

## THE SITING OF THE SELF

*Jeffrey Schwartz*

"There is no looking glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us -hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?"

The search for the subject has been a prevalent theme in the creative arts. Elusive in character, it has been pursued in a constant give and take between personal biography and the exercise of craft, between individual expression, and the pervading influence of historical genres. In contemporary visual art, the creator enters into solidarity with the object, which serves at once as prop, character and text in the eloquent staging of the subject's drama.

The very transit of the author in time and space submits her or him to the risk of loss. It is not just that years and places strip and scrape away from the subject part of its essence, but that this erosion has come to be considered concomitant to the subject's very identity. Placing, defacing and again replacing are part and parcel of the subject's ubiquitous presence in the world. On one hand, the insistent affirmation of the self, in an interminable series of presents, is only possible at the expense of past and future. Alternatively, as if to compensate, memory -titled towards the past- and desire ostensibly setting its sights on the future-annul the present, vaulting the physical body into a state of suspension, immaterial.

The question of who I am and what am I doing here is not just reserved for the mad or forsaken or merely forgotten. Did they think that by

denying me a mirror they would annihilate my avenue to self-recognition, the assurance of knowing that I am who I am, and was who I was? I am awake enough to understand that not even that mirror I gazed into as a child could satiate my questioning. Full face before it, I tried to show myself love, in an act of self-esteem. A small comfort bumping up against chilly reality: the mirror is an object, setting our reflection outside of ourselves. Up close, it will turn our breath to mist, the mist obscuring our face, the lack of a face the reminder of the distance between a warm body and a cold hard plate of shiny glass.

With every object taken away, the artist is left empty handed, voicing doubts of identity, questioning location -who am I, where is here? And just what is it that I am doing here, interrogating the air, obedient, intoning questions as if part of an incantation, learnt by rote?

"On the contrary,' I said, 'only I know how long I have been here. Nights and days and days and nights, hundreds of them were slipping through my fingers. But that does not matter. Time has no meaning. But something you can touch and hold like my red dress, that has a meaning- Where is it?"

The solidarity of the object is the artist's refuge from loss and forgetfulness. Here the object, which is not we, invites us to approach a more tangible citing of the self. The object has meaning, a point of communion, the site around which a situation of solidarity might be conceived. Time loses meaning, for there are distances set between the idea of time and us; time is not approachable. But the red dress, the dress I loved to wear, the dress that is red and shines with a redness that awakens me, the scent of the dress, an aroma of tropical flowers that reminds me that really I did exist in another place and time.

The colour intensifies the presence of the object before us, prolonging its life-span, bridging the gap between its mundane daily use and its overwhelming self-assertion as emblem of another time, another culture, even another self. A red cot, an orange dress, a flowered bed, yellow jackets wrapped in a self-loving hug, reminds themselves they were alive. They were alive in another place and time. (The white dolls have been ritually drained of colour, reached by the lance; they are limp, they are dead.)

The artist needs objects, coloured and white, sharp and dull, eloquent, or with their lips tightly sealed. We need objects to make us up again, even though they are not ourselves. Objects that are too big, too small, too odd, hand sewn objects, copper tubes welded into shapes, a scale all their own. Their distance from the everyday is clear in the shifts of scale, the colours burning like fires in the night. Each offers itself up in a transit to another cultural reference, the span of years that distances us from a child's size, the gap of height that sets us apart from a giant's size, a size for fantasy beings, or from a dress made according to a doll's way of wearing things. Too far away to be used, but close enough to be useful.

"I lay thinking, 'I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. I am safe from the barrier of the cliffs, the high mountains and the barrier of the sea. I am safe from strangers.'"

Clay household objects, common and usual, are set inside glass cases, which are called Glasshouses (1991). They are offered as if in an archaeological museum's display case, the exit point for the rationalization of another time or place, enlightenment through presentation. A rich reddened clay gives them a quality of being from another land, heightening our assurance that the other does exist, either in our memory or in the world; bowls and combs to serve the function of

displacement. Glass cases holding glass shelves, with their edges tinged green, tinged with colour and sense - archaeology in the service of estrangement.

Piled on top of each other, we sense the objects are useful, but they are entirely generic, non-specific, not belonging to any one person or time. In the tall red Cot (1994), the red garments are empty vessels, tucked in amongst the sediment layers of cushions. They hang partially out, show themselves but are tucked partially away, a scheme of our psychological make-up. Soft and empty, they are limp invertebrates, waiting to be fully unearthed -or else to be buried forever. Two nameless chairs (Untitled, 1995), impossibly high, are out of our reach, set as if some small person might sit a long way away upon them, beyond the reach of the world as well. Topping them off are polar fleece objects, as if a hibernating essence was the self-absorbed meaning of each wrapped yellow ball. As if the arms were crossed in a protective, self-loving and self-tending gesture.



In Falling (1996) these headless figures are alive with lifelessness. In the era of the soft, all rigidity is in decline (the vertical desires of traditional sculpture as well) all muscles and tendons have given way. Straight jackets for the emotions. The limp moment of deflation, the soft deflation of sculpture, when the object finally gives in.



In the name of comfort, in the name of myself. What falls, what is soft, what is laid out in patterns on the wall, what I have cut out of patterns and piled upon the edge of the bed. A compelling, orderly home, where everything looks and smells familiar; I have put this place in order, I am sure that I belong.

*All quotes from Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea*