ivor Powell, Marion Arnold and Sue Williamson, as well as anonymous journalists, have commented on Alexander's sculptural process. In her MA thesis *Aspects of Violence and Disquietude in Late Twentieth-Century Three-Dimensional Human Figuration*, Alexander herself elaborates upon her process and relates it to the subject matter of her sculptures. She highlights her concern with issues of violence and victimisation as it pertains to her undergraduate work when she produced a series of figures depicted as carcasses (Alexander 1988: 119), for example *Untitled*, 1982[8]. Alexander writes how, through the use of human and anthropoid form, "figures were developed through distortion and the

[8]*Untitled* won the 1982 *Martienssen Student Prize* in 1982, and now forms part of the Gertrude Posel Gallery's permanent collection.



Figure 1: Alexander, Jane, *Untitled*, mixed media, 1982.

incorporation of bones into the figuration. Bones and modelled plaster were integrated onto steel armatures and painted in water colour. They were coated in wax which was used to equate anatomical material such as fat' (1988: 119). The use of bone and wax in *Untitled*, 1982, serves to evoke carcasses (half animal and half human) which are both frightening and full of pathos, repulsive yet intriguing[9].

It was during her postgraduate years that Alexander began using body casts, which were to manifest an important shift in her work as she recognised the possibilities that the body cast opened up for her. About this shift from direct modelling of plaster to the use of the body cast she writes, "[b]ody casts were used initially to avoid the weight and fragility of the previously used technique and to establish directly the representational human form" (1988: 120). The cast became central to her process as:

> [i]t was found during the process of the works that the cast could be used in various preliminary stages of figuration. Sculptures were not planned in the form of sketches or photographs as it was found preferable to limit creative decisions to the actual formulation of the work. As models could rarely be used for sittings, the cast replaced both the sketch and the model, which allowed for an immediate idea of how the image could operate (1988: 120).

Her casts are always reworked, manipulated and distorted so that through the process she already conveys her concern with violence. Hands, feet, faces and heads are thus allowed to change and evolve according to the manipulation of moulds rather than emulating the 'real' through relying on exact reproduction. Of the works produced while a student, Alexander writes how, "[a]reas that were cast, were cut, altered and manipulated into the

---

[9] Concepts of 'abjection', the arousal of ambiguous feelings of repulsion and desire, as they pertain to Alexander's sculpture, *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* will be explored in more detail in chapter three.

construction of a hollow structure which was reduced from the scale of the castee to enable the application of anatomical forms, appendages and detail. These forms were supplemented by casts taken from clay shapes, for example the heads cast from a modelled skull form, or roughly moulded strips of plaster bandage joined and shaped during the setting process" (1988: 120). Plaster and air-drying clay are thus worked over the core structure of plaster and broken pieces of bandage. The bandage structure is quite substantially reduced so that the completed figure is not much larger than life size. The modelled surface detail is often fairly thick, as much as 60mm (personal correspondence with Alexander: 1998). Alexander writes that plaster was used "for the properties of the material itself, particularly its absorbent capacity and textural possibilities" (1983: 121). Allusions to the body are then reinforced when animal bone, horn and wings are used for their link to anatomical detail (Alexander 1988: 121).

Initially Alexander's concern with anatomical allusion was to "depict [. . .] the combination of implied external and internal anatomy" (Alexander 1983: 121). However, during her postgraduate studies figures began to evoke injury and distortion and materials were used to exaggerate or de-emphasise aspects of a figure. In this way figures appear as "mutant victims of some disaster" (Powell 1995b: 15), while also personifying a sinister malevolence. This is particularly true of the *Butcher Boys*[10] group of 1985-6 (plaster, bone, horn, oil paint and wood), 1285 x 2135 x 885mm, which consists of three bestial male figures sitting on a bench. A reporter for *The Citizen* writes of *Butcher Boys*:

[10]*Butcher Boys* is housed in the collection of the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.

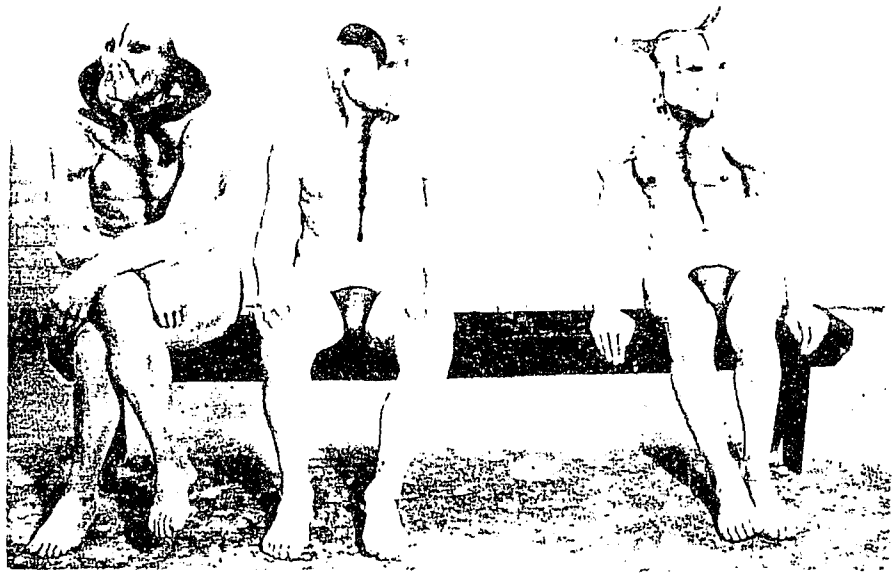


Figure 2: Alexander, Jane, *Butcher Boys*, mixed media, 1985-6.

> "[i]t is the very purity of Jane Alexander's technique which emphasises the horror and power natural to/inherent in these silent man/animals of carnage and destruction - sleek, healthy, alert predators which just might, in time to come, genetically "resurface" to the humanistic heritage which they have deliberately forsaken, or been forced to forsake" (1986: ?).

The writer, who interprets the creatures as mutant beasts of the future does not explain what s/he means by Alexander's "purity of technique" but presumably the conviction with which Alexander has been able to use the distortion of the body cast, including the lack of mouths and the splitting open of their chests and backs revealing their spines as well as the inclusion of bone and horn have motivated the writer's interpretation. The treatment of materials achieves, on the one hand, a convincing literalness while on the other hand it also allows for associative reading when the materiality is allowed to provide a sense of body that is permeable and violable.

While earlier works included foreign materials such as bone and horn, more recent works which represent ordinary humans (rather than mutant beasts which are half human and half animal) include items which relate to their mundane, everyday existence. In *Women and Art in South Africa*, Marion Arnold writes how "[d]uring the creative process foreign materials and found objects are introduced to convey their reality of colluding with a process of mimesis" (1996: 114). Materials such as actual clothing are used to dress Alexander's figures and in *Integration Programme*, 1992, mixed media, an actual trolley is used as a base for the figure. In *Integration Programme: man with TV*[11], 1995, mixed media, 1380 x 1000 x 2200mm, an actual bag and television are incorporated into the tableau. In *Pastoral Scene*[12], the clothing

[11] *Integration Programme: man with TV* is in the collection of the South African National Gallery.
[12] *Pastoral Scene* is housed in the collection of the Gauteng Legislature.



Figure 3: Alexander, Jane, *Integration Programme*, mixed media, 1992.

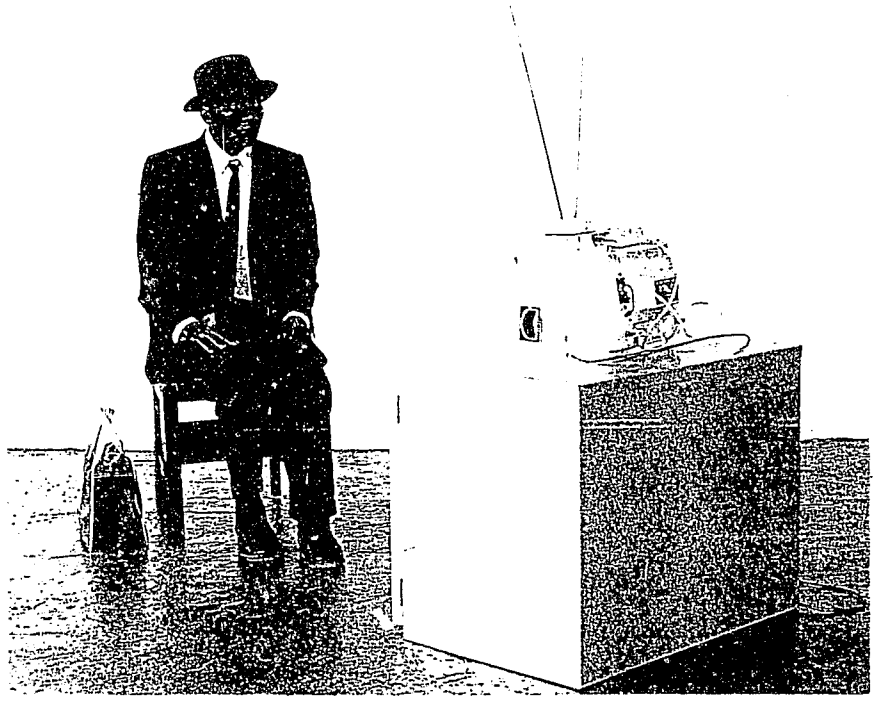


Figure 4: Alexander, Jane, *Integration Programme: man with TV*, mixed media, 1995

of the figures clearly adds to the pathos as we identify with each figure's predicament. Beauty[13] in her maid's uniform, old jersey and slippers looks like many a dispossessed domestic servant. The figure of the black madonna likewise reflects her poverty through her tatty clothing and lack of shoes, while the sadness of the widow is conveyed via her black veil and scarf signifying that she is still in mourning.

Most of Alexander's works are sombre in tone, alluding to death, in both their subject matter and through Alexander's working method. The life-cast in itself conveys ambiguity in its allusion to death and the death mask imprint or copy of the 'real' and living. Brenda Schmahmann in her PhD thesis, *Representations of Women in the Works of George Segal*, has noted how "casting directly off the body has an historical association with death" (1996: 48). Casts from bodies have included death masks and posthumous portraits, while they also allude to casts of people from 'non-white' groups existing in natural history museums, which claim to be objective yet operate from racist ideology whereby such people are viewed as more primitive than Western people (Schmahmann 1996). Although Alexander's casts are radically altered, such references may be witnessed in her 1995 photomontage *Fragmented Group*, where the image of *Black Madonna*[14] is seen "superimposed on an exhibit from the natural history Museum in Cape Town" in which "are displayed life cast moulds used to create standardised ethnographic modules" (Powell 1995b: 14) of various non-white groups which serve to visually render "black people as the dehumanised (and essentially subhuman) tribal specimens that

[13]The figure of Beauty is based on a woman Alexander knew. Through personal correspondence with Alexander this year, she related that models from which casts were taken are chosen for their physical appropriateness. While Alexander would prefer using models with some connection to the content of the work, this is rare. The figure of Beauty was cast from a model selected for her height, while the model for *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* was someone of a similar age and shape. Friends or relatives usually serve as the models.

[14]*Black Madonna* is a small figure and does not originate from a cast. The work is mainly in plaster.



Figure 5: Alexander, Jane, *Fragmented Group*, photomontage, 1995.

the country's politics sought to make them" (Powell 1995b: 14). This overt juxtapositioning reinforces the violence implicit in racial categorisation, serving to underscore the victimisation and suffering signified in the madonna. The partially fragmented moulds also resemble relics or death-masks and are thus inherently violent in nature. The violence is thus "read back through emblems of [the process's] effect into the figures that are its embodiment" (Powell 1995b: 16).

Process and subject matter cannot be separated in a reading of the mutilated *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl),* 1995, mixed media, 1820 x 630 x 505mm, which evokes both life and death. Describing Alexander's working method, Powell notes, "[t]he flesh has been left unworked in places, so the tattered bandage shows through" (1995b: 13). He goes on to describe visible scarring at the knees and stomach/womb area as well as stitching on the stomach, spine and the back of the legs, arguing that this "suggests the post-mortem corpse, the dead flesh available to experimentation" (1995b: 13). Powell also notes that the stitching evokes cosmetic surgery, the willing self-mutilation of the woman who "too sees herself as something to be unpicked and remodelled" (Powell 1995: 13). Marion Arnold also describes the areas of mutilation but reflects more on the ambivalence of the figure. She writes:

> "[t]he body is not handled consistently: it has areas of flawless beauty (the youthful breasts) and areas of mutilation (the damaged back, sides and kneecaps), expanses of tension (the lower arms) and regions of relaxation (the upper chest). The plausible is juxtaposed with the impossible, and both life and death are evoked in a pose which proclaims vulnerability and suffering. Because the form is constructed to render the making process visible, the figure becomes a metaphor for the construction of identity and, in particular, the ways in which women control and manipulate their bodies to meet social expectations about femininity. In the name of socialisation, the body is violated to observe cultural practices, whether these take the form of dieting, cosmetic surgery or circumcision. The form also suggests specific violence - the abuse and victimisation of women - but Alexander avoids

> sensationalising damage, leaving the breasts and pubis inviolate and imbued with a sense of innocence (Arnold 1996: 116/7).

While I will offer a more comprehensive interpretation of *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* in chapter five, it demonstrates how Alexander's process can allude to violence, victimisation and self mutilation and how connections can be drawn between her process and evocations of pain and masochistic pleasure as well as persecution and innocence. Alexander's process of creating a work to evoke feelings of ambivalence is also evident in her photomontages.

Writing about her photomontages produced while a student, Alexander notes, "[f]ound photographs such as postcards, media images and the candidate's own photographs were reproduced by means of conventional photographic processes. These were combined in montage to form manipulated representational images" (1988: 123). In many ways the photomontage thus continues Alexander's concern with manipulation and violence as discussed in relation to her sculptural processes. Furthermore, the medium of photography carries with it a claim to 'truthful' documentation. The images are in black and white which further evokes the documentary photograph and the realm of photojournalism. Alexander, however, distorts this notion of 'truth'. She writes, "[o]f particular interest have been the ways in which photographic documentation condition and distort the viewer's perceptions as well as the actual incident" (1988: 124). The allusion to news media is crucial, evoking news media translations and the way in which the "media interprets and alters situations", whether deliberately propagandist or not (1988: 124).

Photomontage as a medium of expression has a history of provocation. The term 'photomontage' was invented after the First World War by the Berlin Dadaists to describe the technique of introducing ready-made photographs

into their work, which they pasted together with newspaper and magazine cuttings, drawings and text "to form a chaotic, explosive image, a provocative dismembering of reality" (Ades 1976: 7). Apart from disrupting bourgeois values of what art should be, the term 'montage' in German meaning 'fitting' or 'assembly line' (Ades 1976: 7), challenging the idea of creative genius, photomontages also developed an association with revolutionary politics and even propaganda. Ades notes:

> [p]hotomontage was used increasingly by all political factions in Europe and Russia in the decades before the Second World War. During the Spanish Civil War montage posters were made for both Franco and the Republicans; the Italian Fascists under Mussolini also used it extensively. But it is not surprising that photomontage is associated particularly with the Left, because it is ideally suited to the expression of the Marxist dialectic. It was undoubtedly used most brilliantly by Heartfield, first against the Weimar Republic and then to chart the terrible rise of Fascism and the dictatorship of Hitler (1976: 12).

Artists who used photomontage to comment on the evils of Hitler and Nazi Germany included George Grosz, Hannah Höch, Kurt Schwitters and John Heartfield, and as Peter Selz comments on Heartfield's images in *Photomontages of the Nazi Period*, "[a]s Germany suffered from inflation, depression, and immediate threat of fascism, Heartfield's art increasingly shows an aggressively political nature and he constantly placed photography in the service of political agitation" (1977: 9/11). Alexander's series of photomontages reveal a similarly passionate response to socio-political conditions, graphically illustrating her concern with the dialectic between the human, humane and 'civilised' on the one hand, and the bestial, the brutish on the other.

A number of photomontages produced by Heartfield make use of overt Christian imagery in order to comment on the persecution of those belonging to the Jewish faith. A swastika is formed by a Nazi who screws additional

ZUR GRÜNDUNG DER STAATSKIRCHE



Das Kreuz war noch nicht schwer genug

Figure 6: Heartfield, John, *For the establishment of the State Church the Cross was still not heavy enough*. photomontage, June 1933.

pieces of wood to Thorwaldsen's Cross of Golgotha in *For the Establishment of the State Church the Cross was still not heavy enough* (Selz 1977: 13). Selz understands Heartfield's use of "diametrically opposed images to provoke a conflict in the spectator which will give rise to a third synthetic image that is often stronger in its associations than the sum of its parts" (1977: 13). This is true of Alexander's photomontages, which are constructed to evoke disturbingly sinister messages both through the process of combining different images as well as through photographic manipulation such as close-up enlargement, cropping, tone and grain adjustments and focus. Figures are often darkened and intentionally undifferentiated, the strong tonal contrasts of black and white possessing a theatrical quality suggestive of bright flash-light photography. A sense of impending danger is evoked in images like *Ford*[15], 1986, 322 x 240mm, where a figure of one of the Butcher Boys dominates the foreground. The black and white picture is grainy evoking "memories of news photos taken subversively and in difficult circumstances" (Williamson 1989: 42). Powell comments that the Butcher Boy figure "looks out from a scene taken from a newspaper photograph of so-called black-on-black violence, punitive action taken by one group of township dwellers against another perceived as enemies. Behind the Butcher Boy there is a figure in a balaclava, seen from behind, who looms beside the Ford truck of the title, whose windscreen has been violently shattered" (1995: 17). Powell's comments call attention to the way in which media images were used during the apartheid years in an attempt to reflect conditions of unrest in order to conscientise a system which attempted to conceal unrest and revolt and

---

[15]*Ford*, together with a number of other photomontages by Alexander, forms part of The Gencor Collection. Writing in *Contemporary South African Art - The Gencor Collection,* Lesley Spiro describes the resistance to Alexander's photomontages when they were installed. She writes, "[t]he series of photomontages by Jane Alexander was received with outrage. It was perceived by some to be satanist, by others as pornographic, and considered by many to simply be offensive. An enraged employee or group of employees applied yellow 'post-it-notes' to eliminate offending areas and there was heated talk of a petition" (1997: 39).

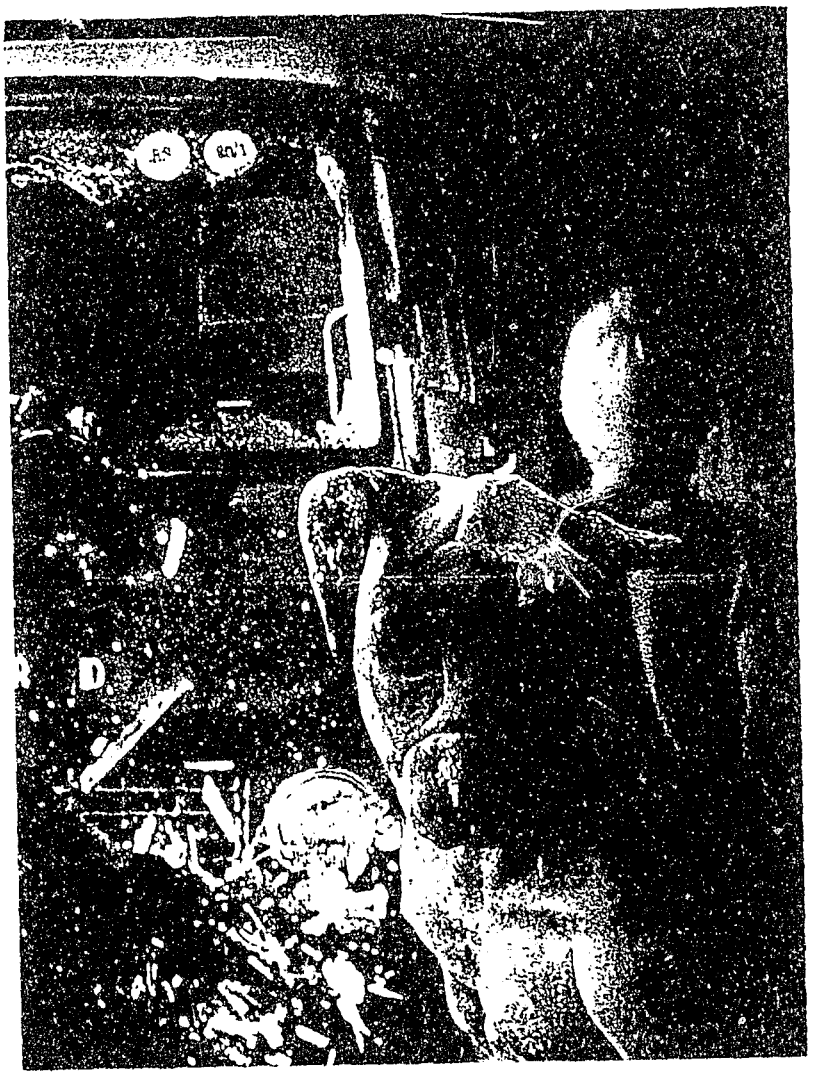


Figure 7 Alexander, Jane, *Ford*, photomontage, 1986.

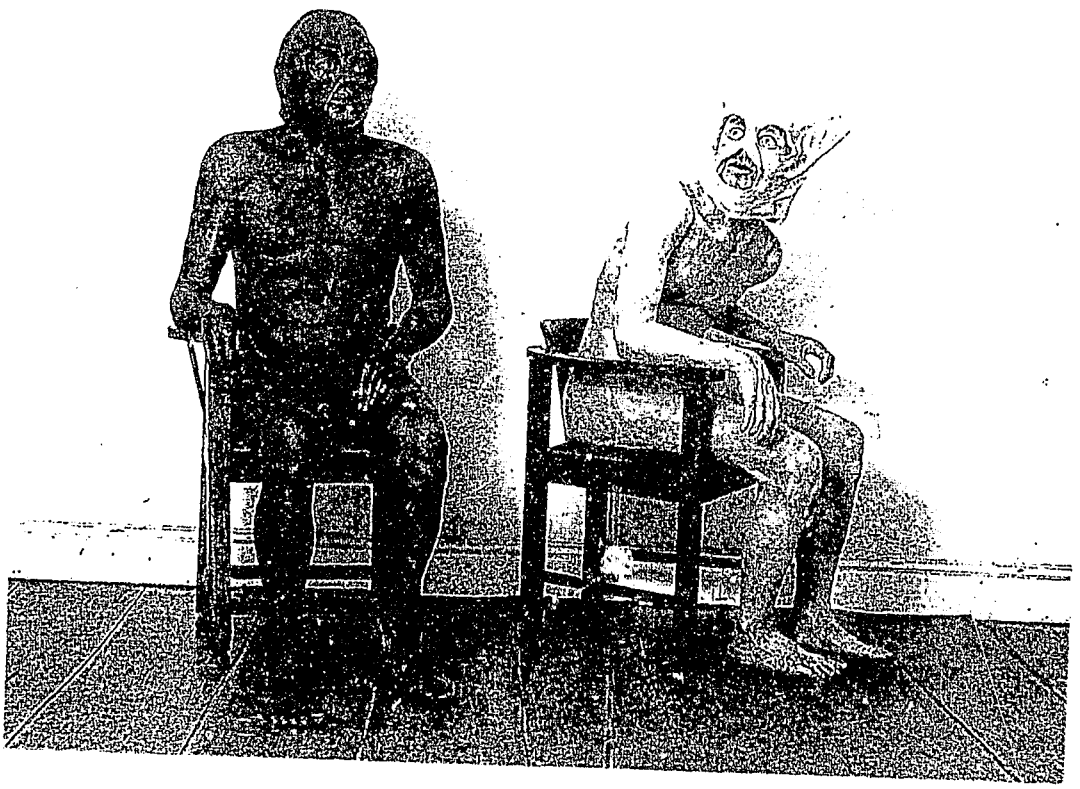


Figure 8: Alexander, Jane, *Self-Defence and Stability Unit*, mixed media, 1994.

denied any responsibility. The figure wearing the balaclava reinforces the notion of concealment, disguise and anonymity, and in a sense the device can often be seen to be used against itself in Alexander's photomontages and sculptures. As Powell has noted of the two-figure tableau *Self-Defence and Stability Unit*, mixed media, of 1994:

> [t]he black figure has over his head the more or less generic balaclava of the township revolutionary in the 1980s in South Africa [while] on the head of the white figure is a canvas bag with holes cut for the eyes and mouth [which] derives in general from a mask sometimes used by members of the Security Forces to disguise themselves during what were usually brutal raids on township activists. Specifically, it derives from a particular image of a demolition by thus disguised municipal workers of a squatter camp in Grabouw [. . .] But [. . .] the masks, instead of hiding the human face, disguising the human expression, serve to focus it - in the frightened eyes and the frozen, vulnerable mouths - into something like a distillation of anxiety and fear. By having both antagonists masked, together in the same space and both naked all at the same time, the artist makes them mirror images one of the other. They are both masked and exposed, aggressors and victims at the same time (1995b: 17/8).

While Alexander's process of assembling the photomontages bears a strong connection to propagandist media images, they also often include or evoke images of the Holocaust. Of *Die Ewige Flamme*[16], 1995, 195 x 240mm, part of the *Triumph over Capitalism* series, Powell comments how the scene includes the monument to the unknown soldier although the flame has been replaced by a Käthe Kollwitz sculpture. A picture of a naked boy (who reappears in the other images of the series) is included and Powell notes that, "[t]hough the constituent photographic elements are integrated as a kind of evidence of the things that have happened, they are rendered meaningful

[16]*Die Ewige Flamme* was a feature of East Berlin, the communist version of the monument. In the photomontage, out of focus, are depicted East German soldiers who goose-stepped in front of the recess that housed the 'eternal flame'. In Berlin today, this monument chamber houses the Käthe Kollwitz sculpture on the site where the 'eternal flame' burned. The stamp at the right lower side of the montage is the stamp that was issued on a day visa by the East to visitors from the West (personal correspondence with Alexander 1999).

especially by the assertion of the human presence" (1995b: 24/5). Indeed, by collaging various images together in one scene not only are violence and uneasiness suggested but so too is the way in which memory operates; images from different times and places become connected in the mind and manipulated and distorted by time. This too is emphasised by the pictures being in black and white rather than in vivid colour.

