

## The Nita Gini Collection: Lauren Lysaght

Lauren Lysaght tells a story of collecting roses for her grandmother Nita Gini's prized Crown Lynn swan vase, when visiting as a young girl. The tale has all the qualities of a fable, and calls up a vivid image of the child gravely choosing blooms of sufficient calibre to befit the vase. It was duly promised to Lauren on Nita Gini's death, and many childhood hours were spent coveting its possession. With proper allegorical bathos, this never ultimately occurred, perhaps heightening its appeal. And so began Lysaght's acquisitive quest.

The early collection of roses could be identified as the first of many for artist Lauren Lysaght. It is to this she returns when presenting *The Nita Gini Collection*, an array of handmade objects which draw on Crown Lynn items from her grandmother's and her own possession. Staged on three impressive plinths, the installation pays sardonic tribute to the notion of 'The Collection' as precious and somehow elevated. The swan motif is preeminent among other pieces including three-dimensional crowns, urns, and a teapot. Affectedly dramatic spotlighting and deliciously blush pink walls emphasise the theatrical atmosphere, while the idiosyncratic scale of different items suggests a child's perception.

Crown Lynn's story is one which resonates with most New Zealanders, and many of Lysaght's chosen objects or designs are likely familiar from our kitchen cupboards or mantelpieces. The Crown Lynn narrative has been co-opted in the articulation of many of our favourite histories – an economic era of entrepreneurship and small business enterprise, domestic nostalgia, the community and livelihoods of immigrant factory workers, the development of a local design aesthetic. It has proud associations with our perceived nationhood and the status of a local institution.

Yet Lysaght's engagement with the tradition adopts terms deeper, darker and wilder. This is no tea party set-up. Our 'hostess' overturns ideas of domestic quietude and feminine roles associated with the home. Fine china is replaced by plaster and fur, dainty teacups with funereal urns. From its earliest stages, her vision for the installation was (characteristically) a complete one. She constructed not only the individual objects in this tribute collection, but the furniture and mechanisms – if sometimes more decorative than practical – for their display. Leopard-skin stands hold the *Roydon Tiny Tots Cat Urns*, veneer-covered plinth tops support the crowns and swans. Sometimes the form is also the means of display, as in the cabinet, the beaded floral curtain, and the coat tree-come-mug rack, *Family Tree*. Funereal urns borrow Crown Lynn's nurseryware *Roydon Tiny Tots* decal, while the crowns sprout unruly beaded growths which allude to tourist shops, macramé, or other homely crafts.

Encountering this work, extravagantly displayed, it's an effortless aesthetic leap to the decorative arts of the Victorian era. 19<sup>th</sup> century 'Victoriana', rather than representing a dominant style of its own, adopted and adapted many styles from various time periods in history, including Gothic, Tudor, Elizabethan, English Rococo and Neoclassical, to heavily ornamental ends. With a combination of domestic ornament, camp stage prop and tacky found item, Lysaght stages her own small nostalgic melodrama in the gallery, rivaling a Victorian zeal for magpie-ing, voluptuous arrangement and display.

Lysaght's work also has a plausible connection to the Arts and Crafts movement, which came on the heels of (and in reaction to) the Victorian period. Inspired by the ideals of thinkers such as John Ruskin and Walter Crane, together with the reformer and designer William Morris, the movement sought to reinstate the importance of handicraft processes and artisanship. While Victoriana promoted industrial techniques of mass production, and cheap reproductions of many styles proliferated, the Arts and Crafts movement proposed that good design was linked to a healthy society. Morris is often quoted as stating the goal was to produce design that was 'made by the people and for the people, as a happiness to the maker and the user.'<sup>1</sup>

As a self-taught artist, 'craftswomanship' has always been fundamental to Lysaght's practice. *Making* is often emphasised when she speaks of her work: 'Every time I show art, anything but the making is a by-product. The making is an obsession for me; it is incidental that it comes into a gallery.'<sup>2</sup> Flamboyant as her conceptual gestures may be, look closely at this work and you see that minute detail is given supreme attention. Etiquette may appear to take a back row seat in Lysaght's practice, yet each piece is finished with dexterity and care bordering on the pedantic. Coming to art-making late in life, she has worked previously in fields including textiles, furniture, cartooning and illustration (also as a guest lecturer, social worker, and on numerous community projects).

It must be acknowledged, however, that Lysaght's practice is at odds with certain tenets of Arts and Crafts; nor is it usefully solely aligned with the aesthetic of Victoriana. More often than not her materials are detritus gleaned from processes of mass production, and her work makes pointed social comment, or parodies the world of art, which she sees as increasingly colonised by the middle classes and overly 'concerned with trying to be nice'. She takes pride in the status of amateur, and her work's relationship to ordinary people's lives, yet it is not a project of social reform that provides the energy behind these works. Visual art historian Dr Pamela Zeplin writes of Lysaght's work 'Mercifully...we are spared any puritan indignation. To be sure, Lysaght bridles at a society choked with convulsive consumerism, but deeper sources of humour, compassion and visual delight are also running alongside.'<sup>3</sup> Her material language is essentially fantastical, rather than automatically opposing manufactured consumer goods.

It would be nonsensical to simply parallel her work's aesthetic with a single period's style of display or design. Rather, her act of creation may be seen as enlightened iconoclasm in as much as she draws on different traditions of visual imagery, with a perspective that is often satirical, critical or wickedly comic. The poise of exquisite craftswomanship underwrites all her production, and her objects have a propensity for 'performing', hogging the limelight, becoming characters in their own right. It would be simplistic to say she is exclusively concerned with ornamentation, arrangement, or surface: this

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<sup>1</sup> William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art: the Art of the People*, lecture originally delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, February 1879.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Gifford, 'Lauren Lysaght at Whitespace', *New Zealand Herald*, September 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Dr Pamela Zeplin, 'Private Night(mares)', *PUBLIC/PRIVATE: Tumatanui/Tumataiti*, The 2<sup>nd</sup> Auckland Triennial catalogue, Auckland Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki, 2004.

installation typifies her will to expand the context of given objects, to visual puns and parody.

Describing herself as 'a recovering collector', Lysaght is interested in the obsessive or addictive aspect of collecting: the compulsive tendency, desire and denial, and the power of objects to seduce. She has amassed, and continues to furnish considerable collections herself, including leopard-skin cake tins, Kiwiana, ceramics, vintage fabrics and haberdashery. Past works have considered gambling and other addictions, as well as mental illness, poverty and disability; there is often a serious and deeply personal agenda implicit in what may initially be seen as eye candy. She considers her making an act of personal therapy, and has been described as a 'devoutly political and aesthetic activist'<sup>4</sup>.

She is also a storyteller, and this is what *The Nita Gini Collection* comes back to. It is both personal memoir, and part of a larger narrative about New Zealandness, about collecting, and about historical attitudes to design and display. With characteristic flourish Lysaght orchestrates our encounter with these stories. As the rose collection for the swan vase provided a ritual enjoyed by both grandmother and granddaughter, we sense the artist here indulging in the ritual of making, of illustrious staging, and the revelation of a collection.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.