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Kathy Prendergast

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INTRODUCTION

This discussion of the work of the Irish sculptor Kathy Prendergast has been divided into three chapters. Chapter One will involve a discussion of A Concise History of a World 1979, Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces 1983, and the To Control a Landscape series 1983. As these works depict the female body as land within a map format, it has been necessary to investigate the historical associations of the female body with land. The organic world-view promoted the belief that the earth was an active, nurturing and receptive female planet, and promoted respect for and integration with nature. The subsequent rise of mechanism and Judeo-Christian beliefs replaced the bounteous female earth-spirit with a passive planet composed of dead particles. Both women and nature were reduced to a passive role within a patriarchal society based on power, control and exploitation. Prendergast's works can be seen as multi-layered feminist texts which engage the viewer in a process of discovery. The paintings highlight the objectified historically constructed notion of female identity within culture and society, using the map as a metaphor for the objectification and colonization of the female body, and emphasising the split between representation and reality.

Chapter Two will involve a discussion concerning Prendergast tent sculptures As Small as a World and as Large as Alone, Land and Range. The rigidly authoritative

representations of female identity exposed in Enclosed Worlds...., are replaced by easily collapsible complex three-dimensional structures, and the distance between representation and reality is removed. The map exists in the form of a place. These sculptures present themselves as puzzles and can engage the viewer in the creation of meaning. Stack can be seen from a feminist angle as being a monumental symbol of female identity, being more solid and enduring than the tent sculptures.

The sculpture referred to in Chapter Two can be seen as developing from the issues of female identity within society arising from Prendergast's To Control a Landscape series. Chapter Three will deal with works stemming from the ecological aspects of the former. Prendergast makes associations between internal bodily systems and external natural structures (Organs), emphasising the human as being essentially a part of nature, and she appears to suggest a return to the values inherent in an organic society. Her studies of organic systems have led to a current project involving drawings of all the capital cities in the world. Prendergast appears to emphasise the organic nature of cities which are products of undifferentiated growth and over-expansion, and are continually growing and disintegrating. This thesis will provide an overview of the work of Kathy Prendergast, and the development of her ideas through the use of the map metaphor.

CHAPTER ONE

ENCLOSED WORLDS IN OPEN SPACES

In a discussion of Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces and the To Control a Landscape series of paintings depicting the female body as land undergoing mechanical alterations within a map-format, it is necessary to investigate the historical association of woman with nature, the rise of mechanism and patriarchal society, and the subsequent control and colonization of both land and the female body. It is also necessary to examine the processes of representation of the female body within a male-dominated culture, and the significance of the feminist movement in the decolonization of the female body.

Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces was executed by Prendergast in 1983. This delicate water-colour and ink painting depicts a truncated female body within a grid-like map-format. The body is equated with land-nipples are labelled as volcanoes, the stomach becomes a desert, while the vulva becomes a harbour. The body appears as an island, surrounded by a sea spotted with ships. The associations of the human body and land can be traced back through history to Pre-Enlightenment times, when people lived in daily contact with, and relied upon their immediate natural environment. The earth was seen as an organism infused with vital energies. The Stoics of Athens in the first century A.D. believed that "The world itself was an

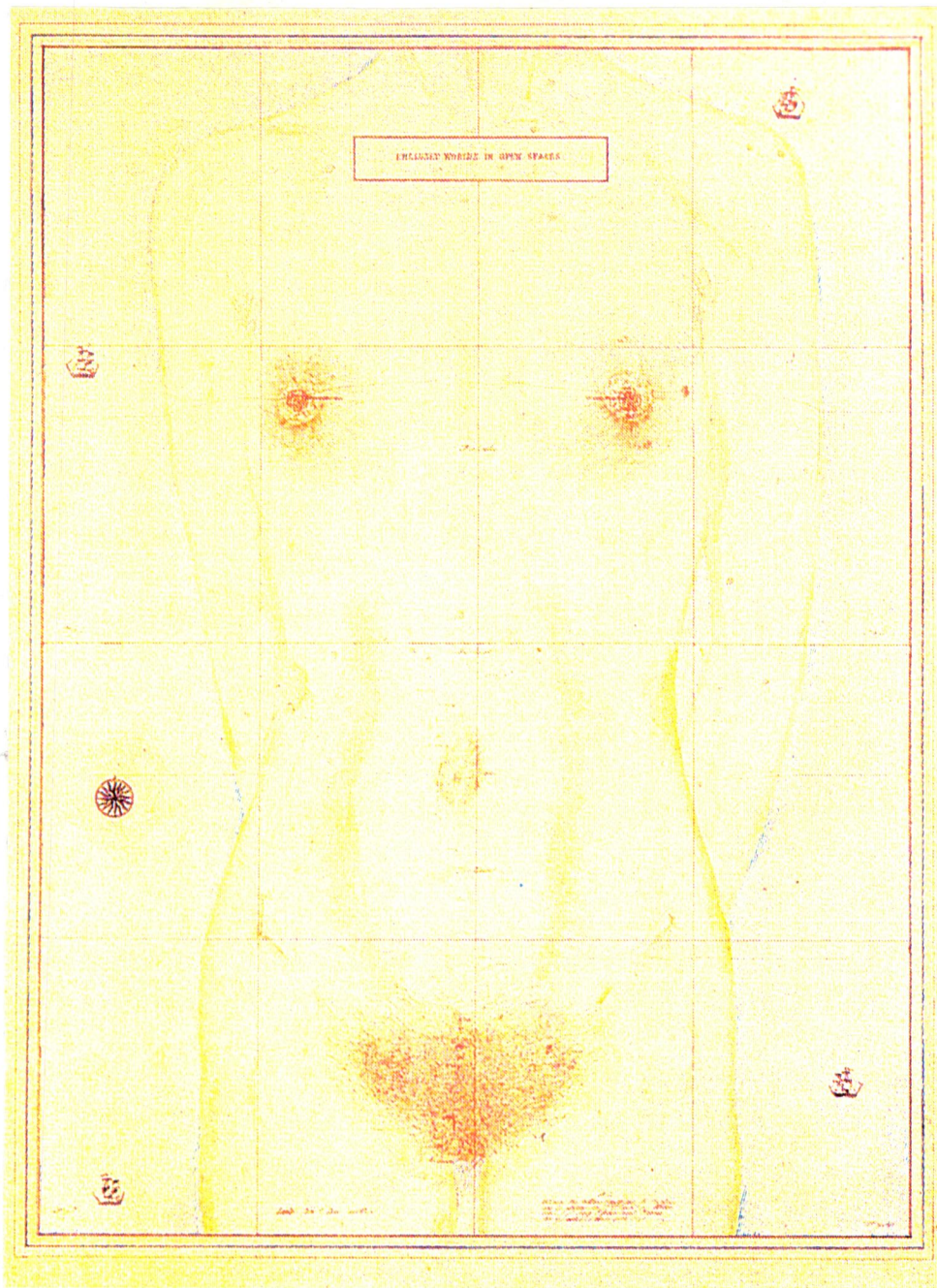


Plate 1.

Kathy Prendergast: Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces, 1983.

intelligent organism, God and matter were synonymous. Matter was dynamic, composed of two forces: expansion and condensation....The tension between them was the inherent force generating all substances, properties and living forms in the cosmos, and the geocosm" (1). The universe was seen as an integrated, balanced whole, each part created to benefit another, and imbued with an animating force. The earth was seen as being organised "much after the plan of our bodies in which there are both veins and arteries, the former blood vessels, the latter air vessels.....So exactly alike is the resemblance to our bodies in nature's formation of the earth, that our ancestors have spoken of veins (springs) of water (2). The earth was seen to produce sweat in the form of dew, and to have its own elimination system, through which winds would expel themselves from the earth's interior, causing earthquakes.

The earth was also widely viewed as being specifically female. This can be seen as a natural projection of human perceptions onto the external world (3). The earth was not only alive and organic, but embodied the nurturing, creative and bounteous qualities of the female, thereby becoming 'Mother Earth'. All living things were said to have been generated within the womb of mother earth. The sixteenth-century alchemist Basil Valentine wrote that:

The quickening powers of the earth produces all things that grow forth from it, and he who says that the earth has no life makes a statement flatly contradicted by facts. What is dead cannot produce life and growth, seeing that it is devoid of the quickening spirit....This spirit is the life and soul that dwell in the earth, and are nourished by heavenly and sidereal influences. This spirit is itself fed by the stars and thereby rendered capable of imparting nutriment to all things that grow and of nursing them as a mother does her child, while it is yet in the womb....If the earth were deserted by this spirit it would be dead (4).

The idea of the earth being fed by the stars was echoed by Aristotle and Copernicus, the former believing that "the movements of the celestial heavens produced semen, which fell in the form of dew and rain on the receptive earth" (5). The latter claimed that "the earth conceives by the sun and becomes pregnant with annual offspring" (6). These ideas have direct reference to Aristotle's theory of sexuality based on the male active semen working on the female passive matter.

