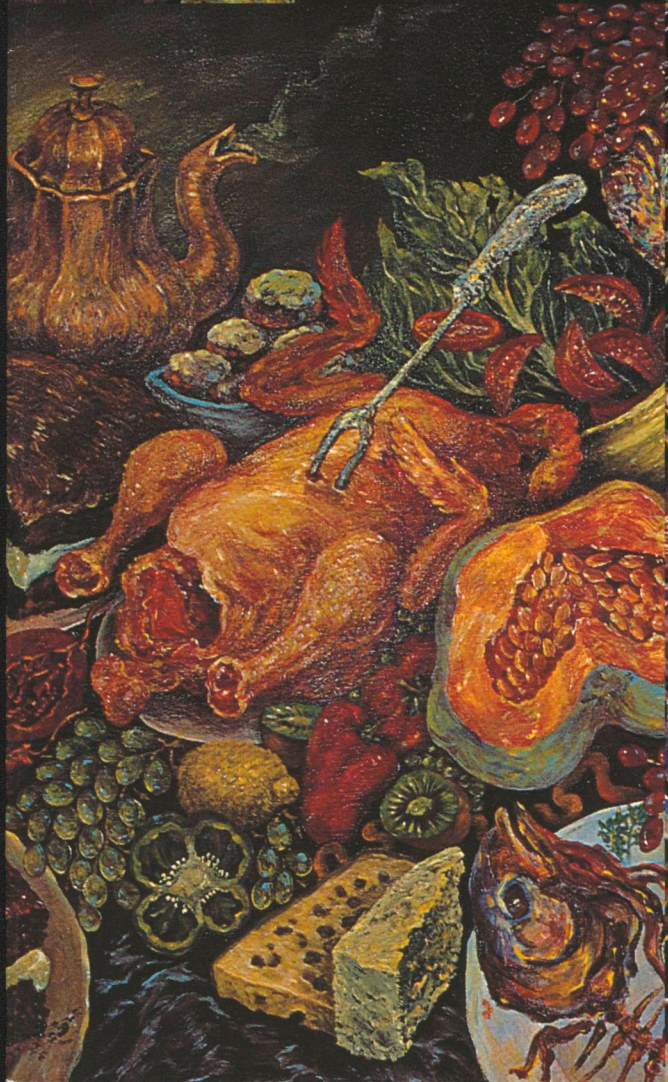
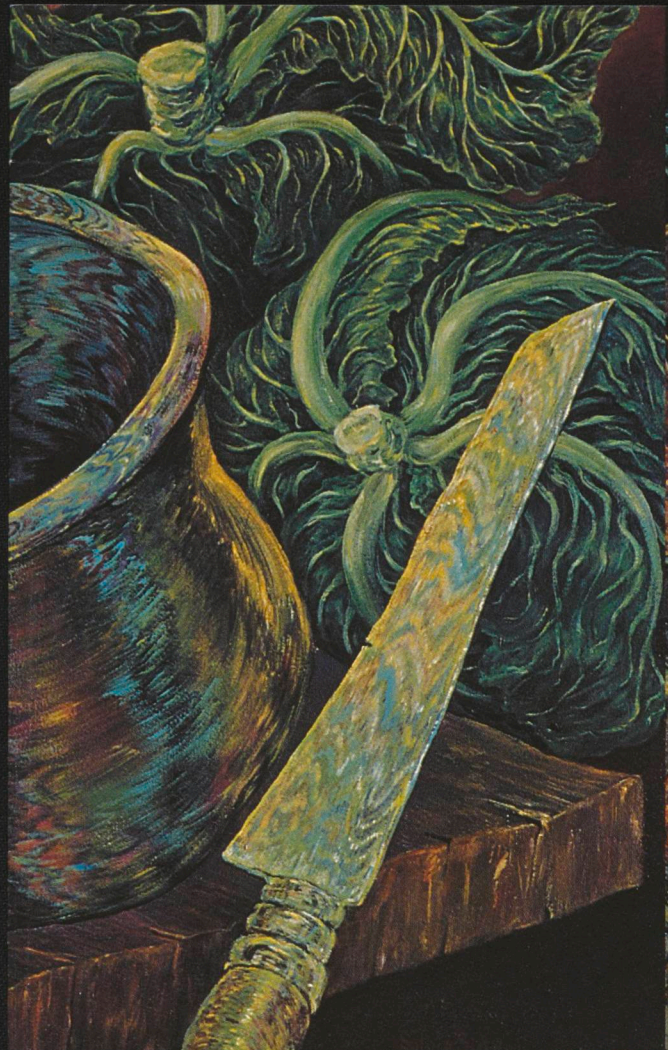


