

Communicable
CONSUMPTION
Phaedra Robinson



OAKLAND UNIVERSITY
**MEADOW BROOK
ART GALLERY**



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Communicable CONSUMPTION Phaedra Robinson

Communicable: adj

1. that can be communicated, as an idea
2. that can be transmitted, as a disease
3. talkative

Consumption: noun

1. a) a consuming or being consumed b) the using up of goods or services, either by consumers or in the production of other goods c) the amount consumed
2. a) a wasting away of the body b) a disease causing this; esp. tuberculosis of the lungs

As an artist when you make something you go through this cycle: rebirth, life, death, rebirth, life, etc., but not just when you're making a piece of art, when you're dealing with your own relationship to your work, which is a very specific thing, and so of course everyone has to go through a certain period of killing it, killing your art, or having it die on you.

– Phaedra Robinson 2005

Landscape of Love and Death, 2004, 17.5" x 30", Food colouring, lipstick, beet juice, hairdye, red wine, gelatin, ink, bullet holes on watercolour paper

Left and inside back cover: **Landscape of Love and Death** (detail)



Beginning art students are linear thinkers. Their progress moves concretely from "A" to "B" to "C," etc. Students of art initially learn the rules of realism through drawing. In high school, if they are painting a landscape they use local colors: green for grass, blue for sky. Like Prussian troops they become very comfortable with this literal, linear approach and will follow their teacher with unflinching obedience. Perhaps the most important thing that they will ever learn (to their initial horror) is that creating art is about making choices – choices about things that do not appear in the training manual.

In this initial perceptual crisis, a freshman in college might be encouraged to make the grass red and the sky yellow. This formalistic shake-up at the end of the first year can seem unreasonably harsh. Toward the beginning of their sophomore year, students experience the next jolt, which invariably rocks their world. They discover that their nose-to-the-grindstone discipline, all the fundamentals to which they have so religiously adhered, will be worth naught if they cannot learn to demonstrate discernment and make their own choices about what they might keep and what they must abandon with regard to their precious training. This exhibition is timed to help students adjust to this challenging process because Phaedra Robinson is the perfect artist for undergraduates to learn from in this context.

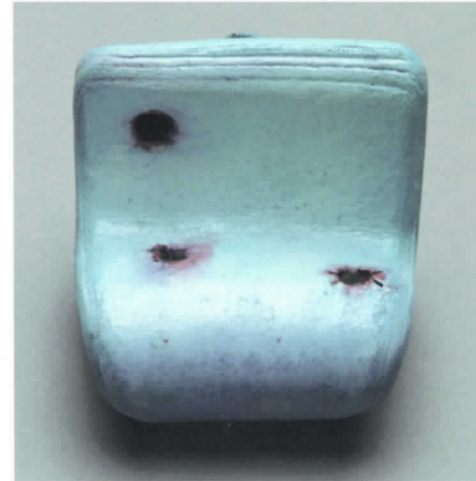


What is so inspiring about Robinson's work, and her ethos as a teacher, is her openness to this process of undoing, rethinking and retooling – or as she puts it, the process of "rebirth, life, death, rebirth," etc. – "I always tell my students that the only good art is art that takes risk." Her work reveals a rich conceptuality of choices – these are the challenging choices that artists have to make to be successful, that is, to be inventive and original. Robinson's work possesses all the complex layers of meaning – the skin of orthodoxy and tissues of dissent – all the contradictions that such structures must encapsulate and communicate if they are to be visionary and unique – if they are to be art.

Phaedra Robinson talks about having "a Jungian faith in the wisdom of the subconscious." Contemporary artists are driven to look for truth (and lies) wherever their vision takes

them. This is perhaps their greatest luxury. New art students see this degree of freedom, this luxury, as terrifying. Robinson: "Not seeing the path at first – not knowing where I'm going, not knowing if I'm going anywhere. If you find it with the map, your comprehension will have been somewhat sacrificed."

In a university culture, which is often strictly canonic, *Communicable Consumption* is an exhibition that possesses exactly the appropriate openness, candor, and seriousness that nascent artists require to broaden their understanding of the complex intellectual and technical processes involved in making art. But watch out because along with honesty and gravity Robinson's work contains the opposing traits of irony and cynicism.



Above all, Robinson is interested in the seminal properties of substances, and in the monolithic *thing*, the single salient idea that will reveal everything – as she puts it, "the macrocosm in the microcosm." She talks about blood and milk as being seminal fluids – simple yet complex. Simplicity and complexity fascinate her. All the paradoxes and issues embodied in interpretations of what these two liquids can incite – the red and white – keep Robinson's imagination energized. Similarly she is interested in the opposing straightforwardness and convolution of particular leitmotifs – like blood or milk, and leading from that she is interested

in the human body: hands, eyes, ears, etc. She talks about "little fetish objects dealing with parts of the figure." The most important leitmotif for Robinson is the mouth, which resonates powerfully in the title of this exhibition. The mouth is at the heart of *Communicable Consumption*: the lips, the teeth, the tongue – the soft and the hard – and the vast wet expanses within – there is something simultaneously innocent and corrupting about the mouth.

The mouth is the primary zone of eating and talking – the target of attraction and stimulation. The mouth is simple yet complicated, trite yet lurid. Phaedra Robinson uses the mouth because of its specificity and generality, its niceness and nastiness – the mouth can be a metaphor for almost anything that humans can do or think. It can be lined with

Oral STD: Victim (view 1 and 2), 2003, 2.5" x 2.5" x 1.5," Acrylic, bullet holes, glue, watercolour pencil, watercolour paper

On back cover: **Oral STD: Victim** (detail)



Oral STD: Deadly (view 2), 2003, 2" x 2.5" x 1.5"
 Acrylic, watercolour pencil, braille, watercolour paper
 On cover: **Oral STD: Deadly** (view 1)

lipstick or go *au naturel*. It can bad-mouth or smile. In the public domain, constantly exposing itself to scrutiny, it has universal appeal. A symbol of happiness/sadness, an accessible instant-messenger, it is also paradoxically strictly off-limits to all but a select few. The mouth invites poetry, but can censor and bite. It can be loquacious or a blunt thin line, be frank or deceptive. It can carry the voice of reason or lie through its teeth. The instrument of salutation, it can be loving or hateful – it kisses, gobbles or scorns – it can be a total embarrassment. You get the picture. The mouth is a living breathing paradox.

Robinson relates, "We are a walking mess of contradictions." She is an artist of many paradoxes and that she should choose the mouth is in keeping with her plurality of character. She is urbane yet reclusive, outraged yet calm, open yet closed, argumentative yet agreeable. And then there is her work, which encompasses so many contradictory zones of interest (and indifference) – hers is the art of opposites: compression/expansion – that is, big works or tiny, hand-held works. She is meticulous yet hasty – her small works are fastidiously crafted like those of Joseph Cornell, but her large paintings can be as manic as the scribbles of Cy Twombly. She can be literal or abstract, rebellious yet orthodox. At once Robinson is satisfied yet frustrated, courageous but apprehensive. More than anything, she hates the idea of being comfortable – of settling – even if she wants order in everything she does – at the same time she embraces chaos. This makes her work charged and startling. She will make something specific, focused and small and then produce a work that is massive and gestural. Although in this exhibition the artist has purposely shifted away from large-scale works and this has made her work less ambiguous and more articulate. Honing in on the mouth as the port of entry for this exhibition has provided the artist with a leitmotif for the 1,001 polemic utterances all of which could be contained in the phrase *Communicable Consumption*.

