

*The Aesthetics of Frivolity:
Reinvesting in Balloons, Cake Icing, Bows, Ribbons and Trinkets*

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Abstract

*The Aesthetics of Frivolity:
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This thesis investigates the phenomenon of frivolity in contemporary art practice and thus elaborates a concept of the frivolous, not only as a new aesthetic category, but as a theoretical instrument as well. The thesis explores the works of artists Shelley Miller, Jo-Anne Balcaen, Portia Munson and Jeff Koons. The two main objects of concern in this thesis are, firstly, frivolity itself, and secondly, its expression through everyday trivial objects. The thesis begins with an analysis of frivolous objects and their relation to their everyday context. Frivolity is then considered as a theoretical concept in juxtaposition to Jacques Derrida's semiotic analysis of the subject. Subsequently, the artworks are studied in light of the elaborated theoretical construct of frivolity and other similar states such as Georges Bataille's theory of free expenditure, various notions of the grotesque and wonder, and Gaston Bachelard's work on childhood space and the state of reverie. Finally, the Lefebvrian moment and concept of *la fête* are used to understand the locality of frivolity and its everyday potential as a space and time marker. Ultimately, I propose a use for the uselessly trivial by conjecturing that it may create an awareness of the here and now due to its potential to create moments, that it has the capacity to bring simultaneously differentiation while also destroying it due to its movement away from a comprehensive origin and that it explores the distance between boundaries allowing for movements to take place and irrationality to enter.

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I would like to thank first my supervisor, Dr. Kristina Huneault, for having encouraged me to pursue my interests, in addition to having wisely and patiently guided me through this enriching process. I would also like to thank Professor Gisele Amantea for her guidance, as well as my readers and the wonderful Art History faculty at Concordia University for their support. Many thanks also to the artists who have been generous with their time. I would especially like to thank my husband, for his comprehension and conversations, my sister for her precious time and assistance, and all my inspiring friends and family who have truly helped me in this endeavour. And lastly, thank you to my grandparents for their generous support.

I would like to dedicate this thesis
To:
All that is wonderful, enchanting, ephemeral, and frivolous.
May we continue to produce in vain...

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Presented as digital prints mounted on Di-bond documenting installation, cake, icing
sugar, cookies

Source: the artist

74 x 112

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Presented as digital prints mounted on Di-bond documenting installation, cake, icing
sugar, cookies

Source: the artist

74 x 112

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Presented as digital prints mounted on Di-bond documenting installation, cake, icing
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Source: the artist

74 x 112

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Source: the artist

610 approx.

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Installation: vinyl , tissue & crepe paper, balloons, ribbon, mixed media

Source: the artist

914 x 640 x 305

Figure 20.

Jo-Anne Balcaen, detail of The End, 2000

Installation: vinyl , tissue & crepe paper, balloons, ribbon, mixed media

Source: the artist

914 x 640 x 305

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Installation: vinyl , tissue & crepe paper, balloons, ribbon, mixed media

Source: the artist

914 x 640 x 305

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671 x 853

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41 x 51

Introduction

Ever since I was a child I have been fascinated with small trinkets. I collected erasers, stickers, fantasy pens, ribbons, and to some extent I still do. I love tiny little objects that decorate. This love has developed into an art practice, and a fascination with understanding the attraction of the small, frivolous object. My personal space is filled with objects of little monetary value quite devoid of any use or meaningful reflections. They hang on my walls content with simply being, and I—at least on a day-to-day basis—am content with blank wonder. However, I have also realised that this is not an aesthetic that many appreciate or care for, and it is one which seems to be in direct conflict with the severity of contemporary world events and concerns. It is easily labelled as eccentric, dubious, false, airy, or childish. If some are enchanted by it, many others are completely disgusted, and I have come to wonder why.

However, in the course of my studies I discovered that I was not alone and soon became aware of other artists who have similar interests. If it would be too much to refer to a movement *per se*, it is nevertheless possible to identify an aesthetic category within which some contemporary artists can be grouped. As with many of their past and present peers, these artists work with everyday objects. But unlike Pop-Art, which was on the whole much more concerned with making an art form out of everyday commercial culture, they often use a particular type of everyday object which usually is not a commercial icon and which is a much more generic and anonymous example of its kind. The artworks produced are not confined to any particular media or size, and are made in a wide range of media from painting, installation, video, prints, ceramics, performance, and

photography to booklets. Furthermore, unlike the past ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp—which challenged the traditional notion of an artist and art object—they have a general gaiety and lightness of spirit, coupled with a common focus on objecthood.

To understand how these objects combine to form an aesthetic category I had first to find the common denominator linking the many artists who employed them. Because several of the objects were quite tacky, I initially believed that the notion of Kitsch was the unifying factor. But I soon ran into trouble, for although there are indeed many objects which could be labelled as kitsch within the artworks that will be studied in this thesis, the prime interest of the artists I intended to study was not Kitsch but something else. I have defined that something else as “frivolity”. To explain exactly what I mean by this, is the principal objective of this thesis.

Frivolity as an aesthetic category is not a dominant trend in contemporary art and therefore has not previously been considered as an aesthetic category. Though little attention, if none at all, has been given to frivolity in contemporary art, it certainly is a theme which can be found in the practice of many contemporary artists today. For example, many contemporary art practitioners work with frivolous objects: Osario Pepon and Gioia Fonda from the United States, Joel Hubeault from France, and Gisele Amantea and Allyson Mitchell from Canada, to name a few. All of these artists have used common everyday objects of a somewhat ephemeral, useless nature and manipulated them in some way or other. Through their manipulations, these objects have been used to reveal different narratives—some are concerned with otherness and third space, and

others with stereotypes of femininity. But it is the four following artists whose art practice emerges, in my opinion, as most emblematic of frivolity.

The emerging Montreal artist Shelley Miller has gained a reputation for working with cake and cake icing, and her work has been recognized by the federal and provincial granting agencies such as the Canada Council for the Arts. Her installations have been exhibited throughout Canada and she has also obtained international artist residencies. Jo-Anne Balcaen is another young Montreal artist I have chosen to examine. She has also exhibited throughout Canada and received federal and provincial grants. She works with various media from scents, to neon lights, and of course decorative frivolous objects. Her art is mainly installation-based. Portia Munson is an American artist who has come to be known in the nineteen-nineties, and most particularly came to the attention of art critics for her participation in the notorious *Bad Girl* exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City in 1994. She has also often exhibited in the now closed Yoshii gallery in New York City. Munson is both a painter and an installation artist; she works with collected objects which she arranges in various forms and often classes by colour. The fourth artist I am considering is the internationally known American artist Jeff Koons. His career was launched in the early nineteen-eighties and since then, he has had many international exhibitions and is widely collected. Koons works as well with a variety of media from sculptures to installations to paintings. What groups these four yet unseemingly unrelated artist is the frivolous object and their articulations of a frivolous state. Though the techniques, the objects and the aims may

seem different from one to the other, this thesis will demonstrate the intertwined qualities of the objects with which they have all chosen to produce art.

The artists whose work I have chosen to emphasize in this thesis have likewise, particularly rich aesthetic practices. For instance, Miller's work is concerned with consumption, advertising, and the commodity. Although in certain installations Balcaen seems entirely consumed by the frivolous, she also seems to have a particular interest for ornamentation. And while Munson's series of pink installations has been a focus for the frivolous, her work is as well concerned with consumption, questions of environment, and notions of femininity. Besides the frivolous object, it is hard also to ignore Koons' interest in material consumption and preconceived notions of beauty.

As we can see these artists broach many subjects besides frivolity; they consequently warrant many types of analyses. The object of study which unites them is indeed the frivolous, and there are many routes I could have used to understand such frivolity. I could have decided to approach frivolous objects through a question of value and modes of consumption and production. For example, I could have chosen to address why we attribute such low value to objects such as bows, ribbons, balloons and trinkets; and considered how their mass production and consumption affects our appreciation of them. Or I could have investigated the frivolous through an understanding of ornamentation, seeking to understand the history, function, and value of ornaments nowadays. Another potential approach would have been to consider the frivolous as a form of trivialised femininity; frivolity has often been associated with womanhood, and

feminine taste equated with the lowered aesthetic value of frivolous objects. It would have been easy, for instance, to warrant such an analysis in the case of Shelley Miller since some of her installations could be said to be feminine appropriations of stereotypically masculine spaces. Surely it would be worthwhile to have taken any of these roads, for frivolity does indeed often surface within such contexts. However, all of these subjects have been written on and dealt with by prominent authors.¹ Instead, I desire to consider frivolity itself, and its effects. The aim of this thesis is to question what frivolity is from an ontological perspective. What is the setting for frivolity? What are its forms? What are its effects? What is its nature? Why is there a need to produce frivolity?

To answer these fundamental questions I have chosen to study the work of the four artists named above. I have not sought to understand the artists behind the work, but rather how their work may exhibit signs of frivolity. Hence, this thesis is very much based on my own experience of frivolity and is concerned with the phenomenological aspects of it. When and how we become conscious of frivolity, and what are the signs that alert us of the presence of it are questions that underline this thesis. Basically, I wish

¹ For a consideration of the value of the frivolous object it is first important to understand how the value of an art object is acquired, see George Dickie, Art and Value (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); and Robert Stecker, Artworks : Definition, Meaning, Value (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996). For further analysis of the value of everyday art objects see Colin Painter, ed. Contemporary art and the home (New York, N.Y.: Berg, 2002); and Naomi Schor, Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine (New York: Methuen, 1987). For a consideration of the frivolous in light of its ornamental qualities see Bernie Miller and Melony Ward, eds. Crime and Ornament: the Arts and Popular Culture in the Shadow of Adolf Loos (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2002). Also refer to Patricia Conway and Robert Jensen, Ornamentalism: the New Decorativeness in Architecture & Design (New York: C.N. Potter, 1982). See Lynn Peril, Pink think: Becoming a Woman in Many Uneasy Lessons (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), for an understanding of trivialised femininity as well as Penny Sparke, As Long as it's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste (London; San Francisco, Calif.: Pandora, 1995).

to investigate how frivolity appears to us, and what are its mode of recognition. I seek to interpret frivolity in terms of an observable relation certain objects have with us and the world. To conceive of frivolity based on my experience and interpretations of it leads to a subjective form of knowledge. But, I do not wish to define frivolity in inflexible terms; rather, I seek an approach which is based on perception and is thus open to interpretation. This approach is useful in order to comprehend the phenomenon of frivolity and how it is constructed, through a description of its appearance and effects.

