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A Eudaimonistic Model for Femininity in the Art of Vida Lahey
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'Wanted, a strong girl, able to milk and make herself agreeable' : A Eudaimonistic Model for Femininity in the Art of Vida Lahey (1882-1968)

In 1916 the Australian artist Vida Lahey came to London to form a home base for her three brothers and 12 cousins who were fighting in Europe. The visit was also an opportunity to connect to her Irish heritage. During some 'off duty' time, as she was cycling through the Irish countryside, she came across the notice that forms the title of this paper: 'Wanted, a strong girl, able to milk and make herself agreeable' (Lahey 1919, 9). That Vida even recorded the advertisement in her journal says something about the impression that it made on her. The roles of domestic worker and 'agreeable' object form the twin poles of an ideologically determined continuum along which single women have traditionally been expected to define themselves. It is a short, rather constrained continuum because the definition of femininity has been articulated in tandem with the heterosexual institution of the family. Consequently, those who exceed or challenge normative femininity have been considered at best deviant, and, at worst, subversive and threatening to the social order.

I argue that this idea of the single woman as domesticated labourer and agreeable object can be the starting point of an analysis of Vida's capacity to move beyond those categories. At the same time, however, I want to recognise that this shift is not a severing of ties that bind single women to family but a movement that accommodates normative aspects of femininity. In other words, instead of seeing the desirable domesticated labourer and the agreeable object as opposite ends of a continuum that limits women, I want to place them alongside one another at one end and think about what it is that single women might place at the other end. Additionally, I want to recognise potential movement back and forth along the continuum.

I use Vida's paintings to explore a more complex form of femininity that is foreshadowed by a couple of salient points made by British feminist Katherine Holden (2006). The first is that single women sometimes want the status of married women. Holden's concrete example of this was the existence, in the United Kingdom, of 92 branches of the National Spinsters Pension Campaign which represented single women whose chances of marriage were denied as a result of the First World War. They demanded treatment as war widows rather than spinsters. This acknowledges that there are intrinsic benefits to 'single' women in gaining the status of (once) married (now widowed), even to the point of compensation when that naturalised expectation is thwarted.

In this paper, the example is less concrete but nevertheless provocative and perhaps more prevalent than recognised. Vida's relationship to her family sheds light on the way in which this particular single woman continued to have and enjoy her emotional investment in family. That investment was equivalent to a married woman's duty of care to family (as opposed to a woman's sexual duties to a husband). I also argue, however, that it was partly through her investment in family that Vida was able to develop her artistic identity *beyond* the family.

The second of Holden's points that I want to recruit to this analysis is her recognition of a problematic in the work of Martha Vicinus. Here, Holden suggests that, when

seeking models to understand the lives of single women, we need to move beyond Vicinus' 'household model' (where relations of care are always categorised as familial) and beyond her 'sexuality model' (where relations of care are conceptualised as eroticised) (Vicinus 1985, 2). It is possible, in fact, to add that it is necessary when thinking about ways to understand the lives of single women to try to move beyond each of these models separately, and their combination, for example in the eroticising of mother/daughter roles that Vicinus outlines in her book *Intimate Friends* (2004).

This is not to invalidate these models, or the extraordinary and exciting scholarship that has gone into their recognition of the ways in which women, single and partnered, relate to one another. It is simply to acknowledge, as Holden invites, that there may be other, equally functional models which are not necessarily erotic, not necessarily structured around *alternative* familial/household institutions such as middle-class educational institutions, convents, or working women's shared residences.

Such an alternative model for understanding how single women constructed lives that they perceived as virtuous and rewarding might be called a *eudaimonistic* (*eu*—well-being, *daimon*—spirit or soul) model: one concerned with a person's flourishing. In this, I am following Martha Nussbaum's use and spelling of the word to acknowledge that what is 'good' is not necessarily linked only to happiness or pleasure but can be linked to other states or activities perceived as valuable. Indeed, Nussbaum states quite plainly (for a philosopher!):

Not only virtuous actions but also mutual relations of civic or personal love and friendship, in which the object is loved and benefited for his or her own sake, can qualify as constituent parts of a person's *eudaimonia*. (Nussbaum 2003, 32)

So, for Vida, dutiful service to others may have formed part of the answer to the question of how a single woman should live but her *eudaimonia* (well-being) incorporated the expectation that she too would be 'benefited' 'for her own sake' without the expectation that she would sacrifice her own desires. There is an implicit mutuality that needs to be teased out and emphasised: that social well-being would result in personal flourishing. Suffragettes and early feminists clearly recognised this in the campaigns for social purity and companionate marriage but perhaps the idea can be extended to become more of a model for personal flourishing as a means of understanding the lives of single women.

The goal, then, is to use Vida's life, firstly to examine the idea that early twentieth-century middle-class single women did not necessarily marginalise family. They could, indeed, happily function in ways equivalent to those of married women; that is, as domestic workers and agreeable identities, though not necessarily eroticised. Secondly, I use her art to try to visualise the complexities of femininity and single life that this recognition demands. Finally, I consider whether my analysis opens up a *eudaimonistic* model through which the past lives of single women may be brought into the cultural imaginary.