Another aspect of Robinson's work is the way in which it comes to life. Her commentary on the cycle of: "rebirth, life, death, rebirth" is instructive; her work, particularly her drawings and paintings, often goes through a destructive process before it can be completed. Artists will sometimes take their work too far and have to somehow bring it back to life, but with Robinson this destruction is often intrinsic to her process. An example of this is *Victim*, 2003 (paper & acrylic with bullet holes), where she sculpted a tongue from layers of watercolour paper and shot it through with bullets before finally painting it. Other contemporary artists are interested in this sort of pathology. Cornelia Parker for example blows things up, damages things – destroys to create. In *Cold, Dark Matter; An Exploded View*, 1991, Parker blew up and reconstructed a garden shed. Robinson acknowledges that she is interested in destruction: "I started with the perspective of being iconoclast," she says, but she is now more interested in what comes afterward – in what emerges from the ashes – as in rebirth and life.



Contemporary artists are becoming increasingly indivisible from their work. When French artist Sophie Calle says: "I try to find my own way out, which is my personal therapy," she is talking about making art to make sense of herself. Artists making autobiographical sense of themselves is not new, but today many artists exist as an intrinsic part of their work either in documentary form or in *acting-up*: Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons, Tracy Emin, Mariko Mori, etc., have all appeared vividly in their work. An early example of an artist becoming the substance of his or her work is the Marcel Duchamp/Rose Sélavy body of work (Duchamp in drag photographed by Man Ray, circa 1921). Other examples of Duchamp's guest appearances followed: *Monte Carlo Bond*, 1924 (photo-lithography) and *With My Tongue in My Cheek*, 1954 (paper, graphite and cast plaster) – a self-portrait in profile with a cast of the artist's cheek. Phaedra Robinson's appearance in her work is more reticent in that it is her *ethos* rather than her *image* which is present, but in a sense this could be seen as *less* reticent. She is, for example, very concerned with what she eats (as those who elect to eat nothing but vegetable matter must be). Her veganism informs

Wool Over Our Eyes (The White Dragon) *street view*, 2003, 23' x 7.5'
Mixed media on plywood



Communicable Consumption, both on a level of process (choice of materials) and the fact that we are, proverbially, what we eat – she has also made work using her mouth as an instrument to deliver pigment – evacuation of material via the mouth as the ironic equivalent of eating. Another aspect of her character in forming her work lies in her activism (being a vegan is itself a form of activism). All this *self* is intrinsic to her work and she is as indivisible from her work as any contemporary artist.

Robinson is also an activist in the sense that she is an instrument for social change. She would not put it like that, however. She is no one's instrument, but she actually *does* concrete things (advances causes) and is inadvertently her own instrument – she walks the walk as it were. The title of this exhibition is a prime example, particularly the *consumption* part. It pertains to the idea of consuming (using-up) goods and services. This addresses both consumerist immoderation and its environmental consequences, but Robinson's activism is more eaten-up with education, that is providing a platform for the exchange

Wool Over Our Eyes *(detail, in progress)*



Force Fed – Kathy's Kisses (detail)



of *other* ideas and philosophies. This is a significant component of this exhibition. She has acquired a building in Detroit and will eventually open her *Center for Creative Exchange* – a venue for *other* voices. This, rather than making propaganda art, is her form of activism. Her work may allude to issues but she would deny any suggestion that her work was issues-based. As she states: "not seeing the path at first – not knowing where I'm going," which means her ideas are intuitively (rather than aggressively) polemic. Her sculpture might depict blatant objects – a tongue sticking out – but the *communicable* part of it – "what" it stresses – is invariably ironic and subtle.

Marcel Duchamp instigated, if that is not too pejorative, many of the trajectories and strategies that are fundamental to Postmodernist Art. His "hand-held" pieces like *With Hidden Noise*, 1917, *Feuille de vigne femelle*, 1950, and *Coin de chasteté*, 1954, inform Robinson's work with regard to scale, intimacy and conceptuality – as well as in terms of irony and the double-entendre aspect. Robinson's *Pack of Lies*, 2001, for example resonates

Force Fed – Kathy's Kisses, 2004, 22" x 30"

Lipstick, chocolate soy milk, beet juice, charcoal, hair dye, coffee on watercolour paper

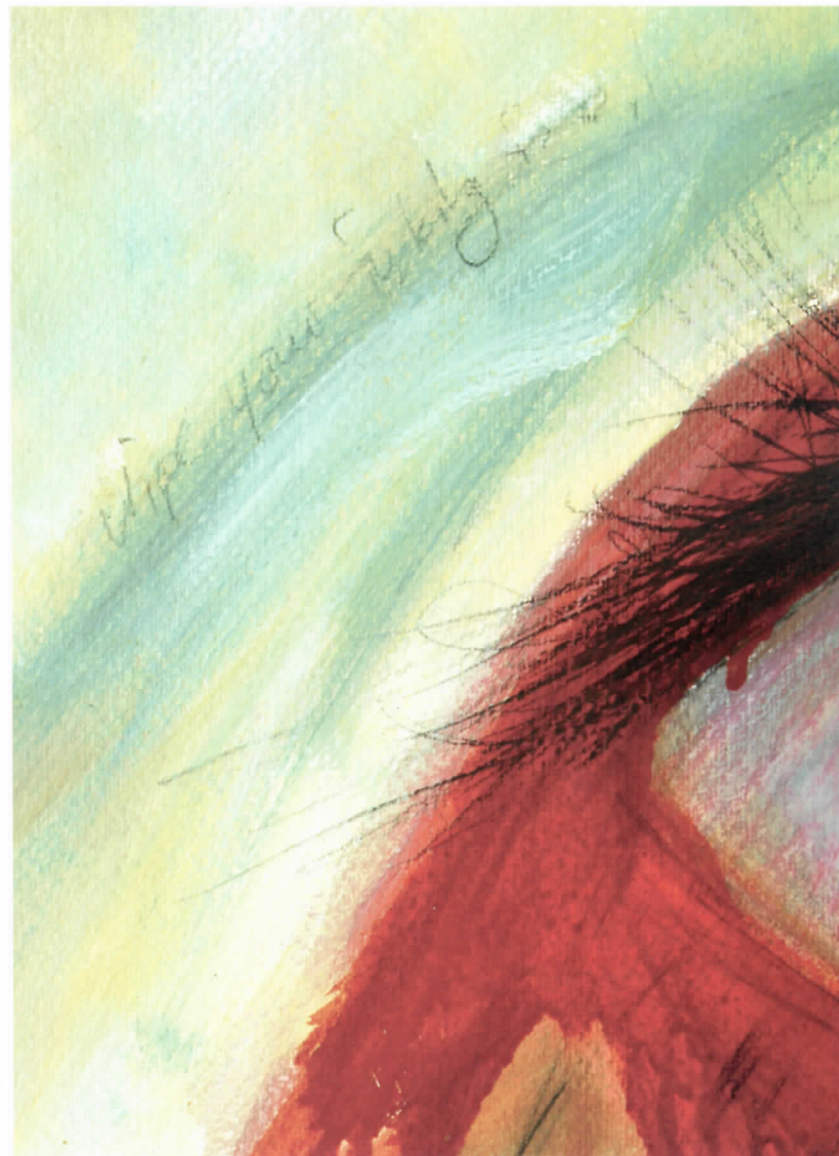
with Duchampian mirth. A flexed tongue arches itself immoderately; brazenly pierced with a stud, it is made of stacked paper the same size as a pack of 22 cards. Each layer of paper, front and back, is inscribed with a lie – 44 of them, hidden within the pack. The tongue's surface is embossed in esoteric Braille – the pink flesh invites our touch but retains its cryptic message.

