

# THE TEMPEST

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## Return to the Forbidden Zone

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# RETURN to the FORBIDDEN ZONE

Urszula Szulakowska



Linda Schwab:  
'Manners Maketh Man', 1989

**S**heila Gaffney and Linda Schwab are artists who work separately but who are in close dialogue with each other. They are concerned with the process of imaging rather than with the formal and material aspects of a particular academic art-form. In the past two years they have begun to create works in Leeds which reflect post-modernist practice, feminist theory and which broadly discuss the power structures controlling society. At the moment they are preparing an exhibition for Dean Clough in Halifax (1994).

Their type of post-modernist practice is little encountered in this country in which art-training, with rare exceptions, seems ossified in a deathly academic dualism between the two- and the three-dimensional form. This convention is pernicious to the development of experimental art. It often no longer suits the needs of young artists who are crying out for access to a variety of materials and for the right to work eclectically across formal boundaries. Such a practice meets with unjustified suspicion in

England: simply because it is not placeable within an established category of art-making, whereby, pinned down and locked-away, an art-work will not be a potential threat.

Nonetheless, Gaffney and Schwab continue to work within a specifically English art-historical set of references. Also a particularly English trait of theirs is the reluctance to create a ground-theory for their work although they are well-aware of certain theoretical implications within it. But, they retain a slow and more intuitive working-process.

Gaffney's and Schwab's concern with imaging the 'female' and with a critique of historical practice has caused their forms and materials to diversify. Furthermore, they have moved into a sensitive re-assessment of older types of feminist theory. In doing this, they are revealing themselves to be young artists whose ideas and desires have been formed by feminism itself. They have been given the inner strength to re-interrogate certain areas demarcated

by older feminist practice as 'ghettos' and, with the changing times, to reclaim them as valid areas for a liberated women's art-practice.

This may be only one aspect of their future development. Both artists are already turning away from issues of gendering and sexuality in order to discuss the construction of power more broadly.

Schwab is working in a British figurative tradition, she defines herself as an image-led painter who has rejected the modernist concern with bold abstractionism and with the materiality of the paint surface. Influenced by early Freud and Spencer, Schwab has also retrieved a more ancient, almost mediaeval, miniaturist handling of paint of exquisite quality.

Both Gaffney and Schwab deal with the theme of mutation, initially through picturing the gendering process in terms of the iconography of dress and objets trouvés.

This is now becoming more subtle. For example, recently Schwab has been examining power structures through the semiotics of the paint-surface itself, as in *Slipper* in which the Cinderella theme is explored. In the top panel an object has been impressed but has left only traces of its former presence as a black shape. Also included is a silhouette of a feather and a blue mirror. The picture plane treats of absence: a two dimensional surface from which three dimensional objects have been removed. Under discussion is the hierarchy of power which, as Foucault argues, is so dangerous because it is invisible. We can only feel its effects.

Schwab has continued to treat the theme of power as absence in her most recent works, subsequently moving to the more specific investigation of secret societies and hierarchies which mark themselves through insignia, such as flags and heraldic shields. For example, she has created panels of heraldic symbols on gold paint, hung with paper chains, as emblems of the stages of human growth: childhood, school, adolescence (the bridal).

Both Gaffney and Schwab have used an ongoing dress theme which was initially related to a very personal examination of the imaging of the girl and the young woman, but which now examines the badges of self-defence with which we all arm ourselves.

In common with other recent women's art their work has a much less puritanical air than was found in some feminist art of the past. Rather it is joyous work proclaiming female sexuality to be an authentic power which could be freed from appropriation by negative socio-political and economic determinants. To them a woman's sexuality is a potential alive and real to

itself, a way of being which is humorous and mischievous.

It is noteworthy that they are part of a trend in young women's art-practice which is re-emphasizing 'core' imagery as well as the notion of a specifically 'female voice' in art-making. This had been negotiated by women artists of the seventies, most notoriously Judy Chicago. It favoured texture, surface, dress, colourism, emphasis on the process of construction and the concept of womankind as a particular type of technologist. An open-ended narrative was important, as was dialogue with the viewer. This idea was developed originally by feminists such as Lucy Lippard as a defensive essentialism based on the notion of biological determination. Till recently such a notion of specifically female-originated iconography and use of materials and form had been discredited by more rigorous feminist theorists. They pointed out that language itself, already gender biased, was a greater determinant in the construction of sexuality than the biology of the human body. The

