

Margaret Dawson's Amusements



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Margaret Dawson's Amusements: Identifying Marginalised Territory

If I were just curious, it would be very hard to say to someone, "I want to come to your home and have you talk to me and tell me the story of your life." I mean people are going to say, "You're crazy." Plus they're going to keep mighty guarded. But the camera is a kind of license. - Diane Arbus¹

While Margaret Dawson cites and agrees with Arbus' comment concerning the power of entry into people's lives that the camera can provide, for Dawson it is a more reciprocal process.² She also welcomes the subjects of her camera lens into her life so that they might learn from each other. However, despite the glowing reference she gives the medium, it is one that she feels still occupies a place outside the mainstream of visual arts practice. The peripheral location which Dawson feels photography inhabits is a key to understanding **Amusements**, as the concept of marginalisation infuses the exhibition at virtually all levels. Not only does it preface Dawson's position on her profession and medium, it provides the content of the series. Dawson has a strong interest in the politics of gender and in **Amusements** she considers the marginalised role of women in society.

Dawson is well known for appropriating imagery from familiar art historical references and incorporating them in her own work. The photographs in **Amusements** are inspired by Australian artist Sidney Nolan's **Ned Kelly** paintings. Dawson is fascinated by the 'outsider' role of outlaws and the way they are placed in a fringe position in society. She sees that there is common ground shared by the outlaw and traditional women's role's in that they both occupy this marginalised territory.

Dawson's interest in gender constructs arises out of her interest in identity; what forms us, deforms us, and informs us. Her concern with issues such as body politics emerges from the belief that the traditionally lesser status conferred on women is due to their gender. For this reason she was also attracted to the colonial time frame of Nolan's **Ned Kelly** series. She believes that, for New Zealand, many of the perceived behaviour patterns considered appropriate for men and women would have developed at this time. By focusing on this period, it offered an opportunity to deconstruct their origin.

The title chosen for the series, **Amusements**, comes from the notion that what is accorded less value in society is associated with women. Dawson is deliberately parodying the stereotyped association of the trivial with women's efforts and activities. She also enjoys the fact that the word 'muse' is contained within the title, conjuring up clichéd notions of artistic inspiration.

In keeping with the title's light tone and the links it makes with women as providers of entertainment, Dawson has given names to individual works that are in a similar vein. There are layers of references contained within them all. For example, **Riding Out** refers to a sexual revelation. In **High Jinks** Margaret Dawson utilises the complex set of meanings attached to the game of hide and seek as relevant to societal structures of gender. **Domestic Duties** both describes an incident credited to have sparked off the whole Kelly saga and examines the role of women at that time. In this picture a policeman, Constable Fitzpatrick, while searching the Kelly house looking for Ned, pulls Ned's

younger sister Kate onto his lap.³ Women's duties, it is implied, include being subject to this sort of treatment. In this image, Kate's face is pale and impassive as she mutely accepts being sacrificed to this imperious policeman's behaviour. The sense of women's enslavement to men's whims created in this photograph is reinforced both by the narrative content and through the compositional arrangement. Kate's dress seems to merge with the tablecloth as if an extension of it and the association of her with traditional women's duties, such as cooking. The pale area in the picture established by the figure of Kate and the tablecloth, adds a stark tension to the mood of the scene. The titles for both the show and the individual photographs are all clues to deciphering the multiple meanings built into the images and the concept governing the exhibition.

Some of Dawson's photographs present a literal tableaux-like reconstruction of Nolan's paintings while others are less direct but inspired by the theme. An aspect of Nolan's paintings which both appealed to Dawson and suited the methods she employs for making her images is their narrative quality. What emerges from Nolan's scenes is the sense that despite the bushrangers outlaw or marginalised roles, they are just as important as the police or any of the other elements of the picture. All are given equal emphasis. It appeared, to Dawson, that interesting juxtapositions occurred where there was a combination of the effects of people and culture on nature. Dawson sets an examination of this subject within the construction of gender, primarily masculine, stereotypes. She did not want to restrict her exploration to just the feminine, feeling that greater meaning would emerge out of comparison.

