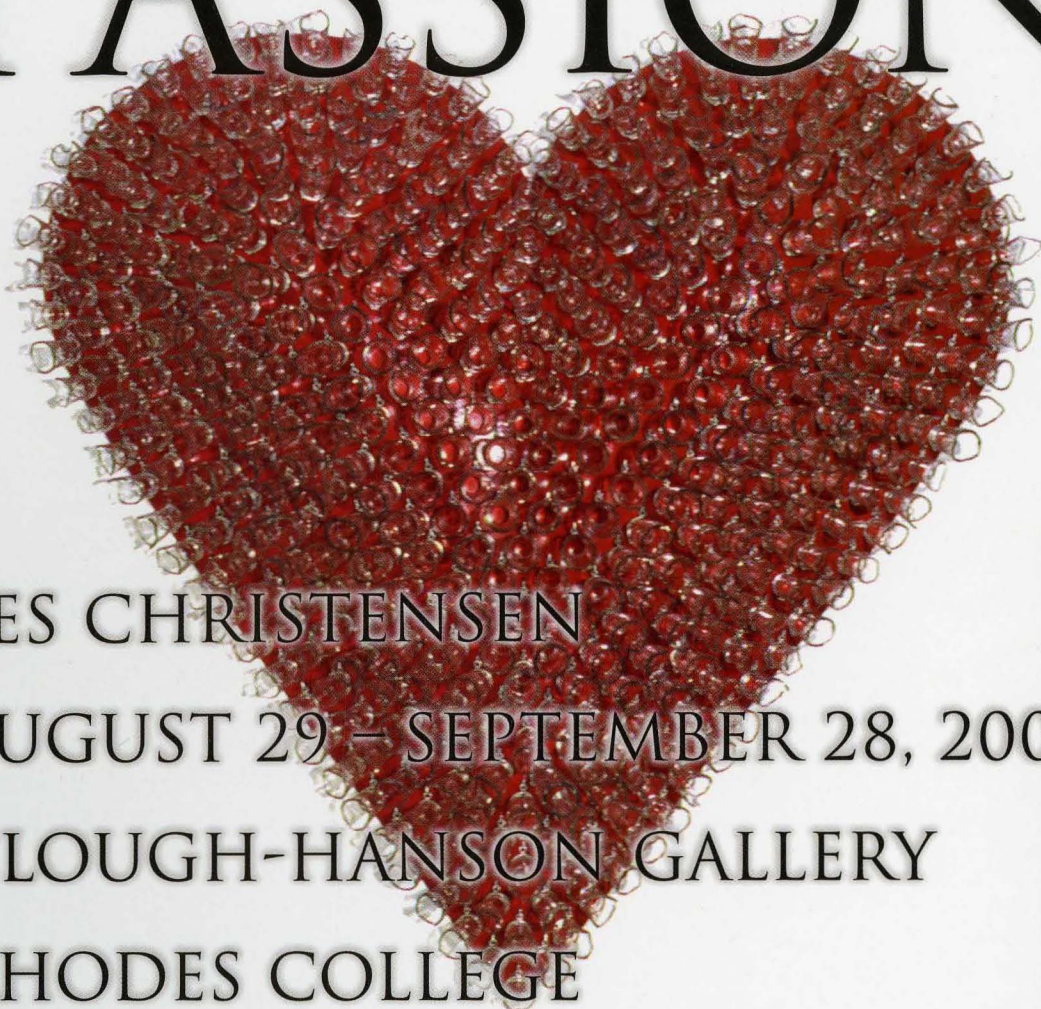


PASSION



LES CHRISTENSEN

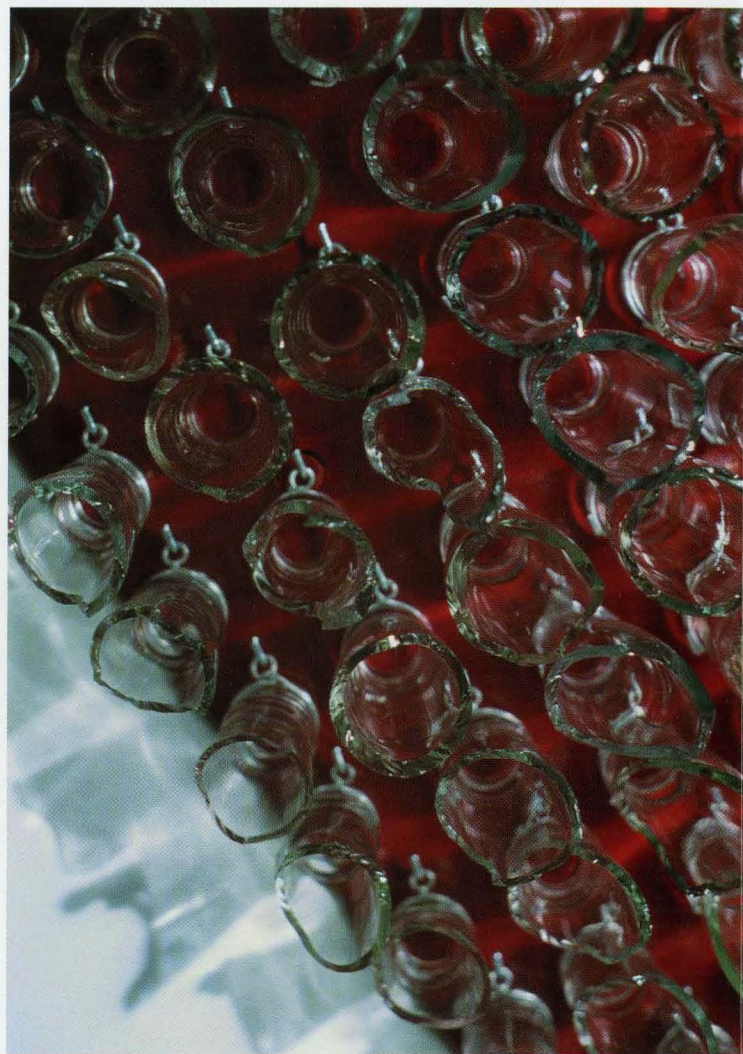
AUGUST 29 – SEPTEMBER 28, 2000

CLOUGH-HANSON GALLERY

RHODES COLLEGE

Although beauty was long held to be a positive attribute in art, over the last one hundred years it has been regarded with suspicion and even outright hostility; apparently, among its other failings, beauty is so facile that it could not possibly challenge the intellect sufficiently. Beauty can, however, be used very effectively to seduce a viewer into confronting an artwork and reassessing preconceived assumptions, as in the *oeuvre* of Les Christensen. Her sculptures are so exquisitely and carefully crafted that the viewer is visually enticed, pulled ever closer, only to be arrested, even repelled, when the seduction gives way to a rumination on the materials and the form. Her work is a study in