Robinson has always liked to point out weaknesses in the system, but her dissent is not mainstream – she is not talking about the blue chip issues: foreign wars, the end of oil, or the demise of social security. Her fascination in what we consume, for example, makes her appear marginal, out there on the fringes. Yet on the other hand *Phaedra Robinson* is famous – in Detroit. Here is another paradox: in Detroit she is celebrated as a curator, but as an artist she is more marginal – she has not shown her work that often. Sensing a conflict of interest, artists/curators always feel ambivalent about showing their own work. Curators are political animals, artists not so much or not at all. *Phaedra Robinson*, curator, is a known commodity. She has certainly demonstrated a capacity for excellence in choosing, installing and promoting other artists' work. She also writes – she has been writing exhibition reviews for the weekly newspaper, the *Metro Times*. When she was executive director of *detroit contemporary*, at its height, there were five or six hundred people at her openings. In the art community of Detroit she was a celebrity. Adopting the smart dress and professional detachment of the curatorial persona, she had few serious rivals. Here is another contradiction between the famous *Phaedra* and the private artist. As a curator she has an extraordinary eye for what is successful, but as an artist her worldview appears eccentric – eccentric to those that live a purely work/TV existence. Rather than blindly embracing contemporary popular culture as the gold standard, she is interested in what alternative cultural ideas from all the *other* places can teach us. She is interested in I-Ching as a way of tapping into the realm of chaos. Above all, she is particularly fascinated by indigenous cultures, but then will say: "I am interested in all cultures and the way they operate and communicate – their codes of communication, kinesics and language are really behind a lot of my thinking." Her veganism is an intrinsic part of this interest in *otherness*. While veganism might appear severe and incomprehensible to mainstream culture, remember that it takes 250 gallons of oil to produce one steer for the table. What at first appears eccentric might actually be vanguard. This otherness, this counter-cultural bent is at the heart and substance of her work, and since she is now, for the moment *sans* gallery, she is fully alert, fully engaged in making art. Mainstream culture and especially students of art, poised to make difficult choices, will learn much from the otherness and audacity of this exhibition. *This is Phaedra Robinson* – artist, communicator, educator (and consumer) and Meadow Brook Art Gallery and the Department of Art and Art History are delighted to host this inclusive, consensus-building exhibition.



Never Bothered to Understand, 2004, 22" x 30"

Lipstick, hair dye, watercolour, charcoal, oil pastel, carpenter's wax on watercolour paper



Wipe Your Face – Third Eye, 2005, 22" x 30"

Oil, acrylic, graphite, charcoal, oil medium, oil pastel, marker, wax, pigment on watercolour paper

Wipe Your Face – Third Eye (detail)

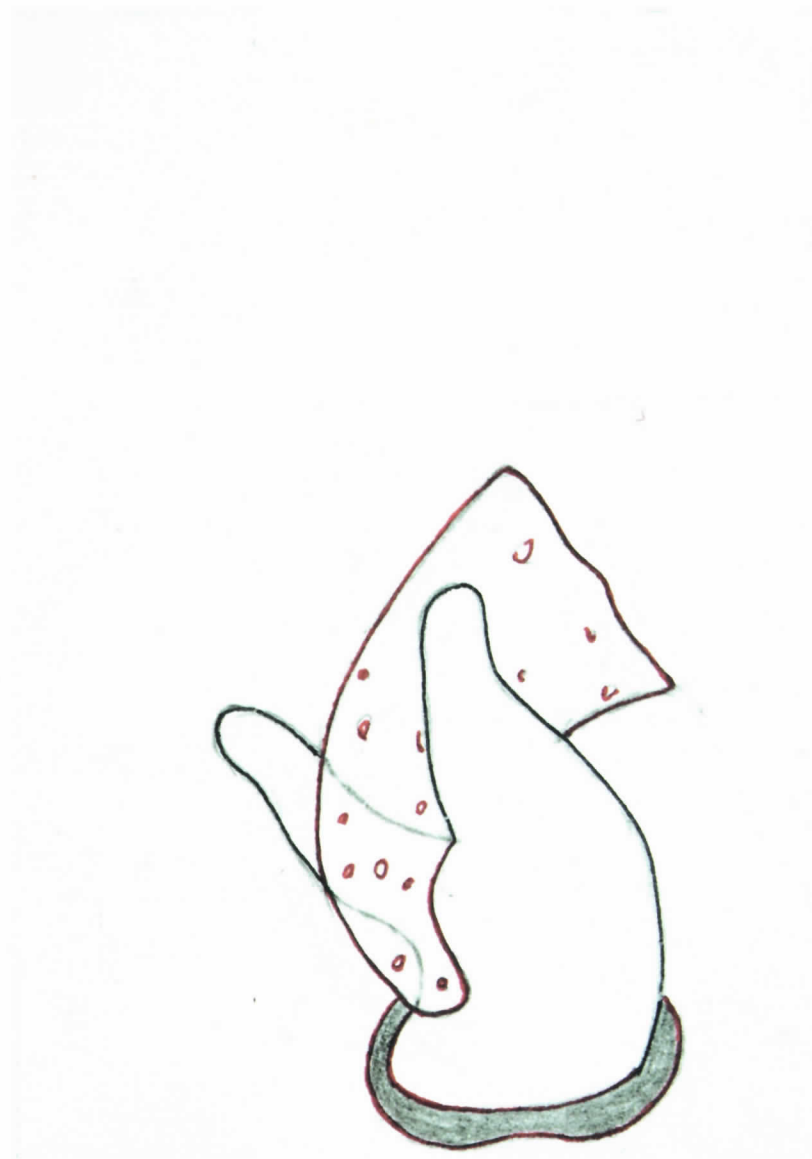


Eternal Sentence (*view 2*), 2001, 10.5" x 3" x 6" (*dimensions variable*)

Watercolour pencil and braille on watercolour paper, Collection of Tina Johnson, Jasper and Glen Bergers



Tsunami (Relationship), 2005, 19.5" x 25.5"
Charcoal, graphite on Canson paper



Lovers, 2003, 4" x 6"
Graphite and ink on watercolour paper

Communicable
CONSUMPTION
Interview with
Phaedra Robinson

Dick Goody: Why Communicable Consumption?

Phaedra Robinson: Well, the title becomes a statement itself and through its own form in function it represents the body of work as if it was one of the pieces. What I mean by this is that entirely aside from the meanings of these two words, there is also alliteration and play with syllable and vowel and consonant. There is pattern and repetition. The fact that these words operate on many levels through multiple meanings excited me and I felt that each meaning and the contradictions that arose were all relevant! This is how my work operates, and my brain. These words have opposing forces within them, which I like a great deal. And the words refer to powerful action that demands a reaction. What results is a variety of questions that all relate to the work.

How did you first learn to draw?

I think when I was a kid, mainly from observation. I would draw people around me and I had model horses so I would set them up and draw them. Sometimes I would just draw from my head – a lot of animals, rabbits.

Were you living in the country? Were there lots of animals around to draw?

I had pet rabbits and I rode horses a lot. I lived in a suburb in New Jersey, but my very early years were spent in the country in Rhode Island where I established a kinship with nature.



Foaming at the Mouth, 2003, 6" x 10"

Marker, graphite, carpenter's wax on chipboard, Collection of Riva Sayegh

Do you think it was drawing that led to you becoming an artist?

Drawing is a symptom of what makes me an artist.

In an interview in *Markzine* magazine you said that you were an outsider from a young age. What did you mean by that?

I think that I had that dynamic... I was very capable of being by myself and falling into my own head when I was young – very introspective, capable of being social, too – but I think that because I was so interested in philosophical questions about the world around me and why things were the way they were, I had these grand ideas, so I think that separated me from people.

If we look back to the work you were doing in college, at what point would we be able to say: that looks like an early Phaedra Robinson?

