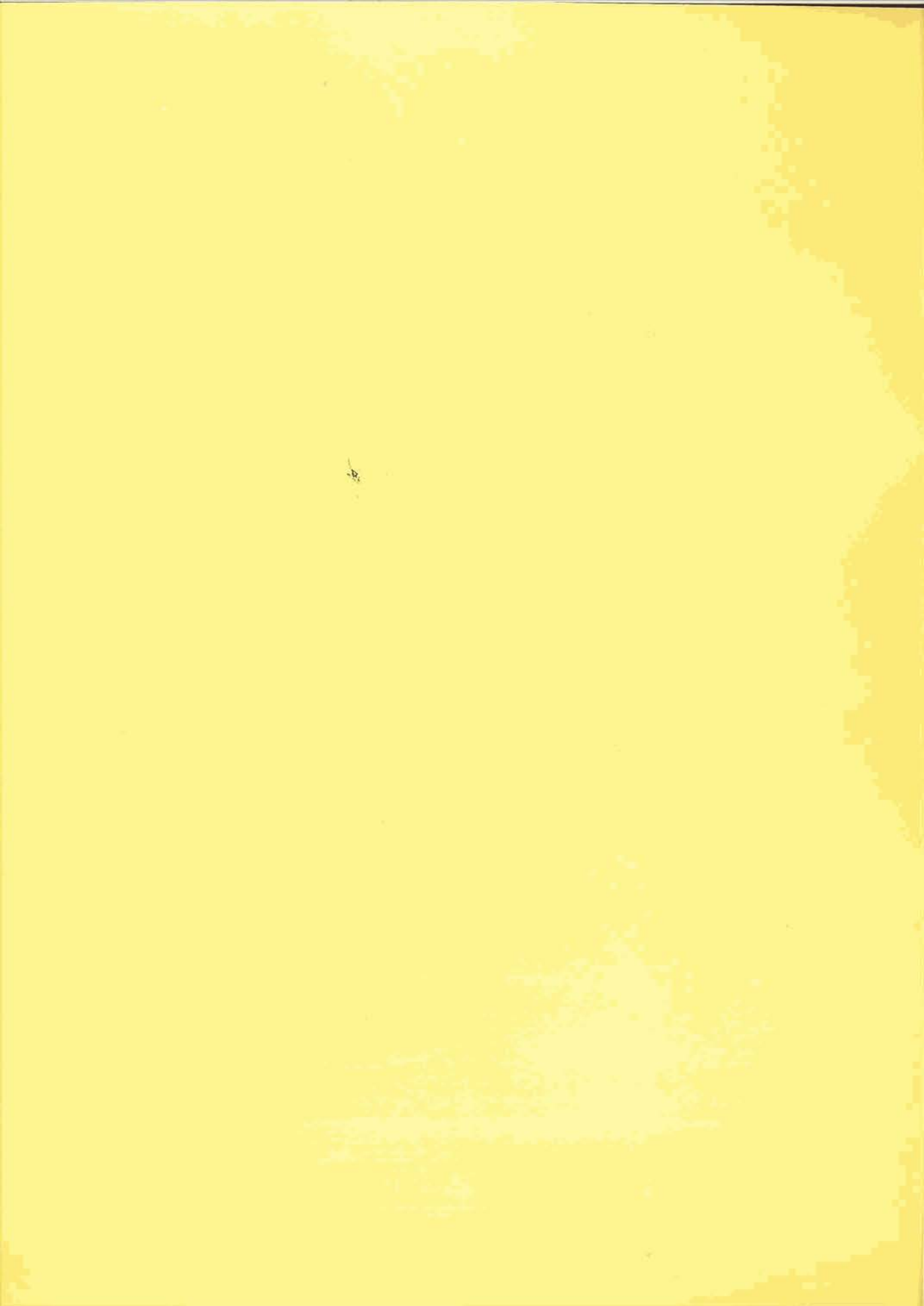
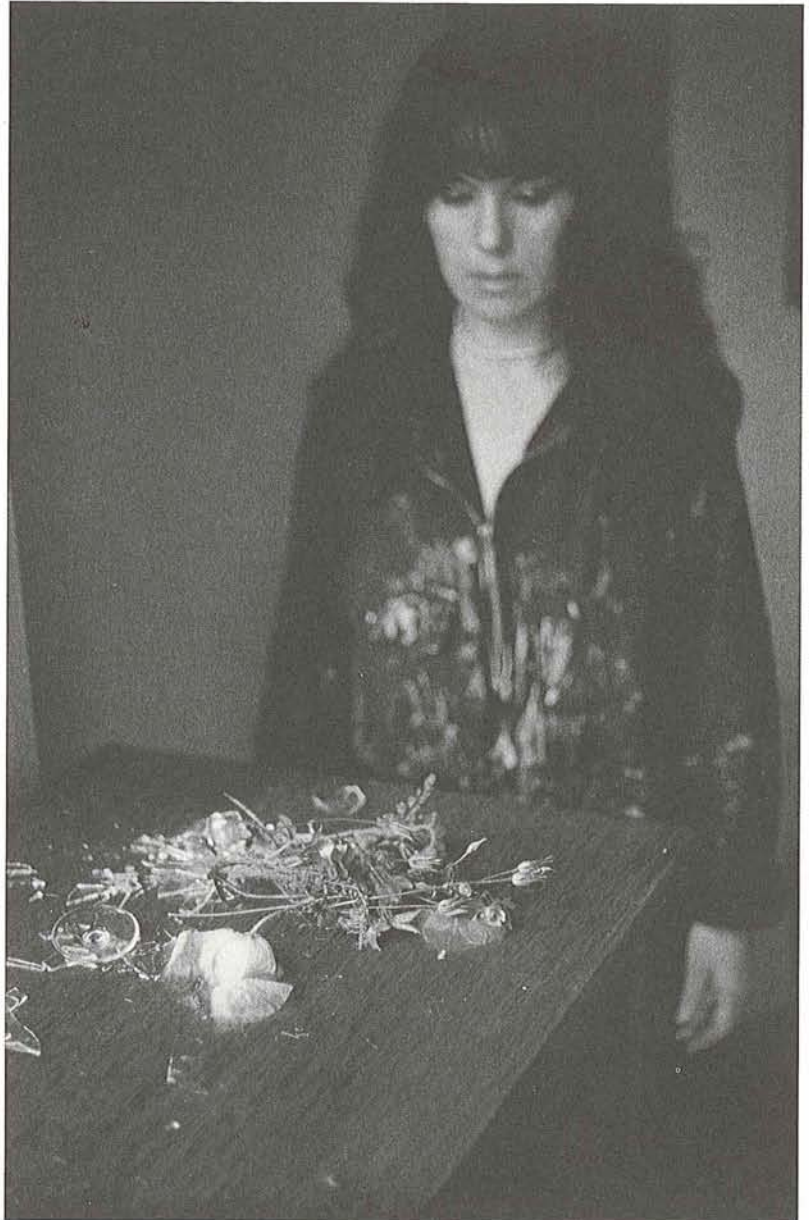


Di ffrench Light and Illusion



Light and Illusion



Still image from Fractures performance, 1981
Di ffrench
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate



Robert McDougall Art Gallery & Annex
December 14 – January 14, 2001

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Robert McDougall Art Gallery & Annex



University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts



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Ti Whare Wānanga o Ōtago

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It is a special privilege for the Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Annex to present this retrospective exhibition celebrating Di ffrench's unique and innovative contribution to New Zealand art as a sculptor, photographer, filmmaker, performance artist and arts educator.

The exhibition and accompanying catalogue are intended to bear testimony to the diversity of ffrench's oeuvre, which ranged from powerful, ritualistic performances to the "visual poetry"¹ of her photographic critiques of the male body. Born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1946, ffrench came to New Zealand in 1963, training at the Auckland Technical Institute. She began exhibiting her work in the mid-1970s and by the 1980s had become a regular participant in national, individual and group exhibitions. In addition to her artistic practice, ffrench also deserves recognition for her contribution as an arts educator. She was employed by the Otago Polytechnic for over three years, during which time she lectured at both the Polytechnic's Oamaru and Dunedin campuses, and also contributed to numerous conferences and workshops throughout New Zealand. Named as the Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence for 1990, ffrench also received several Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Grants, including an award to travel to the 1983 ANZART event in Tasmania and a major Individual Grant in 1985/6.

A defining characteristic of ffrench's practice, despite her experimentation within a range of themes, media and material, was the underlying desire to navigate and complete a creative process of investigation: "All I can do is question. I cannot see any simple answers".² In addition to blurring the lines between sculpture and performance, ffrench also pushed the boundaries of photography, making the deliberate artifice present within photography the subject of her work, rather than merely the medium. Finding beauty within simple and often prosaic materials – newspapers, cheesecloth, branches, ash – she developed processes which broke new ground within New Zealand art practice.

It is particularly appropriate that this retrospective exhibition takes place within the McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, the same Gallery that hosted **Black and White Photographs and Cibachromes**, the exhibition marking ffrench's residency in the Arts Centre almost exactly ten years ago. The studio in which ffrench worked was once the life drawing class for the Canterbury College. During ffrench's residence in what is now the Francis Shurrock Room, she became interested in the history of the site. Built in 1893, the Life Room was part of an addition to the original buildings by Thomas Cane. In keeping with attitudes inherited from Europe, nude models were not available to male students until 1887, but by 1892 (a year ahead of the Royal Academy in London) nude models were made available to female students, albeit on the proviso that they were segregated from their male colleagues. These circumstances in particular, and the history of the female nude/male gaze in general, informed ffrench's powerful 'Hunter Warrior' series, which incorporated slide transparencies that had been projected from above onto coke, or coal dust, and then re-photographed into a large format image. *The Life Drawing Class* (1990), now held within the Gallery's Permanent Collections, confronts the convention of female passivity

inherent within classical artistic training with its depiction of an athletic, powerful and self-possessed female body.

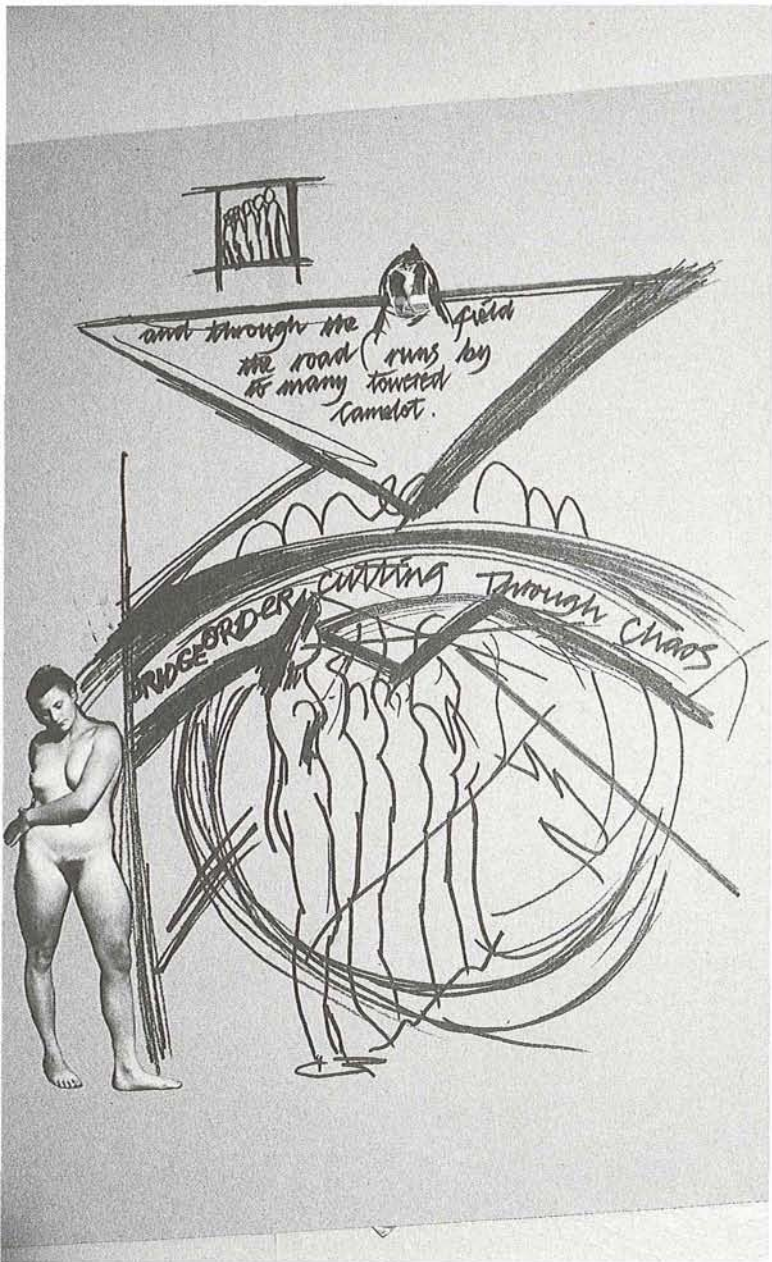
Ffrench's 1991 exhibition at the Contemporary Art Annex was by no means her only artistic connection with Christchurch. In 1981, she presented the installation and slide presentation *Gut Reaction* at the University of Canterbury and participated in the ANZART exhibition at the Christchurch Arts Centre with the performance *Fontanel*. Macabre yet disturbingly sensual, this powerful work questioned the legacy of black civilisation and ideas of personal, racial and cultural survival. In 1984, Ffrench presented *The Opinion*, a work originally devised as an artist's project for the Auckland City Art Gallery incorporating objects, film and sound, at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery. She returned to the Gallery in the following year, participating in the successful **Spare Parts** exhibition with an installation/performance. Ffrench participated in both solo and group exhibitions at the Jonathan Jensen Gallery (now the Jonathan Smart Gallery), with her coolly erotic photographs of male torsos in *The Thousand Rocks* (1988) garnering particular attention.

In 1993, to commemorate the centenary of Women's Suffrage in New Zealand, Ffrench was commissioned by the Christchurch City Council to design a wall hanging depicting aspects of women's lives over the years between 1893 and 1993. Embroidered by 100 members of the Canterbury Embroiderer's Guild, the hanging took eight months to complete and was exhibited at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery between 25 September and 7 November 1993, before being installed permanently in the Christchurch Town Hall. Ffrench's work is represented in many major public collections, including the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Auckland Art Gallery, Te Papa Tongarewa/ Museum of New Zealand, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Forrester Gallery, Oamaru, and Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Her films have been shown at festivals in Wellington and Dunedin and videos of her work have screened in Berlin.

On behalf of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, I would like to acknowledge the extremely generous assistance of Ffrench's husband, sculptor Peter Nicholls, who has provided invaluable access to information, images and artworks for the exhibition curators and the authors of this catalogue. Several of the cibachromes represented within this retrospective are part of the large number Nicholls placed on permanent loan at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery after Ffrench's death. I would also like to express the Gallery's gratitude towards the Otago Polytechnic, for providing generous financial assistance towards the publication of this catalogue.

Given Di Ffrench's acute consciousness of artistic and social history and her exploration of the concepts of construction and representation within her own practice, I am sure that she would be intrigued to learn how her own history is being assembled. It is my hope that this exhibition will suggest something of the vital and innovative contribution made by this too often undervalued artist, thus encouraging a wider audience to appreciate, enjoy and be challenged by her remarkable oeuvre.

Felicity Milburn
Curator of Contemporary Art



Bridge Order Cutting Through Chaos, 1993

Shalott Series, wall mural

Di ffrench

Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

- 1 This phrase is borrowed from Trinh T. Minh-ha: "Every reaching out that remains non-totalisable is a "horizontal vertigo" in which the exploring explored subject can only advance through moments of blindness." See Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Cotton and Iron," in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West, (eds.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, and The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1990, p. 329.
- 2 Di ffrench, notes accompanying *The Same Leaves*, Women's Gallery, Wellington, October 1981.
- 3 Early signs of this and of the strength of her feelings can be seen in the following: "I felt during the Hobart Anzart [May 1983] there were female performers presenting themselves very strongly as objects on display without enough intellectual or fully resolved conceptual content. One questions their motives." In the following paragraph ffrench claimed that conversely, "*Gut reaction* [1981] used the abdomen as material not for 'desire' but rather as a power source (not sexual) [...] Because (or if) people view the female form as a sexual object – even isolated parts of the body, they are prevented from seeing what the work is really exploring, and prevented also from thinking, from becoming receptive to what the work represents." Di ffrench, "Q (How do you define the erotic)," unpublished notes in the Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection, undated.

by Rob Garrett

"I feel some performance works can be extended into photographic areas. But not all performances, only those which suggest the possibility of extension into new work."²

In 1985 Di ffrench made a deliberate decision to transfer her energies from performance to photography. During the early 1980s, when ffrench made the statement above, she thought her performances enabled her to activate connections between various sculptural elements. These connections presented her reactions to current affairs and she believed they served as a provocation to her audiences to consider various weighty moral issues. For instance, *Gut Reaction* (1981) addressed connections between violence and popular protest; and *Fontanel* (1981) responded in part to questions raised by the Springbok rugby tour of the same year.

By 1985 a shift had taken place in her thinking and she became wary of performance itself as a kind of spectacle that thrust her own body rather than the issues to the fore.³ Her unease about the spectacular body contributed to her decision to make installations specifically for the camera.⁴ Acting and constructing installations for the camera enabled a more deliberative approach and shifted the viewer's attention from the artist's body to the bodies of others of the artist's choice. The exhibition that occasions this writing and the catalogue in which this essay appears have afforded us a first opportunity to look back on Di ffrench's oeuvre. The perspective of the retrospective is a deceptive one, and like any mapping exercise, is less precise and complete than it appears to be. Together, the curators and writers for this exhibition have agreed that all we can contribute to a survey and evaluation of ffrench's work and significance are some preliminary remarks containing, at best, a fresh perspective and, at least, an invitation to others to continue the work begun here.

