

the  
**pam  
harris**  
show

*Video and Performance  
Experimental Art Foundation  
18 August - 11 September*

*Prints and Banners  
Adelaide Festival Centre  
30 August - 15 October*





## *from plaits to punk...*

*We keep coming back to words  
And not just to words, but  
to words set in visual  
frameworks that are emotionally  
as well as intellectually stimulating.<sup>1</sup>*

A description of the artist's work; but equally a description of the artist.

But it is not that I am making the historical/patriarchal mistake of fusing women with their work, seeing their art as a mere extension of their femininity; but rather referring to the staging of self, to Pam's performances of appearance.

Those essential components, the hair and the hats, were (to those of us who knew her) signifiers of Pam and of changes in her life.

Once, she had long dark plaits, worn squaw-like framing her face. Long hair, symbol of fetishism and female sexuality - but Pam's were always plaited, ordered, controlled.

Then came a stage of playing; looping and winding the plaits, sometimes wearing dangerous earrings! And like the Smirnoff advertisement she smiled and said, "I used to think Saturday nights were for working, until..."

So she did it - cut off those powerful plaits. But the effect was no less striking, with one side sweep of hair down to the jaw-line and the other side cropped closely behind the ear. She let her hair down - but always on her own terms!

This cut proved only to be an interim measure, for it was soon followed by short back and sides with a flat crew-cut! Very dramatic, very bold, very "don't-mess-with-me". (But worn with dark lipstick and a laugh.)

After her illness, the hair grew back, fine and curly (rather chic, I thought), but I knew she preferred a firmer, more purposeful look. Brave, strong, vibrant Pam.

But in the end it is the voice that remains. The voice that speaks through her works, the voice of shared exchanges and the voice that spoke out, that was always prepared to ask the difficult questions.

"Community, what community? Do you need free legal advice? Women need time to feel, think and breathe..., you might want to talk to people, genius has no gender, one man's revolution is another's platitude, Hail Mary."

Evidence of the value she placed on the voice is found in *Living Doll, Whores Part 1* and *Hail Mary*. It's there in the recognition she gave to the richness of voice in its connection to daily life. And finally of course, the voice comes into its own narrativity and performance.

In Pam's work, language addresses, demands, accuses, questions and subverts. It moves from stridency to speculation, to story-telling. Language is the obvious element, linking the different areas of her life and work - theatre, community arts, printmaking, performance and teaching.

This emphasis, however, (on voice/speaking/text) doesn't deny other connections, Pam's last poster *Greetings from Tasmania*, in its use of colour, humour and theatricality, clearly establishes visual links with her performances.

Pam belonged to the new breed of women artists, who provided a "radical image of feminine creativity".<sup>2</sup> She chose to work in the dissident, marginalised artforms of our time - posters (silk-screen printing, in the 70s was also possibly physically damaging) banners, performance, video - works that privileged dialogue, communication, accessibility.

She knew that "...power is invested and exercised through her who speaks: given the long history of the patriarchal silencing of women, it is crucial that women speak out for ourselves and occupy resistant subject positions"<sup>3</sup>...and that's what she did.

*Jude Adams, Lecturer, Visual Arts Theory, SA School of Art, University of South Australia*

## *from posters to performance*

*A picture is supposed to be worth 1,000 words, but it turns out that a picture plus 10 or 100 words may be worthiest of all. With few exceptions, most effective socio/political art (propaganda) being done today consists of a combination of word and images.<sup>1</sup>*

Traditionally, posters rely on image and caption, slogan and illustration, but increasingly the posters and prints of Pam Harris reveal that her intention was to

move beyond this format, in order to fully integrate the idea, word and image.

Perhaps therefore, a more appropriate designation for the artist's work would be the use of the term *word/image pieces*.<sup>2</sup>

Silk-screen posters emerged from the political, social and counter-cultural movements of the 60s and 70s. Within the art world, these anti-institutional movements rejected established art values in favour of social, cultural and political change, encouraging not only the development of alternative practices (eg video, conceptual art, silk-screen prints and murals) but also challenging the dominant ideology of the artist. The artist as creator of aesthetic commodities for an art market, was replaced by the artist as producer of information for new and diverse audiences. Likewise community arts, community access workshops and later, Art and Working Life projects were particularly important sites, not only in constructing new constituencies for art, but also in the promotion of more collaborative work processes.

