

SENSORY MEMORANDUM

an exhibition of mixed media works incorporating print and digital techniques

March 26 ~ April 25, 1998



Dianne Longley



SENSORY MEMORANDUM

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)

Tennyson's Lady leads an isolated existence, spending her days at her loom behind four grey walls on the Island of Shalott, watching life pass by below as reflected in a mirror. She knows that should she look at the world directly through the window, an unknown curse will be upon her. When she does eventually go to the window, drawn by the reflected image of Sir Lancelot riding by, reality assaults her senses. The sun is too dazzling, the knight's armour is too shiny, his singing is too loud. The Lady of Shalott who has become 'half sick of shadows', leaves her sanctuary and sails down the river to Camelot, moving from her virtual world to the real world and perishes in the process.

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.

The title of this exhibition is *Sensory Memorandum*. In the five works titled *Temptation*, *Envelop*, *Engage*, *Reminder* and *Comfort* the artist reminds us that there is a gap between reality and virtuality, that a world experienced through the computer screen can never completely duplicate the one directly perceived through the five senses. She presents the viewer with five stylised computer screens, each dealing with one of the senses. Each etched tin plate houses a digital image and each image is somehow impaired - distorted or imperfectly resolved.

The works in the exhibition represent a fusion of the artist's practice. Longley has a national and international profile as a printmaker/book artist. While she originally worked primarily in the etching medium, she has more recently embraced computer technology in her work, not replacing the old technology with the new, but rather moving back and forth between the two. Much of her recent work involves a discussion of this relationship: one between the physicality of traditional techniques - the creation of the etched plate through the corrosive action of acid on metal and the physical process of printing images on a press for example - and the less physical process of creating artworks on the screen.

Longley is acutely aware of our society's gradual loss of traditional craft skills, skills which were both functional and recreational and which had the ability to bring people together and provide them with the satisfaction of completing a tangible artefact or product. Perhaps it's a question of time and the speed with which we now expect to complete tasks so as not to fall behind in the fast lane of contemporary life that has led to the gradual demise of such pursuits. A sense of this loss is communicated in the Novajet print *The pursuits of a lifetime can't be recorded on calendars*: ironically the central image of the hands crocheting is taken from a nineteenth century encyclopedia of needlework, but it has been incorporated into a digitally created artwork.

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.

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. 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*.

In the *Armorial* series, the artist again refers to the desensitisation of those who choose to experience the world virtually rather than immediately through the senses, taking her cue from the computer glove and helmet already available to those embarking on a virtual adventure.

While armour serves to protect and insulate the wearer from danger, it also serves as a physical barrier to the outside world. Encased in a metal skin, the senses may be dulled, but the intellect remains intact: flashing LED's on the work *Armorial Cerebrum* indicate someone is at home inside - and hard at work.

Interestingly, recent military developments mirror to a certain extent the notion put forward by the artist in this series. In an article in *The Weekend Australian*, March 7-8, 1998, Robert Wilson reports that 'the recent threat of another Gulf War had all sides racing to the lab', with military establishments 'investigating using virtual reality systems for infantry training'. It is predicted that 'the soldier of the next century will rely on the technology of the microchip and wear armour of Kevlar and carbon fibre composites'.

The armorial bearings on Longley's metal shield, helmet and gloves 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 *The Golden Rose* series, the images were created on the computer, printed out onto film and photographically transferred onto commercial photopolymer plates. 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
March 1998



Acknowledgements

With thanks to Shaw Hendry, Olga Sankey, Craig Noble, Neville Daniel,
Mary-Patricia Mitchell, David O'Connor, Robert Steele.

Catalogue published March 1998 by Illumination Press,
Adelaide, South Australia.

Robert Steele Gallery 420 West Broadway New York NY 10012 USA