

DIRECTIONS

JEANNE DUNNING

JULY 21–NOVEMBER 2, 1994



Leslie, 1994. Laminated cibachrome prints and frames. Feature, New York.
Photograph by Tom Van Eynde.

JEANNE DUNNING BEGAN EXHIBITING HER work during the late 1980s amid the preoccupation with the body then influencing the art of the time.

Her lushly colored photographs of body fragments and food confront systems of representation such as landscape, still-life, portraiture, and the nude. Earlier in the decade artists such as Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman, who employed photography to address issues of authorship, gender, and the workings of a patriarchal society, paved the way for such analysis. Levine has appropriated images from the mostly male history of art, including re-shoots of photographs by Walker Evans. Sherman has presented her own versions of the stereotypical media images of women such as the glamorous movie star and soft-porn queen. Dunning's work fits within the context of this line of inquiry while expanding her own investigations. This exhibition presents her most recent work, including her first video and video installation.

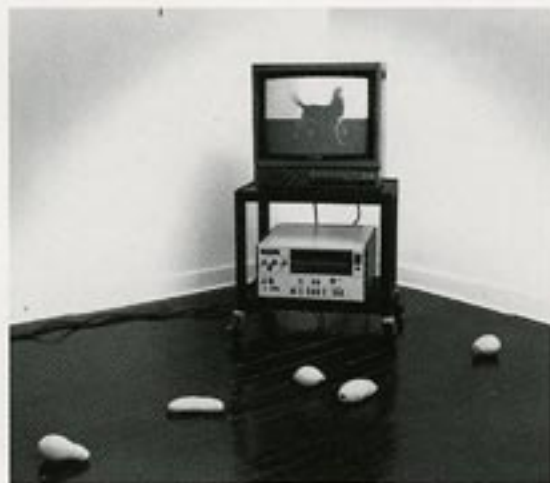
Dunning's concern with photographic truth began in 1987. In that year she captioned a series of close-up photographs of natural settings with the names of camouflaged insects. What was visible, however, did not match the claim of the caption. Furthermore, the photographs' veracity as a record of nature was unclear, thus subverting the objectivity of scientific documentation.

Continuing her exploration of fact and fiction, Dunning turned to images of the body in the series "Untitled Landscapes," 1987. What initially appeared to be scenes of bizarre, unidentifiable terrain suddenly became intimate views of ambiguous details of a body. Mounds of hair suggest chins with stubble, furry arms, or pubic areas. Her next series, "Untitled Holes," 1988, continued these detailed examinations, now focusing on orifices. What at first seems to be the most intimate of bodily areas are actually nostrils.

In a 1988 cycle of photographs, Dunning produced gender-bending head shots of women with realistic, just-visible mustaches. These straightforward depictions are shocking in their ordinariness and seem all too revealing—as in the quick pose of a driver's license. The subsequent "Heads" and "Details," 1988–90, are more glamorous portraits, but with the sitters defiantly rejecting the viewers' gaze by showing only the backs of their heads. In these works Dunning recorded luxurious, shiny hair in a range of color and styles. In contrast to the unwanted mustaches, this hair is desirable—the kind of hair of which fetishes and advertisements are made. While confronting ideals of feminine beauty,

some of these images appear quite phallic.

Dunning began in 1990 to use fruits and vegetables in her photographs. In *Sample 4* a pale, glowing hand holds red stewed tomatoes against a black background. The visceral nature of the tomatoes, variously interpreted as ovular or testicular (and as a castration image), increased in the subsequent "Detail" photographs. Close-ups of glistening, organlike fruits reveal veins and texture. The sheer beauty of the image causes an attraction and simultaneous revulsion. In "Untitled Holes," begun in 1992, beautiful purplish fruits resemble orifices or wounds in close-up, a possible reference to the AIDS epidemic.



The Squeaky Toy Tape, 1993. Videotape loop, latex squeaky toys, cart. Feature, New York. Photograph by Tom Van Eynde.

