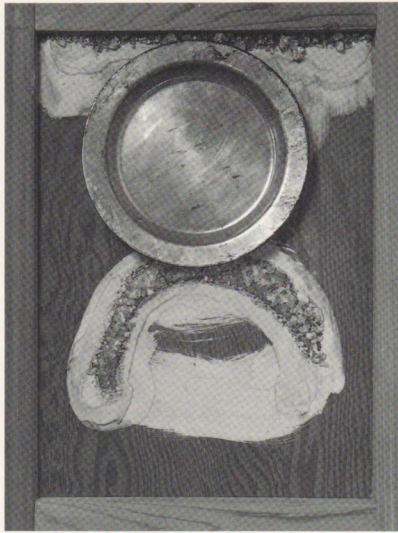
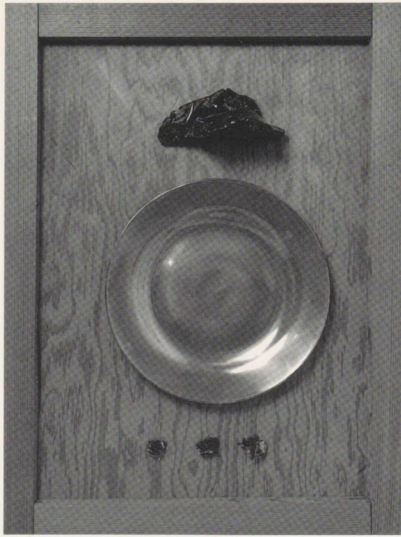


unwily practices

4

christine hellyar





We are all familiar with requests to wipe our feet before we come inside the house; 'inside' is not the preferred place for mud or muck, dirt or grit. Exhortations and requirements that the inside of houses be kept clean and pure, deodorised and sanitised, despite all of nature's best efforts to undo our work, have been seen by many women as a form of domestic enslavement. Virginia Woolf wrote about her need as a writer to kill off the 'Angel in the house' a phantom of the perfect housewife. Alexis Hunter titled a 1978 photographic work, *The Marxist's Wife (still does the housework)*. A character in Christopher Fry's play *The Lady's not for Burning* remarks 'What, after all, is a halo? It's only one more thing to keep clean.'

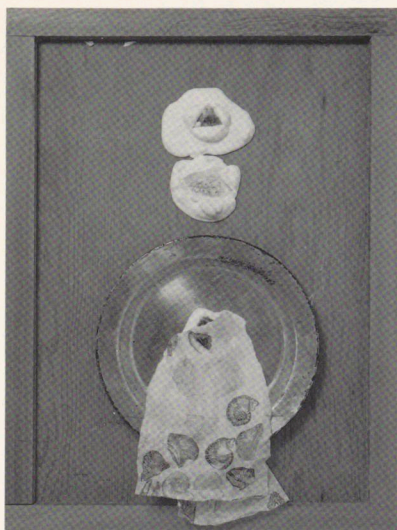
Although Christine Hellyar calls this installation. *Taking the mud inside*, her basic premise seems to be that mud or earth is already there inside our houses in the form of objects that we treasure and enjoy. Hellyar has often used her work to uncover paradoxes in the way we think about materials and their place in society's hierarchies of value. She can create a slight audience unease by using materials in her sculpture which seem surprising, sometimes even grisly. Her preoccupations are with nature and its processes of growth, transformation and decay; and with human, particularly female activities which mirror these natural processes. Reactions to some of her earlier work led Hellyar to examine our uneasy relationship with 'dirt'.

She uses this idea as a departure point for an installation which stimulates visual memories of domestic interiors; hard and soft furnishings - curtains, cupboards, 'pictures' on the wall but as she often does, overturns some

of these associations and makes objects which are both familiar and disturbingly strange. Domesticity in apparent disarray. Yet everything here is carefully selected by Hellyar; her apparently free association of words, images and materials form a whole in which a tenuous orderliness begins to be apparent, she has a visual and sensory story to tell.

Around the walls, high up like nineteenth century paintings, are a series of wooden trays. Ceramic and metal plates, some of them polished to a mirror shine are attached to the trays, almost a pastiche of the fine china plates, made from clay (mud) which hang on the walls of many collectors. Other trays have chips of marble used in decorative mosaics, or splashes of whitewash, another form of mud that is traditionally used to cover dirt and keep a clean appearance. And images of the endless array of brooms used to keep houses dust-free appear printed on paper and tucked around two very white plates.

