

Mary E. Rawlyk

For as long as I can remember, I have enjoyed colour and light and form, and have found pleasure in line and texture and spatial arrangement. Wherever I am, I feel intensely aware of these visual aspects of my environment. It is a visual orientation—which is an important ingredient in my personal creative process. A second ingredient which I am aware of constantly is a strong inner compulsion to make visual comments about my environment. And a third ingredient, a psychological processing of personal and societal experiences, often results in the refining or reordering of the image—to communicate something about human experience. This last ingredient has played a significant part in the production of the Apron Series and the Housewife Series, in this exhibition.

The practical and technical experience and skills which are involved in presenting my ideas, have been developed through professional training and years of work and experiment.

Most of my printmaking is done in my domestic surroundings. My press is in a small section of the basement of my home, not far from the freezer and the laundry equipment. And my drawing and designing area is above it, beside the kitchen, in a bright room which also serves as a dining room.

Throughout the last fourteen printmaking years, my household has been a very busy place. Many a meal has been made while I was thinking about the next step in a print, and many a print has been taken off the press, while the family sheets and towels plunged in the suds in the washer.

Of course it does not always fit neatly and sweetly together. There are times when I feel my

very soul and creativity are extinguished by household trivia. Many prints never reach completion because of domestic disruptions. Nevertheless it has been possible to participate in a professional way—on a reduced scale in Printmaking Exhibitions across Canada for the past fourteen years.

From 1972-1978, when my family life was least conducive to printmaking, I worked on a series of prints about the household objects that absorbed my time and energy—my washing machine, stove, iron, sewing machine, scissors, lawn mower, among others. I remember times when I desperately wanted to make prints about aspects of landscape, but could not free myself from domestic commitments long enough to study and experience the phenomena which I wanted to deal with. I made several prints that included leaves and clouds. My print, *Shading Window*, with leaves outside the glass, presented my predicament. My view of landscape was mostly through a domestic window with a shade, that could be drawn down at any moment for any reason.

I found myself struggling to find time and energy for my art, and experiencing an undercurrent of turmoil and frustrations. In my domestic life there was no outlet or way of expressing the frustrations that surfaced in my art making experiences, and up to that point, my art had not directly expressed the frustrations of the domestic experience. But I began to realize that my art making could offer the possibility of expressing this conflict. Like most isolated housewives, it took me a long time to discover that other women share the problem of time management in some form. And it took me many more years to understand that this personal experience of women is political, that is, controlled by wider

political structures. Although I had very little time to read, I did make a point of reading the works of women writers in the areas of arts, and history, sociology, psychology, theology and literature.

One of these books in particular shed light on my dilemma. This was Dolores Hayden's book, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities*, and it was brought to my attention by my friend, Dr. Joy Parr. It documents efforts made by a group of gifted women well over one hundred years ago to deal with the problem of opportunity for creative women with families. They designed and built several types of housing arrangements to include co-operative cooking, laundry and child care—long before Betty Friedan wrote about 'the problem that has no name' in *The Feminine Mystique*. Why had I never heard about these projects or benefitted from them? Why have efforts to promote private domestic labour been so successful?

By 1980 I was ready to make some visual comments about my experience of fulfilling expectations of a family housewife and struggling to make a professional contribution in another area. It was in a way a relief to allow myself to deal with a personal problem, and it released a lot of energy which might have been wasted trying to keep the problem out of sight and out of mind. And by this time I was also beginning to realize that it was a widespread problem with huge political dimensions.

