

THE SUBVERSIVE STITCH

Two Recent Exhibitions by Narelle Jubelin

Bronwyn Hanna

Bronwyn Hanna tutors in the Fine Arts Department at the University of Sydney and is currently researching Australian domestic space in the post-war period.

Two recent exhibitions by Narelle Jubelin¹ provide a stimulating exploration of the way that 'deconstruction' may be used by feminists as a tool of social analysis. In her portrayal of the visual dominance of phallic symbols in Sydney's historical environment, Jubelin attempts a difficult but foreseeable extension of the application of deconstruction — from written texts analysed in writing to visual texts analysed in artistic practice. This essay is designed to acknowledge and explain the complexity underlying Jubelin's imagery, to examine the notion of phallic dominance in the built environment, and to question the efficacy of Jubelin's project of making a serious critique of representation through a visually attractive and commercially viable art form.

Narelle Jubelin's delicate, beautifully framed works in petit point may seem an extraordinary medium for a serious appraisal of the priorities and presuppositions signalled in the forms of our built environment. Needlework is traditionally a supremely feminine medium — passive, repetitive, labour intensive and gently appealing. However Jubelin deploys these qualities deliberately in order to 'seduce' the viewer; her tiny representations of New South Wales' public parklands and monuments are indeed exquisitely appealing, but they are no more innocent than the scenes they represent. As Jubelin wrote concerning her exhibition at Mori's Gallery in October 1986,

His Story tells of patriarchal colonisation. Each sequence of accidents and unforeseen events 'echoing the tales his forefather told' weaves the elaborate fabric of culture. . . The form is familiar and insidious. Parklands eulogise, warfare gracing their monuments as tacit bastions of male power. The founding days are over but the select restoration of their relics conserves the consistency of the patterns.

The familiar, insidious form which features in so many of Jubelin's images is, of course, the phallus. Jubelin shows Sydney's public places to be full of phallic symbols projecting into troubled skies — in the shape of statues, gateposts, war memorials, towers, lighthouses and even native flora. Many of these dominating forms are shown complemented by rounded, sheltering, feminine structures such as trees

and pavilions. It is the representation of a land whose shape through acquisition and settlement has been subjected to, in Jubelin's words, 'European vision, European power structures and European stylistics'. In Jubelin's tiny tapestries, the public juxtapositioning of such objects becomes a 'text' suitable for 'deconstruction'.

Deconstruction is a philosophical/literary tool devised by French intellectual Jacques Derrida, applied usually in the reading of philosophical 'classics' in order to reveal 'unacknowledged excessive textual play . . . capable of undermining the logic of each text's explicit commitments and claims'.² It is an idea which has been seized upon in recent years by feminist intellectuals as an invaluable method of interrogating patriarchal representations in many different media. For philosopher Liz Gross, deconstruction particularly favours the recognition of *dichotomies* — binary oppositions which insist that the world is black or white (East or West, culture or nature, public or private, mind or matter, masculine or feminine etc.) — when the suppression of the innumerable shades of grey in between acts as an effective repression of 'difference'. Gross uses the word 'phallogocentrism' as a feminist appropriation of Derrida's 'logocentrism', to describe the specific oppression of women through the use of such discourse, in 'texts, representations, images, metaphors'.³ Deconstruction can operate to uncover such hidden bias, and to force language to 'acknowledge its unspoken oppositions, exclusions and its privileging of certain terms and hierarchial structures'.⁴

Narelle Jubelin's images present Australian public spaces as a series of visual dichotomies in public discourse, sites where soaring masculine forms are contrasted with sheltering feminine forms. Her work operates as a form of deconstruction in its recognition that such binary oppositions are socially constructed but tend to be passed off as 'natural'; thus she depicts phallic symbols operating in the built environment as collapsing the concept of two autonomous sexes into a complementary coupling — a typical example of phallogocentric discourse in which 'a singular model which claims to be valid for both but in fact is only congruous with the masculine'.⁵ Jubelin's images show arrangements of public space



Breaching the Boundary

which celebrate patriarchal domination, allowing for feminine forms only as complements to masculine erections. Moreover, Jubelin's work does not simply present this opposition but, in her materials and methods, also mobilises a variety of 'plays of difference' outside many conventional dichotomies used in Modernist representation. Before discussing these, it is worth looking at some of the implications of the idea that we are literally surrounded by phallic architectural forms.