In keeping with this phenomenological point of departure, I begin in Chapter One by naming and considering the material aspect of frivolous objects, which initially will be examined apart from the artworks that incorporate them. Secondly, I try to understand these objects by considering how they behave in their usual context, which is the everyday. Of course, these objects which here we deem frivolous may not be considered so elsewhere, as this quality is socially determined. This is why I have also, in the second part of the first chapter, considered frivolity itself. In asking what frivolity is, I subsequently analyse the thoughts of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the only thinker I am aware of who focuses on the frivolous as a critical category. Thus, the first chapter of this thesis considers the objects which will be discussed, their everyday context, and frivolity theoretically; but it does not yet consider the frivolous object as an art object.

In the next three chapters I focus on particular artists and their works, exploring their engagement with frivolity. I seek to elaborate my understanding of this term by

examining its connections with other critical concepts. As I flesh out frivolity itself, I also compare it to other fluctuating philosophical structures of a parallel universe. In the second chapter of the thesis, for instance, I explore some of the installations and paintings by Portia Munson. Concurrently, I explain Georges Bataille's theory of free expenditure and my interpretation of it, as well as how it is similar to frivolity. I then demonstrate how Munson's work exhibits frivolity and can be viewed as an example of free expenditure. This then leads us into the third chapter where I study Jo-Anne Balcaen's installations. I consider their effects and how they, along with Jeff Koons's paintings, can be considered as producers of grotesqueness. This brings me to explain various theories of the grotesque, as well as my own, and demonstrate how grotesqueness and frivolity have common traits. Grotesqueness also begins the fourth chapter, dedicated to the installations and photographs of Shelley Miller; but the analysis soon enters into a discussion of the opposite effect—the wondrous and the enchanting. By using Gaston Bachelard's work on childhood and the state of reverie, I explain how the wondrous is created. Thereafter, I demonstrate how these two states and the wondrous are linked with frivolity.

In the conclusion I leave the artworks once again to consider frivolous objects in an everyday context. This time, I juxtapose Michel de Certeau's resistance of the everyday with Henri Lefebvre's notion of the "moment" and "*la fête*". My principal concern here is to explain how the frivolous takes root in the moment. I conclude this thesis by revisiting the different facets of what could constitute a state of frivolity,

bringing to the surface the various commonalities between all the states and theories discussed throughout the thesis. Lastly, I try to justify this need or desire for frivolity.

The goal of this thesis is thus to undertake a theoretical voyage exploring the nature and state of frivolity. While discussing theory, I also reflect on and juxtapose artworks which I deem to be exhibiting frivolity. My hope is that in so doing, I will stir the reader towards a certain wondrous state of the ephemerally useless.

Chapter One

Before undertaking the task of discussing the artworks to be studied, I wish first to consider the objects composing the works themselves. It is important to begin this investigation of frivolity by questioning whether or not these objects have the potential within themselves to transmit frivolity. When one engages with these works of art, initial perceptions usually center on the identification of the objects as everyday, ‘real world’ things, and only secondarily on their composite signification, which is built from the relation of one object to another within the artwork. I want to know if frivolity is something which is first and foremost in the very nature of a certain type of object, or if it is something that subsequently arises out of its manipulation by the artist. Perhaps it is both. Hence, if I am to demonstrate that these works of art are tokens of frivolity – that is, vehicles for its representation – I must first understand their components. I propose to look at three aspects of these objects’ structure: their identification, their function or role, and their original context. In asking what exactly these objects are, I am also questioning their worth and their reason for being.

The task of identifying the objects within these works is no easy feat. To see if there is a frivolous aspect to these “things” I must investigate the differences and commonalities between them. If there are no commonalities, then how can we spot the needle of frivolity within the haystack of objects? To establish commonalities between the objects I had to first identify them by name, and then group them by kind; this, using their similarities which may be found in their various functions and aesthetic qualities. In some cases it was a problem to discern which object to consider since some objects were

in fact two objects meshed together in a double representation. For example, in Shelly Miller's triptych Le Rêve (2005, figs. 1, 2 and 3) casino-related objects are depicted, but it is not the real objects themselves that have been photographed. The casino items are all made of cake, icing and cookies; hence cake, icing and cookies are also represented as they are simultaneously identified with the casino representations. Portia Munson's pink installations function in the same way. In some of the installations it is possible to identify and name certain objects, but in others it is virtually impossible, as all objects mesh together in a huge chaotic pile as in Pink Mound (2002, fig. 4). Amongst the disparity between the many objects of Munson's pink installations, the only commonality is the colour pink. Hence in her case "pink" must also be considered as a virtual object since pinkness – or the essence of pink – is represented.

Among the artworks under study, the different types of objects that recur the most are: ornaments, fake flowers, stuffed animals, dresses, balloons, wrapping paper, ribbons, cake, icing, bows, bunnies, flowers, desserts, table cloths, and the colour pink. The main categories that can be derived are: gift decorations and celebratory decorations; foods of an especially sweet kind; toys; trinkets, knick-knacks and tokens of all kinds; floral patterns and flowers; architectural ornamentations; fashion and clothing.

Most of the objects named above have a decorative function. Sometimes the work is nothing but decoration, as in the architectural ornamentations of Jo-Anne Balcaen's Grotesque (2000, fig. 5). As well, in a celebratory context, most of these objects are used as decoration. Balloons, bows, ribbons, icing, wrapping paper, fake

flowers, table runners, table cloths, and party hats all help decorate or enhance a celebration of some kind. As for the toys and trinkets, they hold an entertaining function, but they can sometimes also be of a decorative use or even act as sentimental tokens. Indeed, it must be granted that all the other decorative objects, too, can be of an entertaining value; as they enhance and detract our attention, they can also enliven and thus entertain. This combination of decoration and entertainment calls our attention to the difficulty of establishing the function and potential usefulness of these objects without first considering them within an adequate context.

The first context for these objects is the everyday. These are not rare objects; we know them and are familiar with them. Sometimes we even form intimate bonds with very similar objects. Because these items are often made of cheap, affordable materials such as plastic, sugar, paper, cloth of low quality, and sand, it is usually easy to gain access to them. Many have a one-time use or a short life-span. In several instances they have a very ephemeral use, such as a plastic balloon at a party. It is blown, it is hung, and then it deflates and is soon discarded. Even if one desired to keep it, the balloon is not made to last, within a year it will eventually lapse into a state of decrepit, crumpled plastic. The “cheapness” of the objects here is one of the reasons why they are so common to life’s cycles. Even if one does not have balloons every day, one may, at least, encounter them in the supermarket every day. They may not be consumed all the time but they are recognized—they are part of that fluctuating state which is the everyday.

In order to better understand the context of these objects I will now elaborate on what exactly the everyday is. From a certain perspective, we can conceive of the everyday as a state in which similarities reoccur so often as to blur out differences between actions, events, and thoughts. It is a state that is conducive to forgetfulness, for the conscious mind is driven to become inattentive faced with these repeated occurrences. Everyday objects are often taken for granted and this consequently bestows a certain quality of invisibility upon them. Many theorists have elaborated upon the everyday and its condition. In contrast to the position I have just advanced, for example, Michel de Certeau's theory of the everyday portrays this state as a much more fluctuating structure that is resistant to homogenisation.² Both readings—negative and positive—are richly encompassed by Henri Lefebvre's theory of the everyday which can be found, amongst other texts, in *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1* and *Everyday and Everydayness*.³ For Lefebvre, the condition of the everyday is a state which is conducive to categorisation, alienation, monotony, rigidity, order, and boredom.⁴ At the same time, he perceives a potential within the everyday to break these negative conditions.⁵ This is because the everyday is not merely routine, repetition, nor the expected. Through the course of our daily lives we are sometimes witness to everyday events of an extraordinary nature, as Lefebvre succinctly put it: "Why should the study of the banal itself be banal? Are not the surreal, the extraordinary, the surprising, even the magical, also part of the real? Why

² For a thorough and concise explanation of de Certeau's theory of the everyday see Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002) 145-173. Also see Mary McLeod, "Henri Lefebvre's Critique of Everyday Life: An Introduction," *Architecture of The Everyday* eds Steven Harris and Deborah Berke (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997) 15.

³ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life Volume I Introduction* trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991) and see Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday and Everydayness," *Architecture of The Everyday* eds Steven Harris and Deborah Berke (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997) 32-37.

⁴ Highmore, 129, 143. Lefebvre, *Architecture of The Everyday* 36.

⁵ Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* 227. Highmore, 118. McLeod, 15-16.

wouldn't the concept of everydayness reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary?"⁶ Accordingly, the everyday may first appear as though composed of order and structure, within which many of us may operate or dig roots; but it is equally composed of unusual occurrences, the unexpected, surprises, and the uncontrolled. The part of the everyday which can be determined is the controlled part of our lives; it is the control all of us exercise over nature and our mutual systems. This control can take the form of structures, systems, reason, and understanding. The uncontrolled part of the everyday is the collision of those different systems with one another. In this part of the everyday lies a potential to overcome the forgetfulness I first mentioned.

