*In English they be called Belfloures, and of some*

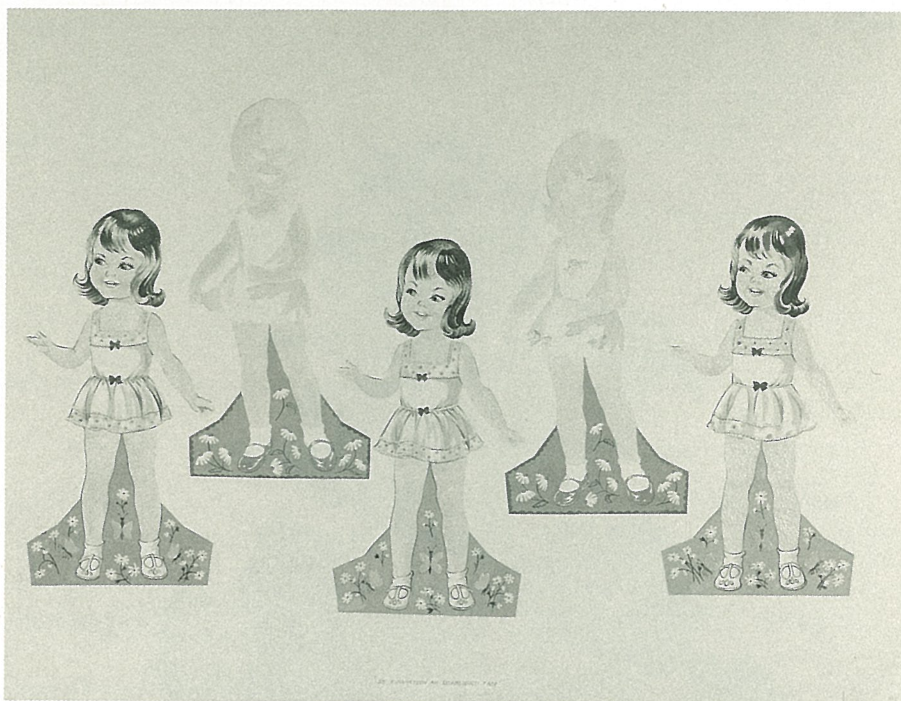
# *Canterbury Belles*

## *Margaret Dawson, Mary Kay & Julia Morison*

The Annex
Robert McDougall Art Gallery

Toured by the New Zealand Art Gallery Director's Council with the assistance of the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council.

*In English they be called Belfloures, and of some Canterbury Belles.*
*Lyte, 1578.*



*Mary Kay. "Is Evolution an Established Fact?"*

There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations, and so all criticism is prose poetry.
*Harold Bloom*

*This is the age of postmodernism, dominated by new technologies endlessly reproducing copies of copies. Media society constructs a consumer society in which aesthetic production is integrated into commodity production generally. Art work that "turns centrally around commodification . . . ought to be powerful and critical political statements" (Jameson,* Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, *1984).*

*But even when art works that centre on commodification function as "critical political statements" commentators write about structure and/or source studies. While classifying and differentiating elements in a work sometimes provides a plausible account of composition, it is limited when it becomes an end in itself. Why a particular interpretation is produced and who is to make use of it are not part of the enquiry. Concentration on source study can mean at artist's work is read as a collection of the influences claimed by a particular critic: it can be disjunctive, working against cohesion: it is retrogressive, looking back in time, often elsewhere in place, at work made in a different context (William Hodges', "A View in Dusky Bay" (1773) etc, etc.). A reviewer, accessing a specialist body of knowledge, can give crummy work stature by tracing it back through a long and revered tradition of great names. Specialist jargon ensures restricted membership of an exclusive club, and so we have something called 'fine art' distinctive from what is 'popular'. And we have an image of the artist as some rather mystical, eccentric being who rarely knows what day of the week it is. Art should be treated as a dialectical process of production and reception and its analysis should make connections between the work and social reality.*

*Source studies have a place in this process as reminders of the impossibility of originality: we are all contained by the images we know (though we 'know' things in different ways). As viewers, we are often most comfortable with artists who strive to eliminate evidence of artifice from work that gives us images of a known world. We go along with such work, suspending for various durations our realisation that we are dealing with an artificial construct. The work in* Canterbury Belles *does not allow that suspension of disbelief.*

