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AN ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATIONS
OF ANNETTE MESSENGER

BY

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INTRODUCTION

... Why must every aspect of human identity come down to the Oedipal?... (1)

Jane M. Gaines

... If the political asymmetry between the sexes is produced through culture rather than given in nature, then intervention into these determining factors is not impossible ... (2)

Vicky Kirby

The question which feminists today are asking is a question which relates to women's choice - a choice to represent, or not to represent (which is less prevalent), their own sexuality and their own desires. Annette Messenger's depiction of desire is one of contradiction in her own sexuality and yet she finds a sort of comfort in this contradiction. What this contradiction is, and why she finds a certain comfort in it, are necessary and significant questions in this post-modern world.

The historical emphasis on Freud's Oedipus complex raises questions in relation to concepts of desire, difference and knowledge. Freud's Oedipus Complex hinges

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on gender identity, firstly on anatomical details - man possesses the penis which women lack - and this leads into aspects of the drive in the unconscious desires of the individual. What Gaines is asking above is whether the Oedipus Complex has been regarded in society as a universal answer to the question of unconscious desire and whether there exists another answer or other forms of desire. One must take into account that Freud spoke from a masculine and Victorian bourgeois perspective and there has been no female counterpart to challenge this myth of the Oedipal. One gains access to other forms of analytical discussion if one accepts that the Oedipal myth is not an answer but only part of the structure of a question. This question must be a political one which challenges the constructions of a society.

The question to be addressed in relation to the work of Annette Messager is: how does she deal with gender construction and gender difference? Her visual representations of desire and curiosity will be analysed. However, when trying to connect her female curiosity with Freud's concepts of desire one cannot exclude the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and his concept of the alienation of desire which begins with the child who sees his image in the mirror for the first time. His mirror image is perceived as the perfect "self" but this self is an illusion, an unknown and fragmented "Other" which is

misrecognized as the Self. Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalysis intertwine throughout their analysis of unconscious desires, the ego and the "Other" and through an analysis of gender differences and identities as a lack or absence in the subject.

The form and content of Annette Messenger's work will be addressed through specific psychoanalytic theories and feminist thought. Her use of objects, photographs, text and drawings will be discussed in context with Sigmund Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex, Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, and feminist concepts of gender differences which deal with different forms of desire. These theoretical developments which focus on difference as a construction of identity are challenging the historical and prevalent images of women as fetishised objects in a patriarchal society. The question of how and why gender is constructed through differences of male and female desires will be analysed in order to challenge ideological power structures, which themselves structure a way of "looking".

The first chapter deals with the artist's early work. It shows how she was influenced by feminism and why her work deals with representations of the human body. This chapter acts as an introduction to the themes of the human body, of concepts of desire, and of knowledge and

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1932
1933

language, which run throughout the next three chapters. Most of all, however, the theme of complicity on women's part to submit to ideological powers will form the basis of an analysis of gender constructions in language.

An analysis of concepts of desire and curiosity will be conducted in chapter two in relation to the desire and curiosity that Messenger's images portray. How the artist constructs "the gaze" is very important when talking about women's complicity with images in a patriarchal society.

Chapter three deals with Messenger's more subjective depictions which are based upon the inseparable relationship between childhood and adulthood. While subjective through the expression of poignancy and loss, Messenger's work is connected to objective social constructions of behaviour from childhood onwards.

In chapter four, concepts of knowledge and death will be analysed in relation to constructions of "femininity": firstly as a masquerade and secondly as a construction in language.

In comparing the language of a female artist with the language of two male psychoanalysts the question of identity continually raises its head. Messenger, as a

woman and an artist, defines herself within a multitude of roles which help her to feel important. Desire as lack is central to a language which places woman as an undervalued commodity in a patriarchal and symbolic order. The analysis of Messenger's representations will be structured through a relationship between sexual and political cultural factors. The aim of this analysis will be to discover whether or not women are trapped in concepts of sexuality and if so, whether they can resist the identities that they have historically assumed. The last question here is one of process: how do women break down the codes which structure femininity? Visual representation is one powerful force which has many possibilities.

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CHAPTER 1

"THE HUMAN BODY"

... Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question... (3)

One is confronted with a problem of identity when entering the exhibition entitled " Telling Tales" by Annette Messenger in the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin. The first work to present this problem is entitled "Collection pour Trouver ma Meillure Signature"¹. Combinations and differentiations of the artist's own signatures are neatly and repetitiously framed and randomly attached to the wall with double sided sticky tape.

To visualise identity is to assume a presence, yet for the past twenty years Annette Messenger's presence (or signature) has never reached a stage of completion. It is only a collection. She calls herself "Annette Messenger, Collector" in awareness of the fact that a collection is never finished, it is "... some kind of preservation ... against time ... [against] life ..."

¹Collection to find my favourite signature.

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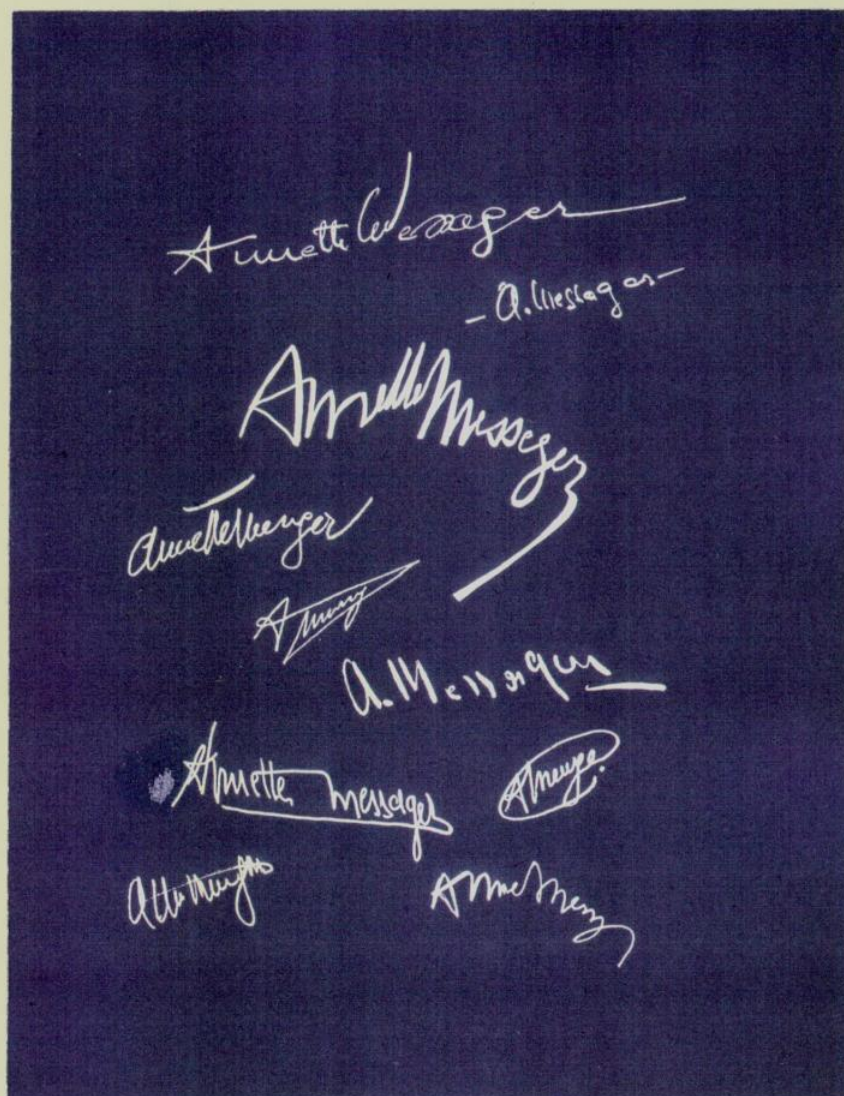
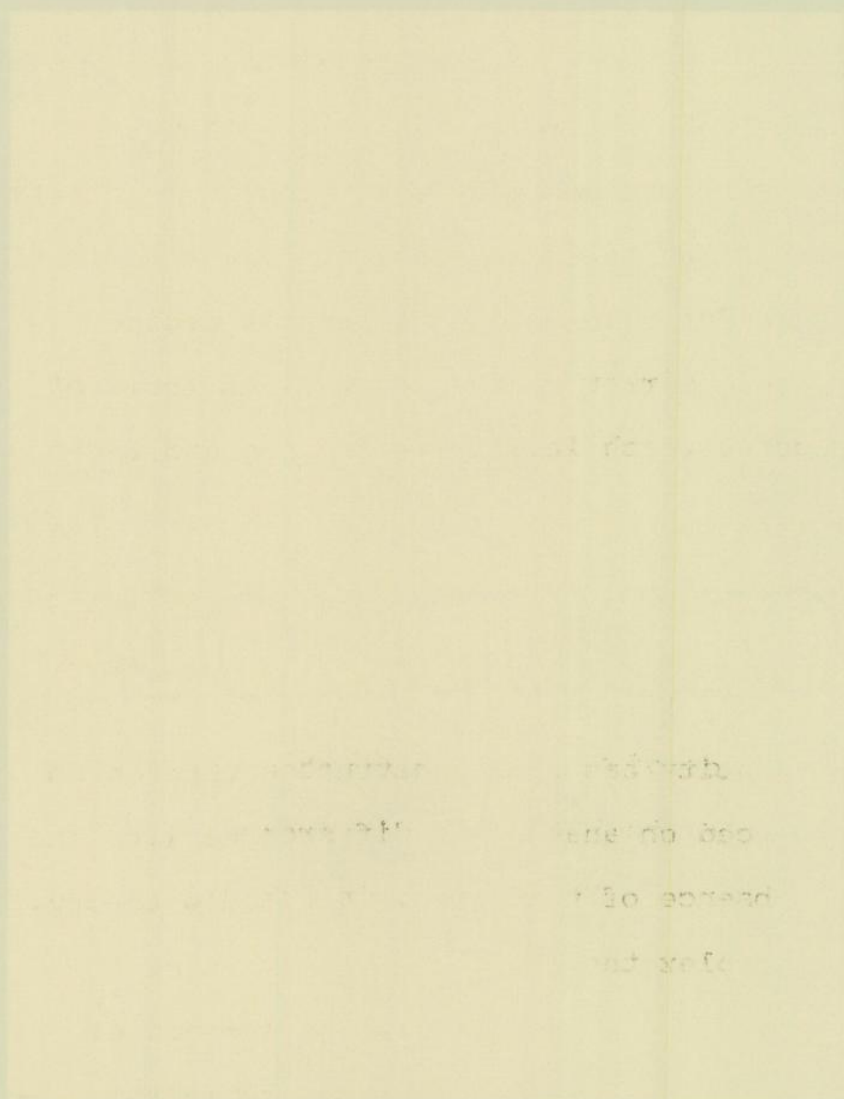


Figure 1.

Collection pour Trouver ma Meillure Signature 1972
 (Catalogue "Telling Tales" 1992)



(4). Is it the very concept of "presence" that Messenger uses for defending herself against the concept of "absence"? To answer this question is to analyse what these meanings of presence/absence have come to signify. This entails an analysis of psychoanalytic theory along with the question of whether Messenger, as a woman and an artist, can break the confines that bind certain forms of thought. As stated in the introduction, the forms of thought chosen for discussion are Freud's Oedipus Complex, Lacan's Mirror Stage, and various forms of feminist thought which infiltrate Freud's and Lacan's theories.

* * * * *

Gender identity has been constructed through an importance placed on anatomical differences i.e. the presence or absence of the penis, in Freud's theory. In the Oedipus Complex the child becomes aware of the difference between his parents through the act of looking. Identification then takes place in the recognition of this anatomical presence or absence of the penis. In the pre-Oedipal phase both the little girl and the little boy identify with the mother as their first object of love. Under fear of castration in the later Oedipus Complex the boy represses his feelings for his mother and identifies with the father as the signifier of

CONQUEROR

authority. For the girl it is different in that she comes to resent the mother because she sees the mother as castrated. The girl, recognising her wound, identifies with the father in the hope that he might retain an interest in her.

If one accepts this Oedipal myth as universal then one sees gender difference and identity as a fixed form of representation. This representation views men as more confident in their gender role and identity than women are. While this may be seen to be historically true, this "truth" is what is uncertain in the work of Annette Messenger. Her collection of signatures maintain the 'presence' of her identity while at the same time it is negated by the fact that she repetitiously repeats it and presents it to us in order to assume a presence. Messenger herself says that a majority of female artists have been absent from art historically (5). Her changing and shifting forms of identity are torn by contradictions. She reveals them to us and acknowledges an incompleteness of identity in order to continually choose, change and reconstruct the presences or absences in identification.

The role of the artist in this process for Messenger is a game of "double intimacy" (6). In her bedroom she is Annette Messenger the collector and her dining room is

the studio where she is Annette Messenger the artist. This game was not deliberate for her. It became essential in that it became a social reality, "... a shift of view, compulsory roles, a loss of identity ..."
(7).

