

# MARC STRAUS

## NEW YORK

## BOMB — Artists in Conversation

Jeanne Silverthorne

by Saul Ostrow



Photograph © 1990 Peter Bellamy.

Jeanne Silverthorne is an artist and critic. Her studio is in a basement in New York's Lower East Side. In this less than ideal environment, she excavates the depths of the psyche and its mechanisms. Guided by a mixture of the post-Freudian views of such figures as Klein and Kristeva, and a large measure of uncertainty, she delves into the symbolic order of images, abstraction and language.

**Saul Ostrow** The position some of us, as artists, find ourselves in is one of being overly conscious of an incredible number of details: whom we address, how we address them, what we want to say, what the context of our statement is...

**Jeanne Silverthorne** I'm trying to contextualize.

**SO** And what do you mean by that? (laughter)

**JS** You want me to answer that?

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**SO** I think that is what your work's about.

**JS** It wasn't an example pulled out of a hat?

**SO** Your new pieces, like this installation, take visual metaphors familiar to modernism like the primitive fertility figures and use the seduction of their familiarity, and the seduction of the images, to somehow contextualize another reading. Putting a fertility figure on the floor like some cripple and then putting a photograph next to it, you get the black and white photo to read as realism, but it's not. It's a kind of bringing things back to their place, in the real world.

**JS** So they're sort of friendly sculptures?

**SO** It looks like art but it's not about challenging the categories. They are sculptures.

**JS** A lot of these figures have to do with the female. These figures were appropriated by modernist masters who just started spiraling off into meanings and completely detached from a woman's real body. In the spiral, I'm catching the metaphor and bringing it back down to the fact that there's a person, there are people on whom these metaphors are based.

**SO** We spoke about this notion of why male artists use women's bodies as metaphors. You insist that they use somebody else's, they should use their own.

**JS** Artists should use their own bodies.

**SO** Yet the DNA sculptures from '86, '88 are all bodies and they are nobody's body. They're utilitarian, they're abstract.

**JS** I think they're definitely figures, don't you? And anthropomorphic. Or maybe they do read abstractly.

**SO** In silhouette, they do, but what they're made up of is not anthropomorphic.

**JS** Quite right. And I was interested in the notion of mechanicalness. These are stock images, the mechanicalness of these figures is the mechanicalness with which we project on to virtually anything we see.

**SO** These are nobody's bodies.

**JS** These particular pieces are nobody's.

**SO** They are genderless. To be obvious, they have no genitals.

**JS** I'm interested in what gender people project on to them. You've got a rising figure and you've got two small scale identical figures. How do you read those? A lot of people think male/female children. Other people never see the figure at all. Or people see the rising sculpture as a mothering shape rather than a male shape. I'm interested in that. Participation from the audience does not complete the meaning, I don't

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think the meaning is ever completed, but it keeps it moving. These pieces are very much about projection, it's a self-test: how much do you project?

**SO** Does it always turn back on itself? Is it purely a function of ambiguity, a conscious nonspecificity?

**JS** Is what?

**SO** Can one make something that is just open-ended? We also know that at times somebody can paint something very specific. And nobody gets it.

**JS** It seems to me that the more specific you are, almost madly specific... over-determined. It almost becomes a kind of schizophrenic specificity—Jameson talks about every particle becoming hyperreal. It seems if you start with that kind of mad specificity, you end up with extremely abstract or mysterious objects. It's like a law of nature. That fact that I can have this mad plan in my head filled with the meanings of this particular element, and this element is specifically an ear and then by virtue of my intensity, my preoccupation with it, it's unrecognizable to anybody else.

**SO** You can't see the forest for the trees...

**JS** I don't know exactly what to make of it. The relationship between the artist's intention and the audience's perception of that. You've got this highly-focused, specific, conscious intention coming from the artist. And then you've got the audience coming at it without the privilege of knowing that intention, and arriving at something else.

**SO** The artists' dilemma. If one's not going to make icons—like Peter Halley or Ashley Bickerton, where there seems to be a very specific reading, a prime text—you get the same subjectivity or disjunction that took place with late abstract expressionism where eventually the maker, on an existential level, put his whole being into these paintings; and the viewer looked at them formally.

**JS** That's a good analogy, yes, absolutely.

**SO** There's a shifting, different view of the sociological function of art. For all of the claimed death of ideology, we still function very much in an ideological world. And if one views art as an ideological tool...my view is that culture is still an arena in which values are reinforced, an echo of the political world which is then reinforced or criticized by the world of culture. I want my work to leave the viewer with a consciousness of that challenge, which of course, for me, is a question of challenging a dominant ideology.

