

THE UNTOLD STORY

Matthew Ritchie

To the Third, Bonnie Collura at Janice Guy Gallery, New York, Summer 1997.

It is difficult to properly examine any first show; the artist has no past, only a future. Everything is invested in the moment that the body breaks surface in the choppy critical sea. But it is also a moment when the artist is most honest. All the ambitions and blind spots are as yet undisguised. An ambitious artist can serve as a cultural barometer, recording our aesthetic temperature. In Bonnie Collura's first show *To The Third* at the Janice Guy Gallery, the recent fever of narrative revival seemed to be breaking.

Collura's show revisited and revised the chthonic legend of Persephone, fusing it with the story of Snow White in a single large and extremely ambitious work. A series of highly determined forms interlocked to make something less than an installation but vastly exceeding the terms of a conventional sculpture. Reminiscent of unfinished model kits, the stumpy silhouettes of Roman statues, key chain mascots, and the debris of childhood games, the semi-organic shrouded fragments and gesturing limbs left a sense of something incomplete, a

giant's ritual interrupted. Despite the complex imagery of the work there were no videos, texts or soundtracks, no temporal elements at all. It was pure sculpture, operating with the thoughtless efficiency of history.

The only clue that this might not be the end of the story was a color-coded drawing, a kind of flow chart, depicting various characters, none completely present in the piece. Snow White, the virgin bride, makes an alchemical passage through puberty, becoming Persephone the Red (remember that pomegranate-apple?), a fertile woman who will in turn age into the Black Witch, nurturing, envying, and assaulting the younger versions of herself. Persephone is a variant of the fertility myth, sharing her origin with the stone age triple goddess: The Maid, Mother, and Crone; the spinner, the weaver, and the cutter of the thread of life. It is a self sufficient cycle, a cyclical pattern of birth and death. If the triple goddess is the mother, then Walt Disney becomes a kind of magician-progenitor in Collura's work. Disney based his drawings for *Snow*

White on an earlier project, an animated adaptation of the Persephone legend, and she draws on his utopian fantasies for the slick, seamless surface of her sculpture and for the immaculate, cartoon-like color scheme of her work.

Disney and the triple goddess play point and counter-point, synthetic fantasy pitched against organic legacy. Collura's female protagonists are sometimes pursued by a hunter, "Green," his arrow seeking the circle, the target. It is right here, at the insertion point of a circular narrative, an endless thread, into the "progressive" arterial system of formal sculpture that Collura's work takes the contemporary temperature and finds it wildly fluctuating, as the body of art shifts between the past and the present.

For cultures and for people, identity is delineated by time; with enough time we are all shape shifters, shedding our skins, looking daily at strangers in the mirror. The tale of contemporary polymorphism is a story of accelerated evolution and devolution, of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny. If the "high" conceptual art of the 1970s represented the mind's final escape bid from gross corporeality, the "body" of the art world, then the 1980s was about reanimating it. Since it was never really dead, a Dybbuk was born. Representations of the human body quickly began re-appearing in the eighties, animus to body art's anima. By the early nineties it could be spotted skulking around in installations, videos, and "body referential works," drawn out of hiding by what Mike Kelley described as "the wonderful feeling of making a corpse walk." But with simple representations of the human figure we reach not the

beginning of realism but the end. Canetti described the figure as "an entity not capable of further transformation. It is not a natural object but a creation of man; it is his escape from the ceaseless flux of transformation." The completed figure defies our empathy. In one of the 1990s most iconic works, Damien Hirst has a shark float in a state of equilibrium. Curiously disengaged, it is an iconic representation of the species permanently at rest, a contradiction in terms: auto-referential. It is impotent.

But another of this period's most iconic images shows a young man (Matthew Barney) partially transformed into a goat and chasing his own tail. He is a figure in flux, a fragment, a glimpse. He fascinates us because, like us, he is only a part of an untold story. Narrative is the unravelling of the self-referential, the re-weaving of form into story. And that is where we stand, dancing from foot to foot, chasing our tails. We seek resolution but we desire mystery.

This oscillation between form and meaning is the grace note sounded by Collura's sculpture. Her work and that of some contemporaries like Anna Gaskell, a young photographer who works with the myth of Alice In Wonderland, is on the cusp, working with myths so grounded in our cultural legacy they have become almost pure form. Persephone and the fertility myth, the marriage bargain, and the triad goddess are so much a part of the background radiation, any further elaboration of the legend seems superfluous. Collura takes the only recently revived idea of "narrative" so much for granted that the story itself is redundant, just background material. In her work the back story, the "narrative," has already become merely

another formal platform, like the opening scene of a video game, a way to identify a few transient points of commonality. So narrative recedes, slipping effortlessly back inside the clothing of form and we come full circle. She has wrestled a kind of freedom from both the nineteenth-century imperatives of a central cultural narrative and from the equally seductive myth of the auto-referential creator. At the beginning of this century another precocious young woman artist began to work in a similar way: the work of Louise Bourgeois rotates around a series of personal myths

that also feature the maid, the mother, and the crone, without the "narrative" ever needing to become entirely legible.

With its incomplete chart, lost limbs and tale of a central character who is absent both metaphorically, as the sleeping Snow White, and literally, as the exiled Persephone, Collura has begun a pas de deux with the idea of the eternal return. It's a dance as old as stories and as powerful, played out in the long shadows of the quantum evening where time travels backwards in a widening circle, on the edge of its own surprise.

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