Annette Messenger continually assumes identity and immediately calls it into question. This assumption deliberately formalises role-playing, roles that she herself has named. Annette Messenger Collector, artist, practical woman, trickster, etc. She assumes identity in order to define herself in life. As Annette Messenger Storyteller, a spinner of fables and riddles, she uses different forms of representation to construct new ways of seeing. Yet she never defines herself fully as one person or another. She is not comfortable in any of these roles yet they help her to feel important and she needs them to protect herself against time and life. Her role as a woman and as an artist is a mask against concepts of "femininity" which she doesn't snugly fit in to.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

... this work is clearly serious in intent, yet behind it is an artist who regards the tribulations of womankind with wry humour ... (8)

"Les Tortures Volontaires"² is another collection assembled over the past 20 years from magazine cuttings. In these representations the surface of the skin is washed, cleaned, moisturised; bound and strapped by various machines; exposed to light; and "fashioned" in order to improve bodily appearance and to cover up bodily defects. Messenger's 'wry humour', which is itself an expression of disgust, is not found in the images themselves but in her arrangement of the magazine cuttings which dramatise an acceptance, by women and men, of patriarchal ideology and its fetishistic impulses of possession. This will remain so long as "... the individual subject recognises/misrecognizes itself reflected in an absolute subject and accepts the situation as natural ..." (9). Precisely by collecting these images Messenger herself desires to own an object. She wants to "... possess what I am possessed by ..." (10).

* * * * *

A concept of identity raises questions about corporeality and difference. In the piece entitled "Les Tortures Volontaires" 'tribulations' of perfection are afflicted onto the human body, notably female bodies.

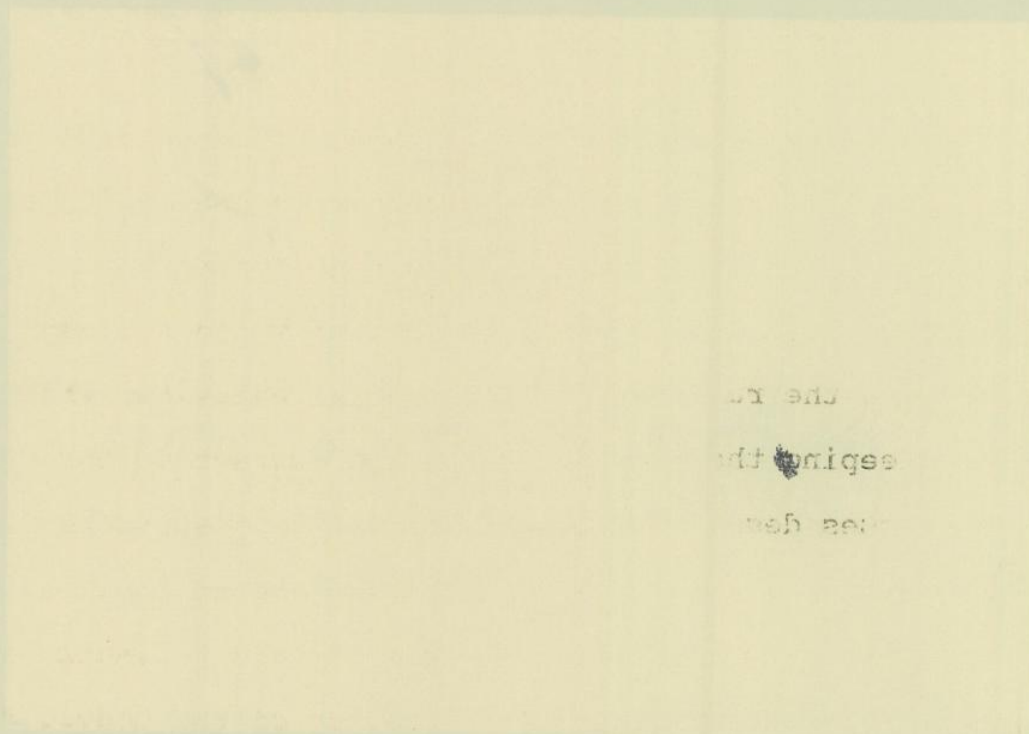
²Voluntary Tortures.



Figure 2.

Les Tortures Volontaires 1972

(on exhibition at DHG, Dublin, 1992.
Photograph N. Cooney.)



Here, Messenger questions our physical identity, which, in western culture, has been assumed as a corporeality which privileges the male gaze. Women have historically been incorporated into ideological structures in a patriarchal society. Louis Althusser refers to three forms of ideology. The first is parental authority, the second is social authority and the third is religious authority.

While Messenger deals with all three of these aspects in her work, in "Les Tortures Volontaires" she explicitly represents an ideology that society perpetuates. Patriarchy will be maintained so long as women and men comply with the rules of physical social behaviour which entails keeping the body beautiful and attractive through the processes described. Female figures are shown as wanting to erase the exterior imperfections of their bodies. The male body is emphasised through "...muscular development, thus affirming the presence of the body..." (11). To identify with these magazine pictures is to realise a complicity, to a greater or lesser degree, in maintaining these fetishes. Conversely, in recognising one's complicity, a necessary awareness of resistance to the laws of patriarchy may be attained.

"Mes Voeux"³, another early work, deals with representations of the human body, with concepts of

³My Wishes

desire, and with complicity towards fetishistic impulses. While alluding to representational violence with its fragments of the nude body it is a subtle and subversive form of representation. A circle of fragmented photographs of body-parts hang from household string. All of them are close-up images of hands, ears, eyes, mouths, noses, breasts, penis's, hair and lines of skin. The different poses are repeated and the different arrangements of fragments juxtaposed together serve to confuse and not differentiate or favour any part of the body from another.

While Messenger finds it difficult to photograph the nude she still desires to possess the images, to cut them up and to "mix" them together. Through the process of mixing images of male and female bodies she seeks to expose the historical abuse that mere "looking" incorporates and to expose a sexually gratifying gaze. The desire for possession is never situated because in the circle "... you are looking everywhere at the same time ..." (12).

"Mes Voeux", unlike "Les Tortures Voluntairs", reveals the imperfections of the flesh. The technique of close-up representation breaks up the image further and

reveals reality as a mere illusion. Familiar things become exotic abstractions. "...Psychoanalytically speaking, the photograph has prompted comparison with the structure of the fetish in so far as the camera image marks the conjunction of a look, an arrest, and an illusion of presence that belies the objects real absence..." (13). The fetish, "...as a token of triumph over the threat of castration and protection against it..." (14) of the photographic gaze tends to symbolise the status of women as objects (15). Messenger takes photographs of her friends and through the process of rearrangement distorts the image, disturbs the spectators fixed position of observation, and confronts their attitudes to sexuality.

Underneath Messenger's openness to physicality, with its perfections and imperfections, there is a withdrawal of physicality. The vagina, "...the body part usually isolated for prurient scrutiny - significantly, is missing..." (16). By "...telling" herself stories, desiring to function solely in an imaginary realm, the hysteric [Messenger] forgoes representation as a possible body - her body. Because to be seen, as such, she must negotiate castration..." (17). Messenger does not wish "woman" to be seen. Permissiveness of sight is refused the observer and the notion of "absence" persists.

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Home-based objects like the string which suspends the fragmented photographs are necessary objects in Messagers constructed representations. Text written on the wall resembles the "feminine" activity of knitting in "Les Lignes de la Main"⁴. In this piece six photographs of hands, usually associated with creativity, are hung high up at an angle to the wall and in such a way that they seem to fall towards the observer. Fairytale scenes of ships, mermaids, faces, stars and houses are drawn upon the photographs with ink. The artist is constructing a narrative yet the devices she is using in this narration are not clearly "good" or "bad".

The six columns of text underneath each picture is a weary litany to fairytale love and to notions fed us in childhood about femininity. One word underneath each picture is repeated endlessly until its meaning is finally lost through its repetition. The futility in striving for a knowledge which is already socially constructed from childhood onwards is highlighted and the similarities between the French and English language e.g. voyage, solitude, serve to reconstruct language as a source of many possibilities of meanings. Female

⁴The Lines of the Hands.

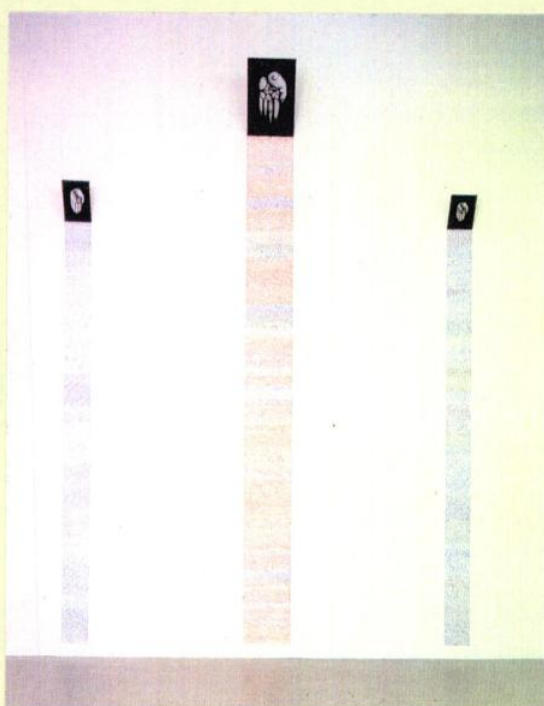
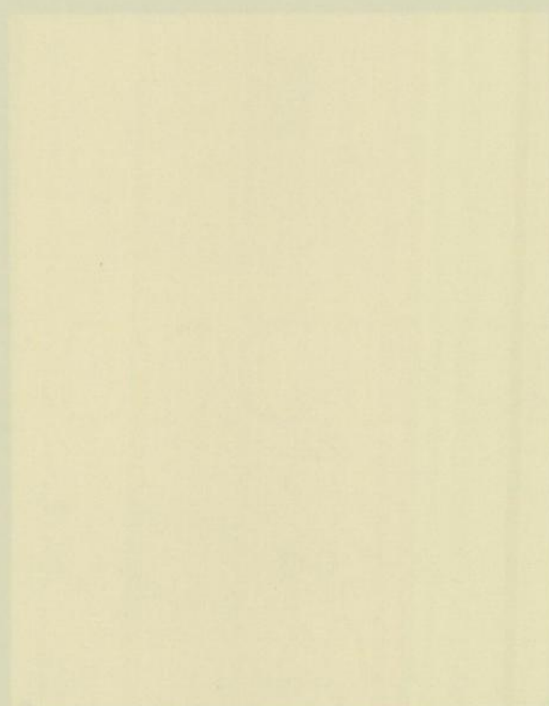


Figure 3.

Les Lignes de la Main 1988 - 89

(Catalogue "Telling Tales" 1992)



identity, through the assumption of images, has been historically defined and Messenger calls its "truth" into question in that she neither denies its truth as a social construction nor does she legitimise it as a perfect representation.

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CHAPTER 2

DESIRE AND/OR CURIOSITY

... Desire - as all philosophers since Plato have told us - is lack, a void in the subject that is filled by the acquisition of an object ... (18)

Psychoanalytic orthodoxies consider the biological differences between men and women as fundamental to human sexuality. Despite an interpretation of Freud's analysis as a biologism of opposites, his discovery of an existing unconscious in the subject brought about a series of questions to do with sexual difference and desire in the subject. Freud based his theories around the Oedipus Complex which dealt primarily with the sexual repression of desire in the subject. Lacan's re-reading of Freud situates the unconscious within a structure of language which accepts a patriarchal system of authority. Both Freud and Lacan theorised the concept of desire as having a subject and an object which accounts for the dichotomies of presence/absence; "real/other"; and "Symbolic/Imaginary".

According to Freud, in the pre-Oedipal phase the little girl and the little boy both take their mother as

the primary object of their love. The Oedipus Complex itself is an analysis of how and why the girl and boy switch their love-object onto their father. This aspect of the complex is important because it forms the basis of how patriarchy and its repressions of desire remains a dominating force in society.

Freud viewed the boy's form of desire a victory over the girl's because of the fact that his love-object was heterosexual in the Oedipus Complex. When the boy sees his mother's "lack", he thinks that the father has castrated her. He then fears castration himself by the father, so he rejects the mother and concentrates on identifying with the father. For the girl it is different as her primary love object is of the same sex. Freud then says that the girl accepts her castration as an "accomplished fact" (19). In rejecting her mother and in blaming her for not giving her the penis, and in identifying with the father the girl submits to the authority of the phallus where "... the concept of the phallus stands for that subjection [to a law which exceeds any natural or biological division], and for the way in which women are very precisely implicated in its process ..." (20).

...During the sexual development of childhood...a first antithesis is introduced with the choice of an

object, which, of course, presupposes a subject and an object...The antithesis between "active" and "passive" is the dominant one. At the following stage of infantile genital organisation maleness exists, but not femaleness...Maleness combines [the factors of] subject, activity, and possession of the penis; femaleness takes over [those of] object and passivity... (21).