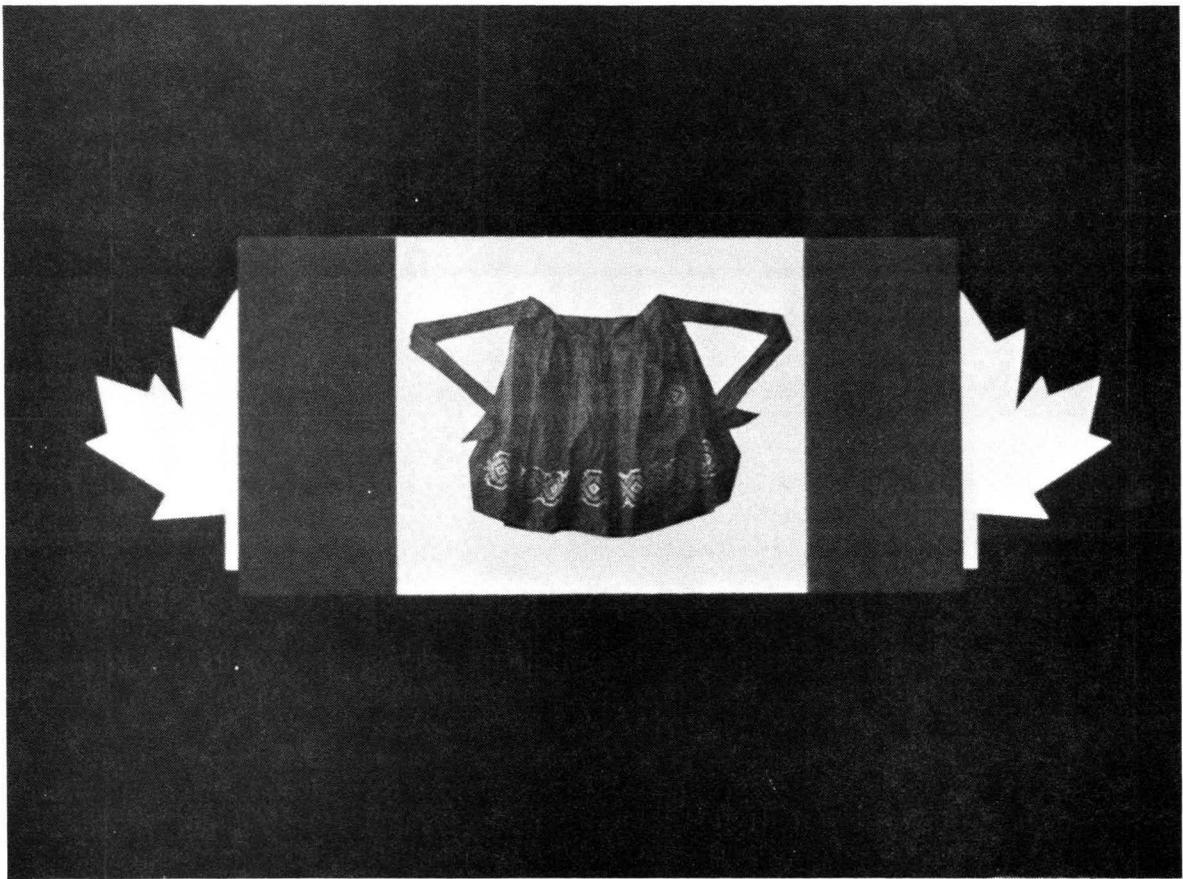
In an effort to cope with time restrictions, I decided to experiment with colour xerox techniques, and with monoprints, made on the etching processes closely relating to etching techniques.

The first step in expressing the realities of the domestic experience, was to find an image which would symbolize women's housework. My search began in my kitchen where all of the objects are

associated with preparing, cooking, serving, storing, and cleaning up food—work which I have been doing for over twenty-five years. I opened drawers and cupboards and by a process of elimination ended up with my kitchen aprons, ordinary skirt style apron which tie around the waist. These aprons, of all the articles in the house, are the most obviously associated with the private domestic labour of women. I felt that they would have enormous meaning for nearly all women, and that they could express feelings which most women have—but hesitate to put in words.

So I began to draw aprons, and to think about their shapes, and it wasn't long before the idea of making the ties look like and function like gesturing arms occurred to me. And this led to the idea of attaching hand images on the ends of the tie arms. I was also thinking about printing aprons (as opposed to drawing them). In earlier prints, such as *Wringing Shirt*, *Cutting Cloth*, *Ironing* and *Sewing*—I had printed fabrics on etching plates. It occurred to me at the time that monoprints could be made by a similar process. I began to experiment with printing an ordinary utility apron which eventually produced results that encouraged me to continue.

