

Poodles, Rivers, and Gutskin

Posted on [August 13, 2011](#) by [Satri Pencak](#) www.satripencak.com

Slaughterhouse Space

There is a rare opportunity in Healdsburg to view a pair of stunning multimedia installations. **Sensory Interventions** features the work of two artists, Pat Lenz and Hugh Livingston. Each artist makes a provocative statement of their own using different media to address distinct issues.

The exhibition space, which is a converted century-old slaughterhouse, makes a very unique backdrop for these installations. When I first entered the old industrial building I noticed the dark concrete walls reaching up to the high ceilings, and remnants of equipment still remaining from its former purpose. At the next turn I came upon a scene that left me amazed and speechless. There, in an alcove, amid somber grey walls, and rusty chains with hooks tucked in a corner, was a poodle. Not just any poodle, it was **Nobody's Poodle**, a huge, opalescent pink poodle. Created by Healdsburg artist, Pat Lenz, the 7-foot tall by 8-foot long fiberglass and stainless steel sculpture makes an imposing visual impact and a tension of sensibilities in the space it holds.

Nobody's Poodle is a potent feminist statement with a number of corollaries to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, which is an expansive, triangular installation with ceramic place settings for 39 women from legend and history. *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979), brought to the foreground the forgotten and often undervalued achievements of women. While, at the time, considered art of a "special interest group", *The Dinner Party* opened up greater possibilities for women artists to create art that is recognized as important on its own terms as well as in the broader art world. Lenz' Poodle departs from the realm of legend and history and creates a modern-day heroine, a new goddess who "embraces her femininity while exuding power and control; a force for peace and non-violence whose weapon is perfume emitted from a grenade-shaped (tail) atomizer".¹

In answering the question, "what does it mean to be nobody's poodle?" Lenz asserts that "No one can name you, command you, or lead you around. You think and decide for yourself." This statement can also be seen as a legacy of Judy Chicago, who, for a 1971 exhibition, boldly posted on the wall that "Judy Gerowitz hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name, Judy Chicago."²

Other similarities exist in their choice of scale, if not over-all size, to heighten the force of their message, as well as the use of stereotypical emblems of the feminine—such as items for dinner and vanity tables—as statements of strength and power, not something to be easily dismissed. Social commentary aside, there is also the attention to fine crafting that must be noted, whether in ceramic or fiberglass each artist produced visually spectacular pieces with exquisite surface finishes—Chicago's China-paint glazes and Lenz's pink automotive paint. Fabricated over time, each artist also worked with teams of collaborators to bring their projects to completion.

After leaving the Poodle and its ancillary multi-media pieces, work your way to the back of the building to discover **Catch & Release**, by Hugh Livingston. Employing video and audio installations, Livingston recreates the essence of the Russian River as he experienced it during his term as a Russian Riverkeeper Artist-in-Residence. In one segment, Livingston lines up a row of small video monitors. Each shows a video loop of a particular aspect of the river. Alongside each monitor is a color strip showing a selection of hues seen in the

video loop. The colors were technically extracted from the video and reproduced as accurately as possible onto the color strip. What occurs, because both can be seen in your frame of vision at the same time, is that elements in the video that match in color to the strip begin to pop out in a way that would not have been noticed otherwise, causing a shift of focus. The artist explains that “The River colors refract and pixelate and moirize. The collection here distills a few experiences to their essence, removed from the River and recontextualized.” Another piece can be viewed in a small dark room up a narrow flight of concrete steps. A streaming video is projected on the black wall. It takes a while to take it in and sort it out—words flow from top to bottom as a river, forking and re-converging with the main stream. I crane my head from side to side trying to read the flowing words without success. When I mention this to the artist he says that’s okay, they’re words from an Environmental Impact Report, nobody reads them anyway.

Slaughterhouse Space, 280 Chiquita Road, Healdsburg, CA 95448, 707-431-1514. Gallery hours are by appointment. www.slaughterhousespace.com. The exhibitions continue through September 10, 2011.

If you aren’t able to catch the Poodle in its Healdsburg location, you still have a chance to see it in Santa Rosa, where a second version is on display at Sonoma County Museum, and while the setting is not quite as dramatic, its sheer scale still strikes an inimitable presence.

Sonoma County Museum

Along with **Nobody’s Poodle**, the museum is showing **Gertrud Parker: An artist and Collector**. Trained as a fiber artist, and having been in close association with the Pacific Basin School of Textiles in Berkeley and with noted fiber artists such as Pat Hickman, Lillian Elliott, and Kay Sekimachi, Gertrud Parker founded the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum in the 1980s.

This retrospective exhibition primarily focuses on Parker’s use of gutskin as a sculptural material. Considered a natural fiber, gutskin has appeared as a popular medium in fiber art shows in recent years. The twenty, or so, pieces by Parker are accompanied by selected work by other artists from Gertrud and her husband’s, Harold Parker, private art collection. One of the most striking pieces by Parker is *The Shelf*. Composed of institutional-looking metal shelving which holds bundles of human hair wrapped in gutskin, it is a peculiar, intriguing, and perhaps disturbing, piece that puts to question the psychological implications of hair, especially when it is no longer attached to the body.

The work by other artists from the Parker collection reflect and complement aspects of Gertrud’s work, enhancing the exhibition as a whole. Included are pieces by noted West Coast artists such as Gordon Onslow Ford, Mark Toby, Bruce Conner, and the Surrealist painter and writer, Leonora Carrington, who recently passed away, as well as others that often aren’t seen outside of private collections.

Sculpture Garden

After pondering all that pithy art, go outside to relax in the museum’s new Sculpture Garden; currently featuring work by Carroll Barnes, Roger Berry, Edwin Hamilton, Bruce Johnson, Ned Kahn, Pat Lenz, Hugh Livingston, amid landscaped berms, benches, and a small plaza.

Sonoma County Museum, 425 7th Street, Santa Rosa, CA 95401, (707) 579 1500, Museum Hours, Tuesday – Sunday 11am – 5pm. www.sonomacountymuseum.org. The exhibitions continue through September 11, 2011.

¹Press release, SlaughterhouseSpace, May 25, 2011.

²*Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century*. Ed. Uta Grosenick (Cologne: Taschen, 2001). P. 78.



Nobody's Poodle, by Pat Lenz

Photograph from SlaughterhouseSpace website.