



'Pirate Jenny in a Kimono', 1987, linocut, 61.5 x 46 cm.
Edition 25. Private Collections



'Looking Back to See', 2011, linocut with chine colle, 38 x 28 cm.
Edition 15. Collection: Print Council of Australia



'Chocolate Argus Winged Woman', 2010, linocut, 32 x 32 cm.
Edition 30. Private collections



'Watching You, Watching Me', 1996, linocut, 46 x 31 cm.
Edition 15. Collection: Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria

Profiles in Print – DEBORAH KLEIN

Deborah Klein's body of linocuts contain a continuous narrative on aspects of the female presence in modern life which allows us to see ourselves and our society from a different perspective. Text by Prof. Sasha Grishin.



DEBORAH Klein knew she wanted to be an artist as far back as she remembers, at least as far back as primary school, but it was always a question of convincing the rest of the world. She was 31 when she entered art school and was in her mid-thirties when she started to exhibit regularly.

In some way this explains why there was no juvenile period in her art, no faltering steps or uncertain beginnings, and on completing art school she possessed a strong and resolved language, already apparent in a print such as *A Moving Still Life*, 1985. Here we find her tight, prickly forms set within an ambiguous domestic feminine space, where there is an implied narrative, but nothing is quite what it seems. All of these qualities were to remain constant to her printmaking for the next three decades through to the present. The cutting of the linoblock is crisp and precise with very little left to chance: she is an artist who works with a battle plan strategy in mind. She takes no prisoners, there are no compromises, only an exacting and painstaking fulfilment of artistic and conceptual strategies which she has set herself. Any interpretation of her early prints or, for that matter, any other Deborah Klein print, begs a decoding on metaphorical and allegorical levels. The still life has a precarious existence and seems to allude to something more than that which is initially described. It is an enclosed, sheltered and, I am inclined to say, feminine space, known, but fully unknowable, personal and intimate, but at the same time objectified and already presenting itself as a candidate for the Freudian

'A Moving Still Life', 1985, linocut, 75 x 53 cm. Private collections

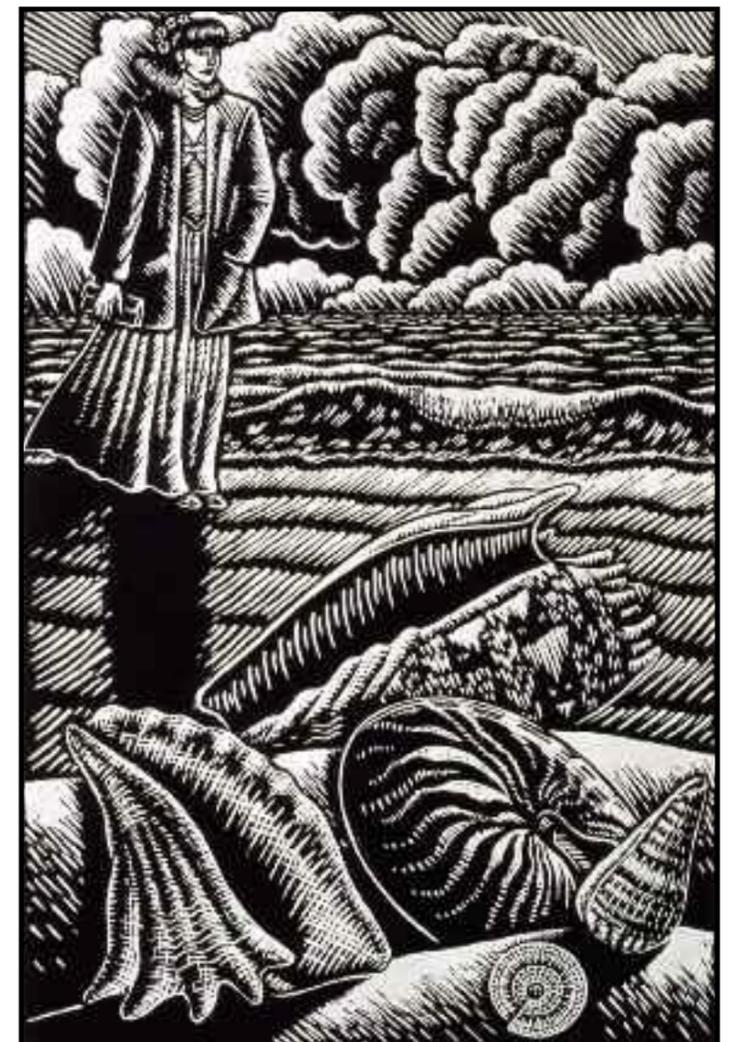
uncanny. Subsequently Klein's art developed, matured and grew in sophistication both in its imagery and means of execution, but something of the mood, sensibility, the bitter sweet sensation, and the quality of intricacy was to remain throughout her oeuvre.

Deborah Klein was born in the Melbourne bay-side suburb of St Kilda on 4 December, 1951, as the only child to Ronald Klein from the Creswick area of Victoria and Mavis née Rogers from Port Augusta in South Australia. Her father's family was more interested in sport than art, although pride was later taken in Deborah's artistic achievements, while her mother was artistic, with a keen interest in music and a proficiency in leatherwork, knitting, crochet and sewing.

Klein recalls: 'As a young child my mother took me to Luna Park (no doubt the origin of my fascination with fairgrounds and my own funfair-related imagery) and to my very first movies at the Palais Theatre and the Victory (now National) Theatre. Thanks to her, I became a keen film buff – to this day film is one of my greatest enthusiasms. She also introduced me to literature, music, the performing arts and the visual arts and took me on my first visits to the Melbourne Museum and National Gallery of Victoria. I remember wanting to be an artist as far back as primary school days and I'm sure I owe this to her. One of the first artworks I recall seeing was *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891), by William Waterhouse at the National Gallery of Victoria ... I must have carried the memory of that work with me from then on, because decades later I began the myth-entomology series, which included a flock of winged women. Although my linocuts and paintings were drawn from personal rather than classical mythology, I'm certain the series had its origin in the Waterhouse painting.'

Apart from her parents, the other important formative experience from her childhood was that of St Kilda itself: a somewhat sleazy part of Melbourne suburbia,

'Woman on the Beach', 1995, linocut, 46 x 30 cm. Edition 15.
Collection: Art Gallery of Ballarat, Victoria





'Night Drivers', 1996, linocut, 30.5 x 46 cm. Edition 15. Private collections



'Woman at the Door', 1996, linocut, 61 x 31 cm. Art Gallery of Ballarat

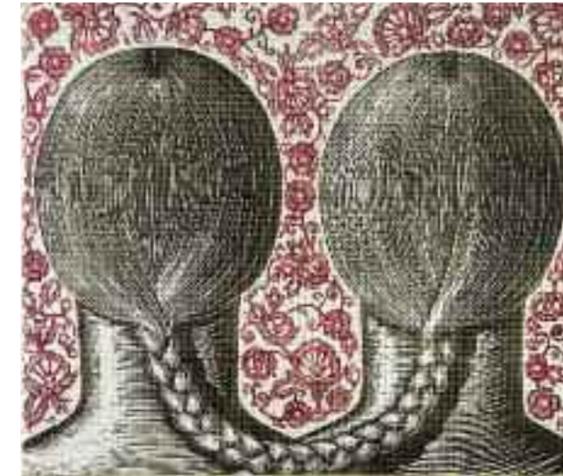
where the beach collided with a funpark, brothels competed with cafes, while hookers and their clients gave the place a somewhat menacing atmosphere in the eyes of a child. The artist Wendy Stavrianos spoke of the peculiarities of the place when opening Deborah Klein's survey exhibition in 2008. "There is a great vulnerability in this time, a need for protection. I wonder about artists like Nolan, Tucker, Deborah Klein, myself and others who grew up around that St Kilda area and how that impacted on their work. I remember the warnings, the dangers in the environment (mostly the dirty old men); not to drink out of the water fountains on my way home from school. St Kilda was pure and bizarre theatre in the 1940s – all fuel for active imaginations."²

