Why Did Petah Coyne's Work Make Me Cry?

BY MATT MORRIS

Untitled #1394 (Clarice Lispector), 2013–14. Specially formulated wax, silk flower, velvet, velvet ribbon, felt, cotton, thread, foam core, batting, glass, wood, wire, and screws, 14 x 32 x 26 in.

CHRISTOPHER BURKE STUDIO, © PETAH COYNE, COURTESY GALERIE LELONG, NY

Untitled #1103 (Daphne), 2002–03. Specially formulated wax, silk flowers, cast-wax figure, curly willow, synthetic feathers, hat pins, tassels, ribbon, paint, acrylic primer, chicken wire, metal hardware, horse hair, mixed media, and human hair, 77 x 83 x 86 in.

Eleven years ago, I wept openly in the middle of Petah Coyne's touring survey "Above and Beneath the Skin." Within compulsory, regulated social systems—the ones that determine what options are available for a subject's action and identification—uncontrolled crying is a breach of those mores, a breakdown and demonstration of the effects of life struggling in relation to power. But what tensions snapped that morning when I encountered Coyne's sculptures hanging, standing, and spreading across the walls of a darkened gallery? What loss and eventuality did I feel?

Coyne's sculptures can only be grasped from a distance, across time. They can finally be touched only in ghost form, after they have become embedded in the viewer's interior life. Now, gathering my memories of that exhibition and other Coyne shows over the past 15 years, I realize that Coyne makes memories. And as remembrance, her works enlarge, accumulate, distort, iterate, and spread into fantasies and deep desires. In every grouping of Coyne's sculptures is the hope—vain, frustrated, wistful—that if these figures gather (as remembering), all-but-forgotten rooms may be limned in the spaces between their forms. They mark out not a return to prior places, but suspended states at considerable remove, perpetually slipping away—not just in death, but in the exquisite death of never touching. Recalling the installation at Chicago's Cultural Center, the darkest works receded into the shadowy, ornament-laden hall. Coyne's works inhabit a psychological space more than a physical one, where what is withheld or lost forever is more potent than what remains.

In her exhibitions, remnants—particularly those expressing femininity, leftovers from recursive modes of art studio production, and the taming of flora and fauna—disrupt a stable correlation between senses and knowledge. Every piece of evidence, just short of reaching out to grab them, conspires to suggest that for all of the lavish surfaces of Coyne's work, there is far more unseen, undisclosed, and unknown. Understructures are buried in wax and flowers, wound in wire and braided hair, obfuscated. The internal forces are left to be imagined, filled in by one's own recollections. "They have turned back within themselves, which does not mean the same thing as 'within yourself.' They do not experience the same interiority that you do and which perhaps you mistakenly presume they share."[1] These insides where cause might reside, fulsome in their accumulated effects, are unreachable.

Unseen though these inner workings may be, Coyne chooses to exteriorize their emotional effects. Dread, ecstasy, keening, and other expressions of feeling are maximized in the excesses of her surface treatments. It is as if in the making of these works, Coyne "chose to suffer spectacularly before an audience of men: it is an attack of spectacle, a crisis of suffering…An entire fantastic world, made of bits and pieces, opens up beyond the limit…it is pleasure in breaking apart; but from the other's point of view… The suffering is not originally hers: it is the other's, which is returned to her, by projection…she keeps her inner desires for herself, holding back her tears and swallowing her cries."[2]

For the philosopher Catherine Clément, women are usually assigned societal roles as witches, hysterics, or other such malcontents in contrast to patriarchy. For Coyne, a waxy weeping brims along the edges of many of her works, drips and runs held in stasis rather than allowed to flow down and

WIT MCKAY, © PETAH COYNE, COURTESY GALERIE LELONG, NY

away. In Clément's formulation, this spectacularized suffering serves a complex set of purposes: to react through demonstration of the effects of an oppressive social sphere, to be publicly moved to solidarity with "the other," but also to shield inner desires from being displayed in kind. Coyne's embellished façades are layered in dense accumulations; residing among the tangles of floral branches, ruffles of ribbons and beading, and coiffed tresses, we find these mixed uses of affect presented for an audience. Since the late 1970s, Coyne has struggled with and succeeded in organizing, taming, and releasing a level of feeling mostly taboo elsewhere in public life.

"I don't know what's changed. The world has changed. It saddens me," she recently said.[3] Art, like crying, registers the consequences of the global and cultural systems through which it circulates. An artwork is a point of crisis between the interior psychic life that inspired its creation and the turbulent society in which it comes to be operative. It is into this fray that Coyne's practice comes. The work's attention to inner fantasy, self-possessed of its own psychological purgatory, has, over the past three decades, also come to involve a secondary array of

Above: Installation view of "Petah Coyne" at the Brooklyn Museum, 2008. Below: Installation view of "Vermillion Fog" at Galerie Lelong, 2008.

TOP: © PETAH COYNE, COURTESY THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM AND GALERIE LELONG, NY / BOTTOM: WHIT MCKAY, © PETAH COYNE, COURTESY GALERIE LELONG, NY

aesthetic problems calling attention to prohibitions that temper the pleasures promised by its feminized allure.