It is this period of commitment and optimism, when questions of production, distribution and politics took precedence over those of aesthetics and style, that provides the context for Pam Harris' work.

From 1975-1980 Pam worked at Community Media Association where much of her work was produced in collaboration with community groups, creating posters of the self-help, consciousness-raising type.

Prior to this, the artist was associated with the Adelaide Progressive Art Movement, whose work was characterised by "a seriousness of political purpose" and the "didactic tone of their posters"<sup>3</sup>.

However, it is Pam's work that exhibits an engagement with specific feminist issues that is pivotal to this exhibition. The shifts in feminist discourse - from positive images of 'real women' to the construction of gender, to investigation of female desire - can be traced in the artist's oeuvre.

Strategies of visual communication were always important to Pam, thus her work can also be read in terms of a change in focus from art as a weapon in the battle against 'false consciousness' to art that makes reference to the politics of representation and visual pleasure.

The notion of 'positive imagery' derived from the common-sense idea that the media presents false, idealised images of women and that the replacement of

these representations by more 'realistic' images as seen in *Doll* encourages identification and self-affirmation. The representation of women in non-traditional jobs was intended as both a corrective and an inspiration.

Often however, these images (combining the 'real' and the false) tended to co-exist rather than contradict.

Other works, such as *Whores Part I* and *Working Woman and Child*, while also drawing on the 'positive imagery' approach begin to question the idea that reality is based on appearances by juxtaposing text, collage, and media images to "expose the complex social and economic relations within which women's subordination is maintained".<sup>4</sup>

To avoid the problems of fetishism and essentialism associated with the visual representation of women, one strategy has been to refuse the image of woman, focusing instead on the signs or markers of sexual difference. A cluster of works including *Living Doll*, *Anorexia*, *How You Can Achieve Bodies Men Admire*, *The Powder Room 1-3* and *Colour Me In*, explore this option.

*Living Doll* looks at the place of women in the lyrics of popular music; the text "And in the end, once upon a time, twice upon a time and thrice upon a time, she was created" acts as a reminder that gender, like meaning, isn't a given, but is always being produced and reproduced. In *Anorexia*, *Bodies Men Admire* and *Quest of Quests* isolated and fetishised items of female apparel, that 'mold and control' the figure, signify the importance of the body in definitions of femininity.

But the graffiti in *The Powder Room* (a place of repairs and rehearsals) speaks of feminine solidarity and subversion, as the artist wittily references her own 'self-help' posters by making the (lonely and bare) public toilet a site of knowledge and information for women.

The shift from positive images of women to questions of gender representation is accompanied by a shift in the viewer/text relation. From the closed text of realism which allows the reader/viewer only one position from which to passively consume a pre-given meaning, to the open text where "The reader is forced into the active role of co-producer of meanings, since no privileged reading is offered."<sup>5</sup>

In *Process*, *Living Doll* and *Unknown Photographer Part I & II* this is facilitated by the use of sets of alternative titles, used not to anchor meaning, but to open up meaning, allowing the reader to enter the work.

Language has always occupied an important place in Harris' work - as a method of propaganda, a device to convey information, a technique of collage and in constructing subject positions for the viewer (as in *Who Does this Man Serve?*, and the defiant but celebratory *IWD* poster). For the artist words were an integral part of the work, given equal value with visual imagery and perceived as essential in the making of meaning. Language is used to link ideas to facilitate entry into the work, and as a play on meaning (as in *Print as Object* with its theme of objectification and commodification).

But sometimes language fails. Referring to the work *Unknown Photographer Part I & II* Harris wrote, "something developed in these prints that was not present in the others...". With this phrase, the artist seems to recall the split subject of psychoanalysis, for the "something" that developed is unknown, unnamed.

The subject, who doesn't always know, is also a desiring subject. Consequently, these works can be read as the representation of the transgressive female desire to look.