Annette Messenger does not represent desire as a dichotomy of opposites, i.e. active/passive, masculine/feminine, subject/object, but as a contradictory concept, which encompasses theories of difference, lack and other; love, pleasure and pain; obsession and curiosity; identity and masquerade; memory, knowledge, choice and death.

In the exhibition "Telling Tales" banal, everyday references to the home, which the artist sees as an undervalued realm of female activity, are deliberately used in order to depict a world where women are perceived as victims of their own sexuality. Messenger is not comfortable with this perception. In her role as artist she questions the spectator's comfort with representations of desire. She seeks to expose an acceptance of patriarchy by generating feelings of unease as the spectators look upon body-parts, meaningless texts and aggressive, but subtle, placement of objects.

Desire is at once personal and removed in "Mes Voeux". The technique of close-up shots of the nude serve to distance the spectator from the image and the body's reality becomes illusory and abstracted. Messenger has resisted the "... temptation of the spectacular ..." (22). "Mes Voeux" celebrates the corporeal aspect of the human body but at the same time this piece is also threatening in its awareness of pain within pleasure and of loss within desire. In chapter three these concepts will be discussed in relation to innocence and childhood, knowledge and adulthood. This chapter however deals with the physical "lack" as theorised in the Oedipus Complex which frames this "lack" and this castration within a dialogue of opposites. The French feminist Luce Irigaray commented that Freud "... thinks of difference within the realm of the same ..." (23). Messenger's work does not situate itself comfortably within this realm of opposites but delights in oscillating within the realm of difference.

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... Sex becomes an open door for all kinds of deviations ... (24)

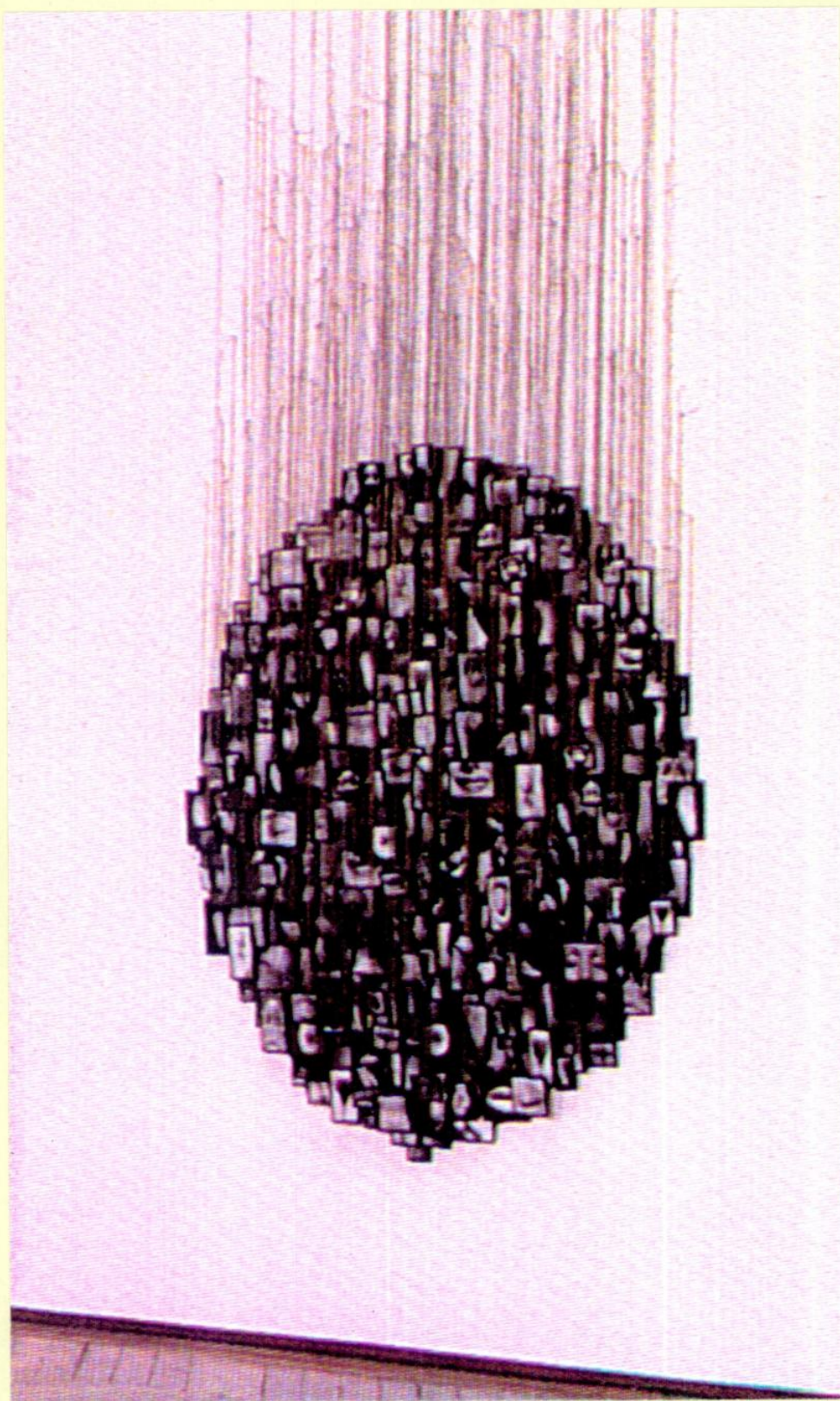


Figure 4.

Mes Voeux 1988 - 90

(Catalogue "Telling Tales" 1992)



Freud dealt with the concept of desire at the level of unconscious deviations or what could be considered perversions in relation to the sexual object and the sexual aim (25). He considered sexual overvaluation connected to an abandonment of the sexual aim. Freud explained fetishism as that which is "... substituted for the sexual object in some part of the body (such as the foot or hair) which is in general very inappropriate for sexual purposes ..." (26), but which fulfils a sexual aim to possess the object. All of Messenger's work refers to fetishistic objects but she twists a Freudian reference of fetishism by turning her own gaze, through her representations, onto the voyeur. If Messenger forces the spectator to consent to the lure of the visible she does so in order to expose "...the structure of fetishism in which the gaze finds itself consistently displaced in relation to the horror of the absence..." (27). The fragmentation and isolation of the close-up images are fetish objects but the artist includes female and male anatomy. Through this technique of mixing images together women can re-evaluate insulting attitudes sometimes directed towards them through specific constructions of female imagery, e.g. pornography.

Messenger accounts for differences in desire and testifies to an anatomical "lack" in women but struggles against submitting to the law of the Father in this

story. This law is what Lacan termed "the Symbolic". Lacan called for a return to this realm of the conscious ego of knowledge where patriarchy is a symbol of authority. Misuse of the Symbolic "... relied heavily on Levi-Strauss's notion of kinship in which women are defined as objects of exchange ... within this process, woman is constituted as an absolute category (excluded and elevated at one and the same time ...)" (28). In being categorised by Freud as opposite and by Lacan as an elevated "other", woman becomes a fixed object of fantasy and not a shifting subject of reality and fantasy. Messenger, in trying to understand the concept of woman as fetish or exchange object, directs her own gaze outwards in order to possess what she is possessed by.

The power of the fetish as both pleasure and anxiety leads inevitably to an analysis of the gaze of the voyeur. Messenger likes to expose voyeuristic tendencies. She said that it is important to be a voyeur (29) but a voyeur who also sees his own image reflected back to him/her. Like Lacan's concept of "misrecognition" of the self in a mirror-image the voyeur may be surprised to find an-other reflection of his/her self. The vague close-ups of body parts in "Mes Voeux" can be seen as an act of passion between lovers. The photographs freeze the body-parts and the voyeur's gaze is allowed to linger but because the circle demands no one single gaze the

voyeur becomes confused. Messenger desires to be effective in changing the way men and women look at images of women but generally she aims to change and confuse the way in which people view different human sexualities.

"Mes Trophées"¹ is another series of works in which the artist obviously and intentionally questions how people look at images. Here, the artist constructs the gaze in order to satisfy her own desire and curiosity. Most importantly, however, the image "Mes Trophées" provokes in the spectator an awareness of the process of looking upon female imagery which has historically been constructed as a pleasurable activity for men. The piece exhibited in the Douglas Hyde will not be discussed in detail but only described. Three separate black and white photographs hung with string are arranged in the shape of a face. This face only consists of two eyes which are closed and an open mouth. A different form of "Mes Trophées" was printed on the leaflet which accompanied the exhibition. This image combined beauty with beastliness and knowledge with language. This printed image is more striking than the object in the gallery in that the eyes are open and are isolated from the rest of the face. Fairytale animals like snakes and

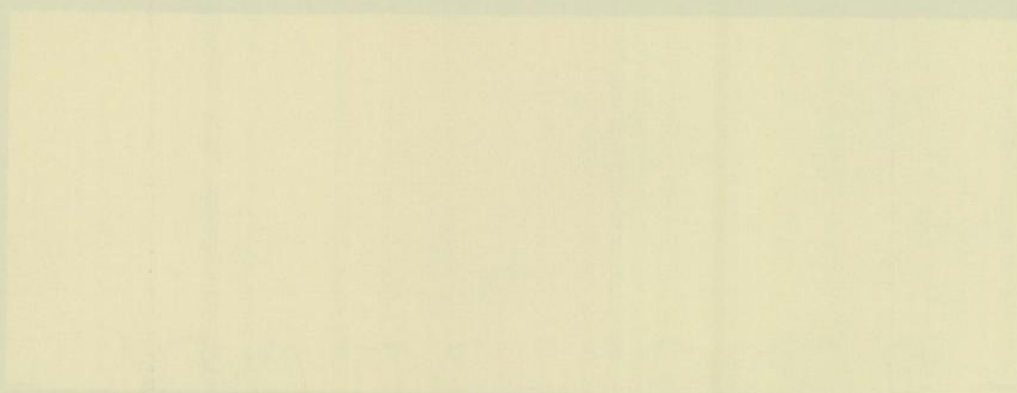
¹My Trophies



Figure 5.

Mes Trophées

(Leaflet accompanying exhibition, DHG, 1992)



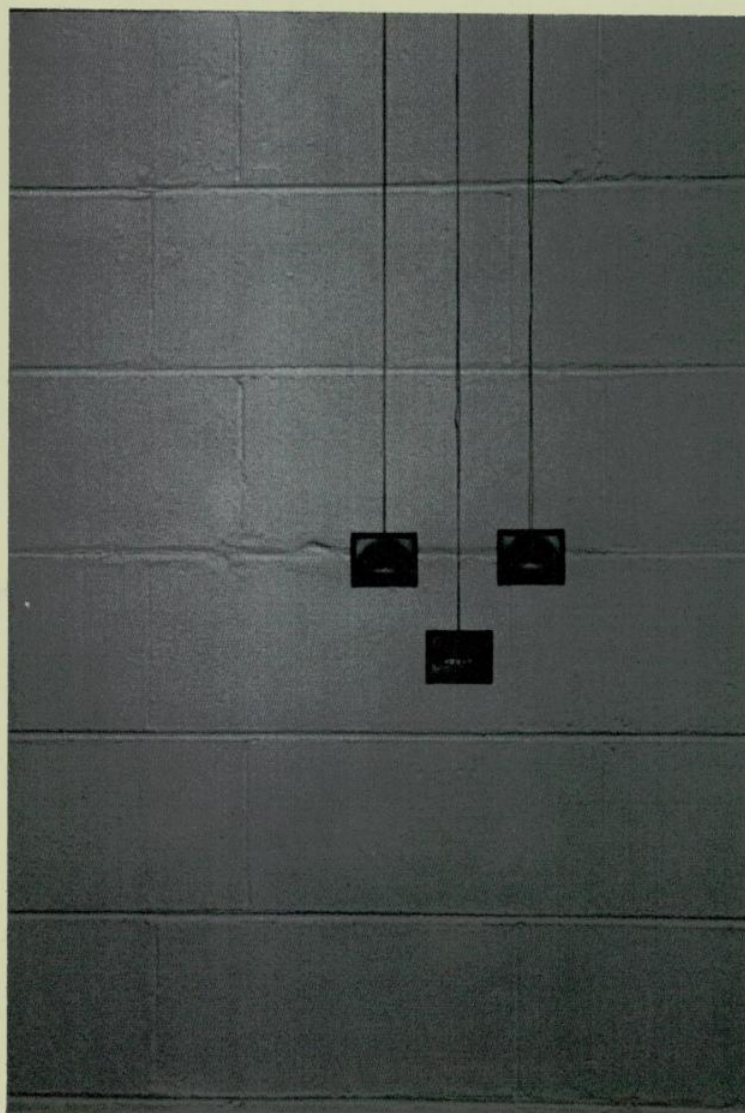
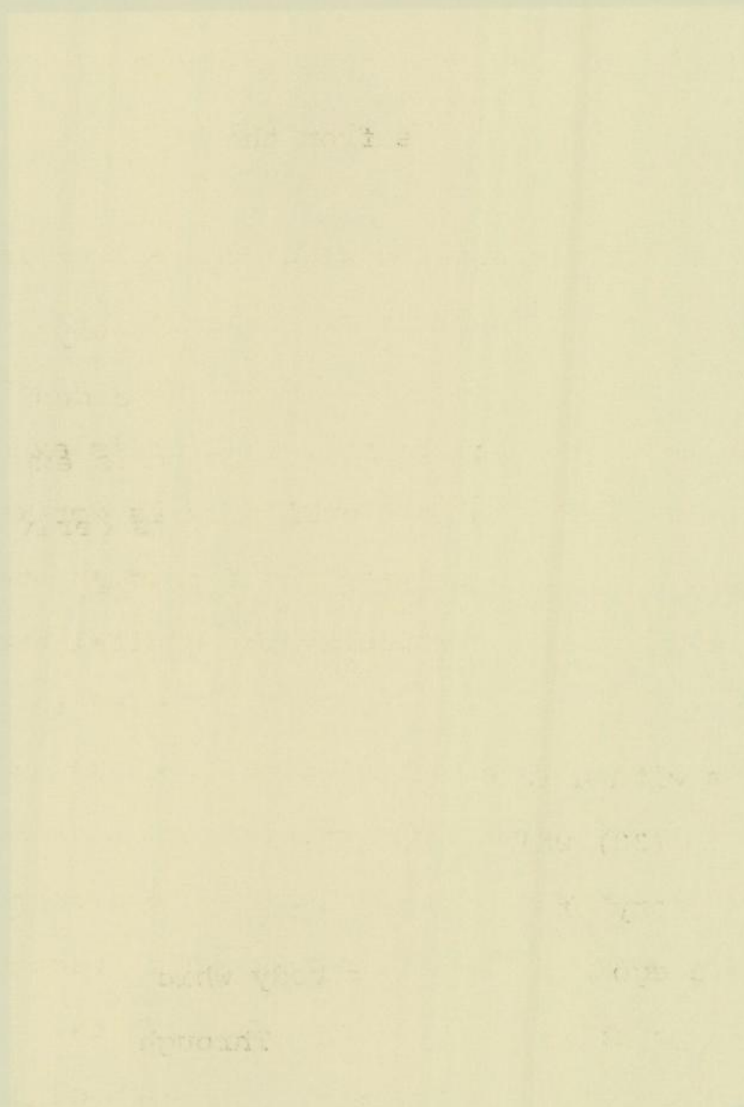