The naked boy reappears in front, back and side pose in *Für Deutsche Geschichte* (For German History), 1995, 243 x 163mm, *Lustgarten (Garden of Lust)*[17], 1995, 195 x 223mm, and *Die Ewige Flamme*, also suggesting the vulnerable child facing the horrors of the Nazi death camps. Yet the naked youth/child also speaks of the self-conscious neo-classicism predominant in Nazi art which established links with a past golden age, so creating a timeless culture for the Thousand Year Reich. Through depictions such as the idealised nude, Nazi art dwelled upon mysticism, individualism and timelessness (Lindey 1990).

Alexander appears to reinforce a sense of timelessness which is, however, then subverted. In *Für Deutsche Geschichte* and *Die Ewige Flamme* (as well as *Museum Boy*, 1986, 298 x 215mm, which is not part of the series) the naked boy appears in the context of a museum - a place where memory is preserved and objects are rendered timeless. However, in *Für Deutsche Geschichte* images of a minister's uniform and dressmaker's dummies "suggest the human rendered by socio-political forces as mere function, without form or face, [t]he human as a shell, programmed, without memory and without meaning" (Powell 1995b: 23). This deprivation of

[17]'Lustgarten' is an actual public space in Berlin. Alexander photographed it in the former East Berlin in 1982 and it forms the backdrop for this montage. In this context *lust* refers to pleasure rather than lust (personal correspondence with Alexander 1999).

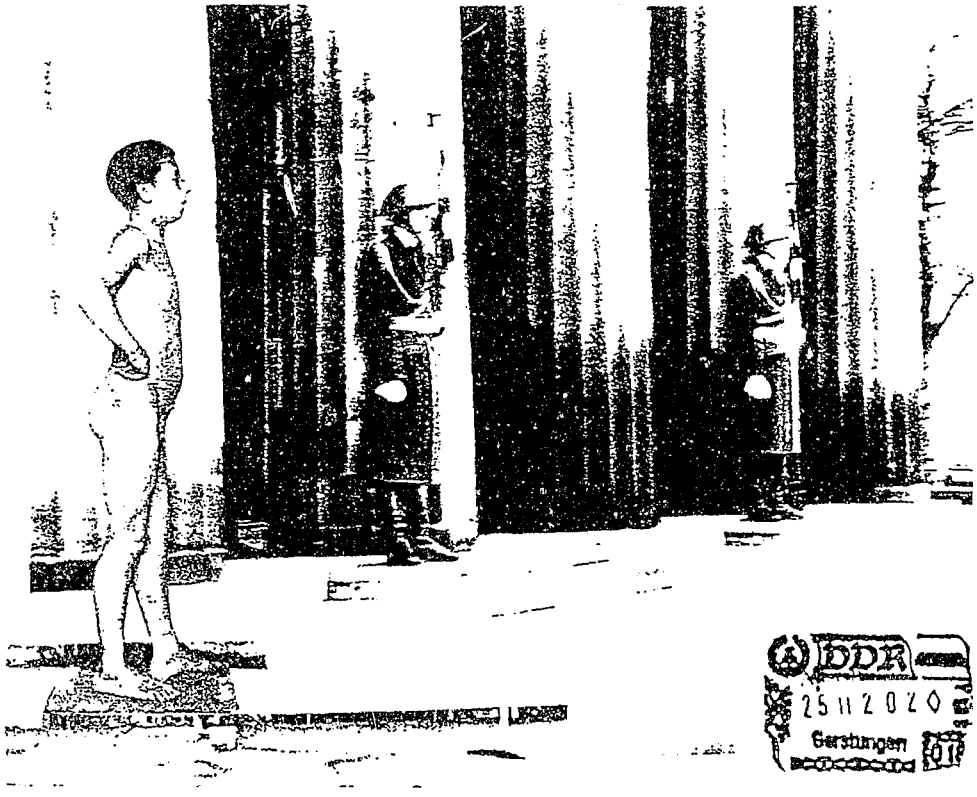


Figure 9: Alexander, Jane, *Die Ewige Flamme*, photomontage, 1995.

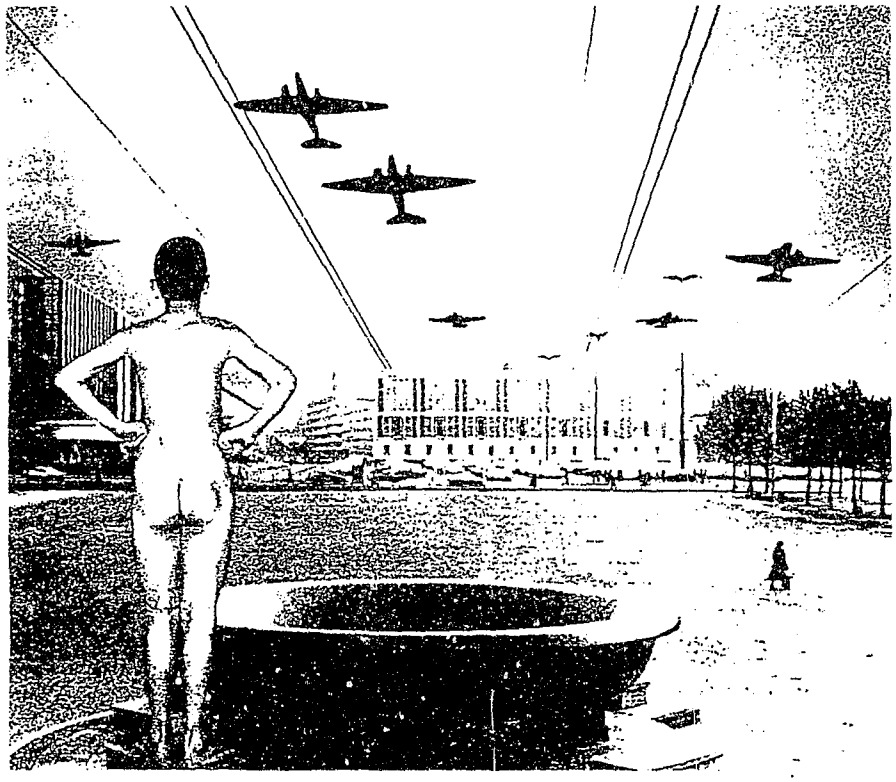


Figure 10: Alexander, Jane, *Lustgarten*, photomontage, 1995.

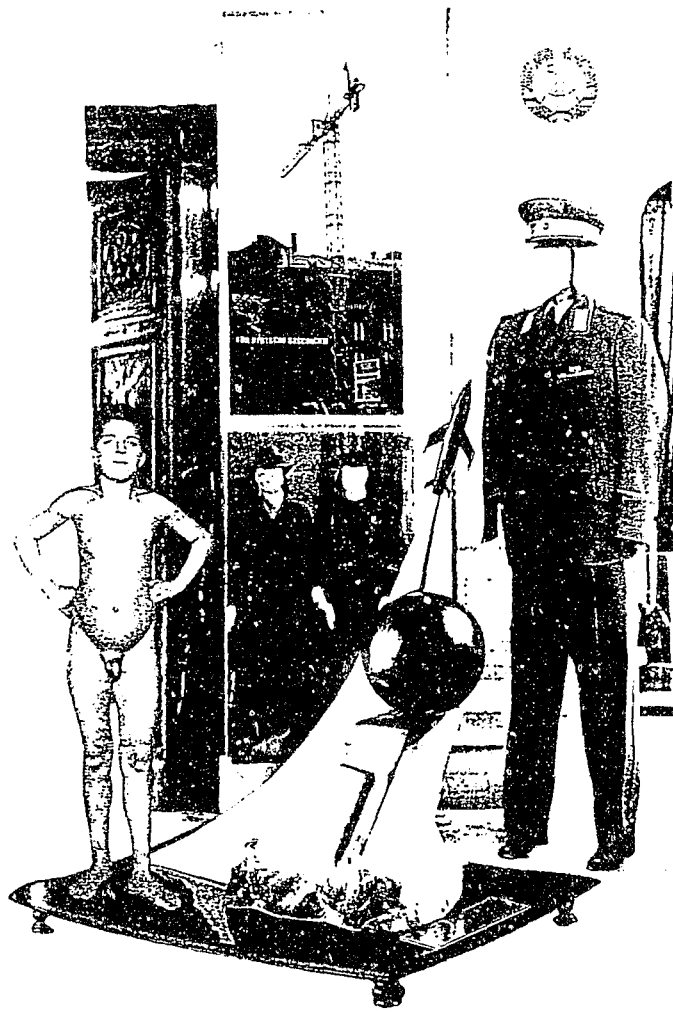


Figure 11: Alexander, Jane, *Für Deutsche Geschichte*, photomontage, 1995.



Figure 12: Alexander, Jane, *Museum Boy*, photomontage, 1986.

individuality and a sense that the boy is about to be 'moulded' by societal conventions is reinforced in *Museum Boy* where a boy "stands naked in front of a suit of protective clothing exhibited in a display case [and] gazes, as it were, at his manufactured self" (Powell 1995b: 24). In each image of the *Triumph over Capitalism* series the naked boy figure appears out of place, in his unengaged expression and the rendering of him as object. As Powell notes, he is, "both vulnerable and profoundly ambiguous" (1995b: 23), and the repetition of this image of the naked boy serves to "repeat and assert the presence of the human in the face of what would dehumanise us" (Powell 1995b: 24).

Alexander often juxtaposes human beings and/or human qualities with that which threatens our humanity or notions of our humanity in some way. Whether it is an outside threat of socio-political forces or the inside threat of animal instinct, Alexander's work often engages with these dialectics to confront many of the destructive forces which we embody as a society or as individuals, but usually choose to ignore.

Chapter 3

The Interrelation of Human and Animal: Imperfect and Ideal

In *Women and Art in South Africa* Marion Arnold describes Alexander's use of the body "as a means to evoke disquietude" (1996: 114). As already shown, this occurs partially through Alexander's manipulation and distortion of the body cast, as well as the ambivalence evoked through subject matter. The way in which constructs of baseness and ordinariness are apparently opposed to the ideal as, for example, in the interrelation of human and animal are further ways in which this ambiguity is reflected and will be discussed more fully in this chapter.

In her MA thesis *Aspects of Violence and Disquietude in Late Twentieth-Century Three-Dimensional Human Figuration*, Alexander explains that her interest in combining human and animal aspects was already being explored in her under-graduate years of study (1988: 119). *Butcher Boys* (1985-6) is one of Alexander's better known works which continues this interest in a bleak image of brutalisation. Representing three male figures sitting on a bench, it has been widely exhibited, including a solo exhibition of Alexander's work at the *Market Theatre Gallery* in 1986, and the 1995 Venice Biennale[18] and represents the artist's response to the spiralling violence occurring in South Africa in the 1980s. The ambivalence of the figures is immediately apparent - whilst the title implies that they are perpetrators of violence, in their nakedness and subordinated, uncomfortable seated poses

[18]The 1995 Venice Biennale included a centenary exhibition entitled "Identity and Alterity: figures of the body 1895/1995", in which *Butcher Boys* featured (*Contemporary South African Art 1985-1995 from the South African National Gallery Permanent Collection* - catalogue 1995: 14).

on a wooden bench, they may well be understood as victims of violence too. As Alexander says, "[a]ggression, as it is frequently expressed in the urban social environment is also a reflection of pathos and a vulnerable state of being" (1988: 126). The three Butcher Boy figures also bear this out in their alienation from each other, as they do not interact or establish eye contact with each other[19]. Yet, while the figures remain aloof, impassive and immobile, they occupy the viewer's physical space as life-size counterparts having been made from direct body casts. In *Jane Alexander: Sculpture and Photomontage*, Ivor Powell notes, 'they have been worked beyond the casting - bone has been inserted in the flesh and the flesh scraped away to reveal the bone [. . .] [b]ut the heads are only half-human. Horns grow out from the skulls; the faces are distorted, pulled out of shape, flattened into snouts that do not open into mouths" (1995b: 15). Whilst such details depict them as violent aggressors, the creatures seem impaired or disabled by the inclusion or exclusion of bodily details, for example, having holes where their ears should be and although naked, their genitals are covered by "protective 'boxes' worn by cricketers, fused into the flesh" (Powell 1995b: 16). The pallor of their skin and glassy stares of their eyes makes them appear grotesque and deathly as though having been hidden from daylight.

Bryan Turner in *The Body and Society* comments, "[t]here is an obvious and prominent fact about human beings: they have bodies and they are bodies [. . .] [t]he legacy of both Christianity and industrialisation is the prominence of bi-polar oppositions in thought and culture between the body and soul, matter and spirit, desire and reason" (1984: 19). Alexander's animal-like beasts seem to spell out this observation in their nakedness and fusion of animal nature with human spirit. The fact that the creatures are always presented as

---

[19]A similar scene exists in *Pastoral Scene* which includes a park bench and three adult figures who do not interact with one another.



Figure 13: Michelangelo, *The Last Judgement: Charon's Boat*, Sistine Chapel.

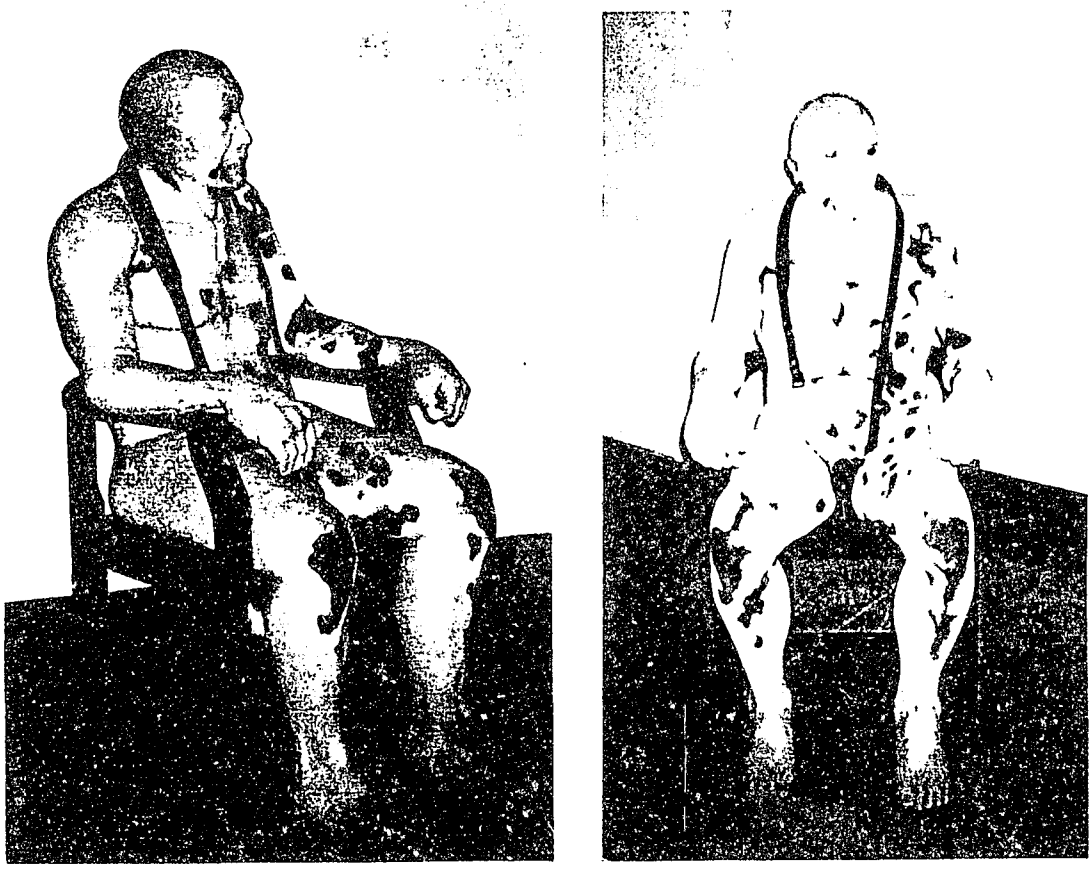


Figure 14 Masaccio *The Expulsion from Paradise*. fresco. c. 1427

naked emphasises their physicality and flesh, and thus vulnerability as well as baseness. Turner further comments, "[t]he Western tradition of the body was the seat of unreason, passion and desire. The contrast in philosophy between spirit and flesh. The flesh was the symbol of moral corruption which threatened the order of the world" (Turner 1984:36). Indeed, in art historical portrayals of the Judgement of the Damned, for example Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* from the Sistine Chapel, and in representations of Adam and Eve, such as Masaccio's *The Expulsion from Paradise*, the naked body is understood as a vessel of despair and decay. To be naked is also to be vulnerable and exposed, as in the case of Adam and Eve being expelled from Eden. These various associations of nakedness are evident in Alexander's *Butcher Boys* whose ambivalence is increased in the uncomfortable postures of the figures so that they appear immobilised, frozen, waiting, vulnerable and insecure. The idea that they may be waiting is also reflected in their staring out at something. The working of the naked flesh is also significant as it often looks scarred and eroded and thus appears in a state of decay or mutilation. A real sense of the body as a biological entity is thereby heightened to a nightmarish degree.

This ambiguity is evident in many of Alexander's early works where she uses animal material to evoke half-animal creatures, or at least, creatures which possess an animal nature. In *Untitled*[20] (1985-6), an obese, nude male figure seated in a chair appears human but is painted with spots which allude to wild animals, while the glass eyes are more suggestive of an animal's than a human's as the whites of a human's eyes are not visible and the reflectiveness of the glass suggests a certain wildness. A rubber securing strap from a stretcher used to carry injured miners is draped over his

[20] *Untitled* is in a private collection.



Figures 15 and 16: Alexander, Jane. *Untitled*. mixed media, 1985-6.



Figure 17: Alexander, Jane. *Untitled*. detail

shoulders like a leash or restraining device. As in *Butcher Boys*, *Untitled* conveys the duality of animal qualities of aggression and vulnerability. Sue Williamson, in *Resistance Art in South Africa*, comments on this ambiguity in Alexander's work, "[t]hrough her work, Alexander seeks to identify the manner in which violence, aggression, cruelty and suffering are conveyed through, and contained by the human figure. The alter ego of aggression is vulnerability. Those who are secure and unthreatened do not need to bully, but when an entire society is insecure all its members become both aggressors and victims" (1989: 42). It is through visual disjunctions that Alexander examines situations of disempowerment, suffering and acceptance. The visceral sensation is always juxtaposed with the human response as the distinction "between ourselves, our own situation, and the things we are seeing [becomes] more and more blurred" (Powell 1995b: 5).

It is not surprising that Alexander's sculptures produced in the 1980s have been interpreted as political commentary relating to the horrors of South Africa's apartheid history, as her images can be broadly located within a framework of socio-political commentary. In her MA thesis, however, she writes that her work is not intended as social criticism and that a direct political context is "too easily determined by partiality" (1988: 125/6). To read her sculptures and photomontages as prescriptive or as overt political social commentary with a sense of moral imperative would fail to do the works justice, but as several commentators have noted, there are definite political undertones to many of her works in which the political ambivalence within a South African context are characterised. Situations of exploitation and perpetration of violence, victimisation and powerlessness (political pawn or product of one's upbringing) are often conveyed via the intermeshing of animal and human characteristics in order to jolt the viewer into re-thinking his/her understanding of the human condition. One such example is the 1995

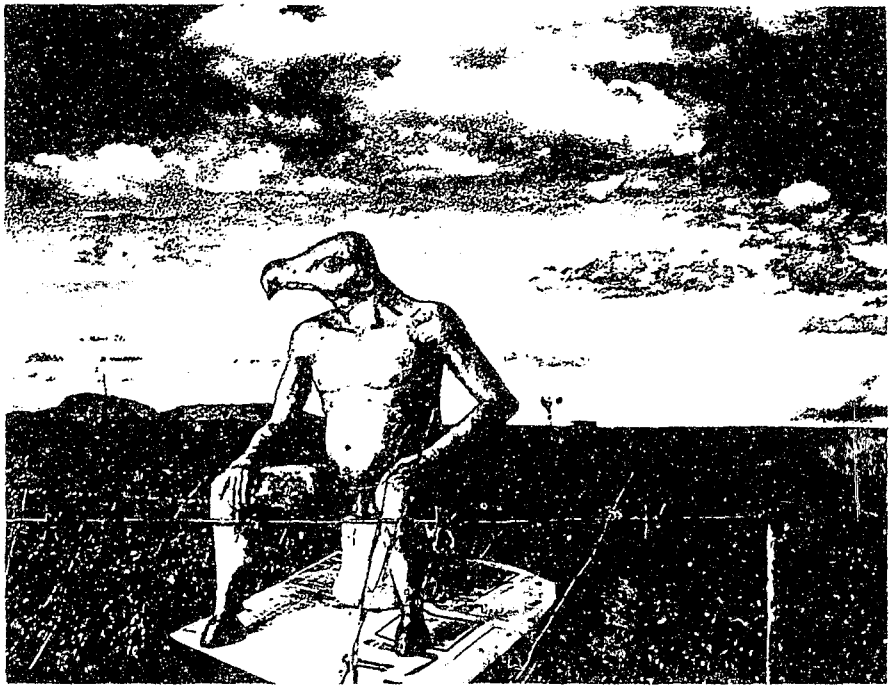


Figure 18: Alexander, Jane, *Landowner*, photomontage, 1995.

photomontage *Landowner.* The figure is comprised of a human torso, with hooves as feet and a vulture's head, which emphasises its cruel and predatory nature. Recalling some of John Heartfield's photomontage images of vultures, these creatures are depicted as scavengers and symbolise death, as, for example, in *The Old World had vultures of bankruptcy* and *Madrid 1936.* Powell refers to the vulture figure in Alexander's photomontage *Landowner* (1995) "[a]s a personification, he is politically charged to invoke the rapacity which has characterised land-ownership in South Africa" (1995b: 19). Figures of predatory birds have been portrayed in other works too, for example, *Goose*[21], 1984-5, which has actual goose wings, human-like legs and a vulture's head, and *Erbschein: An den Bergen*[22] (Inheritance document: At the Mountains) 1995, mixed media, 1800 x 460 x 460mm. The birds are flightless, having large heavy torsos which would not be able to be supported by their wings. In their flightlessness they embody impotence, perhaps even a state of victimhood, while also evoking the dark, chaotic, destructive forces of the human psyche. *West Coast African Angel*[23] (1985-6), presents a hybrid bird, having an actual flamingo skull and goose wings, with human legs riding a bicycle. In both this work and *Erbschein: An den Bergen* a bird of prey is juxtaposed with machinery, through the inclusion of respectively the bicycle and building cranes; nature juxtaposes culture. Despite our technology our society is still capable of despicable brutality and inhumanity[24].

---

[21] *Goose* is in a private collection in Johannesburg.

[22] *Erbschein: An den Bergen* is in the collection of the artist.

[23] *West Coast African Angel* is in a private collection.

[24] Below the goose-stepping bird-like creature in *Erbschein: An den Bergen*, a lizard-like creature appears which Powell interprets as being derived "from a monument erected in Berlin to the dubious memory of the anti-Semitic poet, Theodor Fritsch. In the original the dragon/toad is only part of the sculpture. It represents in gross personification, the Semitic race, and is imagined as being slain by the heroic personification of Aryan manhood" (1995b: 21). Two quotations by Fritsch on the original monuments, rendered in English read:

> When it has been proved that the lower race despoils the higher, then the higher must command sufficient sense of cleanliness and relentlessness to keep the lower away from it.
>
> No health for humanity (or for the people) before the elimination of Jewry. (cited in Powell 1995b: 22).



Figure 19: Heartfield, John. *The Old World has its vultures of bankruptcy,* photomontage. March 1934

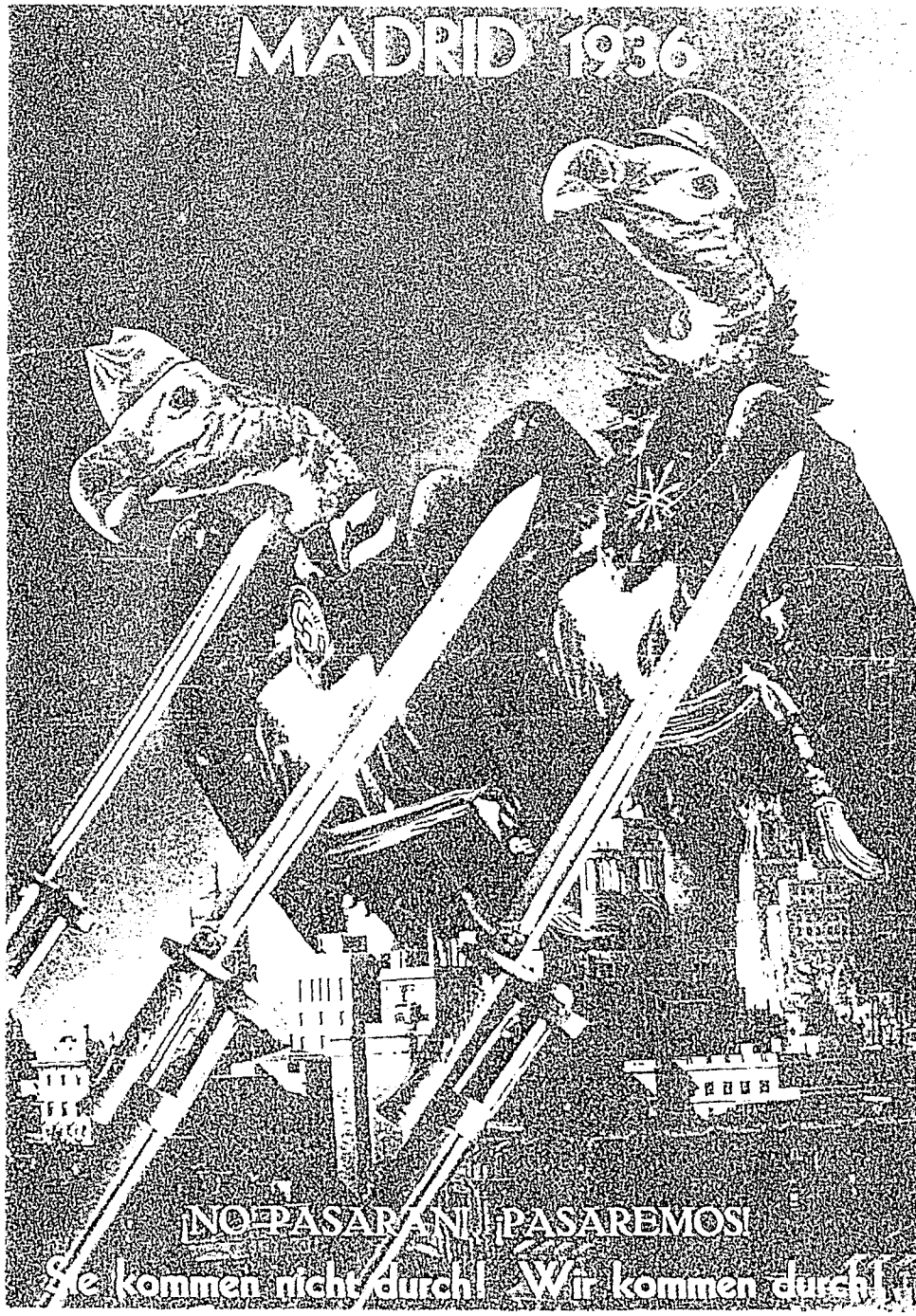
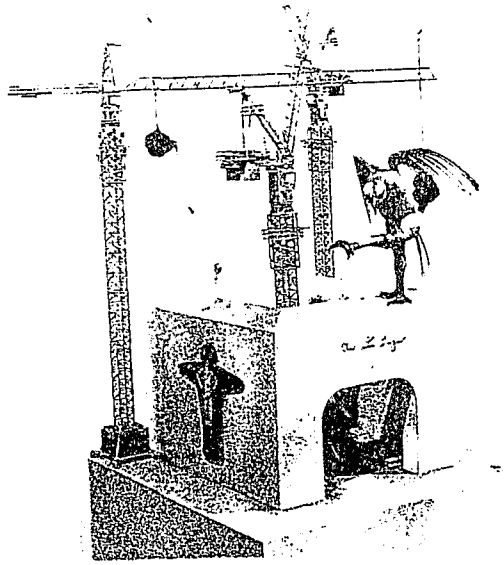


Figure 20 Heartfield John, *Madrid ... tomontage*, November 1936.