This "seductive" image (of which much more could be said) thus illustrates the dilemma that the woman/artist finds herself in as both subject and object of the look (must it always be attack and recoil?). The artist and theorist Mary Kelly has stated that attempts to deal with this contradiction centre on the question: "How is a radical, critical and pleasurable positioning of the woman as spectator to be done?"<sup>5</sup>

The gaze of the woman/photographer/mother in *Unknown Photographer Part I and II* disrupts and unsettles. She is the deviant/bad mother that occurs elsewhere in the artist's work - the prostitute mother, the single mother, the mother who needs time for herself.

The mother who desires and refuses to be silent. Desire can also be read in *The Single Ladies Race*. Here desire for the phallus/baby (a patriarchal desire) is replaced by a desire that moves beyond constraints, that runs ahead of, and that may run somewhere else entirely "taking flight for the viewer's pleasure"<sup>7</sup>, as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* meets *Thelma and Louise*.

In her on-going regard for the viewer, Pam Harris continually sought to investigate the relationship between the text and the reading self, seeking different models of communication.

While making *Working Woman and Child*, the artist wrote: *I was thinking a lot*

*about alternative ways I could visually communicate and considered if I could develop imagery as rich as...a letter from my mother. Her letters...loaded with a history we shared were made of fragments: of statements, questions always open-ended and waiting for a response from the receiver.*

This description echoes the idea of a "conversation between pluralisms"<sup>8</sup>, a technique that is "circular in form, cooperative in manner and constructive in intent."<sup>9</sup>

The works *Memory Trace*, *Process* and *Unknown Photographer* draw on the family snapshot tradition. Snapshots, like letters, like conversations, resist fixed meanings and closure; instead the scene is set for recollection and for the viewer to tell her own stories.

In this survey of Pam Harris' art, we can trace a journey from the moralism and didacticism of the political poster, to the word/image pieces that engage the viewer in conversation, "where the aim is comprehension, not agreement..., coherence in diversity and respect, rather than a unity of logical consistency".<sup>10</sup>  
*Jude Adams, Lecturer, Visual Arts Theory, SA School of Art, University of South Australia*

Footnotes to From Plaits to Punk...

- 1 Lucy R Lippard *Heresies* Vol 9, 1980 "Some Propaganda for Propaganda", p38
- 2 C Moore *Indecent Exposures*, Allen and Unwin 1994, p1
- 3 C Weedon *Feminist Practice and Post structuralist Theory*, Blackwell 1987, p173

Footnotes to From Posters to Performance

- 1 Lucy R Lippard *Heresies* vol 9 1980 "Some Propaganda" p 35
- 2 *Ibid* p 39
- 3 J Ewington *Anything Goes* ed P Taylor, Art & Text 1984 "Political Postering" p 94
- 4 S Bradon *Committing Photography*, Pluto Press 1983 p 87
- 5 T Lovell *Pictures of Reality* BFI London 1980 p 86
- 6 M Kelly "Desiring Images, Imaging Desire", cited in *Vision and Difference* (Pollock, Routledge 1988) p 86
- 7 A Kuhn *Family Snaps* ed J Spence, D Holland Virago 1991 "Remembrance" p 25
- 8 P Schweickart "Pluralisms with Feminist Literary Criticism" cited in J King McFee *Studies in Art Education* 32 (2) 1991 "A field of Dichotomies or a Network of Mutual Support" p 76
- 9 J Martin "Reclaiming a Conversation" (Yale Uni Press) p 10 1985 cited in S Hagman *Studies in Art Education* 32 (1) 1990 "Feminist Inquiry in Art History, Art Criticism and Aesthetics" p 33
- 10 Op cit. J King McFee p 76

*stone the crows!*

Pam Harris' metamorphosis from a political printmaker into Australian performance art's equivalent of Fanny Brice was nothing short of miraculous. It was a change as unexpected as a rabbit popping out of a hat, and twice as many laughs. You must understand, this woman was wired, always had been. She fairly

crackled with energy, loved life, laughed hugely. So performance was, somehow, a natural destination for her talents and for her prodigious energies. Performance insists on focus, on pulling any number of disparate elements together in one place for an infinitesimally brief moment, and holding them there by the force of desire in the face of scepticism. After that, it's only memory, a whirling impression. That was Pam to a tee: firecracker force and certainty. All I can clearly remember from one performance in Perth in 1987 is Pam whizzing by on roller-skates wearing an insane grin.

