

Jenny Heishman
complexions
11.15.2007-1.5.2008





Jenny Heishman
Complexions

essay by Sara Callahan
interview by Billy Howard

JENNY HEISHMAN RESUME

EDUCATION

- 1998 Ohio University, Athens, OH, MFA
- 1996 Penland School of Art and Craft, Penland, NC
- 1995 Geology, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, BS

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 Complexions, Howard House Contemporary Art, Seattle, WA
- 2004 Soft Sport, Howard House Contemporary Art, Seattle, WA
- 2001 The Big Picture, King County Gallery, Seattle, WA
air space, SOIL Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 1998 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition, Ohio University, Athens, OH

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2006 Pilchuck EAiR's, Friesent Gallery, Seattle, WA
New American Talent, traveling exhibit, catalogue, Arthouse, Austin, TX
New Sculpture Survey, Howard House, Seattle, WA
Hardline Organics - part two a tale of absurd optimism, SOIL, Seattle, WA
- 2004 Sell Out, Howard House, Seattle, WA
Pseudoanonymous, 1506 Projects, Seattle, WA
- 2003 YSA!!! Howard House Contemporary Art, Seattle, WA
- 2002 Binocular Parallax, Consolidated Works, curated by Meg Shiffler,
Seattle, WA
New Poverty, Ministry of Casual Living, Victoria, BC, Canada
Group Exhibit, Howard House, Seattle, WA
- 2000 Plaster: Means/ Ends, SOIL Gallery, curated by Mandy Greer, Seattle, WA
- 1999 New Members Exhibit, SOIL Gallery, Seattle, WA

AWARDS AND HONORS

- 2006 Artist Trust/WA State Arts Commission Fellowship Grant, Seattle, WA
Finalist, Betty Bowen Award, Seattle, WA
City of Seattle, Public Art Commission, Ernst Park
Grant for Special Projects, King County 4 Culture, Seattle, WA
Full Fellowship, Artist in Residence, Vermont Studio Center
- 2005 Grant for Artist Projects Recipient, Artist Trust, Seattle, WA
Artist in Residence, Pilchuck School of Glass, Stanwood, WA
- 2004 Finalist, Creative Capital Visual Arts Grant
- 2003 Artist Trust EDGE Professional Development Selected Participant
- 2000 Artist in Residence, Atlantic Center for the Arts, with Charles Ray and
Jennifer Pastor
- 1998 Albert A. Murray Fine Arts Grant Recipient



Mud Thing, 2007, Polystyrene foam, plaster, enamel. H67" W22.5" D18"

Heishman's work makes me think of being a teenager. It has something of the freshness, passion, and honesty of the teenage mind, constantly questioning and re-evaluating the world, playing with, and rebelling against it. The discovery of love, sex, heartbreak, and betrayal; the strangely exhilarating understanding that the world in which one has lived until that point, has only superficial similarities to this new world of hormones, existentialist angst and infatuation. Try for a moment to recall what you were like as a teenager. The way you felt more, cried harder and loved more intensely. The way you were more vulnerable and more confident. More of an outsider, more awkward, but also more excited and more brave. You will never take risks like that again, nor be as nervous, scared or embarrassed. It is a complex state and Heishman delves into these complexities with her eyes and heart open, and I for one am thrilled to be along for the ride.

One of the most striking aspects of Heishman's work is the subtle but jarring suggestion that we need to question our trusted senses, constantly and methodically. She plays with our understanding of the world, and she interrupts the shortcuts that we take when interacting visually and spatially with things around us. If we see a three-dimensional anthropomorphic shape we assume that we know what it will look like as we move around it. When Heishman delivers a flat, a gooey cut-out version of the warrior, the experience is disturbing. Not only because we have to go back and re-evaluate what it is we are looking at, how we look, but perhaps more importantly, because we were so sure we knew what the other side would be like. In her earlier work, *Untitled (goat)* a similar shift happens when the colored lines in the plexiglass turn out not to be the tent poles reflected, but rather reflections of colored vinyl strips hidden within the glass. We think we know how to read the world, but Heishman stops us in our familiar tracks and make us see anew. It is as though she is challenging the very neutrality of seeing: what we see depends not only on where we stand, how we move around the space, how things are arranged within the space, but also on who we are, what expectations we have, and what we expect to see. The weight, the shape, the very presence of pieces like *Mud Thing*, *Invisible Guru*, and *Fireframe* change drastically as we move around the space. It has become so common as to be a cliché to describe contemporary sculpture or installation as an 'investigation of space' (in fact, I sometimes struggle to find a press-release that doesn't include that, or a variation of that phrase), but in Heishman's case, the description is apt. Perspective, point of view, spatial and visual interaction are investigated and challenged over and over, subtly and effectively.

