

Artspeak Postscript 71

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**on “Witch With Comb”
ANNE LOW**

When I was a teenager my parents decided to join the Society for Creative Anachronism, an international organization that dedicates itself to researching and recreating arts and skills of pre-17th century Europe. My mother, a seamstress by trade, sewed the family medieval garb and my father made traditional long bows. For several years we learned different medieval skills, dances and crafts, and attended banquets and battles. For a few summers in a row, we attended the 'Battle for the Baroness' on a cattle ranch in Clinton, BC. The weekend would be spent engaged in full medieval re-enactment, complete with battles and rows of merchants selling their goods. My sisters and I would wander around the fields with our long hair flowing, dressed in medieval garb while my parents shot dummy arrows at people in armour made from PVC and leather. The back drop for the battle was a makeshift fortress or castle made from repurposed real-estate signs that had been boarded together and painted to look like stone bricks. I appreciated the finer elements of medieval re-enactment; the elaborate courses at the banquets, medieval dancing and bobbin lace making. This was where I learned to appreciate the elaborate lace collars worn in the 16th century otherwise known as the Elizabethan ruff. This experience allowed me to enter the world of fantasy and to critically reflect on romantic escapism, more specifically to question the way we experience and engage with objects of re-enactment. In order to relearn old technological processes one needs

to closely observe the structures and details of fabrication from the past as a way to understanding the process of making. Close observation presents opportunities to analyze our relationship with time through material artifacts and objects.

In Anne Low's exhibition *Witch With Comb* configurations of sculpture, weaving, prints and architectural interventions allows us to ask questions about time, narrative and the body's relationship to sculpture directly through material investigations. Low weaves together historical fact and fiction to ask how we begin to speak about objects and what objects are doing in the gallery these days.

To begin, entering the gallery one physically passes through Low's sculpture titled *Ingress to the Ugly Room*, an architectural intervention of custom built shutters for the windows and hand-woven cloth drapes covering the two glass doors. The shutters remain selectively left ajar in a few spots letting light into the gallery and simultaneously letting one peer in from the outside. The colour of the shutter reminds me of the green of copper oxide. It asserts itself as a demarcation of a site, or rather refers to a place other than the gallery, a monochromatic narrative-deriving threshold. The stage has been set for us to enter another realm, a realm of thinking and being that does not rely on the logical time frames that we generally occupy. This metaphorical threshold leads me to think

about the space as an object, to be worked the same way an object would be worked, formed and molded by the hand.

Most of the objects in Anne's exhibition oscillate between the masterful and the mundane. The skill and labour invested in the weavings are so accomplished that they transcend the visual clues typically associated with handcraft. The human errors and clumsiness (those small perceptual clues that aid us in how something was brought into this world, whether by machine or by hand) are simply not visible in these textiles. The textiles within the work simultaneously become and support the objects and sculptures.

I frequently think of sculpture's complex relationship with the hand. Before industrialization sculptures were carved, molded and modeled—having a direct relationship with the body through making and directly through their subject matter. In the early 20th century artists began to use objects and materials made through industrial processes. This allowed artists more conceptual and explorative space to work and question our relationship to the world of objects. I've never experienced another time other than the present and therefore have only lived with the mass production of objects. With so many industrially produced items occupying my surroundings, I crave and appreciate objects that are made by hand. The idleness of hands in our daily urban lives crave a job to

do other than typing, swiping and clicking. The hands want to weave, mold, push, pull and clip.