Now that we have established and summarily explained a larger context for these objects, let us consider how the objects function within it. When we take into account the everyday, we add a scene behind the object. Let us imagine looking at a photograph of a real-life birthday party (fig. 6). Notice in this image that although most of the objects decorate or entertain, they do so in relation to something else. Thus we come to the realisation that these objects are peripheral to that something else—they are *peripheral* objects. The balloon decorates a wall, and it is there to celebrate an event. The bow, like a cherry on top of a sundae, crowns a gift-wrapping which is itself peripheral to the gift. The icing on a cake is peripheral to the cake and the cake to the event celebrated. The toys, the gambling chips of Miller's *Le Rêve* all are entertainment to something else—life. Even entertainment is peripheral to primal survival, an activity one can afford only

⁶ Lefebvre, *Architecture of The Everyday* 35.

once all basic survival needs have been met. In short, many of these objects seem inessential to life as they are seemingly unnecessary to meet daily essential needs.

Frivolity is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary* as something “very silly, paltry, trivial, trifling, lacking seriousness”, hence something of little value—reasonable or monetary.⁷ In contrast to the indispensable and primary, these frivolous objects appear unreasonable, unnecessary, futile, excessive, and consequently superfluous to essentiality—thus lacking essence. Like the peripheral, the frivolous is something extraneous.

If such objects are so inessential and unnecessary, then in a way, to insist on their presence does not make sense. There is a certain irrationality to the existence and use of these objects. This is especially the case if we consider an object by itself. For instance, considering a balloon solely by itself, without a context or event, one can come to ask: “what truly is the role of a balloon?” Why should we bother with the production and consumption of the silly, ephemeral and trivial? Since such objects are being produced and consumed, there must be a reason for their presence in the everyday. Is frivolity present in the everyday merely as a side-show to something else, to be decorative and entertaining?

If this is the reason we create the frivolous, then should it not participate in the production of the negative conditions of the everyday such as forgetfulness, boredom, and alienation? The trivial is by nature unsubstantial and for this reason it can easily be

⁷ Joyce M. Hawkins, ed., *The Oxford Reference Dictionary* (London: Guild Publishing, 1986) 324.

discarded. If frivolity is but silly triviality, then does it not merely serve to clutter and pester the everyday with perpetual insignificance? Yet, the irrationality which is a derivative of the frivolous is also brought into the everyday, and this irrationality is a boon. It is part of Lefebvre's and de Certeau's 'other' everyday, the one that is much more unexpected, chaotic, and ultimately uncontrollable. As much as trivialities clutter our desk, they can also singularize and identify. This can be best understood with a concrete example. Birthdays come and go every year, and every year we try to render them special in some way or form so that we may distinguish that day from a) other regular days, and b) other birthdays. Ultimately, through this difference our memory can singularize and distinguish one day from another. Of course, each day is never entirely the same, but in the day-to-day rhythm, in the long run, we tend to forget what happened that one day, sixty-eight days ago, because in all likelihood the same daily events reoccurred, and only with minor alterations. On a birthday, however, we dress the place of celebration with many protuberances such as balloons and paper wreaths; an elaborate cake is baked and decorated, for we eat special foods as well. Gifts are given, songs are sung, people make merry and behave differently. In fact, everything strives to be extraordinary; that is, extraneous to the ordinary. All of these efforts aim to singularize an event, with each little trifling detail adding up to create difference. In other words, frivolous items can act as 'Post-It Notes' for our memory. While frivolous objects can be as unmemorable as they are silly, trifling, trivial, and paltry, they can also be extremely memorable. They can act as tiny details to construct an identity for a memory. Insofar as they succeed in this, they serve to combat the obliteration that is the negative aspect of

the everyday whose final outcome is a homogenised forgetfulness, and a sense of the unlived.

By considering frivolous objects in their everyday context, certain ideas have been laid out. I have established that frivolity can both trivialize, in its acknowledged aspects, and singularize, in its unacknowledged potential. Frivolity is extraneous fat, but it enhances the taste of life. Like all good things that are bad for you, it is loathed and scorned by some, and loved and appreciated by others. Some morally condemn, and others sensibly prescribe. As a lover of frivolity myself, I naturally appreciate and feel this need for it. But how does one justify and explain what is in appearance vapid, valueless, and unreasonable?

My own answer to this question came to me one day while walking on a busy city street. As I gazed at some construction workers repairing a dilapidated early-twentieth-century house, I wondered at their method. It seemed that everything was executed a bit haphazardly: planks seemed cut without being measured, and readjustments were brought everywhere. This is how I realised that even the structures which are meant to be the most rigid and sturdy of all – architectural ones – contain flexibility and unpredictability and it is easy to lose sight of this. In trying to understand everything surrounding us, we form knowledge, and subsequently reason. This knowledge is then applied to life by naming, categorizing, and understanding. Consequently, we build structures that define and enable us to move. In other words, we make sense of the vastly chaotic by encircling it with infinite labels. These knowledge-based constructions afford us a certain degree of

control—control over ourselves, our destiny, and others. This, by the same token, grants other individuals, bodies, institutions, and the state, control over ourselves. But a life of utter control would not be possible, as all emotions would be suppressed. Our own unexpected selves would have to be withheld. As much as control is exercised, the very fact that there must be control signals the presence of the uncontrolled. A mass of fluctuating events, consequences, and unknowns constantly enters, by filtering through cracks of the structures in order to destabilize them. Frivolity is such an agent. Frivolity is the unnecessary, hence it has some means of manoeuvring away from reason and thereby injects spurts of chaos into the stable everyday. These are only small spurts, ones that in the real world can pass completely unnoticed, or be appreciated. Once their quality is prized, they can afford moments of singular joy. It is the unnecessary which fills the empty desolation of life. Frivolities are like the stars which puncture the night sky; they enable us to trace and create paths through a void that really is unknown.

Theorizing the ephemerally useless and unnecessary is not something that many authors have taken to. However, I found within Jacques Derrida's writing a fittingly obscure book titled *The Archeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac*. While Derrida's treatment of the subject is much more semiotic than my own, and its object is the linguistic sign rather than frivolity in itself, nevertheless there are parallels between our two conceptions of the frivolous. Therefore, I will take the time to go into detail, explaining this enlightening text so as to consider frivolity from another angle than objecthood or art.

The location of repetition, for Derrida, is extremely important, as he believes it is there we will find frivolity: “[f]rivolity begins its work, or rather threatens the work of its work in repetition in general, i.e.: in the fissures which, separating two repetitions, rends repetition in two.”⁸ Frivolity is not a repetition of terms, but rather, repetition is frivolity’s work. Because things have the capacity to be iterated, they constantly double themselves. But in this doubling act, there has to be a space that occurs in order to differentiate the doubles from one another. There must be a space, if there is to be not just one continuous whole, but rather two. Therefore, a distance is established between the doubles: the iteration is stretched away from the iterated. However, in every distance there is the risk of deviating away from the origin and thus producing a certain emptiness. It is this “in-between” the repetition, this distance, stretch or fissure that Derrida points to as a moment of frivolity.

An interval between iterations consequently implies that a lapse of time has occurred. During such a time period, the reception or the context of the repeated can change. Thus time allows change and a possible reinterpretation of the idea or terms repeated. Accordingly, in repetition also lies difference, and this difference is a drift that carries sense away from an origin.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, The Archeology of The Frivolous: Reading Condillac trans. John P. Leavey Jr. (Pittsburg: Duquesnes University Press, 1980) 127.

Although Derrida does not specifically say this, there are two levels of “gaps” at work. The first level we have already mentioned; it is that of the interval between repetitions. The second is in the sign itself, between the signified and the signifier.

This frivolity does not accidentally befall the sign. Frivolity is its congenital breach [the sign]: its entame, arche, beginning, commandment, its putting in motion and in order—if at least, deviating from itself, frivolity, the sign’s disposability, can ever be or present itself. Since its structure of deviation prohibits frivolity from being or having an origin, frivolity defies all archeology, condemns it, we could say, to frivolity.⁹

If you have an idea, by extension you will have a representation for it; and in this extension also lies the possibility of frivolity. As with the interval between iterations, there is here also a possible vacancy, an emptiness that can lodge itself. Furthermore, what has been extended away from the signified, can always work by itself, it can be cut off.

In order to better understand what this “gap” is, we must understand difference and what provokes it. First, this in-between or difference, is one of degrees; it is composed of similitude and opposition, which in other words is comparison: “[i]ndifference itself is only an effect of (temporal) comparison, hence an effect of difference.”¹⁰ When two things are pitted one against the other, from the onset they are perceived as different since both can be distinguished from one another. But as they are assessed it is also possible to find similarities or commonalities, especially when they are supposed to be repetitions. Hence, gaps separate things to render them both similar and different.

⁹ Derrida 118-119.

However, as much as degrees, due to their spacing, engender frivolity, they also prevent it. “But at the same time the degree makes the identical propositions possible by giving it a synthetic value which advances knowledge and prohibits frivolity.”¹¹ By creating links (similarities) between degrees, gaps are closed and interpretation ensues. Henceforth, Derrida thinks the true nature of difference is not to be dis-similar, but is this separation. It is a distancing away from the presence of immediate comprehension. Without distance there could be no comparison, nor opposition, as there would be no gap; but neither could there be similarity. This means that frivolity is continually present and dissipated through a perpetual process of rupture and repetition.

The idea that Derrida wants to demonstrate is that through the differentiating act we create gaps which are distance. In this light, understanding then becomes interpretative. It is no longer an instantaneous act since it is always slightly distanced from its object because of this gap. In fact, understanding becomes the interpretation of those distancing gaps. For Derrida, frivolity is then this distance that is away from an origin and thus away from a sense generator. But it is always possible to make some sense, some comparison, and to find some similarities; hence frivolity occurs back and forth in this rupture between periods of sense. All this boils down to the idea that there is a gap between the signifier and the signified. The two are no longer tightly bound. Frivolity here is really perceived as a lack of sense; sense here being understood as meaning created through origins.

¹⁰ Derrida 131. I interpret “indifference” here as also meaning similarity.

¹¹ Derrida 131.

I agree that frivolity can be conceived of as a maker of difference, something that creates distance—a distance away from origin or comprehension. But at the same time, as much as frivolity can engender a loss of sense, I believe it also creates sense through its making of difference. Like the peripheral objects I described earlier, the difference that frivolity creates acts like a detail that singularizes those repetitions Derrida mentioned. Singularity can distinguish a repetition to render it whole, identifiable, and different. Although that which is repeated becomes something that has drifted away from the repeatable, it has also become something else—something new. When we take a close look at objects deemed frivolous, we often feel bereft of meaning, because we are really staring at a gap in sense—at difference. But when we consider these objects as drifted signifiers, like a stack of unused “Post-It Notes”, they can append themselves to form something entirely new and distant from iterability. And once this identification has been established, frivolity flutters away momentarily.

I believe the process of identification temporarily counters frivolity, and can afford a structure, a container by which to understand what there is. But whatever is contained is so only fleetingly, and soon it deviates from the knowable to the unknowable. This is possible because frivolity is a structure that deviates from itself, is empty and unknowable. To counter this state of the frivolous one must identify things, attribute signification, and differentiate amidst the chaos. But as aforementioned, the frivolous itself creates difference and singularizes. Therefore, as frivolity creates difference, it counters itself to once again re-engender itself. It is indeed the vicious

circle of the birth and death of differentiation. When we reach a state where similarities have been drawn between the degrees of difference, unity installs itself. Thus detail is forlorn, and unity is plaguing. Frivolity, then, must once again bring in difference to break this verisimilitude and perfect structure. Consequently, frivolity is a state that can be attacked by difference, and simultaneously create it. It is the inessential that can be used to either de-essentialise or essentialise.

In the first part of this chapter, I have tackled the chaotic objects of frivolity by trying to find similarities in order to counter frivolity's differentiating act. Thus I have found that frivolous objects of the everyday are like Derrida's empty signifiers and can act as a crack within structures. Akin to signifiers, peripheral objects are often distanced from the source and can easily drift away. Yet, since they can create difference, they may potentially help us rid ourselves of the negative conditions of the everyday.

I have now established the perimeters of the game. I have described the players—the objects—which we will encounter in the artworks, and their performance or role in the context of the everyday. Whereas for the state of frivolity, I have described how it acts as a kind of guideline for the format of the game. This state serves as a means of understanding the relation which we may have with these objects, and the relation we perceive these objects to have with the rest of the world. We will continue this search for frivolity, throughout the rest of the thesis, by comparing it to other alike states. Thus, I will not limit my explanations to one descriptive narrative. Now that I have set the stage

and described the stakes, we can examine how frivolity arises out of the following artworks.

Chapter Two

In the previous chapter I considered frivolous objects by themselves and in their natural context of the everyday, divorced from the artworks that first led me to them. By now considering these objects as components of artworks this will liberate them from their initial context and consequently, due to their saturated presence as art objects, allow us to investigate their unhindered potential. I will begin this consideration by examining works by Portia Munson. I commence with Munson since her artistic treatment of these objects mimics the actions of an archaeologist; frivolity, here, is pried from its philosophical shell and placed on display (though as seen with Derrida, frivolity will only defy such an archaeological endeavour). I also want to begin with her as my own interest in the subject was first awakened by encountering her work. When I first saw Pink Project Table (1994, figs. 7 and 8) I felt a bolt of excitement and recognition go through me, though I did not yet have the critical tools to explain why. I now feel that this art encompasses frivolity in its purest form, and as such it leads us to an exploration of the combination of appeal and disgust that I have found to be so frequently stimulated by an aesthetic of the frivolous.

Munson's early practice is characterized by installations which exhibit only objects of the colour pink, and which helped her achieve considerable success in the contemporary art world.¹² Pink Project Table consists of various pink objects assorted by

¹² For more information on her first major appearance on the high art scene see New Museum of Contemporary Art, Bad Girls (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

kind and size, and all neatly laid out on a long white-topped table. Other pink installations include Pink Project (case 2) (1994, fig. 9) which consists of a wooden transparent case filled to maximum capacity with small pink objects of all sorts, and Pink Project Vitrines (1994, fig. 10) which consists of a transparent glass case with shelves on which are laid out assortments of pink objects, again classed by genre and size. There have been other pink projects, but I will begin with these.

Let us start by asking how these works exhibit frivolity. There are three relevant factors: the type of object included, their colour and gendered associations, and the ways in which they have been manipulated by the artist.

Certainly many kinds of objects in these installations could be thought of as trivial, especially in Pink Project (case 2), where several of the objects displayed cannot be described by their use, as they seem blatantly to have none. Encased between the glass, they lie there squished one against the other, prevented from having any other usage. Furthermore, their removal from the context of the everyday only enhances the effect of their uselessness. In fact, all of the installations exhibit the objects as though they were artefacts retired from the everyday. This is especially the case in Pink Project Vitrines in which the objects, in addition to being framed within a glass case, are also placed on glass shelves like artefacts, so as to permit them to be properly admired. From what I discern, most of these objects appear to be either of a decorative or entertaining use, and are thus, as seen in chapter one, peripheral. As well, many can be recognised as being made of mass-produced plastics. Cheap, common and accessible, they and their

like are trivial, and present a certain surface uselessness which is frivolous. Some have a recognised use such as a toothbrush, yet through their common mode of display, they too are associated with the other more purely frivolous objects.

If the objects themselves exhibit frivolity, does the colour pink contribute in any way to the construction of the frivolous? In a sense we cannot escape seeing a portrait of pinkness, especially in Pink Project Table. Thus confronted with these installations, pink is framed as the spokesperson of frivolity.

But pink, here, is evoked through a subjective choice of objects which tends to be articulated as objective through the manner in which they are presented. As viewers we are confronted with Munson's choice of pink signifiers, and are subsequently forced to compare these with our individual versions of pinkness and its signifiers. When I think of pink, I think of cotton candy, pink mints, roses, cake candles, bows, strawberry milkshakes, cake icing, a little girl's dress, a ribbon, wedding decorations, tampon applicators, sanitary napkins, paper wrappings, and bubble gum. That is what pink evokes for me. Since I equate pink with packaging and the extraneous, certainly for myself this colour contributes to the construction of the work as frivolous. Some of its stereotypical associations with frivolous actions of embellishment and entertainment may be recalled, and consequently pink contributes to enhancing the frivolous aspect of these works, but it is not the only contributor. But of course this is all relative to the viewer's own cultural background and conception of pink.

Nail polish, make-up, hairbrushes, dresses, dolls, stuffed animals—all tend to be more closely associated with women, especially when they are coloured pink. In general, Westerners have tended to associate pinkness with femininity,¹³ but it could very well evoke a whole array of other things for other people. And of course nowadays, pink has become quite a commercial colour. It is possible to have pink cars, pink running shoes, pink winter coats, pink tennis balls, and men's clothing coloured various shades of bright pink. However, the kind of objects exhibited in Munson's previously discussed installations and Pink Project Bedroom (1996, fig. 11) can also be associated with a kind of stereotypical femininity. If the objects are viewed as stereotypically feminine it is because several of these have a decorative and entertaining vocation. In these capacities they often perform fragile and ephemeral actions, such as beautifying, which were once relegated to the feminine sphere. Consequently, we can ask if frivolity is something that is intrinsically feminine. The gender-neutrality of my philosophical discussion in chapter one helps to establish frivolity as a genderless category. But when facing Munson's saturated amassing of gendered objects this is easy to lose sight of.

More than mere colour choice, or its social implications, it may be that it is the gesture of assembling a whole array of objects of a single colour that is a frivolous action. When I tweaked a photograph of Pink Project Table with Photoshop and changed the colour of the installation to moss green, while my response to the change is necessarily subjective, it seemed to me that the installation still remained frivolous, by virtue of the commonality of the objects' colour. It is not simply that the objects chosen here in these

¹³ See Sparke, As Long as it's Pink.

installations are of a frivolous kind, nor that the colour may evoke for some uselessness and triviality, but also how the objects have been called to attention. As though Munson were an archaeologist in search of pink, she exhibits her results in a taxonomic display. Objects in Pink Project Table and Pink Project Vitrines are laid out very rationally, or so it first appears. They are carefully displayed symmetrically, and grouped by kind and size, as if they were shards of pottery. All that is missing are reference numbers and labeling. However, the sense of rationality which is instilled by the mode of display is false; in fact, Munson really plays with our point of view and discernment.

When viewing Pink Project Table we are under the impression that we can see everything; but actually the view is blurred by the massive number of items and the unity they form. Upon first glance, one sees two things: the colour pink and then objects. But what objects are we precisely seeing? It is hard to describe what exactly one sees as the sheer amount of information we face is simply too overwhelming. Right away, our brain grasps the many types of objects present, several of which are rather small and hand-size. Upon close inspection viewers can distinguish types of objects: hairbrushes, tiny knick-knack toys, bathroom paraphernalia, small dolls, and small pink containers, and at least some of their singular manifestations. From a standard viewing distance, however, the objects that are laid flat on the table disappear into a foggy pink blur even if one attempts to identify them. Thus dazzled by quantity and the sheer sum of the detail, it even becomes hard to name singular objects. Furthermore, parts of objects hide parts of others so that one can never be sure what an object really is. There is a play here between knowing, and not knowing, between reading and being blind. It is paradoxical that

everything is laid out systematically under the eye to be seen, and yet, pinkness unifies the information into one global whole that annihilates any attempt at understanding the differences amidst the objects. There is a compressing unity that ties each object to the whole; hence the whole cannot be ignored. The totality of the work weighs on the assessment of its particulars.