Echoing her early body landscapes, the series "Cracks," 1991, delineates the edges of two bodies sandwiched together. Of undetermined gender and indistinguishable parts, they are clearly images of intimacy. Here Dunning speaks of the inevitable boundaries between people.

A year later and simultaneously with "Untitled Holes," Dunning began a series of sculptures, "Flaws." Made from pliable, neoprene latex, each work looks like a small, peach-colored sheet stretched flat on a pedestal. On closer examination, the work resembles a layer of skin, a topography one's eyes traverse to discover in the eerily realistic texture a hairy mole or other flaw. Although she has consistently portrayed the human

body as ambiguous territory, with "Flaws" Dunning takes a more surrealist approach. Many of her earlier photographs were abstractions of the body or metaphors employing vegetal matter for body parts. "Flaws" are jarringly realistic yet obviously fake and made by the artist.

In her most recent work, Dunning continues surveying the surrealist vein and heightened sense of artifice. The tension between humor and fury presents itself in *The Squeaky Toy Tape*, 1993. On a monitor viewers see a dog playfully pouncing on toys as if they were prey. The squeaking playthings appearing on screen are scattered around the gallery floor. They are, in fact, sculptures shaped like fruit or beige-colored body parts.

Other new works echo previous photographs. *Hand Hole*, 1994, is a mysterious, cavernous interior. As in her earlier descriptions of nostrils, by manipulating scale Dunning forces us to see the familiar in a radically different way. The image could refer to a female sexual organ or male auto-eroticism. Similarly, *Untitled*, 1994, is either a ridiculously over-scaled thumb or a blurry phallus.

In her "Leaking" diptychs, 1994, Dunning lets loose a wicked humor that has always been in her work. In each pair she presents a gleefully drooling woman with a stewed tomato. Creating a narrative between the woman's red drool and the fleshy fruit, Dunning joins the two elements as "before" and "after" pictures. The previously controlled and contained tomatoes of earlier photographs literally explode in *Untitled Splatter*, 1994. The largest of Dunning's photographs, this work resembles an abstract painting or the aftermath of a violent scene. One can imagine the artist flinging tomatoes at a clean, white wall in a humorous form of "action painting."

Dunning reveals the hidden through extreme close-ups and alterations in scale or by highlighting the ordinary. *The Toe-Sucking Video*, 1994, depicts a woman in what might be a private ritual. Leaning against a wall, she sits on the floor and sucks her toe for about five minutes. Afterward, she sighs and sits back looking not terribly satisfied. The distasteful nature and presumed physical discomfort of performing such an act make one feel uncomfortable. At the same time, the performance seems absurdly ridiculous.

In collaboration with artist Hirsch Perlman, Dunning presented a selection of favorite quotations about the nature of the perverse as a reflection of a norm and its repression and absorption by the law. Through absurd logic, they conclude that "the law is a mirror image of

the perverse, and the perverse is the original, the standard or norm, that the law depends on for its existence."¹ The "perversion" of the standard is common in Dunning's work as she portrays seemingly normal types—landscapes, portraits, nudes—and then undermines them. In *The Extra Hair 1*, 1994, she exposes a hairy inflammation in the center of an otherwise ordinary palm. The startlingly real blemish from one of the earlier "Flaws" now appears in an unlikely place. More surprising corporeal dislocations occur in *The Extra Nipple*, 1994. A stylish woman in three-quarter pose sticks out her tongue to reveal a nipple. The transference of an erogenous zone to an accessible organ is unsettling.

