

## Fusion Cuisine

DESTE Centre for Contemporary Art, Athens

These days an exhibition about art made by women is likely to be greeted with some scepticism. The debate on multiculturalism has revealed that in considering women's issues and women's art gender alone offers too narrow a perspective unless issues of race, cultural difference and nationality are also taken into consideration.

Curated by Katerina Gregos, 'Fusion Cuisine' attempts to reveal some of the multiple layers that define post-feminist art. In particular, it strives to dismantle an essentialist perspective, and to show that 'feminisms' and the idea of 'difference within difference' have eroded the idea of a universal feminist agenda. Echoing the playfulness of the exhibition's title, the choice of artists aimed to be non-dogmatic, resulting in a mix that lent the exhibition a degree of sophistication but which may have deprived it of a certain edge. Still, the visual variety of the show was absorbing: the

shifts of mood, for example, swung between the gloomy ennui of Eliza Jackson's *Pasta Flora* (1998–2002) a film shot on Super 8, to Tracey Emin's defiant self-portrait, *Good Smile, Great Come* (2000), a photograph of the artist laughing, her legs spread, stuffing money in her crotch.

Many contemporary feminist artists do not so much create ruptures with the past as acknowledge a debt to a previous generation. This is one of the aspects that made 'Fusion Cuisine' as much a record of contemporary art by women as a retrospective of some of the fundamental ideas that have informed feminist art. For example, Patty Chang's physically exhausting performances create powerful associations between the interest in process and the gender politics so prevalent in the 1970s. In *Melon (At a Loss)* (1998) Chang is shown slicing her breast to reveal a melon, which she then consumes in a dispassionate but self-negating act. Also harking back to performance and process art is the videotaped, ceremonial-like performance *The Burden of Guilt* (1999), in which Tania Bruguera uses her own body to refer to history, trauma and collective memory.

Transforming domesticity and personal experience into political gestures has long been a feminist practice, one employed here by Janine Antoni and Catherine Opie, whose depictions of lesbian relationships challenge dominant heterosexual assumptions. In her photographic triptych *Mom and Dad* (1999) she portrays her parents in roles that play with traditional ideas of male and female.

The influence of commodity culture and representational codes in

structuring gender roles emerges in Despina Meimarakoglou's work, in which the idealized image of a Barbie doll is given ageing facial features to expose the dictates of beauty stereotypes. The ways in which consumerism conditions women also comes up in Sylvie Fleury's gold-plated shopping cart rotating on a mirrored pedestal and in Liza Lou's mocking but pensive *Super Sister* (1999), a gun-wielding life-size dummy studded with gold beads.

Lisa Yuskavage's mock salon-style paintings of a reclining female nude touch on another of feminism's preoccupations – the exclusion of women artists from art history and the depiction of women as objects of desire. In a similar vein Hilary Harkness questions the relationship between sexuality and power in her paintings of an all-female team of industrial workers.

Lee Bull's *Cyborgs* (2002), sculptures that resemble hybrids of women and machines, consider the effects of technology in conditioning sexuality. So does Kiki Seror's work, whose Duratrans light-boxes feature fragments of sexually explicit words exploring the world of cybersex and the ways that information technology shapes sexuality.

Although much of the work in 'Fusion Cuisine' explores similar territory, it comes at the ideas from a wide range of angles. Maria Papadimitriou's 'sucksexfull', stencilled in a black font to resemble an advertising hoarding, makes fun of stereotypes about sexuality and femininity, but also of women for passively adhering to such stereotypes. With analogous brashness and ambiguity Camilla Dahl's *Champagne Bar* (2001), a sink-like appliance from which champagne is served, plays on the idea of servility and sexuality. Mon-

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Left: Liza Lou  
*Super Sister*  
1999  
Mixed media  
213 × 91 cm

Right: Patty Chang  
*Melon (At a Loss)*  
1998  
C-type prints  
Each 102 × 76 cm

ica Bonvicini's installation of sleek leather-bound chairs explores design and architecture in relationship to gender; Lina Theodorou attacks traditional gender roles by interrupting the flow of a video showing middle-aged women shopping at the open-air food market with phrases full of violent connotations.

Cultural complexities and racial difference in respect to gender are topics raised in Elahe Massumi's video *A Kiss is not a Kiss* (2000), which explores the story of a girl living in India who is forced into prostitution, and in the visual collages of Fatimah Tuggar, in which the artist creates a playful reversal of gender roles in the

West and in Third World countries. Jitka Hanzlova's elegant photographs explore the lives of women of different ages, social backgrounds, ethnic origins and urban surroundings.

Perhaps the most poetic work in the exhibition was Cosima von Bonin's installation *The Cousins* (2000), a ranch fence made of Laura Ashley fab-

ric, set against the background of an embroidered painting in which the figures of two cowboys are barely delineated. Von Bonin touches on multiple issues in a work of visual strength and subtlety. Like much of the best post-feminist art, it is at once cool and emotional, intricate and direct.

Alexandra Koroxenidis

## Rose Nolan

Ian Potter Museum, Melbourne

The word 'forever' emblazoned on a huge banner hanging in the stairwell greeted visitors to this 20-year survey of Rose Nolan's work. In vivid red and white it announced the show with the optimistic flourish of an enthusiastic cheerleader. Upstairs was a modest piece comprising words painted on to small hessian pennants. As if backtracking from the banner's proclamation of immortality, it more cautiously whispers: 'forever, a really long time, until I die'.

