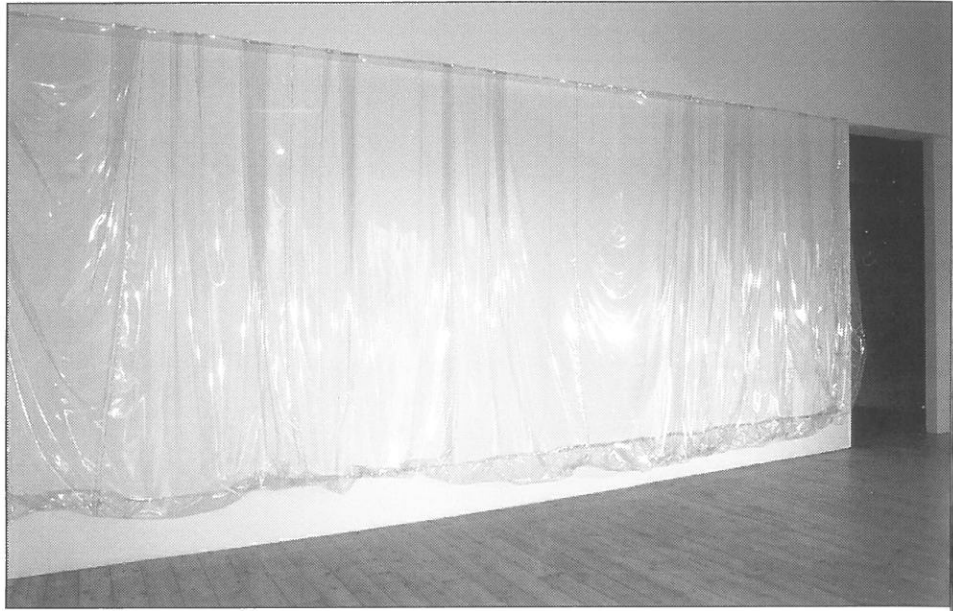


**prima donna**



*What do you want to know?*

What do you want to know about this exhibition? Let's start with the title. The dictionary defines prima donna as the most important female artist in an opera production or theatrical company. Yet the term also refers, more popularly, to a temperamentally self-important person. The four women artists included in this exhibition have more in common with the first rather than the second definition of the term, which playfully alludes to **Primavera**, the annual showcase of young contemporary artists at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The four artists in **prima donna**, selected from around the country, stand out from the chorus of others clamouring for attention. What makes them so distinctive is not the striking beauty or sophistication of their work, but a raw sensibility derived, in each instance, from an art practice grounded in the often trivial events and mundane concerns that fill our daily lives. Justene Williams's installation was inspired by something she saw on the street in the city; Yenda Carson's delicate glass objects are strangely domestic, comforting viewers with a warm glow; Megan Marshall's works experiment with plastic, one of the most ubiquitous materials in contemporary life while Ruth Watson's obsession with maps seems to suggest an ongoing confusion with her sense of place.

Composed almost entirely of plastic, Megan Marshall's artworks explore the experience of an impermanent and malleable world. The transparent nature of many of her works gives them a delicate beauty and raw sensuality, but it also creates the effect of a blank screen onto which the viewer is free to project dreams and desires; or on which images of the world are briefly captured and reflected in the dance of light. Art, like plastic, is often a product of imitation, it creates a representation of an image or object (hence the term 'the plastic arts'). Marshall's use of plastic doubles the representational act, employing moulded plastic objects as a sort of palimpsest, a surface of impression on which things are imprinted and erased, a bit like a video or cassette tape.

Transparency takes on a different function in the work of Yenda Carson who uses pieces of glass to create delicate sculptural objects that sit on the floor, illuminated from within by bright fluorescent lights. Some of her pieces recall stalagmites or jagged clumps of ice while others look more like beehives. One even resembles a cocoon. The works change from where and when they are viewed.

Megan Marshall **Untitled** (1996)



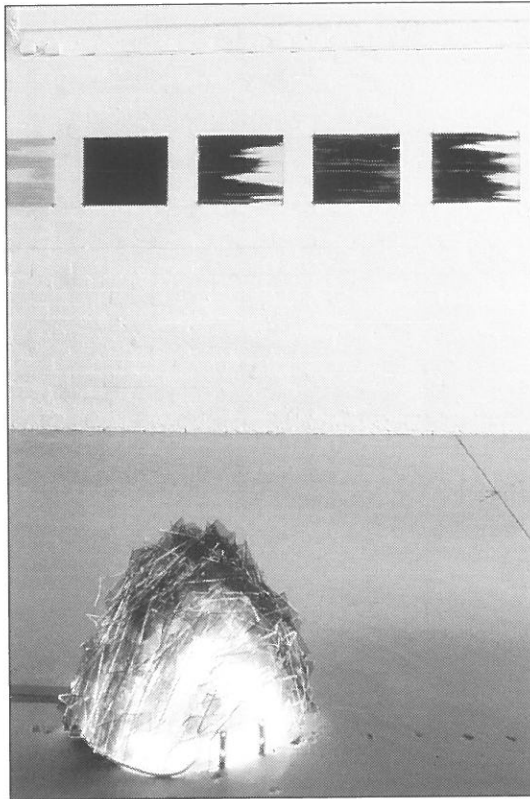
Justene Williams **Downstage** (1996)

