

Caroline Rust: A Room of One's Own

The Blue Pony Gallery, Charlotte
September 4 - October 11

Caroline Rust addresses several issues in the complex psychological works of art in "A Room of One's Own"—in particular the place of woman in the South, and female sexuality. This painter demonstrates an expansion of her style and technique by incorporating the found objects she refers to as "integrated" objects, along with "straight" oil painting which is handled with control and beauty.

Although abstract, Rust's painted imagery is often anthropomorphic, and the assembled pieces in the show imply narratives, some with darker edges. The romantically charged triptych titled *Voices that skip toward Night* is one of these darker introspective paintings, as is another embellished oil on canvas triumvirate, *The Center of the Self Exists, Present All Along*, which are deep green and resonating red-violet, respectively.

While the darker, more somber-toned pieces have a murkier depth, lighter pieces, such as the triptych titled *A Closeted Strength*, capture literal light and intellectual clarity, offering a poetic if alarming expression of womanhood. A searing sliver of orange interrupts the gauzy white-on-white painterly field of the central panel; above it, suspended on the wall, an artificial bridal bouquet suggests hidden meanings within the imagery and rituals of marriage.

Any male presence is noticeable only by its absence. Yet Rust's work is not avowedly anti-male; somewhat distant and historical, Rust's feminist statement may represent the search for self and the meaning of self, all residing within the artist's concept of feminine history.

Rather than representing the human figure, Rust suggests a human presence through the use of articles of clothing and other accessories to create a resonance rich with social symbols. The "integrated" objects, matching and counterpointing the palette of the canvasses, are selected right out of feminist iconography.

Eight small squarish canvases, (approximately 10 inches by 10 inches each) comprise *Memories of Ivanhoe*, alternating on the surface of the wall with seven dainty cups and saucers on shelves mounted beneath like the metered rhythm of a poem. These porcelain cups and saucers imply domesticity, or by shape analogy, receptacles or breasts.

Another set of evocative objects together with three paintings comprise *Wounds that Never Bleed*, one of Rust's most enigmatic pieces in its conveyance of another secret narrative. The inclusion of carefully displayed tableaux of pairs of gloves, filled with the shapes of capable female hands is poignant, implying the artist's hand. Given their proportions, the white antique kidskin gloves, dating no later than the 1920s, were worn by women who were small of scale and dainty of proportion. This was the feminine ideal of the early 20th century.

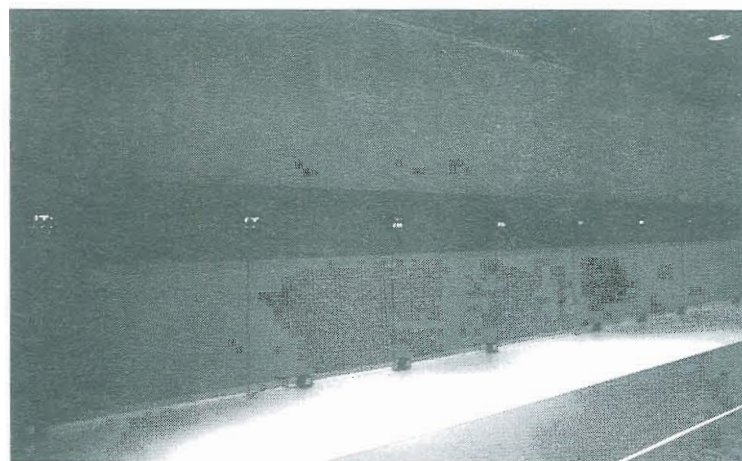
As part of a complex piece dedicated to a famous princess, the gloves seem a clear reference to genteel womanhood; they are distinctly feminine in a self-conscious way. Is this womanhood as it exists in the memory of cultural mythology rather than in reality?

Like the fictional persona of a woman in a novel, individual examples of Rust's work become more literal and imaginative. These gloves are real. Alone, they are nostalgic; in the context of a work of art, they stimulate other meanings.

