

Jane Mulfinger

contemporary visual arts

I N C O R P O R A T I N G W O R L D A R T

THE SOURCES OF NINETIES ART

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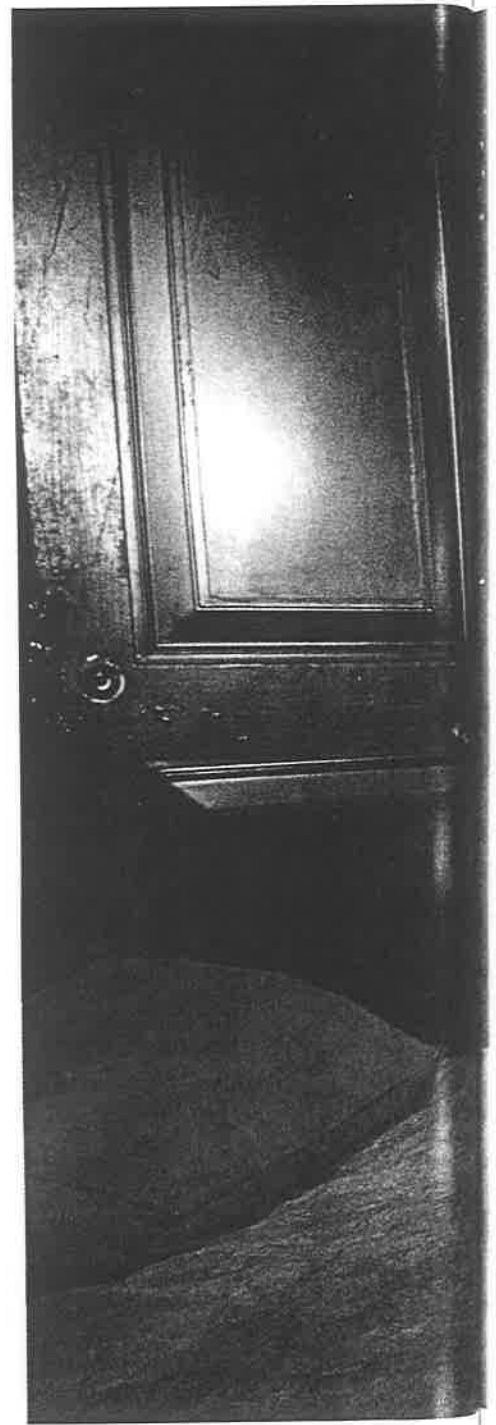
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Beyond the

The mastering gaze [renders] the passive image of woman fragmented ... dismembered, fetishised and above all silenced', wrote Griselda Pollock in *Vision and Difference* in the eighties, while Angela Carter vigorously claimed that 'Picasso liked cutting up women'. In the seventies, the reclamation of the passive female body from the dominant male gaze became one of the major enterprises of feminist art. Artists such as Judy Chicago, Cindy Sherman and Helen Chadwick all identified the body as the site for self-exploration and self-definition. By laying claim to their own bodies – by 'being in control' – women turned the hitherto commodified female body into the active site of sexual discourse and gender politics. Ten years ago it was still a novelty to have 'all women' art shows. Now, a generation on, women artists from Mona Hatoum to Jenny Saville have grown up being identified with work on the body. The title of the classic seventies self-help health manual *Our Bodies, Ourselves* gives a historic insight into how control over our reproduction (the pill had only been in existence for a decade), our sexuality and, above all, over how women were viewed by men, was central to an emergent feminist identity.

In her short story *Dans la maison de Louise*, Louise Bourgeois describes her own body as a house with several storeys. 'I'm familiar with that body ... I've lived in it', she writes. Bourgeois, now in her eighties, has always been an artist's artist. Her extraordinary work – inventive and fresh enough to be shown alongside any Turner prize artist – plunders body imagery as the starting point in an exploration of what Julia Kristeva calls 'the braided horror [of] the abject'. Reappropriating traditional female skills such as needlework, Bourgeois investigates the webs we weave within the psychodynamics of relationships, particularly our primal Oedipal relationships. Her *Red Room* works of 1994 evoke the conjugal scene of the parental bedroom. Childhood trauma and its implications for adult sexuality are explored through the coupling of her freakish, headless figures, often fitted with prosthetic devices denoting psychic damage. The processes of ageing and decay in the female body are encoded in the presence of bare bones acting as macabre coat-hangers for sexualised and fetishised female underwear.



body

While the subversive autobiographical vision of Louise Bourgeois continues to affect a younger generation, **Sue Hubbard** notes the shift towards a broader discourse among certain female artists.