The organic view of nature as a female, nurturing, receptive living entity, served as an ethical restraint in terms of alteration of or control over the landscape. The Smoholla American Indian tribe voiced concern over environmental abuse in the 1800's:

You ask me to plow the ground! Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's breast? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest. You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under her skin for bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again. You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it, and be rich like white men! But how dare I cut off my mothers hair? (7).

The image of the earth as a bounteous mother inspired the Roman compiler Pliny (AD 23-79) to condemn mining into the bowels of the earth:

For it is upon her surface, in fact, that she has presented us with these substances, equally with the cereals, bounteous and everready, as she is, in supplying us with all things for our benefit! It is what she has concealed from our view, what is sunk beneath her surface, objects, in fact of no rapid formation; that urge us to our ruin, that send us to the very depths of hell....when will be the end of thus exhausting the earth, and to what point will avarice finally penetrate! (8).

The organic view of nature stemmed from and shaped a society which promoted integration with, and respect for the natural environment. Human beings were seen to be parts in respect to a living cosmic whole, an essentially feminine planet.

The organic order of the world came under threat in early modern times, leading to the identification of nature with the witch. Developments in science, notably Copernicus' realisation that the earth was not the centre of the cosmos but revolved around the sun, and the sighting of a new star in 1572 by Tycho Brache, led to a distrust of nature, and served to undermine ideas of an ordered balanced cosmos. The feminine earth principle gave way to the masculine sun. The female pagan life-spirit was also under threat from Judeo-Christian belief in an all-powerful male god, of whom nature was but a servant. Judeo-Christian belief emphasised the idea of nature

as a wilderness, into which Adam and Eve had been sent as a form of punishment. The Judeo-Christian God had also advocated the conquering of nature. Technological advancements, scientific developments and changes in ethical codes led to the rise of mechanism as a world-view superseding the organic order:

Mechanism was based on the logic that knowledge of the world could be certain and consistent, and that the laws of nature were imposed on creation by God. The primacy of organic process gave way to the stability of mathematical laws and identities (9).

The vitalistic, organismic world view was replaced by an ordered, mechanical, dead universe.

The witch was used by advocates of the new mechanistic view as a symbol of the disorderly elements in nature, being capable of causing famine, disease and storms. The witch as a symbol of nature and society suggested disorder which must be brought under control. In reality, witches were closely associated with the organic world view and female sexuality, acting as "midwives, advisors and healers" (10), to their villages, through an understanding of natural remedies, and association with "spirits" present in every natural object, Carolyn Merchant notes that "through the power of spells that summoned spirits, witches could control the forces of nature, they could make hail or rain, destroy crops and bring plagues"

(11). Merchant also describes witch craft as "a method of revenge and control that could be used by persons both physically and socially powerless in a world believed by nearly everyone to be animate and organismic" (12). Francis Bacon, one of the main contributors to modern science, used witch trial imagery in his advocacy of the control of nature for human benefit, treating nature as a female to be tortured into divulging her secrets. He claimed it was necessary to "hound nature in her wanderings", "to examine nature herself and the arts upon interrogatories", "so nature exhibits herself more clearly under the trial's and vexations of art (mechanical devices) than when left to herself" (13). Mechanical devices were used to torture woman suspected as being witches during the witch trials. Witches were seen as a challenge to the scientific viewpoint, due to their supposed understanding and control of nature and their unrepressed sexuality. Bacon called for the control of nature in the name of progress through the use of the machine. No longer was the womb of nature a sacred place, nor was nature seen as being bountiful and nurturing. She was to be "bound into service" (14), and man was to regain the power over nature lost after the Fall from the Garden of Eden. The ethical codes which had previously protected nature were lifted, and the subsequent objectification, colonization and exploitation of the earth and its resources led to the formation of a patriarchal capitalist society in which value is measured in monetary terms, "a market

economy based on money exchanges, property rights, agricultural improvement and the domination of the earth (15) in the name of progress. The human being became controller and operator, thereby removing himself from nature.

The objectification and exploitation of the earth went hand-in-hand with that of women. The assignment of a passive role to the earth, was paralleled by the assignment of a passive role to women within society. Aristotle's theory of sexuality not only suggests that the passive female egg supplies matter which is acted upon by the powerful male sperm, but also that the female supplies matter alone to the child, while the male element supplies intellect. The Protestant Reformer John Knox believed that

In the macrocosm theory, spirit and pure activity (associated with the male) increased toward the upper reaches of the closed spherical world, while the female earth lay at its centre. Women's place was symbolized by the passive, base matter, which nurtured the active spiritual principle, but was always below it and inferior to it" (16).

Another prominent Protestant leader, John Calvin, proposed the idea that "Eve's punishment for her sin was to be cast into servitude and subjected to her husband's authority and will" (17). Merchant notes that

Anthropologists here pointed out that nature and women are both perceived to be on a lower level than culture, which have been associated symbolically and historically with men. Because women's physiological functions of reproduction, nurture and child rearing are viewed as closer to nature, their social role is lower on the

cultural scale than that of the male. Woman are devalued by their tasks and roles, by their exclusion from community functions whence power is derived, and through symbolism (18).

Thus the woman/nature association came to be abused as a means of subjecting both to a passive role under the control of a patriarchal society.

Sheila Rowbotham makes the valid statement that "Power in the hands of particular groups serves like a prism to refract reality through their own perspective" (19). This supposed reality can be represented in the form of art. It has been necessary to investigate the woman/nature association throughout history in order to examine the representation of the female body within culture. The image of the female has been traditionally represented in conjunction with nature or the landscape. The pastoral tradition of the Renaissance abounded with images of an idealised nature, using the female body as a symbol of the earth spirit, nurturing and beautiful, but passive. Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus depicts the naked, virginal goddess of love in association with the "earth mother who is covered with a gown and a wreath of flowers", both, symbols of female fertility", (20). The Venus figure was said to have been imagined "not as an erotic figure but as a symbol of Humanitas, an image of beauty intended to inspire man's most noble thoughts" (21). However, images such as this presented the female body/nature as passive objects which could

be tamed and controlled, in order to provide for the well-being of man. The artworks of the Romantic age can be seen as a form of escapism within an ever-repressive industrial age. The male artist used the image of nature as "symbolic of a spiritual realm free from the influence of the Industrial Revolution" (22). Nature represented the "realm of violent emotion, mystery, fugitive spiritual states, a watery world, stillness birth and darkness" (23). Nature as female represented a passive site of desire of the active male. After the Scientific Revolution nature was depicted as female in sculpture by Louis-Ernest Barrias, "Nature reveals herself (to Science)". Nature was seen as a beautiful submissive woman shyly removing her own veil, willingly exposing her secrets to science. Artists such as Renoir, Cezanne and Gauguin continued to portray the female nude within the landscape, associating the woman's body with the forces of nature. Representations of women within culture became increasingly objectified. They were portrayed as being passive, malleable objects under the male gaze.

Because women were seen as being closer to nature, and men identified with culture, women were denied a voice with which to challenge these representations. Woman was specifically an object for art rather than an art producer. Griselda Pollock notes that the "Academies refused to allow women to study the nude. Control over access to the nude was instrumental in the

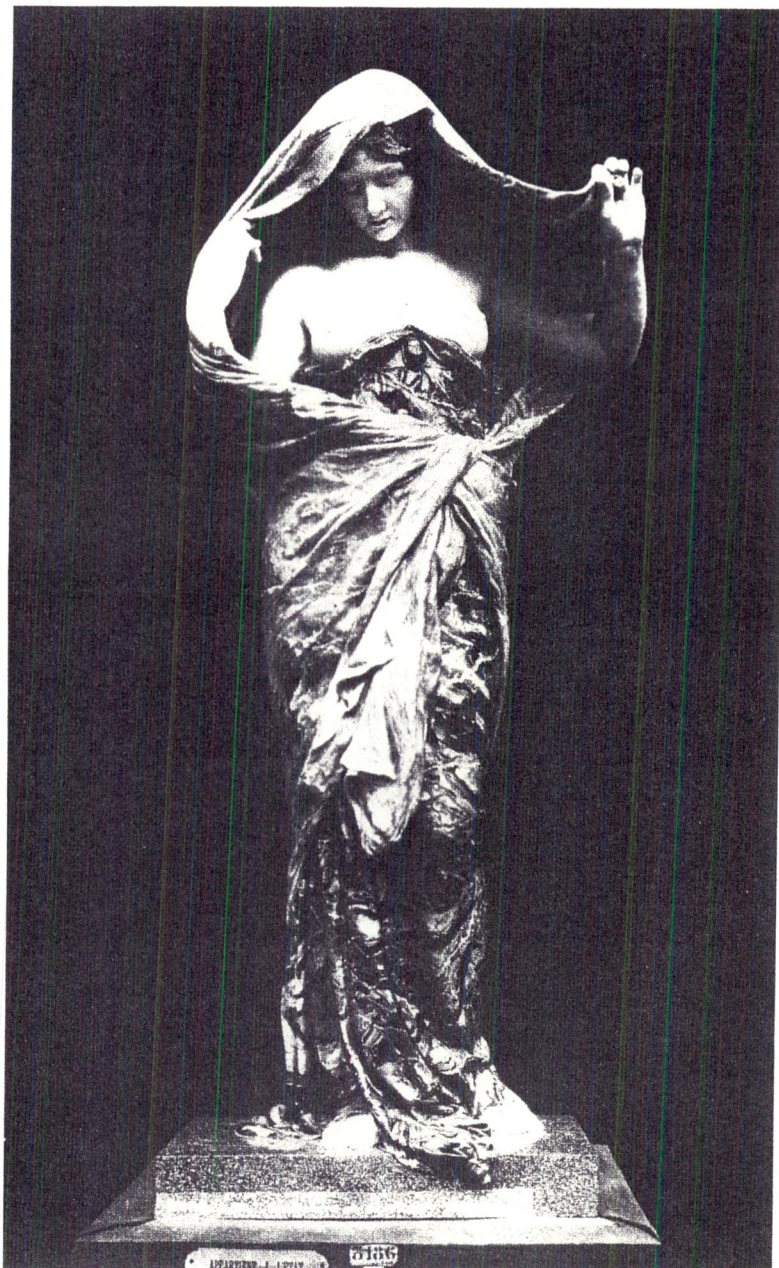


Plate 2.

