

THE MAGAZINE OF CONTEMPORARY VISUAL

WORLD AR

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THE FIRST 12 ISSUES

US\$9.50 UK£5.95
¥2200 Aus.\$14.50

#15 - Quarterly



SHANE COTTON: HAUNTED BY HIST



h e a v y

This page: *Grandma is Pregnant*, 1997, plexiglass, water, light, knit hat, hat pins, pump, 4 x 5ft.

Facing page: *Commingleing without Ever Exchanging* (detail), 1994, pumps, water, glitter, tubing, cord, wires, beads.

Breath, along with the four

elements – water, fire, earth

and air – is at the heart of



irreverent visual poetics.

“Water in a straitjacket,” says Los Angeles artist Terri Friedman, is “liquid insanity.”

Do what you can to contain it – put your finger in the dike; design your sewers, drainpipes and concrete canals – but water will have no boundaries. Friedman thinks it’s sweet madness trying to control the uncontrollable. Water, aqueous and flowing, knows no containment. Like madness, or unwanted sweat, it seeps through the civilized pores of rational society.

“Water in a Straitjacket” is the title of the newest body of work from one of LA’s brightest young artists.

With recent shows in the Netherlands, Greece, Germany and at home in the US (New York and LA),

M. A. Greenstein inhales.

Friedman’s chimerical, pop approach to artistic production has begun to attract attention on both local and international fronts. Her opus woos the tough-minded viewer salivating for a delicious

escape from the redundant, anorexic machismo of American modernism. With an intuitive foothold in “flow theory,” Friedman also courts followers of contemporary French thought (meaning the incestuous writings of Lacan, Kristeva, Foucault and Deleuze). But Friedman’s sensibility is thoroughly American; she orchestrates a sense of the marvelous and the culturally absurd – and breathes life and deadly critical commentary into

the freakish distortions of life's

sustaining system – breath.



an art that genuinely speaks of its time.

Breath, along with the four elements – water, fire, earth and air – is at the pumping heart of Friedman's visual poetics, consisting of glitter trash sculpture and installation. In works like *Sunny Sideways with*

Oxygen (1994) and *Over the Top* (1994), Friedman envisions a kitschy, pulsating fantasia of opulent objects – like oil paintings – along with chandeliers made of budget hardware, craft-store materials, cheap travel souvenirs, water, electrical current, hobby grass, and touches of gold and silver leaf. All of this reenacts the freakish distortions of life's sustaining system – breath. The bizarre story of Sunny von Bülow is the source of the work: The heiress remains in a coma in a New York City hospital, her body coifed, her hospital room decorated in ritualistic high fashion. Friedman sees von Bülow as “decorated breath.” Like her subject, Friedman herself draws double inspiration from the metaphor of breathing – a trope of life, and also a symbol of the kinetics that fill and perpetuate a body made fundamentally of water.

Breath and water become interchangeable signs in Friedman's poetics, visualized most succinctly in a series of shimmering fountains produced for the von Bülow study and later works. “The fountains act like

breath,” says Friedman. Some fountains, however, exist only in the mind. In *Blow but don't Inhale* (1995), set in installation along with *Fantasies about Thirst* (1995), Friedman transforms a silly little portable fan into a spiritual entity, as if to suggest that, maybe one day, von Bülow's own breath might quench the abetted appetite of her comatose body.

The metaphors of water and breath are common to Buddhist meditation. This Friedman knows well, being a meditator who is aligned with the teachings of Buddhist Vietnamese activist and poet Thich Nhat Hanh. Water and breath are also at the crux of Emilie Conrad-Da'oud's theories of movement, which Friedman studied prior to entering the Claremont Graduate School Art Program in California, where she eventually made the transition from oil painting to more flippant acts of throwaway, painterly installation or “paintings in motion.”

“Painting,” says Friedman, “is claustrophobic. When it dries, it hardens. I seek materials that allow me to breathe.” Friedman claims to have first discovered her breath as an artist at the age of 20, while interning with the New York artist Charles Simonds.

Friedman also pursues materials that address her aversion to decorating domestic spaces, and here, in light of her testament to von Bülow, we must include the domesticated body. If the living corpse of Sunny von Bülow represents the materialistic folly of thinking in terms of class and *déclassé*,



This page.

Left: *Sunny Sideways with Oxygen*, 1994, electric cord, spiraling lights, wire, beads, vinyl, paint, glass, water, 4 x 5ft.

Bottom: *Fantasies about Thirst* (installation view and detail), 1995, lamé, foam, wire, tinsel, 22 x 4 x 4ft.

Facing page.

Left: *Over the Top*, 1994, velvet, glitter, plexiglass, colored water, gold leaf, mirrors, 6 x 6 x 2ft.

Top right: *Inside the Exterior*, 1996, installation at MOCA's Geffen Contemporary.

Right: *Commingleing without ever Exchanging* (detail), 1994, pumps, water, glitter, tubing, extension cord, wires, beads.

Buddhism opened the door to Friedman's aversion to economic hierarchies of decoration. "I'm very influenced by the Buddhist teaching that treats the ordinary as the extraordinary, that elevates all materials to the special, whether it's a matter of decorating your car or making a kitchen altar."

Six months of travel and study in India and Nepal, and later, a month in Indonesia, pushed Friedman's investigations even further, forcing her to rethink her middle-class, Jewish, Ivy League upbringing (by a professional decorator mother), and her attitudes toward image production. "I don't think I'm appropriating Indian or Indonesian culture," says Friedman. "The fact is that traveling dramatically changed the way I think about and look at Western art."

Anyone familiar with the early morning Hindu



ornamentation and shopping bags to embellishing gold bangles, saris and batik fashion. Friedman's Orientalism operates much like any other found among the new generation of PoMo American artists who have popularized traditional Hindu and Buddhist mores by questioning the deadening vapidness and neurotic abundance of bourgeois American culture.

Indulgent? Yes. Nihilistic? Hardly.

This is one artist you'll rarely catch wearing black. And if you look closely at her self-informed, irreverent materiality, including her kittenish take on the human body, fashion and high art, you'll find that it reads like a dark comedy on the hysterics of class and archival traditions. Like others in the emergent pack of "LA ephemera" artists, Friedman's rebellious view of civilization is wrapped up in the gossamer grotesque, where twirl-

ing lights and kaleidoscopic whimsy burlesque the horror of the rational, the mundane and the inevitability of death. I think of David Lynch films when confronted with Friedman's work. The only thing missing is the twisted ecstasy of violence that drives the filmmaker's cool spin on society's logical endgame. What Friedman leaves you with instead is a fey, sensual illogic that sees weird homologies between varicose veins and artificial waterways. Call it the difference between a painter who works with cellophane and one who works with celluloid. (M)



ritual of *rangoli* painting will recognize the spiral motifs that dominate Friedman's metaphysical vocabulary of electrical cords and fountains. Less obvious is the mannered way in which Friedman alludes to Indian street aesthetics – from rickshaw

**...like a dark comedy
on the hysterics of class
and archival tradition.**