At the age of 22 Deborah Klein packed her bags and left for London, where she was to remain for seven years working odd jobs to support herself, drinking in the cultural atmosphere of Europe, while initially living with a cousin in Notting Hill Gate and then with a friend at Holland Park. Art and theatre became her obsessions and she indulged in a pilgrimage to Albi in Southern France to visit the museum dedicated to one of her favourite artists, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. The major retrospective exhibitions of Stanley Spencer and Lucian Freud left a strong impression on her and she further developed her passion for David Hockney and Gwen John. She was also exposed to a significant exhibition of the *Die Neue Sachlichkeit* (The New Objectivity) from Weimar Germany at the Hayward Gallery with some of the great works by Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, George Grosz and Christian Schad. At this time she travelled for the first time to New York – a city with which she instantly fell in love, as she later noted: 'I had constructed my own mythology of the city, based on the films, music and literature I'd enjoyed all my life. Some favourite sites were the Empire State Building, Grand Central Station and the Algonquin Hotel – meeting place of the Algonquin Round Table members, most notably Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley and George S. Kaufman. The city was even more exciting than I had dreamed it.'³

Although she had drawn obsessively in England, following her return to Australia she realised that she needed a formal training in art and enrolled in 1982 as a mature



'Sunny Sunday Afternoon', 1985, linocut, 75 x 53 cm. Edition 25



'Sister Act', 2000, linocut, 3 colours, on Japanese mending tissue overlaid onto brown oriental paper with hand-stitching, 64 x 74 cm. Collections: Maroondah Art Gallery, Victoria, private collections



