Vivian Lynn

b.1931

Diploma of Fine Arts: Canterbury College School of Art

Vivian Lynn uses art to explore questions of identity and perception. Who are we? How do we see ourselves? Is our personality fixed from childhood? Or are we constantly in the process of evolving – our identity shifting and changing according to our circumstances and the chemicals that flood through our systems?

Lynn is interested in the way the brain works. Spare a moment to think of your brain – the hub of your nervous system, your control centre. It's made up of 100 billion nerve cells – so perhaps it's not surprising scientists admit there is much they still don't understand about how the brain works.

In 1997, Lynn exhibited a very contemporary form of self-portraiture: huge MRI scans of her brain, hung in a frieze around the walls of a Wellington gallery. This work, *MIND FIELD: A Hairstrand Contemplates The Order #9*, is linked to that project. The blob-like shape is at first baffling: what is it? On closer inspection its organic form suggests the body, perhaps a cross-section of the brain or another organ. There is a fragility about the image: the delicate veins and mottled markings suggest the texture of human tissue. Meanwhile, the grid that underlies the image reminds us of the science block, the world of experiment and careful analysis. We could be looking at a specimen under a microscope.

MIND FIELD: A Hairstrand Contemplates The Order #9 recalls the Rorschach inkblot test, invented by Hermann Rorschach in 1921. In this test, a patient is instructed to look at a simple splatter of ink on a piece of white paper, and suggest what it represents: a bird, an insect or a witch? Psychologists use this test to try to examine the personality characteristics and emotional health of their patients.

For the surrealists, ink blots offered the opportunity to explore effects of chance in art. Max Ernst, for example, used the technique of 'decalcomania'. Try it: spread some paint on a piece of paper, press a second piece onto it, then peel the second sheet away. You'll end up with a wavy, organic pattern – perhaps something like the shape of Lynn's work.

Artists like the Spanish surrealist, Joan Miró, used abstract patterns found in his surroundings as a springboard for making paintings, but the idea of using found patterns in art goes back much further. In 1500, the Italian artist, Leonardo da Vinci, wrote about being inspired by looking at a wall marked with stains that suggested landscapes: "Through confused and vague things the spirit wakes to new inventions".

If Lynn's blob-like shape could be interpreted in various ways, what are we to make of the butterfly-like form on the left? The delicate butterfly – that creature of metamorphosis – could be seen as a metaphor for the fragility of the human brain. And we've all seen butterflies pinned into cabinets as scientific specimens. Is Lynn alluding to the way we pigeonhole and label things: from mentally ill patients to insects? In our contemporary world, are we being 'Rorschached' on a daily basis?

Jill Trevelyan

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.mhgallery.co.nz

www.tepapa.govt.nz
click on Sacrifice: From the series Guarden Gates
for more information about this work

Articles:

www.artschool125.co.nz/Interviews/V_Lynn/

Books:

Kirker, A. (1983). '*Vivian Lynn's Guarden Gates*'. *Art New Zealand*, 26, pp. 40–41.

Barton, C. (1996). '*Vivian Lynn's Semi(r)otics*'. *Art New Zealand*, 79, Winter 1996, pp. 54–57.

Web search:

Decalcomania

Max Ernst

Joan Miró

MRI scans

Hermann Rorschach

Vivian Lynn | *MIND FIELD: A Hairstrand Contemplates The Order #9* | 2007 | Mixed media on aluminium | 610x480mm