

The Aberrant Object: Women Dada and Surrealism

BARBARA CREED

Zipped uterine rocks, a tongue/bag labelled 'pleasure', an eye with nipple clip, three large vulvic mouths set into a wall, a plaster turkey baster - familiar objects in surreal contexts. What I find most compelling about *The Aberrant Object* is the way in which the works, while evoking themes central to the overall history of surrealism, nonetheless draw on and extend the female surrealist tradition, including themes of feminine desire, the body, the problem of a



Sadie Chandler, *Objet* 1993. glass, plate, knife and fork, human hair

female 'muse', the femme *castratrice*, the domestic world, female fetishism. Too often, the surrealist movement has been conceptualised as male. André Breton, René Magritte, Salvatore Dali, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Luis Bunuel, Max Ernst, are the most cited names. Yet women also played a crucial role. Leonora Tanning, Léonor Fini, Kay Sage, Meret Oppenheim, Hanna Hoch, Claude Cahun, Lee Miller, Frida Kahlo and Germaine Dulac are perhaps the best known and they have influenced many works in this exhibition.

Echoing Freud, André Breton wrote in 1929: 'the problem of woman is the most marvellous and disturbing problem in all the world'¹ Woman, in her different manifestations, was Muse for the male surrealists. She assumed various forms in their art: enchantress, child-woman, femme fatale, femme-phallic. If the male surrealists turned to woman as their source of inspiration, who or what functioned as muse for their female counterparts? According to Whitney Chadwick, the female surrealists of the 30's and 40's, having rejected the idea of woman as an abstract principle, 'turned instead to their own images and their own realities as sources for their art'²

Although the male Surrealists of the 1920s and 1930s advocated the liberation of woman from the home, in their art and theoretical writings they continued to idealise woman as Muse. One of the dominant themes in this exhibition is that of

female sexuality located within the domestic and familial. Penelope Lee's collection of zipped rocks, *Hardcore. The Series* 1990 & 1993, draws on the Surrealists' love of alchemical transformation, combining mineral and metallic, natural and artificial. These bizarre vagina dentata playfully evoke the threat of castration. [I overheard two women, entranced by these baby biters, saying they would like to take one home]. The dentata theme is presented in a more serious context in Caroline Eskdale's *Masonic Order*, in which a large piece of chequer-board linoleum is laid on the floor with irons at each corner and a flat wooden tailor's dummy in the centre. Female genitals are evoked through a pair of pincers. *Masonic Order* constructs a nightmarish vision of a female world constricted by domesticity and uniformity.

A completely different face of female sexuality is presented in Lee's *Mother Nature*, a lush, confronting celebration of fertility. Three large vulvas rise from a white wall, each a long gash filled with fruits and flowers. Are these mouths captured in the act of devouring or waiting to be devoured? Sadie Chandler's *Boudoir* occupies an entire room. A mattress on a bed in the centre appears soft, but appearances are deceptive. It is hard and cold, made of plaster. Behind the bed is a white screen draped with white sheer stockings. A portrait of a woman hangs on a wall, her head a shimmering reflection, her features impossible to see. *Boudoir* creates

an inviting, erotic, fragile atmosphere which is undercut by the hard, heavy bed. All these works utilise objects from the domestic world (zips, irons, pincers, fruit, stockings) to suggest different 'faces' of the feminine rather than representing woman as the larger-than-life ideal of the male Surrealists: Muse, Woman-Child or Medusan nightmare. Even Roslynd Piggot's installation (*Fall*) in which a video projects a subliminal image of woman descending into the sea - a central image in the works of Rita Kernn-Larsen and Edith Rimmington - is anchored strongly in the real by a jug of milk signifying motherhood and domesticity.

Susan Fereday's wonderful handbag series, in particular, reinforces this interest in the interior, domestic world. Each bag has a label: 'pleasure', 'hysteric', 'memory', 'theft'. Dada and Surrealism created art objects from the contents of women's bags. Fereday's use of key words, largely drawn from psychoanalysis, focuses on the crucial social and economic importance for a woman of a handbag. Here the image of woman as - according to Breton - signifying the basis of ecstatic discourse is deliberately absent. The handbag signifies the extent and limit of woman's powers in the domestic, sexual and familial world. Women keep their money and their 'face' in their bags - lipstick, powder, comb. Men joke about women's handbags. Dare they place a hand inside? What strange horror awaits them?

Mikala Dwyer's amazing shoe display (*Wall to Wall Ceiling to Floor*) covers an entire wall. Women's, men's and children's shoes hang on the wall in plastic bags, each separated from the other like forensic specimens. Although very different from Meret Oppenheim's *The Couple* (1956), in which two boots are fused together at the toe, *Wall to Wall Ceiling to Floor*, by separating rather than joining, also comments on the impossibility of relationships.