

Betty Leigh Hutcheson Terri Jones

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Rhodes College, Clough-Hanson Gallery



Betty Leigh Hutcheson,
Guardian, 1995,
type C print

At a glance, the works of Terri Jones and Betty Leigh Hutcheson appear vastly different—

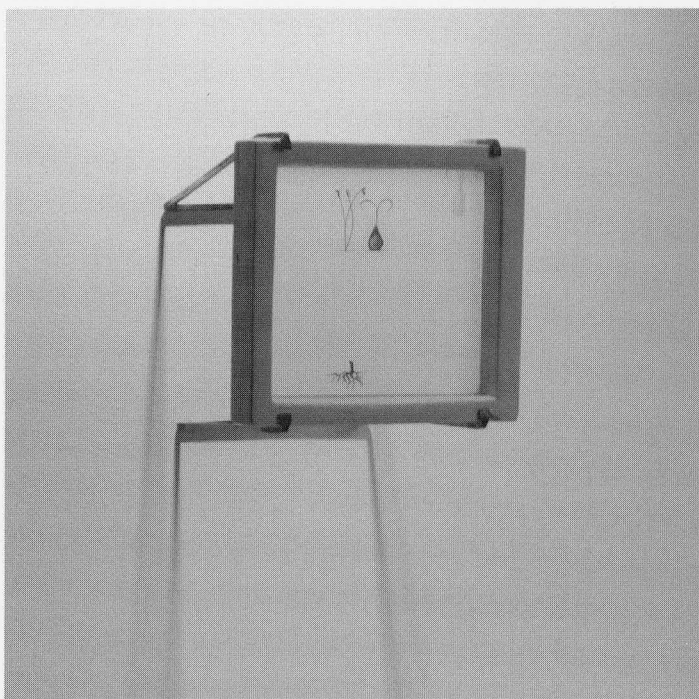
Jones produces small, delicate graphite drawings on white vellum framed in white plaster, and Hutcheson shoots large still life photographs in vibrant color. Hutcheson uses high-heeled shoes, cigars, gloves, roses, and swans, objects freighted with meaning, while Jones draws plants. Yet, their art converges on several thematic

levels: both artists exploit allegory in order to question notions of gender and sexuality; and both use an implied narrative to seduce the viewer into an active reading of their work. Before looking closely at these shared concerns, we should begin by looking at the artists individually.

Hutcheson deliberately sets out to play with the misconception that a photograph captures “reality” and “truth.” She begins by creating her own reality in her studio where she takes hours to select and arrange her objects in a tableau. Further

control comes through the use of colored gels, various levels of focus, and sometimes double

images. All of her prints, however, are created within the camera on a single negative. Utilizing Polaroids as sketches to assess composition and content, she works carefully toward the final concept. When completed, the pictures are anything but a simple view of “reality.”



Terri Jones, *Drift*, 1995, graphite on vellum, plaster, steel

A straightforward interpretation of a work, of what the objects are, where they are situated and what they mean, is rarely possible. Space is complicated; while in some photographs, foreground, middleground, and background are easily read, more often than not the manipulation of focus and lighting renders analysis problematic. Because of the focus, the wire table in the foreground of *Remains* melts so that all that appears are the shadows cast across the wooden table. In *Reflex*, she introduces mirrors and reflections that break up the space in an almost cubist fashion, further complicating comprehension. Although

individual objects are generally easy to identify, the conjunctions she sets up—which pique the viewer into attempting to frame a narrative—are far less transparent. In *Metropolis*, white plastic high heels (the kind used for wedding decorations) situated on several different levels are juxtaposed with ladders. We immediately begin to question how those heels got to those levels; did they climb? Some of the ladders appear melted and crooked. Do they represent even greater hardships? Are we looking at the difficult paths in front of women? Or is it a testimony to the fact that women have climbed even against major obstacles?

With her more recent work, Hutcheson experiments with objects—croquet balls, chairs and tables—that are less symbolically loaded than her usual assortment of props. Instead, formal issues such as focus, contrast, depth of field, and color are of greater concern. This is not to say, however, that subject matter is no longer important. Again, once the objects are recognized, the impetus is to try to read a narrative. In *Guardian*,

an empty chair faces a table on top of which is a half-smoked cigar, an apple core, and an alarm clock. The feeling that someone just left the space is inescapable; the problem is, who was it? The tabletop almost looks like an ironing board. Was it a modern day, cigar-smoking Eve who left behind her apple and ironing for bigger things? Or over time have things changed so that now Adam is responsible for the fall from grace? Even more

oblique than the earlier photographs, these images leave the viewer with many more possible narratives.

Jones's construction of her art is also a laborious and well-thought-out process. Although the materials she currently uses are simple—vellum, graphite, plaster, and steel—the overall effect is of understated elegance and opulent sparseness. Her beautiful botanical drawings derive not from nature

but from an 18th-century broadside. Several techniques are used: varying the width and density of the line, smudging the surface of the image, or partially erasing the figure. When these variations appear in

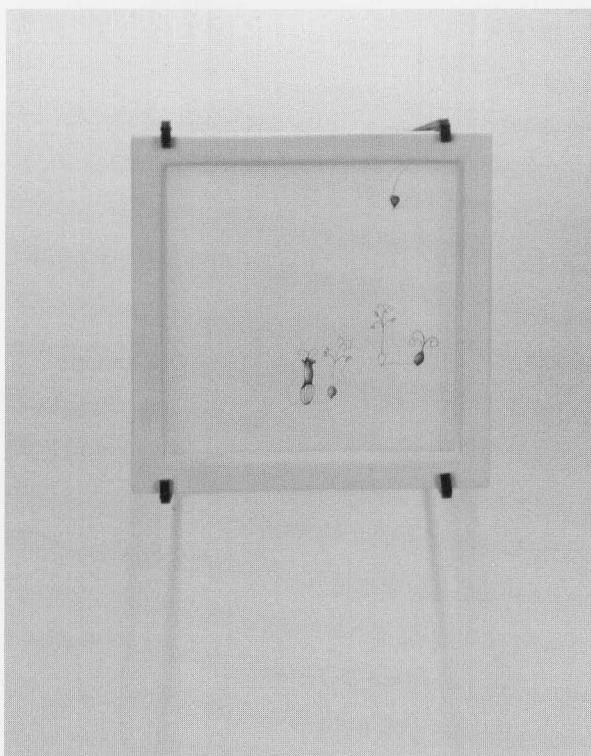
Betty Leigh Hutcheson, *Reflex*, 1995, type C print



a single work, they create the illusion of three-dimensional space. Once completed, the drawings are suspended from walls at varying heights and angles. Despite the random appearance of the installation, Jones carefully plans which plants to depict, just where they appear on the page, how far the frame juts from the wall, and whether it will be parallel to the wall, or tilted up or down.

This ostensibly rambling grouping can be seen as mimicking a garden, but these are not real plants in a real garden. To see them as such is far too simplistic. Jones's garden is one where we are asked to participate actively. Because the drawings are hung at various heights, we become involved bodily, stooping and stretching to see them all, while mentally engaged in deciphering their meaning. Jones likens the experience to riding the city bus and overhearing a conversation, or reading Raymond Carver short stories or e.e. cummings poems, where one has a sense of not really knowing what the story is, but nonetheless experiencing a strong feeling or

Terri Jones, *Presence*, 1995, graphite on vellum, plaster, steel



response to the moment. The drawings tease us into trying to construe a narrative where one is not visible or possible.

This impulse to read the works is sparked by the use of allegory, which is one strategy adopted by postmodern artists attempting to address such complicated issues as the nature of gender and the representational practices that actively produce

sexual difference.¹

For the purpose of this essay, allegory is defined as the use of objects that stand for abstract ideas, cultural constructs, or forces so that a deeper symbolic meaning is suggested. Among the characteristics of allegorical art are the utilization of appropriated imagery, as can be seen in Jones's drawings, and the layering of objects and images, which is common in Hutcheson's photographs.²

Employing recognizable and often culturally loaded objects—Hutcheson uses red high heels and cigars, Jones draws stamens and pistils—allegorists add another level of meaning. Expecting to comprehend the significance easily, we are lured

in and captured by a game of identification and explication. Through different media and subject matter, both artists struggle with notions of sexuality and gender, forcing us to enter into a dialogue with them and the work to determine just what is being articulated, by whom and for whom.

Reflex is an allegory of femininity, its construction, and its obsolescence. A Greek bust stares into the photograph from the right representing the epitome of Western feminine beauty with her pure, classical profile. On the far left is an old alarm clock

with its guts replaced by dried roses. Spread across three vertical areas are the missing clock parts. The clock face, however, is a mirror image; it must be outside of the frame in the viewer's space. As usual with Hutcheson's photographs, the objects, the arrangement, and compositional elements provoke a series of questions in us as to the intended meaning. Normally associated with the passage of time and mortality, the clock is doubly loaded here; it is filled with dead, decayed roses, which represent feminine beauty and its transience. The