Though I have previously stated that frivolousness can act as a differentiating gap we must remember that this Derridian difference is not dis-similarity but indeed, a distance away from an origin. And though frivolity in an everyday context can, through its detailing, actually singularize, in doing so it mends the gap. This is why due to a lack of identity in these installations unity is capable of engendering frivolity, even though, ironically, unity and similarity may be what it can eventually counter.

These two installations pretend to show us the objects, but we cannot know them individually. We notice the difference between objects, and upon closer inspection we can even identify some, but as soon as one is recognized its singularity is lost in its association with the other objects. As soon as comprehension is grasped, it becomes volatile as it is lost to the comprehension of something else which may be ungraspable. The end result is a global unidentifiability of the objects. Unreadability installs itself partly out of the initial character of the objects (their uselessness), partly because of their loss of context (the everyday), and then because of their orchestration which creates a great unified mass. Difference here is interrupted momentarily through pinkness.

Decontextualizing the objects from the everyday plays a great role in un-anchoring them from sense. Because there is no everyday context in these compact installations, we cannot see what these knick-knacks, trinkets, and ornaments are peripheral to. They no longer seem useful to something, and neither are they the active ‘memorializers’ or ‘Post-Its’ discussed in chapter one. Hence, because of this loss of context they slowly drift away from an origin. The general loss of sense which these objects present us with is attested to in works such as Pink Project (case 2) and Pink Mound. In contrast to the order of Pink Project Table, their mode of display changes to let a chaotic irrationality seep in: the objects are thrown together and mishmashed into haphazard piles. In that particular form of display they are in total opposition to the two installations previously discussed. Each object blocks another, truncating it, and in so doing, our comprehension of their individuality is compromised. As signs they are no longer easily comprehended or, in other words, consumable. Their absorption as signs can only come by creating links between the different parts we see so as to gather an understanding from the whole. Because they no longer generate any individual sense, as a totality they can be considered what John Erickson terms a mass of ‘material objectification’. In *The Fate of the Object: from Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art and Poetry*, Erickson explains material objectification as a “primary form of resistance.” It is “the creation of an object that proclaims and draws attention to its objecthood, that is, that resists rationalized language’s tendency to reduce it to a sign to be consumed.”¹⁴ In these two installations it seems that as a whole, the objects draw attention to their objecthood. When we try to apprehend the degree of difference

¹⁴ Jon Erickson, The Fate of the Object: From Modern Object to Postmodern Sign in Performance, Art, and Poetry (U.S.A.: University of Michigan Press, 1995) 3.

between each object, we can only gather that they are things of an unknown use. These objects are consequently transformed into empty shells. That is, impenetrable and non-interpretable surfaces that are slick and slippery to comprehension; and within which, since they are signifiers which have drifted from their signified, the inside is completely devoid of any essence.

Considered as a whole, this mass of objects has the potential to reify pink. In the process of moving from one empty difference to another, not only is there a loss of origin but so too is there a loss of the associations of pink with femininity and tackiness. This dissociation is a result of the material objectification of the items. Their specificity no longer present, they transform into a mass of pure objectness. In this state, femininity is no longer signified, as all that is left is this pure objectness. In this instance, pink again acts as a global unifier between the objects, and comes to be the signifier of objectness. Thus it is reified, reassigned as new signification, seen as a new truth—that of the gap of frivolity. Pink in these installations now represents a huge chaotic mass of objectness, a total sense of loss, a drift from origin.

Frivolity in Munson's installations is also present because, through the choice of objects and their articulations, free expenditure is expressed. Expenditure is a concept elaborated by Georges Bataille in his essay *The Notion of Expenditure*.¹⁵ In this text, Bataille identifies several forms of expenditure, though he never thoroughly defines any of these. My object of concern here is the beginning of his text, where he explains the

¹⁵ Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) 116-129.

principle of expenditure, and the last three paragraphs, where he theorizes on the relevance of expenditure and on “free expenditure”. Much of his essay is concerned with public upheaval and argues in favour of social revolution against the Bourgeoisie. The premise of his argument is based on the idea that the principles of classic economy, based on production, preservation, and consumption, are wrong. In a classic capitalist economy, according to Bataille, when one makes an expense it is for one’s own gain. In such a system, material accumulation, the species’ survival, and reproduction are the ultimate goals. Bataille dismantles this notion by explaining the so-called primitive activity of the Potlatch, and by mentioning the ideas of sacrifice and gift, all of which result in a loss of some kind. Bataille proposes that there is a meta economy which is based on the principle of expenditure, and that this expenditure is always present but has been made into a functional form in part by Christianity and subsequently by the rise of the Bourgeoisie. Though much of Bataille’s argument aims to justify class struggle and a call to public upheaval, which he perceives as a form of expenditure, I would like to turn our attention to the notion of expenditure itself, and ultimately to that of free expenditure.

Even divorced from this political critique, the fundamental idea that certain actions or things expend is an attractive one. To put it simply, Bataille discusses expenditure in terms of the loss that accompanies an act.¹⁶ One might argue that everything is marked by some form of expenditure as everything expresses some form of loss. For example, when things are being differentiated from one another they are, in a sense, what they are not, hence a form of loss occurs. In developing his analysis, Bataille

¹⁶ Bataille, Visions of Excess 129.

devotes particular critical attention to the category of free expenditure—a dispersal that does not result in production.

Such free expenditure consists of actions, or in our case mainly objects, that have no other end beyond themselves.¹⁷ Freed from the expectations of material utility, this unproductive expenditure in a sense legitimizes what seems unnecessary. It is thus a force for liberation. Like myself, Bataille seems to want to understand why life would allow for the production of actions or objects which, at the surface level do not seem necessary to its survival. Why would humans bother to engage in behaviours which may even be nominally detrimental to themselves or their species? Why would we bother with the production of objects which do not possess a fundamentally utilitarian nature?¹⁸

One answer to these questions resides in the principle of loss. When making art like Munson's, or having trinkets, or contemplating pure pink material, one is somehow at a loss. It may be a loss of logic one senses, perhaps a loss of aesthetic value, or even of moral direction. Works such as the installations named thus far exhibit objects which, though they seem devoid of use, and to have lost their sense and their origin, are inexplicably still present. But free expenditure affords us with exactly this—a freedom of boundaries: free from servitude, free from production, free from subordination, free from reason, free from characterization, and free from understanding logically. Because there is such a lack of restraints, Bataille therefore perceives in free expenditure an

¹⁷ Bataille, Visions of Excess 118.

¹⁸ Bataille, Visions of Excess 118.

accompanying degradation which results in a loss of morality.¹⁹ In turn, because of the presence of this degradation, I perceive in free expenditure an unavoidable loss of idealism. An ideal is characterized by being elevated above others; it is held at such heights that everything around the ideal is lowered and continually bound to strive towards it. But free expenditure is rid of these bounds. The freedom from idealism is like a neutral blankness which does not lead you to a god; it is without end, it is not teleological. In direct opposition to Neo-Platonic ideals of elevation, free expenditure can ground us in a mass objecthood of materiality; and consequently it allows us to gaze at pure materiality without the restraining bounds of utility. It permits us to produce, include and contemplate objects devoid of idealism, hence affording a freedom of thought.

When loathing frivolous materiality for its loss of ideals, morality, aesthetic and monetary values, and its loss of logic, origin, and reason, I believe one plays into the hierarchical game of ideal form. Frivolity in such a game is often placed at the bottom, deemed an non-idealistic perversion. Munson, as well as the other artists I will examine in this thesis, elevates these non-idealistic objects by placing them in a higher aesthetic context. Frivolity is certainly a form of free expenditure and it offers us a break from boundaries. Beyond its origin, the object of free expenditure lets us gaze at the boundless infinite ends.

¹⁹ Bataille, Visions of Excess 129.

Since these ends are unproductive, upon first consideration they may be pronounced useless; but on the contrary, they do indeed have a use. Free expenditure and frivolity afford us with a means to break the cycle of the useful and bring about boundlessness. I believe what is bound is forcibly retained, thus bounded energy is not truly productive; it is rather castrated from its full potential. Boundlessness on the other hand releases energy and brings movement, whether illogical, immoral, or not, it does not matter. That a movement is in fact created, and in so doing expands away from its origin, that a distance arises—this is what I think stirs understanding, stirs reason to grapple with the shift issued out of the movement. Just as frivolity both creates and inhibits unity through difference and causes movement, gaps and time, so free expenditure can, by means of boundlessness, stir life.

Munson, in an act of reason, binds pink through a taxonomic objecthood. In both Pink Project Table and Pink Project Vitrines illogical pink materiality is submitted to an order. However, in Pink Project (case 2) we see a conflict emerging between free chaotic expenditure—that is this pink materiality—and its captor—the container. In all three of these installations, a battle between the object and its mode of display takes place. But, in Pink Mound, a formless pile of pink objects is completely devoid of any orderly restraints. Although no more sense arises out of this chaos, there seems in this work to be a resolution between order and chaos. The result is that order has never had a true grasp on pink, for we have not been illuminated with a definition of it. Pink Mound brings a happy serenity to these haphazard objects. This free expenditure is no longer constrained, and its mode of display no longer holds the tension of the previous pieces.

The chaotic state of Pink Mound destroys all difference, it becomes a mass of undistinguishable matter, and thus blurs all defining boundaries.

