

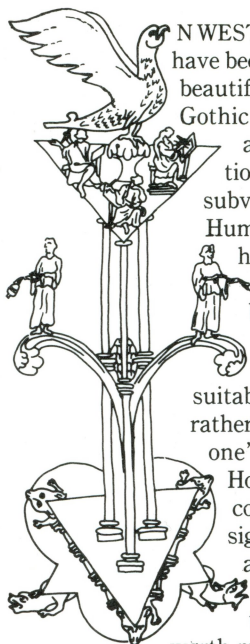
200
GERTRUDE
STREET

THE
GOTHIC
PERVERSITY AND
ITS PLEASURE

CURATOR: ROBYN MCKENZIE

JOANNA FLYNN • FIONA HALL
FIONA MACDONALD • JAN NELSON
SUSAN NORRIE • JOANNE RITSON
VIVIENNE SHARK LEWITT

WEDNESDAY 18 MARCH
WEDNESDAY 15 APRIL 1987



IN WESTERN ART HISTORY, CLASSICAL VALUES have been the rule and measure of the good and the beautiful, of 'taste'; a normative category. The Gothic has been excluded. Constructed as the aberrant, the perverse, the abject; the attractions of the Gothic have always been a needling subversive agitator in the monolithic facade of Humanist tradition, which predicates man and his reason as the measure of all things.

The original Gothic artefact has today been subsumed into the middle class lexicon of the 'tasteful'. A rudely carved excerpt in stone from any west front, is an eminently suitable image for the postcard you feel obliged rather than prompted to send, a certain index of one's foray into another cultural territory.

However, the young poet Thomas Gray on his continental travels with Walpole in 1739, significantly, only made references to Gothic architecture, a developing interest, in letters to his mother. Significant, for the reason that it could not then have been considered worth mentioning to his friends, "men of taste".¹

The growth in appreciation of Gothic architecture in the 18th century coincided with the development of new categories of aesthetic pleasure, both formal and associational, that could not be encompassed by orthodox classical conventions. The Gothic essentially opposes the balance, harmony and order of classical form. As Sir John Summerson, an esteemed keeper of this faith writes, "The use of the pointed arch is in itself amply suggestive of discordant relationship..."² It is only with the circular disclaimer that, "Beauty is an historical document; but a historical document is not necessarily beautiful"³ that Kenneth Clark felt it safe to embark on his pioneering study of the Gothic Revival.

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Clark suggests that the appreciation of Gothic architecture "crept in" through an analogy with non-classical periods of literature, through the appreciation of Spenser and Shakespeare first; who were considered great despite and in defiance of "Aristotle's rules".⁴ Hughes, in the Introduction to his edition of Spenser (1715), provides an illuminating example of this analogy.

To compare it (*The Faery Queen*) therefore with the models of Antiquity, would be like drawing a parallel between the *Roman* and the *Gothick* architecture. In the first there is doubtless a more natural Grandeur and Simplicity; in the latter we find great mixtures of Beauty and Barbarism, yet assisted by the invention of a Vanity of inferior Ornaments; and though the former is more majestic in the whole, the latter may be very surprising and agreeable in its parts.⁵

Whereas classical architecture is unified in its planning, and integral in its form, the Gothic is an aggregate of varied form. As Hughes implies, the aesthetic quality of the classic is to be found in its Whole, its parts being logical proportional divisions of that central statement. The essential aesthetic pleasure of the Gothic however, is to be had from the effect of a variety of individual details, which although subordinate to, are not dictated by the whole.

Ruskin's analysis of the proper ordering of ornament with reference to sight found in the Gothic, adumbrates this point, and extends it by comparison with natural form.

As nature manages it... for every distance from the eye there [is] a different system of form in all natural objects: this is to be so then in architecture... each order of ornament being adapted for a different distance: first for example, the great masses... which give it make and organism, as it rises over the horizon, half a score of miles away: then the traceries and shafts and pinnacles, which give it richness as we approach: then the niches and statues and knobs and flowers, which we can only see when we stand beneath it... on the roofs of the niches, and the robes of the statues, and the rolls of the mouldings, comes a

fourth order of ornament, as delicate as the eye can follow... any of them may be approached.⁶

It is in a similar way that the works in this exhibition, by Fiona Hall, Fiona MacDonald and Joanne Ritson, are to be appreciated. These works could be said to rely on a "Vanity of inferior Ornaments", which while accruing into visual totalities at removed distance, invite and require closer inspection. Of course, the pertinent qualities of any art work change with the distance from which it is viewed, but need not be, as these works are, built around and aesthetically activated by such visual shifts. So too, in these works we find that mixture of attraction and repulsion, of "Beauty and Barbarism", that provides a frisson distinctly Gothic.