The work *La Cocadrille* speaks closely to Low's material interest in the garments and objects used and constructed by peasants. The work shares its title with a novel written by John Berger in the late 1970's about a rural community in the French Alps of Haute-Savoie. Berger was interested in learning more about peasant life from a first-hand perspective and lived amongst these communities, gaining insight into the romantic and more pragmatic side of their lives. Low's piece echoes this curiosity with the sculptural object operating as a quasi-historical re-creation consisting of handwoven and printed silk pants, handwoven linen, pigment, found cloth, pearls, rabbit skin glue, rubber, silk, silver and wood. Several small silver trinkets of the Venus of Willendorf have been carefully sewn to the green cloth that hangs behind the pants as well as a shiny pink darning tool. On the pants curiously hangs black letters or symbols, fishing lures and pearls. The knees have been made to look dirty or worn with patches of pigment applied to the fabric. Knowing all too well this is a sculptural object I can't help but wonder hypothetically who wore these pants, what their function was and what was happening in their world? Perhaps some sort of fertility suit for fishing and sock mending excursions in a warm climate.

Placed in the front and slightly in the center of the room stands the sculpture *A sunken ash pit*.

A stove like object of powder coated steel and walnut with a small piece of hand woven linen hanging from the aluminum duct running from the stove to the wall of the gallery. This stove had me guessing when I first saw it. I don't have a relationship to wood stoves,. I grew up in the suburbs with a furnace. After spending some time looking through images of sunken ash pits online, I came across a site dedicated to selling antique Shaker Stoves. I found an image of a mini cast iron stove with thin legs, penny feet, and the rounded ledge of the base that protrudes out where the latch would open so that embers don't fall out onto the floor. This was the object I encountered in the gallery, and as I cross-referenced images of shaker stoves to the sculpture in the exhibition I noticed that some of the more functional elements had been erased from the work and materials had been shifted. The object in the gallery did not have a door and the base was made of walnut and nonetheless would burn if it were to be used. There was a small textile on the aluminum flute that would also most likely catch fire if the stove was burning fuel. This tension between the symbolic and functional kept me asking questions of the work that can't seem to be answered.

In addition to the object-based sculptures housed within the object-room there are a series of object-prints to discuss as well. Three framed prints that use

different printing techniques such as mono prints, screen prints and soft ground etching. In one of the prints title *Witch with Comb* it appears that tangled clumps of hair have been dipped in blue paint and then directly pressed up against and printed on the paper, as screen printed illustrations of ants wander about on the surface. The second print titled *OB* has a red mono print of the bottom portion of a pair of pants with graphically illustrated tampons screen printed all over the surface. The third print in the exhibition titled *Chores* appears to have an etching made from direct contact with a piece of cloth, a screen print of the top portion of the back of an old chair, a nail and graphic line marks. All three prints associate themselves with specific objects. Through this graphic translation we are able to read the objects like texts and images through their structure and line but what is lost in the process is their corporeality.

Another sculptural configuration titled *Greasy Head* finds itself propped up against the wall at the back of the gallery. There is a small mattress covered in a hand dyed and hand-woven silk fabric. The fabric is stripped and has the appearance of a machine woven cloth too fine and precise to be hand loomed. A strange walnut wood T-shaped tool is resting against the mattress, almost broom like in its silhouette and function in sweeping debris together in a cluster. Debris such as; a stained feather pillow, a candle, an etching, newsprints and a reproduction of Albrect

Dürer's painting *Avarice*, an allegorical painting depicting an older woman wrapped in a crimson cloth with one breast visible and holding a large sack of gold coins. The allegory of *Avarice* being the excessive desire for gain and the greed of wealth, the painting warning both of the transience of life and the worthlessness of earthly fortune and alluding to the passing quality of youthful beauty.

In a discussion about this work the paintings of Cornelis Norbertus Gysbrechts surfaced. I've always been fond of Gysbrechts Trompe-l'oeil paintings that depict still life clusters of notes, letters, combs, feather quills and scrappy bits of everyday life held taught by straps of leather to the back of wooden boards. The elegance of mundane objects and the mastery of the trompe-l'oeil painting technique to trick the eye into thinking that these were real objects allow the viewer to slip through a time portal and consider painting to act as a conceptual tool of perceptual transportation. These paintings do something that most paintings don't, but it is hard to describe exactly what. What do the sum of objects become when we are presented with them in sculptural configurations, I take in all of this information, the references, the making and the unmaking of narratives to experience the act of watching and wondering.