

MARGARET DODD 93

MARGARET DODD SOME WORKS FROM 1965-1993

REMEMBRANCE & THE VERNACULAR OF NOSTALGIA

Margaret Dodd made her first ceramic Holden in 1969. It was not, of course, the first ceramic car she had made. Her formative studies under Robert Arneson at the University of California at Davis in 1965-8 gave her the impetus to develop ceramic trucks, cars and motor bikes, which were exhibited with other funk ceramics of Arneson himself and others whose work is collectively known as Californian Funk. This retrospective exhibition includes Dodd's Fake funk truck (1965-6), along with other early vehicles such as Morris Minor (1967), VW bus (1970), Kawasaki (1970), Little bike (1971). But it is in her Holdens that the critique of post war and contemporary Australian culture finds its incisive expression.

FX and FJ Holdens have become icons of a particular moment in the rhetoric of Australian national culture. Indeed, the production of 'Australia's own car' in 1948 by General Motors was acclaimed at the time as a decisive moment in the maturation of Australian national culture. ¹ The appeal of the Holden lay in its ability to "modernise" myths of nationhood founded on notions of the bush, mobility and masculinity without actually dislodging them.

The widespread popular currency in the late 1950s-1960s of the 'bush' legend was based on a nostalgia for an invented past which appeared continuous with the present. A similar preoccupation had motivated the late nineteenth century urban artists and intellectuals in their retrospective construction of the struggle, decades earlier, to tame the land. The car that was specifically 'designed for Australian travel and conditions' could effect a symbolic association of deeply held concepts of the bush, masculine mobility and freedom with the everyday life and rituals of suburban family life. Consumerism and suburban family life could appear to be rooted in the values articulated through the bush legend. Writing about John Brack's painting *The Car* (1955), Ian Burn says:

Driving in a car, you think you are in the landscape, you feel part of the landscape, it washes over you in successive waves. But you're in a car, locked inside a form of transport designed specially for the nuclear family, taking a Sunday drive like everyone else. You are both placed and displaced in the landscape.²

In the context of postwar optimism and economic development, the Holden could serve and sell as "a symbol of mobility and freedom, the ability to overcome the

vastness of the country while keeping the family unit intact".³

By the time Margaret Dodd was making ceramic sculptures of Holdens, FXs and FJs were no longer symbols of smug conformity, affluence and family values. Her Holden sculptures and the film *This Woman is not a car* reflect critically on a cultural nostalgia for invented national pasts - the recent past of 1950s postwar affluence and cultural consolidation and its nostalgia for the nineteenth century past of the bush legend. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the stifling rhetoric of cultural homogeneity and conformity could no longer contain the divisions, differences and disillusionments of increasingly audible sections of the population. No longer symbols of affluence, ageing Holdens were the cars of young impecunious men with the mechanical skills to keep them going. The values of youth overlaid, but did not erase the associations of Holdens with conformity and national consolidation.

Dodd's Holdens speak in the vernacular of nostalgia in order to contest the versions of the past that have threatened to suffocate the present and stunt the future. Nostalgia thrives when there is a loss of confidence in the connection between the past and the present. The term 'nostalgia' derives from the Greek *nostos*, meaning 'the return home'. Nostalgia refers to the yearning for the past as if it were home. The past invoked by such longing inevitably is the work of a highly motivated and self-censoring memory. Indeed, Gayle Green distinguishes between nostalgia and memory, observing that "the roots of the words suggest different impulses: whereas 'nostalgia' is the desire to return home, 'to remember' is 'to bring to mind' or 'think of again', 'to be mindful of', 'to recollect'. Both remembering and recollecting suggest a connecting, assembling, a bringing together of things in relation to another..."⁴

Nostalgia and remembering are in some sense antithetical, since nostalgia is a forgetting, merely regressive, whereas memory may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions into enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future.⁵