Louis-Ernest Barrias (1841-1905): Nature Reveals Herself.

exercise of power over what meanings were constructed by an art based on the ideal of the human body" (24). Modern media abounds with images of the female body as a passive sexual object under the male pleasure-seeking, dominating, scopophilic gaze. John Berger notes that;

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between man and woman, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male, the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object, and most particularly an object of vision (25).

Pollock observes that:

The fiction of an eternal natural order of things is employed monolithically to ratify the continuing power of men over women. Historically produced social roles are represented in bourgeois ideologies as timeless and biologically determined. Feminists must challenge this substitution of 'Nature' for 'History' and to insist on understanding that history is itself changing, contradictory, differentiated (26).

It is precisely this historically constructed notion of female identity which Prendergast highlights in Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces and the To Control a Landscape series.

Although Prendergast insists that feminism is not a major concern in her work, these images can be read coherently from a feminist angle. The precursor to Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces was a depiction of Botticelli's Birth of Venus enclosed within a gridded map, entitled, A Concise History of a World.

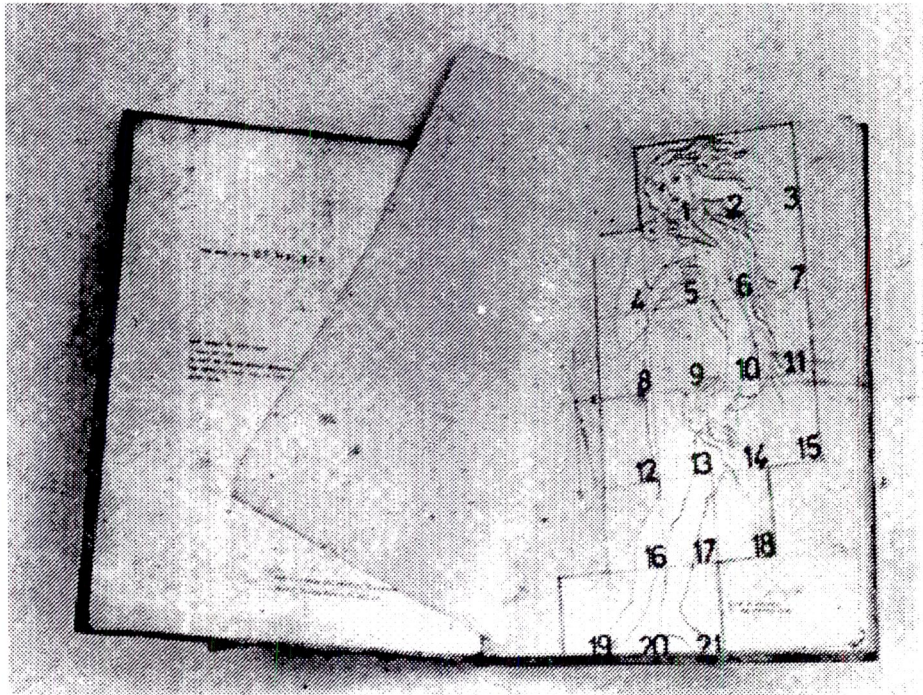
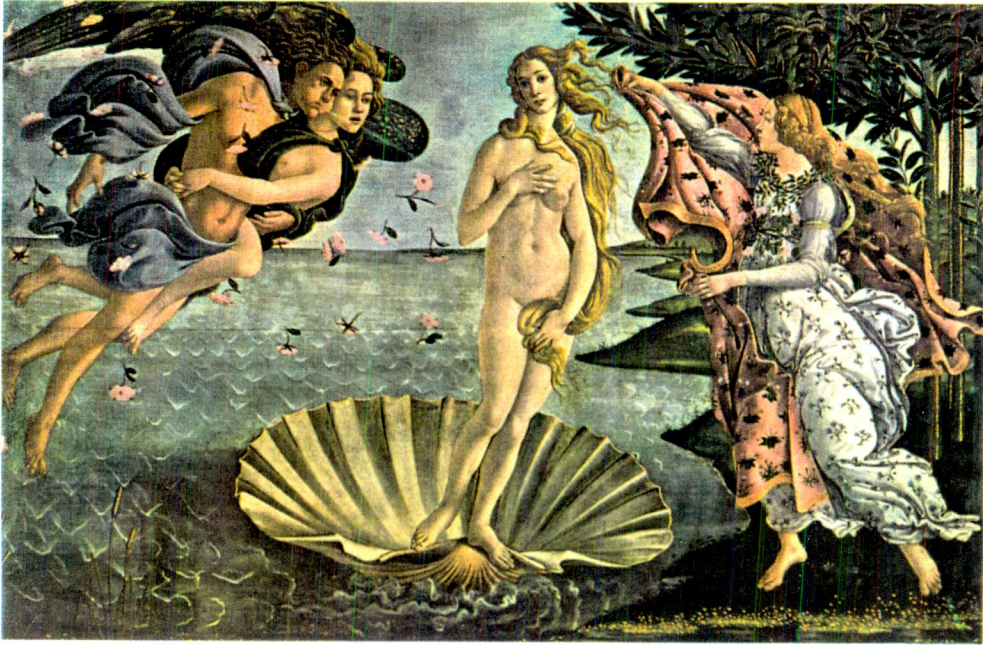


Plate 3A and 3B

3A. Sandro Botticelli: Birth of Venus, 1482.

3B. Kathy Prendergast: A Concise History of a World, 1979.

As previously discussed, the Venus was depicted as a symbol of virginal beauty and love, and associated closely with the natural world. Her exposed body and averted eyes imply qualities of passivity and submission. The reference in the title to a "world" can be seen as relating to the female body as a symbol of the world, and also the body as microcosm, a world in itself. The map is a recurrent means of exploration in Prendergast's work. Maps are two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional forms. They serve as metaphors of the realities to which they correspond, operating through an orderly, clearly defined and highly impersonal system of grids and symbols. Maps can be seen as carrying connotations of discovery, order and control. Throughout history the mapping of landscape. Usually went hand-in-hand with the control of that landscape.

Prendergast notes that maps are in a sense a record of human folly. We attempt to regulate, chart and fix, but before long it becomes apparent that the names, the boundaries and even the landscapes themselves have changed. On the other hand, maps endure, despite the fact that what they are supposed to represent has altered" (27).

Maps can be seen as a demystification and objectification of the natural world, a combination of history and geography into an objective representation of reality. The objectification of nature through the use of the map parallels the objectification of women within patriarchal representations of the female body. A Concise History of a World can be seen as exposing both

historical concepts of the female body as being close to nature, patriarchal concepts of the passive, objectified female, and the control of the female body and identity through a fixed mode of representation within patriarchal culture. Maps can be used by those both familiar and unfamiliar with a place, and the representation of the female body using the map highlights the discrepancies between the constructed, objectified nature of female identity within modern culture, and the suppressed realities.

In relation to the work of the British feminist artist Mary Kelly, Rosmary Betterton suggests that she:

poses femininity as a complex production of social and cultural meanings which it is the task of the artist to deconstruct. The explicit purpose of this work is to disrupt the expected pleasures offered by the subject matter and its visual treatment, in order to engage the viewer in an active process of critically considering how such conventional meanings are made (28).

