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NERISSA LEA

"I REMEMBER DANCING"

This exhibition has been produced by Nerissa Lea during a six-month period as Artist-in-Residence at Griffith University during which she has worked with etching, lithography, drawing, collage and assemblage.

Nerissa Lea was born in 1959 in New South Wales, and graduated from the South Australian School of Art after majoring in printmaking and cinematography. She has made animated films, worked in a hospital for incurables, and taught printmaking at Ballarat College of Advanced Education. After graduation she completed a post-graduate course in Italy, spending periods in Urbino, Florence, Rome, and later lived as a recluse in Wales.

To enter the world of Nerissa's art is a startling experience. It is a mysterious dream-like world, where strange, eerie human faces and figures seem suddenly transfixed in settings of imaginary architecture and fantasy landscapes.

There are unmistakable reminders of a wide range of earlier artists and artistic movements, from Giotto and early medieval religious and secular art, through Heironymus Bosch, Albrecht Dürer, William Blake, caricaturists such as Honoré Daumier, the collages of Max Ernst, the surrealists, early twentieth century German expressionism, and more recently printmakers such as Paul Wunderlich. But Nerissa's work goes beyond an interpretation of these traditions. She revitalises them with a facility for imaginative recreation of fantasy, and detailed expressive drawing, creating a world in which a powerful personal iconography illuminates a series of intense invented narratives. The works are vestiges of the artist's own fantasy world, which like the pages of a diary or personal sketch book, reflect on daily occurrences, friends, dreams, hopes, fears and observations about the world.

The concentration on portraiture in these works reveals a refined knowledge of facial proportion and expressive detail. The artist's interest in alienation and human isolation leads to great attention being given to the drawing of faces which reveal the characters' illusions about themselves. Many of the faces appear like Commedia del'Arte masks, disclosing character-revealing extremes.

Elements of distortion verging on caricature are applied to the images of friends, relatives, strangers who have been sketched or photographed, and most frequently the artist's own face, in an exploration of the range of human emotion. A detailed study of physical stereotypes investigates the perception that fear is the universal value disclosed in the dialectics of religion and philosophy. Fear is also perceived as the motivating force behind the pursuit of power, political and personal ambition, and all interpersonal relationships. The stereotype is unmasked through repetition of the same face in various environments. Recurring environments are studied with various inhabitants.

Human solitude is associated with a quest for perfection. Mutated bodies and distorted facial features are superimposed upon mask-like faces of statuesque classical beauty. An exploration of the Platonic ideal attests to the impossibility of pure thought or perfect balance. Isolated figures hint at the phenomenon of self-destruction through dogged attachment to an ideal.

The use of collage is evident throughout the exhibition, both in the finished drawings and as a sketching device (often incorporating xerox copying) for preparing the prints. The collage technique in which drawings, photographs and other objects are selected for their associative, representational, formal or textual values, and glued together, is an ideal vehicle to embody wit, irony, absurdity, dreams, disturbing psychological states, unexpected shifts of scale, and puzzling distortions of depth and distance.

Cover image: Detail from "Three Blind Boys" Etching and Aquatint.

With its ability to telescope time and place, and to accommodate violent contradictions, collage has a particular appropriateness for art-production in the 1980 s. In the knowledge of the vastness of human culture, each individual in Nerissa's collages is confined to a very narrow experience of life. People are glued to a particular situation, stopped as in a photograph in the act of movement, in one place as they may well have been stopped in another. Expressions are cemented on faces. In restricting the activity and expressive capacity of the characters in this way, the artist provides for infinite interpretations of the dilemma of the individual.

Some of the works inspired by literary sources (especially the short stories of Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann and Edgar Allan Poe) use collage to produce the key images for animated films in which elements in the collage will move and change.

A very noticeable variety of distinctly different drawing styles emerges in the work, and the choice of drawing style, like the choice of medium, is dependent on subject matter and mood. Nerissa views her approach to drawing styles in the same vein as the chameleon-like adaptation of the individual to varying social situations. She adopted printmaking after being discouraged from the use of spontaneous and illustrative drawing techniques. The prints, especially the etchings, drawn directly onto the plates, indicate in the complexity of their detailed imagery the tension of technical challenge. The drawings using monoprint technique and cartoon-like simplified forms are produced for sheer pleasure in spontaneity.

To step inside the frames of the work in this exhibition reveals the personal world of a young artist in a state of trepidation, self-confrontation, rapid development and transition. Nerissa's own description of the past six months is revealing:

"A residency really brings out one's honesty to oneself. You cannot pretend for six months, day after day that something will get away with being art just because it goes through the motions. I have head-bashed a lot. I feel I have achieved an enormous amount."