In the main, this essay maps the artist's search for identity across the terrain outlined by her photographic works from 1984 to the last year or two before her death in May 1999. The analogy of the map is introduced from the start to indicate the unavoidable imprecision of any attempt to match the works and the life, or selves, of the artist. A map can only ever represent partially. All maps are just as much about what they leave out, cannot show and abbreviate as they are about what they delineate and reveal.

The map is a useful analogy too for it is a device that must be used by someone who find their *own* way – the map is neither the original terrain of the surveyor, nor is it the journey or destination of subsequent travellers. As such, the map as analogy is intended here to signal that I am highly sceptical that there can ever be a literal match between the life of the artist and the art works themselves. The two are related but incommensurate.

In the following pages I will mainly focus on the ways the photographic works point to the artist's own processes of identification through the last fifteen years of her life. I will also discuss the photographic processes she used as an analogy for contemporary ideas about the decentred subject that the artist was well aware of through her own reading and discussions with fellow artists and others. Finally, I will revisit previous assessments of her communicative intentions and suggest that, in hindsight, ffrench was equally, if not more, interested in mystification, enchantment and the atmospheric. Along the way the essay will explain how ffrench constructed her photographic works, discuss some of the themes her various series present to viewers and trace her use and re-use of various motifs.

4 In 1988 ffrench stated that she was "not involved solely in the formal investigation of materials although materials are necessary." She went on to explain that her "interest first of all is in researching the idea. And the way the idea and the materials come together decides whether the outcome appears beautiful to some people. *Appears* because sometimes objects, like people, are not what they seem to be." [Di ffrench, several copies of this unpublished statement by the artist exist in the Robert McDougall loan collection, including one signed and dated 1988 within a collection of documentation notes and interview material on *Gut Reaction* (1981).] Despite this assertion that she was not solely involved in the formal investigation of materials, ffrench's technical processes and innovations are of equal importance to any other consideration in a retrospective view of her oeuvre. Her material investigations were distinct enough to produce a recognisable signature style for her last ten year's work. They also comprised a set of stylistic innovations that had their parallel in other local and international art practices during the 1980s and 90s that deployed filmic narrative and montage techniques to explore questions of identity and subject ambiguity. The cibachrome works were constructed using a complex but methodical approach. Ffrench claimed the cibachrome "process" was "first performed in the [Christchurch] Arts Centre (where the *Le Café* is) in 1981 [in] *Fontanel* for the ANZART Festival." [Di ffrench, "Taking Possession," 1990; unpublished hand-written artist's statement in the Robert McDougall loan collection.] Often the process would begin with the artist photographing an "original" element or set of elements on colour transparency film. For instance she might start with photographing her own body or a model's body in black and white and then add a drawn or painted architectural detail, or a found image and combine all these elements together to form a small wall mural. After this wall mural was re-photographed using slide film the resulting colour slide was projected onto a sculptural environment laid out in the dark in her tiny studio. For many years this studio was one of the small rooms still favoured by local artists high in Dunedin's Regent Theatre overlooking The Octagon. Ffrench's sculptural installation would include rocks, coal and coke breeze, occasionally water or ash and sometimes with the addition of strategically placed patches of raw colour pigment. These "sculptural techniques," as she called them [see Di ffrench, "Workplan – August 1988/1989; Sculpture – Photography (Cibachrome)," unpublished notes in the Robert McDougall loan collection], provided a dark, textured surface onto which the artist's first slide image was projected from a projector high up on a spindly stand. Then the whole combination was re-photographed onto slide film for printing as a cibachrome image.

As an observer of the artist, viewer of the work and writer, I have been interested in the way Di ffrench chose to work primarily with human subjects for her photographic works. This was not an accidental choice. Even during a brief period when the primary motif of a series of images was the leaves of the ginko tree, ffrench made reference to her wider interest in subjectivity by calling the series *Theatre of the Non Body* (1992)⁵. I want to suggest the artist's processes of selecting, framing and photographing the human subjects she was drawn to involved a more profound desire, or quest, than that of simply making a fine looking image with a convincing conceptual basis.

I argue that ffrench was after something more, something more personal. She was looking for subjects with whom she could identify in ways that would help her answer some fundamental questions. Who am I? Who, or what, do I want to become? How can I be different from who I am? All of us use images of other people – through observing others in the flesh or in various representations – to find out how to be like others and different from others. We rely on such images of others and ourselves to gain a sense of what it is to be boy, girl, feminine, masculine, white, black, gay, hetero, young, middle aged, and so on. This perpetual quest for identity that we all participate in, almost from birth, is partly conscious and partly unconscious. It is a process of identification that also involves an ambivalent oscillation between seeking and recognising normative prototypes and looking for extremities, that is, looking for things at the margins of the normative that point to possibilities for escape from the constraints of the normative.

In the application of these ideas to the works of Di ffrench I am distrustful of the works themselves and of any viewer's ability to recognise what ffrench was after. The images cannot be trusted to directly reveal the prototypes and extremities that ffrench was drawn to. Firstly because representations of what someone looks like are never complete, pure and transparent presentations of what it is to *be* that person. Secondly, we can never assume viewers will agree on what they "see" in an image because all seeing involves projecting onto the image something of the viewer's own conscious and unconscious selves. Thirdly because the identification process is never entirely conscious we cannot expect that ffrench ever completely recognised and understood what she found as she made the images we are left with.

Lastly, I would insist we regard the images as left overs of the process of locating and interviewing the models, researching the idea and making the images and that it is this *process*, not the images themselves that provided the material with which the artist identified. I am aware that this view seems at odds with the artist's own. For instance, in 1991 ffrench stated that "the photograph is the prime repository of meaning rather than a subsidiary of the main event."⁶ However, it could be argued that when she made this claim she was asserting the relative importance of the cibachromes as works in their own right compared with earlier photographs that had been documents of a prior performance and therefore secondary material.

It is a question that is worth asking on the assumption that part of the answer must be that by making art ffrench believed she could become someone who was somehow

The title was borrowed from Somer Brodribb's *Nothing Mat[te]rs: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, 1992. On the same page that ffrench makes this assertion she further emphasises her interest in psychic identities by quoting the title of a drawing by Eng Teong Low who was a student at Otago Polytechnic School of Art at the time: *Cloud without rain*, a Chinese allusion to a non-physical sexual act. See Di ffrench, "Statement (*Theatre of the Non Body*, 1992)," unpublished artist statement and hand-written note to Jonathan [Smart] and Andrew [Jensen], in the Robert McDougall loan collection, dated 2 November 1992. Di ffrench cited in *Di ffrench, Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence 1990, Black and White Photographs and Cibachromes*, McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch, 1991; unpaginated catalogue.

changed by the process. In theoretical terms, the scepticism I advise about the reliability of the images means they should be read or interpreted *sous rature*, or under erasure, as Derrida would say.

To say the images must be read under erasure is to suggest we look at them as if someone has drawn a bold line across their surface, as if to cancel them out while still leaving them visible. We would do this so as to remind ourselves that the images will never give us the clarity and directness we might expect from them. It is to say that the images should be regarded as traces of a process that was never complete at the time and that can never therefore be captured or condensed into a single form. This claim borrows from Jacques Derrida's notion of the trace-structure of language where he asserts that, at the very time legibility is presented it is also effaced. Without going into too much detail about Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence, it can be said that when he writes of language, he makes a strategic insistence that legibility is always, necessarily accompanied by erasure.⁷ By juxtaposing ffrench's figurative subjects with questions about what prototypes and extremities she was pursuing with compelling fascination, two ideas are deployed under erasure here. On the one hand the idea that any picture can represent a subject in its psychic completeness and, on the other, the idea that ffrench was entirely conscious of the identifications she was making.

Ffrench's development of her distinct cibachrome techniques enabled her to create compositions of subtle complexity and ambiguity. "Currently I am interested in the photographic image being, as an imprinted memory – a slightly indistinct image where the sequence moves in and out of focus/time."⁸ This aesthetic sensibility was linked in ffrench's mind to a fundamental connection between life and art. "To turn life into art is to take life apart and select only the fragments that are sublime."⁹ Her works are not truly sublime, but they tend towards it. That is, they tend towards a presentation of the unrepresentable, where "the sublime is the failure of the imagination to present any object which could accord with a concept, even if only in principle."¹⁰ The unrepresentable in ffrench's work are the various identifications she was trying to encounter, understand and perhaps become, through the very process of making the works. Her repeated use of atmospheric techniques – the shadows, silhouettes, parts of bodies disappearing into a darkness, layering – suggest or allude to ideas that she was trying to give concrete form to by an accumulation of overlapping and half-perceived figurations. The images are meticulously crafted and yet they remain suggestive rather than explicit. Or, as she said admiringly of Peter Greenaway's films when Wallis Barnicoat suggested her own film *Shelters* was quite abstract: "Who understands those films? [...] Who the hell knows what Greenaway is doing? Yet people go along and watch his films."¹¹

These things said, what fascinated the artist? What was she pursuing as she set about looking for herself through her working process? Her photographic works are populated from the start by a variety of subjects, from young Maori men and women and body-builders and martial arts experts in the early years to a tattooed woman and the artist's grand daughter Marcia in the later years.

7 See Jacques Derrida, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (trans.), "Translator's Preface." In Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 1994, p.xviii.

8 Di ffrench, untitled and unpublished artist statement in the Robert McDougall loan collection, c.1990.

9 Di ffrench, "Banqueting in the Void," artist statement in the Robert McDougall loan collection, January 1988.

10 Jean-François Lyotard. 1992. *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982–1985*. Translated by Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Pefanis, Virginia Spate and Morgan Thomas. Power Publications, Sydney, pp.19–20.

11 Di ffrench, from an interview with Wallis Barnicoat, "Di ffrench, Shelters," in *The Big Picture*, Issue 11, Summer 1997, p.15.

As I have already said, I do not believe these images present us with literal or unambiguous representations of the various subject prototypes she was fascinated by in her quest for her own self-hood. Nevertheless, I do hold that they point imperfectly both to the variety of French's desires as well as suggesting some consistent themes.

Identification is a process of transformation of the personality whereby a subject takes on certain aspects of another. The process of identifying with a normative prototype or alternatively with an extreme type that enables escape from the norm involves a perpetual search. The subject is likely to experience a feeling of recognition or discovery of what they have been looking for without knowing it. Many contemporary theorists have "questioned the traditional belief that human identity is present to the conscious mind or at least an accessible piece of self-knowledge is questionable. Rather, many theorists describe the subject as perpetually in flux, pursuing an illusion of wholeness and selfhood that is ultimately unattainable."¹² This self is perpetually in process, always recycling familiar attributes in conjunction with new prototypes in a voyage of self-discovery.

According to current theories the process of identity formation is never complete and we can never have direct or complete access to it; equally, we can never assume that the artist had anything more than a partial consciousness of it herself. The experience of partial, fragmentary and sometimes contradictory identifications is echoed by the title phrase of this essay. Trinh Minh-ha's "horizontal vertigo" aptly suggests the experience of all becoming where advances occur through "moments of blindness" and where a complete and transparent picture of the self is always inaccessible.¹³

Because the process of subject-formation was always in flux and never complete, no one image, nor any collection of images can represent the subject or its objects of desire in their entirety. Equally, in that identifications are fragmentary, only partially perceived by the conscious mind and frequently contradictory, the self never appears as a fixed and whole image to the subject.

French's works suggest a diverse range of prototypes fascinated her. In *Fundamentals* (1985) French is attracted to the sexual energy and discipline of muscular male figures. The *Thousand Rocks* series (1988) has her seeking out and photographing subjects less privileged than her¹⁴ in order to express their inner dignity through the gestures of their hands and eyes which she construed as "outward manifestations of the psyche."¹⁵ French's self portraits in the Arnolfini hat (1984) and her *Portrait of Julia Morison* (1990) both suggest an interest in the mystic and the visionary. The Arnolfini works also permitted an exploration of the "psychological tensions" that arose as French reacted to the "relationship between the subjects of the [van Eyck] painting" in the context of her own cultural location.¹⁶

Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, eds. *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p.148.
Trinh T. Minh-ha, op cit, p329.
"These are photographs of young people from a working class background. They have the backgrounds some people would find difficult." Di French "The Thousand Rocks," artist's inscription on unpublished artist statement in the Robert McDougall loan collection. 1989.
Di French, "Workplan - August 1988/1989; Sculpture - Photography (Cibachrome)," unpublished notes in the Robert McDougall loan collection.
"In the work *The Useful Idiot* and *Arnolfini's Hat*, my concerns are more with the relationship between the subjects of the painting, the suggestions of their qualities, particularly within the social hierarchical context of that time, and one places this in the present world considering its relevance." Di French, "Statement, Photography, Portraiture," unpublished notes in the Robert McDougall loan collection, signed and dated 1985.

The pursuit of prototypes or extremities will present the exploring self with images that appear to arise alternately from the comforting extensions or shadowy and troubling margins of consciousness. Exploring the shadows can throw up both pleasurable and terrifying discoveries. When I use the term fascination it is with both of these connotations in mind. Ffrench has given us some insight into this paradox herself in her notes about the fifteenth-century double portrait by Jan van Eyck¹⁷ that inspired *The Useful Idiot and Arnolfini's Hat* (1984). The marriage at the heart of the van Eyck painting irritated ffrench because she saw tyranny at its core, yet at the same time she was impressed by its beauty.¹⁸ This love-hate attraction is a simplistic yet effective analogy for the subject's oscillation between different selves, as well as the subject's movement between the familiar and the strange, the attractive and the repulsive.

Just as ffrench was in two minds about the van Eyck painting there is ambivalence in her relationship to the motif of the nude figure. When she first made the *Fundamentals* in 1985 it was at the precise moment that she moved finally from performance to photography as her primary mode of working. The *Fundamentals* series reflects her respect for the body as "a superb machine [...] with the capacity of [sic.] regeneration."¹⁹ For some years ffrench had been practising weights and circuit training and running to prevent back problems and improve her stamina and eventually became involved in martial arts training. For various reasons she saw this as "an extension of [her] performance"²⁰ whereby she formed an active, constructive relationship to her own body. Her identification at this stage was with "the unconscious display of confidence of the male athlete."²¹

By the end of the decade her interests in the nude had become more complex and ambivalent. She was drawn to androgynous figures – indicated by her reference to the suggestion that Michelangelo's muscular female nudes were modelled on male prototypes²² – and hoped to avoid fashionable criticisms of the time about the sexualised gaze and patriarchal power. Instead of reproducing an erotic aesthetic she seemed intent on being disruptive, but discovered, through responses to her work and through her reading of poststructuralist theory, that this was determined less by the image than by how viewers look at the image. It seems impossible to think she was not sexually attracted to the male nude – however much she insisted on her objectivity – such that she felt compelled to integrate its supposedly unfeminine aggression and violence with her own sense of self.

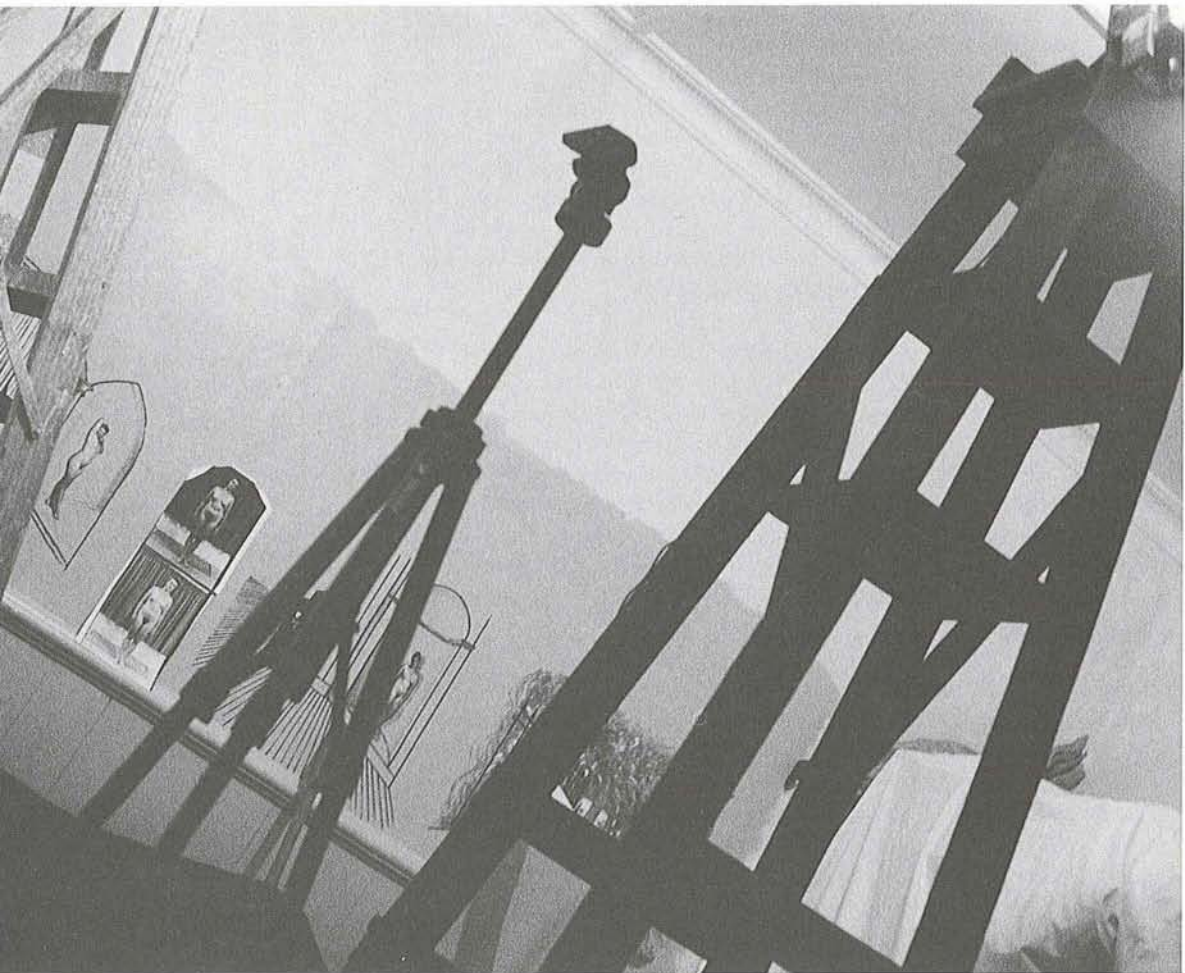
In the sexually powerful male figures of the *Hunter Warrior* series (1990) ffrench is perhaps identifying with aggression and violence and their paradox, an ethic of environmental care. These works suggest an attempt to integrate and harness the otherness of aggression. Just prior, she had been making photographs of her own nude torso for the *Taking Possession* series (1989–90) in which she juxtaposed assertive kata gestures with her arms and hands against the contrapposto posture of her torso which emphasised the rounded contours of her breasts and buttocks.