This statement could be readily applied to both Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces and the To Control a Landscape series. The truncated female body in Enclosed Worlds... was drawn from a cast of the artist's own body. The visual language of both paintings is reminiscent of biological, gynaecological and civil engineering diagrams, thereby ruling out any form of scopophilic pleasure. The deliberate interference with and domination of both nature and women is signified by the use of

machinery altering and controlling the landscape/body. The machinery can be seen as an external force attempting to enforce change. Prendergast says that she "wanted to show how the landscapes could be altered quite radically, how someone might change mountains into deserts, or irrigate a plain" (29). In To Control a Landscape-Irrigation a complex mechanism of turning bogs controls the release of fluid from the breast/spring. This carries obvious references to the role of the female as nurturer. To Control a Landscape-Oasis depicts a hole drilled into the body/land, down to water level, and a mill on the surface powering a sprinkling system. This can be seen as referring to the passive sexual role of the female which patriarchal society dictates. The depiction of the naked body being tampered with by odd mechanical devices can instill horror in the viewer, particularly because of the quietness of the images and the violence of the subject matter. Julia Kristeva points out that horror, which she terms 'abject' (what is degraded or rejected) has the ability to destroy existing symbolic codes:

The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule or a law, but it turns, misleads, corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life. Because abjection momentarily enforces the dissipation of all meaning, in the face of horror, the subject confronts Nothingness itself - it enables the construction of new meaning. Empowered by fear, the individual can imagine new realities when the existing symbolic world proves insufficient (30).

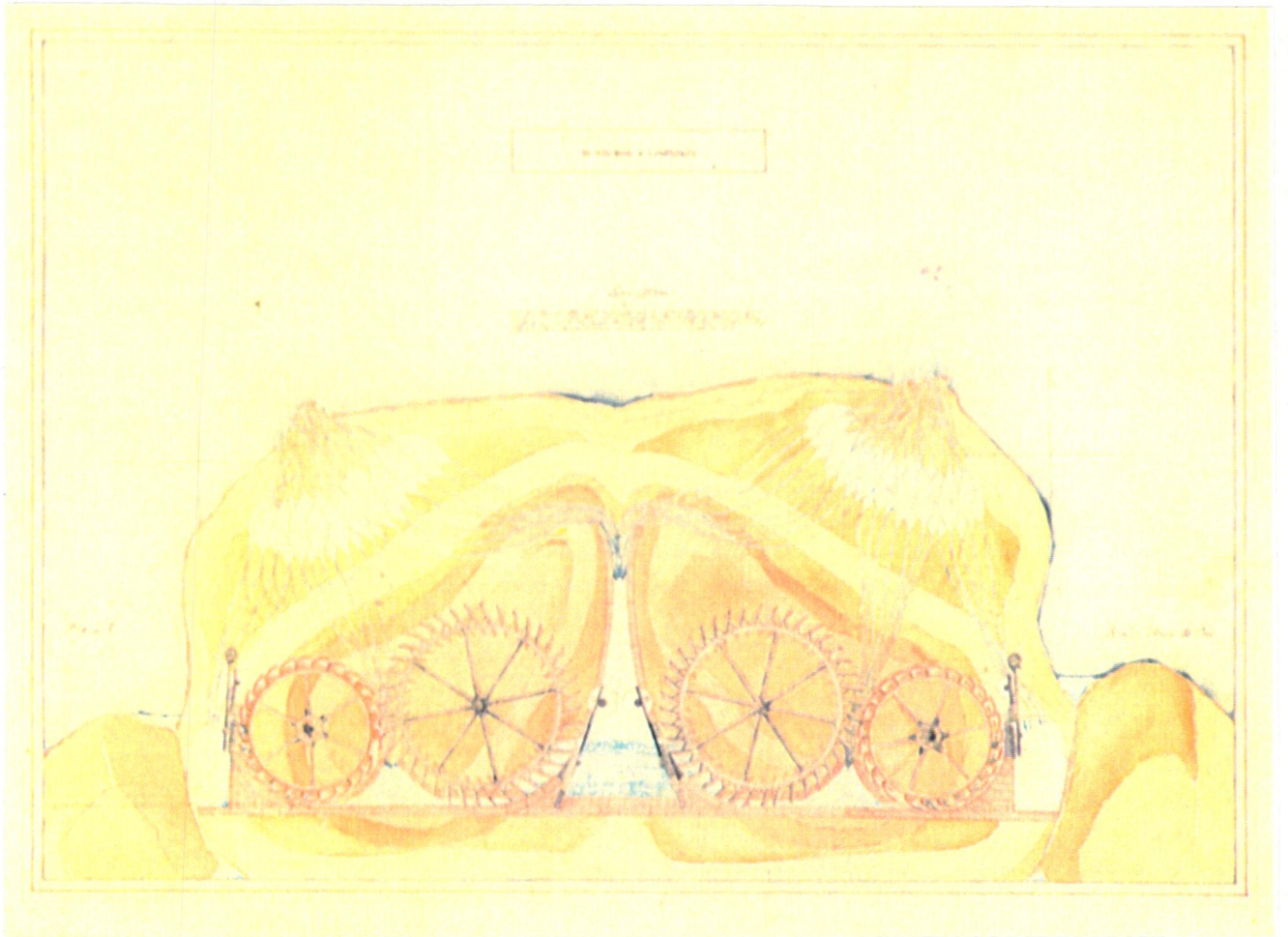


Plate 4.

Kathy Prendergast: To Control a Landscape - Irrigation, 1983.

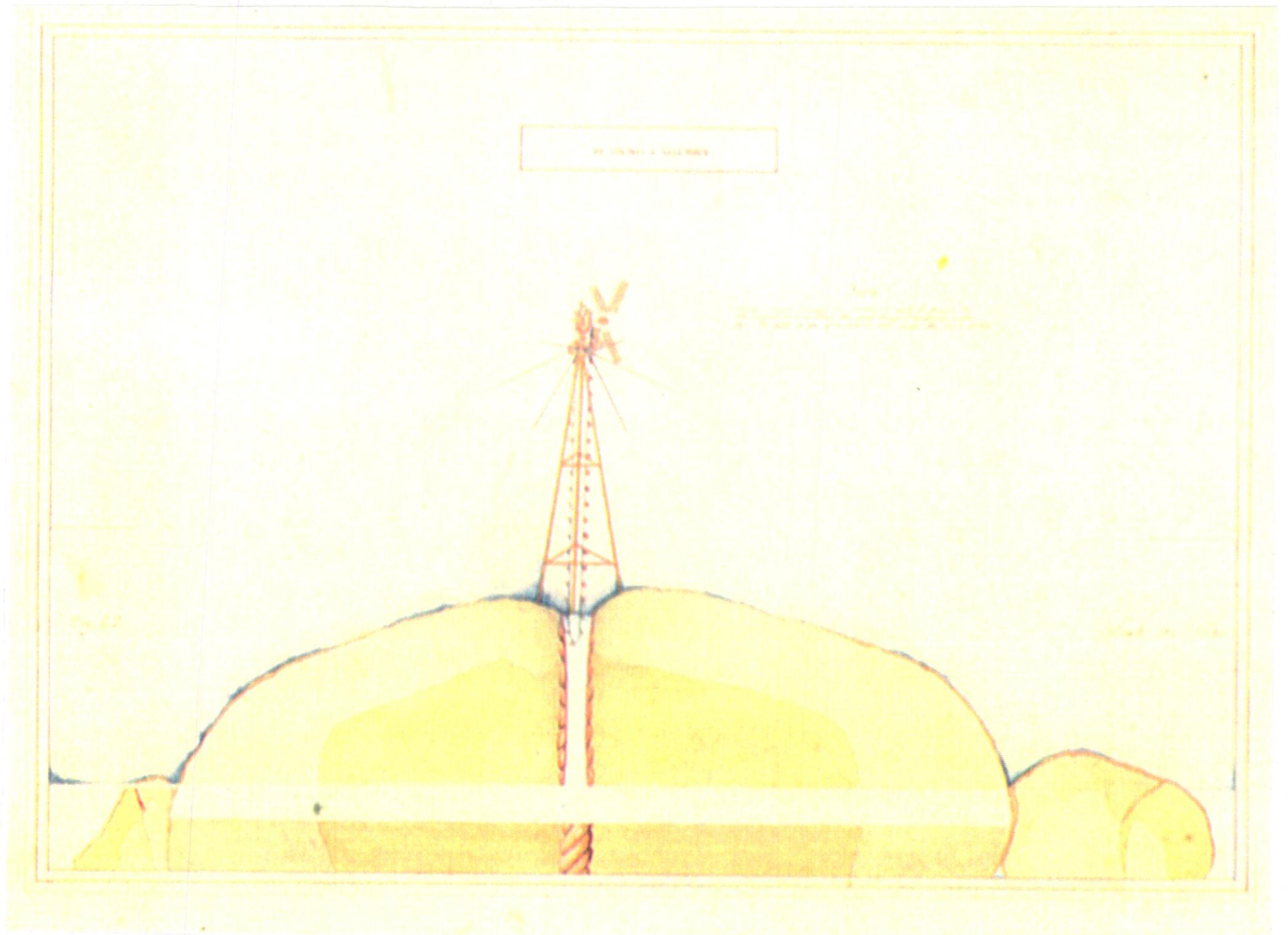


Plate 5.

Kathy Prendergast: To Control a Landscape - Oasis, 1983.