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In the 18th century an aesthetic theory of the Horrid and the Terrible was instituted in the category of the sublime, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible..."⁷ The pleasure of pain; the delight in horror; a beauty enhanced by exactly those qualities which seem to deny it, a beauty tainted by vice, corruption and death; were evoked as an exquisite new sensation by the Romantics.⁸ This proclivity found one of its expressions in the Gothic novel.

The author Horace Walpole, who began Gothicising his own villa Strawberry Hill in the 1750s, in a chapter on the mediaeval architects in his *Anecdotes on Painting* (1762), feels he has gone too far in defence of the Gothic. He writes, "I certainly do not mean... to make any comparison between the rational beauties of regular architecture and the unrestrained licentiousness of that which is called Gothic."⁹ Fittingly then, he chose a mediaeval background to his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), which inaugurated and through its subtitle *a Gothic story*, referring to this setting, gave its name to this genre of literature. Ruskin defended Gothic in the 19th century on the grounds of its 'truth to nature', as a moral principle. Sade had formerly given, in the 18th century "the *reductio ad absurdum*" of this doctrine, the untamed lessons of nature, "destruction, murder and sexual promiscuity",¹⁰ the regular fare of the Gothic novel.

The primary aim of this type of literature was to evoke terror by exploiting mystery, cruelty and a variety of horrors. Exhibiting a taste for the uncontrolled, the deviant and the strange, the Gothic novel opened up to fiction the realm of the irrational, and of the perverse impulses and frights, that lie beneath the ordered surface of the civilised mind. Supernatural devices, ghosts and spectres were often brought in as a central effect. Susan Norrie's leering macabre Disney characters, materialising through painterly landscape, interventions from another world, recall this particular *modus operandi*.

Vivienne Shark LeWitt's painting *Nightmare Abbey*, takes its title from the novel of 1818, by Thomas Love Peacock, a satire on the Gothic fashion. Peacock's intention was "to bring to a sort of philosophical focus a few of the morbidities of modern literature, and to let in a little daylight on its altrabillious complexion."¹¹ The black bile of "hatred - revenge - misanthropy - and quotations from the Bible", its "morbid anatomy."¹²

The effective powers of the Gothic genre are questionable properties in themselves: the trite histrionics of melodrama; the kitsch and clichéd excess of 'horror'; characters drawn in extremes, a two-dimensional duplicity, moralising and moral turpitude. The materials are volatile and unstable; the lurid so easily becomes the ludicrous; the fantastic, the farcical; the horrific, risible and ridiculous.

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The artists in this exhibition explore the murky depths of the Gothic, obdurate in their desire, to play it for all it's worth. Using it to their own ends with a knowing irony and humour, they are yet respectful and admiring of its charms.

The Gothic flouts and thereby questions a classical order which

idealises nature, imposing upon it rational, civilised conduct; proposing the moral category of the good, coextensive with the aesthetic category of the beautiful. By conflating the categories of the beautiful and the ugly, the attractive and the repulsive, the Gothic threatens the possibility of an order which is natural, a logic which is irrational, a virtue which is not so good. It threatens taste.

In reviewing Jan Nelson's work earlier this year Gary Catalano was frankly disenchanted, with "the banality of their compositions, the coarse and ugly way in which they are painted and the melodramatic excesses of their scale . . ." ¹³ He considers her work to be a painful misunderstanding, and misappropriation of the Romantic landscape tradition. Terence Maloon, in reviewing Susan Norrie's latest series of paintings *Tall tales and true*, while exalting himself in her renewed "attack on those prejudices", documents the general opinion that considers her work "cynical and 'off' ". ¹⁴

The feminist position of sexual 'difference' requires the disclosure or manifestation of a language or sensibility peculiarly 'feminine'. It is still working through its definitions, in response to, and within the practice of current women's art. The works in this exhibition suggest that the Gothic as an aesthetic and thematic paradigm, has a potency relevant to feminine expression today; and as a cultural trope, it is loaded for a discussion of the issues surrounding the question of 'difference'.

