

# “Reconstructions”, Catalogue essay for Solo show at The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 1987 by Marjorie Allthorpe- Guyton

## Reconstructions

“The puppet master, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their strings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves; the king, aghast, witnesses the revolt of his pawns”

Angela Carter *The Bloody Chamber*

Gwen Hardie talks a lot about territory. Since 1984 she has lived in West Berlin, the island city which is concrete and irrefutable evidence of national political division. Paradoxically it is also the place where she now feels freest. West Berlin, a sprawling city of German, British, French, American and Turkish communities, has enabled her to loose her self from the influences which shaped her life and work in Scotland. She felt the necessity to untie the natural authority of family and friends and the formal authority of academic art school training in Edinburgh—unequivocally, rigorously based on the liferoom. She was not though, aware of the authority of feminist art practice which denied the possibility not only of painting but of using the image of the female body. Gwen Hardie is an instinctive artist, conscious of but not concerned with theory. She is equally uncurious about the political turbulence which surrounds her in Berlin; rather she is content to be an island to herself allowing the Berlin experience to eddy through her work. Leaving the security of Edinburgh for the unknown challenges of Berlin was, though, a deliberate strategy to test her competence, her psychological fitness to work in a complex and an alien city. And that competence had to be judged by the resolution of new work. This exhibition is a measure of her success.

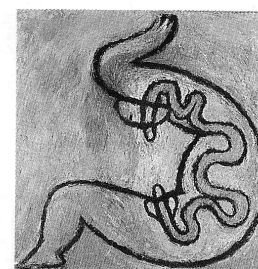
The bloody reds and oranges of the earlier works *Red Body Open* and *Geometric Body*, 1985 were the artist's answer to West Germany's Neue Wilden machismo neo-expressionism. If her work was still overly arty—hovering uncomfortably between painterly good taste and vulgarity—the veils of the preceding work were ripped away. These body-works were, as Hardie describes, a “way of eating into the situation”, a way of halting that trapezing between the formal classicism of the influence of the Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer and of the raw vitality of the contemporary German lion Georg Baselitz who made studio visits to Gwen Hardie during early months in Berlin. In the new work flesh no longer gleamed with unearthly palour but is revealed raw and palpable. The swollen belly and vulnerable vulva of *Geometric Body* are a heavy bodily burden. These are self portraits which confront the gaze with the plain facts. They

revoke the secrecy, the void stare of the early heads such as *Cowardice*. *Arms Stretched Out* is even more an emphatic statement of intent. The eye focuses on the reddish torso whose energy gives life to the splayed thick arms and thighs, bringing to mind Blake's *Glad Day*, image of the resurrection of the human imagination. The programme is clear: Gwen Hardie is not concerned with a formal engagement with her body or with the pleasantries of technique, but with her state of being—her affective and cognitive experience. More particularly she attempts in the more recent works to reverse “the male's phallogocentric views in underestimating the importance of the female sexual organs”.<sup>1</sup> In classical Freudian analysis female development is seen as “a derailment and subsequent adjustment to the male developmental track”.<sup>2</sup> Feminism has attempted to break down this position. But Gwen Hardie flouts the historical strategies of much feminist art practice. As Mary Kelly states “using the body of the woman, her image, or person is not impossible but problematic for feminism”<sup>3</sup>—not least because the artist must occupy the “so-called masculine position” and compromise her sexual difference. It is this view that Hardie is prepared to challenge.

*The Fist* is one of a group of works of parts of the body, which are modelled, almost chiselled out of paint which is applied not with the brush but with the sponge. The artist describes these works as “inching the way forward”. This urgency in later works to construct the image with the body's own tools, amounts to an intensely tactile relationship with the work. As if the artist was attempting to slough off a socially programmed body image in order to re-experience a childhood exploration of the body's surface. This is achieved by recreating that skin surface as pigment which she uses unmixed straight from the tube. It is significant that *The Fist* belongs to a group which also included monumental hands and breasts—the maternal skin with which the infant identifies in the early months. This is not to suggest a pathological infantile regression but a condition normal to the painter for whom “the canvas may sometimes represent skin while the artist's hand and eye libidinize this substitute skin in the manner of early auto-erotic activities”.<sup>4</sup> The two transitional paintings *A Self Propagating Mechanism* and *Interior*, with their overt body imagery of swelling forms, orifices and generative energy, also invite the psychoanalytical speculation which Mary Kelly proposes “Is it possible to produce pleasure differently for women? Perhaps by representing the very specific loss—the loss of her imagined closeness to the mother's body (that archaic,