19 Di ffrench, unpublished lecture notes on the occasion of an artist's talk at Otago Polytechnic School of Art, 30 October 1991; in the Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection.

20 Di ffrench, *ibid.*

21 Di ffrench, *ibid.*

22 Di ffrench cited in *Di ffrench, Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence 1990, Black and White Photographs and Cibachromes*, McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch, 1991; unpaginated catalogue.



The artist's studio set-up in
Dunedin's Regent Theatre
Di ffrench
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

By combining physical defence movements that improved strength and stamina with a process of visualising the body as a series of target areas, the martial discipline of kata provided ffrench with perfect material for visualising and imitating a female subject taking charge of her own physical and psychic becoming.

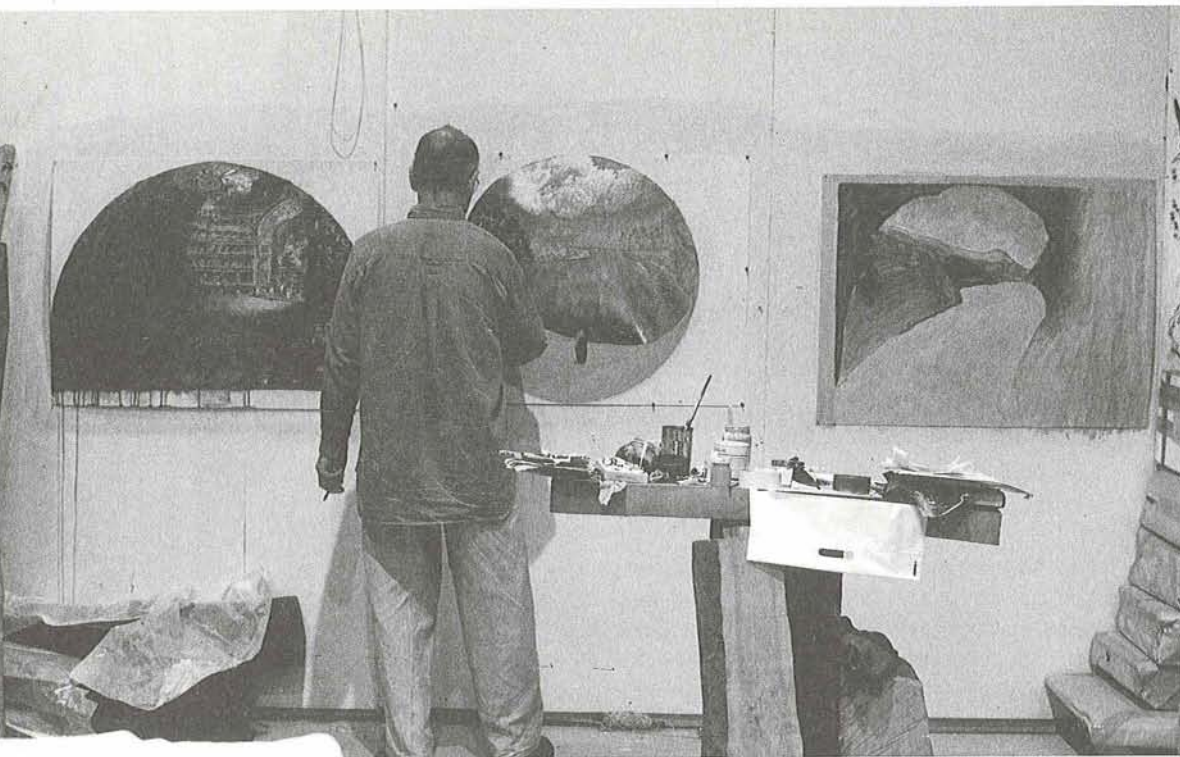
At times through the photographic period ffrench's fascination with the male body borders on a homosexualised projection, especially where the male torso is presented from behind in order to show a toned and yielding body. This may have been yet another strategy for integrating masculine extremities. For example *Fundamentals* (1985), some of the *Taking Possession* series (1989–90), *The Idea Becomes Extinct* (1990) and the closing frames of the short film *Shelters* (1994–96) suggest ffrench identifying with a homoerotic prototype. Seen from behind the musculature of the figure is defined by cross lighting while at the same time appearing more generalised and less dynamic than front or side views that suggest subjects who are in charge of their own power. The broad modulated surface of the back and buttocks that ffrench has photographed suggest bodies that can be possessed by the viewing subject. In several series the figures have their arms raised in such a way that further accentuates their muscularity at the same time as heightening their appearance of vulnerability.

The earliest example of this form of erotic image occurs in the slide documentation of ffrench's 1983 performance *Asters* in which a young male figure stands with arms upraised against a wall with his back to the camera. He is caught in a spotlight as the spiked shadow of a stretched fragment of cheesecloth is projected onto his back. Incidentally, the spiked projection reappears in the *Taking Possession* images (1989–90), a series which ffrench said was about women "taking possession of themselves."²³ Towards the end of the 1990s, when speaking privately of her persistent interest in cultural conflicts, the artist emphasised that she thought sexuality was the real site where the relationship between order and chaos was negotiated.²⁴ The homoerotic subject was a persistent and perhaps difficult prototype for ffrench to integrate if the recurrence of these motifs in her work over at least a ten-year period is anything to go by.

In another exploration of the masculine subject ffrench identified with the marginal and sometimes feral existence of the man alone in her one and only short film *Shelters* (1996). *Shelters* is a story about men and the land, yet it feels like something else. When Di ffrench and husband Peter Nicholls bought rural scrubland just north of Dunedin in the 90s she uncovered the remains of shelters built by trappers more than half a century earlier. Buried beneath a quilt of grasses were hearthstones and a doorstep and, nearby, deep within the enfolding bark of the giant tree trunks, the wooden framing of an old hut. These traces spoke to ffrench of isolated lives and indomitable wills. The film sought to weave these together with fragments of another hermit's life known to locals: the story of a feral man who, before being taken to an asylum, lived in a house with an upturned flying table and a dead cow. *Shelters* creates an ambiguous hybrid identity from these three land men – one who moves through the film as a shadow, a hand, a silhouette.

23 Di ffrench cited in Di ffrench, Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence 1990, Black and White Photographs and Cibachromes, McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch, 1991; unpaginated catalogue.

24 Di ffrench in conversation with the author, unpublished notes, 6 April 1996.



Peter Nicholls working on
Oscillation for Significant Little Opera, 1996
 Di ffrench
 Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

In *Life Drawing Class* (1990) and again in the *Shalott* series (1993) ffrench identifies with a nude model who impressed the artist with her professional ability to objectify herself in front of the camera. The author witnessed this fascination when present at a studio shoot in December 1991 in which ffrench waited behind her camera for the moment of opaqueness in the model's eyes that told of a certain distance or remoteness, the moment of her transformation. A woman she met in Invercargill and later photographed for the *Significant Little Opera*, *Projections on Landscapes* series (1996) equally fascinated ffrench. This model had undertaken a project of re-making herself by tattooing her whole body as a way of making art out of her extensively burn-scarred body.

The nude also afforded her a motif with which she could idealise the figure and suggest something of the realm of the intuitive and the shadowy margins of the conscious mind. While she started out on the mid-eighties with a celebration of the disciplined body, she turned more and more to the nude figure – either shown in shadow or silhouette – as a metaphor for the sublime. Figures such as her grand daughter Marcia and the tattooed woman in the *Illustration of Government* series (1996) signalled the discipline, power and transcendence of the mind. A good example of ffrench's representation of the sublime subject is her own nude body in *The Idea Becomes Extinct* (1990) with its head disappearing into shadow to suggest the subject moving "back" into the darkness of "intuition and instincts."²⁵ The figure's pose is derived from one of Michelangelo's unfinished bound slaves, *Awakening Slave* (c.1520–23). Thus ffrench constructs an image of the exploring subject who is at one and the same time culturally bound to conventions and psychically bound to an unfathomable but enlightening unconscious.

Equally, ffrench found a fruitful tension between her own desire for control and her understanding that subject development often involves antagonistic struggle. In the cibachromes, particularly the *Shalott* series (1993) this is frequently referred to in the figure of a bridge of order traversing chaos. Conflict was also a theme in such performances as *Gut Reaction* (1981), *Fontanel* (1981) and *The Opinion* (1984) and in several of the cibachromes in the *Significant Little Operas* series (1996). Then in the collaborative projects in the 1990s ffrench appears to be putting this tension between the order of self-control and the chaos of the collective to the test.

Di ffrench cited in Di ffrench, Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence 1990, Black and White Photographs and Cibachromes, McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch, 1991; unpaginated catalogue.
 "I don't know how democratic I am really. In fact I was being quite decisive [...] it looked as though I didn't know what the hell I was doing, but I did because I put everything with people in whom I had absolute trust, and by operating in the way I did it actually put a bit of pressure on those people to produce [...] What I don't have control over is the individual creativity, and in a really over the top way I have supreme reliance on it, I take the risk [...] but the control was still there which is interesting. I had the whole idea mapped out, I controlled all the images." Di ffrench, from an interview with Wallis Barnicoat; "Di ffrench, Shelters," in *The Big Picture*, Issue 11, Summer 1997, pp.14–15.

Specifically she appeared to wilfully pit her own conscious control-lust against another prototype whereby she tested her capacity for patience and tolerance towards coworkers. The *Chesterfield* project at Lookout Point in Oamaru (1993), the Women's Suffrage Tapestry project for Christchurch (1993) and the short film *Shelters* (1994–96) each required a far higher commitment to collaboration with other creative workers than ffrench had ever entertained before and each of the projects tried her tolerance. That she was aware of this and prepared to undertake the projects at the risk of testing her own sense of self was to her credit. Whether she successfully integrated the cooperative prototype that was required for these projects into her self-formation is debatable. Several times during the late 1990s she characterised herself as retiring from public life and particularly from engaging with the art world to which she belonged. My impression is that she hedged her bets when wrestling with the collaborative prototype. She certainly talked about letting go and appeared to relinquish creative control at certain points in the three projects listed above. Realistically she relied on people to supplement her own skills and abilities and "bought" their commitment to the project by apparently sharing creative control. She particularly relied on her partner Peter Nicholls for the precise drafting required for the tapestry cartoon, much of the structural expertise required for set building for *Shelters* and engineering advice for the *Chesterfield* project. Many others contributed ideas and creative labour in these projects, but at no time did I sense ffrench let the projects go in directions that she disapproved of or in directions she couldn't claim an overarching authorship of. Indeed there were occasions where the unacceptable contributions offered by some provided the catalyst for ffrench to let go of the contributor in order to keep the project on track. When interviewed in 1997 about the making of *Shelters*, ffrench was in no doubt that she wanted to retain "control" in these complex projects and she seemed to know both the extent and limits of that control.²⁶ In the past I have made much of ffrench's collaborative drive but in the context of this retrospective exhibition and catalogue I have been rethinking her methodology. On the one hand her attempts to involve a broad creative team in some of her projects provide legitimate opportunities to discuss the politics of inclusion and participation. On the other hand, such discussions should not give the impression that the Christchurch tapestry, Oamaru earthwork and Dunedin short film were all that unusual in her oeuvre. By this I mean that in most of her sculptural and performance works and all of her cibachrome series the artist typically harnessed a wide range of technical expertise and creative labour from other people in order to realise her "idea." Perhaps the difference is that in the case of the cibachromes at least, not much has been made of the contributions of others in published writings on the artist. To some extent ffrench herself has noted her reliance on the expertise of others in the sculptures, performances and cibachromes in her notes and letters. On the whole she has acknowledged these as technical rather than creative contributions.²⁷ French's repeated reliance on technical advice and support is even more understandable in the context that she was self-taught or "a primitive" as she put it.²⁸ Having received no formal fine arts training other than a few months at Auckland Institute of Technology,²⁹ ffrench continually supplemented her lack through the help of others. The fact is also that in the case of the cibachrome images, she relied very heavily on the creative contributions of her partner Peter Nicholls for the drawing and painting of aspects of the wall mural stage of their construction.

27 For example, these comments about the production of the Arnolfini work: "I hire just [sic] a local man who takes photographs at weddings and I talk to him about technical things like aperture openings, like I do at Healing industries. I just pay him by the hour. I can get really good equipment that way. He said you won't even get a picture from this and took two films and the images came through though you couldn't even see them when you were actually taking them because I was projecting black onto black." Di ffrench, "The Arnolfini Work," unpublished artist statement in the Robert McDougall loan collection, undated (c.1986).

28 "I am a primitive without conventional art-school training." Di ffrench, personal correspondence in the Robert McDougall loan collection, dated 21 April 1980.

29 Di ffrench, unpublished notes from an interview with Bridie Lonie (for: Marian Evans, et al, eds. *A Women's Picture Book*, GP Books, 1988) in the Robert McDougall loan collection, undated (c.1986).

30 Di ffrench, unpublished artist statement in the Robert McDougall loan collection, signed and dated 1988.

31 "In conjunction with ongoing processes, sculptural techniques are often used to manipulate material prior to the shutter action of the camera, thus reinforcing my background in the practise of sculpture rather than the manipulation of images in the context of the dark room." Di ffrench, "Workplan – August 1988/1989; Sculpture – Photography (Cibachrome)," unpublished notes in the Robert McDougall loan collection (ffrench's underlining).

32 Di ffrench, personal correspondence in the Robert McDougall loan collection, dated 21 April 1980.

Given this, it is interesting to look again at French's 1988 assertion that she was "not involved solely in the formal investigation of materials" but that her "interest first of all is in researching the idea."³⁰ For French the cibachromes coincided with a period of rising national and international interest in and debate about the conceptual and contextual bases of art works. It was also a time when a generation of young overseas artists was in the spotlight with media-savvy works where it was quite explicit that they had been largely or entirely executed by skilled artisans rather than by the artist's own hand. Both of these observations can be taken as contemporary contexts for French's work that licensed her down playing how the works were made in favour of emphasising the ideas that informed them. Seen in this light it was not necessarily disingenuous for French to understate the creative partnership she had with Peter Nicholls.

French is not entirely silent on the subject though, but neither is she unambiguous. There is an inconsequential yet intriguing inscription by her on the back of a cibachrome print from the Fundamentals series (1986-87) in the Robert McDougall loan collection. The inscription reads "by her own hand" whereas, of course, none of the cibachrome prints were ever made by French herself – they were all sent to a production lab – and the artist prided herself on making all the image manipulations in front of the camera rather than in the darkroom.³¹ At the very least the inscription attests to French's earnest desire to be taken seriously as the originator of her work and as a legitimate artist. It was an attestation she felt compelled to make on more than one occasion:

I am very intense about my approach to art, I know. [...] Also being married to a sculptor is not so easy, I have to justify what I make, and there is raw criticism in this situation. We have different approaches to our work, but sometimes I find myself having to prove that I make my work myself, even if it is on the large scale and the ideas are mine. That is hard to live with, but so many people have seen me make my own sculpture that it is not so bad now.³²

This is a difficult issue to write about. On the one hand, French repeatedly asserted her authorship as if, despite the evidence of the works, her agency and identity as an artist could be erased or overlooked. On the other hand she practised in a way that seemed to shun the mannerisms of the expressionist school, that had both seen a revival and faced earnest critique during the late 1980s, by relinquishing much of the handiwork of her art to others more skilled.

Yet the very seductive appearance of the works themselves, here and now, has the power to separate viewers from these contexts, just as surface sheen masks depth and denies easy scrutiny. Despite her earlier protestations, by the 1990s French was consistently reliant on her partner for, of all things, the drawing that articulated the perspectival space and architectural motifs in her cibachromes. At this time the realisation of her ideas required the academic rigour Nicholls could provide rather than the gestural manner of her own hand as seen in the *Shalott* series (1993). Sometimes her partner's contributions could be regarded as little more than technical assists, but not when the contribution is on the scale of the architectural contrapposto of the spiral staircase that so marvellously anchors and activates the composition in *Ascending Descending* from the *Illustration of Government* series (1995).

These assists and contributions are among the most anomalous aspects of a life in search of identity through the processes of art making.

