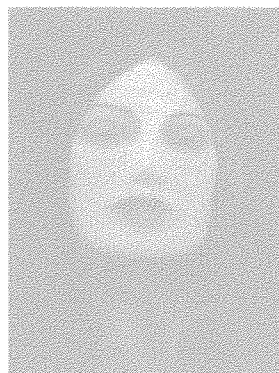


Scratching Skin





Looking Like Someone Else (Portrait # 15, 1997)
Doris Collection, Wellington

Séraphine Pick
Scratching Skin

Scrapbook Pick
Touching Skin



Looking Like Someone Else (Portrait) # 35 1997
Private Collection, Wellington

Once seen, Séraphine Pick's paintings make it difficult to look at a paper bag, a hospital bed or a little girl's party dress in quite the same way again. In an oeuvre encompassing several major shifts in style, media and technique, it is Pick's unerring eye for imagery which makes her work so instantly identifiable and so enticing. *Scratching Skin* is the first time that examples taken from the complete range of Pick's work, from her almost monochromatic 'dreamscapes' to her richly coloured fully modelled paintings, have been brought together, offering viewers a unique opportunity to discover and explore the connections between them.

Pick describes her painting as an intuitive process, a "chaotic sorting and deciphering of images" from real, remembered and imagined worlds. After a series of early works which featured powerful women from mythology amidst largely expressionist landscapes, she began, in

1994, to make paintings which combined dreamlike, abstract backgrounds with floating objects derived from her childhood. The symbols she first experimented with during this time have gradually developed into a highly evocative system of iconography which runs like a thread throughout her later work. One image, an old metal colander she used to play with on the beach during her early years on Moturua Island, has become a compelling metaphor in relation to Pick's artistic practice. With grains of sand caught in its base and water pouring freely out of the perforated sides, it has come to represent the sifting process she goes through as an artist, mining her past and daily life for objects and images with the power to prompt recollections and associations for others. Pick's colander takes on many roles; in some incarnations it serves simply as a reminder of a comparatively innocent time, in others it is a more contrived signifier, suggesting the

inward struggle to contain what the body would release; blood, words, emotions. In Pick's capricious, invented worlds, it is also not unusual for other objects, such as baths, masks or dresses, to take on the colander's more general qualities of diffusion.

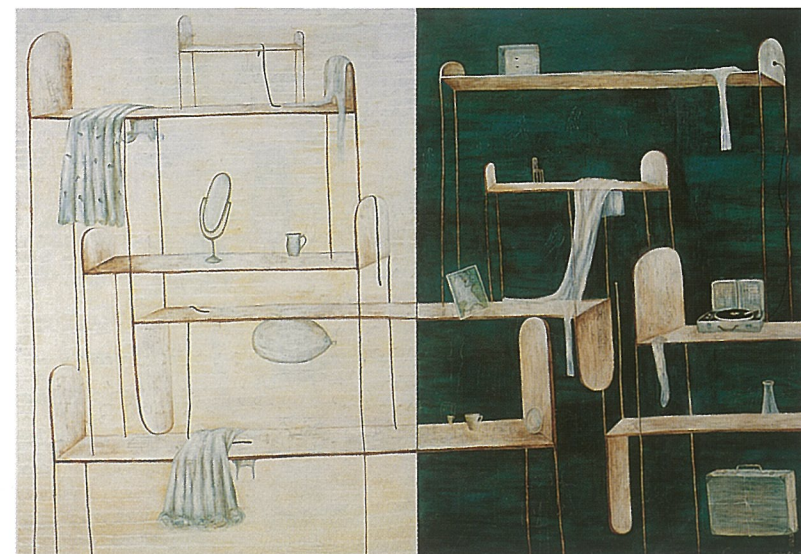
The thin iron hospital bed which appears so often in Pick's painting, and which recently took on three dimensional existence in the installation *Passing Moment* (1997), had its origins in her "unusually illness and accident prone childhood". After a spate of misadventures involving swimming pools, lawnmowers and stonethrowing (combined with a severe bout of bronchial pneumonia at the age of three) Pick found herself confined to beds such as these, both at home and in hospital, for what must have seemed interminable periods of time. The bed became a place which symbolised illness, but also her concurrent escape into

imagination: "it was an island and a place to dream". The presence of the bed is an immediate indication that we have left the world of reality behind and have entered a realm of fantasy where anything (and everything) can happen.

Pick almost drowned in a dress like the ones which hauntingly occupy her paintings, and these eerie frocks emit an unavoidably mournful and elegiac presence. They are usually empty, and float aimlessly through space or drape sadly across beds and shelves, disconsolate and discarded by the little girls who once brought them to life. Their poignancy is echoed by Pick's lugubrious paper bags whose faceless eyes seem to seek ours with wordless pleas for recognition. The bags themselves often act to blur gender and identity, hinting at the painful adolescent battle to reconcile appearance with society's expectations. Within their wretched presence you can almost hear

the cruel gibes and catcalls of the classroom.

