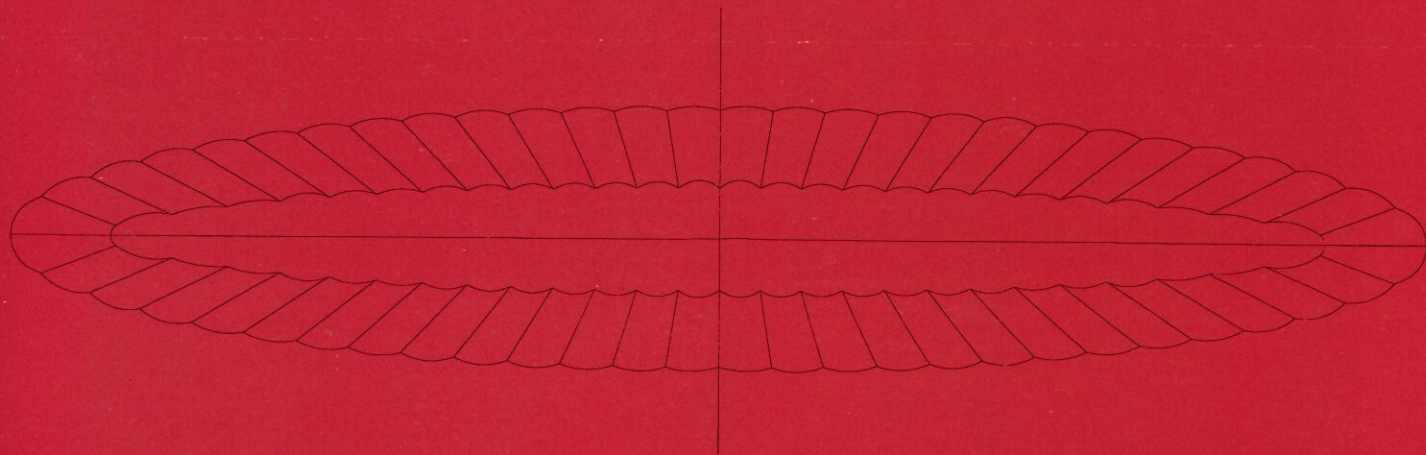


SATIATE

SUSAN SHANTZ



ESSAYS BY

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SOUTHERN ALBERTA ART GALLERY

LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, CANADA

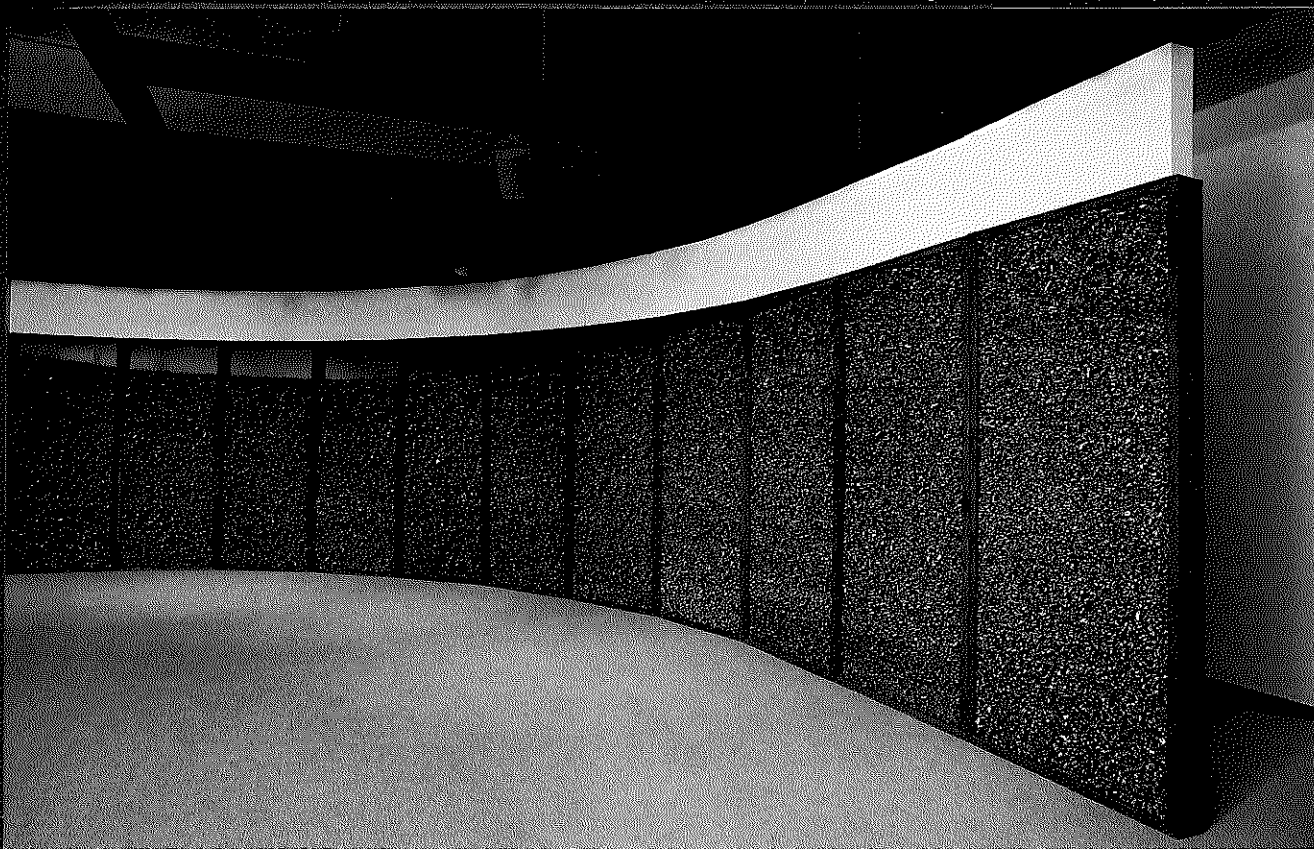
SALVAGES

RENEE BAERT

ON ENTERING INTO THE SPACE housing Susan Shantz's *Satiata*, the visitor's first encounter is with an impress of colour and scale. The object in view is of an imposing size, a draped table of elliptical shape, filled with a variety of objects. The ensemble is a unified field of a dark red hue. The fluted skirting of the table's stiff drapery extends its base perimeter and ends a few inches above the ground, lending the table the effect, despite its mass, of a floating object. The work commands the room, which is dim but for the illumination directed upon the table surface.

On closer view, it is apparent that, though shaped and draped like a table, the object is not to that height; rather, it stands almost to chest level, and is equally reminiscent of an altar. The work is centered in the room and approachable from all sides, so that there is no privileged sightline; each spectator is granted a 'place' — together, yet individually — at the altar/table. The closer view also brings into sharper focus the singular forms settled upon its surface. These are mysterious, uncanny: vaguely familiar, yet estranged. Table and objects alike have been coated with a substance of a velvety finish, whose tonalities can be seen to vary subtly in hue from a dark red to a deep brown. Beneath this tactile coating can be discerned the shapes of candlesticks, fluted pans, goblets, vases, serving utensils, jars, mortars and pestles and other objects — a multitude of vessels and instruments associated with food preparation or decorative tableware; indeed, the table itself approximates the shape of a fluted bread pan. Yet the modulated uniformity of their patina lends them an abstract appearance, divorced from their everyday associations and uses, and highlighting their distinctive, interesting, forms. Here and there, objects of like shape are grouped together, producing discrete unities within the seeming randomness of arrangement, yet, if this partial organization mitigates against a perception of disordered clutter, neither is a governing order apparent.

The artifacts upon the table are objects of process and transformation in several respects. Rather like the statuary and artifacts of antiquity, whose original finishing of bright colouration has been stripped bare by erosion and time, so the differentials of original colour and material of these found objects are brought to a unified, monochromatic colour field. With these objects, though, the activity over time is reversed: while in the former instance, decorative characteristics have been removed through natural processes, here the particularities are effaced by a labour of covering over, by design. The effect of the two processes is nonetheless similar: a highlighting of the underlying specificity of form.



hibernaculum (wall), 1994.