This theme of the boundless and the bounded is continuous in Portia Munson's work. In frivolity's unbounded state or "open" state it can, ironically, be suffocating for the viewer. For example, the installation The Garden (1996, fig. 12) is extremely convoluted with objects belonging mainly to these categories: fake flowers, material with floral patterns, and stuffed bunnies of all kinds. The installation imitates the setting of a room; we can distinguish the bedposts, shelves, and some forms of furniture, but all of these are covered with floral tablecloths or floral material of some kind or other. Amidst the fake flowers and the stuffed bunnies is one supreme bunny which is made entirely of fake flowers. This is almost like a hallucinogenic apparition—flowers and bunnies intermingle to such a point that one seems to be created out of the other. There are items everywhere; hence, this is not a sight for sore eyes. Our eyes are constantly stimulated, prompted to look in every direction, never gaining any rest. As in Pink Project Table, the instant our eyes have gazed upon and identified an object, we are called to jump to the next one. And so our sight wanders from object to object like a bee gathering pollen; in this way it is indeed like a garden. But since this frivolity is permitted to sprawl upon us in an almost invading fashion, the garden's perfume becomes somewhat suffocating. The sheer amount of objects and symbols creates restlessness for the mind and drives it to seek a flat surface to rest upon, but unfortunately there is none. Not quite the chaotic slump of Pink Mound, The Garden offers an open state enclosed by a sort of cocoon-like bedroom setting.

A similar setting characterizes the installation Pink Project Bedroom. Here, the state of boundaries falls somewhere between Pink Project Table and The Garden. As it is less riddled with haphazard objects than The Garden, Pink Project Bedroom emanates less of this ‘free for all’ chaos. The pink colouring again acts as a unifying agent, this time between the dresses and the bunnies. Through a cocoon-like orchestration of the dresses, a sense of enclosure transpires. As in The Garden, we can discern the presence of a bed even though it is completely covered by stuffed bunnies. Here, then, boundlessness is tamed; it is as though we can feel a pressure coming from the walls forming the enclosure. It is not suffocation that characterizes Pink Project Bedroom so much as an emerging pressure that issues from the play between binding walls and a frivolous state.

In Munson’s installations we always retain a sense of this attempt at order and this presence of a fragmented state of disorder. In Pink Project Table, Pink Project (case 2), Pink Project Vitrines we witness the contained. As viewers we are held a bay and stand on the outside of this contained. But in The Garden and Pink Project Bedroom we are taken inside this container, inside the womb-like cocoon or the ‘Alibabanesque’ cave. It is as if in these two works we stand inside the casing of the other pink installations. But more than being within these treasure-like caves, Munson’s paintings Pat The Bunny (1994, fig. 13), Pink Donuts (1996, fig. 14), and Untitled 2 (1998, fig. 15) engage us at an intimate one-on-one level with the frivolous objects.

In these paintings we are witness to the openings of boundlessness in their most private moments. What desires most to explode from the openings is this ceaseless chaotic state of frivolity. The latter is depicted in a realistic manner and portrayed as though born out of detail. For example, in Pat The Bunny, Munson paints one of those famous iterated bunnies which keep being reproduced throughout her works. This tiny, inoffensive, frivolous pink bunny sits inside a half-open trinket box decorated with frills, very much like a clam displaying her prized pearl. This clam-like box rests upon a phallic slumbering cucumber which is depicted amidst a background of flowers. These objects, or signs, reside far away from an everyday context and because they are so disparate from one another they are lonesome. Yet because of this solitude they interact with one another and thus combine their many referents in order to insinuate obvious sexual undercurrents. In Untitled 2, these sexual undertones come gushing to the surface as we stare at the non-existent private parts of a pink-dressed doll. The doll is painted lying on her back, her dress fluttering up in a Marilyn Monroe fashion so as to display her vagina which resembles a tiny hole. The doll must have those eyes that close as she lies horizontally, and hers now rest closed. Her mouth forms a permanent smile, but painted from this angle she looks more like a sexually gratified doll. Again, like the clam box, the dress acts as an opening. The creases of the dress and the frills of the clam-box both have weaving membranes and flesh-pink tones all too reminiscent of the vulva's lips. Pink Donuts enters this perverse relation when considered in the light of the two other paintings. Again the theme of opening reappears, but in this painting it takes the form of the implied donut's hole. This time, the opening is equated with a boundary. The suggested form of the dough painted on the cover of the donut box forms a restraint

around nothingness, but it also acts as an outliner, delineating the existence of two states. The partially tacit hole of the donut in turn highlights the presence of the flesh of the donut from the absence of donut. This play between opening and enclosure is perpetually visible, and this at many levels. For example, the donut box itself, which lies open, can be considered another opening. As there are containers, there is also the contained. Where there are boundaries, there is also the bounded. Here, then, are open states and enclosed ones, but amidst the weaving there is always the contained which, when in expansion, wishes to break free. In this case, because it revels in a pitiful non-idealistic form of materiality and shows a loss of origin and reason it therefore takes the form of free expenditure, of frivolity. This force of expansion is depicted here as the implied sexual organs of a doll, the idea of an empty vast hole, or the uncontrollable forces of reproduction of a bunny. All show the explosive potential held within the lowest levels of frivolous mundane details—sexual expansion.

Bataille foresees this loss of morals, this force of reproduction in free expenditure, and explains it through the principle of loss which accompanies all expenditure, and which, in the case of free expenditure, can result in degradation.²⁰ Munson brings to our attention the nitty-gritty details of frivolity, and through a certain articulation of their semiotic possibilities, reveals a sexually degrading potential within them. It is not that sexuality is a negatively degrading activity *per se*. Rather, sexuality here is lowered away from the world of pure ideal, (even though one may have fantasies) as it is an activity which is bodily based. Hence, sexuality in this context, is understood as

²⁰ Bataille, Visions of Excess 128-129.

degrading by virtue of the fact that it is away from the ethereal and bodiless, to be rooted in the materiality of the body and the earthly. Although frivolous objects may seem inoffensive – and even retain an air of innocence since they are often associated with children, such as when they are toys – they have a debasing potential as well, and perhaps even more so than utilitarian objects (except those of a sexual use, of course). While Munson demonstrates that these items can be objects for objects' sake, free of use, free of anything but simply being material objectiveness, at the same time she shows how frivolous materiality grounds itself away from a world of ethereal idealism. Frivolous objects here are degraded into a state of Bakhtinian materiality which is concerned with forces of expansion, ultimately generated by the flesh and sheer life.²¹ Life's expansion in this case is expressed in its materialistic form through frivolous objects. Frivolity, which has an ephemeral nature emerging here and there, is never truly bounded when captured. Munson prods the viewer into an intimate relation with frivolous objects. Away from their everyday context, they can be perceived as totally free forms of material expenditure. We can thus witness in their singularity how these objects hold certain sexual undertones which only serve to reflect this force (life's expansion) that is characteristic of free expenditure, and, consequently, of frivolity.

For some it is understandably uncomfortable to witness such sweetness associated with such perverse sexual undertones. Such opposite qualities within the same objects would seem to reveal a certain grotesque nature. Could contradictions such as uselessness versus usefulness, innocence versus perversion, formlessness versus idealism,

²¹ See Bakhtin's theory of the material bodily principle in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968) 19-21.

order versus chaos, openings versus enclosures, producer of difference versus purveyor of unity not be symptomatic of a grotesque potential within frivolity? In the following chapter, I will explain how frivolity and grotesqueness are tied together, drawing my examples from the art of Jo-Anne Balcaen and Jeff Koons.

Chapter Three

Jo-Anne Balcaen works with frivolous objects that are mainly of a decorative nature. In her installations, these objects are often related to celebration, and though the objects are peripheral to something else, such as, for example, an event (The End, 2000, fig. 16) or a gift, (Happiness, 1999, fig. 17) this principal thing is not present in the installations. As with most frivolous objects thus far encountered, the ones Balcaen uses also usually hold a relatively cheap monetary value, and in particular, they are objects which in their everyday context are easily disposable.

In everyday experience, balloons, bows, and ribbons are mainly associated with a decorative context for special circumstances. But when such an event ends so too are these items disposed of soon after they first appeared. Balcaen continues this tie to the everyday by also manipulating these objects in a decorative manner. Thus, although recontextualized as artworks, these ephemeral objects still maintain an aspect of impermanence. Consequently, as viewers we know that these objects are not there for long; somehow we think someone will eventually take them down, will tear them apart. At some point the true artwork will be revealed, and the wrapping will be disposed of. When viewing some of her installations, this impermanence establishes a certain awareness of time or moment, an acknowledgement of a passage. Thus the use of these ephemeral objects also imbue the works with an impermanence typical of frivolity, which is a state that comes and goes without any stability.

As well as these objects' impermanent use in the everyday, many are also hand-made, such as the paper flowers in The End, or the ribbon flowers in Happiness. This coupled with the low monetary value of the objects lends them both a craft-like and low art quality in addition to a certain fragility, since many could easily be crumpled. To add to the fragile state of the installations, many of the objects in use are also lightweight. Thus a sense of impermanence, fragility, airiness, and triviality appears. We gather that what is before us will soon drift away.

But frivolity for Balcaen is not limited to exploring objects. She has also experimented with frivolous gestures such as implementing a smell where it should not be, such as in the installation Get Well Soon (2001). For this installation, she hung a scent dispenser diffusing the odour of mint in an empty hospital bedroom. Her investigation of the frivolous embellishing detail truly goes beyond the object and penetrates the world of scent, gestures, sound, and language.

Language, too, is often found at the center of her art practice, in the form of individual words which have been spelled out either in commercial neon lights or in decorative objects such as in Happiness and The End. Just as pink is expressed by frivolous objects in Munson's installations, Balcaen makes words the subjects of the frivolous objects, spelling out 'happiness' in ribbon and bows in the installation so titled. In artworks that do not literally spell out a word, the title word itself becomes crucial. Hence when considering Balcaen's work we must be mindful of the relation it has to words and their ensuing potential as signs.