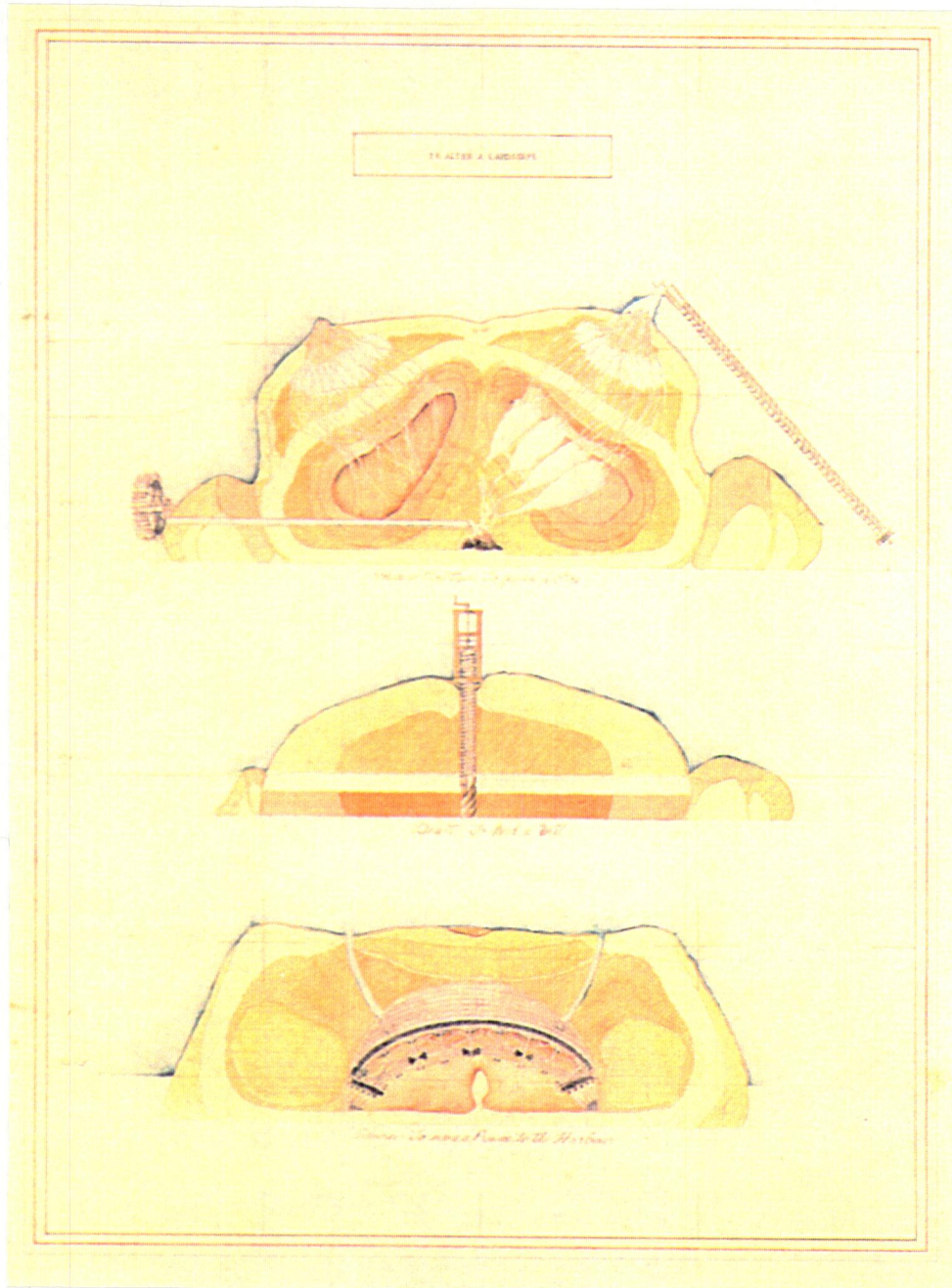


Plate 6.

Kathy Prendergast: To Alter a Landscape, 1983.

That the existing symbolic representation of women is undoubtedly insufficient is highlighted in the process of viewing Prendergast's work.

Helene Cixoys writes that "the machine of repression has allied 'homogenizing reductive unifying reason' with the single, stable, socializable subject" (31). Culture as a mechanism can be seen as imposing an assumed unity on a diversity of codes, having a naturalizing function in that it makes this constructed unity appear as given and enduring. It is the task of feminist artists working within culture to expose existing constructed symbolic orders in order to make room for the expression of womens' truths. Prendergast's work reproduces the historically constructed identity of women through the use of the map and the woman/land metaphor, the map and the machine, while transforming the spectator.

From passive consumer into an active producer of meaning by engaging the viewer in an active process of discovery rather than offering a rigidly formulated truth. The artwork strives to produce a critical perspective that questions absolute or reified categories and definitions of women (31).

In terms of Prendergast's subsequent body of work A Concise History of a World, Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces and the To Control a Landscape series can be seen as starting points in a journey of exploration using the metaphor of the map.

FOOTNOTES

1. MERCHANT, Carolyn, "The Death of Nature", New York, Harper and Row, p. 23.
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3. MERCHANT, op. cit. p. 2.
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9. MERCHANT, op. cit. pp. 102, 103.
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11. MERCHANT, op. cit. p. 140.
12. Ibid.
13. MERCHANT, op. cit. pp. 168-169.
14. Ibid.
15. MERCHANT, op. cit. p. 78.
16. MERCHANT, op. cit. p. 145.
17. MERCHANT, op. cit. p. 147.
18. MERCHANT, op. cit. p. 144.
19. Sexuality, the Female Gaze and the Arts, op. cit. p. 64.
20. MERCHANT, op. cit. p. 8.

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22. Sexuality, the Female Gaze and the Arts, p. 122.
23. Sexuality, the Female Gaze and the Arts, op. cit. p. 122..
24. ROBINSON, Hilary, Visibly Female, London, Camden Press, 1987, p. 217.
25. ROBINSON, op. cit. p. 254.
26. ROBINSON, op. cit. p. 209.
27. CURTIS, Penelope, Kathy Prendergast-Land, London, Spotlight Arts Council Collection, , 1993.
28. BETTERTON, Rosemary, Looking On, London, Pandora Press, 1987, p. 207.
29. HUTCHINSON, John, "Painting Interwoven with Map-Making", Irish Times, 1983.
30. Sexuality, the Female Gaze and the Arts, op. cit. p. 21.
31. Sexuality, the Female Gaze and the Arts, op. cit. p. 30.
32. ROBINSON, op. cit., p. 117.

CHAPTER TWO

LAND - THE RECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE IDENTITY

Human beings are driven by the urge to do what is not practical, to see the unseen.....And when the uncrossed mountains are within instead of without....there seems to be a special urgency, arising out of a sense of incompleteness, even a sense of self-deception and self-deprivation. For to live only half oneself is to live a kind of lie (1).

The dominant images of women within culture have led to an "internal division, resulting from our inability to find ourselves in existing culture as we experience ourselves" (2). Having exposed the constructed identity of the female dictated by patriarchal culture, Prendergast prepared a space to be filled with images of her own "personal geography". As Small as a World and as Large as Alone, Land, and Range comprise a series of tent sculptures. As Small as World..... is a dyed purple canvas carefully stitched into the form of a one-person tent, held up with poles and pinned down with pegs. It is equipped with a ground sheet and zip. Land can be seen as a progression from the former, being larger and painted in the colour scheme of a map. It is also carefully overlaid with contour lines corresponding to its shape. Its structure suggests a mountain range or island. It is at once a geographical place, and a cartographic representation of that place. The polarity between representation and reality