It is a singular fact that women have in the past, been amongst the most adept exponents of the genre in literary fiction - from Mrs Radcliffe and Mary Shelley to Emily Bronte - and that it primarily made its appeal to women. A fact Jane Austen includes in her satirical parody *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Isabella Thorpe is supplied with a reading list of "horrid" stories for her edification, by "a Miss Andrews, one of the sweetest creatures in the world". ¹⁵

Robyn McKenzie
November 1986

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FOOTNOTES

1. Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival*, 2nd ed., Constable, London, 1950, p.44. First published 1928.
2. John Summerson, "William Butterfield; or the Glory of Ugliness", in his *Heavenly Mansions*, Cresset Press, London, 1949, p.173.
3. Clark, *op. cit.*, p.11.
4. *Ibid*, p.42.
5. As quoted in Clark, *ibid.*, p.41.
6. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. I, London, 1851, Chapter XXI, paragraph 26.
7. From Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*, London, 1757. As quoted in Mario Praz, "Introductory Essay", *Three Gothic Novels*, Penguin, 1968, p.10.
8. Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1951. Chapter I: "The Beauty of the Medusa".
9. As quoted in Clark, *op. cit.*, pp.55-56.
10. Praz, *Three Gothic Novels*, *op. cit.*, p.12.
11. As written by Peacock to Shelley in 1818, quoted in Raymond Wright's Introduction to *Nightmare Abbey*, Penguin, 1969, p.17.
12. Thomas Love Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey*, Penguin, 1969, p.60.
13. Gary Catalano, Review: "Calendar views on a grand scale", *The Age*, Melbourne, Wednesday May 14, 1986, p.14.
14. Terence Maloon, Review: "Disney with a sombre touch", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, September 20, 1986, p.48.
15. As quoted in Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror*, Russell & Russell, New York, 1963, pp.128-129.

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CATALOGUE

JOANNA FLYNN

Born Moorine Rock, Western Australia, 1959, lives in Perth.

1. *Protestant Dream*, 1986
monoprint, 80.0 x 60.0
2. *Protestant Dream (Guilt)*, 1986
monoprint, 60.0 x 80.0
3. *Angel and a Sailor*, 1986
monoprint, 80.0 x 60.0
4. *A Rising Tide: Fear of Persuasion*, 1986
monoprint, 60.0 x 80.0

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

FIONA HALL

Born Sydney, 1953, lives in Adelaide.

5. *The Seven Deadly Sins*, 1984
Avarice; Pride; Envy; Anger; Gluttony; Lechery; Sloth
marionettes, xerox on card, 40.0 x 30.0 each

LIMITED EDITION, COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

FIONA MacDONALD

Born Rockhampton, Queensland, 1956, lives in Sydney.

6. *Excerpts from Luxury Lives No. VIII*, 1986
photo offset print collage, 122.0 x 76.0
7. *Excerpts from Luxury Lives No. X*, 1986
photo offset print collage, 122.0 x 76.0
8. *Excerpts from Luxury Lives No. XIV*, 1986
photo offset print collage, 122.0 x 76.0

THE ARTIST, COURTESY MORI GALLERY

JAN NELSON

Born Melbourne, 1955, lives in Melbourne.

9. *Orphan Rock*, 1986
oil on plywood, 274.0 x 213.0

THE ARTIST, COURTESY 70 ARDEN STREET MELBOURNE

SUSAN NORRIE

Born Sydney, 1953, lives in Sydney.

10. *Untitled*, 1986 (from *Tall tales and true*)
oil on plywood, 90.5 x 90.5
11. *Untitled*, 1986 (from *Tall tales and true*)
oil on plywood, 90.5 x 90.5

THE ARTIST, COURTESY MORI GALLERY

JOANNE RITSON

Born Pakenham, Victoria, 1956, lives in Melbourne.

12. *Madonna of The Garland*, 1986
oil on linen, 46.0 x 36.0
13. & Sheet of Prints: Four *Designs for Holy Cards of*
14. *The Virgin and Child*, with two *Ornamental Panels*, 1986
etching, 10.5 x 5.5 and 5.1 x 5.5 (respectively), total 47.0 x 28.0

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

VIVIENNE SHARK LeWITT

Born Sale, Victoria, 1956, lives in Melbourne.

15. *Nightmare Abbey*, 1985
oil on cigar box, 22.0 x 15.5

PRIVATE COLLECTION, MELBOURNE

16. *Charles Meryon the Voyeur. La Belle et La Bete*, 1983
acrylic on wood, two panels, total 35.0 x 60.0

COLLECTION OF VIVIENNE SHARPE, SYDNEY

ALL MEASUREMENTS ARE IN CENTIMETRES, HEIGHT BEFORE WIDTH.

