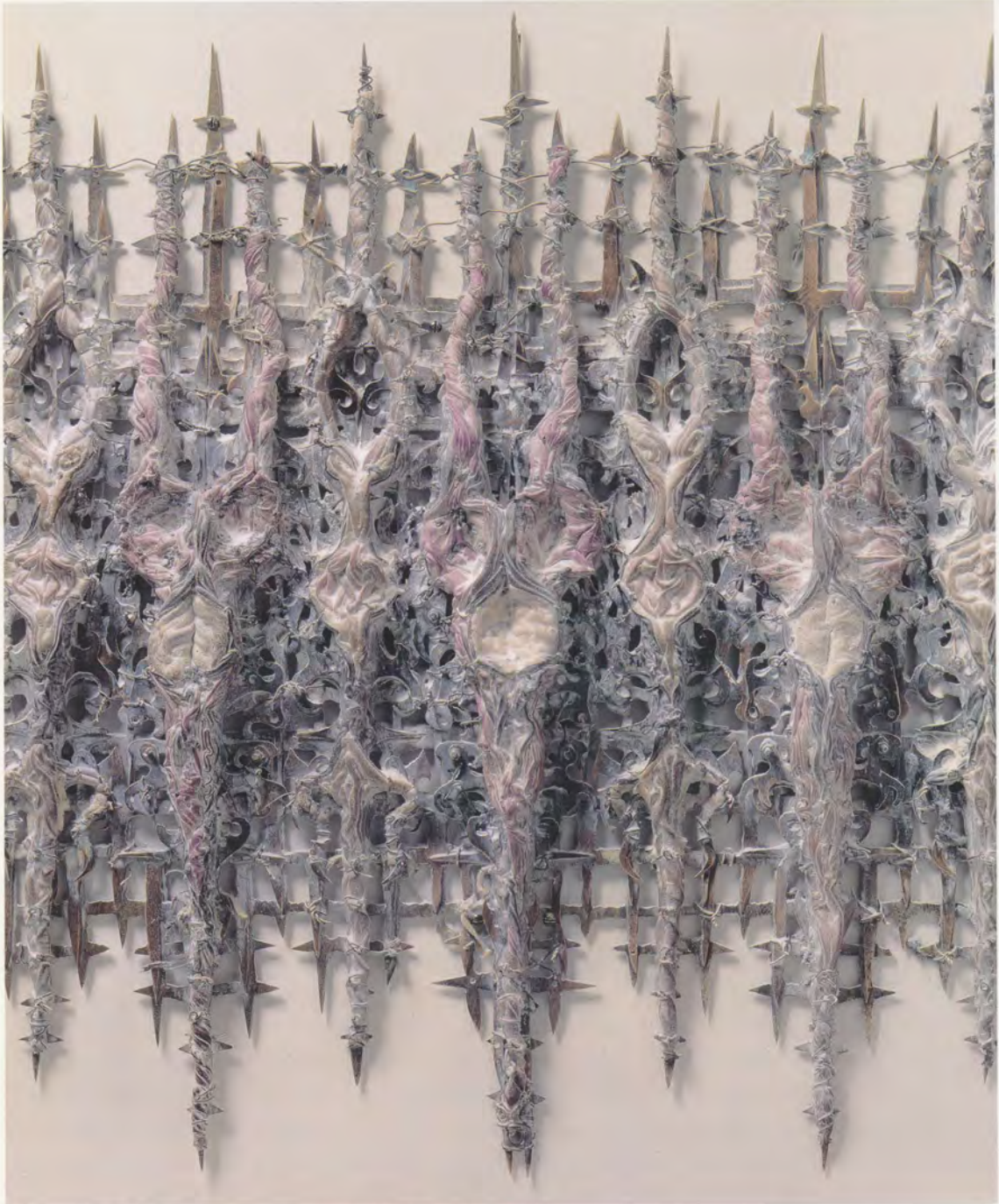


DIRECTIONS

Cathy de Monchaux

July 14 – October 22, 2000



Making a day for the dead ones, detail, 1997 (checklist no. 4)