'Mirror, Mirror', 1995, linocut, 31 x 46 cm. Edition 15. Private collections

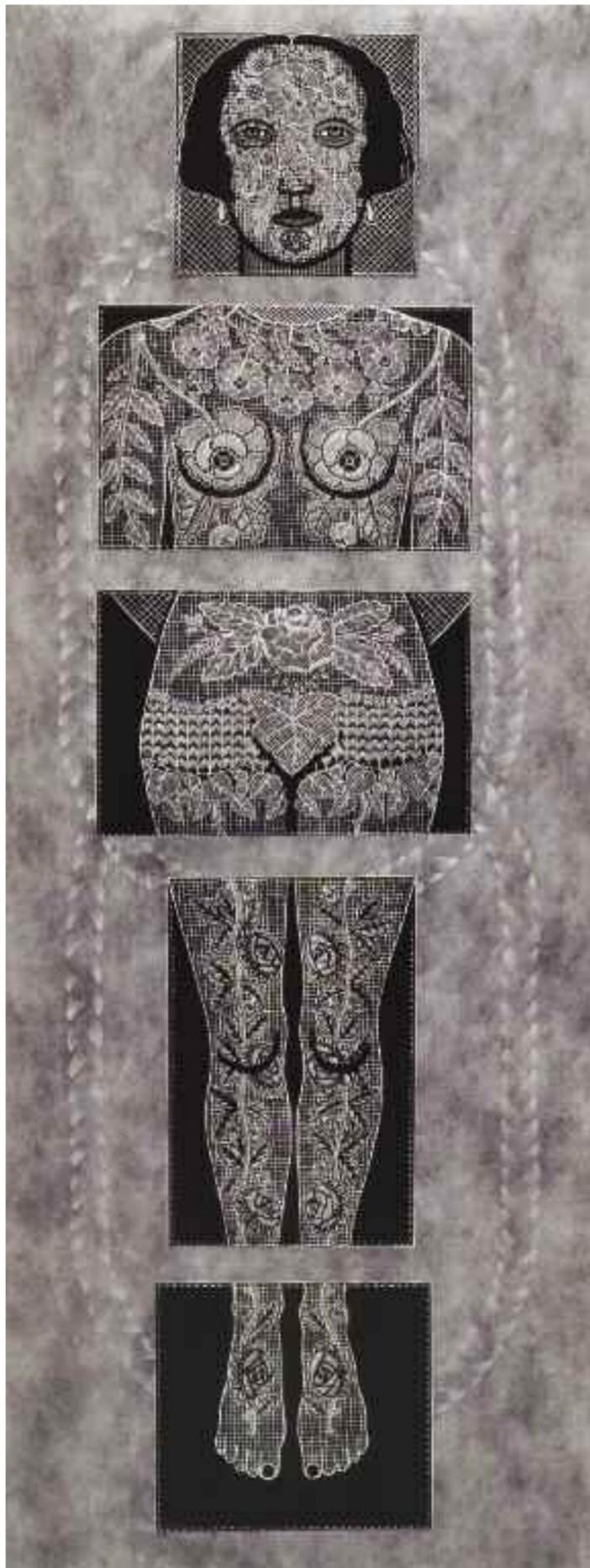
age student at the Chisholm Institute of Technology (which subsequently became part of Monash University). Although she started in painting, she quickly migrated to printmaking, specialising in relief printing, especially the linocut, where she was attracted by the medium's directness, with the cutting tools simply an extension of the drawing process. It was a strong department, where Ray Arnold taught briefly and inspirationally, before moving to Tasmania, and the key teachers in printmaking were John Neeson and Geoff La Gerche, while Craig Gough taught drawing and painting. In 1987 Klein continued her studies as part of a Graduate Diploma at the Gippsland School of Art (now Monash University) as a part-time student where she came under the supportive mentorship of Euan Heng, who initially encouraged her to move from her still life and interiors to the *Pirate Jenny* prints and many years later, while studying for her Masters, to develop the tattooed faces and the "fabric pieces".

Deborah Klein's single most important body of work to emerge from the 1980s was her *Pirate Jenny Prints* (1987) drawing on a character from Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (musical score by Kurt Weill). Brecht himself alluded to John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and set the scene in London's criminal underworld with obviously references to Weimar Germany and containing a broad critique of the capitalist world from a socialist perspective. Klein adopted the not particularly likeable character of Jenny, to add a further feminist dimension to the plot,

'Mildred Pierce on St. Kilda Pier', 1995, linocut, 65 x 46 cm. Collections: Art Gallery of NSW, Art Gallery of Ballarat, Deakin University, and National Gallery of Australia



'Women With Wings', 2010, Concertina artist book with linocuts, 24 x 20.5 x 0.3 cm (folded). Edition 4. Collection: Bank Street Arts, Sheffield, UK



and then shifted the action to St Kilda. She recalls her process of conceiving the series: 'On a train journey to Gippsland I first got the idea for what became the *Pirate Jenny Prints*, a suite of linocuts inspired by a character in *The Threepenny Opera*, which I had always loved. I remember scribbling like a crazy woman in my sketchbook for the entire journey, fearful of losing the germs of ideas that appeared to come from nowhere ... At the time I conceived the series I was back in St. Kilda, living in Grey Street, then one of its more squalid pockets. Prostitutes used to line up in front of my block of flats. It wasn't too much of a stretch to transfer the opera's original setting to my own hometown, although in the end, it only featured in three of the works. *The Pirate Jenny Prints* freed me, enabling me to draw inspiration from other artforms, and to incorporate more personal narratives. Essentially it became the cornerstone for all the work that followed.' Powerful prints from the series, including *Pirate Jenny in a Kimono* and *Pirate Jenny at Luna Park*, both of 1987, seamlessly splice self-referential imagery with private narratives and highly emotionalised, expressionistic conventions. There's an otherworldliness about the images with a realisation that we are dealing with a number of competing narratives which seem to collide and hidden in the seams within these collisions are levels of ambiguity.

