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**NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN,
DUBLIN,
FACULTY OF FINE ART - PAINTING**

**FETISHISM AND THE WORK OF
DOROTHY CROSS**

by Mairead Laher

**Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and
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FETISHISM AND THE WORK OF DOROTHY CROSS

INTRODUCTION

"Given the oblivion to which history has consigned so much of women's art it is difficult to construct an ancestry for the female produced fetish object". (Kuspit, 1988, p. 134).

Sigmund Freud created a cultural and theoretical impasse by defining fetishism in a way which designated it as a practice confined to males. It is the intention of this thesis to examine work made by the artist Dorothy Cross highlighting the fetishistic aspects of specific pieces, and exploring the possibilities of what may be revealed.

Freud's theory of fetishism is based on the premise that the male child experiences acute anxiety at his first sight of the female genitalia based on castration anxiety. Freudian theory is the necessary starting point for any discussion of fetishism but feminist theorists have subsequently pointed out the limitations and flaws in a theory which centres everything on a putative male reaction to the first sight of the female genitalia and which excludes the possibility of female fetishism, without ever giving it consideration. The work of Dorothy Cross troubles Freudian discourse on fetishism by accentuating what is usually perceived as fetishistic in its witty play on gender roles.

"Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital" (Freud, 1927, p. 354). If the mother, previously believed to be all powerful, does not possess the phallus, then it is theorised, that the (male) child fears the loss of his own organ. A splitting process takes place which is a disavowal of castration, rather than simply a repression or denial: he retains the belief that woman has a penis, while simultaneously knowing that this is not true. This disavowal is an incomplete attempt at detachment from reality - leading to oscillation between knowing and not knowing, and the necessity for the fetish object.

A fetish object is used to stand in for the woman's 'missing' phallus, thus making her 'whole'. The most commonly chosen fetish objects are shoes, stockings and undergarments, seen in the last moments when the female could be considered 'whole', velvet or fur said to be reminiscent of pubic hair, or body parts such as a leg, a foot or the breast. In psychoanalytic terms the fetish represents a 'compromise', a half-way house on the road from self to other, for those unable or unwilling to go the whole way. Through the mechanism of disavowal the fetishist's desire is granted a 'safe' expression in the external world, without having to accept the 'threatening' knowledge involved. Through the use of the fetish the fetishist is able to continue to believe what is false while also knowing that it cannot be true since it does require a substitution.

Because Freud's analysis is based on castration anxiety, therefore fetishism must be a male phenomenon if this analysis is accepted. For since girls have no penis, why would they need to disavow the horror of its possible loss? Freud and his followers thus defined fetishism as an exclusively male practice. Because of the Freudian exclusion of the female the concept of fetishism is of special interest to feminist theorists. In 'Speculum of the Other Woman' (Irigaray, 1985, p.114) Luce Irigaray argues that Freud, in order to identify with the law-giving father, had to construct women as 'fetishised objects, merchandise of whose value he stands surety'. Irigaray argues that it is only the male gaze that sees woman's genitalia as 'lacking', since for little girls their clitoral stimulation has perfectly satisfied their autoerotic desires. Thus, girls have to 'become women' through a painful and cultural feminisation process that internalises a phallogocentric view of their 'flaw'. Irigaray further argues that the concept of penis envy is an attempt by men to deny the possibility that women might have another form of desire.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau in an article entitled 'The Legs of the Countess' (Solomon-Godeau, 1993, p. 277), writes about the Countess de Castiglione, who in the midnineteenth century had her body and her legs as body parts repeatedly photographed. Solomon-



Fig. 1 Mayer & Pierson. Countess de Castiglione. c. 1855-1860. © Musée d'Unterlinden Colmar. Reproduction Christian Kempf.

THE
FEDERAL
BUREAU OF
INVESTIGATION
OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
WASHINGTON, D. C.
20535

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR, FBI

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DATE: [Illegible]

TO: [Illegible]

FROM: [Illegible]

RE: [Illegible]

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Godeau makes a case for this woman's practice as a case of female fetishism. The Countess imaged parts of her body (Fig. 1) and reserved these images for her own gaze, and her own pleasure, being captivated by her own image. Solomon-Godeau is aware that this example is at odds with the Freudian theory of fetishism, which hinges on the threat of castration. Describing the Countess's case as narcissism or extreme vanity would sit more easily with Freudian and subsequent psychoanalytic theory. This however does not fit in with the Countess's view of herself as a 'work'. In the reproduced photographs (Fig. 1) the headless Countess curtsies demurely, while lifting her skirts, as if a curtain, to reveal the legs as idealised body part. Since the photographs were taken and printed according to the Countess's instructions it is clear that she colluded in the headless objectification of herself and that she ordered the revealed body part to be focused on and fetishised as it is. She had internalised the male gaze, identifying with it in seeing her legs as objects of desire.

Woman, Solomon-Godeau writes, having no 'culturally privileged organ of narcissistic identification', 'being positioned outside the symbolic order of patriarchy, defined only as other in relation to the masculine', is precluded from subjectivity, from a positively defined identity. Since her self-worth and social value are contingent on her value as an object of desire, woman internalises the male gaze to the point of near total identification with it. These are the eyes with which the Countess de Castiglione views herself. She concludes that the Countess's obsessive self-representations are a 'demonstration of a radical alienation that collapses the distinction between subjecthood and objecthood'. (Solomon-Godeau, 1993, p.278.)

In "Female Fetishism - a New Look" (Gamman and Makinen, 1994) the authors question psychoanalysis's denial of women's fetishism and ask what is at stake behind such a denial. They state that at least a third of the psychoanalytic literature that they have examined contains detailed references to women who fetishise. They indicate how male psychoanalysts have chosen to ignore the evidence or reinterpret it in a way which negates it as 'true' fetishism. They conclude that claims of

the practice's rarity amongst women stem from phallocentrism. The primacy Freudian theory gives to the fear of castration and the phallic mother has, they feel, created a blind spot that prevents analysts and psychologists from seeing the evidence in front of their eyes. Their research leads them to agree with French feminists that the laws of castration and sexual difference have been unchanging organising principles of Western patriarchy.

Gamman and Makinen contend that arguing that women can and do practise fetishism becomes a way of challenging the psychoanalytic model of female sexuality. It is also a way of showing how the existing model is simply a way of reinforcing phallocentric values. Thus a woman-centred analysis of Freudian theory, could argue that the very concept of 'penis envy' could itself be described as a fetish to safeguard the value of phallocentrism within a patriarchal medical discourse. The male's obsessive fixation on his own signifying value cannot allow a denial of its importance, or the unimportance of a so-called 'lack' within the feminine. An acceptance of female fetishism challenges the very signifier of desire in a way that none of the other perversions do, by refusing to see all sexuality from a phallocentric viewpoint.

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman, still tied to her place as bearer not maker, of meaning. (Mulvey, 1989, p.15).

Woman, Mulvey has argued, is designated a specific place and function by patriarchy where she is to be the passive repository of meaning and where she is never to play an active role. Her function is to have meaning imposed on her, to sustain the patriarchal structure of phallocentric society. The image of castrated woman is essential to give order and meaning to a phallocentric world. Without a particular construction of woman as lacking the whole house of cards of a phallocentric world collapses. "An idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus

signifies." (Mulvey, Macmillan 1989, p.14.)

The impact of Laura Mulvey's seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" can be gauged by the realisation that most feminist theory of the last decade has been - at least in part - a response to the theories advanced by her. Implicit in Mulvey's model of the Male Gaze are issues of gender, of identity, and of sexual looking. Mulvey says that the 'looks' involved in cinema are linked to the issue of gender, later explaining this in relation to castration anxiety and sexual fetishism. "Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle..."(Mulvey, 1989, p. 14). Mulvey seems to conflate voyeurism and scopophilia with fetishism. She suggests that scopophilic pleasure arises principally from using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. Thus she is able to argue that the erotic contemplation of the image is a form of sexual fetishism. But voyeurism is the obsessive desire to look, about which there is intense anxiety, and often, no sexual orgasm. Fetishism, on the other hand, disavows anxiety via the object, to allow sexual orgasm. Orthodox sexual fetishists rarely react to sight alone. Smell, feel and even taste are central to the orgasmic experience.

There have always been art objects which had a fetishistic function. Art transforms the ordinary, giving it meaning, and in the process of this transformation fetishistic implications come into being. Kuspit in his article "The Modern Fetish" cites psychologist Phyllis Greenacre in attempting to understand the nature of fetish and fetishism. She has suggested that there are areas where 'the fetish is not related specifically to genital performance'. It can, she argues, function as 'an amulet or magical object, as a symbolic object in religious rites, as a token in romantic love, and as a special property in children's play'. Kuspit extends this by adding that fetishism can 'function in an artistic rite or as a special property in artistic play.' These works of art can be used to compensate for or decry the much vaunted female 'lack'. One way of 'making a body unconsciously experienced as defective seem complete or adequate - is through the supplement of the work of art.' (Kuspit,

1988, p. 135).

Kuspit suggests that fetishistic artwork has emerged in this century at sensitive, conflict - filled times in the artists's creative lives which parallel the anxiety - filled psychological moment of individuation for the child where fetishism is said to have its roots. The creative artist struggling for development, struggling for independence from the nurturing of artistic tradition, produces fetishistic artwork, Kuspit suggests, in an attempt to quell the anxiety produced by this attempt to break away, in this bid for an independent voice. 'The Modern artist has been acknowledged as most potent when he or she creates an object that taps the imagined power of the phallic mother.' (Kuspit, 1988, p.135)

Making all fetishistic theory dependent on the privileging of the phallus makes it problematic for the artist who is a woman, at the point in practice where psychology intersects with art. Kuspit points out that if the phallus is understood symbolically rather than literally as the emblem of security and power for both men and women, then artists of both sexes would be strengthened by reifying 'its power in their work'. And since the phallus can be associated unconsciously with people perceived as powerful, the fantasy of the phallic mother comes into being.

Women are expected to construct themselves as objects, as well as to experience themselves as subjects, and to oscillate between the subject/object dichotomy in order to maintain a notion of successful femininity. But femininity, if it is culturally, rather than biologically constructed, is always about simulation, a simulacrum. Often, in discourse, the female body becomes a metaphor at the cultural level of the sign, removed from its relationship to biological reality. Where signs have lost their relationship to the signified, the female body is perhaps the final site of struggle over meaning. This problematises representation of the female body for women artists.

The art practice of Dorothy Cross is rich in fetishistic elements. She considers issues of identity and gender and deals with these in a way which seems to highlight the fetishistic aspects of these issues. This approach is particularly apparent in the udder pieces and in other 'skin' works. This thesis sets out to explore the work of Dorothy Cross, specifically considering its fetishistic aspects and what these may suggest or reveal, bearing in mind the background of psychological theory and what has been added to the argument by feminist interrogation and re-interpretation of Freudian theory.

CHAPTER ONE

"Udder work"

"....a strong streak of fetishism travels through Modern art."
(Kuspit, 1988, p.134)

Visiting a Norwegian folk museum in 1990, Dorothy Cross discovered, hanging on the back of a door, a sieve which had been made from a perforated cow's udder. This was to be the instigation of all the artist's subsequent work with cows' udders. Cross was excited by the idea that the udder could be used for something other than nourishment. This chance discovery led to the artist making a prolific amount of work using udders and skins. This chapter will discuss four of these works - "Amazon", "Croquet", "Stilettos", and "Pointing the Finger", examining their fetishistic elements, with reference to art practice and to psychoanalytic theory.

