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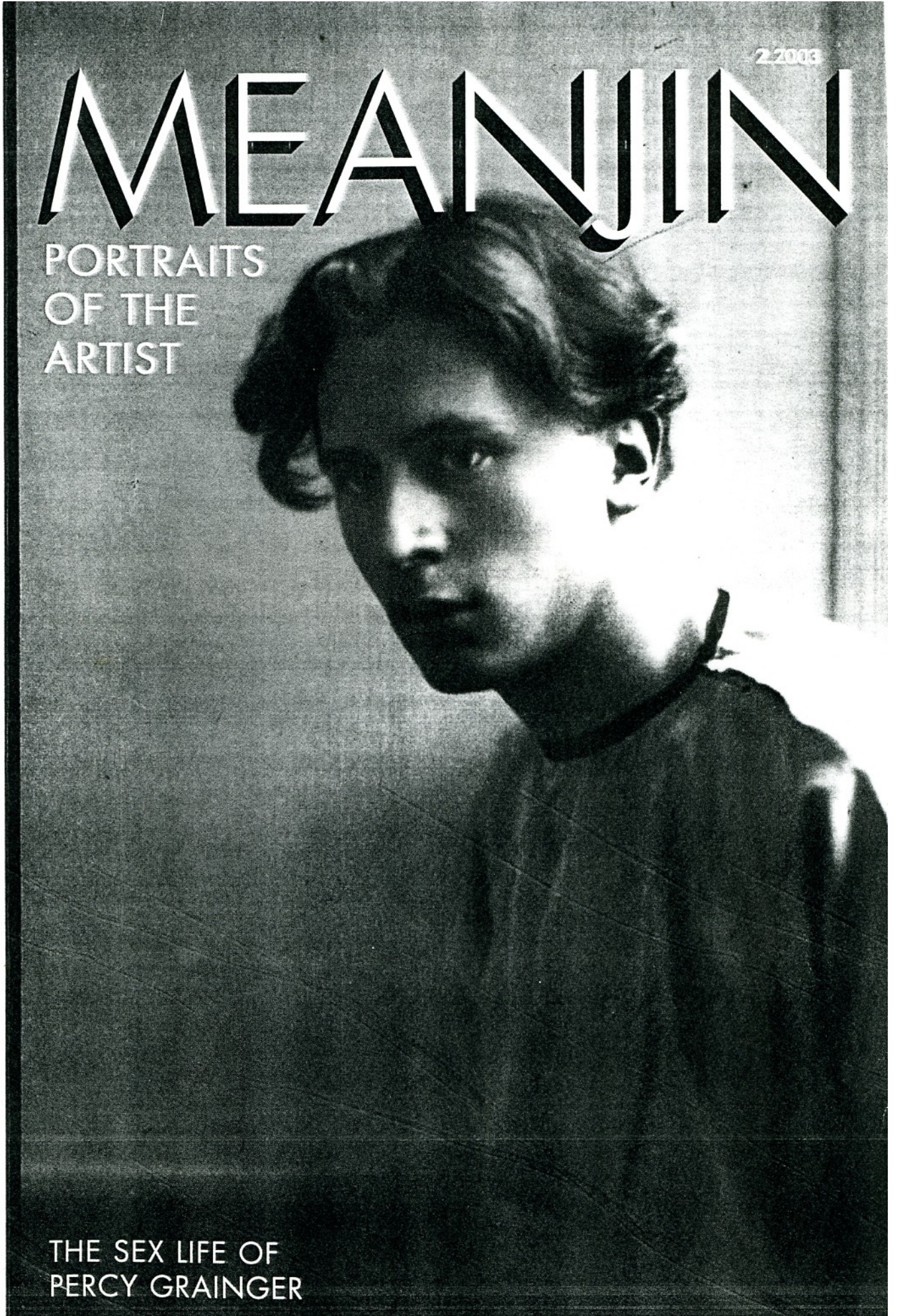
MEANJIN

PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST



THE SEX LIFE OF PERCY GRAINGER

MEANJIN PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST
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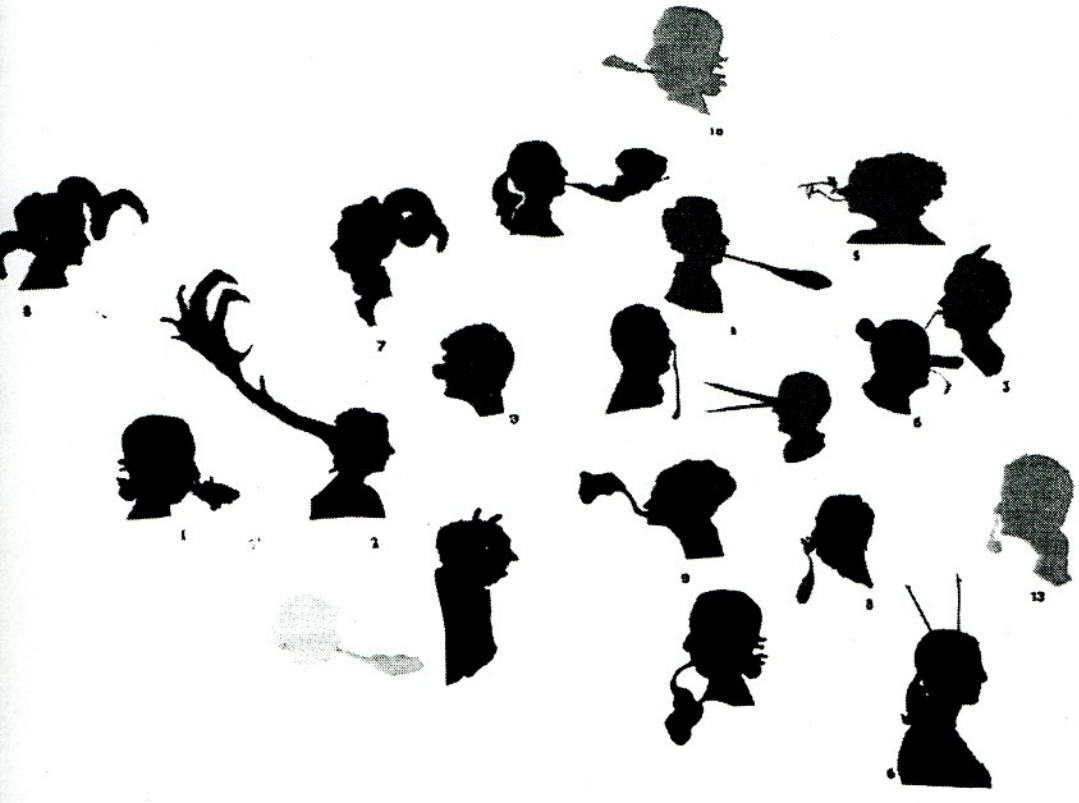
CONVERSATION PIECE

ARTIST CYNTHIA WILD SPENDS A MORNING WITH ARTIST SALLY SMART

'SALLY Collects' (or 'Smart Collector') might have been another title for this piece, because Sally Smart collects: ideas, material, objects, shapes, feelings, cut-outs, cuttings, used and manipulated in an oeuvre that is truly postmodern, in that the works embody a complex and energetic interweaving of all that she gathers. The work is underpinned by her love of making, a phenomenological approach (in the Heideggerian sense) to her art practice and deeply felt feminism, and it is imbued with a rich, eclectic and far-reaching intelligence. Smart ranges through ideas, collecting and reassembling them in much the same way as she builds her artworks. The reading and experience of art, mythologies and stories, psychological texts and ideas about life and feminism are all stimuli for the act that drives her making, and the resultant works are more manifestations of this plethora of stimuli than illustrations of any one idea—a gathering of multiple sources directed towards a multiplicity of meanings.

She cuts out and assembles silhouettes of a huge range of living things—household objects, grids, organs and body parts—working with them in a very direct and physical way that she connects with a forensic exploration of the self in culture. Hence the work often has an uncanny feel. Smart expressly acknowledges her interest in Freud's notion of the *unheimlich*, seeing it as a core idea in her work.



