

CARSON FOX

By Lynne Allen

At first glance we are struck by the iconography of little girls' dreams. The Cinderella story where the prince finally comes to the rescue. Ornate tiaras and fanciful dresses. She is, in fact, rescued from her own idea of herself. But a second glance reveals the disappointment, the "soul's bandaged moments."



Carson Fox has created a world many of us have experienced, one with equal measure of beauty and loss. The allure of the materials draws us to the work, the time-worn quality they exhibit compels us to look, yet we are kept at arms length by the more sinister elements they allude to. There is an almost morbid feeling that hovers between creation and destruction. Take the rusted dresses, the absent wearer. Do they represent lost innocence or lost identity? The drawings and small prints of beauty contestants are a kind of repository of cultural values...princesses, beauty queens and happy brides, the feminine success story every little girl subscribes to from the moment she owns her first "Barbie." Lost limbs become symbols of those parts of ourselves we lose when we conform to contemporary cultures ideas of beauty, and ultimately our own identity.

Although the object works are not terribly large, they convey authority. Their imposing presence is compounded by their rusted and eroded weight. They are dense and stable, yet changing through corrosion. They are laden with history, not just the artist's, but everyone's. The "Tiara" series is profoundly metaphorical. They lead outward, away from what they seem to represent, toward our own individual experience, memory, and longing. And again that disappointment. Some are incredible ornate, almost gaudy, like "Tiara #5." Its lush beauty holds an equal measure of morbidity. You respond to it immediately, it is absolutely beautiful, before realizing it could in actual fact, hurt you.

Carson Fox blurs the distinction between craft and art. In the funeral wreaths (no, perhaps a better term would be commemorative wreath because, after all, they highlight some part of ourselves rather than one particular individual) there is evidence of an intimate labor with the materials, as if she were immersed in choosing each flower or bead for every square inch. The obsessiveness and laboriousness of the process reflects the self-involvement of her work. They become sites of ritual. From them I sense the artist's interest in all kinds of mysterious beliefs and old folk stories, voodoo rituals, iconography, and religious reverence. "Child" is plain and raggedy, yet possesses the sadness at the loss of the child in each of us. The remnant of exquisite detail in the dense floral patterning highlights the esteem of the subject. It is only when we see "Slut" that the ironic tone, the celebration of some unacceptable or unspoken quality is understood. There are deeper messages here, often personal, yet universal, that go beyond sentimentality. They are touched with skepticism, yet also hold a measure of passion. They are honorable and courageous. They represent the strength of the human character in general, and women in particular.

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This essay was published on the occasion of the exhibition "Carson Fox: Beauty Queens" at Rider University Gallery, September 30 - October 24, 1999.

A Conversation with Carson Fox

by Harry I. Naar, Professor of Fine Arts and Gallery Director

The title of your show is "Beauty Queens." This is a very provocative title that can have multi-meanings. Explain the importance of this title.

The title is meant to be ironic. Certainly, the show is not about traditional beauty queens; rather it is about women and their own concepts of beauty. It is about those things which mold a woman's perception of herself. Overall, the work is about beauty, loss, identity, and empowerment.

What role does female identity and feminism play in your work?

All of my work has to do with the construction of human identity, and since I am female, I am particularly concerned with women. The model I have is my own life and identity. As a woman concerned with her own place in the world and the impact society has on the formation of herself, feminism seems like a natural and inevitable interest.

There are four major art forms displayed in your exhibition: rusted dresses made of paper, headpieces and tiaras made of wire, beads, pins and nails, heavily caked funeral wreaths composed of artificial flowers, mud, words, and paint, and finally, drawings and prints referencing beauty contestants with missing limbs. What links these art forms?

On a material level, these artworks all incorporate the use of media which has been relegated to "lesser" art forms or craft. Often, an association is made between things women have traditionally produced, and these so-called "lesser" materials. I like the idea of changing and expanding the language we use to define "fine arts." Additionally, there are links between the content or intended meanings of these works. As I mentioned earlier, my chief concern is how a person constructs identity, what influences or losses she or he accepts, and how these movements can be dealt with via the physical construction of artifacts. The rusted dresses refer to how dresses shape and influence female behavior, and the importance of the dress to American women as they mature from a child to an adult. The tiaras refer to a similar theme. Here, I was interested in a persistent influence I have felt my entire life which I'll call the "beauty queen effect." It is the societal suggestion to girls and women that equates their self worth to cultural beauty. The tiara or headpiece is the symbol of being pronounced beautiful and consequently special in contemporary, American society. I tried to make the tiaras alluring and pretty to highlight the temptation which exists for women to accept such cultural trophies without

question. However, closer inspection reveals the true nature of the tiara. None of mine could be worn without impaling the skull of its recipient. The drawings and prints refer to this idea more literally. The beauty queen accepts her mantle at the cost of loss of herself. I express this by removing limbs, the face, or the entire head. The wreaths are my most recent works, and have to do with really personal themes of loss and identity. For a long time I have been intrigued by the little altars people set up by the side of the road to memorialize the death of someone due to an automobile accident. I am very interested in such gestures to remember and commemorate. My wreaths are very much like true funeral wreaths in that I use them to say good-bye to things in my life which were painful or hurtful or to memorialize moments which I wish I could relive or recreate.

In most of your work in this exhibition there seems to be a strong concern with change and decay which suggests time. How does the notion of time relate to your work?