Descriptions of skyscrapers as phallic symbols are common and apparently so banal that the very obviousness of the observation seems to have precluded much further investigation. Yet the assumption behind the idea is intriguing: that men construct their environment in their own (selective, exaggerated) image. Why? One clue may be found in the words of Louis Sullivan — the early American Modernist architect and proclaimed 'father of the skyscraper' (note the sexual analogy). In *Kindergarten Chats*, Sullivan expressed the 'imperative voice of emotion', which, he wrote,

... demands of us, what is the chief characteristic of the tall building? And at once we answer, it is lofty. This loftiness is to the artist-nature its thrilling aspect. It is the very open organ-tone in its appeal. It must be tall, every inch of it tall. The force and power of altitude must be in it, the glowing pride of excitation must be in it. It must be every inch a proud and soaring thing. . . The man who designs in this spirit . . . must live of his life and for his life in the fullest, most consummate sense.⁶

The allusion to male sexual excitement seems unmistakable. In typically phallic fashion, the gender specific language and content of the passage, referring as it does to a sexually inspired type of creativity associated with the production of tall buildings, is 'congruous' only with the masculine subject. This is not to state that women could not build or take pleasure in building tall structures, but simply to emphasise that there is a strong masculine orientation underlying such discourse and perhaps to question the lack of feminine priorities (for example, the domestic) in this rationalisation for a building format

which has attracted such huge concentrations of social resources in the twentieth-century.

An insight into the social signification of the phallic symbol may be found in Charles Jencks' *Postmodern Architecture*, which emphasises a semiotic reading of the modern built environment, and makes frequent note of phallic forms in the buildings examined. In puzzling over the explicitly phallic shape of the *Hotel Beverly Tom* in Japan, Jencks wrote,

What metaphysics justifies such a metaphor? It is clear that the vertical shape may have led to the symbol, and hotels are in a banal sense corridors of power, but neither rationalisation can sufficiently explain the phallus, which seems to be the abstract statement of primitive power in the industrial landscape. But why again THIS hotel as a phallus? It's not the equivalent of a dolmen, Place Vendôme, obelisk or Christian spire — the building task can't carry here such strong content.⁷

In this passage, Jencks explicitly accepts the phallus as a metaphor for primitive power, an image appropriate for religious monuments but of questionable value for an overtly commercial venture such as a hotel. Why this implicit privileging of the signification of the phallus to almost sublime status?

Lacanian psychoanalytical thought positions the phallus as *the* primary signifier of our culture. However in 'The meaning of the Phallus' (*Feminine Sexuality*, 1982), Lacan's discussion revolves around its linguistic operation as a sign in the formation of sexual identity through the castration complex.

In Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a fantasy, if what is understood by that is an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (part, internal, good, bad etc.) in so far as this term tends to accentuate reality involved in a relationship. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolises. And it is not incidental that Freud took his reference for it from the simulacrum which it represented for the ancients.

For the phallus is a signifier . . . given to designate as a whole the effect of there being a signified in as much as it conditions any such effect by its presence as signifier.