The first duty of life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered.
*Oscar Wilde.*

*A sense of theatricality pervades the show. It is evident in the staginess of Margaret Dawson's performance photography. A photograph, we know, transmits "the scene itself, the literal reality. From the object to its*

*Margaret Dawson. "Sword Lily."*

*image there is of course a reduction — in proportion, perspective, colour — . . . . the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect* analogon . . . *Thus can be seen the special status of the photographic image:* it is a message without a code . . . . *Duality of message is evident in all reproductions other than photographic ones: there is no drawing, no matter how exact, whose very exactitude is not turned into a style" (Barthes,* The Photographic Message, *1961). Because it gives us reality, we accord the photograph particular credibility. Margaret Dawson's special effects negate the myth of the photograph's 'naturalness'. Manipulation of a mechanical process is exposed as integral to a medium used as much to construct cultural codes as to reflect them. With sleight of hand Margaret Dawson shows personal style as a means of establishing identity: she does this literally in the lily works ("Sword Lily", "Torch Lily") and by appropriation in "Death Cap".*

*Kitsch glitz is also integral to Julia Morison's works. The photographic medium is used to make spectacular images of mixed media constructions, themselves already a simulacra. Postmodernist multiplicity over lays the multiplicity of the teachings of the Egyptian god, Hermes Trismegistus. Disciplines we treat as discrete — religion/philosophy/medicine/magic/ alchemy — are integrated in a model signing dynamic relations among humanity, world and universe. Although there is a will to order in the hierarchical construction of "Quiddities: I-X", which reads from lead square to transparent circle, there is also an undermining of the concept of 'truth' ("part of the metaphysical baggage which poststructuralism seeks to abandon", Jameson, op.cit.). Whereas in other work Morison applies real gold, in "Quiddities: I-X", she uses imitation gold stickers, gloves, coins, artificial light, photographed. Practising a form of alchemy, she mocks her own model: "gold is unalterable" (Morison,* Vademecum & Golem, *1986) and (like Margaret Dawson) foregrounds the process of production.*

*Mary Kay's works are similarly dramatic performance pieces. Incredibly refined rendering makes images of crude consumption almost paradoxical but in these works too, surfaces are paramount. Reworked appropriations, like the Edmond's banner, combine with photo xerox to foreground 'the pose' and stereotyped attitudes which form ready made signification. These elements combine in "XX" with glitteringly perfect ('real' gold) butterflies, symbolic cultural codes, undermined in context by the white hole at the work's centre. The reclining nude's background is made to convey an astonishing depth and texture, drawing focus to a form that is both present and absent (this play with an invisible subject is paralleled in Margaret Dawson's "Pin Cushion Flower (Scabiosa)".*

'Everything is subjective', you say; but even this is interpretation. The 'subject' is not something given,

*Julia Morison. "Quiddities: VI."*

it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.

*Friedrich Nietzsche.*

*Concern with constructing a subject is integral to the work of all three artists whose images undermine the notion of a stable self. Stereotyping assumes static objects. By giving us a faceless female, Mary Kay refuses to represent, and yet paradoxically manages to depict, a 'type'. Baby barbie dolls show these to be socially gendered rather than born ("Is Evolution an Established Fact?"). Margaret Dawson's work pulls in a similar direction by insisting on consideration of the props. Julia Morison locates an image of self at the centre of each of her works simultaneously asserting the subject as creator and as created by surrounding codes. A spiral motif ("Quiddities: I") imposed on the cerebrum images the constant recreation of self as described by Barthes, for those who mistakenly assume 'subjectivity' and 'narcissim' to be the same thing:*

. . . today the subject apprehends himself elsewhere, and subjectivity can return at another place on the spiral: deconstructed, taken apart, shifted, without anchorage: why should I not speak of 'myself' since this 'my' is no longer 'the self?'

