

Lillian O'Neil
Escape Velocity
The Commercial Gallery, Sydney
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exhibition text by Steven Miller

One of the most intriguing Surrealist artworks created by an Australian was a collaborative sculpture, carved and assembled by Robert Klippel and painted by James Gleeson in 1947 and titled *Madame Sophie Sesostoris (a pre-raphaelite satire)*. The artists named their work in honour of 'the famous clairvoyante' from T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. Interpreting her tarot cards in the poem, she warns: "fear death by water". For Surrealist artists water was a potent symbol of the unconscious and *Madame Sophie Sesostoris* incorporates a wide range of aqueous imagery on her painted base. More significantly, as an artwork she plays on the watery zones of junction between dreams and reality, surface and what lies beneath. From the waist up *Sesostoris* is flesh and blood. Below, the artists—in their own words—have peeled away her skin to "see all that lay within." Here she is revealed as a strange amalgam of organic and mechanical forms.

The tension between nature and technology, the organic and the machine, was a recurrent theme for Surrealist artists, such as Max Ernst and May Ray, brought into particular focus after the devastation of war. Lillian O'Neil works within this rich tradition. Her collages often include strange organic/inorganic hybrids, such as the figures in the *Standing Stones* diptych. Hers also is an art that aims to penetrate below the surface of convention and human reason. The large collages *Mirage* and *Dark mist through the floor* invite interpretation as Surrealist psycho-scapes. Yet the juxtaposition of imagery in these works is not simply the result of free association, it has all been thoughtfully orchestrated. O'Neil uses cut outs from her library of pre-digital books and magazines to form her intricate tessellated surfaces, which are often then juxtaposed with enlarged details from the same sources.

Inspiration for the works comes too from the artist's library: books she has read, poetic insights that have remained with her. "Dark mist through the floor" is how Dickens in *Pictures from Italy* describes the atmosphere in the Roman oratory where St Peter was imprisoned. The memory of its past as a place of imprisonment and suffering seeps through the very fabric of the building. It is unforgettable: "a small wave by itself, that melts into no other wave, and does not flow on with the rest." Memory is a major theme in O'Neil's art. It is anchored in the real, as O'Neil's collages are constructed from photographs, a medium championed for furnishing hard evidence. But our experience of memory, O'Neil suggests, is often as a collage, vivid but piecemeal, a small wave that "does not flow on with the rest."

The works in this exhibition are mysterious and beautiful, but also unsettling. And like the great collage art of the past, they seem to tap into the anxieties and uncertainties that characterize modern living. Artists are like seismographs; they are sensitive recorders of the spiritual climate of their times. O'Neil's collages, whilst often whimsical and full of human warmth, look out upon the world, dissecting and questioning, through a distinctly 21st-century, post-9/11 prism. This exhibition is titled 'Escape velocity'. In physics, this is the minimum speed required of an object if it needs to escape from the attraction of a much larger one. For me, however, this title and these works speak more of that desire—felt by so many of us in the 21st century—to escape from the pace and trajectory of modern life and to find something simpler, richer, more sustaining.

A few stanzas before *Madame Sesostoris* appears in *The Waste Land*, Eliot describes the terrain of the work's title.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water

It is a biblical vision of spiritual aridity, drawing upon images from the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and from the book of Ecclesiastes. O'Neil probably did not intend it, but there is a confluence of insight between the works in this exhibition and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Parched landscapes dominate one corner of *Dark mist through the door* and there is no medium more appropriate for the "heap of broken images" than that of collage. Powerful art has the ability to make us question our world and ourselves, what we value and desire. These works give pause to ponder if the things we are reaching out for, like the small hands in *Dark mist through the floor* or the much larger one in *Mirage*, are real or just an illusion.