

Susan Shants *Satiate*

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Satiate

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dreams have been the genesis for many famous works of art from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* to Jasper Johns's American flag paintings to Jean Cocteau's play *Knights of the Round Table*. Like them, *Satiate* by Saskatoon sculptor Susan Shantz owes its existence to the mysterious mental processes that occur in the unconscious depths of the human mind.

In this instance, Shantz had a day-dream of coating an object with tomato paste. After examining the idea in greater detail, she was intrigued. "There was something compelling about it," she says in a gallery publication accompanying the exhibition, "the sense of moisture and dryness, of colour and texture akin to flesh, the inside of the body. I tried it—icing (the paste) on with a knife and letting it air dry to shrink like a leathery skin around the object—and liked the effect it gave."

Shantz, who received her MFA from York University in 1989, and joined the Fine Arts department at the University of Saskatchewan the following year, proceeded to collect hundreds of second-hand candle holders, bowls, dishes, goblets and kitchen utensils. With the assistance of three local women, she coated the objects with a thin layer of tomato paste and installed them on an elongated oval table with a ruffled, fibre-glass table cloth.

Not perfectly monochromatic (in the dim gallery light, it is possible to discern tonal variations that are perhaps attributable to Shantz's use of different brands of tomato paste), *Satiate* nonetheless projects a strong minimalistic aura. Both the objects and the support surface have a uniformly pebbly texture reminiscent of fruit leather. Several metres in length, and over one metre in height, the sculpture's visual impact is augmented by a faint tomato aroma that, despite any

queasiness we might feel concerning the process by which it was produced, is not unpleasant. Overall, the effect is quite striking, with the sensual quality of the piece evoking a strong kinaesthetic appeal.

For the most part, the objects chosen by Shantz inhabit the domestic realm of the kitchen and diningroom. Like Ontario sculptor Tim Whiten, who is best known for wrapping human skulls and other unconventional objects in leather, she seeks to deemphasize the exterior surface. During a mid-1990s lecture in Regina, Whiten summed up his sculptural strategy by noting that he "conceals in order to reveal". At first glance, this statement appears contradictory. But through a detailed examination of *Satiate*, its underlying logic becomes apparent. By coating diverse objects in tomato paste, Shantz neutralizes distinguishing characteristics such as material (glass, plastic, wood, metal), colour, texture and decoration. Freed from these aesthetic distractions, we can concentrate on the essential form of each object. Most possess a strong organic sensibility, with luxuriant curves, blunted appendages and pregnant bulges.

Despite their altered appearance, however, the objects are still readily identifiable as consumer products. Arranged in orderly groupings on the table, they recall that most ubiquitous icon of materialism in the 1990s—the garage sale. Read in this context, *Satiate* becomes a melancholy contemplation on the production/consumption dynamic that fuels Western capitalism. While undeniably efficient from an economic viewpoint, capitalism depends entirely on an ongoing cycle of production, consumption, planned obsolescence and construction (through advertising) of renewed consumer desire that operates without regard for the principles of need, equity, social utility and environmental sustainability. The objects here represent the detritus/excrement of this system dating back forty years. Having been supplanted by "superior" products in the home of the original purchaser, they

are being offered for sale to a rapacious band of roving consumers in more desperate financial circumstances than the vendor. In much the same way as a dash of ketchup or some other condiment can make leftovers more palatable, Shantz's addition of a semi-glossy coat of tomato "paint" to these objects effectively enhances their marketability by obscuring their defects.

Working against this reading is the austere elegance of the floor-length fibre-glass table cloth, which is suggestive of an event far grander than a dingy garage sale. Given that most of the objects in *Satiate* are associated with either the preparation, presentation or consumption of food, the installation could be viewed as an effort to replicate the serving area at an elaborate, and perhaps somewhat surreal, banquet (a Roman bacchanal, perhaps, where guests first gorge themselves, then purge their bodies of food and drink, before returning to the repast). Under this interpretative scenario, *Satiate* not only addresses the importance of ritual in public dining, it also examines our current troubled relationship with food. On one hand, we profess to abhor gluttony. And, in fact, a large and growing percentage of the North American population is overweight. But tormented by glamorous images of ultra-thin models, many people are developing an unhealthy obsession with dieting that precludes them from appreciating the sensuous pleasure of fine dining. On occasion, this obsession can even result in an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia.

Both the above readings remain faithful to the core identity of these objects as consumer goods. But the fact that they are installed on a chest-high table introduces an element of inaccessibility that argues against viewing them in strictly utilitarian terms. With the objects arranged in ascending and then descending order of height to create a squat equilateral triangle, the table transcends its mundane origins in consumer culture and enters the realm of the ethe-

real as a sacred altar. In the gallery publication cited above, Shantz describes the applied paste, once dry, as resembling leathery skin. But equally strong is the notion that the objects have had their "skin" removed to reveal the blood-red flesh beneath. With this thought in mind,

Satiare could be seen as the end product of a macabre series of autopsies, where an assortment of internal organs have been surgically excavated from cadavers and put on ritual display. Alternately, the entire piece could be read as a single body that has been turned inside out so

as to expose its viscera. Because the objects have simply been placed on the table, and not melded to its surface, they lack the physiological integration of a regular body.

If we extend Shantz's metaphorical allusion to the human body to its logical conclusion, we find that she has negated all external signifiers of identity that people either employ, or have forced upon them, to distinguish themselves from others—clothes, hairstyles, piercings and other forms of bodily adornment, even gender and skin colour. Just as her act of coating the objects with tomato paste forced us to focus on their essential form, so too are we forced to contemplate the biological template that defines and demarcates human existence. While ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity do add flavour to life, and must be respected, it is worth remembering that beneath the surface, much more unites us than could ever divide us. Having said that, it might have been interesting if Shantz had included a more diverse range of objects in her installation to more fully articulate the breadth of human experience. ■

Susan Shantz: *Satiare*
MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina (Saskatchewan)
April 3 — June 14, 1998

Satiare, de Susan Shantz, est une œuvre qui doit son existence aux processus mentaux se déployant dans les profondeurs de l'inconscient. C'est en effet à la suite d'un rêve, où elle se voyait couvrir un objet de pâte de tomate, qu'elle fut tentée d'explorer les jeux de texture et de couleur qui s'étaient alors manifestés. Recueillant des centaines d'objets usagés—associés pour la plupart à la préparation, la présentation ou la consommation d'aliments, elle les a enduits d'une couche de pâte tomatée puis déposés sur une longue table recouverte d'une nappe de fibre de verre. L'installation induit de multiples interprétations. Outre sa forte connotation minimaliste, l'œuvre quasi monochrome met en valeur la forme de chaque objet, peu importe le matériau utilisé. Sans pour autant que se perde complètement la référence utilitaire des objets—de même que leur statut d'objets de consommation—, ceux-ci font tout autant office de viscères, ou de fragments écorchés d'un corps posé sur un autel.

Susan Shantz, *Satiare*,
1998. Photo: Robert
Kezeire. Courtesy of
the Southern Alberta
Art Gallery.