It was a long way from the *Progressive Art Movement*, where Pam Harris first emerged as a mature artist in the mid-70s, with its emphasis on political commitment and correct imagery, to the highly personal vocabulary she developed in her performance work ten years later.

Not that these works were entirely remote from the preoccupations of earlier times. In many respects the continuity of interests is striking: the conditions of Australian mythologies, the great issues confronting women, indifference to art as commodity. *Australian Landscape* is the direct descendant of earlier concerns with contemporary political issues, speaking about the role of education in indoctrination, nuclear testing at Maralinga and the treatment of Aboriginal peoples, the great ruling mythologies of Australian public life. But the wacky irreverence of Pam Harris' performances deliberately walked away from the strict didactic tone and the orthodox politics of the Australian Independence Movement at its height. This was not a question of political difference but an artistic departure, the confidence to be herself. By the mid-1980s, Pam Harris was ready to try totally different tacks where serious matters were concerned, and seriously silly gambits wherever possible.

Why? I'd say it was basically a matter of audience. Long before, I had been struck by the Adelaide artistic Left's cavalier disregard of audience, both actual and potential, in practice and in theory. The emphasis was squarely on the subject of each work, seen in the context of a developed political ideology and the campaign needs of the moment. Information was the greatest good, politically-motivated education the aim. I wish I could say I remember Pam telling me she wanted to try humour instead of hectoring, but my memories are woefully inexact. Yet that is exactly what she did. The urgency and the passion were still there, but in the performances realism is leavened by opening the floodgates of the imagination and letting all sorts of unexpected animals through, beasties large, small and

Speaking of birds, why did those dotty avian head-dresses become so important to Pam's performance personae? Maybe it had to do with the fabulous showgirls of the 1950s, something about the beast in her, something about the sumptuous tackiness of wearing fake leopard-skin (something no 'nice' girl did in the childhood era we shared), just being 'a bird'? The Surrealistic personae Pam adopted for her performances - the gloves, the metamorphic birdy-head-dresses, the black lipstick - were only slightly adapted from her regular party dress, much as the subjects of her dream-like performances were those which consumed her in her waking life, and many derived directly from the culture of women. For Pam Harris always took great pride in the company of women. *Art Studies of Home Life* speaks about fugitive memory, pointing to the daily experience of women's domestic sphere, summoning up the key aesthetic roles women play in their households (I said key, I don't mean trivial, I mean truly, deeply, generously affirming the enjoyment of pattern and colour and value in every corner of life.) To remember it, to hold it, to recall even some of it, as the camera tracks across the junction of floor and wall, to let in the inconsequential flashes of memory, the unbidden phrases as the cameras breathes heavily in the room: here Pam Harris works with the daily sense of time passing.

Every single videotape reiterates Pam's loving curiosity about artefacts (and art and fun and fiction) but all have most to say about the love of life. When I first met Pam Harris at a women's shelter meeting in 1974 she was fresh from Broken Hill and had the best platform-sole sandals in Adelaide. Yesterday someone sage remarked that women become more eccentric as they age, men merely more conventional. I hope so. Speaking personally, I intend to follow Pam's example.

*Julie Ewington, Curator, Museum Education,  
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, July 1994*

**Pam Harris**

1946 Born Broken Hill, NSW

1977 Diploma Fine Art Painting SACAE

1981 Post Graduate Diploma Fine Art Printmaking SACAE

1987 Master of Fine Arts candidate, University of Tasmania

1992 Master of Fine Arts candidate, University of SA

1992 Died Adelaide, SA

**selected exhibitions**

1977-82 Various group exhibitions, Women's Art Movement SA

1977 Progressive Art Movement Exhibition, Contemporary Art Society, SA

1981-84 The Lovely Motherhood Show, Experimental Art Foundation, SA Artists Against Uranium, Experimental Art Foundation, SA

1983 Truth Rules - Okay?, Experimental Art Foundation, SA From the Inside Out, Women and Arts Festival, Sydney, NSW City of Fremantle Print Award Exhibition, Fremantle Arts Centre, WA All Australian Poster Show, George Paton Gallery, Vic

1984 Tenth Anniversary Postcard Show, Experimental Art Foundation, SA Festival '84, Adelaide Festival of Arts, Anima Gallery, SA

