

INSIGHT AT HAND

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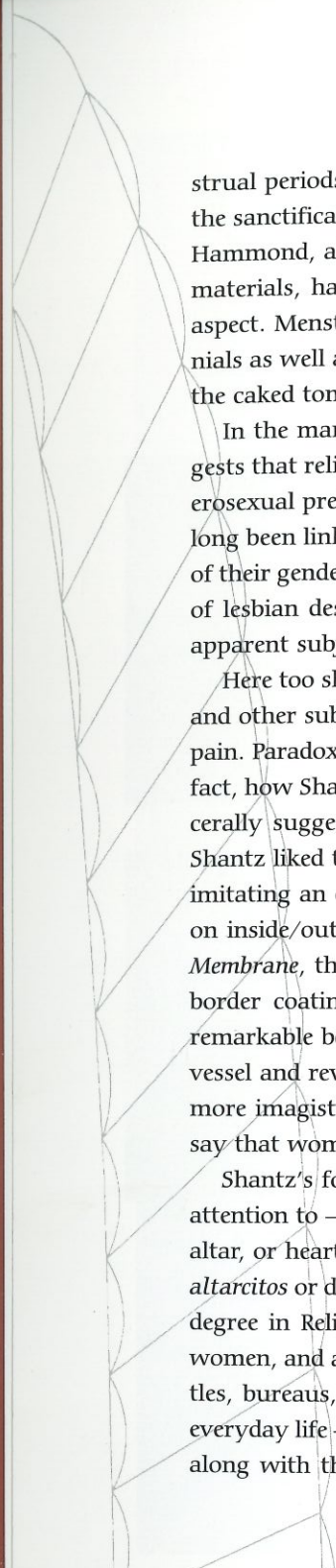
WHEN I WAS CONSIDERING whether or not to write this text, given my first-hand ignorance of the work, Susan Shantz sent me a "sample" of a tomato-paste-encased object, a flecked, dark red-brown mould of a miniature bunch of grapes, its lumpy surface almost effaced and very tactile. I was immediately reminded of another object I was once given — a small brown latex semi-sphere (I always thought of it as a diaphragm) by Eva Hesse. The similarity in scale and colour are obvious, but there was another "flavour" that arrested my attention and made me decide to go ahead and try to write on Shantz's work sight unseen. The modest but compelling object she sent me continued to provide a "touchstone" throughout the process, a direct if microcosmic contact with the larger, imagined, installation.

Not all sculptural work is tactile or even particularly dimensional. At the risk of being called (yet again) an "essentialist," I have to say that certain women's art has always struck me as far more visually tactile than most men's, Hesse being the obvious and best known example, along with Louise Bourgeois and Michelle Stuart, among others. They all work or have worked with sensuous materials and relatively simple, if highly original, forms that often seem both familiar and familial.

Aside from the generalized eroticism of an "edible" material, Shantz has chosen a "blood red," uses the title *engorge* for a 1995 installation, and *Satiate* for this one, although the unassuming objects that fill her oval table top are hardly erotic in themselves. The clue is that she often uses body references in referring to her work. It is not, therefore, totally far-fetched to draw parallels between the blood of a fruit-vegetable and the fertile blood of a woman's men-



engorge, 1995. Installation details.



strual periods. Several feminist artists have used actual monthly blood in their art, to call attention to the sanctification or at least the dignity of this natural substance. Perhaps not coincidentally, Harmony Hammond, also a lesbian feminist whose almost abstract work also focuses on sexuality, gesture, and materials, has recently made a series of "blood braids" and "blood journals" with a distinctly ritual aspect. Menstrual blood is perceived as very powerful in many cultures and has been used in ceremonies as well as in folk love magic. Caked blood is often found on sacred objects in Africa and elsewhere; the caked tomato paste might be comparable.

In the manuscript for her book *Making Out: A Contemporary History of Lesbian Art*, Hammond suggests that reliance on the figure "with its fixed contours and impermeable surface of skin" may be a heterosexual preference, while lesbian eroticism is "multiple, layered, and not fixed. Because erotic art has long been linked to photography and to the figure, which can easily be consumed by anyone regardless of their gender or sexuality," she questions whether figuration is "the best way to reflect the fluid nature of lesbian desire and pleasure." Certainly Shantz challenges any connection with erotic art with her apparent subject matter, which is in turn very subtly contradicted by the forms and materials.

Here too she joins a number of women artists who have perceived paint on canvas, latex rubber, wax, and other substances as evoking their own skin — a protective layer also vulnerable to penetration and pain. Paradoxically, her objects acquire an outer skin made from the innards of the tomato. This was, in fact, how Shantz came to the notion of using tomato paste, "in a strange daydream image" that was viscerally suggestive. (There is also a humorous touch in that a tomato is slang for a "ripe" woman.) Shantz liked the play between wet and dry, how the dried object seemed enveloped by a skin. Instead of imitating an object by casting it, she was mummifying and preserving it. This is only one of the plays on inside/outside, and turning herself/her forms inside-out that characterizes Shantz's art. In *Body as Membrane*, the catalogue of a 1996 exhibition of women's art in Denmark, membrane is defined as "a border coating between the cell and its surroundings." Shantz herself quotes Elaine Scarry, whose remarkable book *The Body in Pain* draws intricate parallels between the forms of womb, well and altar, vessel and reversed vessel as surface: "that the altar's surface is the reversed lining of the body is made more imagistically immediate in all those places where blood is poured across the altar." (Some would say that women's periods and the childbearing they make possible are, literally, a sacrifice.)

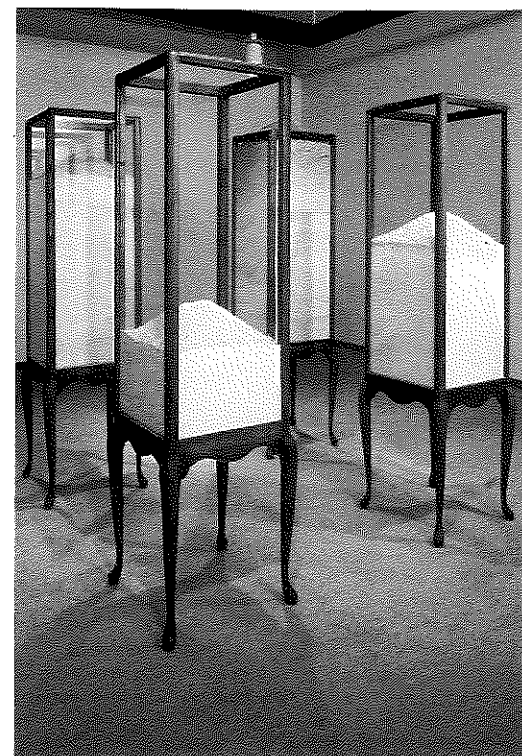
Shantz's forms, then, like their material (*mater*) are offerings. This brings in the other facet she calls attention to — her search for ways to articulate the spiritual in everyday matter and gesture. The home altar, or hearth as altar, has a long history from prehistoric Europe and the indigenous Americas to the *altarcitos* or domestic shrines still ubiquitous in the Mexican-American Southwest. (Shantz has a Master's degree in Religion and Culture, so such connections make sense.) The altarmakers are almost always women, and a casual bricolage is the constructing principle for most of these assemblages found on mantles, bureaus, tables and TV sets. Objects on the altars may be outwardly incongruous artifacts from everyday life — stuffed animals, American flags, pop cultural artifacts and especially family photographs, along with the plaster saints, velvet paintings, and other mass-produced religious paraphernalia. Like

Shantz's forms, these can be seen as the modules, or vocabularies, of the makers' visual languages.