Shantz's painterly action upon these modest objects transforms them into a new order of visibility as a system of forms that bear a kind of archeological weight. Their earthen tones and their ghost functionality highlight this sense of aged domestic artifacts retrieved — salvage objects suited to the appreciations of a museal gaze. As such 'fieldwork finds,' the objects in the installation also foreground processes of use — of production, consumption and discard — brought to a second order of reclamation and regain. Yet what is produced in this fashion is a formalized archive of everyday cultural artifacts that reveal, not a distant past, but the idioms and graces of an immediate and living culture.

The work also suggests a transformative dimension in its evocation of the altar. Unlike the sacred objects of institutional religion, these are humble domestic objects, closely associated with food and its presentation. This table/altar recalls a long history through ages and cultures of ritual thanksgiving for the bounty of nature's harvest, whose originary moment may be found in the pre-Apollonic mythologies of matriarchal societies in which fecundity and divinity were mutually integral. The process of labour in the production of the piece mimes the repetitive patterns entailed in nourishing care. The title of the work suggests fullness, hungers satiated, satisfaction, plenitude. This is not an ethos of transcendence and transubstantiation — it recalls us to, rather than pointing us 'beyond,' the felt facticity of everyday life.



engorge (veil), 1995.

The work draws upon two traditions of female creative labour. In the first instance, it recalls the culturally invisible processes of everyday caring, tending, feeding, hospitality and succour that remains disproportionately women's share of domestic and social life. In the second, it is linked to a contemporary genealogy of feminist art practices. So-called 'first generation' women's art, that began to emerge in the second wave of the feminist movement some 30 years ago, has been particularly associated with the project of honouring — indeed, of salvaging — women's history through forms and processes associated with the sphere of the feminine. Yet an abiding tendency in much feminist art that otherwise diverges from this approach has been an insistence on drawing life into art, on interimplicating public and private, on making proximate the character of the material world and the processes of aesthetic making.

Satiare shares features of other works by Shantz which play upon the boundaries between nature and culture, and foreground transformational processes through which objects are modified to produce other associations and effects. In her installation *hibernaculum* (1994), for example, a set of four glass and wood cases are filled to various levels with ashes — the residue trace of material transformations. In its companion section, an expansive curved wall built of thousands of broken twigs is contained by a press of glass on one side, but left ragged, exposed and exuding its forest scent on the other. Like the

ashes and twigs, the material used to coat the objects in *Satiare* — applied layers of tomato paste — is an organic matter, transformed: in the first instance, through the processing and packaging that already render it a 'cultural' object, and again through the change in its materiality from organic juicy edible to dried painterly product. These works (including the 1995 installation *engorge*, in which Shantz first used the tomato paste coating on found objects) are not merely a processional drawing 'nature' into 'culture,' for in these works these are not discrete and mutually exclusive categories. Rather, there is a flow between, in which the affinities and imbrications of the two are conveyed in Shantz's emphasis on process, transformation, and sensual modes of apprehension.

Yet over and above these several aspects of *Satiare*, there is an unmistakable further dimension to the work: its uncanny evocation of bodiliness. The tomato paste, dried upon the objects, has produced the effect of a membrane, a tight second skin over the original surface. Further, its lush dark colour is reminiscent of dried blood. These objects with their orifices, mounds and tubular shapes call to mind organs and other mysterious morphologies of a bodily interiority brought to a surface exposure. As figures for the body, these objects at once resist and invite interpretation.

This aspect of the work raises a number of 'fecund' questions *vis a vis* the body, the feminine and symbolization. The work might be seen, through its materiality, to bridge two quite distinct models of feminist art practice. On the one hand, as a symbolic honourific of a female-centered lineage, it continues a line of affinity with 'first generation' feminist art, a period distinguished as a celebratory moment of articulating female specificity against a universalizing norm modelled on the masculine. From this vantage, these biomorphic feminine forms, while mediated here through cultural artifacts, seem also to reiterate the familiar tropes through which the symbolic 'portion' of women is associated with body, domesticity, nature. But it is precisely in so doing that the work seems to get at issues raised in a different generation of feminist thought turned more toward an analysis of the psychic construction of subjectivity and the related politics of language and symbolization within patriarchal culture.