This image resembles the 1950 *Untitled with Tongue*, a picture of a woman with an enormous, extended tongue, actually a slice of a red pepper. That photograph is in turn reminiscent of a 1935 work by Raoul Ubac. Entitled *Post Your Poems/Post Your Pictures*, the photograph depicts a woman's mouth with a very long, strange protrusion: a piece of liver. Ubac, along with Man Ray, Jacques-André Boiffard, and Brassai, are among the photographers associated with Surrealism during the 1920s and 1930s. Critic Rosalind Krauss writes that the photographer Man Ray "defamiliar[ized] the human body, redrafting the map of what we would have thought the most familiar of terrains."²

Dunning's similar strategies can be traced to those of the Surrealists and their "simple rotation and consequent disorientation of the body."³ Boiffard produced close-ups of toes and Brassai and Man Ray transformed women's torsos into bizarre, abstracted images. If the Surrealists presented women's bodies as erotically charged and sometimes violently sexual, Dunning's female nudes are straightforward and defiant.

The Third Breast, 1994, is a reclining, classically posed nude with an extra breast emerging from her pubic area. In his theories of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud identified women in terms of what they did not have, a penis. According to Freud, when a boy first encounters this lack in others, he develops a fear of castration. Girls feel "greatly disadvantaged owing to their lack of a big, visible penis . . . and envy boys for possessing one."⁴ No penis envy colors Dunning's image. In a humorous retort to Freud's theory, Dunning's woman confronts the viewer with a vision of female fecundity.

In an influential essay, theorist Laura Mulvey employs Freud's principles to discuss gender differences in films. She writes that men and their desires control the image of the passive female body.⁵ Dunning's

women, from mustached faces to back-turned heads, confront the authoritative male gaze and refuse to give in to power relationships. The owner of the third breast is beautiful. She, however, relates less to a pin-up than perhaps to the Ephesian Artemis, the multi-breasted fertility goddess of Asia Minor, whose cult originated with those warrior women, the Amazons.

In *The Extra Hair 2*, 1994, Dunning's camera records an image of hairy excess. The visible long tresses, as



Hand Hole, 1994. Cibachrome print mounted to plexiglass and frame. Feature, New York. Photograph by Tom Van Eynde.

undesired as the female mustaches, subvert the traditional view of female nudes. In her study on images of female bodies, Janet Wolff describes one view of the classical body: "[It] has no orifices and engages in no base bodily functions. . . . It is opposed to the 'grotesque body,' which has orifices, genitals, protuberances."⁶ To present the 'grotesque body' as Dunning does is to confront this model, and Wolff argues that such "transgressive images" are important in undermining the dominant ideal images of women's bodies.

Dunning's use of fictional documentation sabotages the supposed truth inherent in photography. Through dislocations and substitutions, her work offers alternate views of the body while questioning presumptions

about gender. At the core of her work is a belief in the power of images and an awareness of the societal values and power structures that support them. By providing viewers with startling alterations of the ordinary, she forces us to question these assumptions and confront our own preconceptions.

Amada Cruz
Associate Curator

NOTES

1. Jeanne Dunning and Hirsch Perlman, "Getting to Know the Law" or "Making Things Mean What I Want Them to Mean" or "A Collection of Quotes I Like," in *Dirty Data: Sammlung Schürmann* (Aachen: Wilhelm Schürmann, 1992), 58.

2. Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti," in Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism* (New York: Abbeville for Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1985), 60.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1966), 394.

5. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 967.

6. Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 124.



