

‘I decided many years ago that my life & work were about I, HERE, NOW – wherever I was in the world, this was my anchor. Being grounded in I, HERE, NOW has been essential I think, in stopping sliding into generalisation, nationalism, universalism, maybe romanticism & so on. I, HERE, NOW is...sobering and liberating.’

Anchoring herself in the world has been an ongoing project for Vivian Lynn. Perhaps the most punctiform instance of this is the earliest work in the exhibition, a palm print made around 1950 on the instigation of family friend and mentor Archie Robertson, an amateur expert in the pseudo-science of palmistry. Leaving an indexical trace of the lineaments of her hand is undoubtedly the most ‘primitive’ form of self-portraiture but it is also the purest proof of existence. It is also a sign that links material presence to unique identity, without recourse to the proper name. Here many of the ingredients of Lynn’s later work are already in evidence: a refusal of the tropes of conventional western representation in favour of a trans-historical form of mark making; a frank awareness of the body and a recognition of its liminal surface as a key site of significance; and a delight in the inherent qualities of materials and the embodied potential of drawing. ¶ In various ways the selection of works in this first section of the exhibition all evoke Lynn’s foundational assertion, ‘I, HERE, NOW’, which she wrote to herself and pinned to the wall of her first studio on the farm in South Canterbury where she lived with her husband and raised her two sons. From its windows she drew and painted ‘her’ world as she saw it: the stand of kahikatea brought close as a vestige of primeval nature; the fragile tracery of apple-tree branches in the orchard envisaged as a mesh of lines on white paper. The words – a mantra designed to locate and direct her – reappear in other places throughout her career and underpin her ongoing self-scrutiny. This takes conventional form in paintings and drawings from the 1950s and 1960s and then, in the 1980s to the present, is transferred onto a range of visceral materials, most especially hair and paper made to look like skin or human tissue. ¶ If one of Lynn’s aims has been to dwell in the specificities of material life, paying attention to natural forms and processes and the character and capabilities of the human body, another has been to grapple with the man-made structures and systems that impose upon her. As she puts it, ‘I, HERE, NOW’ is sobering as well as liberating. Hence the free play of line and exuberance of materials are constrained and channelled in knowing recognition of the bind of social and cultural being. These works speak not only of Lynn’s personal experience but of her encounters with everything from the science that sees in palm prints the outlines of individual destiny, to the binary logic of knowledge systems; from the tools devised to map and control the human body, to the technologies designed to defy the temporality of human existence.

‘No safe anchorage’

After Vivian Lynn had recovered from the first of a series of major illnesses and working around her circumstances as a wife and mother living in rural South Canterbury, she enjoyed a productive phase of drawing and painting, exploring her surroundings close-up (in her *Cabbage tree* series, for example) and from afar (in aerial views of the region generated from flights in her husband’s glider). Her aim was to work through the lessons of modernism to produce works that maintained the integrity of painting’s two-dimensional surface, using colour and shape as corollaries for natural motifs and investing these with her sense of the inherent openness and grandeur of the landscape. Despite her isolation, she established contact with key figures in the Christchurch art scene (the dealer Andre Brooke and the critic Professor H J Simpson) and began to show (and sell) her work. She was also included in group exhibitions organised by the major metropolitan galleries, especially Auckland City Art Gallery, which had begun the important task of surveying the work of contemporary artists in recognition of the validity of local practice. Few examples of her paintings from this period remain in the artist’s possession as they readily fulfilled a growing taste for a ‘modern’ response to the New Zealand landscape.

¶ By 1968 Lynn had begun to question whether painting was sufficient to her needs and ambitions. Indeed, though she never abandoned a commitment to the communicative potential of her formal language, she did feel increasingly alienated from the medium, seeing it as a male preserve, and compromised by false investments in notions of expressivity. That year she announced that ‘a feminist oil painting on canvas is an oxymoron’. She adapted her practice to make use of stencils and spray cans and turned her attention to printmaking as less loaded practices that better suited her critical agendas, eschewing expressive mark making in favour of compiling a resource of representational shapes that were, as she understood them, already richly coded. In 1972 she travelled to America, where she spent a year immersing herself in the art scene (memorably visiting Christo’s *Valley Curtain* in Rifle Gap, Colorado) and developing her knowledge of printmaking techniques, returning to Wellington in 1973 to devote herself to life as a full-time artist now dedicated to a thorough examination of the political, social and cultural frameworks within which she felt herself to be enmeshed. ¶ This gallery follows the trajectory of her formal investigations in the 1960s through to the 1990s, specifically focusing on her drawings and prints. Here the formal bases of her practice emerge. These include: an active engagement with line to delineate shapes (both geometrical and figurative) and to register motions and materials that are inherently unstable and fluid; a fascination for texture and pattern that is used to intimate the ‘grain’ that both connects and screens things; a recognition of the meaning potential of symbols and an ambition to re-code these so that their tangibility as material signs is realised, and a willingness to shift between abstract and representational registers so that normal expectations of what a picture is or does is undermined and reconfigured. The result is a visual language keenly tuned to convey what she calls the ‘ecology of the erotic’, a sense of being in the world that is strikingly different from the one upon which western systems of representation have been predicated.