Seeing the adult world clearly with all of its falsehoods, fakery and deception is one of the most violent disappointments we face as we move from the comforting world of the child to the bewildering one of the adolescent. Heishman takes on the fake and the faux, and again plays with it and turns it around. Her faux surfaces and materials somehow allow us a glimpse of the honest and the genuine. The monumental logs in *2gether4ever* are heavy and solid like fallen trees after a storm, but the crusty bark covers a hollow core and the logs are surprisingly lightweight. Perhaps analogous to the simultaneous depth and shallowness of teenage love, and the logs remind me of that love in so many ways, but I will return to that in a moment. The wood grain on the sticks in *Fireframe* is so realistically faux that we can't help but want to believe that they are not painted styrofoam. It is a complex process; we think that we are looking at wood, while simultaneously recognizing that it is exquisitely fake, willingly participating in a game where we are both accomplices and victims of an intricate trickery. It is a tug of war between



Fireframe (detail), 2007, Styrofoam, molding paste, enamel, Plexiglas, canvas, watercolor, metal. H22" W30" D29"

fantasy and reality, between reason and magic, and we can somehow, for a short while, both have our cake and eat it. Heishman's work is tremendously performative in the sense that her objects are not static sculptures, or rather, they are static sculptures right up until the moment when we walk into the gallery space and breathe life into them.

Invisible Guru is built around a simple visual trick but like the absent guru, raises more questions than it answers. Is Heishman saying that the search for a guru/savior is a futile one? Or that the true power of the guru is the fact that he/she is invisible? Or both? The quilt with its references to domesticity and craft is painted, painstakingly, layer upon layer of semi-transparent paint. Our visible/invisible guru is resisting simple readings, but there is a great deal to explore here. The process of meandering through meanings, themes, and possible interpretations is what Heishman's work is about.

References to bodies, sex, romance and desire are all over Heishman's work, although in Complexions the body itself seems to be hovering somewhere in our peripheral vision. It is literally covered up, hidden and missing simultaneously in Invisible Guru; it is hinted at in Mud Thing but as soon as we start believing in the three-dimensional human shape it shifts into a flat, two-dimensional illusion. The body is there but not there, and it is that absence, that grasping and groping (and possibly gasping) for the elusive contact with the flesh that stays with me. 2gether4ever is literally cut in three,



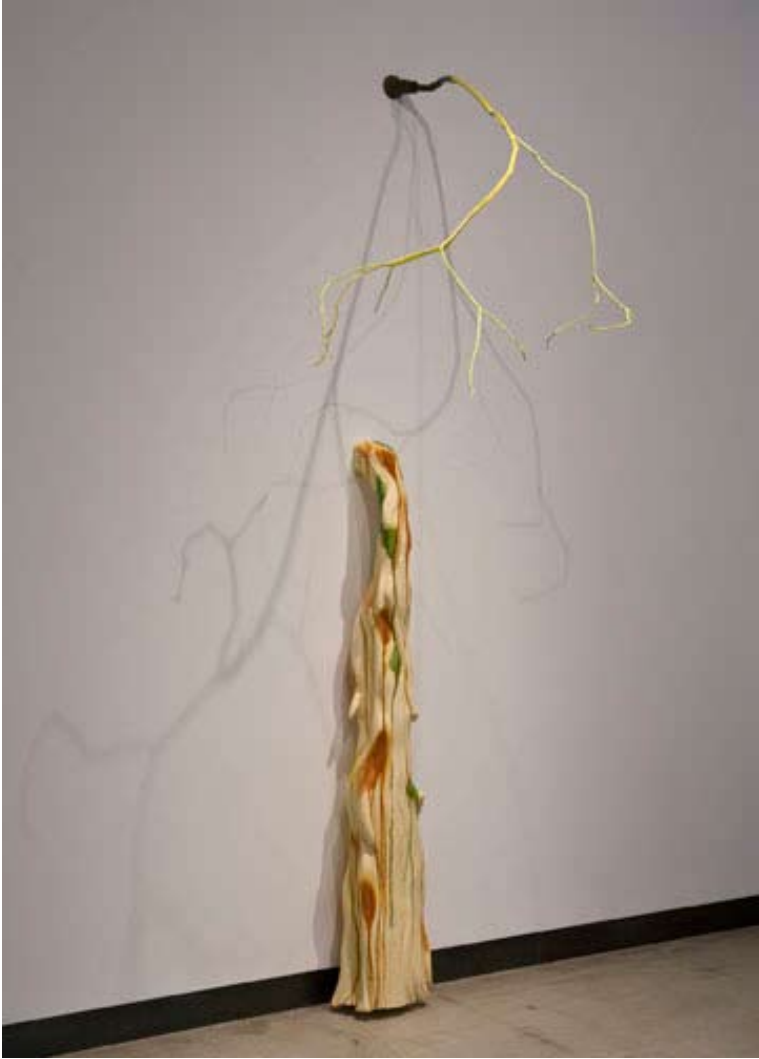
Fireframe (detail), 2007, Styrofoam, molding paste, enamel, Plexiglas, canvas, watercolor, metal. H22" W30" D29"

