

THESIS

LOSS AND PLENTY:  
A BANQUET OF AGE AND SPIRIT

Submitted by  
Susan Joy Sternlieb  
Department of Art

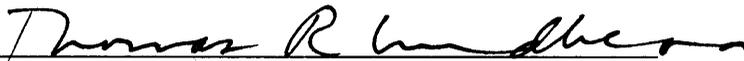
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado  
Fall 2000

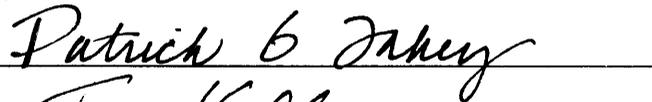
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

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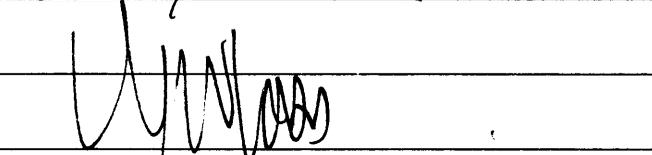
WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY SUSAN JOY STERNLIEB ENTITLED LOSS AND PLENTY: A BANQUET OF AGE AND SPIRIT BE ACCEPTED AS FULLFILING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work









Adviser



Department Head

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### LOSS AND PLENTY:

### A BANQUET OF AGE AND SPIRIT

This exhibition presents a still life tableau on a wooden banquet table, eighteen feet by three and one half feet. The objects on the table are platters, bowls, shards and potatoes of fired clay and urethane rubber. All of the objects are metaphors for spiritually enriched aging human beings, and relate to each other and the viewer in an attraction/repulsion play.

Three decades of feminist artwork have coalesced into the analysis and exposure of many discriminating myths which have defined women. In addition, we have seen the creation of an enormous body of women-defined, substantive and empowering images. These gifts from women artists who have come before me have made it possible for me to make self defining work about age and spirit.

Susan Joy Sternlieb  
Art Department  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO 80523  
Fall 2000

## Loss and Plenty:

### A Banquet of Age and Spirit

The passage of time ensures an aging process. When a mountain range ages, decay and gravity sculpt magnificent peaks, rocky faces and soft volumes. When time and gravity work on human flesh we don't usually use words like magnificent or sculpted to describe the results. Instead, we talk about the ravages of time. Middle aged women become invisible as the aging process transforms them. In most societies, no one has an interest in looking at, let alone celebrating, their craggy faces or soft volumes. In 1972 Susan Sontag said that the most obscene thing in this society is a middle aged woman. It is still true, despite the nearly thirty years that have passed since that statement was made.

For the past thirty years, women artists have challenged the objectification of women with multifarious strategies. Still we in the West continue to glorify and promote the ideal female body, which resembles an adolescent boy with large breasts. In all media, in speech and through behavior women are encouraged to spend prodigious amounts of time, money and energy in diet and exercise. Even surgery is promoted to help women measure up to this unnatural and unattainable fiction. As a middle aged female artist who feels the freedom and wisdom of age and who identifies with the grandeur and spirituality in the rocky faces and soft volumes of aging mountains, I need to respond to this situation - one which reveals a society afflicted by the insanity of congenital misogyny.

Historically, feminist art has had two goals. It has sought to expose and analyze the myths that have consigned women to the roles of sexual object and decoration, people who are looked at rather than listened to. Concurrently the icons that have served to support such myths have been replaced with substantive, empowering images by which women define themselves. The strategies for accomplishing these aims have varied over the years, revealing differences in philosophy and emphasis of these women, and in their responses to the context of their times.

In the late sixties the concept of self validation of women's reality emerged. Women artists and philosophers talked about their physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual components and about the male gaze with its historic power to misdefine and objectify the female body. As a response, through the seventies the first generation feminist artists such as Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke celebrated their own bodies in both performance and object art. Because these two young women were exceptionally beautiful, by male standards, their work was often misinterpreted as exhibitionism. Since their bold nudity was shocking to many people, the serious conceptual nature of the work was almost lost. In the early nineties, as a dying middle aged woman, Wilke continued to use the image of her own body. For a photograph she posed nude, her body swollen and her intravenous sites bandaged, with a flower pot on her head. She was still asserting that a female body is not an object of decoration and that a woman of any age and condition can have power over her image and how it is presented. She named the series, of which the flower pot image is a part, *Intra-Venus* - a play on the intravenous tubing of the cancer treatments

and her earlier work of the seventies, in which she identified with and celebrated herself through Venus, a metaphor for all things female.

