The Feminine: Five Patterns

MARGARET WEST TAKES AN INTIMATE LOOK AT THE WORK OF FIVE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

"I can't help but express the feminine"... Catherine Truman

THE FEMININE IS A COMPLEX AND SHIFTING CONSTRUCT, COMPRISING A MULTIPLICITY OF INTERPRETATIONS which affect and inform studio craft practices and elicit a wide range of responses to the consequent objects. Both *studio craft* and *the feminine* have influenced postmodern discourse, as they continue to be formed and informed by it. Although the roots of the construct may appear in constraining and often degrading patriarchal definitions, prescriptions and representations, today's pluralist critiques and aesthetics provide numerous vantage points and strategies, hence possible contracts with *the feminine*.

Without attempting to enter the debate about women's constitutive or *real* essences, styles or aesthetics, I engage with the *feminine* as the term in feminist theory usually applied to our social construction, as distinct from *female*, which is generally reserved for the biological aspects of sexual difference. *Masculine* is a social construct too, of course, with equal but different significance. The *feminine* has been scrutinised, analysed and discussed (laid bare) from a range of perspectives within feminist critiques and elsewhere. There are probably as many patterns of the *feminine* in practice as there are women makers. Maybe more. Some women undoubtedly engage in more than one way with the construct—as a deliberate strategy, or less consciously. To muddy the water further, it must be said that many men, also, engage with *the feminine*, just as women engage with *the masculine*.

To clarify. There are identifiable paradigms, which persist in spite of the many resistances that have been mounted against them. *Women are narcissistic; we want to be beautiful* (whether for ourselves or for *other* women or men may be argued). *Women turn houses into homes*. (In spite of the number of women in the traditional work-force, most domestic work is still done by women.) *Women care* (somebody has to—a biological imperative?) *Women hold potential (perform magic) within their bodies*. (As a biological actuality, this is irrefutable.) Whether we attempt to ignore the *feminine*, to subvert it, to resist it, to celebrate it, or merely acquiesce, we move within it, and almost certainly respond to it in one way or another. Cliches abound; but we can break rules, ignore cliches or conflate them into work. The domestic arena has been perceived as the proper place for both craft and women; and assumptions still exist about women's identification with craft in our roles of nurturing and producing within the home. It is opportune to revisit them, in the light of women's undoubted eminence in these cultural practices.

Seeking the influential role of *the feminine* in studio craft, I look at the patterns of making of five women whose work is affected by particular aspects of it. Susan Cohn's *Cosmetic Manipulations* deal with vanity, and turn the bizarre practices of surgical intervention into elegant jewellery. Liz Williamson draws on her experiences as the daughter of a farmer's wife who darned and embroidered to make life comfortable for her family. Gwyn Hanssen Pigott's families of porcelain pots coalesce dualities within the feminine. Rowena Gough's *Bandoliers* celebrate a family history of buttons and bridges. Catherine Truman's *Red Seas* turn wood into flesh, in an exploration of surface and interiority.