*unruly practices*

5

sylvia siddell



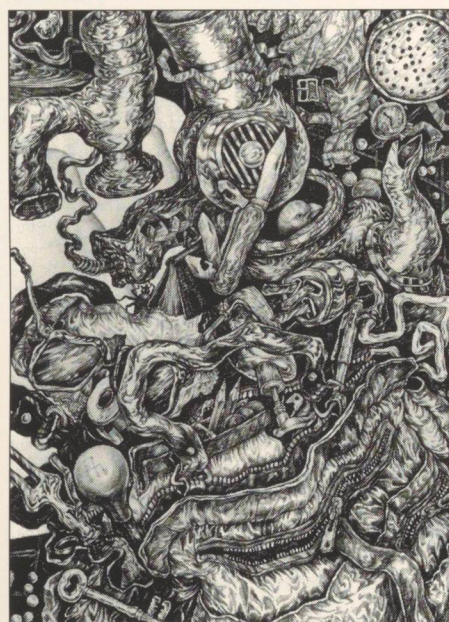




*Ascent* 1994 (detail)



*Sewing Machine* 1983 (detail)



*Off to work* 1985 (detail)

The preparation of food is surrounded by constraints and rituals in all human societies. Food is not only essential to our physical survival, it is also sacred, precious and loaded with powerful symbolism. It is used to mark our most important events, and its beauty and transience is celebrated, but if treated in the wrong way it can pollute and even cause death.

The gathering together of people to eat is also fraught with possible dangers. Stories we tell of social disasters, *faux pas* or family strife, are often set around the dinner table, when we are in close proximity and our differences are most exposed. In her masterly book *The Rituals of Dinner: the origins, evolution, eccentricities and meaning of table manners*, Margaret Visser outlines the ways cultures attempt to control the possible dangers inherent in people eating together. She writes:

"Violence, after all, is necessary if any organism is to ingest another. Animals are murdered to produce meat; vegetables are torn up, peeled and chopped; most of what we eat is treated with fire; and chewing is designed remorselessly to finish what killing and cooking began. People naturally prefer that none of this should happen to them. Behind every rule of table etiquette lurks the determination of each person present to be a diner, not a dish. It is one of the chief roles of etiquette to keep the lid on the violence which the meal being eaten presupposes."

Sylvia Siddell relentlessly but humorously removes this lid, leaving us face to face with a mayhem in which the distinctions between the diner and the dish are often uncomfortably challenged. A cabbage head is sliced in half in a painting titled *Beheaded* and, in *Divided*, a gleaming orange pumpkin spills its seeds under the attack of a shiny meat cleaver. The painting *Bonbons* shows a box of chocolates in which all the delicious sweet morsels are parts of women's bodies. A feminist concern with the relegation of women to the position of 'consumable' items permeates many of Siddell's



# sylvia siddell

## slaughter of the innocents

images. It is hard to control an instinctive shudder, and perhaps a smile. By painting these atrocities Siddell disempowers them.

Siddell's perceptive and at times macabre sense of humour has been a distinctive facet of her work since she began exhibiting in 1975. Her first solo exhibition, called 'A Day in the Life of Mrs S', included drawings of out-of-control home appliances, the crawling and awful antithesis of those bright and shiny machines which advertisers promise will remove all the nasty dirt from houses, clothes, and by extension, lives. (Margaret Visser comments on the twentieth-century western obsession with cleanliness which leads fast-food proprietors to encase foods in layers of unnecessary packaging - promising to seal us away from the dangers of rawness, rottenness and dirt.) Siddell spells out clearly the impossibility of ignoring these processes which are an inevitable and essential part of the whole cycle of life. *Casualty* shows the mess left after a dinner party and in other paintings a fly lands on a meat pie, a wasp hovers over fruit and a milk bottle emits a cascade of green slime.

Siddell's title for this exhibition, *Slaughter of the Innocents*, originates in the biblical story of Herod ordering the massacre of all children in Bethlehem, in an attempt to remove the threat created by the birth of Christ. The subject became a favourite among painters in fifteenth-century Europe for displaying virtuosity in compositions of violent action. Sylvia Siddell consciously connects her work to this art-historical precedent, but uses the theme in a secular way to explore its resonance as political and social commentary. She makes of the many small works in this room a composite battle scene swirling and seething with action and colour; a scene which encompasses events within and beyond the domestic arena, commenting on the violence which is a constant in contemporary life. Some of her titles read like

a litany of unpleasant states: *Imperilled, Lacerated, Bleeding, Pitiable, Flayed*. Yet there are also *Bountiful, Ample, Delectable, Tender* and *Homegrown*.