Figure 21. Alexander, Jane, *Goose*, mixed media, 1984-5.



Figures 22 and 23: Alexander, Jane, *Erbschein: An den Bergen*, mixed media, 1995.

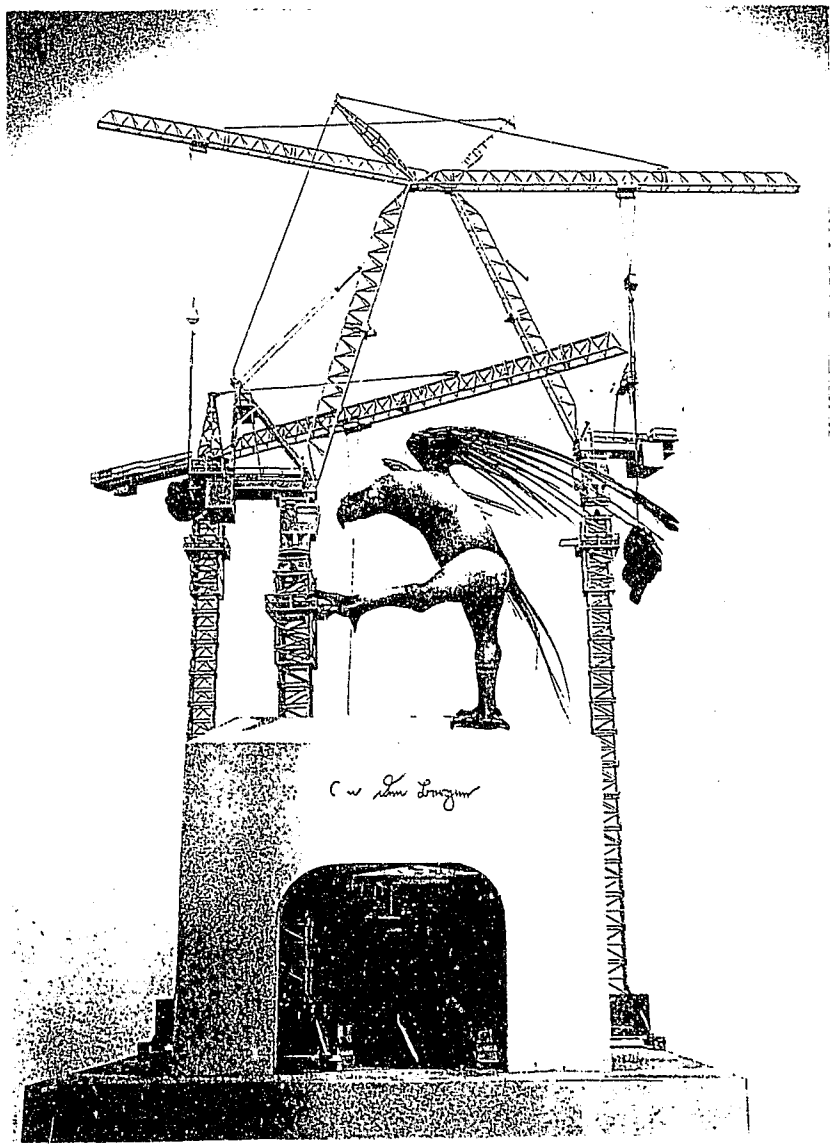




Figure 24: Alexander, Jane, *West Coast African Angel*, mixed media, 1985-6.

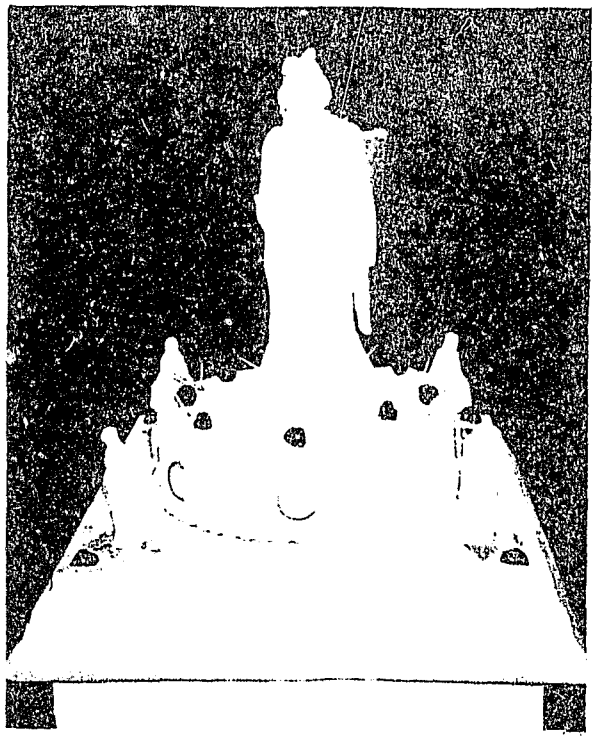


Figure 25: Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, mixed media, 1991, back view.



Figure 26: Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, mixed media, 1991, side view.

Allusions to animal characteristics are sometimes more covertly apparent, as in the work *Cake* in which ostrich feathers have been attached to the back of a bride/madonna figure who already appears somewhat bird-like in her bent posture. The feathers may again allude to an impotence and sense of helplessness as ostriches are flightless birds but may also suggest a certain delicateness and finesse. *Cake* does not possess the same sense of animal bestiality as found in earlier works but the inclusion of the feathers generates associations with animal characteristics in a metonymic way.

In *Pastoral Scene,* which depicts ordinary human figures and a 'real' dog in one tableau, Alexander moves away from evoking/alluding to animal qualities in quasi-human guise to more formal and associative relationships between animals and humans. The dog exists in the same iconised way as the other figures do, thus avoiding an immediate antithesis to them. While animals which inhabit the realm of fantasy such as mythological beasts and demons may easily be defined as grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser in his book *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* notes, "real animals also frequently occur in the grotesque. Even in animals that are familiar to him, modern man may experience the strangeness of something totally different from himself and suggestive of abysmal ominousness" (1963: 182)[25]. While the grotesque may not feature strongly or explicitly in the inclusion of a dog in *Pastoral Scene*, it may still occur in a more sublimated way considering Alexander's interest in the evocations of disquietude and concerns with the grotesque and violence in her earlier works. *Pastoral Scene* may not really be less violent but *appears* so. The violence is not so obvious as the scene is quiet and contemplative.

[25]Kayser notes that certain animals are especially suitable to the grotesque - snakes, owls, toads, spiders - the nocturnal and creeping animals which inhabit realms apart from and inaccessible to man (1963: 182). This is relevant to my own work as I have worked with images of insects, spiders and crustaceans and reptiles.



Figure 27: Alexander, Jane, *Pastoral Scene*, mixed media, 1995.

A different kind of violence is portrayed which is less overt and less reliant on immediate shock value.

Although the evocation of violence will be discussed more closely in chapter four, some associations of the dog may be raised at this stage. Both Ivor Powell and Marion Arnold have written of the bitch with her swollen teats. Powell writes, "[i]f the sadness of the other figures lies in their stories, hers lies more in the memories of blood. But she shares in the guiding irony of the title, evoking as it does a rural idyll inside which is clearly an urban context. The pastoral is precisely that which has been forever, lost" (Powell 1995b: 11). Arnold comments that "the idyll postulated by the title is contradicted by real, unidealised people" (1996: 120). The title has classical associations. Classicism is generally seen to represent certain 'essential' or 'timeless' characteristics of the human condition. It focuses on human cognitive functions of reason, harmony and balance. Alexander's figures are however dispossessed, and the only 'timeless' characteristic appears to be one of eternal suffering. Of the bitch Arnold writes, "[t]he bitch [. . .] is also a metaphor for the manner in which female biology is used to denigrate women. 'Bitch' is an insult all three women in the group are likely to have endured" (1996: 119). While the dog may initially appear to stand as an antithesis to the human figures, it clearly does not carry any of the moral judgement that such a juxtapositioning would bear (Powell 1995b: 6). Rather, it establishes a more ambiguous dialectic that avoids immediate closure. The dog is thus read as a complex figure open to a number of interpretations.

James H. Marrow, in his book *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance*, traces the

portrayal of Christ's tormentors as animals. Citing Psalm 21[26] as the principal source for such characterisations, when Christ's tormentors are described as bulls (verse 12), lions (verse 13) and later as dogs (verses 16 and 20)[27], Marrow points out how Psalm 22 became "so well established that it crystallised into visual imagery in the earliest-known Psalters and was popular in the Middle Ages" (1979: 34). For Marrow, "[r]eferences to Christ's tormentors as dogs are a commonplace of late medieval passion literature, and nowhere more so than in narrative passion tracts". Some of the examples he gives include: "At the Arrest of Christ the Lord goes out to meet the malicious dogs who run about like roaring lion [. . .] and He is bound, beaten and dragged by fierce, raging dogs [. . .] Christ is led to Pilate in order, as Ludolph of Saxony expresses it, *to be devoured by the wicked judge as by a mad dog*, [. . .] It is cruel dogs who, crying and howling, lead Christ, the Lamb, to Herod [. . .] the cruel dog" (1979: 36-7).

Marrow further writes that depictions of dogs as Christ's tormentors "range from subtle to pointedly obvious" (1979:37). Some images use the figure of the dog in scenes while other images allude to animal-like characteristics, such as Hieronymous Bosch's *Bearing of the Cross*. Alexander's figure of the dog alludes to the pictorial convention of situating dogs towards the bottom of many paintings of the Middle Ages. She appears to subvert this notion of dog as tormentor as her figure of the dog appears tormented and a figure of suffering itself. The reading of the dog as tormented is further reinforced by the significance of the animal being more like a wild

[26]Marrow incorrectly cites psalm 21. The correct citation is psalm 22.
[27]verse 12: Many bulls have compassed me: strong *bulls* of Bashan have beset round.
verse 13: They gaped upon me *with* their mouths, *as* a ravening and a roaring lion.
verse 16: For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.
verse 20: Deliver my soul from the sword; my life from the power of the dog.
(The Holy Bible - Authorised King James Version 1956: 454).



Figure 28: Bosch, Hieronymous, *Bearing of the Cross* (Ghent).



Figure 29. Schongauer, Martin. *Ecce Homo*. engraving.

dog than a domestic pet, even though it is "derived as a motif from the artist's own pet" (Powell 1995b: 11). Powell interprets the dog as "more jackal than anything else" (1995b: 11), although I believe that with its distinctly rounded ears it looks far more like an African wild dog. The African wild dog is known as a vicious predator with cruel killing methods, and has been hunted itself under the justification of being a threat to livestock and human beings. It was once common practice to shoot wild dogs on sight (Hare and Lambert 1995: 2231)[28].

In this light, Alexander's figure of the dog is ambivalent in nature, being both predator and scavenger as well as hunted. It seems to share the predicament of the human figures in the tableau. The discrimination against the women on the grounds of their biological determination is echoed in the persecution of the wild dog on the grounds of its natural instincts. The fact that the dog is portrayed alongside the female figures, removed from its natural habitat, not only adds to the dog's pathos but likely relates to the displacement of the other figures, a theme which recurs in many of Alexander's works.

In *Pastoral Scene*, the sense of displacement is juxtaposed with the ideal suggested by the title; the idyllic is juxtaposed against the poverty of rural South Africa. This, together with the intermeshing of the animal and the human, evokes ambivalent feelings. Furthermore, the incorporation of actual clothing on the figures, together with applied paint to achieve a heightened naturalism evokes a real-life situation. Powell writes, "[y]et the naturalism is at

[28]African wild dogs are classified by *The World Conservation Union* as 'endangered', facing a high probability of extinction in the near future if its situation is not improved. Writing in 1995 for *Animal World*, Tony Hare and Mark Lambert note of the dogs' demise, "[i]n the whole of Africa there may be no more than 4000 - 6000 in total" (1995: 2230). Reasons given for their decreasing numbers include vulnerability to disease and a combination of persecution and habitat persecution (Hare and Lambert 1995: 2231).

the same time undercut. It is undercut in obvious ways by having one of the figures wearing a halo; and in less obvious ways by the absence of an attempt to render the Aristotelian unities of time and action, the absence of any eye contact or interrelation among the figures" (1995b: 5). For Powell this generates an ambiguity, "a seeming contradiction, on the one hand the anti-naturalistic presentation leads us towards a symbolic reading of the figures as essentially separate icons; on the other, the attention to naturalistic and realist detail in the individual figures suggests a reading in terms of more direct references to the world of experience" (1995b: 5). This slippage is what gives Alexander's sculpture a critical or evaluative dimension whereby one meaning is played off against another, creating a charged space with a critical edge.

The juxtaposing of the religious ideal and the everyday world of experience surfaces in much of Alexander's work. Sculptures such as *Hit (poor Walter)*[29] 1995, 960 x 735 x 360mm, and *Integration Programme: man with wrapped feet*[30], 1994, 1975 x 830mm, make use of Christian imagery: *Hit (poor Walter)* is presented in a pose resembling the crucifixion, while *Integration Programme: man with wrapped feet* makes use of the halo (as in *Black Virgin* and *Pastoral Scene*). These 'ideal' qualities are not distinct, however, from the ordinary, everyday, imperfect people who possess these characteristics. The figure of Walter refers to a young black library assistant "who was pointlessly assassinated in an ongoing blood feud raging between two basically rural clans which is both a contemporary tragedy and, in the way that he is remembered, a martyr" (Powell 1995b: 9). The sense of tragedy and martyrdom also exists in *Integration Programme: man with wrapped feet* (1994). Powell notes that a sense of violence is evoked by means of the shards of glass on the figure's head instead of hair. He writes: "a real violence

[29]*Hit (poor Walter)* is housed in the collection of the Sandton Civic Art Gallery.
[30]*Integration Programme: man with wrapped feet* is in the collection of the artist.

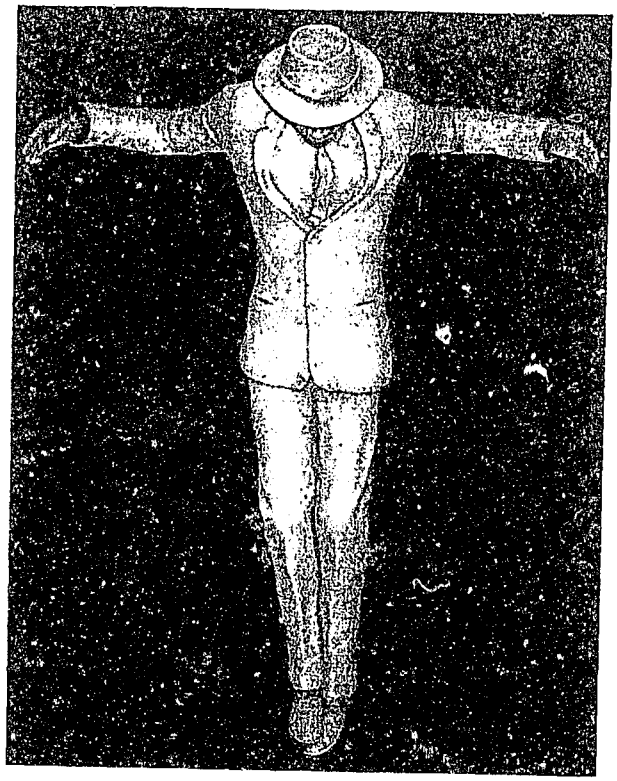


Figure 30: Alexander, Jane, *Hit (poor Walter)*, *mixed media*, 1995.



Figure 31: Alexander, Jane, *Hit (poor Walter)*, detail.

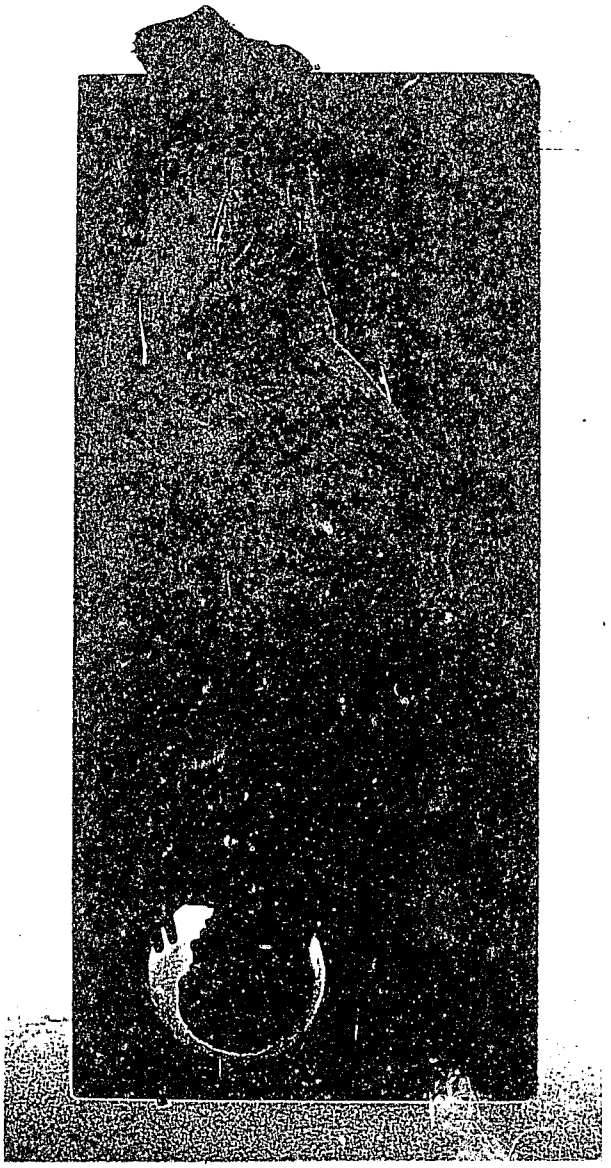


Figure 32: Alexander, Jane, *Integration Programme. man with wrapped feet* mixed media, 1994.

is given in the feet, tightly bound with strips of leather, sewn up and shrunken to make the feet a single, useless club" (1995b: 32). The figure may be viewed as dead or sleeping or, as Powell suggests, drunk. He notes that the figure hangs upside down and this fact, which recalls the martyrdom of St. Peter "together with the horrific torture image of the bound feet, creates and sustains strongly the effect of the secular martyrdom" (Powell: 1995b: 32).

These two figures then are ordinary, imperfect types. The religious imagery suggests both violence and empathy, even a pathetic state to their being. The evocation of these ambivalent feelings may be connected to Alexander's sculptures from the 1980s, which suggest violence and victimhood but also carry through into the works which I will be discussing more fully in chapters four and five, such as *Black Madonna* which also displays a halo similar to Beauty in *Pastoral Scene*. Both these works evoke the ideal virgin/mother of God, yet interrelate these ideals with the everyday. *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* recalls the crucifixion yet also connects to images of the fallen virgin, Mary Magdalene, Eve, as well as a puppet-like doll, all of which are complicated by the setting up of the ideal through the crucifixion pose.

Chapter 4

Violence and the Female Body: Persecution and Veneration

Alexander's sculptures from the 1980s usually depict male figures, while more recent works have increasingly focused on the female body. Siopis, in her article *Domestic Affairs*, suggests that in images such as *Butcher Boys*, the use of the white male body reveals the ugly image of power (1997: 58). While the shift to the rendering of the female body still embodies concerns of violence, victimisation and alienation, Alexander often employs religious themes and Christian iconography in her depiction of female figures, thereby creating complex, multivalent and ambiguous readings in both her sculptures and photomontages. The theme of violence and the female body thus seems to play on more complex levels of association and commentary. References to the Virgin Mary, Eve and Mary Magdalene can be found in several of Alexander's works in which she refigures the familiar associations of these figures in contemporary guises. While some of her earlier works obliquely introduce Judeo-Christian concepts of guilt and shame in relation to the naked body and binaries of flesh/spirit, animal/human, her more recent work deals far more explicitly with institutionalised Christianity. Her use of Christian imagery thereby serves to comment more directly on the way in which religion has been used as a vehicle for both persecution and veneration. The ambiguous correlation between persecution and veneration is explored in works such as *Black Madonna*, *Cake*, *Pastoral Scene* and *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* as well as in *something's going down* (1993-4), and will be discussed in this chapter with reference to Kristeva's ideas on the split subject as manifested in her writings on the Virgin Mary.

something's going down[31], 1994, mixed media, 1550 x 2090 x 355mm, is a small-scale tableau piece comprising four figures (the tallest around 350mm), gazing outwards as if transfixed by some event or disturbance in the distance which we are not privy to. Three of the figures are clearly black, a woman with her arm raised, a child wearing a balaclava, and a man dressed in a green coat, while the fourth man dragging a leather and twine bundle behind him may be white or, as Powell suggests, a black albino (1995b: 28). The figures appear to be moving in a procession along a ramp painted in military camouflage. Behind them to the left is what appears to be a miniature billboard featuring a "twice repeated image of an Aryan-type angel girl, her hands clasped as if in racially pure prayer [. . .] with an expectant gaze heavenwards" (Powell 1995b: 28). The wording at the bottom of the images reads 'Radiance of Faith'. While the group of figures contemplates an unknown happening or seems to be moving towards some event, the little girl seems enrapt in a wishful prayer which underscores her disconnectedness to events about her. The billboard image twice repeated furthermore speaks of a world of material wealth and sheltered living which remains foreign to the events unfolding in front of it. Powell expresses it as " the galvanising vision of the innocence and purity that is threatened by the dangerous Other. Images like this [which] in history have usually marked the most corrupt and inhumane of ideologies, and indeed it is with this sinister double message that Jane Alexander uses the image in this context"[32] (1995b: 28). The blonde, blue eyed girl image is blown up in scale in relation to the other figures and is elevated from the sculptural base. The image serves as a traditional ideal of

[31] *something's going down* is in a private collection.

[32] Powell notes that on the back of the billboard "the source of the agitation is explained" as there is a message gleaned from a police roadblock (Powell 1995b: 28). In both English and Xhosa it reads, "WE ARE HERE TO: *Search for stolen property *Search for unlicensed firearms and ammunition * Identify suspects and arrest them. This is necessary to maintain law and order and to protec (sic) you from troublemakers. you have no reason to fear us. Thank you for your co-operation" (cited in Powell 1995b: 28).

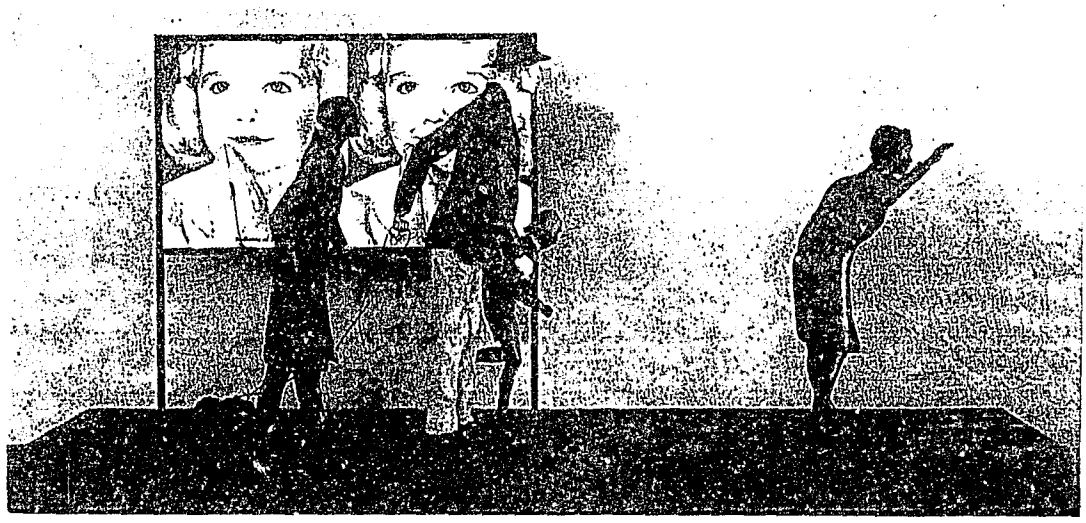


Figure 33: Alexander, Jane, *something's going down*, mixed media, 1994.

Western prettiness and innocence, but in its commercial display within the agitated context of the other figures it adopts a tone of false propaganda. Billboard advertisements of this kind promote values not only of the products displayed but also about 'life styles, attitudes and aspects of what advertisers promote as 'the good life' " (Barrett 1990: 62). Hands clasped in prayer, she represents perhaps the blind faith with which religious institutions such as the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa sanctioned Apartheid in denial of the conditions leading to the persecution of Others.