Figure 6.

Mes Trophées

(on exhibition at DHG, Dublin, 1992.

Photograph N. Cooney)



frogs mark the skin around the eyes and inhabit a world of dreams alongside female figures. It is a world of adventure on an ocean full of rhythmic ripples and waves. What threatens these dreams is the gaze which spins its web throughout the scene and the figures are caught up in the marked lines which issue from the eyelashes.

If masculinity is equated with desire then femininity could be equated with curiosity. Laura Mulvey, a film maker and theorist, explains curiosity as a desire to know something secret so strongly that it is experienced like a drive (30). A child's curiosity is derived from wanting to discover the private and forbidden areas of the human body, and in particular the genital area. (31). For Mulvey, adult curiosity "...and the wish to look intermingles with a fascination with likeness and recognition...(32) which is overlaid with misrecognition. In Lacan's theory of the mirror stage the mirror-image positions the ego as a superior body which becomes an alienated subject: Self as Other. Through this alienation the subjects identification with others is constructed through the symbolic order. The construction of the image is split in two ways: firstly in its narcissistic identification with its own image and likeness, and secondly through an erotic identification with images where the pleasure of looking separates the subject from the object. What Messenger has in common

with Mulvey is a desire to challenge the assertion of the male gaze through their own curiosity and with the aid of a camera. Both women view expression and language in representation as a means of sexual and political curiosity which could shift the masculine gaze which patriarchy emphasises.

... How [do women] fight the unconscious structured like language, while still caught within the language of patriarchy ... (33)

This question is a political one about the processes of identification in a society. While Mulvey's essays relate to film they remain pertinent to the work of Annette Messager. Voyeurism on the screen generally exploits the realistic female form as fetish object for exchange and enjoyment by male, and female, spectators. Female spectators also identify with woman as fetish and this is called scopophilic looking. Woman as object for the male gaze specifically has ideological significance. By its very nature, patriarchal ideology demands submission to an absolute subject i.e. the father. To submit to an order is to comply with its rules and disciplines. While women are seen as "other" in this ideology they have been historically a compliant component within it. What feminists today want to break down are the codes that structure the gaze. These codes have constructed "sight" as a primary identification with

an object or image. There are three "looks": the look of the camera, the look of the characters within the frame and the look of the spectator. Mulvey wants to freeze the look of the camera into "passionate detachment" in order to destroy the privileged pleasure of the male gaze and to highlight a dependency on voyeuristic processes of identification.

The myth of the Oedipus as a universal answer "explains" this dependency. For Mulvey "...the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox..." (34). Both narcissistic identification with images and sexual objectification of images creates an Imaginary and eroticized concept of reality where the image of woman in the Symbolic order is idealised. Lacan's theory that an alienated and misrecognized subject enters into the symbolic order through language can structure relevant questions for feminists dealing with the problems of identification. To criticise the Oedipus complex as a "fiction" which is inadequate in its meanings and identifications is to enable women to redefine sexuality on a political level.

Annette Messenger's role as a woman cannot be separated from her role as an artist. She plays games with the spectators in order to shift the codes that

structure the attitudes of "looking". Since her presentations offer no answers she is free to narrate her own stories of difference within a father's law of representation and language. The title of the exhibition, "Telling Tales" suggests that she is betraying her own sex in accepting the given rules of the dominating order. It also suggests that she is narrating her own story and therefore working against this acceptance. Messenger explicitly reveals this acceptance through the "telling" of her story.

* * * * *

... the Lacanian gaze is "punctual" : it both punctuates (arrests, suspends) and punctures (pricks, wounds) ... (35)

To suspend "...means to hang from a single point of support in space, to interrupt, to defer. The woman perpetually defers the question of truth..." (36). By literally suspending, with string, pieces of her work Messenger offers no fixed identification with the truth of an image. In "Les Piques"² the artist directly and more aggressively confronts the Lacanian gaze which splits the subject and desires to know the "other".

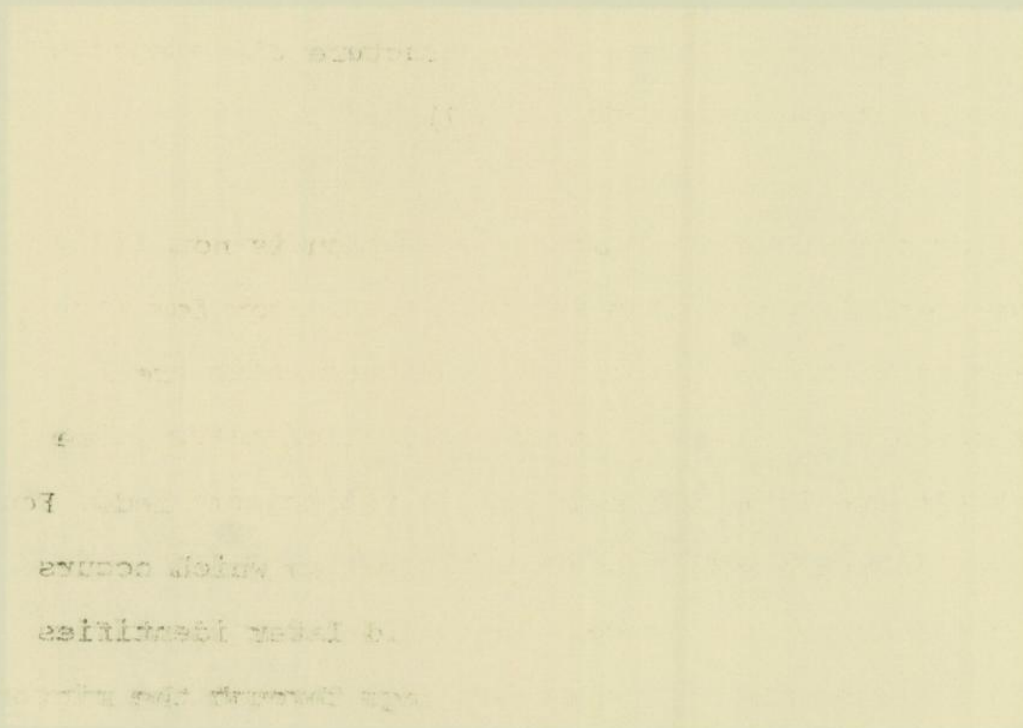
²Pikes



Figure 7.

Les Piques

(on exhibition at DHG, Dublin, 1992.
Photograph N. Cooney)



... the mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation - and which manufactures for the subject ... the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality ... and lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subjects entire mental development ... (37)

The child, whose motor co-ordination is not fully developed recognises his image in the mirror for the first time through a series of gestures which are reflected back to him. An identification takes place with his own image which is not as yet objectified. For Lacan, identification is a transformation which occurs when one assumes an image. The child later identifies with other people in its surroundings through the mirror. This mirror image as a "... threshold of the visible world ..." (38) is an alienated and exterior form of the body, which Lacan termed "Gestalt". While recognition for the child is pleasurable, it is overlaid with misrecognition. The reflected image is misrecognized as an ideal ego which is an alienated subject. The relationship of the Ideal-I to the Gestalt is split. Lacan calls this misrecognition an entry into the Symbolic order.

The translation of "Les Piques" is ambiguous in its many associations - pike, prick, cut , jab, pin; hot, pungent; thorn, prickly; quill, spine; cutting remark, stitch; sting, burn, bite; arouse; pick up; inject; put to sleep. Messenger herself said that this piece is a joke about the French Revolution of 1789 when people were executed and their heads cut off. Yet these heads are in fact shapeless gloves where the heads of toys like Goofy from Walt Disney or rabbits from Beatrice Potter peek out from holes already torn in the gloves. Messenger has called herself a liar (39) and one can say that while alluding to this piece as a joke or social statement, it can be analysed on a more subjective basis where a conflict of desires arise between pleasure and pain, the loss of childhood innocence, and entry into knowledge in adulthood. "...Beheading is well known to us as a symbolic substitute for castrating...". (40).

CHAPTER 3

CHILDHOOD / ADULTHOOD

... the gaze is at stake from the outset ... (41)

Tucked away in a small corner of the gallery is a piece entitled "Histoire des Petites Effigies"¹. A triangular shaped stack of dolls and teddy bears are piled up on top of each other and are abandoned. Framed photos, similar to the photos of eyes, mouths, breasts and feet in "Mes Voeux", are thrown on top of the pile. On the wall above rise little boxes in the shape of staircases. These boxes contain different doll's clothes and are made to fit these clothes perfectly. Framed photos of fingers and hands, some of which Messenger has drawn upon, hang in front of the clothes. This piece tells a tale about a memory of and a relationship to childhood which is socially constructed and resonates throughout adulthood.

¹The Stories of the Little Effigies

These effigies with their ex-voto placards of offerings and thanks suggest a loss of innocence. Messenger's story overlays pleasure with pain. Toys are transformed into effigies. A child's view, which neither distinguishes nor favours certain parts of the body, is destroyed as she realises that "... they are human likenesses on which to fictively inflict pain, punishment-in-lieu for escaping possession ..." (42).

According to Freud, the little girl and the woman have nothing you can see. He also claims that their desire to have the penis, their desire to have something which they 'lack' forms the basis for "normal womanhood" (43). But sexual difference is only found out through a process of looking, a "sight" which recognises the difference. The significance of this looking is what is at stake. Irigaray states that "... nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing, no being and no truth ..." (44). She also states that, according to Freud there is only "...one libido which serves both the masculine and feminine sexual functions..."(45). This identification of the libido is problematic in that the masculine (as active) is privileged over the feminine (as passive).

Annette Messenger's effigies are punished for wanting to escape possession. What is disturbing in "Histoire

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Figure 8.