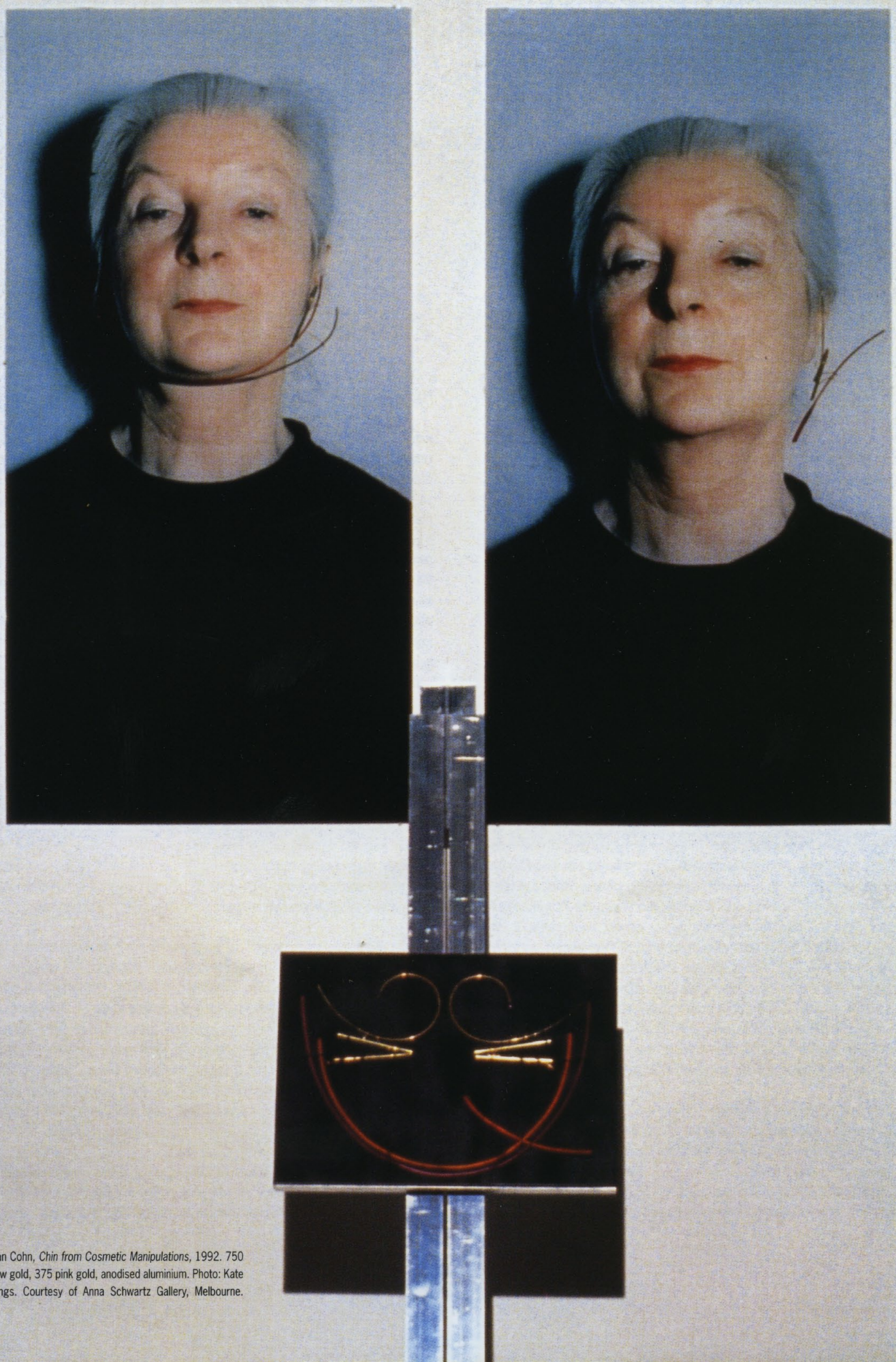
"the way we see ourselves"... Susan Cohn

Women are vain. (So are men; but it is less evident in the construct of *the masculine* than in that of *the feminine*). In our society we have certain stereotypes of beauty for women, in particular, proliferated and perpetuated in the media. The young are adored. Those not so young cast aside. We do not appear to admire (or even respect) character in a face, preferring whichever bland Barbie doll fashion dictates. There is a *use by* date written across the face of each one of us; and wrinkles, crows' feet and sagging chins as unmistakable signs of ageing are to be avoided, whatever the cost. Unable to move beyond the outward appearance of the self, so closely do we link it with self image and identity, we invest vast sums of money on cosmetics. The more serious or adventurous resort to cosmetic surgery, not merely to cut and snip and tuck away excess chins and smooth out wrinkles; but to straighten noses, neaten ears, reduce or enlarge breasts, even lengthen penises. But it is mostly women's business. That is to say, more women than men undertake to have cosmetic or plastic surgery; although most surgeons are men.

Cosmetic surgery is a secret. People who have undergone it usually go into retreat until all outward signs of intervention have faded, although I understand that this is changing and current tendencies suggest a time when it will be *de rigeur* to enliven dinner conversation with a snip by snip account of one's latest re-formation. Orlan, the French feminist performance artist, working at the intersection between identity, self and image, uses her own body as a site for social action and commentary. Under local anaesthetic or epidural, and working with a team of plastic and cosmetic surgeons, she stage manages every aspect of her reconstruction as well as its video recording. This is bizarre and gruesome work; and yet as life rather than art it is a regular occurrence. Orlan draws our attention to it so explicitly that the event becomes banal.

Susan Cohn is also a woman who has an interest in our behaviour; but she is a jeweller, with a jeweller's sensibilities and eye for elegance. She touches more lightly upon our perceptions of ourselves and the social games we play, attending particularly to the accoutrements of those games with purely ornamental Walkman headphones, tiny clip-on microphones, long aerial brooches, key-cards and identity bracelets—all in anodised aluminium. Her *Cosmetic Manipulations* (1992) tweak impishly at mores and assumptions, as well as at noses, ears and the corners of eyes. Some women became distressed when viewing the work in exhibition; but there is nothing either grotesque or banal about it; and nothing sexist either. The installed works were photographed on men as well as women.