It is at the intersection of nostalgia and memory that Margaret Dodd works. She is able to explore the nostalgia for the past invested in the FX Holden because she has not forgotten the past. The past that she remembers sits uneasily in the national



nostalgia. Her recollection of the two decade career of the Holden is inseparable from her feminist interpretation of that past as "a time when women were forced out of the modern world, back into a traditional sphere of the duties of wife and mother."⁶ This view of the 1950s as the "pre-history of second- wave feminism", to use Lesley Johnson's phrase, is now itself the subject of critical scrutiny by feminist scholars. Margaret Dodd's early work registers the explosive and liberating impact of second-wave feminism in Australia.

It was reading Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*⁷ that impelled her towards art school at Davis. Friedan seemed to speak directly of her own experience as the partner of an Australian postgraduate student at Yale in the early 1960s, caring for young children without the financial, social or cultural resources that she might have had at home. She has spoken of art school and ceramics practice as literally 'saving' her from the mindlessly repetitious labour and emptiness of women's suburban domestic life.

Margaret Dodd's works are tokens of remembrance. Her first Holdens were produced at the moment when women were struggling for equal participation in paid employment and embracing the opportunities presented by political activism. Though she comments on the isolation she felt from the artistic milieu of Adelaide on her return from the US, Dodd could identify herself as an artist rather than a housewife. Feminist writing in the 1960-70s saw 'forgetting' as part of the foreclosure of women's ability to determine their own lives. Friedan, for example, described the housewife's malaise as a loss of memory. Lee Sanders Comer argued that "happy housewives...are simply those women who have successfully forgotten who they might have been. The act of forgetting is their only contribution to the world."⁸

Forgetting, repetition and nostalgia are the responses of those who do not seek to learn from the past. The use of black and white sequences in *This Woman* is not a car implies that the suburban woman's life is an endless cycle of repetition. The use of the car for shopping and picking up and dropping off children underscores the woman's experience of constriction and immobility, in implied contrast to the masculine narrative of cars, mobility and freedom. The use of black and white inserts frequently connotes remembered experience, but in this film there is no sense that

these domestic activities occur in the past. The resulting lack of distinction between past and present erodes the possibility of change.

Not only is the woman bound to the car by domestic chores, but she and the car are ultimately interchangeable in the economy of masculine sexual desire. The scene that begins with a mechanic enacting an erotic fantasy in which the woman and the car are one ends in violent rape. The ravaged car becomes a symbol of women's cultural memory that refuses nostalgia for the "Australian way of life" which is simultaneously symbolised by the FX Holden.

The nostalgia critically acknowledged by Margaret Dodd's ceramic cars represents a desire for an imagined national past which appears to legitimize suburban drudgery and sexual violation. If nostalgia represents the past as the longed-for home, then Dodd's Holdens suggest that women may not yearn for either home or past. The 'good old days' was a time when 'women knew their place' and, says Gayle Green, "it is not a place to which most women would want to return".⁹ Whether one speaks of the bush legend or the postwar suburban dream, women in Australian narrative rarely undertake journeys, and are rarely far enough away from home to yearn for their home-coming. Australian narratives of nation formation by and large require women to await the home-comings of men.

The horror which is the counter-balance to humour in *This woman* is not a car is not evident in Dodd's sculptural ceramics. The funk humour of the ceramic Holdens is more ironic and less macabre than the black comedy of the film. The Funk ceramics movement of the late 1960s, drawing on the visual language of Pop Art, produced carnivalesque objects that referred in form and content to popular culture of mass-produced commodities. The visual language and use of materials of Funk debunked the heroic pretensions of both high modernist art and 'high craft'. Dodd's vehicles are formed within the vernacular of popular culture, tacky but affectionate. The glazes, Dodd has said, are bought from a hobby catalogue, the colours banal and the application beguilingly casual. The shapes of the cars are dumpy and the clay seems indeed to be "just squashed in" the mould. A logical response to the mass production of commodities is a fascination for the error which represents the failure of control, and Dodd shows a similar attitude to commodity culture as Imants Tillers does in his meticulous copying of the mis-registration of postcard photographs of European