*‘To open a space
in the symbolic order’*

‘My work is a broad critique of western metaphysics focusing on the fundamental dualism in western thought: that is, feminine versus masculine and nature opposed to culture. In this context, feminine equates to nature and both are defined as inferior to the masculine/culture construct. My work refuses these male myths of cultural origin. ¶ I have used the morphology of the human female body choosing charged sites of hair, skin, vulva, brain, and found their architectural correspondences – gate, column, door, house – in order to differentiate between the biological body, the imaginary body and the socio-historical or symbolic.’

In the 1980s and more recently Vivian Lynn expanded her practice into installation, using a range of materials to create works that engage the viewer physically as well as visually. It is as if the juxtaposition she explored in her two-dimensional work, especially the contrast of ‘grid and flow’, structure and surface, was extrapolated into three dimensions. Now hair, paper and fabric were mingled with or used to emulate solid structures and architectural forms. Likewise the figurative dimension of her socially oriented works of the 1970s was transferred into a complex coding of materials, so that the body was explored not in pictorial terms but through a play of substances and their functions. ¶ Lynn produced some of her most ambitious works in this period (including *Guarden gates* (1982) which are now in the collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and will be on display there from December to coincide with this show, and *The gates of the goddess: a southern crossing attended by the goddess* (1985–6, Auckland Art Gallery) which was commissioned by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 1985 and included in the Auckland City Art Gallery’s major review of sculpture: *Sculpture I and II* in its *Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art* series in 1986). These received considerable critical attention, as installation came to be recognised as a new art form paradigmatic of postmodern practice and as acknowledgement was paid to feminist positions, for their contribution to the deconstruction of dominant culture’s ‘master narratives’. ¶ Though Lynn’s work fitted the critical agendas of contemporary art in the 1980s, she was in fact continuing her investigations along lines that had taken shape much earlier. Newly available feminist theory provided her with means to understand her situation, but she continued to read and research widely to draw connections in her practice to historical, philosophical, scientific and cultural subjects that extended the parameters of her work well beyond local or purely artistic discourses. And new art forms and strategies reinforced her commitment to finding more socially-engaged ways of working. Her aim in this was not only to expose the binary logic of western thought that had relegated women and nature to a secondary status, but to re-value sexual difference, positing the idea of a ‘third space’ that might exist in the liminal zone *between* the terms she had set in play.

‘My dilemma was in matching my adult female experience in the world with the body of learning I’d received from my culture about both art and life...

...Identifying the matches led me to identify the differences and unmask stereotypes. What began simply enough developed my critical eye and understanding that a political dimension accompanied everything and that art was not neutral or devoid of political meaning. The utopian and universalising ideals of Modernism cracked as my feminism developed.’

The 1970s saw Vivian Lynn’s practice shift and respond to a more overt engagement with the political in art. If she had turned away from oil painting because she saw it as an embodiment of male privilege, she also began to shift her printmaking techniques from the ‘fine’ arts of etching, engraving, lithography and relief printing, with their long history and established place in the pantheon of high art, to silkscreen printing – a mode more closely associated with commercial art and advertising. Likewise, she sought out less expressive modes more rooted in the everyday, including stencilling, spray-painting, collage and assemblage. ¶ Refusing to conform to modernist expectations that an artist should develop a consistent style with the aim of investigating the limits of a particular medium, Lynn embraced various ways of working, switching between abstraction and figuration as need dictated. She also turned her attention to the social reality of life in New Zealand rather than to the reiteration of its natural features. Such strategies set her apart from expressive, nationalist and realist modes which assumed that art was adequate to the task of revealing essential ‘truths’ about self and world, and led her to develop a conceptual praxis at odds with prevailing artistic tropes. ¶ If Lynn’s critical stance was underpinned by her experience as a woman living in a society riddled by inequalities, her thought was shaped by an intense programme of reading, undertaken in part during protracted periods of ill health, in history, philosophy, comparative religion and theory. This led her to appreciate that western society was structured according to a system that had developed from antiquity to the present, that valued mind over body, culture over nature, reason over emotion, ideal over real, active over passive, production over procreation, where the first term of each pair was deemed a privileged masculine preserve. ¶ Lynn’s aims as an artist were to expose the bias of dominant culture and to examine art’s complicity in its dealings, but also to envisage another social reality and a visual language suitable to its articulation. While she never aligned herself with the Women’s Movement, that began to galvanise women in the 1970s, she did call herself a feminist. In retrospect, it is possible to see how Lynn’s practice is part of a more widespread deconstructive project that challenged established paradigms, what theorists have called postmodernism.