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Latent Content

Lisa Keedwell

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JUSTINA M. BARNICKE GALLERY
HART HOUSE, TORONTO
FEBRUARY 1ST - MARCH 1ST, 1990

Lisa Keedwell's *Latent Content* show at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House is surprising not so much for its material content as for its implicitly human focus. These works are silent vestiges drawn from the wardrobe of Keedwell's inner world. Her art is meticulous. Its purpose has already been defined through the choice of clothing, bodily forms, the layers of human existence as subject matter. Keedwell states, «My recent work focuses on ideas concerning self-discovery and identity; exploring how we fit into the world and how we protect and expose ourselves within it. I have used a wide variety of materials and techniques not normally associated with the production of "art objects", trying to find through them a link between our everyday existence and something which transcends it, looking for a deeper appreciation of our lives and the people within them».¹

While Jasper Johns and George Segal worked with these simple physical extensions of physical being in earlier work from the 60's, by using body casts, and more recently Gilbert and George have used it in conjunction with photography, their art is part of an ongoing social discourse in the live performance vein. Keedwell's work, on the contrary, is obsessive. Its myriad components at first seem to present a facade, a dressing of form. She seeks to redefine what the exact role of



→ Lisa Keedwell,
Artistic Constraints, 1984.
Mannequin, brushes,
fibreglass,
30,4 x 35,5 x 152,4 cm.

the artist is in objectifying expression. While her search for figurative, non-violent prototypes for sculptural expression could be seen as part of a feminist discourse on art, the way she fabricates and extends meaning broadens the discourse beyond mere gender identification. These works are curious precisely because they do not seek to define, but instead classify meaning through inductive reasoning. They become a kind of modernist folkway where sculpture reiterates the body-objects' tactile relevance to the outer world of materialist experience, and become part of a deeper discourse on what Michel Foucault has called the technology of sex.²

Keedwell's art works on two levels, and one acts as a barometer for the other. The first is that of the material object, static, rigid, implacably resistant to incursions from the world of interpretation. The second level consists of the dream content that Keedwell's art intuitively. Both are unhampered by ideological, visceral statements, and by pointing to an unstated relationship between each other these objects become magic, precious. Like museum relics these sculptures achieve a distance from popular culture that makes them immediately intractable. They become instant fictionalizations of popular mores.

Magnetic Marilyn has a suspended headless torso whose "body" has been laboriously constructed of continuous bands of copper wire used for electrical motors. The smooth metal's magnetic potential is part of a visceral joke that Keedwell enacts, a transistorized comment on the unstated laws of sexual attraction whose rules are seldom stated by either sex in our society. The regimen of exterior appearances, our cosmetic uniforms, are nevertheless rigidly followed by both sexes. Below this hovering form on the gallery floor, a spotlight mirror outline reflects this floating torso whose brilliant facade is the shape of fashion, on which clothes are fitted and can be adjusted to any woman's size. It becomes an allegorical paraphrase for a psychic definition of self and other.

Burning Potential uses the same process of disguised workmanship as the former, a long-term crafting process. Here a piece of clothing which resembles a kimono, an outer garment, has been constructed entirely of what appear to be match sticks, but are actually thousands of pieces of wood, hand painted. The work is inspired by a *Time* magazine article on the Hindu practice of suttee, where if a male husband dies, the widow then cremates herself on a funeral pyre. This apparently beautiful cloak becomes a guise for a cruel social convention that itself is a form of "historic

fashion", that contains human behaviour for simple reasons of gender. Suttee was followed for centuries for apparently correct, religious reasons, and short-circuited Hindu women's conception of self through an identification with God at the deepest, transcendent level.

In a wall piece inspired by a fleeting dream of escape, of gliding above the earth, observing it from an aerial perspective, we see a leaden cross shape resembling a flat fuselage of an airplane. Holes have been cut out of its wings and its corpus. The airplane - the body -



Lisa Keedwell, *How Do I Know Thee*, 1986. Zippers, fibreglass. 25,4 x 50,8 x 167,6 cm.

became Keedwell's own body. The holes became windows to look at the landscape below until the plane crashes into a bridge and the dream ends abruptly. Although more implicit, personal, this work fuses ideas of infinity with the workings of the individual unconscious.

In all of these works, the hidden potential of Keedwell's communicated message is immediate. We readily sense that we can only trust sensations that emerge from our mind's reading of physical experience, and these are not

surreal, but an unconscious realism, Keedwell's definition of traditionally feminine locutions of experience. As John Berger has stated in *Ways of Seeing* on traditional male-female self perceptions, «A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence... defines what can and cannot be done to her».³

In a series of three "Heads", one titled *Ideation* has been constructed entirely of paint tubes. Another work titled *Artistic Constraints* has a torso whose bodice has paint brushes strapped around it. Here, Keedwell's intuitive depth soundings give way to suggestions that an art that uses intuition and natural vision is now giving way in a post-natural world to an expression subjugated to the rules of industry. It is no longer consistent with humanity's place in nature. The congestion of material, paint brushes, tubes of paint, are product ideations, preconstructions of expression. They suggest that the new laws of art are those of production itself, and that even the manufactured materials needed to create what we call art, are resulting in a divestment of creative statement, leaving us blinded by the new formalisms of process. The core of any creative statement, our origins in nature, bio-history, is giving way to other technological considerations which now invade all levels of interpersonal and sexual communication.

How do I know thee has a human (male) body composed of a series of layers of multi-coloured zippers. The levitated figure, suspended invisibly as if in a hypnotic trance is blind to the entire world, mummified by its idiosyncratic clothing, frozen by perpetual reason. Our ability to realize the invisible persona within is inhibited. We can't read through to the vestiges of its inner core. These layerings, experiential as much as actual, could be the experience of any person. The piece suggests a tactile, childlike sensibility, the least expressed of our sensations, through visual device. Keedwell's art is quintessentially concerned with the different ways in which men and women view their roles both in the realm of art and in life. ♦

1. Lisa Keedwell, *Artist's Statement*, February 1990
2. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Press, 1980, pp. 145-146
3. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*. BBC Penguin Harmondsworth, 1977, pp. 45-46