

Neo-neo feminisms

Is feminism dead, we of a certain generation ask ourselves? The younger breed look with awe and a little pity at what they see as a rapidly ageing older generation, for whom this question would even be an issue. Work/life balance, equality in the workplace, equal pay for equal rights: these are all feminist issues whose outcomes have (theoretically) been resolved, of a time and a period relegated to the dim dark past. Germaine Greer and Kate Millett are now studied as historic leaders of movements, grand dames of a past time, whose significance has, perhaps, somewhat paled with our belief in a better, and more equal place. We are more comfortable with our bodies so we say, and that we owe in large part to an earlier generation of feminists, whose writing and radicalism shifted generations of women's thinking on the personal as politic. Traditional women's work is now revered as high art (in some circles), and Stitch and Bitch groups are open to men.

And what, we might ask, does this have to do with an exhibition by two Melbourne artists Lauren Berkowitz and Starlie Geikie? As was first suggested to me in discussions about the show, this could be the neo-neo feminist exhibition that we had to have. At a time when notions of an exclusively feminist practice seem somewhat redundant, the exhibition joins together two generations of female artists with apparently radically divergent interpretations of the feminine. ,. Berkowitz and Geikie's practice explores and encapsulates many of the elements that have, in the past, been associated with a feminist perspective. Stitching, sewing, gathering and collecting, making use of the often discarded and humble object, they create something that is redolent of a sensory perception of the past, a residual memory that acts as an index of the past as lived within the present. Recycling, retrieval, trace and memory all play a part in each artist's practice, though with radically different impetus and outcomes.

Over the years, Berkowitz' work has focused on themes related to the environment and its precarious fragility. Recent floor installations combine the structured framework of Minimalist and Abstractionist grids, lines and circular formations with a series of ecological and domestic references. Likened to exotic tapestries, or domestic rugs, flowers, food, and natural elements more traditionally associated with the feminine are collected, ordered and incorporated into these structured frameworks. This is not so much feminist or feminine, as a desire for order and control imposed on the organic and unruly. Does the association with the domestic – ordering and repetitive, thankless tasks, make it feminist? Berkowitz suggests that these materials allude to fertility, growth and

regeneration. The ironies are that she sets organic, uncontrollable elements into a tightly formed patterning and draws on the aesthetics of an artistic period that was largely propagated and remembered by male endeavour. Her work both attempts to control and place order on the organic and the ungovernable, as well as reclaim aesthetic territory for the feminine. And yet, the ordered in nature will rapidly revert to the wild without careful husbandry.

Berkowitz' earlier sculptural works embodied similar ideas of retrieval. However her interest appeared to lie more in the idea of collecting and recycling than the creation of order from chaos. Collections and orderings of onion sacks, bags, bottles, jars, rubber gloves, glycerine soap, plastic and paper bags owed much to ideas of *arte povera*, highlighting our consumerist lives, focused on the economy of expenditure and exchange. Berkowitz suggests that these are the remains, the detritus if you want, of repetitive daily rituals of shopping, eating and cleaning. This of course is true, but the compulsive collecting and ordering implies a fascination with preservation as much as a material tracery of excess and obsolescence. The structuralist frameworks of organic material, and the earlier collections and ordering of waste suggest a desire to allow some sort of sensory perception to resurface from the past, triggered by the objects and their ordering.

Geikie has long worked with topics more readily associated with the feminine, or female in her explorations of the relationship between formalism and the body. An early video work of a performance both repetitive and controlledly frenzied explored notions of hysteria and repressed emotion, as does the black cast sculptures of arm and hand. Much can be read from a person's hand, so what does a series of radiating limbs, starfish-like in their geometric formation, tell us of repressed emotion, clenched frenzy and enforced acquiescence? Her smaller, more intimate works on paper reference historically female genres of literary type and text, such as Gothic novels, horror schlock, historical romances and the sub-genre of female pot-boiler fiction. No longer do they need to be written under a male pseudonym or passed surreptitiously from hand to hand. The genre, however, is subverted again by Geikie who adopts and adapts elements from literary fictions in a series of drawings using various text, collage, and fonts more reminiscent of a Hell's Angel bikie banner, or the record cover albums for heavy metal music. Like Berkowitz, Geikie similarly collects, orders, structures and re-works cultural detritus, though the inspirations, and outcomes, differ greatly. The discarded tat and scavenged ephemera that she collects and sources - crochet rugs and patchwork quilts, knitting patterns, ponchos and macramé string, local studio pottery and chunky goblets - each in its own way an object revered for a period of time and now quaintly historic.

Geikie is equally fascinated by the precarious balance between immutability and ephemerality, evocation and loss, utopia and dystopia.

Geikie has long been interested in the overlap between formalism and 'craft art', exploring the gendered world of embroidery and quilting in previous shows. Whilst in America in 2006, Geikie visited an exhibition of Gee's Bend quilts at a museum in San Francisco. Known for their geometric simplicity reminiscent of Amish quilts and modern art, she was drawn to them as much for their order and patterning, as the associations of creating something structured and systematised out of odds and ends of discarded waste. Whilst today, quilting in some circles has become the high art of craft, with shops specialising in expensively cut and custom made fabric, in the past, its associations were far more humble. Attempting to recapture their original sentiment and sensibility, Geikie has rendered many of these quilt patterns in a series of grey lead pencil drawings on off-white paper. No longer are they a geometric testament to order and shape, but they float, oriental carpet-like on sheets of rough-torn paper, their very bumps and uneven edges alluding to a life of domestic wear and sentimental associations.

Adjacent to these drawings is a sculptural object. Tetrahedral in shape, with its four triangular sides, the form is made of finely stained wooden timber rods that sit lightly on a wooden base. Its interior void is further broken up into smaller geometric shapes, a study in mathematical geometry as well as a reference to the patchwork templates on which the quilt patterns are based. The reference to the hand-made quilts is reinforced by the subtly shifting shades and tones of the stained wooden shapes that make up the whole, and the three wooden pegs that appear to pin together the three faces of the geometric form. The quality of craftsmanship evokes American Shaker traditions of woodwork akin to the patterns and shapes of Amish quilt making. Though it references craftmaking traditions, and aspects of female employment, Geikie's sculptural object reminds me more of a Sol LeWitt abstracted construct than the hand-crafted traditions which have influenced the artist. As with Berkowitz, the dichotomy of the feminine and the abstract is ever-present.

For this exhibition, Berkowitz has returned to her gathering and ordering of consumerist excess, creating two different installations from off-cuts and discarded ends – the circular leather remains from the industrial manufacture of cricket balls, and net bags used for hanging and preserving meats and delicatessen and smallgoods. This is not the first time that Berkowitz has used leather off-cuts. But this new work, *Spinning Webs*, is a toxic riot of fluorescent hues. Yellow, pink, white and orange

all jostle together in a competing layering of veils and skins, knotted together with nylon thread, not unlike a surgeon stitching together subcutaneous layers of fat and filament underneath the enveloping skin. If *Dystrophy* (1997), her previous exploration using the vermilion leather cricket-ball off-cuts, was the visceral body-like form hanging limp and flayed in the corner of the room, Berkowitz now presents the super-structure, or epidermis, complete with skin and fat, gristle and bone. This is the body, as explored by Helen Chadwick, in all its order and disease, its very toxicity caused by our continued pursuit of consumerist excess. Women's work, perhaps, this stitching, but the violence of raw edge and rough-cut end belies the domestic association.

Residual Forms is an ethereal, ghostly, diaphanous layering of whites and greys, each sinew of uneven gridded mesh and dangling thread suspended from the ceiling. Its effect not dissimilar to a ghostly cascade of Old Man's Beard hanging from tropical forests in far north Queensland, or spider webs interlaced between the trees. The form of this sculpture owes more to the organicism of post-minimalist artist Eva Hesse than pure formalism of abstraction, providing an experience of frailty within order and disorder within unity.

And this, perhaps, is the uniting thread that links together these seemingly diverse artistic practices of Berkowitz and Geikie. Both desire to create a sort of tracery, a dissolution between edge and interior, formalism and sentiment. Each has a fluidity of subject that enables constantly shifting associations, memories and histories to coalesce. It is as if there is a confluence between public and private: the public records and physical traces of collected objects, and the private unsaid and invisible memories and histories that so easily disappear with time.