Histoire des Petites Effigies 1990
(Catalogue "Telling Tales" 1992)

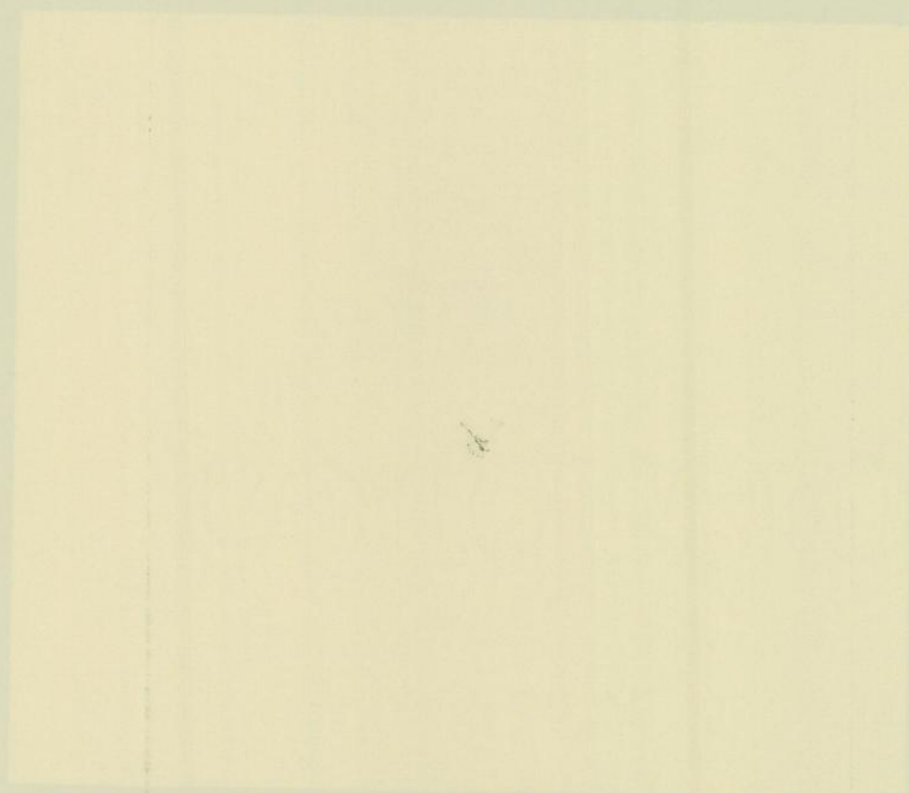




Figure 9.

Histoire des Petites Effigies

(on exhibition at DHG, Dublin, 1992.
Photograph N. Cooney.)

des Petites Effigies" is the thought that one cannot escape a loss of innocence with maturity. These toys are abandoned like a mass grave dedicated to childhood.

At the same time, Messenger does not state whether there exists an innocence in childhood at all. Messenger is a storyteller and a liar. She is setting up questions which only relate to concepts of innocence and knowledge or looking and voyeurism. She invites the spectator to partake in her fictions and as one willingly looks at "Histoire des Petites Effigies" one may fall into an intellectual trap of deception and contradiction. Messenger's deception is derived from notions of social behaviour. One of the photos of the hands in the glass boxes has a drawing of a woman on its finger. The artist asks us to imagine woman as a phallic signifier in a society which sees woman as castrated and in the marginal sphere outside of the symbolic order. The question of whether woman can gain access to an economy of desire in the symbolic order is an important question.

Luce Irigaray, in raising this question, takes Freud's Oedipal complex on its own terms but, in her book "Speculum of the Other Woman", she specifically takes the mother/daughter relationship into account. In raising the question of the "master signifier" she comments that "...access to a signifying economy is difficult or even

impossible for her because she is an outsider..." (46). Messenger's image of woman as signifier can be seen as a parody of masculine desire which is based on a biological visibility and she too calls into question the problem of representing feminine desire which "lacks" visibility.

As an artist who comments on aspects of desire and curiosity in the subject and who gives no answers, Messenger fails to fall into the trap that psychoanalytical theory cannot be freed from: that femininity is constructed as "other" and as marginal and undervalued in a patriarchal society. Difference is acknowledged, celebrated, and mourned in Messenger's representations, yet they do not differentiate exclusively in favour of a male or female symbolic order. Messenger invites us to question concepts of difference in order to place the burden of answering this riddle onto the spectator.

* * * * *

... It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger ... being henceforth dependent, in

man, on a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of the sexual object, by the Oedipus Complex ... (47).

Why must every aspect of desire come down to the Oedipal? In Messenger's "Petite Effigie" desire and its laws of language are called into question. Human identity is important in relation to the concept of desire in a subject. Is human identity dependant on the Oedipus Complex whose explanatory force designates masculinity as the active and dominating libido? Lacan's "mediatization" is itself an agreement about desire in human knowledge which is "dependent in man" and which is maintained by women in culture. Is woman's intellect irredeemably connected and confined to biological, and therefore sexual relations? While not negating this notion of physicality, Messenger does not confine her images in this way, but incorporates and connects physical desire with intellectual desire in trying to possess both a fixed and an uncertain sexual and political knowledge. With these ambiguities Messenger confounds the spectator's desire to know or understand.

Lacan's third elaboration of the mirror stage deals with woman as "...symptom of "man's" refusal to believe that lack and loss are organising agents of being and language..." (48). For Lacan, knowledge as a desire for the other gains permission to establish its objects and

thereby structures the I into a social apparatus of signifiers. Ellie-Ragland Sullivan says that "...the Imaginary confusion of Mother with primordial loss rules out the possibility of Woman becoming a totalized Symbolic signifier, an organizing symbol of power..." (49). The loss oscillates between a sense of being and nothingness where the Real blocks Imaginary identifications with the body's sense of wholeness. Messenger, with and without the cultural apparatus in her roles as woman and artist, does not give her images of knowledge the permission to establish fixed meanings. In her piece "Petite Effigy"² lines of text escape from the arms, the feet and the genital area of an androgynous doll. The doll looks as if it had been torn and re-stitched. Around its broken neck hangs a framed photograph depicting an open mouth which shows lips and tooth but not the tongue. At the end of each line of words is another framed photograph of body parts. Each line of text contains one French word which is repeated. They are written in such a way as to make it difficult to read. Some lines read from right to left, others from left to right depending on how the spectators tilt their heads. Lines with lines, lines with photographs, lines with the doll, and the doll with the photographs are juxtaposed against each other.

²Small Effigy

CONQUESTOR

Messenger never uses the same arrangements of texts, photographs or objects in different exhibitions. Each arrangement is unique but at the same time the words, through repetition, come to as having no meaning. The arrangement of "Petite Effigie" in the Douglas Hyde Gallery juxtaposes "soupçon"³ with an ear; "retour"⁴ with the spine; "hesitation" with female pubic hair; "desillusion"⁵ with a smiling mouth which has a pubic-shaped beard; "illusion" with a hand; "mensonge"⁶ with a mouth; and "rupture" with a foot. Messenger may invite an analysis of these juxtapositions. At the same time she warns against a certainty of meaning in language and representation while actually using images of text and visual forms to express this warning.

It is this moment, when the child becomes an adult, that knowledge becomes powerful, and painful. For Messenger however, the fading memory of childhood, with its cruel and unselfconscious judgements, retains a strong link in the learning processes of adulthood and cannot be dismissed. The child's individuality is savoured in "Petite Effigie" and the "I" struggles

³suspicion

⁴return

⁵disillusion

⁶lie

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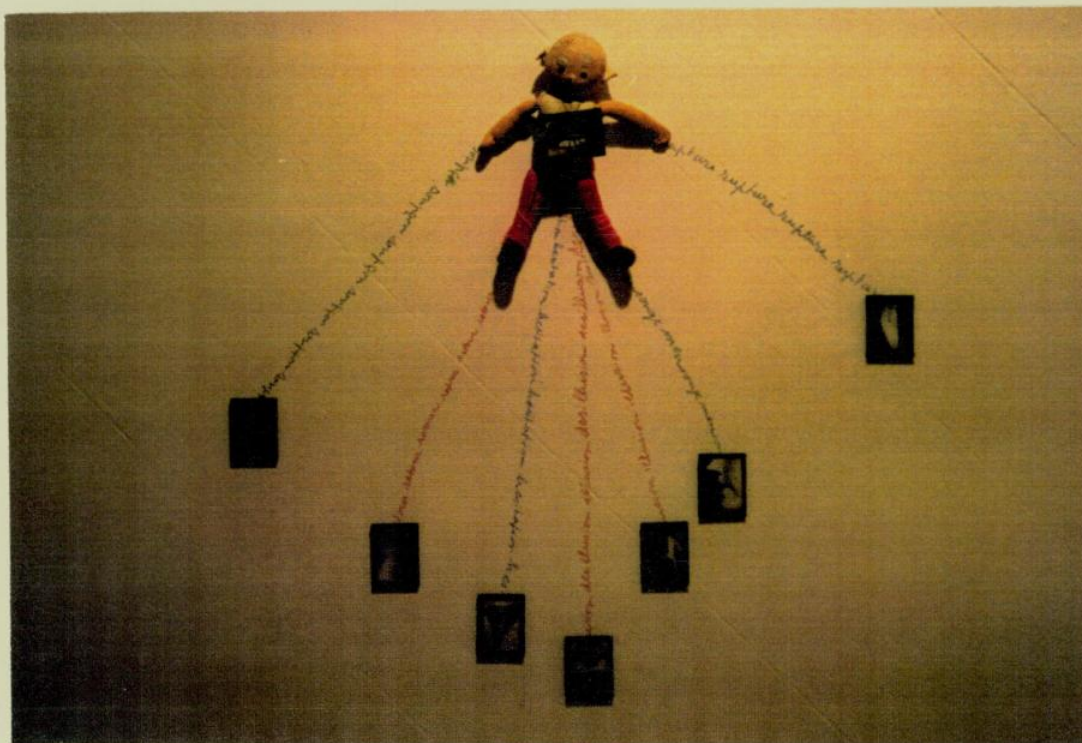


Figure 10.

Petite Effigie

(on exhibition DHG, Dublin, 1992.
 Photograph N. Cooney.)



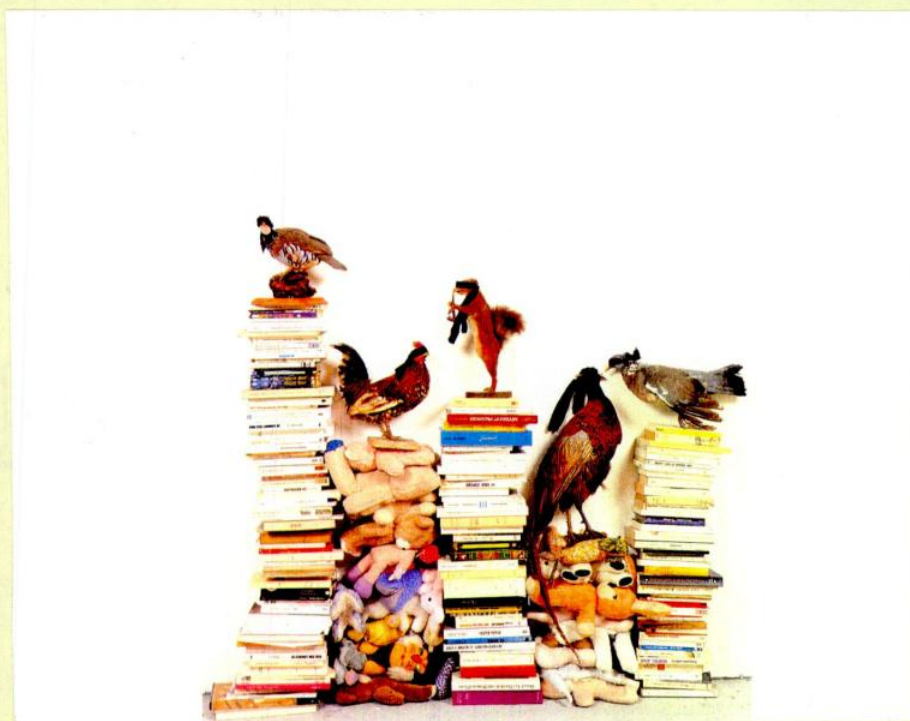


Figure 11.

Fables et Récits 1991

(Catalogue "Telling Tales" 1992)

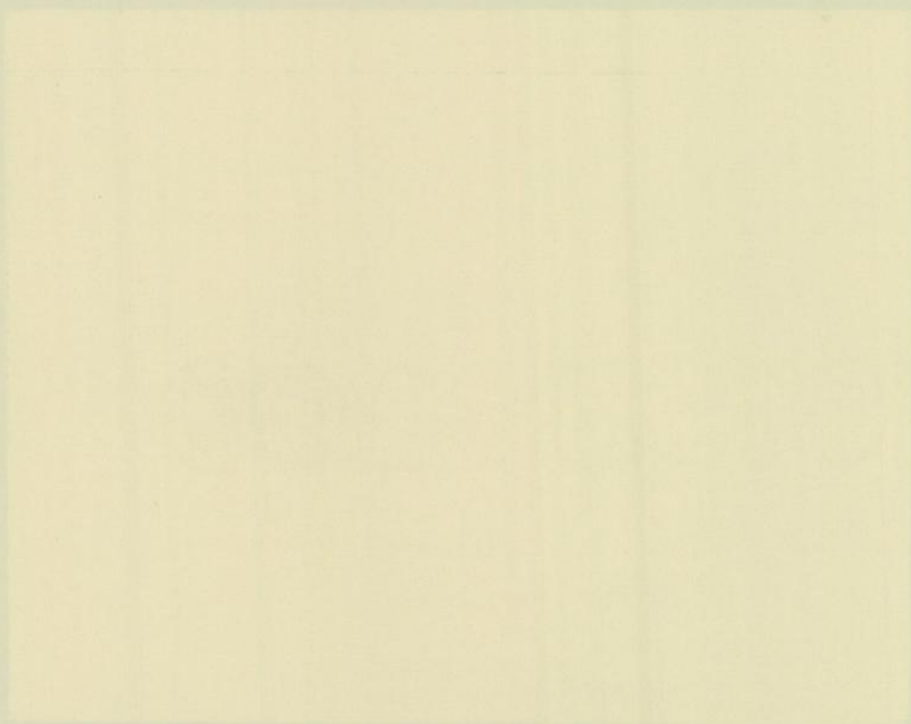




Figure 12.