SALLY SMART, **CONVERSATION PIECE #1**, 2002. SYNTHETIC POLYMER PAINT ON FELT FABRIC. COURTESY KALIMAN GALLERY.

For me, the work resonated with my own childhood apprehensions: my own *unhomely* feelings about a time and place that has disappeared in reality but remains as traces in my own psychopathology. This, however, doesn't exclude the aesthetic inherent in the work, which is often simultaneously hauntingly beautiful, vaguely frightening and witty.

My encounter with Sally Smart began before I met her when I was struck by *Conversation Piece*, along with other work of hers at Kaliman Gallery in Sydney, and it continued when we talked in her studio in North Melbourne.

CW: For the benefit of those who are not familiar with it, how would you describe your work?

SS: I think it's since 1992 I've been using cut-outs—but more recently mostly painted felt and canvas, other materials too—cut out and put into assemblages, which sometimes make tableaux, large flat wall constructions. Sometimes I take on the architectural space or just one wall—a field—with these cut-out elements. Then the various elements are painted, cut out, pinned to the wall, then manipulated within that process until it's settled and I'm happy with the

configuration. After that I document it with a photo and then I make photo-maps of all the installations. Each component of the whole has a number and a letter on the back. Duplicated components have the same number. In addition, on the back of each component is written the date, title and venue of each showing of that component. This sets up the history of the individual elements that make up the work as well as the history of the whole piece. Then I can reinstall it.

CW: A kind of (*searching for the word*) provenance of the work (*pause*). Do you have copies of all your elements so that you can reuse them? Take the skeleton, for example.

SS (*laughing*): One in black, one in white and sometimes other colours. The way I work: I'll have all of these elements cut out—it takes weeks and weeks to get it all together. I'll have models who pose, a library of slides and books for all those elements, to put together in all these layers—like anyone does to make a work.

CW: Do you paint the felt first?

SS: Yes, I use really good-quality acrylic paint: it keeps the work supple, not stiff—and durable. Even after ten years these works retain their firmness. And painted felt also makes a fantastic *cut*: very firmly delineated and crisp. The whole idea of my cutting originally started out in 1994 in a series called *Dress*—derived from the cut-out models (*hesitates*).

CW: With the tabs like we used to play with as kids, you used to fix cardboard dresses over the cardboard bodies with knickers and vest printed on them.

SS: Yes, exactly. There were works called *Ms: Eight Representations to be Changed*. Called *Ms-fits*, *Ms-match*, *Ms-print*—all sorts of 'Ms's to do with methodologies of making and pattern making … In conjunction with that I was making large paintings with stained grounds. I didn't want to muck up my grounds so I started to make elements —components—and lay them on until they were in the right position, then take them off and paint them to look like they were stuck on. Gradually, as I looked around the room—see all these cut-outs around the wall—I found the cut-outs more interesting than their painted illusions. What I was trying to show in the paintings was the idea of the artificiality of construction (*of the identity*), making it *look* as though it was real but it wasn't. And I thought, no, this whole idea of identity being fugitive and unstable meant that I should actually make the construction fugitive and unstable so I started to pin and make it literally, as well as conceptually, more unstable.

CW: Is there any particular significance attached to the materials you use in connection with the ideas underpinning the work?

SS: Over the years, as the work developed, the felt itself increasingly became a focus in relation to the idea of the conceptual with the performative—in connection with the work of Josef Beuys: a slim link but one nevertheless. Having come out of painting, using felt enabled me to manipulate the colour, surface and the dryness.

CW: Is there purpose attached to the texture in the felt?

SS: It gives it visual depth, intensity. However, I don't want to drift too much into the craft thing, although I am drawing on it and describing it in some way. I try to veer and meander towards and through it. As a woman using that methodology, I'm constantly avoiding it being read in a certain way—all signed, sealed and delivered, so people don't just switch off after they've seen the materiality of the work as the only reading. I want to create an ambiguity, a tension. Also, there is an intensity between being flat and the strange tension of volumetric illusionistic drawing with the felt.

