

Between Plumage and Plunder

-Ebon Fisher, 2006

Caterina Verde –and by extension, Gloria Zein and Elise Martens– has drawn me into a cocoon of rumination on coccooning. And said coccooning is beginning to take on quite a halo, although streaked with rivulets of velvet and blood.

Quite naturally my initial response to the term “confinement” was one of repulsion and not a little guilt: I’m a citizen of the United States, after all, a country with one of the worst records of incarceration in the industrial world. Hamstrung with poor educations and writhing in underpaid jobs, nearly 2 million citizens have been transferred to US prisons and jails and stripped of their voting rights. We haven’t raised the minimum wage significantly in decades, relegating 33 million Americans to a life of severe immobility, a form of confinement approaching slavery.

Those are cruel realities which we are forever ignoring, forever pushing into our unconscious. We can’t be shy about this stuff. There is much to be said about control of movement and information flow, control of identity, and the yearning for personal and communal definition. Perhaps we are all confined to some degree, just as we all capitulate to the confinement of others.

Confinement is fairly critical, for example, if you’re one of those fauna whose body tends to fall apart when the skin is off. I’m pretty sure that goes for most mammals. It’s also nice to be confined by a second layer or two which we have a little more control over: clothes, walls, pictures, cell phones, communities, nations. Come to think of it, the outer most layers are nearly as squishy as the body. Communities and nations seem to ooze about quite a bit. Whenever I try to pick up the threads of The Revolution, to rupture, in effect, the confining circumstances of our lives, half the populace can’t seem to decode me and just flows past on the way to the television. That’s no reason to quit, but it’s interesting.

It might even be said that we willingly, even passionately, search for confining circumstances, blocking out both environmental and symbolic pressures, desperate to exercise some control over some small part of our lives, desperate to bring back the decorative plumage we shed with our body hair millions of years ago. And is this decorative instinct an act of grand self-definition and ego construction? Is it self-delusion? Or is it just nesting? Perhaps, if we can cast aside our confining delusions of scientific objectivity, we are really wading into a form of personal magic in the face of infinite possibility. The mind, after all, could very well be 90% redundant nerves, poised for grand, unnatural purposes.

Surely there are degrees of confinement. As Deleuze and Guattari have pointed out, the world is a continuum of stresses, blockages and flows. The world might even be described as overlapping waves of semi-permeable barriers. Somewhere between plumage, pluck and plunder we attempt to anchor ourselves within the great swirling mystery. Of course, attempting to share such a process with the public may be somewhat problematic. The artists in this exhibit, after all, do not live in the gallery. As Robert Smithson has pointed out:

“Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is... A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral.”

(From the essay, Cultural Confinement, The Writings of Robert Smithson, edited by Nancy Holt, New York University Press, 1979).

Given a common tendency to experiment dangerously with the visual order, I don't think Caterina, Elise and Gloria will be preparing the usual nest and can manage to hold at bay some of the entropic tendencies of gallery confinement which Smithson speaks of. Caterina continuously pushes back and forth between curatorial projects and formal creative expression, agitating numerous lines between the two. In a wry embodiment of such contrasting operations she rolls out a strip of polypropylene grass into which she projects her friend, Bill Murray (“Not the movie Bill Murray, but he's just as droll,” says Caterina), tramping about in four videos shot in her back garden during each of the four seasons. Home and virtual home, like Smithson's site/non-site territories, collapse into each other.

Elise Martens brings us photographic treatments of tree boughs from her home in Oslo. Along the way she symmetrically splinters these along two axis. As she puts it, these are “ever stretching” mandalas, “that lacerate the void, recalling Victorian decorative woven carpets.” Our homes and our perceptions of home dwell in an infinite lattice of furniture, images and memories. Undeniably decorative in spirit, symmetry is also one of the great forms of visual reverberation, drawing us into a hallucinogenic sense of convergence. That we should resonate with trees from Norway is a nice touch as far as I'm concerned.

Like Caterina and Elise, Gloria Zein roves about between different media. This may be a generational predilection brought about, perhaps, by the increasing friendliness of digital media tools. But with deep roots in Dadaism and Late 20th Century experiments with process, video and social-environmental context, it may have been inevitable. Even artists whose tools of preference are more traditional, such as David Dunlap in Iowa City and the late Keith Haring, have thrown themselves into an extended stream of iteration and reiteration across numerous exhibits and sites. Gloria Zein's stream has included internet-assisted audio works involving public tours of an old building strewn with scenes of deadly import. For this exhibit she addresses confinement through a photographic effort

at voguing an array of pajamas purchased through a consumer catalogue. The confinement is not so much in the flannel as much as in the scenes and schemas offered up to us by our consumer culture. The contrast between the softness of bedtime clothing and the rigidity of the standard pajama pose is quite weird. Pajamas are the least confining of clothing, why should they be so awkwardly paraded? Shouldn't there be a little more sex and chutzpah in the mix? Can catalogues and their PG aesthetics shape our behaviour, our ease of movement? Do we really have control over our most intimate of domestic routines? Cindy Sherman explored similar questions in her efforts to pose herself as a character within popular film scenes. Oddly, her presence in such a virtual world seem to fulfill her. Gloria's chosen world, the clothing catalogue, may be far more restricting, not to mention frontal, flattening and spookily severe.

As Martha Stewart exemplifies in her "Living" magazine, we may own that halo of expression poised somewhere between our scivvies and our front door –but we may not actually control it. Liberating that penumbra, unlocking its elixirs of joy, is the art of life, even when (like Martha) we are quite literally confined in jail, or in a nation quick to confine.