

Of women's lives and bodies

by Fionna Barber

A dozen women artists in Ireland set up the Women Artists Action Group, a network of North-South artists involved in visual arts. The women had a wide range of experience and background from painting, sculpture, photography and art history. Some women had children, some lived in the country, and others were town or city based.

Three of these women artists are Beth Ridgell, Una Walker and Delice Osborne.

Beth Ridgell's outstanding photographs dealt with the theme of woman's relation to nature. She used archetypes of the triple Goddess, virgin, mother and hag.

Una Walker works in a very different area, in what is known as installation work. This is similar to sculpture in that it is three dimensional, but different in that frequently the floor or surrounding walls are used as well.

Like Beth, Una Walker is concerned with the relationship between women and nature.

Delice Osborne's paintings are almost life size and focus on the different social roles open to men and women. One particularly striking example depicted the elderly writer Beatrix Potter standing at her cottage door smiling at the viewer: Instead of a window the wall of the house opens onto an inset of Neil Armstrong taking a 'giant step for mankind' on the surface of the moon. This painting is both very moving and haunting in its suggestion of the different worlds which women and men generally occupy.

Women frequently make art out of the circumstances of their everyday lives, fitting in painting with child care, often working on the corner of the kitchen table, although some are lucky enough to have a studio.

Often the materials they use have more 'female' associations, such as in the use of textiles and embroidery. From a very early age women are steered in this direction and it can be difficult to break out.

Not only do women artists need to develop their work in an atmosphere of support and constructive criticism from other women but as feminists they need to broaden the audience for women's art.

For many women not connected with art it is something mysterious and frequently meaningless, having little to do with everyday experience. Many feminist artists have begun to base their work in their experience of women's lives and women's bodies and the many different oppressions women face as women—not as men have seen and painted them for thousands of years. It is important to go on opening up access to women's art: every woman has a right to look, and voice her opinion about what she sees.

Source: *Women's News*, May 1987, 185 Upper Donegall Street, Belfast, Northern Ireland.



Detail from an installation:
Harvest by Una Walker