Small Reminders

Craig Owens seems to have drawn from such notions when he suggested a reason for the importance of the symbol, writing,

the phallus . . . is, in fact, the privileged signifier, the signifier of privilege, of the power and prestige that accrue to the male in our society. As such it designates the effects of signification in general.⁸

Jubelin's work and its hyperbolic recognition of phallic symbols in the urban landscape is not light-hearted, but neither is it dogmatic. She reconstructs views which are already available to every Sydney-sider. She admits that she originally intended to take a 'sledgehammer' approach in titling her works, but thought it might be more convincing in the long run if people worked it out for themselves. Thus her Avago exhibition at Paddington last November was entitled soothingly, *Remembrance Of Things Past Lay Bare The Plans For Destiny*. The installation consisted of a laboriously worked panorama in petit point, an appropriation of the popular nineteenth-century format used so often to record views of Sydney. The tiny work (3.5cm by 67cm, composed of approximately 170 stitches to the square cm) features a series of recognisable public spaces, from Sydney's Botanical Gardens and Domain to Centennial Park and the Federation Obelisk — a symbolic imaging of Sydney's period of colonisation, from first settlement to the moment of nationhood. It includes the coastline, fountains, pavilions, lightposts, gateposts and fences, each scene with its own moody sky separated from the next by a different species of delicately depicted tree. The focus of the work is a depiction of the Art Gallery of New South Wales set imposingly amongst the ordered gardens of the Domain, flanked by monuments and backlit with a dull sunburst radiating glory over hallowed halls. Here is the high point of patriarchal culture, an institution ideally situated and in fact historically responsible for the presentation of mostly sexist and ethnocentric images — Jubelin's 'bastion of male culture' — ridiculed (ridiculously) from a hole in the side of a wall in Paddington. The title warns that the values propagated through acts of 'remembrance' — both within the art gallery and in the continuing preservation of the historicised garden in which it sits — are sure indicators of current social priorities. Jubelin's gentle

sarcasm coupled with her acute awareness of phallic presence in this environment questions these priorities, their biases, their possible effects on our present and future

The title of the nearly contemporaneous exhibition at the Mori Gallery was *His Story*, a feminist pun which had great currency in the 1970s as a comment on the traditional concentration of Western histories on male experience and masculinity. For Jubelin, the title was appropriate because her work is so closely involved with historical public representations of culture; it was also meant as a respectful acknowledgement of her feminist forbears whose strategies were more directly confrontational in the 1970s.

Freeing The Patriarchy was the earliest work shown in this exhibition, a transitional piece from Jubelin's previous interest in depicting buildings which house social institutions. It represents in the one frame two images of Sydney's Central Station clock tower, each tightly enclosed in a diagonally tilted 7cm square and stitched minutely in restrained tones of Colonial greens, creams and browns. The top square shows the tower as it appeared recently in a long bout of maintenance and repairs: covered in scaffolding which is wittily denoted by a crisscrossing of threads over the tapestried image. The lower square depicts the refurbished tower, smooth and hard in phallic outline, glowing with civic pride. The work clearly refers to the contemporary trend of restoring past monuments in order, perhaps to question the values being reinforced in the process.

By contrast, *Small Reminders* and much of the rest of the exhibition refers specifically to historical relics from the period of the colonisation of New South Wales. Depicted in triptych form, each in its own tiny frame; a gum tree, the Macquarie Place obelisk and the anchor from the Sirius. For Jubelin it is a political statement made through reproducing an existing visual juxtaposition in Sydney's Macquarie Place. The land is symbolised by the tree, the action of taking the land denoted by the anchor and the process monumentalised by a phallus at the point where road distances to all parts of the colony were measured. However, while the phallic nature of the obelisk is reasonably obvious, this somewhat profound reading



First Sight and Second Glance



of the interrelation of the three simple images was unlikely to be apparent to the casual gallery goer, especially to the many who do not expect to find a narrative in contemporary imagery. (This is doubtless one of the reasons behind Jubelin's commissioning of this written review — to supplement the subtlety of her imagery with an explicit explanation of her objectives. For most viewers, of course, the images must stand alone on their own mysterious, pleasant and gently ironic merits.)