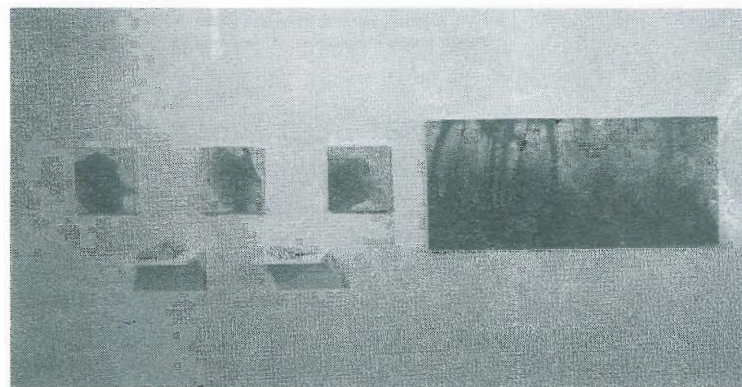
Wounds that Never Bleed includes a horizontal canvas depicting a landscape deep in the woods with the objects mounted on platforms, setting up a formal rhythm like the syncopation of a longer poem. On the third and last platform of this combine is a small rounded stone at the end, like a period.

Dedicating a work of personal art to the Princess of Wales is problematic. As a cultural icon Princess Diana has been mythologized, even canonized to the point of triteness. Similarly, when dozens of movies, TV shows and millions of greeting cards trivialize the presence of such ineffable spirits such as angels or ghosts, confronting any myth becomes difficult. The use of found and integrated objects that could be considered humdrum in their original context is a radically appropriate gesture and oddly daring.

This pleasing show could be enhanced by more objects and more details, for while restraint is evocative in its suggestion of repression and fetishism—pregnant feminist themes—a denser compaction of objects would add greater texture to the painterly backgrounds. The object-laden cabinets of Sophie Calle come to mind, memorials to a series of birthday parties over many years, in which the artist used her birthday gifts as elements of obsessive 3-D collages. Rust's paintings are secret, rather than secretive, revealing much through the medium of paint, but offering imagery that invites further exploration. There is a handsome balance between form and content which is rare in our postmodern age. Ambiguity of meaning and technical competence merge to create a well-developed, satisfying whole.



Jenny Holzer, LED installation view, 1994 (text from 1977-90), eight electronic LEDs, 5" x 4" x 1 1/4" each (photo by Joseph Coscia, Jr., courtesy of Allentown Art Museum).



Caroline Rust, *Wounds That Never Heal*, 1997, oil on canvas with integrated media, dimensions variable (photo courtesy of the artist).

David Finn and Page Hamilton Laughlin: Critic's Choice

Duke University of Art, Durham
September 10 - October 11

As a couple, Page Hamilton Laughlin and David Finn have been reluctant to exhibit their work together, if only because they seemed to be engaged in such different artistic projects. Here, however, they've assembled a delightfully quirky, coherent and thought-provoking exhibition. Although they work in the traditional mediums of figurative sculpture and oil painting, Laughlin and Finn employ their conventional skills in an unconventional, even iconoclastic manner, appropriating imagery from advertising, art history and popular culture and turning its expected meanings inside-out. Both artists are appalled as well as enthralled by the seductive power of imagery—especially depictions of the human body—and their work attempts to subvert or "short-circuit" the cultural construction of beauty and desire.

Laughlin's paintings are lush, sensuous, densely-layered parodies of pictures from popular magazines. One recent untitled series consists of seductive, mysterious closeups of woman's body—her eyes, lips, fingernails—in the same sort of fetishized, commodified treatment of the female form we've come to expect from commercial advertising. But to undermine the seductiveness of these images, and to highlight the insidious objectification they represent, the artist systematically distorts and defaces them; the pink lips are grotesquely swollen, the skin tones assume a deathly grey-green pallor, and the surface of each painting is violently scraped away as if the artist has gouged her fingernails through the wet paint. Sometimes this scraping seems to imply an angry response to the imagery, but at other times it seems so tentative it might be mistaken for decoration.

In her recent "Architectural Digest" (1997-98) series, Laughlin has appropriated images of lavishly decorated living rooms from *Architectural Digest* magazine. The pornographic consumerism of these images, too, is designed to manipulate our desires, and once again the artist's version dis-