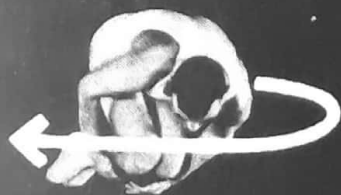


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Self-address

Catherine Owens

Triskel Arts Centre, Cork
May 1998

This exhibition is an investigation of femininity and 'dress'. It is contemplative work. Its disturbances are troublingly, but quietly resonant—drawing the viewer/listener towards its objects and thematic nests with a subtle tenacity. Owens' project here is realised through sculpture, drawing and sound. Several of the pieces are made from fabric and paper—media which make the labour of art-making itself delicate and transportation/storage difficult. It is no accident that so many women artists are drawn to working with materials that are fragile or disappear. Women's relationship to absence/ephemerality and to the quotidian labours of private space make it no surprise that such artists return so regularly to these realms. Owens' *Self-address* has a different take, it haunts such space in a different key.

Entering the Main Gallery at the Triskel, one approaches a collection of curt shapes attached to the far wall. They read immediately as dresses, but it isn't clear what they're made of, and we have the length of the gallery to work it out. Their detailed brown contours suggest at first, that these feminine icons are carved from wood.

Remarkably then, when one gets closer, the marching dresses are painstakingly made from kitchen towels stained with tea. Owens' background in batik is visible here, in her careful tannic staining. This quiet geography belies the operations of female activity. Such objects are resonant precisely because the labour of their making is as much part of the work as the object itself. The quiet repetitiveness of these dresses, the same shape, but marked differently, suggests a femininity wound in repetitive labour. These caricatured little dresses stage a performance in which women are represented metonymically. Bodies, clothes and cleaning are profoundly unsettled here, and mark a

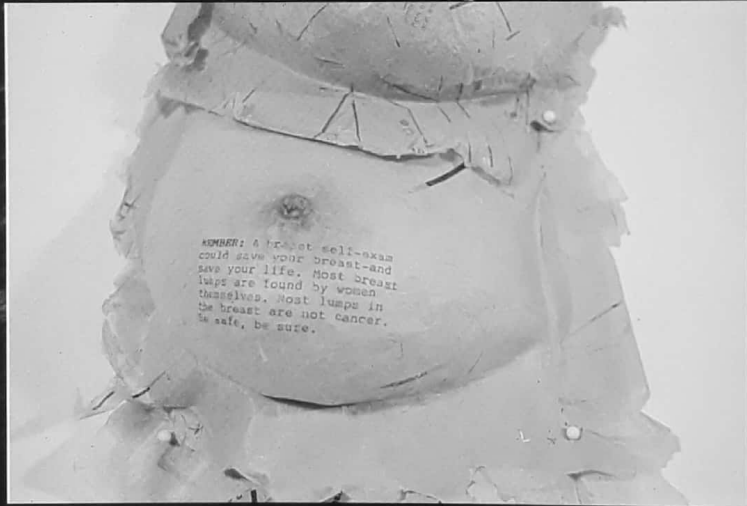
curves in the space. At certain angles it suggests the full breasts and bustle of nineteenth century female form, at others, the effect of Lainey's spun golden fibres suggest an elaborate coiffure—rows of golden pin curls framing no face at all. Its slow turning in the air of the gallery is in marked contrast to the parading dresses slapped against the gallery wall. This counterpoint is an important one, since representation of femininity is characterised (despite postmodernity) by the glorious exception, singular and golden as she is here, and absolutely removed from the grubbiness of the stain-tending masses.

As well as the physical objects in the space, Owens

Many of these stories are funny, others are unsettling, even chilling. One woman describes in bubbly detail how she plans her outfits in twenty-eight day visual diaries a month in advance. Another tells of her husband slowly cutting-up the apparently seductive dress she had worn out for the evening. "If this were to go missing I could never replace this," said of a knitted gold lamé bikini top. There are cameos of embarrassment—the dress caught in the buttoned fly during a dance; breasts exposed in error. One of the women says of a teal green dress "when you put it on, it's like skin." In this exhibition, in which bodies and fabrics seem interchangeable, such a comment seems to sum up much of the essence of *Self-address*.

Along one of the side walls of the gallery, and quite missable in its understatement is several metres of white muslin, only an inch or so wide and carefully attached to the gallery wall. The fabric is fixed to look as if it emerges directly out of the plaster. This little sculpture, this half-hidden fissure, is perhaps the most unsettling of the work here. Along its open side, a careful blanket stitch is sewn in mustard-orange thread. Its subtlety betrays a quiet power, as the loose blanket stitch prevents the gallery walls from fraying. Tiny repetitive loops, caught loosely repeat the hues of the tea stained dresses and Lainey's shining filaments. It suggests something held back quietly from fragmentation.

Self-address is thoughtful and thought-provoking work. Its tissues of paper, textile and flesh haunt its performance, suggesting bodies that don't fit, and femininities haunted and pleased by dress.



NUMBER: 4
I bet self-exam
could save your breast—and
save your life. Most breast
lumps are found by women
themselves. Most lumps in
the breast are not cancer.
Be safe, be sure.

mourning space in which stain-removal is a poor joke on a femininity symbolically constructed as 'stain.'

In powerful contrast to these dresses is Owens' collaborative sculpture with designer Lainey Keogh. This 'special fabulous thing' (Owens) is a curvicular form covered with Lainey's fabric. Femininity haunts its bi-lobal shape. This sculpture carves

feeds a series of audio recordings of women's stories about dress through a sound system into the gallery. The anecdotal, chatty, documentary voices suggest veins of narrative that settle and move away from the objects in the space. Women's relationship to dress is staged between the easy-chat of telling a story, and these symbolically slippery objects.

Background material: Lainey Keogh



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