



Playing with Display

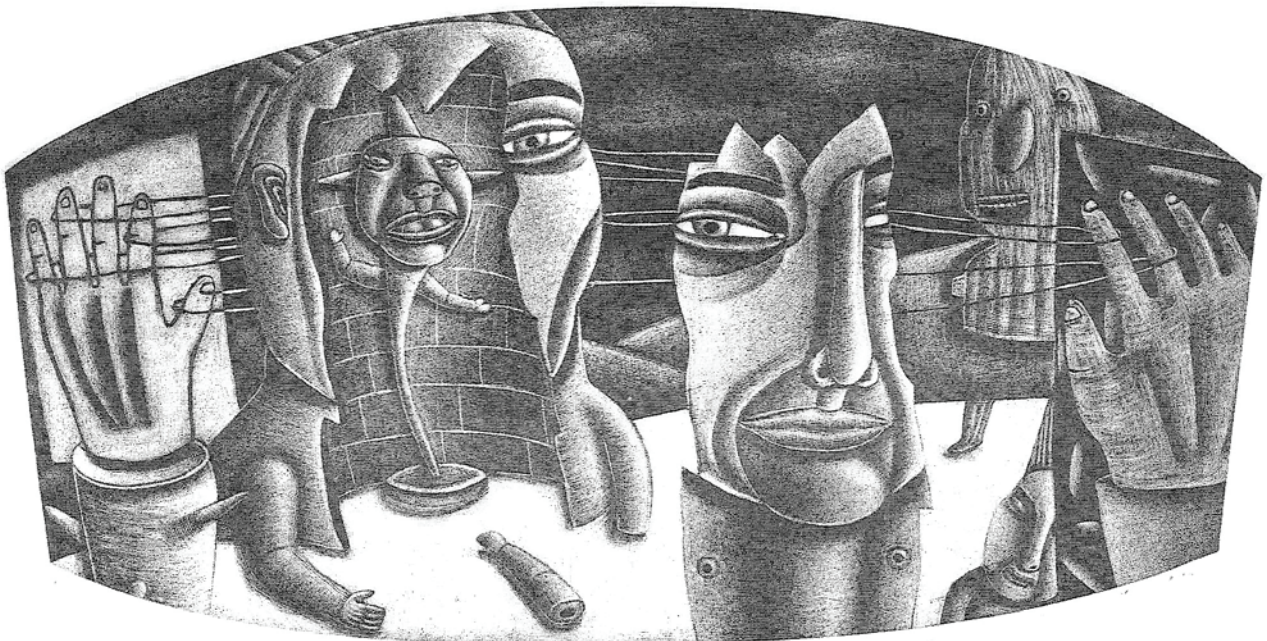
Jenny Dolezel's Art of Spectacle

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I want to talk about the quality of my perception. I want the quality or kind called childhood cause children see the sadness which sees this city's glory. What does this sentence mean? I can wander wherever I want. I simple see. Each detail is a mystery a wonder. I wander wonder. The loneliness feeling is very quickly lost. So I can see any and everything. I can talk about everything as a child would. The interior of my mind versus the exterior. Art proposes an interiority which no longer exists, for all of us are moulded. The nightmare I fear most is true.¹

Jenny Dolezel's art has often been described as childlike and playful: it is packaged as fun for all the family. Mistress of the cunning disguise and heavily implicated in her depicted world of those caught putting in an appearance, she is deft with the sugar coating. It takes a while to see that her confections are all moulded, subject to some controlling force, and that her figures, though cute, have hungry eyes and rapacious mouths.