One of the purposes of the residency programme at Griffith University is to allow the community a more than usually direct acquaintance with the ideas and methodology of a range of working artists. In this spirit, the following list of works includes some brief annotations which are not intended to restrict responses to the work, but to provide a context for the individual works and a few clues to the artist's working methods.

Margriet Bonnin
October, 1985

<u>LIST OF WORKS</u>	<u>MEDIUM</u>	<u>IMAGE SIZE</u> (HxW in cm)
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|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1. "I Remember Dancing" | Coloured Pencils,
Ink, Gold Conté | 51.3 x 65 |
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Collaged photo-booth faces of the artist and friend form the basis of a monoprint with heavily built-up pencil drawing. This version of the artist's face appears in various works in the exhibition as do the silhouetted figures that lurk in the shadow of the dance floor.

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| 2. "The Lighthouse Jan 1 1796" | Lithograph | 68 x 55.7 |
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The lighthouses which appear in a number of works in the exhibition indicate idealism, isolation and strength. Edgar Allan Poe is shown in a fantasy setting inspired by his unfinished story. This print was produced partly as an exercise in mastering the techniques of aluminium plate lithography.

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| 3. "...It's Been So Many Years,
My Mummy's Dead" | Coloured Pencils,
Ink | 50 x 37 |
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In one of the many images of isolated figures in rooms, the artist dances in a personal expression of grief and solitude.

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| 4. "Invitation to a Beheading" | Coloured Pencils,
Ink | 33.6 x 28.5 |
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Many of the fantasy sketches record daily events and feelings.

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| 5. "The Visit" | Coloured Pencils,
Ink | 38 x 56 |
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Drawing based on fantasy sketch recording a particular event.

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| 6. "John Keats Died at the Age
of 26, They Made Casts of
His Hand and Foot, They Cut
Him Open, His Lungs Were
Gone" | Colour Etching and
Aquatint | 43 x 51.2 |
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The title comes from a plaque at a Keats' memorial visited by the artist. The face of the artist appears twice along with the physical features of various acquaintances.

<u>LIST OF WORKS</u>	<u>MEDIUM</u>	<u>IMAGE SIZE</u> (HxW in cm)
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| 7. "Signor Frola and Her
Son-in-Law Signor Ponza" | Colour Etching
and Aquatint | 45 x 60.5 |
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Based on collage of photographs taken by the artist and images from Bosch.

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| 8. "Man Without Qualities" | Etching and
Aquatint | 29.7 x 45.2 |
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In these etchings the artist is attracted to the cultural traditions reflected in European art and architecture, but also senses the physical and intellectual restrictions imposed by history. The enigmatic qualities of collage are achieved in the central figure in worker's clothes, bearing the artist's face with the artist's injured forefinger raised in a gesture of blessing and authority. The concerned onlooker on the right appears in all etchings in this series.

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| 9. "The Shortness of Life and
the Uncertainty of Riches" | Etching and
Aquatint | 30 x 45.3 |
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The faces are those of former students taught by the artist. The elephant which belongs to the priest is pulling a cart of lotto balls. The onlookers in the gallery and the woman in the magician's hat are gamblers. The young man (who appears again in the drawing "Bobby") in the foreground holds a representation of his ideal self-image.

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| 10. "A Case of Fratricide" | Etching and
Aquatint | 29.9 x 45.7 |
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Inspired by a short-story by Kafka. The artist and other recurrent figures representing human stereotypes appear in a study on hypocrisy and injustice. The pigs which appear as architectural decoration in this print are self-referential images which recur in several of the works in the exhibition.

LIST OF WORKSMEDIUMIMAGE SIZE
(HxW in cm)

11. "The Vested Interests of the Common Man" Lithograph and Coloured Pencils 28.2 x 27.8

This print and the four which follow are based on small collages of instamatic photographs taken by the artist at various seaside resorts including Redland Bay. The figures caught in action from a family photograph album evoke various memories of the past.

12. "Eater or Darkness" Lithograph and Coloured Pencils 28.5 x 27.1
13. "From Fish to Man" Lithograph and Coloured Pencils 28.9 x 27.5
14. "Myth or Legend?" Lithograph and Coloured Pencils 27.2 x 39.4
15. "Quest for Certainty" Lithograph and Coloured Pencils 28 x 39
16. "Waiting for the Boat" Lithograph and Coloured Pencils 28.6 x 41.5

Based on a sketch made after a visit to Russel Island.