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paintings which she has called **Riding Out**. It features Steve Hart, a member of the Kelly gang, who frequently disguised himself as a woman to avoid public detection. **High Jinks** is another image that encourages us to question gender role construction. It is Dawson's version of the incident concerning the execution, by the Kelly gang, of Aaron Sheritt. He had betrayed them to the police so two members of the gang waited outside his house and shot him when he emerged. Dawson's photograph features the frightened police hiding inside with Sheritt's wife, a role played by a man, held as hostage. Repetition, a characteristic of photography, Dawson says, lends an internal structure to the composition of this image. The repetition of the uniforms and the pattern of the wallpaper and quilt are intended to underline the idea of repetition in the roles we assume in our lives.

Including a questioning of the make-up of masculinity makes the analysis less rigid. It extends it beyond mere dogma, where there is more challenge due to the dichotomies that exist in culture between the masculine and feminine.

Another way the concept of marginalisation permeates the multiple layers of meaning contained in Dawson's photographs is in the way she constructs her images. She often utilises, as models, arts groups who as she perceives herself, occupy a position outside the mainstream of arts practice, for example, the cake icing guild, potters, or woodturners. She does this in an effort to extend the definition and interpretation of what is meant by the arts. It also means that she and the groups she works with get to know each others work and the skills they each possess. Dawson feels this helps to break down some of the barriers between art forms. Those in the photograph are united for that moment.

A Shooting Party, colour photograph and mixed media, 1020mm x 1340mm



Nature Study, colour photograph and mixed media, 1030mm x 1370mm



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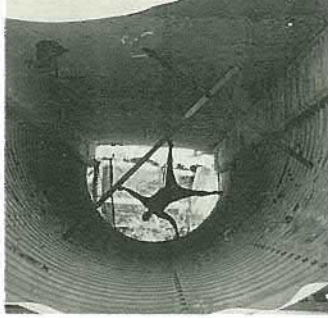
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Spinning, colour photograph and mixed media, 1000mm x 980mm

Using established groups such as these is also an aid to creating the working relationships required for the construction of the image. Because there is an existing rapport amongst the group, it is a means towards establishing a unified dynamic for the camera.

Apart from providing the driving force for the underlying concerns Dawson is dealing with in her photographs, Nolan's paintings were also useful in other ways. Dawson feels that the Australian link will lend a cultural familiarity to the images that will serve to attract the 'reader' to her work. Dawson deliberately describes viewers of her work as readers. Viewer, she says, sounds passive and amorphous. Reader, on the other hand, suggests an engaged, directed and structured encounter with her images. The recreation of familiar images provides a point of recognition for the reader assisting their efforts to access the meanings contained within the image. There will be a 'local' quality that contributes to a personal attraction to the images but which is then followed by the reader becoming aware of the differences.

The fact that this series of images has been drawn from Antipodean history has also affected their technical production. Dawson has been able to incorporate the use of existing settings and several of the photographs, such as **Domestic Duties**, were shot at Ferrymead Historic Park, Christchurch, to obtain an authentic colonial backdrop for the images. Ironically, after the elaborate constructed settings Dawson has employed in the past, she found working with these existing sets lent a strangely kitsch note to the experience.

Because the majority of the manipulation brought to bear on the construction of these images takes place in the choices made when setting up the photograph rather than through using paint

Bird Watching, colour photograph and mixed media, 1025mm x 1250mm



or other technical post production methods, Dawson has had to be very sure about how she wants the finished image to look. She tries to make each step of their production a conscious and relevant one, all contributing to their predetermined and constructed meaning.

The way readers are attracted to her work is also a factor in the large format Dawson employs for her images. She feels that the large, colourful contours have a seductive quality that has the power to attract and draw a person's response. The size of the work is intended to have this effect and it also serves to emphasise that it is larger than life, dramatic, and pointedly constructed.

In **Amusements**, Dawson combines a personal interest in a woman's place in contemporary society with an analysis of her own profession and its relationship with current arts practice. While she assesses the status of both the photographic medium and the role of women as wanting, Dawson is herself a strong advocate for both. Her skilful articulation of these views combined with her compelling images ensures that the reader is in the best possible position to reflect in an informed way on these issues.