The four works in the series consist of vibrant curves of thin anodised aluminium wire, combined with gold clips which are modelled on the tiny stainless steel ones used by cosmetic surgeons. They may be worn as brooches, lapel pins, button replacements,



Susan Cohn, *Chin from Cosmetic Manipulations,* 1992. 750 yellow gold, 375 pink gold, anodised aluminium. Photo: Kate Gollings. Courtesy of Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

Liz Williamson, *Undulations* (detail), 1995. Handwoven wrap in wool, wool blend, wool lycra, nylon, monofilament. Photo: Ian Hobbs.

ear ornaments; but they may also be worn on the face itself. A sweeping zigzag of red or green wire passes through a clip attached to the bridge of the nose and presses against the lower nose in order to straighten it, or politely hold one nostril closed. A slender blue wire passes round the back of the head and through clips attached to the ears, tensioned to pull them back neatly. A delicate gold clip pulls taut the skin near the temple, erasing crows' feet. To further enhance the effect, one of three wires—a bold sweep of purple or a curve of brilliant green or red—may be threaded through the clip, defining a browline, a surgeon-jeweller's mark. When the clip is removed a discreet scar remains while the skin relaxes into its usual configuration. Closely bound curls of gold wire on what were earclips pass over the ears like spectacles, while the clips hold red and purple wires, forged flat where they pass beneath the chin, eradicating evidence of excesses in food or years. The work is witty, but amicable rather than acerbic. Any discomfort is no more than that of clip on-earrings, not in the same league as piercing—even earlobes! These urbane renderings remind us of our own more barbaric practices associated with those beauty conventions of manipulation, distortion, what some might see as disfigurement or downright butchery.

So, what are the particular qualities that allow this work to tantalise and tease, rather than taunt and bludgeon, that create its intriguing combination of piquancy and gentility? Although Susan Cohn is commenting upon our vanity and our stereotypical perception of beauty, she is also taking delight in our *feminine* pursuits. She is laughing *with* as much as at those who engage with them.

And she has the finely honed skills and sensibilities of a jeweller. Her solutions are sophisticated, both in their engineering and their aesthetic resolution. *Cosmetic Manipulations* are indeed jewels. With their refined gold elements and gem-like colours they appear to operate innocuously within that most decorous area of traditional jewellery. Although jewels can be ostentatious, these manipulations are discreet, or may be as discreet as the wearer decides to make them. In their subtlety and their acuity, they both arm and dis-arm. Performing on many levels they appear as social commentary, as accomplished engineering, as elegant jewellery, as aesthetic objects, as humour.

In the photographs, which resemble cosmetic surgeons' *before and after* shots, the works are modelled by men and women whose faces reveal that they have lived, have character, as well as almost incidentally disclosing the ravages of time. By subtly drawing attention to *imperfections* Susan Cohn celebrates them as evidence of the unique. Her work brings to a fine, jewelled point the tension between the uncompromising precision of the surgeon and human vulnerability; the chill of metal against defenceless flesh. Jewellers have always walked this path; and it has been a symptom of *the feminine* in our culture.

"Mother darned and embroidered"... Liz Williamson

I take delight in winter. It is then that I can wear one of Liz Williamson's scarves. I wrap it around my neck and shoulders like a warm embrace. I feel its texture, watch the play of light on its undulations, muse on the subtlety of colours; and am occasionally jolted out of my reverie by glimpses of an unpredictable colour—one I had forgotten was there. This is what Liz Williamson wants. She wants people to be comforted and delighted by her woven works, demonstrating the care and concern for the well-being of others that we have come to regard as part of *the feminine*.

Liz Williamson explores surface distortion in her woven textiles. By selectively combining and juxtaposing yarns that will change and react in the finishing process with those less susceptible, she achieves selective shrinking, stretching, slackening, felting, causing the material to crumple, wrinkle, pucker, undulate, twist. Some of her works take the form of scarves and wraps, which she calls *coverings for body and soul*. Others are installation works, aptly named *Landworks* (1994-5)—*Lie of the Land, Land Folds, Rises, On the Rise*. They rise and fall, hump and hollow, undulating through rich and subtle fields of colour and texture. In her earlier work, in a deliberate engagement with the structure of weaving, the grid formed by warp and weft was carried through into bold rectilinear patterns of colour. More recently she has used this grid to determine the intersection between one textural field and another, as well as between colour and colour, tone and tone, creating an entire landscape (or farmscape).

Liz Williamson is beguiled by the history of use and wear that older things develop and demonstrate. She has managed to imbue her new works with this patina. Her specially dyed colours are often mixed or overdyed creating tarnished, burnt, smoky subtleties. Her textures are soft, crumpled, with the amenability of old and favoured garments. She finds opportunities to make holes, unpicking then felting the edges, like ready-made moth holes. She cuts or burns holes, sometimes in order to darn them up again, building a worn and repaired quality into newly woven, sound textile. Repair speaks of care. It demonstrates the touch of a diligent hand, for one only bothers to darn something that is valued. We need not fear to handle or crush her work, for its leniency aptly complements today's more casual lifestyle, wearing its history of past handling graciously, warmly inviting our collaboration in its future.

Liz Williamson grew up on a farm. She returns there regularly to visit and occasionally to help with the work of farming. She is familiar with the range of patterns in colour and texture created by the seasons and by the use to which various areas of land are put. More than merely seeing them, she has experienced them—felt dried grass, lush pasture, crumbling earth, scratchy bush; and those who touch her work, as we do, for textiles are one of the most touched things in our lives, learn something of the feel of the land, as well as being reminded of or introduced to the subtleties and surprises of its appearance.

