

## The Opinion 1984

Footage of performance filmed by Peter Nicholls at Auckland City Art Gallery, Artists' project programme

Courtesy of the artist's estate and New Zealand Film Archive Nga Kaitiaki O Nga Taonga Whitiāhua

## The Opinion 1984

Sculptural objects from the performance installation: perspex lectern, resin mandible (jaw bone), newsprint stack, fibreglass bowl, and perspex block of newspapers.

Courtesy of the artist's estate

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During the first half of the eighties, through a number of high energy performances (shown at ANZART and elsewhere), French ritualistically activated site-specific installations. In *The Opinion* (1984), for instance, she fearlessly challenged issues that were topical at the time.

Here French was concerned at what she perceived to be an unquestioning reliance upon overseas opinion by New Zealand media. Performed in Auckland 1984, she used clips from film footage of a 1951 Labour Party rally, together with a large fibreglass container in which the artist (clad in workers' overalls) poured red and black paint. A stack of newspapers showed David Lange and Robert Muldoon during the 1984 election campaign. Standing in front of a perspex lectern, the artist held a large mandible-like structure which was levered so that it resembled a mouth opening and shutting. She explained: 'Various elements were manipulated to suggest that the exchange of ideas in this country is characterised by mechanical repetition, banality and an inability to be original.'

## Taking Possession series 1990

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Artis Gallery

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Di ffrench: 'Since 1980, I have been working with sculptural installations in conjunction with photographs: the action being specifically structured for the camera, so that the photograph is the prime repository of meaning rather than a subsidiary of the main event.'

Many of the artist's cibachromes are concerned with the idea of "possession". Traditionally, the female figure has been portrayed by male artists as a passive object of desire. Without denying the sexuality of the sitter, she redresses this balance and incorporates the male nude into her cibachromes. By employing the nude as a body with physical prowess, both men and women are endowed with the power to revise outmoded canons of belief.

**> Cibachromes are extremely fragile, please remember to follow our don't touch policy.**

## The Life Drawing Class 1990

cibachrome

Collection of the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

Purchased 1991.

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By the end of her artist-in-residence program at Christchurch Arts Centre in 1990, Di ffrench had built up a sizable corpus of photographic images that took not only the image of man as an embodiment of classical beauty (albeit with a latent eroticism) but one also that reflected the traditional hunter/warrior role imbedded in the idea of masculinity. She had also addressed the female nude and its orthodox conventions, seeking to deconstruct them, with the *Life Drawing Class* (1990) and *Coding/Observer* series of 1992.

*The Life Drawing Class* (1990) confronts the convention of female passivity inherent within classical artistic training with its revisionist depiction of an athletic, powerful and self-possessed female body (based on Di ffrench herself, shown in silhouette).

## Hunter / Warrior series 1990-92

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate

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Di ffrench's use of the camera and treatment of the body resulted in photographs that 'are not photomontage. They are made by a lengthy process of photographing light and illusion, using materials with refractive qualities.' From her Dunedin studio she evolved a synchronicity between installation and photography. She cut and tore photographs of figures, sometimes superimposing gouache and line drawing on them, and photographed these compositions as coloured slides. She projected these slides from a 2.3 metre stand onto floor arrangements, re-photographing them with her camera at that level to later create large cibachromes in a commercial laboratory.

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## The Useful Idiot and Arnolfini's Hat

1984/90

cibachrome

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 1996 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society.

## Portrait of Glenda Norris 1994

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate

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It would be incorrect to categorise all French's photographic portraits of herself, friends and colleagues as simply material in her search for new systems of meaning. Sometimes the body is clearly invested with psychological power and poetic resonance which defies solely theoretical justification. Among these images are that of the artist herself in several versions of *The Useful Idiot and Arnolfini's Hat* (1984/90) and the portraits of friends such as *Glenda Norris* (1994).

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## **Oscillation** 1996

cibachrome (tondo)

Private Collection, Dunedin

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Ffrench's photographic tableaux of the nineties are often reconstructions of art history. In *Oscillation* (1996) the collage and final cibachrome process allows for a majestic composition by Poussin to be appropriated and revised to show artist/academic Rob Garrett with his lap-top in conversation with the robed figure of Christ. A plumb-line has been photographed over the top, like a pendulum off-centre.

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## **View Finder** series 1993/94

1. **Ascending Descending** from **Illustration of Government** series

2. **Mirroring** from **Coding/Observer** series

3. **Significant Little Opera** series

cibachrome with metal surrounds

Courtesy of the artist's estate

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The *View Finder* series straddle the period 1990-95. Encased in geometric boxed structures (rectangular with an oval aperture) of black or white, these small-scale cibachromes in glass, along with the wall installation *Magnifications*, are among the most intimate of her oeuvre.