Firstly, then, let us get a sense of Vida's family, a family, that was instrumental in the formation of a character that has been described as 'quiet and tolerant, but very determined' (MacAulay 1989a, 19). The Laheys (formerly Le Haye) have a French Huguenot ancestry and a history of migration, initially from France to Ireland, then to

Australia in 1862. Her father, David Lahey, was one of 11 children. The Laheys embodied an ability to survive political, religious and social upheaval by creating new paths in new lands. David Lahey and his brothers inherited a viable arrowroot farm and quickly developed a mechanised processing of the product that stayed in use for decades. They also owned a small sawmill that became central to the expansion of the family's business interests in south-east Queensland (Lahey 2003, 1-10). David was on the Shire Councils of Sherwood, Canungra and Tamborine (Curtis 1979, 23). Indeed, it has been suggested that the township of Canungra, south-west of Brisbane in the Gold Coast hinterland, 'owes its very existence to the extended Lahey family' (Curtis 1979, 17).

Vida grew to adulthood aware of her family actively seeking national and international markets for their arrowroot and later, in relation to log-hauling, researching the latest machinery, travelling to America, and then importing a steam locomotive from the United States that was 'the first imported geared engine to operate in Queensland' (Morgan 2000, 21). The combined family business was to spend £26,000 on tramway lines and £80,000 on roads containing 2,615 feet of bridgework (Morgan 2000, 11, 19). To put this in perspective, in 1911 a skilled sawmill engineer had an annual salary of £300—less than £4 a week (Lahey 2003, 234).

Such a proactive and dynamic context, where people were used to setting their goals and then finding ways to achieve them *and benefit the community* produced a generation of offspring, Vida's siblings and cousins, who were also active in their local areas. In 1960, after a lifetime of work in conservation through the establishment of the National Parks movement, Vida's brother, Romeo, earned an MBE (Lahey [1915]Lahey [1985]; Lahey 2003, 255-56, 385-87, 480). Another sibling, Oswald, became a missionary in India for 43 years, building hospitals and working with lepers; while Vida's cousin, Sir George 'Frank' Nicklin, was leader of the opposition for 16 years and Queensland Premier between 1957 and 1968 (Lahey 2003, 346, 400).

The women were also active. In 1929 Vida's feminist cousin, May, became the first female municipal court judge in California. Her sister Mavis, married but childless, graduated from Queensland University in 1921 with a Bachelor of Science and had a career as a science teacher in Queensland and New South Wales. Another sister, Jayne, never married and had a career in nursing; and sister Esmé was one of the first Montessori teachers, training in Sydney in 1912 (Lahey 2003, 204, 256, 294, 354, 238). Vida's mother, Jane, 'was a staunch believer in the independence of women' and supporter of Australian feminist Margaret Ogg, the founder of the Queensland Women's Electoral League (1903) and the 1908 Women's Progressive Club in Brisbane (Lahey 2003, 307). Vida received an MBE for her services to art and was a practising artist and teacher who supported herself all her life, with the exception of the time she was in London.

During Vida's youth this progressive family environment, with its support for independent women, was contextualised within a wider social and cultural shift in relation to women's rights. Indeed, Australian women were very much involved in the Western campaign for suffrage and parliamentary representation. Federally, they had the vote in 1902, two decades before women in America and almost three decades before *all* women in Britain. At State level, women in South Australia (including

Indigenous women) were enfranchised in 1894; in Western Australia white women could vote in 1899. Following federal recognition in 1902 for all white women (the indigenous losing their vote), the remaining States fell into line under continued pressure from women for equal access to suffrage: New South Wales granted the vote in 1902, Tasmania in 1903, Queensland in 1904 and Victoria in 1908 (Magarey 2001).

In 1902, as Vida approached her majority, this familial and social context created a culture of possibility within which she believed various landscapes, physical and institutional, were responsive to human intervention that improved the lot of the individual and the community.¹ Although it was a progressive and enabling environment characterised by optimism, gendered expectations remained. Even in a family that valued independence, for example, Mavis, Esme and Jayne extended domestic skills into teaching and nursing. Vida's niece, Shirley Lahey, writes that as the eldest child of 12, Vida took partial responsibility for her siblings 'quite early in life'; and that, on the death of her parents the emotional work of staying in touch with family members as 'head of the family was naturally assumed by Vida' (Lahey 2003, 261). When she saw her brother off to war, for example, she sent him away with a sewing kit; she gave free art lessons to her siblings and cousins; she actively supported Romeo in his campaign for National Parks; she offered emotional support on the anniversary of traumatic events such as the death of an uncle (Lahey 2003, 261, 379, 257, 474).

Even as she was dying, Vida's characteristic sensitivity remained. At the time she was sharing a home with Jayne, her youngest sibling at 19 years Vida's junior, who had nursed the Lahey parents prior to their deaths. Jayne's 'mental state was easily upset' (Lahey 2003, 482) and Vida made three stipulations if she should become 'bedridden or mentally incapacitated': the first was that medical attention should not prolong her life; the second was that she would be 'cared for in an institution or by strangers, rather than at home where personal attachments add so much to the strain of nursing'; finally, she did not wish anyone to 'feel blameworthy for not visiting' (Lahey, in Lahey 2003, 482). Shirley Lahey suggests that this was a direct attempt to prevent Jayne from feeling obliged to care for Vida in the way she had cared for their parents.