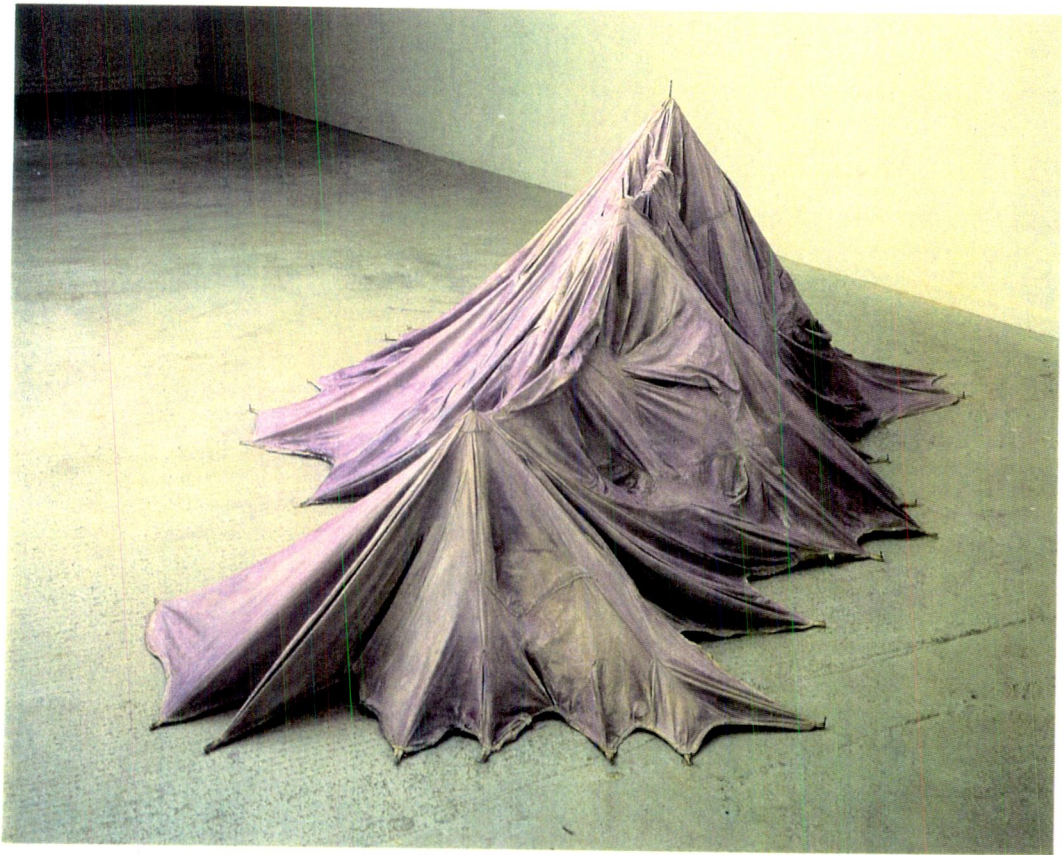


Plate 7.

Kathy Prendergast: As Small as a World and as Large as Alone,
1989.

evident in Prendergast's previously-discussed maps is completely destroyed. The viewer is presented with a work which is no longer on a 2-D plane, which denies access to alternative views, but exists as a complex 3-D structure which cannot be viewed in total from any one angle. The tent form allows for the viewing of an external/public space or mountain range, while also acting as a portable private home. Prendergast suggests that she is:

trying to find a 'poetry', a sense of the extraordinary in the ordinary eg. trying to make a mountain/tent that can be your own personal mountain, that can be as big as a world but also fit inside a room, that is an image of itself but something more (3).

There is an inherent tension in the work, as the tent is simultaneously pushed up and pulled down or rooted. Catherine Nash suggests that "the map in Land becomes a shifting ground, a spatial metaphor which frees conceptions of identity from a repressive fixity and solidity" (4). Prendergast manages to reclaim her land, establishing an independent area, a new personal landscape, while also refusing to replace Enclosed Worlds... with another rigidly authoritative representation. Land has no imposed boundaries bar its own natural ones. It is not undergoing exploitative mechanical alterations, but instead has been carefully traced out in the painstaking process of tracing all its contour lines.



Plate 8.

Kathy Prendergast: Land, 1990.



Plate 9.

Kathy Prendergast: Land (detail), 1990.

As already mentioned, maps endure, despite the fact that what they are supposed to represent has altered. However, Prendergast's map/tent sculptures are easily collapsible, and the remaining 2-D map can serve to remind the artist of where she has been, or alternately, the map can be reworked. Identity, symbolized by the land, can "symbolise the possibility of fluidity and openness, of multiple and diffuse names and maps" (5). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe the map as being:

open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by individual, group or social formation. It can be drawn on the wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation (6).

In Range, the largest of Prendergast's tent sculptures, the higher regions of the mountain summit have been left blank. Penelope Curtis wrote that:

Prendergast was struck by the fact that there is no one way of mapping mountains, and also realised that many of these highland areas have not yet been mapped. Mapping gave way to nothingness in front of her. Range may be said to scale the heights of unknowing (7).

The blank regions of Range can be seen as emphasising the open-endedness of the work, while allowing space for the representation of future discoveries. It has been suggested by Susan Bowers of good art that:

unlike homogenizing, unifying reason, it seeks out contradiction, in fact it undermines rational thought by requiring the rational mind to grapple with the puzzle of contradiction while the irrational takes the reins (8).

As Small as a World and as Large as Alone, Land, and Range all present themselves as puzzles or contradictions. The viewer becomes engaged in a process of creating meaning, because no absolute meaning is thrust upon them, leaving them to grapple with the puzzle of contradiction. Thus the tent sculptures can be seen as subtle, natural progressions in Prendergast's work which provide a balance to her previously discussed mapped bodies.

In contrast to the lightness and collapsibility of Prendergast's tent works, her monumental sculpture Stack 1989 was almost infinitely dense. Stack is a soft sculpture, composed of layers of fabric piled high into a towering structure. The tent sculptures suggest the illusion of mass, being mountain ranges constructed with one simple layer of fabric, while Stack is a compression of multiple layer of fabric bound together into a weighty structure. Each layers of fabric is impregnated with varying shades of indigo, deep blue and violet. The viewer is presented with infinite layers, while all that is visible is the surface, countless light, thin edges of fabric. Close up the form towers up beyond sight. It eventually levels off to form a plateau. Stack is

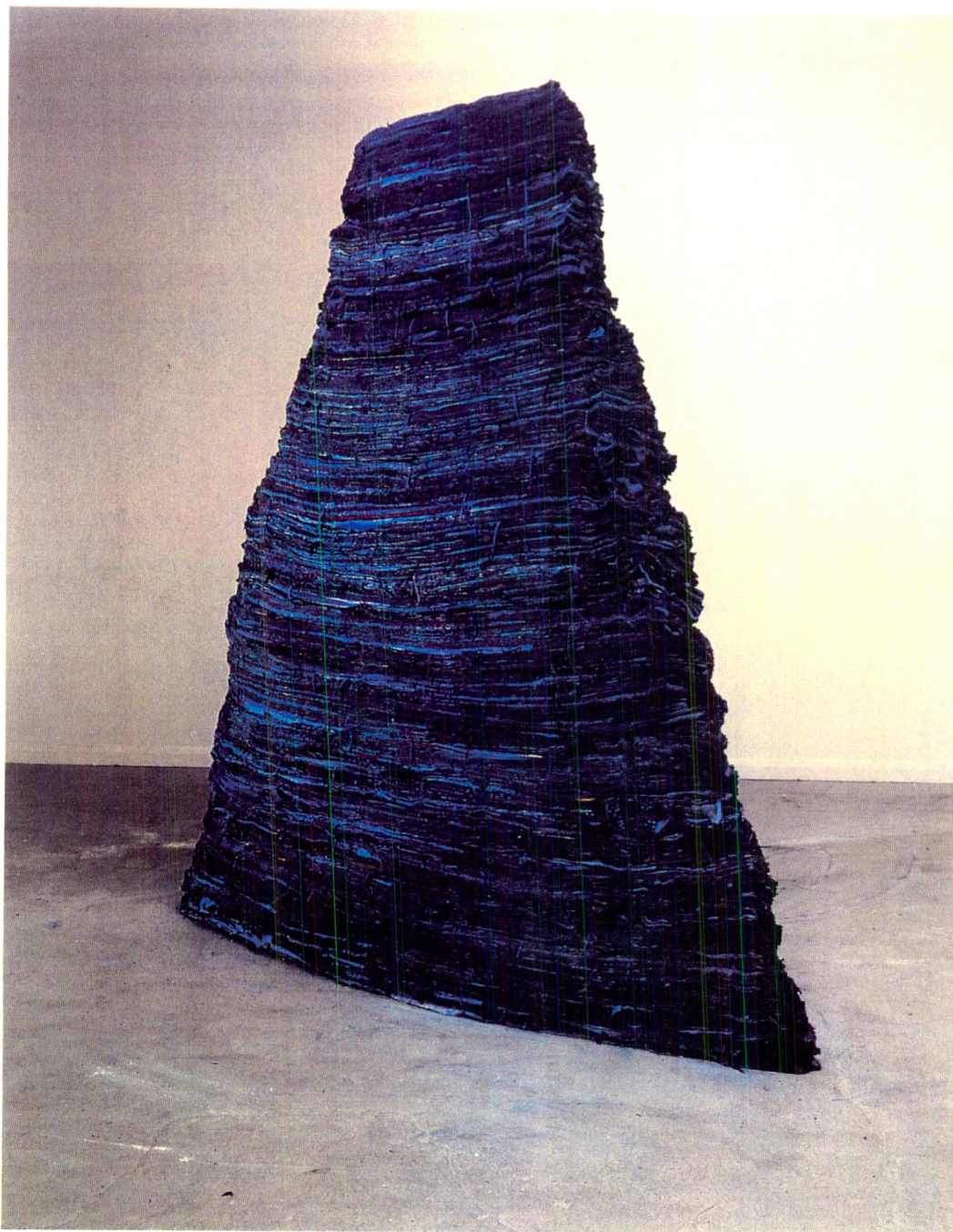


Plate 10.

Kathy Prendergast: Stack, 1989.



an organic form, its stratified layers suggesting a cross-section of the earth. Aidan Dunne wrote that "the fabric is saturated and softened with colours, frayed at the edges and ruffled in a way which suggests labial folds, particularly in the light of the overall vaginal form" (9).