Freud located the starting point of sexual life at the mother's breast, and linked subsequent sexual satisfaction back to this time of nurture. Representation of the breast has subsequently been conflicted being conceived and depicted both as a symbol of nurture and also as an erotic symbol. Cross's reworking of the cows's udders disrupts traditional notions of comfort and nurturing, confounding expectation.

"Using udders makes me feel like a cross between a butcher and a scientist. The whole process generates a strange mixture of disgust, hilarity and excitement. It wasn't until later that I remembered that Freud had spoken about the symbolism of cows's udders in Dora's case history." ("Even", 1996, p.16.) The disgust and excitement mentioned by Cross are states connected with fetishism.

"AMAZON" 1992

The title of the piece "Amazon" refers to ancient Greek mythology which describes a race of strong, warrior women who fearlessly cut off their right breasts to improve their prowess with bow and arrow and make

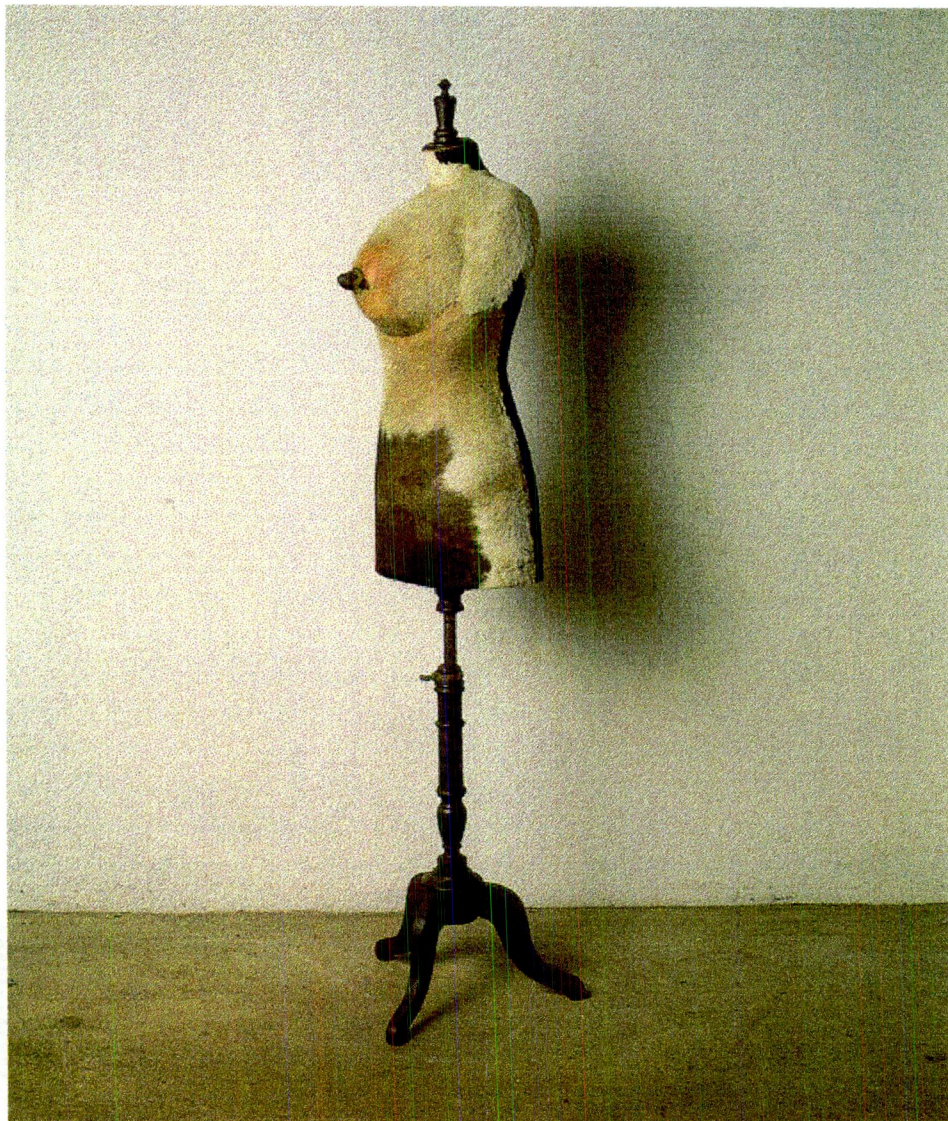


Fig. 2: Amazon 1992

them more effective in battle. These stalwart women were virginal, denying themselves relationships with men in order to be stronger, single-minded and independent. From the male perspective, they constituted the threat of uncharted territory. Cross herself has said that the piece deals with "blurred sexual territory" and also "mysterious virgin territory" (Laher, A, p.37). Cross's work could itself be said to constitute uncharted territory.

Cross has used a tailor's dummy - brought from her family home - and stretched the brown and white cowskin over it. The hide tightens and hardens as it dries. The statuesque figure, on an elegant mahogany tripod, culminates in a single thrusting breast, with one wizened, leathery teat, as evocative of penis as of breast nipple. Gender boundaries are blurred as the construction suggests both breast and phallus. Jacqueline Rose has written that there is no stability of sexual identity. "Sexuality belongs to this area of instability played out in the register of demand and desire, each sex coming to stand, mythically and exclusively, for that which could satisfy and complete the other." (Mitchell and Rose, 1982, p. 33). The Freudian concept of the Phallic Mother - the all-powerful female whom the child believes holds the phallus within her body - is proposed by this confusion and by the overall phallically upright nature of the piece. Male and female sexuality are conflated in the oscillation between breast and phallus.

The animal and human are brought together by the use of cowskin in a piece which is based on and suggestive of the human form. Cross has said that she was excited by the animal nature of Meret Oppenheim's fur teacup and saucer as she has always been interested in how close the human is to the animal. (Laher, B, 1997, p. 46)

Freud's notion of the 'uncanny' (Wright, 1992, pp. 436-440) comes to mind when considering Cross's "Amazon". Expectations of breasts are that they will evoke memories of comfort, nurture, and erotic pleasure, and these expectations are confounded by the brazenly upright, thrusting, confrontational nature of the piece. Expectation and preconception are disrupted. Public reaction to the piece has varied

from nausea to tenderness, and this oscillation between repulsion and attraction, disgust and pleasure is suggestive of fetishism, with its capacity to swing between different states. The quintessential qualities of the cow, her reputed gentleness, nurturing, and patience - also associated with a stereotype of motherhood - are confounded in this piece, despite its allusions to the bovine and the feminine. Far from seeming gentle and passive, it is stridently assertive and iconoclastic.

Texture is important for the fetishist. Psychoanalysis suggests that fetish objects of fur and velvet are chosen because these suggest pubic hair, glimpsed in the last moment when the female could be considered phallic. "Amazon" is covered in sleek, hairy cowskin, the tactility of which invites touch. The fetishistic nature of the form is emphasised in the thrust of the single, jutting breast with its hardened teat, emblematic of the penis. The expected comfort of the nurturing breast is denied.

Roger Malbert has pointed out how Cross has dissected misogynistic constructions on the theme of the cow as the unthinking feminine, in her work with udders (Malbert, 1995, p.94). "Cow" has frequently been used as a derogatory term to describe woman, to imply that she is close to the animal rather than the rational, that she is stupid and unthinking, beneath contempt. This particular construction - "Amazon" with all its references seems not so much the bovine milk-producing cow or the unthinking, irrational female, as a being capable of rational thought, strategy and forward planning, as evidenced by the removal of a breast to aid prowess in battle. It is capable also of perpetrating the unexpected as the form manipulates perception to oscillate back and forth between the illusion of breast and penis.

John Hutchinson has described "Amazon" as "confusing in its assertiveness, claiming 'masculine' power while refusing to surrender 'feminine' fecundity (Hutchinson, 1993, p.99). Of course it will be viewed as confusing if power is perceived as the natural prerogative of the male. This confusion can also be linked with fetishism, where disavowal and the fetish object allow the subject to both know and deny at the same time the reality of the female genitalia.

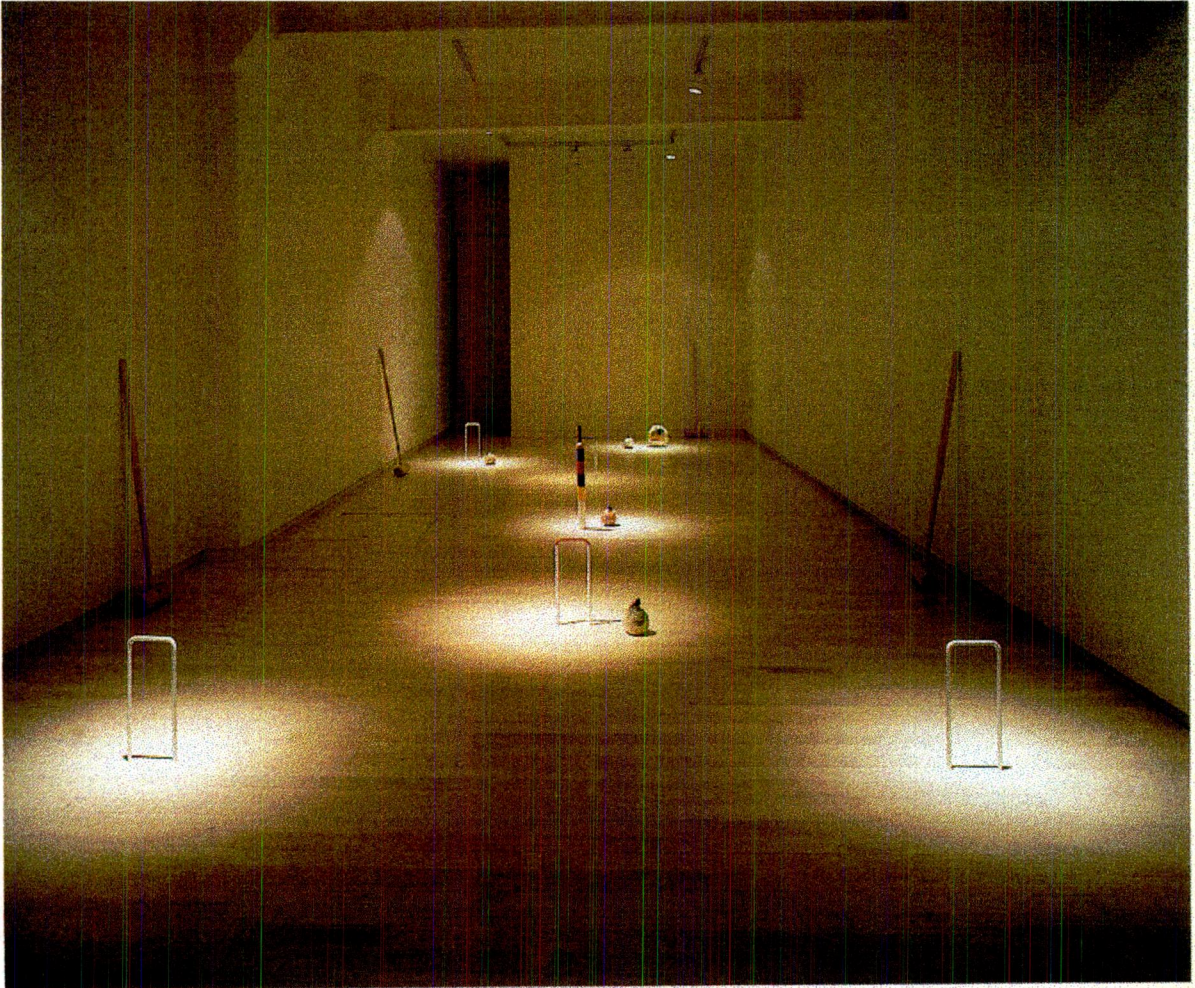


Fig. 3: Croquet 1994

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CROQUET 1994

A croquet game has been set up. It may even be in progress. There are no players visible. In Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" the mallets for another surreal croquet game were flamingos and the balls were hedgehogs. The surreal dimension in Cross's croquet 'game' is that the four balls are made from udder skin, each having one protruding teat, which render the game unplayable. (Fig.3)

A fifth large ball, which Cross calls the 'mother ball' lies at the far end of the room. Too large to be used in the game, it may have a protective role towards the smaller balls. By calling it the 'mother ball' the artist seems to be suggesting that it has a maternal relationship to the smaller balls, its offspring. Strangely when the conceit is extended one wonders why it is the small balls which have teats and not the larger 'mother'. The phallic like mallets lean casually against the wall, relaxed symbols of power, potential violence and aggression.

