

# SARAH NOLAN ARTLIST-TEXT

Carrie Miller is a freelance arts writer and social commentator. She is a regular contributor to Australian Art Collector magazine and The Art Life website and has a weekly column in The Spectator.

Traditionally, domestic handicrafts have been associated with women and the private sphere and opposed to what was considered 'high' art – historically the domain of men.

This aesthetic dichotomy between art and craft which privileges mediums such as painting and sculpture over needlework, embroidery and sewing was called into question by feminist artists in the 1970s. These artists sought to reconceptualise craft as a legitimate artistic activity by reclaiming it as a means to explore notions of the "feminine" and the founding of a uniquely "female aesthetic".

At first glance, the work of Sarah Nolan appears continuous with this tradition. Her hand sewn fabric works, which combine a range of plain and printed textiles embellished at times with sequins and fringing and on which she stitches words and images, do problematise the art/craft hierarchy, and they also raise questions about the (still masculine) hegemony of the contemporary art world.

But there is a subversive twist to her use of craft-based materials. Rather than the materiality being a primary conceptual concern of her practice, it functions as a camouflage for its provocative subject matter: the sometimes harsh commercial reality of the world of the artist. This is obfuscated with a decorative flourish, a "feminine" touch.

In Nolan's latest series of work, the artist presents the viewer with a sardonic and sceptical take on the machinations of the art world, not through an obvious and literal critique, but by taking the modernist grid and remaking it in domestic fabric. On the individual material squares of 'Sincerely', for example, are stitched fragments of text taken from rejection letters from galleries and arts organisations: 'I'm sorry to inform you'...This is a continuation of Nolan's ongoing desire to question the status quo of the art world – "a means of trying to understand and make sense of how the 'art world' functions and to highlight the forms of



Sincerely 2011, detail 21x30cm

communication and language that is used", as she puts it. Instead of being narrowly concerned with the possibilities of a feminist craft-based aesthetic then, her practice can be better understood within a tradition of text-based work which is often associated with painting and photography. In this sense, her work is much closer in its aims to those artists who incorporate text in their work in order to question dominant cultural assumptions and reveal the ambiguity of language through humour rather than direct confrontation. Nolan challenges us, not through overt political statements, but with a playful wit which belies the subversiveness of what she is saying.

Carrie Miller

# MADELEINE PRESTON ARTLIST-IMAGE

Nell Greco is a freelance writer, and presenter of FBI's weekly arts program CANVAS. Nell currently works as a producer on ABC Local Radio, 702, and contributes music and arts writing to both online and print publications.

It's difficult to look back on yesterday and not yearn for what has been. It can be irrational, whimsical and frivolous, yet it can also provide guidance, perspective and build a sense of who you are. Whatever its outcome – it is nostalgia, it is innate and it is inescapable.

So when 'the past' was thrust upon Madeleine Preston in the form of a shoebox of photographs left to her by a friend, she began revisiting it with some hesitation. Would it be too self-indulgent and embarrassing to exhibit these images of herself and her friends from the 1980s? Braving this question, Darlinghurst Eats its Young was exhibited in May 2010 as part of Sydney's Left Coast Festival and the impact of the photographs on those in Sydney's arts community was widespread.

Notions of nostalgia have continued to wander in to Preston's work, either as a result of looking back to examine the past, or looking to the past in order to explain and inform our experience of the present. Preston's exhibition in October 2010, Childs Play, did just that. She presented observed associations and dissociations between contemporary children's storytelling imagery and the imagery of her childhood – there seemed to be more naivety in the

imagery of the past. But wait – is that simply our yearning for the past influencing our perception of the present?



In this current work for Gaffa, Preston again fortunes upon a treasure of photographs but this time she has no record, no knowledge, and no memory of the subjects in them.

Artist exhibits a series of photographs of Berliners, discarded and sold in flea markets in an

apparent attempt by their former owners to expunge themselves of their past. The photographs seem innocuous enough. They're mostly of people gathered inside homes, either around a dining table or in a living room. We can't be sure of why they've gathered – we might suggest for the sake of celebration or tradition, but that is because we instantly recognise a subtly familiar event. The effect is that of a constructed nostalgia where we're confronted with unfamiliar faces, place and time, yet still are able to 'read' and 'understand' the current scene.

Regardless of these 'unfamiliar', each viewer will recognise in these images, that which they have at some time experienced themselves. Despite the 'alien' faces, the photographs conjure varying degrees of nostalgia in the viewer, nostalgia created by the recognition of an oddly familiar experience.

Preston's work evokes a natural comparison of these strangers and their antiquated experiences, with those of our own past and present existence. She allows us to understand that it is our ability to place ourselves inside the image – inside the experience of others that enables us to make sense of our experience of the present.

Nell Greco

# ARTLIST#1

EATS  
REWARDED  
DAMIEN AND ME PLAY  
REPRODUCE SOME HOMAGE COLLAGES  
STUCK DOWN  
PICK UP CHILDS YOUNG  
WE DON'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE  
ABSURDITIES  
ITS DARLINGHURST  
PRESTON NOLAN  
ARTLIST#1  
2011

ARTLIST #1  
MAY 19-31 2011

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