REVIEW

June 1996

EPISTLE 3: ON THE TRAIL OF THE MAGICAL

by April Kingsley

Unable to decide whether to turn north or south from Prince Street and Broadway last Saturday, instinct drove me downtown to **The Drawing Center** and Louise Bourgeois' drawings—which I have long loved and wished I could own. This meant turning away from Damien Hirst, Robert Ryman, and the big hype galleries, but it was right for my mood, for I was in search of magic. And I found it at The Drawing Center. The first drawing to seduce me was a very early one, *Escape, 1939*, which seemed to lie at the heart of her endeavor as I understand it. Two interlocked figures make one long swimming form on a light blue field that speaks of being held back from escaping with a dreamlike feeling of powerlessness despite great effort. Alternate readings might concern birth, or the desire to return to the womb, or sex, or dependency, or maybe even seduction, but its shapes and its style reverberate throughout her work. It is significant that she used this drawing as the frontispiece for *Louise Bourgeois, Drawings and Observations*, her book with Lawrence Rinder, published last year by Little Brown and Company. This revealing and charming little volume is really a form of artist's book in that her words accompany her images, even though those words were recorded by Rinder. Whether overt or not, sexuality, or at least the communication of a sense of bodily pleasure, comes through in many of Louise's drawings. It is the repeated strokes, the sense of hair, the erectile points and blunt knobs, the feeling of smoothing, caressing, or succumbing that makes this happen. When she says that what her drawings have in common "is that they were made with pleasure," she confirms the viewer's instinctive response. That pleasure, though, never comes through in a literal, pornographic, or anything but purely esthetic way.

Flammarion has just published a monograph by Marie-Laure Bernadac on Louise's work, the theme of which is her ability to sculpt her emotions. The author also sees those emotions revolving around sex, the fear of it, and its associations with death, which go back to the stone age and beyond. Such ideas were loudly and frequently voiced in France by the Surrealists, and by Georges Bataille in particular, during the thirties as Louise, who was born in 1911, came of age as a woman and as an artist. Whether the themes are: guilt—a child's or a parent's; the home—refuge or hell; or the body—subject of mutilation or reverence, the author explores them in an non-obscurantist manner, bringing out the richness of her very emotion-laden subject.

A personal aside: Louise's husband was the late art historian Robert Goldwater, an illuminating writer on the subject of Modern Art's relation to "primitivism" and on Abstract Expressionism. (Someone might profitably trace the influences of the "primitive art" with which Louise was undoubtedly familiar on her totemic work and discover how sophisticated were her uses of that material.) Robert was my dissertation advisor at the Institute of Fine Arts in 1969. Radical that I was, I wanted my subject to be a living woman artist, but he only had Georgia O'Keefe to suggest, and she was supposedly the province of Eugene Goosen. Soon thereafter I dropped out of Graduate School. It would have been a conflict of interest for him to have suggested his wife, but I didn't find out about her work until the women's movement of the early seventies brought her out, and ultimately, deservedly, made her its queen. The exhibition runs through the month of June.

Now committed to letting my instincts be my guide through Soho, I thought I might wend my way to ACE Gallery on Hudson street, where some amazing, though usually oversized, things go on, but I became way-laid. **Deitch Projects**, on Grand Street with an unlikely Dutch Cleanser-like logo, is showing *Daily Incantations* a sculptural installation by an internationally known Chinese artist named Chen Zhen until June 8th. 101 *nightstools*, as Chinese wooden chamber pots are called, are hung like bells on a sturdy wooden frame in the tiered structure of the ancient Chinese musical instrument. In the center is a huge sphere covered with radios, phones, TVs, and other relics of our communication-overloaded life. It reminded me of Nam June Paik, which didn't add to the experience. I thought the "bells," some of old and beautifully carved wood, might have been more eloquent if the sound

came from them instead. The rugged geometry of the structure, the wonderful wooden objects, and the repetitive, work-related sounds were magic enough. You hear the sounds of women scrubbing out their family's accumulated bodily wastes at the start of day at communal drains in Chinese streets as they might have sounded to young Chen Zen as he made his way to school during the Cultural Revolution. Once there, Mao's *Red Book* was quoted in daily communal readings. The two incantations—the traditional scrubbing and talking of the women, and Mao's daily "cleansing of the soul"—became fused in the artist's mind many years ago and have now emerged to light in the middle of New York City. That tunnel to China of our childhood working in reverse?

Next-door, I found **Paul Kasmin**, the British dealer, showing marvelous cloths woven, dyed, and befeathered in Pre-Columbian Peru. More finely woven than possible by other mere mortals until the computer-driven looms of recent time, and gloriously abstract, these textile works are at the tip top of the mountain known as art before it became westernized. In other words, when craft was art, and vice versa. (closes June 15.)

After that the magic began to taper off. Only one of Toba Khedoori's paintings at **David Zwirner** did it for me, the one with the chain link fence which had interesting perspectival play and an enchanting sense of wonderment. The rest were completion games we've played before. (closes June 15th.) At **Art et Industrie**, which is a wonderful space frequently containing wondrous objects, is Howard Meister's furniture. The practical handwrought steel furniture is OK, the steel canes interesting, and the lead and ceramic wall plaques and photographs can be quite sexy, but there is one moment of magic, a Lucite table covered in translucent, gooey-looking latex titled *Read Her and Weep*. It just glowed—useless, but beautiful. (closes June 22nd.)

I also had a sneak preview of what promises to be a delightful show of wood carvings at the **Luise Ross Gallery**, which opens on June 6th, *Chips Off the Block: Carvers*. Besides a 10 foot high *Hand Tower* by Nancy Azara, a terrific William King, and a ghostly, white-washed cedar totem by Ursula von Rydingsvard, there will be a work by Jack Whitten, *The Saddle*, carved between 1973 and 1980 on Crete where he summers. Known as a painter, and feeling very private about his sculpture, Jack rarely exhibits it, so this is a special occasion. Irene Gennaro's colorful locustwood object and one of Ann Pacher's pieces have figural qualities, making a connection, along with Nancy Grossman's works, to the vision-driven figurative sculptures of auto-didacts Elijah Pierce and Albert Hoffman. Carving is a subtractive, slow, and elemental process whether in the hands of a sculptor, craftsperson, or naif. The nice thing about this show is that no value judgments seem appropriate between them. The exhibition closes June 26th.

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Art and Objecthood Redux: Jessica Stockholder at Dia

by Steve Mumford

In 1967 the art historian Michael Fried published his seminal essay *Art and Objecthood* in Art Forum. Fried was a standard-bearer in what was shaping into an ideological war within the art world, waged over the very definition of *art*.

In retrospect those seem like invigorating, if not exactly halcyon, days. Like two vast tributaries converging and sometimes mixing, artists loyal to the heritage of Abstract Expressionism shared lofts with artists who saw that heritage as rigid and old-fashioned. Warhol and Rauchenberg, Judd and Morris represented a generation of iconoclasts to Fried, who saw the conflict in starkly moral terms. His writing defined explicitly and succinctly the differences in perceptual terms between modernist art and what he termed *literalist art*, meaning Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Pop. What's trenchant today about his writings is that if you remove his moral equation (Ab-Ex/good, Conceptual/bad), you have a profound and useful analysis of two different traditions in modern art, both of which are alive and well today albeit no longer mutually exclusive to one another.

Broadly speaking, Fried saw artwork in the modernist tradition as working by virtue of a juxtaposition of parts. Each part can suggest (suggest a gesture, or the efficacy of a gesture as he put it) by its relationship to another part; this network of relationships becomes