Fables et Récits

(on exhibition at DHG, Dublin, 1992.
Photograph N. Cooney.)

1. The first of these is the fact that the
2. second is the fact that the
3. third is the fact that the
4. fourth is the fact that the
5. fifth is the fact that the
6. sixth is the fact that the
7. seventh is the fact that the
8. eighth is the fact that the
9. ninth is the fact that the
10. tenth is the fact that the

against being defined in an apparatus and dependent upon its attributes, especially upon Freud's concepts of masculinity and femininity as opposing sexualities.

* * * * *

In the Imaginary or pre-Oedipal phase the object, presumed to be the mother, satisfies desire. The Symbolic or the Oedipal phase is a recognition that desire cannot be satisfied. Freud privileges sight over all the other senses, like touch, smell or taste, and this is where the Oedipus Complex cannot be seen as a universal answer. A question can be asked therefore in relation to the other senses. Messenger highlights this question through her photographs by isolating parts of the body where the senses are. Yet she gives no answer. Her representations are riddles which cannot be solved. The riddle which confronts children is the problem of the origin of babies and not the question of the distinction between the sexes. "...This is the same riddle that was propounded by the Theban Sphinx..." (50). The most startling and terrifying exhibit to the "Telling Tales" exhibition is a piece entitled "Fables et Récits"⁷ precisely because it is a riddle based upon the relationship between childhood and adulthood, innocence

⁷Stories and Narratives

and knowledge. Messenger said of this piece that "... all is dead, finished. You are older ... these animals are not really alive ... at the same time they are only playing, like children ... and it was some kind of dialogue between them ..." (51).

A dialogue between past and present takes place underneath the stairs - a place which is not very beautiful but which is filled with memories of secrets and fantasies. In public discussion Messenger does not give many secrets away but they are revealed through her role as an artist and in her visual representations. In "Fables et Recits" columns of books echo the shape of the staircase under which they occupy. Soft teddies are squashed and glued together in the negative spaces between these columns. Stuffed animals occupy a privileged place atop these books and teddies yet the glass eyes of each animal are blindfolded. "... As Freud indicated in his interpretation of the myth of the Oedipus, blinding is a common symbol for a castration threat" (52).

These books, as sources of fantasy and knowledge, are preservations and defences against time and life, a release into a world of one's own. They are English paperbacks which display a variety of titles between fact and fiction, and were picked up from a second-hand market

in Bristol. In parading an accumulation of knowledge the artist presents the books closed and the spectators desire or curiosity is once again ignited. The obviousness of the materials with their placements and juxtapositions testify to the difficulty and uncertainty in reading the subject matter - childhood abandoned and re-surfaced through memory; knowledge gained yet meaningless; knowledge not gained and therefore blindness; or adulthood gained but blindfolded. The striving for autonomy vis-a-vis the fixed constructions of sexuality in language is an ongoing struggle for Messenger.

Bernard Marcadé has called Messenger's work the "Taxidermy of Desire" (53). Her art succeeds in creating what Mulvey considered essential - to maintain a passionate distance between the spectator and the work of art. Messenger's art describes the pain within the pleasure of maturity and with the pain comes a release of emotions and a healing through the process. The fact that childhood cannot be separated from adulthood nor innocence from knowledge is accepted. The question of difference remains to haunt the space.

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CHAPTER 4

KNOWLEDGE AND DEATH

... Lacan shifts the emphasis from the deadly answer to the deadliness of an answer, of a knowing that kills. Whereas the myth of Oedipus stresses the importance of the dead father, Lacan emphasises the relationship of knowledge ... (54)

"Histoire des Robes"¹ is one of Messenger's more peaceful pieces in that the physicality of the body is missing and its clothes symbolise an "evaporated body" (55). Voyeuristic tendencies may not disturb the spectator here because of the absence of the body, but a perturbing sense of danger prevails, a danger of knowledge through the representations of loss.

One must enter this exhibition space from above and walk down stairs to find out more about this piece. The ground as a symbol of the earth is, for Messenger, like a cemetery (56) which she fills with glass-topped coffins. Inside these various-sized boxes one can see different dresses which are associated with different stages in a woman's life: communion robes, wedding gowns, black evening dresses, and colourful children's robes. Each

¹Stories of Dresses

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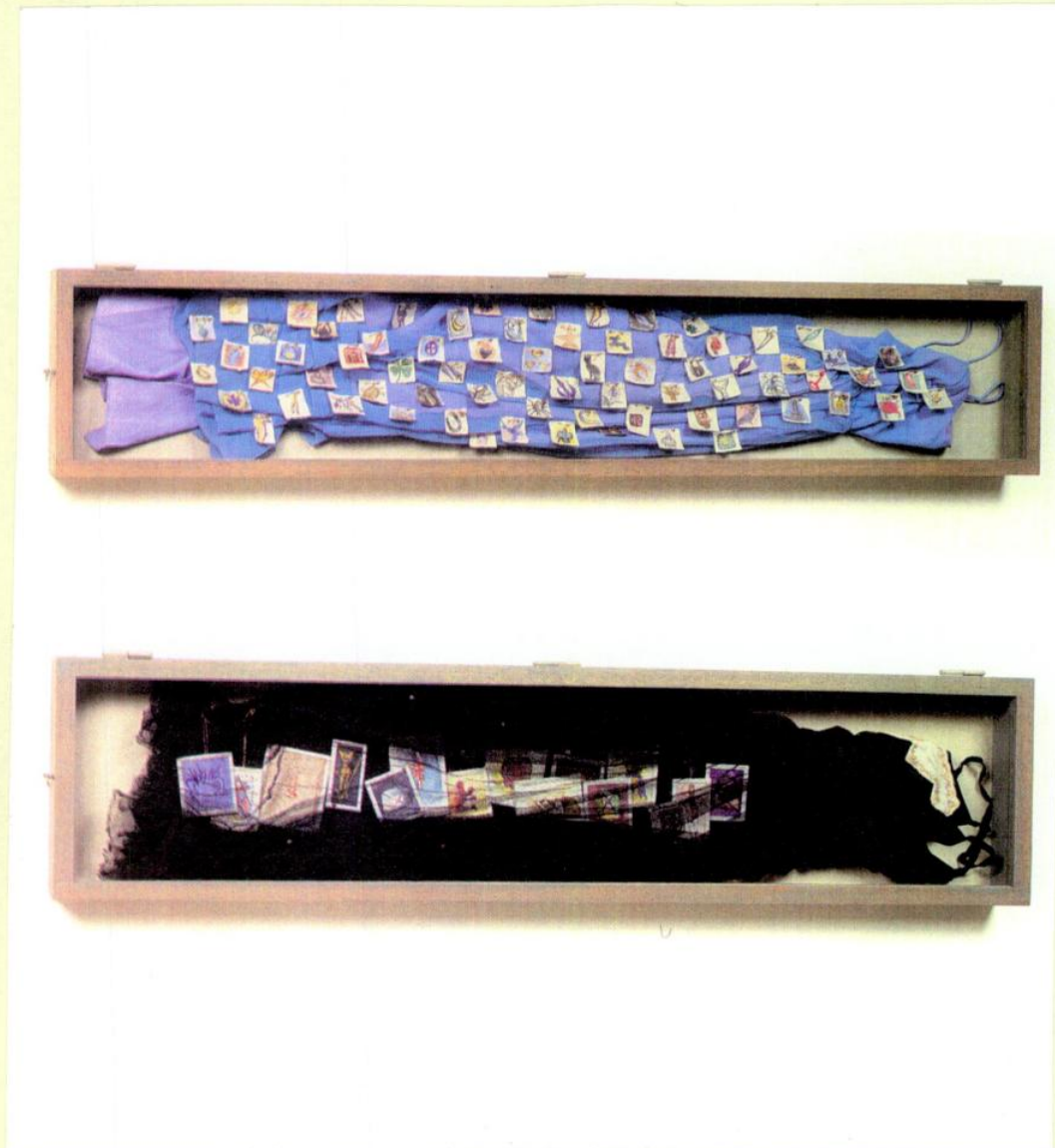
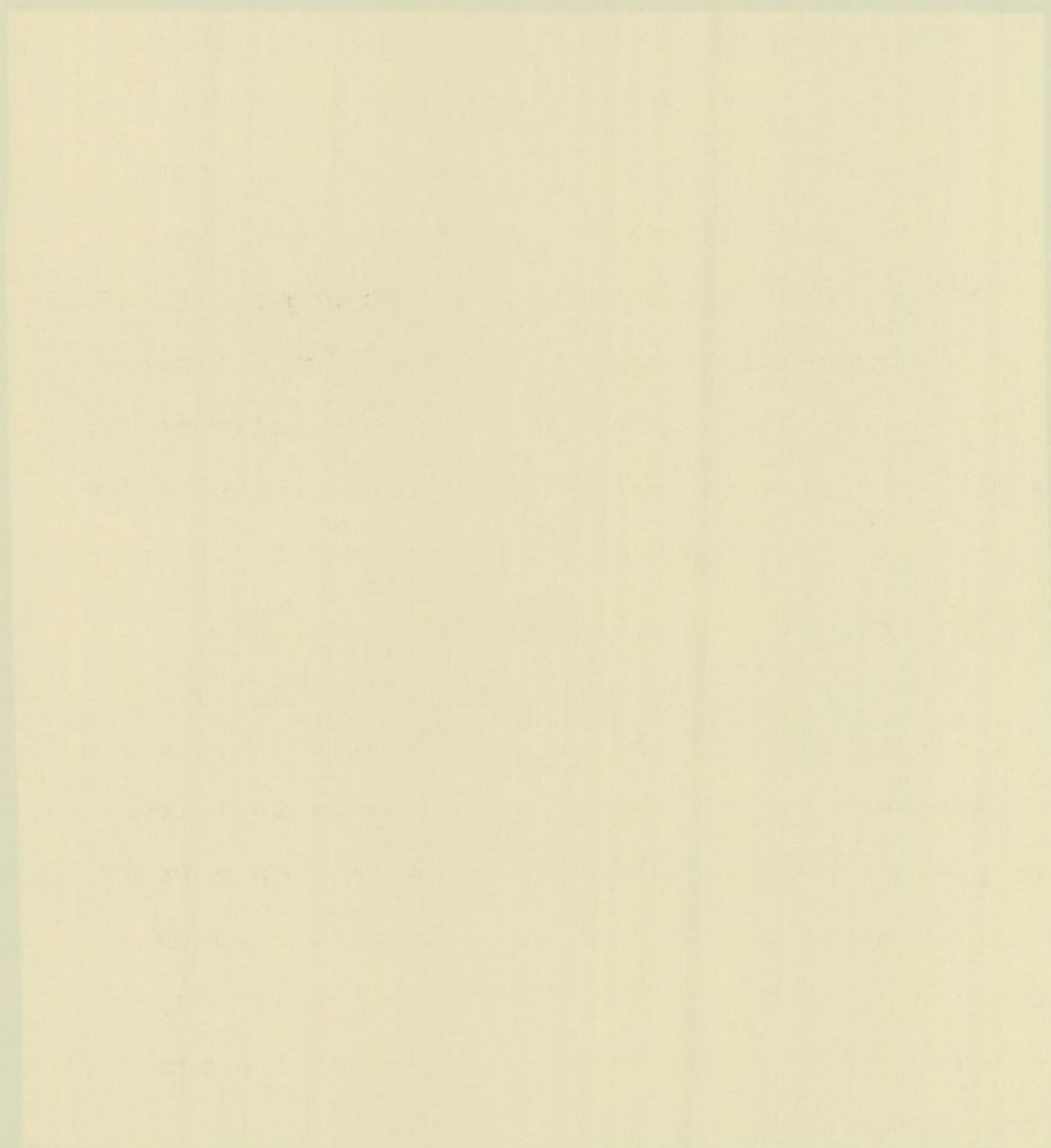


Figure 13.