17. "Waiting..Waiting for the Boat; Russell Island" Graphite, Collage, Coloured Pencils 37.5 x 48

The artist and various friends are shown amongst Russell Island locals on the jetty. The boy holding the dog in the previous lithograph is left frozen in position.

18. "Three Blind Boys" Etching and Aquatint Printed in Relief and Intaglio 28 x 45.5

Automatic fantasy drawing produced in the artist's bedroom directly onto etching plate.

LIST OF WORKSMEDIUMIMAGE SIZE
(HxW in cm)

19. "Panic in Room W4.7" Pencil, Crayon, Liquid Paper 38 x 56

Diary drawing produced near the start of the residency. The artist has spent the past six months living in a room in the campus housing village.

20. "Passion Spent in Chronological Order" Lithograph and Coloured Pencils 38 x 55.5

The various drawing styles in the exhibition interpret various strata of subconscious reality. The embryo-like cartoon figures represent the most basic subconscious level, here showing the agony and ecstasy of solitude.

21. "Vision of Sudden Death" Graphite 38 x 56.3

Pencil drawing inspired by a story by Thomas Mann. The silhouetted figures, as in the first drawing in the exhibition, have just stopped dancing.

22. "A Call to Duty" Graphite 38 x 56.5

Once again the shadowy figures lurk menacingly behind the idealist with unrealistic fantasies.

23. "Diet and Social Practice" Graphite, Collage 38.1 x 55.8

Inspired by a story by Kafka about a travelling entrepreneur who makes a living by public performances of fasting. As in many of the drawings, the artist's own bedroom is revealed to indicate the public and private aspects of creativity.

LIST OF WORKSMEDIUMIMAGE SIZE
(HxW in cm)

24. "Room 1. Norman"

Lithograph,
Graphite,
Coloured Pencils,
Xerox, Collage

44 x 60

The five drawings in this series are representations of human stereotypes each in succession inhabiting the same environment. Each of the individuals is faced, in the uncompromising solitude of the room, with images of their own frustrated ideals, represented in the unfinished letter in the typewriter. The faces are based on those of close friends and relatives. Norman is the quixotic dreamer, unwilling to compromise with the demands of society. The lighthouse images are based on earlier drawings indicating idealism and isolation.

25. "Room 2. Jane.
Living in the Present"Lithograph,
Graphite,
Coloured Pencils,
Xerox, Collage

44.7 x 61.8

Religious images haunt the screaming woman whose sole companion is her toy bear.

26. "Room 3. Bobby. Fought
the Law and the Law Won"Lithograph,
Graphite,
Coloured Pencils,
Xerox, Collage

44 x 59

The private school boy keeps a tight hold on his perfectly balanced pet, while images of masculine success hang behind him.

27. "Room 4. Joy ...
Contemplates Aberration"Lithograph,
Crayon, Graphite,
Coloured Pencils,
Xerox, Collage

44.6 x 59.5

This study of male/female stereotypes makes observations about sexuality, manipulation, morality and alienation.

LIST OF WORKSMEDIUMIMAGE SIZE
(HxW in cm)28. "Room 5. To Let - Large,
Airy, Well Appointed Room,
Suit Quiet Pensioner"

56.7 x 75.8

The letter in the typewriter reads "Dear Doris.
I've had enough."

29. "A Day Goes By"

Coloured Pencils, 55 x 61.5
Graphite, Ink

Photo-booth self images are often used to document moods by providing stark and varying lighting effects. The face on the sick girl in this drawing appears several times in the exhibition, here shown in a state of paranoia with her dolls as friends and the shadowy onlookers pointing through the open window above the Brisbane skyline.

30. "The Rites of Spring"

Coloured Pencils, 38.3 x 57
Crayon, Ink

This image is a summing up of the process of art production.

31-34. Assemblages

Photographs,
Paper, Plastic

Nerissa produces for her friends, three-dimensional greeting cards and miniature sculptures from discarded prints and photographs.

35-40. "Greetings from Brisbane"

Photograph and Collage
Postcards

I would like to thank friends and colleagues in Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide for their support during the past six months. In all things there are times of confusion and loss of confidence in what one is attempting to achieve. I wish to express particular gratitude to the following friends for their encouragement during such periods, for making me feel at home, and for providing the consistent atmosphere of familiarity that is so important if one is to work:

Margriet Bonnin
Laura McKew
Toni Warburton
Simon Elliott

I would also like to give special thanks to Kaye Green for her prompt replies to calls for help.

Nerissa Lea
October 1985

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The exhibition will remain open 9am - 8.30pm weekdays, and 2pm - 5pm weekends, until 31 October, 1985.

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