As a farmer's wife Liz Williamson's mother worked with care and ingenuity to make life comfortable for her family. This has been the tradition. In hard times on the land in Australia, women have *made do* with great resourcefulness and creativity. Quilts or *waggas* that were made to provide warmth and comfort, as well as to add an individual element of decoration to any room, often consisted of a top layer neatly stitched together to form a patchwork of worsted woollen rectangles retrieved from suiting sample books. The under layer might have been made from an old and well darned blanket, or even sugar bags sewn together, while carefully deployed and stitched old woollen clothes provided a warm filling. Liz Williamson has childhood memories of old *waggas* being used as floor mats. She remembers her mother making patchwork quilts, as well as clothes. Nothing was thrown away. She watched her mother darning—a practical task of repairing applied not only to a patch worn thin or a hole in clothes but to canvas irrigation pipes—a task undertaken with diligence and pride. After the day's chores were done, her mother sat down to embroider the clothes she made—making them *special*. Liz Williamson says "She made nice things". (As her mother's daughter, Liz Williamson also makes nice things).

As the daughter of a farmer who worked the land, and a farmer's wife who darned and repaired, Liz Williamson makes work that clearly demonstrates her heritage. The process of working with fibre is often perceived as women's work. Since the Middle Ages textiles have been associated with feminine ideals and constraints; and weaving is one of the craft practices most strongly associated with *the feminine*. While Liz Williamson's work bears witness to her understanding of and affinity with the land, more particularly it demonstrates her place within a lineage of women weavers as well as painters. Those who have embraced the rectilinear as a strategy of abstraction, demonstrating the pervasiveness of weaving through other forms of practice.

"they are known by heart"... Gwyn Hanssen Pigott

Gwyn Hanssen Pigott is a potter who makes wood-fired porcelain. Her pots are exhibited singly or in groups of up to eleven pieces, combining bottles, jugs, beakers, cups and bowls. She gives these groups titles such as *Quiet still life, Still life with pale jugs, Cream still life with dark jug, Three silent bowls* (1995). As well as engaging with the essentially domestic (and so predominantly *feminine*) genre of the still life and the interior, these

works are family portraits. The individual pots clearly relate one to another as members of a family, each of whose singularity has been noted with affection. We are led to the idea of the jug by a pout that has been gently stroked into the wet clay on one side of the mouth. Apart from the appearance of the groups, the paradox of the title is pertinent. *Still* is not alive and *life* is not still. The beakers, cups and bowls are not static; they waver with the slightest eccentricity, reminding us of the movement of the potter's wheel, where the centred appears still, the eccentric draws our attention to movement. This sensitises us to subtle nuances of form, and allocates a position of honour for the unique and the imperfect, much in the manner of a Japanese tea bowl. It might also be read as a demonstration of *the feminine*, caring for all members of a family, especially those less *regular* than others.

Gwyn Hanssen Pigott's work recalls the abidingly *feminine* domain of the domestic. Her pots speak of nourishing and nurturing, of care and warmth, of hospitality. They invite intimacy. They are almost familiar. We want to pick them up to hold and pour or drink from them; but precisely arranged and titled *Still life with white beaker, Gentle still life*, they remain remote, aloof as any work of art. As with the warm serenity of a Vermeer, we may yearn to move beyond the frame; but, as with any item in an art gallery, we know we may contemplate but we must not touch. Until recently none of the pieces had handles; but in *Parade with yellow cup* a handle appears on the cup in question, like an invitation or a temptation, the promise of seduction, or perhaps a taunt or a teasing joke. *Feminine* territory indeed!

Gwyn Hanssen Pigott's works are deceptive in their almost reductive simplicity. They are in fact complex and replete with allusions to the construct or condition of *the feminine*. The translucency and loss of colour in their fine rims make the pots appear fragile, susceptible. The pale lips speak with extreme yet slightly eccentric delicacy; but the forms themselves are generously full and have monumental strength, in spite of their domestic scale. This is partly achieved through their tautness of form. There is no flaccid line, no gratuitous enhancement. Their quiet strength is enlivened by the resonance of their colour. The only clue to vulnerability is in the slight waver of the lips.

The emphasis on interiority is a trait of *the feminine*, as well as a biological actuality of *the female*. The pale lips of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott's pots speak of the line between interiority and exteriority. In *Black Mountain still life* three conical bottles rise glistening blackly from behind jugs, beakers and bowls. The evocation of landscape is powerful, yet subtle, developed through the juxtaposition of title with expectation, and the configuration of the pots, which suggest the layering of mountains behind hills or rocks. They are brown and burnt siennas, umbers, sepias, anthracite, with aubergine and mauve. A glimpse of pale blue is sighted on the inside of one jug, sealing the landscape metaphor in a patch of sky. But more revealing is the glow of light passing through the fine, translucent rim of each jug and beaker and bowl, gently but insistently drawing our attention to the change between the inside and the outside. A lilac-brown jug has a rich tan interior; a bowl that is tan on the outside is dark greyish sepia on the inside; a rich brown-red beaker has a red-brown interior—a switch so subtle that we might have thought it a trick of light if not for the pallor of the rim.