LOUISE BOURGEOIS, *Red Room (The Parent)*, 1994, mixed media, 248 x 427 x 424 cm, Courtesy: Cheim & Read, New York, © 1994 the artist. Private collection, Zurich

below: JANE SIMPSON, *In Between*, 1994, brass, butter, halogen bulb, refrigeration unit, 32 x 50 x 10 cm. Courtesy: Asprey Jacques, London

opposite: JANE MULFINGER, *The Drunkard Forewarned and the Swearer Caution'd*, 1998, silver plate, steel wire, television, video, compressor, inflatable, wadding, foam, pillows, fabric, dimensions variable. Courtesy: Mayor Gallery, London

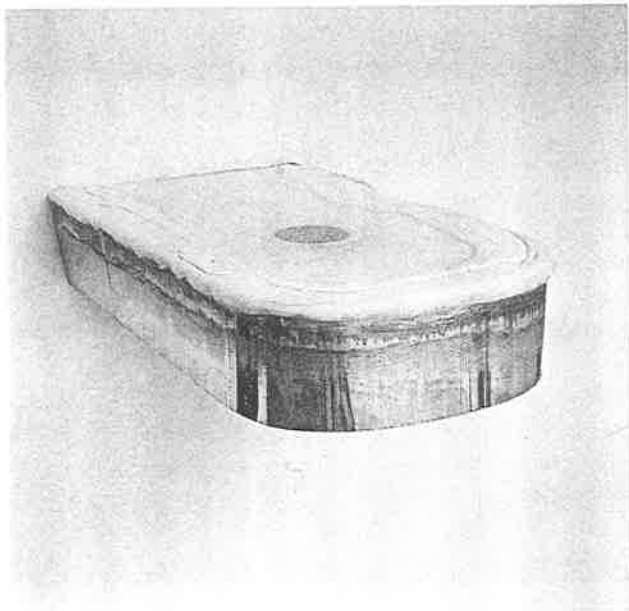
The complex primal relationship with the mother is signified by the recurring motif of the spider lodged at the centre of her web. The power, the subversive vision and raw pain that characterises Bourgeois' work has had its effect on numerous younger female artists. Paula Rego may well have glimpsed Bourgeois' early engravings of cat-women (which combined femininity with the feline) before making her own *Dog Women* works, and perhaps Jana Sterbak had seen Bourgeois' sewn garments before making her *Flesh Dress*. The assemblages of Annette Messager and the prostheses and body extensions of Rebecca Horn all touch upon themes dealt with in Bourgeois' *oeuvre*.

Bourgeois' work may yet come to exemplify the twentieth-century struggle for a coherent, autonomous female identity but, as we move into the twenty-first century, where do women turn now? It is perhaps time to move on, to engage in other discourses or there may be a danger that we corral ourselves into a new ghetto where autobiography is our only narrative. It was not always thus. A 'transitional' generation of women born in the thirties and making work 'pre' feminism – such as Bridget Riley, Gillian Ayres and Elisabeth Frink – felt that to make art as a woman required no special positioning. Whilst for most feminists autonomy, the knowledge of who we are, is a prerequisite that enables them to

engage in wider discourses, there is a growing number of women artists who are investigating in philosophy, history, the sublime, memory etc. – exploring what it means simply to be *human*.

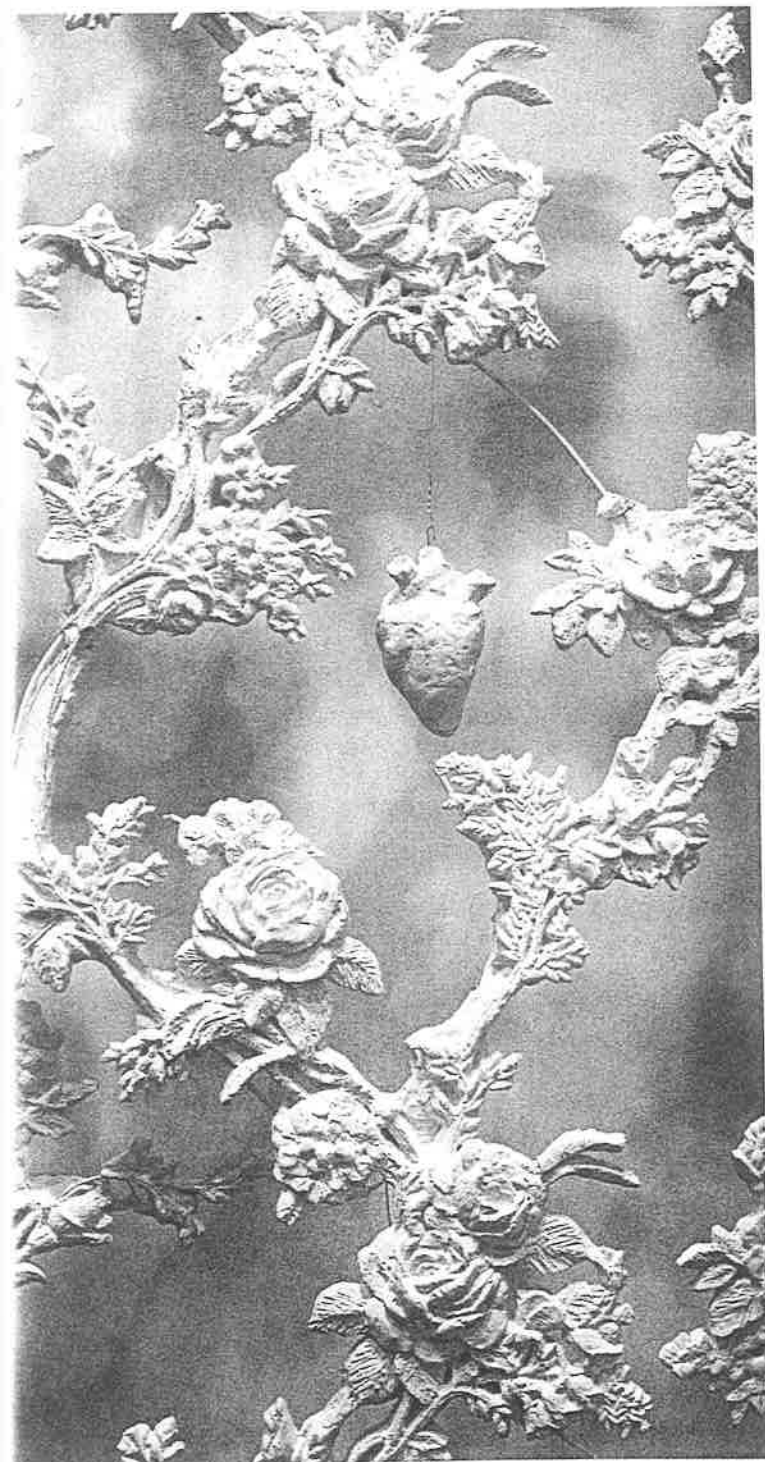
In Jane Mulfinger's recent installation at the Mayor Gallery, London – *The Drunkard Forewarned and the Swearer Caution'd*, 1998 – the basement was filled with a squelchy silver object somewhere between a Michelin man and a silver Spandex bouncy castle. The viewer was seduced into climbing onto this orgiastic bed. Clouds appeared to float by on a video monitor. The effect was like peering from an aeroplane window, and was as close as any of us is going to get to sitting on a cloud playing at being an angel. Dangling from the ceiling, etched onto silver plaques, were words with distinct moral force such as 'fortitude', 'prudence', 'envy' and 'temperance', based on the *Virtues and Vices* illustrated by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel. Tarnishing at different rates, these words were being obliterated in an arbitrary act of censorship. The piece returned us to the debates and thought systems of the medieval world, where God sat in heaven at the top of a moral pyramid. At the Dominic Berning Gallery, *No Image No Matter* (1998) – Mulfinger's delicate glass etchings referencing clouds and feathers – suggested not only celestial spirits but also fossils embedded in crystalline rock structures and the quest of archaeologists and palaeontologists for the source of life. *Lost for Words* and *No Vacancy* (both 1991) ranged rows of spectacles on glass shelves. Engraved on the lenses were individual texts. In *No Vacancy* the lines were taken from Philip Larkin's *Old Fools*. Here vision, knowledge and language were all elided, for language is one of our ways of knowing and naming the world, as is sight. Mulfinger's appropriation of various forms of written signs – Morse code, musical notation, Braille – also challenges our perceptual relationship with the visible, tactile world. This subtle, witty and poetic work deals with complex issues, including how we 'know' and memorise things, and how we negotiate our relationship between our internal desires and the external world.

