

Thursday Arts

Artists expose the niceties of convention

Canterbury Belles— Margaret Dawson, Mary Kay and Julia Morison at the Waikato Museum of Art and History.

THE works of Dawson, Morison and Kay provide a fertile ground to look at socialised attitudes towards women, as well as representations of the female.

They are concerned with repudiating the former and understanding, if not changing, the latter.

The three artists do not express a single vision, nor a uniform position — if indeed, there exists a single feminist gaze. Rather, they have distinctive ways of seeing, with quite separate and diverse concerns and practices; photography (Dawson), illuminated montage (Morison), and prints and paintings on paper (Kay).

Kay is the most political in her work, whereas Morison and Dawson assume a position against various modes of interpretation of the feminine, through intense, self-revelation, Dawson does this by addressing the direct social image-making of women, Morison through alternative modes of construction. They are each concerned with how the self, as woman, is constructed, through fragmentation and disintegration, as a historical rather than a prescribed biological entity.

They speak more directly about contemporary reality for the female (or the receptive male) ego, where the self is com-



● Mary Kay's work *A Hand in Things to Come*.

objects particular to each quiddity.

The self is seen to be quite literally constituted by these objects and personal references. These and the constant appearance of her body set within each iconic order create an overabundance of imagery.

Yet the different systems that order her work — including the Kabbalah, alchemy and mysticism — establish a set of universals which, though happily anti-Christian, anti-patriarchy, and anti-science, are yet to convince one of any suggestion towards greater freedom.

Her dependence on mysticism and numerology is worrisome, although the breadth of vision within it is astounding. The universal nature of her statements is specious — though this is just as it should be.

This is equally the case with Dawson, who speaks

which tends towards repetition and conservation. The concern with death in Morison's work needs to be fully explored.

In *Quiddities* she surrounds herself with inanimate objects which, with the focusing on the natural elements' symbolic characteristics, suggests a possible regeneration of spiritual wealth in the alchemaic sense. But it can also be seen as a fetish with dead material, no less free from the same processes which contribute to the unspiritual centre of our present economic realities.

The sexual drive in these and the other artists' works pushes artistic production into new forms. They heal and exert a sense of self which is far greater than that which would be allowable in our male society.

Repetition and conservation are the hallmarks of Kay's formal compositions. Precise and careful renderings of the fifties are made through frottage (the rubbing of two materials to impress an image on paper) and a watercolour technique of considerable advance in its consistency.

Her practice is partly located within a Warhol-like framework, the "pop" appropriation of popular images from domestic publications — the cookbook, advertisements, instruction manuals, magazines. They are given a steel-like political backbone.

She uses evolution and genetics as metaphors to make inroads into the cultural terrain that constitutes the popular, and to systems of power that shape and define the female.

If the centre is the rationale for Morison and Dawson, it is done so through negation for Kay. It is associated with the male, so that those works that criticise discourse have a concentrated central image; those that address the female are decentralised.

One of three similar prints, called *Making It*, shows a tightly knit, tiered pattern of different plates of food as metaphors for sexist views of women. Under each are common terms of abuse used by men to belittle women.

Jellies, pies, other desserts and main courses are labelled *Bunnygirl*, *Chick*, *Pussycat* and *A bit of crumpet*. She highlights the "masculinity complex" of the male and breaks a fixed social taboo by naming it.

In another two prints, called *A Hand in Things to Come* (double entendre intended) a man's hand covers some strawberries in one and an elongated rock formation in the other; auto-eroticism is linked to power.

The *Canterbury Belles* argue against a system of power which limits the individual, woman, as self-conceived and constructed. Dawson expresses the suffering of this experience, and explodes its myths.



partmentalised through specialisation, division and oppression.

It is Morison who produces perhaps the most complex and problematic relationship to the social constitution of the individual.

Her contribution to the exhibition is called *Quiddities I — X*. Each of ten "quiddities" consists of a light-box which illuminates a cibatron, a transparent sheet that has transposed on to it a photo-montage of two or three exposures.

The 10 boxes are arranged together. As a simulation of an advertising box they announce her presence; as a simulation of an x-ray box, they reveal it, too.

The *Quiddities* are the fifth work (*Decan* was the fourth) in a projected series of 10, correlating to the principles of the Kabbalah. Internal references are made to images and symbols that have appeared in previous work, so that each cibatron contains one of her formulated logos, and embodies elemental material, such as clay or silver.

Her head is in the centre of each montage, viewed from different angles and surrounded by symbolic or metaphoric

of the socialisation of women in our post-colonial society.

Known since the mid-1980s as a photographer of the Cindy Sherman school, she disguises herself as various types of women, making herself up into familiar social and historical images. She is not so concerned with the media (male) portrayal as Sherman is, but rather parodies domestic image-making (the snapshot, the studio portrait) to look at how women are constructed in history and through society.

These seven photographs, which can be viewed as an installation, show her to be far more lyrical.

The first image is a photographic ready-made, a classic snapshot of a man and woman beaming at the sport of having caught a big game fish.

The next six show Dawson as the hostess entertaining, a flame thrower, a burning photograph of her face screaming, a sword-swallower in a suburban backyard — the outline of a body made by a knife-thrower and a prostrate mermaid.

EACH of the women is dressed in milk bottle-tops, tied together as an imitation of glamorous clothes — a critique of the glamour industry and reminders of a redundancy in the endless cycle of consumption and production.

As a linear narrative, nature is taken as a powerful conceived metaphor for the suffering of the self.

The tragic is uppermost in her work as she explores this condition of the self.

If there is a death-drive apparent in the works of these artists, it is one