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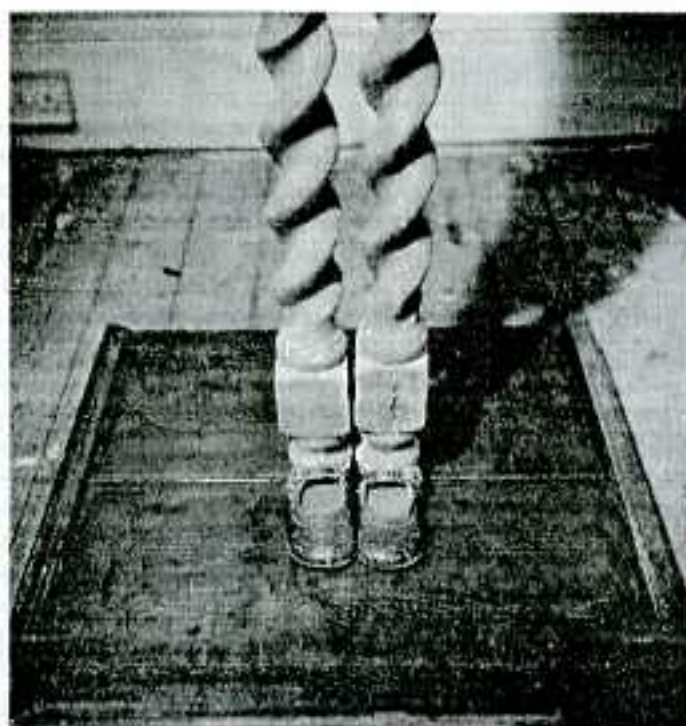
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art of this early type of feminism was, therefore, rejected as being a ghetto with no way out.

In spite of the theoretical critique against it, nonetheless, women artists return again and again to such core imagery, understandably fascinated by their own physicality and biological processes seeking to find a language which can interrogate with justice what it is to be a human in a biologically female body. The need is to find that 'body' which is flesh and has a mind and feelings inside it, rather than that other 'body' which is only a phantom mental construct. Maybe this is an impossible task. And there continue to be dangers in this quest for the Grail of 'authentic' female sexuality which demand enormous artistic sensitivity and intellectual discrimination.

Core imagery is intrinsic in the reading of Gaffney's work. It is both specifically evoked and allowed to emerge in the process of experimentation involved in the making-process. A broken pink wax shell apparently carelessly (but in fact specifically) placed on a chair becomes a discarded and wrecked vagina that suddenly has its own woeful story to tell.

Schwab's mixed media works are far more deliberated and painful in using such forms and voices. They make their statement so clearly and directly that they



Sheila Gaffney: 'Skirt' (detail)

have been misread as being deliberately confrontational. They are, in fact, not an assault except to those who blind themselves to certain realities. For example, Schwab has made a bold statement about edibility and sexual consumption in a *trompe l'oeil* painting, in execution equal to early Flemish / Dutch works of this type: an altarpiece effectively to lust. Entitled *The way to a man's heart* Schwab showed wooden cooking spoons, two beetroot and the cooked parts of a quail leaving the viewer to work out the metaphors for themselves.

A very early image of this type which distressed only those formalists completely ignorant of the history of women's work in the seventies was an ironing board covered with dense and minutely exact figurative painting: a woman placed upside down, body contorted, petticoats flying and shoes coming off, including a self-portrait of the artist. It was a visual equivalent in female terms to Blake's descriptions of Hell. Another work consisted of a vest / corset painted miniaturist-style with fruit and the horrible head of a satyr after Rubens. Embroidered and sewn all over with objets trouvés, shell buckles, buttons, pearls, the corset had the shape of an egg cut out of its side while a beeswax egg hung on a ribbon on the coat-hanger. On this was inscribed *Dog in the Manger*. The changing of shape effected by the corset was a metaphor of lustfulness: the concept being that the erotic is composed of the fantastic.

In the directness of such mixed media work Schwab has returned to the gutsy self-assertiveness of early feminist work.

While still being aware of the pitfalls that exist, it is now possible to re-consider the possibility that a

specifically 'woman's voice' does exist in art, one which transgresses formalist boundaries. This is stated with caution and without support for any emotionally and intellectually suicidal separatism between male and female. Nonetheless, judging from some recent young women's work there does exist such an experience. For a very few economically and educationally privileged Western groups, feminism has been taken seriously to some extent. For these, at least, having a female body does not always result only in a scream of protest at the conditioning which perverts that experience. For them, womanhood is a triumphant state of being. Theirs is a genuinely positive voice not just the defiant stance of the nearly-defeated. Griselda Pollock has recently examined the subtle shifts in the relations of male and female within the socio-political and economic structure of the West. (1) With other feminist theorists she has recognised certain positive historical changes.