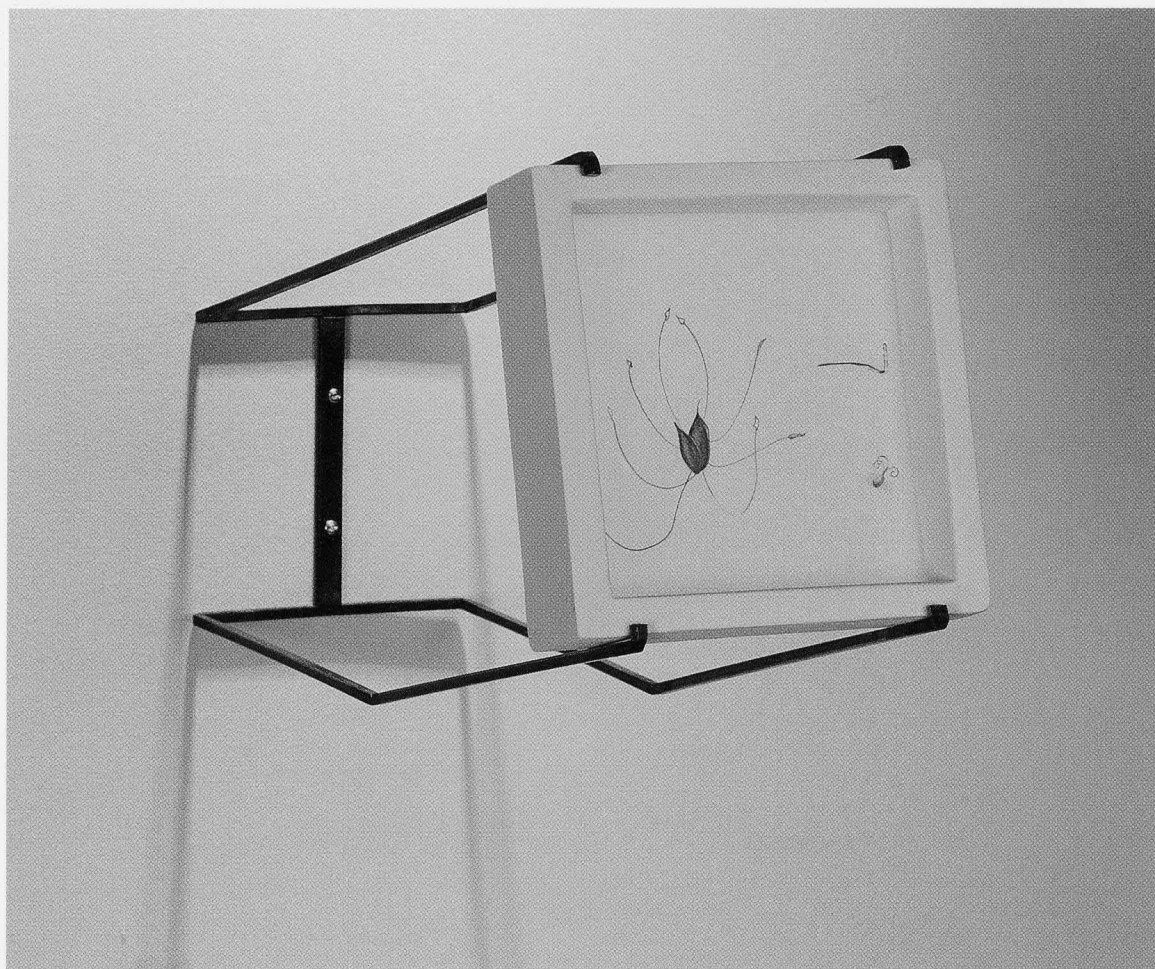


Betty Leigh Hutcheson, *Remains*, 1995, type C print

bust, from a civilization long dead, is a constructed ideal of femininity. Are we musing then on dead concepts of femininity; were they based on reality to begin with? Or are these notions of femininity still extant, long past the point where they have any relevance?

Jones is very subtle in her discussions of gender and sexuality. Her appropriated drawings come from a 1736 broadside depicting Carolus Linnaeus's system of plant classification in which all flowering plants are reduced to twenty-three basic forms depending upon the

number, length, and location of the stamens and pistils.³ On one sheet, all the complexities of plant life are reduced to a simple series of permutations, and at the same time they are gendered based on then-current beliefs regarding human sexuality. In fact, Linnaeus often described pollination in terms of human behavioral patterns.⁴ Feeling that through plants she could comment on human life, Jones began thinking about specific male and female qualities and characteristics, relationships between genders, the evolution of relationships,



Terri Jones, *History*, 1995, graphite on vellum, plaster, steel

and growth and autonomy within relationships. On one level her drawings are re-creations of scientific illustrations, but they also function on another level as ruminations on the nature of sexuality and gender.

In *Drift*, there is a dark root at the bottom of the page. Almost directly above, side by side, are

two figures; the left-hand “male” seems ready to drop a seed into the open arms of the “female” to the right. A third, ghostly form, which is similar to the “female” of the lower pair, floats up and off the top right-hand corner of the vellum. Immediately, a host of questions occur: what is the connection between the pair and the drifting form? Is the drifting plant in fact a “female”? Where is its “male”

counterpart and does it need one for completion? Is it disappearing both off the surface of the page and from view as it loses contrast because it was not fertilized? Is it drifting because it has not put down roots? Are the roots related to or a comment on the pair above? All of these questions verge on creating a narrative about the image, but answers are denied. We are left to ponder the nature of coupling and gender.