One of the mallets carries a label which reads 'Prime English Ash - Made in England'. This double assertion of Englishness makes one question if some political point is intended. If, as is the case, in Gaelic mythology and poetry Ireland has been repeatedly identified as a cow, this can be extended to Cross's work and the unplayable croquet balls become metaphors for Ireland, under threat from the 'Prime English Ash'. The balls can be hit by the mallets, but because of the projecting teats - their femaleness - the balls cannot be controlled or put through the hoops. The teats resist any attempt at control, while remaining fetishistically desirable in shape and texture. So it is a game which can never be played out or resolved. The Irish question remains insoluble. Or would the artist say like Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock.... "That is not it at all, That is not what I meant at all". Dorothy Cross, when asked if the piece could be viewed as a metaphor for colonialism, said that because she made the piece for a show in London, and because most critics would know that she is Irish, she was aware that that reading could be made. While conceding that the mallets could be viewed as the coloniser, she insists that the cow is "just the cow" (Lahey, B, 1997, p. 46).

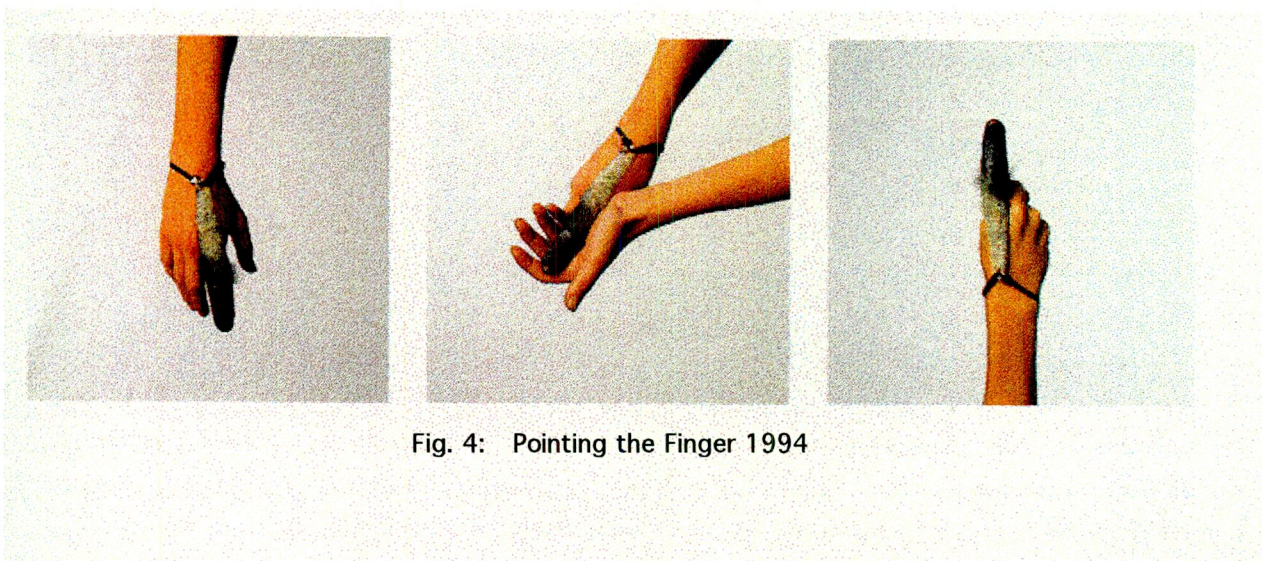


Fig. 4: Pointing the Finger 1994

With or without the colonial reading, "Croquet" is full of fetishistic elements. The mallets are phallic in their structure and in the way that they function in the game, by driving balls through circular hoops. The tactile nature of the cowskin 'balls' with their single teat protruding lends itself to a fetishistic reading. And finally there is the 'Mother ball', that essential element in the castration complex where it all began.

"POINTING THE FINGER"

Having come across a quotation which described the inside of a cow as the darkest place in the world, Cross felt impelled to make a photographic triptych called "Pointing the Finger". The three photographs which make up the piece show the artist's finger inside a protective finger stall made from a cow's teat. In the first of the images the finger hangs down passively, in the second the covered finger is being held, and in the third panel the finger is erect, pointing upwards.

Cross has said that she intended the three images to be seen as representing passivity, nurturing and assertiveness, and further that she very deliberately chose to use the index finger, which always indicates direction, rather than the middle finger which might be interpreted differently (Laher, B, 1997, p.46). Fetishism concerns itself with substitution and with the woman's putatively missing penis and it is possible to view the triptych in these terms as depicting a sheathed penis in different modes. The attraction/repulsion criteria are present, as is the compulsive element, all qualities associated with fetishism.

The gendered element is important for Cross. 'I dislike this identification of the female with the dark and the mysterious and the unknown. I would imagine being inside a cow is no darker than being inside a bull. It's not gender specific. By putting my finger inside a cow's teat and using it in different ways, I'm truly getting inside it, confronting that sense of disapproval and contradicting the notion that females have to be docile and harmless and obedient.' (Cross, 1996, p.18). There is nothing docile or compliant about this work. There is the feeling of a challenge being issued to the viewer to make of it what you will.



Fig. 5: Stilettos 1994

"STILETTOS" 1994

Using an item of footwear to be found in most females' wardrobes, "Stilettos" takes and remakes one of the classic fetish objects, a pair of high heeled shoes. The front of each shoe ends in a single, upturning teat. The shoes are closed, no foot can be inserted in the slit of an opening. So, in one sense, these are objects of frustration. The dangerously pointed heels, named after a narrow, sharp-bladed knife, are there but, without the weight of a body inside the shoes, they would seem to pose little threat. The overall shape of the shoe is elegant and feminine. The hardened teats suggest both the penis and the breast nipple.

The work contains a reference to the Japanese practice of breaking women's toes and binding their feet to produce something to be used for male pleasure. Broken-toed, deformed women's feet were used as sex toys (Laher, B, 1997, p.46). Cross makes the point that as the teats and skin dried over the shoe shape they shrank and tightened, and the teats hardened and began to point upwards. The pair of shoes in this work could be seen as fetishistic sex toys.

The work of Dorothy Cross follows in the strain of art tradition which has produced fetishistic work. All the essential elements are there. Cross may or may not be "reifying" the power of the phallus. But she is also effectively thumbing her nose at phallocentric society by making art work which blurs gender boundaries, making the demarcation lines between male and female territory far less clearcut or certain.

This chapter began with an examination of "Amazon" which took its shape in part from a tailor's dummy which Cross brought from her family home. Chapter Two examines two more works in which the artist uses inherited family items. This time Cross uses objects which have greater iconic significance than a dressmaker's model, namely a bridal train and the family Bible.

CHAPTER TWO

"Sacred Cows"

"A fetish is a story, masquerading as an object".

(Stoller, 1985, p.44)

This chapter is concerned with the use of objects which are generally accorded iconic significance and which have personal family associations for the artist. Her particular use of the found or inherited object and the art work she constructs from it, subverts expectation and arouses discomfort and confusion in the viewer by the image produced.

"VIRGIN SHROUD" 1993

"The wild cow is a female. She has healthy calves, and milk enough for them. And that is all the femininity she needs. Otherwise than that she is bovine rather than feminine. She is a light, strong, swift, sinewy creature, able to run, jump, and fight, if necessary. We, for economic uses, have artificially developed the cow's capacity for producing milk. She has become a walking milk-machine, bred and tended to that express end, her value measured in quarts."

(Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Women and Economics"
quoted in Hedges, 1989, p.56.)

When Cross was ten she was given her grandmother's wedding train dating from 1914. A more orthodox use may have been envisaged for the family heirloom than that to which the artist subsequently put it. The seven foot high "Virgin Shroud" (Fig. 6) - now part of the collection of the Tate Gallery in London - seems an impregnable form, with no overt reference to sexual identity. The entire cowskin is used, rather than just the udder or the teats, to construct this monumentally phallic shape. The teats crown the 'head' on either side, like a double set of horns, or a crown of thorns. The cowskin is draped over a steel structure, suggestive of the human form, and one wheeled metal leg protrudes coyly at floor level. The animal skin is incongruously lined with white satin from the wedding train.



Fig. 6: Virgin Shroud 1993

Tension is produced by the tactile juxtaposition of the animal rawness of cowhide with the purity and refinement of white satin, by custom and usage reserved for moments in life which have special, iconic significance. Cross has said, referring to the family link in the wedding train, that it obviously had greater significance for her to use the family heirloom than to go out and buy a few yards of satin, which would also have served her purpose. The use of this specific piece of satin, therefore, is very deliberate. Cross has also said that this particular cowskin was battered and torn when it arrived in her studio. This may have prompted the impulse to put beside it the fetishistic smoothness of satin. She was looking for something to counterpoint the grotesqueness of the torn, ripped skin. Cross says that it was almost sacrilegious, to put the wet cowskin beside the bridal train (Lahey, B, 1997, p.41). As satin lines a coffin containing the remains of what was once living, so Cross has lined the cowskin. Cross has stated an interest in exploring how close the human is to the animal, by looking at the animal under a skin of civilisation. Only a thin layer of assumed rationality and of "civilisation" separates us from the animal.

Freud's notion of 'unheimlich', or uncanny as well as conveying its own meaning also implies the 'heimlich', or homely (Wright, 1992, pp.436-440). Freud's 'uncanny' refers to the disruption of expectation of the familiar and the comfortable and the discomfort, dread and horror that arise because of this disruption. Freud claims that woman's genitalia are a primary source of this uncanny feeling. Something of the shocking nature of this work can be traced to expectations of the homely and familiar, which the viewer might have of cows and wedding trains when perceived as separate entities. Fear and dread is aroused by the provocative nature of the artwork which disrupts expectation of the comfortable, the familiar. Elements of what ought to be repressed or hidden come to the surface. Acknowledgement of the closeness of death, which is inherent in the human condition, is usually suppressed. Cross has indicated that the work could be read as more about death than about weddings. (Lahey, B, 1997, p.42). Intimations of mortality float up as dead cow skin enfolds a seeming human form draped in satin. If the clothed form of "Virgin Shroud" is female, it could be

argued that it is so covered up because of its supposed power to provoke horror in the male at the sight of it revealed, calming the foreboding allegedly aroused at the sight of the female genitalia.

