

ARTFORUM

Bonnie Collura

By Jan Avgikus, October 1997

Everybody knows how the "high-low thing" is supposed to work in art. The only movement is from the bottom up, there's no descending the ladder. Pick your poison—billboards, graffiti, porn, tchotchkes—at street level, it's visual blight. But when subjected to art's miraculous powers of transformation, dross turns to gold. This process is less a mystery than a straightforward colonization. Pressed into the service of a canonical regime, made to speak its language, to reflect its histories and traditions, the once-offending element becomes newly enculturated and art triumphs. But what if art's power were supplanted by the pumped-up and persuasive machinery of emerging digital technologies that collapses distinctions between entertainment and information, provides access in interactive sites, and delivers advanced visual effects? Bonnie Collura's sculptural installation, *To the third...* 1997, seems to beg the question, albeit in extremely indirect ways.

Hand-carved from blocks of blue-foam insulation and resembling theatrical props, prototypes, or even three-dimensional storyboard components, the oozy, slightly melted-looking landscape and figural elements in Collura's installation composed a frozen tableau vivant that had to do with the story of Persephone, her underworld experience, and subsequent transformation (into Snow White) through what Collura refers to as "representational time travel."

To the third... may look like art but its allegiance to popular media is pronounced more specifically, it taps into a cutting edge where comics, cartoons, and movies meet computer-generated models, animation, and special effects. From that matrix unfolds a cybernetic, science-fiction future that we, as "mediatized" consumers, have watched unfold for years, which contextualizes

Collura's work and defines the conditions to which it aspires. *To the third...* is a virtual reality of mutability: everything is familiar, thoroughly generic, and constantly morphing. Characters bleed into one another, crossing temporal and spatial boundaries according to the vagaries of plots and subplots, which are thick with conspiratorial intrigue, always promising closure while never achieving it. Collura's sculptural forms are beautiful to look at, though impossibly hermetic. There are codes and legends to aid in deciphering extremely convoluted narratives, but there are also decoys. Lineage charts that supplement the sculptural components of the installation not only explain that Persephone and Snow White are one and the same, but in so doing read like revelations of a grand conspiracy sustained over centuries, with protagonists that include Abraham Lincoln and the Baroque sculptor Bernini. Though Collura suggests a perfectly ordered modular cosmology, deciphering this universe requires managing dozens of plots and characters, all utterly familiar yet strange. Grappling with disabling narrative overload, we are charged with charting a path through a residue of signs and symbols left in the wake of characters whose travails are numerous, whose alliances are odd, and whose relations, at best, are of fleeting importance. Substance derives from artful arrangements of bits sampled from myriad mythologies, from mixed messages and metaphors linking hypernarratives that may or may not go anywhere. Difference, surprise, resolution—these are the real themes she entertains.

Collura's *To the third...* is presented as pure fiction. Her narratives are shaped to resemble the contours of ordinary myths, yet there's something here that conjures, too, the postmodern condition of information overload: that explores the mutability of fact and fiction, reality and artifice; that anticipates, albeit in the form of a static object, a digital age.