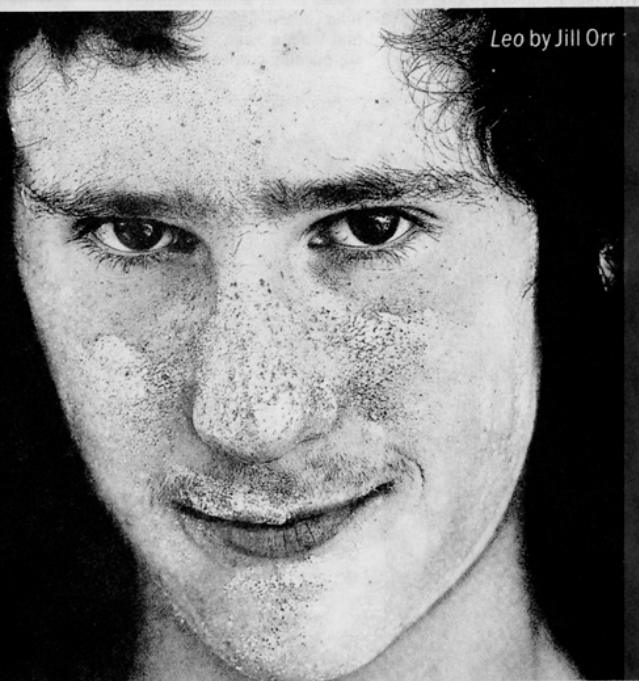


# THE ARTS

SPACE VISUAL ART

## VISUAL ART

# The ghoulish art of witchcraft



Leo by Jill Orr

Works such as these would have had dire consequences during the Inquisition. **Robert Nelson** reports.

**A**BOUT the time of Botticelli's beautiful pictures, a disgusting book was published called *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches). Written by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, this misogynistic piece of scholarly mischief explains how witchcraft was practised. It prescribed hideous methods for persecuting witches and hammering them out of society.

In their exhibition by the same ominous title, James and Eleanor Avery evoke the "painful interrogation and torture" that Kramer and Sprenger recommended.

A large and slick arc with spire at Nellie Castan Gallery called *Double Rainbow* translates inquisitorial imagery on a frightening scale; and a terrifying glary spiked grille makes

you wonder if you will get out of the gallery alive.

Since Salvator Rosa and especially Goya, artists have had a vivid interest in witchcraft, its rites and its traumatic suppression by religious authority. It is not for ghoulish thrills or lurid detail. Rather, the sorcery that was condemned by faith continues to interest contemporary artists because they, similarly, have access to alternative phantasms and transformative spells, and are similarly hammered — albeit more softly — by mainstream culture.

The work of the artists in *Trouble Set Me Free* at the Margaret Lawrence Gallery would all be doing heavy penance in the Renaissance for their caprices. What would an inquisitor have thought of Catherine Bell's collection of metal penises, Patricia Waller's chopped-

### EXHIBITIONS

**NELLIE CASTAN GALLERY** — James and Eleanor Avery *Malleus Maleficarum*; Marc Freeman *Broken Canon*. 12 River Street, South Yarra, to July 3.

**MARGARET LAWRENCE GALLERY**: *Trouble set me free*. 40 Dodds Street, Southbank, to July 3.

**JENNY PORT GALLERY**: Jill Orr, *Vision*, 7 Albert Street, Richmond, to July 3.

**PLACE GALLERY**: Anna White, *Away... Towards*, 20 Tennyson Street, Richmond, to July 3  
**KAREN WOODBURY**: Lara Merrett, *Every breath you take*, 4 Albert Street, Richmond, to June 26

off thumbs in fibre or Stephen Garrett's macabre models of suicide venues, including an irrational staircase that closes in on its entrances? Ross Moore's essay that elaborates these morbid specimens with orgasmic metaphors would also not have impressed the Holy Tribunal.

Artists still live dangerously and incur much unsympathetic scrutiny with their persistent

interest in rituals. An example is Jill Orr's *Vision* at Jenny Port Gallery.

Orr presents sombre photographs of children's faces besmeared with white clay, which immediately makes them seem spooky, alternately with eyes closed and shut. The patchiness of the clay is a form of painting that interacts pictorially with the freckled skin and transforms the

ghostly presence of the face into a cracked spectre.

Acknowledging the hazards of handling schoolchildren in this way, Anne Marsh writes in an essay that "there is a dangerous edge here as children participate in their own agency". Dangerous indeed, as artists still don't know what kind of "auto de fe" the Australia Council has in mind for pursuing its "protocols" and hammering out of society all the artists who are currently boiling babies to make their reprehensible artworks.

Artists are magicians, conjurers and witches; if a work lacks magic, audiences are instantly bored. Theorists have compared the ancient art of painting to alchemy, and when we look at a painting we expect to see transformation in action.

Anna White practises a suspicious kind of white magic by techniques of smearing paint over slippery perspex. Her small fields of colour at Place Gallery reveal the deceitful characteristics of paint in folding different layers into one another. Called *Away... Towards*, the exhibition seems to rip paint apart, as if tearing at the spectrum inside it, fragmenting the integrity of a formerly solid mixture and spreading out its component colours in staggered reverberations as the paint shudders at its own innards. Peeling the hues out of their medium reveals heretical contempt for the divinity of light.

Lara Merrett might also have to explain to the monks how she paints a picture with several scenes popping up separately from behind a black layer. With the title of *Every Breath You Take*, the works combining so many abstract vignettes at Karen Woodbury Gallery have a relation to Marc Freeman's abstractions at Nellie Castan. Bearing the confessional title of *Broken Canon*, these collages also break the sequential coherence of painting and make you think that the devil controls the scissors.