Histoire des Robes 1990 - 91
(Catalogue "Telling Tales" 1992)



gown fits snugly into each designated box. As symbols of age and of past histories, these clothes are immune from fashion and time. They evoke memories of a past childhood and a past, but present, adulthood. Once again, photographs or drawings rest on top of the dresses. Some of them are framed and some are not. Childlike drawings in one box may be placed alongside old snapshots of lovers in another box. Messenger likes "... to mix the funny scenes and sad scenes with different materials ..." (57). Some images are partially covered because of the intentional draping of the robes in loose folds. These "amulets" (58) are connected to the robes with safety pins.

... Adornment "is" the woman, she exists veiled; only thus can she represent lack, be what is wanted: lack "is never presented other than as a reflection on a veil". Disguising herself as a castrated woman, the woman represents man's desire and finds her identity as, precisely, woman - genuine womanliness and the masquerade are the same thing ... (59)

Lacan credits Rivière with the discovery of the masquerade as that which is the status of the feminine, the identity of the woman. (60). This masquerade, for Lacan, acts as a compensation, not for possession of masculinity, but for woman's lack (61). What is "lack"

for Lacan, who is either phallocrat or a feminist (62)? If "... desire is knotted to the Other, but in that loop lies the desire to know ..." (63), is knowledge then, and the desire to know, not identifiable for woman? Michele Montrelay states that "...the objective of such a masquerade is to say nothing ... and in order to produce this nothing the woman uses her own body as disguise ..." (64). What is considered "feminine" therefore is the assumption and objective of a mask which conceals a non-identity rather than the actual mask itself (65). For Annette Messenger this masquerade acts, not as a compensation for lack or non-identity, but as an intellectual struggle against notions that this lack must subjugate women to a symbolic order of sameness. Her work does not deny that women put on masks². She uses the concept of the masquerade as a joke or a game and, through structuring this game, asks questions about women's complicity to a masculine order.

Central to Riviere's account of womanliness is the concept of clothes and behaviour. In this sense "Histoire des Robes" is linked to "Histoire des Petites Effigies". Messenger's robes are laid out with

²Messenger talks about "Les Piques" in the DHG discussion as a joke with the gloves, but also as "a mask" for something strange with a person inside. The dresses in "Histoire des Robes" are an obvious relation to the concept of masquerade.

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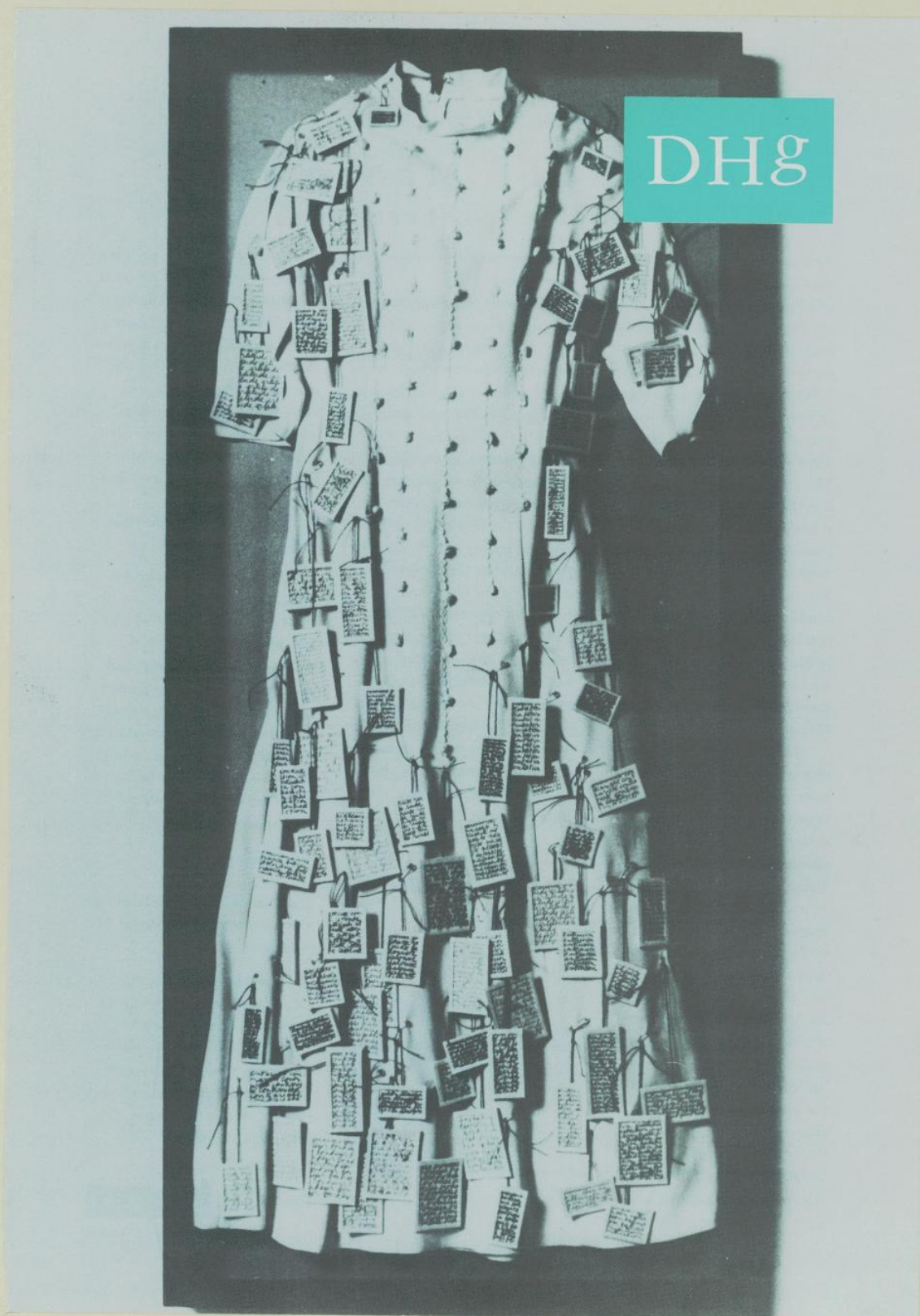


Figure 14.

Histoire des Robes

(leaflet accompanying exhibition, DHG, Dublin, 1992)

fetishistic reverence in their boxes. One large close-up photograph of mouths kissing and another one of a stretched face, which is printed on the fabric, are wrapped up in the stomachs of the dresses. Elsewhere a plait of hair, cut off from the head, emerges from the waistline of an orange dress and fairytale images of Rapunzel trapped in the tower are remembered. As Elliott Gose says "... the fairytale often embodies this important function of the riddle ..." (66), where the riddle is an attempt to provoke wisdom in the subject of whom it is asked.

The riddle that Annette Messenger sets up "... attacks the sticky, sugar and spice attitudes towards little girls and indicates its consequences in adulthood ..." (67). These consequences are perpetrated in the concepts of femininity as a construction of a mask, a skin, or a veil which hides a desire and a knowledge.

Jane Gallop states that Irigaray's reading of Freud's theory continually discovers an ignoring of pleasure (68). The masquerade is what women do in order to participate in man's desire, but at the cost of giving up theirs. For the girl in the Oedipus complex, Irigaray states that there is "...not a trace, in this development, of a desire for female pleasure..." (69). Female sexuality has been reduced to an economic

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Figure 15.

Histoire des Robes

(on exhibition at DHG, Dublin, 1992.
Photography N. Cooney.)

production of pleasure which does not allow for an accession to knowledge and which women accept as natural. "Histoire des Robes" is a commemoration of the roles that women have played in the past. In seeking to represent her knowledge of the past, Messenger accepts these roles as she would accept the death and preservation of them. She doesn't deny their historical context yet neither will she comply with it. Messenger's constant questioning of femininity as a non-identity leads to a presence and to a mask of defence. Pleasure need not be given up anymore if one doesn't comply with the system. This piece presents itself as a struggle against and a preservation of the skin one lives in. It incorporates a desire to destroy, to preserve, and to create all at the same time. Yet the riddle remains: "... the 'still present but no longer here' is intolerable ..." (70). There are no fixed answers to the questions posed by "Histoire des Robes".

* * * * *

A structuralist reading of Lacan sees "... unconscious deviations of meaning as playful gestures of desire which should be celebrated as they are ..." (71) whereas Freud's "unconscious deviations" in dreams are psychic distortions. Messenger's work incorporates both

these theories. She calls herself "Annette Messenger Trickster". Elliot Gose³ explains the role of the trickster as "... constantly over reaching himself, tricking others and hurting himself in a series of crudely humorous, grotesque adventures appropriate to a Freudian id figure..." (72).

"Les Lignes de la Main" celebrates the image of woman through playful gestures of desire, but of a desire which seems to be coded. When describing this piece Messenger used the third person singular "she".

"She" is the person who has been historically coded in a patriarchal society. Yet Messenger refuses to be coded or to conform to society. She cuts deep into the photograph and codes the surface itself. Her code is not one of certainty. There is no single truth, because it is a lie, a masquerade, a role, a silence, and a question of desire which creates contradictory meanings.

These photographs of hands are linked to her collection of signatures as metaphors for the self. In linking these hands with the gloves in "Les Piques", these hands mask the self. Through the connection of the

³For a comprehensive study on fairytales Elliot Goses' "The Wonder Tale" studies specifically the Irish wonder tale and compares Irish fairytales with North American Indian myths.

fairytale imagery and the text, these hands refer to the passage from childhood into adulthood, as in "Histoire des Petites Effigies". Inextricably related to "Les Lignes de la Main" is "Histoire des Robes". These two pieces of art deal with her more detached yet powerful representations which evoke the danger of knowledge and death. The graves of the dresses are placed in a contrasting position to the lines of text which simultaneously rise and fall on the wall behind. Through this use of text ones "sight" oscillates repeatedly between body and clothes.

Messenger erotically codes this body, these hands, by drawing on the surface of the photograph. The zones of the hand have libidinal meanings which generate pleasurable associations. The palm of the hands are used often in the artists depictions in order to suggest fortune-telling associations. A woman is once again drawn along one finger as in "Histoire des Petites Effigies". The fingertips are especially significant and in one photograph different faces are drawn on these zones. Pleasure is indistinguishable from pain, as one cannot decide whether these expressions are happily laughing or whether they are stretched in pain.

In "Les Lignes de la Main" bodies are turned into text; skin is turned into paper. Underneath each

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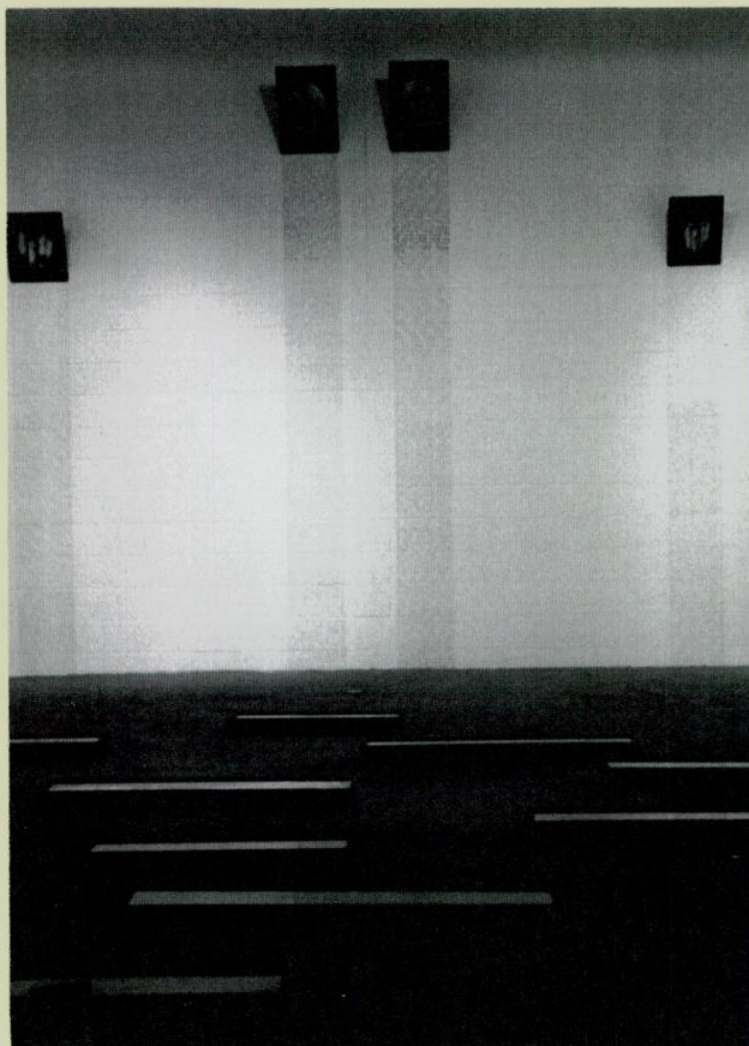


Figure 16.