Alexander plays on the idea of othering when she depicts the female figures in *Pastoral Scene* and her *Black Madonna* as black, which renders them as doubly victimised, while also offering an alternate to the traditional way in which Christianity and Christian art have portrayed images of women, especially images of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary as a cult figure embodies a paradox which is idealised in the Western World. Mullins comments that, "[a]rt galleries are stacked with mothers, and most of them are virgins" (Mullins 1985: 152). Of the idealisation and veneration of the Virgin, he writes:

> Art is responsible for creating Mary's face and form; the Church is responsible for enshrining her. Together they have stamped her image on the vision of western man. As the model mother she stands powerfully before man's eyes; she controls the threshold of his encounters with the world; she is his standard of womanhood and the guardian of his morality [. . .] Look at Mary. It is impossible not to: she is everywhere. Her life story is recounted in art over and over again. She is born, presented to the Temple, educated, married, visited by the angel of the Annunciation; she nurses her son, flees with him to Egypt, presents him to the Temple, witnesses his crucifixion, laments over his body, sees him again after the Resurrection, herself dies amid a gathering of mourners, and is received and crowned in heaven. She is pomegranate, the white rose, the lily; she is the olive, the flawless mirror, the star. She is Queen of Heaven, she is Mater Dolorosa. She is the Virgin of Mercy, Virgin of the Rosary, Virgin of the Rose Garden, the Virgin with the Unicorn, Virgin of the Seven Sorrows, and she is the Virgin with numerous donors and innumerable saints who attend her (1985: 153/4).

In her veneration, the Virgin Mary stands apart from ordinary women who, through their physicality and sexuality, cannot "partake of the Virgin's powerful aura" (Ockenden 1996: 3). While Mary is venerated as the pure ideal of woman, she has her antithesis in Eve, the temptress, or Mary Magdalene, the whore. Ockenden writes how unfavourable comparisons were often made between Eve and the Virgin Mary (the new Eve). She notes how Jerome stated "Death through Eve, life through Mary" while Augustine embodied similar concerns in his statement: "through woman, death; through woman, life"[33] (Ockenden 1966: 20). This binary venerated woman on the one hand and chastised her on the other. Ordinary women were expected to identify with the Virgin Mary, although they were more often equated with Eve:

> The Virgin's passive attributes (as the woman without sin and the woman without sexuality) created and celebrated in monastic circles, had its natural concomitant in the celibate's view of ordinary women. Real women were equated with Eve (as sinful and sexual), and were viewed negatively by the Church as opposed to the ideal of virginity (Ockenden 1996: 22).

Alexander can be seen to complicate and problematise such binaries in her depictions of the Virgin/Madonna. In *Black Madonna*, for example, the Virgin Mary's image is transposed onto a black woman and represented as pregnant, thereby subverting the expected, conventional depiction of the pure and blessed virgin. Ivor Powell identifies this transposition as potentially blasphemous, noting that Alexander reinterprets the dual nature of the Virgin Mary to "sanctify the motherhood rather than the virginity" (1995b: 10). This idea of reversal or negation may be related to French theorist Julia Kristeva's writing on the Virgin Mary in her essay *Stabat Mater* in which she challenges

[33]Ockenden cites J Dalarun's 'The Clerical Gaze' in Klapisch-Zuber, C (ed.) *A History of Women: Silences in the Middle Ages.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), translated by A Goldhammer, as her source for the quotation (1992:23).



Figure 34: Alexander, Jane, *Black Madonna*, mixed media, 1991.

our desires for goddesses, and rearticulates the virgin's purity in the mode of the maternal. As Kelly Oliver states, "the fleshed mother with her [. . .] 'sexual-intellectual-physical passion, of death' replaces the Mother-God" (1993: 53). While I do not wish to prescribe a direct link between Alexander's work and Kristeva's writings, much of Kristeva's theory is useful in her revisiting of idealised concepts as Alexander similarly asserts the human qualities of woman in favour of idealisation.

Alexander attributes contemporary identities to her *Black Madonna*[34] and the figures in *Pastoral Scene.* In both works the representation of the madonnas as black subverts idealised western notions of madonna as white and pure. Furthermore, Powell notes that in *Black Madonna*, 1991, mixed media, 820 x 1220mm, the figure's "contemporary and profane identity is insisted upon in the indigo (rather than the conventional red and blue robes), in the wearing of neck rings and in the somewhat rakish angle of the halo" (Powell 1995b: 10). The figures in *Pastoral Scene* are similarly given contemporary identities as seen in the figure of the domestic worker, Beauty, a woman Alexander knew, who is dressed in slippers, old jersey, maid's overall and head scarf. The image of the Madonna is depicted barefoot, clothed in a skirt and shirt, while the Widow is dressed in slippers, pullover, skirt and veil. The African wild dog and park bench further convey an unidealised contemporary South African setting, ironically undercutting the idyll postulated by the title *Pastoral Scene.*

Alexander's titles frequently present layered meanings. For example, *Black Madonna* may not only refer to the identity of the figure but also to the colouring of her robes which are a very dark indigo. Moreover, the title also

---

[34] *Black Madonna* is in a private collection.

refers to the way in which the figure has been branded or discredited as being not pure, nor virginal white. Traditional images of the virgin/madonna focus mainly on themes of the Annunciation, Mother and Child, and Assumption into Heaven, and generally do not reveal Mary as pregnant. Brenda Schmahmann in her essay "A 'Playmate' of a different cast(e): George Segal's *Pregnant Woman*" comments on the condition of pregnancy defying a classicised and contained image of the female body, which is why images of pregnant women have been negotiated in such a way that images of the pregnant Virgin Mary have necessarily spoken of chastity with the condition of pregnancy being presented by gestures such as the pointing to the stomach/womb area. Schmahmann further notes that outside the realm of the religious pregnancy has usually signified shame. In *Black Madonna* Alexander disturbs notions of chastity and shame. Even though she is best known for her role as Mother of Christ, it is somewhat disconcerting to view the madonna as pregnant, breasts ripe, with her hand on her swollen belly. Alexander sexualises the figure by rendering her as pregnant, so that she appears fallen, tainted, forcing us to face our own idealised misconceptions of motherhood, especially when in a religious context.

While the figure is disconcerting, she is also sad. Measuring 1220mm in height, she is smaller than life-size, the reduced scale imbuing her with a sense of vulnerability and submission. The plinth on which she stands, a wooden military ammunition box, both elevates and immobilises her not unlike statuary on an altar or monument. The thorns situated on top of the plinth immediately bring to mind the crown of thorns worn by Christ or those strewn along the path to Calvary and thus imply suffering. While the madonna has been elevated as the mother of God, her submissive role in a patriarchal society violates her much in the way that the pregnancy may be viewed as having violated her body. Her suffering could stem from a number of things,

not only her submissive role dictated to her, but also the idealisation she is expected to live up to, and which ordinary women are expected to try in vain to emulate.

It is revealing to find the image of the *Black Madonna* reappearing in a 1995 photomontage entitled *Fragmented Group*. For Powell the life cast moulds "provide a foil for and are themselves foiled by the substantial integrity of the sanctified Madonna figure and the powerful assertion of identity contained therein" (Powell 1995b: 10). While Powell may be correct in reading the figure of the madonna as a foil to the fragmented images behind her, I would suggest that she herself could be read as having been victimised and categorised. She is herself 'fragmented' as only her upper body is revealed showing her swollen breasts and belly. By positioning both the ethnographic models and the image of the madonna within the context of a museum, a connection is made with practices that categorise and aim towards neat, concise identification. Alexander's juxtaposition of the devotional figure with the moulds draws attention to the absurdity of their placements in a museum context, and may also suggest that both ethnographic module and the model of the Virgin have little relevance to contemporary everyday life.

Alexander's figures thus disturb idealised notions of motherhood as well as constructed binaries of the ideal and the ordinary, persecution and veneration and, in the case of *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*, pleasure and pain. Similar challenges to the idealisation of motherhood are also expressed in Kristeva's *Stabat Mater*[35]. She writes, "we live in a civilisation where the

---

[35]*Stabat Mater* is the name for the Latin hymn to Mary's suffering at the Crucifixion (Edelstein 1992: 29). Kristeva's essay was first published as "Hérethique de l'amour" in *Tel Quel*, 74 (Winter 1977: 30-49). It was reprinted as "Stabat Mater" in *Histoires d'amour* in 1983. Moi reproduces the translation taken from the American edition of *Histoires d'amour* (Moi 1986: 160).

consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood [. . .] this motherhood is the *fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult [. . .] of a lost territory, what is more, it involves less an idealised archaic mother than the idealisation of the *relationship* that binds us to her, one that cannot be localised - an idealisation of primary narcissism" (Moi 1986: 161). Kristeva suggests that through the experiences of the real mother idealised concepts can be revisited with a new vision, but there is no joy without pain. In her essay "Metaphors, Meta-Narrative and Mater-Narrative in Kristeva's *Stabat Mater*", Marilyn Edelstein states,

> maternal love is a form of sacrifice and produces an acute sense of both identification and separation, of narcissism and masochism, of pleasure and pain [. . .] Although Kristeva locates [. . .] crucifixion in mothering, her texts suggest that all split subjects exist at [. . .] crossroads between pain and pleasure, lack and plenitude, sameness and difference (1992: 33).

Kristeva thus offers a more complex concept of motherhood, one which poses a split subject. Kelly Oliver in her book *Reading Kristeva - Unravelling the Double-Bind* relates how Kristeva "is concerned with discourses that call up a crisis in identity, [and that] [f]or her the discourse of maternity is such a discourse" as it points to a subject-in-process; the maternal body is a split body, a site of an "infolding" of otherness, a double (1993: 48). This is metaphorically asserted in her essay *Stabat Mater* in which she presents a split text - two voices speak. On the left the 'mother' speaks; of her relationship to her child, the pain of giving birth and this relationship to death, "[t]here is him, however, his own flesh, which was mine yesterday. Death, then, how could I yield to it?" This death relates to sexuality, "[t]o say that there are no sexual relationships constitutes a skimpy assertion when confronting the flesh that bedazzles me when I confront the abyss between what was mine and is henceforth but irreparably alike" (Moi 1986: 179). In the column on the right a second voice (identified as the 'father's' discursive text

by Jonte-Pace)[36](1992: 9) asserts Mary as the mother who does not die, so that sexuality and by association motherhood, and death are separated. In *Stabat Mater* then, the way in which the virgin as ideal mother, she who experiences no pain, no death, no decay, is sharply contrasted with the human suffering mother whose experience of pleasure and pain is closely intertwined. The consecrated representations of female figures in Alexander's works bear witness to such contrasts.

While I will focus on *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* in chapter five, this work clearly articulates issues dealing with pleasure and pain/suffering; sexuality and death, evoking concerns shared by Kristeva. Although it is not clear who the figure in this sculpture represents, she may allude to the virgin, among others. Another work which also accentuates the polarity of sexuality and death, pleasure and pain through the use of a deeply ambiguous figure is *Cake,* 1993, mixed media, 500 x 465 x 465mm, which bears some similarity to *Black Madonna* in its depiction of a pregnant madonna and the inclusion of thorns. *Cake* is a smaller work, which includes a white cake supporting a monumental standing figure clothed in white with a veil over her bowed head. On the surface of the cake and immediately surrounding her robes are violent looking thorns of a variety common to the South African bush vegetation, substituting the floral icing decorations one expects to find on such a cake. Again these clearly allude to crucifixion, suffering and violence, all the more ironic in their being played off against the expected. Further local signifiers occur in the green bicycle reflector lights around the sides of the cake sometimes used in decoration of African dress, and a row of cowrie shells

[36]Much debate has been generated around the possible 'identity' of the voice in the right hand column. Some writers have viewed it as the father's symbolic voice while others such as Marilyn Edelstein have viewed the two voices in *Stabat Mater* as two different voices of the mother. Edelstein writes, "[t]he two columns do not remain alien to each other; in their dialogue, they often mingle and overlap, echo and anticipate" (1992: 35).



Figure 35: Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, mixed media, 1991.

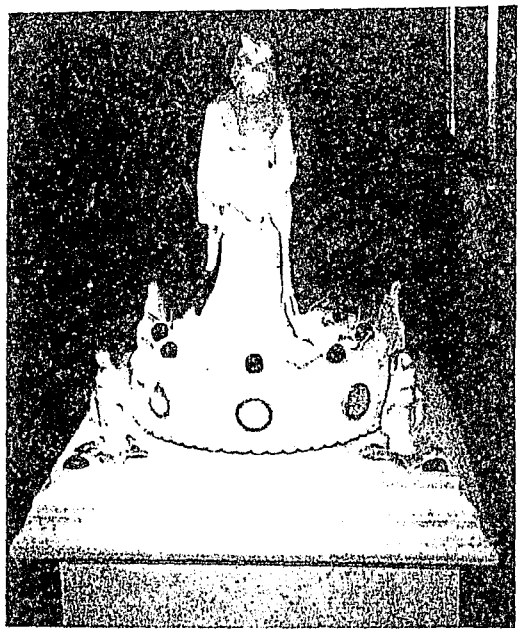


Figure 36: Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, mixed media, 1991.



Figure 37: Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, detail.

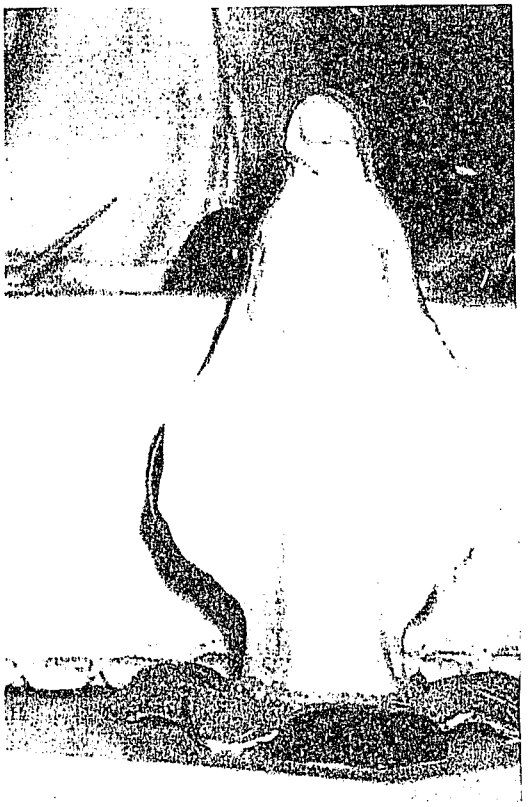


Figure 38: Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, detail.

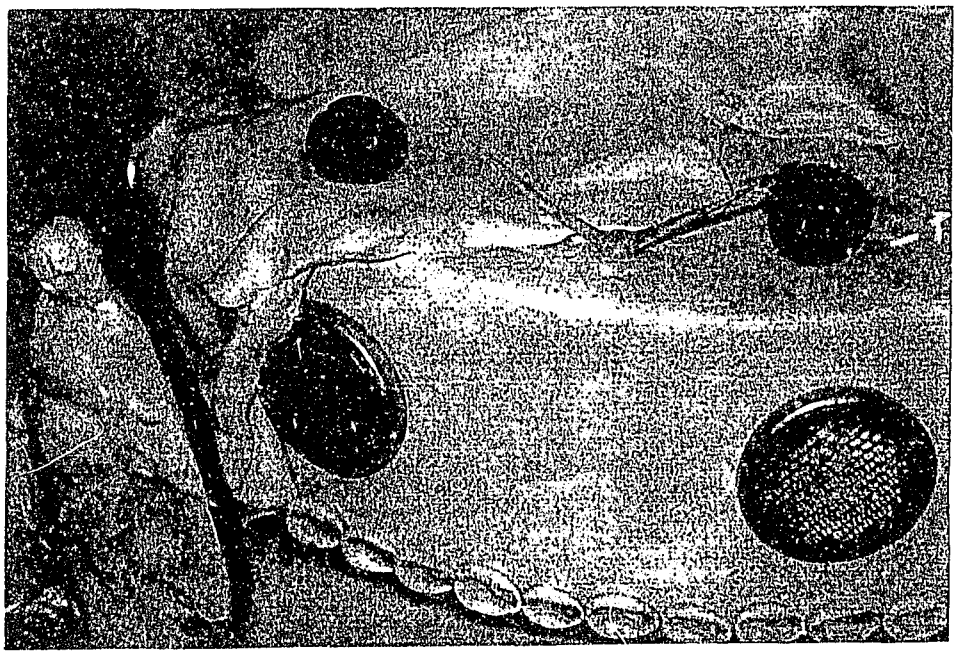


Figure 39: Alexander, Jane, *Cake*, detail.

around the bottom of the cake where it meets the board. Apart from the allusions to sexuality suggested by the inclusion of cherries, and four red hearts, cowrie shells also allude to sexuality through the appearance of their vaginal-like shape. They are also, by their inclusion, known to be used as currency in parts of Africa, and thus possibly make an oblique reference to a dowry or 'brideprice'. Strings of tiny pearls around the base of each of the four smaller pregnant madonnas on the corner of the cake-board likewise evoke the bride's adornments which together with the whiteness of the cake and the veils, evoke virginal weddings. The miniature pregnant virgins, on the corners of the cake-board stand, with outstretched arms, facing outwards. Their open-arm gesture is typical of many representations of the Virgin Mary and their association with the large bridal figure atop the cake clearly refers to the Virgin Mary. The bride's head is bowed in a gesture which may evoke both shame and prayer. While a wedding cake should be celebratory in nature, Alexander subverts this idea, disturbing the expected reading thereof by referring to connections between sexuality, suffering and death. Indeed, the sculpture is somewhat suggestive of colonial war monuments in its structure. The sombre figures evoke devotional statues on pediments in cemeteries which commonly share the gesture of the lowered head. The accompanying photomontage to *Cake* entitled *Belief and Ritual / Geloof en Ritueel: Respecting*[37], 1995, 220 x 233mm, seems to support such a connection to funereal monuments through the stark tonal qualities which include a sinister male figure who is represented as almost pitch black, and thus becomes quite a sombre presence. The inclusion of the wording "Respecting" may also suggest the practice of respecting the dead.

[37]*Belief and Ritual /Geloof en Ritueel: Respecting* includes an image of the black male figure from *Integration Programme*, 1992, mixed media. While he may be distinctly 'other' from her, being of a different gender and race, a connection is drawn between the two figures.

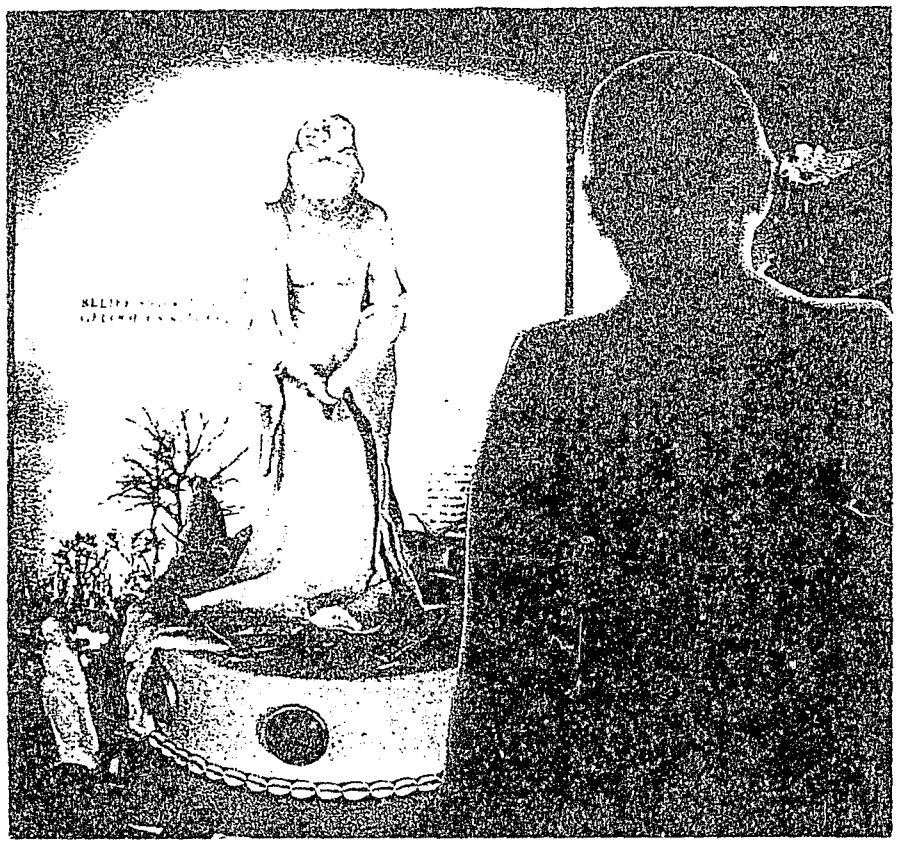


Figure 40: Alexander, Jane. *Belief and Ritual / Geloof en Ritueel: Respecting*, photomontage, 1995.

The ideal is again subverted in *Pastoral Scene*. Five figures appear in the tableau: two seated black, female figures, a baby, a standing white female figure and a bitch. The figures all stare outwards, not interacting with one another, and yet the three female figures seem connected in a form of implied trinity. On the Christian trinity comprising God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Marion Arnold notes that, while this represents the patriarchal authority of the church, "in earlier matriarchal societies the symbol of woman was the triangle" (1996: 118). The symbolically religious number of three is repeated in the three sardines the white woman holds out on a piece of bread which also alludes to the miracle of the Loaves and Fishes (Arnold 1996: 118) whereby five loaves and two fishes were miraculously made to feed a multitude of people[38]. The only other possible allusion to a miracle is in the figure of the madonna who nurses her genderless baby. Arnold notes:

> She is not just a nursing mother, engaged in a natural action. This black madonna is a symbol of motherhood, and her femininity is accorded a special status. The ordinary is rendered distinctive; nature is transformed into culture through a visual symbolic device with a long artistic pedigree. The woman's importance is also emphasised by the baby, an enigmatic bundle swaddled in purple cloth, the colour of royalty (1996: 118).

However, while there are suggestions of events of a miraculous nature, these are also undercut. All three female figures as well as the dog appear dispossessed and displaced. Miracles seem completely absent from their lives and although the madonna is depicted with a halo, her poverty is suggested through her ragged clothing and bare feet. Powell suggests that she is probably a migrant worker, while Arnold writes that the Beauty figure has

[38]And they say unto him, We have here but five loaves, and two fishes. . . . And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to *his* disciples, and the disciples to the multitude (Gospel according to St Matthew 14: 17 and 19) (The Holy Bible, Authorised King James Version 1956: 762).



Figure 41: Alexander, Jane, *Pastoral Scene*, detail.



Figure 42: Alexander, Jane, *Pastoral Scene*, detail.

probably come to the city to seek employment. Both writers also identify the white woman as an east European immigrant known to Alexander. (Powell 1995b: 11 and Arnold 1996: 119). In a sense they do not belong, just as the wild dog does not belong in the domestic scene. As mentioned in chapter two, the persecution of the dog likely echoes the suffering the three women have experienced.

The sense of displacement is reinforced by the inclusion of the park bench and by the title, *Pastoral Scene*. Two of the figures are depicted sitting on a park bench, while the third figure looks out into the distance. They all seem to be waiting for something like passengers waiting at a bus stop. The sense of a journey is furthermore implied by the title which evokes associations with the repose on the Flight into Egypt, where the religious party, comprising Mary, Joseph and Jesus, is said to have rested in an idyllic setting. The theme of the Flight into Egypt is a well known theme of escape from persecution. As Arnold explains, 'pastoral' has other associations too:

> In Western art, 'the pastoral' is a concept originating in the world of antiquity. It is, above all else, a strategy of the artistic imagination, not a reflection of reality. The pastoral, first located in Roman wall-painting of the first centuries BC and AD and then the subject of extensive elaboration in sixteenth-century Renaissance Venice, theories on arcadian landscape peopled by shepherds and nymphs. In this idyllic, peaceful world - a unity of humankind in nature - there is no labour. The situation is one of escape from reality and historical time to sacred space and timelessness. Pastoral space, precisely because it does not claim to simulate life, features conventions which hold art in tension with life and establish a dialectic between nature and life. Pastoral existence can only be conjectured as harmonious through knowledge of its antithesis - conflict. Thus, in Alexander's 'pastoral', the idyll postulated by the title is contradicted by real, unidealised people. As sculpture, the figures are not 'real' at all: this means that even irony is not a stable concept (1996:119/120).

Arnold further comments that Alexander's work evokes reversals and deferrals of meaning (1996:120). While the pastoral is a constructed ideal,

Alexander's figures are sad and appear victimised. Allusions to death are also introduced in *Pastoral Scene* in the figure of the Widow who mourns her dead husband as she wears black and white dress including a black shawl. She is deathly pale herself, evoking someone who is ill or waiting to die. The dark colour of the madonna's robes is likewise sombre and suggestive of mourning. Yet despite the strong sense of pain, suffering and persecution expressed in this work as well as other sculptures and photomontages I have discussed in this chapter, they also serve to challenge idealised concepts of womanhood and motherhood. While I do not believe that Alexander's works offer moralistic social commentary, nor prescribe a didactic message, perhaps they contain a suggestion that in order to rethink idealised notions, a painful look at experience is necessary. This in itself posits an ambivalence which connects to Arnold's comment that "[p]astoral existence can only be conjectured as harmonious through knowledge of its antithesis - conflict" (1996: 120). Perhaps then destructive idealisations may be transcended. While this does not necessarily lead to pleasure, this idea may not be that different from Kristeva's theory that only through pain, can its antithesis be achieved, as it is through the experiences of the 'real' mother that idealised concepts are revisited while it is through the necessary pains of childbirth, and the subsequent sense of loss experienced, that death can be transcended.

Chapter 5

Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl): Drawing Connections between Sexuality and Death

In chapter four I demonstrated how Alexander's portraits of women may be seen to question patriarchal constructs underlying traditional representations of the female body by working from "within the very site of oppression" (Ockenden 1996: 2). With reference to Arnold's and Powell's comments on *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*[39] I will now focus on this work in order to identify features which evoke ambivalence and will then investigate how Alexander thereby problematises and undermines widely held views on the female body, revealing patriarchal assumptions about female sexuality and offering a critique of such views as well as suggesting the possibility of transcendence.