CW: It has the textural tension of craft papers and that, combined with the silhouette, evokes in some of them a harsh nostalgia that underscores the darker side of the silhouettes as a form in art and in psychoanalysis. I find them quite creepy.

SS: My work is never really just about the silhouette, but as much about the shadow, about the psychological. When I look back and analyse it now, I've been working continuously with things in-between, often revealing and concealing simultaneously. In the early work I used the skeleton: inside and outside the body showing simultaneously. In *Shadow Farm* the shadow itself reveals and conceals simultaneously in the silhouette.

Like your silhouette, which you know, and don't want to know, because the image isn't the 'you' that you're familiar with. So your presence is there but you aren't there.

It's a space filled [with image] but at same time empty [of personal relevance]. So ideas and complexities are as much there in the choosing of this way of working as they are in the work itself. For example, in another series of works—*The Large Darn*—I used darning as a metaphor for repair (*ponders briefly*). The darn itself is interesting to me—like an unconscious wish—because it simultaneously reveals and conceals, in the Freudian sense, a manifestation of the slip of the tongue.

CW: Are there any specific myths or stories, or other cultural forms, or psychoanalytical texts that inform your work or which are of particular interest to you in relation to your work?

SS: [In] *Dora Drawer* I took a specific look at Freud's patient Dora. All the work is white, manifesting as images of the body with internal organs, rupture, and because it was called *Dora Drawer* I was making connections between the relationship between drawing and the unconscious—all revealing in other ways. And that came out of some other work called *Delicate Cutting*. 'Delicate cutting'—the condition: to cut ruptures in the skin; coarse cutting means when people cut off limbs, amputation and so on.

CW: So you mean self-harming?

SS: Yes, women tend to be the delicate cutters and there are many different forms, from pulling eyebrows to scarification.

CW: Is bulimia also seen as an act of self-cutting?

SS: Yes, it's all in the same spectrum. At the same time I became very interested in Hannah Hoch's work and with the idea of cutting as a political act: rupture as an act of reconstruction and I saw that to Hannah Hoch's early Dada works we can now attach a political feminist agenda. But what was *I* doing—wanting to take something apart, cut it up and reconstruct it? I wanted to make this analogy between when a delicate cutter cuts and what they describe as a wonderful release, a sense of well-being—catharsis—not good for the body, but good for *them*, and the act of cutting as a positive act *for me*. So, the deliberate act of cutting became an underpinning idea as well as an act—thus opening out many wonderful analogies between the act of cutting for me as an artist and for the self-harmer who scars.

So I actually dealt with scarring in that particular work and I also started using Rorschach in these works—as a spurious sign for analysis. But also, using facsimiles of Rorschach tests (four colour and seven black-and-white), I made silk screens and literally used them in the work so I was making something more to go on than blots, for you as the reader-viewer. They can be read as stains, parts of the body, cut and put in the mouth, which makes them a bleed but also part of language. When I started making work it obviously was defined in—um—series …

CW: Projects?

SS: Yes, projects (*thoughtfully*). But now so much of the whole iconography in the work has tended to criss-cross and bleed one into the other—the cutting is still going on but in different ways.

CW: There's a strong sense of the visual, the knife at work as strong as very clear brushwork.

SS: Like the huge Matisse cut-outs in Washington—breathtaking.

CW: They're brutal and sensitive simultaneously—a visual oxymoron.

SS: There's also something strange about pinning—this fugitive assemblage— so defiantly pinned and placed, at the same time just a pin away from coming apart.

CW: What do you call this one *(pointing to a huge cut-out Rorschach in velvety black felt)*?

SS: *Shadow Mania*. Well, I haven't really called them anything, but that's what they are. It all connects, too, to Hans Christian Andersen cut-outs. A certain image that comes to mind is silhouetted illustrations of his stories—once again, a Victorian idea of silhouettes. His cut-outs are all done on white paper, not very big—

CW: He used to read his stories out loud to audiences—

SS: And he would be cutting at the same time as telling the story and the audience would be thinking that it would be to do with the story and then as he unfolded it they would see that it had nothing apparent to do with the story.

CW: A kind of performance.

SS: But it was also the speed and the accuracy of them that interested me. So, I decided to experiment with very large pieces of felt. It takes me days to draw it all up on the back with a degree of accuracy—I make a lot of templates and lay them on top of the work. Then I get the scissors really sharpened up and cut furiously for the next two days then pull it out, have a good look at it and decide and then fold it back and make a few more decisions on the way. I don't necessarily cut the whole drawn piece out, I just get to a point and say 'Yes, that's it!' So despite drawing out all the elements I wouldn't cut them all out.

CW: Almost a kind of palimpsest of the cut over the drawing.

SS: Good word, yes. I love the idea of palimpsest. It's a really good word for so much of my work because of its layering and tracing—like the giant in *Shadow Farm*. I've just been reading the Rosalind Krauss book (*musing*), *The Optical Unconscious* (1993). It's all about Freud's idea of the *Wunderblock*—you know, the old game where you'd draw and just pull up the drawing and it would disappear but you'd be left with that trace. There's something in that which I've been thinking about how to show—how to reveal the performative in the work. Part of the work—as an action—isn't seen but it's such a major part of the work so now I'm getting to a point where I do want to show it.

CW: A part in your 'artist's statement' talked about how the image was a chimera—unstable—and that you used the reassemblage of fragmented parts as a way of 'explaining'. I wanted to ask you about that because the challenge of finding your own explanation seemed more appropriate to me.

SS: Yes, but it's more a statement of intent. The broader philosophical idea that we are subjected to a number of different readings in the building of our identities is an overriding belief that there is not just one truth. That underpins all my work.

CW: So you're quite happy for people to bring their own agendas to the work?

SS: Yes, they do anyway.

CW: Are you interested then, in this triangulation between the artist, the work and the audience?

SS: Yes, people say 'Is that what you wanted?' And my response is that I know a certain amount of the range. As an artist I am totally knowledgeable, in part, of the range of readings. Most readings will be in that spectrum and I am in full control of those readings—to a point. I manipulate that. For example, if I want a piece to be spooky, I know how to make it a bit spooky, but it might not look as incredibly spooky as someone else might feel, or another person may even see it as funny. So the work is funny-spooky and I know the range and will deliberately use that spectrum and enhance, no, what's the word …?

CW: 'Draw out', maybe.

SS: Yes. Draw out. Yes, I'll use my knowledge of art techniques to do that and I'll be quite deliberate about that. I'll manipulate—as an artist does.

CW: I wanted to ask you about your motivation as an artist—if there had been anything in your childhood that made you want to make this kind of work. Just what it is that made you become this person who makes these things.

SS: Yes, it's curious. I've been thinking about it quite a lot recently. I grew up in the far north of South Australia in the Flinders Ranges in a unique part of the country where the light is extremely bright and the sky incredibly clear.

CW: And the shadows are strong.

SS: My visual experience was quite profound. There is no doubt that that environment has an amazing ancient atmosphere. And there's a light that's violet, my colour is always violet, something atmospheric about the colour: it always tends to the browns and violets. And also a space of brightness or light. There is a clarity that is *such* clarity—sharpness—in the work that comes from that environment. I also had a childhood isolated from children outside the family and with only one of my sisters being close in age. So, we had loads of imaginative play—and now I love to be alone, to work alone. All our experiences and environment weave through the work: tree-houses, beds in the bush (we used to often sleep out on the veranda—an inside-outside space), women's position in the bush, through the pioneer history. The series of works *Shadow Farm* looks back at living in the

country. The traditional homestead sat in the middle of green grass, lawns, trees. Quite a nice place that had spring water, surrounded by real bush, although domesticated because it was farmland, but always the rugged mountain ranges—in some ways I see the landscape as a body—we name the land after parts of the body: foot, breast, headland.

CW: Anthropomorphising the landscape.

SS: Yes, it occurs in *Shadow Farm* as a huge pale giant lying underneath the other elements. Another palimpsest. Here are some bits of *Shadow Farm*: *The House that Jack Built*—my son's name is Jack—a bit of a farmhouse, inside–outside linear sections, a gate, horses.