*Les Lignes de la Main
juxtaposed with
Histoire des Robes*

*(on exhibition at DHG, Dublin, 1992.
Photograph N. Cooney.)*



photograph is a weary litany of words which relate to each drawing, i.e. "solitude" to a bed; "rencontre"⁴ to faces; "promesse"⁵ to a woman who stands within a star; "voyage" to a mermaid and a ship; "crainte"⁶ to woman; and "confiance"⁷ to a house. This literary process of description of visual representation is like the earlier repetition of the words in "Petite Effigie" which become meaningless. These recognisable fairytale images are "bodies" inhabiting a site of knowledge and power but the artist confounds our expectations of elevation into meaning. Messenger's insatiable curiosity for multiple connections and her consequent destruction of meaningful connections places her in a realm of contradiction, of difference, and of "other". By playing games within the symbolic order she both releases the tension of being trapped within it and also begins to fill the psychoanalytically theorised "absence" by taking pleasure in playing these games.

* * * * *

⁴encounter

⁵promise

⁶fear

⁷confidence

... Messages coded into the body can be "read" only within a social system of organisation and meaning ... (73).

Lacan believed that one was not born into society but rather that one was constructed by it. Jacqueline Rose suggests that the force of Lacan's writing was in his argument that 'femininity' is constructed and that the issue at stake is women's relationship to language (74). Freud specifically spoke of desire in relation to genital identity in the Oedipus Complex. Anatomical difference is allowed to become sexual difference where the phallus is the signifier of desire. It is not allowed to become that which "figures" as sexual difference. The "fact" of "lack" in woman subjects her to a language where meaning has been constructed. The patriarchal order comes to be defined as "... natural rather than normative ..." (75). Irigaray's argument for a growth of symbolisation of the maternal body only returns to the unanswered question of symbolisation itself. For Lacan "... there is no feminine outside language ... she is simultaneously symptom and myth..." (76)

... in so far as it is the order of language which structures sexuality around the male term, or the privileging of that term which shows sexuality to be constructed within language, so this raises the issue of

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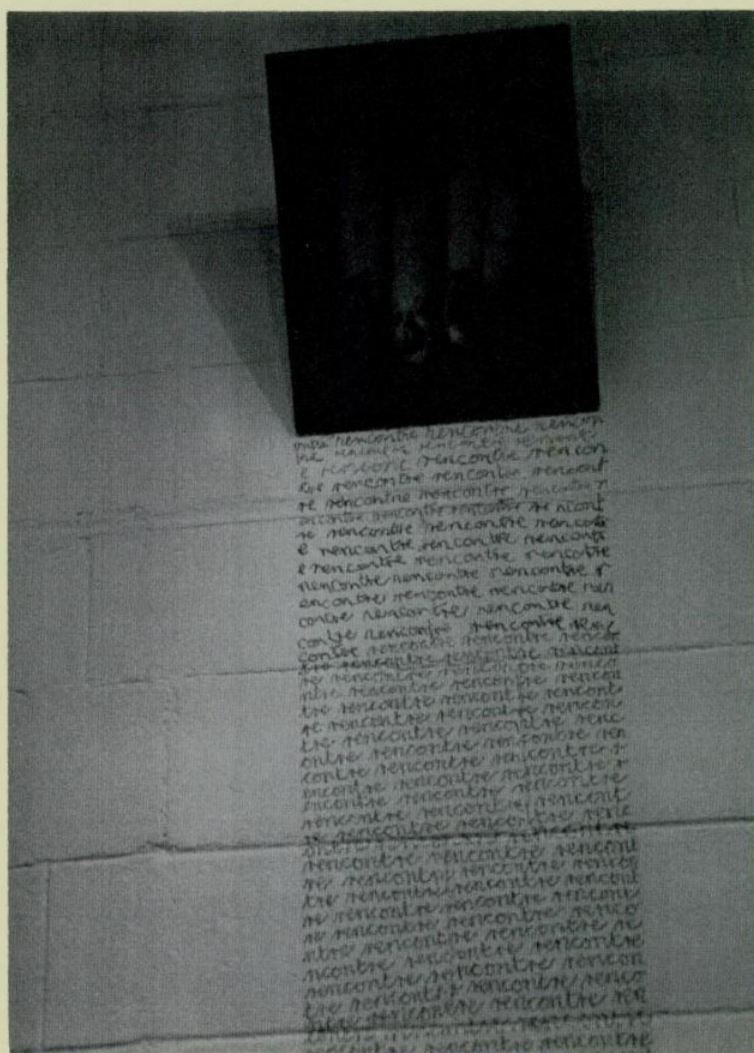


Figure 17.

Les Lignes de la Main (detail)

(on exhibition at DHG, Dublin, 1992.
Photograph N. Cooney.)



women's relationship to that language and that sexuality simultaneously ... (77)

Within patriarchy women are posed without yet Lacan's concepts pose men and women within a patriarchal language. Lacan, the master of language himself, is implicated in language as well. He recognised that language has its limitations and its ambiguities because it oscillates between a Real and an Imaginary realm of realisation, perception and understanding on the part of the individual. Messenger relates her work to this privileged order of language which has structured female sexuality as "absent" in that language.

June Quinn Berger, in her lecture "Male/Female Aspects of Personality" in the Douglas Hyde Gallery⁸, said that the piece "Les Lignes de la Main" was the key to the exhibition in the Douglas Hyde Gallery. In this piece, she says that Messenger is posed as the "tragic hero" - the person who is confined to the constructions of "femininity", the person who has lost, and the one who endlessly struggles against these constructions and this loss.

⁸Education, Lunchtime Events, 9 December, 1992.

CONCLUSION

This analysis opened on a Freudian concept of sexuality and ended on a Lacanian construct of femininity. However, both concepts are inextricably linked to each other. Lacan himself returned to Freud's theory which acted as a backbone for his own developing theories¹. So the question posed in the introduction - why must every aspect of human identity come down to the Oedipal? - is necessary in that it allows feminists to question constructed codes of identification. The Oedipus Complex deals almost exclusively with sexual identification and constructs femininity in relation to a more privileged masculinity. Freud was aware of difference but as a construction of polarities or opposites between the sexes, favouring one over the other. Where Lacan's theories are more applicable for feminists than Freud's is in their political content as a structure of language.

¹Lacan, Jacques "Le Seminaire II: Le moi dans la theorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychoanalyse (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

conqueror

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The contradiction which is posed for women today lies in the connections between Freud's and Lacan's notions of femininity and in their concepts of where the female is situated in society. Woman as "lack" is seen as "other". In Freud's account women portray a need for possession of masculinity and, as Joan Rivière points out, women act out a masquerade which veils this masculinity and, therefore, her intellect. For Lacan, this masquerade is seen as a compensation for her "lack". Women use the masquerade to "assume" a feminine non-identity. This is where the problem of complicity lies, i.e. in women's acceptance in a patriarchal society of a non-identity. Messenger, the artist, on the other hand, finds comfort in a masquerade. Its function in her representations is to question the notions incorporated in the masquerade itself, how it has been constructed, and why it still remains today. Her visual representations question the contradictions of sexual difference in society, and women's complicity to these contradictions.

In Messenger's masquerade of representation the artist constructs "the gaze" and directs it to the spectators, male and female alike. Her scopophilic instinct derives from pleasure in looking. Through photography she aims to possess the image but does not wish to subject it to any form of order. Instead, her aim in possession is to confront the audience in their voyeuristic or scopophilic

viewing and to expose their complicity in the act of "looking". Gender difference is constructed in society and men have maintained a privileged acceptance of presence through "sight". The possible intervention for women, through questioning the authority of patriarchy and women's complicity to it , lies politically in the "passionate detachment" of desire. Messenger, as artist and as woman, resists the identifications with which she has been historically coded, i.e. fetish, other, lack and undervalued, through her political and passionate detachment of representation.

Constructed in language as Messenger is, she recognises these restrictions. The problem, as Mulvey stated, is how do women fight the unconscious language of patriarchy? Messenger gives no answer to this question because one can never know the unconscious. What Messenger does is to protect herself against it. She achieves this preservation through the many roles that she dons. "Annette Messenger Collector" is a role which fights off death, but the larger it gets the more incomplete it becomes. "Annette Messenger Trickster" embodies the riddle of the unconscious which deceives and which gives no answer. In hurting herself through painful representations of the passage from childhood to adulthood, an aspect which dominates the exhibition, Messenger also takes pleasure in this "game" of

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representation. In the role of "Annette Messenger Artist" she is a liar and confronts the spectator's acceptance of "dead" images in a symbolic order. The photographs of the woman are "dead" precisely because the medium of photography situates the image in the past. The stuffed birds are dead. Annette Messenger aims to complicate pleasure on a political level. This can only be achieved in an uncertainty of language, images and knowledge.

"Annette Messenger Woman" is perhaps the role which poses the most difficult problems. She has not escaped being historically coded from childhood. Her sexual identity becomes important for her yet she cannot fix it in language. Sylvia Thompson² said of Messenger that "... deciding not to get married or have children, she decided to dedicate herself to her art...". The role of "woman" cannot be alienated from the role of "artist" while at the same time her identity as woman and artist is divided, separated and fragmented.

The critic Brian Fallon³ spoke of her work thus: "There may be conceptual unity in this exhibition but there is no obvious visual unity. It is yet another case of the part being greater than the whole". The part is

²Article on A. Messenger in the Sunday Press 8/11/1992

³Article on A. Messenger in the Irish Times 8/12/1992

not greater than the whole because the whole has not yet been created. The whole is incomplete.

Messenger's intention is to disturb the spectator through arrangements of images, objects, texts and drawings in fragmented and juxtaposed positions. If unity can be achieved in this exhibition it would occur through the materials used and through the subject-matter. The human body and processes of identification resonate throughout each piece. Hands and heads are prevalent images for the "self" and are portrayed in various different ways through photography and through objects. Childhood objects are incorporated into many pieces. A sense of uncertainty infiltrates every single exhibit in this exhibition.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

"...answering these riddles is a matter of life and death; only a correct answer will save the neck or head of the guesser. The situation in the riddle of the sphinx is the most well-known of these. Like all riddlers, the sphinx offers an opportunity and thus takes a risk. If the guesser is correct, as Oedipus is, she loses her superiority, her power ... but if he fails she has the right to kill him ..." (78)

Elliott B. Gose Jr.

Freud is the guesser of the riddle. In the myth, Oedipus is correct. In reality, Freud's theory only

offers clues to the solution of the riddle. He is still caught within it as he offers no correct or incorrect answers. Lacan takes more of a risk than Freud in that his theories offer a political analysis of gender construction and difference in sexuality and in language. In the Oedipus Complex women lose their power. Lacan considers this loss not a sexual "lack" but an intellectual misrecognition and alienation which structures the sexual lack as lack in power. Freud's and Lacan's theories do not give us a final understanding of masculinity or femininity. Caught between life and death these theories have not as yet fully answered the riddle.

Psychoanalysis and feminist theories are caught within the language of patriarchy. Their problems of analysis lie in unravelling the unconscious, which is itself structured as a language in relation to desire. Psychoanalysis has tried to understand sexual difference through metaphors, representations and narratives in order to clarify and question codes of sexual and political identification in society. If the quest is to answer this riddle it can only be through language again, because language is the processes it uses. "...Creation, like psychoanalysis, is a process of re-living in a new situation..." (79). Messenger not only creates new spaces but also extends narrative devices in order to question the processes involved in creation and also to stress the

contradictory meanings in language which are split between a conscious and an unconscious realm of identification. Through her complications and juxtapositions of objects and images the familiar technique of narratives as moral stories is disrupted. Explanatory fictions are discarded in favour of an exploration of sexual and political identity which the artist knows to be ambiguous. She leaves the spectators confused as to where their own identities lie. For Messenger, "...to confound and exceed reality becomes the rule..." (80).

CONTRACTOR

11

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APPENDIX A

EDUCATION

Lunchtime Events

(held at the Douglas Hyde Gallery in conjunction with the exhibition "Telling Tales")

October 28th - December 9th 1992.

Tuesday, October 27th:

Annette Messenger talks about her work.

Wednesday, October 28th:

Under the Skin: Hilary Robinson, Lecturer in History of Art, University of Ulster.

Wednesday, November 4th:

Feminism and Representation: Dr. Barbara Bradby. Lecturer in Sociology, T.C.D.

Wednesday, November 11th:

French Feminist Theory: Alison Ainley, Lecturer in Philosophy, U.C.D.

Wednesday, November 18th:

Annette Messenger's Work and French Feminist Theory: Ailbhe Smyth, Lecturer in Women's Studies, U.C.D.

Wednesday, November 25th:

The Found Object and the Feminine: Legacies of Surrealism: Fiona Barber, Lecturer in History of Art, University of Ulster.

Wednesday, December 2nd:

Feminist Theology and the Imagination: Dr. Anne Louise Gilligan, Lecturer in Religious Studies, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra.

Wednesday, December 9th:

Male/Female Aspects of Personality: June Quinn Berger, Jungian Psychotherapist.

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