While her art is hardly family fare, she lulls us with the familiar, appealing to the power of memory for



that which is lost: childhood, the art of the past. Like Kathy Acker's 'I' in the passage above, she wanders wonder in an eclectically fashioned vehicle. She records a few signposts along the way to let us know where she has been travelling. A 1986 mezzotint warns of Goya in its title *The Sleep of Reason*. The Three Graces put in an appearance in a chalk work from 1989. Bosch is lurking in the wings of her 1990 Aotea Centre mural, *The Circus of Life*. Her figures put on faces and sidle up to the work of Tony Fomison, get brutal with Jean Dubuffet and flirt with surrealism while on a visit to Jean Michel Basquiat's ghetto.

For the last eight years, her personal bestiary has been performing for our pleasure across a range of media: prints, drawings, paintings and oilstick works on paper. The journey started with the anthropomorphic animal fables her mother told her as a child and was fuelled by memories of 'real' nightmares. In commentaries on Dolezel's art much is made of her fairytale 'success'; and the artist is fondly presented as an innocent going hither and thither, dipping into a lolly-jar of imagery without programme of intent.

But Jenny Dolezel is no child and although there may be madness in her method, the crazy capering of her figures is along a well-defined route between chaos and order. That which is underneath the jolly, waiting to be uncovered, masked by surface appearances, is the driving force in her art.

Dolezel deals with the fake and the real, like Kathy Acker whose book *Hannibal Lecter, My Father* carries an admonition on its back cover; 'This writing is all fake (copied from other writing) so you should go away and not read any of it'. Of course this just serves to whet the appetite, teasing us to read the book and see whether we can spot the difference, or work out how she has manipulated her plagiarized texts. Similarly, Dolezel teases with her evocations of childhood innocence, when fairytales dazzled, and were taken at face value, rather than as the rehearsal of culturally upheld prescriptions for male and female behaviour that they really are.

Dolezel's *The Circus of Life*, is an epiphany of sorts, a moment of manifestation of a supernatural reality, when all the wild things come out to play. Drawing on an imagery developed in preceding years, and healthily stocked with patently fake figures, figures of fun, she has created an apotheosis for all great pretenders. As before in her art, the larger-than-life grotesques are often pointedly androgynous, as mixed up about their gender as they are about what is going to happen next. Captured cavorting without a script,

they are fixed momentarily in one guise but capable of many. They have to juggle with the consequences of looking absurd on stage, while engaging us in the willing suspension of disbelief at their seriousness of purpose. It is very definitely human fallibility, vanity, folly and insecurity, that gets spotlighted within the little theatre of influence these creatures inhabit, as well as the gap between appearances and reality.

She imbues this work with the qualities of live theatre, where things may appear static like emblems, and significant actions may take place simultaneously, all over the stage. Like a dramatic tableau, everything crowds in at once in *The Circus of Life*. All relationships are already completed and are only waiting to be deciphered by the viewer. The clock scampers over the stage filled with its own self-importance and independently claims a share in the drama's unknown further developments. The whole thing seems disorganized and quite absurd, like life itself. Watching over all is the giant spring-borne observer figure of the artist herself suggesting that we live in a society of both spectacle and surveillance.

Giggling at the grown-ups while hiding behind a pretence of childishness has not always been a theme in Dolezel's art, but masks and what they cover up, certainly have. She plays around with the grotesque in an early photograph *Self Portrait (1983)*, wiping off her camouflage to confront us with a malevolent stare. The grotesque in art has been given an explanation in recent theory as the 'undoer of narcissism and all imaginary identity as well'.² This self-portrait shows the artist refusing to present a face typical of the feminine, in fact violently disrupting that image and



(opposite above) JENNY DOLEZEL *Self Portrait (In Disguise)* (1983)
Black-and-white photograph, 130 x 135 mm.

(opposite below) JENNY DOLEZEL *The Awakening* (1992)
Mezzotint, 335 x 165 mm. (Photograph: Glenys Ng)

(above right) JENNY DOLEZEL *Real Life Reversible Head* (1990)
Mezzotint, 170 x 120 mm.

