

Bridges and Curves: Female artists and the fascination with urban engineering.

Dr Meighen Katz
University of Melbourne

Abstract

During its construction between 1928 and 1932 the Sydney Harbour Bridge fascinated a range of local artists including photographers Henri Mallard and Harold Cazneaux, printmaker Jessie Traill, and painter Grace Cossington Smith. Explorations of the relationship between artists and the Bridge, particularly women artists and the structure, have tended to be framed as indicative of a body of work that embraces modernity and all its trappings. I want to suggest that the fascination with Sydney Harbour Bridge by women artists equally raises questions about women's interaction with urban spaces. Visual expressions of the relationship between women and cities often position the female inhabitants in limited roles as consumers of goods and participants in leisure activities. This paper argues though, that taken collectively, prints and paintings of bridges by female artists demonstrate an active engagement with ideas of infrastructure, engineering and importantly the developing city. Using the work of Cossington Smith, Traill, Ethel Spowers and Eveline Syme, I explore the way that bridges, as a subject of art, can provide significantly different views of urban women, views in which they are not simply drawn to the commercial, frivolous side of the city, but intrinsically embedded in the urban environment and sensitive to its changing nature.