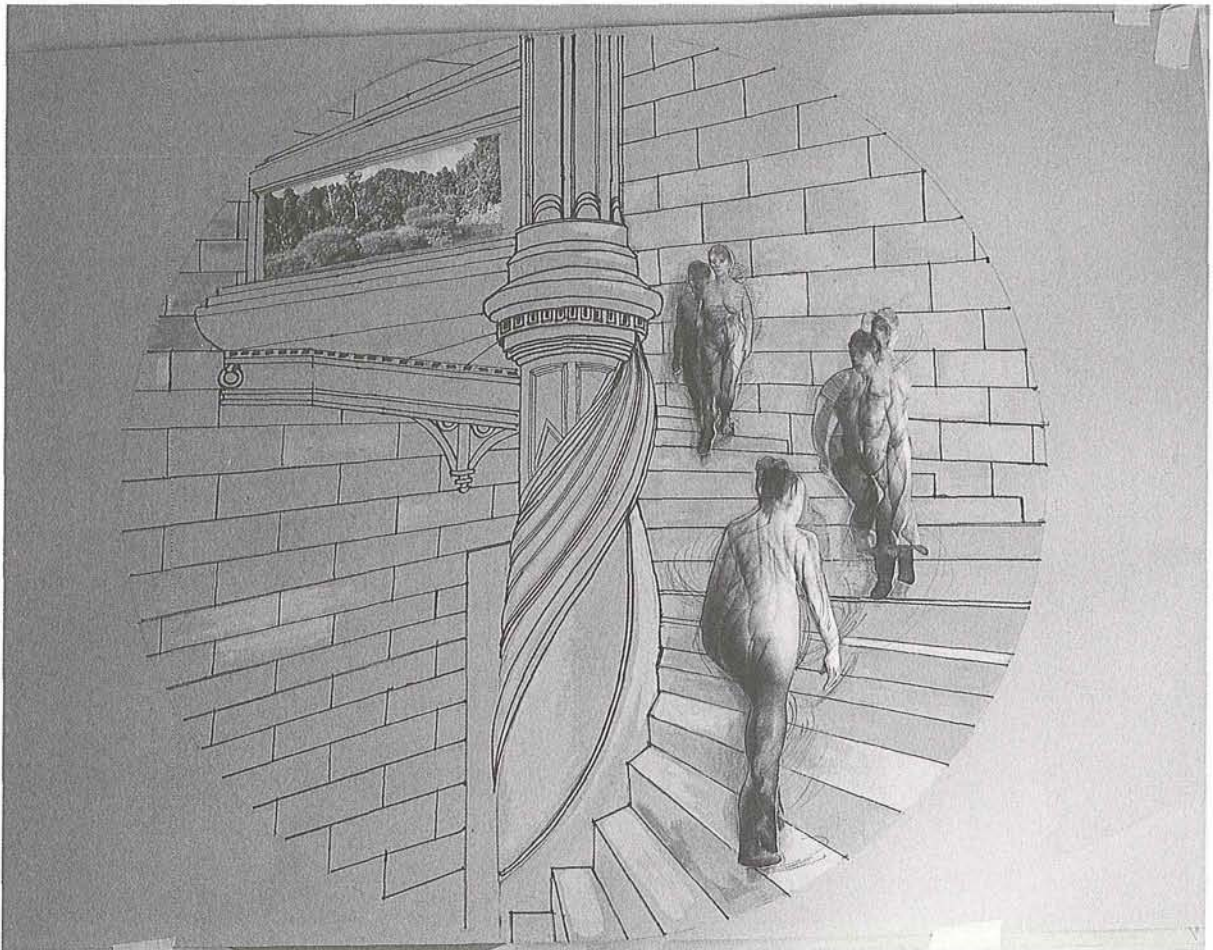
This anomaly and the complex and sometimes contradictory patterns of French's subject representation, if they can be assumed to trace processes of identification, present an analogy of contemporary notions of the decentred self. That is the self without a single, stable, central point of reference. But this multiplicity should not be confused with free-spirited play. Identity formation is repetitious, contradictory and uncertain. Identifications are tried and re-tried, sometimes successfully integrating elements and at other times creating a sense of dislocation and unease. Di French's stories about her life journey frequently found recourse in the motif of the battler and themes of struggle and conflict. This is a theme that is evident in the work too. Consider, for instance, in the *Taking Possession* series (1989–90) where French has projected a hand onto the hip of each photograph of her nude torso; it is motif reminiscent of the Old Testament story of the wound Jacob receives while wrestling with the angel. According to her own narratives, becoming Di French was arduous.

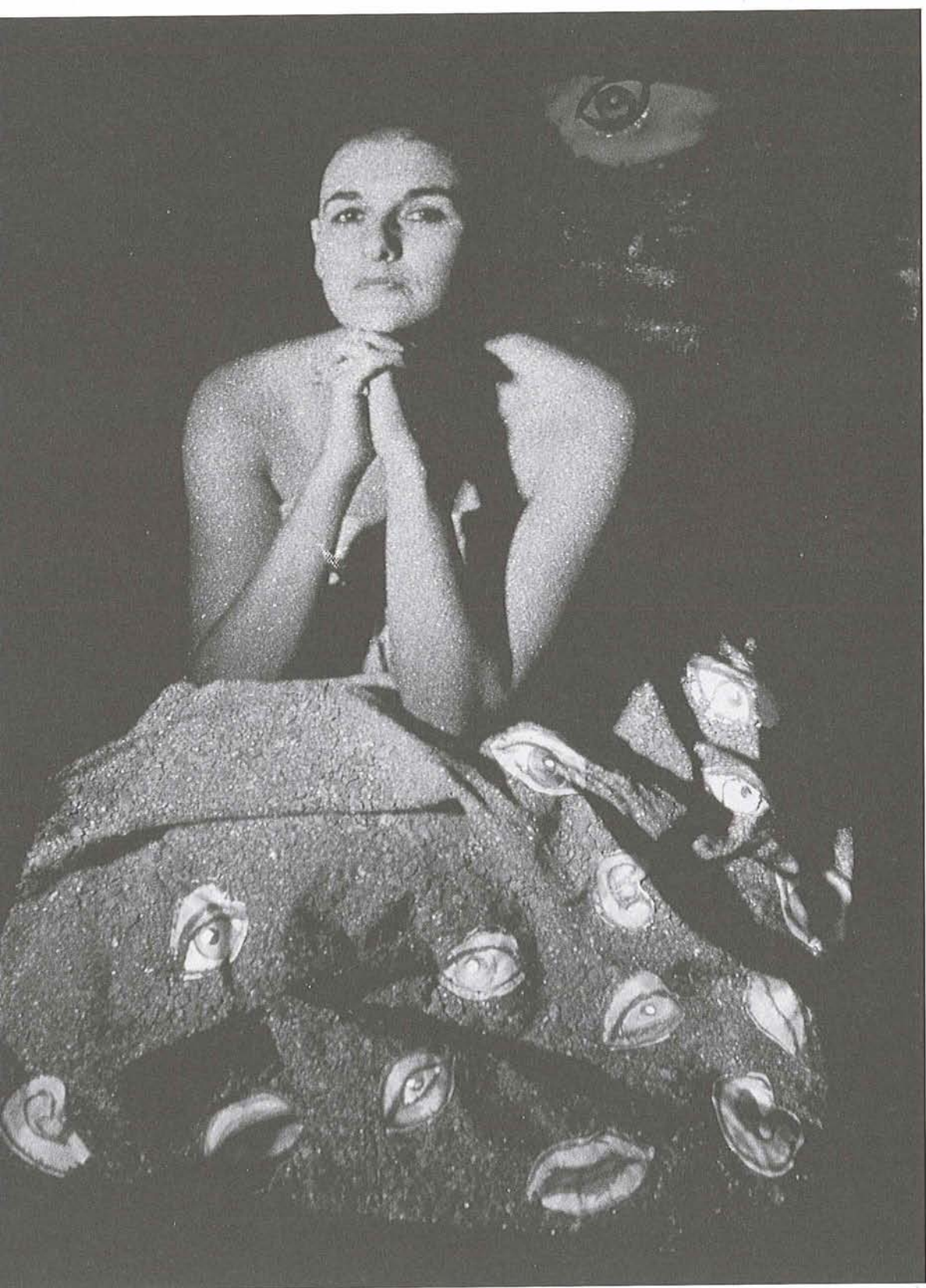
Ascending Descending

Illustration of Government series wall mural, 1995

Di French

Courtesy of the Artist's Estate





Portrait of Julia Morison, 1990

Di ffrench

Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

"I make what I see and I don't go around seeing the same thing over and over...because they are in constant motion, the light moves about on everything for one instant. I use materials and colour to convey a concept...I don't contrive to be subtle. I aim for an intense statement even if the end result is not pretty. I am very intense about my approach to art."¹

Di ffrench worked within the spheres of sculpture, painting, performance and photography from the 1970s to the 1990s. These mediums, integrating and remaining open, harnessed her analytical preoccupation with the formal qualities of art and her romantic sensibility that stemmed from an inner aesthetic visualisation. With innovation, ffrench applied a cogent understanding of theoretical and philosophical research to her study of varied media and genre. Ffrench then demanded that the viewer look beneath layers of time, light and illusion to discover alternate realms of interpretation, perhaps otherwise veiled by conditioned ways of seeing.

Ffrench's singular interest in her practice is the body and the exchange of meaning between the artist, subject and audience. The indexed trace of the body evolved from early sculptural work in fibreglass, and importantly this notion of trace became crystallised through photographic experimentation in ephemeral performances. The unfolding topography of ffrench's oeuvre enmeshed signs of corporeality, identity and desire and her imagination and interest in processing the idea above all else, drove her to seek unique technical means through which this could be achieved.

Sculpture from 1976 and performances from 1981 display a critique of, and aspiration to overcome, the obstacle of women's perceived biological oppression. Vulnerability, social subordination and, importantly, the invisibility of women, whether mothers and/or artists, was an ongoing reality and for many New Zealand artists the 1980s heralded a time whereby the imbalance in patriarchal art world politics was addressed.²

Ffrench's socio-political beliefs also opposed issues of tyranny and apartheid, and along with her concerns for the environment were manifested through performances in the 1980s. Ffrench defied the premise that art should be purely about having a good time, that instead art could be a disturbing experience; a protest against violence, brutality and the inhumane. As Anne Kirker wrote of ffrench's work in *New Zealand Women Artists*:

Inevitably provocative and striking in her technique, the socio-political content of Di ffrench's performance work reflected the changing role of the female artist. Integrating herself in the same space as her public, she respected the power of art to explore and reveal fundamental truths. Even more so, she saw it as her right to comment on matters that either attack a patriarchal system or involve areas of interest that were previously considered to be outside a woman's domain³.

1 Di ffrench, artist statement, 1980.

2 The pervasive nature of this oppression can be identified in a review of ffrench's work by Peter Leech 'Art and Association' in the *Otago Daily Times* November 1982. Ffrench exhibited at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 1982 a selection of her sculptures from the 1970s and photographs from the *Fontanel* and *Same Leaves* performances. Reviewing the exhibition Peter Leech described ffrench as an artist with 'an undisciplined imagination', with no sense of a 'unitary aesthetic concern or even any signatorial artistic stamp', describing her sculptural work as derivative of male contemporaries. Her response to this unfortunate reading of the exhibition is worth examining. Ffrench dates and describes her working progress from *Aeonian Dance*, to *South Pacific Souvenir*, outlining the variety of materials used prior to and without reference to any of the men that she is supposed to be 'replicating'. "When one makes sculpture, it is basic to understand the nature of materials, symbolism and spatial concepts. This derives from and is strong in traditional constructivist principles. It is nonsense to suggest I step back for anyone who is inclined to use the same material. I can hardly be expected to withdraw the *Blue Pacific Souvenir* because Peter Leech wants us all to believe it has "replicative associations already exhibited by my contemporaries" Does Mr Leech realise the *Souvenir* has been exhibited before and it is a development of earlier sculpture he knows nothing about?" (Di ffrench, "Sculptress replies to critic, *Otago Daily Times*, 8. 11. 82. Note also the title attributed to ffrench, that of a 'Sculptress'.)

3 Anne Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, Auckland 1992, p 173.

A questioning of the male gaze rather than a simplistic reversal created in her work an oscillating dialogue of gender and identity with critical references to aggression and sexuality. Through her performances and photographic series French confronted assumptions and contradictions inherent in voyeuristic Western representations of the nude figure. With the use of her body, as well as those of others, both male and female, she aimed to decentralize and subvert the enduring notion of the human form as a disinterested subject of desire.

Born in Melbourne, French immigrated to New Zealand from Australia at the age of 16 in 1963 and settled with her parents in Auckland. She studied both art history and practical art in New Zealand and was particularly interested in medieval book illumination and renaissance art. Her art historical quest began while in Auckland, later citing Scottish expressionist painters neo-expressionists, and the colour field painters Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis as precedents for initiating a lifelong interest in art history.⁴ French met the sculptor Peter Nicholls in Auckland January 1965 and five months later they married. Nicholls and French worked together on sculptural projects, such as the outdoor environmental project in Albert Park, Auckland, 1977, private performances and more recently the *Chesterfield Couch* at Oamaru 1993.⁵ The collaborative nature of their professional relationship, each contributing to the others practice both directly and indirectly, was to remain a steadfast process.

The human figure as a primary source of inspiration and expression in French's work can be seen in *Aeonian Dance*, (1977). Performed on Pakiri Beach, it was a performance/sculpture imbued with a profound respect for nature that integrated concepts of time passing with found objects on the beach. The structure was built on a mound a few yards from the sea out of twisted manuka stakes, cheesecloth membrane, fishing line and feathers from a dead albatross her children found in the morning tide.⁶ The sea, 'sails' and feathers evoked a sense of flight and freedom in riding the waves and wind, while the sky and sea were 'framed' in the transparent cheesecloth. Stretched, taut material framed by natural timber, or hanging freely, became a consistent leit motif in her sculptures and also appears in later performance and photographic work. In a photograph of *Aeonian Dance* taken by Nicholls, French, naked and with her arms outstretched, appears to embrace and rejoice in the freedom of the fleeting moment, acknowledging a cyclic instant of renewal. Before leaving with her family to work in the USA⁷, French realised that photography could be an important component in her practice enabling a flexibility of idea and process.

...I photographed Aeonian just before I left for the USA and the gales and salty winds had eroded the sails/wings, it died beautifully...⁸

On her return to New Zealand, French gained an extended understanding of the manipulation of materials, such as fibreglass, through interviewing and observing technicians in a fibreglass factory.⁹ This technique was to play an important role in her later performance/installation work in which she constructed props and sculptures out of cast resin and constructing fibreglass that

Di French in a taped interview with Lita Barrie, 1984, Te Papa Tongarewa, Hector Library.

French also contributed to Art in the Mail projects both in New Zealand and in America, exhibiting works with the titles of *Smelling You on a Bulge of Freshly Mown Grass*, at the Broadway Galleries, Milwaukee, USA, 1976, and *Fit for Towels – One Extra Breast*, University of Georgia, Athens USA, 1977. The New Zealand Mail Art Movement, initiated by Nick Spill in 1976, *Art in the Mail: Where Worlds Collide*.

The materials used for *Aeonian* are outlined in an artist statement written in 1978, however in Anne Kirker's *New Zealand Women Artists* the materials are listed as willow timber supports and the feathers from a petrel.

At the University of Wisconsin 1978, French's work became more solidly sculptural in construction, chiselling the surfaces of local timbers and drawing inspiration from the unique surrounding environment. *Wisconsin Lakes*, (1978) was a large sculpture of driftwood timbers from the shore of Lake Superior that became a trestle and a sheet of clear plastic filled with water formed the contours pressing about the timber framework. The work reflected the "undulating ripples of prairie grasses and lake surfaces". The very distinct landscape of the area contrasted with French's knowledge of the New Zealand bush and captivated her imagination something which is also translated in *Tumbleweed*, a series of cheesecloth, wire and fluorescent orange spray paint sculptures that effectively evoked the movement and shape of the tumbleweeds that dance about the surface of the arid American landscape.

Di French quoted from Anne Kirker's *New Zealand Women Artists*, p.172

Largely self taught French chose not to go to art school but to study liberal arts learning skills directly off tradespeople who did not attempt to influence her ideas or challenge her independent commitment to being an artist. Although working collaboratively was a strength, as manifested through such projects as *The Sullfrage Tapestry*, and her short feature film, *Shelters* 1996, French at all times was fearlessly independent and singular in her approach to art and life.

were integral to the overall understanding and meaning. The use of fibreglass to suggest a notion of transparency became an interest in French's sculptural practice, and in her contribution to the *Mothers*¹⁰ exhibition at the Women's Gallery in 1981, *Mother, Daughter, Woman*, three fibre glass bowls filled with water symbolised the membrane and fecund cycle of womanhood:

Fibreglass is a resilient material, which in this work has the translucence of a membrane filled with water. The meniscus is the membrane, the sealing in.¹¹

This work is replete with the imagery of childbirth and the relationship between mother and daughter and is unique in its poetic allusions to femininity and strength. *Mother, Daughter, Woman* encompassed three stages in the life of a woman through the trinity of bowls shaped to suggest the contours of a woman's stomach.