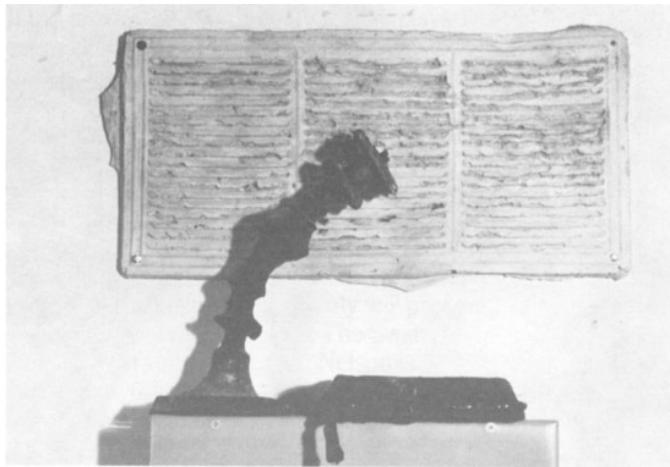
**JS** Obviously I'm engaged in your challenge too, but I'm just a pragmatist.

**SO** At this point, I'd say a feminist critic is an ideological one.

**JS** Absolutely. I would just like to say that I don't start consciously with the notion that I'm making critical or ideological works. It's because I am a woman, and I feel it under my skin, that this comes out in the work. Do you know what I'm saying?

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Jeanne Silverthorne, Vent, Candlestick, Ashtray, 1987, rubber and hydrocal, 12×16×6".

**SO** Yes and no because I would say, in that case, that Louise Fishman's or Agnes Martin's work would have to be similar to yours. Obviously, you can't escape the body, the biological facts of your existence and, at the same time, choose to make work...

**JS** That doesn't address that. But I wasn't making that claim for all of us, I was only making it for myself.

**SO** It's a conscious decision.

**JS** It's not a conscious decision. That's just it, personally, I mean, it's both. When I'm making work I don't consciously start out from the ideological position. These things come into my head, I ponder what they mean, and to-and-behold, very often, they have a strong ideological point to them which has to do with my feeling, my position as a woman and I use that phrase "advisably"...it's on my skin. I have a lot of theory to back that up, but that's secondary. However, to get back to this idea of being a pragmatist. So there's all that and again there's this really intense intention here in the studio when I'm making a piece. As a pragmatist, when it goes out there in the world—because there are these multiple audiences whether I want them to get it or not is irrelevant to the fact that some audiences will, some audiences won't. It has a life of its own out there in the world, and there's not much I can do about it. I like that I can't control it because I'm not omniscient enough to know what effects should be created...

**SO** There are other woman artists, Aimee Rankin or Barbara Kruger, who say they must make art as explicit, as obviously critical as possible in order to change or erase sexism from the audience's consciousness, and do it with a very authorial voice.

**JS** Thank God they do. It lets me do what I do. Their work is in the world. And because they're there, I can be where I am.

**SO** Any psychoanalyst would probably tell you that an ideological choice has to do with deep-seated memory, personality development—ideology is never a conscious...

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**JS** Not totally, I would say that it is conscious...

**SO** One seeks an ideology. Those people who are ideologically conscious seek an ideology that they are comfortable with.

**JS** That's true; on the other hand, take it further, you can grow into an ideology. An ideology can have an effect on what you do—it could work from the other end as well.

**SO** The argument could still be that one grows into it because the personality is susceptible to it, otherwise it becomes brainwashing.

**JS** Or it implies that the personality is always changing.

**SO** Or that there is a forced transformation of personality in order to come into line with an ideology.

**JS** I just wanted to say again that my work can be read in the way I would like it to be read because artists like Barbara Kruger have built an audience and a context. If my work was shown in a place where Barbara Kruger or Sherrie Levine had never been heard of, it would be, from my point of view, misread, but I would have to let that happen. Do you understand what I'm saying? Because one of the things I flirt with is a realist reading that's actually sexist.

**SO** Explain that.

**JS** What you see is quite traditional, your reaction is activated by what you want to see.

**SO** One could view this as traditional women's work. Domestic tableaux, sadomasochistic still-lifes.

**JS** Which has been a traditionally feminine point of view too, so that's something I'm sort of liable for, if you will, it's a real danger in the work. You can't control it, that's what I know to be true. I'm to some degree complying with what I'm criticizing. There are a hundred times when one's work can be read that way and it's quite clear that it is.

**SO** In that case, how you read the social situation outside the work informs the work.

**JS** I'm hoping that everybody comes to the present social situation as I do, so that the reading comes close to my reading.

**SO** I become very self-conscious when I say "my body," as if there was something exterior to my body that owned it. Obviously, there's some sort of discourse going on at this point because of mortality.

**JS** One other factor is that we've been so language-centered in the past two decades. There's a wonderful line from Richard Rorty's book *The Consequences of Pragmatism* which reads, "There's no way to get between languages to the thought which language expresses." That's like a dead end, he says it's a bit like the 18th century argument for the existence of God. It's not that we could ever prove it or disprove it, we just lost interest. We reached this conundrum with language. There is no natural self, no center, no unified self. No self you can point to and say there it is. It already belongs to you. It also

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belongs to your existence. We recognize the truth of that and also the inadequacy because we exist in physical bodies that die.

**SO** We're passing out of that period in which everything is sociologically determined. The fact that there may be a biological determinacy, there may be that bad seed. There may be genetically retransmitted personalities.

**JS** You're talking genetics now? Yeah, I feel both totally incompetent and totally suspicious. I know what you mean, but since we're using language to talk about this, I don't know what that means. I know that genetic theory can be demonstrated, but it's demonstrated within the parameters of language.