Something about the pose of the piece is suggestive of traditional representations of the Virgin Mary, a kind of contained calmness and self-possession. In using her grandmother's wedding train, Cross has linked the piece with the virginity of the bride on her wedding day. A further layer of meaning is added by the title, "Virgin Shroud". The word 'shroud' suggests death, the death of virginity, the end of innocence, the death of the old way of life, the end of being an individual, a single autonomous entity, answerable only to oneself. As a virgin she has shrouded her sexuality, covered it up, kept it safe. Now that safekeeping is no longer hers to make. In another sense, the figure, draped in a way that resembles the voluminously covered form of a Muslim woman in a repressive regime, is effectively muzzled and gagged. She has no mouth; she cannot speak. It is a shroud for the upright dead, the unspeaking, the unrecognised.

Despite the use of cowskin and udder, "Virgin Shroud" is not a symbol of motherhood, is not a giver of sustenance. No life-sustaining breasts are evident and it is the monumentally phallic shape of the figure overall, perhaps incorporating the child's fantasy of the powerful Phallic Mother, which is the most striking. There is a potent, visceral charge to the piece.

The teats could be a garland or horns. If they represent a garland, then she is celebratory, a crowned queen, content in her mute, unspoken power. If they are interpreted as horns, a bestial, satanic element creeps in with the implicit threat of sinister power. The ambiguous nature of this element, as of the piece overall, is what makes it so unsettling. This difficulty in pinning it down safely, this fluidity of meaning harks back to the blurring of gender boundaries in other 'udder' pieces, such as "Amazon". The decided lack of certainty, the shifting between different possibilities is typical of fetishism.

"The whole artificial cosmos that art is - its inherent theatricality, exhibitionism - is explicable in terms of fetishism...". (Kuspit, 1988, p.137).

The shoe is the most common fetish object. However other leather objects all have their place. The usual requirement for the fetish object is that it be old and used rather than new, and that it should preferably have been worn by a woman. Cow skin, drying and becoming hide is, of course, leather. It is, in the case of this art work, old and battered. It does not fulfil the condition of being worn by a woman, but has been the covering of a cow. Cross has referred to the removal of women from cerebral roles and expressed an interest in exploring ways of uniting mind and body. Articles of clothing are often used as fetish objects, commonly silk or satin female underwear. The satin train, the cowhide, the teats atop the overall phallic shape are the most obvious factors that connect this piece with fetishism. Added to that there is the ambiguous nature of the piece, the shifting of perception and meaning, the unsettling, discomfiting nature of the work.

"BIBLE" 1995

The Bible lies open on a wooden plinth. A red ribbon bisects a blank page. The facing page shows an engraving, an illustration of a biblical scene, three pious women, two gazing upward in mystification, their faces illuminated. What have they seen, or more accurately not seen? The illustration depicts Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, the reformed fallen woman, both of whom loved Jesus Christ. The shock for the women, come to see their lord, is that the tomb, which should contain his corpse, is empty. There is no sign of his body. The shock for the viewer of this Bible is that there is a gaping hole at the centre of each page, cutting right through the hearts of these two women.



Fig. 7: Bible 1995 (two views)

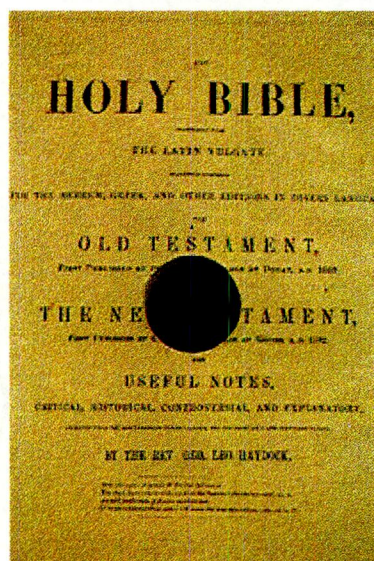


Fig. 8: Bible 1995
(two views)

The starting point, the Bible in question is, again for Cross, an object with a family connection, as well as one with iconic significance for Christianity. The Cross bible was in the artist's mother's attic before it was passed on to her. The leather cover was torn, but she had it mended and the brass clasps renewed. It lay in her studio for quite a while before she decided what she would do with it. One day she had a clear image. Acting on it, she drilled a perfect hole clean through the Bible from end to end. It required more strength and skill than courage Cross asserts. She says that it is very pleasurable to drill a perfectly precise hole (Laher, B, 1997, p. 42).

Cross has taken and radically altered an object commonly viewed as the fount of Christian wisdom, truth and symbolism, something not to be tampered with, something accorded iconic status. The hole is circular, industrial, exact. Despite the breaks in the continuity of the biblical stories caused by the perforations, Cross asserts that the Bible is still readable (Laher, B, 1997, p. 42). The beautiful, old engravings with which it is illustrated are pierced through, their significance altered. The decision is taken to have it open at a page which shows the two Marys, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, approaching the tomb to search for the body of Christ. The body has gone. As with the changed Bible, there is a void in the tomb. It is this void which gives meaning to the story of Christ. The spirit separates from the body, physicality is no longer important or necessary. It is with a similar physicality which Cross tries to reimbue it now, give it fresh meaning, recentering its authority. The breasts and hearts of the two Marys are gone with the introduction of the hole, symbolically linking them with the fact that their beloved Jesus has gone. Rather than being about a putative female 'lack', because of the significance of the way it lies open, it is, in a way, about the 'lack' of the body of Jesus.

Cross has said (Cross, 1996, p.15) that the Bible for her is full of negative energy and that it harbours some of the most destructive information. By drilling the hole she was unravelling its notions of authority and accountability. Something 'unravelling' can be knit up again in a different way, re-centering it, reinvesting it with physicality. By making

the hole she has passed comment on many different aspects of Christianity, what it lacks, and the role it allocates to women.

There is something essentially fetishistic about piercing the book with a hole. It suggests penetration of the text and of its message, which obviously leads on to suggest sexual penetration. It might be feminising it also, though the artist is quick to make the point that there is nothing particularly feminine about the hole, that it could be anal (Laher, B, 1997, p. 42). She goes on to assert that the hole reminds her of "Glory Holes", early sex aids, devices used by men when they did not have access to a woman.

The drilling of the hole could be construed as a wanton, mindless act of violence, particularly for those who revere the Bible as a repository of sacred wisdom and divinely revealed truth. Fetishistically what it does, once again in Cross's work, is disrupt comfortable expectations of the familiar, with spirit-shocking clarity. It casts doubt on any complacent acceptance and forces a questioning and re-visioning of blindly received 'truths'.

"For me, by working with it, this Bible has become a personal icon. In a fetishistic way, I have made a precious object from something close to hand." (Cross, 1996, p.15). In "Bible" Cross takes a revered book, found in the domestic setting and radically and dramatically alters it, giving it in the process fetishistic qualities.

Chapter Three will consider how Cross took beds, found in a junk shop this time rather than inherited, and gendered these by the addition of large knitted wire phalluses. The next chapter also examines how industrial found objects were gendered by Cross and in the process came to carry meaning and suggest other possibilities. The chapter will end with an examination of "Trunk" which for many seems to be Cross's most controversial piece of work.

CHAPTER THREE

"And so to bed"

"Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment". (Wilde, 1981, p.179)

Several times in her career, Dorothy Cross has taken found objects, things already in existence, and has changed and given meaning to these by gendering them. In so doing, she seems to be highlighting that sexuality is a construct, rather than a given, and a far less clearcut black and white area than is sometimes assumed.

In 1991, Cross had a show entitled "Power House" at the ICA in Philadelphia. The work in the show stemmed from a period she had spent working in a disused power station near the Dublin dock lands. This now defunct powerhouse, once an exclusively male domain supplying power to most of Dublin city, was used by Cross as a studio in which she produced work which explored gender roles and power dynamics. For much of the work made there Cross used objects found in or near the power station. The work questions the absoluteness of male power and authority and in so doing highlights the phallogentric nature of patriarchal society.

BEDS

When she was working in the powerhouse studio, Cross found cast iron beds in a junk shop near the site and decided to use these as a way of bringing the domestic into the industrial. A series of cast iron beds are transformed by Cross's process so that their usual identities and associations fade away. Two of the beds, those in "Parthenon" and "Double Bed" have phallic wire constructions knitted into the space where only a wire mattress support is expected. "Slicer Beds" (Fig. 9) look like implements of torture, being constructed with standing steel sheets where a mattress ought to be. The legs were cast in iron from



Fig. 9: Slicer Beds (detail) 1991

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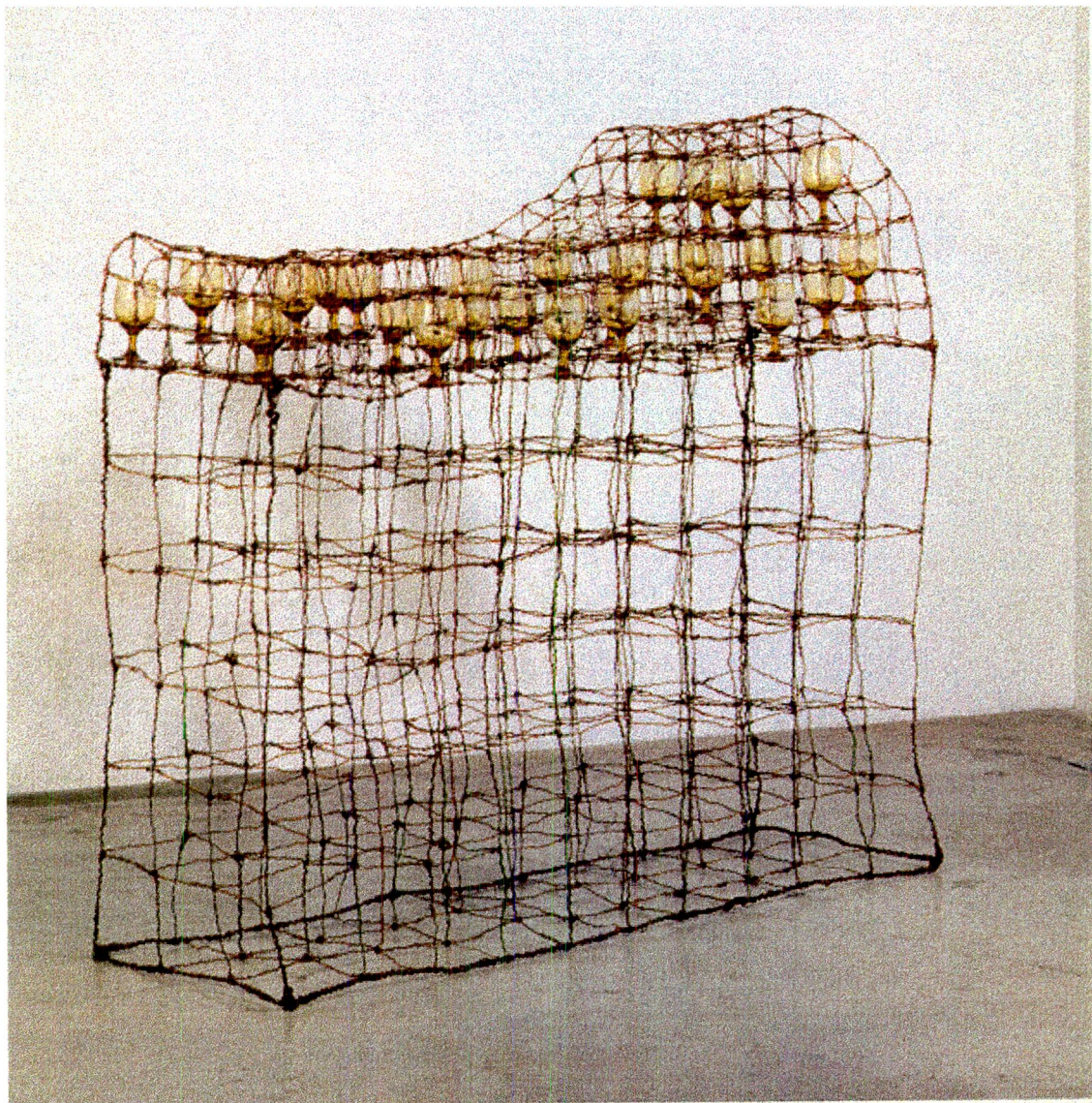


Fig. 10: Passion Bed 1989



Fig. 11: Double Bed 1991

wooden legs because Cross wanted these to look as if they could be connected to machinery. A lit indicator from one of the powerhouse control panels is embedded in each bed, suggestive of a way of monitoring performance.