Elizabeth Caldwell, Curator

Notes

1. **Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph**, Aperture, Millerton, New York, 1972, p.1.
2. Much of the information for this essay is the result of conversations with the artist which took place on 30 November 1993.
3. Information regarding the Kelly gang and Sidney Nolan's paintings has come from **Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly Paintings and Drawings from the Collection of the Australian National Gallery**, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989.



Embroidery, colour photograph and mixed media, 1030mm x 1350mm

Outlaws in everyday life: Margaret Dawson's Amusements

Everyday life should be a work of art - Henri Lefebvre

For Henri Lefebvre, the experience of everyday life in the modern world can be characterized by one word: terrorism. The terrorist society, according to his definition, is not one of bloodshed, or the usual images we associate with the term. Rather, as Lefebvre notes: "In a terrorist society terror is diffuse, violence is always latent, pressure is exerted from all sides on its members, who can only avoid it and shift its weight by a superhuman effort . . . terror cannot be located, for it comes from everywhere and from every specific thing".¹

Lefebvre's terrorist society resembles in many ways Michel Foucault's "disciplinary society". The terrorist society, too, functions through the internalization of terror. The diffuse nature of terrorism arises out of the ways in which we take up our roles as consumers and producers within the institutional narratives which govern daily life. From work to consumption and leisure (as well as the consumption of leisure), advertising and modern institutional structures function as a network of signs, which in turn comprise a network of discipline which we internalize in varying ways and degrees. For instance, we are known by our credit card history, or our income tax returns; we are assailed by market research; our leisure is structured by the codes of tourism, gender roles, and market research yet again. We are taught to consume leisure as a commodity, as reward for our labour.

Like Foucault, Lefebvre also sees modern life organized around

the disciplining of subjects; that is, the ways in which we subject ourselves and are subjected to surveillance and power through self-discipline. However, as Foucault and Lefebvre both note, we do not just submit. We also resist.

In his analysis of the relationship between repression and power, Foucault notes that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power". Moreover, he suggests that "resistances are the odd terms in relationships of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite . . . The points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behaviour".²

So for Foucault, resistance serves as the operative term, arising out of, and inextricably linked to, the network of power. Lefebvre's analysis, on the other hand, celebrates a utopian impulse by emphasizing the possibility of finding "the opening, the way of escape" from the terrorist society.³ Although their analyses of power diverge in fundamental ways, both Foucault and Lefebvre emphasize the possibilities inherent in contradictions within the system. Lefebvre writes: "In appearance at least a terrorist society is coherent and powerful, and there would be no answer to such terrorism if it did not exploit an ideology of Reason and of Liberty and thus involve irrationality with Reason, compulsion with Liberty, violence with the so-called persuasive measures, in a word contradiction with an illusory coherence".⁴

The exploration of "contradiction with an illusory coherence" can be seen as a recurring issue in Margaret Dawson's work. Since the late seventies and through the eighties up to her present exhibition, Dawson's work evinces a fascination with and exploration of personae and the various kinds of roles either assigned to us or taken up by us in everyday life. An ongoing concern of her work in particular has been the way in which gender roles constrain and even terrorize women. Above all, her work is characterized by a strong narrative impulse; one which also calls for an active interpretation by the viewer. By "reading" the works, we participate in the construction of the narrative, becoming aware of the limitations of roles as well as possibilities to change them.

Her most recent exhibition, **Amusements**, is also marked by this ongoing exploration of the construction of roles, staging, photographic conventions, and narrative. Central to the series of photographs as well as the narrative interpretations we construct. Based on the Australian painter Sidney Nolan's **Ned Kelly** series, Dawson's new work could perhaps effectively be characterized by the phrase "outlaws in everyday life". These works, too, manifest her interest in the relationship of art to popular culture and the construction of boundaries: the boundary between criminality and the law, or the boundary between photography and painting, or high and low cultural forms.

In Nolan's work, Ned Kelly's characteristic armour, in particular his helmet, is the means by which Nolan represents his own view of landscape and events; in Dawson's reinterpretation, Ned Kelly appears masked like a kind of terrorist striking back at the terror of everyday life. For Nolan, the popularity and power of the narrative of Ned Kelly as a national myth is what first captured his attention. The popularity of the Kelly narrative and its power as a

legend even in New Zealand is part of what attracted Dawson as well. The legend can be seen as one particular mode of resistance at a certain historical juncture, Australia in the nineteenth century, but its force as a popular narrative suggests that the contours of the story describe contradictions and possible resistances within contemporary everyday culture.