The psycholinguistic models of subjectivity that have fuelled postmodern thought have seemed to at once describe and prescribe women's dereliction in a patriarchal socio-symbolic economy. In this account, subject positions are organized through the play of sexual difference around the Phallus as privileged, positive and transcendent sign — a differential logic within which Woman is produced as the negative counterpart, as the signifier of emptiness, nonbeing, castration, lack. Woman in this sense is a sign in language, an abstraction distinct from — but, as feminist theory has emphasized, complexly intertwined with — the status of women as historical subjects.

Central to this (Lacanian) account of the psychic formation of subjectivity is the Oedipal transaction, through which the subject forfeits the plenitude of the maternal body to enter the order of language, law, exchange under the paternal sign. The phallus is the necessarily 'third term' that inaugurates the rupture from the maternal dyad necessary to entering into the order of social and signifying relations. But this 'third term' also maps over language; the phallus, the transcendent sign of the symbolic order, serves to 'ground' the differential structure of language. Thus an important issue within this frame-

work of feminist thought has been the question of what might constitute the terms of a non-patriarchal symbolic.

The very title of the installation — *Satiare* — in a work so invested in figures of the feminine, functions as a rejoinder to the positioning of the feminine as 'lack.' On the one hand, the work alludes to our pre-Oedipal origin, in which the maternal body is the all, a reference figured by the cornucopia of the table as an externalization of this bountiful body, an abundance that obliquely references orality and the early mother-child unity. But, in its trope of the altar and in its use of cultural artifacts as bodily forms, the work also crosses the Oedipal divide to position its maternally-connotated signifiers not only on the side of the body, but on the side of language, symbol and ritual. Its modes of symbolization articulate an economy of desire not dependent upon the Father's law, but orchestrated along a feminine axis.

Luce Irigaray argues that, even as religious rites provide the foundation and structure of society, women have been almost universally absented from an active celebrant role within the religious and social rites of what she terms sacrificial religions. Further, although women's labour is essential to the constitution and renewal of the social body, this absence of recognition of women's part is structurally integral to the patriarchal functioning of these systems. "What allows the sacrificial rite or rhythm to exist," Irigaray writes, "is already based in the first place on this non-recognition, or on this oversight."¹

Shantz's installation seems to propose a way of thinking about the sacred that is not founded on the sacrificial, or on the effacement of women, or on usurping and covering over the debt to the female matrix. Rather, it instantiates an acknowledgement and respect for the patterns and rhythms of nature and life processes. Further, its organic references recall us to the bodily basis of being, to libidinal forces and corporeal energies, incorporating these as integral to social and cultural life.

Elaine Scarry, in her remarkable account of the powers of human creativity as a '(re-)making' of the world against the language-shattering structures (war, torture) of its 'unmaking,' describes material culture as itself a projection of bodily interiority. She has drawn particular attention to the form of the altar as a body turned inside-out, an externalization of the womb. Scarry argues that the materialization of "interior sensory events" is the condition of possibility for human consciousness, symbolic thought and social exchange; created objects, already structures of perception, in turn re-create human perception and being. "The interchange of inside and outside surfaces requires not the literal reversal of bodily linings," she writes, "but the making of what is originally interior and private into something exterior and sharable, and, conversely, the reabsorption of what is now exterior and sharable into the intimate recesses of individual consciousness."²

In this sense, *Satiare*, with its imaginary relays of inside and outside, organ and artifact, body and culture, models an ethos by which to imagine differently the structural and relational possibilities of sacred ritual and of social exchange. In this, it seems to speak to a question posed by Irigaray: "Why shouldn't a community be formed at the meeting point of cosmic and social necessities without some

such supplement as offering a sacrifice, eating the sacrificial object, etc."³ The shape of the table, with its invitation to participation and allusion to the sacred character of the communal meal; the symbolic iteration of a female genealogy; the artifacts that recall the mutual materiality, and the interdependencies, of body and language; these and other elements envisage the social and spiritual in terms that are not patriarchal, yet are fully aligned with the rites of culture. In this, the work constructs from its salvage objects a symbolic form through which to conceive a relation to the social and the sacred whose registers are feminine, but which are not reserved for women .

SOURCES

- 1 Luce Irigaray, "Women, the sacred and money," *Paragraph*, Oxford University Press, Vol. 8, October 1986, p. 15.
- 2 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain, The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 284.
- 3 Irigaray, *op. cit.*, p. 7.