

the
dignity
of

survival.
desire
+ destiny

Liz Young, *The Dignity of Survival*. Photo: Joseph Cullice

solo exhibitions + installations

1986

Psychic Bleeding: A Clinical Approach.
Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE).

1988

The Way of the Flesh, Crash Arts, Phoenix.

1990

The Allowance of Pain, New Langton Arts,
San Francisco.

1992

A Virtue of Control, Otis Art Institute of the
Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles.

1993

The Mutiny of Flesh, the Prudence of Reason.
Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica.

selected group exhibitions

1984

The Cotton Exchange Show, Cotton Exchange
Building, Los Angeles.

1985

The Floor Show, Los Angeles Contemporary
Exhibitions (LACE).

1986

Baa Baa Babel, Alexandria Hotel, Los Angeles.

1987

Los Angeles/Houston, Diverseworks, Houston.

1988

Almost Functional, Richard Bennett Gallery,
Los Angeles.

1989

Art as Religion, Richard Bennett Gallery,
Los Angeles.

1990

Low Technology—Neglected Fixations,
Center of Contemporary Art, Seattle.

Taking Liberties, The Woman's Building,
Los Angeles.

1991

Art in the Anchorage, Creative Time, New York.

1992

FAR Bazaar, Foundation for Art Resources,
Old Federal Reserve Bank, Los Angeles.

selected bibliography

1985

Colin Gardner, "Using Gallery Structure as
Canvas," *Artweek* 6, no. 5 (9 February): 5.

1986

Kathy Tanney, "Pick of the Week," *L.A. Weekly*, 4
May, 85.

Suzanne Muchnic, "One Speaks, the Other Bleeds,"
Los Angeles Times, 2 June, "Calendar" 1.

Linda Burnham, L.A. Reviews, *High Performance*,
no. 34 (August): 67.

1988

Terry Bissell, "Faces," *Southern California Home
& Garden*, June, 18, 20.

1990

Regina Hackett, "The Odd, the Outcast, and the
Obsessive," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 6 July.

Keith Raether, "'Low Tech' Aglow with Dark
Humor," *Morning News-Tribune (Tacoma)*, 23
July, 27.

1992

Peter Kosenko, "Mortification as Installation,"
Visions Art Quarterly 6, no. 4 (fall): 39.

Larry Rinder, "Robot Redux," *Artforum* 31
(November): 74-78.

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Los Angeles County Museum of Art

November 18, 1993–January 30, 1994

My work is about sustenance and survival. My goal is to address issues of physical, emotional, and spiritual limitations that everybody has. That's really what survival is about—dealing with those limitations and transforming them and transcending them. Liz Young

Los Angeles-based Liz Young is not an artist in the traditional sense. The objects she makes exist less for aesthetic pleasure than as symbols of utilitarian apparatus that serve human needs, both physical and psychological. What is more, these implements are placed in environments or architecturally scaled structures large enough for viewers to enter and explore. These are likewise designed and built by Young. Her objects further serve as props and her architectural environments as sites for staged activities she calls live procedures (borrowing a medical term), in which she and other performers engage in tasks requiring physical and mental endurance.* Thus Young's art form is less aptly described as sculpture or architecture, even though it is sculptural and spatial, than as a kind of theater—a theater of ritualized struggle and survival.

If Young is not a traditional artist, she is surely a traditional artisan. A fabricator of things, she employs traditional—and notably labor-intensive—craft techniques to construct her works. In fact, she has been drawn to basic handicrafts all her life. As a child she learned carpentry from her father, knitting, weaving, and crocheting from her grandmother, and mechanical skills from a boyfriend. As her art became more diverse in medium and complex in form, she taught herself to weld, cast various metals, and piece together just about anything she might need out of such stock industrial materials as iron, steel, concrete, cardboard, or plywood and such base—even rude—organic substances as wax, animal gut, rawhide, and human hair. Young's raw materials are almost always the detritus given up by the world as worthless and devalitized, which she reclaims, revitalizes, and redeems. Her "belabored" constructions never evoke elegant craftsmanship for its own sake but have a crude, handwrought, medieval quality; and like much medieval artifact, her works appear both to serve a practical purpose and to signify ritually something of the human condition in the larger scheme of things. They often bespeak an existence in which ambiguity and irony are fundamental attributes of survival.

In the present installation, for example, a basinlike form may suggest a sink in which to wash one's hands, or it may connote a baptismal font to cleanse one's soul. Curiously, Young's basin is made of glycerine soap and would dissolve quickly if it were actually used. Similarly a tentlike enclosure, made of thousands of pennies, which Young hammered thin, drilled, and sewed onto a fabric like so many overlapping scales, as readily implies a coffin-sized confinement as it does a primitive shelter. Likewise, a cruciform stand with hand grips, foot supports, and a chin rest might be a medical device, or it might be a torture rack. A vestlike garment made of stitched rawhide bears a permanently protruding, "pregnant" belly (intended by the artist to represent the burden of original sin) as well as a prominent rubber phallus; Young calls this work the "coat of shame."

These poetically charged objects and others comprising **The Dignity of Survival** are displayed in a suspended, cage-like structure that viewers are compelled, in part by their own curiosity and in part by Young's architectural plan, to enter. The viewer thus becomes complicitous in a situation that suggests at some conscious level the specter of danger or imprisonment and, perhaps at a more subliminal level, establishes a covenant of trust with the artist. Like much medieval religious art, the materials, workmanship, and content that comprise Young's art evoke such dualistic yet indivisible associations as the body and the soul, suffering and succor, perishability and perseverance, loss and redemption, confinement and freedom.

Liz Young, who is partially paralyzed and wheelchair-bound as a result of injuries sustained in an automobile accident in her youth, asserts that her work "reflects the realities of a physically challenged woman yet relates to struggles that are universal." Her art is an allegory of struggle and survival. Its every aspect—from the labor-intensive fabrication to the arduous live procedures to the often unsettling engagement of the viewer—is an exercise in toiling to transform materials, straining against the body's limits, breaking through customary psychological defenses.

There is a clear protagonist in this unsentimental struggle against adversity and ultimate death: it is the persistence—the insistence—of the will to endure and to prevail. Young's creative process is a ritual through which the banal drudgery and hard grind of her artmaking becomes the artist's passionate assertion of the supremacy of willed purposefulness over futility. "That's really the core of my work—it's everything from being somewhat disabled to being able to fly."

Howard N. Fox, Curator of Contemporary Art

* Three live procedures are scheduled in the gallery space for Friday evenings, November 26, December 17, and January 21, 7:30–8:30 p.m. Parental discretion is advised.