Water is level with the edges, a meniscus and is symbolic with life. Mirror image photographs seen through the water are two sides of the personality, relating to mother and daughter. Water has a density and the women are watching eternally through this. They become ghosts who are and are what has gone before and what will inevitably come after.¹²

French began to employ her own personal memento mori, revealing her awareness of the fugitive moment. This particular iconography revolved around the forces of life and death, the ultimate inevitability and temporal existence of humanity. Although poetically inspired, French also approached her art and life with a sense of pragmatism. Being a mother early in life to a large family meant her time management skills had to be finely honed. Balancing her own career with motherhood was emotionally draining, and exercise and discipline increased her stamina to achieve both. In a letter written almost a decade later in 1989, French reconciles her artistic calling and motherhood by putting herself and her career first,

I moved studio to a larger one in the Octagon above the Regent Theatre and I have sorted out (myself) and the family so that I am not always available to sort out trivial things. Also I have finally made the ultimate decision – that I do make art works and probably won't do much else for the rest of my life. May as well get on with it. I have always had the odd niggle that one should be sensibly employed and doing responsible things. But I don't do sensible things and I may as well enjoy it all.¹³

One senses that French, despite being devoted to her children and husband, struggled with herself and her family over a period of years to create a space and a place in which she could guiltlessly abandon all vestiges of 'responsibility' in order to fully engage her creative potential.

For the *Aramoana* exhibition of 1980/81 held at the Wellington City Art Gallery, French contributed three large environmental installations, *South Pacific Souvenir, Promenade* and *Active Perimeter*: a political triptych of considerable impact, as protest against a plan for a smelter to be built on Aramoana. The series drew on a range of materials and metaphors that created individually powerful statements as well as reverberating collectively in a sculptural dialogue. They were a continuation of her earlier installations in the recurring use of bamboo and hooks but significantly more confrontational in nature.

10 For the touring exhibition *Mothers*, 1980/81, a group of women were invited to create works centring on the common experience of being a mother or daughter. *Mothers* was a successful touring exhibition that brought to the wider public attention work created by women who are now New Zealand's leading mid-career and senior artists. Jacqueline Fahey's *My Skirt's in Your Fucking Room*, Robyn Kahukiwa's *Hinetitama*, drawings by Joanna Paul and a Jane Zusters sculpture were among the works exhibited. Women artists in New Zealand and abroad (through the initiatives of Women's Galleries and collectives) began to create work that centred on the female bodily functions and cycles as a means to re-evaluate women's much maligned biology.

11 *A Woman's Picture Book* p.112.

12 *Ibid*, p. 112.

13 Personal letter to Jonathan Smart dated, 20.2.89.

The third work in the Aramoana series, *Active Perimeter* garnered the most attention. A pyramid of 80 garbage filled Kleensaks symbolised 'the modern pyramid of pollution'.¹⁴ Left to slowly rot, the pyramid, lashed precisely to poles within a bamboo structure and surrounded by nine aluminium rubbish tins (each emphasized by an angry blue stripe of fluorescent paint), effectively translated the undesirable and damaging effects of nuclear waste disposal in the South Pacific. As Jonathan Smart wrote:

As a work of political art this was a visually arresting metaphor which through the stench of the rubbish tied the observer back into the immediate and literal, thereby making its political impact.¹⁵

As an artist concerned with ecological issues, French's main concern was to divert attention away from her individual ego in order to express a more encompassing and effective political framework. Her early sculptural practice served to provide a rich background of experience, enabling her to move lucidly between sculpture, painting, theory and performance, genres that coalesced in her ensuing photographic and performance oeuvre.

French's socio-political aesthetic evolved into choreographed, moving and often chilling performances from 1981 that demarcated her political and feminist beliefs as well as a being an apposite medium to investigate new creative impulses and techniques. Identity, socially constructed and gender implicit, was apparent in French's work from the early 1980s onward. Wary of being labelled or pigeonholed, she chose not to highlight her knowledge of feminist theory as part of her creative and working process (especially during the 1980s backlash against feminism), it is nevertheless an important component to her development as an artist.¹⁶ In *Fractures*, a private performance in 1981, French explored the metamorphosis of her emerging identity as a woman and as an artist.¹⁷ In the sequence of slides that documented this event,¹⁸ French can be seen to celebrate and reject the conditioned rites of womanhood. Dressed in a cocktail dress, stilettos and full facial makeup, she delicately placed several floral arrangements in crystal vases on a series of plinths with studied concentration and then proceeded to overlay paint directly from the tube onto the glass of three collages of text (constructed from Foster's *How to Paint* booklets) made prior to the performance. The darkened setting is both familiar and oppressive and, as the events unfolded, the domestic nature of her environment became more incongruous, highlighting the conflict in the deconstruction of her 'feminine' personae. French then appeared to realign her identity by discarding the dress, shoes and makeup. She donned a blue boiler suit as an indication of her new role as a 'serious artist' that marked the crystallisation from a 'weak' female, into a determined and focussed practitioner. In doing so, her momentary nakedness was captured on film, emphasizing the vulnerability of her body and embodied state as a socially constructed site of interchanging identity. French then overturned and smashed with a machete the crystal vases of flowers. The sartorial change into neutral work dress, juxtaposing 'serious' attire with the broken crystal vase¹⁹ was symbolic of the personal fracture in her makeup as a woman and the fractures that feminism was beginning to create in traditional social roles for women.

Di French, unpublished artist notes, 1981, Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection.
Jonathan Smart & Hugh Lauder 'Ideology and Political Art in New Zealand: A Radical View' *Landfall* March 1985, no. 53, p. 89.
French in a taped interview with Lita Barrie in 1984, reiterated her feminist concerns, citing the Women's Art Movement in Sydney during the 1970s, Lucy Lippard's book *From the Centre*, Juliet Batten's *The Menstrual Maze*, Alexis Hunter's early photographic series in the 1970s, the art history courses of Cheryl Sotheran during 1977 at Auckland University and the New Zealand Feminist Art Network (FAM), during the early 1980s as inspirational for her development as an artist.
French also cites a childhood memory in the construction of this performance. A glamorous woman French knew when a child during the 1950s, used to dress in net ball gowns with camellias in her hair. "I saw her dressed in a ballerina length cocktail frock, sherry glass in hand, awaiting the arrival of her new Kelvinator refrigerator. She did floral arrangements/her art. She was also moody, melancholic, very special. I organised a routine for her - because for me to understand her, to have such a clear memory of her, I was coming to terms with my own mirror. I was saying there are no limits, but they are inevitably built. The only thing to do is to break them down and keep on going forward." *Broadsheet*, June 1983, p. 23.
Fractures was documented by Peter Nicholls, and is not without an element of spectacle, French's slow strip tease is at once beautiful and disquieting in its collusion with the gaze.
The shattered glass is also interesting to note as French subsequently worked with broken materials in performances and in her photographic tableau of ruptured matter.



Active Perimeter, 1981

Di ffrench

Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

Since this work I have attempted to harden and strengthen my body through intense mental and physical discipline. To reject fear, anger, frustration – weak responses.²⁰

Following *Fractures*, a trilogy of political performances, *Gut Reaction*, (1981) *Fontanel* (1981) and *The Opinion* (1983) were statements made against an impingement of freedom and democracy.

Public protest is one form of individual or collective opinion; other more reflective actions usually follow a gut reaction to a given situation.²¹

Gut Reaction, devised after the death of Bobby Sands in Ireland²² was an installation/performance for the University of Canterbury at the Peterborough Centre in June 1981.²³ Being of Catholic Irish heritage, ffrench was aware from a young age of the longstanding conflict, unrest and oppression in Ireland. *Gut Reaction* emphasized the continual thrust of violence relayed through the incessant sound of semi-automatic gunfire and the protracted action of throwing 'missiles' (such as rocks, slabs of concrete and asphalt) at a target on the wall. Three video sets played images of her undulating abdomen in a continuous loop for the duration of the performance. Her intent was to draw the audience closer to the target wall challenging the audience's reaction by exposing them to the sounds and images of violence. Ffrench emphasized on a number of occasions that her role in a performance was one of activation, of materials and concept rather than a performance-personae or an 'actor' per se: "The work was violent – not my acting."²⁴ Using her own body as material, ffrench regarded herself not as a potential site for sexual connotation but as a "power source". Abdominal control, the belly as a centrifugal force or a site where life begins and ends, also metaphorically absorbs the shock of violence as "the abdomen controls against anger, fear and frustration".²⁵ It was at this point in ffrench's life that she began to train in martial arts, an interest that was to inform her artistic practice on a number of levels. Karate focussed her attention on the mechanics required for mental and physical discipline and activated her investigation of the 'ideal' body that was to occupy her working aesthetic during the 1990s.

Ffrench's powerful and beautiful performance *Fontanel*, 1981, (performed at the 1981 ANZART in Christchurch) was the result of a conceptual multi-layered approach. The issue at the heart of *Fontanel* was the political turmoil in Uganda during the 1970s and Idi Amin's reign of terror relayed through television coverage throughout the 1970s and 80s. The tyrannical and murderous regime of Idi Amin, which caused the deaths of thousands of Ugandans, was a political nightmare that the artist associated with a loss of compassion in a world of increasing brutality. The *Fontanel* performance was a political protest against the parasitic nature of violence that was emphasized by the cruelty of Amin's executions.²⁶ The blatant cruelty ffrench observed in everyday life also reinforced her growing concerns for violent issues in society, as the potential for brutality was also evident in New Zealand at the time of making *Fontanel*. Police misuse of the baton to wound and grievously harm protestors of the Spring Bok tour highlighted the vulnerability of children and the fact that all humans were potentially subject to out-of-control damage. *Fontanel* was a performance of unusual beauty given the nature of the protest.

20 Di ffrench, unpublished artist's notes, undated, Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection.

21 Artist notes to accompany the performance of *Gut Reaction*, 1981, University of Canterbury. Also published in *The Women's Picture Book*, p.111

22 Bobby Sands, a Provisional Sinn Fein member, died after a hunger strike to protest against Margaret Thatcher's denial of their status as political prisoners. Ten Provisional prisoners died in this fashion amid the worst violence in Northern Ireland since the early 1970s.

23 Ffrench had planned to perform *Gut Reaction* at the 1985 ANZART, and constructed an artist statement *ANZART In Auckland, Gut Reaction* but it was never performed in 1985.

24 *Ibid*

25 Unpublished artists' notes, undated, Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection.

26 Amin devised this execution where the prisoners knelt in a row and one was given a sledgehammer then the prisoners executed each other ...this really did happen, human beings behave like this, it could be happening now or something just as abominable, and we know it is. Generally when authority responds to social problems by becoming violent and negatively tough, the population increases in violence. Violence feeds on itself. (Di ffrench *A Woman's Picture Book*, p. 114).

For the performance, a room in the Christchurch Arts Centre was lit with five candles and the floor was covered with black builders' paper on which a circle of seven skull-sized, rock-like ovid forms were placed. A slide projector, situated above the installation, was turned on and the candles then blown out. Working to a precise beat, (pulse and breath), ffrench projected 36 slides of black Africans in 'reverse', (photographic negative) within the ring of forms, followed by its mirror image, (the photographic positive) which included a cross, drawn over the fontanel area of the skull. The sepia images displayed over the sculptural forms created distortions that contrasted with the three dimensional objects.

After the completion of the slides, ffrench walked into the area and sprayed the paper with toxic white lacquer. The next sequence of *Fontanel* evoked a curious sense of violence and unveiling. Ffrench removed a gauze patch from each ovid form to reveal a black hole (which indicated change) in the 'fontanel'. The clay structures became vessels of containment, symbolic of the "womb, the universe, or just life".²⁷ Leaving the image of the last slide on, ffrench, armed with a steel machete, struck each vessel across the fontanel, at which they crumbled, spilling ash over the "white lacquer, over the projected sepia portrait taking up the colour – becoming a landscape merging like a ghost."²⁸ In conclusion, ffrench picked up the last two remaining vessels, which were intact and completely wrapped in gauze. Unwrapping and crumbling the vessels with her hands she then left the area, "revealing a desert-like landscape of sepia ash surrounded by broken shards of clay – the portrait taking up the subtle contours of ash – present to prehistory."²⁹ *Fontanel*, although motivated by the cruelty of racism, and intolerance, evoked a sense of regeneration, a continuous cycle of civilization and evolution, time and space, birth and death.³⁰

Fontanel was an important precursor to ffrench's later technique of projecting photographic imagery over a bed of ruptured matter, to be re-photographed and developed as a cibachrome. This photographic 'discovery' was explored again in a performance/installation entitled, *The Same Leaves*, performed at the National Art Gallery, Wellington in 1981.³¹ In an interpretative account written in February 1982, ffrench cites the "inevitability of recycled nature, every year spring is a fresh experience".³² as her inspiration. *The Same Leaves* was constructed by ffrench as an examination of her journey toward the commitment and the participation in making art. Her growing interest in the creative possibilities of photography was worked through in both *Fontanel*, and *The Same Leaves*, the third performance that seemingly completes this nascent investigation into the resulting photographic tableaux is *Asters*, performed at the 1983 ANZART in Hobart. *Asters* is an important work to examine in order to understand further ffrench's working process, specifically the idea and medium leading toward a growing experimentation with surfaces, content and representation of the human (male) figure. Ffrench described the performance as focussing on 'an obsession, a violence, a war',³³ those prevalent concerns with life/death polarities find signification in the sculptural materials used. A bow commonly used in archery represented the manifestation of an obsession and the exchange of energy,

The Bow is one of the most effective ways of storing the "strain" energy of human muscles and releasing it to propel a missile weapon.

With a Bow, when the bowstring is released some of the stored strain energy is communicated directly to the missile as Kinetic Energy.³⁴

Unpublished artist notes, undated, Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection.

Di ffrench, *The Women's Picture Book*, p.114.

Ibid

In an interview with a friend, ffrench expanded on the *Fontanel* premise. The performance was perceived to portray a time sequence involving a "transition from ancient to 'pre-white' dominated cultures through to the present white dominated period and extending to the future as it may or shall be". The overlay of white lacquer suggested the ascendancy of 'white-skinned' people, from the 'oneness' between man and the environment during antiquity to the 'plastic superficiality of white supremacy, a sense of unnaturalness, the plastic veneer of white civilization on human differences.' The interview goes on to reveal a dream the artist had after reading about the anthropologist Dr Leakey's discovery of human skulls in Northern Tanzania, the dream-skulls breaking open with black ash spilling over white ground. This in turn coincided with ffrench's knowledge of an ancient Celtic custom in which the cremated bodily remains of the dead are placed in a clay urn, and then broken open as a religious act of liberating the spirit from their earthly remains. The gesture of breaking open the womb-like vessels and spilling ash as relayed through the performance, symbolized an "emtion and going back, the end of the physical part." (Unpublished artists notes, 1981, Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection).

An earlier version of *Same Leaves* was also performed at the Women's Art Gallery in November 1981, ffrench realised it as a model for a more involved installation, performance and importantly for the photographic element.

Di ffrench *The Same Leaves: An Interpretative Account*, February 1982, Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection.

Di ffrench, *Statement of Intent: Asters*, Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection.

Ibid

According to John Hurrell who was present at the performance, ffrench (dressed in mechanics overalls) began the work by hanging the bow on the wall and spraying the vessel (full of ashes), with acrid smelling white paint.

Alternating between modern and primitive male roles, she repeatedly referred to tribal hunting cultures in her images, such as roasting a skin bound club over a burning torch thrust into a huge mound of earth, and then dripping black paint, like blood, from it, when it was suspended on the wall.³⁵

Images of a young male with an animal hide stretched over his body and a video of a supine male nude with the petals of silvery pink asters lightly falling over his body was interspersed with the action. An old legend relayed by ffrench indicates the symbolism behind the imagery:

He rode out searching for a site. Having great power, being a master in archery he ordered Asters to be planted where they fell. And soon the plains were undulating with Asters.³⁶

The metaphor of war and death juxtaposed with the beauty and colour of a sweep of flowers becomes embodied through the use of the male nude. The stretched animal hide, (indicating a target or a site) and his fallen body conjure imagery of death brought about by war. He becomes a memorial, an entire field undulating with colour. Rather than 'perform herself', ffrench's author function remained veiled. Dressed in the workers garb of mechanics overalls which hid her femininity, her ritualised actions did not engage the audience in the traditional way of seeing women (as scopophilic objects of desire), by dancing or revealing emotion. Emotion was conveyed only through the display of her photographs of the male nude and her gaze rather than audiences gaze of the artist was displayed.

The third performance to complete the more overt political/protest trilogy of *Gut Reaction* and *Fontanel* is *The Opinion*.³⁷ *The Opinion* took a year of development, until it took the final pared down form, and in viewing the performance on video, one can discern the economical use of sculpture and gesture in order to convey the idea that had evolved over a period of time and thought. Ffrench felt that the reliance on critical and judgemental pronouncements of overseas opinion created a sense of torpor in the New Zealand psyche. The elements that made up the performance and the way in which they were juxtaposed, presented a visual cipher for blind acceptance, abuse, fragility and erosion of power structures. As previously explored in *Gut Reaction*, and *Fontanel*, *The Opinion* concerned itself with the easy manipulation of media to convey truths and half-truths, issues of violence and victimization.

35 John Hurrell, 'The New Zealand Presence in Tasmania', *Art New Zealand*, No 28, 1983 p. 21

36 Quoted from Di ffrench, *Statement of Intent: Asters*.

37 *The Opinion* was first performed at the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1984, as part of the Artist's Projects programme and later in conjunction with the exhibition *Spare Parts* at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch 1985 for which the performance was video taped).