(below right) JENNY DOLEZEL *Two Dogs Fighting for the Head of a Monster* (1986)
Asphaltum & enamel, 590 x 425 mm.
(Private collection, Auckland)



replacing it with one fashioned from her own desires. She draws attention to the business of making up, putting on one's face, and also to the idea that to put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off again, abandoning masquerade to reveal not non-identity but chosen identity.

In this one manoeuvre, she approaches the concerns of a contemporary feminist writer, Julia Kristeva, who sees the creation of her own texts as Dolezel does, as '[a] vision of the apocalypse that is rooted . . . on the fragile border where identities (subject/object) do not exist or only barely do so—doubly, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject'.³

Again, five years later in *Metamorphoses* (1988), the central figure acts out a dilemma of femininity. The title of this work puns on the notion of metamorphosis and invokes ancient Greek myths

about escape from danger through changing appearances. Yet hands at the top of the picture control the choices here and there seems no way out. But how to tell which is the right mask for this situation? Tellingly, all the faces are fixed up with ready-made smiles, a sure-fire winner in the femininity stakes, as Susan Brownmiller points out:

When my cosmetically adept friends complete their conjurer's art of creating their faces, I marvel at the finished picture, the makeover, the transformation: an even glowing skin, a widened eye, a richly defined and luscious mouth. In short, a face that has responded to the age-old injunction of man to woman: Smile. A made up woman does not need to be inwardly happy to give the impression of ecstatic pleasure.⁴

The word masquerade has been used to describe the 'false' position of women experiencing desire only in response to the male lust for that pretty face. But



(above) JENNY DOLEZEL *The Circus of Life* (1989-90)

Oil, 10.5 x 5.5 metres
(Collection: Aotea Centre, Auckland)

(left) JENNY DOLEZEL *Protected Vision* (1988)

Oil, oilstick & oil pastel, 1190 x 830 mm.
(Private collection, Auckland)
(Photograph: Peter Hannken)

(opposite) JENNY DOLEZEL *Metamorphoses* (1988)

Oil & oilstick, 1230 x 770 mm.
(Private collection, Auckland)
(Photograph: Peter Hannken)

this concept can also be applied to those who wish to be desiring subjects, to female sexuality as a potent initiating force rather than response to masculine desire. To be masked, like Catwoman, is to make oneself over, in order to both seduce and repel. Dolezel's creations evince both attractive and repellent qualities through their masks, and are out on the rampage. The world they inhabit is both lively and loosely defined. It is reminiscent of that described by Kathy Acker in her telling of the invention of herself as The Black Tarantula who crawled out of a San Francisco subculture in the late 'seventies:

It was this ambience in which everyone was androgynous. You weren't gay, you weren't straight, it was very loose. And everybody changed their name, everybody dressed up all the time, everybody wore make-up.⁵

Acker evokes an atmosphere of permanent Mardi Gras, where people literally re-wrote themselves and presented the new version as a spectacle for viewing. Distinctions of gender were apparently blurred through the crafty deployment of the traditional markers of feminine difference: cosmetics and clothing. It is often hard to pick the gender of Jenny Dolezel's figures because they are, in two senses, all made-up too, and consequently versatile masqueraders. In *Real Life Reversible Head* (1991), a mezzotint, the face smiles out if the print is held up one way and grimaces the other way. This recalls the lopsided grins at the top and bottom of the faces of the flanking figures in *Metamorphoses*. As well as being both masculine and feminine, the later mezzotint shows a broadening of concerns by making a nod to the characteristic symbol for theatre, the twinned faces of comedy and tragedy. Less literally, it can be seen as alluding to the image reversal involved in the business of printmaking.

Dolezel likes doing things backwards, it seems. Even the mezzotint process, where the all-over black is first rocked up and then scraped and burnished back to create light tones is in itself an inversion of other intaglio printing methods.

