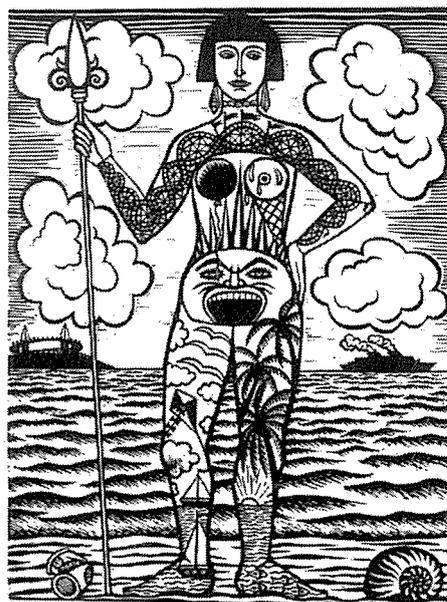


# ST KILDA WARRIOR

The linocuts and woodcuts of  
Deborah Klein 1986-1996

Katherine McDonald

In her nostalgic, bittersweet images of women Deborah Klein interweaves eclectic influences from art, music, literature and film with private emotional experiences and physical aspects of her St Kilda environment — where she has lived since a child — to courageous female saints, tired whores, abused Hollywood actresses, disillusioned literary wives and side-show performers from another time. Like Klein, these characters are survivors; they directly meet the gaze of the viewer, or they enigmatically avert their eyes, in either case inviting sympathy in the spectator.



Deborah Klein ST KILDA WARRIOR, 1996  
linocut 61 x 46.5 cm

Women artists have long been associated with relief printmaking in Australia and over the past decade Deborah Klein has drawn inspiration from two of its finest practitioners, Thea Proctor (1879–1966) and Barbara Hanrahan (1939–1992). Klein's early linocuts, such as *Glass Cabinet*, pay homage to Proctor's still life prints of the 1920s and '30s, although experimentation on a larger scale, and the use of still life as a conscious reflection of self, places these images firmly in the 1980s. Many of the artist's carefully designed prints of women in patterned dress recall the modish Modernist images of Thea Proctor, with their angular, flat shapes and decorative schemes, but a closer study of Klein's work yields an iconography which is as rich in metaphor as it is in emotional tension.

There are links with the relief prints of Barbara Hanrahan, such as the use of tight detail within figures and cursive script words, and a shared concern for the plight of women, although Hanrahan addressed the broader social contexts of sexual relationships between men and women whereas Deborah Klein presents an intensely private perspective in a world where the male presence is often sensed but not frequently seen. Hanrahan's prints of the 1970s and '80s are gutsy and irreverent; Klein, like Proctor, maintains a sense of decorum and order in her work.

Autobiographical references in the form of symbolic self portraits, or allegory, began in 1988. A return visit to London,

which coincided with the deaths of two close male friends there, intensified the emotional tenor of the artist's subject matter and determined a deliberately simpler approach to technique through the use of woodcut, traditionally a direct and expressive medium. Something of Klein's emotional state is transmitted in the cutting style of *The Sisters*, and it is reinforced in the stricken representation of the artist with her close friend, Sue Verney, at Paul Coram's funeral. At this time Klein produced the acclaimed linocut suite *The Pirate Jenny Prints* which are dedicated to the memory of the artist's two friends.

Published by Port Jackson Press in 1989 *The Pirate Jenny Prints* comprise fifteen large black and white linocuts, the first eleven prints (each approximately 61.5 x 46 cm) showing scenes from Pirate Jenny's life and four larger panels (63.5 x 95 cm) ending the sequence with a *Danse Macabre*. Overall the mood is cynical and grim; the figures are severe, unsmiling and sad. The printed set is imbued with a complex system of symbols and influences which are as dense as a painted renaissance allegory although the references to the artist's environment are clear and sustained. Deborah Klein explains in the illustrated catalogue:

*For some time I had wanted to draw my images from a range of personal experiences and purely imaginative perceptions that had found no place in my earlier works of interiors or still lifes ... Eventually I came to focus on one woman in particular — the whore Pirate Jenny,*

*a minor, but unforgettable character in 'The Threepenny Opera' by Bertoldt Brecht ... I was concerned that my work should not be merely illustrative but that this Jenny would be a symbol for all women; sometimes my alter-ego. I wanted to take her out of Brecht's Soho in London and place her in a setting and in situations which would have more personal meaning. The next logical step, it seemed to me, was that if Pirate Jenny lived in Australia, apart from King's Cross in Sydney, the obvious place for her would be my home town of St Kilda.'*