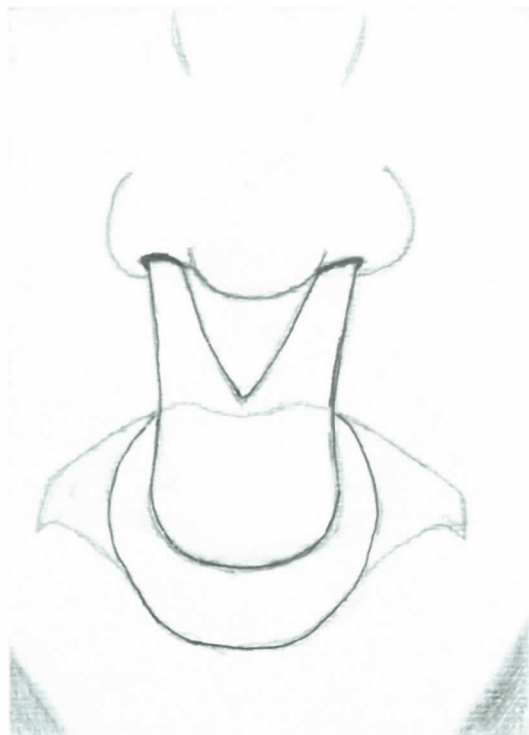
I guess it depends upon how hard you were looking. There were some images of the tongue in some of the work, particularly the installation from my last semester at CCS where I actually used a real tongue. It was a cow tongue that I cut up into several pieces and used with a shoe fetish piece. But my work with symbol systems began much earlier than that and I have continued to investigate this.

Was there a particular artist that you remember that you were working with that made a lot of difference?

There wasn't any one particular professor although at Alfred University Andres Serrano lectured and I met him and I thought his work was brilliant.

What do you remember about him?

He told me that I reminded him of Juliet Lewis. I remember this critique where everyone



Self-Serving – Forked, 2003, 4" x 6"
Graphite and ink on watercolour paper

was saying his work was meaningless because he doesn't develop or print his photographs, and people were kind of upset about this, (and, of course, these are all freshman art students who don't know anything, but think they know everything, including myself!) I felt that through that conversation I got to a point where I understood the work better and I started to defend it and talk about how vats of blood and milk, though they may seem simple, are really much more powerful.



but it was beneficial in a way. If I hadn't made that mistake I would not have understood its true significance because I thought: this is a really beautiful piece of sculpture.

It looks like a Richard Deacon or something.

Yes. When I was 20 and traveling around the United States, I met someone who was crazy about Duchamp. We started talking about chaos theory and that's when I began to look further into Duchamp. I really respect what he initiated and his purity of purpose.

They're complex chemicals, biological secretions, but they can be used to represent powerful concepts.

They're also archetypal. They're part of us. It's something I really value: complexity through simplicity. I think that Andy Goldsworthy introduces it in his work. It reaches into these archetypal forms and pieces of us in the world.

On the other hand, looking at it from the other end, I also see upfront complexity in your work, which recalls a more devious artist like Marcel Duchamp.

Well, Serrano is a good example of this dichotomy. He was playing a joke on the viewer (and thereby forcing them to see themselves through their reactions) by making something sacred out of the profane. With Duchamp, the first piece of his that I saw was his bottle rack readymade and I thought it was an actual piece of sculpture; this was very early on and I was ignorant,

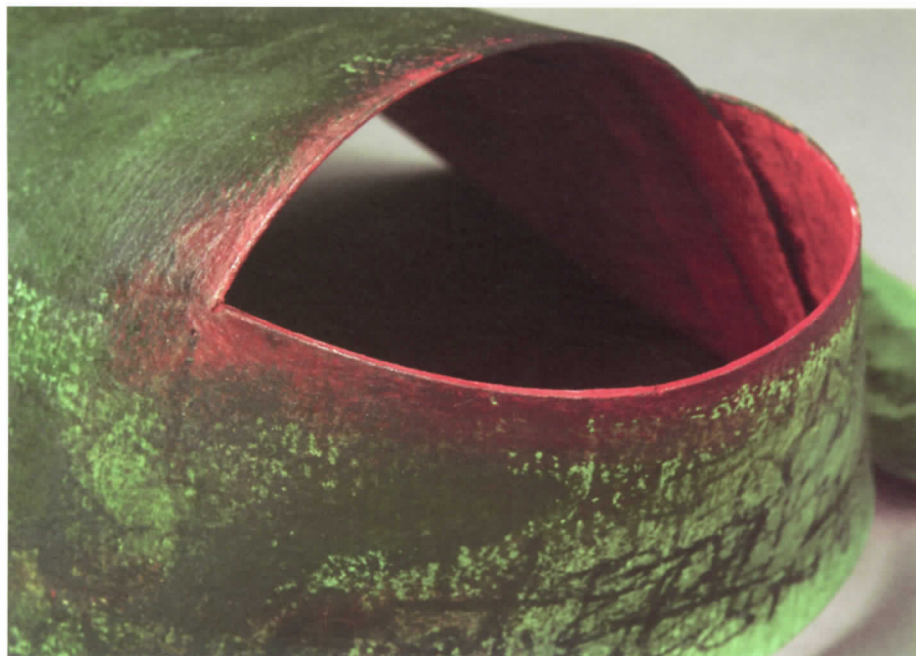
Self-Serving – Mono, 2003, 4" x 6"
Graphite and ink on watercolour paper

What do you think about his ideas of good or bad taste – actually his complete indifference to taste?

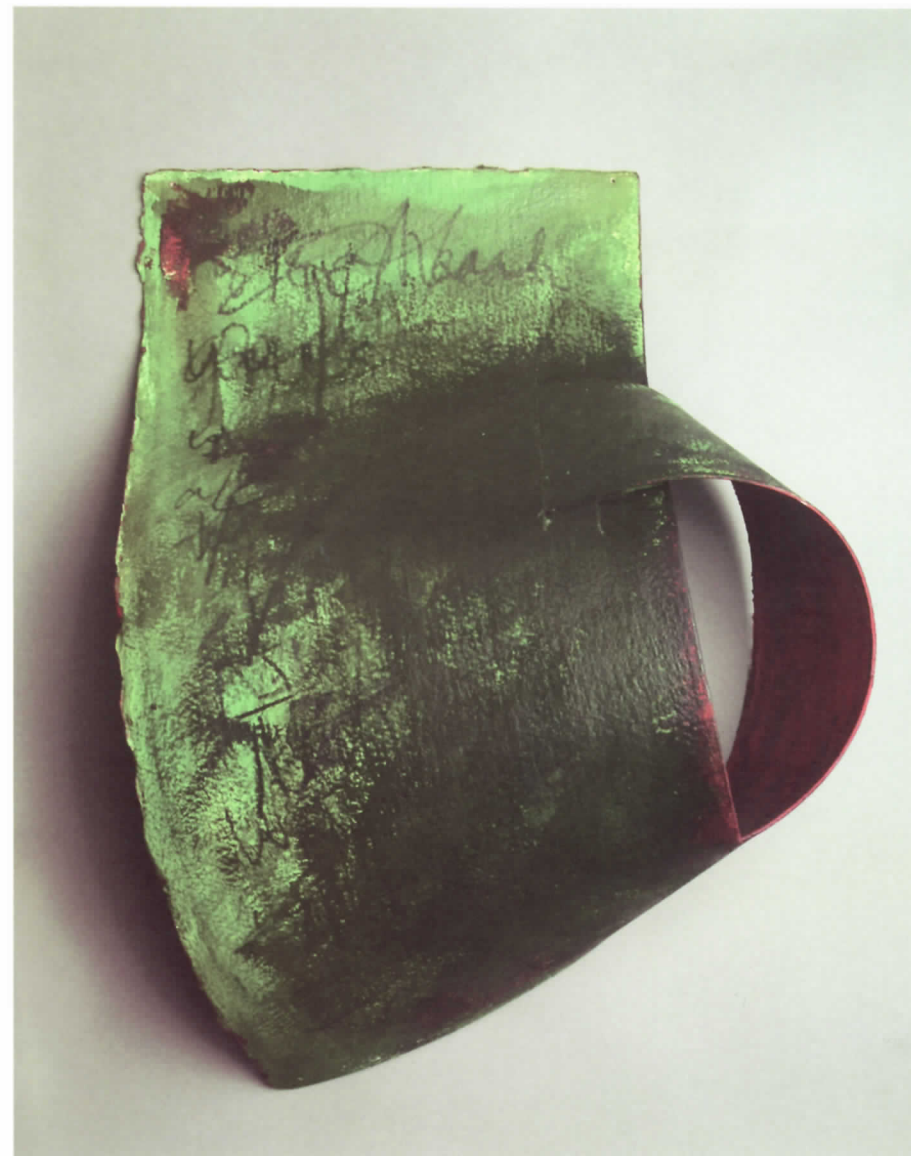
I think Duchamp believed in the experiment – in the exploration. So, the prescriptions of what is fashionably correct, of what goes over well and is accepted can only get in the way of honest exploration. This is what I have been grappling with in the studio. The inevitable signs of postmodernism – of genre, style and the trained and educated decision-making against the desperate need to escape these things, to return to purity in an effort to dig deeper without the crutch of a preexisting language, visual or otherwise. I am not saying that I have mastered this, only that I am exploring it.