THE MYSTERIOUS WALL AND floor sculptures by Cathy de Monchaux (b. London, 1960) defy rational interpretation for they appeal to instinct as much as to the intellect. Fashioned from metal, fabric, and an array of hardware, her perplexing, seductive forms conjure a variety of associations and have been likened to medieval reliquaries, musical instruments, jewelry, and the dense, encrusted ornamentation of Gothic architecture. Correlations have also been made to heroic armor, Victorian torture machines, perverse fetishistic restraints, and a panoply of sexual paraphernalia. Despite the often mechanical appearance of her sculptures, the pleated and puckered textures and the swelling, seemingly pulsating forms are decidedly flesh-, wound-, and animal-like. The collars of fur that adorn the repeating elements in *Sovereign*, 1999, for example, contain unidentified internal matter spewing forth in a profusion that seems both intestinal (animal) and vegetal (perhaps resembling a Venus's-flytrap that has mutated exponentially). The whiplike tentacles of *Dunce (mind tenant)*, also 1999, similarly suggest an alien creature, while the central element of *Fretting around on the brink of indolence*, 1998 (figs. 1 and 2), gives shape to a vital life force, nestled between two views of a fantastic landscape.

The body, particularly the sexualized body, is a potent subject in de Monchaux's art. Pierced, pinched, squeezed, pulled, and splayed in all directions, flesh is a pliable and evocative substance. In *Making a day for the dead ones*, 1997 (cover), the rosy skinlike surface seems literally fused to the intricate, cut-metal armature. The pliability of the flesh, however, is compromised by the severity of the man-made devices that contain it.

Oppositions of hard and soft, excess and restraint, and life and death are important artistic concerns. The mysterious powdery white substance—a grainy chalk liberally applied by the artist—is seen in the creases and folds of many of the sculptures, giving the appearance of ancient dust. The chalk, like the rusting metal in works such as *Assuaging doubt through others' eyes*, 1997 (fig. 3), endows de Monchaux's objects with the "patina of age and belonging." For the artist, it is important that her sculptures look as if they are of this world even though they suggest forms that are unearthly.

De Monchaux's art belongs to a universe dictated by, in the artist's words, its own "internal logic." That characterization helps explain not only the essence of her disturbing imagery but also the formal language she has steadfastly developed since the late 1980s. De Monchaux matured as an artist at a time when many of her generation were attempting to bridge the seriality of Minimalism with content and social narrative. While the reductive vocabulary of Minimalism would appear to be at odds with de Monchaux's aesthetic of excess, repetition has been and continues to be a frequent strategy as evidenced by the successive imagery that comprises *Sovereign* and *Strange animal*, 1998. Among the British artists who emerged concurrently with de Monchaux on the London art scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s were Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread (both b. 1963). Indeed, Hirst's fascination with sickness and death in his formaldehyde and pharmaceutical pieces of the early 1990s and the morbid quality of Whiteread's ghostly castings of mortuary slabs and vacant dwellings share a certain affinity with de Monchaux's darker imaginings. While de Monchaux delights in the formal

qualities of her baroque compositions, she does not pare down her forms to aesthetic simplicity in the manner of Whiteread. Additionally, the content of her work is more enigmatic than either Whiteread's or Hirst's. Her attention to detail ultimately separates de Monchaux from them and soundly aligns her work with that of Richard Deacon (b. 1949), a formidable figure in British sculpture of the 1980s who established his career making elegant, finely crafted works of laminated wood. Going "over the top" with her obsessive, artisan's focus, de Monchaux reveals the imagination in its most extreme, surreal manifestations.