Of the eleven scenes from *Pirate Jenny's* life, four are more obviously set in St Kilda and in two of these — *Sometimes Jenny Took Long and Lonely Walks Along the Long and Lonely Beach* (a self portrait of the artist) and *Death and Resurrection in a St Kilda Nursing Home* (depicting Klein's horror at seeing her Aunt close to death) her life crosses with her fantasies most fully. In others such as *Pirate Jenny at Luna Park* and *Pirate Jenny with a Customer* we see first hand observation of the streetwalkers of St Kilda, and in *Pirate Jenny and the Whores of Babylon* and *Give Me Your Poor, Your Maladjusted*, Klein's brothel interiors are decorated in vivid detail with her own domestic objects.

The deliberate use of a children's storybook style for *The Pirate Jenny's* four *Danse Macabre* panels — which form a continuous narrative band of undulating landscape and sky behind the eight dancing figures — sets up an ironic contrast with the unhappy scene of Jenny

and her cat led by circus and carnival figures to the black-robed figure of Death in the last of the sequence. Death is based on Ingmar Bergman's character from his film *The Seventh Seal* although original Dance of Death scenes derive from early thirteenth-century German woodcuts, which notably often feature rolling hills and a striking use of black and white. Some of the domestic compositions in earlier scenes, such as *Death and Resurrection in a St Kilda Nursing Home* recall German woodcut interiors of religious subjects such as *The Death of the Virgin*. The artist freely acknowledges references to the *Japonisme* of Rupert Bunny, Japanese woodcuts, Toulouse-Lautrec, Whistler, the Victorian neo-classicism of Alma-Tadema, illustrated children's books and the films of Bergman and Lang - and to these one might also link the expressionist relief novelettes of the Belgian printmaker Frans Masereel (1889-1972), especially his depiction of low life genre in a narrative black and white format.

Also from this sombre period are a group of raw, expressionist woodcuts which focus on the tragic lives of three twentieth-century literary women — Dorothy Parker, Zelda Fitzgerald and Virginia Woolf. These works were exhibited in 1992 at Australian Galleries, Melbourne, alongside coloured drawings of the same subjects. The refined, illustrative style of the drawings, with their amusing themes, lack the striking simplicity of the woodcut prints, such as *Zelda Fitzgerald in the South of France*, and on the whole, the latter seem to more clearly reflect the artist's state of mind at the time.

An Australia Council Studio Residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris in 1993 saw a continuation of the theme of the suffering of women in Klein's relief prints, oil paintings and oil pastel drawings, although the exhilaration of living overseas appears to have expelled the artist's introspection. The recently



Deborah Klein LACE FACE, 1996  
linocut 46 x 31 cm

completed Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery in London, with its outstanding collection of medieval and renaissance paintings, provided Klein with almost surreal representations of female saints with their often shocking attributes of martyrdom. While the artist made many

vividly coloured oil pastel drawings on black paper, the prints from this body of work are not so numerous and their appropriation of imagery is passive. An oblong linocut of *St Dorothy* in black and white banded socks standing on a striped cat, in the angular, symmetrical style of the Australian printmaker and painter Christian Waller (1895-1956), underlines a lighter mood in the artist. Self portrait prints from this time exude a new freshness and joy for we now see her smiling before Luna Park amidst a floating array of red heart-shaped balloons in *A Heart that's Free*, and in *The Nature of Things*, Klein giddily whirls a hula-hoop in tune to her ruling planet Saturn (a symbol of melancholy), as if at last in acceptance of herself.

Black and white *film noir* movies of the 1940s and 1950s — with their desperate women and petty criminals based on the 'hard boiled' novels of authors such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammet — next become an absorbing subject for Klein and one suited to her medium, locale and concern for women's freedom in a male domain. Unlike the Australian painter, Stewart MacFarlane, who uses similar subjects as metaphors for a broader contemporary social and political unease, Klein focuses exclusively on the imagined psychological state of fictional characters in a brutal world. The film *Mildred Pierce*, directed by Michael Curtiz in 1945 and starring Joan Crawford, is the subject for Klein's linocut *Mildred Pierce on St Kilda Pier* 1994. By bringing Mildred to St Kilda, Klein is again romantically claiming a character and fitting herself inside it in