Do you think about taste in your work?

Yes. When I had the tongue/shoe fetish exhibition I used a quotation by fashion designer Mary Quant: "Good taste is death. Vulgarity is life." It was very important to the piece, and it was about art, about what we thought was taboo, what we thought was good taste, what was just wrong. I still reference fashion itself in my use of materials.

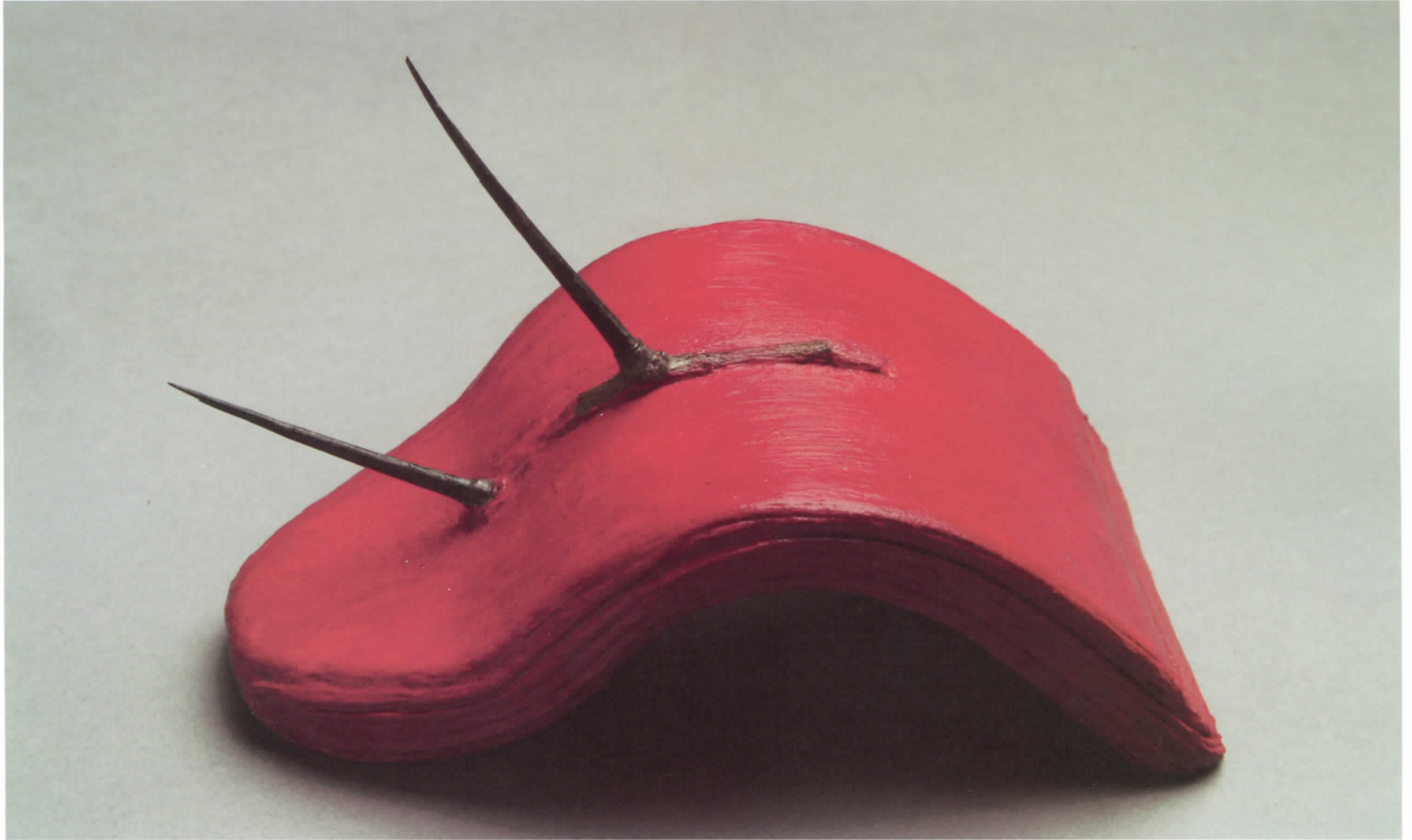


Study for Green Tongue (detail)



Study for Green Tongue, 2003, 10" x 14" x 5"

Charcoal, wax, acrylic, watercolour, glue, watercolour paper
Collection of Giorgio Gikas, Venus Bronze Works, Inc.



Honey Locust, 2001, 3.5" x 7"

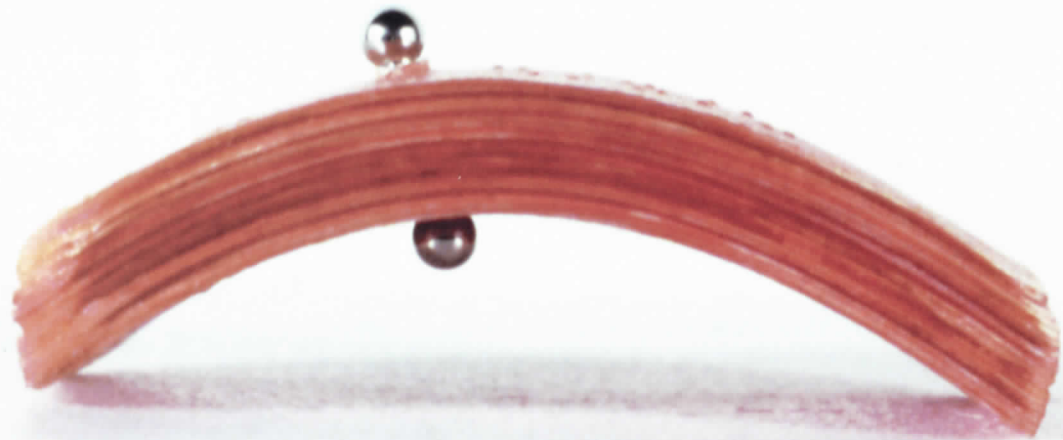
Thorns, acrylic, glue, construction paper, Collection of Riva Sayegh



Unspoken Truths (*back*), 2001, 4" x 2" x 1"
 Suture, watercolour pencil, acrylic, braille, watercolour paper



Unspoken Truths (*front*)



Your small sculptural work is particularly cerebral in the Duchampian sense, but your large paintings look more formalistic – like Twombly or de Kooning. Do you see a conflict between the retinal and the cerebral?

No, to me they're the same thing. My work has a lot to do with trying to escape what you are, but you still end up with what you are. It's about coming to grips with that and not obsessing about the process, but instead going through it. I am basically a formalist.

I wouldn't necessarily describe you as a formalist. You're obsessed with these loaded images and objects and even when they're small they tend to be monolithic and singular.