1985 Decade for Women, Constitutional Museum, SA Australian Prints 1985, travelled USA 1985-86 Disarm Nuclear Apathy, Adelaide Festival Centre Gallery, SA Print as Object, toured nationally, Print Council of Australia

1986 Truth Rules II, Experimental Art Foundation, SA SA Light, Adelaide Festival of Arts, Adelaide University Union Gallery, SA

1988 Traditions and Visions, Multicultural Arts Trust, SA Australia: Right Here Right Now, Adelaide Festival of Arts, toured nationally during the Australian Bicentenary

1989 The Body Show, Prospect Gallery, SA

**video/performance**

1985 Supernatural Stories for Boys, slide/performance in collaboration with Michele Luke (approx 15 mins); Australian Perspecta '85, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney; Performance Night, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide; Artists Exchange ANZART '85, New Zealand.

1986 Tripping the Light Fantastic performance in collaboration with Michele Luke (approx 15 mins); Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide; Adelaide University Union Gallery, Adelaide; Artists Week, Adelaide Festival of Arts.

1987 Australian Landscape 1988 video/performance (approx 15 mins); Woop Woop National Performance Event, Adelaide, SA; ARX '87, Perth, WA

1988 Australian Landscape 1988 and Bird Dog videos (approx 24 mins); Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide The Lingerie Salesman; performance, 5UV Radio Summer Arts Program, Adelaide

1991 Heptad Heresies, slide performance, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide

1992 All Over the Shop, performance, co-hosted The Pedantic Chat Show, SCAT Access TV, Adelaide Festival Fringe Exhibit A, performance (90seconds), SCAT Access TV, Adelaide

**awards/commissions**

1978 Women in Australia, University of Adelaide Union Gallery, Painting Prize

1979 SA International Women's Day, poster design

1980 Reclaim the Night mural SA, (collaboration), Art Gallery of SA's Alternative Arts Program

1982 Artist-in-residence, Praxis, Fremantle WA

1983 Individual artists grant, Visual Arts Board, Australia Council

1984 All Our Working Lives, Adelaide Festival Centre Gallery SA, Art and Working Life project

1985 Friendly Street Poets SA, book cover design SA Country and City Women Writers, book cover design SA Institute of Teachers, poster and book cover design

1985-86 Working Art, banner for Public Service Association Women SA

1986 Art and Working Life Project, banner for the Building and Construction Workers Union SA

1989 Australian Network for Art and Technology, National Summer School scholarship

**collections**

Chinese Painting Institute, Shanghai, Peoples Republic of China University of Tasmania Museum of Contemporary Art Art Gallery of NSW National Gallery of Australia Print Council of Australia SA Department for the Arts & Cultural Heritage Artbank Art Gallery of SA Art Gallery of WA Philip Morris Collection, Broken Hill Art Gallery Monash University Regional galleries

**selected bibliography publications**

1983 After the Rage, SA Women's Art and Writing,

1984 All Our Working Lives catalogue, Art and Working Life project

1985 Artlink Image Issue, Dec Artlink Aug/Sept Australian Perspecta '85 catalogue, Art Gallery of NSW Working Art catalogue, curator, Ian Burn, Art Gallery of NSW Print as Object catalogue, Print Council of Australia, Vic

1988 Artlink, double issue, June/July Right Here Right Now, catalogue, Co Media SA

1990 The Body Show, calendar, Prospect Gallery SA

1989 Aust Network for Art and Technology Bulletin, Vol 2, No 1, Aug

**articles and reviews**

1985 Art Network, Winter-Spring issue, critique by Pamela Zeplin of Tripping the Light Fantastic

1986 Broadsheet, Contemporary Art Centre SA, Vol 15, No 2, Oct, Print as Object, touring exhibition by Ian Were

1987 The Western Mail, Weekend, 5-6 Sept, Art Review of ARX '87, Perth WA

1988 The Advertiser, 10 Mar, Adelaide Festival of Arts, Australia: Right Here Right Now Mercury, 20 April, p20, Australia: Right Here Right Now by Susan Leggett, Tasmania