The artist has described her approach to making art as a form of exorcism. For her, creating sculpture is a way to work out an array of unexpressed feelings—from deep-seated anxieties to a myriad of unconscious desires. Her creative attitude parallels the intentions of Louise Bourgeois (American, b. France, 1911), a stellar figure of twentieth-century art who, active since the 1940s, has influenced a great number of women artists of de Monchaux's generation, including Janine Antoni, Mona Hatoum, Doris Salcedo, and Kiki Smith. Giving form to immaterial sensations and raw emotions, de Monchaux similarly reflects on the marginal and the

ephemeral. She has commented, "Obviously in one way [my work] is about the sexual desires that one represses—the personal fantasies that aren't to do with reality or what you'd really like to do. I'm using sexual imagery as a metaphor for that sort of fantastic possibility."

Early critical interpretations of de Monchaux's art emphasized the sexual connotations of her imagery, which sometimes lend themselves to Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations and feminist theorizing. Yet de Monchaux's art begs larger questions that cross conventional distinctions between the sexes and get at the mysteries of human desire and its many provocations. The artist's commitment to feminist concerns, however, is clear, and de Monchaux has often expressed the difficulties inherent in representing the sexual body in a way not framed by the traditional male gaze. Indeed, the objectification of women throughout the history of Western art and popular culture has significantly shaped the artistic approach to the human form. As de Monchaux has noted, "I don't think it's possible to work from a woman's perspective. The way that I understand the world is really from a man's perspective in terms of the way the world has been ordered. You have to find a way of



Fig. 1. *Fretting around on the brink of indolence*, 1998 (checklist no. 5)

dealing with that, or of inventing an alternative to that male perspective." For de Monchaux the "imaginary place of art" is where she, as a woman and an artist, is free to "reinvent the world" and reconsider the nature of male and female subjectivity. Her perspective is shared by a number of her contemporaries, most notably the American artist Matthew Barney (b. 1967), who in his films and photographs creates a mysterious world of creatures that do not conform to conventional categories of desire or gender.

As de Monchaux settled into her own visual language in the 1990s, her forms became increasingly complex and her installations more ambitious in scope and scale. Since 1997 the artist has conceived her works as part of architectural environments rather than independent objects, designing what she has described as a type of "dream architecture." For the installation at the Hirshhorn, de Monchaux has brought together a group of works created between 1996 and 2000. The sculptures inhabit a cathedral-like space in which a central gallery dominated by large wall and floor pieces is flanked by two galleries more intimate in scale. In one of the side galleries, the mood is of piety and restraint. Here, the regimented figures of *Strange animal* reluctantly stand at attention along the spiky fence of the metal background; the buckles and straps of *Red*, 1999, harness an ebullient red interior that might otherwise overflow; and the clasp metal hands of *Caught in chaos (courting chaos)*, 2000, evoke the mortification of the flesh. Although de Monchaux's works express the discipline of the body and physical desire through austerity and self-denial, her art suggests that the mind is willing but the body is weak. That conflict is inherent in a work such as *Dunce (mind tenant)*. The creature here



Fig. 2. *Fretting around on the brink of indolence*, detail, 1998 (checklist no. 5)

is, as the title indicates, a resident of the mind—a sentinel trapped between states of sleep and reason. Despite the conscious desire to relegate the perverse machinations of the mind into a corner, like a child who has misbehaved, the "monster" remains, dangerously poised on the periphery.

Assuaging doubt through others' eyes also provides insight into the construction of the artist's lexicon. It is one of several recent works, including *Fretting around on the brink of indolence*, in which de Monchaux has incorporated photographic imagery. The wall piece presents a collection of fifty photographs assembled in a gridded framework that crosses a corner of the gallery. Layering loose sheets of paper over the images, de Monchaux constructed narrow slits, or apertures,