Clearly, this description of Vida's attachment to family emerges from her niece's meticulously detailed family history. It might, therefore, be considered to be the result of the affection and admiration of one single woman for the determination, integrity and kindness of another single woman in the face of life's many challenges. This opinion of Vida, however, is echoed by others inside and outside the family. A letter from her uncles responding to a query about what she was to do with remaining funds when the 'boys' returned to Australia on troop-prioritised transport, reveals appreciation for her work within the family, *and the expectation that she will reap some tangible reward*:

As to a refund of the balance in hand, we are all unanimous that you retain this for your own use and to show our high appreciation of the splendid work you have done for the boys, we are very pleased to supplement the amount by a further contribution to your own private funds, and now have much pleasure in enclosing a draft for £50, which we trust will give you as much pleasure in spending, as it does us in giving. (In Lahey 2003, 297)

Another niece, Ann Neale, provided material to Bettina MacAulay when she was researching the publication that accompanied the 1989 retrospective of the artist's work (1989a). There is a scribbled comment from Neale attached to a clipping from the *Brisbane Courier* of 12 October 1912. It is about Vida's studio being used for a meeting of the Queensland Architectural Association: 'How like Vida to be helping other groups, and to be taking an interest in designs for the federal capital ... not a cause that would elicit much local interest, then or now' (Neale n.d.).

Daphne Mayo, also a single woman, close friend and co-conspirator in the long fight for the better treatment of art and artists in Queensland, was a long-term beneficiary of Vida's supportiveness, 'missing Vida dreadfully' when she (Mayo) was in Sydney (Mayo Papers, Box 21). Mayo's archive reveals that she and her family were brought into Vida's orbit for many years. This included part of the 1940s and 1950s that Daphne spent in Sydney furthering her career as a sculptress. On one occasion Vida wrote to Daphne's mother saying that she hoped Mrs Mayo would 'decide' to be happy (Mayo Papers, Box 25). Happy or not, Vida visited her, sought nursing accommodation when she needed it and generally became a surrogate daughter in Daphne's absence (Mayo Papers, Box 28). Like Shirley Lahey and Ann Neale, Daphne admired Vida and highlighted her 'sense of duty to all fellow creatures', not just to family (Mayo Papers, Box 1).

The important point here is that Vida is *unresistingly* enmeshed in family life even to the point of extending 'family' duties to the Mayo clan. During the First World War she very much wanted to act as the conduit through which correspondence passed in both directions as loved ones sought first-hand news of their menfolk. In a letter home from London she states emphatically: 'I would not be elsewhere [*sic*] for anything and have never once felt other than happy and glad that I came' (in Lahey 2003, 290). She willingly fulfilled a duty of care role that did the gendered emotional work expected of any married woman and, often, of single women in large families. Their roles were equivalent except that for singles there were no sexual 'duties'.

To some extent this willingness is not surprising. In Australia, citizenship for women was very much conceived as 'maternal citizenship' (Lake 1999) with a focus, across barriers of class, on the welfare of children and mothers. Although this was also true in Britain and the United States, in Australia international eugenicist concerns with the health of the nation and the corresponding health of its mothers and its offspring were intensified by the perceived need to rapidly increase the white population. As a settler country, Australia's whiteness was threatened not only by its Indigenous population but also by imported non-white labour from the South Seas *and* a legacy of Chinese immigration from gold rush days.

The concepts of (maternal) nurturing and self-sacrifice were sufficiently appealing that, despite suffrage being gained, femininity *and* citizenship for women continued to be constructed through these concepts. Examining the impact of the First World War on Australian women's activism, Australian historian Joan Beaumont reveals, firstly, that the war only entrenched such constructions (the movement of women into men's jobs that characterised Britain with its munitions industry and development of paramilitary organisations for women did not occur in Australia); and, secondly, that women's activism proceeded in a dualistic manner. For example, in the Australian National Women's League education in politics was a stated goal of the organisation

but it worked within gendered constraints so that 'education' still meant influencing and guiding 'right thinking men'. Even many socialist women tended to leave the public speaking to the men whilst constructing their activism through feminised tasks like fundraising and program preparation (Beaumont 2000).² Patricia Jalland, amongst others, has argued that early and mid-Victorian spinsters 'cared for aging parents until their deaths; they acted as surrogate wives to bachelor brothers, without the personal rewards reserved for wives; they became resident maiden aunts, permanent childminders and nurses and unpaid housekeepers' (1984, 129). To some extent, this pattern continued beyond the nineteenth century because the dominant rhetoric for Australian twentieth-century feminism remained feminised in its conceptions.