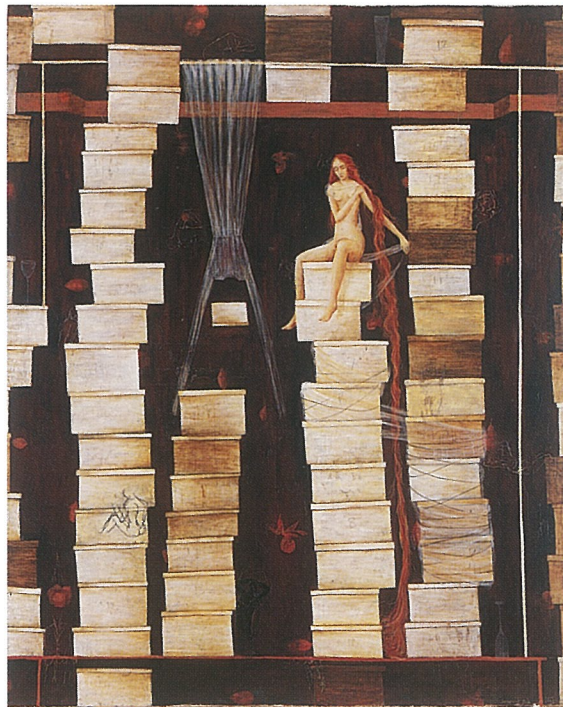
As specific as these symbols are to Pick's growing up, they are also powerful emblems, capable of triggering our own recollections, and it is her deft handling which allows them to be woven into a more universal narrative of childhood. The strangely dislocated emblems are often domestic in nature, emphasising the special significance memory can inject into otherwise inconsequential household objects. Looking into one of these canvases can be like stepping into a forgotten room full of long-lost keepsakes and mementoes. In the diptych *Sound* (1995), one panel is filled with a warm, sunny light, the other cast into shadow, effectively breaking the picture plane up into day and night. Waking hours are preoccupied with appearances; dresses have been flung down in teenage despair and a smug, portable face mirror takes



Sound 1995. Paris Family Collection

centre stage. In the opposing panel, the mood is less frenetic; a moonlit paper bag head plays possum to the inaudible melody of an old record player. At night the assembled objects suggest dreams of the future: a fine Renaissance portrait hints at the treasure to be found in faraway countries and, at bottom right, a packed suitcase waits, impatient for

departure. In both sections, the bed legs drip softly down like candlewax, seamlessly drawing together a host of separate memories. As in almost all of Pick's work, the atmosphere is oddly rarefied; gravity and scale take on a hazy insignificance and the suspended objects exist within an unstructured and idyllic world of make-believe.



Wonderlust 1996 Collection of Paul F. and Ellen M. Majurey

Pick travelled to Europe in 1995, and when she returned to New Zealand her painting revealed a dramatic stylistic shift. While away, she had been newly overwhelmed by the magnitude of European culture and, having never been formally instructed in the history of art, found wandering through

the galleries and museums was “like walking through time”. As a consequence of this experience, Pick began to employ a stronger, richer palette, drawing on the sumptuous colours in the paintings, tapestries and manuscripts she had seen. She also began stacking images, in a coy

allusion to the precarious appearance of much European architecture, and playing around with scale. Many works from this period feature tiny amorous couples who are absurdly dwarfed by immense suitcases and shoeboxes. Pick's time spent travelling, and then the upheaval of shifting from Christchurch to Wellington once she returned home, developed into the use of the suitcase as a symbol of the increasing struggle to contain one's worldly possessions and life experiences within a single item of luggage. She has described her own work as “looking into an imaginary world, the kind that might be contained in such a suitcase”.

The shoebox was an obvious image for Pick to adopt, given her long-held interest in people's attempts to archive their lives in order to remember them, and to make sense of the past. In some paintings, her shoeboxes are inscribed with numbers on their sides, dates which correlate to significant moments in Pick's own life. Increasingly, though, the boxes

became more anonymous, serving to symbolise more generally the accumulation, categorisation and eventual containment of experiences of every life. *Wonderlust* (1996) features a woman with hair of fairytale proportions who sits astride an impossibly tall tower of boxes, apparently unflustered by the teetering stacks and plummeting objects which surround her. One shoebox, with piercing pinpoint eyes, has been halted in its fall by the arms of a ghostly dress-up gown, indicating, perhaps, a memory which the mind is reluctant to release. In places, the luminescent surface is annotated with scratched-in, calligraphic images of phantom lovers twisted into often torturous positions, resulting in a kind of Mannerist uncertainty. Although the flattened composition found in Pick's earlier works has given way to fully modelled forms, her objects continue to flout the laws of gravity, and the fleshy beauty of the seated figure serves to heighten the magical atmosphere rather than bringing us back to cold reality.