"Passion Bed" is the most fragile and vulnerable, and also the least accessible of these bed sculptures. Composed of high layers of knitted wire, it has two rows of wine glasses, sandblasted with images of different species of sharks incorporated into the top wire layers (Fig. 10). Thus it links intoxication and lovemaking with shark-infested waters, the whole structure being destined to sway dangerously if too much weight is put upon it.

"Double Bed" is, in fact, a single cast-iron bed which has been sexualised and fetishised by the knitted wire structure incorporated in it. A giant wire phallus hangs down through the wire 'mattress' and wire breasts or testes rise up out of it (Fig 11). The ambiguity is deliberate. It might be a reference to the infant's fantasy of the all-powerful Phallic mother. It could also be read as a witty comment on society's preoccupations with size and power as the exaggeratedly large organ sags through the wire mattress. As before, gauges are incorporated into the wire structure and the reference to measurement of power, and of energy is unavoidable.

"Parthenon" is the most ambitious of the 'bed works'. The word 'Parthenon' itself means 'virgin'. A raised room-like structure sits on a platform (Fig. 12). Two of the walls are composed of workmen's lockers, the other two of plywood, drilled with peepholes. It is approached by climbing steps, as if approaching an altar. The interior is viewed through the open locker doors. A cast-iron bed sits on a white tiled floor surrounded by broken gauges (Fig. 13), broken glass and other industrial paraphernalia. The curved legs are cast from Queen Anne furniture, combining elements of the domestic and the industrial. The bed enfolds a giant phallus within its knitted wire structure. It is the gauges strewn on the floor, around the bed, which seem significant.

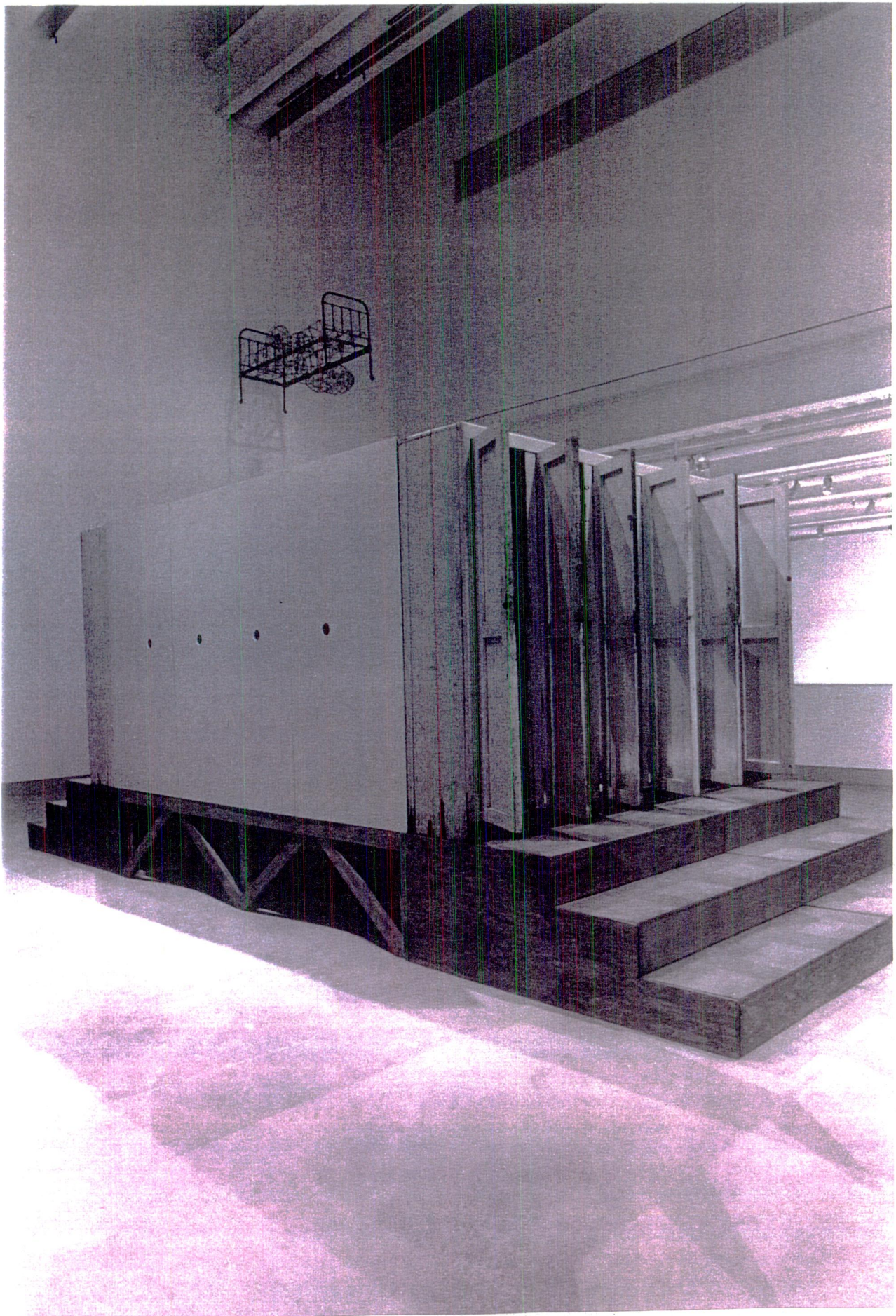


Fig. 12: Parthenon (detail) 1991

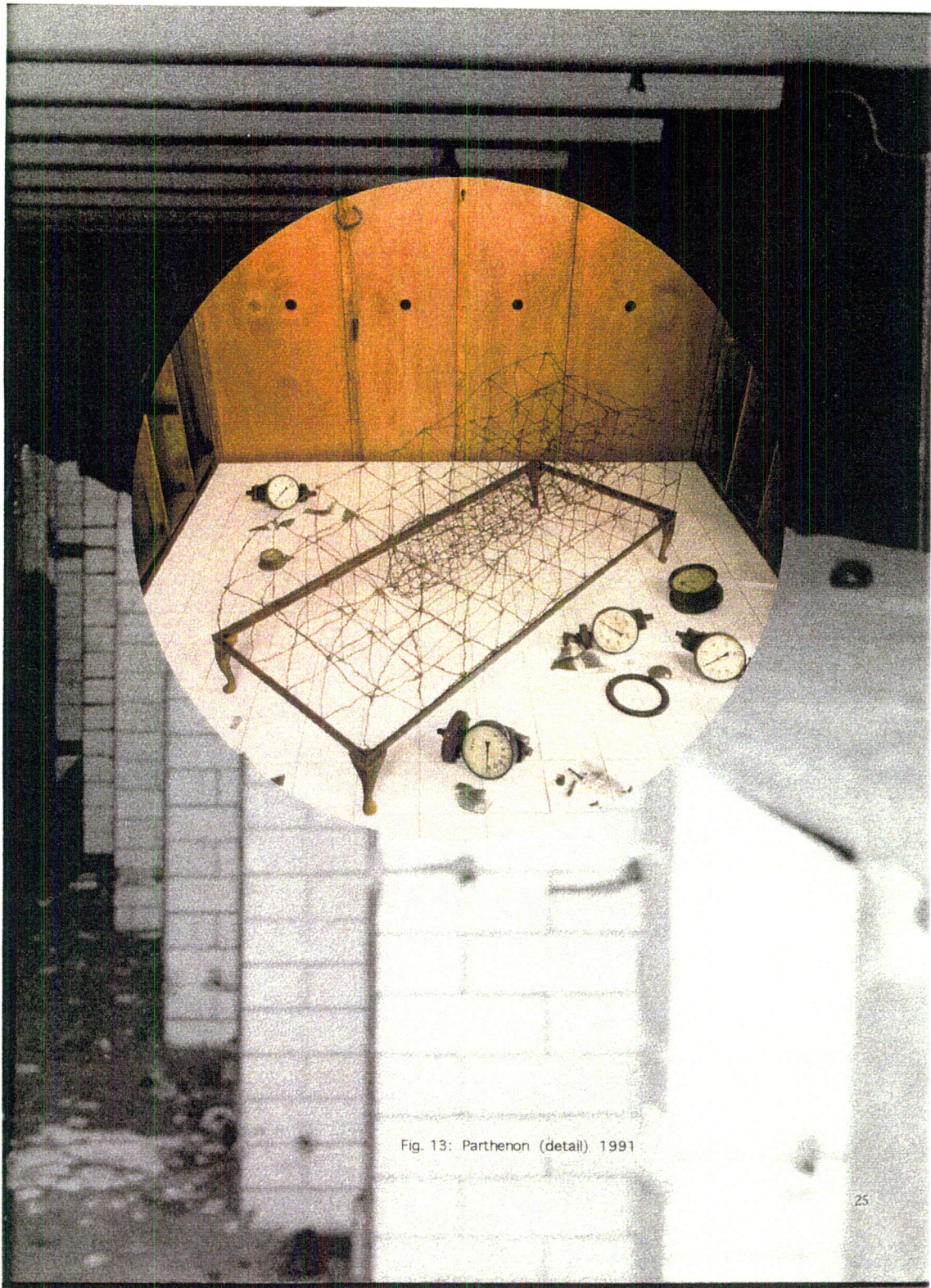


Fig. 13: Parthenon (detail) 1991

When in use in the powerhouse, the gauges measured how much energy was being produced, being part of a system which ascertained a level of power. Cross has pointed out that in human interaction there is no comparable gauging system. (Laher, B, 1997, p. 44).