It only seems like that because I started with the perspective of being iconoclast. I consciously had no faith in a traditional respect for formal qualities in art though I was intuitively a formalist. Over time I came to realize this. As a friend of mine has said of all people, "we are a walking mess of contradictions". I got through it by changing materials or just trying to come from a more expressive formalist perspective.

I still see you as primarily an image-maker. Even an iconoclast is obsessed with images.

Yes, and now I have once again submitted to the images.

When you're beginning a new work, how do you get started?

There are a lot of different approaches. They don't all start the same way. Sometimes I begin

from a very specific conceptual root and then I'll start on the piece having a clear idea of where I'd like to go. A lot of times it might be more of a humorous, tongue-in-cheek, language-oriented beginning. I will also approach my work with a Jungian faith in the wisdom of the subconscious and a feeling of unattachment which at times can be frightening to follow. Not seeing the path at first – not knowing where I'm going, not knowing if I'm going anywhere. If you find it with the map your comprehension will have been somewhat sacrificed.

In terms of process, which materials fascinate you the most?

I often look at material as content – process is also content. Paper is really important.

You actually do more than just draw on it; you mold it, shape it and make objects out of it.

Yes. It all originated back when I was becoming vegan. I started reading about the connection of the forests to what we eat and consume and how the forests are being consumed by us through our actions. That's when I decided to use a lot of paper and wood and animal referenced products as the material. It spoke to what was being consumed and my role in that. Also, I had been working with language – "diaristically" – on paper. That led to layering – layering words and layering the paper to make these sculptures, seeing them each as a book and writing on each side of each piece of paper and then gluing the

Pack of Lies (view 1 and 2), 2001, 1.5" x 2" x 3.5"

Watercolour, acrylic, braille, implant grade steel, watercolour paper, Collection of Shirley and Frank Piku

pieces of paper of this book together which referenced the rings of a felled tree. That's how it started. It started with the concept of a pack of cards as a game to be played socially. That was called "Pack of Lies." There was a lie on each sheet; there were 22 cards, so front and back that's 44 lies and then they were glued together with braille on the surface.

How did you come up with the lies?

I started with lies that were told to me.

Is that a lot of lies?

Yes, at the time I felt it wouldn't be difficult, but I was wrong and so I learned something from that. Then came "Unspoken Truths" – its mate in a way.

These unseen pieces of text are an intrinsic part of the work, and no small part because they transform it conceptually. They're potent because they're invisible.

Yes. I knew you weren't going to be able to see any of the writing and yet I made a decision to write on each side of the paper. It became part of it and resonated outside of just the physical object. It's a kind of subconscious stimuli and works on the psychic level. I continued to do this with many of the other paper tongues.

How much risk is there when you're making art?

I always tell my students that the only good art is art that takes risk. It's important to me. How it's done can never be predicted because the risk is always going to be specific to the person and the time.

Do you ever feel like saying to yourself: "Oh, you're being a bit safe now." I mean if you're working on something and it seems to lose that kind of reverberation of risk.

Yes. There was a piece I was working on where I kept saying that. "These are really safe marks." I wrote on another of the paintings: "This is a safe neighborhood."

What's a safe mark?

If you've made a mark over and over and you feel confident about it, you feel like it's your pal, then it's too safe. These drawings have been dealing with the concept of trying to make a new mark, (which is just masochistic!). That goes back to the point that my art is diverse. That has frustrated a lot of people.

I think your work is diverse in the sense that it seems to be about opposites; there's a sort of polarized thing going, for example, you either seem to do these small delicate hand-held works like "Pack of Lies" and "Tongue Tied" or you're doing these huge robust expressionist paintings. What is going on with that?

It goes back to when I was young; I questioned a lot of stuff: why am I female? If I'd been

Psychology of a Cat, 2004, 28" x 45"

Charcoal, graphite, sewing needle, thread, scorching, lipstick, oil stick, wax, pigment, watercolour, acrylic, oil medium, wine, conté, coffee, metal clips on watercolour paper



male, what would that mean? Why am I born in this time? Why am I white? Why do I identify so much with Native Americans? Because of thinking about all that and translating that into a figurative painting or drawing, that eventually led to making these little fetish objects and dealing with parts of the figure. Working large or small isn't a conscious thing, but considering microcosm and macrocosm is. Whether it's a 23-foot mural or an installation or a tiny tongue made out of paper, each piece has to have a directness, it has to be organized in the end or so we've been trained. There was a time when I thought I should just pump out tons of different variations of these tongues.

But could you? There's a kind of intensity about them – especially the oral work – they wouldn't have the same resonance or monolithic quality if you did tons of them. I think that's their strength, these objects are somewhat rare in a way.

Right. I labor over each one.

How much of your work is derived from the mouth?

A lot of it is orally fixated. Currently and more recently it's been like that. It's not innate to anything I have to make. Like we were talking about Andres Serrano and blood and milk – some of these substances or symbols are simple, yet they're a doorway into more complex layers of things. The mouth is so fully layered in references and meaning and directness.

Incredibly direct, which brings me to my next question: a lot of your work has what I would call a 15 second 'get', in other words you can look at it and you can understand it very quickly. Some of it's more contemplative. Are you aware of the short "get?"

I'm aware of what kind of energy the piece has. A more conceptual tongue-in-cheek piece that really amuses me, is more of the 15 second 'get', though there are multiple 'gets' in the same piece and ironically when the viewer thinks they've "gotten it", they become part of the joke. There's another difference, too; some pieces might be provoking the viewer, whether they know it or not, and other pieces are opening up to them.



Psychology of a Cat (detail)

How much of your work do you think is opportunistic in the sense that you're taking advantage of opportune circumstances? For instance, you might see something on TV or experience something outside and think, "I'm going to do something about that."

A lot of it is in reaction to stimuli, my own life and experiences, or some kind of insight. For instance, I was walking down the street with a friend and there weren't many cars

around and I saw all the tar marks that went over the cracks in the street. I stopped and looked at it and thought it was absolutely brilliant. It hit me as being pure genius; it looked like abstract expressionism. I related this to the intentions of abstract expressionism, yet it was hilarious that this was happening so unintentionally in a chaotic sense. That really interested me. I decided I'm going to come out here some day with a huge piece of paper and do a rubbing, take down this exact pattern, I'll crop it and create a picture plane that will have a boundary around it but that will become this piece of art.

That story reminds me of the work of Gabriel Orozco. One of the things that's been said about his work is that it's a poetic record of the fleeting and the mundane.

His work deals with phenomenon. A simple phenomenon can contain everything.

Or it could be a metaphor for a number of things. I don't know if it can contain

everything. Can the universe be contained in a single drop of water?

The microcosm is the macrocosm. If life contains death, then death contains life; that whole. Using some kind of equation to show everything and nothingness, that they have to coexist together, contradictory things are also codependent even though this contradicts in our limited and linear perspective.