There is a tendency within feminist art practice to place an emphasis on vaginal forms, which can be seen as being based on the belief in a female essence residing somewhere in the body of a woman. Vaginal iconography is an attempt to construct symbols of shared femaleness. Rosemary Betterton considers that within male-dominated society:

To be a woman is to be an object of contempt, and the vagina, stamp of femaleness, is despised. The woman artist, seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of otherness, and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the beauty and truth of her identity (10).

The symbol of the vagina can be used by female artists as a form of celebration of their sexuality, but this can also be seen as a mere inversion of the male dominant code. The repetitious process of stitching countless layers of fabric, repeatedly binding the materials together in order to create a single unified whole can also be seen in the light of a "reconstruction of a hidden history of female productivity" (11). This form of feminist art "postulates a kind of artisanal work, often overlooked in dominant systems of

representation, as the 'unsung' prince of female art activity" (12). It emphasises the ideological distinction of craft as a lower cultural form, a distinction impressed by patriarchy to down play female creative activities. Both the image of the vagina and the repetitious craft-oriented work process involved in creating Stack, could be seen as positive, but also as implying a self contained sub-cultural resistance, which is removed from the general social and political structures which it is the task of feminist art to address. However, Stack can be seen as functioning effectively in conjunction with Prendergast's maps and tent sculptures. In fact, Stack itself could be built up using acres of canvas tents, into a more solid and enduring symbol of female identity.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER TWO

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CHAPTER THREE
ORGANS - THE HUMAN BEING AND NATURE

Prendergast's preoccupation with the body and nature led to the production in 1989 of a series of Organs. Various internal bodily organs, for example, the heart, liver and kidneys, were represented using low relief woodcarvings. Each organ is infiltrated with complex systems of veins, capillaries and tissue, creating a map-like surface. These carvings were followed in 1990 by further biological systems engraved and painted onto roughly-hewn stone torsos. The torso engraved with the respiratory system is entitled Breath, the spinal column is called Nerve Tree, and the heart, a Root. These carvings are also largely reminiscent of maps. If cartography serves as a method through which the world is disciplined, appropriated and controlled, it appears that Prendergast is emphasising the natural order inherent in all natural systems. It is no coincidence that the organs represented are all specifically concerned with maintaining equilibrium within the body, making associations between internal bodily systems and external natural structures, for example, Nerve Tree and Root could be seen as emphasising the "oneness" of all living things, and emphasising the position of the human being as being essentially a part of nature. The separation of man and nature which occurred during the rise of mechanism is disclaimed. If Prendergast's tent sculptures can be seen as



Plate 11A and 11B

11A. Kathy Prendergast: Organs No. 1. Heart, 1989.

11B. Kathy Prendergast: Organs No. 4 Gall Bladder, 1989.



Plate 12.

Kathy Prendergast: Breath, 1990.



Plate 13.

Kathy Prendergast: Nerve Tree, 1990.



Plate 14.

Kathy Prendergast: Root, 1990.

41.

evolving from the feminist aspects of Enclosed Worlds in Open Spaces and the To Control a Landscape series, her organ sculptures can be seen as evolving from the ecological aspects of her painted works. The dissection of nature in the form of the female by machinery signifies the objectification, demystification and exploitation of nature, which was transformed from living, nurturing mother into a dead, passive planet. Prendergast appears to be suggesting a return to the values inherent in the organic society and world-view discussed in Chapter One. Her expression of a wish to portray the extraordinary in the ordinary can be seen as a wish to regain the sense of wonderment at nature lost after the decline of the organic world-view. Entitling her engraving of the respiratory system Breath implies a wonder at the mysterious functions of nature. The mapping of bodily systems onto the surface of the body is primitive in style, and contrasts sharply with the diagrammatic, scientific dissections of To Control.....

A more detailed look at basic natural structures is evident in Prendergast's huge pastel drawings of 1989. Leaf Drawing and Hand Draping are both enlarged to such an enormous degree that attention is called to their intricately arranged structure. Hand Drawing displays each line as being deeply embedded within the hand, while infinite numbers of smaller wrinkles divide or taper off to invisibility. The surface of the hand can be seen as an intricate map, calling to mind the



Plate 15.

Kathy Prendergast: Hand Drawing, 1989.



Plate 16.

Kathy Prendergast: Leaf Drawing, 1989.

art of palmistry. Leaf Drawing displays each individual vein creating the framework of the leaf, eventually branching off into invisibility. The implications of the drawings are much the same as those of Prendergast's Organs. Both leaf and hand are known to be small parts of larger wholes, but have been represented as intricate wholes in themselves. Fritjot Capra describes the multi-levelled structure of organic systems, each level consisting of sub systems which are wholes in regard to their parts and parts in respect to larger wholes. Entitles from molecules to organs to human beings and on to social systems can be regarded as wholes in the sense of being integrated structures and also as parts of larger wholes at higher levels of complexity (1).

Prendergast's study of organs, the body and landscape has led to a current project based on drawings of all the capital cities in the world, in total between 275 and 290. The images are drawn from maps and consist of roads, rivers and buildings drawn as far as the cities' natural boundaries. There are no numbers or references of any kind, and the drawings are to be exhibited untitled. The images are constructed in layers, each layer slightly overlapping the last, emphasising the development of both the city and the drawing over time. The cities appear as dense, dynamic, circular organic forms. They are initially suggestive of microscopic cross-sections of plant or animal matter. Prendergast says she is "attempting to

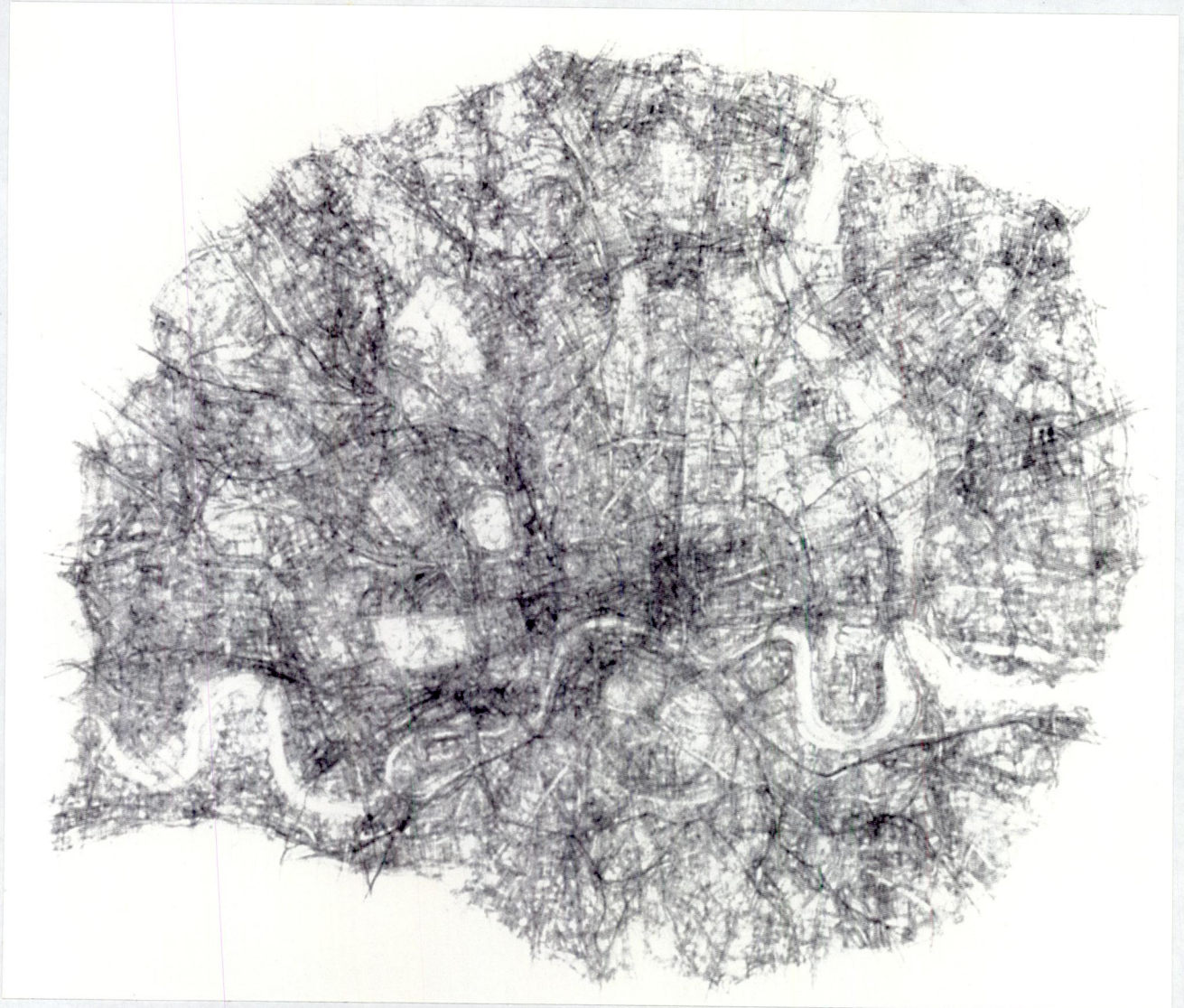


Plate 17.