One of the most engaging things about this exhibition was the animated dialogue that seemed to be taking place between art works. Over the years Nolan has developed her themes or ideas so that they have emerged in different versions or forms. Important too is the playful and stylized oscillation between contrary moods and approaches in her art, giving it an air that is by turns confident and self-effacing, serious and schoolgirlish, grand and humble – all of which lends the work an endearingly human aspect.

Inevitably the viewer was caught in the crossfire of boasts and taunts. The sheer immodesty of works displaying the words 'mighty' or 'Rose Nolan for me' (abbreviated to 'RN 4 ME') was dramatically countered by others that flaunted anti-heroic words such as 'loser', 'flop' and 'dud'. It was unclear who the object of this name-calling might be; although the words confronted the viewer, one suspected that Nolan might be directing them mischievously at herself.

To a large degree Nolan takes herself as the main subject of her art, and this results in an approach that is often disarmingly self-referential and matter-of-fact: what you read is often what you get. *A Very Early Constructed Work* from 1991, for example, is just that. In *Rose Nolan 2000/2001* (2000–01) the work's 18 panels spell out its title and date. Nolan's choice of

focus stems not from a desire to be overtly biographical but simply from a wish to reflect on what it means to be an artist, using herself and her own art as the examples nearest to hand. She categorizes her work much in the way that a student might use subject headings to organize his or her studies: Banners, Flat Work, Word Work, Constructed Work, Homework, Quality Photography were all represented in this survey. The result was a diverse and dynamic display that Nolan masterfully laid out in relation to the architecture of the museum – suggesting that Exhibition Making should be added to her list of categories.

The relationship between Nolan's work and its historical sources, in particular Constructivism and non-Objective Geometric art, is a frequent discussion topic. Her abstract motifs and shapes (including letters stylized nearly to the point of abstraction) and her resourceful use of simple materials such as hessian and cardboard connect her to this tradition. Her painted cardboard constructions, each glued, stitched or tacked together in a manifestly handmade way, employ the iconography of Constructivism, notably the cross (a symbol she also relates to her Catholic upbringing). And the forms she works with – banners, flags, self-published pamphlets and books – recall the days when art had a didactic and revolutionary function. But Nolan inscribes them with references that are personal and playful, rather than public or political; for example, a flag in the exhibition simply declares 'I Was Here'.

Several haphazardly clustered museum vitrines filled with small works – photographs, multiples, publications and a hand-hooked rolled-up rug – were of particular interest. The artist's self-confessed early love affair with the Russian avant-garde was conveyed through an intriguing display of what she calls her *Secret Russian Archive* (1980–2002), including souvenirs collected when visiting Russia in 1985, revolutionary posters and books, busts and photographs of Lenin, as well as her own early works. Showing

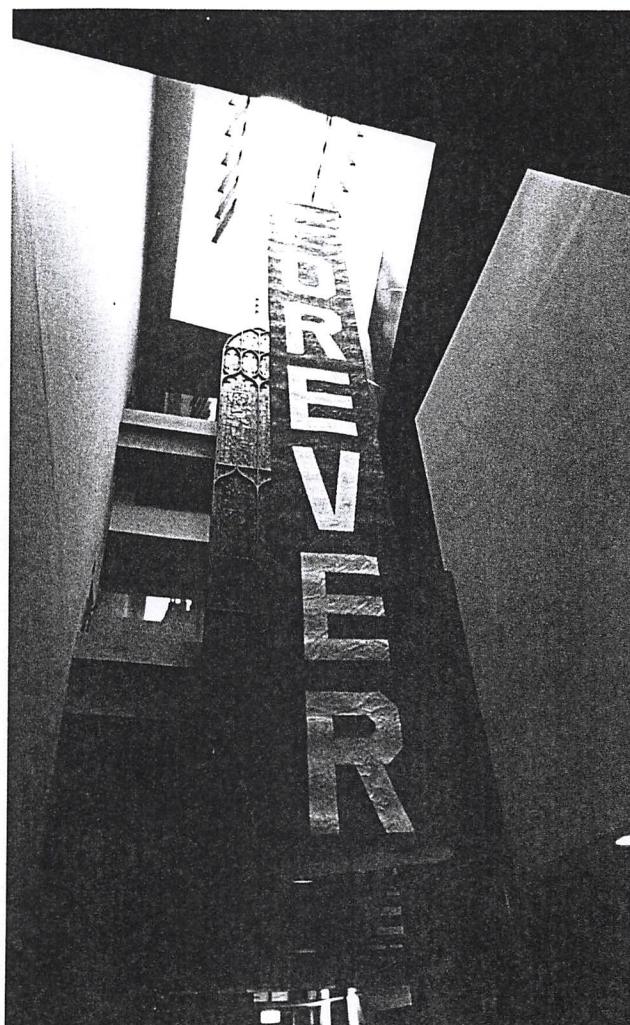
the depth of her infatuation and commitment to the Russian experiment is a set of worker-style clothing made and sometimes worn by Nolan in the early 1980s, hand-printed with Constructivist designs.

Nolan's work replays the drama and visual excitement of revolutionary aesthetics but recontextualizes these with content that has more to do with her everyday reality. She continues to be inspired by a defining historical moment when it seemed art could play

a central role in social change, but recognizes with a mixture of romance, longing, humour, sadness and happiness her own inevitable distance from those times. With the intensity of a deeply felt schoolgirl crush or the ardent loyalty of a fan, she's bravely willing to take her chances with the heroic idea that art (in particular, abstract art) does still matter, and that she as an artist might make a difference.

Sue Cramer

Rose Nolan is willing to take her chance that art matters and as an artist, she might make a difference.



Rose Nolan  
*Big Word FOREVER*  
2001–2  
Oil paint, hessian  
1020 × 130 cm