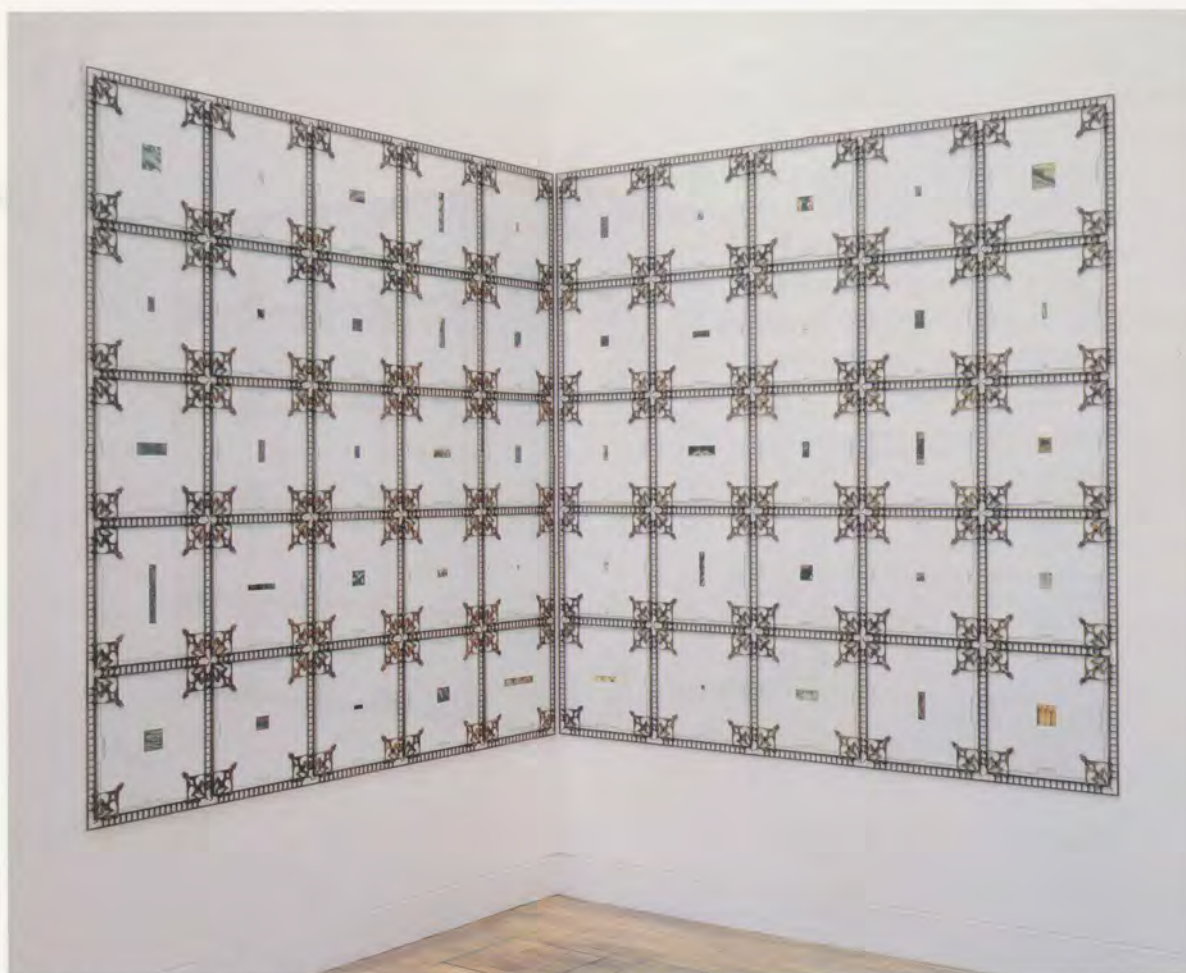


Fig. 3. *Assuaging doubt through others' eyes*, 1997 (checklist no. 3)

that allow only fragments of the photographs to be seen. Swelling forms and wet surfaces reminiscent of her sculptures are the disturbing subjects of the photographs. While the images appear to be erotic source material for her bizarre objects, closer inspection reveals that they are not depictions of flesh or the human body. The luscious, even lascivious details are in reality taken from photographs of vegetables, flowers, and fish displayed in a produce market. De Monchaux's reframing of the pictures through the simple technique of cropping illustrates the strong interplay between the abstract and the figurative in her art. Eloquently, she again reminds us that

the power of the erotic often resides not in reality but in the realm of a heightened imagination.