However, a converse situation in women's art must also be acknowledged, as Griselda Pollock discusses, in which many women continue to use purely modernist forms in art-making. These had been defined as a specifically 'masculine' speech by earlier feminist theory and hence were considered to be inadmissible to women without falsification of themselves. (2) In fact, this objection has still not been properly answered but many women artists continue to feel personally drawn to the use and re-interpretation of various types of modernist forms, ideas and history. 'De facto' this situation has to be respected. In the case of Gaffney and Schwab the intellectual strength of their work would not be possible without their exposure to the rigours of the modernist vocabulary in the English art education system and their work would be less for lack of such

a strong, formal 'skeleton'.

Sheila Gaffney is creating a series of fifteen wax 'girls', bubble-gum pink, standing about three-foot high. They consist of torsos and legs in the main, occasionally a wax-cast handbag is placed where the head might be. The legs are deliberately cast from Victorian turned-leg tables, an obvious reference to the stereotyped idea of the sexual puritanism of that period. They all wear button-strap shoes and some wear ribbons as on camisole tops.

In a recent temporary installation in the gallery of the Victoria Quarter shopping-arcade in Leeds, the photographic art-works show them leaning against walls, peeping through doors, standing freely and boldly on the overturned drawers from a bedroom chest of drawers, sitting sulkily in corners. They spin-off accidental narratives from the fact of their

The discourse concerning the construction of 'girlhood' itself as a state of being distinct from womanhood is only very recently emerging, as at the Amsterdam conference on girlhood in 1992 in which the signifier was the figure of 'Alice'.

A significant influence on Gaffney's imagination are the novels of Angela Carter, specifically *The Magic Toy-Shop*, with its story of the little girl and her rather sinister uncle puppeteer. But the dark urban sexuality of that novel is not a theme in Gaffney's work. Rather she is interested in the concern with that other self which is a very important theme in Central and East European folk-tales, theatre and film. The making of the female gender, her vitalisation and the control of the strings that pull her are the themes that Gaffney negotiates.

In fact, Gaffney's work witnesses a type of 'outsider

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materiality rather than by any intention of the artist. The light effects of the photographs encourage such story-telling: lit candles stand on the mantle-pieces and the shine of the plate-glass windows and the reflections of the passersby intentionally confuses reality and art, so that the sculptures become animated.

This animistic quality of the works is a very ancient subconscious desire in the artist: to create their own other Self, the mirror that when breathed into becomes alive and lives greater and more perfect, capable of fulfilling the desires of their much weaker creator. This aspect of Gaffney's work is as important as her feminist intentions. The fixtures and the siting in the Victoria Quarter keep recalling Jan Svankmajer and his animated *Alice*. Alice is menaced by such a horrendous assortment of animate and inanimate personæ that she is finally driven beyond her common-sensical limits. She overturns the chest-of-drawers which has been her entry to the underworld, seizes an enormous pair of scissors and savagely cuts off the (stuffed) White Rabbit's head: "I'll fix HIM!!!"

While not demanding such a desperate act of castration, Gaffney's girls are self-assertive, wilful and inquisitive. Their little legs and feet stomp about the playground, not with the intention of bullying, but asserting their strength as a quality to be desired as a challenge. The girl sprawled out in a corner seems at first vulnerable: raped or drunk. In fact, as Gaffney explains, this is as much the naughty girl who petulantly refuses to come out, making her own decisions as they suit her.

understanding' of the history and function of figurative sculpture. She admits a kinship from her student days with the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois. Lucy Lippard in writing about Bourgeois in the seventies had categorised her practice within an intuitive animism, valuing Bourgeois' work for its emotive qualities as almost 'primitive artifact' (3). Thus, Gaffney's art practice is, indeed, to be defined as 'sculpture' for its concern with space, tactility and presence. Nonetheless, its 'atmospheric' is created by one who hovers around the figurative sculptural tradition, perceiving it with quite different eyes. This by-stander Other appropriates the forms of the tradition, both critically and with reverence, converting them into a personal protective talisman.

Gaffney's intention is to acknowledge the history of figuration but not to be part of it. For, in the end, these wax figures are not 'girls'. They are wax and table-legs and ribbons. They have no inherent sensuality as in the tradition of figuration. They are constructs. There IS no story. There is only the context of the installation and the meanings that arise by chance.

The message in the work of Schwab and Gaffney is hopeful: in the playful following of one's own retrieved, real desires the nightmare of becoming a faceless Ideal Woman can be avoided. But such freedom is dependent on understanding the forces which construct the personal 'self'.

1) Griselda Pollock, "Painting, Feminism, History" in *Destabilising Theory* (eds. Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips), Polity Press, 1992.  
2) *Ibid.* 3) Lucy Lippard, "Louise Bourgeois: From the inside out" in *From the Centre*, New York, 1976.