The use of the gauges in "Parthenon" refers to a mechanised system being applied to presumed levels of energy that flow through individuals whether that energy is sexual, emotive, or depressive. The artist is dealing with levels of strength and levels of vulnerability. With the broken glass strewn around the bed amongst the gauges, she represents the viewer with what remains of that which has been extremely powerful. There is an interdependence between all the different elements in the powerhouse, a network. Cross tries to reflect this interdependence in this work. She sees even the broken glass as proof of something, as evidence, the residue of a system of power no longer operational.

"SCREEN (LADIES CHANGING ROOM)" 1990-91

A wooden screen seems to offer modest protection, until the viewer notices the regularly drilled peepholes at eye level. To see what is behind the screen the viewer is forced to become voyeur. Behind the screen is a simple wooden bench, worn down through use. Hanging in a brazen line over it are four hard hats in a row. These have been fetishised and gendered by the addition of erect nipples. Questions about the nature of gender and identity are raised by the addition of the nipples to the rounded breast like forms of the type of industrial hats usually worn by males. Perception oscillates back and forth as is typical of fetishism. Is it a part or is it whole, male or female?

On taking up occupation of the powerhouse space Cross found remnants of the previous occupants. Inside the men's lockers were scrawled messages, a picture of the Virgin Mary, a press cutting showing Hitler and Mussolini, female pin-ups. The locker-room atmosphere that is thus conjured up is exploited in "Screen" by the manipulation of the viewer into the position of voyeur with its attendant

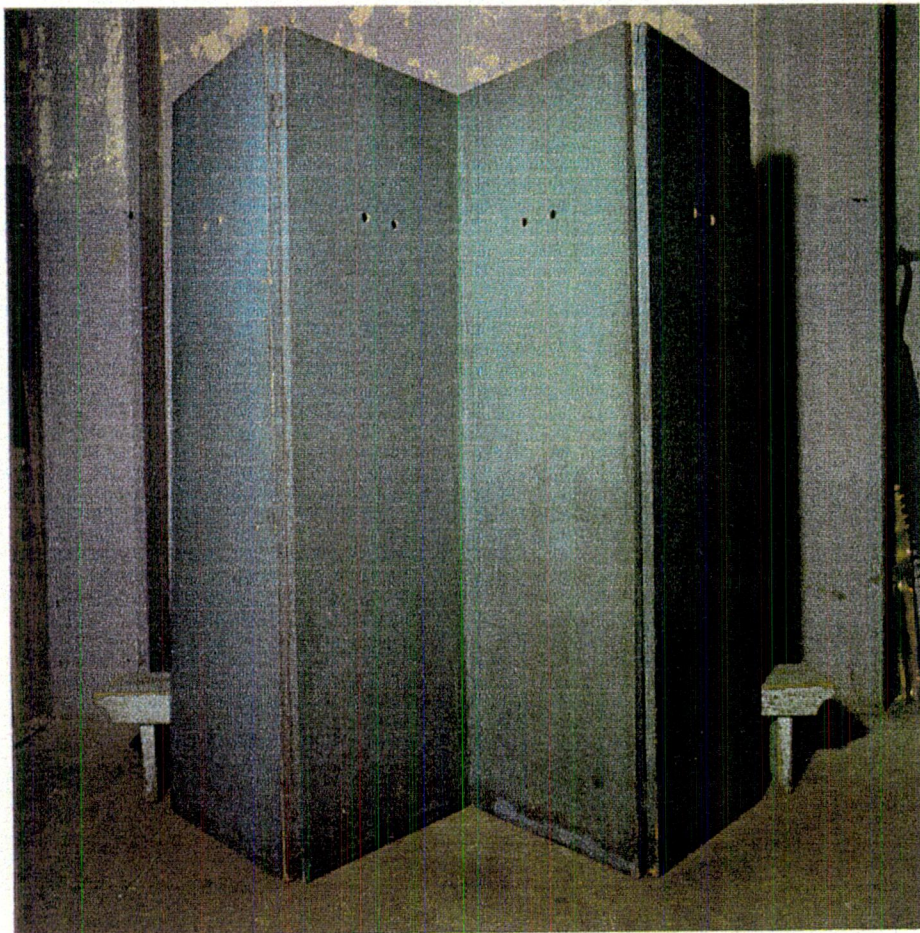


Fig. 14: Screen (Ladies Changing Room) (detail) 1990-91



Fig. 15: Screen (Ladies Changing Room) (detail) 1990-91

associations of guilty pleasure. In a posture reminiscent of that assumed by Norman Bates in Hitchcock's "Psycho" the viewer must peer through a purpose-made hole to view what lurks behind the screen (Fig. 14). What the viewer actually sees adds to the confusion and disorientation (Fig. 15).

Cross has cast the hard hats in bronze and nipples them so that they become like hardened breasts. Hard hats protect the head, the mind, the intellect. When this is allied here to the breast, with its nurturing qualities, there is a combination, a bringing together of mind and body, unifying the two. Cross seems to be saying this is how it is to view a woman in this way - as an exploitative, guilty peepshow.

In 1995, Cross made another screen piece, bringing together a tapestry screen, bricks, and the cow's udder of which she used part in the photographic piece, "Pointing the Finger". There were no peepholes in this screen, called "Untitled, 1995". The tapestry screen depicts an allegorical tale, a version of the parable of the Good Samaritan, which involves finger-pointing and jeering by the peasantry. The back of the screen is closed off, literally bricked up, confounding expectation of seeing anything further. Over the bricks is draped the cow's udder which was used to make the finger stall, with which the artist pointed her own finger in her photographic triptych. The udder hangs limply over the top of the tapestry screen like a fungus, mouldering away.

This later screen piece seems at one level to work in the opposite way to the Powerhouse screen piece. The powerhouse piece lures the viewer to a blank screen to gawk through peepholes at a further image which perplexes and confuses but which the viewer can see. The tapestry screen seems superficially to be revealing its story, only to confound it in part by presenting a closed-off blank wall, which "screens" perception, and by its ambiguity suggests concealment.



Fig. 16: Trunk 1995

"TRUNK 1995"

"In Freudian theory, masculinity and femininity are only their difference from each other. Difference is articulated by something imagined to be missing." (Mitchell, 1984, p.311)

To view "Trunk" the spectator must become voyeur once again (Fig. 16). Peering into a half-open wooden chest one encounters a seemingly innocent pair of white cotton knickers lying at the bottom of the trunk, with a cow's teat sewn into the gusset, so that it becomes a kind of female fetish object, an autoerotic pleasure device. The spectator is on the horns of a dilemma here, having had to peer into the trunk to investigate the contents. Having absorbed the initial impact, is the viewer to stay for a moment and enjoy this intimate revelation, savour the possibility, or recoil in shock and shame and slink away? A taboo subject is being highlighted here, in this Pandora's box.

'Pandora replaced the lid. The box was almost empty, everything that was cruel, violent or swift had left it. All that was left, right at the bottom was a little thing which did not take up much space. It did not leap out like the others but was calm and assured. It was hope. It remained in the box as if afraid, as if it had not the right to spread.' (Cross, 1996, p.26).

Cross hesitated before deciding to show this work.

'There are few works that I've made which I have hidden, but 'Trunk' was one of them. When I finally finished the piece I thought, 'Oh God, what am I doing here? This is too weird.' But then weeks later, I began to understand it and decided to show it regardless of its reception. This is the first and probably last time that I will ever place a cow's teat genitally, but it had to be done.'

(Cross, 1996, p. 18).

Paul Bonaventura, writing in the 'Even' catalogue has suggested that we 'manifest our concern about our relationship with the social body through our individual bodies.' Dealing specifically with 'Trunk' and

masturbation, he writes "the artist is not only asking her audience to contemplate the joys of self-stimulation, but to consider also the ways in which social and sexual inequalities lead to introspection and withdrawal." (Bonaventura, 1994, p.20).

What hope does 'Trunk' offer? And is this hope offered to women? A psychoanalytic interpretation of the work is favoured by Marian Dunlea, writing in the 'Even' catalogue. She suggests that the knickers contain both male and female characteristics, the teat comes from the udder and is the phallus. For the infant the mother is all-powerful one who can choose to satisfy the infant with her nourishing breast or who can choose to withhold this satisfaction at her whim. The infant also fantasises that the mother holds the father's penis inside her body, so therefore she has everything. The helpless, dependent infant wants to become the object of desire for the mother, and so wishes to become the phallus for her. The infant's desire and the object of the mother's desire become interwoven. Dunlea questions whether we ever move on from this point, from wishing to be the object of the mother's desire, to wanting one's own desire. She suggests that our response to the phallic knickers in Dorothy Cross's 'Trunk', may tell us more about ourselves, than about the object which we are viewing.

Donald Kuspit has written that "fetish objects produced by such artists derive their power from stirring up the uncomfortable recognition, whether acknowledged or not, or the most repressed secrets of our psyche and our culture." (Kuspit, 1988, p. 140). The presentation of this innocent white cotton knickers altered so radically by the addition of a phallic seeming teat may most discomfit those who repress desire or deny sexuality. It seems an overt expression of a deeply buried secret wish presented in a covert setting which involves circling and peering voyeuristically. Having circled the trunk and peered into it the viewer is presented with something uncompromising which there is no denying. What to do? Perhaps take it on board with the philosophical recognition that life is full of such strangeness.

CONCLUSION

The question of identity is central to fetishism and it is also pivotal to Cross's practice. In her interrogation of issues of gender and identity fetishistic elements come into play. This thesis set out to explore what fetishistic elements there are in her work, keeping psychoanalytic theory and feminist re-interpretation of this phallogentric theory in mind in this exploration.

Other work by Cross not specifically examined within the scope of this thesis deals with sexual identity in ways which spawn doubt and uncertainty which Cross has declared to be a satisfactory reaction to her work. (Laher, B, 1997, p. 43) When the udder work was deemed to be complete Cross moved on to work with snake skin. So the fetishistic preoccupation with animal skin is still present as is Cross's interest in exploring how close the human is to the animal. Beneath a thin layer of civilisation lurk atavistic urges and reactions.

There is a touching vulnerability in the snake pieces which is also present in the udder work. The entwined snakes in "Lover Snakes" 1995 are locked in a reptilean embrace, their silvered hearts linked by a thread to their bodies, emblems of a love which denies their purported cold-bloodedness. Another snake piece entitled "Albino Python" 1996 uses the skin of a reptile which was specifically bred to be white. An offshoot of this piece of genetic engineering was her infertility. And so, Cross says, that in trying to breed, she died. She is impaled on a piece of aluminium piping, three inches in diameter, suspended between two opposing walls of a room. The pipe pierces her through as the drilled hole pierces the Bible piece discussed in chapter two, leading inevitably to ideas of sexual penetration. The snake can also be linked to the Bible through its demonising in the story of creation and the fall of man attributed to woman as weaker vessel prey to satanic suggestion through the snake. Cross's work rehabilitates the snake which was once seen as a symbol of goodness and integration, just as the artist's udder work makes one rethink perceptions of the cow.

"Mooncage" 1989 is hauntingly moving. There are no animal skins, but a knitted wire phallus - as in the bed works - protrudes from a wire cage and a box which frames a photograph of the moon. The moon, more usually associated with the female than the male, thus appears to have a phallic symbol extending from its surface. "Iris" 1994-5 has a gentle tenderness in its silvered curve, the flowerhead a feminised vulva and the phallic shape of the bulb root at the other end emphasised. Gender boundaries are again brought into question by linking the two suggested sets of genitalia by this seemingly simple strategy.

