

Feminine take on place of women

5:00AM Thursday May 22, 2008 By T.J. McNamara

Auckland galleries this week feature shows by women artists meditating on the position of women. They show women of different ages in different situations, women portrayed realistically and with an imaginative flourish of Gothic Romanticism.

Up from Dunedin for her first Auckland show is Sarah Dolby at Oedipus Rex until May 31. Her exhibition is called Art of Darkness and one of her most effective paintings is Dunedin Gothic. It is the simplest of the works and shows a modern young woman with an elongated neck clothed in a hood that is more like a monk's cowl. It sets contemporary style at one with history.

Other works are much more elaborate and literary. This is obvious in a work called Ophelia's Choice where, amid a mass of Pre-Raphaelite plants, an exceptionally young, wide-eyed Ophelia is up to her knees in water. Then there is a portrait of Mary Shelley, wife of the Romantic poet Percy Shelley and author of the novel Frankenstein. In the painting, Mary is a femme fatale with jewelled choker around her long neck.

All of these paintings are done with immense care. Dolby's accurate detail shows brilliant skills that match her imagination. Sometimes these skills are apparent in flowers and brooches, other times in the great massing of clouds behind the figures.

These extraordinary women owe something to the brilliance of West Coast American comics but are more refined than those racy images. The effect is comic cover or poster crossed with Gustav Klimt. The feeling of elegant decadence is complete and compelling, though the figures inhabit a romantic world of the imagination.