Olga M. Viso
Associate Curator

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Quotations by the artist were drawn from articles and statements cited in the exhibition history and Selected Bibliography. Bibliographic research was compiled by curatorial intern Amy Gotzler. All photographs are courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in London, 1960. Received B.A., Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts (now Camberwell School of Art), London, 1983; M.A., Goldsmiths' College, London, 1987. Lives and works in London.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1988 Mario Flecha Gallery, London.
- 1989 Goldsmiths' Gallery, London.
- 1990 Laure Genillard Gallery, London; Studio Guenzani, Milan (and 1993).
- 1991 Galerie Grita Insam, Vienna; Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris (and 1994).
- 1993 Galerie Marc Jancou, Zurich; Chisenhale Gallery, London, and tour. Exhibition catalog.
- 1996 Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.
- 1997 Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, and tour. Exhibition catalog.
- 1999 "Mordant Rapture," Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

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- Schwabsky, Barry. "Shameless." *Sculpture* 11, no. 4 (July–August 1992): 44–51.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

1. *And some mornings I didn't want to get up at all*, 1996, rusted steel, leather, chalk, and brass; overall 10 1/2 x 3 x 37 1/2 in. (26.7 x 7.6 x 95.3 cm). Collection Camille Oliver-Hoffmann.
2. *Trust your sanity to no one*, 1996, brass, copper, leather, chalk, glass, and diamanté; 9 parts, each 6 5/8 x 4 x 2 in. (17 x 10 x 5 cm). Private collection, New York.
3. *Assuaging doubt through others' eyes*, 1997, glass, rusted steel, paper, and photographs; 2 panels, each 84 x 84 x 3/4 in. (213.4 x 213.4 x 1.9 cm). Collection Anthony T. Podesta, Washington, D.C.
4. *Making a day for the dead ones*, 1997, brass, copper, leather, and chalk; 44 x 24 x 2 in. (111.8 x 61 x 5.1 cm). Private collection, New York.
5. *Fretting around on the brink of indolence*, 1998, photographic lightboxes, enameled steel, brass, leather, chalk, and thread; 35 1/2 x 220 x 3 3/4 in. (90.2 x 558.8 x 9.5 cm). Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.
6. *Strange animal*, 1998, brass, leather, chalk, and thread; 12 x 238 x 3/4 in. (30.5 x 604.5 x 1.9 cm). Private collection, New York.
7. *Dunce (mind tenant)*, 1999, brass, lead, wire, fur, leather, and chalk; 72 x 26 x 22 in. (182.9 x 66 x 55.9 cm). Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.
8. *Marie (mortified love)*, 1999, brass, copper, fur, leather, oil on canvas, and chalk; 125 7/8 x 40 1/2 x 3 3/4 in. (319.7 x 102.9 x 9.5 cm). Private collection, courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.
9. *Red*, 1999, brass, copper, velvet, leather, thread, graphite, and canvas; 14 x 46 x 34 in. (35.6 x 116.8 x 86.4 cm). Collection Anthony T. Podesta, Washington, D.C.
10. *Sovereign*, 1999, brass, copper, leather, wood, mink, oil on canvas, graphite, and chalk; 4 panels, 25 x 160 x 5 1/2 in. overall (63.5 x 406.4 x 14 cm). Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.
11. *Caught in chaos (courting chaos)*, 2000, copper, wood, brass, rope, lead, fur, leather, chalk, and felt; 16 x 112 x 52 in. (40.6 x 284.5 x 132.1 cm). Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

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