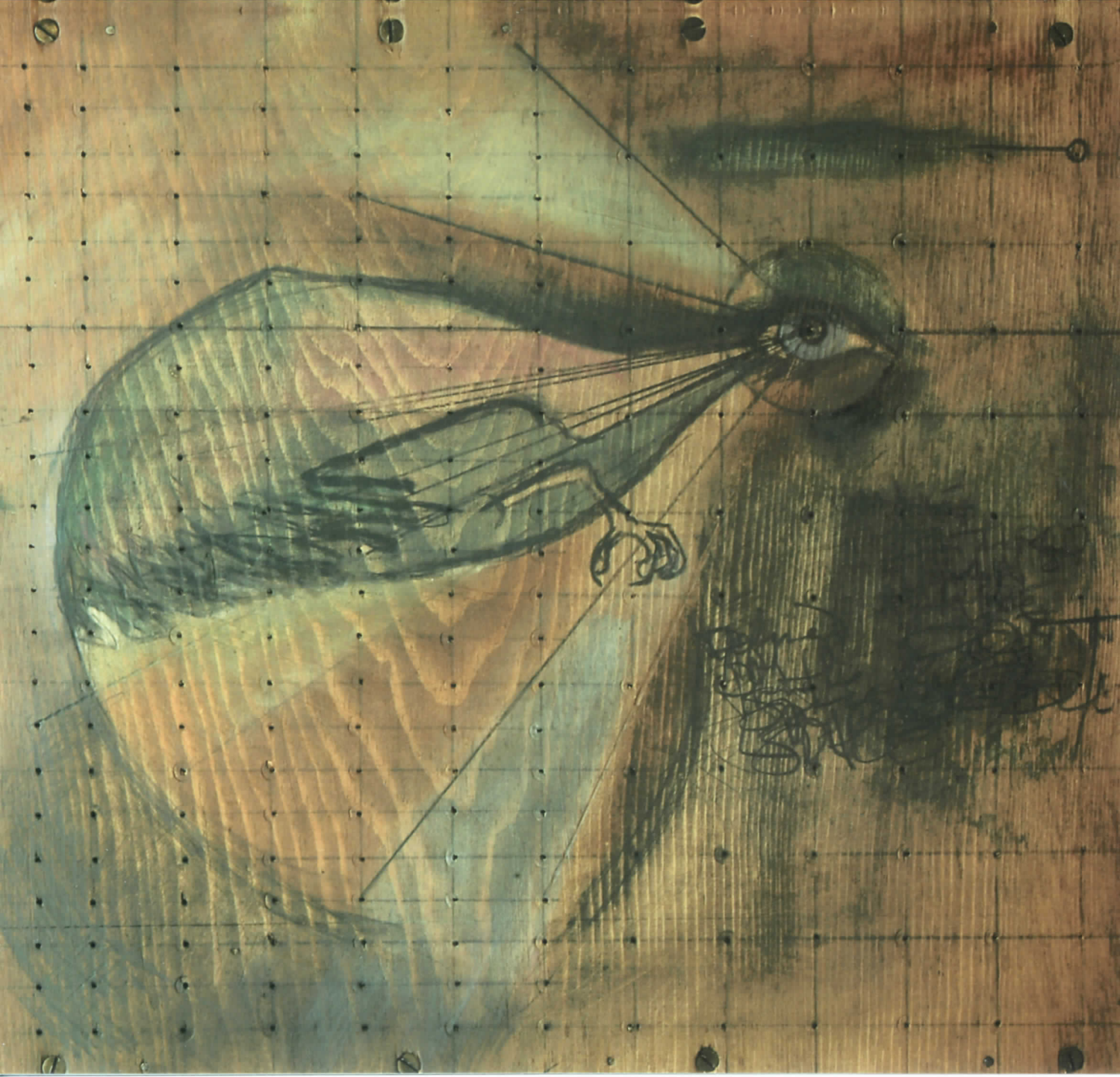
As the director of Detroit Contemporary you were a powerful force. If you were the contemporary art czar of Detroit, what would you do next?

I would change the system so that I wouldn't be a czar. That would disgust me. I'm starting this art center and I have these particular goals. I saw what was needed here,



Sweet Meat, 2004, 2" + variable dimensions

Acrylic, marker, human hair, "Fed Up" nail polish, gelatin, cinnamon flavoured dental floss, Canson paper



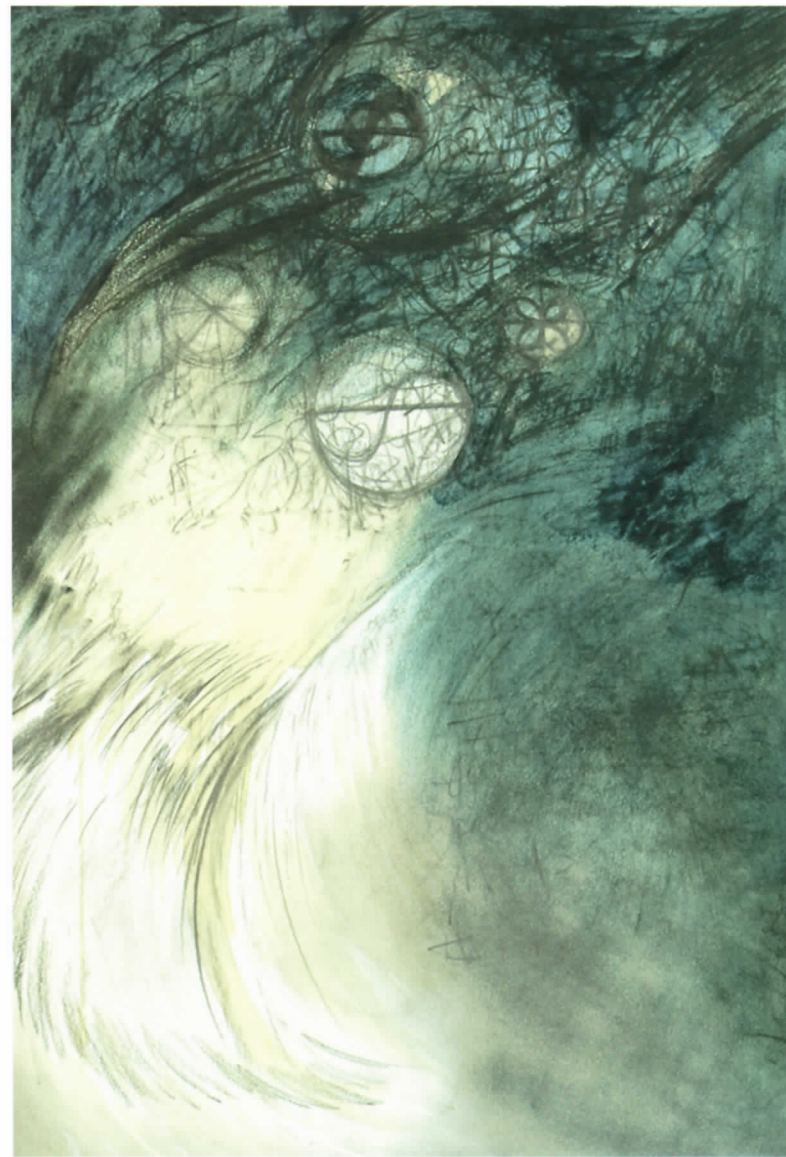
Measure of Love from Bird's Eye View

2005, 13" x 12"

Charcoal, graphite, wax, oil pastel, on wood



Looking Back – Flying Away, 2004, 18" x 24"
Coffee and charcoal on watercolour paper, **Collection of Paul Fracassa**



Mysterious Science – Myth/Balance, 2004, 22" x 30"
Graphite, charcoal, coffee, wax, pigment on watercolour paper



Force Fed – Madonna and Child, 2004, 22" x 30"

Tar, wine, watercolour, lipstick, hair dye, beet juice, charcoal on watercolour paper