**SO** Language asserts itself as dominant almost to the point where it would deny the existence of random, non-linear, fragments—this world in which guess what, there ain't no focus—only language organizes it. And the fact that we can only say one word at a time organizes it in a linear manner.

**JS** Yeah.

**SO** So, given that experience of language, we want to believe that everything has to do with our conscious activity, things we have control over because language gives us control over those things.

**JS** I agree; all I'm saying is, if we're talking about the observer as phenomenon are we observing our own genes?

**SO** In quantum theory the observer is implicated in the equation as another variable.

**JS** Exactly. Which is why I know what to do with information like, there's a bad seed. There could be, I don't know. But who's telling me this and why are they telling me this?



DNA III, 1988, hydrocal and keys, 9 × 10 × 7 inches. Courtesy Burgin Gallery.

**SO** Or is it that they were looking for it and that's why they found it.

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**JS** Yeah. I can't deal with this. I'm always truly skeptical—not in the sense of critical—I'm an agnostic.  
(laughter)

**SO** Then you are in agreement with Karl Popper, who says ideology determines the questions that are asked and, therefore, how one approaches answering them.

**JS** Absolutely. I'm glad you said that. (laughter)

**SO** It's knowing that the potential of the existence of God must be known to ask the question, "Is there a God?" Baudrillard said there is no apartheid.

**JS** There is no what?

**SO** Apartheid. And there is no third world. No sexism, and so on. "If you stop participating in it. It disappears." It only exists as a language made real when one participates...

**JS** Yes. That's like his saying the Watergate scandal showed we still had morality. Which everybody knows we don't so, it was like, we'll have a scandal and then they'll think we have morality by our outrage, which only proved our immorality because we didn't do anything about it. I'm going to have trouble when it comes to things like apartheid and sexism, if you put it in those terms. There's a certain level of lived experience that's not being taken into account.

**SO** It's one of the things that seems to have been missed by all those people who got real interested in the simulacra. The simulacra was a falsehood in that it denied experience. Rather than focusing on things that would become experiential, they focused on the falsehoods. (laughter). Give us more falsehoods. That's the reality of it. But they want to, it seems, take into account the reality of it.

What I hear you saying is that one can construct experiences that deny the simulacra, that, in a way, deny language because it opens to your interpretation.

**JS** Certainly there's such a thing as experience.

**SO** Is that why your description of the sculpture is ambiguous; it doesn't allow one to reside purely in language, because language doesn't satisfy them.

**JS** I wouldn't be involved in sculpture if it did. You know, sculpture is about mass and tactility. I mean, obviously somewhere I'm a closet phenomenologist. (laughter) Yes, if it were only language, I wouldn't feel the need for these really physical objects. I'm a sculptor in a traditional sense, certainly in the physical, and I'm interested in surface, and it's very much about the flesh and the pleasure of arousal and that kind of thing. However, by the same token, there is the juggernaut of the body. I'm really leery and worried that it could become a kind of anti-intellectualism. So I still need language. I mean I love language.

**SO** But this juggernaut of the body is the second time around.

**JS** The first being?

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**SO** First time around was right after World War II, late '40s, early '50s, a lot of the West Coast people like Bruce Conner and the collage assemblage people, Kienholz, Yves Klein—all of that's the body.

**JS** Yes. But I want something more distanced.

**SO** But it was a violated body, a body that had been afflicted by violence and pain.

**JS** I'm interested in pain, but not violence. And the left and right sides of the brain, I like this metaphor.

**SO** In meditation, you become, on the experiential level, quite aware that there might not be, geographically, this right and left, but some place in your brain fights like hell to retain control and not allow you to slip into this other state. And it talks to you. It'll bring up everything, oh, I've got to get another set of keys made...maybe chicken for dinner etc. You become quite aware that there's a section of your brain that cannot stand repetition, that cannot stand anything but linearity and language. It resists allowing you to open yourself up to images and dream.

**JS** Yes, I know. One of the hardest things to do in meditation, is to sit still. But to get back to what you were saying, this business of my being worried about the juggernaut of the body—taking the body out of the realm of language all together in the art is something I can't do. For me, what's interesting about the scheme of the right and left sides of the brain is the isthmus. The flow between the two is where I situate myself. A too uncritical, untheoretical, nonlinguistic approach makes me nervous. Likewise, it makes me tremendously uncomfortable to just use an intellectualized language. There is no such thing as just language and just body.

**SO** We're very good at creating the illusion of the either/or.

**JS** On a practical level, maybe we have to do that split. But I don't feel practical.

**SO** What it arouses is the possibility of a raw, cooked and its other. The material, the experiential, the linguistic and the informal..

**JS** Did you read this article in the paper about the three categories of matter. There are two stationary ones, I always thought that the third was absolutely located, but its not, the third is at the breakage of the first half and the last half, It's never one thing, it's a kind of attitude. That's where I've positioned myself.

—Saul Ostrow is a sculptor, curator and art critic.

Original source: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1326/jeanne-silverthorne>