

Martin Grant and Julia Morison installation view *Material evidence: 100-headless woman*, at Artspace, Adelaide Festival Centre, Adelaide, 2 March - 21 March, 1998. Photography: Bryan James. Courtesy Martin Grant and Julia Morison.



## Material Evidence: 100 Headless Woman

Frock-trauma or more?

**Martin Grant & Julia Morison:**  
**Material Evidence: 100 headless—woman,**  
**an artists' project initiated by City Gallery,**  
**Wellington and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.**

**Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, NZ,**  
**25 October - 8 December 1997**  
**Artspace, Adelaide Festival Centre,**  
**2 March - 21 March 1998**  
**City Gallery, Wellington, 16 October - 6 December 1998**

It was only when I had cavalierly walked straight past the pale pink ball-gown, dismissing it as pretty but pedestrian, that I was brought up short by the sight of a pair of charred Charles Jourdan dancing shoes, neatly positioned beneath an equally charred and empty coat hanger, that I realised something more was going on. A rapid consultation of the catalogue, elicited the information that the pink confection was in fact called *Shit* and closer inspection indeed revealed a large and disfiguring stain.

In all, there were ten of these elegant and elongated forms, falling somewhere between costume and sculpture, which were the result of a collaborative project by New Zealand artist, Julia Morison (winner of the 1990 Moet & Chandon award) and Martin Grant, an Australian expatriate fashion designer. Once again Morison has looked to Kabbalistic lore to provide both the structure and the materials for the installation. The ten chosen elements can be imagined as a tree-like structure, with lead at its base, followed by ash, clay, excrement, pearl, blood and oxidation with silver, gold and, finally, transparency at its summit.

References abounded in this multi-layered exhibition; the most obvious being the Dadaist/Surrealist Max Ernst, from whom its sub-title is derived. In 1929, Ernst published a collage-novel, punningly called *La femme 100 tetes*—the joke deriving from the similarity in pronunciation of the French word for 100 (cent) and the French word 'sans' meaning without. Thus the title can be translated as either 'The 100 headed woman' or 'The headless woman'. Morison and Grant appear to have opted for a combination of these two—*The 100 Headless Woman*. In *Beyond Surrealism*, Evan Maurer states that *La femme 100 tetes* is a heroine of mythic proportions. She represents the essence of womanhood, who bears no single face, but is constantly changing.<sup>1</sup>

Change is significant, for all of these figures, with the exception of the three represented by solid, old-fashioned dressmaking dummies, are in a state of transmutation, of instability, variously assailed by the forces of nature.

Seemingly light and innocuous as a feather, *Pearl*, a triumph of French seaming in a wisp of white organza, contained a secret. A pearl has been sewn into the inside waist of the garment 'as an irritant'. Every woman is all too familiar with the constraints imposed by even modern clothing. Gone are the savage corsets of times past, only to be replaced by more sinister self-imposed constraints. Interestingly, the pearl is itself the product of an irritant and along with the butterfly (also present in Ernst's collage-novel) may represent the most beautiful of all metamorphoses.

In *Blood* sixty metres of muslin (the fabric of bandages) cascaded from a slim and pristine bodice to a profusion of blood-stained, swathed fabric on the gallery floor (echoing a secret nightmare of all women). Under the gallery lights, *Rust* initially appears to have a skirt of richest velvet, with a bodice of finest chain-mail (itself subject to oxidation with time) and one extremely long, trailing sleeve. Revealing Grant's theatrical background, the skirt is in reality a plain rust-stained calico, cut with unfinished edges.



Martin Grant and Julia Morison, *Blood*. From *Material evidence: 100-headless woman*, at Artspace, Adelaide Festival Centre, Adelaide, 2 March - 21 March, 1998.

By far the most arresting of the figures was the extraordinary *Grass*. A plain muslin gown has been meticulously quilted, vertically and horizontally, to form pockets into which earth and seeds have been selectively 'planted'. After watering, the seeds sprouted, forming halos of dazzlingly green grass. Unfortunately, in the environment of Artspace the full feathery Ginger Rogers effect as seen in the catalogue was not achieved, because the airconditioning proved too cold.

Next we come to *Silver* and *Gold*, represented, in yet another allusion to the Surrealists<sup>2</sup>, by two dressmaker's dummies, their bodices coated in silver and gold leaf. *Silver* stands tall, remote and contained, with its long skirt of silver chains. Gravity on the other hand, has defeated *Gold* which lies grounded, though able at any time to be hoisted aloft by an elaborate gilded pulley. Finally we arrive at the 'summit', with *Transparency*, an invisible dress, delineated only by a tracery of fine cords upon another dress form. "Lighter than air, powerful and isolated: the 100 headless woman flew away."<sup>3</sup>

There can be no doubt that in Martin Grant, Julia Morison has found a co-exhibitor par excellence. Without exception, the garments have been magnificently realised, with a masterly attention to detail, cut and selection of materials. I found this exhibition fascinating and was intrigued to discover in discussion with others, that most people had been oblivious to any of the references. Such was the visual appeal of this installation, that they were content to view it as simple spectacle. Similarly, a Simpsons' cartoon may be enjoyed by an audience, unaware that they are, for example, watching a witty re-enactment of an Alfred Hitchcock film, or that the voice of the Mayor is that of JFK, but the complexities are there for those who choose to seek them out. As far as this exhibition was concerned, a lushly illustrated catalogue, with accompanying essays, was there to provide all the clues.

**Wendy Walker** is an Adelaide designer and textile advocate, who, when not pursuing her other preoccupations of languages, travel, and film, can be seen dancing up a Latin-American storm.

### endnotes

1. Maurer, Evan in *Max Ernst: Beyond Surrealism*, Robert Rainwater (Ed), Oxford University Press, 1986, p63.
2. Both the dressmaker's dummy and the mannequin were frequently used (& abused) as a motif by the surrealists and before them by De Chirico.
3. Extract from the catalogue text accompanying *Material Evidence: 100 Headless Woman*.