



detail from **Bluebeard** by Tracy Holland

Magic, Murder and the Weather

Tracy

Holland

Now wait for last year

Penny

McCarthy



detail from **Narcissus** by Penny McCarthy

both at Leeds Metropolitan University
Gallery

John Hudson

Two very different artists with very different perspectives and methods have come together to confront the myths of our time.

I first met Tracy Holland in the autumn of 1992. The exact circumstances of our meeting escape me, but I recall attending a talk given by the artist in which she showed a number of slides of her work. These were presented as complex transparencies or a combination of overlaid images used to create a 'whole' image in the form of what I assume to have been a Cibachrome print. The effect of these 'combines' or layering, if that were the right word, was an intensification of colour and light that results in an unearthly richness and highly atmospheric images. So I was thrilled when I finally had the chance to see Holland's work in the flesh.

Holland has used the gallery space to create a photo installation containing a series of what I assume to be transparencies, suspended from the ceiling and lit from the back with light bulbs. This use of artificial light intensifies the richness, colour and complexity beyond that of her early work.

I have often thought of Holland as a photographer, but this would be a slightly inaccurate description in the conservative sense. She does take photographs, but it would be more appropriate to say that she **makes** photographs or images. Superficially these 'combines' resemble Rauschenberg's screenprint collages, or even his much earlier blue prints from the late forties and early fifties. There is also something painterly about Holland's pictures. Where colours seem to run or almost bleed, they do so in much the same way as Helen Frankenthaler achieves in many of her works in the 50's and 60's, and in particular in the 70's with such examples as **Moveable Blue**. Holland seems to treat her backgrounds as a 'ground' to place images, just as a painter prepares a canvas surface. Photographs take on the quality and transparency of canvas soaked with diluted paint (an effect not dissimilar to Frankenthaler's near-contemporary Jules Olitski in such works as **Green Goes Around**, 1967).

As we explore the images, we realise that Holland has produced a complex series that relies on multiple narratives rich in fairy tales, bedtime stories and folklore. Holland is a woman who uses her works to speak to women, reclaiming the power of narration for women, to examine and give a voice to their experiences while focusing on what is deemed to be female creativity. She re-appropriates from male interpretations of these experiences by taking on Freudian symbolism. Her images are full of

locks and keys. Just look at details of the **What came Picking Jasmine** series and we see fishhooks, stockings, hair, fabric, shoes and eggs, symbolising birth, life and death. They seem like collections out of a Victorian girl's childhood. These works are quite disturbing. The more you gaze at them the more is revealed, rather like looking at a Cocteau Twins' album cover.

Dead things litter these pictures. We see insect wings, ash, bones, hymns, images of children as angels, and shadows of objects that recall photograms combined with glass jars containing liquid. Each object is overlaid with layer after layer of images, smudges and drips suggestive of paint, blood and bodily fluids. The abject is placed alongside the precious.

In **Bluebeard**, a ballet dancer's bleeding feet remind women that they must suffer to be beautiful and also suffer for their art. This is Angela Carter's universe we are visiting, reminding us how macabre, dangerous and beautiful the mundane and everyday can be. This is something that Holland shares with her closest contemporary Cindy Sherman, who uses photography to fabricate scenes from folklore, fairytales and horror films. I will certainly be rereading **The Bloody Chamber**.

Like Holland, Penny McCarthy seems to like to collect things. Instead of using stories for inspiration McCarthy seems to have scoured encyclopaedias and Victorian scientific manuals. **Now wait for last year** is an exhibition that can be divided into two. The viewer is confronted by a series of complex black and white drawings. McCarthy has appropriated from a wide variety of sources including postcards, dictionaries, and astronomical and medical imagery.

McCarthy in her drawing seems to be mimicking the Victorians' obsessive and meticulous labelling of nature. She also seems to be commenting on the Victorian obsession with adventure and conquest. In particular McCarthy seems to focus on man's conquest of Mother Earth. In **Narcissus** we see illustrations of alpine land, mountains and labia-like gorges.

McCarthy's drawings have a lot in common with Georgia O'Keefe's paintings, in that they demand narrative, connection and meaning. Similar to O'Keefe, McCarthy has arranged anatomical studies (although they seem mainly human) with plant life, drawing together similar patterns between natural forms. Trees seem to take on the form of veins and

vice versa. This kind of interplay is repeated with the copying of maps, snowflakes and the overlaying of plant life.

Personal narratives fill what little space is left. Since, through the use of science and art, humanity - or should I say men - do not seem to be the centre of this creation, how do we read images like **Fall** except in the Biblical sense? Everything here is of equal importance. There is no hierarchy of being that is suggested or enforced through science via evolution or through religion via Christianity (a very patriarchal system).

The second part of this exhibition is an installation of two hundred individual rose petals called **Why a woman's hair is like water**. Each petal is inscribed with drawings and text. The observer is called upon to examine the petals with a magnifying glass, in an act which re-examines humanity's study of nature and our whole conception of truth and what we deem to be true. It's not surprising that this artist has a publication accompanying this exhibition called **Encyclopaedia of Dust**.

Now wait for last year will be on show at The Yard Gallery, Wollaton Hall, Nottingham from 28 July to 30 September 2001.