In her use of colour Gwyn Hanssen Pigott develops yet another dimension to her works. Clearly, through the way they look as well as through the names they bear, they invoke the heritage of still life painting—the passion for the domestic, the carefully observed and even more carefully developed and deployed qualities of form and line, the nuances of tone and colour and texture. But, beyond that, associations of form with colour create the individual persona and temper of each member of the group. The colours in each grouping move with care out of the monochromatic into close harmony. One group, aptly named *Silent still life*, is predominantly white, with a glaze the colour of palest celadon on the outside of a bowl and inside of a jug, while the yellow of pale butter appears on the outside of another bowl, inside one jug and outside another. *Parade with Yellow Cup* is also a white work with pale yellow appearing on the exterior of one jug, and interior of another, as well as two beakers and the cup after which the work is named. The glaze is glossy, giving the pots the appearance of wetness associated with the process of their making or use, whereas in *Gentle still life* the glaze is matt, almost crystalline and palely off-white. The work might be called ethereal; but the generous swelling of the forms will not allow of it.

"Granny's button box... Grandpa's garage"... Rowena Gough

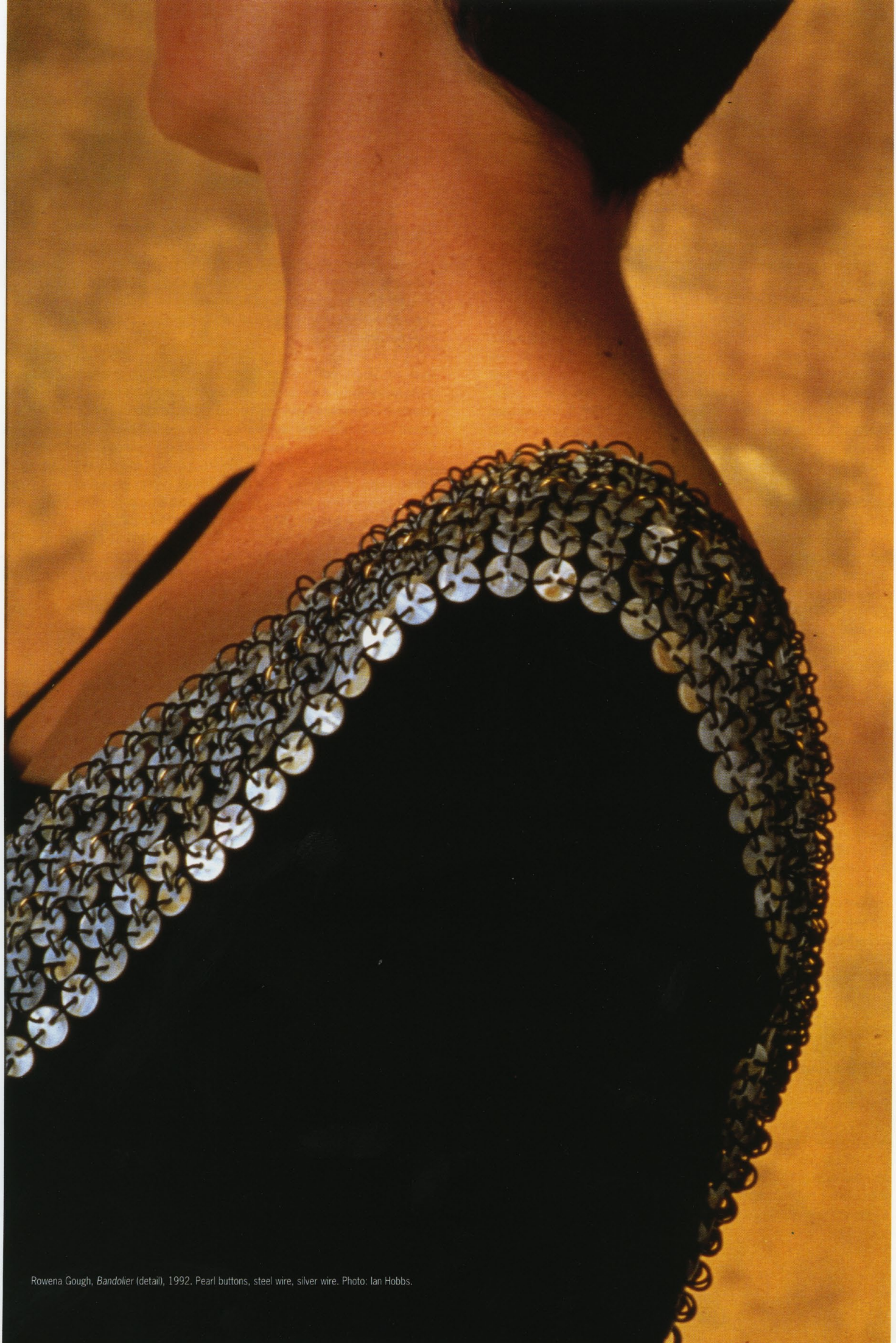
According to the Oxford Dictionary a *bandolier* is a shoulder belt with loops or pockets for cartridges. But Rowena Gough is a jeweller and her *Bandoliers* (1992-3) are made from antique pearl buttons linked together with wire. They are worn slung diagonally from shoulder to hip, falling with fluid grace across the body. In this, they could be called *feminine*.