This is not to suggest that Vida fitted neatly into the category of spinster in the way of Jalland's Victorians. The dominant rhetoric of Vida's early adulthood and formative years was very much characterised by the idea that women 'serve' their families. Nevertheless, Australia had its share of New Women and even had its own conception of the Australian Girl that was a colonial representation of the greater freedom possible in a younger country (Jalland 1984, 129). Vida never became a 'resident maiden aunt' or 'permanent childminder' for she was well travelled both inter-state and internationally. Nor is it the case that Vida's family only 'took' from her what ever she could give, or expected her to limit her own ambitions in order to be available to them.

Rather, in line with the eudaimonistic model I am proposing, the family provided opportunities that Vida accepted and shaped to her own needs and ambitions in tandem with her love for her family. For example, when Vida was sent (c.1894-1896) to Goy-te Lea, a private girls' boarding school in Southport, she learnt not only the prevailing ideology of femininity and respectability but she also lived away from family in a surrogate institution where the value of friendships and connections external to those of the family could be nourished. The network of friends and colleagues that she established stands as testament to this lesson, and endorsement, indeed, of Vicinus' work. Importantly, in terms of official curriculum, it was here that Vida was also first tutored in art and, within the decade, embarked upon a life as professional artist rather than interested 'lady' amateur.

When her uncles paid for her to visit relatives in New Zealand in 1902, Vida took a 'round trip stage coach journey to the west coast' with her cousin (MacAulay 1989a, 35). The outcome of this journey within a journey was her first exhibited work in November of the same year (*In the Otira Valley, NZ*). MacAulay notes that this, and other works that emerged from the New Zealand trip, were possibly influenced by various New Zealand artists then exhibiting in Australia and New Zealand. Vida was already energetically seeking models for her own work. Within a year she won first prize for a small oil painting of Brisbane River in the Australian [white] Natives' Association Brisbane Exhibition (1903), thus demonstrating very early in her career an abiding attachment to her home town.

In 1905, an uncle stepped in again, financing her first stint of serious inter-state study at Melbourne's National Gallery School. This time she built on the experience by opting to return for further classes in 1909. In Melbourne she was influenced by leading male artists with established reputations (Rodney Hall, Walter Withers,

Frederick McCubbin) and made lifelong friendships with other students; one, with Gwendolyn Stanley, would support her in the emotional turmoil following the First World War. She developed the confidence and skills that would challenge the gendered expectations of the art world within which she was increasingly active as both artist and educator. Even the trip to London in 1916, again at the behest of family, meant that she could remain there well after the war ended in 1918. She travelled in Europe to view the work of great artists in Belgium, Italy and France as well as studying at Colarossi's in Paris and with Frances Hodgkins in the United Kingdom. She did not return until 1921 and, as with her study in Melbourne, Vida chose to extend her experience with a return to Europe in 1927-1928.

When Daphne Mayo wrote that there were 'two channels' that 'ruled' Vida's life, 'her family and her religion—art' (Mayo Papers, Box 1), she usefully highlights what sets Vida's spinsterhood apart from that of Jalland's Victorians: Vida's capacity to exercise a much more complex femininity than that represented by the demand for a 'girl who can milk and make herself agreeable'. This is so even though the dominant rhetoric about femininity was based on the idea of service to others. Whether or not she realised it, Vida effectively puts into practice the advice of early Australian feminist Catherine Spence, who said of herself (in 1905 when she was 80):

I am a New Woman, and I know it [...] I mean an awakened woman ... awakened to a sense of capacity and responsibility not merely to the family and the household, but to the State; to be wise, not for her own selfish interests, but that the world may be glad that she had been born. (Magarey 2001, 43)

Here is a perfect combination of the ideas of service and duty to others with the recognition that a woman, even if an old New Woman rather than a sexually threatening New Woman, can move beyond the domestic sphere through 'service' rather than selfishness. It is a hybrid position that I suggest is, *in itself*, appealing to those raised with the rhetoric of service to family and nation, but without the constraining ties of married domesticity.

Vida's energetic engagement with the art world did not stand in isolation from her family relationships. Other family members were also active in the same circles. Whether they were recruited to that interest *by* Vida or whether she was part of a specifically art-oriented family remains currently unestablished, but she was certainly not alone in her altruism. Vida's aunt by marriage, Edith, was heavily involved in both political and artistic ventures (Lahey 2003, 98). Her name and that of her husband, Isaiah, appear in minutes of various sub-committees of the Queensland Art Fund, of which Vida was a co-founder (Queensland Art Fund Papers, 1929, 1935, Box 1).³ Similarly, the appearance in the history of the Queensland Art Society of Henderson and Lahey as honorary solicitors indicates the possibility of Vida's personal influence behind the scenes (Bradbury and Crooke 1988, 72).

Vida's family focus was certainly central to her life but the interests and activities of the family were also shared, perhaps even shaped, by Vida's desires in the public realm. She was 39 when she returned from London in 1921. In the context of such a supportive family, it is even possible that her increasingly apparent spinsterhood enabled her to rejuvenate her career with increased focus. '[A]wakened to a sense of capacity and responsibility not merely to the family and the household, but to the

State' (Spence, in Magarey 2001, 43), not perceived as threatening because she served the cause of art and family as well as followed her own ambitions, Vida therefore had a degree of relative freedom that was increasingly deployed for her own well-being as a progressive artist.