The theme of representing colonisation through its historical remnants is carried out with somewhat greater complexity in the pair of works entitled, *First Sight and Second Glance*. *First Sight* depicts a highly gendered pair of native plants: a (masculine) bulbous gymea lily pointing confidently into the calm air, and a (feminine) delicate flower, fruitful but fluttering vulnerably before a restless overcast sky. *Second Glance* consists of a similarly sexually distinguished pair of statues, again silhouetted against the sky: Captain Cook, gesturing upwards with an appropriately positioned telescope by his side and Queen Victoria, still and majestic, the imperial (phallic) mother. The two works were linked in the exhibition by title, scale and positioning in similarly styled frames. The allusion to European colonisation is easily apparent in the depiction of the statues, which are in themselves deliberately monumental representations of European sovereignty towering significantly over the landscape. The representation of the plants can be read as referring to colonisation in a more subtle form — the intellectual imposition of European vision and European science. The plants are shown with the same intimate detail which characterised so much of the early botanical drawings of Australia. Jubelin's method, as in her Avago installation, is in fact an appropriation of the nineteenth-century style of depiction. Here there is an implicit critique of the assumptions inherent in such imagery: for example, that Europeans have a right to investigate the continent, that their studies are the first or only possible approach, that plants like this can be meaningfully depicted in isolation from their environment. All are privileged notions and entirely exclusive of, for example, any appreciation of Aboriginal interaction with the land. The paralleling of native 'natural' plants with European 'constructed' monuments

warns of the persuasive power of such representations in naturalising Eurocentric understandings of the world.

Breaching the Boundary and *Waiting For the Tide* challenge the patriarchal landscape in a slightly different sense — through an attempt to deconstruct phallic form. The former work is a triptych depicting the Garden Palace gates at the entrance to the Botanical Gardens on Macquarie Street. The masculine tips of the gates stretch into broken skies (cloudy with semen?) while their function is paradoxically feminine — to open a boundary. However the gates also operate as part of a structure of patriarchal authority, of enclosure and surveillance, controlling and protecting property. Acting between the dichotomy inside/outside, the role of the gates is tenuous, shifting, open to interpretation. It is a work specifically dealing with the notion of ambiguity or *difference*. Observations of such 'plays of difference' have also been discussed recently by Joan Kerr, with regard to lighthouses such as that depicted in Jubelin's *Waiting For The Tide*.

The lighthouse . . . [is a] powerful icon, Janus faced in its perceptual representation of darkness and light. By day that conical totem towers over the landscape asserting human presence and control; by night it functions by making itself invisible and immaterial through its own light . . . [It is an] impossible duality — always both ever present and non-existent . . .

Waiting For The Tide was perhaps the most powerful piece in the Mori exhibition. A superbly serene and stately depiction of the Macquarie Lighthouse seen at night against a childlike starry sky, it makes gentle allusion to many of Jubelin's most seriously deliberated themes. A building of considerable historical significance, it is explicitly phallic in shape and beams out a cannon-like light, a warning of both caring and surveillance. It inhabits a boundary overlooking the tides, in special relation to the washing over of time, and perhaps in another sense to specifically female periodicity. Existing between land and sea, between 'man' and 'nature', between seen and unseen, it is an image of patriarchal dominance over



Waiting for the Tide

history, but also an image of oscillation and equivocation. The tiny image, set against wood in a small antique frame, may also be seen as very beautiful.

How can such highly politicised images be described as 'beautiful'? How can a feminist produce work so 'exquisite' (as Jubelin's work was described in a review in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 20 August 1986) when it is founded upon a critique of the exploitative representations of patriarchal society — including, and especially, such aesthetic values?

In one sense, the problem presented in this question is the old dichotomy between form and content, encompassing in its extreme forms the simplified conservative view that propaganda cannot be art and the simplified radical view that art is superfluous. It is a dichotomy which can limit appreciation of the complexities of representation, by screening out any examination of the sign itself, understood here as the *interrelation* between signifier (form) and signified (content). Walter Benjamin dealt with this problem in deliberating upon preferred strategies for the politically committed 'author as producer' by suggesting that

a work which exhibits *the* right tendency must, of necessity, show every other quality as well . . . the tendency of a work of literature can be correct only if it is also correct in the literary sense.¹⁰

Benjamin forwards the notion that what is required, in the 'literary sense' is 'technical innovation', participation in class struggle through 'liberating the means of production'¹¹, widening here the Marxist concept of 'means of production' to include intellectual (and literary and visual) production.