CW: The flatness creates an otherworldliness that you described earlier, like a parallel existence—not the one *we* live in. You *know* something's happening over there around the corner, it's not *this* space but it defines itself so sharply from wall to wall.

SS (*cautiously*): That comes out strongly for you?

CW: Yes.

SS: Another space, another psychological space. There's a Goya print in the British Museum of women—old witches sitting in a branch. In this etching the branches are similar to the one I use (homage to Goya), there's no horizon, no surrounding landscape.

CW: Just a tree and witches.

SS: A branch and witches suspended in a deeply psychological space. And when you say this about the work, it's great because what I wanted to do was to re-create that space—because when I saw it I asked myself 'How could you create a space like that?'

CW: What kind of political influences are contained in and influence you in your work?

SS: When I went to the VCA in 1987–88 I had a real insight—almost an epiphany—into what was important about my past, about feminist issues and being a woman artist became a major drive in my work: about a woman's identity as much as anything. And I have to mention too, that I had a great-great-aunt, Bessie Davidson, who was an artist. She went to Paris with Margaret Preston, who came back to Australia while Bessie stayed on working in studios in Europe. She was made a Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur before she was fifty. She was an amazing role model for me—an expatriate woman, a professional artist.

But it wasn't until 1988, having sort of missed the late feminist period in the seventies, and also being more interested in the androgynous punk thing, that I

really turned towards myself as a woman artist. I still see today that it i profoundly important issue for me and for all women artists—that you still ha to be vigilant as an artist, despite the wonderful nineties presence of wom everywhere in the arts. There is this sense of unease that it could so easily be tak away. It's not that the work looks overtly political but that it *is*. That's ongoi and I know it's stimulated young women artists to make art because it's true, real, it's like part of the fibre, it's a drive, it interests me; other women arti interest me; the whole history interests me—from the poems of Emily Dicki son to the work of other women artists. It is a discourse that is part of t psychology of me and of making art. The strangeness of it all is that it's not a n thing, but an uneasy thing—even quite contradictory in images, but that's wh it's like to be a woman artist, so you don't necessarily want it to be singul because our lives aren't like that.

CW: You're describing postmodern eclecticism here.

(*Both chuckle.*)

SS: Yeah, well it is.

CW: A friend of mine once said that it suits women—postmodernism—su their way of doing ten things at once.

SS: That's very true, because we do. In a complex art methodology, whether v talk race, gender, sexuality, we mimic very much the complex way that huma relationships work at any level. It's not that I exclude men at all: I often have the in the work *and* I'm married to one and I have a son. They're not excluded- they're part of me, an extension of me in the way that they're *there*.

CW: When you're working, do you feel that sort of androgynousness th doesn't define you as a man *or* a woman, just a person making art—as a being

SS: Yes, I do, I don't think about being a woman while I'm working but at th same time while I'm working I'm an artist, and I'm a woman.

CW: But it's not there in the consciousness the whole time. I wanted to as you whether you felt pressured in the way that ethnic minorities sometimes d to represent some political aspect—

SS: You mean as a woman?

CW: Something like that, yes.

SS: What makes us human beings is an important umbrella to the whole oeuvr but in front of the work as an artist I am drawing on my life as a woman t inform my work. So I don't feel pressured to represent that: it is integral to m work and me. But I am trying to seek out what that could mean: feminisation o human knowledge (*laughs self-deprecatingly*), which we can all benefit from

That's the umbrella that I live by and while it's not didactic, it certainly comes through in some way, although not always overtly, but embedded.

CW: How do you respond to market and exhibiting pressures?

SS: I love exhibiting, and the market entails a huge amount of work and organisation.

(*Pulls out canvases as we speak.*)

CW: I see a lot of some sort of carapace: moths, cicadas, cockroaches—

SS: Yes, and from our viewpoint they have their insides outside.

CW: The exoskeleton. These insects or parts of insects are sometimes actually connected to human bodies, or as a large presence in an installation. These evoke for me the kind of mixed affection, horror and sadness I find in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. I wondered if you had read it.