Many of Deborah Klein's prints in the 1990s continue to develop ideas which first presented themselves in the *Pirate Jenny* series, where the technique remains the linocut, the subject a woman, her circumstances suggest a narrative and her face and body becomes a canvas on which to inscribe her diary of being. Prints including *Lace Face*, 1996, *Lydia the Tattooed Lady*, 1995, *Mildred Pierce on St Kilda Pier*, 1995, *Mirror, Mirror*, 1995 and *Night Drivers*, 1996 are all complex culturally encoded images, confronting in their directness, yet rich in subliminal messages. Cloth, as an indicator of women's work and craft plays an increasing role, while the tattoo both conceals and reveals a woman's history. The lifesize *The*

Daughter of Time, 1997, linocut on white and grey interfacing with hand-stitching, 200 x 76 cm. Edition 3. Private collections

'Pirate Jenny at Luna Park', 1987, linocut, 61 x 45.5 cm. Private collections



'Tattooed Faces', 1995–1997, linocuts, installation view from "Tattooed Faces and Figures" exhibition, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 1998

Daughter of Time, 1997, a virtuoso print in part inspired by the fragmented structure observed in Rene Magritte's *The Eternally Obvious*, was made at the same time as her *The Lair of the Lyrebird*, for which she was awarded the Silk Cut Award which took her to Amsterdam. These prints in some ways are a summation of her work in this direction; they are bold yet intricate, stark but puzzling, challenging, while simultaneously decorative and pleasing to the eye.

Generally, Deborah Klein's work in the new century adopted a new perspective, where more is revealed by what cannot be seen, as many of her female figures are depicted from the rear. Early examples are the *Anonyme* and *Muse* linocuts, both of 1998, and the magnificent print *Sister Act*, 2000. Rather than presenting a face obscured by cloth or tattoos, as well as other deliberate

disguises, the female figure now is observed from behind and the focus of the beholder's gaze is directed on the intricate woven hair, which she originally discovered in English portrait miniatures. In order to be admired, these women needed to turn their heads away from the viewer, so that clues to their personality could only be gleaned through anonymity.⁴ The typology of hair and combs may be used as an indicator of the woman's social status and occupation, but always at the expense of her individuality. It is in the realm of hair works and the subsequent moth woman pieces, including *Swarm*, 2010 and *Women with Wings*, 2010, a concertina artists book of linocuts, that her imagery most readily engages with the concept of the uncanny, where the familiar is made to appear as strange and foreign and we are simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the image. The hand-coloured linocut, *Emergent Cicada Woman*, 2013, is both seductively attractive and repulsive, alluring yet deadly.

Moths and butterfly masks may be employed to conceal identity and comment on the subservient roles which women play as well as empower the wearer. As the artist recently observed: 'In the last couple of years the moth-masked woman has morphed into a group *The Moth Woman Vigilantes*, who are super heroes.'⁷ Deborah Klein's body of linocuts contain a continuous narrative on the female presence in our culture and many other cultures. By making visible that which has been largely overlooked she allows us to see ourselves and our society from a new perspective.

Prof. Sasha Grishin, AM, FAHA

The Sir William Dobell Professor of Art History
Head, Art History, Australian National University

FOOTNOTES

1. Deborah Klein, written interview with the author, Melbourne, 22 October, 2013, p.2
2. Wendy Stavrianos, opening remarks "Deborah Klein: Out of the past 1995-2007", touring survey exhibition, Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum, April 5, 2008
3. Deborah Klein, written interview with the author, Melbourne, 22 October, 2013, p.5
4. For a discussion of this body of work see Inga Walton, "The elusive feminine: Works by Deborah Klein", *Eyeline*, No. 67, 2009, p.54

'Corporeal-Ethereal', 2012, linocut, 60 x 50 cm. Edition 23. Collections: Geelong Art Gallery and private collections