The large 'china cabinets', with their pale pink and white interiors, have no dark and mysterious depths. Inside are gauzy paper 'curtains' printed with images of fossil shells and leaves, preserved by the action of mud. Framed wooden trays bear two of Hellyar's lists of phrases: Mud on the shelf, mud in the glass, mud behind glass, mud in the cupboard; and Mud in the hand, mud in the mind, mud on the mind, mud underfoot. On the velvet curtains hang test tubes containing glass and paint, or vaseline and sand. Beside the curtains hang nets, like string bags for shopping or onions. Inside them are more specimens - crushed glass and clay inside glass canisters, or wooden shoe lasts, whitewashed for cleanliness.



christine hellyar taking the mud inside

Despite her 'muddy' subject there is a delicate and surprising beauty in the artist's precise and careful placement and balancing of opposing colours, forms and textures in all these works.

The wall of charcoal and ink drawings (more substances made from earth) shows some of Hellyar's source material and the discipline and pleasure she gains from drawing directly from nature. This is a constant part of her working process, as is the making of books using a variety of papers, fabrics, photographs and some sharply witty combinations of words. One series of books is called *Floppers* and *Flappers*. They are what Hellyar calls 'tool' books and they include images she has found relating to women's work preparing food. *Flippers* are about food for thought. *Flappers* and *flippers* are made from paper - the *floppers* from fabric. More books are called *Slippers*, *Sloppers* and *Slappers*, and while continuing the theme of food and tools they introduce the idea of taking mud inside. The books are best handled and read aloud so that sound and touch become part of the viewer's experience.

Christine Hellyar's works have a strongly celebratory mood - she overturns expectations, reveals contradictions and opens new possibilities of experiencing and thinking about the natural and the social world. In this year celebrating the centenary of women's suffrage in New Zealand, the Auckland City Art Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of Christine Hellyar's work and to salute her achievements as a feminist artist.

Alexa M. Johnston
Principal Curator



Christine Hellyar 1993 (Photograph by Gil Hanly)

catalogue

Installation comprising:

1. Twenty-four wooden trays (six illustrated inside)
2. Two cupboards (illustrated on cover)
3. Two velvet curtains
4. Twenty netted objects

Eight ink drawings, 500 x 650 mm each

Rocks for women's roads 1982

Bird stones for young brides made by men 1982

Survival, tools of upright character 1982

Bird stones stuck on sticks for young brides 1982

The female and male huias picked and hammered 1982

Some silly self-supporting back stabbers 1982

Moth rocks with roots 1983

Women's skin scrapers 1982

Auckland City Art Gallery collection, purchased 1987

Eight charcoal drawings, all titled *Hanging gardens of*

Babylon, 1990 - 1993

500 x 650 mm each

Photographs: John Mclver

Design: Glenn Hunt

ISBN 0 86463 196 0

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biography

Christine Hellyar was born in New Plymouth in 1947. She studied at the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, graduating in 1969. She spent a year at Teachers' Training College and has taught art in secondary schools. Since 1982 she has been a part-time lecturer in sculpture at the Elam School of Fine Arts. She has exhibited widely and has had two extended periods of study and travel in the UK, Scotland, Europe and North America. She was very early in her use of domestic imagery in sculpture and a list of the titles of some of her solo exhibitions reveals some of her preoccupations: *Preserves*, *Stone Homes*, *Shelter* (an Artist's Project for the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1982), *Thought Cupboards*, *Aprons*, *Cloaks*, and *Being born, bearing fruit and dying*. A work purchased by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth in 1977 was called *Country clothesline*. Christine Hellyar has spoken of her fascination with the objects and displays found in traditional Natural History museums and at times seems to present her own work in the style of museum artifacts. A series of fourteen *Tool trays* acquired by the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1982 hold objects which mimic the tools used by women through millenia to carry out traditional tasks. The titles of individual trays include *Flax beaters*, *Women's grubbers*, *Skin scrapers* and *Rocks for women's roads*. She was the first woman sculptor chosen to represent New Zealand at the Biennale of Sydney in 1982, and was selected to make a permanent work in the International Sculpture Symposium at Seoul in 1988. Christine Hellyar lectures in Sculpture at the Elam School of Fine Arts. She is married with one son and lives in Auckland.

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