"A constant problem is that people are often trying to touch my work—they want to see if it is real": Coyne has wondered what this growing tendency means in relation to the complex ways that the social dimensions of modern life have become mediated by simulation. One might speculate in numerous directions about how a magical thinking disconnected from the real distorts the relationship between artwork and viewer. Museums and arts spaces have changed over the decades that Coyne has been working, broadening their mission and experimenting with ways of making artworks interactive and directly participatory—all with the hope that such adjustments would translate to more socially diverse attendance. These initiatives mark the advent of a museum that is "yours," a tricky rhetoric that seeks to give visitors a sense of agency, ownership, and stakes in the culture of the place without ever actually redistributing power per se.

The irony of this "hands-on" art world is the increase in visible shows of regulation. Such spaces can no longer assume a shared value system, wherein audience behavior was self-regulated by internalizations of "look but don't touch." To do so was classist, anyhow, too often confusing the proprieties of the cultural elite with the pragmatism of preservation. Now there are increased numbers of guards, motion sensors, stanchions, grit tape, cases, gallery furniture, and, most of all, plinths that intervene between artwork and audience. These devices are defensive architecture at its most dazzlingly subtle. Here is a utilitarian Minimalism that iterates the planes of the institution's architecture—a silver cord, like a Fred Sandback, drawn taut around an art installation, glittering lines of tape

***Untitled #1373 (Ms. Redstockings: Notes to Women Sculptors in One Hundred Years)*, 1998–2012. Silk flowers, specially formulated wax, candles, hat pins, cast-wax figure, plaster, CelluClay, rubber, metal sheeting, steel, maple, laminated Luxar®, lace corset, human hair, antique Chinese bound shoes, letters, photographs, artist prints, drawings, bound book, and mixed media, 69.75 x 63.5 x 45.25 in.**

ELISABETH BERNSTEIN. © PETAH COYNE. COURTESY GALERIE LELONG, NY

Installation view of "Above and Beneath the Skin" at SculptureCenter, 2005.

WHIT MCKAY. © PETAH COYNE. COURTESY GALERIE LELONG, NY

crossing the museum floor like some perceptual effect of Robert Irwin—a crisply moral aesthetic that could not operate in greater contrast to Coyne's elaborately visual, emotional outpourings.

And yet, the combination emphasizes a comportment long demonstrated in Coyne's work. In considering together the artworks and the institutions they inhabit (and also the institutions that inhabit them), we find that Coyne's sculptures perform uneasy social operations out of the deeply personal psychologies they evidently espouse.

This integration of plinths, with their preventive function and clean aesthetic so in contrast to Coyne's assemblages, renders explicit a withdrawal tacitly positioned within her work, which has always turned away, crept away, drifted heavenward, and refused. If there is an action inscribed onto the bodies that Coyne has rendered in a diverse range of media, it has been the refusal to be touched, a paradoxical rejection of the physical in sculptures characterized by their physicality.

Nun on the Highway, Sister Elizabeth Throckmorton (1985) was the first of many nuns in Coyne's work, their bodies preserved from being handled by the physical world, committed instead to a heavenly union. These figures are all descended from Dickens's Miss Havisham, a woman abandoned before she is wed or her marriage consummated, and an often-cited inspiration for Coyne.

Untitled #1103 (Daphne) (2002–03) physically articulates the transmutation of the mythic naiad into a tree, just at the moment when Apollo's amorous intentions would have overtaken her. Coyne's Daphne is an endlessly visual spectacle—seductive enough to engulf the viewer's vision in an exploded bouquet of black blossoms and branches. The central figure trails scattered bouquets, synonymous with a path of rose petals leading to a bed for lovers.

When I first saw *Daphne* on that emotional day in Chicago, it spread across the same floor on which visitors walked. The difference between the permission to gaze upon her and the figure's refusal to be handled by Apollo or anyone else apart from the artist and the staff that installed her was acute. (But beginning in 2008, with the exhibition "Damaged Romanticism: A Mirror of Modern Emotion" at the Blaffner Gallery at the University of Houston, *Daphne*'s multiple elements have been placed on low plinths.)

Taken as a group, these sculpted women recall Yasunari Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, a favorite of Coyne's. In the novella, there is a secret inn where impotent elderly men may sleep with virginal young women who have been drugged into slumber: sleep together, mind you, but no sex. The whole of sensual knowledge must be apprehended more by memory than penetrative touch. Coyne says of Kawabata, "You could go back and go over your memories and have these memories just through looking. That, to me, was the most interesting. It allows you to go back over your life."

This formulation of remembering through looking, but not touching, is emphasized by the combination of Coyne's sculptures and the intervening structures, such as plinths, an intricate psychological turn in which the object by which one is seduced is, in fact, lost, reachable only in memory. Such bitter-

sweet refusals are shown as preferable over forms of easy accessibility and the attendant false promises of equitable community popularized within contemporary museum culture, socialized as it is through interactivity. By comparison, Coyne's work has for years risen just beyond reach, turned away, and emanated the eventuality of loss.