Within the realm of popular narrative, the story of Ned Kelly's resistance has literary and historical precedents. Wearing his helmet and suit of armour, Kelly recalls other knights of popular legend, such as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. While the parallel between Cervantes' knight and Ned Kelly is not an even fit—Don Quixote, with his aristocratic pretensions, has read too many chivalric romances—Cervantes' novel nevertheless is significant in terms of thinking about the power of popular narrative, for it marks a moment when the focus on everyday life came to the fore and the power of legend became apparent. What the novel reflects is the nature and power of popular fiction and its effects. Like Don Quixote, the popularity of the Ned Kelly legend has had an impact on everyday language: from Don Quixote, we get the phrase, 'tilting at windmills' and the term 'quixotic' and from the Kelly narrative the expression, 'game as Ned Kelly'.

The other knight of popular legend more closely aligned to the story of Ned Kelly is, of course, Robin Hood and his band of merry men, robbing from the rich to give to the poor. Again, in Ned Kelly's version: "We rob their banks/We thin their ranks/And ask no thanks/For what we do".⁵ These narratives and phrases are embedded in everyday culture. In the context of popular narrative, Kelly is everyone's outlaw—that is, anybody could potentially be a Ned Kelly in relationship to the law. Read allegorically, we can read into the narrative and into Dawson's photographs various

Skittle, colour photograph and mixed media, 1700mm x 1025mm



Fox Trot, colour photograph and mixed media, 1380mm x 1020mm





Solitaire, colour photograph and mixed media, 1330mm x 1030mm

groups who have been marginalized or defined as 'other'. The photographer, too, is a kind of renegade, s/he is everyone's painter; the possibility exists that anyone can pick up the camera.

Implicit in Dawson's work is the utopian possibility of rethinking our roles by recognizing their contradictions. In an interview several years ago with **Broadsheet** she notes of her work for the exhibition, **Marginal Persona**, that "snapshots are universal, personal, familiar things and they are of us, growing up, changing, assuming roles, so it seemed natural to use myself as actor, showing up the illusoriness and also how one can move into a role and out".⁶

As a popular narrative, Ned Kelly's story and its reinterpretations in painting, film, photography, and other mediums can be seen to represent what cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes as transformations of meaning, or "the active work on existing traditions and activities, their active reworking so that they come out a different way: they appear to 'persist' - yet, from one period to another, they come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people live and the ways they define their relations to each other, to 'the others' and to the conditions of life".⁷

The Ned Kelly legend undergoes such transformation in Dawson's photographs, and we are meant to reflect on the ways in which the story in its outlines can define the terror of daily life today and the productive contradictions of the various roles of the characters. The Ned Kelly legend crystallizes the ways in which roles are reversed and revered: the police in the role of representing and upholding the law of property in fact take on the opposite role, that of criminal, and the outlaws, heroes. At other points, the lines between oppressors and victims also blurs. More importantly, the

Hangman, colour photograph and mixed media, 1670mm x 1030mm



Ned Kelly story is one which is constructed collectively and whose meanings will accrue differently depending on the medium through which the narrative is conveyed whether it be film, print, oral history, painting, or photography. It is also a narrative that offers possibilities to investigate the construction of roles in the colonial past, while simultaneously pointing to possibilities of alternative meanings and roles in the present. In this sense, the Ned Kelly legend can stand as a powerful allegory of outlaws and institutions in contemporary New Zealand.

Dr. Yvonne Reineke

Lecturer in American Studies, University of Canterbury

Notes

1. Henri Lefebvre, **Everyday Life in the Modern World**, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 1990, p. 147.
2. Michel Foucault, **The History of Sexuality: Volume I**, trans. Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, New York, 1990, p. 95.
3. Foucault, p. 96.
4. Lefebvre, p. 150.
5. **Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly Paintings and Drawings from the Collection of the Australian National Gallery**, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989, p. 13.
6. Pat Rosier, interview with Margaret Dawson for **Broadsheet**, August 1988.
7. Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in **People's History and Socialist Theory**, Raphael Samuel (ed.), Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. 227.



