



Deborah Klein



Practical and Decorative 1999, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 25cm

Studying a Deborah Klein rear view 'portrait' is similar to the experience of being pressed behind a stranger from another era in a crowded commuter train. Since there is no uncomfortable vis-à-vis contact one may openly stare at the immaculate plaited coiffure above the exposed neck and shoulders and imagine how life looks from where she is – to see as she sees – but the figure's anonymity and blank background setting seems only to elicit a crushing emptiness, an existentialist futility that is underlined by the artist's exacting technique. This unsettling encounter is further heightened when one realises that, from behind, the viewer's own head must appear to replicate Klein's images – and so be party, with the female head, to the observation of nothingness, and, in turn, even be the subject of someone else's scrutiny.



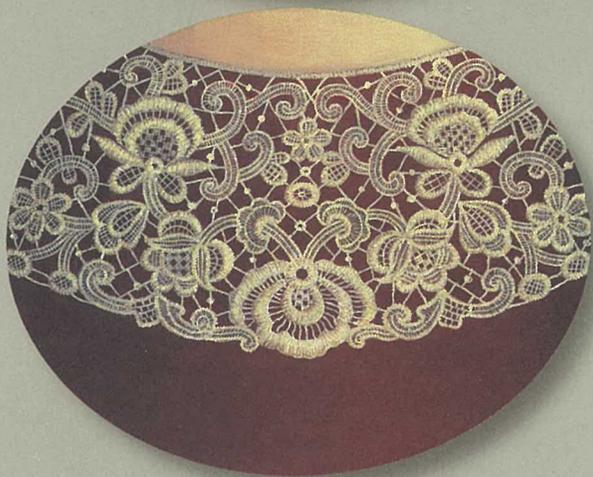
This linking of the spectator to the image particularly recalls the magic realism of Magritte and Delvaux. The intentional symmetry of Klein's head compositions are, in themselves, dual reflections. If we see the relief nature of Klein's circular and oval canvases as mirror-like for both the depicted subject and the spectator, one can further ruminate on the



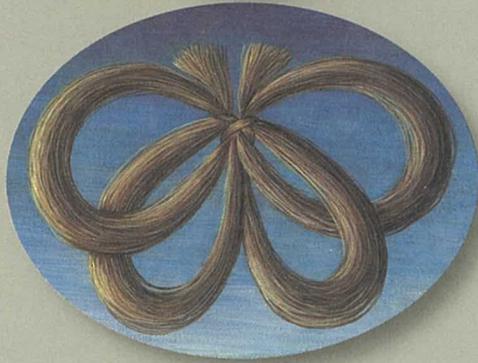
possibilities of duplicated illusion and representation. Several of the artist's works utilise a circular hand mirror, but they only teasingly repeat what is already there; the face we expect to see is not revealed. Some of the oval canvas groupings that form parts of heads and shoulders, such as *Lace*, strongly suggest dislocated mirror reflections while others set up a deeper

connection. For example, *Visionary*, with its sibylline title and azure infinity promises insight if the viewer is willing to collude with the image.

Klein's view of how one perceives a work of art is informed by her two-decade preoccupation with feminine histories and feminist concerns. Her linocut prints, large pastel drawings and small canvas pendants are, on the surface, a 'flip-side' continuation of the artist's already extensive drawn and printed explorations of female faces tattooed with complex, symbolic imagery referring to the physical and psychological bondage of women. Recent viewing of fifteenth and sixteenth-century female portraits by Pollaiuolo, Ghirlandaio, Holbein, Clouet, Hilliard and Bronzino in overseas museums have been influential in further compounding her thoughts about the nature, history and meaning



Lace 2000, acrylic on canvas, 43.5 x 30cm



Untitled 1999, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 22.5cm

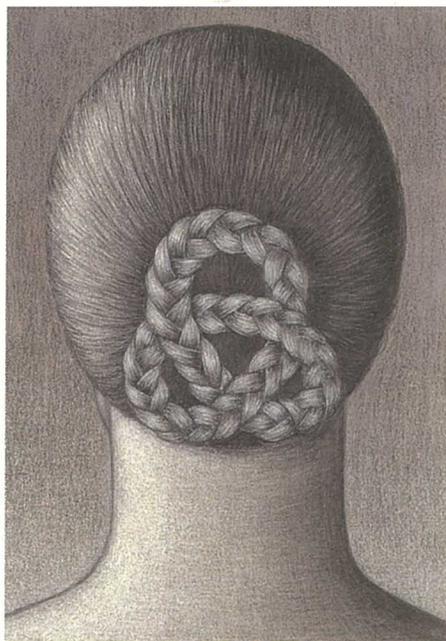
of women's body decoration in male dominated settings, and alongside this, has been the artist's appreciation of decorative beauty as an end in itself.

For this reason, museum-case groupings of Elizabethan miniatures and Georgian and Victorian jewellery at Kenwood House, and at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, have inspired the format of many of Klein's canvases. The unusual nature of Victorian memorial brooches and pendants, with their circular and elliptical rims of half-pearls and precious gems enclosing glassed compartments of plaited or woven interlaces of human hair, and open-hinged Elizabethan miniatures set out in configurations of two or three beside their filigree casings of brightly enamelled gold, have especially interested Klein. The containment of human

matter in exquisitely wrought, precious materials for spiritual or emotional edification has long intrigued the artist as has the function of Elizabethan portrait miniatures as badges of devotion, to be secured over the heart, or locked away in the bedroom to be contemplated in private.

The public/private nature of Deborah Klein's groomed hair works are as compelling as Helen Wright's contemporary hair drawings and Belle Johnson's 1890 unconventional rear view photograph of three differently aged Victorian women displaying their floor-length tresses. Wright's and

Johnson's works, however, evoke sexual desire while Klein's females, like marble portraits of Roman matrons, represent desire held in check. The artist instead portrays females as hairstyled 'faces' made



Knot 1999, oil and water soluble pastel, 75 x 55cm

for public gaze, and she provides other feminine articles to aid a reading of the work. The blonde and chestnut-coloured plaits, chignons, twisted hanks and coils of hair, with their capricious loops and tight symmetrical patterns, seem armour-like in their protective clasp of the head but it is difficult to ascertain the true intention of this repeated device. The neat plaits, with their endless spirals and zig-zags might speak of entrapment or a sense of hopelessness, or perhaps they function as protective barriers? Likewise, the accompanying lace collars that are carefully rendered across the shoulders might be seen as curved snags or they could be read as insulating wraps. The bare necks and shoulders of the women, too, which appear unguarded below the formality of the ornate hairstyles,



Muse 1998, linocut, 74 x 64cm

deny the voyeur's intimacy when clothed with ribbons or jewellery.

In depicting women as anonymous, specimen-like creatures Klein seems to be inviting us to view the decorated heads as a connoisseur/collector might study the outer wings of a pinned butterfly, with little regard for their inner being. Despite the signs, it is also possible to see Deborah Klein's prints, paintings and drawings as powerful statements of female independence – if you like a resolute turning away from the public gaze in preference for an expanded intellectual and spiritual engagement with the inner self: the caged bird with the exquisite plumage may still sing the exhilaration of private meditation.

KATHERINE McDONALD

Deborah Klein is represented by Australian Galleries in Melbourne and Sydney.

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