ARMORIAL

Dianne Longley

September 8 ~ October 3

ADELAIDE CENTRAL
GALLERY

ARMORIAL

There she weaves by night and day,
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
  To look down to Camelot.
   . . .
And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear
   . . .

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
  She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
  The Lady of Shalott.

from **The Lady of Shalott**
Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809 - 1892)

Computer technology puts at our disposal vast quantities of information. On the Internet one can chart one's own path of information acquisition, moving forwards and backwards at the touch of a key.

There is a difference between Information and Knowledge, and Longley is acutely aware of this. Information is the action of informing or telling, while knowledge is information imbued with meaning. On the one hand the receiver merely accepts data, on the other the receiver processes it with some purpose in mind.

With the advent of this new form of information technology, the range and accessibility of data available to anyone who is equipped with a computer, and who is armed with the appropriate software and skills, has increased dramatically. The democratisation of access to information in the late twentieth century parallels the radical shift in information technology which took place 500 years ago in Germany with the invention of movable type by Gutenberg and which resulted in the publication of books on a previously undreamt of scale. Longley is currently investigating the shift from books to computer technology as a source of information storage and retrieval in her Master's studies at Flinders University. She makes direct reference to this shift in the two large works, *Oceans of Information, Islands of Knowledge* and *Oceans of Information, Casting the Net*.

While the traditional book is essentially linear in construction, the structure of computer games and computer programs can be likened to that of a complex web of possible paths: the user interacts with them to create a personal narrative which is by no means strictly linear. One can travel both horizontally and vertically on the surface of the screen. However to travel below the surface and move from the level of simple information gathering to that of increasing knowledge requires a different kind of rigour.

Virtual reality is a term widely used in conjunction with computer travel. Examination of the terms reveals an inherent nonsense: *virtual* is to do with essence or effect although not formally or actually, while *real* means actually existing or present as a state of quality of things.

Well, it may appear nonsensical on paper, but try to interrupt a player engrossed in **Myst** or **Doom** or **Pro-Golf**. The person seated at the terminal is no longer present in the room; to the observer he (I'll use 'he' as that's the case in our household) is absent in mind only, but to the player himself he is virtually absent in body as well, negotiating various worlds and avoiding sand traps, choosing the correct club or the appropriate missile. The crowd cheers a birdie, the enemy groans and writhes on the screen, a plane crashes into the side of a mountain. Adrenalin pumps through the veins, the pulse rate sky-rockets and the fingers of one hand pound at the keyboard. It's virtually exhausting. But is it truly aerobic?

Longley presents the viewer with five stylised computer screens, each dealing with one of the five senses. Each etched tin plate houses a digital image and each image is somehow impaired - distorted or imperfectly resolved. The suggestion is that there is a gap between reality and virtuality, that a world experienced through the screen can never completely duplicate the one directly perceived via the five senses.

Nevertheless, before one embarks on a voyage through the Internet or faces the perils of **Doom**, it's necessary to be suitably armed and skilled in the appropriate tactics. Knights of old donned protective armour before commencing upon some or other quest.

> A Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,
> Y cladde in mightie armes and silver shielde,....
>
> ...on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,
> The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,
> For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore,
> and dead as living ever him ador'd:
> Upon his shield the like was also scor'd

The Faerie Queene
Book 1, Canto 1
Edmund Spenser (1552 -1599)

In Spenser's allegorical work, *The Faerie Queene*, the Red Cross Knight carries armorial bearings which signify his allegiance to Christ and to Holinesse and which determine how he will act in the face of adversity. While armour serves to protect the wearer and insulate him from danger, it also creates a physical barrier between him and the outside world and this robs it of its immediacy. The senses may be dulled when encased in a metal skin, but the intellect remains intact: flashing LED's on the helmet indicate someone is at home inside - and hard at work.

The armorial bearings on Longley's metal shield and glove are the zero/one binary code which is the basis on which computers operate. Appropriate insignia for the symbolic armour to be worn when entering the realm of virtual reality. The code has been etched into the metal in the same way that metal smiths in the Middle Ages created ornaments and insignia on armour worn by knights. The historical connection between the etching of steel armour and the printing process which grew out of this practice - etching, where an etched and inked image on a metal plate is impressed onto a dampened sheet of paper, is a further example of the cross-referencing in this exhibition. Artists since the 1500's have used the medium of etching to express visual ideas and continue to do so today. Contemporary artists work with computers to create visual images. The hand that guides the mouse is the same hand that guides the paint brush and the drawing scribe.

In terms of image generation, parallels exist between the ways an artist creates a print using traditional methods and using computer technology. Both situations allow for the gradual working up of an image through a cumulative process of layering. In both, elements can be added and subtracted and experimentation with colour is a relatively simple affair. And both require of the artist an understanding of particular procedures (codes of conduct in chivalric terms) and particular technical skills. Paradoxically, the greater the familiarity with and understanding of procedural matters, the greater is the artist's expressive freedom. You have to know the rules to know how to break them.

In *The Golden Rose* series, the images were created on the computer, printed out onto film and photographically transferred onto chemically coated solarplates. The plates were subsequently printed using materials and methods which have had a place in the printer's workshop for centuries: a successful marriage of old and new technologies. This body of work traces a journey of renewal and Penelope Curtin's comprehensive accompanying essay places the images in a historical and symbolic context and also discusses the artist's rationale for her selection of particular roses for inclusion in the folio. The metaphor of the journey for a voyage of self-discovery and renewal is one

which reappears in Longley's work and which has provided a structure for a number of her published folios and limited edition books.

Also recurring is the notion of life as a game of chance, a theatre where a throw of the dice or a deal of cards can determine one's fate and where acrobats strive to keep their balance. Curiously though, whereas each throw of the die offers one of six possible outcomes, every move in a computer game comprises a single choice. The player actively interacts with a binary coded program along every stage of the journey and is ultimately responsible for his/her fate. There's no question of who cast the die or who dealt the hand.

Greater freedom in one sense, but also a greater burden of responsibility. Perhaps the angst which sometimes envelops us as we move inexorably towards the end of the millennium is due at least partly to the knowledge that our fate lies within our own hands. And in a world of computers one of those hands is fondling a rodent.

Olga Sankey
September 1995