architecture. Dodd's play with scale also implies a nuanced perception of the language of popular culture. Little cars and buses that fit into the hand and the pocket are like souvenirs. They almost ask to be taken home, and in fact, a closer look reveals that they are miniature homes, buses made of bricks and rendered cement. As always, the mobility implied by the concept of a car or bus is undermined by the object itself. Margaret Dodd understands the desire for such objects as kewpie dolls, stuffed toys and souvenirs. She associates the tawdry icons of national culture and modernity with the experience of carnivals and cheap toys, things of the past for which we have affection but to which we attach no great value.

In contrast to these ceramic 'toys' are her huge sculptures, which include Bridal costume for an FJ Holden discarded (1987) a fibreglass 'costume', now in the Powerhouse Collection, Sydney, and The Fossil (1991) - a full-sized sculpture of a fossilised Holden made of cement and steel for the National Motor Museum at Birdwood, S.A. With its allusion to the limestone cliffs and yellow sandstone at Port Noarlunga and Maslin Beach, The Fossil pushes to absurdity the association of land and mobility in national culture, imagining the 'Australian icon' as if it were resumed by the land.

These works respond to cultural nostalgia for invented pasts with a combination of affection and contempt. At the same time, they disallow the cultural forgetfulness that such nostalgia entails. The Holden becomes the vehicle of remembrance of what is too readily forgotten in celebrations of the past. Through her work, the past becomes a contested terrain. Ol' Mick (1993) contests the myth of post-war national independence which the Holden symbolised. In spite of the claim that this was "Australia's own car", the profits from the sales of Holdens were destined for the United States. In the context of American cultural domination on a global scale, the assertion of cultural autonomy suggested by the 'Australian way of life' was merely rhetorical. Mickey Mouse ruptures the Holden, his smile suggestive of fleshy wounds - the fabric of Australian culture is torn apart by the American mouse plague.

Recent work by Margaret Dodd diverges from the familiar ironic critique of nostalgia for an invented past shaped around male-centred fantasies and quests. Dodd searches through her stock of family stories for clues that allow her to reconstruct a different history which, in turn, allows different perspectives on the present. The earthenware plates included in this exhibition, He holds the lantern...(1993) and

Second Valley 1844, artist tries to patch crack in the world (1992) describe South Australian colonial experience and refer directly to Dodd's grandfather's family experiences in the 1850s-60s. The plates combine the commemorative form with visual narrative. The images formed in relief refer to the yarns of a family in which a woman might "crack a joke with her dying breath" and in which "he holds a lantern..." while she swings the axe.

These plates use the domestic commemorative form to tell a story which is at once personal and communal. The layered historical consciousness that addresses the history of the coastal area south of Adelaide and Dodd's own family history, also reflects on the evolution of her own practice and identity as an artist. The images themselves, and the visual and narrative concerns they address, affirm her identification with an Australian art historical tradition, traced back through Arthur Boyd to Frederick McCubbin and Tom Roberts. Through the form of the commemorative plates, she also pays tribute to the late Robert Arneson, acknowledging a tradition of commemorative plates that developed under his tutelage at Davis in the 1960s.

Margaret Dodd's art unsettles our relation to the past. She uses the vernacular of nostalgia to contest the masculinist myths that lie at the heart of Australian nationalism. The Holdens as vehicles of remembrance of aspects of the past should not be forgotten if we are to understand the past in its dynamic relationship to the present. *Sue Rowley, School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong*

1 Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p. 164

2 Ian Burn, "Is Art History any use to Artists?", *Art Network*, No 15, Autumn 1985, p. 11

3 *ibid.*, p. 9

4 Gayle Green, "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory", *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Winter 1991, p. 297

