

Melinda Rackham on Barbara Hanrahan's *Bee Stung Lips* exhibition

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A palpable cast of women inhabit Barbara Hanrahan's oeuvre, joined frequently by their "daddys", sweethearts, valentines and husbands. Given her father died the day after her first birthday, leaving Hanrahan (1939-91) to grow up with her maternal grandmother, mother and great aunt in Adelaide's then working-class suburb Thebarton, it is no surprise the matriarchy dominates.

Innocent and audacious, her characters jostle, quiver and hum in this significant [salon-hung survey at Flinders University Museum of Art](#). 180 works on paper — woodcuts, linocuts, screenprints, lithographs, etchings, dry points and rarely-seen drawings, paintings and collage — produce a shrine to Hanrahan's bold visual language.



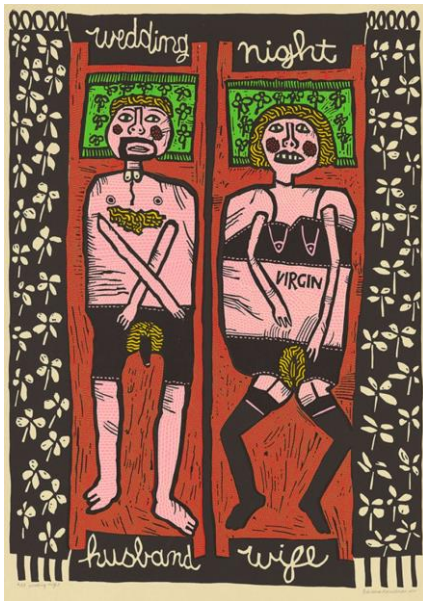
Barbara Hanrahan, *Memento mori*, 1976. Screenprint, colour inks on paper 60.4 x 42.4 cm (image), ed 6/23. Private collection, Adelaide. © the Estate of the artist, courtesy Susan Sideris 2020



Barbara Hanrahan, *The angel* 1989-90. Hand-coloured etching, colour inks on paper, 34.8 x 22 cm. Private collection, Adelaide. © the Estate of the artist, courtesy Susan Sideris 2020

Gaining a taste for pop art and the burlesque, she was not so much a proponent of the [Women's Art Movement](#) but worked in parallel, questioning beauty, social convention and sexual mores. She regularly visited Australia to exhibit until returning to live in Adelaide with her partner in the late 1970s. It seems quaint to recall that, in 1964, Sydney art dealer Barry Stern declined to show Hanrahan in his "family gallery" or, after purchasing many works, Adelaide gallerist Kym Bonython received legal advice not to exhibit her etchings of naked men.

Australian women artists of her era such as “femail” artist [Pat Larter](#) and [Charis](#) worked with sexually explicit imagery in drawing, collage, photography and video. But Hanrahan’s characters are often unaware, naive, or — as in *Wedding Night* (1977) — very awkward.



Barbara Hanrahan, *Wedding night*, 1977. Screenprint, colour inks on buff paper, 64.5 x 46.7 cm (image), ed 2/17. Flinders University Museum of Art, Adelaide 5770. © the Estate of the artist, courtesy Susan Sideris 2020

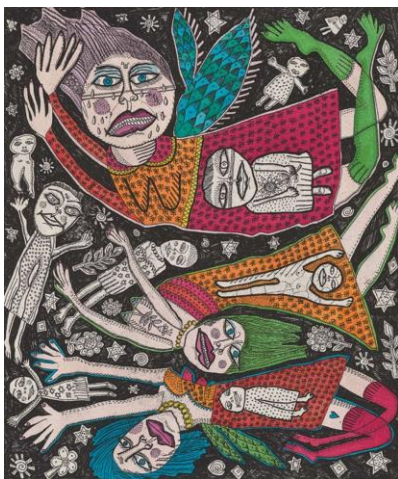


Barbara Hanrahan, *Moss-haired girl*, 1977. Screenprint, colour inks on paper, 63.3 x 33.1 cm. Gift of Jonathan P Steele, Flinders University Museum of Art, Adelaide 5769. © the Estate of the artist, courtesy Susan Sideris 2020

Life, and death

Hanrahan’s interspecies ecosystems are populated by celestial bodies and English and Australian flora and fauna. Intertwining woman becomes tree, branches sprout from human trunks and crevices, vulvas filigree into flowers, birds nest in fibrous hair, a man lives in the moon, Adam and Eve frolic before the fall, angels float Chagall-like through troubled skies, women hover flower-strewn as Ophelia across the Serpentine in London’s Hyde Park.

In her work, the flutter of the dove and buzz of the bee are as vital as the ebb and flow of the tides or the flowering of the sun: all grounded in the order and fecundity of nature and its cycles of life and death. Twinning, mirroring and doubling reoccur. As with [Frida Kahlo](#), Hanrahan has a fascination with birth, giving birth to the self, and self-realisation. From her alarmingly unconventional linocut *Birth* (1986) to women depicted with fully formed children inside their belly or on their clothing, Hanrahan celebrates the curious inner-child we all carry with us.



Barbara Hanrahan, Jonathan P Steele (collaborating printer), *Angels and children*, 1989. Relief etching, ink on paper, 25.9 x 22.2 cm (image), ed 13/25. Private collection, Adelaide. © the Estate of the artist, courtesy Susan Sideris 2020



Barbara Hanrahan, Jonathan P Steele (collaborating printer), *Birth*, 1986. Linocut, ink on paper 57.8 x 40.5 cm (image, irreg.), ed 16/25. Gift of Jonathan P. Steele, Flinders University Museum of Art, Adelaide 5768. © the Estate of the artist, courtesy Susan Sideris 2020

Abundant heart

Over three decades, Hanrahan revealed her adventurous, desiring, fragile, dreaming self in over 400 images and 15 books. Her work would frequently return to portrayals of her grandmother, Iris Pearl, and she continued to explore the psychological underbelly of family lineages and the diverse neighbourhood characters that impressed her childhood. She exorcised the socially demonic forces of propriety, unbinding the constriction of gendered stereotypes and, through western and eastern spiritual practices, came to a peaceful acceptance of her own terminal illness.

Works produced in Melbourne in Barbara's final years beat with an abundant heart. Celebrating her mastery of line and intelligence of touch, *Girl with dogs* (1989) and *The Angel* (1991) are iconic Australian images. This ambitious survey is set to ensure Barbara Hanrahan becomes a household name.



Barbara Hanrahan, Jonathan P Steele (collaborating printer), *Girl with dogs*, 1989. Linocut, black and red inks on paper, 62.5 x 36.5 cm (image, irreg.), artist's proof. Private collection, Adelaide. © the Estate of the artist, courtesy Susan Sideris

[Bee-stung Lips: Barbara Hanrahan works on paper 1960-1991](#) is online and on display at FUMA Gallery until October 1, before touring nationally.