Riding Out, colour photograph and mixed media, 1030mm x 1470mm



the artist

Margaret Dawson was born in Blenheim in 1950 and trained originally as a nurse. However, she followed this early training by attending the University of Canterbury, graduating with a Diploma in Fine Arts in 1978. In 1981 she completed a Diploma of Teaching, and in 1992 a Bachelor of Arts in Feminist Studies. In addition to this impressive group of qualifications, Margaret Dawson has been the recipient of five Q. E. II Arts Council of New Zealand grants; in 1979, twice in 1986, in 1991, and a major fellowship award in 1993. Her work is represented in the following public collections: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, Sarjeant Art Gallery, Wanganui, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton.

selected exhibitions

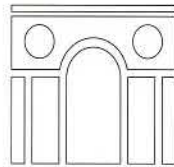
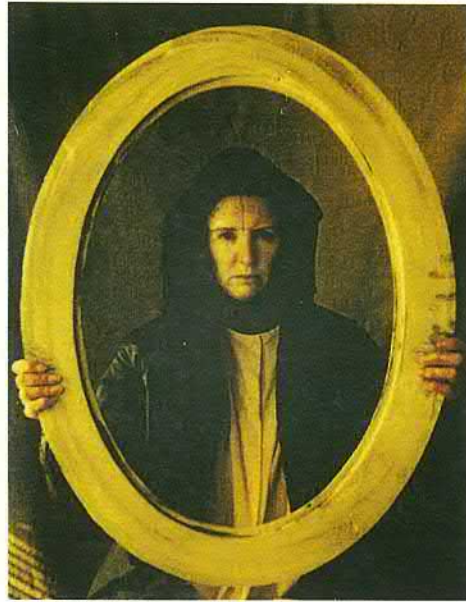
- 1983 **About Women**, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch; South Island tour.
- 1986 **Content/Context**, Shed 11, National Art Gallery, Wellington.
- 1987 **Marginal Persona**, Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt.
- 1988 **Marginal Persona**, Brooke Gifford Gallery, Christchurch; George Fraser Gallery, Auckland.
- 1989 **Canterbury Belles**, McDougall Art Annex, Christchurch; national tour.
Imposing Narratives, Wellington City Art Gallery; national tour.
- 1990 **Yardbirds**, Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch.
In the Forest of Dreams, Moët et Chandon Art Foundation; national tour.
Now See Hear, Wellington City Art Gallery; national tour.
- 1991 **Inheritance**, Wellington City Art Gallery.
- 1992 **Flowers, Birds, and Maladies**, Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North.
Crush, Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch.
Home Made Home, Wellington City Art Gallery.
Prospect Canterbury, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch.
- 1992 **Maladies**, Jonathan Jensen Gallery, Christchurch; Left Bank Gallery, Greymouth.
- 1993 **Where is she?** Ferrymead Museum School House, Christchurch.
White Camellias, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch.
Perspectives, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.
Alter/Image, City Gallery, Wellington and Auckland City Art Gallery.
T'arting up Town, a Christchurch Community Arts Council project.

list of works

- Portraiture**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1330mm x 1030mm
- Skittle**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1700mm x 1025mm
- Domestic Duties**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1030mm x 1330mm
- Embroidery**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1030mm x 1350mm
- A Shooting Party**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1020mm x 1340mm
- Riding Out**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1030mm x 1470mm
- Nature Study**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1030mm x 1370mm
- High Jinks**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1360mm x 1030mm
- Fox Trot**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1380mm x 1020mm
- Solitaire**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1330mm x 1030mm
- Spinning**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1000mm x 980mm
- Bird Watching**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1025mm x 1250mm
- Hangman**, colour photograph and mixed media, 1670mm x 1030mm



High Jinks, colour photograph and mixed media, 1360mm x 1030mm



McDougall Art Annex
Christchurch

Plates: front cover, **Domestic Duties**; back cover, **Portraiture**.

Design and Typesetting: Gwynneth Campbell

The artist wishes to acknowledge the support of **Presentation Prints Limited**, Auckland,
and the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand

ISBN 0-908874-16-2