The Old English word for altar meant "table of idols." The remains of "cult tables" bearing different forms of vessels from c. 5,000 BC have been found in Transylvania. In our secular society, Shantz's table may evoke such ancient finds, but the objects she encases are taken from everyday life. They are the tools and utensils of domesticity, from a turkey baster to jello moulds. Her earlier work along the same lines focused more abstractly on vessels, goblets and pots (used in this installation to provide a taller center focus), some of which recall Old European goddess imagery. The long, narrow table itself is another body reference. Skirted like an elongated bread pan, it offers intimacy in proximity and then almost flirtatiously distances the viewer by the skirt's five-foot extension.

Satiate, the title of the Lethbridge installation, also calls up abundance and fullness, even fertility. The table full of dark red forms recalls photographs of turn-of-the-century cornucopias — tables at state fairs groaning under the weight of plump fruits and vegetables, testifying to prosperity and rich harvests. But here this fullness is countered by Shantz's use of hollow objects — useful objects, often vessels, associated with the female — the price paid for such rich harvests. In fact such an obsessive need to fill space has also been psychologically associated with eating disorders, a fact probably irrelevant here except for the (initially) edible material. I was reminded of Janine Antoni, and her opposite process of casting solid "figurative" art in chocolate and then licking it down to abstraction. Or perhaps the medieval *horror vacui* is more to the point — filling space in response to a fear of the unknown that might leak into unguarded interstices.

The density of Shantz's arrangements on the oblong table augments this impression. A certain level of obsession is carried over from life into art. Hers is not a gestural process but a careful, sensual, solitary one — labour-intensive like Ann Hamilton's. Shantz's 1994 installation called *hibernaculum* also referred to repetitive work. Joan Borsa referred to this major piece as "a transformation of sites, functions, purpose...Repetitive rhythms, labouriously engaged, involving images of cultivated furrows in rich dark soil, intricately stitched hand-made quilts, and old stone fences outlining a well-trodden countryside." The title inevitably suggests a social reading of feminist experience in its image of an awaken-



hibernaculum (ash cabinets), 1994.

ing, an emergence from darkness into light, a passing of time in dark places with the result a "coming out," and survival.

Perhaps because of their vegetal patina, these tomato-encased utensils have an antique look. (Some were chosen because they were older and not totally familiar.) They are beautiful in their simplicity and decorative forms. Like the Catholic women's home altars, their flexibility a subliminal resistance to the institutional church's rigidities, Shantz's installations refuse to separate the spiritual from daily life. So does her tender respect for homely objects as reflections of simple but divine gifts. Shantz was raised in Waterloo, in southern Ontario, as a Mennonite.¹ She attributes her work ethic, her interest in using her hands, and her emphasis on a home environment to this upbringing.

Women artists often seem to be striving for intimacy on an almost unobtainable level. The body, its parts, its functions, its discomforts and ecstasies, always seems to be involved. Postmodern theory strives to recontextualize this preoccupation and separate it from early feminist artists' concerns, but they end up in the same place, a place dangerously close to social stereotypes of women's narcissism and insecurity that is also integral to the struggle for independence from just such "internalized" social constructions. It makes sense that the desire formally inherent in Shantz's humble objects and their curious envelope extends to the spiritual realm, to the need expressed in home altars to bring the divine female into intimate domestic space.

All moulds are about turning the inside out, and these encased objects that appear as solid casts, but are actually hollow, double that meaning in their use of food to create implements that will in turn manipulate food, and more oblique references to the maternal, nourishing female body. The table, the forms, and the materials can all be seen as a secular celebration of the trials and glories of domestic life, or, more likely, of the trials and glories of artmaking as a woman. In all Shantz's work the sense of material touch, the sensuous memory of making, is forcefully recalled by what has been made and is now seen, the ultimate transformation of private to public, internal to external.

SOURCES

Phone Conversation with the artist, January 25, 1998.

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Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain, The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

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¹ A Protestant Christian offshoot of the Anabaptists in the 16th century, Mennonites believe in "the necessity for regeneration" and baptism for consenting adults only. They refuse to take arms or civic oaths, reject worldly concern, and preserve simplicity of dress and habits. The better known Amish are a conservative splinter group. There are a number of Mennonite communities in the midwestern U.S. and in Canada.