Consequently, when Vida left for London in 1916, her artistic career was already established even though gendered expectations structured opportunities for success. The appropriate genres for women were still life and the painting of flowers; both deemed suitable because governed by a passive principle rather than the rigour of narrative pieces, sweeping landscapes or the complexities of portraiture. In 1906, just a few years after Vida began her exhibiting career, the introduction to the catalogue for the Exhibition of the Hundred Best Pictures of the New South Wales Royal Art Society stated bluntly that:

there were hardly any flower and still life studies and with the proper subordination of these branches of art there has fortunately appeared more originality of idea in the figure painting and a wider range of treatment in landscapes. (Ambrus 1992, 98)

Caroline Ambrus, a researcher in Australian women's art, uses a critic's comment about one of Lahey's still life pieces to highlight this marginalisation of what remained, even in 1932, a feminised aesthetic. Vida's 'beautiful still life studies' said the critic, 'almost shake an inborn prejudice against still life pictures just as the presence of Lot redeemed his home town from utter baseness' (Ambrus 1992, 97). 'Almost', as Ambrus astutely indicates, is the operative word here, with 'utter baseness' representing that which is feminised and ultimately unredeemable in art. Similarly, women were expected to have an aptitude for colour, its being a component of all effective design of domestic spaces, clothing and harmony. Form and composition, on the other hand, were the strengths of men with their precise, analytical and mathematical minds. Women were dilettantes and amateurs; even their ventures into modernism following the First World War fell on deaf critical ears until men became interested and women were displaced (Hoorn 1994; Topliss 1996).

Monday Morning 'heralded the beginning of Vida Lahey's serious career [and ...] pre-dates Lahey's trip to Europe and her absorption of more modernist influences' (*Queensland Art Gallery Collection Souvenir* 1996, 29). The painting, of two women washing clothes in the Lahey family laundry, was first shown at the Queensland Art Society's 1912 exhibition. Brisbane poet, Art Society member, and owner of a popular wine saloon Madame Emily Cungeau (rumoured to have been a lady in waiting at the court of Romania) purchased it and promptly donated it to a rather moribund Queensland National Art Gallery (Lahey 2003, 238).



[Enlarge Image]

Figure 1. . Monday Morning (1912). Image reproduced with the kind permission of Queensland Art Gallery and Shirley Lahey.

Monday Morning is an example of Vida's challenge to the expectations that women should paint still life and flower studies. Art researcher Lynne Sear describes it as a narrative painting in the convention of the interior genre picture that 'conformed to the compositional methods being taught in conservative academies everywhere' (Sear 1998, 114). She suggests '[t]he carefully controlled placement of the protagonists, the virtuoso flourish of a still-life arrangement somewhere in the composition, the emphasis on a grey-brown palette with red and purple highlights' (114) are 'commonplace' elements in a piece with a focus on women in domestic space. She goes on, however, to note that 'the mandatory still life element is cleverly downplayed by Lahey and [*Monday Morning*] features a pile of grimy clothes instead of the usual elegant groupings'. In a characteristically subtle way, Vida subverts the norm.

Another challenge to convention lies in the 'story' in the narrative component of this painting. Its scale and subject matter, as Bettina MacAulay notes, are 'rare in Australian art [because] women artists elsewhere generally chose a more genteel, often a more cultured, view of women's work' (1989a, 37). This painting is a far cry from the meditative act of shelling peas represented in McCubbin's 1912 picture of that name, even though it, too, features a cornered woman absorbed in her domestic task. Nor, as Seear points out, is it as sanitised as Helen Hindley's English painting *Washing the Dishes* (1904) in which there is no steam or sense of the grubbiness of her task. Yet all women are 'cornered', all bathed in light from a window, all occupied in domestic cleaning, all impervious to the gaze of the viewer.

Only in *Monday Morning* is there real physical exertion narrated through the image. It is a pragmatic rather than sentimental view of women's work. Its emphasis is the centrality of women's physical labour to the well-being of family life and it highlights the necessary scrubbing and steaming that produces the cleanliness that was one hallmark of bourgeois respectability. Thus women's social task of this era, enacted through the temperance and moral purity campaigns in the United States, Britain and Australia, is underpinned by their vigorous attack on dirt. Vida demystifies this middle-class laundry, revealing it as the scene of manual working-class labour.

This class component in *Monday Morning* is highlighted by Vida's comments about the painting, and about washday in the Lahey household. The models for the painting were her sister Esmé, and a friend, Flora Campbell, and, to capture the light and atmosphere of the place, she strapped her canvas to the mangle. Vida was deliberately revaluing work done (as Vida said):

by people of a very low order ... To help develop respect for such occupations seemed a definite need, so by using it as a subject matter for pictures, I tried to give status to various forms of service. (In Seear 1998, 115)