The Extra Nipple, 1994. Cibachrome print mounted to plexiglass and frame. Feature, New York.
Photograph by Tom Van Eynde.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Hartford, Conn., December 28, 1960. Lived in Granby, Conn. Educated at Oberlin College, Ohio, 1978-82, B.A. 1982; The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1982-85, M.F.A. 1985. Awards and grants include Illinois Arts Council Special Assistance Grant, 1986; Artist Fellowship Award, 1989 and 1993; Community Arts Assistant Grant, City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, 1989; Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, 1993. Lives and works in Chicago.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 *Features*, Chicago (also 1988).
1989 *Features*, New York (also 1990, 1991, 1992).
1990 *Real Art Ways*, Hartford, Conn.; Roy Boyd Gallery, Santa Monica (also 1992).
1991 *Jeanne Dunning: Bodies of Work*, University Galleries of Illinois State University, Normal; Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan; Galerie Samia Saouma, Paris (also 1993); Feigen Inc., Chicago (also 1992, 1994).
1992 Esther Schipper, Cologne.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1986 *Dull Edge*, Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago.
1987 *The Non-Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1965-7777*, 341 West Superior, Chicago.
1989 *The Photography of Invention: American Pictures of the 1980s*, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., and tour.
1990 *On the Road*, Art against AIDS, public project on Chicago buses sponsored by American Foundation for AIDS Research; *Your Message Here*, public billboards coordinated by Randolph Street Gallery and Group Material, Chicago.
1991 1991 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of Art, New York.
1994 *Bad Girls*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; *Existence and Gender: Women's Representation of Women*, Kyoto International Exchange, Japan, and tour.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aghéon-Jumeau, Jean Charles. "Review." *Forum International* (September 1991): 83, 92.

Decter, Joshua. "New York in Review." *Arts Magazine* 63 (Summer 1989): 93.

Dunning, Jeanne. *Heads*. Chicago: Jeanne Dunning, 1989.
_____. "Heads: A Project for Artforum." *Artforum* 28 (May 1990): 165-67.

Gerstler, Amy. "Jeanne Dunning." *Artforum* 29 (November 1990): 174-75.

Hixson, Kathryn. "Double Reverse Flip." *Arts Magazine* 66 (December 1991): 42-45.

Jeanne Dunning: Bodies of Work. Exhibition catalog. Normal: University Galleries of Illinois State University, 1991. Essays by Laurie Palmer, Matias Viegner, Barry Blinderman.

Kardel, Susan. "Representative Work from Dunning." *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1992, F13.

Kirshner, Judith Russi. "Jeanne Dunning." *Artforum* 31 (September 1992): 102-3.

Viegner, Matias. "Jeanne Dunning." *Art Issues* 15 (December 1990-January 1991): 43.

Wittig, Rob. "Jeanne Dunning at Roy Boyd." *Art in America* 79 (January 1991): 142-43.

CHECKLIST

All works are courtesy *Features*, New York.

The Squeaky Toy Tape, 1993. Videotape loop, latex squeaky toys, cart. Dimensions variable.

The Extra Hair 1, 1994. Cibachrome print mounted to plexiglass and frame; 65.4 x 48.9 cm (25 3/4 x 19 1/4 in.).

The Extra Hair 2, 1994. Cibachrome print mounted to plexiglass and frame; 81.3 x 42.5 cm (32 x 16 3/4 in.).

The Extra Nipple, 1994. Cibachrome print mounted to plexiglass and frame; 66 x 48.2 cm (26 x 19 in.).

Hand Hole, 1994. Cibachrome print mounted to plexiglass and frame; 74.9 x 69.8 cm (29 1/2 x 27 1/2 in.).

Leaking, 1994. Laminated cibachrome prints and frames; two panels, each 54.6 x 44.4 cm (21 1/2 x 17 1/2 in.).

Leaking 2, 1994. Laminated cibachrome prints and frames; two panels, each 54.6 x 44.4 cm (21 1/2 x 17 1/2 in.).

Leaking 3, 1994. Laminated cibachrome prints and frames; two panels, each 54.6 x 44.4 cm (21 1/2 x 17 1/2 in.).

The Third Breast, 1994. Cibachrome print mounted to plexiglass and frame; 64.7 x 99 cm (25 1/2 x 39 in.).

The Toe-Sucking Video, 1994. Videotape loop.

Untitled, 1994. Cibachrome print mounted to plexiglass and frame; 82.5 x 54.6 cm (32 1/2 x 21 1/2 in.).

Untitled Splatter, 1994. Cibachrome print mounted to plexiglass and frame; 170.8 x 132.7 cm (67 1/4 x 52 1/4 in.).



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