

Identity and Fragmented Bodies: Remembering the Feminine

Dr Marion Manifold, Victorian artist

My research and printmaking explores and reconstructs identity and body imaging of past women, both renowned and familial, who paved the way for today's forms of female identity.

Over many centuries women have been portrayed as the Earth Mother, nature, the body, while men have appropriated the intellectual realm, the mind. The Surrealists used the body/mind dichotomy allocating woman to a fragmented body to fulfil their journey as the mythological, enlightened hero. André Breton objectified and patterned woman to blend with nature while he remained self-contained in a dark suit. Postmodern theorists redefined the way that we understand gender, but the body/mind dichotomy and Surrealist legacy are still relevant today. I look at patterns, symbols, and manifestations of the fragmented female body that still permeate the subconscious and influence contemporary identity and printmaking practices.

We bring to our art our experiences, knowledge, and, I believe, mythical and psychological imprints and ancestral memories, which include the role of Earth Mother (Magna Mater), also portrayed as the rose, or butterfly (double axe, bow, or mirror image M). Women's identity is also associated with the decorative arts – textiles and stitching. Both iconography and medium permeates my own work and submits to a universal feminine idiom.

My Mother's, Mother's Mother – Rose, 2000, a set of nine digital prints, depicts my great grandmother's dressmaking model falling and dissolving in a rose-coloured sky. The mannequin's hour-glass, bow-shaped form, in Freudian and Surrealist terms, represents a female double, the symbolic woman who must fall in the male's initiation rite. The iconography repeats Freud's theories of doubling, repetition and patterning which provide an assurance of life, but which are also an uncanny reminder of death. The prints are housed in a rose velvet box with tissue interleaves printed with sanitary napkin rose design, evoking the feared and sensuous mythological Mother.

I search for the identity and essence of former women through the visual language of objects that belonged to them and the places where they lived, which retain an aura endowed with their imprint. Rosy dreams from the veranda of Purumbete, 2010, reinvents Eugene von Guerard's painting of a family homestead. It adds a decorative rose pattern retrieved from a shard found in the lake and a rose silk bow, reminders of a former Mother. Uncannily, I am the fifth Marion Manifold, in the south-west Victorian pioneering family that built this homestead. This gives me a sense that I am just part of a continuum, a fragment of an eternal feminine idiom.

My exhibition Marie Antoinette through the Notebook, 2012, reinvents Marie Antoinette's tragic life via a faded and stained notebook containing roughly glued swatches of fabric, which was presented to her to choose her day's attire. Le Sphinx, 2010, conflates the headless, hour-glass female figure with the feared femme-fatal sphinx. Fabrics are rich talismans of association; Barnave, an admirer of Marie Antoinette, went to the guillotine with a snippet from one of her dresses in his pocket, while women prisoners wore a thin red ribbon around their neck in defiance of their fate, and which again are a symbol of the headless female body.

Trousseau: The Red Wedding Dress, 2013, unravels my five times great grandmother's identity and life in Coffrane, a small French-Swiss village, and incorporates objects from her life, including excerpts from her 1765 divorce from an absentee planter husband.

Fragmented and layered images are also a contemporary aesthetic that can be read as a metaphor for disjointed memories or snippets of the past, echoing the complexity of society and woman's multifaceted identity and roles. And despite my understanding of gender-loaded dichotomies, I am still drawn to beautiful fabrics and fashions – the frills, stripes, flounces, embroideries and laces which fragment, veil and dissimulate the female body and identity.

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Marion Manifold majored in textiles and printmaking at Melbourne State College in 1975 and continues to explore these mediums, including in her 2001 PhD on female body imaging and identity. In 2008 Marion was awarded the three month Australia Council for the Arts Paris residency. She has work in 34 public and corporate collections including the National Gallery of Australia and Cite des Arts, Paris. Marion has taught in both secondary and tertiary education systems, including Koorie education.

Images:

Marion Manifold, *Le Sphinx*, 2010, Linocut & beads, Edition of 9, 80 x 120 cm

Marion Manifold, *Trousseau –The Red Wedding Dress*, 2013, Linocut, silk appliqué, embroidery & beads, Edition of 30, main print: 77 x 55 cm, 8 prints in folder 30 x 30 cm (each print)