## **Shelters** 1996

19.30 minutes

Feature length film directed by Di ffrench

With camerawork by Paul Donovan, script by Rob Garrett and Sarah McMillan and original score by Jack Body and Philip Brownlee. Narrated by Wallis Barnicoat and edited by Julie Watson. Young man played by Christopher Hogan with karate performance by Dennis May and herding of sheep by Geoff Stafford.

Courtesy of the artist's estate and New Zealand Film Archive  
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*Shelters* 1994-96, is a feature length film made just a few years before Di ffrench's death.

Camerawork is by Paul Donovan, script by Rob Garrett and Sarah McMillan and original score by Jack Body and Philip Brownlee. Here she wove a narrative around the life of the man, a trapper, who eschewing the conventional, had chosen to live as an "outcast" in rural Otago. She gives dignity and poeticism to mental illness and the hardships associated with subsistence living.



## Visual documentation from the artist's studio.

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This selection of working imagery relates to *The Life Drawing Class* and *Coding/Observer* series of 1992 where contemporary and antique worlds collide. It also shows Di ffrench herself in the famous group of cibachromes *The Useful Idiot and Arnolfini's Hat* (1984/90) as well as “constructed” portraits of her friends Glenda Norris and Julia Morison (a well-known Christchurch-based artist).

The documentation includes small versions of *Oscillation* (1996) based on a painting by Poussin.

## Visual documentation from the artist's studio.

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This selection of working imagery relates to the late 1980s and early 1990s when Di ffrench addressed “The Body” as the central theme in her photography. The proofs and collages show the way she built up her cibachrome images from collages of posed studio figures and invented ways of manipulating them through superimposition of slide imagery projected onto floor-based assemblages.

Aspects of the *Fundamental* (1986-87) series, *Hunter/Warrior* and *Taking Possession* (1990-92) are used to demonstrate this here.

## The 1000 Rocks series 1988

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago.

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Toby and Jeanine are names identifying Maori subjects of French's distinctive group of portraits collectively titled *The 1000 Rocks* (1988). Unlike the African peoples subjected to the violence of Idi Amin's dictatorship in Uganda which she performed earlier in *Fontanel* (1981), here the "tangata whenua" are given dignity and self-determination.

## **Water Drops** 1980

fibreglass bowls on native kahikatea

Courtesy of the artist's estate

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*Water Drops* is close in concept and date (1980/81) to the *Mother, Daughter, Woman* work exhibited in Wellington at the Women's Gallery in 1981. Both comprise fibreglass bowls moulded by Di ffrench to evoke "femaleness". The curvature relates to the body and the water to the fullness of life.

## The Lady of Shalott series 1993

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Artis Gallery

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*The Shalott* series 1993 includes *Bridge Order Cutting Through Chaos*. This group of cibachromes is based on classic art school drawing formulas where the female nude becomes objectified and architectural schemas are taught. The figure is idealised yet also suggests something of the realm of the intuitive and shadowy margins of the conscious mind, with an ominous hooded “puppet master” figure present in some of the compositions. The nude can also be interpreted as being caught in a fruitful tension between the artist's own desire for control of the composition and allowing the model an autonomous presence of her own.

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## **Asters** 1983

Video component in performance, filmed by Peter Nicholls

'ANZART' 1983, Hobart

Courtesy of the artist's estate and New Zealand Film Archive

Nga Kaitiaki O Nga Taonga Whitiāhua

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*Asters* was performed at ANZART Hobart in 1983. These trans-Tasman events brought together artists from New Zealand and Australia who were pursuing experimental, challenging art practice. This is the video component of ffrench's performance and installation work *Asters* showing a supine male nude sprinkled with flower petals. Elsewhere in the performance the representation of the male focuses, as the artist stated, on 'an obsession, a violence, a war'.

## **Magnifications from the place names** 1996

silver gelatin print on aluminium

Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Purchased 1998 with funds from the Dunedin Public Art Gallery Society with funding assistance from an anonymous Dunedin Trust for the 1998 Commemorative Collection.

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*Magnifications* 1996. Installation of 33 photographic “disks” scattered in a random order. This work is based on the history of the Wanganui River.

## **And Out Through The Web** series 1992

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Artis Gallery

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**Di ffrench interviewed for TVNZ  
during her Christchurch Art Centre  
Residency. 1990**

Courtesy of TVNZ Television Archive

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**The Raising of Adam from  
Fundamental series 1986**

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate

**Fundamental series 1986/87**

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate

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**The Idea Becomes Extinct 1990**

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate and Artis Gallery

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# **Coding / Observer series 1992**

cibachrome

Courtesy of the artist's estate

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