In my examination of *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* I focus primarily on the way in which it suggests links between sexuality, death and religion in its depiction of the female body. As an attempt to critically re-think established views on women, such concerns may be viewed alongside the misogynist psychoanalytic theory of Freud and Lacan, who, through linking women with death and religion, have constructed her as 'lack' and 'other'. Diane Jonte-Pace, in writing about Kristeva's refiguring of connections between women and religion, argues that psychoanalytic theory has the potential "to critique misogyny by revealing the structures linking the fear of women with the fear of death" (1992: 2). Psychoanalysis can reveal the "intricate workings of cultural, social, and psychic structures" (Jonte-Pace 1992: 22). In examining these

[39] *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* is housed in the collection of the Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg.

writings alongside Alexander's work *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*, I wish to consider the potential of transcendence as expressed in both selected psychoanalytic theory and Alexander's work[40].

"In Lacan's theory, the infant begins in an incoherent plurality of sensation" (Crownfield 1992: xiii). Between the ages of six and eighteen months the child enters into the Mirror stage whereby it is offered a sense of (false) unity with which to identify, and which forms the basis of the ego as the child enters into the Symbolic Order, the world of language. As Crownfield states, "behind and beneath the symbolic order lies the imaginary order, characterised essentially by a self identified and unified by its reflection from the other and by iconic, magnifying modes of representation of the world" (1992: xiii). Crownfield continues "[t]he interplay between the substitutionary unreality of the symbolic and the mirroring unreality of the imaginary, both always struggling against the exigency of the real - somatic intensity as ecstasy and as pain; need; the inaccessible other; death - constitutes the dynamics of life and of suffering" (1992: xiii).

If death is constructed as other, so too is woman. Jane Gallop notes, "[i]n the phallic phase, according to Freud, 'Only one kind of genital organ comes into account - the male [. . .] At the same time the real female genitals never seem to be discovered' ". The phallic phase is organised by the opposition phallic/castrated (one either has a phallus or one has nothing)" (1988: 135). Woman, then, has been constructed as 'lack'. Wish fulfilment, the desire to possess the phallus, aims to compensate for this lack, and so it is not surprising that Freud has linked "both religion and femininity to

[40]It must be noted that the scope of this study does not allow me to give detailed accounts of Freud's and Lacan's theories. I will rather draw on what is relevant to my argument, and this will necessitate that many of the distinctions between these theories cannot be analysed.

developmental inferiority and illusion" (Jonte-Pace 1992: 3). Jonte-Pace relates how "Freud's primary definition for religion is *belief*, consolatory belief, belief that God exists, belief in eternal life" (1992: 3). This illusory belief may be interpreted as an attempt to negate the reality of death. For Freud "religions' illusions are dangerous because they keep us in infantile relationships of dependence to a deity whose existence is unprovable. Dependence is equivalent to immaturity, while autonomy is equivalent to maturity. Freud characterises psychological, intellectual and moral maturity as the renunciation of attachments, dependencies and illusions" (Jonte-Pace 1988: 3). For Freud these attachments and illusions are ascribed as feminine so that "[b]elievers are like daughters, gods are like fathers; and sons are like nonbelievers" (Jonte-Pace 1988: 4).

Lacan has also linked woman with religion. Jonte-Pace points out that for Lacan woman is always outside of discourse and cannot be represented (1991: 6). This leads Lacan "to link woman with God, religion, mysticism, and the soul through an illumination of alterity and *"jouissance"* [as] [w]oman has a supplementary *jouissance* "beyond the phallus" (Jonte-Pace 1992:6). Jonte-Pace further cites Lacan and this analogy between God and woman. She writes, "[t]hough "nothing can be said of the woman" she is "of the order of the infinite" and is homologized with God through her otherness: "the unmoved mover, the supreme being - is situated in the place, the opaque place of the *jouissance* of the Other - that Other which if she existed the woman might be. It is in so far as her *jouissance* is radically Other that the woman has a greater relation to God" " (1992: 6).

Both Freud and Lacan ground their discussions of women and religion in absence, lack or death (Jonte-Pace 1992: 14/18). Working within the realm of psychoanalytical discourse, Julia Kristeva locates the homology of woman

and God "most explicitly in death" in *Stabat Mater* and *Black Sun* (Jonte-Pace 1992: 19). For Kristeva the relationship between woman and death is necessary as the child needs to renounce the abject maternal body in order to become autonomous. This loss is a screen for matricide and is therefore positive as "the imaginary capability of western man, which is fulfilled within Christianity, is the ability to transfer meaning to the very place where it was lost in death and/or nonmeaning [. . .] (it) constitutes a miracle" in [Kristeva's] view, the image of death as feminine provides a protection against collapse" (Jonte-Pace 1992: 20).

In celebrating death as feminine, Kristeva privileges difference. This might be read as both negative in that it upholds constructs of difference, and as positive in that it is a form of resistance, as Jonte-Pace understands it (1992: 13). Kristeva understands the identification of women with the Virgin Mother as masochistic as the Virgin operates within the Symbolic order, and is therefore a Paternal Mother. This identification with the Virgin "sacrifices an identification with the semiotic maternal body" (Oliver 1993: 52) who has an ambiguous relationship with her child and is abject. Kelly Oliver cites Kristeva's understanding of the abject[41] as:

> What is on the border, what doesn't respect borders. It is "ambiguous", "in-between", "composite" [. . .] it is neither one nor the other. It is undecidable [. . .] The abject is what threatens identity. It is neither good nor evil, subject nor object, ego nor unconscious, but something that threatens the distinctions themselves [. . .] In all cases, the abject threatens the unity/identity of both society and the subject. It calls into question the boundaries upon which they are constructed (1993: 56).

---

[41]Kristeva's understanding of the abject stems from her essay, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).* In this essay "Kristeva shows how the abject, as a point of ambiguity beyond what can be consciously coped with by either the individual or society, is evoked in an individual's vomiting because of the dislike of certain foods, or in social rituals dealing with pollution, or in works of art which either attempt to express, or repress the abject as horror and ambiguity" (Lechte 1994: 142).

The abject is both attractive and repulsive. *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* may be understood as abject as she is deeply ambiguous, seductive and beautiful yet repulsive in parts. The boundaries of her body are not respected - the inner body spills over to the outer body and the stitching is highly visible. While the semiotic realm of the abject may be understood as potentially offering "possibilities to women for re-articulating their personal and cultural selves" (Wright 1994: 142) allusions to suicide and self-inflicted pain may also be suggestive of transcendence, and will be discussed in relation to the notion of sacrifice. Before this is done, however, I feel it is necessary to give an account of the work itself.

In *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* a naked woman appears crucified, perhaps already dead. It is unclear whether she is being butchered or has already been killed, whether she is a female Christ or an Eve figure or even a fallen Virgin. Powell notes, "[s]he is what the viewer or user wants to make of her: the woman as manufactured object" (1995a: 5). In parts she appears innocent and idealised, while, in other parts she is mutilated, stitched together, reinforcing the notion of doll or puppet. In this manner she may be understood as grotesque. As Wolfgang Kayser writes, "[a]mong the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks" (1963: 183). Both Powell and Arnold write that this nameless doll/woman is based on two prostitutes Alexander had seen near her home in Cape Town (Powell 1995b and Arnold 1996). Observing their demeanour and body language Alexander called one of them the 'happy sex worker' and the other the 'unhappy sex worker'. Arnold writes that, while the sculpture is not about prostitution *per se*, it is about "female identity as constituted by biology and developed or inhibited by socialisation and economic circumstances. [. . .] In essence it is about the



Figure 43: Alexander, Jane, *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*, mixed media, 1995.

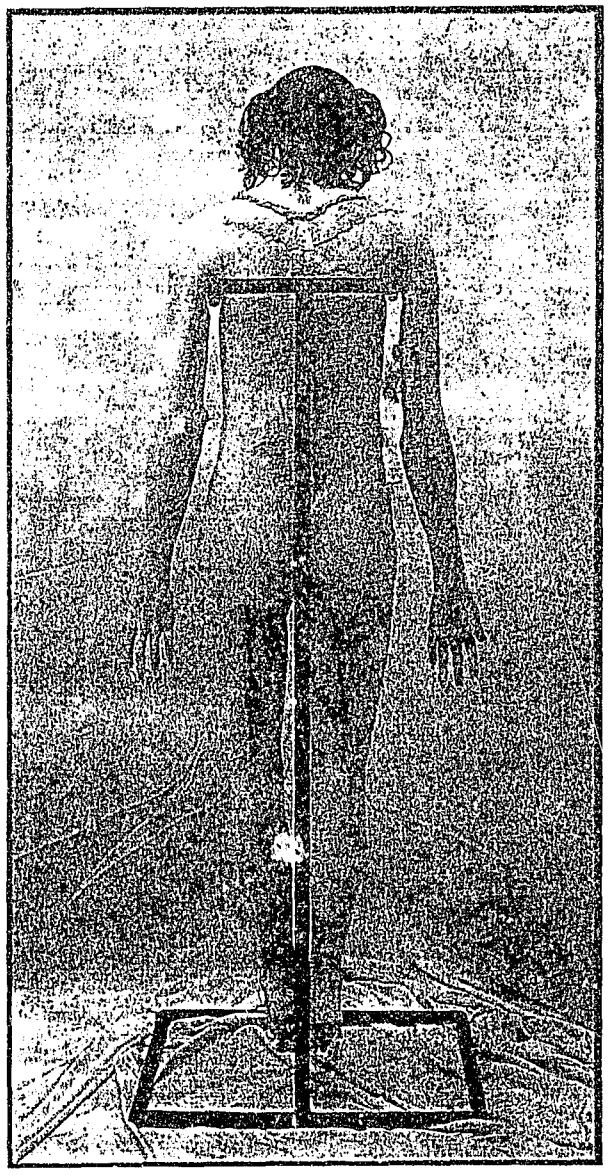


Figure 44: Alexander, Jane, *Stripped ("Oh Yes' girl)*, mixed media, 1995.

fact that woman as subject is invariably reduced to woman as object" (1996: 116).

While *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* is represented as object she also seems to participate in her fate as object, thus substantiating the possibility that she may be partaking in her own death. The visible stitching alludes to the post-mortem corpse but also to cosmetic surgery, "the willing self-mutilation of the woman [who] too sees herself as something to be unpicked and remodelled" (Powell 1995b: 13). The figure thus becomes much more complex than just being presented as 'woman as object'. Of this ambivalence, Powell notes that although the "Unhappy Sex Worker" predominates over the "Happy Sex Worker" both viewpoints become fused in the figure. "She is seductress and victim at the same time, an object of fascination and an object of abuse. She enacts in this way the basic tensions that make pornography, between desire and violence, between tenderness and lust, between the power of the pornographic object and her pain" (Powell 1995b: 13). The association with prostitution and submission as well as sexual pleasure is further inferred by the title and the words embroidered on her body, *'Oh yes'*[42] which imply promiscuity and abandonment.

Paradoxically, the implied mutilation of the figure may appeal to both enjoyment and revulsion (Arnold 1996: 117). As Arnold notes "[s]ome areas of the form invite admiration of the erotic female body; others invoke sadness about abuse" (1996: 117). Furthermore, Alexander depicts *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* on an armature reminiscent of those supplied with early models of Barbie dolls. Barbie was initially fashioned on the prostitute cartoon character Lilli

[42]"Oh Yes" is quoted from the sex club window where the sex workers Powell mentions worked. "Oh Yes" was circled with big red hearts (personal correspondence with Jane Alexander 1998).

and was first marketed in 1959 as an adult doll for children[43] (Arnold 1996: 117). While Barbie is an adult female figure she possesses no nipples or genitalia. Alexander draws on these characteristics imbuing *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* with a sense of innocence through depicting her breasts as youthful and her pubis as childlike. Arnold writes: "[t]he stand is not an arbitrary device to elevate the woman. It is a reference to the marketing of sex and female childhood" (1996: 117). While the childlike pubis evokes feelings of innocence it also alludes to the countless female nudes which have been idealised throughout the history of art through their absence of pubic hair, such falsifications of the female anatomy seeking to de-sexualise women. In her thesis, *Manet and the Nude, a Study in Iconography in the Second Empire*, Farwell relates how it was considered "all right and even desirable to expose the female body in art because art speaks to the spirit and the mind, and the message it speaks is one of eternal and classic beauty which is by definition chaste, pure and uplifting" (1981: 216).

While traditionally painted female nudes also served an erotic function, they were often distanced in time and space from the viewer. This expectation is curtailed in Jane Alexander's *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* by virtue of the fact that her nude is not a painting hanging on a wall but a sculpture which occupies the viewer's space. In this way Alexander's work challenges the notion that the nude speaks of the spirit and is removed from the 'real' world. The surface of *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* is highly tactile, in parts her skin is broken, a far cry from the flawlessly even complexions of traditional nudes. In *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* the subject is not only nude but clearly naked - there is a feeling that she is deliberately undressed which is implied by the inclusion of

[43]In her notes to *Women and Art in South Africa* Arnold comments, "[i]nitially manufactured in Japan, Barbie was produced with huge breasts and large nipples. The mammary emphasis was reduced but Barbie remained adult" (1996: 172).

the word *Stripped* in the title. Her nakedness is further reinforced by the wearing of a lace collar, suggesting a state of undress or incomplete dress. It also acts as a counterpart to the naked body in that "the lace collar embellishing the body alludes to a skilled female craft practice [which] is a contradiction to the untidy seams that stitch up the wounded flesh" (Arnold 1996: 7). Arnold notes that the lace collar "also emphasises the aesthetics of culture and the beauty and vulnerability of nature" (1996: 117). Conventional studies of female nudes are often juxtaposed with nature through their placement in natural settings. This connection establishes that the association of woman with nature has at times overt sexual meanings, as constructed binaries have often situated women in the realm of nature in opposition to man, who is believed to occupy the realm of culture. Nudity has usually been understood as relating to the realm of nature. Farwell notes, "[n]udity in Renaissance art [. . .] has carried for posterity a generalised meaning of 'nature' as opposed to culture [. . .] [nudity] was [. . .] always seen in contrast to modern life [. . .] beautiful, free, ideal, and remembered with regret for its loss by an accursed humanity" (1981: 242). *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* likewise appears to offer a critique on the nature/culture dichotomy - her mutilation and suffering is not only a result of her 'natural' biology but also of cultural and social expectations.

Arnold writes "the figure becomes a metaphor for the construction of identity and, in particular, the ways in which women control and manipulate their bodies to meet social expectations about femininity" (1996: 116). As a subject-in-process she may recall Kristeva's theories on the split, incomplete subject. Apart from the allusions to Barbie and cosmetic surgery, the figure possesses long fingernails and a detachable head. Her extremely long

fingernails are like talons[44], capable of inflicting pain so that she partakes in her masochistic and narcissistic pain. The head similarly refers to constructions of identity as the hair "protrudes from holes in the scalp like an operation for a hair plant" (Arnold 1996: 117). This idea that we alter our appearances for the sake of beauty or societal conventions is reinforced by the fact that the head is detachable, and possesses mask-like characteristics (Arnold 1996: 117). Arnold comments: "[t]he fact that the head can be put on to the body suggests that flesh is a mask: appearances can be worn and discarded in the role-playing of life" (1996: 117).

The gesture of the bowed head, as in *Cake*, evokes both shame and humility or prayer, death and sleep and thus possesses the same "state of rapturous self-description as Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1645-52) (Arnold 1996: 117) where death and sexuality are closely linked. It is in this manner that the figure may be viewed as transcending the pain of suffering and death through a sexual ecstasy. Connections between death and sexuality are crucial to any interpretation of *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*. The figure is not only naked but sexualised, the corporeallity heightened by allusions to prostitution, Barbie and cosmetic surgery. It is these very associations that serve as her cross, her prop becoming her crucifix. She is clearly represented as crucified with her feet crossed, head bowed, hands extended and side pierced. The gesture of the outstretched arms and palms also signifies the showing of stigmata, the wounds Christ received from the nails in His hands and feet.

Stigmatics have generally been viewed as female. Caroline Walker Bynum, writing on medieval religion, notes, "[a]ll but two documented cases of full and visible stigmata are female" which has been used to provide "much

[44]The talon-like fingernails are reminiscent of the fusing of human and animal characteristics in many of Alexander's works.

Figure 45: Alexander, Jane, *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*, detail.





Figure 46: Alexander, Jane, *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)*, detail.



Figure 47: Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*, 1645-52.

evidence of what psychiatrists call "conversion phenomena" (what we used to call "hysteria") in women's piety" (Bynum 1991: 56). Bynum continues:

> Not only are all late medieval stigmatics women, visions and transformation miracles of the bleeding host (like all eucharistic miracles) were reserved mostly by women as well. Stigmatic women clearly saw themselves as imitating Christ's bleeding flesh both as it hung on the cross and as it was consecrated in the wafer. Indeed, stigmata sometimes appeared as a result of taking communion. Thus, it was women's bodies almost exclusively that bled as Christ bled, and thus blood not only purged the woman of her sin but also saved her fellow Christians by substituting for the expiation they owed in purgatory. Holy women imitated Christ in their bodies; and Christ's similar bleeding and feeding body was understood as analogous to theirs (1991: 56).

Christ's body has been paralleled to women's bodies in many ways, including the acts of feeding and bleeding. Parallels have also been drawn between Christ and Mary. Not only is the suffering of Christ's crucifixion and Mary's suffering in witnessing her child's pain in being circumcised (often viewed as prefiguring the pain of the crucifixion through the shedding of blood) assimilated, but connections have also been drawn between Christ's wound and Mary's breast. Bynum notes that in medieval painting "the bleeding Christ is treated as the feeder of humankind" (1991: 102) and that "Mary's feeding is sometimes explicitly seen as eucharistic with her breast and baby both offered as eucharist" (1991: 103).

With such references in mind, the identity of the figure in *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* may be read on a number of different levels. She is both Christ and Mary, the Virgin and Whore, Mary Magdalene. She is idealised, venerated and degraded. It is believed that Christ sacrificed his life in order to save us all from sin, and as Eve is held responsible for original sin entering the world, Alexander's figure is both Christ and Eve. The figure's allusions to Christ are supported by the way in which she appears androgenous from behind, possibly evoking countless images of Christ represented with long hair. The



Figure 48: Quirizio of Murano, *The Saviour*, (fl. 1460-1478).



Figure 49: Cornelisz, *The Man of Sorrows*, (ca. 1510).

crossing of gender identity is further supported by the figure's hair having been sacrificed by a male friend (Arnold 1996: 117).

The representation of *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* in the sculpture and in the accompanying photomontage *Convention*, (which includes a representation of an image of Christ) as crucified further suggests connections between Christ and medieval religious women. Bynum writes that while women identified with Christ in a number of guises the primary identification was with the suffering Christ. She notes:

> "[n]o religious women failed to experience Christ as wounded, bleeding and dying. Women's efforts to imitate this Christ involved *becoming* the crucified, not just patterning themselves after or expanding their compassion toward, but *fusing* with, the body on the cross. Both in fact and in imagery the *imitation*, the fusion, was achieved in two ways: through asceticism and through eroticism. Thirteenth-century women joined with the crucifix through physical suffering, both involuntary and voluntary - that is through illness and through self-mortification" (1991: 131).

Alexander's figure is a victim of societal demand of womanhood, yet her wounds are self-inflicted, evoking suffering and orgasmic ecstasy, "the unspeakable suffering and unspeakable joy" (Bynum 1991: 153) experienced by medieval women. The nature of self-inflicted wounds has often been understood as hysteria or as wish fulfilment, thus relating to patriarchal psychoanalytic theory. Pollock describes how the hysterised body of woman "was made the object of pathological scrutiny" (1988: 189) by Freud and his colleague, the neuropathologist Charcot. Freud believed that hysterical disorders originated in conflicts which developed in the Oedipal period and were due to a failure of adequately resolving the oedipal complex and accepting the lack of the male penis. For Freud the hysteric phallicises a part of her own body, seeing herself as masculine and feminine. By not accepting her 'lack' she participates in wish fulfilment.

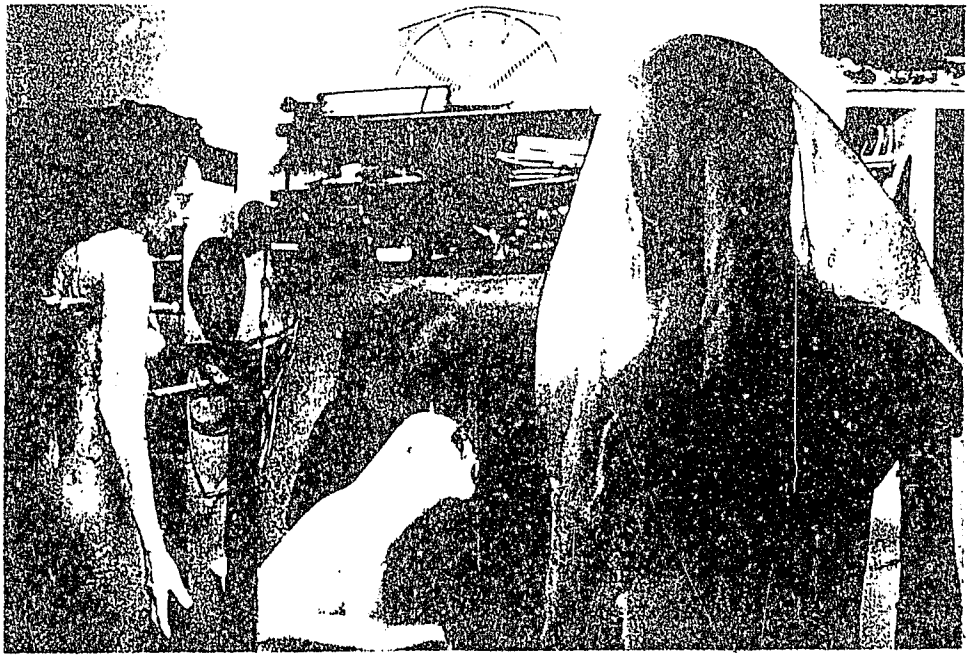


Figure 50: Alexander, Jane, *Convention*, photomontage, 1995.

The figure in *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* may be read as partaking in wish fulfilment through her participation in her own suffering and ecstasy. This connection may be understood as masochistic, as the figure alludes to suicide and self-inflicted pain. This need not, however, be read as negative, as her masochistic pain may suggest sacrifice and the possibility of transcending societal expectations of femininity. Suicide is often associated with women although "[w]omen commit suicide roughly half as often as men" (Higonnet 1985: 69). Despite the way in which suicide is often viewed as 'weakness of character' usually linked to femininity, it may also be read as a significant gesture to reclaim one's identity and autonomy. Higonnet writes: "[t]o take one's life is to force others to read one's death [. . .] To embrace death is at the same time to read one's own life" (1985:67). Higonnet notes that the breakdown of one's sense of identity often is believed to be a cause of suicide and women's self-sought deaths are ambiguous in that they "may affirm identity or erase it" (1985: 72). Suicide may be understood as sacrifice. She is a martyr who sacrifices herself. Higonnet points out that "Christ's death on the cross was regarded by early Church fathers as a suicide" (1985: 76). Whether or not Christ's death is understood as a suicide, it still serves as an act of sacrificing one's own life. His sacrifice has been understood as an act of redemption which opens up the possibility that the figure of *Stripped ("Oh Yes" girl)* may function as an object of transcendence and redemption, even if only of her own pain, revealing the "capacity of the victim to transcend deprivation and damage" (Williamsom and Jamal 1996: 22). Her identity may in part have been informed by societal expectations of what constitutes femininity but by actively participating in her own fate she may be transcending expectations of woman as passive object, and may also be read as possibly redeeming or liberating (stripping) herself from such expectations by transforming her suffering into a pleasurable release.

Chapter 6

Evoking Ambivalence - A Discussion of My Own Paintings

In "Hybrid Dreams" John Beardsley writes that the grotesque "implies inexhaustible inventiveness of a type that is at once serious and playful, fascinating and horrible" and is sometimes used to evoke ordinarily hidden subjects, such as fear of death or sexuality (1995: 92-96). In my body of practical work submitted for the Masters degree I have concerned myself with evoking feelings of ambivalence through various means, including the chosen subject matter of insects, arachnids and reptiles which are very often regarded as both fascinating and horrible, attractive and repellent. By using these images and their associations, I have attempted to frame the emotive or instinctive fascination we have with these creatures, and by articulating this through qualities in the paintings which embrace sensuousness and tactility. I thereby try to evoke associations with the human body as well as touching on repressed fears and desires. This allows me to explore painting as a practice which embraces tentative and even denigrated qualities through intuitive working with images and materials that are richly associative in their signification. Also, by evoking ambivalence, I do not prescribe a particular way of approaching or interpreting the paintings. Knowledge does not come from the 'work itself' but rather the works become active producers of meanings. They remain radically open ended.

In *Man, Myth and Magic*, E. A. Armstrong points out that, "[m]an has been interested in insects not only out of curiosity but because some have forced their attentions unpleasantly upon him as parasites, pests and destroyers of crops [. . .] profoundly affect[ing] human history and economy"

(c1970: 1446). Armstrong also relates how characteristics of insects "have become associated with mythology and folklore giving rise to remarkable beliefs and superstitions [. . .] [about] their origins, transmigrations, oracular significance, the explanation of their characteristics, devices for the expulsion of noxious species and the use of insects in magic and medicine" (c1970: 1446). Numerous myths surround insects, including beliefs that beetles arose from putrefying flesh and from dung, butterflies were the souls of people, often of witches or of naughty children, that the caterpillar was made by the devil, or was the devil's tears and that the dragonfly, also known as 'Devil's darning needles' could sew up the mouths of scolding women and cursing men. Myths and superstitions surrounding insects have not all been negative; dragonflies may also be lucky talismans while the ladybird, often associated with the Virgin, was thought to be able to point out the direction from which a young girl could expect her 'true love' to come (Armstrong c1970: 1446-1451). The extent to which these animals exist in folklore and myth highlights our fascination and disgust with these creatures which seems to encompass many of our fears. While many of the myths and stories about insects may no longer be prevalent, associations with fear, the unknown and the poetical and magical still inform the way in which they are regarded.

The works are all executed on ultra board projected from the wall on box-frames at varying depths. With the inclusion of cut-outs, recessed and inserted boxes, trap-doors and heavily modelled and textured/worked surfaces suggesting insect life, these aspects serve to emphasise the objecthood and relief-like qualities of the paintings. Being of modest scale (the largest panel measures 1230 x 820 x 155mm), the viewer is invited to step close up to the works while the doors and lids, as well as the textured surfaces, further invite viewer participation through touch and manipulation. This gives the works an eccentric edge against the expected association one has with traditional

painting. It is only when viewing the paintings closely that the detail can be adequately seen. They may resemble 'gestural' or 'expressive' abstract painting at first glance but they clearly deny any claims to self-expression or originality which one conventionally associates with such work in the modernist canon. The surfaces are covered with a series of marks which depict or replicate insect colonies, traces or webs, and at times the materials with which I build up my paintings seem more like the residue of organic processes than the conventional 'oil on canvas' medium of painting. Through giving significance to the materials used for the tactile qualities they engender, I tie the works' facture to the body (feminine) rather than to the mind alone (a value associated with maleness within an 'authentic' tradition of modernist painting). In these terms my paintings may be understood as undercutting the expected elements of painting associated with the experience of the subject.

Besides oil paint, the materials with which I work are plaster, white glue, acrylic PVA, shellac, eggshells, sponges, plastic, beeswax, wood shavings, photocopies, etc. I use a mixture of dry plaster, wood glue and acrylic PVA to build up the crawling and burrowing insects, spiders and crustaceans as well as reptilian skin. The mixture is pliable, fast drying and may either be applied directly by hand or by a brush, or may be piped through a plastic bag. Oil and/or shellac is applied over this to achieve highly glossy surfaces suggesting coagulation, secretion or encrustation. Shellac in itself carries associations with insects in that it originates from the secretions of scale insects. When applied thickly it dries semi-transparent, appearing almost wet and sticky to the touch. Furthermore, when pooled over the insects it may recall the entrapment of insects in amber. Together with the recognisable imagery, the agitated, scaly or sometimes very smooth surfaces thus become both attractive as well as repulsive through the manipulation of such tactile qualities.

The inclusion of boxes to be opened and closed further articulates the tactility of the paintings, while also evoking the ritual of encasing keepsakes as signifiers of memories. In selected works where I have included self portraits and photocopies, which have been obscured or manipulated, I imply the erosion or distortion of memory through time. This idea is perhaps enhanced by the images having been overpainted with shellac, giving them a sepia tonality commonly associated with old photographs.

Although most of my works do not include self portrait images[45], connections with the body and a feminine identity are evoked on a number of levels, for example, through excess and the grotesque, which speak of corporeality. Tracey Wright notes, "[i]t is in this *excess* that the abject and grotesque is figured. Detail associated with the feminine and formlessness, the grotesque and its associations with women [. . .], the transgression of boundaries, abjection, undifferentiated matter, source of fascination and horror" (1994: 72). In evoking these ambivalent associations with the female body, which are always in a state of flux, there is no closure, reinforcing the idea that identity is always in process.

Where I have included faces, they are either positioned on the outside or inside of the boxes, and thus are associated with the identity's function of revealing and concealing as well as of storing memories. Where self portraits have been photocopied and included in the paintings, they may inform my

---

[45]My postgraduate work is a continuation of many of the concerns with which I was dealing in my undergraduate work. In my paintings produced for my undergraduate degree, insects, etc. were juxtaposed with representations of 'self portraits', painted white with very little detail so that in appearing 'absent' they challenged the idea of self portrait as information about subject. While the insects may be read as potentially threatening, they often possess bodily associations as well, so that the juxtapositions set up often are confused, in order to reveal identity as constantly shifting.

identity as a gendered subject, but are also obscured through bleaching of the image, overpainting and covering, allowing limited access to a clear reading of the image. As such, self portraiture is presented as a problem which is conceptualised in the form of a limitation, a blockage or a blind spot. It is understood as limiting in that it *supposedly* offers a 'truth' about a subject. Catherine Lupton comments that "[t]he function of the [self portrait] representation is to mobilise individual subjects into particular ideological identifications, which form the basis of their conscious operation *as* subjects in the social world. Therefore, if the cultural apparatus is identified as the site where these representations are produced and naturalised, then culture becomes defined as a site of political struggle which seeks to expose the ideological nature of representations and transform them" (1994: 246). Lupton further states how "it is politically important to maintain some notion of female identity, while at the same time recognising this identity as complex, contradictory and fictive" (1994: 251). In my paintings I have tried to suggest this struggle in terms that problematise or complicate the reading of the self portrait, as well as through the more associative connections made to the representation of identity.

Apart from associations with keepsakes and memory, the inclusion of the boxes evokes practices of taxonomy and categorisation. Attention is drawn to acts of revealing/exposing and concealing and the ambivalence associated with them. The consequence of such actions is perhaps most immediately brought to mind by the myth of Pandora's box, (a term I have included in the titles of my works). In Greek mythology Pandora represents the first mortal woman. While there are variations on the myth of Pandora and her box, the best known is that of Pandora having been sent to earth to punish Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus for stealing fire from heaven. Pandora was believed to have been made in heaven and was thus extremely

beautiful and blessed by the gods. Wanting revenge, Jupiter sent her, along with a jar, to Epimetheus. Curiosity got the better of her, and on opening the jar a multitude of evils, affecting both the body and mind escaped. These included envy, sorrow and revenge. On trying to close the jar Pandora discovered that the only remaining content was hope, which remains man's sole comfort in misfortune. Another lesser known version relates that Pandora was sent with a box containing her marriage blessing. On opening the box all the blessings escaped (Bulfinch 1979: 38-40).

It is of interest that the version of misfortune and woe has predominated. In *Man, Myth and Magic* it is written that Pandora's jar was eventually said to have been a box by the sixteenth century humanist, Erasmus, and 'Pandora's Box' became a phrase for any source of multiple disasters (c1970: 3056). It is thus not surprising that Pandora has been likened to Eve. In *Man, Myth and Magic*, Richard Cavendish explains how, "[e]arly Christian writers likened [Pandora] to Eve and the Renaissance rediscovered her, though usually not as the source of evil but as the 'all-gifted' one, on whom the gods had bestowed their treasures. However, Jean Olivier, author of *Pandora* (1541), said, 'Eve in scripture opened the forbidden fruit by her bite, by which death invaded the world. So did Pandora open the box in defiance of a divine injunction, whereby all the evils and infinite calamities broke loose and overwhelmed the hapless mortals with countless miseries' " (c1970; 3056/7). Pandora's box may also be linked to fear of female sexuality. Cavendish states that the box was occasionally identified with her genitals, [while] Paul Klee's drawing of *Pandora's Box* (1920) brings in the menstruation motif, for it shows a goblet shaped like the female genitals, containing some flowers and emitting evil vapours" (c1970: 3057).

In many of my own works I have juxtaposed opposites, such as rough/smooth, dark/bright, absence/presence, inside/outside in order to evoke ambivalence. In a number of works, such as *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, *Pandora's Box (wasps)*, *Pandora's Box (ants)*, *Pandora's Box (moths)* and *Pandora's Box (caterpillars)*, I have thus manipulated the interiors of the boxes to set up correspondences with the surfaces of the supports. For example, in several works, sponges have been inserted into boxes, introducing a softer material against the hard surfaces of the board, but also introducing a tactile equivalent of structures built by insects. Its pitted surface and porous body carries associations of microcosmic habitats and nests.

As already mentioned, the detail of the works can only be adequately seen from close up, and it is hoped that the viewer will be drawn towards the works and feel invited to participate in the opening of the boxes, and to, therefore, also touch the works. The viewer is "provided with an encounter, rather than an object to contemplate" (Wye 1982: 33). Both the visual and tactile experience is aimed at being attractive and repulsive, hopefully engaging the viewer with a desire to open the boxes and touch the surfaces, but to pause and be somewhat fearful in doing so. As meaning is acquired and not intrinsic, it is hoped that the strong and contradictory responses engendered will operate on both visceral and imaginary levels (Wye 1982: 13), and that ambiguous feelings of desire and fear will be aroused through the instability of signs and references that characterise the works. Having covered the main concerns in my paintings, I will now provide brief discussions of selected individual works[46] and their ambiguous nature.

[46] I have not discussed paintings which are yet to be completed.

Pandora's Box (caterpillars), 1998, measures 305 x 640 x 175mm, and includes a deep box with a sliding panel. The surfaces of the insects are built up in a fair amount of detail, with each insect differing from the others, by being built up as an 'original', i.e. I have used many different images from my source material. The outside of the box is worked up in the same way as I have approached the board. I have placed a stopper on the inside of the lid so that access is denied by the box only being able to be opened to certain degree. Inside the box I have placed a yellow sponge which is manipulated by the addition of other materials, including, plastic, embroidery thread and oil paint. The embroidery thread is suggestive of the trails left by insects, while the coagulation of shellac appears as if it may have been ejected by the caterpillars. The swollen and shiny forms of the caterpillars in close proximity to each other also alludes to the soft interior organs of our bodies.

Pandora's Box (moths), 1998, also measures 305 x 640 x 175 mm, and includes a similar deep box with a sliding panel. The insects are perhaps not as repulsive or as bodily as in *Pandora's Box (caterpillars)*, although the inside of the box is suggestive of something visceral. Inside the box I have positioned a blue sponge at a diagonal angle so that the upper part recedes. This has enabled me to work on the inside of the walls of the box, which I have built up with small blue stones suggesting a form of crystallisation. As a process of accumulation and layering, the crystallisation may also evoke associations with storage, hibernation and cocooning. Reference is thus made to mutation and metamorphosis, moths beginning their lives as caterpillars. In folklore, metamorphosis has often been regarded as being both magical and evil, with stories told of superhuman beings having the ability to transform themselves through acquiring shapes of animals.

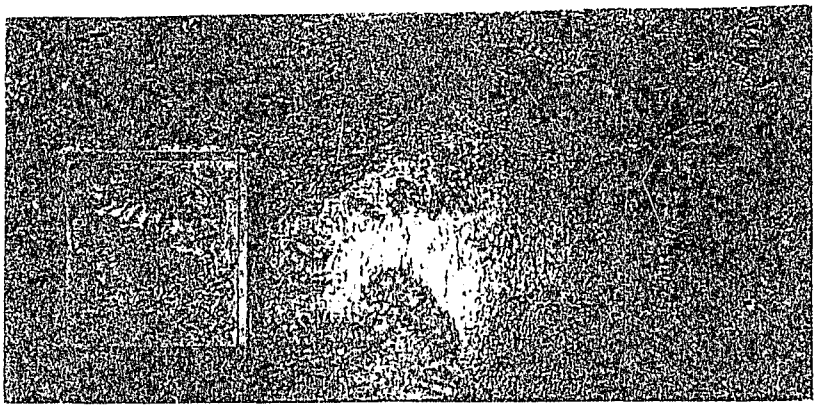


Figure 51: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (caterpillars)*, mixed media on board and wood, 1998.

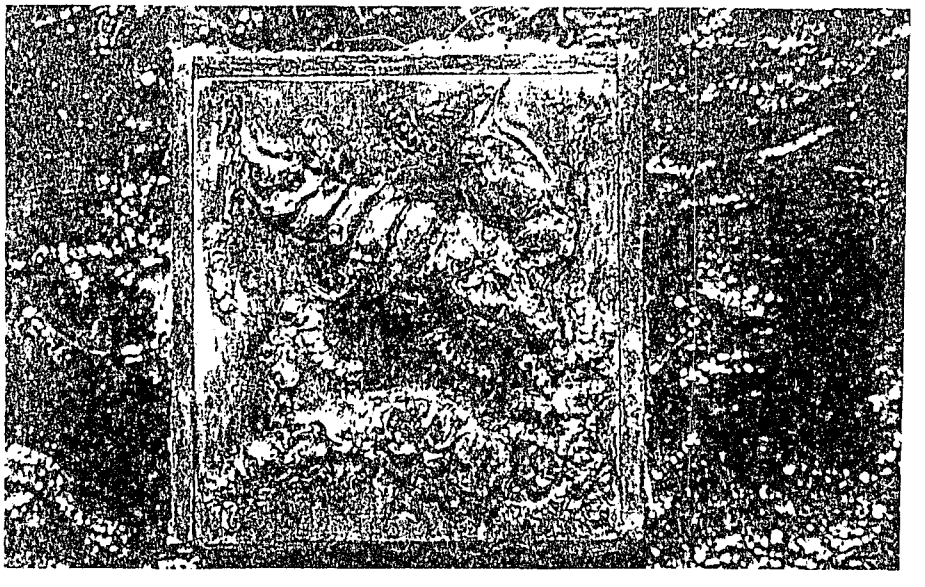


Figure 52: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (caterpillars)*, detail of closed box.

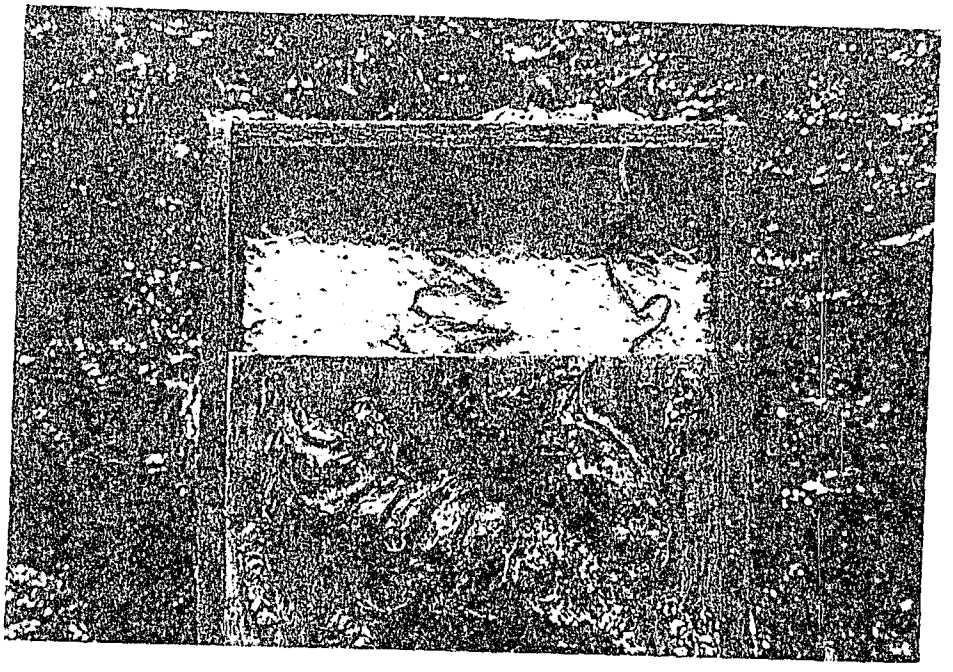


Figure 53: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (caterpillars)* detail of open box.

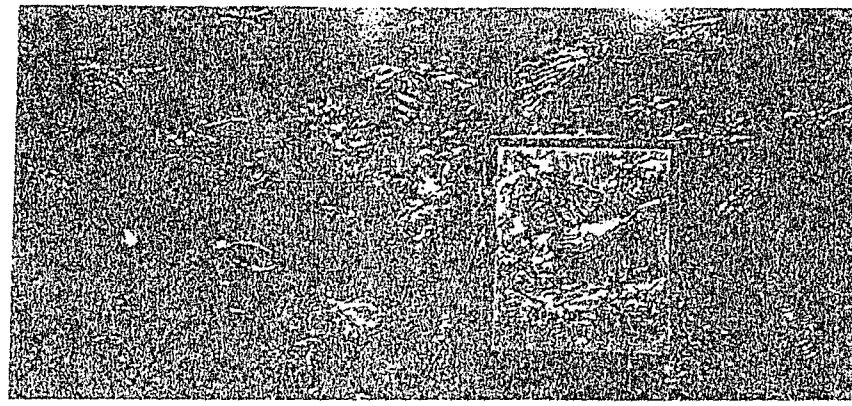


Figure 54 Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (moths)*. mixed media on board and wood. 1998

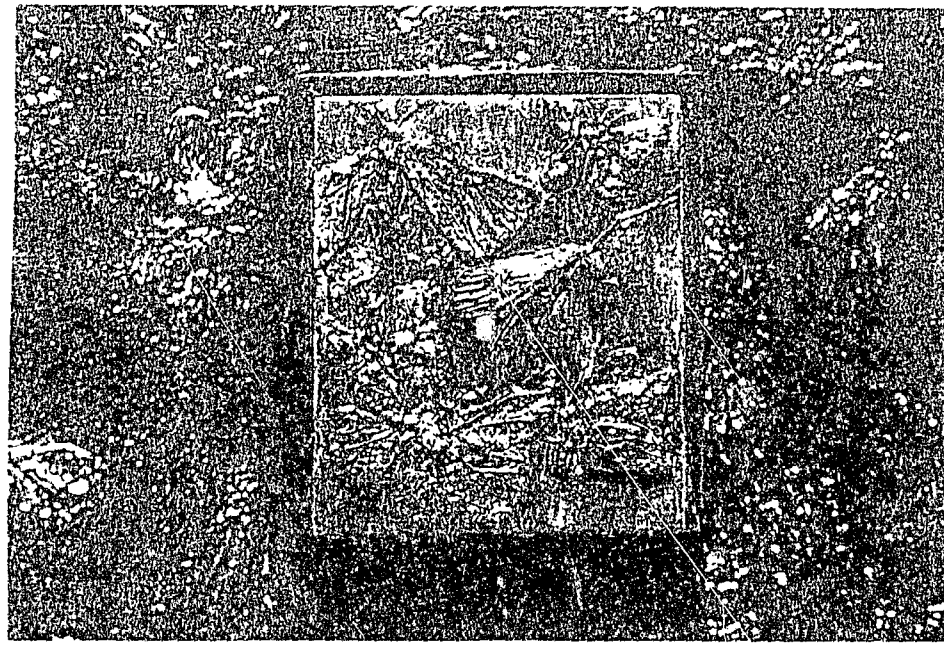


Figure 55 Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (moths)* detail of closed box.

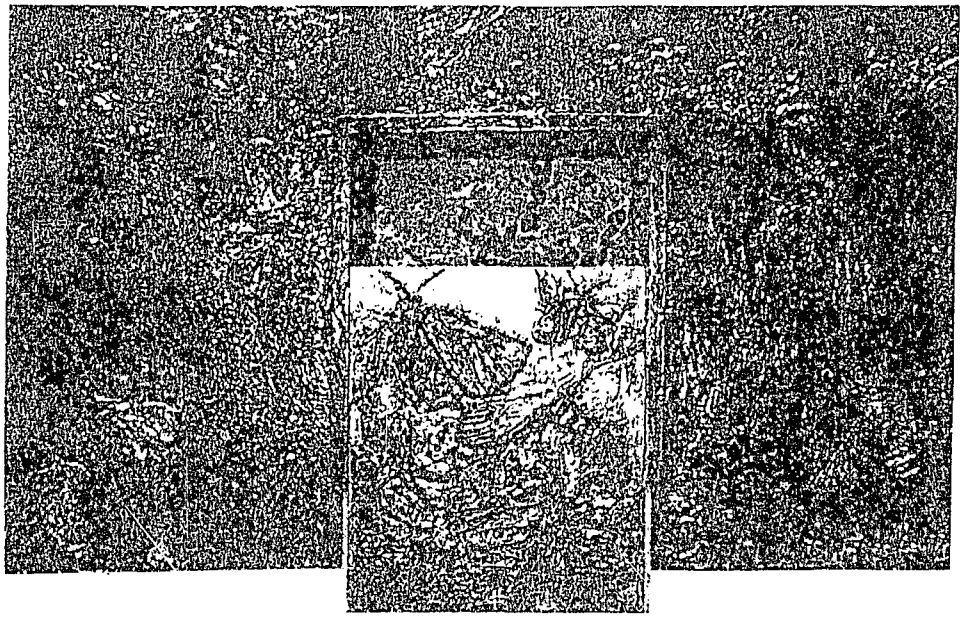


Figure 56: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (moths)*, detail of open box.

Pandora's Box (scorpions), 1998, is a larger work measuring 560 x 1230 x 125mm. The surface of the board has been covered with flaked shellac, which I have overpainted slightly with oils and then applied liquid shellac, which in some areas has become thick and encrusted. The work reveals a deep space inside the box when open. Its door appears flush against the painting's surface when closed, almost camouflaging itself in the overall flatness. The danger and threat of scorpions, together with the mystery of not knowing what may lie behind the closed lid triggers a sense of ambivalence. Once opened, the interior of the box reveals a green 'nest'. The inside walls have been covered in artificial grass (of the kind used for model train landscapes) in contrast to the shiny and dark exterior. The empty nest cannot be fully viewed as the lid does not open to the full length of the box, thus heightening the mystery of whether something may be hiding deep inside it. The inclusion of a small light in the interior adds to the sense of mystery.

Pandora's Box (wasps), 1998, measures 540 x 860 x 130mm. I have again covered the board with flaked shellac with insects appearing on the outside of the box lid. As in *Pandora's Box (caterpillars)* and *Pandora's Box (moths)* each insect is differentiated, but grouped together, they suggest a colony of wasps. The larger box may be opened by lifting the lid, yet the depth of the box is denied by the inclusion of a photomontage, images screening off most of the interior space. Directly behind this surface appears a bright yellow sponge, which I have overpainted in a strong yellow. Images of old photographs and postcards as well as a partially concealed self portrait have been used in the photomontage. Flaked and liquid shellac cover the surface of the photocopies, effectively 'hiding' them and reinforcing the idea of something being concealed or erased. The photomontage surface, as well as the inside lid of the box, have been evenly treated in the same tonality as the rest of the board, allowing the focus to remain on the brightness of the yellow

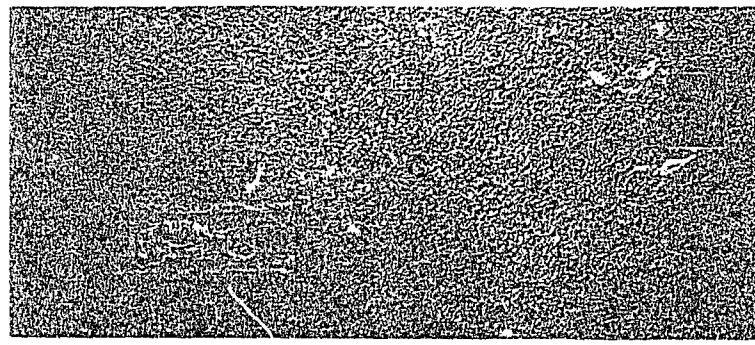


Figure 57: Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (scorpions)*, (closed), mixed media on board and wood. 1998.

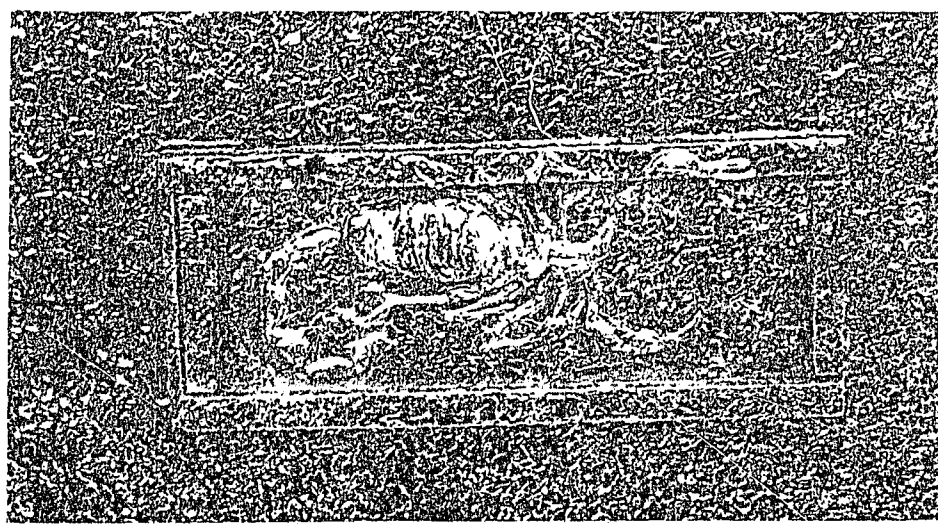


Figure 58: Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (scorpions)*, detail of closed box.

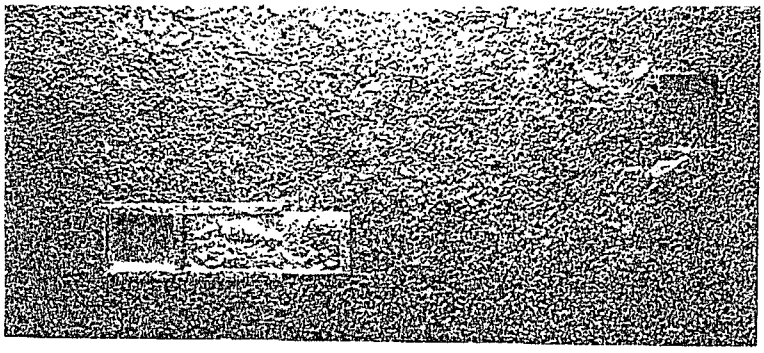


Figure 59: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (scorpions)*, (open), mixed media on board and wood, 1998.

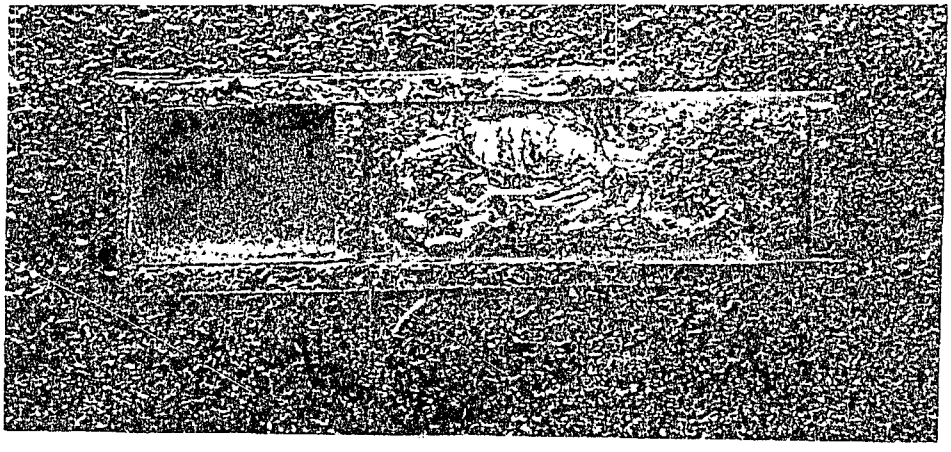


Figure 60: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (scorpions)*, detail of open box.