From a distance, they resemble giant jewels. In the dark, the warm glow emanating from within is reminiscent of a television screen, flickering as the light filters through the layers of glass at different points. At other times they are more innocuous, blending into their surroundings like decorative ornaments. There is no sense of representation here. Carson's objects allude to simple emotions and experiences that transcend the materials themselves.

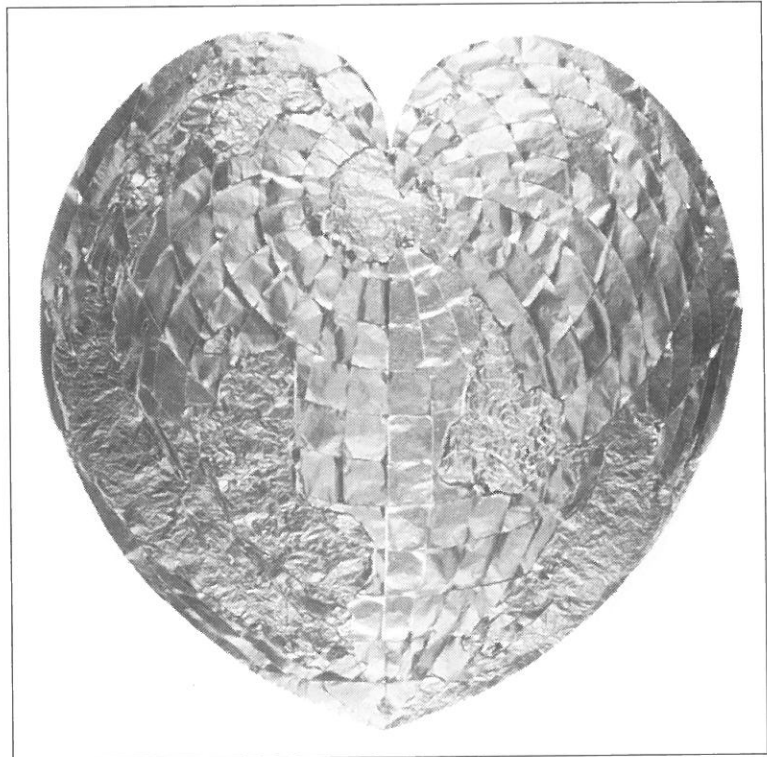
Justene Williams's photographs melt slowly and softly before the eyes. Taken spontaneously with cheap disposable cameras containing low-grade film, her abstract portraits of banal objects and suburban scenes mesmerise viewers with their rich colour and mysterious beauty. An earlier series of photographs titled **Can't Live Without Plastic** (1996) consisted of fourteen unrecognisable images exploring light and colour gradations and the purity of form. Williams's more recent photographs teeter on the border of abstraction, although now and then some objects and figures are discernible. For **prima donna** Williams has returned to installation art, creating a work out of the unusual combination of a plant, a luggage trolley and some placards resembling Real Estate signs. The overall effect of the work is similar to that of her photographs, eliciting a strong sense of familiarity yet no clear recognition of the subject matter.

Ruth Watson has spent the best part of a decade pouring over maps. Globes, however, are what really fascinate her. Some of her most successful pieces are based on Codiform Projections of the world. Popular throughout Europe and the Middle East during the Enlightenment, Codiform Projections appear in the shape of a heart, often with the South Pole at the top. The essence of Watson's works appears to be an exploration of our changing relationship to the world through changing representations of it. The heart-shaped projection embodies the idea of the romance of the past, a time when the world was thought by some to be shaped like a pear with a big round nipple on top. Watson's new work, **L'Ancien Regime** (1998), consists of a Codiform map made from gold chocolate-box paper. The material adds another dimension to the symbolism of romance, seducing viewers with its sparkling surface.

**Benjamin Genocchio**



Yenda Carson *Installation view* (1996)



Ruth Watson *L'Ancien Regime* (1998)

### **Prima donna**

Yenda Carson, Megan Marshall, Ruth Watson, Justene Williams  
Curator: Benjamin Genocchio

Gallery 4A

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3 - 19 September 1998

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