Another reason for printing the aprons—rather than drawing them, was that the printed impression gives the apron a strong sense of realism and presence. The scale is unaltered, and details, such as stitches, threads in the weave of the fabric, lace, and wrinkles can be seen. This realism is important to a statement about circumstances which are also painfully real. But there was a practical problem—most skirt style aprons are larger than the printing surface (or plate) which I had at that time. And since I wanted to make impressions by actual contact with real aprons, I had to deal with the fact that part of each apron would not fit onto the printing surface. This prompted me to make some smaller aprons to print from. And the resulting apron monoprints with colour xerox transferred



CANADIAN APRON FLAG, 1981-82

hands, were included in *The Apron Show* at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario in the spring of 1982. Also included were two of the fourteen variations in the Bow Series, in which colour xerox printed hands were attached to ribbon bows. This series was another concession to my limited printing plate size, but it allowed me to experiment further with the visual impact of joining the photographic images to the contact printed ribbon bow. I was trying to present in simple terms a feeling that I have had for a long time—that young women's efforts to make themselves attractive—result for most women, in a loss of freedom, and in finding themselves for the most creative years of their lives—restricted to a family kitchen. Something of this same idea is presented again in the *Pink Proposal Apron* in the apron series.

As I worked, I became increasingly concerned about housewives whose other gifts and potential are wasted. As someone has said—the greatest brain drain in this country is in the kitchen sink! Two public events in 1982 damaged the status and hopes of women in Canada beyond tolerance. The first was the uproarious laughter in the House of Commons when MP Margaret Mitchell asked the members to concern themselves with the widespread problem of battered women. And the second was the reluctance with which women's rights were included in the Canadian Constitution. I felt compelled to express my outrage.

I made three sets of images based on the theme of the Canadian Flag, replacing the central maple leaf with a red apron. One set of these *Apron Flags* was commercially printed in the form of posters, which were welcomed by many women and posted in public institutions. The two other sets were small editions of prints, which I printed on my press.

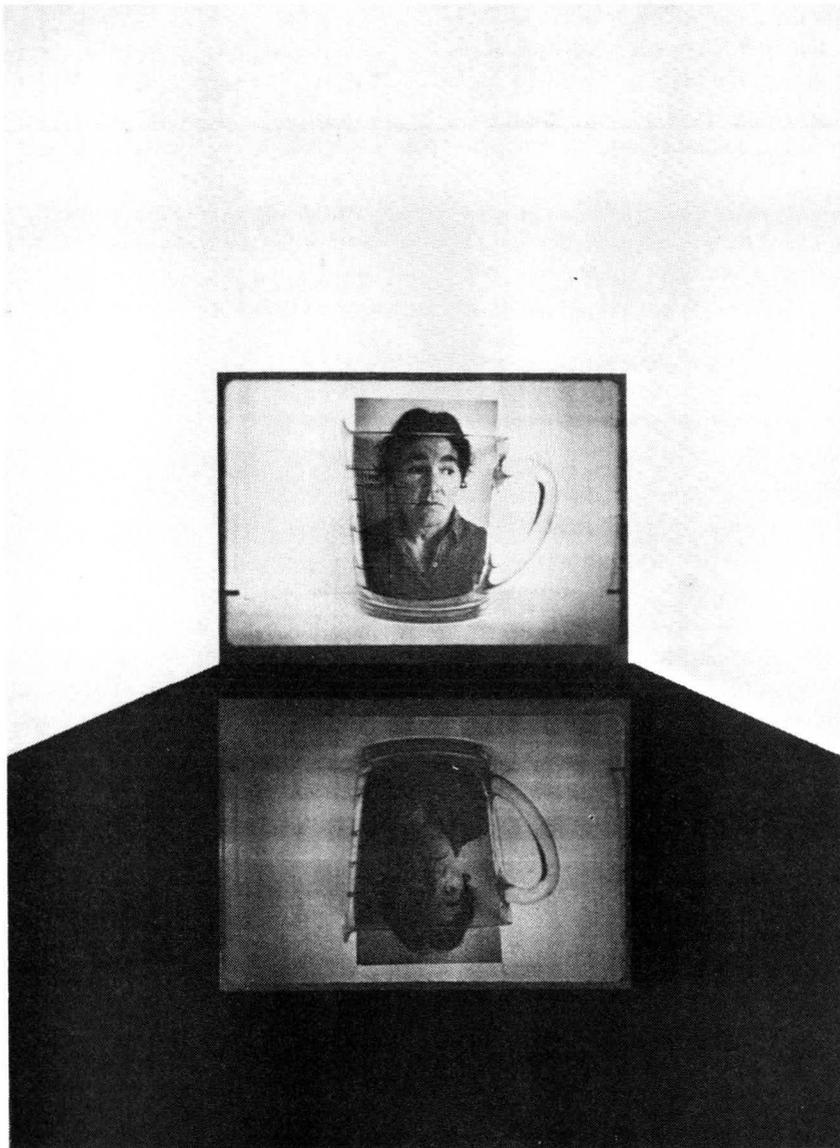
There was only one apron in my possession which was smaller than the normal size, and I was able to print it on my limited surface. Al-