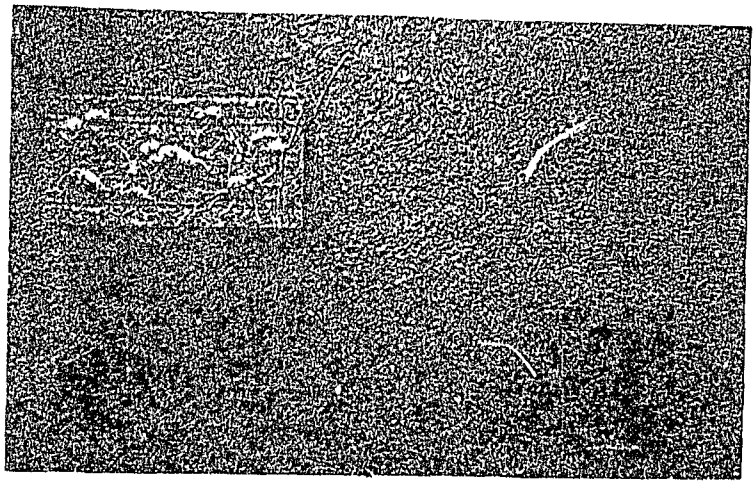


Figure 61: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (wasps)*, (closed), mixed media on board and wood, 1998.

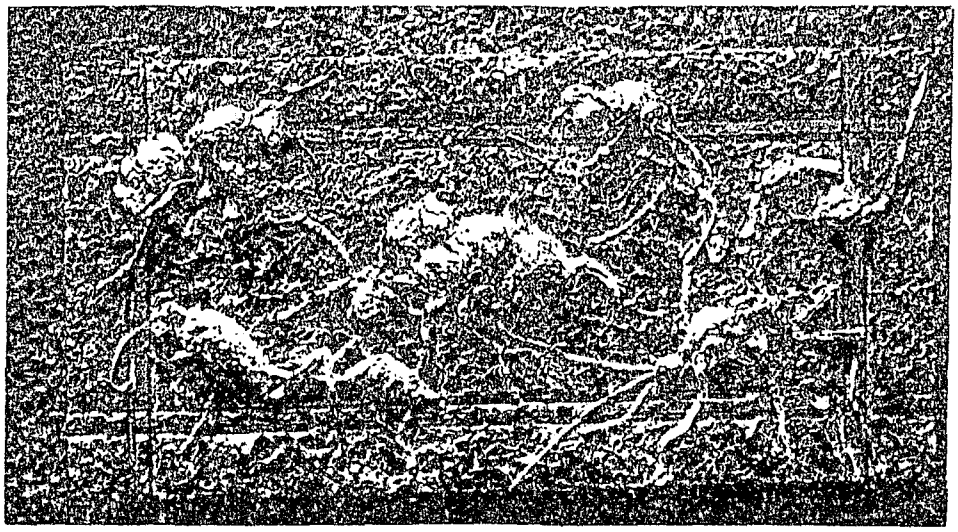


Figure 62: Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (wasps)*, detail of closed box.

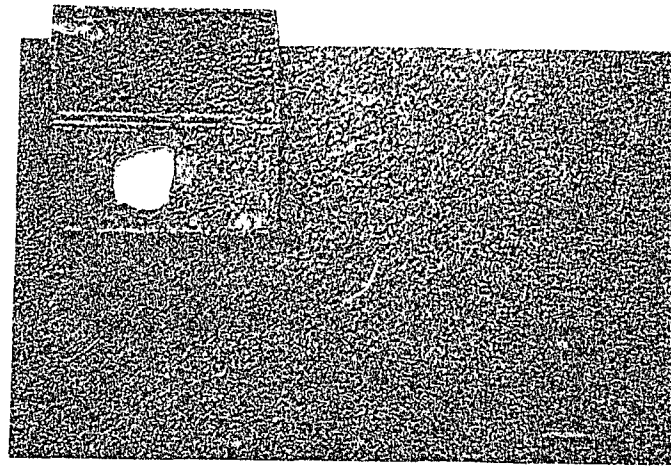


Figure 63: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (wasps)*, (open), mixed media on board and wood, 1998.

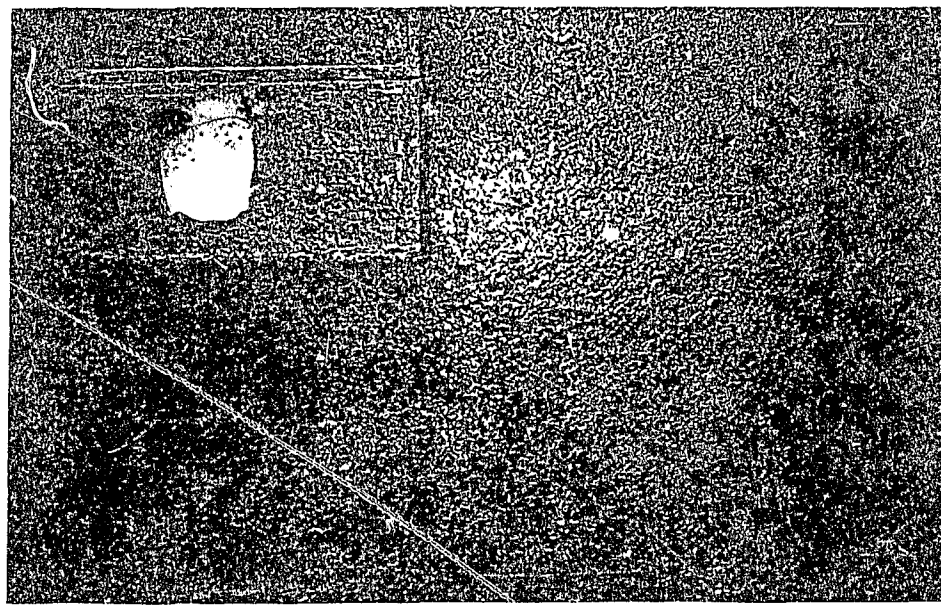


Figure 64. Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (wasps)*, detail.

segment. The depth of the box having been denied, there is a sense that something may be hidden behind the frontal panel. The subject matter of the wasps (considered dangerous because of their painful stings) may evoke in the viewer a possibility of assault, although the opening of the box, and the act of exposure may also evoke a sense of vulnerability or intrusion.

The idea of hiding something also occurs in *Pandora's Box (ladybirds)*, 1998-9, measuring 610 x 710 x 120mm, which includes a box with a gilded frame set into an almost square board. Insects appear on the board together with fragments of broken eggshell, while a semi-transparent sheet of honeycomb beeswax has been inserted into the window of the box-frame, behind which I have placed a photocopy (taken from a photograph of myself). While the shape of a face is discernible, detail cannot be seen or accessed as the box has been closed shut and cannot be opened. As the viewer approaches, an attempt may be made at opening the box, leading to a sense of frustration at not being able to access the image. The gold colouring and frame like appearance of the box give it an iconic and somewhat reliquary presence. This sinister quality is reinforced in the very dark and shiny treatment of the board surface, having been painted with black enamel paint and shellac. The insects are often difficult to read as separate entities, resembling boils or secretions, and are obscured to a degree by being covered with shellac. Their enigmatic presence echoes that of the image inside the box.

In *Pandora's Box (ladybirds)*, *Pandora's Box (spiders)* and *Pandora's Box (ants)* the insects are not differentiated as in other works, but are rather replicated over and over again to create a mass. *Pandora's Box (ants)*, 1998, a work consisting of two boards, each measuring 610 x 850 x 150mm, is built up with numerous insects, many of which are overlapped to read rather like

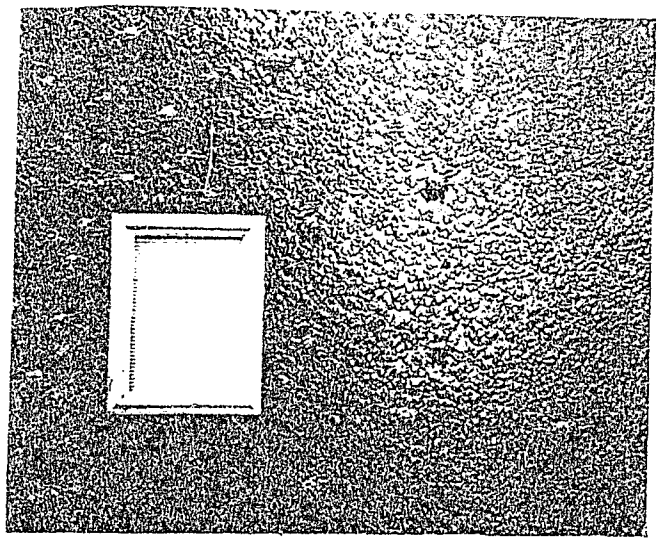


Figure 65: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ladybirds)*, mixed media on board and wood, 1998-9.

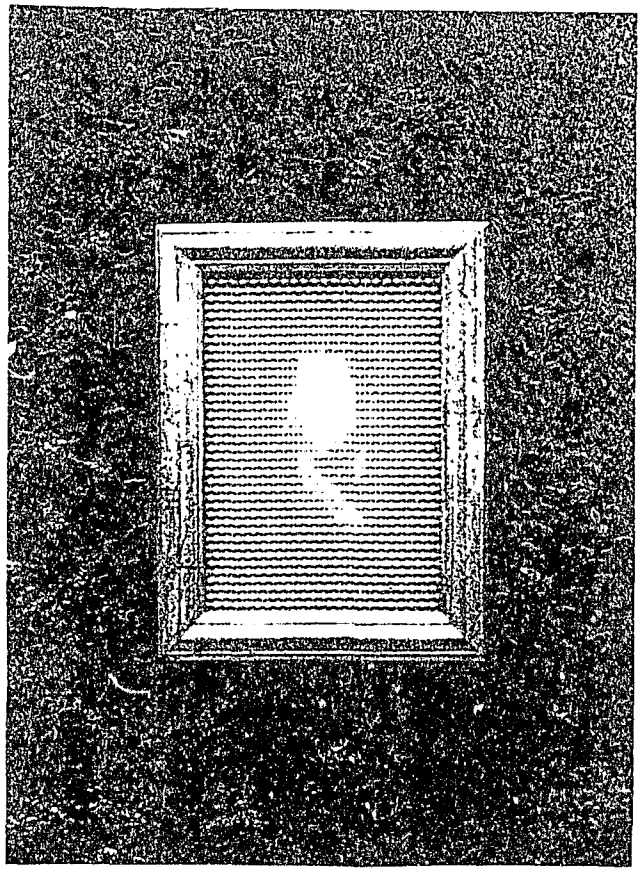


Figure 66: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ladybirds)*, detail.

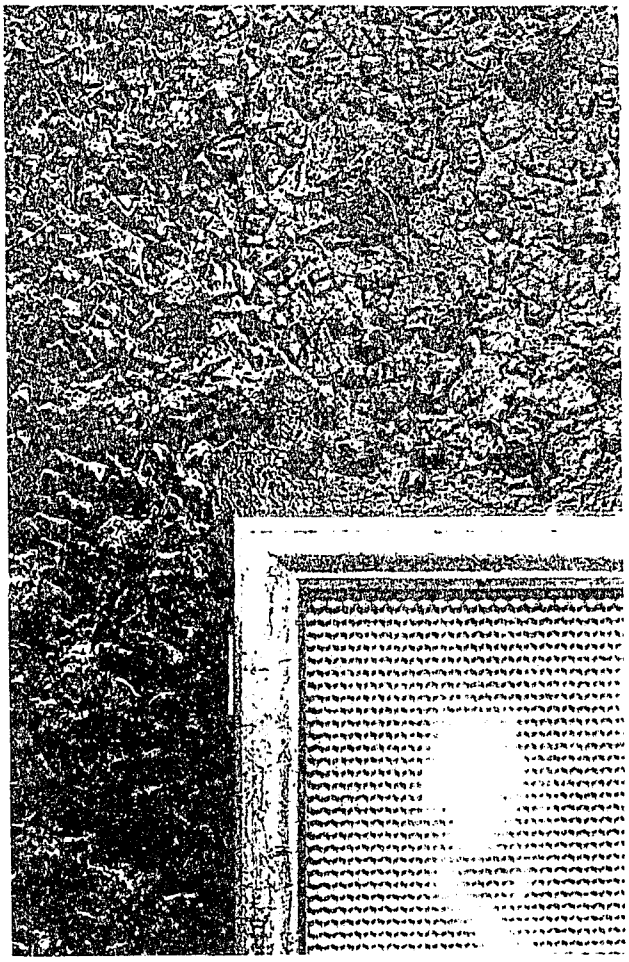


Figure 67: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ladybirds)*, detail.

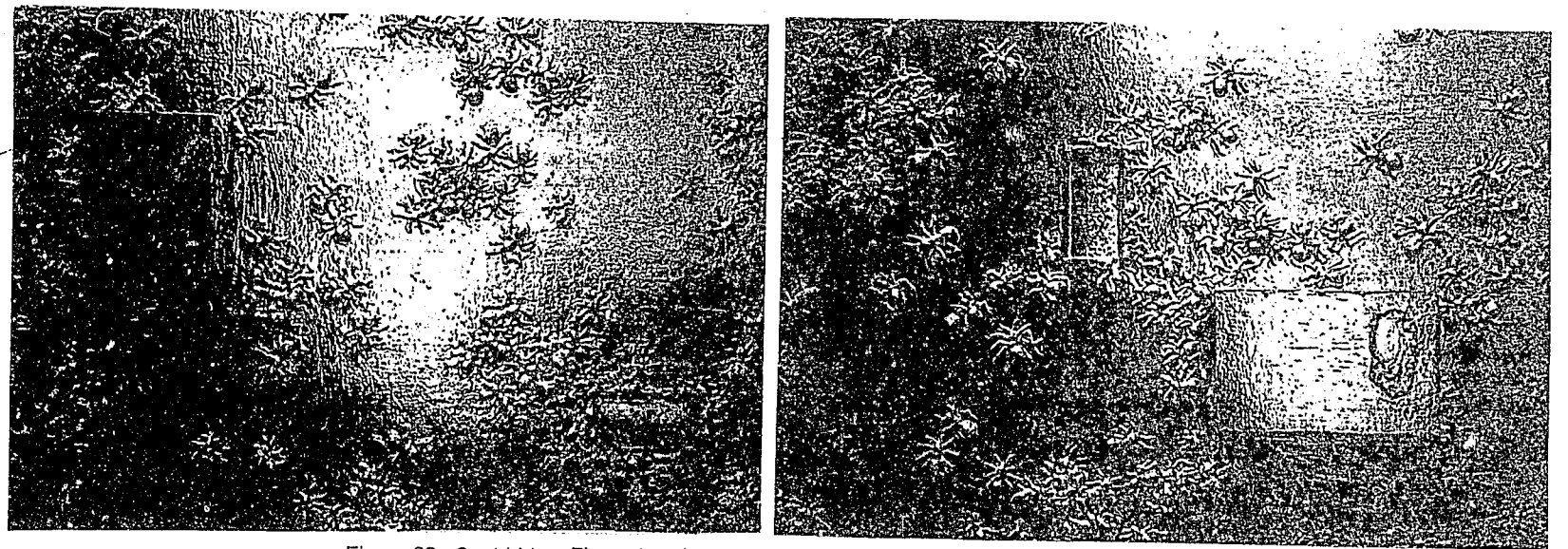


Figure 68: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ar[illegible])*, mixed media on board and wood, 1998.

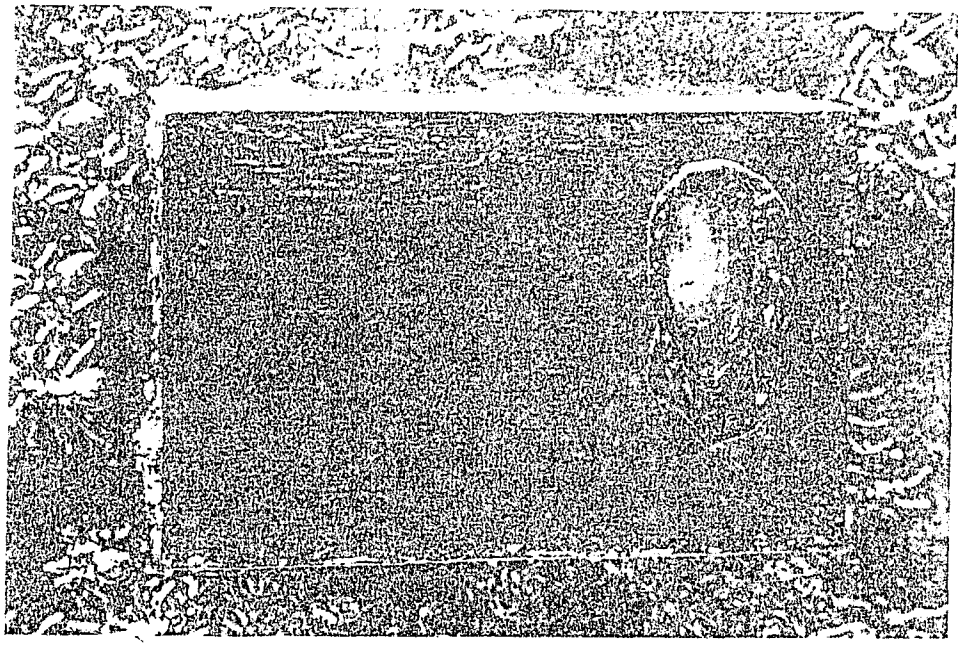


Figure 69: Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (ants)*, detail.

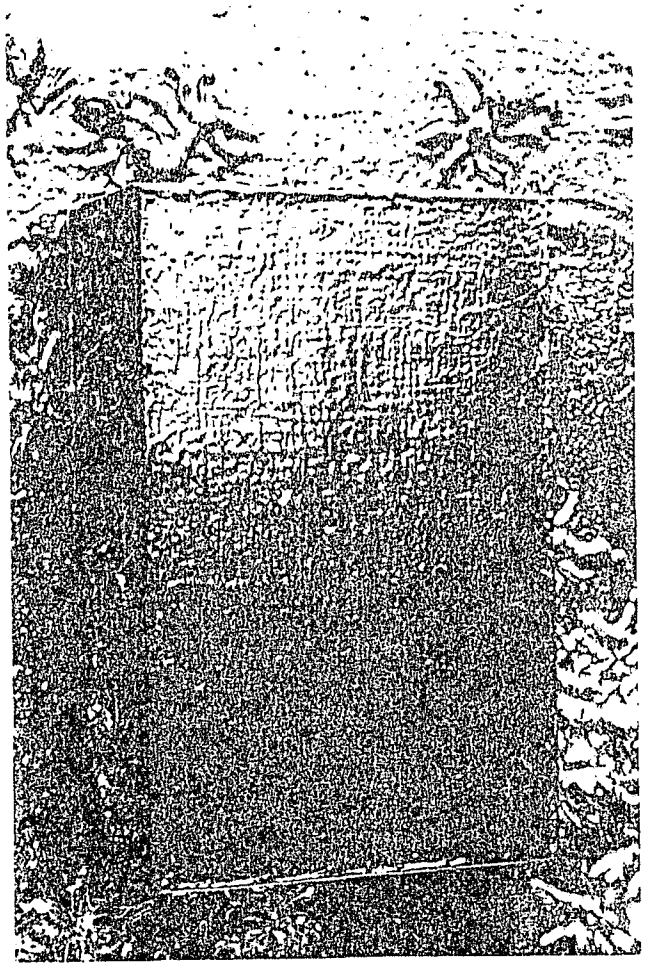


Figure 70: Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (ants)*, detail.

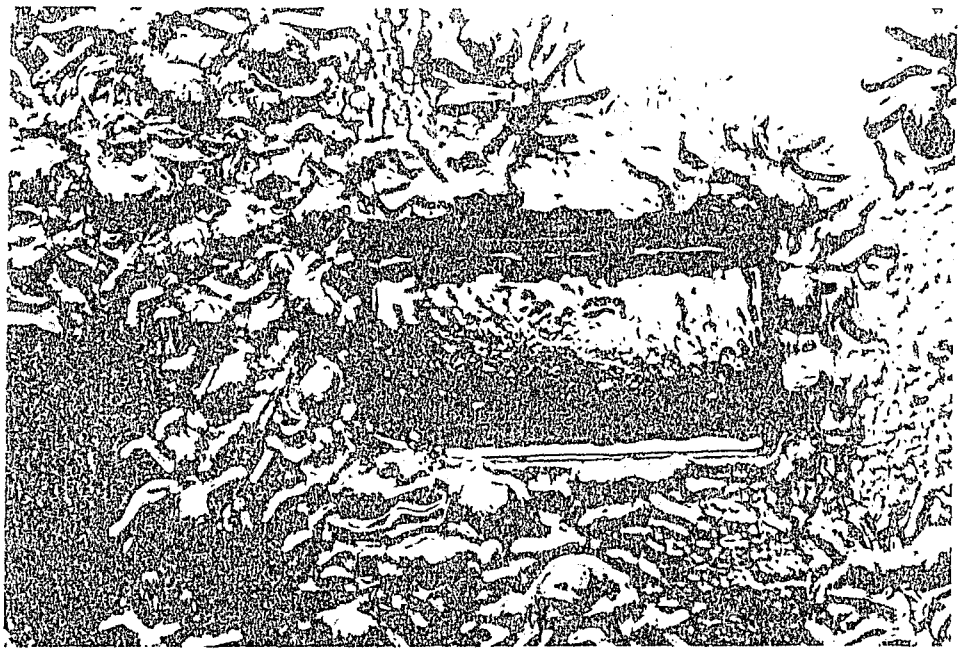


Figure 71. Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ants)*, detail

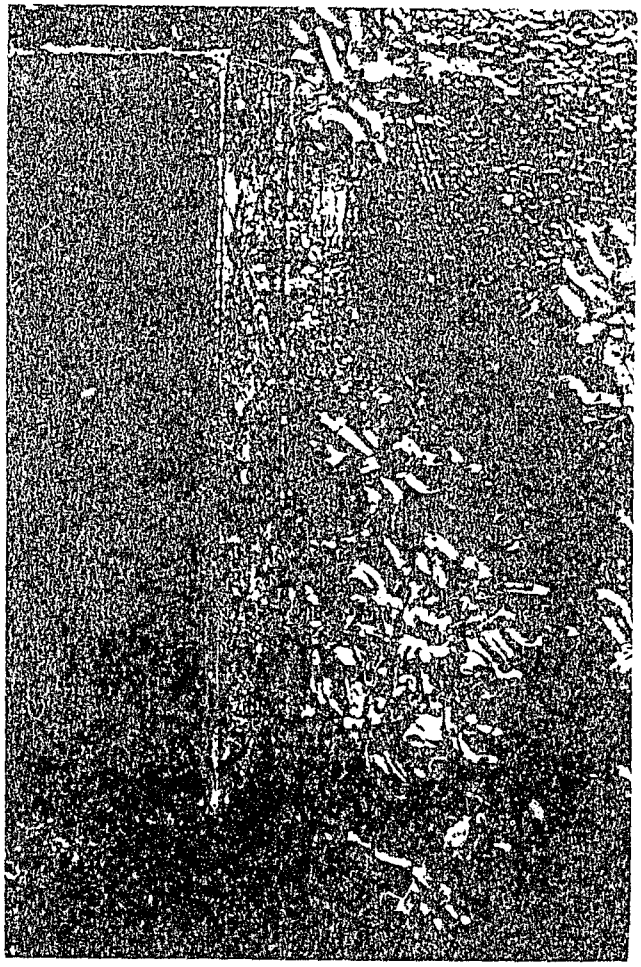


Figure 72. Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (ants)*, detail

globular protuberances. The effect is a coagulation of ants which themselves resemble a secreted mass of bubbling, blistering bodily eruptions. This is reinforced by the board having been covered in several layers of shellac which has pooled around the insects. The layers of shellac suppress much of the detail and appear to freeze the image under a veil. A thick layer of shellac also covers the sponges inside the two smaller boxes. The two larger boxes project as closed and uninterrupted flat surfaces from the busy background like platforms with insects crawling up their sides but not on to the frontal plane. A photocopy of a self portrait has been included on to one of these empty planes, adding to the possibility that the work speaks about our, often suppressed, fears and desires.

In *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, 1998-9, 1230 x 820 x 155mm, the surface is similarly treated, though is less excessive than *Pandora's Box (ants)*. The shellac is not as thickly applied as it covers an initial layer of paint. Inside the larger box a photomontage of microscopic images has been layered across a panel covering most of the interior space. An irregularly shaped hole (which appears to be nibbled out) reveals a fleshy sponge resembling a wound. The pinkness of the sponge evokes the vulnerability of exposed flesh, as do the numerous pink stones on the surface of the sponge. The scurrying spiders on the outside surface of the painting serve almost as protectors of this inner space, reinforcing the inside-outside dialectic of the work. The second recessed box also contains photocopies which appear in the larger box, and have been similarly obscured. Along the perimeter of the recessed box, a thickly pooled layer of shellac suggests dried blood around a gaping wound.

I have used thick shellac for somewhat different effect in *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, 1998, 970 x 850 x 100mm. This board differs from my other paintings in that its surface is much quieter and less crowded. The board has

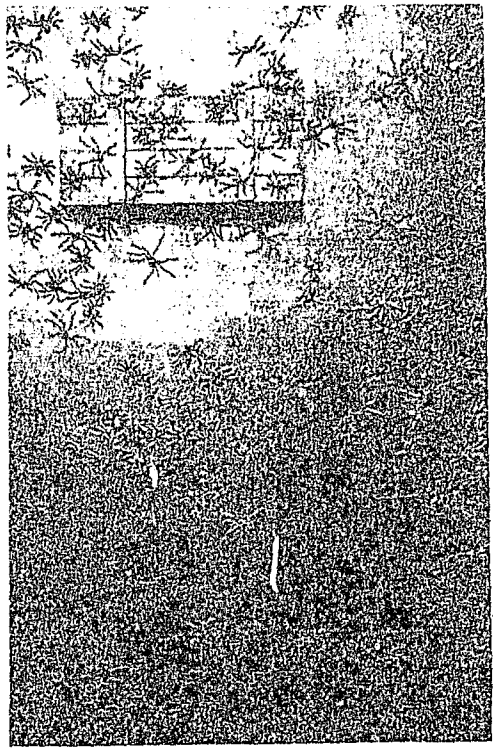


Figure 73: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, (closed), mixed media on board and wood, 1998-9.