Benjamin's words could be simplistically applied to Jubelin's work to argue that its very attractiveness and appealing quality is evidence of its 'correct' political orientation — at least when seen through the eyes of a sympathetic feminist critic. It would seem however, that biased appreciation was not quite the attribute which Benjamin had in mind when he used the word 'quality'. Perhaps instead, Jubelin's 'correct' orientation may be seen to consist in her contribution to the struggle against patriarchy through the adoption of the feminine tradition of needlework in order to 'liberate' it into a medium of critique, using skills derived from her training in painting. Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch* presented the history of embroidery as an instrument of subservience but

also of resistance, citing numerous examples where it was used by women, as Jubelin uses it, to subvert feminine stereotypes. However, the real success of such a strategy in Benjamin's terms might depend upon its adoption by others, indicating that such images can work as an empowerment of women as well as a symbolic gesture within intellectual discourse.

The presentation of embroidery within a commercial gallery is of course an affront to the conventional intellectual distinction between 'art' and 'craft'. It is remarkable also because of the physical limitations it imposes, firstly, on the near miniature size of the image and, secondly, on the necessity of using absolutely rational and uncompromising diagonal strokes of pure colour. Both factors reveal the artificiality of the medium and tend to emphasise an interpretative role for the viewer. It is fitting that the mode of representation itself should be highlighted when a major theme of the exhibition is to figure the persuasive dominance of patriarchal representation in our culture. The fact that Jubelin's images are quite legible to most, even naive (or working class or homebound female) eyes, can also be seen as an adventurous departure from the established traditions of Modernist art still dominating contemporary art exhibitions in Sydney.

It can be further argued that Jubelin's exhibition is technically innovatory in another sense: in its self-conscious operation as a *visual* contribution to the discourse of feminist deconstruction. It differs from much Modernist art by its failure to attempt to express or respond to 'reality'. Rather, as deconstruction, the works blur the distinctions between art, craft and theory, referring to other 'texts', reading visual juxtapositions in the relationships between images and objects in public space. They depict common dichotomies found in these sites (male/female, monument/shelter, construct/nature) and, in the mere process of doing so, publicly question the meaning of such oppositions and the values of the hegemonic order that is maintaining them today. In its own practice — in being both serious and humorous, deliberated and whimsical, historical and present-minded, intellectual and easily apprehended, both subtle and frank — Jubelin's work itself manages to escape many of the binds of representational dichotomies and 'conceive difference without opposition'¹² to an admirable degree.

1 *Remembrance of Things Past; Lay Bare the Plans for Destiny* Installation at Avago Gallery, Sydney, Nov. '86. and *His Story*. Exhibition at Mori Gallery, Sydney, Sept. '86.

2 L. Gross, 'Philosophy and the Body' in C. Pateman and L. Gross, *Feminist Challenges*, Sydney, 1986, p.126.

3 L. Gross, 'Derrida, Irigaray and Deconstruction', *Left-uright*, Sydney, 1986, p. 71.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

6 L. Sullivan, 'The Tall Building Artistically Considered', in *Kindergarten Chats*, New York, 1986, p. 260.

7 C. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, London, 1984, p. 114.

8 C. Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism' in H. Foster (ed) *Postmodern Culture*, London, 1985.

9 L. Anderson, J. Kerr and C. Peake, *Designing Lights Drawings for Colonial Lighthouses 1817-1899*, Sydney, 1986, p. 3.

10 W. Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer' in *Understanding Brecht*, 1973, p. 86.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

12 C. Owens, 'The Discourse of Others' in *Postmodern Culture*, London, 1985, p. 62.

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