## list of works

### Adelaide Festival Centre

#### Prints and Banners

1	Process 1984 silk-screen print 70 x 50	14	The Powder Room No. II 1983 collage, paint 39 x 26	28	Doll 1976-80 silk-screen print 56 x 76	41	Surplus Value 1978 PPA silk-screen print 90x70
2	Anorexia Nervosa 1982 silk-screen print 102 x 67	15	The Powder Room No. III 1983 silk-screen print 26 x 39	29	Who does this man serve? PPA Progressive Printers Alliance: Pamela Harris, Peter Mumford, Ruth Chadwick 1976-80 silk-screen print 65 x 40	42	Women (Lesbian Mothers are Everywhere), 1984 silk-screen print 57x74
3	Unknown Photographer Part 1 1981 silk-screen print 51 x 70	16	Working Woman and Child 1981 silk-screen print 41 x 50	30	The Lovely Motherhood Show 1980 silk-screen print 54 x 35	43	Public Service Association of SA Women's Banner 1985-86
4	Unknown Photographer Part 2 1981 silk-screen print 51 x 70	17	Hail Mary 1986 silk-screen print 58 x 38	31	Colour me in (For The Lovely Motherhood Show) 1980 silk-screen print 68 x 50	44	Australian Building & Construction Worker's Federation SA Branch Banner 1986
5	Memory Trace 1982 silk-screen print 76 x 56	18	Print As Object - one of six Object of Ridicule 1985 silk-screen print 40 x 35	32	State Theatre Company poster 1980 silk-screen print 56 x 32	45	I Am a Woman, 1978 studies of four women in the home (book)
6	Greetings from Tasmania/Tour at your leisure 1988 silk-screen print 48 x 50	19	Print As Object - one of six Money is No Object 1985 silk-screen print 40 x 35	33	Community What community? 1976-80 silk-screen print 56 x 38	1985	Supernatural Stories For Boys, slide/performance in collaboration with Michele Luke (approx 15 mins)
7	Let Us All Resolve 1981. silk-screen print (On grey paper) 101 x 70	20	Print As Object - one of six Object D'Art 1985 silk-screen print 40 x 35	34	Community Legal Services 1981 silk-screen print 61 x 43	1986	Tripping the Light Fantastic, performance in collaboration with Michele Luke (approx 15 mins)
8	Let Us All Resolve 1981 silk-screen print (On white paper) 101 x 70	21	Print As Object - one of six Strong Object/lon 1985 silk-screen print 40 x 35	35	Yes to Australian Independence 1978 PPA silk-screen print 76 x 50	1987	Art Studies from Home Life, video (approx 10 mins)
9	Single Ladies Race 1983 silk-screen print 44 x 76	22	Print As Object - one of six Sex Object 1985 silk-screen print 40 x 35	36	Kerr's Coup First Step to Fascism 1976-80 PPA silk-screen print 75 x 45	1988	Bird Dog, video (approx 9 mins) Australian Landscape 1988, video (approx 15 mins)
10	Living Doll 1981 silk-screen print 76 x 53	23	Print As Object - one of six Print as an object 1985 silk-screen print 40 x 35	37	Australian Women's Education Coalition 1976-80 silk-screen print Kelly's Shelter poster 1977 silk-screen print 50 x 70	1992	Exhibit A, performance (90 seconds)  A 30 minute composite of performances by Pam Harris on VHS, together with associated paraphernalia and photographic documentation exhibited at the Experimental Art Foundation 18 August to 11 September 1994.
11	Whores Part 1 1981 silk-screen print 101 x 70	24	Quest of Quests 1975 collage, paint 51 x 63	38	Bowden Brompton Community Group poster 1976 silk-screen print 70 x 50		VHS editing by Dean Farrow. Photographic printing by Terri Ellis and Alan Cruickshank.
12	Whores Part 2 1981 silk-screen print 101 x 70	25	Survival of the Fittest 1975 collage, paint 25 x 51	39	The Margaret Guilfoyle poster 1978 PPA		(All measurements in centimetres, height before width)
13	The Powder Room No. 1 1983 collage, paint 56 x 76	26	How You Can Achieve Bodies Men Admire 1975 collage, paint 63 x 51	40			
		27	Women's Liberation Movement 1983 silk-screen print, poster 70 x 50				



The Pam Harris Show  
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Edited by: Stephanie Radok

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Single Ladies Race, 1983  
silk-screen print, 44 x 76cm

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