Freud's limiting of fetishism to the male is inadequate. To develop an adequate model of female sexuality, a whole range of disciplines must reexamine the phallocentrism inherent in them, and thus comes the possibility of cultural change. The structure of fetishism itself, oscillating continually between knowing and unknowing, does not create a positive or stable space. Fetishism, as personal practice, offers oscillation and compromise. Similarly, Dorothy Cross's art practice is concerned with the production of work where the meaning, as in fetishism, oscillates between knowing and not knowing, between one gender and the other, confounding expectation of clarity of intent or meaning. The wit inherent in the work is reminiscent of the subversiveness of the joke, being both provocative and thought-provoking.

From Meret Oppenheim to Louise Bourgeois women have made fetishistic work, and Dorothy Cross's art practice is part of this lineage. Cross's work highlights the phallocentrism inherent in society, and in blurring gender boundaries and indicating female strength she adds to the on-going discourse. The artist has said that she does not like to overdetermine meaning. Dorothy Cross may or may not have intended consciously to make fetishistic art work or have 'intended' those meanings to be read into the work. However the work can take on a life of its own and this thesis contends that the fetishistic element is there, and that the work is concerned with sexuality, gender and identity, as is fetishism itself.

APPENDIX
INTERVIEWS WITH DOROTHY CROSS

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY CROSS A: Sculpture Dept. NCAD, 6 May, 1997.

(Interview begins with a discussion of fetishism in the work of Mary Kelly & Cindy Sherman)

ML: Mary Kelly tends to be very theoretical, whereas Cindy Sherman denies any theoretical input.

DC: Did you see that Arena television programme [on Cindy Sherman]? When I heard her speak, I was shocked. I actually wished she hadn't, because I thought she was undermining the power of her work by being so flippant about it. She was in that shop, looking at those dolls, I thought that was really destructive.

ML: Trivialising her work?

DC: You never know, of course, that could have been edited down, you never know what they get up to on those TV shows.....they did make her look..... the most interesting thing was her kissing her parrot nearly!

ML: She doesn't believe in commenting on her work at all apparently.

DC: Well then, why did she talk?

ML: You mean let the work stand and adopt a more Greta Garbo attitude - I want to be alone -?

DC: A very glamorous kind of way of putting it! I sometimes think with work like that the less words the better, because it's so simplistic. Any way you describe Cindy Sherman's work in words, it sounds so trite. The image itself is so descriptive, it doesn't need words. Whereas with Mary Kelly, she is talking around it ...it is more descriptive. Which is a problem when you come to the work of Cindy Sherman or in some ways in the way that I work....particularly when you are asked to come up with a proposal.... It's totally difficult, because everything you come up with sounds stupid....

ML: Even though you probably have the image?

DC: Well, the transformation occurs when you are actually making the work. I think with Cindy's work the image totally stands up anyway.

ML: I saw your show 'Even' at the Kerlin. I have read the catalogue essays and also references to your work in a book called "Fetishism - Visualising Power and Desire". In the Roger Malbert essay "Fetish and Form in Contemporary Art" he was talking about your 'Amazon' piece and he attributes its power to an "awesome and unnatural combination of ideas - ferocity and domesticity, the animal and the human". How do you feel about the word 'unnatural' being used in relation to your work?

DC: I don't know really. You get all sort of different reactions to it, from tenderness to horror. A mutation occurs with the work. What is 'natural' and 'unnatural' anyway? I don't think it is unnatural. But what he's talking about might be the primal thing connecting cows with motherhood. You just get different reactions to it.

ML: He uses strong language and talks about "phallic confusion" adding to the effect of "freakish abomination"!

DC: People say such different things. I don't think it is "freakish". You see work differently at different times, and when you see it in different settings. For example, I always used to like to see my work set beside Helen Chadwick's. Her work is so feminine and it is all about celebration. Mine is all about anxiety. I have friends who write about the work from different perspectives.

(Cross talks about the importance of using things with a history and about getting things from her mother).

ML: How does your mother feel about the work you've done?

DC: I use her very much as a kind of monitor to the work. She's afraid of it a little bit. She was more inclined to hang back when it wasn't acknowledged, but now that other people think it is okay she'd be more inclined to dive in. It takes a while for her to relax into it and to understand it. I talk to her about it and then she has to try and regurgitate

it for people who want to know what it means ! She's very open to it, which is great.

ML: You used the Bible she gave you in a piece of your work. You said in referring to this piece "In a fetishistic way I have made a precious object from something close at hand". I was wondering were you defetishising something - the Bible- which for many people would be viewed with fetishistic reverence?

DC: Another way of talking about it would be to see it as an icon more than a fetish - people are fetishistic about it.

ML: Did it take great courage to drill that hole through it?

DC: No, it didn't take courage, but it took great skill and strength. I was sweating! And I'm not technically that brilliant! I can't expect other people to know what I'm doing if I don't know myself. I was very aware of it being a valuable book that I could get a hundred quid for in an antique shop . But it had been thrown under the stairs at home, the cover had been torn off and some brass things, and I got it put back .

ML: In his essay in the 'Even' catalogue Paul Bonaventura says that the sixteen pieces in that exhibition "set themselves the task of questioning representations of control and desire" and says that they do this by commenting on "the dynamics of masculinity and femininity " . Is this what the work is about for you?

DC: Things like the 'Rugby' series of photographs, that's very much about that. Power and control? The photographs of the kids with their mouths open with their eyes closed , that's very much about seduction and trustthe adult and the child.....power and control. But I think it's less laboured than some of the earlier work, you know, and maybe its gendered. And then you have the Rugby thing and it's definitely gendered. What he is saying is right in a way. The cuttlefish and the rings are all gendered. But there are so many other things you could say about it, rather than talking about it in one particular way. Desire

is more interesting than fetishism, in a way, because it's much more difficult to make manifest, isn't it?

ML: Visually?

DC: Yes. I was in a show in Paris called 'Eroticism'. I remember thinking that it failed miserably. We all failed. It had work by lots of different people.

ML: Why did it fail, do you think?

DC: I don't know. You went in with expectations from such a title, and there were people's bizarre attempts. I suppose it was the curator who decided which pieces were particularly erotic. Again how eroticism is manifest is very much about the context. (Talks about Annette Messenger and Gary Hill in the context of desire) Messenger photographed different parts of the body and showed these in black frames, so that you can never see the whole body. And it's about when you kiss a mouth can you envisage the elbow. And Gary Hill made a video piece about a beam going across a room and there are black and white monitors about a couple making love. But you couldn't actually see the whole couple at any one point. So you have the absence, the in - the - cheekiness, which is much more about desire. It's funny how fetishism, the word itself limits. When one hears the word 'fetish' one thinks 'pervert', 'degenerate', the dirty raincoat brigade and peepshows and all that stuff.

ML: It's much more than that. Can we talk for a moment about your piece "Trunk"? Bonaventura says in his essay, that your udder-based work is marked by a "compulsive property which embraces seduction and repulsion, pleasure and pain.... and an interest in confronting taboos and accessing their potency for transformation". Were you conscious of that, of confronting taboos in your work? In that essay you said yourself that you found it weird... "This is just too weird. What am I doing here?"

DC: I'm not consciously approaching anything. In the old days.....going to the shrink, talking about dreams, reading about Jung.....all of that was conscious. But the knickers were totally unconscious. I knew the cows

informed what I did. I find it much more exciting, depressing and much more scary to work around. I felt the cow thing should end anyway. I had a few teats lying around. You know it obviously was conscious at one level. I had this teat in a box in my studio. I saw the teat and I went home. Then I did go to the chest of drawers and get out a pair of white knickers and bring it to the studio. I had actually started making a pair of knickers with the teat on the outside, out of the whole udder, and it just looked too corny, and not intimate enough and not familiar enough. And a lot of the thing with the cow stuff is familiarity, something that latches you into comfort, whether it's a dishcover, or a game of croquet, something that kind of soothes you into acceptance. Even the fashion thing, it's something that's familiar and kind of acceptable. Then you can harness the strangeness of the teat by that [familiarity]. Then with the knickers, I stitched the teat in and put them in a cardboard box for about two weeks and said 'No, I can't show these, because they're just too weird. They felt peculiar. If I was into some weird fetishistic thing, you could have used them yourself. I actually had no desire to do that. I was aware that that was part of the read you could have of them. That was how they ended up in the trunk. The sensation I had around them was 'bold', there was something 'bold' about them.

ML: Do you like that?

DC: Well, it's not that comfortable when you are first doing it, you know. Marian Dunlea who wrote the essay [in the Even catalogue], and my friend Mervyn, they both act as reflectors for the work....a man and a woman, both. Academically, I use them quite a lot. I'd say 'what do you think?'. So they both then said, 'It's fine, really'. It's a bit like a secret that particular piece. Also with "Amazon", I hid her too from the steel workers when they first came down. I just thought, 'I don't want to have to explain this. And that's what's so great about the art gallery, you don't have to explain. You just put them up and you're grand. And everyone will dump the stuff on you that they can't handle themselves. But they don't have to know you at all.

ML: Do you often get that feeling - what I'm doing here is weird - but go ahead and do it anyway ?

DC: I don't intentionally want to make things weird at all. I'm not interested at all in the grotesque or trying to make people sick. I'm very interested in strange beauty. And I think in many ways that the knickers are the most grotesque thing I've ever done, and I think 'grotesque' is probably even too strong a word, because it's an innocent teat when you actually get close in to look at it. I remember some student work once. I remember a man who was going to slice his penis with a blade, or stick a pin in his eye. And I just felt I'm not remotely interested in that. A lot of people would think I am just because I cut up cows's teats! But 'peculiar', things that are just a little bit peculiar, I find interesting.

ML: Do you ever find you get a difference in reaction between men and women? At the slide talk you gave, a man - whom I know - talked, with some hostility, about cows's 'tits'. There was a slight edge of hostility there and I just wondered about it.

DC: You might have noticed that more than me, knowing the person. Some people might just say 'cows's tits' because they are uncomfortable talking about it. Generally speaking, certainly you get hostility, but that's the person's problem. It deals with blurred sexual territory, mysterious virgin territory. I've had people turn around to me and say 'You've obviously find sexuality a real problem because you laugh at these works and that's obviously nervousness and that you can't cope with the seriousness of it. I just think 'Where's your sense of humour? But this woman [in the audience at a talk] was absolutely adamant. She had psychoanalysed me in my talk. But that's okay, that's her stuff, she can think that if she wants. To answer your question more clearly,..... it's hard to tell. You probably heard much more reaction to that slide talk than I did. I just heard those few questions, but I don't hear what people are saying, in the cafe, or wherever else. So you miss a lot. To describe the reaction to the "Amazon", one man going green and nearly getting sick, and another man kissing the teat, I don't know if I said that in my talk.

Those were two very extreme opposite reactions . Women either talk about the cow or talk about the udder as breast and can really feel under siege. Like a woman who stopped me on the street and said how can I do that, do I not think about women who've had mastectomies? She was really distressed.

ML: I wonder had she had a mastectomy?

DC: Well her sister had had one. And my mother had. I said to her my mother had had one, but she didn't identify herself with a cow, you know! But that distress comes out of some identification, with the cow, which is very, very interesting. But the knickers stuff you get very little response to really.

ML: People are embarrassed, or they don't know what to say?