5 *ibid.*, p. 298

6 Lesley Johnson, *The Modern Girl - Girlhood and Growing Up*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993, p. 4

7 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1983

8 Lee Sanders Comer, *Women's Liberation Review* (1982), cited in Gayle Green, *op. cit.*, p. 300

9 *ibid.*, p. 296







1988-89 Queensland Art Gallery, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, Art Gallery of South Australia
Australian Decorative Arts, 1788-1988
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

1990 Women in the Arts, Loft Gallery, Adelaide Festival Fringe, South Australia

1991 Thirty Years of TB-9, a tribute to Robert Arneson, John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, California, USA
Brown, 1970s ceramics from the collection, Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, Victoria

1992 All Creatures Great and Small, John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, California, USA
LA Drives Me Wild, Sherry Frumkin Gallery, Santa Monica, California, USA

1993 Eighth Annual Thirty Ceramic Sculptors Exhibition, John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, California, USA
Ross Turk Collection, Palo Alto Cultural Centre, Palo Alto, California, USA

FILM

1981-82 Directed and co-edited a video film Progress They Call It, as part of the Clocks and Lorries project at the Adelaide Festival Centre, South Australia

1982 Completed the film This woman is not a car

1983 Womens Film Festival, Paris, and tour of France, represented by the film This woman is not a car

1984 Tyneside Film Festival, United Kingdom, represented by the film This woman is not a car

1985 Munich Film Festival, represented by the film This woman is not a car

1986-93 Worked on The Kangaroo Eating House (working title), a film and video project on the fate of the

1986-93 East End Market area of Adelaide

COMMISSIONS

1982 Commissioned by Jim Sharman to work with Tony Coleing on an installation for the 1982 Adelaide Festival utilising the Plaza and the Gallery

1991 Completion and launch of The Fossil, Commissioned by Birdwood Mill National Motor Museum, Birdwood, South Australia, to complete a work titled The Fossil, a cement and steel facsimile of a fossilised FX Holden embedded in lime and sandstone

1991-93 Noarlunga Community Hospital, South Australia, a series of ceramic illustrative plates, platters and sculptures

COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Latrobe Valley Arts Centre, Morwell, Victoria
Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, Tasmania
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Philip Morris Collection, Melbourne
Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, Victoria
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
State Film Library, Adelaide
National Film Library, Canberra
Powerhouse Museum, Sydney
Nickel Art Museum, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada
Johnson Wax Collection, North America

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS

Ross Turk, Allan Stone, Robert Arneson and others in the United States and Australia

Film Separations:
Show Ads and The Bureau
Printed by: Finsbury Press
Design: Michelle Brus

CAPTIONS

1. Ol' Mick 1993
earthenware 31 x 20 x 43
Private collection
2. Holden with lipstick surfboards from the series 'This woman is not a car', 1977
earthenware
21.1 x 44.1 x 20.2
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1981
3. Kawasaki 1970
earthenware 33.8 x 27 x 55.5cms
Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia
South Australian Government Grant, 1976
4. VW bus 1970
earthenware 21.5 x 45.8 x 18.4
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of the Philip Morris Arts Grant, 1982

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Shepparton Art Gallery, Victoria
Art Gallery of Western Australia
Latrobe Valley Arts Centre, Morwell, Victoria
Powerhouse Museum, Sydney
Art Gallery of Western Australia
Ray Hughes

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University of Wollongong
Photography: Ol' Mick & Kawasaki - Clayton Glenn
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LIST OF WORKS