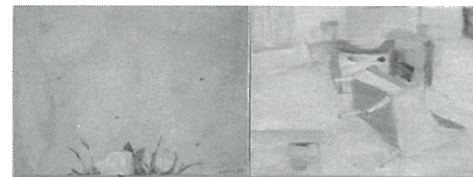
Part of Pick's conscious shift away from making paintings which tell very personal stories involved a series of works which she deliberately termed "portraits". Finding her subjects in magazines, photographs, and even images of herself, she transformed these specific recordings of identity into elusive and evocative representations, playing with the idea that everyone we meet reminds us of somebody else. The faces in these paintings are often shown in the act of turning away, or are partly concealed, either by obscuring, juxtaposed objects or by diaphanous veils of paint. The eyes, in particular, dissolve away. In many, the 'sitter' is accompanied by an attribute - a cigarette, a cup, a cloak - which offers teasing clues as to identity, but reveals little. In several of the works the painting seems to be crumbling or tearing, giving us even less chance of recognition, but is difficult to tell whether the disappearing identity is a result of gradual loss or



Looking Like Someone Else (Portrait) #1 1997
Collection of Helene Quilter and Tony Chamberlain

permanent and instantaneous erasure. Are these the victims of some terrible accident, or have they simply succumbed to years of neglect? The subject's face in *Portrait #1* (1997) is completely covered by a staring boxlike brown paper bag, giving it an empty, melancholic appearance and forming a shielding disguise which cannot be looked into, only out of. Pick's colander reappears in other portraits from this series, acting not only as a concealing mask but as a silencing device, rendering the subject mute and anonymous.

When Pick began to paint her *Body Interiors/ Still Life* paintings, many people saw them as an abrupt shift in style. In reality, she had simply closed in on the figures which peopled her previous work, making details from their naked bodies the subject of her paintings. By removing these features from context, she subjects them to greater scrutiny and allows viewers to create endless random narratives. Elegant close-ups of male and female nudes are paired with panels featuring hovering shells, jugs, flowers or blurry scenes of strangely altered and recently disturbed domestic interiors. In *One Thing Leads to Another* (1997) a female torso (complete with virtue-defending roses) is contrasted with an armchair which



One Thing Leads to Another 1997 Collection of Bell, Gully, Buddle, Weir

has been tossed violently onto its back in an otherwise empty room. The title suggests that some kind of sequence is operating, that one image is the natural consequence of the other, but which, and why? Another work from the series pairs a different view of the same downy skin with a swanlike object and the word "she". Upon looking more closely (and already the distance seems uncomfortably familiar) it is possible to see that Pick has added tiny, almost unreadable letters which alter the statement to read "She's the one". This phrase, coupled with the distinctive moles surrounding the subject's navel invite us to guess at the person behind these images. How much more detail would it take before we could name her without hesitation?

Pick's latest paintings examine the image as a focus point rather than as merely part of the painting's surface; a reaction, she says, against the more painterly, graphic works

painting them out, using the aftersight as the painting focus. In the predominantly blue and black works, Pick uses the darkened background to suggest a screen



Why/Why Not? 1997 Collection of Stephen and Karen Pearson

which preceded them. Intrigued by the possibilities of the negative image, the fleeting trace a moving object leaves behind it, she has tried to capture this sensation in her work by drawing lines and then

or stage set. As part of this process, she began looking at driving images from film stills, using her painting to explore the paranoid, self-conscious scramble we all undergo in an attempt to discover who we

are, and what we should be. *Why/Why Not?* (1997) presents a cluttered and confusing world in which indicators of identity (faces, clothes, accessories, language) are part of a seething crowd scene of shadowy figures. The connections between these people are uncertain and there appear to be many different and conflicting conversations taking place. This gives the painting an overall feeling of uncertainty, an atmosphere emphasised by the enigmatic words "are your eyes open or closed?" which float across the surface.

To make her recent white works Pick has used the sharp end of her brush to scrawl spidery images into the paint's surface and then wiped paint over the etched marks to blur them into an ethereal, misty background. Using figures drawn from magazines, her memory and her

imagination, she cloaks the images in ambiguity through the masking nature of the gauzy paint surface. Initially, these forms are often painted in the round, then made more indistinct, illustrating the erasing effect of time and perception on memory and the sensation imprinting nature of memory itself. In *Burning Question* (1997), many of the forms are half painted out, appearing to shift and disintegrate. The alternately revealing and veiling layers in Pick's work act as a metaphor for the seemingly random process of human recall, which allows some memories to remain clear and prominent while others simply fade away. Relationships between figures and objects are never clearly stated, leaving any final resolution in the hands of the viewer's own imagination. "I try not to pin things down" Pick has said, "so people can make up a narrative out of their own experience".