SS: I was just having a look at it again the other day—in connection with the idea of insects and metamorphosis, thinking about cultural images—for example, in Louise Bourgeois's *Spider* and in my own *Shadow Farm* work. When I reconstruct it in June there'll be a whole wall of insects, a plague of insects. Last year I did one of the crow, not just a bird, but a large dark bird, lots of them—all along one wall, recalling Hitchcock's *Birds*, the large dark in mythology, the harbinger of death. And now, using the moth, to call forth female sexuality as well as death. I think that's another example of these 'cultural images' around insects.

CW: Julia Kristeva's written an analysis of the moth as a generic form in art, but with reference to a particular painting, in *Black Sun* (1989), where she talks about the skull and the moth in similar terms.

SS: It sounds interesting.

CW: Do you read a lot of psychoanalytic theory?

SS: Not really, I just go in and out, when I'm ready. I'm reading a lot about schizography at the moment. Surprisingly, it's not really about the schizophrenic …

CW: Can you distinguish between your works *Parameters Head*, *Design Therapy* and *À la Ronde*? Are they three separate pieces, three aspects of the one piece or pieces that can be seen separately or together?

SS: The *À la Ronde* is the building on which the whole piece is based, and *Parameters Head*, *Design Therapy* are separate but interchangeable parts of the *À la Ronde* project.

CW: Can you elaborate?

SS: I was awarded an Australia Council studio residency in Hackney, London, and decided to turn an article I'd found in a magazine into this project. Two women cousins, the Parmiters, designed and built a sixteen-sided house in Exeter in the

1790s which was to be bequeathed only to women, except for a Victorian intervention when women weren't allowed to inherit. A moving psychological space—there was something in the creation of this house: the sun followed it throughout the day, from room to room, and there were great design innovations. Sometimes *I* had almost become *À la Ronde*: friezes, silhouettes, architectural spaces. So I gridded up the whole gallery space with felt pieces.

CW: The grid is drawn on the wall?

SS: No, it's made with felt strips, which makes it a subversive grid—not really tight. I liked this idea of working with a sort of feminised grid. Sometimes it disappeared it was so pale. This was all shown somewhere else for a second time and this time I included the silhouette heads 3.5 metres high and this silhouette was actually in the house in the domestic space.

CW: Because of the numbers it's almost like a museum piece. But what do the numbers actually mean?

SS: I'd done those numbers in *Conversation Piece*, then I put them in that work to refer to the whole documentation process in museums. After I'd done all the lettering and numbering on the back in the usual way, I thought about the evocative power of numbers and letters and then, because people try to read them in particular ways, I saw that there's also the sabotaging of numbers.

CW: Can you tell me something about the piece in the National Gallery of Victoria at Federation Square?

SS: The one with the three figures on the branch is called *Femmage Frieze*. I made that in 1997. The figures are made from silhouettes that I select randomly from my collection.

CW: Yesterday, when I went with friends to see it again, we were interpreting it from our three viewpoints: three women; the Three Fates; psychoanalytically: Freud, Jung and possibly Lacan. And then Brecht's Mother Courage, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Dickens' Madame Defarge doing her knitting.

SS: Flexibility of interpretation is what draws the viewer into the work. I just love hearing all these different interpretations.

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Ken Inglis: the ABC. Patrick McCaughey: Federation Square. Artists, Magic, Beauty: Alex Miller, John Armstrong. Fiction by A.L. McCann, Philomena van Rijswijk. Poems by Peter Rose, Bruce Dawe, Barry Hill. Sally Smart in dialogue. Memoir by Jessica Anderson. Christopher Brenda Niall: Boyds at the Gallery School. Jim Davidson: Barry Humphries. Peter Stansky: William Morris Down Under. Peter Beilharz: Bernard Smith. Charles Condy: Bernard Smith. Henry James, Queer Monster. ARTS OF POETRY (VIVIAN SMITH); FILM ADAPTATION (BRIAN McFARLANE); BALLET (ROBIN GROVE); OPERA (JOHN RICKARD); NOISE (PHILIPPE TAPON).