the vibrating exuberantly colored tree rings transform into a heart-shape, split apart and brought back together. Some kind of creamy fluid is oozing from the inside, but more tender and innocent references also seep out. I think of all the hearts carved into trees in parks and forests, hearts that were beating so passionately for someone at some point. Love so intense and so fleeting forever etched into the skin of the tree, a tattoo that will be around long after the people involved are dead and gone.

Time and history are referenced in the work in an number of different ways; references span back hundreds of years in her Tang dynasty glazed horse tail, or thousand's of years in the primordial shape of Mud Thing. But personal history, ephemeral moments are also there, and Heishman expertly weaves the different time spans together where the insignificant becomes monumental and the ephemeral becomes eternal.

Riders on the Storm with its cascading horsetail coupled with the stylized lightning bolt is a complex web of references. There is the innocent and sweet aspect of the young girl caring for her horse, feeling at home only in the stable and crying into her companion's mane. But the horse is also the most erotic of animals; it is manly and wild, uncontrollable, and powerful, and we keep his pounding muscles clasped between our thighs (and, no, I will not mention Enumclaw). The horse is of course also firmly tied to American history and westward expansion; the sense of freedom, the lone rider on his horse on the wide- open plains in thunder and lightning. And the angular lightning bolt makes me think of love again, sparks flying, flaming desire, that short brief moment of exquisite brightness in the dark sky.

Ultimately the work in Complexions is all about relationships; absence, presence, longing and desire are all referred to within each piece, but also the pieces relate to one another in a way that uncannily continues these themes. Some of the links are tenuous and some more solid, relationships come and go. Links between past and present, fantasy and reality, painting and sculpture. And Heishman, as always, places her work right in that intersection so that the viewer can never quite get comfortable in one interpretation, in one vantage point. Shift one step to the left and something entirely different will happen, shift one step to the right and you will be in the opposite place, same-same-but-different.



Rider on the Storm, 2007, tree branch , polystyrene foam, enamel, acrylic paint, dims. variable



2gether4ever (detail), 2007, foam, wiremesh, plastic gel medium, pigment, watercolor, resin, clayshay, approx 8ft long when installed, 22" diameter



Invisible Guru, 2007, Wiremesh, plaster cloth, clayshay, gesso, acrylic. H28" W64" D38"

Billy Howard Interview with Jenny Heishman

Billy Howard: Let's talk about 2gether4ever. The log is split apart in one end, made whole in the center with the heart shape and then it splits apart again at the other end. There is a real sense of violence here, but also of healing and wholeness. Is this a metaphor for a relationship?

Jenny Heishman: Yes

BH: Another thing about this is your beautiful use of color and concentric circle that seem to be mimicking the growth rings of a real tree.

JH: I used growth rings as the pattern when I put the color onto the piece. The color is all about creating energy, vibration, to charge the space that is contained by the form. A space that you can't access visually.

BH: Where the log splits open, it becomes almost like an abstract painting. It is as though we get a glimpse at the interior of love. A mystery is being exposed, and the chewy and gooey interior is seeping out.

JH: I am fascinated with the edge where the graphic meets the gestural, the edge where the inside meets the outside. I find myself attracted to very simple concepts like divisions of space; I think that they have a lot of depth. I always come back to thinking about the membrane that holds the space.

BH: Speaking of that gooey center makes me think of Mud Thing. The materiality is



Invisible Guru,(detail) 2007, Wiremesh, plaster cloth, clayshay, gesso, acrylic. H28" W64" D38"

both mud-like but also like chocolate, melted, or eroded by saliva. Can you talk about the physicality of this piece, the different planes, and how it meets the ground? To me, the piece seems to talk about becoming and not-becoming in a sense.

JH: The becoming and the not becoming, that is interesting! I have never put it into those words, but it's on my mind a lot. I have been thinking about it in terms of the energy of the upward lift and the gravity of it coming down. The form is simultaneously emerging out of the mud and being grounded in it. And I like the way the shape of the shield form mimics the base, it is as though it is being lifted up and brought out.