though it produced a perfect record of its crocheted pattern and form it did not communicate much about the experience of women who wear aprons. I then tried printing the top sections of normal size aprons, and was disappointed to find, after many experiments, that apron images lose their identity by being incomplete. It became obvious that in order to present contact impressions of real normal size aprons, I would have to acquire a larger surface to print from.

Once this practical problem was solved, I began to experiment with ways of arranging aprons on the printing surface. I had discovered earlier how to present the apron tie as an arm, with a shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand, simply by folding the tie forward at the elbow, and choosing a wrist position to suit the gesture. This made possible the whole range of apron gestures. Each apron in the series makes her own gesture-statement about a specific aspect of the domestic experience. Some of the arm ties are twisted, some hang limp, some suspend the apron, and others tangle in a state of collapse. Feelings of exhaustion, devotion, isolation, confinement and anger, among others, are expressed. The knot always refers to the tie to the household and the resulting loss of freedom.

Some of these statements are heightened by adding hand shapes to emphasize the tie-arm-association as in the prints, *Twisting Green Apron Arms* and *Hanging Green Apron*, etc. The *Purple Heart Apron* uses a common symbolic heart shape to express devotion, as an aspect of apron labour. And *Blue Headache Apron* used a symbolic colour change where the tie arms touch an invisible throbbing forehead.

The ties of the *Pink Proposal Apron*, with its elegant, embroidered courtship couple, express a mixture of anger and exasperation. This apron presents what society prefers to ignore—the connection between the glamorous courtship and the ensuing female fate of private domestic labour. Another connection is pointed out by



MEASURING CUP WOMAN, REFLECTING, 1981-82

Roszika Parker in her book *The Subversive Stitch*. There has always been a connection between embroidery, itself, and the inculcation of feminine domestic qualities in women.

All of the apron images owe something to Jim Dine's series of bathrobes. I am very aware of them, as having made an article of clothing into a legitimate subject for art. I also wanted my aprons to be isolated, central, and confrontational.

There are other ways in which my work derives from the Pop Art Imagery of the 60's. My content is domestic, but with the exception of the early Domestic Object Series, it has a strong feminist perspective. In the Housewife Series, the intensity of the feminism is increased by the use of a woman's face, within the domestic object.

I tried to be more specific in my comments on the isolation and confinement of the family housewife—in relation to her kitchen work and grocery shopping. I thought about a remark made by Paraskeva Clark, to the effect that her painting time had been sadly reduced by her domestic duties. She said "There's just cooking, cooking, cooking, Loblaws and Dominion." The deadening effect of housework on the creative impulse, is also part of the message of this series.

The ideas for the Housewife Series developed in 1981, and I worked on these prints in stages over the next three years. They began with the photography. At the time that Marilyn Dyer took the photographs of my hands and face, I had planned the use of the hands—but was not sure what I would do with the face. I was thinking of ways to show how women become incorporated onto their domestic labour. I started to put the face photograph beside my kitchen objects, and eventually began to photograph various combinations. One day I dropped the face photo into the measuring cup and was somewhat shocked by the result. It brought to

mind several aspects of my own experience, and it represented the domestic confinement of many family housewives. This led me to put the photo in the egg carton, and under the cake rack, and in the shortening box, and brown paper bag.

When these photo images were transferred to the print paper, the rest of the print was unplanned. At intervals, I added printed images such as the stencil fork and spoon, the inked shortening carton, and the textures and shapes under the egg carton. There was a stage when all the imagery was on the white background of the paper. In the winter of 1984-85 I printed black areas surrounding the images. For this reason, it is difficult to put a specific date on each work.

There are still some ideas for the Housewife Series which I hope to explore. There are still some aprons which I would like to print. There are many aspects of women's private domestic labour which still require visual comment.

By bringing images of women's private unpaid domestic labour into a public gallery, the value-laden division between housework and public work is challenged. Attention is focussed on the growing awareness of women that the personal is political. Women's private domestic labour supports the wider political structures which control women's lives.

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