



Bowl &amp; dress fragment

For Her, 2003  
Lead, lace and woodSalt Blocks, 2003  
Salt with lead and leather objects

## Jacki McInnes at Bell-Roberts

by Kim Gurney

Do not be put off by the hard-hitting theme of this exhibition. The decision to abort a pregnancy is its starting point and, along the way, the artist challenges conventional ideas about women and their reproductive role in society. However, it also speaks more broadly about other sorts of abortions - mental block, emotional haemorrhage, spiritual wrenching - to which any viewer whether male or female can surely relate.

'The Vocabulary of Ambiguity - for her' is the title of this show but the gender suffix for the unborn child is really superfluous. It is of course an exploration of the heavy expectations and restrictions placed upon women to conform to a maternal role. Yet it also resonates on many levels about any manner of abortion through medium, metaphor and association.

McInnes' use of materials is particularly striking. She repeatedly employs salt and lead, which work very well visually through a muted colour range of earthy tones that unifies the works. The materials also link metaphorically to her theme. Salt, much like memory, can heal and preserve but it also has corrosive properties that are used to great effect here on mild steel.

Lead also has ambiguous properties. It is malleable and simultaneously indestructible. It can be toxic, yet it is also used in the medical field for absorption of harmful radiation. McInnes, who used to work in radiography, knows this well. Unsurprisingly, the medical field is regularly referenced in her work.

McInnes combines these industrial materials with a feminine touch. In *For Her*, she shapes lead into a little girl's dress. The metal is interspersed with actual embroidered sections lovingly stitched to create the three-dimensional illusion of a soft fabric hanging from the back of a wooden chair.

The dress motif recurs in wall hangings such as *She did not want*. A girl's dress lies in a baking tray encrusted with salt that continues to erode and discolour it in a beautiful yet disconcerting ongoing chemical reaction. This morphing of the artworks over time is entirely deliberate. Perhaps it alludes to how memory does the same thing as time changes the appearance of things and their memory.

Such morphing is also evident in the collection of salt blocks that lie scattered on the floor. Each block is altered - through water, wood, leather or steel - in an intriguing array of chemical processes that changes their appearance over time. McInnes says she allows time, chance and weather to create the artwork and allow the pigment to come through - for both visual and metaphoric reasons.

Hanging from the roof are a series of wire cages, *Caged I - III*, which are painstakingly made by the artist in her distinctive labour-intensive way. Within each cage are suspended various objects made of steel and fabric. In one, the springs from a bed lie scattered like the intestines of a wounded animal as evidence of some inner carnage to which it was witness.

This sense of foreboding engendered by the wire cages is linked with the image of a battery farm. This recurs in a couple of the wall hangings including a digital print on glass called *Shed*. There is an immediate association between chickens and their forced reproduction with the socio-political concerns of abortion.



She Did Not Want, 2004  
Salt, lead & perspex



Stretched, 2003  
Detail, lead and wood bed frame



Stretched, 2003  
Lead and wood bed frame



Swell I, 2004  
Copper sheet on board

Another repeated form is the inverse of a swollen belly: the sunken basin-like shape. It occurs as a menacing alteration in the steel bed *Stretched*, which is centrally situated in the show. It also recurs in the chair, *For Her*, where a hollow replaces the flat seat.

In contrast, two newer works made during McInnes' recent residency in Switzerland have swollen protuberances. The two woven steel wall hangings at the far end of the room, called *Swell I* and *Swell II*, speak of pregnant expectation while also suggesting some kind of abnormality. The artist has more recently been experimenting with looms and the weaving technique.

Somehow this show manages to make its point without being overly didactic. There is enough bold statement for a stranger to browse through and get the gist. Yet there is enough subtlety and ambiguity of meaning for another viewer, more familiar with McInnes' concerns, to make surprising associations and come away with new insight.

In conclusion, 'The Vocabulary of Ambiguity' is a remarkably honest exploration of a complex set of issues that happen to intersect on the issue of abortion through a sophisticated collection of mixed media works, produced with immaculate attention to detail. Look out for McInnes' next Johannesburg show in early 2005.

Opens: November 10  
Closes: November 27

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Hours: Mon - Fri 8.30 - 5.30, Sat 10 am - 1pm



Swell II, 2004  
Lead sheet on board

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