contradictions. Simultaneously it attracts and repulses, suggests safety and danger; and ostensibly cold, expressionless factory-produced substances are used to address intense human emotions and themes.

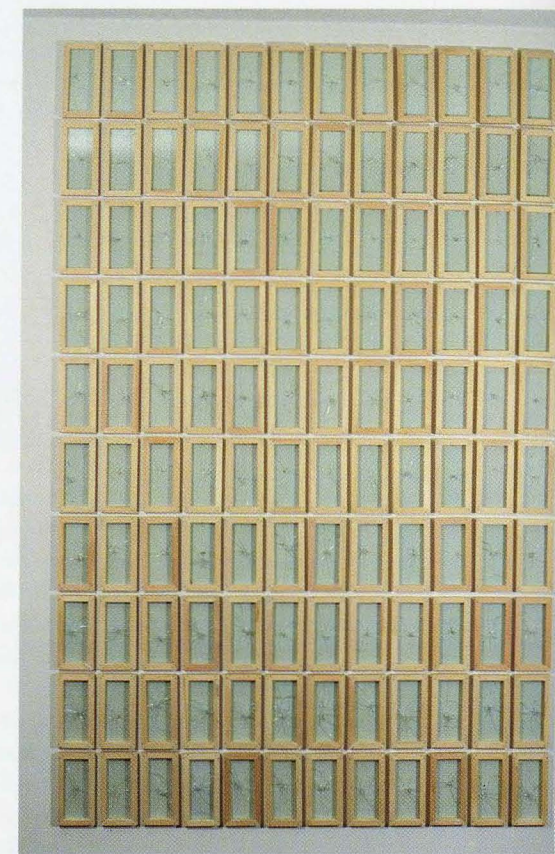
Made of prefabricated, industrial components—glass, tacks, nails, staples—and multiple identical units, Christensen's sculptures clearly derive from minimalism. Initially, because of the perfection, they appear to have been mechanically produced, but upon closer inspection the hand of the artist becomes apparent. The subtle variations among the individual parts, which actually increase the appeal of the work, could never have emerged from an assembly line. She then provides provocative titles—*Shield*, *Shroud*, *Twin*, *Passion*, *Anxiety*, *The Promise*—so that the sculptures function as poems or meditations on feelings and human concerns.



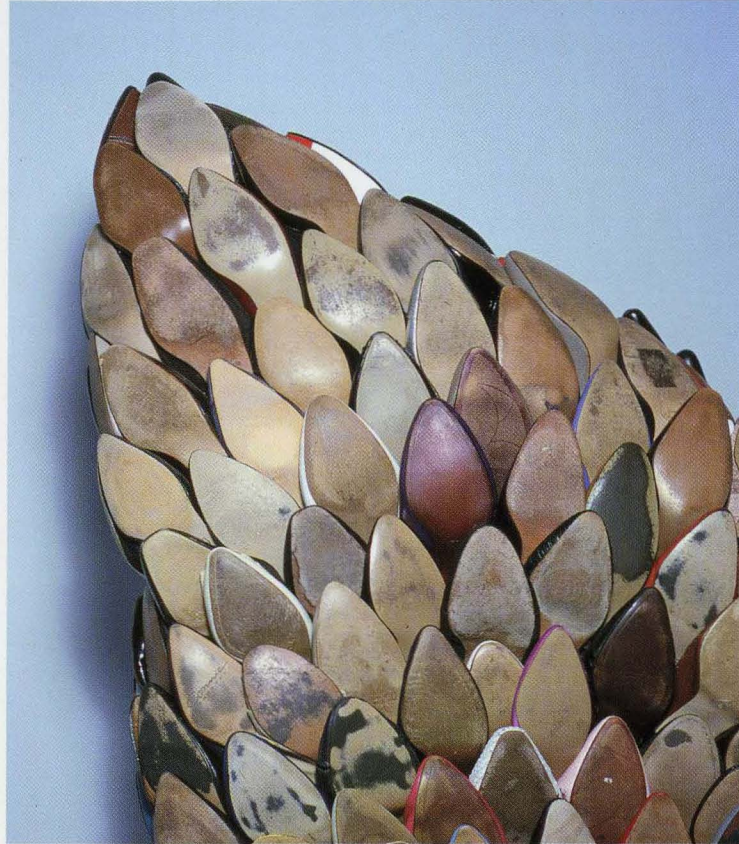
Passion (detail), 1999, wood, broken bottles, paint, hooks

In her earlier work the titles emphasize packing, wrapping, and covering. Contrary to the expectations set up by its title, *Blanket* (1991) does not convey comfort, warmth, or the softness of cloth. The sculpture is composed of innumerable glass units that have been systematically broken. As a result, the potential for offering protection is remote. And a natural antipathy to broken glass is elicited in the viewer. Similar to a quilt in its construction, *Blanket* should evoke affirming thoughts of home, family, hearth, health, life, and marriage. Christensen's interpretation, however, demands that the subject be reconsidered: perhaps these everyday associations are wrong; perhaps life is in fact hard, cold, damaged and damaging, and no blanket can really provide sanctuary. Or possibly even things that seem on the surface to repel or suggest difficulties can be beautiful and provide their own kind of comfort. These conflicting readings are possible because the piece is visually beguiling—stunning but also disturbing.

Reminiscent of modernist architecture, the earlier sculptures are elegant, simple in form, and highly cerebral, with emotion held firmly in check. The elements used are in their most basic form; they have rolled off the assembly line and been cut. The only color is inherent to the materials—the slight tint in the glass, the natural tones of the wood. The substances bring with them little emotional baggage, but the objects Christensen constructs from them are full of baggage. In *Blanket* the broken glass implies violence and inflamed feelings. And yet, because of the materials and the obvious discipline of the craftsmanship, the overall mood of the piece is controlled, dispassionate, and detached. Perhaps Christensen is better able to explore these highly charged images because she has stripped them of some of their heat. It is this paradox—between the cool ingredients and the hot subjects—that gives the work much of its power.



Blanket, 1991, wood, glass, 93 1/4" x 53 1/2" x 1"

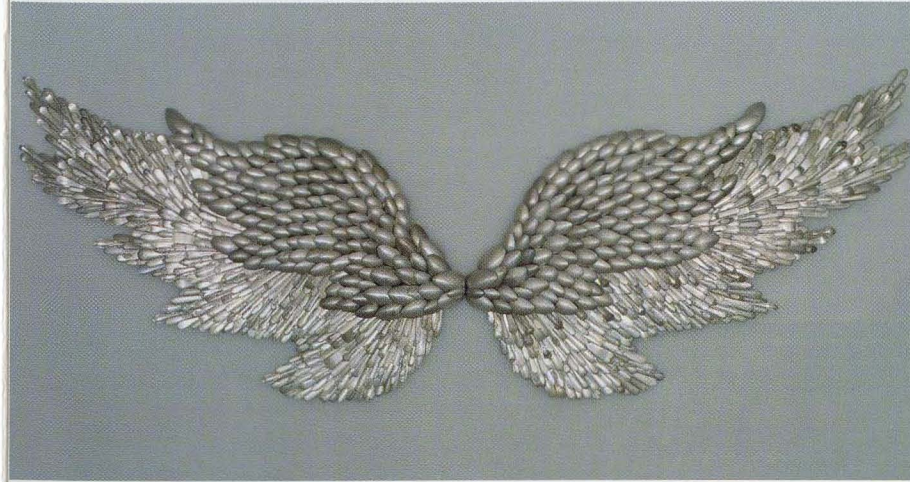


***Why Should I Walk If I
Have Wings to Fly (detail),
2000, shoes, wood***

they still retain enough of their previous forms to be recognizable.

The materials Christensen chooses contribute to the meaning she is exploring. In the wall piece *Flight From Servitude* (1998) spoons are turned into wings, an opulent means of escape from the drudgery of such tasks as cleaning silver. Shoes are attached to a freestanding framework to become wings in *Why Should I Walk If I Have Wings to Fly* (2000). Although Mercury had wings on his feet, the rest of us

In Christensen's newer work, the objects—hearts, wedding dresses, and wings, subjects of poems through the ages—are still freighted with meaning, but she has expanded her palette and the range of her materials. Besides the pre-fabricated, industrial substances, she uses found objects—worn women's shoes, silverware, plates, beer bottles. These materials are not neutral; they bring with them associations from their previous incarnations. Silverware is handed down through families from mother to daughter. Plates too suggest family rituals. Shoes carry the imprint of the individuals who have worn them; they conform through use to the discrete bumps and contours of the foot. There is something very personal about a worn shoe. Beer bottles conjure up too many connections to list. Christensen takes these things and disassembles them—the bottles and plates are broken, the silverware and shoes cut in half—although



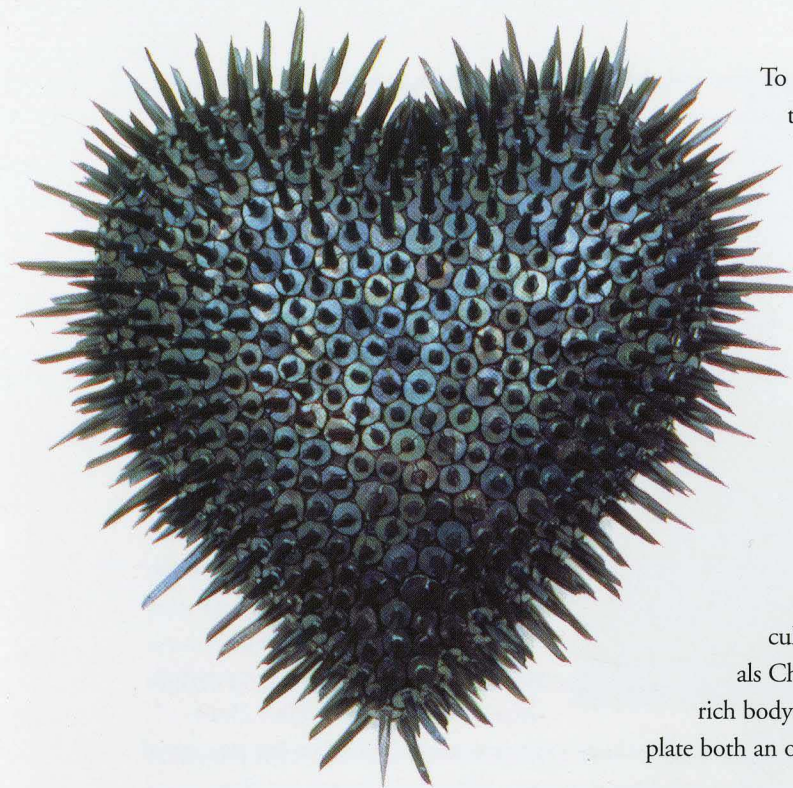
***Flight From Servitude, 1998,
spoons, wood, 27" x 72" x 1 1/2"*
Collection of Mobile Museum of
Art, Mobile, Alabama**

are bound to the earth, feet and shoes firmly planted by gravity. But not in Christensen's imagination: with wings made of enough shoes the wearer perhaps can transcend the pedestrian. Because of the way she has cut and reassembled them, the soles of the shoes are prominent. It almost seems as if thousands of

women have joined forces to elevate themselves. It is both poignant and uplifting that these worn shoes, some clearly more sensible than others, have merged for the betterment of all.

Christensen's current series of hearts also relies on armatures, either hand-made plaster casts or painted wood, which are then covered with colorful, highly evocative objects. Nails appeared in earlier work, usually applied to the interiors of geometrical shapes, not as in *Your Black Heart*

(2000), where shimmering black tacks of various sizes are applied to the exterior of something as fraught with symbolism as a heart. Glass is no longer cut from sheets: *Envy* (2000) is constructed of shards of dark green beer bottles, and colorless bottle necks are hung onto a cherry red surface in *Passion* (1999). Are these the remnants of bottles that have been flung across the room at a loved one? If the heart is the organ associated with love, life-giving blood, and passion, as one title suggests, just what kind of passion is it? Or are those sharp edges a form of self-protection, there to guard the heart from further pain? Perhaps the tacks are the outer shell of a hardened heart that is impervious to feelings. Similar to tone poems, the works in this series encourage meditation on the various emotions that hearts can engender. Throughout, color, form, and materials combine to produce stunning objects that compel the viewer to touch, even though touching will surely entail the loss of blood.



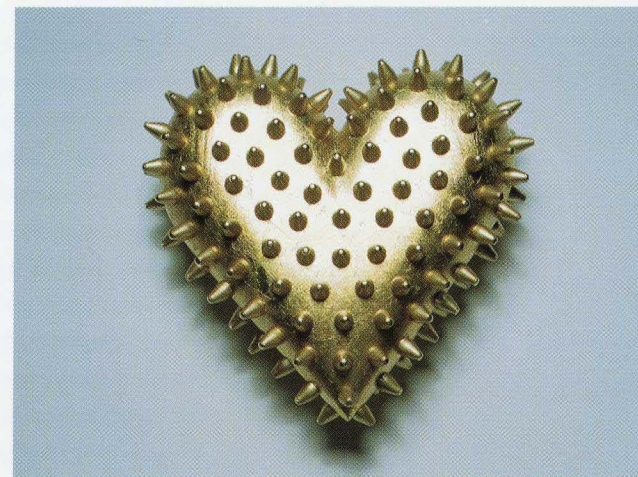
Your Black Heart, 2000,
upholstery tacks, papier-
mâché, 3 1/2" x 5" x 5"

Marina Pacini
Director
Clough-Hanson Gallery
Rhodes College
Memphis, Tennessee

Support for this catalog is provided, in part, by the Arkansas Arts Council, an agency of the Department of Arkansas Heritage.

Catalog design: Larry Ahokas
Editor: Joanne Allen

To reduce Christensen's *oeuvre* to its most rudimentary form, one might say that she assembles artworks out of multiple pieces—thousands of tacks, hundreds of shards of glass, dozens of shoes. But that would miss the point. Her sculptures might be described as visual puns, but that too would be too limiting. Certainly she plays with the titles, and they do deepen the meaning of the pieces. The quality of her craftsmanship is breathtaking, but it is brought to bear not just in the service of beauty but as a kind of seduction that forces the viewer to engage with the sculptures as wholes, with both their shapes and their content. And often that content is difficult or suggests less than happy truths. The materials Christensen uses and the forms they take create a rich body of work that leaves the viewer happy to contemplate both an object of beauty and a conundrum to be worked.



Heart of Gold, 2000, wood, gold leaf, lead bullets, paint,
2 1/4" x 5 3/4" x 5 3/4"

Les Christensen

Education

Arkansas State University, Jonesboro, Arkansas, MA, Sculpture, 1993
Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht, Utrecht, Netherlands, 1991-92
University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, BFA, Sculpture, 1982

Grants

Arkansas Arts Council Assistance Grant, 2000
National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship Award in Sculpture, Mid-America Arts Alliance, 1995
Arkansas Arts Council Fellowship Award in Sculpture, 1995

Awards and Honors

Best in Show, 27th Annual Juried Competition, Masur Museum of Art, Monroe, Louisiana, 2000
Purchase Award, Southeastern Triennial, Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile, Alabama, 1999
Cover Illustration, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference* by Ellen T. Armour, 1999
Cover Illustration, *Arkansas Review*, Volume 28, Number 3, 1997
Juror's Award, Dishman Competition, Dishman Gallery, Beaumont, Texas, 1996
Best in Show, 11th Annual Juried Exhibition, Kansas City Artists's Coalition, Kansas City, Missouri, 1993
Salute to the States, videotape produced by National Museum for Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., artist and artwork represented, 1992

Selected Exhibitions

- 2000** **Passion**, Clough-Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College, Memphis, Tennessee
27th Annual Juried Competition, Masur Museum of Art, Monroe, Louisiana
- 1999** **MAX: 99**, Art Museum, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee
3+2, Baum Gallery, University of Central Arkansas, Conway, Arkansas
Appropriation: Art About Art, Gallery One, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, Arkansas
Southeastern Triennial, Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile, Alabama
42nd Delta Art Exhibition, Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas
- 1998** **Imaginary Friend**, Rupert-Goldsworthy Gallery, New York, New York
Then and Now, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee
The Art of the Multiple, Marshall Arts, Memphis, Tennessee
- 1997** **Invitational Art Exhibition**, Memphis Arts Festival, Memphis, Tennessee
The Home Show, Gallery One, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, Arkansas
- 1996** **Red Clay Survey**, Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, Alabama
Dishman Competition, Dishman Gallery, Beaumont, Texas
VII from XCVI, Arkansas Arts Council Fellowship Award Exhibition, Gallery One, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, Arkansas
- 1995** **Marking Time (Tijd Tekens)**, Galerie Quartair, The Hague, Netherlands
- Les Christensen & John Salvest**, Clough-Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College, Memphis, Tennessee
- 1994** **Multiples**, Cooper Street Gallery, Memphis, Tennessee
LaGrange National, Lamar Dodd Art Center, LaGrange, Georgia
Southern Invitational, Memphis College of Art, Memphis, Tennessee
Christensen and Crawford, Kansas City Artists's Coalition, Kansas City, Missouri
- 1993** **The Luxury of Solitude**, Arkansas State University Fine Arts Gallery, Jonesboro, Arkansas
11th Annual Juried Exhibition, Kansas City Artists's Coalition, Kansas City, Missouri
- 1992** **NUMBER: Invitational**, Art Museum, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee
Mid-America Neighbors 2, Gallery One, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, Arkansas
Arkansas Women Artists, National Museum for Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

Cover

**Passion, 1999, wood, broken bottles, paint, hooks,
45" x 42 1/2" x 7 1/2"**