Unlike the bulk of the permutations on the broadside where both male and female elements are part of a single form, as in *Presence*, for example, the plant depicted in *Drift* is distinctly separated into male and female elements. Is the separation of the male from the female within humans possible in this manner? Are sex and gender really that simple or basic? One wonders what a classification drawing for current notions of human sexuality would look like, if indeed it were possible to concoct one. Given the many factors that would have to be taken into account, attempting a solution similar to Linnaeus's would be futile.

Although very different, the works of Betty Leigh Hutcheson and Terri Jones are unified by the strong urge they create in the viewer to decipher the imagery and its significance. One enters into a dialogue with the artists and their art that will not necessarily end with a clear-cut answer as to just what the intended meaning is. This elusiveness is not a failure, rather it is a strength. It forces a reconsideration of what signs and symbols mean, to whom they mean this, how they come to mean this, whether they can mean something else, and just who decides the meaning. These open-ended questions keep one locked in front of the work rather than just casting a quick glance and moving along to the next piece. This is a rare experience and one that rewards viewers both aesthetically and intellectually for their patience.

Marina Pacini, Director
Clough-Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College

1 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).

2 Ibid, 205-6

3 Reproduced in Ray Desmond, *Wonders of Creation: Natural History Drawings in the British Library* (London: The British Library, 1986), 66.

4 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 172-73.

Betty Leigh Hutcheson

Education

- 1995- Currently enrolled in Masters of Fine Arts program, Bard College, Annandale, NY
- 1992 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Photography, Memphis State University, Memphis, TN
- 1981 Bachelor of Arts, Anthropology, University of Florida, Gainesville

Selected Exhibitions

- 1995 Invitational Artists, Arts in the Park Festival, Memphis, TN
- 23rd Prints, Drawings and Photographs Exhibition, juried exhibition, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR
- Artstravaganza, juried exhibition, Chattanooga Association for Visual Artists, Chattanooga, TN
- 1994 Brooks Biennial: Contemporary Memphis Photographers, invitational exhibition, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN
- 1993-4 From the Mountains to the Mississippi, juried exhibition, National Museum for Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, and Hunter Museum, Chattanooga, TN
- Betty Leigh Hutcheson Photographs, Askew, Nixon, Ferguson & Wolf, Inc., Memphis, TN
- 1993 Artstravaganza, juried exhibition, Chattanooga Association for Visual Artists, Chattanooga, TN
- 1992 Juried Artists Exhibit, Arts in the Park Festival, Memphis, TN
- Patchwork of Many Lives, juried exhibition, Tennessee Valley Women's Conference, Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL

Honors and Competitions

- 1995 23rd Prints, Drawings and Photographs Exhibition, purchase award, Arkansas Art Center
- 1992 Juried Artists Exhibit, juror's choice award, Arts in the Park Festival
- Patchwork of Many Lives, purchase award, Tennessee Valley Women's Conference, Huntsville Museum of Art

Terri Jones

Education

- 1985 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Painting, Atlanta College of Art, Atlanta, GA

Selected Exhibitions

- 1995 Installations: Terri Jones/Michael Warrick, Memphis College of Art, Memphis, TN
- 1994 Invitational Artists, Arts in the Park Festival, Memphis, TN
- Terri Jones: Installations, University of Arkansas, Little Rock, AR
- Mid-South Gothic: Terri Jones/Greely Myatt, PS 122 Gallery, New York, NY
- Listen, solo exhibition, TULA Foundation Gallery, Atlanta, GA
- Smoke and Mirrors: Terri Jones/Greely Myatt, Bigging Gallery, Auburn University, Auburn, AL
- 1993 Windows of the Dream, Main Street Art Installations, invitational, Number, Inc., Memphis, TN
- Terri Jones: New Installations, Memphis State University Gallery, Memphis, TN
- Southern Arts Federation/NEA Fellowship Exhibition, Atlanta College of Art, Atlanta, GA
- 1992 35th Annual Delta Exhibition, juried exhibition, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR
- Brooks Biennial, invitational exhibition, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, TN
- 1991 Special Projects, juried, Arts in the Park Festival, Memphis, TN
- 1990 Collection from the Unswept Floor, solo installation, Cossitt Branch, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, TN
- 36th Annual Drawing and Small Sculpture Show, juried exhibition, Ball State University Art Gallery, Muncie, IN
- 1989 Terri Jones and Tom Lee, Memphis Center for Contemporary Art, Memphis, TN

Honors

- 1992 Southern Arts Federation/NEA Individual Artist Fellowship—Works on paper