

The Dinner

Fiona Gunn and Chris Cree Brown

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In name, *The Dinner* gives knowing reference to the quintessential feminist work by Judy Chicago (1979, SF MOMA), *The Dinner Party*, although in ways which appear more complex than simply in either celebration or critique of Chicago's original work. Chicago created porcelain plates with embroidered placemats to celebrate a range of historically significant women, a mammoth task which took five years and hundreds of volunteers to complete. The work itself has been the subject of continued debate, both for its contribution to a burgeoning feminist art canon, and yet also for its somewhat biologically defining placement of women, each plate depicting, not the woman's face, but her mythical vulva - woman equals body yet again!

Gunn and Brown's nod to Judy Chicago is perhaps in acknowledge of both sides of the argument, yet their work stands in contrast to Chicago's dinner of warm-fuzzies and shouts-outs. The seventies DIY look has been replaced by a strictly traditional arrangement of silver cutlery upon an exquisitely restored antique table: this dinner is a particularly formal event. Wrapped both literally in a web of latticed cord which stretched from floor to ceiling, and metaphorically by the white noise distorting the accompanying soundtrack of party-goers, the artists set up various barriers to distract our participation in the event. A lone chair, sitting desultorily by itself outside the cluster of cords, reinforces our role as observer, a kind of Dickens-like lonely orphan looking in through the window at the bourgeois high jinks within. The sounds of the party overwhelmingly fill the gallery space: the chatter of friends and the tinkle of glasses, drunken laughter soaring at certain points till you wish you were there.

Based in Christchurch, the city of flatness, grids and a tendency to clutch at traditional hierarchies of class and status, one suspects the artists of pointing an unerring finger at the political structures underpinning the city. A humorous yet clinical comedy of manners, *The Dinner* looks like the interred remains of a Court Theatre production, a sort of Roger Hall meets an antipodean Oscar Wilde. One can almost see the various good ladies of Fendallton sitting down for dinner and a chat, and the socio-political drive of this work stings you with its thrust. Yet convexly a kind of lightness of touch, an obliqueness in approach, saves this work from being overly politicized or didactic, creating a work that could be read on many levels, and hovers somewhere between humor and critique. A final link back to Chicago's *Dinner Party* can be seen as well in the discrete inclusion of an antique high chair and tiny, modern toy, perhaps a crisp comment on the fact that, glamour or no glamour, high society dinners or not, somewhere in there lies the (messy) reality of childbearing and motherhood.

Emma Bugden