When she was a child Rowena Gough joined her family in holiday visits to her grandparents' house in the country—a journey back into family history. In the evenings, drawers of embroidered doilies were opened and the beautiful and painstaking work was passed from hand to hand with murmurs of admiration, reminiscent of times when women in the family did their embroidery by the light of a kerosene lamp, after the day's tasks were finished. Her grandmother (like my grandmother) had a large collection of buttons, many of which had come down through several generations—jars of tiny buttons, crazy Art Deco glass buttons, buttons saved from old garments, coat buttons, suit buttons and small pearl buttons. Rowena Gough took delight in playing with 'Granny's button box'. She sorted the buttons according to colour and shape; she learned to count with them; she put them into jars and threaded them onto strings, fascinated with the way they felt, their tactile patterns, their weight, the sounds they made as she sifted through them or shook them against one another. But she also loved to visit 'Grandpa's garage', which was filled with a wondrous collection of old tools, hammers, saws, files, planes, drills.

Her mother, who worked as a tailor, seamstress and embroiderer, taught her to sew, to knit and crotchet from an early age. Rowena Gough took great pride in developing her skill in these traditional *feminine* crafts. She is an expert dressmaker herself. But she has other interests. One is a fascination with structure and design, with architecture, perhaps developed during family trips overseas when much time was spent "looking at bridges with Dad". Her father was an engineer. It is not surprising that Rowena Gough became a jeweller. The use of tools and a grasp of small scale engineering skills are fundamental to the design and construction of jewellery, just as a sense of finery and a sympathetic understanding of the physical and psychological relationship between wearable objects and the body informs its conceptual development.

The *bandoliers*, of which ten variants exist, are made from antique pearl buttons one centimetre in diameter, which have been formed into a grid seven buttons wide by circular wire links the same diameter as the buttons themselves, duplicating them visually while lending emphasis to the formality of the grid. The eight centimetre wide and one meter long strip is twisted once so that the front and back are linked together in a mobius strip. Variations are accomplished through the use of different metals for linking—sometimes steel, sometimes silver, occasionally gold. In one *bandolier* a small cross of gold links is surrounded by a larger cross of steel, while remaining buttons are linked with silver wire. One is linked with half steel and half silver running the length of the strip and reversing where it is joined. One is linked with steel, except for a line of silver links running along the centre. In another the line is gold. A pearl button is replaced by a gold one in a grid made with plain steel links.

Most of Rowena Gough's *bandoliers* are in collections; but she still owns three. When I see her wearing one, I am impressed by the work's *feminine* elegance. The gentle glow of the buttons and the fluid movement are very sensuous. The considerable but not uncomfortable weight makes its fall from shoulder across the heartline to the opposite hip almost voluptuous. And yet I have seen Rowena Gough working on these pieces. I know the grime and effort that had to be endured to produce such work, making silver and gold wire for the links. I have seen her hands raw and aching from the effort of



Rowena Gough, *Bandolier* (detail), 1992. Pearl buttons, steel wire, silver wire. Photo: Ian Hobbs.

Catherine Truman, *Red Seas* (detail), 1994. English lime, shu niku ink. Photo: Grant Hancock.

working steel wire into hundreds of links; and the buttons, retrieved from a second-hand dealer, had to be cleaned before each one had two more holes drilled in order to link them into a grid—a gritty and exacting process, which apart from the technology employed, is reminiscent of the traditional work of Pacific Island women, making shell necklaces. Rowena Gough's engagement with this labour is deliberate. She places a high value on the family, on womens' work, on conservation through recycling materials, and on her heritage as a maker on the rim of the Pacific basin.

The *bandoliers* hang around the body like a sash. They drape and fall as garments. We put buttons on garments. Small pearl buttons speak of delicate, intimate garments, of blouses, shirts, of children's clothes. Pearl buttons are not only a special finishing touch, they are a means of fastening, of keeping garments closed, protecting the wearer from the viewer as well as from the elements, observing the niceties of decorum. However the juxtaposition of pearl buttons with steel wire challenges this gentle domestic history. And expectations and assumptions about the strength and intractability of steel are gently pushed, as it becomes associated with thread in linking the buttons.

Row upon row of buttons form a grid, invoking mathematical precision—*hard* science—as well as the mystery of the mobius strip, which is subverted in its turn by the way the formal structure drapes, conforming to the body beneath it and to the pull of gravity. The process of linking is a jewellery process. It is also used to make chain mail armour. These *bandoliers* are jewels, they are garments, they are finery, they are *feminine* armour.

"a kind of exquisite pain"... Catherine Truman

Nine red patches on the wall—in a row, pieces of wood a hundred centimetres square and about as thick as a finger, some almost flat, others flexing, heaving, humping or hollowing. All carved, and all stained red. Surely they represent flesh. But I see from the title that Catherine Truman calls them *Red Seas* (1994). So they shift. Flesh becomes water for the moment and I perceive that sometimes it is almost flat calm, barely disturbed by a breeze or the pull of the moon or the subtle movement of fish beneath the surface. One piece is a section from the trough of a swell. One surges with two waves. One laps gently. A smooth, unstained *skin* folds over the top third of the last one but then flicks back its corner to reveal the red ripples again. The seas she has carved are reminiscent of those in Japanese woodcuts, in their highly formalised yet carefully observed patterns. They also resemble wood grain. So why do I see them as flesh?

Meticulously carved from English lime, adapting the craft of *netsuke*, which Catherine Truman studied in Japan, to a larger format, they have on their surface fine lines that might be wavelets or clusters of muscle fibre, beneath which they distend or shrink like waves or sections carved from still writhing, palpitating flesh. I have seen whale meat being cut neatly into squares just like these, only much larger. Less exquisite. Less lyrical. The vermilion stain of *shu niku* ink does not bleed into the wood, or if it does, the edges have been sanded clean, leaving no evidence of seepage. I have checked the edges carefully, for here may be a clue; but they reveal little other than clean and smoothly sanded surfaces, moving with the profile of waves or troughs, biceps or pectorals.

Perhaps the clue lies earlier in Catherine Truman's work. In the mid eighties, pursing her interest in the processes and effects of ageing—in particular the manner in which ageing women are perceived and portrayed in our society—she carved a series of wooden fish. The fact that fish do not age as we understand it but merely grow larger according to the available space and food was pertinent (as well as the pejorative use of the term *fish* to describe women!) The works took the form of brooches and neckpieces. In some pieces the wood was so subtly worked that it was unclear whether the maker or age and weathering were the agents that had formed them; but one thing was apparent—the flesh of the tree, the wood, was not merely a material from which to carve the fish, it had become a metaphor for the flesh of the fish itself. The two were indistinguishable—flesh and wood.

In 1992 Catherine Truman first exhibited her *Lifeboat* carvings. Here are further clues. Boats approximately twenty centimetres long, carved from wood were variously stained red with hanko ink, painted, limed, or charred. Sometimes the exterior of a boat resembled skin. Between longitudinal planks glimpses of red appeared as evidence of incisions running the length of one boat, repaired with small metal sutures. The boats appeared enigmatically juxtaposed with fish, carved from wood or mother of pearl. In the boats, as well as in the fish, the conjugation of interior and exterior is particularly intense and draws attention to the pain associated with the flesh. In *Evidence of the Soft Body Within* a fish and a boat lie side by side with their insides revealed. We are used to this. Used to seeing the inside of a boat, to seeing gutted fish. But here the exposure is made relentless by the red stain that cries out from the interior of the forms. In another work carved mother of pearl fish lie beside a boat. The red interior of the boat spills over to stain the outside and each fish has a red gash in its side. The quotation from Angela Carter in the title *No paint nor powder; no matter how thick or white can mask this red mark...* is reminiscent of Lady Macbeth desperately dreaming of removing blood from her hands.

When Catherine Truman carves wood she transforms English lime into water. She stains the water vermilion with ink. The water becomes blood. The wood becomes flesh. But the swell and the waves, the ripples and undulations, remember the grain of the wood as well as the water they have now become. Stained red, they are muscle fibre. They might also be hair. The chunks of wood (or flesh) rise and fall, sometimes viscid, sometimes flowing or gushing; but in their solid state they move to the very matter of the body itself—body as sacrament; but body which has been cut with implacable precision, rather than broken, for every aspect of the form, every mark on each surface, bears witness to the action of a hand holding a blade. The act of cutting, whether wood or flesh, is irrevocable.

Flesh and blood have particular significance for women. Cutting, exposing, suturing, reverberate with the history of women's anguish. The stain of red is something with which women are familiar, as they are with pain, which they know intimately. Interiority is a physical fact of the *female*, as well as an aspect of *the feminine* that has been both eulogised and despised. Catherine Truman understands this, as she understands that surface and detail are never superficial and can only be known and understood through intimacy. Their revelation moves the interior into a known space. Although the works reveal anguish, their essentially lyrical nature renders pain exquisite, and makes all the more poignant the exposure of flesh.