Time plays a very important role in my work. Generally, all of my objects are made to look battered, decayed, or just dug up out of the earth. Primarily, I am interested in communicating the profound effect time has on our perception and identity. Every moment weighs upon us, settling over us like layers of earth. It changes us, until we realize we are nothing but these layers which are constantly being acquired, then covered anew. Nothing can stay the same, regardless of our efforts to preserve, remember, or commemorate. I think my production of art



*Iron Dress 3, paper, iron, rust,
17 x 22 inches, 1999*



Regret, artificial flowers, enamel, iron powder, wire, 24 x 41 inches, 1999

has to do with my futile attempts to win at this game, to somehow leave something behind which will attest to my existence. But of course, we know time always wins. In my work, I wish to express this idea in the actual material of the object. My objects look like they are old, indeed aging, and maybe even falling apart.

How do the variety of media in which you work allow you to express your ideas?

I use whatever materials I feel will best communicate my feelings and ideas. I try to keep an open mind about materials and to use things I really like. I used to visit craft stores with a sneaking sense of shame because I felt like there was something wrong with loving beads and fake flowers and things like that. I was trying to be a serious artist, after all, right? After some time, I came around to the notion that that was a role I needed to define for myself, that is, the real artist, and to trust my visceral attractions to materials. I was secretly buying fake flowers for months and storing them in a closet without knowing exactly what would become of it. I have learned to become more intuitive and to trust my instincts with my work. I find the meanings always show up after the initial love affair with the material.

How would you describe the media in which you work?

That's hard! I really try not to limit myself to a particular media, so it is difficult to give a nutshell description. However, I suppose I am currently most interested in making sculptural objects.

What is your creative process?

I work on everything at once. I do a little bit here, then there, then somewhere else, then maybe come back. I have a short attention span, and I constantly need to move between projects. This method works well for me. It allows

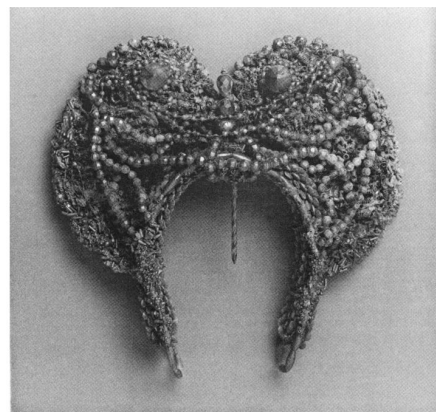
me to use my time efficiently, and to return to things with fresh eye. I find if I work on one thing without a break, I either stop being able to see it, or I ruin it from too much tinkering around. So, I prefer to work on many things. However, this can be a rather unnerving situation right before a show when you are faced with twenty projects which just need something else, and must be resolved simultaneously.

What stimulates or encourages you to create a particular image?

Mostly memories and sentimental indulgences. Sometimes-outrage or disgust or sadness.

Who were, or are, your artistic influences?

There have been so many. I am really attracted to artists who use materials in an emotional or expressive way. Also, artists who really push the surface, or the texture of their work. I can say Anselm Kiefer was the first artist I saw who really inspired me to look materials in a different way. I saw a retrospective of his work when I was a freshman in college in Philadelphia. The work was so moving; it had such raw emotion. I was overwhelmed by his giant canvases, caked with tar and straw. There was such an obvious disregard for the longevity of the object! This was a completely new idea for me, since I was trained as a printmaker to always respect and maintain the archival nature of the materials I used. In Kiefer's work, this went right out the window. He wasn't willing to sacrifice the expressive quality of the work in anyway. As a printmaker, I have always loved the work of Antonio Tapies. The massive scale of his prints is really exciting, but I also really enjoy the way he uses the etching plate to say so much about texture. And, of course there are Rembrandt's prints which I can't stop loving. I have such respect for his ability



Tiara 5, wire, enamel, beads, 10 x 10 inches, 1999

to change the image radically throughout its making, and the kind of meaty tones he was able to achieve. I like Jim Dine's prints for the some of the same reasons. He has tremendous control over the line, and in his prints in particular, there is a kind of viciousness and expressiveness to his marks I try to emulate. Lately, I have been looking at work which blurs the distinctions between mediums, and follows a different kind of path than traditional fine arts. I adore Petah Coyne's work. Her sculpture has a quality about it which I try to achieve in my work. They are at once inviting and repulsive and so magnificently creative. Her recent work with knotted hair and animals was simultaneously sad, elegant, and horrifying. There were so many levels of meaning suggested. Also, I met her once and was struck with how genuinely nice she was, so sincere and open. She was completely without pretension. On a personal level, that meeting was very inspiring to me, because there is this strange and pervasive idea I believe floats around, that in order to be a good and successful artist you must also be unpleasant and aloof. And of course, she was not. I also love Lesley Dill's work. Like many of the artists to whom I really respond, she uses her materials in a way that is compelling and communicative of real emotion and humanity. I was first aware of the empty dresses she produced, made of paper and wire and covered with text. I saw this work, then kind of put it away in my mind until I started making some dress images myself. Then I really started looking at her work closely, really closely, and now, I just think her work is tremendous. Recently, she has been making very large photographs of people with text on top of bodies that are outstanding. There are more, aren't there? I like Anne Hamilton's installation work. I am delighted with the success she is enjoying. I like Kiki Smith, too, and greatly admire the vast variety of media she works between. Louise Bourgeois is a hero, for her work and her fearlessness. I feel really lucky, having had so many inspiring artists to look to, and especially so many women.