In the eighties a second generation of feminist artists came into maturity and changed the predominant strategies. Many women artists of that decade intentionally avoided the image of a woman in their work. In this way there could be no collusion with the male gaze, accidental or otherwise. Mary Kelly's work was an example of this strategy. Kelly substituted related objects, such as articles of clothing, as metaphors for the female body. Her installations were primarily text panels, emphasizing that women were more interesting and valuable for their thoughts than for their physical appearance. During this time there was considerable debate among artists, art and gender historians, and theoreticians about the merits and efficacy of feminist artists using the image of the female body. Joan Semmel was among the first generation feminist artists who continued to use the nude female image as subject matter despite the prevailing attitude against such a strategy. She painted her body as she - and not a man - would view it, from her chest to her toes.

In the nineties the debate over using the image of the body was subdued by a plethora of art practices flourishing in the art world. In addition emerging younger female artists felt more threatened by the political right's puritanism than by misogyny. Younger artists were emboldened to use transgressive, lewd and seductive images in response to conservative congressional attempts to censor such images by withholding National Endowment for the

Arts funding. Interestingly, these younger artists were looking at the work of Schneeman and Wilke, as well as of Louise Bourgeois as antecedents to their own. Some women artists, many from the first generation feminist artists, continued to question myths that pertain to the female body, specifically to older females. Joan Semmel started to paint older women nude in the locker room of a health club. Anne Noggle and Jo Spence are two photographers who have persisted in presenting empowering images of female middle age, often with humor and without obscenity. In the forward to *Beauty Matters*, edited by Peg Zeglin Brand, Eleanor Heartney presents an example of women's own contradictory relationship to the beauty and acceptability of their bodies. She writes of "my friend who proudly refuses to have the breast she lost in a mastectomy reconstructed, but who recently had a face lift".

I am sympathetic to the magnitude of swiftly changing societal and personal forces which influence our decisions. As I make decisions about the nature and form of my work I feel the need to continue the feminist dialogue about what a woman is and can be. My focus in this effort is on aging female flesh, working to debunk destructive myths. I am aware that the issue of aging flesh is not exclusively a female one. Men have joined women as objects of this ageist discrimination. Additionally, as men and women age and their hormonal makeup changes, they become less differently gendered. Feminist strategies imply a male component as well. Therefore, the images are not exclusively feminine. They are as fluid and complex as we are. The work is transgressive in that it shows what is meant to be hidden - aging flesh. But this work is not intended to shock. It is an effort to balance allure

and repulsion, beautiful enough to bring the viewer in and realistic enough to transmit the forces of gravity. Humor is present as a bridge to reality, and the installation is infused with an awareness of the spiritual dimension of the ordinary. In the aging process we lose the vigor of youth and the illusion of the possibility of physical perfection. We lose the illusion of control and endless time. Abundance becomes a word of spirit as well as of numbers. Our bodies are past their prime and our spirits are just beginning to sustain us in ways we hadn't imagined possible. A human connection fills us up. The natural universe is conspicuously sensual, flowers presenting their sex organs to us, and the skies offering luscious expanses of color and form in which to delve and float.

Women of middle years are truly at a banquet table of loss and plenty, which I present as my thesis exhibition. The materials that I use are clay and urethane rubber. The clay is a classic metaphor for the body. It speaks of vessels, nourishment, the place from which our vegetables grow and the resting place of our remains. The rubber adds an element of humor and of the time. Since one myth insists that age thwarts sexual desire, the rubber introduces a sexual element with its suggestion of condoms and sex toys. The forms that I use are bowls, platters, and potatoes.

They exist

as life

as still life

as banquet

a Shaker table  
minimalist and elegant  
ordinary  
careful and careless  
offered in simplicity, abundance and faith  
as having been consumed, presented for consumption.

Metaphor for flesh

they wear their age

and

new growth.

They are yin and yang.

Until one is older she doesn't have both age and youth.

Powerful.

They feel good.

They amuse, titillate and provoke.

They embody spirit.

Our spirit.

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ILLUSTRATIONS  
of  
LOSS AND PLENTY:  
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Photography by  
Joe Mendoza