- | | | | | | |
|----|--|----|--|----|--|
| 1 | Fake funk truck, 1965-66
earthenware 13.5 x 13 x 18
Private collection | 12 | FX Holden, 1977
earthenware 17.5 x 42 x 19
Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
South Australian Government Grant, 1978 | | earthenware
21.1 x 44.1 x 20.2
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1981 |
| 2 | Blue Cloud, 1967
earthenware
17 x 46 x 18
Private collection | 13 | Two blue (blue Holden), 1976-77
earthenware
18.5 x 20 x 40
Collection: Powerhouse Museum, Sydney
Purchased 1987 | 22 | Zip zap punk FX, 1980
earthenware
19 x 45 x 21
Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia
Purchased 1981 |
| 3 | Morris Minor, 1967
earthenware 15 x 36 x 15
Private collection | 14 | Hoon Holden,
from the series 'This woman is not a car', 1976/7
earthenware
18.5 x 42 x 18.5
Private collection | 23 | This woman is not a car, 1982
VHS video
23 minute col/b&w |
| 4 | Rag, 1970
earthenware
14.5 x 15 x 24.5
Collection: Ray Hughes | 15 | Ravaged Holden,
from the series 'This woman is not a car', 1976/7
earthenware
21 x 42 x 42
Private collection | 24 | FJ Holden pretending to be an
Australian native porcupine, 1982
14 x 14.5 x 32.1
earthenware
Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
South Australian Government Grant, 1987 |
| 5 | VW bus, 1970
earthenware
21.5 x 45.5 x 18.4
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of the Philip Morris Arts Grant, 1982 | 16 | Holden with hair curlers,
from the series 'This woman is not a car', 1976/7
earthenware
20.5 x 40 x 18
Private collection | 25 | Port Pirie Gloomchasers Club 1937, 1983
Paint, ceramic, photographs,
sound loop, wooden box
34 x 53.5 x 14.5
Private collection |
| 6 | Kawasaki, 1970
earthenware
33.5 x 27 x 55.5
Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia
South Australian Government Grant, 1976 | 17 | Holden wedding cake,
from the series 'This woman is not a car', 1976/7
earthenware
46 x 43 x 37
Private collection | 26 | Group of small models, c 1972 - 1992
earthenware
Various sizes ranging 10 x 5 x 6 to 9 x 4.5 x 4.5
Private Collection |
| 7 | Little bike, 1971
earthenware
38.5 x 22.5 x 8
Private collection | 18 | Bridal Holden,
from the series 'This woman is not a car', 1977
earthenware, silk tulle, satin and buttons
24 x 42 x 20
Private collection | 27 | Second Valley 1844, artist tries to patch
crack in the world, 1992
earthenware
50cms (diameter)
Private collection |
| 8 | Yellow Cloud, 1971
earthenware
50 x 38 x 10
Private collection | 19 | Decaying Holden
from the series 'This woman is not a car', 1976/7
earthenware
50 x 38 x 10
Private collection | 28 | Garage deity, 1993
earthenware
19.5 x 25.5 x 29
Private collection |
| 9 | Fiddler, 1972
earthenware
8.1 x 46 x 31.8
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1973 | 20 | Holden pies and pasties
from the series 'This woman is not a car', 1976/7
earthenware
Pasties 19 x 11.5 x 5
Pies 12 x 12 x 6
Private collection | 29 | He holds the lantern....., 1993
earthenware 45 (diameter)
Private collection |
| 10 | Eat me, Holden dessert, 1972
earthenware
35.5 x 51 x 7.5
Collection: Shepparton Art Gallery, Victoria
Purchased via the Sir Andrew Fairley Bequest, 1974 | 21 | Holden with lipstick surfboards,
from the series 'This woman is not a car', 1977 | 30 | Of Mick, 1993
earthenware
31 x 20 x 43
Private collection |
| 11 | Holden Newburg, 1972
earthenware 19.7 x 35 x 50.8
Collection: Latrobe Valley Arts Centre, Morwell, Victoria
Purchased 1974 | | | | Catalogue numbers 1 - 3 made at Davis, California, USA
Catalogue works from 1970 made at St Peters, Adelaide, SA
Measurements in Centimetres: Height x Width x Depth |

ARTSPACE

Adelaide Festival
Centre

2 July - 14 Aug 1993