When a frivolous object is disassociated from its everyday context it becomes even more irrational than it already was. In the same manner, words can also become frivolous when isolated from their linguistic context, such as other words or a sentence. Consequently they are bereft of potentially creating any significant linguistic relationships. In such an isolated state, the lonesome word also becomes a drift from its origin, just as frivolous objects stand afar from their center. For example, in the installation Happiness, the title word is spelled out on a drab wall of an empty apartment in a vacant residential building. Nowhere in the room we view can we equate any event with happiness. Happiness, the signifier, has no apparent visible signified to be found. The word has been cut from its linguistic environment and left to hang on a blank page, which in this instance is the wall. Viewers who are daily stimulated by language, are used to seeing words and comprehending their inherent meanings. A quick apprehension of their signification is expected, especially when words are to be found outside a paper environment. In the everyday, words which stand by themselves are usually used as quick signs to transmit information; one might simply think of street signs. Amidst architecture words are indicative of a place, a space, an action or an object, hence they are descriptive and nominative. Viewing 'happiness' in such an architectural environment, our minds race to run the source of this happiness to ground. In Happiness what we are left to supply the word with in order to create meaningful relationships, is the material it is made out of, the location it is in, and our own relation to it. Regarding location it is rather obvious that happiness, the signified, is in direct contradiction to the signifier's empty and drab location. Hence happiness serves somewhat to describe what is not in fact there. In trying to locate happiness—to find its origin—one comes to realise

just how much words are iterative, and how their meaning completely relies on their context and the associations they create. Even such strong and potent words as “happiness,” can become frivolous if unattended by a context. Just like the objects constituting the word, “happiness” is also peripheral to an event, a feeling, a person, an action. In such a state of limbo, the sign “happiness” appears somewhat empty. However, by writing the word ‘happiness’ out of frivolous decorations, Jo-Anne Balcaen added in other signs to play with the word and create signification.

The letter “H” of the word “happiness” is entirely constructed out of hand-made silk-ribbon roses (fig. 18). Dispersed amongst the fake flowers are gift wrapping bows of different sizes, as well as printed ribbons and coloured tulle. The “H” is multicoloured like a rainbow, and the different shades are grouped together to gently flow one into the other. Lastly, throughout this first letter there are odorous objects which gradually melt over the duration of the installation. The rest of the word is spelled out with a thick red ribbon, and the last “S” seems to run away into the outside world through an open window. The fact that the word is made of ribbon and that there are bows and decorative roses, makes the word seem as though it were wrapped like a gift. From a certain point of view, the “H” could appear like the crowning bow, and the rest of the word like the ribbon around the gift. We must logically ask, then: What is the gift? And what is the wrapping hiding?

And so the word “happiness”, which was indicative of no object of happiness, seems, on the surface, to be but a wrapping hiding something else beneath it. What

happiness is wrapping is in fact before our very eyes. It is this empty room bereft of any possible source of happiness, except the one the viewers bring with them. Here, henceforth, lies a deception. A moment of surprise is instigated with the word happiness. As viewers we see an indicative sign and we seek its source. None is found, yet the word is made up of artifacts which point to celebration, gift-giving and surprise; still we seek to find an object, a purpose, a center, a signified. But underneath the colourful surprise lies a falsehood. This deceit was already implied through the fakeness of its ingredients. For example, the overwhelming fake perfume of the scented “H” reminds us of the impossibility of it actually smelling like real flowers. The “H” pretends to be a beautiful garden of roses; it seduces with its rainbow colours, but it nauseates with the fakeness of its smell. Just as with the brand name air freshener *Wizzard*, the “H” mesmerizes us into hoping for happiness. The decorative frivolous objects here are like wrapping which hides a gift. They are again peripheral to something; they are the border or the extensions of something else—of another object. And they try to deceive us, to prevent us from knowing the identity of this other object by using this luscious, ephemeral, and fake beauty. Happiness’s artificial wrapping is reminiscent of other gifts: Christmas gifts that may have seduced us with their wrappings only to reveal a disappointing object soon to be discarded. And so the genuine feeling of happiness is contradicted by the falsity and ephemerality of its constituents.

Yet the installation Happiness can afford us with a moment of reflection; it permits us to ponder on the iterative nature of its materials. Because it is possible to reuse these signs infinitely, with each repetition there may grow a distance or gap

between the intended signified and the repeated signifier. With each distance a loss of meaning may occur, even in words such as “happiness”, which seem inseparable from their signified. Through the fallacy of the wrapping, the word happiness also leaves us with a bitter-sweet taste of emptiness. On the other hand, although the roses may be imitations, and their smell that of pungent pot-pourri, they can still evoke, as an ensemble with the bows, ribbon, and the word, the moment of gift-giving. Besides a potential deception following the gift giving and unwrapping, we must take into account this first encounter with the gift. It is a moment when one is presented with an unknown object, and when all that is known is the exterior beauty of its wrapping, and the generosity of the giver. In that instance of receiving or giving a gift, happiness may be felt, regardless of the object of the gift, and it may well be a fleeting happiness, just as the gift wrapping will be discarded. The word happiness in this installation has, upon first encounter, lost its signified, and seems suddenly unfixed and empty, just as the bows and roses have lost their original gift. Indeed, perhaps in this light they may appear like frivolous ephemerality. However, though it may be fleeting and represent a gap between what is known and what is unknown, this frivolous happiness can still, through its passage, afford a moment of simple joy in the surprise of this unknown.

The same play between surprise and deception occurs in the installation The End. Again, words are at the center of the commotion, and just as in Happiness, these words are the same as that of their title. In this enchanting installation, a gallery space has been completely dressed up for an occasion, as if a graduation or a ball were to take place. Pink and gold table runners are used as wall hangings at the bottom of which, like a

cascading waterfall, pink shaded paper flowers and thick gold and pink ribbons have been laid. In the middle of the space, a ceremonial arch made of pink and gold balloons stands awaiting someone or something. The words “the end” are spelled out with thickly bunched-up pink paper flowers and written in a calligraphic romantic style reminiscent of the same “the end” that appears at the ending of black-and-white movies (fig. 19). In fact, “the end” is quite large, and occupies a good portion of the white gallery wall. On each of its sides are flanked pink and gold panels which suddenly resemble theater curtains. In the same spirit of entertainment, the flowers and ribbons at the foot of “the end” appear to have been thrown by admirers; but admirers of what? The culminating point—always the object of this decoration—is missing. Perhaps that is what “the end” is indicative of: the end of the event, the passing of an object of celebration which is no longer present since this was its final act, and it has now gone. Although upon first viewing The End it may appear as though we are in the wait for something yet to come, the words themselves contradict this expectation. Again, like Happiness, the room is wrapped up in a gift-like fashion. Bows are placed in rows, and myriads of paper flowers trickle down the walls (figs. 20 and 21). Looking at the balloon arch, one may feel within oneself a rising chant of “happy birthday”, which comes to no avail (fig. 22). For even though all the artifacts comprising this installation are familiar to any celebration, and they seem to prompt an excitement, there is nothing here to be excited about. As viewers we recognize the symbols which accumulate to indicate a special moment, and so we await expectantly. Yet we are fooled, because the focus of the work is this special mode of decoration, and not the celebration itself, and so we linger on in this limbo of a moment, which is empty of any occurrence, except that of viewing.

Together, all of these ephemeral, fragile, and delicate decorations combine to make a neat packaged whole, a unit which hides, as in Happiness, the object of its expectations. Together these circumstantial objects come to dress the periphery of a circumstance. They dress it with a pattern, and this pattern-like-wrapping hides the purpose of its presence. Balcaen creates a wonderful, enchanting mask by using a pattern mode of display.

As we have seen with Portia Munson's work, frivolity in over-abundance, as much as it can afford differentiation, can also form a compact unit, such as pinkness or flowers, which can blur our vision of the particular. In the particular case of The End, and Grotesque, a work I shall discuss later on, a blinding unity is achieved through the construction of patterns. Although a pattern organizes into a sort of system its elements, I believe it does not operate in the same manner as order. Pattern creates a unity which thereby makes us forget the individual elements composing it, so as to witness the whole. This unity is achieved by creating links and relations between the various elements. A pattern seeks the commonalities between its elements, whereas order distinguishes the differences and compartmentalizes these. With order we know one thing from another, we can perceive difference, but with a pattern, we unite things so as not to know one from the other. The frivolous detail, when subject to order, will afford distinction and difference; it will act as the difference. But subject to a pattern, it can be manipulated to blur out all difference simply by creating links between the commonalities.

Elements in a pattern are repeated in an expected manner, but they can also be punctured with irregularities, which are even more captivating for the mind as it seeks to find familiarities to link them to the whole. For example, in The End, there are sections of walls which are decorated with golden bows, and the bows are placed in such a regular manner as to create a pattern. The table runners also alternate between tones of pink and gold in a rhythmic manner. The two colours, pink and gold, unify all elements of the installation to create a link between each one of them. The two unexpected irregularities are the words “the end” and the balloon arch. Our minds can thus play back and forth, trying to form a common link between the words, the decorations, and the arc, although the mere fact that they are constructed out of the same types of decorative frivolous elements already affords such a link. In the case of The End, the pattern acts as a screen blocking us from viewing any justification for these decorations. Just like the wrapping paper for a gift, the room has a unifying pattern. The gift wrap serves both to charm and to hide the particulars that are inside. But again: mask what, hide what? Like the purpose or use of frivolity, we are compelled to expect, we desire to know, what is the object of this intended celebration. The irregular element “the end”, then, perforates the celebratory pattern by questioning whether there should be such a finality to frivolity, such a restful circumstance that would justify its means.