Jutting from the wall of the Serpentine Gallery in *Some went mad ... some ran away* (the show Damien Hirst curated in 1994) was a refrigerated brass shelf by Jane Simpson covered with a smooth layer of golden butter. Slowly the golden surface turned to ice whilst a central circle was melted by an overhead halogen bulb. The piece looked like a coddled egg, sunflower or Inca sunburst – yellow against white. The piece





below: DAPHNE WRIGHT, *Domestic Shrubbery* (detail), 1994, plaster, sound, continuous loop tape, Photo: Donald Smith. Courtesy: Frith Street Gallery, London
 opposite: PAT KAUFMAN, *Contained I*, 1991, stainless steel, glass, ultramarine blue pigment, 80 x 66 x 8 cm. Courtesy: the artist



had a strangely beautiful presence, playing as it did with the binaries of cold and heat, mineral and organic. A more recent work, *Folly*, shown at The Approach last year, sat in the gallery looking like a cross between a French urinal and a stainless steel park bench. Its strong architectural presence and utilitarian feel suggested it must have been designed for some practical purpose: a vast espresso machine, perhaps. Yet from deep inside it hummed like a Mr Whippy van. Its curved shiny sides appeared beguilingly sexual as a layer of ice began to build over its shimmering metal skin. The whole slowly became a self-contained ecosystem of ice floes and glaciers, where the rivulets of melting ice continually ran down into a gully. References to climatic change and to the way structures are self-sustaining and self-determining were all implicitly bound up in this captivating object.

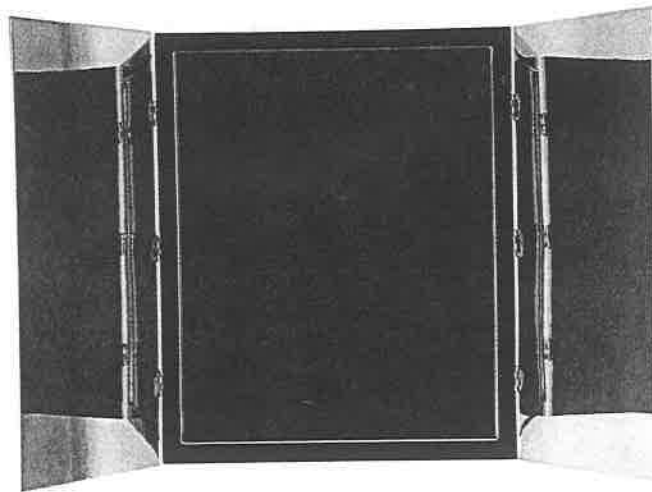
Walking into the small gallery space of Frith Street whilst Daphne Wright's white plaster sculpture *Domestic Shrubbery* was installed there amounted to a Proustian experience, a return to the dim rooms remembered from childhood, to the parlour of some ageing spinster aunt where the clock ticked above the mantel into the damp silence and the room smelt of coal dust and cats. It was a reminder, too, of the genteel poverty that pervaded so many post-war communities. For Daphne Wright, the references are to rural Ireland. The trellised wallpaper evoked in her sculpture was a bid for respectability in many a small front room. Its blowzy roses underlined an implicit desire for some unobtainable Arcadia. The image denoted is not only of hearth and home but of the rigid grip of a close-knit religious community, for respectability creates its own prison. Dangling within the diamond grids were plump little hearts reminiscent both of those on Valentine cards and of the Sacred Heart trinkets that decorate many a Catholic home. The stiff cardboard icing of a wedding cake was also evoked, highlighting the fact that for many a young Irish girl there was a stark choice between becoming a bride of Christ or a drudge of a wife and mother of many. From some dark undisclosed corner a disembodied recorded female voice chirped 'cuckoo' – a mother playing with her baby, perhaps, or the label given to a disruptive daughter? There was the uneasy feeling that within that dark tangled shrubbery, reminiscent of the thorns that encased Sleeping Beauty, lurked dark, undisclosed family secrets.