Writers, even this writer, stumble between calling Coyne's works sculptures or installations. The uncertainty is relevant. The figurative forms that Coyne gathers in a room become demarcations of other rooms, homes in which she has lived, churches she has visited, and places to which she cannot return. "I always see them together in rooms. I love them that way. When a collector asks where I would like [a sculpture they have acquired] donated, I ask them to donate it to a place or a museum that has purchased one, so there will be two or three together."

One could see such a grouping of several works in an installation at the Brooklyn Museum (August 2008–July 2009) in which Coyne hung three large chandelier works over a scattering of wax-encrusted flowers and bows, arrayed over a plinth that filled most of the floor. This room-within-a-room denied the viewer entry beyond the kind of looking and remembering in Kawabata's novella. Likewise, Coyne's 2008 exhibition at Galerie Lelong in New York included an area titled *Unforgiven*, in which a crowd of hanging works gathered in a room closed off with lattices of white wax and flowers, as well as gray velvet cordons. These spaces, separated from viewers, are, it seems, places that Coyne does not revisit, because that is not the memory. Instead, she holds the losing of them in suspension and concentrates on the feelings elicited by denied entry.

As I see it, a new category of objects has been born in Coyne's studio over the past four years, works that respond to the previous, gradual implementation of plinths and other securing structures. This incorporation of both the sensual, extravagant traditions of Coyne's material language and its emergent counterpart in the physicalization of forbidden touching excites these otherwise standard museum logistics.

In 2012, Coyne brought together elements that had been in process since 1998 to complete *Untitled #1373 (Ms. Redstockings: Notes to Women Sculptors in One Hundred Years),* a mélange of many favored materials—silk flowers, wax, burned-down candles, plaster, lace, and pearl-headed pins, among other things—but now encased in a vitrine listed among the work's materials, a digestion of the changed world to which Coyne had referred. Another laminated Luxar® case encloses *Untitled #1378 (Zelda Fitzgerald)* (2013). At the same time, Coyne has also begun to exhibit smaller works under bell jars. *Untitled #1394 (Clarice Lispector)* (2013–14) consists of a waxed flower of the sort that previously might have been scattered about the floor, now under glass, set on a red velvet cushion.

***Untitled #1181 (Dante's Daphne)*, 2004–06. Chicken wire, rayon and silk flowers, berries, feathers, specially formulated wax, velvet, nylon thread, shackles, hat pins, spray paint, metal tubing, metal wire, mixed media, and flowers, 62 x 70 x 101 in.**

WHIT MCKAY. © PETAH COYNE. COURTESY GALERIE LELONG, NY

***Untitled #1424 (Zhang Yimou)*, 2016. Specially formulated wax, silk flower, vintage Italian doily, glass vitrine, velvet, synthetic feathers, velvet ribbons, thread, wire, tape, and pin, 12 x 14 x 12 in.**

Issues of preciousness and capture that were tacit before now appear as apparatuses integrated into the physical composition of the sculptures. Accompanied by the guiding hand of exhibition design and bands of protective registrars, these new works manage to touch only themselves, "constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so."[4] They are held evermore as intensified iterations of what was felt from Coyne's earlier sculptures.

As my younger self sobbed in the semidarkness of Coyne's survey, there hovered a presentiment that I might never again stand so closely on the verge of contact with these sculptures. *Untitled #875 (Black Atlanta)* drifted like a somber raincloud overhead; on its return to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to which it belongs, its constituent parts were bound to a plinth made to complement the blonde wood floor. That day in Chicago, I recognized the pleasure in breaking apart and the public display of feeling that Clément says is shared between women and "others," including introverted queer boys like me, who were still searching to understand the powers and politics available in the delicately mournful stances performed by Coyne's objects.

Even as museum spaces acclimate to increasingly interactive uses, a surveilled, enforced discipline persistently underlies their objects and activities, thus bringing increased relevance to Coyne's imagery of tamed gardens, arranged flowers, birds caged and escaping, and the behaviors of women. It is here, latently, that the retreat into memory, emotional throes, hidden depths, and resistance to being grasped are organized into social potential—not feminist in the sense of being transformative of the powers that continue to regulate the societal body, but in the sense of candidly presenting a complicated psychic life at work on its own tangles and yet confined to the parameters of a form of law that maintains difference. These differences are first of all those between the spaces occupied by artwork and viewer, but further, they are differences that, whether a paean to progressively non-normative ways of living or a strike at neoliberalism's special alienation, which has grown in force and pervasiveness concurrent to Coyne's career, leave a viewer finally aware of a melancholic condition, one in which the longing for an embrace is answered only with the most beautified and ornamented signs that such comfort will not come from without.

Matt Morris is a writer based in Chicago.

Notes

[1] Luce Irigaray, "This Sex Which Is Not One," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, edited by Linda Nicholson, (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 327.

[2] Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press,1986), pp. 9, 33–36.

[3] All quotations from Petah Coyne, unless otherwise noted, are taken from a conversation with the author on May 18, 2016, at the artist's studio.

[4] Irigaray, op. cit., p. 324.