*Roland Barthes.*

*In the postmodern world, fragmentation of the subject (conflagration in "Burning Bush") displaces concepts such as anomie, alienation, and the Van Gogh-type madness of high modernism. Fascination with the "whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Readers' Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film" is now part of the substance of aesthetic production (Jameson, op.cit.). All three* Canterbury Belle *artists use 'high tech' devices to evidence a consumer society in slick images that undermine the barriers between 'culture' and commerce. Human subjects are depicted as commodities among commodities. In "Quiddities: VI", Julia Morison reconstructs her self, minus breasts, as St. Agatha. St. Agatha, who sacrificed her breasts to save her virginity, is often represented in art (as she is reproduced here) bearing her breasts on a plate. Breasts were seen as bread which led to the practice of blessing bread on St. Agatha's day.*

Every Eye sees differently. As the Eye, Such the Object.

*William Blake.*

*To a significant extent it is the viewer who determines a work. A work can be, and often is, read by one person as prosaic and by another as profound. Generally it is an image that somehow differs from the ordinary, that makes us see in a way that interferes with habit, that we describe as 'artistic'. "After we see an object several times, we begin to recognise it. The object is in front of us and we know about*

*it, but we do not see it" (Victor Shklovsky,* The Resurrection of the Word, *1914). ". . . . art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exits to make one feel things, to make the stone* stony" *(Shlovsky,* Art as Technique, *1917). The artist chooses a particular device — in* Canterbury Belles *it is often context — to jolt the viewer. In "Quiddities: I-X", for instance, the viewer is led by serial arrangement to engage with the work's system. Mary Kay uses repetition and association to depict social dominants: she does this within works ("Is Evolution an Established Fact?", "XX", "XY") and among works ("Making It", "A Hand in Things to Come"). In Margaret Dawson's photgraphs the device is oppositional: the (mer)maid "lies bleeding" outside a weatherboard bungalow. The various signs in a work illuminate artistic and social conventions in a way that provokes response. At the same time, however, the strategy draws attention to form itself so that the viewer is directed to the device of defamiliarisation as an element of art. Technique is itself made visible. By depicting her self as 'hands on' creator, for example, Julia Morison makes the work function in a multiplicity of ways, not the least of which is to make the viewer aware of the images as 'art'. According to Brecht, the whole pretence that what was going on in a stage play was 'real' interfered with communication between dramatist and audience. The foregrounding of artifice in* Canterbury Belles *allows the viewer to engage with provocative elements within the works: while we keep stumbling over the artist's devices we must attend to them.*

*But, as viewers, we are limited by our own prejudices and preconceptions. Each of us has a "horizon" that describes our situatedness in the world: this is not fixed but is "something into which we move and which moves with us" (Gadamer,* Truth & Method, *1960). It may be defined with reference to the prejudices we bring with us at any given time, since these represent a horizon beyond which we cannot see. The more committed a viewer is to an ideological position the less inclined s/he is to participate in the events of the work, especially if s/he feels asked to adopt negative attitudes to values s/he does not wish to question. The result is often rejection of the work and the artist. Political concerns evident in* Canterbury Belles *will place the work out of range for some: others will consider the view well within their prospect, seeing what they want to see — failing, for example, to witness the complexity depicted in the politics of constructing a subject.*

Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life . . . . A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in a popular form.

*Oscar Wilde.*

*If we believe Oscar Wilde, the artist carries an immense responsibility. Yet images are distinctive forms of communication: they are abstract partners in a broken interaction between artist and viewer, each of whom read the work in isolation, dependent on a series of comprehensible signs to be deciphered by both. Even if the artist's intention is to achieve randomness, she always has a conscious intention (plus a host of intentions not consciously articulated). If the viewer has access to the artist's stated aim, reconstruction of the work also assumes a shared set of signs and a similar horizon of expectations. And if relationships seem complex at the level of the individual, consider the myriad of political forces governing the way art interfaces with society. Why does a given work or artist become (in)famous? Studying the artist as a social construct may be a useful substitute for the more usual 'objective' depiction of events. Fashion could be a key to understanding: this changes over time and among cultures and is related to the spirit of the age. 'Success' for the artists in* Canterbury Belles *depends on propagators of taste, and the ability of such groups to assert themselves is dependent on the degree of power they can assert in the social structure. What is canonised is selected by individuals in positions of power. It is not necessarily that good wins through but that what wins through will thereafter be regarded as good (Schucking,* The Sociology of Literary Taste, *trans. 1966).*