Deborah Klein DANSE MACABRE (I, II, III, IV), 1989 linocut, 57.5 x 76.5 cm (each panel)



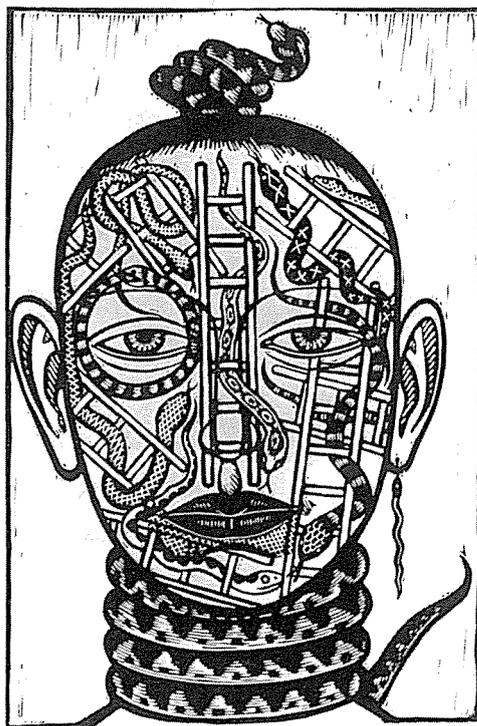
order to link her own experiences with those of other women she admires.

Two years later, in a significant linocut self portrait *St Kilda Warrior* 1996 the artist finally presents herself as a survivor. It is as if a decade's production has been distilled into one image. In the style of the linocuts by her mentor (painter and printmaker Euan Heng) heavy black areas and white line technique give way to a lighter and less constrained black outlined image. Like one of her medieval saints, Klein confidently stands before the viewer: the scenes of *St Kilda* contained within her body are her scars, her possessions and her attributes. In the background, four cloudlets herald the artist's victory while a passing distant ship marks the passage of time.

Around 1995, in another variation on theatrical women, Deborah Klein began making linocuts of female circus performers. The big, oblong prints of full-length figures on shallow, wood-grained stages, such as *See the Lady Saw'n In Half!*, and *Lydia the Tattooed Lady* are charming for their evocation of 1920s and Victorian style, and for their symbolic detail but the underlying mood of pathos and resignation expressed through the figures' faces conveys the artist's strong views on the exploitation of women. The *Lydia* print recalls Barbara Hanrahan's use of ornamental infill for her personages, and in particular her recurring doll-like burlesque figure in prints such as *Dear Miss Ethel Barringer* (etching, 1985). Notable in this print, and in other works by Hanrahan, is the profile of a face inscribed with decorative forms of no particular meaning. These are surely the

precursors of Klein's 'tattoo' series.

Evolving from the circus figures has been the production of an ongoing linocut series of seventeen (to date) 'life-sized 'tattooed' heads. Importantly, Klein has realised that faces with themed infills of pictorial motifs are a more specific 'signifier' for the viewer. Twelve of these



Deborah Klein *SNAKES AND LADDERS*, 1996  
linocut 46 x 30 cm

made during 1996 have been exhibited in an installation-like grid but stylistically there is a great deal of variation in form and influence between them compared to later prints in the series. The 1996 'tattoos', such as *Eyes Everywhere*, *Her Face Lit Up*, and *Luna Park Face*, summarise much of

Klein's oeuvre, but the powerful and enigmatic *Lace Face* (1996) stands alone as an exceptional image, and one which has inspired the design of *Needlework Face* and *Patchwork Face* (both 1997).

In *Lace Face* one encounters a visage as closed as the fabric which veils it. Averted eyes maintain the privacy and the perfect ovoid face set on its strong neck evokes the calm perfection of Buddhist sculpture. Placement of detail within the lace, so that the motifs of flowers align perfectly as circles on the cheeks, foliate forms curl across brows and an emblematic device marks the centre of the forehead, further reinforce the print's symmetry and underline Klein's careful working method. Gone are non essential background props and all that remains are the cut grooves from the lino, picked up during printing.

Now devoid of a specific context, era or influence, *Lace Face* conveys the essence of Deborah Klein's intent in all its potency — this woman is no longer the artist in the guise of another, or indeed, herself — she represents many women, past and present; her thoughts, secrets, desires, experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities are universal.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Deborah Klein 1989, *The Pirate Jenny Prints; a suite of linocuts*, Port Jackson Press, Melbourne.

