

D I A N N E L O N G L E Y



f l o w e r o f d e s t i n y

An Exhibition of Computer Generated Artist's Books & Mixed Media Works

flower of destiny

A "rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"¹ - unless, perhaps, it happens to be in the hands of the artist, Dianne Longley. Then it's more likely to be a mediated and complex floral image which has been extensively researched, rendered, photographed, etched, lithographed, scanned, solarplated, electronically manipulated, laser printed and computer enhanced. But it will probably resemble a rose, all the same.



Rose of Illumination, Relief solarplate print, 1995

Despite any similarities between the floral reality and its artistic simulacrum, however, a significant degree of transformation will have occurred during what can be described as a journey, through these multiple levels of technology. More importantly, the journey also uncovers complex layers of meaning which transform the artist and the viewer's experience of that particular flower and its associated resonances.

One of our culture's most deeply recurring symbols, the rose - Genus Rosaceae - has bloomed for 40 million years², suffusing literature and mythology with complex and profound meanings³. The viewer will immediately recognise the richness and variety of this flower as a compelling aspect of the artist's recent work, notably in her large folio of printed images with companion text entitled *The Golden Rose*. What may not be so obvious is the broader symbolic and structural role the rose assumes throughout this body of work. This flower consistently reappears as a motif but beyond the question of subject matter or decoration, the rose and its history also provides an appropriate metaphor for the way in which the artist works, for Longley's broader artistic concerns, themes and processes.

In spite of the fact that the rose automatically brings to mind a sense of constancy and purity, this flower's history is anything but pure. In horticultural terms it is less commonly recognised that all cultivars of roses today, with the exception of ancient species, derive from an "immensely complicated-podge of genetic influences"⁴, an "incredible chromosomal mishmash"⁵ of parent stock. All derive from hybrids, whether via nature or, during the last hundred or so years in western culture, human intervention, when enthusiasm for growing and cross-fertilising roses "explod(ed)"⁶.

Such a history of technological and cultural intervention in the garden finds its visual parallel in Longley's approach to traditional methods of art production. It is precisely this delight in hybridity, created by 'cross fertilising' time honoured art processes like printmaking and book production - the root stock, if you like - with science in the form of latter day computer technology - that has produced such a heady variety of new art forms or 'species'. These are displayed along the gallery walls in the form of computer generated prints and metal wall pieces, in digitally produced books and on the computer screen as an interactive work, destined for the Internet via CD ROM format. The interactive work, *Traversing the Echo*, for example, which is designed for a limitless audience on the World Wide Web, showcases three limited edition publications, *Compass of Change*, *The Golden Rose* and *Night Sea Crossing*; these publications also exist in traditional 'hard copy' format as artists books. Their existence both within and beyond 'virtuality' wittily refers to both a computer screen future (and present) and a past (and present) where the physical book reigned supreme as the primary repository of information storage and retrieval. Thus it is highly appropriate that Longley has chosen to 'quote' the three major epochs of book production in assembling her computer enhanced works by presenting them in the form of a scroll (*Compass of Change*), a folio (*The Golden Rose*), and a codex book (*Night Sea Crossing*). These works convey the exciting potential that future knowledge systems may hold, suggesting that our present time may prove to be the equivalent of the mid fifteenth century Incunabula (1450-1550), when Johannes Gutenberg's invention of movable type, followed by such other pioneers as William Caxton and

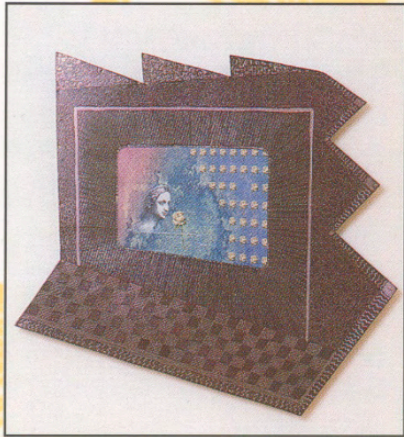
Wynckyn de Worde, "split us clean away from that almost inconceivable world in which there was no such thing as printing."⁷

Before we get too carried away with paeans to contemporary electronic wizardry, however, the artist reminds us that uncritical enthusiasm of technology as an end in itself can be a thorn encrusted thicket. Just as the medieval thorns along a rose stem provided necessary symbolic and religious 'protection' against the moral dangers of the five senses -

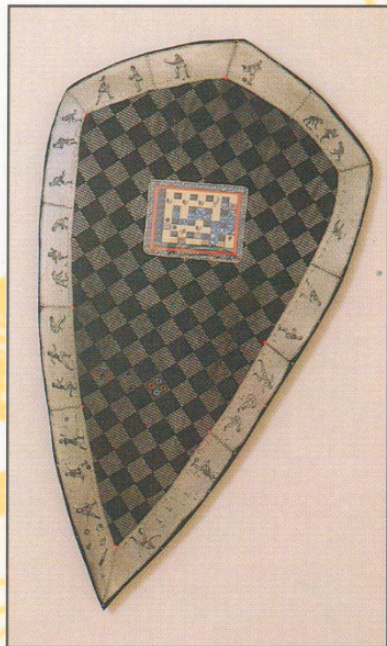
popularly signified by the five petalled rose - so too can electronic technology today 'protect' the user from sensory experience. Even though use of a computer involves "fondling a rodent"⁸, sight becomes an even more privileged sense and the full range of touching and hearing is limited to the fingertip plick-plicking of a keyboard and mouse manipulation, while smell and taste are definitely

off the menu screen. By contrast, the traditional pleasure associated with curling up with a book has been the intimate visual, tactile and olfactory relationship this offers between the reader and the read.