38 Jonathan Smart, 'Opinion by Di ffrench', *The Press*, Wednesday, October 16, 1985

The Opinion performance/installation began with the artist pouring red and black paint ("a journey, the blood of the workers")³⁸ into a large fibreglass container and then carefully placing it strategically in front of a lectern, a tall 'mechanical mouth' and a cubed, fibreglass plinth filled with a stack of newspapers. The top paper showed David Lange and Robert Muldoon during the 1984 election campaign. Another newspaper stack was situated to the right of the artist who, standing on the plinth, (which symbolised a position of authority), manipulated the mouth open and shut, delivering the 'speech', as given by those in power, the politicians and heads of multi-

national corporations. The fibreglass mouth and lectern resembled the shape of a ship's bow, representing 'overseas opinion',³⁹ wordlessly 'speaking' to the audience. The hollow thud of the heavy jaw ("the smiling viciousness of propaganda")⁴⁰ echoed in the gallery space, while the artist slowly and resolutely reached for news pages from the stack, screwing them up and throwing them into the awaiting container. Ffrench described the container in the accompanying notes to the performance as, "catching and consuming the 'speech' of the mechanical mouth". During the action an historical newsreel of the 1951 Wellington Labour Party rally was projected across the objects, towards the wall and over the tall newspaper stack. The atmosphere was heightened as turbid smoke slowly began to filter into the performance space, and the sound of an incoming tide progressively became louder.

The effect of the shadow cast by the artist (a reference, perhaps, to the alter ego) provided an element of corporeal angst juxtaposed with the soundtrack and film loop. *The Opinion's* visual and aesthetic employment of texture as a signification for time and change is another example of how integral performance was to the aesthetic expansion of her oeuvre. The dynamics of ffrench's sculptural and performance journey are a source of reference points. They are in fact proto-types to her subsequent photographic technique that developed as early on as *Fractures*, where glass and colour mingled in a personal ritual of cathartic identity seeking. The prescient vehicle of understanding for ffrench however, was *Fontanel*, a decisive moment of discovery with photographic projections onto ash and clay that produced a three dimensional, textured landscape, open for further exploration.

Through her newly acquired development of manipulating the illusion of refractive matter, the photographic medium presented a foundation through which she could embody complex philosophical and art historical ideas. The photograph could capture the evolution of thought patterns and processes, at times connecting and meeting and also ricocheting into other fields of inquiry.

There seems to be a core of personal experience from which a work is generated, then you can put other references together – almost as if the art work is a double condition – having a private and public history. ⁴¹

In 1985/86 ffrench was the recipient of a major grant from the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, which enabled her to focus on growing photographic interests. *The Fundamental Series*, 1986/87, which evolved from this grant is based on ffrench's observations of athletic training:

I watch the men and the women train and the difference is fascinating, the men have powerful dynamics – a reality/idealism which I intend to explore visually, and psychologically through sculpture and photography. ⁴²

The use of the male nude in her series of cibachromes from 1986 added to an uncomfortable paradox of feminist discourse in relation to eroticism. The Greek philosophy of the Ideal Man and the disciplined training of the mind in logic as well as physical discipline informs

Di ffrench, performance notes, 1985, Robert McDougall Art Gallery.
Jonathan Smart, 'Opinion by Di ffrench', *The Press*, Wednesday, October 16, 1985.
Di ffrench, artist notebook, 1990, Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection.
Artist statement, *Statement/Photography/Portraiture*, 1985, Robert McDougall Art Gallery loan collection.

the content of the *Fundamental Series*. The inherent 'unconscious' sense of primal wellbeing that male athletes displayed, rather than a 'macho' sense of pride, was explored by French, and a study of ancient Greek sculpture depicting male athletes provided further source material for French to build her investigations. The images are detached but charged with eroticism. *From the Raising of Adam* depicts a male model adopting the pose of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel Adam, glowing in liquid amber light. Photographed first in black and white the image was then projected onto a bed of crushed coal. Tungsten projector lights reflected rutilant gold on this material and it was photographed again. Photographic imagery has been manipulated since the Bauhaus (and earlier), but French in rephotographing a projected slide, textualised by haptic matter, created a singular technique and highly performative imagery.

The photographs are *not* photomontage. They are made by a lengthy process of photographing light and illusion, using materials with refractive qualities. Therefore the negatives and transparencies are never manipulated or touched by hand.⁴³

From the Raising of Adam appears passive at first glance, but the muscular body suggests an energy and power further enhanced by the clenched fist. The latent dynamism of this image is encoded with ambiguity of sensuality and aggression, desire and objectivity. When *The Fundamental Series* was exhibited, alongside the 'working' images of black and white studies, the reaction was one of fascination as to French's working process and curiosity that a female artist was dealing with the previously taboo subject of the male nude. The exhibition, **Women's Images of Men**, 1980 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London,⁴⁴ punctured the prevalent masculine mystique and the autonomy of the male gaze by representing the artists' views of patriarchy in both the domestic and public spheres. Critics and the public were at once horrified and mesmerised, and the exhibition, for the first time confronted the gaze of the dominant male system, contorting the assumption made by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* that men act and women appear:⁴⁵

The viewer viewed through the eyes of his traditional sitter confronts us with the inequality of that original relationship.⁴⁶

French conversely juxtaposed the power roles of the muse/artist and celebrated the act of looking, perhaps engaging with the animus in her psyche during the creative process. French represented the male nude positively, asserting her intersubjective exchange of desire with the subject with deference, rather than as a predatory act of satire.

I approach the study of the human form with respect, and primarily intend to project human dignity and humanity. There is no satirical intent.⁴⁷

The *Fundamental Series* was generated from an awareness of and interest in racial memory, the precarious survival of civilizations and the socially coded rhetoric of masculinity. There is a dichotomy of intent; by representing the male nude within a framework of classical Greek sculpture, French reworked the Ideal Male (as identified by men) into her own personal description, colluding with and eschewing the traditional representations of masculinity in art history.

43 Artist statement, *Fundamental Series* 1986/87.

44 This unprecedented exhibition had fused several issues, such as the emergence of important women artists in the contemporary art scene, the use of art as a political vehicle and the renewed popularity of figurative art. It included photographs, paintings, sculpture and performance art by such artists as Mandy Havers, Mouse Katz and Gertrude Elias. Themes that the artists portrayed in their work centred primarily on the abuse of patriarchal power, the power of critics, teachers and art historians. The male as an object of desire however did not appear without irony.

45 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London, 1972, p. 47.

46 Jacqueline Morreau & Catherine Elwes, 'Lighting a Candle', *Women's Images of Men*, p.16.

47 Di French, Work-plan, August 1988/1989.

French was Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence at the Christchurch Arts Centre during 1990. Provided with a studio and situated away from her family she developed the idea of the photographic image as "an imprinted memory – a slightly indistinct image where the sequence moves in and out of focus/time."⁴⁸ Major work produced during this period includes *The Idea Becomes Extinct*, *Taking Possession*, *Hunter/Warrior* and *Life Drawing Class*.

The *Hunter/Warrior* series convey the image of man as ancient warrior/athlete, as if recorded on the walls of caves in a time past, but still a legitimate legacy of contemporary domination, Somer Brodribb writes,

It is man, who risked his life in hunting and warfare, who made choices and developed subjectivity and universal values. It is by risking his life and killing that man realized himself as an existent. As a warrior and a hunter.⁴⁹

A working study in the *Hunter/Warrior* series, before being projected onto a sculptural three-dimensional landscape, depicts a double image of the same male figure. One is a silhouetted body trace, suggesting perhaps the shadow of the psyche/ego and the shadow of time past. The twin figure, devoid of features could be interpreted in phenomenological terms as the "originary presence to itself"⁵⁰, a trace in flux with the past and present.

The working tableau from this series draws a striking parallel with that of Bauhaus artist, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's montage, *Jealousy*, (1930). Both images construct two pairs of figures/silhouettes within a minimal architectural linearity, and in both compositions an inter-relating diagonal line connects the double figures. Moholy-Nagy believed that photography could supplement our opticality thus disengaging the reliance on traditional perceptual and aesthetic habits. The combination of placing photographs with drawing and experimenting with the light effects of substances such as lenses, crystals and liquids, was employed by Moholy-Nagy, who was aware of the full range of possibilities offered by this technique both in exploring subject matter and spatiality. He described his process, as thus:

They are pieced together from various photographs and are an experimental method of simultaneous representation; compressed interpenetration of visual and verbal wit; weird combinations of the most realistic, imitative means which pass into imaginary spheres. They can, however, also be forthright, tell a story; more veristic than life itself. It will soon be possible to do this work, at present still in its infancy and done by hand, mechanically, with the aid of projections and new printing processes.⁵¹

Moholy-Nagy, through photomontage, explored the dynamism of energy exchange between figures in a spatial articulation of perspective. Ffrench, like Moholy-Nagy, constructed her photographic tableaux on the idea of sequences within the frame, "repetition as a space-time organisational motif"⁵². The artist herself described the *Hunter, Warrior* series as an attempt to:

Divide the surface into distinct sections or time zones. Linear perspective and other devices link these "layers of time", which together with environmental and architectural installations, orients, locking the subject into its own reality.⁵³

Ffrench's subsequent photographic work (*Coding/Observer*, *Illustration of Government*, *Significant Little Opera*) employed an architectural dynamic in which to articulate space for a growing repertoire of mythic representations, where contemporary and antique worlds meet.

Di Ffrench navigated her intuitive responses through a matrix of the illusory and the real, and her salient oeuvre continues to project a complex weave of fluid interpretations, like "an imprint dividing"⁵⁴ in the light of a transforming change.

Di Ffrench, *Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence 1990, Black and Photographs and Cibachromes*, Robert McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch, 1991; unpaginated catalogue.

Somer Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(ers): A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, Spinifex Press, Melbourne, 1992, p.133.

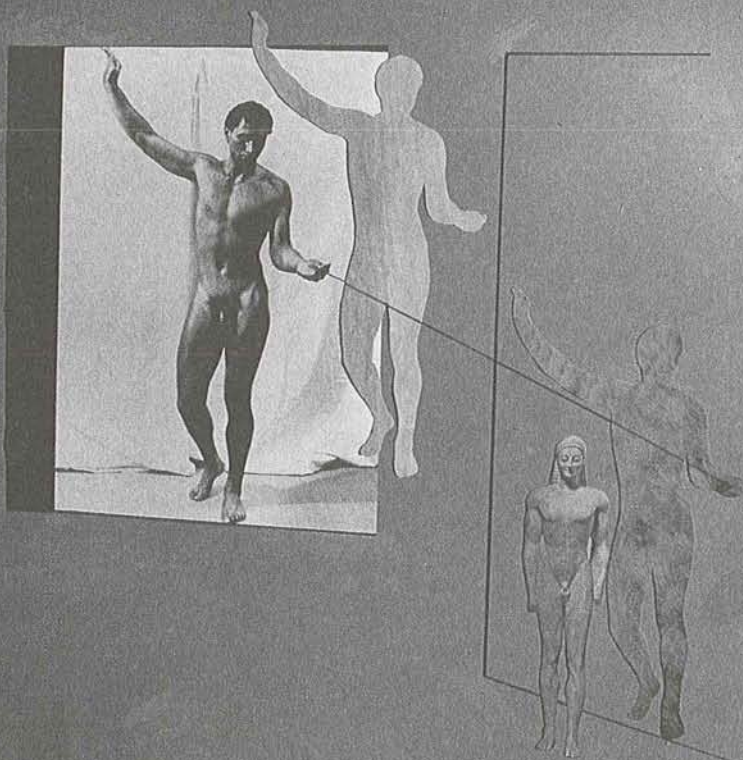
Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, State University of New York, 1991, p.53. Lyotard differentiates the difference and sameness of the ego in an intersubjective exchange with the world. The empirical ego is "interested in the world", and it lives there entirely naturally; on the basis of this ego the phenomenological attitude constitutes a *doubling of this ego*, which establishes the disinterested spectator, the phenomenological ego. It is this ego of the disinterested spectator that looks into the phenomenological reflection, undertaken itself through a disinterested attitude of the spectator." p.p. 51-52.

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy quoted from Dawn Ades, *Photomontage*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1996, p.151.

Ibid p. 153.

Di Ffrench, *Black and Photographs and Cibachromes*, Robert McDougall Art Annex, 1991; unpaginated catalogue.

Di Ffrench, from *Image Seeking its Text*, 1990.

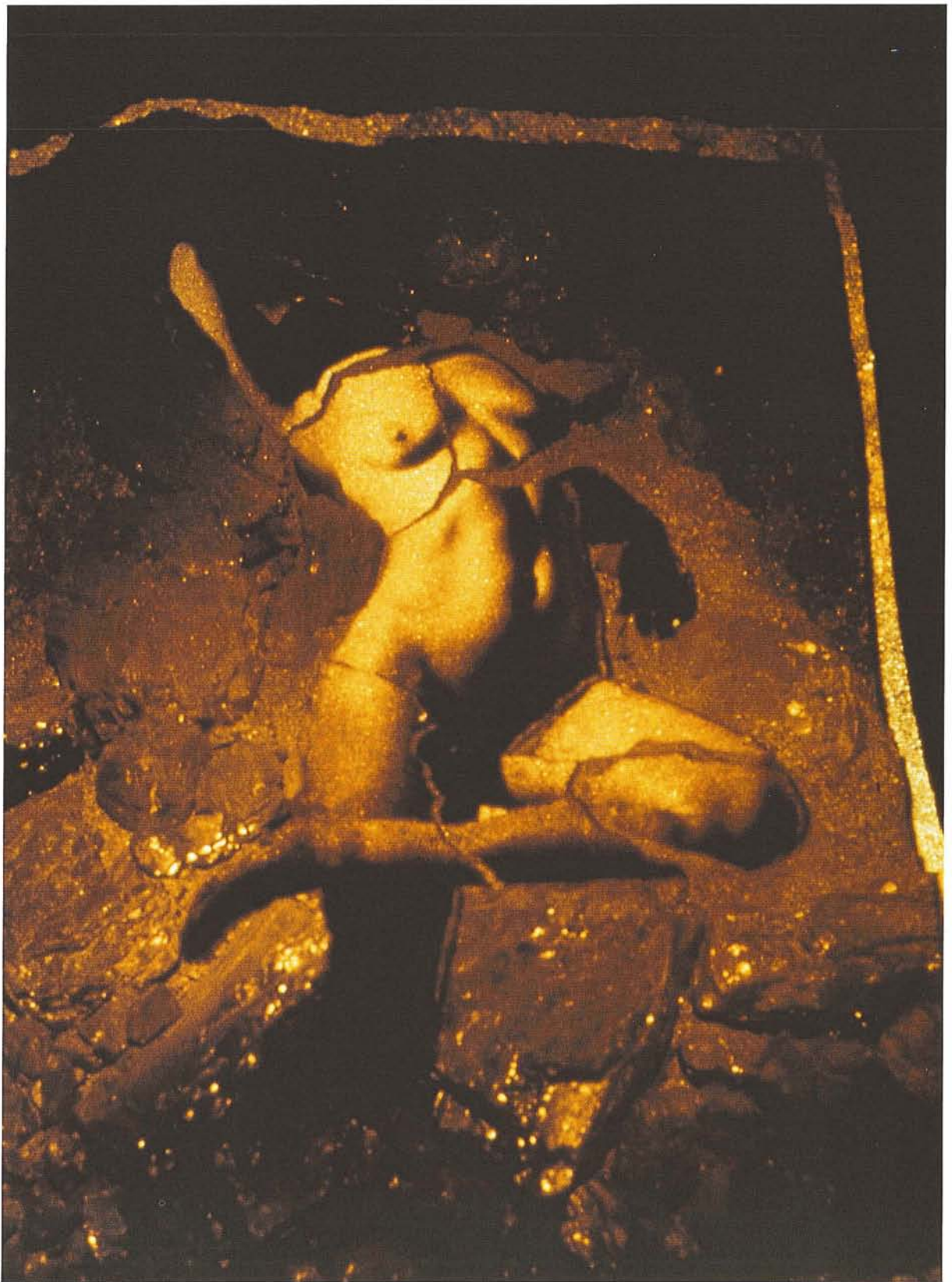


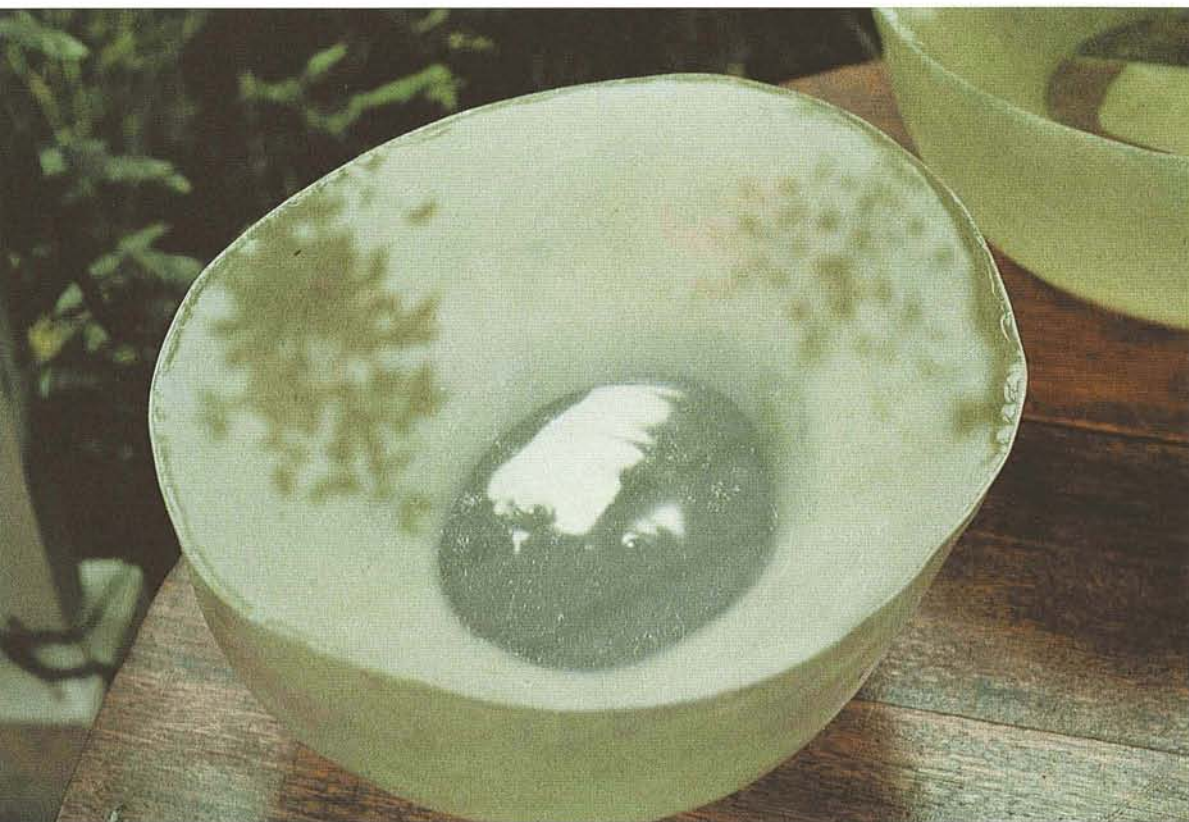
Hunter Warrior, 1990
Di ffrench
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

The Idea Becomes Extinct, 1990

Dí ffrench

Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

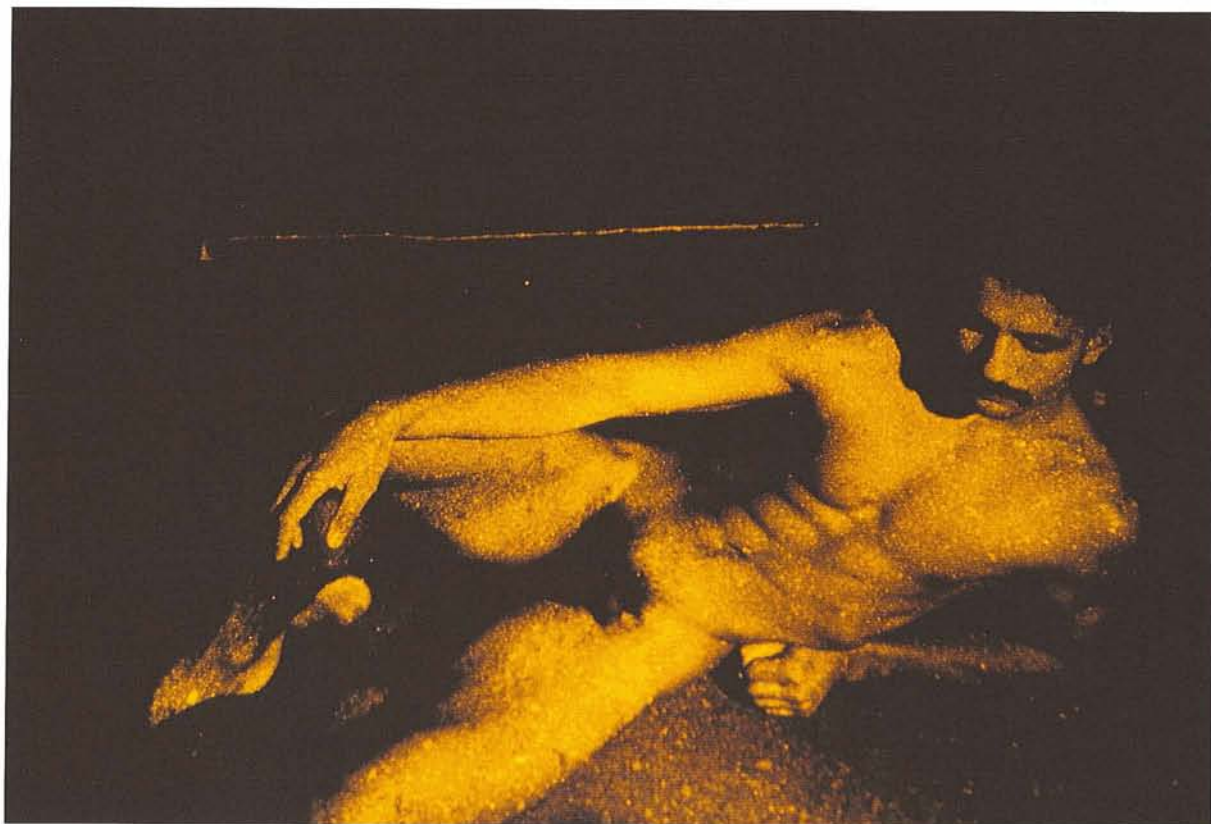




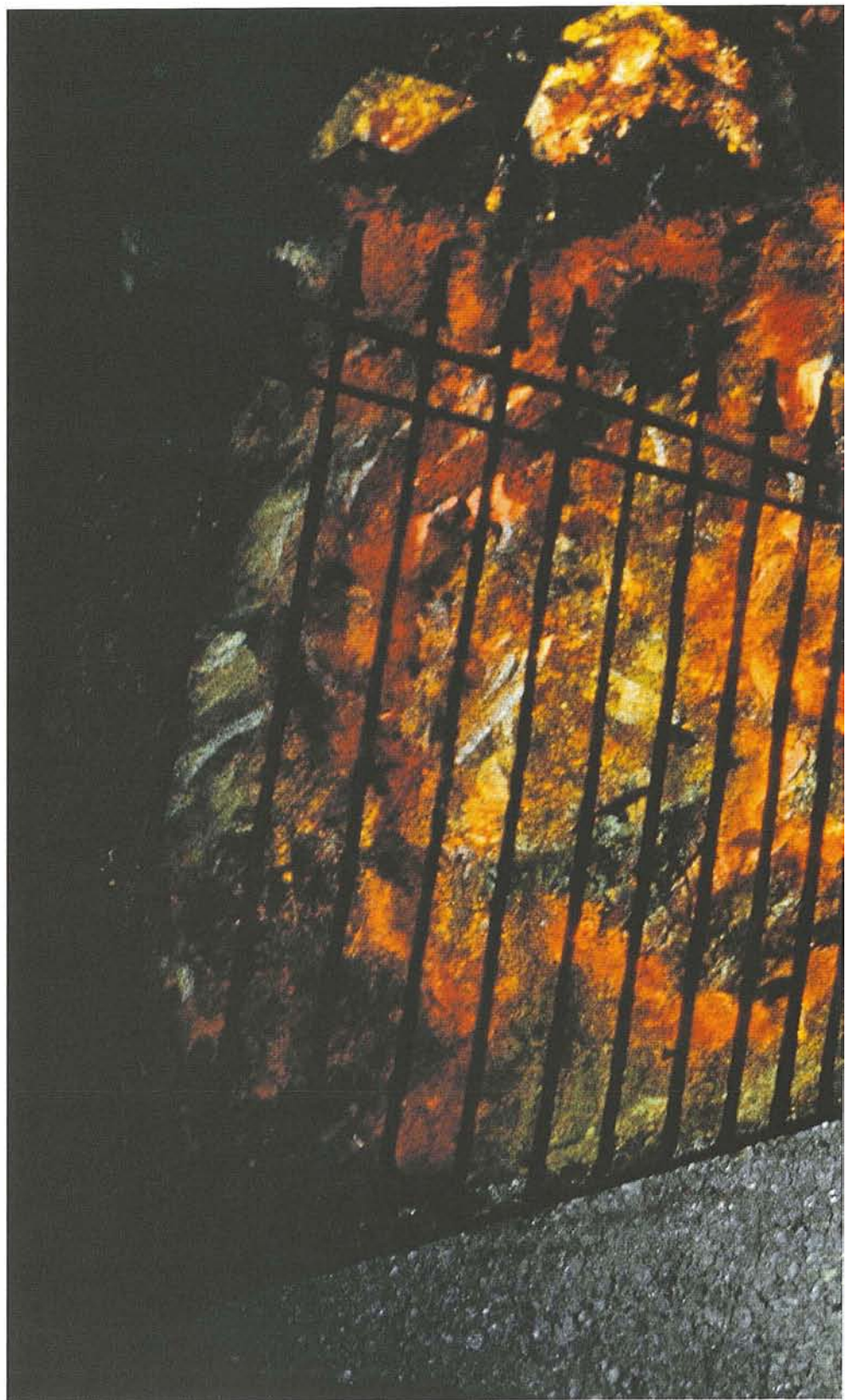
Mother, Daughter, Women, 1981 (detail)

Duffrench

Courtesy of the Artist's Estate



From the Raising of Adam, 1986
D'Offenbach
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate



Coding/Observer, 1992
Di ffrench
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate



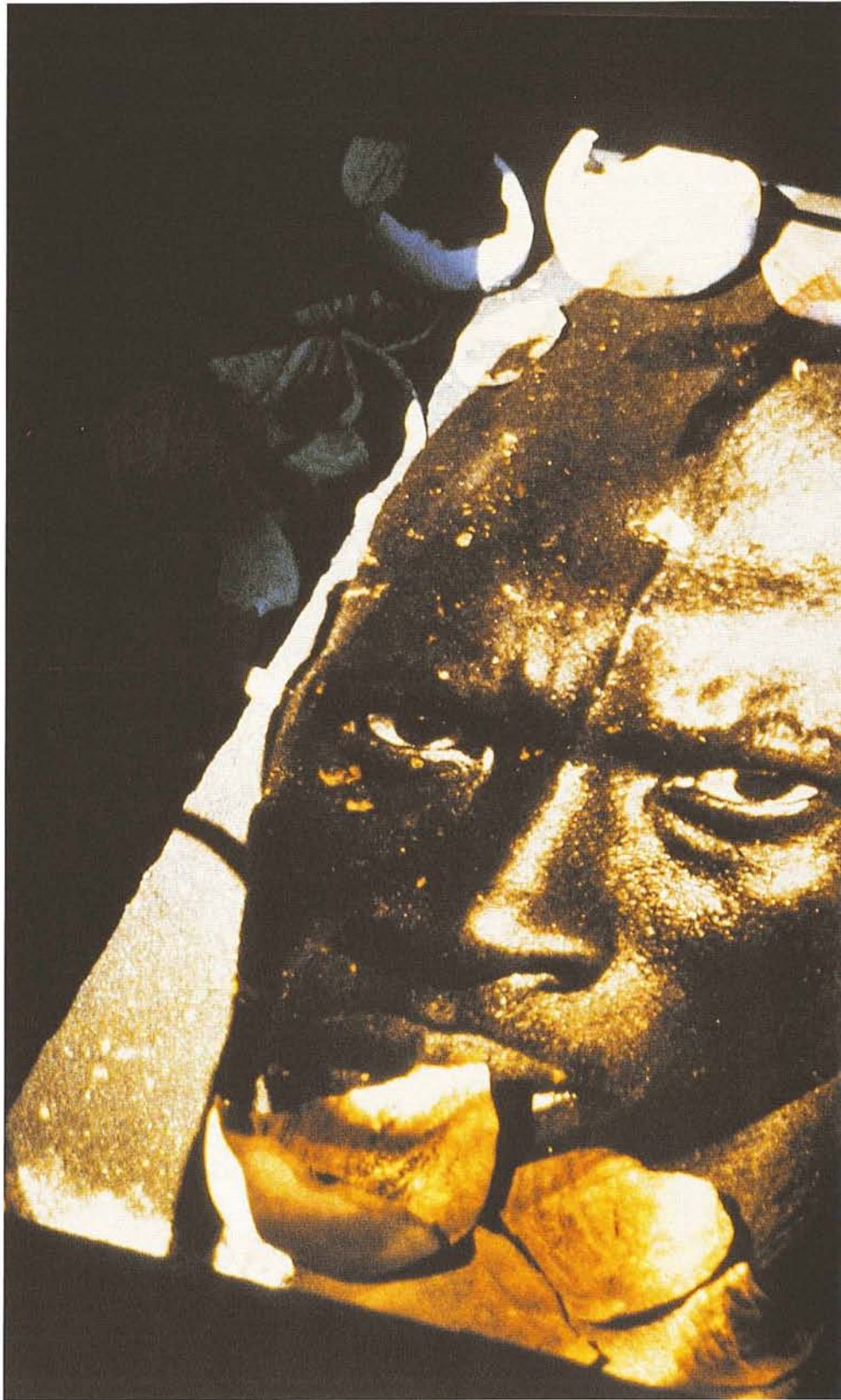
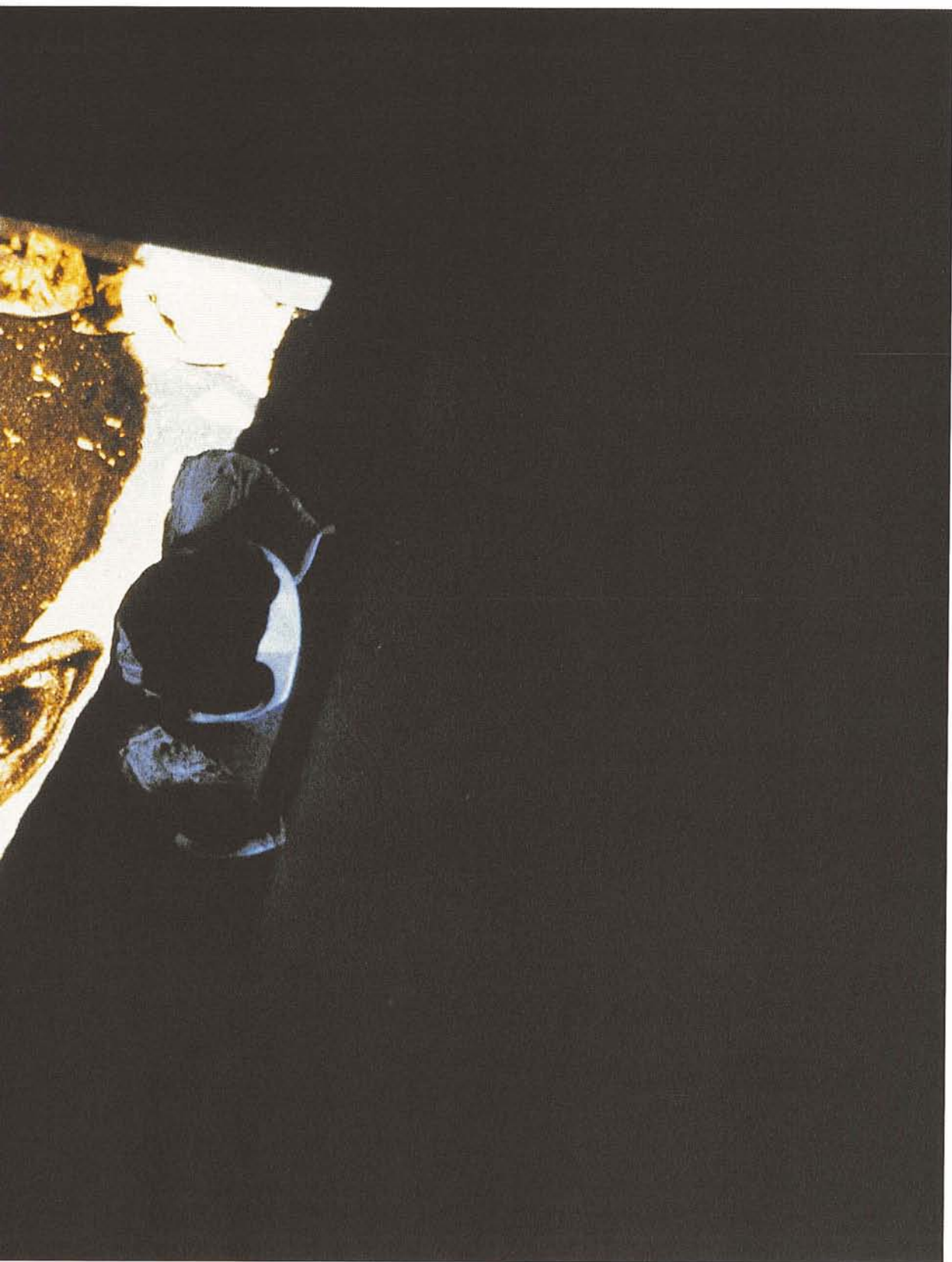


Image From Fontanel Performance, 1981
Diffracted
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate





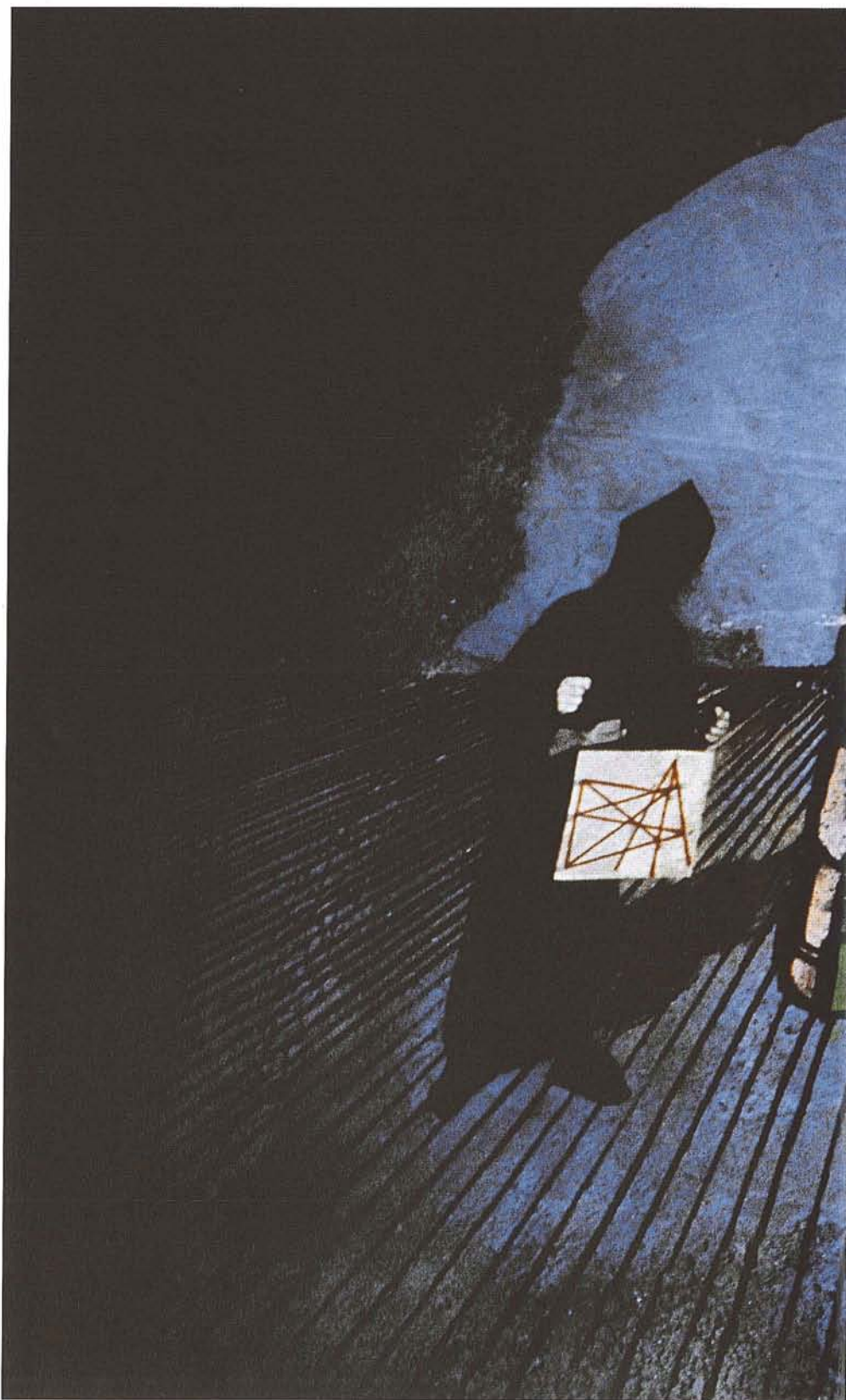
Still Image from The Opinion Performance, 1981

Di ffrench

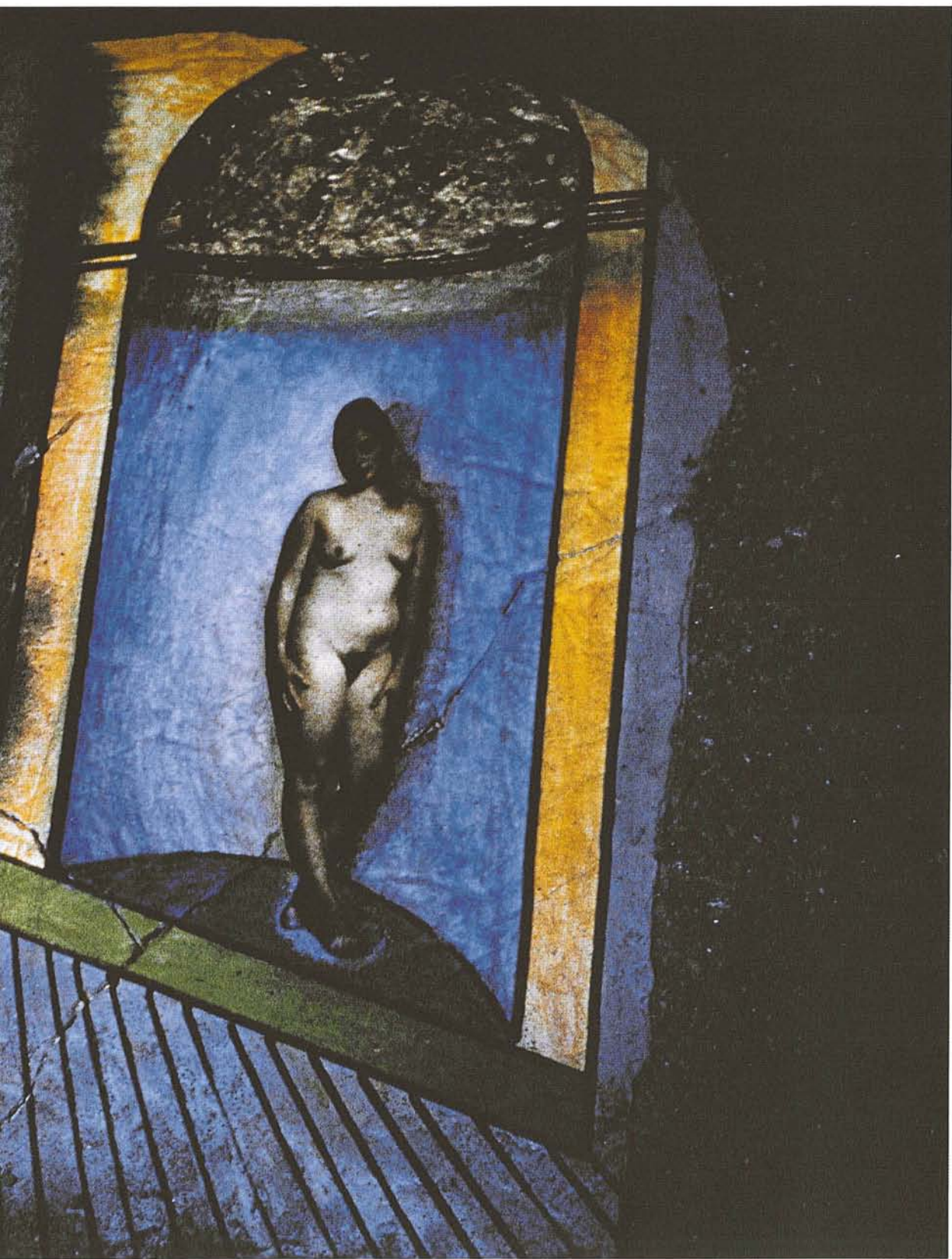
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate



Life Drawing Class, 1990
Di ffrench
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate



Coding/Observer, 1992
Differenz
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate



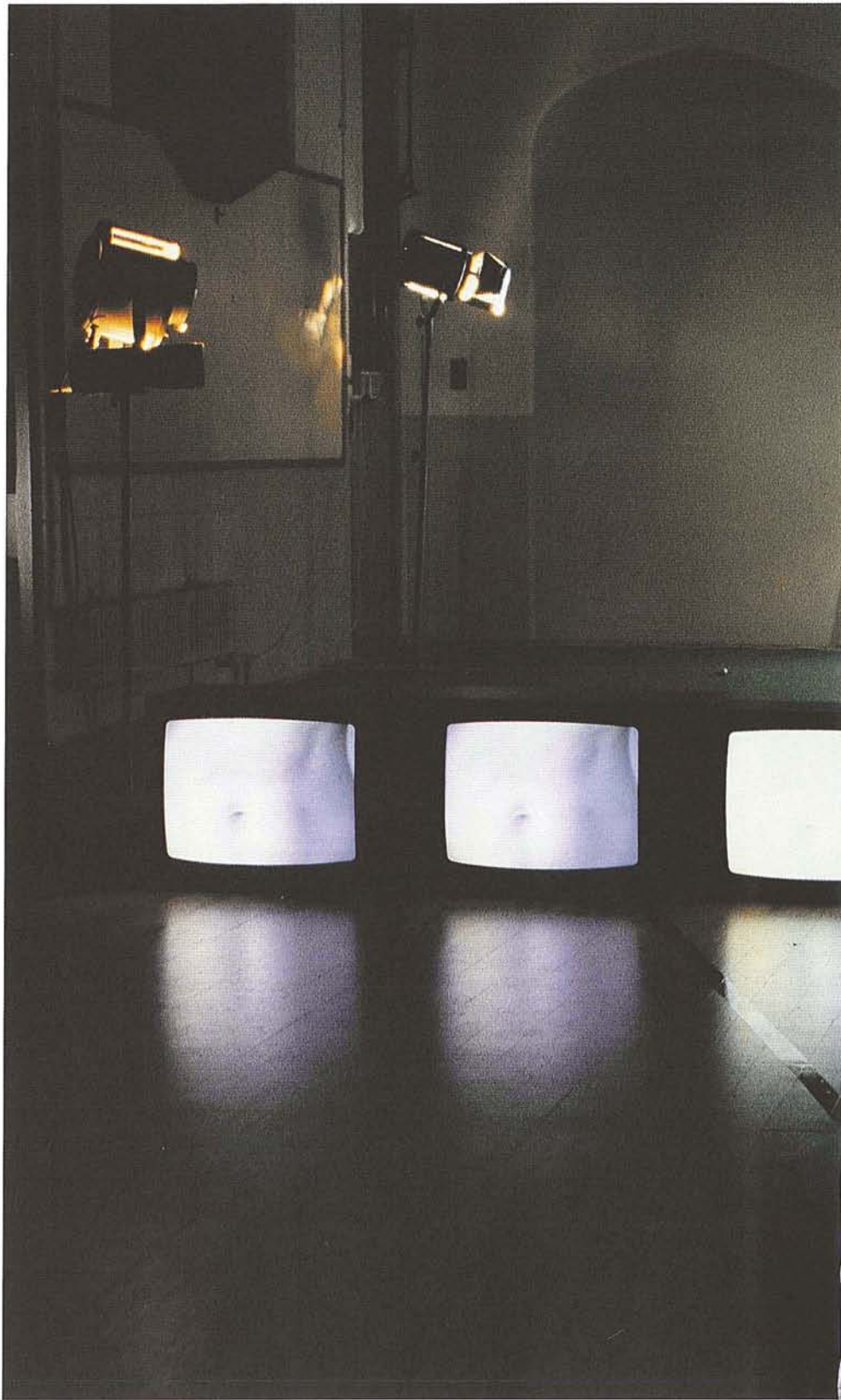
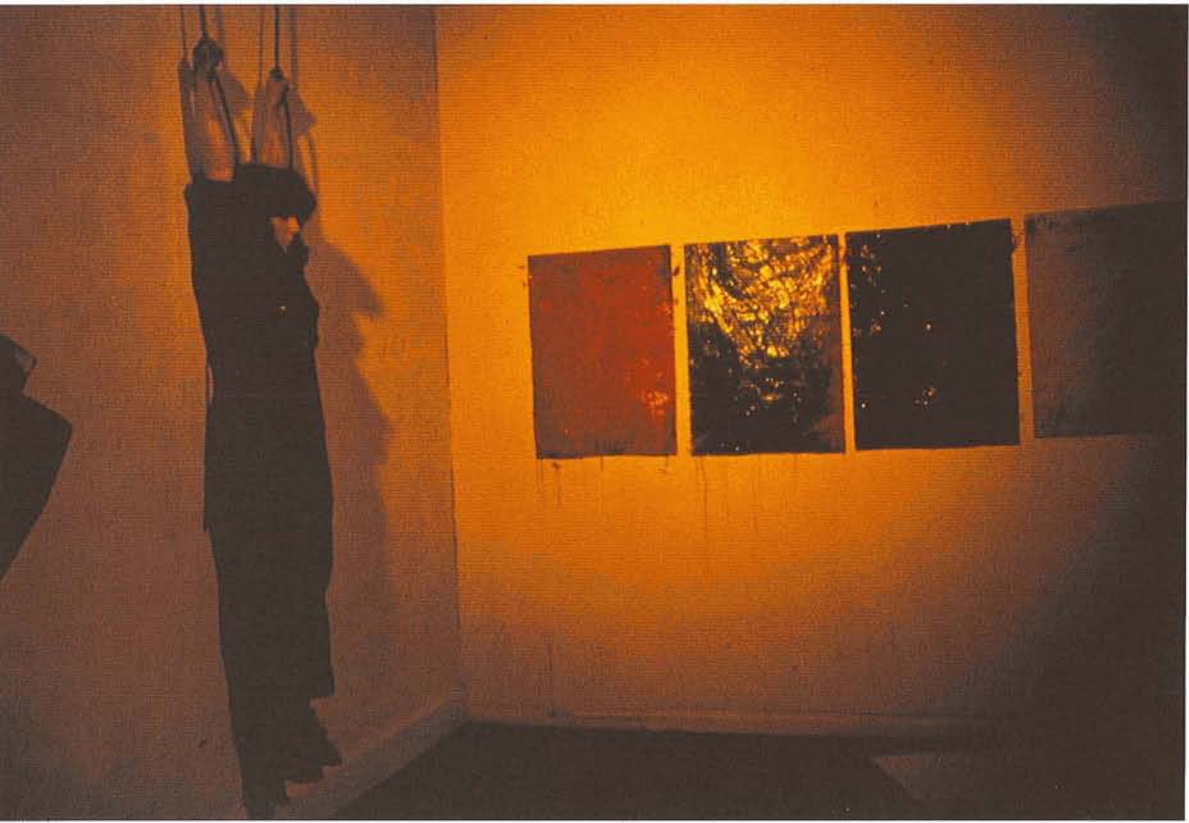


Image from Gut Reaction Performance, 1981
Di ffrench
Courtesy of the Artist's Estate





Page from Same Leaves Performance, 1981

Di ffrench

Courtesy of the Artist's Estate

- 1946 Born Melbourne
- 1963 Arrived Auckland New Zealand
- 1991–92 Dunedin Polytechnic School of Art tutor
- 1993–96 Otago Polytechnic School of Art tutor
- 1999 Died Oamaru, May 1999

Selected Exhibitions

- 1977 Broadway Galleries Milwaukee, Washington University Boston, Albert Park Auckland New Zealand, Pakiri Beach, New Zealand
- 1978 **Guerilla Art Show**, Wisconsin, USA
- 1979 **Fibre Show**, Wisconsin, USA. **Sculpture Festival**, First Church Grounds, Dunedin New Zealand.
- 1980 **Diaries**, (group exhibition) Women's Gallery, Wellington, **Aramoana** (group exhibition) Wellington City Art Gallery, Hansells Sculpture Symposium, Masterton, New Zealand
- 1981 **Mothers's** (group exhibition) national tour, Women's Art Gallery, Wellington. *Gut Reaction*, (performance/installation) Canterbury University. *Fontanel* (performance/installation), ANZART Christchurch. *The Same Leaves* Wellington, performance
- 1982 **F.1. Sculpture Project**, (group exhibition), Wellington. *The Same Leaves*, (performance/installation) National Gallery, Wellington
- 1983 *Asters* (performance) ANZART, Hobart
- 1984 *The Opinion* (performance/installation) Auckland City Art Gallery, Project Programme
- 1985 **Spare Parts** (group exhibition) Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, *The Opinion* (performance/installation) *Fundamental Series* Robert McDougall Art Gallery
- 1986 **Content/Context** National Art Gallery, Wellington, Shed 11. **Peace** Robert McDougall Art Gallery, (touring group exhibition)
- 1987 Carnegie Centre Gallery, Dunedin, (solo exhibition) Victoria University, Wellington
- 1988 Southland Art Gallery, Gore, (solo exhibition). Real Pictures Gallery, Auckland, (solo exhibition) Louise Beale Gallery, Wellington, (solo exhibition)
- 1989 Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch, (group exhibition). Real Pictures Gallery, (group exhibition) Moray Gallery Dunedin, (solo exhibition)
- 1990 Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch (solo). Louise Beale Gallery, Wellington, (group exhibition) Salamander Gallery, Christchurch, (solo exhibition) Arts Centre Christchurch, (group exhibition) School of Fine Arts, Canterbury University, (solo exhibition) CSA Gallery
- 1991 *Black and White Photographs and Cibachromes* Robert McDougall Art Gallery Art Annex, Trust Bank/Arts Council Artist in Residence Exhibition
- 1992 *Coding* (solo exhibition) Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch. National Art Gallery, Wellington, (solo exhibition) Hocken Gallery, Dunedin, (solo exhibition)
- 1993 Sarjeant Art Gallery, Wanganui (solo exhibition). Robert McDougall Art Gallery Suffrage Tapestry Commission, permanent installation, Christchurch Town Hall Chesterfield Couch Community Project Oamaru. **Survey Exhibition 1990–1993**, Centre for Contemporary Art, Hamilton, (solo exhibition) Dunedin Public Art Gallery, (solo exhibition)
- 1994 Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, (group exhibition). CSA Gallery, Christchurch, (group exhibition)
- 1995 *Illustration of Government* Vavasour Godkin Gallery, Auckland, (solo exhibition)
- 1996 *Significant Little Opera*, Vavasour Godkin Gallery, Auckland, (solo exhibition) *Shelters* Dunedin Film Festival, *Shelters* Wellington Film Festival

Grants

- 1981 QEII Travel Grant to attend ANZART, Christchurch
1982 QEII Grant. QEII Travel Grant to attend F.1. Wellington
1983 QEII Travel Grant to attend ANZART, Tasmania
1985/86 QEII Major Individual Grant
1987 QEII Travel Grant
1990 Trustbank Canterbury Fellowship, Christchurch Travel Grant Ministry of women's Affairs, Wellington,
1993 QEII Major Project Grant. QEII Major Project Grant for Producing and Directing Creative Film and Video, (collaboration with Jack Body)
1998 Wallace Art Award, 2nd Equal

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Art Gallery Annex *Black and White Photographs and Cibachromes 1990*
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