If grand themes like the massacre of the innocents have generally been viewed as the province of male artists, still-life painting has a strong connection with women painters. The great age of still-life painting in seventeenth-century Spain and the Netherlands produced many male masters, but also provided an opportunity for women artists to flourish. Despite the danger of identification with a 'minor' area of the visual arts, the painting of flowers, food and fruit gave women access to important systems of symbols which dealt with the brevity of life and the folly of obsession with worldly pleasures. Still lifes were more loaded with grim meaning for the seventeenth-century viewer than they seem today. They also offered an opportunity to revel in the luscious beauty of food and the tactile and sensual qualities of paint.

Sylvia Siddell takes on all these issues in her action-filled 'still lifes'. She is stimulated and inspired by the work of other painters and her pleasure in colour and surface is evident in the celebratory vigour of her paintings. She both acknowledges and questions art-historical traditions by filling her paintings with unruly objects and depicting unruly practices. Rather than warning the viewer of impending decay, Siddell applauds its inevitability. She posits the processes of change and regeneration as symbols of resistance to the human passion for control. As she points to anger and violence, she disempowers them with ridicule. Her works are a call to arms and an anarchic fanfare of revolution. The Auckland City Art Gallery is pleased to present this exhibition of Sylvia Siddell's work and to salute her achievements as a feminist artist.

Alexa M. Johnston  
Principal Curator





Sylvia Siddell 1994 (Photograph by Peter Siddell)

## biography

Sylvia Siddell was born in Auckland in 1941. She has been exhibiting paintings and drawings since 1975. She is married to painter Peter Siddell and they have two adult daughters. She lives and works in Auckland.

## catalogue

- |   |   |  |   |
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| 2. <i>Divided</i> 1993<br>acrylic on canvas 760 x 900   | 15. <i>Hoard</i> 1992<br>conte 730 x 510                      | 28. <i>Bleeding</i> 1993<br>acrylic on board 390 x 495       | 45. <i>Homegrown</i> 1993<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220   |
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| 6. <i>Vacuum cleaner with delusions of grandeur</i> 1985<br>pencil 700 x 1000                       | 19. <i>Exposure</i> 1992<br>acrylic on canvas 570 x 385       | 32. <i>Getting older</i> 1994<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220  | 49. <i>Pawns</i> 1994<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220   |
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| 10. <i>Off to work</i> 1985<br>pencil 850 x 960<br>Auckland City Art Gallery,<br>purchased 1987     | 23. <i>Imperilled</i> 1993<br>acrylic on board 390 x 495      | 36. <i>Delectable</i> 1993<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220     | 52. <i>Greed</i> 1991<br>acrylic on canvas 790 x 1040   |
| 11. <i>Terminal kitchen</i> 1984<br>pencil 670 x 960<br>Museum of New Zealand<br>Te Papa Tongarewa  | 24. <i>Lacerated</i> 1993<br>acrylic on board 390 x 495       | 37. <i>Wayward angel</i> 1994<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220  | 53. <i>Paradise Lost</i> 1992<br>acrylic on canvas 760 x 500<br>Fiona and Graeme Hall           |
| 12. <i>Sewing machine</i> 1983<br>pencil 700 x 1000<br>Auckland City Art Gallery,<br>purchased 1983 | 25. <i>Pungent</i> 1994<br>acrylic on board 390 x 495         | 38. <i>Tender</i> 1994<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220         | ( cover ill: 1,3,4 and 5 )<br>Unless otherwise stated, all works<br>are courtesy of the artist. |
| 13. <i>Banquet</i> 1993   | 26. <i>Seafarer</i> 1994<br>acrylic on board 390 x 495        | 39. <i>Pitiable</i> 1994<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220       | All measurements are in<br>millimetres, height before width.                                    |
|   |   | 40. <i>Flayed</i> 1994<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220         | Photographs: John McIver  |
|   |   | 41. <i>Tyranny</i> 1993<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220        | Design: Glenn Hunt  |
|   |   | 42. <i>Liquidity</i> 1993<br>acrylic on board 295 x 220      | ISBN 0 - 86463 - 198 - 7  |
|   |   | 43. <i>Defiled</i> 1993                                      | © Auckland City Art Gallery   |

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