Here, the valorising of service, so central to her life and well-being, is the very subject of that other aspect of her flourishing: her art. Nor was this painting the only one to give status to humble forms of work. Vida's Tasmanian paintings, painted between 1922 and 1924 with the lighter palette and more impressionistic techniques that she brought back from Europe, quietly celebrate the value of women's rural labour (*Picking Hops*, c.1922-1924; *In the Hop Fields*, c.1922-1924; *Hop Pickers*, c.1922-1924). Her interiors often have women in them who are absorbed in domestic or personal activities without regard for the gaze of the viewer (*Busy Fingers*, 1913; *Teatime*, c.1924; *Drying Up*, c.1930s; *Sunlit Interior*, 1932). The labours and activities of groups of men also found a place in a few of Vida's works (*The Zinc Works, Risdon*, 1922-1923; *Selling the Catch, St. Ives*, 1920; *The Auction on the Beach*, 1920).⁴

In short, as Bettina MacAulay appropriately insists, still life paintings accounted for less than 39 per cent of Vida's output of over 2,000 paintings and, between 1910 and 1916, when gendered expectations remained very powerful, that percentage dropped as low as 2 per cent (1989a, 21). Vida's professional career therefore proceeded in opposition to the expectations that women create still life and flower paintings: she began with landscapes, including those of New Zealand, with social commentary and a *plein air* practice; still life and flower painting dominated only as she became less

mobile. But not only did Vida's artistic output challenge the times in which she worked, she also wrote, lectured and taught about the importance of composition and form, claiming that 'Western pictorial art, particularly in the nineteenth century [...] has tended to become unconscious of its roots in form and composition' (Lahey 1942, 8).⁵ For Vida, art had to be harmonious, balanced and related to life:

If this vital connection of art and life were developed through education, the heritage of the people as a whole would be immensely enlarged to include the outskirts of a domain so far enjoyed only by a few.

At this point, we might do well to ask [...] what is the function of art?

Here is one definition—'the function of art is to express feeling and to transmit understanding'. (Lahey 1942, 5)

Transmitting understanding through the harmony of art led to the well-being of both Vida and 'the people': its development was a social mission as well as a personal passion.

When Vida returned from Europe, even before she arrived back in Brisbane, it is clear that her mind was focused on restoring her reputation as a professional woman artist. In February 1921 the 'Social Notes' of *The Australian* announced that 'Miss Vida Lahey, a well known Queensland artist, is returning to her home by the S.S. *Ormonde*'. It then mentions her war work and her study in Europe before concluding with the notice that she 'intends to hold an exhibition of her paintings in Melbourne in the near future' (42, col. 1). She actually exhibited first in Brisbane in May 1921, in Sydney in 1922, and then in Melbourne in 1923 (MacAulay 1989a, 9).

The world of art, the role of art educator and artist, continued to exist alongside her capacities to be beloved aunt, diligent sister, loving daughter and, eventually, 'head' of family. Though there is a suggestion (de Vries 1997, 141) that in England Vida was romantically involved with a friend of one of her brothers who was subsequently killed in action, there is no evidence to suggest that Vida ever considered marriage. Shirley Lahey recalls an aunt saying that Vida's singleness was not due to 'lack of opportunities' (Lahey 2003, 366). This is a commonly heard comment that, without answering the question of why a woman never marries, nevertheless asserts the heterosexuality of the single person. Lloyd Rees, another Brisbane artist, once engaged to marry Daphne Mayo, knew and respected Vida who, he said, 'belonged to a group we [younger artists] looked up to'. He goes on to say that Daphne and Vida 'made a link in London [...] from then on those two were very close friends ... When Daphne lived for years and years in Brisbane they were a "pair"' (J. Rees 1988).⁶ Rees' representation of Vida as one of a 'pair' is also a fairly standard response. Made by a man who was previously engaged to one of the 'pair', and who remained a friend to her throughout his life, the comment has as much truth-value as that of the aunt. Neither comment has been verified or supported any more than the suggestion that Vida had a romantic involvement with one of her brother's friends. Vida's love life remains her own, as, no doubt, she would have preferred. It seems to have had little bearing on her advocacy for art or on her art work itself and it may well be that, as Shirley Lahey suspects, there are a 'number of ways' the question of why Vida never married can be answered, although perhaps

the main reason was that Vida did not do anything by halves and therefore believed that she could not realize her artistic potential while at the same time carrying out the duties of marriage, including child bearing. (Lahey 2003, 366)

In remaining closely bound to family, in extending the range of that family to include close friends, in gaining the respect of those she loved and served and was in turn loved by, Vida certainly appears to have sidestepped (intentionally or otherwise) the energy-consuming tasks of raising children or meeting the needs of a husband. Yet hers was not a life devoid of emotional commitment or passion either to people or to art and the cause of art in Queensland. Her nature was a sensitive one and MacAulay has suggested that 'like so many of her paintings, Vida Lahey was romantic by nature, but unassuming in demeanour' (MacAulay 1989a, 33). It is to one of her many beautiful and 'unassuming' works that we can turn now to recognise some of the complexities involved in serving others and the self in the ways demanded of a eudaimonistic model.