Catherine Truman's vision is both political and poetic; her craft meticulous. Their confluence moves securely, lapping and tugging at feminist issues, as her practice flows broadly between the banks of several genres. As a jeweller who carves, she understands the elements of matter that go to make up the relationship between the body of the wearer and that of the material being used. This is particularly evident when wood is subjected to the most subtle transformation in order to make it into another body—that of fish, or of the maker herself.

* * *

They conspire with us in our vanity. They remind us that women are homemakers. They tease with feminine wiles. They knowingly reveal flesh. These women claim feminine paradigms, developing them with particular nuances—each making them uniquely her own.

Susan Cohn's critical (feminist) position towards the stereotyping of beauty is tempered by a sympathetic understanding of human foibles. Her *Cosmetic Manipulations* offer us a gentle (which might be seen as *feminine*) option. No blood is spilled. We can have our chins and shed them. Investing in the arts of weaving, darning, dressmaking, needlework, Liz Williamson and Rowena Gough reclaim the feminine territory of their mothers and grandmothers, incorporating the project of conserving its values with the development of their own careers as professional makers. The embrace of a Liz

Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, *Silent still life,* 1994. Wood fired porcelain. Photo: Tim Marshall. Courtesy of Rex Irwin Art Dealer, Sydney.

Williamson wrap is less familial as a result of her plying together threads of home, the professional weaver's studio and the institution of the gallery. Her family is larger, but less known. Rowena Gough celebrates feminine histories and takes delight in the feminine arts of dressing up with her *bandoliers,* which also arm both maker and wearer—against assumptions, perhaps—with their embrace of hard science as well as the *softer* feminine arts. In her meditations on the family, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott declares and verifies her *knowing* association with it, through the very matter from which it is made, raising clay into families of pots. Vessels appear as the issue of her playful affection for the *feminine.* And Catherine Truman re-awakens anguish in order to discover the exquisite and re-affirm not only her feminist critique but her feminine being. Asserting the biological potential of women's bodies, she exposes the body as a site of mystery and mortification. In the re-enactment of each irrevocable cut, flesh is reconstituted, *the feminine* reconstructed.

Making work, we make ourselves. The process is reflexive and cumulative. The action moves from maker as subject to work as object, twists (once) and turns to rejoin and reform the maker (as its object). Through their expression of personally unique nuances as well as general paradigms of *the feminine,* these women re-make themselves in the image of their work. They bend and colour, weave and darn, shape and glaze, link and twist, carve and stain themselves into its likeness. Through careful attentiveness to the particular requirements of their practices, they craft their objects, their lives and themselves. And these women do care. Moving beyond the traditional demands of their craft, they fervently draw on the threads of their feminine heritage, to pass them through the exacting needle's eye of the present.

How much of their work is a dialogue with *the feminine?* How much a critical response to it? How much reflects their own femininity? We can only speculate and embroider upon such evidence as there is, which shifts with the reflection of our (own) looking.

Does the mirror of Susan Cohn's *Cosmetic Manipulations* reflect the behaviour of other people, or simply her own vanity? Is her critique so elegant, so discreet, that the issue is glossed over with gold and jewel-like colours? And the caring response of the mother held within the wraps of Liz Williamson: does this express her own femininity or record that of her mother? By removing it from the home and relocating it in the studio and gallery does she banish or elevate it? Gwyn Hanssen Pigott might be celebrating the family, or sending it up. Her pots are empty and almost still. Almost silent. Yet we remember gibes about empty vessels, as well as their potential. And what of Rowena Gough's *bandoliers*—finery that is armour, named after an accessory of war? Do they reflect an aspect of *the feminine* or merely expose the maker's apprehension? Catherine Truman's work clearly develops from within feminist critiques of the manner in which women have been perceived and treated; but, holding the blade, is she not transformed from victim to perpetrator?

The projects of these women cannot be dissociated from current debate, cogently developed in recent publications [1]. Neither can they be disconnected from histories of *the feminine.* They (we) are bound to re-interpret and re-present it, without necessarily dismissing, disparaging or celebrating it. In fact, without appearing oppressed or disaffected by their *feminine* heritage, they are gracious in their acknowledgment of it. Their work occupies a political as well as a poetic, aesthetic and at times utilitarian dimension, for their decision to engage with *the feminine,* rather than deny it, must be seen, today, as political. As women who may choose to weave or not to weave, to sew buttons or turn them into armour with steel wire, to endure their objectification or make merry with it, to be chained to the routine of domestic hospitality or send it into exile as a still life, to suffer fleshly anguish with due discretion or reveal it, their embrace of *the feminine* is generous. Their work, as well as their patterns of making, reverberate with its histories. From its inception, each piece is inscribed with these histories, which are claimed and re-written by the makers, while they position and re-make themselves. And we re-write them, and re-invent ourselves, with each new reading.

endnotes

1. Such as *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts—1970-90,* edited by Catriona Moore, published by Allen & Unwin and Artspace, Sydney, Australia, 1994.

- **This essay is dedicated to Peter Dormer.**

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