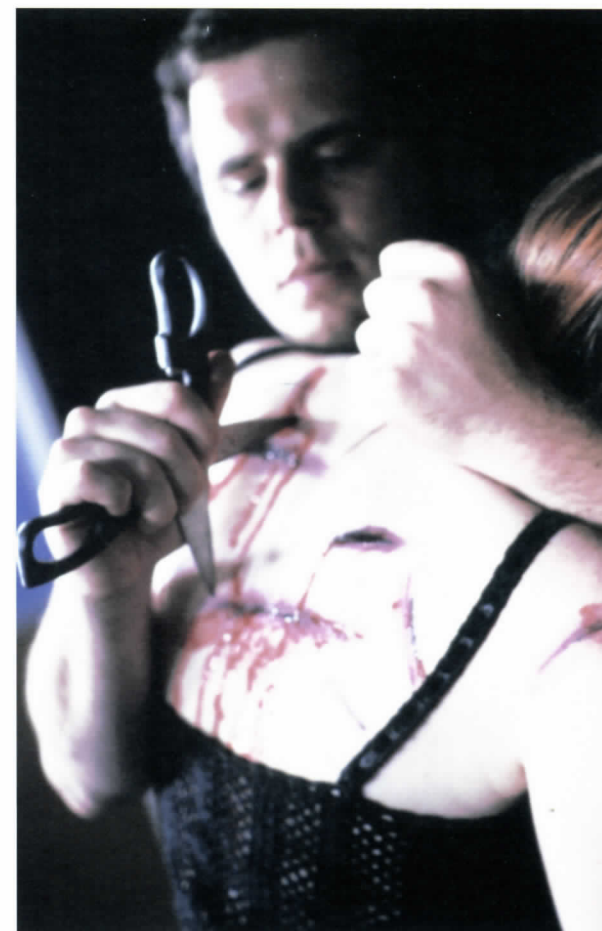
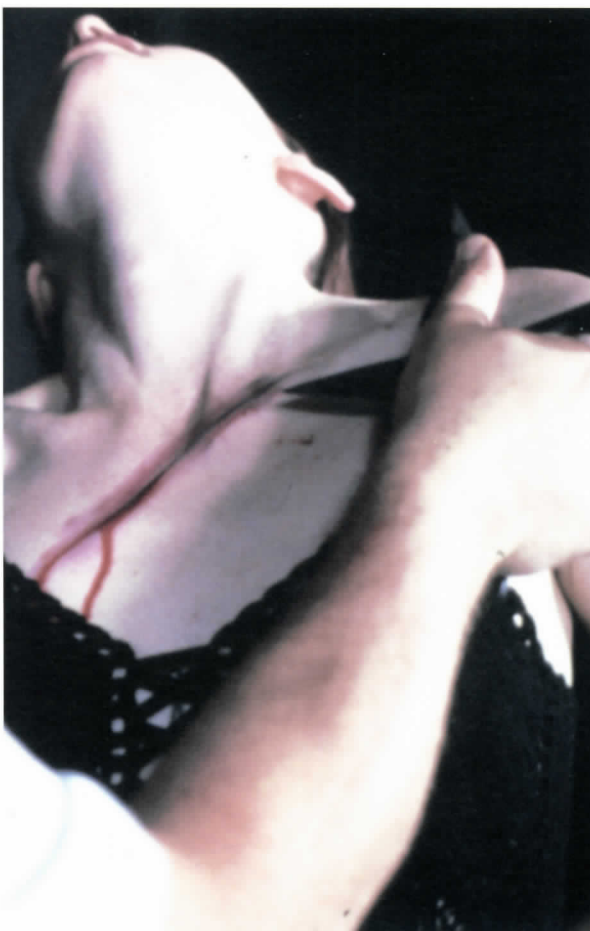


The Manipulator (*front*), 2001, 3" x 8"
Leather, suture, wire, stuffing, Collection of David Brandt



The Manipulator (*back*)





Phaedra Robinson's work addresses issues of balance, chaos and communication (cursive writing, symbol systems, sign language, body language, verbal communication and their relationships). *Rock, Paper, Scissors: 1001 Attempts to Betray a Friend* examines these associations. One male and one female are seen in a spontaneous game of rock, paper, scissors – the competitive hand symbol game with a limited number of variables and a set

system of relationships. As the game continues, filmed uninterrupted for 24 minutes (example left) a relationship of one "toss" to the next is created and a set of charts and statistics compiled. The still images (examples above) correspond to each "toss" or throw in the game of rock, paper, scissors. As the game continues a greater violence and intimacy between the subjects is manifest.

Stills from: **Rock, Paper, Scissors: 1001 Attempts to Betray a Friend**, 2003-05, DVD projection
Rock, Paper, Scissors, technically supported by Joel Silvers



Jealous Hunter, 2005, 3" x 4" x 31"

Thorns, acrylic, glue, eel skin, hunter's bullet, power steering tube, construction paper



Phaedra Robinson

SELECTED SOLO AND GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 *Rel/view*, RX Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2005 *Communicable Consumption* (solo), Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Oakland University, Rochester, MI
- 2004 *Windsor Biennial*, Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada
- 2004 *Femmes Detroit*, Ceres Gallery, New York, New York
- 2004 *Fluxus in Detroit* (with Alison Knowles): *Influx*, Marygrove College, Detroit, MI
- 2003 *Actual Size Biennial*, detroit contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 2003 *Sight: Sonic Revisited*, detroit contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 2003 *Wool Over Our Eyes*, 23 ft. billboard, funded by The Public Art Project, Lemberg Gallery, Ferndale, MI
- 2003 *In the Shadow of Tiger Stadium*, Padzieski Gallery, Dearborn, MI
- 2003 *Members Invitational*, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI
- 2002 *Pin-Up*, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI
- 2002 *Untitled for Now*, C-Pop, Detroit, MI
- 2001 *Actual Size*, detroit contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 2001 *True Stories: Phaedra Robinson and Matthew Breneau*, Alley Culture, Detroit, MI
- 2001 *Head On*, Exhibit A, Birmingham, MI
- 2001 *Ritual*, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI

- 2001 *Detroit 300*, Cranbrook Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI
- 2001 *Sampler*, The Scarab Club, Detroit, MI
- 2001 *North American International Anti-Auto Show*, detroit contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 2000 *Canvas*, Alley Culture, Detroit, MI
- 2000 *Saving Grace*, Gallery 212, Ann Arbor, MI
- 2000 *Actual Size*, detroit contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 2000 *Endangered Planet*, Gallery 212, Ann Arbor, MI
- 1999 *Actual Size: 4 1/4" X 5 1/2"*, detroit contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 1999 *Untitled: the artist in Detroit*, curated by Armando Abogado, detroit contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 1999 *Voice and Place*, Griswold Lofts, Detroit, MI
- 1998 *Polk Competition: Art and Technology* (finalist), BBAC, Birmingham, MI

PERFORMANCE AND INSTALLATION WORK

- 2004 *Fluxus Bake Sale*, Marygrove College, Detroit, MI
- 2003 *Rock, Paper, Scissors: 1001 Attempts to Betray A Friend*, Detroit Tastefest, Fisher Theatre Atrium, Detroit, MI
- 2000 *Artseen: Showcase of New and Experimental Art*, Artcite, Windsor, Ontario, Canada
- 1999 *Art Official Intelligence*, Metropolitan Center for the Creative Arts, Detroit, MI
- 1999 *untitled performance*, Detroit Women's Coffeehouse, Unitarian Universalist Church, Detroit, MI
- 1998 *Sight: Sonic, The Art of Music*, detroit contemporary, Detroit, MI
- 1998 *Instill Elation 1-5*, five one-day interactive installations, CCS, Detroit, MI
- 1998 *Sexplosion*, Palladium, Roseville, MI
- 1998 *Institute of Music and Dance Showcase*, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, MI

ONLINE EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 *Phaedra Robinson*, www.markszine.com/202/probinsn/prind.htm
Fall Issue, curated by Debra King

EDUCATION

- 1998 College for Creative Studies, School of Art and Design, Detroit, MI BFA in Fine Art
- 1993-95 Alfred University, School of Art and Design, SUNY, Alfred, NY

Communicable
CONSUMPTION
Phaedra Robinson

Meadow Brook Art Gallery exhibitions are made possible through the generous contributions of individuals, companies and foundations.

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michigan council for
arts and cultural affairs

Dirt
from shooting
exercise

Gun powder (in
bullet-holes)

LIPSTICK

Red Wine - Chianti?

Shiraz?

Animal Blood? - maybe

Beet Juice



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