The oil painting *Sunlit Interior* first appeared in a solo exhibition at Grosvenor Gallery, Sydney, in March 1932. It was also shown at the 44th Annual Exhibition of the Royal Queensland Art Society and at the Fine Arts Gallery in Melbourne. In the Brisbane exhibition it was 75 guineas, higher than all the other work and higher than the prices of those pieces in the Melbourne show that are known. The next highest price was 50 guineas for another of her oil paintings, *Brisbane Early Morning* (MacAulay 1989b, 33-34). The price on the painting reflects its size and medium (90×74.6 cm, oil on plywood) but also suggests, perhaps, a reluctance to sell it. Indeed, its provenance indicates that it passed into the possession of Vida's brother Percival. It stayed in the family, going to Percival's son, Ivan, then to Ivan's daughter, Margaret, who lodged it with the Rockhampton City Council Gallery for safekeeping from the humidity of tropical Queensland (Author's Notes 2006). It is now displayed in the Queensland Art Gallery, titled simply *Interior*, but remains a family possession.



[Enlarge Image]

Figure 2. . Sunlit Interior (c. 1932). Image reproduced with the kind permission of Queensland Art Gallery and Shirley Lahey.

It is a painting that is simultaneously straightforward and complex. On the one hand, it shows a solitary young woman sitting near a window, head bent to the task of sewing. She appears peaceful and content as though she too would 'not be elsewhere for anything'. A *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer, reporting positively overall on Vida's Grosvenor Gallery exhibition, found the woman troublesome, suggesting that 'an impression of artificiality' was created because she 'does not fit well into the design' (18 March 1932, 7). Quite where else she could 'fit' is unclear, given that she needs the light for her sewing task and that she is unlikely to position herself in the walkway between rooms. The point here, though, is that the painting, as the title suggests, is not about a young woman sewing.

For, whilst clearly a picture of a young woman, it is also a painting that shows more of her surroundings than it does of her; the rooms around her dominate the space of the painting. The mirror on the wall summons thoughts of fairytale quests for an identity as 'fairest of them all' and, in a more literary or psychoanalytical mode, the

mirror also summons discourses about identity rendered more complex by Freud and Lacan. In a sense, then, the rooms themselves can be read as a reflection of the girl's identity, *her* interior, her 'sunlit' contentment. The mirror reflects the representation of the (psychic) interior, not simply the form of the girl. If we now return to that idea of the continuum—with the domesticated worker and agreeable object at one end and the possibility that single women place some other form of femininity at the other end in order to define themselves along an expanded range—we can use this painting to think about what it might be that Vida places at 'her' end of that span.

Perhaps Vida places the solitary woman bent to some task of her own choosing at the other end of the continuum? She would, in fact, be a 'strong girl', though *not* in the terms anticipated by the author of that notice in the window. Such a woman would have a complex sense of her identity, her femininity. Here, some of that complexity is represented by the ambiguity of what it is that the young woman is sewing. Is it her own creation or some sort of mending for the family? A personal item? It seems feminine, too frail to be exposed to the mechanised needle of the sewing machine in the next room. It is transparent and flimsy, illuminated by the light from the window that passes through it. The same light falls upon her arms and face, as well as the fabric of her dress unifying all elements and making them personal and private, deeply solitary, almost somnolent, certainly peaceful. It is a feminised task but its goal may well be personal and, whatever it is, she seems content, perhaps even partially engaged in some reverie of her own quite separate to the task.

The painting proceeds through other such complexities: the woman's position, set (understandably) to one side, deepens the solitary peacefulness; she is marginal yet at ease. She is almost tucked into the shadows which enfold her and deepen beneath her chair, but it is clear that she has placed herself in the light. The window is open, so is the door in front of her. Yet another door is visible in the mirror on the wall of her mellow room; so is another mirror though it is not clear what it may be reflecting. The perimeters of this multi-dimensional space are porous. The walls of the house do not necessarily confine the woman any more than she wishes to be confined. The rooms are a sanctuary, *a home but not automatically a domestic prison*. The openness to the external world offers the woman the potential to move beyond her self-placement at the window, through a number of open doors and into the world that is hinted at by the greenery beyond.

Thanks to the mirror, the gaze of the viewer can actually travel beyond the positioning of the woman, both forwards into the next room and backwards into the space behind her. This layering gives depth, distance, and complexity to the space she occupies. It is all interior space, yet the exterior world flows into the room through the light that enters at three different points. Sometimes that light is unobstructed, such as that which the woman utilises; sometimes it is crossed by the lined shadows of blinds upon the windows; sometimes it is squared by the placement of an exterior trellis. The outside 'world' that this light represents is therefore controlled at its points of entry, shaped, deflected, deployed by the will of a human subject: Vida.

In this reading, I am, of course, shaping the interpretation to my argument. The painting is a visual representation of the complexities that I am arguing for in the lives of 'strong' single women. It gives depth to femininity. It creates potential movement along that continuum for women because it acknowledges the joys of domesticity

without making of them a prison house that denies women agency. The painting is a material artefact that is a testament to Vida's own strength and agency, her artistic career. It connects this paper to its historical subject: a single woman who did not deny family yet also invested passion and sensitivity in her chosen profession; a single woman who contributed to her community and expected that it would, as a result of her labours, become part of a better, more congenial world where human beings could flourish more fully. What renders this reading appealing to me is that the overall mood of the painting in all its complexity is one of solitary contentment. For the woman in this painting, that contentment may be from being in a domestic space, being of service in her task *or* it may be that she is content in attending to some task, or indeed, meditating upon some idea, of her own.