Longley addresses this issue in a number of ways; firstly she invites us to embark upon her intimate journeys of the senses, celebrating "glimpses offered by normal and often trivial events". These might include "gardens of resonance", "sentient pleasures", conviviality, sewing,



Envelop, Etched tin plate, Digital Image, 1995



Armorial Strategm, Etched tin plate, LEDs, 1995

"farm days" and delight in "curious, sleepy cats, warm and soft", not to mention a 'virtual' experience of dream-induced synaesthesia (where image and text evoke a blending of colours and odours). But, like William Blake's famous rose, both human lives and roses are short lived and often harbour blight, so these works also embrace the all too ephemeral nature of sensuous pleasures which quickly fade to memories. Cutting a swathe through *Night Sea Crossing* is such a reminder; an insistent and textured river of Lethe represents sleep or perhaps, death, for the lone traveller who is separated from her beloved memories on the shore.

On a different level, Longley's metal wall pieces make the point more emphatically. In the five 'shaped' computer monitors of tin (*Envelop*, *Tempt*, *Comfort*, *Engage*, *Remind*), which are etched with binary code (the 'DNA' of computer systems), the artist draws our attention to the fact that there are 'glitches' happening within the screen images; these may refer to static cackle or interrupted vision, but in each monitor, something to do with human perception is deliberately awry. This notion of sensory deprivation is further reinforced by a set of virtual reality 'accessories' which approximate stylised medieval armour as 'gauntlets', helmet and shield, "the chain mail of Computerland"⁹. Winking (rose red) light emitting diodes around the helmet's "Cerebrum" may echo medieval roses emblazoned upon the knight's armour, but today they suggest that the rational faculties alone are switched on.

An interesting parallel may be again drawn at this point with the rose. The writer, Diane Ackerman, also laments the privileging of the eye over the nose in modern rose cultivation:

..at one time the rose's fragrance was nearly lost through overbreeding. Fragrance seems to be a recessive trait in roses, and two deeply fragrant parents may produce a petal-perfect but smell-less offspring.

In her recent work, *The Golden Rose*, the artist appears keenly aware of this hybrid rose characteristic in that she has chosen the Peace Rose to represent the quintessential qualities of life fully engaged. Composed of

pale yellow ruffles with translucent tips that are often flushed with pink, ... it smells like sugared leather dipped in honey. Of all ... roses, Peace seems to have an almost human complexion and human moods, depending on the moisture and light of each day.

In a structural sense, this recurrence of the rose motif throughout the entire exhibition - sometimes in the most profoundly complex but subtle manner - recalls the circular rose garland featured in *The Golden Rose's* final image, representing the attainment of harmony and unity. Indeed, in a more abstract sense, it echoes, too, the circularity of Gertrude Stein's famous poem above¹⁰.

Such a vast subject as the rose might present a lesser artist with the dangers of cliché or merely seductively beautiful illustration, but for Longley, a celebration of the senses does not preclude an embrace of the more steely and cerebral electronic media. From this



And Seek, Computer generated print, 1993

we can infer that as a book artist (as opposed to a book producer) Longley never "succumbs to the conventions of the medium", but "envisions what else 'the book' might become."¹¹

Neither do we have any idea of what the rose may become. "Roses have tantalised, seduced and intoxicated people more than any other flower"¹² because, to date, there are few pleasures as "sense bludgeoning" as a rose"¹³. But just as the artist warns us of the delights and hazards of new technologies, so we should remember the risks of roses, as well. Whether virtual truth or not, it is said that one of the Roman Emperor's, Nero, dinner guests was smothered to death under a shower of rose petals.

Pamela Zeplin

¹ Stein, G. from *Sacred Emily*.

² Lake M. *Sense and Sensuality: The Essence of Excitement*, London: John Murray, 1989 p.41.

³ For detailed research on the history of the rose and its symbolism in literature and mythology, see Curtin, P. "The Symbolic Rose" (essay accompanying the print folio, *The Golden Rose*, by Dianne Longley, Adelaide: Illumination Press, 1995, pp.1-5.

⁴ Taylor, P. *Gardening with Roses: A Practical and Inspirational Guide*, London: Pavilion, 1995.

⁵ Lake. *op. cit.* p. 41. The author also notes that, unlike cross-fertilization of roses in the west, "Rose breeding probably began in China five thousand years ago."

⁶ Taylor, *op. cit.*

⁷ Steinberg, S. H. *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 13.

⁸ Sankey, O. "Armorial", *Armorial*, Adelaide: The Print Studio, 1995 n.p. (Exhibition Catalogue, Adelaide Central Gallery, September 8-October 3, 1995)

⁹ Hendry, S. "Armorial: Dianne Longley at Central Gallery", *On Edge*, Stream Artist Collective, Vol2, #3, 1995, p.21

¹⁰ Seward in Curtin, P. *op. cit.* p.1. "We are told that Stein transcribed her rose statement a number of times so that it formed a circle indicating that it could be repeated endlessly and yet assume enhanced meaning..."

¹¹ Kostelanetz, R. "Book Art" *Artists Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, Rochester: Peregrine Books, p. 27.

¹² Ackerman, D, *A Natural History of the Senses*, London: Chapman, 1990.

¹³ Ackerman, D, *ibid.*



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