*The works in* Canterbury Belles *incorporate many features identified as postmodernist yet there is also a tension between flagrant play with surfaces and a drive to meaning. Paul de Man's ideas represent a brake on the energies of deconstruction: he insists there is a point at which we must acknowledge the 'performative' element or will to meaning (*Allegories of Reading, *1979). This is particularly evident in Julia Morison's work which evokes nostalgia for an era when signs had meaning. "Quiddities: I-X" lightboxes are, and are more than, "a world of brilliant surfaces" disguising "the dissolution of essences. Fabricated signs, flaunting their* artificiality as cultural rather than natural, *are encased in closed models, systematized and ritualized in the ephemeral" (Morison, op cit. (my emphasis)). Reworked, the model encompasses the concerns of Margaret Dawson and Mary Kay: the flaunting of* artificiality as natural rather than cultural . . . *Perhaps after all the work in* Canterbury Belles *is merely? part of the humanist tradition that places wo/man at the centre of experience as the organising energy, the point of privilege from which to view the world. Then again the work is radical in its focus on the act of production. Despite/because of indeterminacies, we have ". . . powerful and critical political statements" (Jameson, op.cit.).*

*If the self, society and one's personal horizons are in a constant state of flux it seems safer to resist a notion of interpretation that is concerned with the meaning of art, as though the work is an object with a truth tucked away somewhere waiting to be discovered. It is more useful to look at the artist, viewer, society dialectic. For even if a critic attempts 'objectivity' by concentrating on the elements of a work and their interaction, she exposes herself (as I have done) by selecting certain features for analysis. Interpretive strategies compete with others in the field. Seemingly objective knowledge can effectively mask a drive for power. At its best, writing about art adds another layer to the work: it is an addition rather than a penetration.*

Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them: the finding is called science, the importing — art, religion, love, pride. Even if this should be a piece of childishness, one should carry on with both and be well disposed toward both — some should find; others — we others! — sould import!

*Friedrich Nietzsche.*

*Shona Smith.*

## *Margaret Dawson*

1. "Common White Clematis: *Clematis pubescens*"
   1989
   Colour photograph
   1300 x 1016mm

2. "Torch Lily: *Kniphofia*"
   1989
   Colour photograph
   1016 x 1016mm

3. "Burning Bush: *Dictamnus*"
   1989
   Colour photograph
   1300 x 1016mm

4. "Sword Lily: *Gladiolus*"
   1989
   Colour photograph
   1300 x 1016mm

5. "Pin Cushion Flower: *Scabiosa*"
   1989
   Colour photograph
   1300 x 1016mm

6. "Love Lies Bleeding: *Amaranthus*"
   1989
   Colour photograph
   1016 x 2001mm and 1016 x 85mm

7. "Death Cap: *Amanita Phalloides*"
   1989
   Colour photograph
   1300 x 1016mm

## *Julia Morison*

"Quiddities I-X"
1989
A work in ten parts
Cibatrans in light-boxes
Each light-box 920 x 660 x 175mm

## *Mary Kay*

1. "Is Evolution an Established Fact?"
   1989
   Frottage and watercolour
   Image size 575 x 750mm

2. "Making It: I"
   1989
   Frottage
   Image size 200 x 130mm

3. "Making It: II"
   1989
   Frottage
   Image size 200 x 130mm

4. "Making It: III"
   1989
   Frottage
   Image size 200 x 130mm

5. "A Hand in Things to Come"
   1989
   Frottage
   Image size 148 x 172mm

6. "A Hand in Things to Come"
   1989
   Frottage
   Image size 148 x 172mm

7. "$$"
   1989
   Frottage and watercolour
   Image size 460 x 570mm

8. "XX"
   1989
   Frottage and watercolour
   Image size 770 x 1020mm

9. "XY"
   1989
   Frottage and watercolour
   Image size 560 x 780mm

All dimensions in mm, height before width before depth.

*Margaret Dawson wishes to thank Cultured Cow, Hungry Jacks and DEKA.*

*Julia Morison wishes to thank the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council for financial assistance, and Alan Cowan and the Robert McDougall Gallery for technical assistance.*