There are tensions between the self and the social that govern the lives of both married and single women. Single women, however, did not (and do not) necessarily proceed towards independence in a singular leap that is a renunciation of family bonds. Indeed, Vida's life demonstrates that, in terms of emotional nurturing work, she unresistingly engaged in a familial context in ways *similar* to those of married women. She was valued and rewarded for who she was within the family and this mattered very much to her well-being. At the same time, however, Vida's freedom from the constraints of motherhood meant that she had the time and energy to translate the ideals that governed her familial life into the social sphere. She expected this to enable a more harmonious life. She did this in precisely the ways that Catherine Spence advocated when she identified herself as a New Woman (Spence, in Magarey 2001, 43). Existing discourses of duty, service and sacrifice, whether in relation to 'maternal' femininity or useful citizenship, met Vida's need to be valued without confining her to the domestic sphere. Her art may be read as a challenge to gendered expectations of women artists (*Monday Morning*) and as complex representations of femininity (*Sunlit Interior*).

This is not to claim that all her art could necessarily be read this way or even that others would read these pieces of work similarly. Rather, if the argument that her identity is complex and multi-faceted is to bear any validity, it requires that her art be accessible to several readings. Reading her art in this particular way assists in the task of expanding on the available models for understanding how single women relate to the social world that shapes them. Vida adapts a 'household model', where relations of care are categorised as familial, by moving beyond the space of the household as an independent, professional artist and an advocate for art. At the same time, her apparent celibacy destabilises the usefulness of the alternative model, the 'sexuality' model, where relations of care are eroticised. Of the two models, the household model is clearly more applicable to Vida, yet she exceeds it. That model does not encourage the complexities concerning identity that were facilitated by the familial and social optimism that characterised her growth to maturity and which may be read as present in her art.

What is needed is a model that accounts for how each individual is linked to creating the conditions, or deploying existing conditions, to improve her capacity to flourish through recognition. At the same time, that flourishing should not be simplified as synonymous with achieving personal happiness only through material gain. In this sense, too, what is placed at the other end of the continuum from the desirable object and domesticated worker must be a 'strong girl' or, if we wanted to expand on that

phrase: a woman (like Catherine Spence) with strength of mind and purpose, and a philosophy of life. For Vida, service to family, friends and state was central to her philosophy of life as an extension of self into the public domain for what might be called, rather quaintly these days, the greater good: a concept that was relevant in discursive constructions of femininity and citizenship in the first half of the twentieth century. The improvement of the greater good would, in turn, enable her own flourishing and recognition, personally (within the family) and professionally (as an artist). The Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, often translated as human flourishing, may well be relevant here.

Such a suggestion has problems, of course, not least of all the inherent masculinism of elevating rationality in the Greek format for *eudaimonia* and the fact that virtues of character such as strength, courage, honesty, pride and friendliness are also derived from the heroic warrior culture of the Greeks. Yet if women can occupy hybrid positions of their own making within and against a discourse of service to family and nation, thus moving towards independence, then it is possible for them to also adapt other discourses and use them to their own ends. Indeed, in a society where the greater good has historically been conceived in such masculine terms, it is essential that women be able to redirect and interrogate the meanings of such concepts as courage, strength and pride, of honesty and friendliness.

When Vida saw the notice 'Wanted, a strong girl, able to milk and make herself agreeable', perhaps she smiled to herself at the incongruity of one end of the continuum (domesticity and desirability) appearing in such ridiculous proximity to what she herself may have placed at the other end: a 'strong girl' capable of achieving her own goals and claiming space for herself.

Notes

1. Vida's early involvement in the art scene in Queensland clearly demonstrates this stance but this is another paper currently in progress, with the working title "I think and then I put a line around my think": Vida Lahey and the Space of Art Education for Children'. It was workshopped at the International Geographers Association in Brisbane in July 2006.

2. This last point is particularly relevant to Vida's work for art in Queensland, which consisted, in part, in raising large sums of money through precisely such fundraising efforts, though it was not limited to that by any means. See MacAulay's *Songs of Colour* (1989a) for an overview of this aspect of Lahey's career.

3. The Sub-committee for Raising Funds for the Darnell Bequest, 13 March 1935, also records the names of Edith ('Mrs I. Lahey') and 'Mrs Gordon Lahey'.

4. These paintings are in MacAulay's *Songs of Colour* (1989a), which remains, to date, the only comprehensive treatment of Lahey's art.

5. For similar treatment of the role of colour, see Vida Lahey, *Manifesto for the Colour Club* (1940).

6. It is currently unclear from this source whether this comment is by Lloyd Rees as remembered by Jan Rees or whether the interviewer was shown more tangible evidence. The interview was to specifically seek further information on Vida Lahey from someone close to Lloyd Rees. See Rees (August 1988); and Vida Lahey (Frances Vida Lahey) 1882-1968, Queensland Art Gallery Collection Records File, Queensland Art Gallery, South Bank, Brisbane, Queensland.

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