Felicity Milburn

Pick's latest paintings examine the image as a focus point rather than as merely part of the painting's surface; a reaction, she says, against the more painterly, graphic works

painting them out, using the aftersight as the painting focus. In the predominantly blue and black works, Pick uses the darkened background to suggest a screen



Why/Why Not? 1997 Collection of Stephen and Karen Pearson

which preceded them. Intrigued by the possibilities of the negative image, the fleeting trace a moving object leaves behind it, she has tried to capture this sensation in her work by drawing lines and then

or stage set. As part of this process, she began looking at driving images from film stills, using her painting to explore the paranoid, self-conscious scramble we all undergo in an attempt to discover who we

are, and what we should be. *Why/Why Not?* (1997) presents a cluttered and confusing world in which indicators of identity (faces, clothes, accessories, language) are part of a seething crowd scene of shadowy figures. The connections between these people are uncertain and there appear to be many different and conflicting conversations taking place. This gives the painting an overall feeling of uncertainty, an atmosphere emphasised by the enigmatic words "are your eyes open or closed?" which float across the surface.

To make her recent white works Pick has used the sharp end of her brush to scrawl spidery images into the paint's surface and then wiped paint over the etched marks to blur them into an ethereal, misty background. Using figures drawn from magazines, her memory and her

imagination, she cloaks the images in ambiguity through the masking nature of the gauzy paint surface. Initially, these forms are often painted in the round, then made more indistinct, illustrating the erasing effect of time and perception on memory and the sensation imprinting nature of memory itself. In *Burning Question* (1997), many of the forms are half painted out, appearing to shift and disintegrate. The alternately revealing and veiling layers in Pick's work act as a metaphor for the seemingly random process of human recall, which allows some memories to remain clear and prominent while others simply fade away. Relationships between figures and objects are never clearly stated, leaving any final resolution in the hands of the viewer's own imagination. "I try not to pin things down" Pick has said, "so people can make up a narrative out of their own experience".

Felicity Milburn



S raphine Pick

S raphine Pick was born in Kawakawa, Bay of Islands in 1964. She graduated from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 1988 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. The following year she studied Drama and in 1991 she gained a Diploma of Teaching from the Christchurch College of Education. In 1994 Pick was the recipient of the Olivia Spencer Bower Award and was awarded a Merit prize in the Visa Gold Art Award. In the following year, she was named as the Rita Angus Artist in Residence. She has exhibited regularly throughout New Zealand since 1987, and her work is held in public, corporate and private collections. Pick is currently teaching at the Elam School of Fine Arts at Auckland University.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

Recent Paintings, Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, 1998

Possibly, Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, 1997

Looking Like Someone Else, Manawatu Art Gallery, 1997

Unveiled, City Gallery, Wellington, 1995

Shadowplay, Claybrook Gallery, Auckland, 1994

Headspace, Brooke Gifford Gallery, 1994

Selected Group Exhibitions

A Very Peculiar Practice, City Gallery, Wellington, 1995

Visa Gold Art Award, City Gallery, 1994

Opening up the Book, Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1993

From Liquid Darkness, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1993

Recognitions, McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch, 1991

Acknowledgements:

The McDougall Contemporary Art Annex would like to thank the following for their assistance with *Scratching Skin*:

- Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland
- Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch
- Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington
- All of the private collectors who have generously made works available for this exhibition

Design: Simon Mulligan

Front cover image: *Burning Question* 1997 (detail)

Back cover image: *Lady Luck* 1997 Collection of Wayne and Helen Anderson

Copyright   Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Annex, 1998

No reproduction of any part of this catalogue is permitted without the prior written permission of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Annex.

ISBN: 0-908874-47-2



Seraphine Pick

Seraphine Pick was born in Kawakawa, Bay of Islands in 1964. She graduated from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 1988 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. The following year she studied Drama and in 1991 she gained a Diploma of Teaching from the Christchurch College of Education. In 1994 Pick was the recipient of the Olivia Spencer Bower Award and was awarded a Merit prize in the Visa Gallery Award. In the following year, she was named as the Rita Angus Artist in Residence. She has exhibited regularly throughout New Zealand since 1987, and her work is held in public, corporate and private collections. Pick is currently teaching at the Elam School of Fine Arts at Auckland University.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

Recent Paintings, Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, 1998

Possibility, Victoria Gallery, Auckland, 1997

Manawatu, Manawatu Art Gallery, Manawatu, 1997

Unsettled, City Gallery, Wellington, 1995

Shadows, Claybrook Gallery, Auckland, 1993

Medicine, Brooke Gifford Gallery, 1993

Selected Group Exhibitions

Visual Language, City Gallery, Wellington, 1995

Visual Language, City Gallery, 1994

Opening up the Book, Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1993

From Equin, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1993

Recognition, McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch, 1991