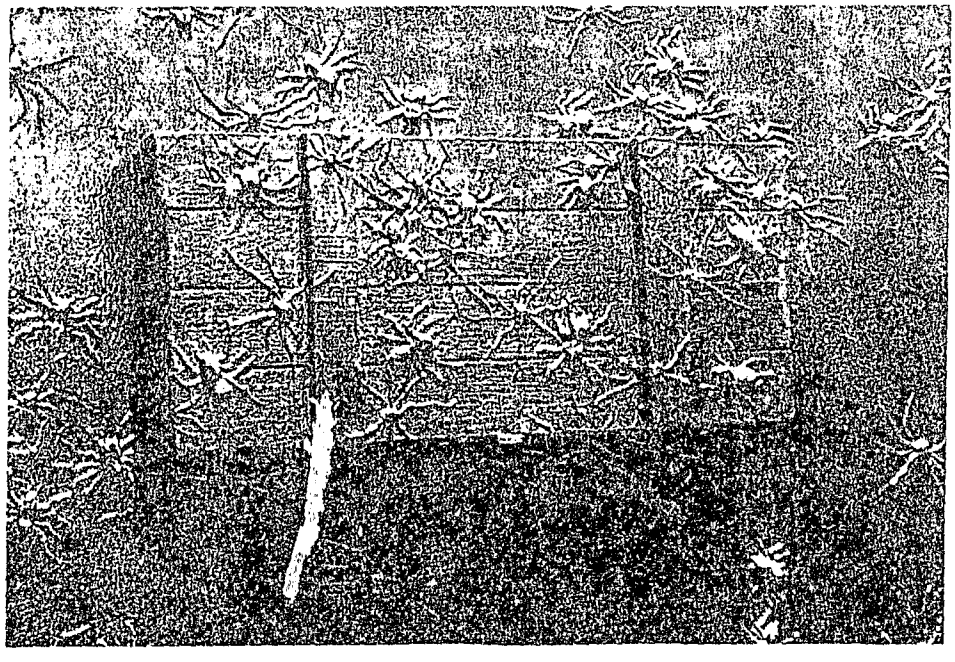


Figure 74: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, detail of closed box.



Figure 75: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, (open), mixed media on board and wood, 1998-9.

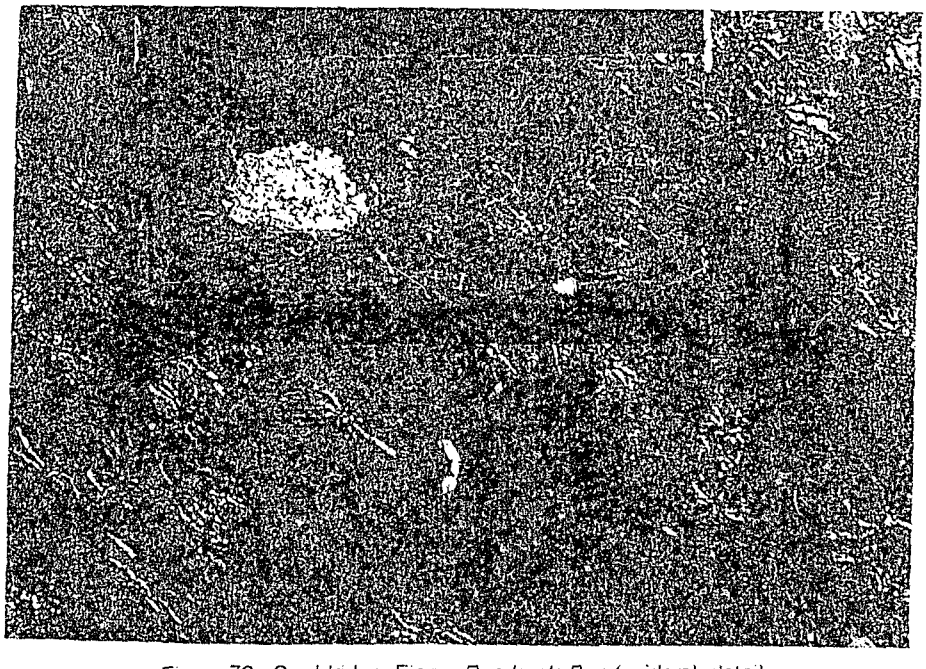


Figure 76: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, detail

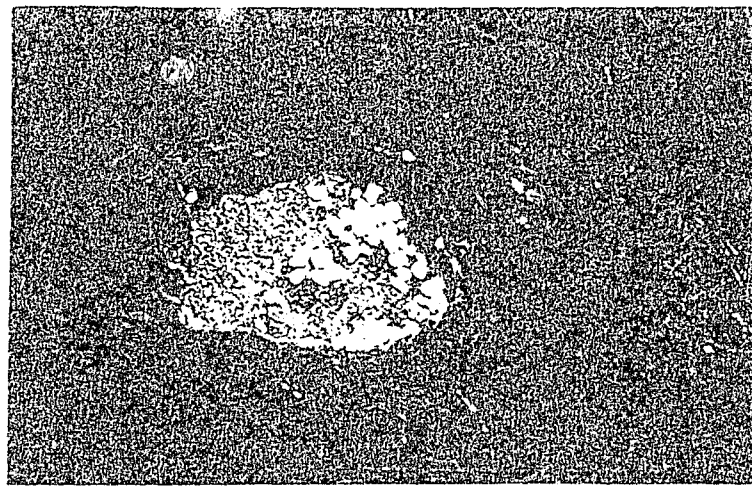


Figure 77: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, detail of open box.

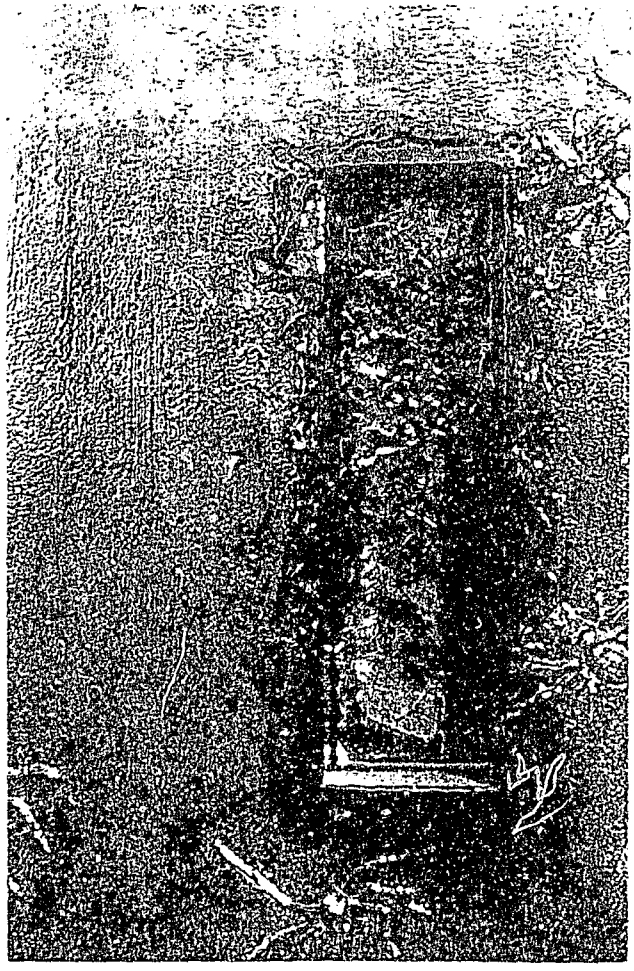


Figure 78: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (spiders)*, detail.

been painted a deep red colour, suggesting scalded or grazed skin. The outside of the box is covered with a number of overlapping dragonflies, while the inside reveals netted plastic seeped in shellac. The gauze-like netting corresponds with the delicate wings of the dragonflies or a means of trapping insects, but also reminds of medical bandaging used for the treatment of burn wounds. The inside lid of the box features painted detail of a dragonfly's extended mouthparts, further suggesting a link to ensnarement and fear. I have poured shellac into the recessed box to create a highly reflective surface of coagulated fluid reminiscent of still waters over which dragonflies are commonly known to hover.

Pandora's Box (lizards), 1999, 810 x 265 x 180mm, is somewhat different from the works featuring representations of insects, and is my most recent work. While insects are often feared, so too are cold-blooded reptiles. The board, representing a section of a lizard's skin, has been worked up in detailed relief in plaster of paris, wood glue and acrylic PVA, over which I have then painted in oils to create a highly tactile and illusionistic rendering of the nodules and recesses of reptilian skin. The irregular shaped box protruding from the board features depictions of lizards and has been left open to be viewed from the side. The box has been left open, inviting the viewer to look into the fairly dark interior, which can only be viewed to a limited degree.

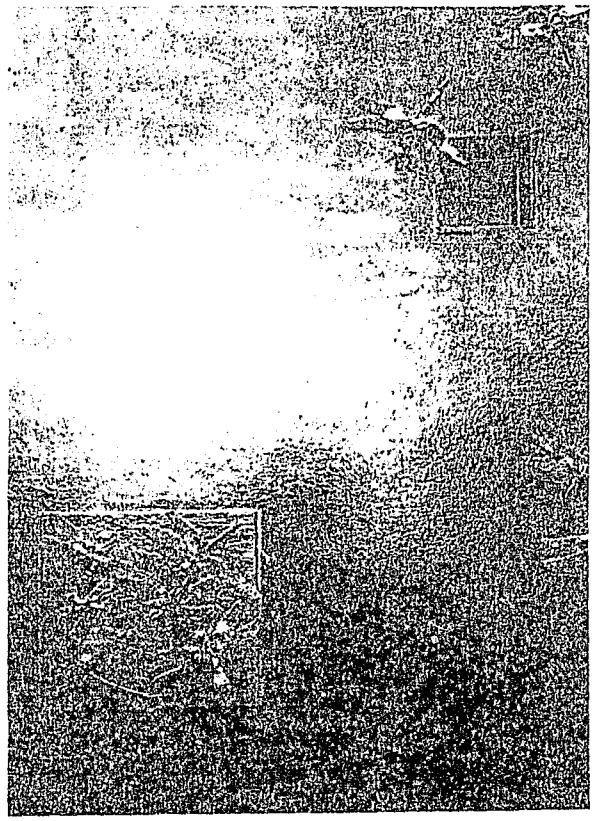


Figure 79: Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*. (closed). mixed media on board and wood. 1998.

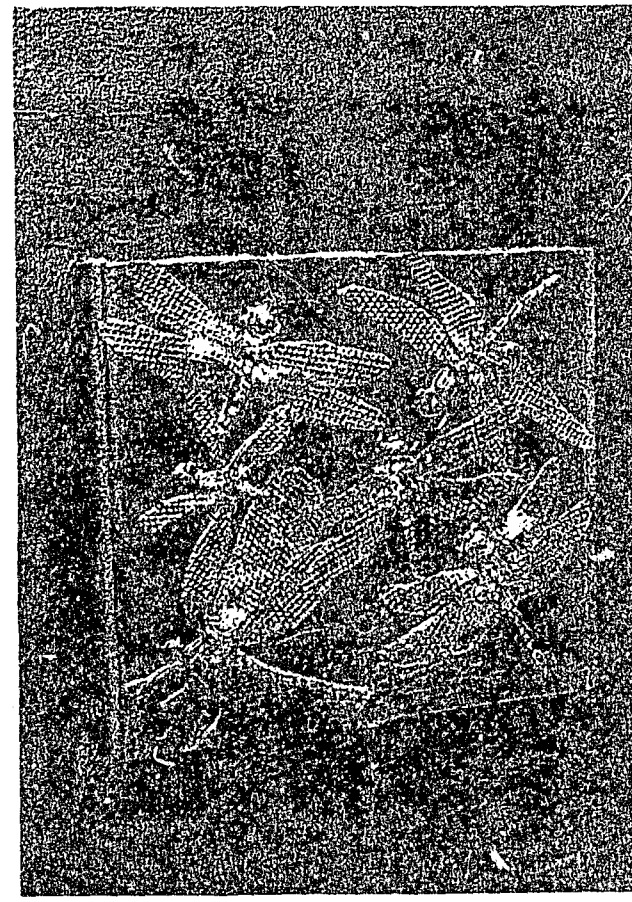


Figure 80: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*. detail of closed box.

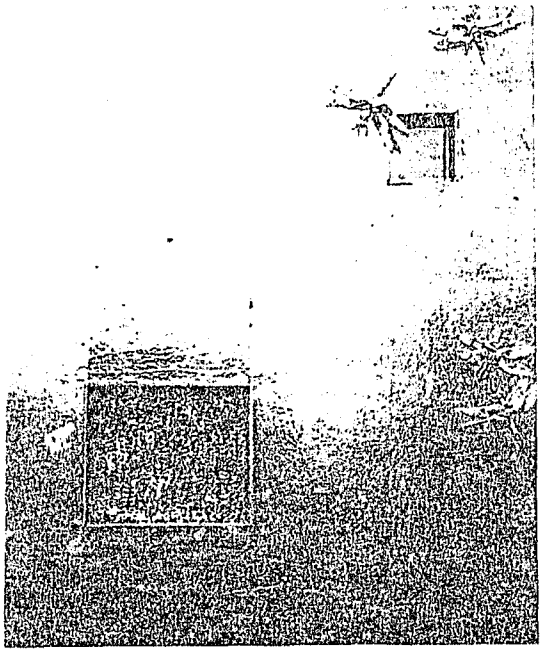


Figure 81: Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, (open), mixed media on board and wood, 1998.

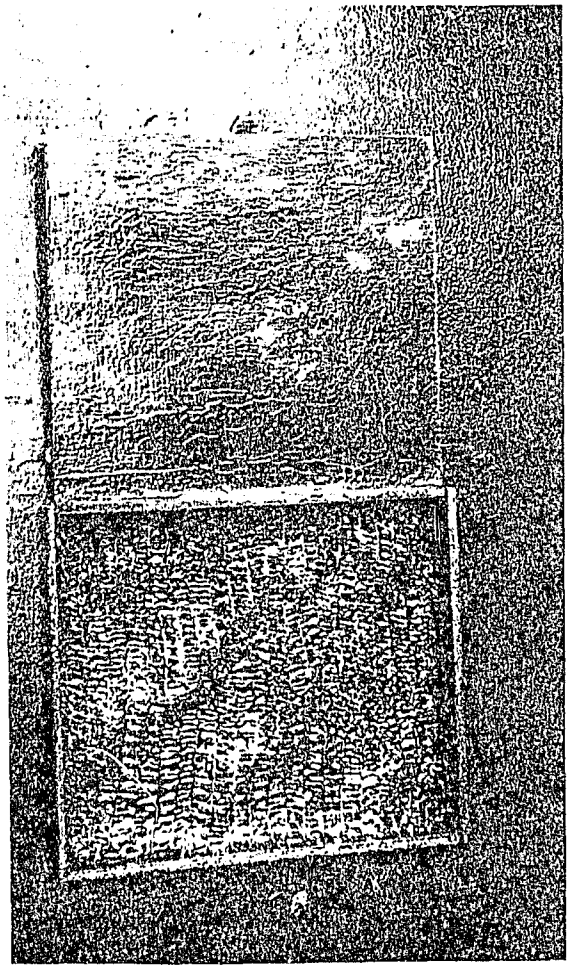


Figure 82: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, detail of open box.



Figure 83: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, detail.



Figure 84: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (dragonflies)*, detail.

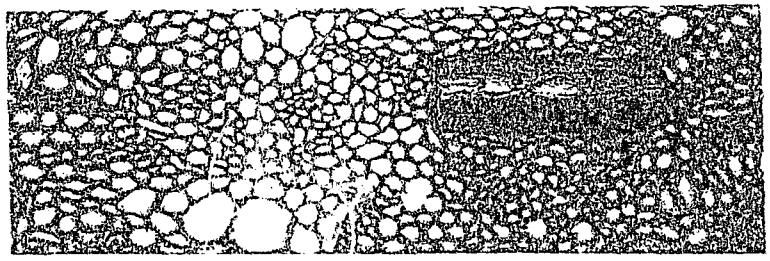


Figure 85 Couldridge, Fiona. *Pandora's Box (lizards)*, mixed media on board and wood, 1999.

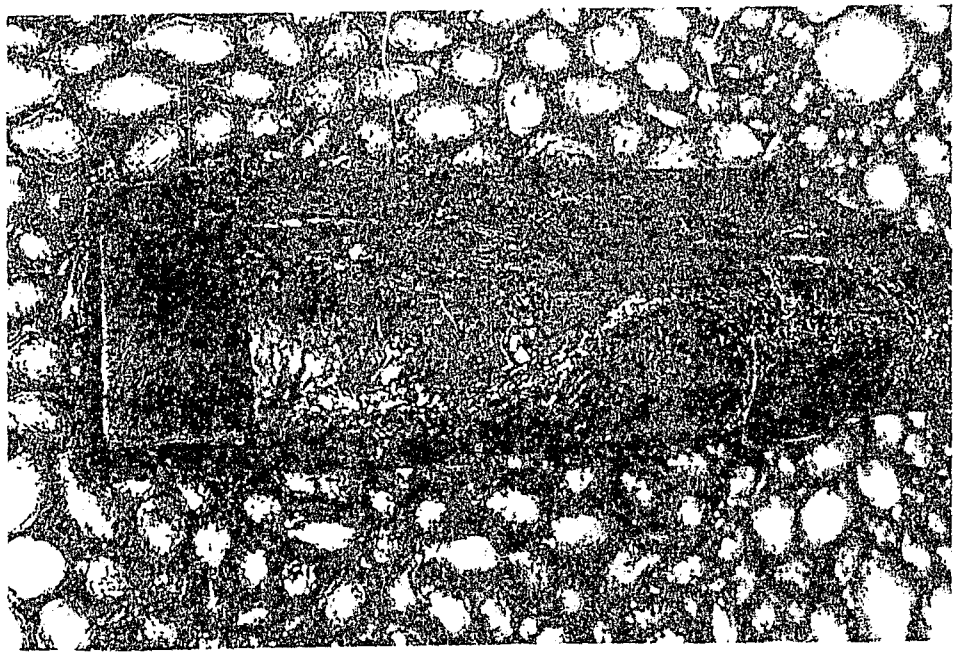


Figure 86: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (lizards)*, detail.

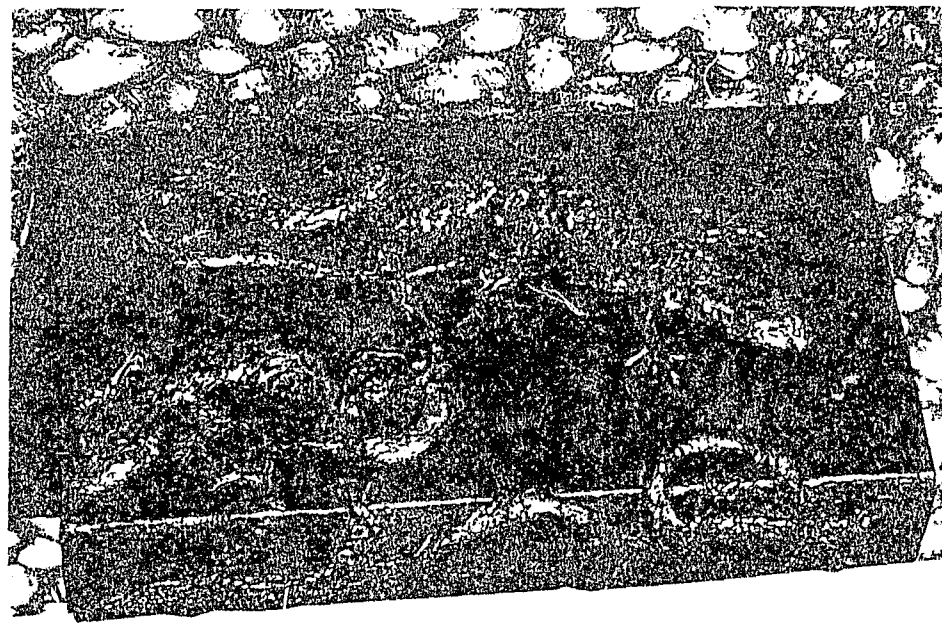


Figure 87: Couldridge, Fiona, *Pandora's Box (lizards)*, detail of box.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ades, Dawn (1976), *Photomontage*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Alexander, Jane (1988). *Aspects of Violence and Disquietude in Late Twentieth-Century Three-Dimensional Human Figuration*. MA Thesis. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.

Alexander, Jane (1995), *Photo-Book*. Vlaeberg: Creda Press (Pty) Ltd.

Anon (1986), *The Citizen*. 29 October, p?

Armstrong, E. A. (c1970), "Insects", in *Man, Myth and Magic* vol 4, pp 1446-1451, edited by Richard Cavendish. Great Britain: Purnell.

Arnold, Marion (1995), "Concepts of Identity". *Vuka SA*, December, pp 32-36.

Arnold, Marion (1996), *Women and Art in South Africa*. Claremont: David Philip Publishers.

Barrett, (1990), *Criticisizing Photographs - An Introduction to Understanding Images*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Beardsley, John (1995), "Hybrid Dreams". *Art in America*, March, pp 92-96.

Bulfinch, Thomas (1979), *Myths of Greece and Rome*. United States of America: Penguin Books.

Bynum, Caroline Walker (1991), *Fragmentation and Redemption - Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York: Zone Books.

Cavendish, Richard (c1970), "Women", in his *Man, Myth and Magic* vol 7, pp 3050-3059

Crownfield, David R., (1992), "The Sublimation of Narcissism in Christian Love and Faith" in his *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva - Religion, Women and Psychoanalysis*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Dutton, Kenneth R., (1995), *The Perfectible Body -The Western Ideal of Physical Development*. London: Cassell.

Empson, William (1947), *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London: Penguin Books.

Farwell, B., (1981), *Manet and the Nude, A Study in Iconography in the Second Empire*. New York and London: Garland.

Edelstein, Marilyn (1992), "Metaphor, Meta-Narrative, and Mater-Narrative in Kristeva's *Stabat Mater*", in *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva - Religion, Women and Psychoanalysis.*

Gallop, Jane (1983), *Thinking Through the Body.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Hare, Tony and Lambert, Mark (1986), *Animal World - Mammals: their lives and their future.* Great Britain: Marshall Cavendish Ltd,.

Higgonet, Margaret (1986), "Speaking Silences: Women's Suicide" in, *The Female Body in Western Culture, Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Suleiman, Susan, R. London: Harvard University Press.

Holy Bible - Authorised King James Version (1956), Illinois: Consolidated Book Publishers.

Jonte-Pace, Diane (1992), "Situating Kristeva Differently: Psychoanalytic Readings of Woman and Religion", in *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva.*

Kayser, Wolfgang (1963), *The Grotesque in Art and Literature.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Kristeva, Julia (1982), *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Kristeva, Julia (1987), *In the Beginning was Love, Psychoanalysis and Faith.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Lechte, John (1994), "Julia Kristeva" in *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers - From Structuralism to Postmodernism.* New York: Routledge, pp141-145.

Lechte, John (1994), "Mikhail Bakhtin" in *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers - From Structuralism to Postmodernism.*

Lindey, Christine (1990), *Art in the Cold War.* Great Britain: Herbert Press Ltd.

Lucie-Smith, Edward (1987), *Sculpture since 1945.* London: Phaidon Press Ltd.

Lupton, Catherine (1994), "Circuit-breaking Desires: Critiquing the Work of Mary Kelly" in *Art has no History! - The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art.* London: Verso.

Marrow, J.H. (1979), *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance.* Belgium: Van Ghemmert Publishing Company.

Moi, T. editor (1986), *The Kristeva Reader.* Oxford: B. Blackwell.

Mullins, Edward (1985), *The Painted Witch: Female Body, Male Art, How Western Artists have Viewed the Sexuality of Women*. London, Secker and Warburg.

Nolte, Jacqueline (1996), "Jane Alexander: Sculpture and Photomontage". *Third Text* vol 36, Autumn, pp 99-101.

Ockenden, Melanie (1996), *Repicturing Certain Christian Imagery of Women*. MA Thesis. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.

Oliver, Kelly (1993), *Reading Kristeva - Unravelling the Double Bind*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Pollock, Griselda (1988), *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. London: Routledge.

Powell, Ivor (1995a), "Giving Pity a Human Face". *Mail and Guardian*, June, p 5.

Powell, Ivor (1995b), *Jane Alexander - Sculpture and Photomontage*. Cape Town: The Video Lab and Tall Systems (Pty.) Ltd.

Schmahmann, Brenda Lynn (1996), *Representations of Women in the Works of George Segal*. PhD Thesis. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.

Schmahmann, Brenda (1997), "A 'Playmate' of a different cast(e): George Segal's *Pregnant Woman*". *De Arte* 56, September, pp 3-8.

Selz, Peter (1977), "John Heartfield's Photomontages" in *Photomontages of the Nazi Period*. New York: Universe Books.

Siopis, Penny (1997), "Domestic Affairs". *de Arte 55*, April, pp 58 59.

Spiro, Lesley (1997), "From Karoo Landscapes to Human Mutants - The Story of the Development of the Gencor Art Collection" in *Contemporary South African Art - The Gencor Collection*, edited by Kendell Geers. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.

Steinberg, Leo (1983), *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*. New York: Pantheon/October Books.

Turner, Bryan, S., (1984), *The Body and Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Valdes, Eugenio (1994), "The Archaeology of Repression: Four South African Artists". *Atlantica,* vol 9 pp 127-133.

Williamson, Sue (1989), *Resistance Art in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Williamson, Sue and Jamal, Ashraf (1996), *Art in South Africa - the Future Present*. Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip.

Wright, Tracey, Teresa (1994), *Problems of Self-Representation with Specific Reference to Gender in Selected Twentieth Century Painting*. MA Thesis. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.

Wye, Deborah (1982), *Louise Bourgeois*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

Author Couldridge F S K
Name of thesis Christian Themmatics In The Work Of Jan Alexander Couldridge F S K 1999

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Library website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the Library website.