

# Breaking down a female barrier

*Lorna Waite looks at an Edinburgh exhibition which challenges the sexist stereotypes of women*

THE everyday images which surround us can have a major influence on women's attitudes towards their own bodies and their health. And an exhibition at the Stills Gallery in Edinburgh, *Silent Health; Women, Health and Representation* makes a bold attempt to examine this.

The writer Jo Spence has said: "Just as the female body is fragmented and colonised by advertisers in the search for new markets and is fetishised and offered for male consumption through pornography, so it is similarly fought over by competitors for its medical care."

Photography offers empowering possibilities to represent how women experience their bodies and illness and Janice Howard's photo-installation explores the myths and contradictions which surround the historical notions of woman as healer/woman as witch.

This opposition is expressed conceptually in a series of photo-boards arranged in a circle.

In *The Prime of Life*, Melanie Friend affirms positive and liberating attitudes towards the menopause in a series of colour portraits of women with accompanying soundtrack.

Challenging ageist and sexist views of the older woman, the portraits and words of the women are empowering and speak from a position which does not interpret natural landmarks in women's lives as disabling and pathological.

Agitational, confrontational and ironic could be words used to describe the magazine and poster

work *Media Infection* of Kate Musselwhite. Taking eroticised advertising imagery and using comic strip balloons of text, she investigates the social construction of cervical cancer. The heterosexist, moralised misinformation of women's magazines, as well as the perpetuation of sexual stereotypes in safe sex adverts, is shown up as blatant.

*Faith, Hope, Charity and Selfishness* by Claire Collinson is a visual journey in photomontage of illness and healing.

The Richard Demarco Gallery is currently showing two complementary exhibitions, prints by the Polish artist Tomasz Paczewski and work by *Scottish Artist/Explorers in Eastern Europe*. The latter is work by the artists Rory Donaldson, Carolyn Bod, Iain McClinton, Lorraine Cotterell, Karen Strang and Lorraine Turley who have all worked in eastern Europe.

Paczewski's linocuts display a technical expertise and humanity which depict moments from the panorama of human life with its absurdities and suffering. He captures moments of vulnerability and spiritual crisis with sensitivity using symbols which add a mythical significance to his fine work.

The work by the Scottish artists illustrates the fertilisation of ideas gained from experience of living and working in a different culture. This process of adaptation and assimilation, observation and reflection is evident in the work on show.