Nonsense rhymes and limericks accompany many of Wright's works. These incessant recorded repetitions act as fillers in the mute spaces where more expressive language

cannot be found. *Nonsense and Death* appropriates an Edward Lear limerick which tells of an old man who dies in his chair. This is played in a paradisaical garden where the roses, made of purplish painted aluminium foil, seem as if they have been subjected to acid rain. In the middle of this uninviting landscape sit two herons (birds that mate for life). Like two old people in a Beckett play, they seem to be waiting only for death.

Pat Kaufman's work is characterised by a sensitivity for the visibility of objects within a space, and by an ongoing concern with both the sculptural and architectural effects of forms and their cultural, spiritual and historical resonances. *Duccio*, 1990, evolved around the simple image of a house. At once intimate and monumental, it was based on the proportions of the quattrocento artist's portable altarpieces. *All that I Survey*, 1997, consists of two sandstone episcopal thrones. These monolithic forms emphasise the lack of human presence. Seats of power, they were nonetheless situated back to back so that no visual or physical contact could occur. The sitters were not only elevated but also isolated in their hierarchical states.

Pat Kaufman started as a painter. She uses glass, mirror, salt and volcanic sand in her work to create monochrome panels that owe much to minimal painting. Yet because of their materiality, they also offer themselves as *tabulae rasae* – virgin surfaces onto which the unwritten text of our dreams and imagination can be projected. But these 'sculpture-paintings' are more than an exercise in form. *After the Fire* (1993–94) is made, in part, of near-white ash gathered from a virulent bushfire which threatened the artist's house. Six panels are set in two rows of three: the bottom row is representative of the colours and materials left after the fire, while the top echoes the colours left after winter rains (earth, ash, graphite and then terre-verte, Indian red and Mars yellow).



These, as does the much earlier *Duccio*, echo the scale, proportion and shape of fourteenth-century pre-Renaissance paintings. Yet in a post-religious world their alchemical history – from fire, to ash, to art – stands as a modernist metaphor for transformation. There is a muscular fragility to this work. It is at the same time both assertively minimal yet melancholically poetic. The cracks and fault lines that occurred when packing the dry material into the panels read

like nascent hieroglyphics. Inspired by the landscape on the Portuguese volcanic island Faial, Kaufman used volcanic sand in one panel, emphasising a continuing human relationship with the land and the ageless human desire to intervene and 'make our mark'.

Whilst traditional feminist discourses remain relevant to women who do not enjoy the freedoms of the First World (and to all those who remain spiritually and economically silenced), it may be time for those

who have enjoyed two decades of growing intellectual and monetary freedom to turn their sights outwards. Within the tradition of western thought there has been for several centuries a split between body and soul, sexuality and spirituality. Women have been viewed as chthonic, fundamental, *material*, and men as rational, spiritual, *Apollonian*. Only when this false binary is abandoned will we truly be able to move forward. To quote Luce Irigaray in her essay 'Sexual Difference': 'A genesis of love between the sexes has yet to come about, in either the smallest or largest sense, or in the most intimate or political guise. It is a world to be created or recreated so that man and woman may once more or finally live together, meet and sometimes inhabit the same place'.

Sue Hubbard is a poet and freelance critic