Venus with Spikes 1986  
Oil on canvas 150 x 200 cm



Self-Motivation 1986  
Oil on canvas 150 x 150 cm

anal, oral or concentric organisation of the drives which Michele Montrelay has called ‘her precocious femininity’).<sup>5</sup>

*Venus with Spikes* 1986 represents not only a radical shift from the preceding works but it is a blatant primitivist image quite unlike the androgynous figures of Schlemmer or even the ballooning bodies of Sandro Chia, or the exuberantly bulbous women of Niki de Saint Phalle. For Hardie's *Venus* the body's boundary is a fragile defence against the world, or more particularly the male *other*. This *Venus*, with her spikes turned in on herself, at first glance seems Sadean, irresistibly invoking the terrible instrument of torture, The Iron Maiden, in Angela Carter's wickedly monstrous yet triumphant short story *The Bloody Chamber* where woman avenges the malefic male. But Hardie's body image in her work is intact, unlike Sylvia Plath's who was tyrannised by her body—referring in the poem *Getting There* to “this skin of old bandages”.<sup>6</sup> The real stuff of Hardie's *Venus* is the oestral parts within; the female's inner space. The subsequent paintings are ideogrammatic projections of the artist's body image and represent a *positive* valuation of self. A jouissance of self-esteem is communicated by the three paintings *I am*, *The Cycle* and *Alive* asserting that the “Woman as the holder, the container and the receiver of the other must use her metaphorical womb to contain and hold herself”.<sup>7</sup> In *I am* the figure, feet planted firmly on the earth, bears the yellow mantle of the body matter; but this is diffused in *The Cycle* where the menstrual subject cradles itself. This work and *Alive*, where the placental chord nourishes the self as mother, express a desire to have the mother in being once again the child.

But *Self Motivation*, with its absurd self-regarding proboscis and penis, deny the maternal, the reproductive function. It also seems to be, unwittingly or not, a witty joke at the expense of the classical Freudian notion of penis envy. It illuminates the real content of these paintings which is not the female body as an object in a material world, but the *inner* female perception of the body. Gwen Hardie inverts the world's massive focus on the woman's external ‘look’ by turning the body inside out; the internal vagina, the uterus are made visible. In *Abandonment* these organs are scored across the length of the figure which the artist sees as an image of energy constrained by the dichotomy between earth/gravity and sky/weightlessness. Such imagery is echoed by that of many female poets and writers where protective boundaries and shelters are Blakean metaphors for imaginative energy stored up and held in check. The imagery of *Abandonment* finds an equivalence in the poem *Appels* by the

American Shirley Kaufman “Juices locked up in the skin. She used to slice them in quarters, cut through the core/open the inside out”.<sup>8</sup>

Such strategies might seem to be evidence of an overwhelming female narcissism. But for Hardie the process is necessary to the breaking down of her ‘programming’ as a woman and an artist. This began with her six weeks in Madrid where she studied three paintings by Velasquez. Her concern was to scrutinise Velasquez' penetrating analysis of moment, his heightened sense of actuality which she realised in a group of studies using the immediacy of watercolour. The experience was both rich and productive, enabling that intellectual shift which she described “for the first time, I understood painting as a construction of an idea, rather than a study of the object in space”.<sup>9</sup> The subsequent shifts in her work are evidence of the continual activity of separation and reconstruction in her life and work. She is the first to criticise her painting, rejecting entirely some early work. What is clear is that she is now free of academic constraints and of contemporary German influences. Gwen Hardie has achieved such independence through what Julia Kristeva describes as “narcissian idealisation”<sup>10</sup> in her painting; a positive re-formation of her psychic space. The artist's need to reconstruct unity denies the banal and anecdotal, the Romantic. In all these new paintings there is a sense of plenitude. *Abandonment* for example is not erotic, the figure does not rise in power but descends; like the Christian notion of love as Agape ‘It falls from the heavens’, as ‘a sort of profusion’.<sup>11</sup> Had she known of it Gwen Hardie might well have taken Kristeva's addition to Descartes and changed the title of the painting *I am* to *I love therefore I am*.

These uncomfortably raw new paintings are an attempt towards what has been described as “The unique ‘mission’ and capability of the woman poet-artist fully to discover affectively, experience, create, designate and enforce the richness of woman's inner-space as a structure of knowing”.<sup>13</sup> Gwen Hardie believes that, in denying the body's representation in paint the woman as artist places an untenable constraint on that knowledge. For her it is through the interchange of her body-ego and the outside world that both can be reconstructed.

Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton.