

Catherine Heard

Our Darling

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represent the whole. Bourgeois has also been strongly influenced by psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of Luce Irigaray concerning the parent/child relationship. In numerous interviews, she has painted a disturbing portrait of her upbringing. Born in Paris in 1911, Bourgeois was the daughter of a prosperous textile merchant. Her status as the middle child between a sister and brother gave her a feeling of insecurity that was exacerbated by the excessively authoritarian and protective natures of her father and mother respectively. Further turmoil was visited on Bourgeois when her father began an affair with the family's English governess. Hoping to discourage the budding romance, Bourgeois' mother invited the woman to move into their home. Her strategy backfired, however, and the affair blossomed.

Of the four monologues presented, only one dealt specifically with Bourgeois. In it, Brisley identified several key parallels between the sculptor's life and his own performance. First, he revealed that Bourgeois' sister had an artificial leg similar to the mannequin's leg. Second, he noted that as a child Bourgeois apparently lived in a house on a riverbank where she was subjected to the noxious aroma and sight of untreated sewage from a nearby town. Finally, he recalled that in one of her more notorious flights of psychoanalytic fancy, Bourgeois reportedly confessed to having killed and eaten her father as punishment for his extramarital transgression. In fact, one 1974 sculpture is titled *The Destruction of the Father*. Like any other digestive process, the consumption of human flesh inevitably produces waste. Several times during the course of the evening, Brisley (in the guise of R. Y. Sirb) donned rubber gloves to handle the turds in his collection as he expounded on their source.

The three other monologues contained oblique references to Bourgeois. In one that discussed the Bill Clinton/Paula Jones scandal, for instance, Brisley highlighted themes of sexuality and adultery that figured prominently in Bourgeois' professional and personal development, while also commenting on the turbidity of American two-party politics: to wit, that the curvature of the president's penis, like the distinction drawn between the Democrats and Republicans,

depended on the viewer's perspective. Jones testified that it veered upward and to the left, while in Clinton's eyes, it was rightward-leaning. Brisley's wry conclusion? That the U.S. political scene was "a bloody, engorged pillar of mindlessness." A second tale, describing the rise of an obscure Ukrainian coal miner to a position of influence in the Soviet politburo, addressed the issue of Marxist class politics. At one point, Brisley referred to Bourgeois and her upper-middle-class family as "bourgeois," thereby implicating them — and artists in general — in an unjust and oppressive economic system.

Throughout the hour-long performance, Brisley and Poitras engaged in a variety of independent and collaborative acts — once seeming to argue when Poitras couldn't read her assigned text because she had forgotten her glasses; another time building a plank-like construction that extended from a chair placed atop the table to which Brisley tied one of the turds while Poitras squatted at the other end to serve as a counterweight. On a third occasion, Brisley wet a Plexiglass sheet and ran his fingers along it to create an assortment of humorous but strangely plaintive sounds reminiscent of whale song.

From an art historical perspective, Brisley's performance recalled the agitprop of Soviet artists in the early stages of the Bolshevik Revolution who sought to rally the disaffected bourgeoisie to their cause. In its use of worthless materials like scrap wood and shit, it echoed the Art Povera movement of the 1960s, in which Italian artists critiqued the commodification of art under capitalism. Sharing the same goal as Piero Manzoni, who packaged and marketed his own feces in *Merda d'artista* (1961), Brisley (again in the guise of Sirb) sought to elevate the turds in his collection from artifacts — which they clearly are, by virtue of their being a culturally specific product whose composition, size and texture are dependent upon the diet of the excreting individual — to actual art.

While there is no doubting Brisley's sincerity, it's questionable how much appeal his low-key, bare-bones approach holds for modern audiences weaned on TV, blockbuster Hollywood movies and the Internet. Born in

1933, he is, unfortunately, the product of a bygone era. Contrast his languid, contemplative style with that of Winnipeg cult filmmaker Guy Maddin who, in discussing the impact of rock videos and TV commercials on his more recent work, said to me, "I love the idea of bombarding people with things — as long as

you're left with a residue, you've had a better than average [viewing] experience." Spectacle, I suspect, is here to stay, and artists who ignore this do so at their peril. ■

Stuart Brisley:
Louise Bourgeois' Legs
University of Regina, Sask.
October 28, 2000

CATHERINE HEARD *Our Darling*

CORINNA GHAZNAVI

Viewing Catherine Heard's most recent exhibition is like walking through a cross between a scurrilous doll museum and a chamber of horrors. The walls are lined with figures trailing embryo cords, secretion tracts, or multiple limbs. Quite the most startling image is that of a small child hanging itself, head hung limp, one hand still curled around the fatal rope.

Ennui is the title of Heard's new body of sculptures, showing foetal or childlike figures encased in antique fabrics. Yet the pieces recall anything but listlessness or boredom, for they are gripping, somewhat horrifying, and endearing all at the same time. We would be wrong, though, to understand these images literally for, like most of Heard's other work, they are deeply rooted in allegory and informed by Heard's interest in history, medicine, psychoanalysis, and dystopian / utopian literature.

The baby or the small child is the site of birth, growth, and construction. It is most profoundly naked and unmarked while already implicated in the Oedipus complex. By using language — she has altered some of the fabrics with silk-screened texts —, Heard pushes the idea of inscription on the body, leading one into the complex debate over textual practice and what Margrit Shildrick terms "the interface between body, desire,

and language." Yet Heard's relationship to language is conflicted: we see a text-covered cord leading from the backside of one small figure into the mouth of the other, insinuating the feeding of lies. Another duo shows branch-like mutated limbs extending from one partner to the other, who turns away, holding its ears shut, warding off this torrent of words in the form of snakes and forked



tongues. In other pieces, the handling of text is more subtle, and throughout it remains fragmented. Because it has been silk-screened onto the fabric that in turn has been fitted and sewn onto the figure, we can only ever read partial passages. If the viewer remains with the piece long enough, a kind of story emerges around insects and decay, for example, but one is always left to

CATHERINE HEARD,
Vanitas, 1999.
Oil on Masonite.
20.32 x 25.4 cm.
Photo: Simon Glass.

complete the narrative oneself. Thus Heard succeeds in addressing the power of language and its limitations while also presenting its poetic potential.

It is the achievement of this balance that marks some of her most successful works to date. While earlier pieces were often extremely difficult to look at, the series *Ennui* works effectively to hold the viewer even while pushing her back. While images of the distorted body circle around taboo topics such as miscarriages, abnormalities, and the grotesque, they also recall rites of passage. Based on birth defects, the forms of the figures nonetheless have an unexplainably attractive quality that goes beyond fascination with the abnormal. Heard holds that if one looks at something long enough other allusions will become apparent, images that can be poetic and beautiful. Moreover, these figures serve to create insightful ideas on what it is that we perceive as normal and abnormal, as acceptable or repulsive. How is it that some things are so difficult to look at, Heard asks, or make us so uncomfortable? Her explorations of these questions lead her to make images that address a kind of horror in us; in the process, however, we discover that allusion to the poetic and the fact that we are constantly surrounded by horror in the guise of the ordinary. Here again, her intense practice with language speaks to us about its power and its corruption. *Ennui*: Heard speaks of being exhausted by language (the news) or of its useless vocalization (politics). Her imagery speaks of us being suffocated and overpowered by words, as if by a force of nature separated from the speaking individual.

Heard's use of a specific, antique fabric, believed to date back to 1790, further enters into the narrative quality of the work. The French fabric is *Toile de Jouy*, patterned fabric developed in the 18th century, featuring anything from simple flower motifs to whole narrative scenes from peasant life, mythology, novels, operas, exotica and history. When placed on a particular kind of object, like the hanged child, they take on an added meaning: violence leading to death, the disruptive and corruptive nature of conflict, and the circular inevitability of life and the grotesque.

While we could view these images as essentially pessimistic — and certainly, Heard's work can be very dark — there are also

humorous and endearing qualities. Some figures seem to ache for touch, others to ward off the invasive, and still others seem to find a nurturing sustenance in feeding off themselves. A two-headed little figure addresses the dualities of interior and exterior, of the sanguine and the melancholy — one head laughs, while the other turns inward with closed eyes.

Simultaneously on view was Heard's oil on masonite, black and white *Vanitas* series. In her artists' statement, Heard writes of the image of a skeleton passionately embracing a young woman, a recurrent motif during the Black Plague and at the turn of the 15th century, when it was commonly believed the world would end to fulfill the prophecies of the Book of Revelations. The theme cropped up again in the late nineteenth century, and Heard presents it at the beginning of a new millennium "to contrast bawdy humour with our fears about the body, the medical/psychological image of the body with the carnal, pairing the drives of Eros and Thanatos." The execution of these works is exquisite, proving Heard's considerable skills in drawing and painting. Some are quite raucous, as the depiction of a skeleton with a woman in the midst of copulation, while others are humorous, showing a skeleton farting, and still others — evoking the kiss of death, close and welcome — convey a sense of intimacy.

Seen together, these two bodies of work speak volumes about our own anxieties at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Unresolved psychic and emotional states are pitted against our powerlessness vis-à-vis language and the tide of history. On a more intimate level this work questions the process by which we see and categorize the world around us. It goes beneath the surface to emphasize experiences we all know but prefer to deny, forcing us to confront ourselves through them and to regard the ubiquitousness of our taboos, while leaving us free, as always, to complete the narrative ourselves. ■

Our Darling,
SPIN Gallery, Toronto
Vanitas, Angell Gallery, Toronto

Snakes and Objects: New Work by DENNIS GILL

GIL McELROY

The Owens Art Gallery of Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, borders on a typical university quad: a patch of lawn, with some old trees and shrubbery, ringed by sidewalks and a variety of university buildings.

Directly opposite the Owens, the university's biology building is in the midst of construction as a greenhouse is being erected in a gap between it and an adjoining building. Construction debris spills out toward the quad, held in check by the bright red webbing of a temporary fence.

The quad itself is in use.

that have come to shape the respective origin myths of Canada and the United States in his work *Frontier/Dominion* (1991). In the work, busts of the Queen and an American cowboy confront one another from shelves set at opposing ends of a glass plate etched with the overlapping words "Frontier" and "Dominion," locked in a semantic struggle. But snakes, it seems, have been his primary focus in the last decade, and *Snakes and Objects: New Works by Dennis Gill* proffered the newest work in this ongoing enquiry.

It all starts indoors. The large lobby of the Owens doubles as exhibition space, and it is here



Dennis Gill, late of the Maritimes and now living in northern Ontario, is using it as a kind of sculpture garden, as the site of a number of sculptural installations involving that figure of myth and Freudian interpretations, the snake.

Snakes are nothing new in Gill's canon. He's been working with them for years, all as part of his larger investigation of the cultural meaning and significance of symbols and icons. Himself born and raised in a symbol — the Old Town Clock in Halifax that figures so largely in representing the city —, Gill has worked extensively with the myths we hold dear, like the oppositions

that Gill has installed *SNAKE and HEATER* (1999). In front of one wall sits a small electric water heater connected by hoses to a cast bronze radiator set nearby. The system is both functional and dichotomous; hot water circulates between the two elements, spaced about three metres apart, so as to warm a steel snake that lies atop the radiator, but the heater and rad form an oppositional dyad, the former a commodified thing straight off the hardware store shelf, the latter a sculptural simulacrum (albeit functional) cast by Gill himself. The one, however, is both functionally and metaphorically useless without the other.

Dennis Gill, *Snake Grate*, 2000. Cast bronze. 7.6 x 61 cm diameter. Photo courtesy of the artist.