Reversal and inversion, the topsy-turvy world of vice-versa and other versions of the upset apple cart exist throughout this artist's work. Her aesthetic enters the enchanted realm of the carnivalesque, where the prevailing social order is temporarily disrupted, or turned inside out. This effect is described by Mary Russo:

The categories of carnivalesque speech and spectacle are heterogeneous, in that they contain the protocols of styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement. The masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society . . . the hyperboles of masquerade and carnival suggest . . . some preliminary 'acting out' of the dilemmas of femininity.⁶

Barking and snarling in the background at the carnivals in Dolezel's art is something uncontrollable, or at least not easily leashed. It is clearly expressed in her early enamel and asphaltum work, *Dogs Fighting for Head of a Monster* (1986). Beasts in the head rather than beasts in the body, the monsters wave like phalluses on the horizon, sentinels attendant upon the spectacle of their fellow's nasty end. In both classical and tribal mythology, animals and their anthropomorphized variants appear as symbols both of spiritual forces of nature and also as indicators of a mystical human relationship to these forces. These slaving dogs appear as visions of passionate excess destroying rationality, presented as literal evidence that something like love will tear us apart.

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Such spectacles demand spectators and Jenny Dolezel gives us that role, that of passive onlooker, while reserving for herself that of the restless observer. Though obviously one who sees, an observer is more importantly one who sees within a presented set of possibilities, one who sees in a certain way. Overly large and expressive, the eyes in her work frequently seem to be seeing in, rather than looking out. These eyes draw us into Dolezel's images in a random way, mimicking the random quality of vision itself, the instability of sight, and the lack of formal order in the way phenomena actually strike the eye.

Protected Vision (1988), baldly investigates sight without blinking. The scene set recalls images of Charlotte Corday visiting Marat in his bathtub, the prelude to a murder. Vision itself is about to be killed off. The bathing figure is immersed in narcissism, with vision so protected that it can only reflect itself in the mirror it holds, while the head on the other side has closed its eyes completely. The central figure is imprisoned by vision, walled in by eyes with a fixed gaze. Such a gaze is the property of death: it contrasts with the living eye which is always in motion, ranging for its food, visual stimuli. Elsewhere in Dolezel's art, the eyes are wide open to experience. Her hungry, roving eyes are most of all alive, linked to an individual desiring heart and searching mind.

Vision cannot exist without light. Hapless human creatures are dependent on the sun, so the action of light has an obvious primal drama, compelling the imagination. This is explored in her new mezzotint portfolio, *The Sun Stolen* (1992). Light often creeps into Dolezel's prints and drawings and steals the show. She uses light in her graphic work as if it were alive, inviting it and coaxing it to expand and create its own visions. In her colour compositions, the lushness of her palette ravishes before the chunky building up of her figures is seen, even before the subject registers. But in black-and-white, her skilful technique of chiaroscuro is to the fore, and light rules. Light has the edge in the game of symbolic association with its

connotations of redemption, the gaining of understanding, acquisition of knowledge—the getting of wisdom.

Dolezel often employs the tricky device of a tipped-down floor in her tableaux, which causes us to lose our footing outside the realm of the depicted. There is a mysterious enlargement of the picture space and the image moves forward coming to enclose, and retreats drawing us with it after the light. By pulling us in to join her in the composition, she suggests that there is no way to step outside the confines of culture, no fantasy escape from civilization. These displays of artful exuberance are not child's play, but exhortations to be aware of controlling forces within and outside the body. Only by keeping both eyes open will we be able to deepen our understanding of inner dramas as well as those which seem remote and different to us, and so continually threaten, challenge and reform our sense of self.

1. Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School plus two*, London, Picador 1984, pp. 298-299.

2. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press 1982, p. 208.

3. *Ibid*, p. 207.

4. Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity*, New York, Simon & Schuster 1984, p. 159.

5. Kathy Acker, *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*, New York, Semiotext(e) 1991, p. 1.

6. Mary Russo, 'Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory' in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, edited by Teresa de Lauretis, Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1986, p. 218.