Kathy Prendergast: London, from the City Drawings series, 1993.

convey the organic nature of cities, and how they are at the same time both similar and individual, a bit like fingerprints" (2). Every city appears different because it grows out of a unique situation. Lewis Mumford wrote that:

from the village, the city derived its nature as a life-promoting environment, stable and secure, rooted in mans reciprocal relations with other organisations and communities. From the village, the city derives the ways and values of an ungraded democracy in which each member plays its appropriate role at each stage in the life cycle (3). Mumford also describes the city as "not so much a mass of structures as a complex of interrelated and constantly interacting functions" (4).

Thus the city can be seen as an individual social organic system being a collaboration between individuals over time to build a larger structure, a multi-created organism or communal colony similar to the bee-hive or antnest. Fritjof Capra notes that,

ants form colonies whose members are so interdependent and in such close contact that the whole system resembles a multi-created organism. Bees and ants are unable to survive in isolation, but in great numbers they act almost like the cells of a complex organism with a collective intelligence and capabilities for adaption far superior to those of its individual members (5).

Within living systems cells are continually breaking down and building up structures, tissues and organs are continuously regenerating themselves. This can be easily applied to the city in terms of structure, demolition and rebuilding, and the continual turn over of the work force within the city. Capra

notes that:

Most organisms are not only embedded in ecosystems, but are complex ecosystems in themselves, containing a host of smaller organisms that have a considerable autonomy and yet integrate themselves harmoniously into the function of the whole (6),

just as the city can be divided into quarters, individual communities, societies and associations. The city as organism also tends towards increasing complexity and variation. The city as organism in which each individual performs a role for the good of the overall society can be seen as a projection of Prendergast's organic view of nature and society into the city.

However, the capital city is also the seat of a huge concentration of money and power. Unfortunately, our current economic system is geared single-mindedly towards growth, expansion and profit, at the expense of both nature and society. "Our obsession with growth and expansion has led us to maximise too many variables for prolonged periods....and the result has been a loss of flexibility" (7). Capra notes that:

Undifferentiated growth tends to go hand in hand with fragmentation, confusion and widespread breakdown of communication. The same phenomena are characteristic of cancer at the cellular level and the term cancerous growth is very appropriate for the excessive growth of our cities (8).

Mumford also uses the cancer metaphor:

Failing to divide its social chromosomes and split up into new cells, each bearing some portion of the original inheritance, the city continues to form inorganically indeed cancerously, by a continuous breaking down of old tissue and an overgrowth of formless new tissue", (9).

The modern city has also made a huge contribution to the defilement of the earth, severely damaging the natural environment which it depends upon for survival. The power and profit ethic and oversized organisation within oversized cities promote a sense of alienation within their citizens. Mumford's concern is that the ultimate outcome of the overgrowth of cities:

Must approach the sub-human hives in which all the functions of the human personality have been absorbed by a collective apparatus, functioning as an all embracing super-organism, leaving human beings with an ephemeral and purposeless existence" (10).

The city as organism has been born, can be seen as growing, and it is the natural outcome of organic structures to finally disintegrate. Prendergast's work highlights the dangers of our oversized, overpopulated modern cities, while also promoting the need for a balanced, dynamic organic society within the city.

Prendergast's work can be seen as highlighting the historical construction of identity within society, searching for alternative ways of expressing her own identity while also emphasising the need to view nature and the world as an organic, integrated, dynamic whole, though the use of the map, body, tent, organs and city. The work can be seen as a natural physical and conceptual progression along a personal map which has established Prendergast as a respected and acclaimed Irish artist within the international art world.

FOOTNOTES CHAPTER THREE

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7. CAPRA, op. cit. p. 439.
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9. MUMFORD, op. cit. p. 618.
10. MUMFORD, op. cit. p. 551.

CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this thesis to provide an overview of the work of the Irish sculptor Kathy Prendergast. Much of her work has been seen as relating to notions of identity. Prendergast's mapping of the female body plays on the historical association between the female body and land. Prendergast has used these associations to expose the historically constructed notions of female identity within modern patriarchal culture, while also emphasising the disparity between the objectified representation of women and the reality. The tent sculptures combine representation and reality, and have been viewed as expressions of a more personal identity which is open and unfixed, while Stack is a more enduring and monumental symbol of female identity. Prendergast's mapping of bodily organs relate to external natural structures, and emphasise the idea that the human being is essentially a part of nature. City Drawings appear to emphasise the need for a balanced, dynamic organic society. Prendergast's continuous use of the map metaphor has led to the production of a large body of work which questions notions of identity, affirms the artist's own identity while emphasising the need to view nature and the human race as an organic integrated whole. She engages the viewer in the production of meaning, and offers an invitation into a personal journey of discovery.

APPENDIX 1.

The appendix consists of a questionnaire completed by Kathy Prendergast in November 1993.

6. Do you consider yourself to be mapping human experience?

Yes. In some of the pieces that is obvious. I am using the vocabulary of geography as a metaphor for human geography.

7. The introduction of machinery into the female body in the "To Control a Landscape" series seems menacing, especially within its diagrammatic framework. What were you exploring with these works?

I saw the body as landscape and the machinery as an image of an external power over the landscape (female) that could enforce change.

8. Many of your works appear isolated, e.g. organs removed from the body, cross-sections of the body, even "Another Country". What does this isolation serve? Is this a social or psychological exploration or both?

Both - I think when things become isolated it heightens your awareness of them. They lose their history - in some of the work, pieces are slightly raised off the ground - even the tents when pulled have space under them. This is also to isolate them in a formal sense.

9. Critics have mentioned emigration in relation to "As Small as a World and as Large as Alone", a portable world and tent. You have mentioned Catholicism in relation to "Sleep" and "Bed". Do you think that your Irish upbringing

1. Could you cite any early artistic influences on your work?
Keinholz and Segal - early artists influences. Later - Richard Long. Writers like Borges.

2. Where do you find your starting point for work (in terms of source material) ?

The starting point is usually different but normally I would have the idea first and it clarifies itself while I am making it.

3. Could you describe the process of development from idea to finished work?

Same as no. 2.

4. Do you find the process to be more important than the end result?

The most important thing for me is the end result which is the culmination of the idea and the process.

5. The female body and also the map are recurrent images in your work. What conceptual significance do these have for you?

The female body signifies identity to me, and I have used the map imagery as a visual metaphor similar to the use of landscape as a metaphor for the human body in poetry and literature. With the map imagery I can make my own landscape.

has had a major influence upon your work?
These influences are personal rather than political. I think my work process i.e. using detail could be seen as being quite "Catholic".

10. Your choice of materials is wide and varied. Do you use materials for their innate qualities?

I don't think I'm particularly sensitive to materials. When I get an idea usually that denotes the material. Recently I have just been drawing on paper.

11. Aidan Dunne suggested that your "works persuade us of their own materiality, of their human familiarity; even while revealing to us that the world of our perceptions is its own island, nothing more". You have referred to your work as being a "separate reality". Could you elaborate on that?

I like the idea of "dislocating" the work from its surroundings, so that it looks isolated and has a separateness to it. I think it's necessary because I use ordinary images - to isolate them reveals their own personality.

12. You have moved to London in order to broaden your experience. Has this move been successful?

I am very happy living in a multi-cultural society. Although I am still using maps I used them connected with my own identity

in Ireland. Now I think this has opened up and I am more concerned with "global" references e.g. the City drawings I'm working on at the moment. I think this is a direct result of living outside Ireland.

13. How has your work developed in your own eyes?

I am using real places as source material and by isolating them I am trying to make them into something different. Before, the map imagery was imaginary.

14. Could you give any information on what you are working on at the moment?

City drawing project. These drawings are the initial ones in a series of drawings of every capital city in the world. They are drawn with pencil on paper, $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $12\frac{1}{2}$ inches. I am attempting to convey the organic nature of the city and how they are at the same time both similar and individual; a bit like fingerprints I hope that these images will transcend their origins and source material so that they take on other properties and refer to other organic structures such as cells, human organs and vegetables matter. The cities are drawn as far as their "ring roads" or else their natural boundaries. I see the "ring road" as the modern day equivalent to the medieval city wall but instead of defending it, it allows people in.

There will be approximately 275 to 290 drawings in the series depending on the amount of capital cities in the world at the time of the completion of the project. The drawings will be untitled.

15. Have you any plans for the future?

To keep working and to try to keep the ideas developing.

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The bibliography is divided into three sections. The first deals with articles consulted in periodicals and journals. The second details exhibitions catalogues consulted for the purposes of this thesis, and the third cites general reference works. For additional information on Kathy Prendergast derived from correspondence with the sculptor see Appendix 1.

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