DC: Well their head is in a box.....You get a fair amount of laughs when they come out!

ML: But that's okay, isn't it? It's a human thing, like how do I read this?

DC: Oh God, yeah! Laughter is brilliant. It's like the way Beckett talked about his Molloy character, when he's on his bicycle, and his balls are getting stringy, and they get caught and he can just cut them off with a secateurs! Humour, I think is very important, but I suppose I'm dealing with it less now than I used to. There's less humour in what I'm doing at the moment.

ML: What are you working on at the moment?

DC: I'm not sure exactly. Well, there's the snake that's up in the Glen Dimplex Exhibition on a pipe, I don't know if you've seen it? It's a big long aluminium pipe it's twenty feet long. She's an albino python that I got in Texas, and she died. In fact, she died having babies. She was genetically engineered to be an albino, and it physically made it problematic for her to have eggs. So that's her story and you'll be prepared when you meet her at IMMA. The tube runs through her, so that it's like she's impaled by this utility pipe. The pipe is only three inches in diameter, and it's aluminium, and it looks like it should be

carrying electrical wires or water. It runs from one wall of the gallery to the other and you have to duck under it to get into the next space, and the snake is impaled on it. She's skinned from the anus like a stocking, so I put the pipe through her when she was wet after pickling her, and she looks like she's draped around it, but also it's a reminder that pythons squeeze to force food down. She looks in some ways like she's pinioned by the museum, like she's trapped between the two walls. So there's nothing funny about her really. But she's terribly kind of formally smooth and complete, like she's almost reliant on the tube, because she'd have dried around the tube and so she's slightly thinner. And she's very elegant and a kind of pale green. I suppose she's kind of tragic actually, but she's also a freak. I'm not sure exactly what it's about. In some ways it's about art, but it's also about a snake that's pinioned in some way that's unnatural.

ML: There you've used Malbert's word (unnatural) yourself!

DC: Yeah! She's pinioned unnaturally, so she's not funny.

ML: And she's a female snake. You know that, you know her history.

DC: I do, yeah. I thought of putting that on a little card, to tell people. But I don't think it matters, particularly. The fact that she's an albino I think is important. She's white, and she's pure. There is something about the filtering system in the art world that kind of reduces everything, to try to refine it to a pure art. And that has been her downfall in a way. She was bred for collectors, to be an albino and that caused her death. But none of that, the reproduction thing isn't evident. I wonder will people get that? It will be interesting to see. But you can't explain everything.

ML: But I suppose to a certain extent you can manipulate things?

DC: Oh yeah, I could have a whole story up on the wall. But again, even titling her, this time, I just called her 'Albino Python'. I didn't want to go into all that stuff. I sometimes try to overcome - by titling, to help people to understand. In the end of the day they'll make up their own story. I'm hostile to the idea of the defining word.

ML: While I was at The Art Institute in Chicago earlier this year, a girl told an interesting story at an undergraduate seminar, while talking about her own work. I was thinking about it in relation to you and the cows. Some very high functioning autistic , has made a machine that embraces cows just before they go to the abbatoir. It was the most bizarre thing . This machine actually physically embraces them, goes round them to calm them.

DC: How lovely!

ML: Yes! But how cynical as well, calming them before you put the bolt through their brains.

**DOROTHY CROSS INTERVIEW B: Cafe en Seine, Dublin,
4th December, 1997.**

ML: Thinking of "Bible" and of "Virgin Shroud" why do you particularly like re-using family objects in your work?

DC: For me it is very important, it is more meaningful than going out and buying a yard of silk or satin with which I have no connection. Also because of the way I work, whether it is a book or my grandmother's wedding veil - having it around for a long time, it comes into the way I work, without even looking for it. More so in the past, I don't have that much left that I haven't used.

ML: Are these things around you in your studio?

DC: The bible was in my mother's attic. The wedding train my grandmother gave me when I was ten. I've been very selective in what I've kept.

ML: Putting the wedding train together with the cowskin in "Virgin Shroud", was it something to do with the tension between the contrasting textures?

DC: Yes. It was very much to do with the tension between the textures. Because that particular cowskin was quite torn and ripped.....the grotesqueness of itI think I was looking for something to counterpoint thatso for two days I did nothing. I had that choice. The cowskin was possibly shrouding something else and then there was the virginal thing of the bridal veil. It was almost sacrilegious, putting the wet cowskin beside the bridal veil.

ML: I was wondering about the significance of the title - "Virgin Shroud". Does it refer to marriage as the death or the shrouding of virginity?

DC: Yes. It is really the conflict of the material. People put these ideas onto the work....they rely too much on titles to try to help themselves

understand. Looking back I think these titles were too clever . Also it's pinning it to just one meaning. It could be more about death and less about weddings, depending on how you read the work.

ML: You have said that when you made the work "Bible", you were getting negative messages from it, and you have also mentioned that there is "destructive information" in the Bible which are "unravelling" in the work. Could you talk about that?

DC: I also mentioned that it is still readable, despite the hole. "Destructive information".....that's a personal thing.....because it's [the Bible] such a voice of authority. "Unravelling".....because of the hole, it's about loss..... the unravelling of their notions of authority, of accountabilityall that. But actually, as I think about it, "unravelling" is a word that I love. The notion that you can unravel something and knit it back whole again.

ML: Is it fetishising it or feminising it by drilling a hole through it?

DC: It is. But also the hole is not necessarily sexed. It could be anal. It is circular and industrial. There is nothing particularly feminine about it. It reminds me very much of "Glory Holes", those devices where men put their penises when they didn't have a woman. There is a preciseness about it. There's a physical pleasure about drilling a perfect hole.

ML: Is it about a female "lack"?

DC: That's the last thing it's about. It's about a void. It is open at the page of the two Marys, looking for Jesus. So in a way it is about the lack of the body of Jesus.

So maybe in a way it is sexual, because they were in love with Jesus. It is never adverted to, but they were besotted. It is there Mantegna's work absolutely, all that foreshortening places the accent on the penis.

ML: Is the hole a way of decentering its authority?

DC: For me it is re-centering it. One thing I find about my work, is that I could talk about all my work in terms of death. Georges Bataille writes brilliantly about sex and death. Sex is a kind of death. He writes about eroticism in a quirky little story called "The Story of the Eye".

ML: In your work "Double Bed" is the knitted wire shape breasts and a penis or a penis and testes? I didn't know which it was.

DC: Well that's good. It's essential really [that you don't know which it is].

ML: Is there a reference in it to this idea of the Phallic Mother? This idea that the child perceives the mother as all-powerful and holding the phallus inside her body.

DC: You couldn't speak about them completely in that way. I don't make any of them to try and determine things. I'm glad when people think they might be breasts. When Joan Fowler wrote the catalogue essay for "Powerhouse" she was so concerned with feminism, and I wasn't, you know. I don't try to overdetermine the meaning. It's much more elusive than that. Marion Dunlea talks about that in her catalogue essay for "Even". She's sure, but I'm not so sure. It's there in the title, the 'double' of "Double Bed", the possibility of different meanings.

ML: Is the idea of working with beds powerful?

DC: It's funny, you know, when I was working with cows's udders, there were tights with cowskin patterns on them, they didn't have udders, but they were cowskins. It's part of the collective unconscious. Artists are part of the collective unconscious. When I was working in the Powerhouse, there were no actual beds in the Powerhouse, obviously. I had found these cast iron beds in a junk shop. It seemed an appropriate means of bringing the domestic into the industrial.

They are fabricated from scratch. I cast the legs from wooden legs into cast iron. I wanted them to look as if they could be connected to machinery.

ML: What is the significance of the gauges strewn around the bed in "Parthenon"?

DC: They were connected with the power that came in and out of the power station when electricity was being produced. They gauged how much energy was being produced. It's about judgment in some way or about evidence of a level of power, so it's also about a system that can ascertain a level of power. But in human interaction you don't really have that gauging system. So it's a mechanised system which can be applied in terms of presumed levels of energy, whether it's sexual, emotive, depressive, whatever that is that can flow through us. So what I was talking about in the Powerhouse was very much about levels of strength, of levels of vulnerability, hopefully both territories can be gauged. Generally speaking, one associates vulnerability with something bad. With all that broken glass stuff, I was hoping that people would consider that it had been saved and it had been represented in a way, and that it had once been part of something immensely powerful, which is electricity. And though it was now completely shattered, it was the residue of a system of power and it is still valid. You know the beds with instruments twisted in them, these were used in the laboratory in the power station, to test the water that went through the turbines to make sure the turbines were in working order. So there was an interdependence between all these different elements, there was a network.

ML: So you were showing this interdependence in your work?

DC: Yes. To try and exaggerate it in a way. And even though it was throw away junk that nobody wanted to save, it was proof of something. But also it was a kind of vicarious attempt to reinstate it in a way, showing that it's vulnerable, because it had been exploded.

ML: Of course glass has this quality that it is both strong and vulnerable.

DC: Yes. It is like the glass penis in that piece "Freud's Couch". It is a big wooden frame with a couch suspended in it and where you would lay your head there's a cow's udder with four teats, and there is an eighteen inch long glass penis which was made in Waterford Crystal. It is an exaggerated penis. It is also transparent and fragile, because it could shatter, so using glass was very important there.....inflated penis and deflated udder.

ML: In "Screen" was the idea of blurring gender boundaries the most important element or was it the voyeuristic aspect, or were both equally so?

DC: Both. "Screen" is always placed somewhere with reference to the "Parthenon". It was where the girls changed. It was a divisional thing. "Parthenon" was where the boys and the girls chose to have some fun. "Screen" was not a complete structure, not a complete building. But it's more intrusive in some ways. What I was trying to do was bring a female process into a territory that was normally male, with the hard hat thing. Whereas with "Parthenon" I wasn't necessarily bringing in the female. The voyeuristic thing, that's only a tiny part of it. The hats are more important with this mixture of what's protective of the head and that's generally vulnerable.

ML: Is there a connection between "Screen" and your other piece "Tapestry Screen"?

DC: The thing about "Tapestry Screen" is that you can't get behind it, that it has all those thousands of bricks behind it. There is really no connection.

ML: One review which referred to "Croquet" spoke of it as a metaphor for colonialism, Ireland as the cow and the mallets of Fine English Ash as England, the coloniser. I was wondering how you felt about that.

DC: I was aware that that could be read into it. You are always aware. I made it for a show in London and I was aware that, number one, they might know I'm Irish and most critics will read that into it, which is terribly annoying. When I talk about it I point out that Croquet is a game which came from France to England through the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. The mallets could stand for the coloniser, but the cow is just the cow.

ML: In "Stilettos" is there a reference to Meret Oppenheim's fur teacup?

DC: Meret Oppenheim's piece powerfully illustrates how we are close to the animal under a surface of civilisation. In "Stilettos" I wanted a reference to the Japanese practice of binding women's feet. They broke the big toe and bent it back so that the deformed feet could be used as sex toys. In my piece the skin shrank and tightened as it dried and the teats began to point upwards, so I suppose it could be used as a sex toy.

ML: In "Pointing the Finger" is there a reference to penis and condom in the finger inside the finger stall/teat?

DC: I deliberately used the index finger in that series of three photographs. The index finger always suggests direction. So in the first photograph the finger is passive, in the second it suggests nurture, and in the third it is assertive.

(interview ends)

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