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 perplex-
ing, 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 pucker-
ted textures and the swelling, seemingly
pulsating forms are decidedly flesh-
-, wound-, and animal-like. The collars
of fur that adorn the repeating ele-
ments 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 sexual-
ized 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 impor-
tant 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 mortu-
ary 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 clasping 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 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,
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

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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 diamond; 9 parts, each 6 1/4 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.
8. Marie (mortified love), 1999, brass, copper, fur, leather, oil on canvas, and chalk; 125 1/2 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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