

THE VIRTUAL IN HAND

Armorial
Dianne Longley

8 September – 3 October 1995
Adelaide Central Gallery

Reviewed by
Catherine Speck

Dianne Longley's recent exhibition at Adelaide Central Gallery is a mature critique of the place of new technologies in art and life. Longley is an accomplished hi-tech artist who steps back from the technical somersaults, wizardry and gimmicks of computer-generated images and the new art technologies and in subversive fashion examines what is real and what is virtual, what ought to be real, what ought to be virtual.

The title *Armorial* is derived from its classical use as armour worn to protect warriors in battle. The current use of the 'armour' of virtual reality such as the headset, permits cerebral journeys to virtual space. Longley questions the de-sensitising of humans which occurs when the armour of the virtual is worn. She proposes a new intellectual and ethical armour of the 'armorial'.

Longley has engaged in two arenas of representation, the landscape and the new technologies, each of which is more frequently the realm of male artists, and she has inverted conventions, subverted traditions.

The exhibition itself assumes the contrasting pace of the realms it represents. The fast, racy high tech world is characterised by *Armorial Cerebrum* in which the virtual reality headset lights up with its flashing LED's signifying the brain racing through a virtual journey, the brain on an information overload. Similarly, the electronic book *Oceans of Information*. *Casting the Net* draws attention to apparently discarded bookish learning with its finite knowledge encased between covers. In its place are the technological promises of journeys through the Internet to lands of infinite knowledge and exploration using the CD Rom. Set against this pace of



Dianne Longley.

Top row: Engage, etched tin plate, digital image, 56 x 76cm.

Armorial Cerebrum, etched tin plate, LEDs, 80 x 60cm.

Armorial Data, etched tin plate, digital print on silk, 75 x 70cm.

Below: Rose of Illumination, reheat solar plate with hand colouring, 70 x 56cm.

explored in this exhibition as a metaphor for the personal journey. Just as Margaret Preston explored both the domestic landscape and the bush in her modernist works so has Longley entered the landscape on both a domestic and extra-domestic level.

The landscape features symbolically in the *Golden Rose Series*, which is made up of computer-generated images printed using the solar plate technology. The rose as a familiar feature of the landscape has become a multi-layered symbol of modes of being. As Penelope Curtin argues in her comprehensive accompanying essay 'The Golden Rose', in which she charts the history of its symbolism from ancient Egypt through medieval Europe to the present, the rose encompasses the pagan symbol of love and death, Christian symbol of purity and many more

associations. The rose was the sacred flower of the sun god Isis, it has had modernist associations with the sublime in the works of romantic poets, and more recently it carries metaphysical symbolism in the works of mid-twentieth century writers. Currently the rose has come to symbolise: "an extensive range of profound meanings ... emblematic to those who search for spiritual relevance and meaning in the wasteland of modern times...".

Therefore Longley is in respected company in her use of the rose, with her symbolism taking on many of these overtones, both existential and romantic. The journey through life takes many forms; it may commence as *Embarkation* when the traveller leaves the ordered domestic landscape with its trimmed hedges, sculpted trees, contoured gardens and passes through the open gate to the natural untamed world where the Dog rose grows, where the landscape is in turmoil.

The rose may become the *Rose of Illumination*, the white damask rose of Madame Hardy, where sages circle shining their torches of illumination. Alternatively the rose may become *Ash Wednesday*, in which the one uprooted rose visible on the horizon, in a land inhabited only by fossils is set against a dark brooding landscape of clouds. Longley however has placed elements of hope into this landscape: her personal symbols of life and chance suggest optimism and new life. In *Roses Through Time* the rose as central image has moved to the periphery and by a careful inversion the roses frame existence, while the central image of the hand rings a bell of warning. This human symbol of action suggests it is time to stop and



cerebral travel are the quiet meditative works of *The Golden Rose* series, where many of the issues raised in the electronic works, flashing cerebrum, high tech play, computer-generated information, high tech 'knowledge', imperfect image resolution and desensitising data gloves are resolved.

The Monitor Series sets the scene for new art forms which may not deliver all that is expected of them. By placing the images themselves in monitors, Longley has focused on the virtual nature of much imagery as imagery, which is also imperfect because it is no longer 'real' imagery. She has classical images tampered with and dislocated by a careful crafting of imperfect technology. In *Engage* for example, the colour spectrum radiating from the woman's eyes suffers from interference and the rays of light waver. In *Temptation* the images of taste are deliberately dislocated by the use of an image of low resolution.

The new technologies have promised and delivered virtual representation to art. Data gloves, virtual reality headsets and computer-generated imagery are no longer novel. But what has been the cost? Longley's *Armorial Data*, the gloves of virtual reality, and the hands which tap endlessly at keyboards suggest desensitising, and loss of the sense of touch. The metal high-tech hands which have become conveyors of information are contrasted with the low-tech elegant dexterous hands, shown in the frilly fabric fringe, which used to sew, embroider, engage in elaborate finger plays and make art.

The landscape, so often a representational genre for masculine statements of nation and identity, is

assess, to question the journey. These meditative, ethically replete, reflective works are balanced by a lyrical quality which lifts them from being laboured.

Longley is combining the old and the new, the old arts of printmaking with the new ways of making prints. She is not just a latent traditionalist, but fully conversant with the new technologies she questions, she muses, she looks beyond the technology. Take some time to step off the superhighway and consider □

References:

- P Curtin *The Golden Rose*: Dianne Longley, Essay accompanying *Armorial*, 1995 Illumination Press, Welland.
O Sankey *Armorial*: Catalogue Essay, 1995, The Print Studio, Welland.