BH: The shield is interesting, this is a solitary figure that is clearly protecting itself, a relationship of some sort is implied. And then it has a very primal, almost primitive aspect; it is like a Venus of Willendorf.

JH: Another thing that happens with this piece is that as you move around it, it virtually disappears from one perspective, it is flat. It has three planes intersecting, the bottom or pedestal plane, then the main vertical figure plane, and the shield is another plane. They are like the x, y, z, axis.

BH: I'd like to return to this idea of becoming/not becoming, or not becoming/ becoming, those dichotomies seem to be prevalent in all of your work. There is a physicality of course, but also a mental becoming/not becoming. In Invisible Guru there is the physical form of a blanket laying over the guru, but then there is also the illusion of the wrinkles and shadows that don't exist.

JH: I'm leaving the imagination to fill in what's physically described as empty. I wanted to make a piece inspired by the invisible dog toy, the one with the stiff leash

and an empty collar at the end. I remember experiencing so much joy as a child, walking that dog. In *Invisible Guru*, I am playing with ideas of how we see in an almost literal way. Using rules that as humans we have agreed that we should use to represent space, because we have decided that that's how we see. I twist that up a bit, and apply the rules of representation to a 3dimensional form. Relating back to the becoming and unbecoming, one of the key words for me is "transformation" - energy changing form, of the invisible guru changing form. Another piece, *Fireframe*, is inspired by a campfire, of the wood transforming into fire.

BH: In *Fireframe* you have a very synthetic approach to the campfire. The viewers have to suspend their preconceived notions of what the campfire should be. On one level it is an abstract painting. In *2getehr4ever*, there is also an abstraction happening. To me, that's where the appeal lies, in that space between the preconceived, the abstraction, and the newly conceived.

JH: Yes, and that requires the willing participation of the viewer. I am using illusion and faux surfaces over and over in this body of work. I keep on inviting the viewer to participate in the illusion in a sense. And the illusion is not at all about deceiving. It is more like "will you play with me"?, that kind of attitude.

BH: Let's talk about *Rider on the Storm*, which consists of a horse tail paired with a lighting bolt. It is extraordinarily ephemeral, violent and beautiful at the same time. Tell me a bit about your process in making this piece.

JH: I found the perfect branch and then everything round was made rectangular or square... Usually, elements of my life permeate my work, in the early summer I started horseback riding, so the tail of this piece is a very obvious example of that happening. The horse's tail is a stylized form, life sized, that comes out of the wall as though the wall were the horse's ass. I am thinking about how the wall is the picture plane in this piece. And exploring how I can use sculpture to make pictures, again coming back to that point where the 3 dimensional meets the 2 dimensional. So the tail is to feel like it's in the foreground, life size, near the body of the viewer. The lightning like it's in the background. There are romantic elements that play out: references to young girls' obsession with horses. The angular lightning bolt like stylized lightning bolts drawn on school folders, remember that? So the two forms go together well. The pioneer/frontier theme is also strong, the horse out on the plain in the lightning storm. The tail is surfaced in a faux Tang Dynasty tri-colored glaze, Blocky and buff Tang Dynasty Warrior horses were made with this glaze. The warrior horses had their tails bundled up into a small knot though, so I like to think of this tail as being let loose, cascading down the wall, wild.

BH: It seems that each of your pieces deal with the idea of interconnectedness or relationships in various ways. *Fireframe* has clear references to heat and the warm body, but it is done in a very cool way. It is almost as though the intent of the fire structure is denied.

JH: Yes, it is paired down to the most essential elements. Which brings me back to another of my over-arching themes in this show; I keep on returning to the basic elements: wood, fire, ether, air, weather, boulders, mud etc., simple, almost primal elements.



Wood Pile, 2007, Watercolor. H21.5" W30"

BH: Could you talk a bit about the title of the show?

JH: This title came about through a brainstorming session with a couple of friends who are word (literary) people. Today, "complexion" often refers only to the appearance of the skin or surface. But, before the advent of modern medical research, ancient Roman and Greek physicians and philosophers used a theory of Humorism to understand the workings of the body. A reading of the surface gave signs of character and deeper goings on. The constitution of the body and personality were built on links between the elements air, earth, fire, and water to specific bodily fluids. It was like, by studying the place of meeting, the skin, one could understand how to create balance between the interior world and exterior world.



Installation view, Complexions, 2007, Howard House, Seattle

artist | T R U S T Creation of this work was made possible in part by an Artist
SUPPORTING ART AT ITS SOURCE Trust/Washington State Arts Commission Fellowship.

all photos by Adam L. Weintraub except Wood Pile by Joel Kvermmo.



