

Celebrating the feminist Holden

Written by Joanna Mendelssohn, Honorary Associate Professor, Art & Design: UNSW Australia. Editor in Chief, Design and Art of Australia Online, UNSW



Margaret Dodd's Bridal Holden, 1977, ceramic sculpture, 24 x 42 x 20 cm. Clay Glen. Courtesy The Cross Art Projects.

In early 1969, Margaret Dodd was living in a Housing Trust house in [Holden Hill](#), an isolated suburb in outer Adelaide. As a young, pregnant mother, she saw how the family car - always a Holden - was driven to work by the men, leaving women trapped in a wasteland.

Isolation was mingled with a sense of abandonment. For women in these circumstances, the ownership of a car, even an old 1948 FX Holden, was the start of liberation.



Margaret Dodd's Flying Bride, 1977, ceramic sculpture, 24 x 42 x 20 cm. Clay Glen, courtesy The Cross Art Projects.

Dodd began to make models of Holden cars, rough affectionate renderings of the vehicles that defined Australian suburban life. Neighbouring children destroyed her first attempt, but she persisted. She soon left the suburbs for the city and her Holden ceramic sculptures became icons for the new wave of feminist art in Australia.

Holdens have long been a sentimental favourite in this country, especially in South Australia. While the first Holden was made at [Fishermen's Bend](#) in Melbourne, Adelaide is where James Alexander Holden began his business, making saddles and harnesses in 1856. When the General Motors' Holden factory [closes at Elizabeth in October](#), it will mark the end of the long history of Australia as a maker of cars.

HOLDEN'S PLANT
IN ELIZABETH TO
CLOSE FOREVER
ON 20 OCT 2017



Cross Arts Projects

The distinctive [lion emblem](#) was designed for Holden's Motor Body Builders Ltd by the sculptor Rayner Hoff who had just completed the [Adelaide War Memorial](#). It was retained when the company merged to become General Motors-Holden Ltd during the Great Depression.

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In the years after World War II, when Australia was developing a manufacturing industry, the Holden demonstrated that our cars could be “fully Australian made”. This was more than a slight stretching of the truth, however, as the design was based on a [Chevrolet](#) .

Those who grew up in Australia’s endless suburbs in the 1950s and 60s remember the Holden as [the car we all yearned for](#) . Primary school children as well as adults became instant experts on the different models as they rolled off the assembly lines – the FJ, Holden Special, Monaro, Kingswood.



A Holden FJ series sedan, one of a range of vehicles produced in Australia by Holden from 1953 to 1957. <http://www.carsaroundadelaide.com/Wikimedia images>, [CC BY](#)

Margaret Dodd enjoys the car’s American connection. Her career as an artist and the maker of model Holdens also started in the US. After initially training as a high school art teacher in Adelaide, she joined her academic husband at Yale, which in the early 1960s was still an all-male institution. The well educated academic wives, denied any chance of paid employment, began to discuss Betty Friedan’s recently published [The Feminine Mystique](#) , one of the triggers for the feminist revolution.

Her husband’s next academic post, in 1965, was at the University of California at Davis. This enabled her to study ceramic sculpture with [Robert Arneson](#) , one of the founders of the gloriously anarchic Californian Funk movement, which was then in its infancy. Students experimented alongside staff.

There was no sense of making art that was precious or refined. Instead, it was to be personal, political – and humorous. Dodd’s ceramics were included in the first Funk exhibition in San Francisco in 1966. Her installation was noticed by Time magazine and described as “a rococo ceramic line of miniature cars”.

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After such exhilaration, Holden Hill in South Australia was especially depressing. In 1969, Dodd moved close to the city of Adelaide, bought a kiln and began to make her ceramic Holdens. Her model was the classic 1948 original. Some were covered in grass, others were brightly glazed. In *On Top of Old Faithful*, one car covered another – a bit like dogs mating. There was an irreverent joyousness to these works, and it was not surprising that her first Sydney exhibition in 1971 was a popular success.

Dodd wasn't the only artist noticing the car. Robert Rooney recorded its constant presence in [Holden Park 1 and 2](#). It was also the subject of John Romeril's *The Golden Holden*, performed at the Pram Factory in 1975, while Ted Bullpit celebrated its working class identity in [Kingswood Country](#) in the 1980s.

Dodd's sense of the Holden evolved throughout the 1970s. The cars were put in curlers and started to be dressed as brides – as idealised feminine objects of worship.

Shortly before leaving the US, Dodd had seen some experimental feminist films, including Gunvor Nelson's [Schmeerguntz](#). In 1974, a residency in Amsterdam led to her seeing Maya Deren's 1943 experimental film, [Meshes of the Afternoon](#). She thought again of the women trapped in the wasteland of Holden Hill, and planned a film.



Margaret Dodd coaches Phil Colson, an actor in her short film. Doug Nicholas.

[This Woman is Not a Car](#) was made over several years in the late 1970s. Funds were so tight that the crew and actors donated their time, and originally many of the sequences were animated drawings. It showed recently at the Sydney Film Festival and is on continuous loop at her current exhibition in Sydney.

The overall narrative is of a harassed suburban mother, constantly driving demanding children in her Holden car. She eventually gives birth to a Holden rather than a child, to the joy of all. It has the intensity of justifiable anger at the way women lost all identity once married, but the

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central scene takes it beyond simple gender wars. The woman takes the car, full of children, to a [service station](#) where the mechanic, played by Phil Colson, fingers the car while filling it with petrol giving a new meaning to the term “auto-eroticism”.

Later his mates enthusiastically join in ravishing the vehicle. It is no surprise that the woman subsequently gives birth to a baby Holden, complete with umbilical cord.

With the closing of GMH in Adelaide, there is a curious sense that a cycle has been completed - and an extra layer of poignancy when contemplating Dodd’s acerbic homage to the Holden.

[This Woman is Not a Car: Margaret Dodd](#), curated by Susan Charlton, is on view at Cross Arts Projects in Sydney until July 1.

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