It is in the work Grotesque that we are most confronted with this masking pattern that Balcaen uses to blur our vision. This work is much further removed from a centre than The End. The latter work, due to its articulation of the objects into a familiar mode of display, constantly dangled a hopeful celebratory event as a source of explanation, but

in Grotesque, these familiar ribbons and roses are used to create a huge lozenge medallion. Since the decorations are not sprawled all over the exhibition walls, Grotesque is much more condensed and presents us with a detailed view of the decorative frivolous objects. Here the pattern consists of intersecting rows of pink paper flowers between which gold ceiling mouldings have been laid like floor tiles. The flowers are squished together tightly, and it seems as though what holds them from bursting everywhere is the pattern itself (fig. 23). The pattern here does not necessarily mask anything, as there is no pretension to anything beyond what we see, but it does hold together the chaotic, overwhelming amount of rich detail threatening to burst in on us. In fact, there are spurt-like ribbon arrows which escape out of the grasp of the pattern to come and aggress the air. It is only upon close inspection that we realise that what the pattern hides are the individual differences between each paper flower. There is a sense in which, apart from the play between the hoped for centre and the empty periphery, what we are seeing here is free expenditure wanting to burst from a pattern frame. Much more like Munson's paintings, Grotesque permits us to engage with the details. Here we can gaze at the empty drifting signifiers without the bother of "why". As we eternally race to understand with reason, our minds seek alliances with other potential signifieds. Hence it is easy to find resemblances and deviations amongst these objects. The shooting ribbon arrows resemble decrepit phalluses, and again like Munson's Untitled 2 painting of the pink-dressed doll, the flowers look very similar to the vulva dress. If this is sheer perversion on my part, it is nevertheless the object that has enabled me to go there. Away from the obstructing pattern, and in dialogue with this empty frivolity, our minds are at the mercy of any association—hence the perversion. Because these objects are empty,

they are inoffensive and only directly reference their decorative use. Therefore, we can transform them to resemble what we will. Any perverse thought may be allowed to enter, hence the creation of grotesqueness.

Jo-Anne Balcaen's work is riddled with contradictions which end in deceptions. For example, because of the disappointment prompted by the words, all the anticipation created in Happiness and The End comes to no avail. Yet although seemingly empty and fake, Happiness, contrary to its mode of representation, can still transmit a remembrance of happiness. In these installations, the words contradict either their surroundings or the objects constituting them. The patterns seek to hide, but only the fact that they hide nothing. And although the elements all seem but trivial bland decorations, they can also inspire naughty, immoral thoughts. In addition to these contradictions, all of these objects transgress, in some form or other, boundaries. These lowly, everyday decorations are transmuted into works of high art, thus breaking the boundaries between low and high art.

As we have previously seen, frivolity can trivialise, identify, singularize, or simply eradicate difference. It is something which seems to be neither-nor, but rather a shade of ungraspable grey. This condition riddles it with contradictions as it can both do and undo what it has done. Thus the frivolous object, especially away from its origin, becomes something that is quite ungraspable and unknowable—just as the pink objects in Portia Munson's Pink Project Table could not be grasped or identified. Or just as the point of The End escapes us, leaving us with a mass of pink and gold whose purpose is

ungraspable. Out of its everyday context, this free expenditure can seduce and disgust all at once; it can surprise and disappoint. For frivolous objects to give rise to negative feelings is counter to their inherent triviality, which is meant to be inoffensive. Yet in their unabashed state as art objects, these artists can combine them to saturate us so that a sense of suffocation and irritation can invade us to a point where some may even experience disgust. Such effects are due to a certain grotesque potential within frivolity which is unleashed.

For myself, I have come to identify feelings of grotesqueness, or its effect, when undergoing both an attraction and a simultaneous repulsion. This inherent contradiction prevents easy identification of what produces it. Objects which are truly of a grotesque nature will be formless, and reason will strain to identify and frame this.²² In this respect, the grotesque object is very similar to free expenditure as it seeks to break free of restraints such as order, reason, and understanding. Grotesqueness appears as an ungraspable mass, such as in Pink Mound. Indeed, because it is so hard to grasp—so slippery to our minds—it is incomprehensible, and thus can either give rise to wonder or to fear. It may be that when the grotesque potential of something is unleashed, all the capacities of that thing are revealed; thus as viewers of the grotesque, we are submerged by these expanding capabilities. Like free expenditure and frivolity, the grotesque resides on the border. It is something, through its unidentifiable and neither-nor nature, that is on the border of categories. It is like frivolity— peripheral, and in-between. But, unlike it, it has a more negative reception; it can be feared, loathed, or despised. Frivolity is not

²² There are further similarities here with Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject. See Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror : an Essay on Abjection trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York : Columbia University Press, 1982).

the grotesque, but it has the potential to become grotesque-like. Because the frivolous object is a drifter and deserter, it has the time to play with our unconscious, leading it to seeking latent associations. The potential to elicit such debasing associations from the frivolous object clashes with the object's initially trivial nature, which is devoid of such implications. These debasing connotations are in accordance with the loss of the ideal that is typical of free expenditure, and reflect the clash of contradictions typically caused in grotesqueness.

To understand the grotesque, Noël Carroll in his essay *The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes Toward a Taxonomy*, divided the concept into three parts: the structural, the functional, and the effect.²³ I will not address the structure of the grotesque as I believe that the grotesque encounter is one that can be highly personal and is based upon the individual's perceptions, as well as a temporal and spatial specificity. Hence from culture to culture the structure of the grotesque may vary. Its symptoms and their effects, however, may be more common. There are many types of grotesque forms identified in subclasses by many authors, few of whom agree. In the hopes of seeing just how close grotesqueness and frivolity are, I will expand on the general functions of the grotesque I have set out here.

Wolfgang Kayser in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* sums up the grotesque in a curt definition: "The grotesque is the estranged world."²⁴ He explains the cause of

²³ Noël Carroll, "The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes Toward a Taxonomy," *Modern Art and the Grotesque* ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 291-311.

²⁴ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963) 184.

this estrangement, writing that “[w]hat intrudes remains incomprehensible, inexplicable, and impersonal.”²⁵ Thus the estrangement arises out of our own world; it is the presence of the unfamiliar in the familiar. This intrusion gives rise at the time of encounter to an active moment filled with “ominous tension” whereby the onlooker is assaulted with surprise and suddenness.²⁶ Furthermore, this estranged encounter results in “...the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe.”²⁷ This failure to orient ourselves implies that we are not able to relate to the object causing the estrangement, and that is because we fail to identify it. In the encounter with the peripheral frivolous object, we are destabilized by the lack of finding it in its familiar position which is on the circumference of something else. Instead, as in Balcaen’s installations, the peripheral has become the unfamiliar centre, or subject.

Three other authors’ ideas on the grotesque are also relevant to Balcaen’s work. Philip Thomson, author of *The Grotesque*, conceives of it as an occurrence which is symptomatic of a disharmony, riddled with clashes, often carried out in modes of extravagance, exaggerations, and extremes.²⁸ As with Kayser, Thomson also sees the grotesque as an unnatural, abnormal occurrence within the normal, and calls this the confusion of the real with the unreal.²⁹ Finally, he reduces his definition to “The unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response”, and gives a secondary definition which he calls “the ambivalently abnormal”.³⁰

²⁵ Kayser 185.

²⁶ Kayser 184.

²⁷ Kayser 185.

²⁸ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1972) 20-22.

²⁹ Thomson 24.

³⁰ Thomson 27.

Geoffrey Harpham, author of *On the Grotesque Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, understands the grotesque state as the death of the theorizing of the mind and a consequent confusion of theory.³¹ This suspension of understanding leads one to an interpretive state, and so Harpham perceives the grotesque as a particularly intense occasion for interpretation.³² He also conceives of the grotesque as something which is very close to the sublime, but which we are prevented from seeing within the grotesque due to its irresolvable nature.³³

David Summers, author of the essay *The Archaeology of the Modern Grotesque*, thinks one can easily be “deceived, fooled, tricked, gulled, or duped” by the inherent ambivalence of the grotesque.³⁴ But part of the viewer’s deception is due to what he or she brings to the grotesque object. As Summers explains:

But after Freud, associations themselves are never presumed innocent but are part of the “primary process”, thus betraying deeper connections and impulses; and if the wit of the grotesque is aesthetic or decorative it may also touch deep chords...Once the aesthetic, sophistic dimension of the grotesque has been breached or forgotten, unnatural fusions of plant and animal – their virtual forms ensouled by vegetal and linear movement, both apparently alive and caught up in uncanny repetitions and symmetries of ornament – become disturbing and suggestive, or symptomatic of the mind of the maker. The “grotesque” lends itself to association with the unnatural in all its senses.³⁵

³¹ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On The Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982) 17.

³² Harpham 21.

³³ Harpham 20-22.

³⁴ David Summers, “The Archaeology of the Modern Grotesque,” *Modern Art and the Grotesque* ed. Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 26.

³⁵ Summes 26.

As we can see, Kayser's "estranged world" is caused by the unfamiliar, and the incomprehensible. This incomprehensibility is in turn caused by what Thomson has labelled a "clash of incompatibles", and what Summers views as ambivalence injected in a real or normal context, or at odds with our referent for such a context. In short, our collision with the grotesque drives us to, as I have already mentioned, an inability to identify what it is, thus leading to Harpham's lack of theorizing of the mind. Since we are inept at logical comprehension when facing the grotesque, we are free from reason to interpret without any restraints. Therefore, as Summers explains, due to such a susceptible recipient for our machinations, the grotesque's free-floating signifiers are at leisure to interact with our latent unconscious associations. It is not so surprising, then, that when we view Jo-Anne Balcaen's installation Blow (2001, fig. 24) we may merge the title with the object, and through such an interpretation, deform the bouquet of long balloons into one of colourful condoms.

That it is both possible to perceive inoffensive birthday balloons as condoms, and to interpret the work's title as that of the name of a sexual act, can engender a reaction in the viewer symptomatic of the effects of the grotesque. Surprise may be experienced upon first encountering the exploding colourful protuberances in the space, but surprise at the subsequent sexual connotations may also be felt. Some may feel deceived or fooled by a work which at first seems inoffensive and frivolous, and on second thought may appear aggressive and sexual. Thus, works such as Blow may cause ambivalence in their attraction and possible subsequent repulsion. It may perhaps also be the case that some are initially repulsed by the seemingly empty frivolous signifiers being proclaimed as art,

but thereafter attracted to its ambivalence as a richer signifier, once sexual or other connotations are perceived. Whichever it may be, a clash of possible new significances is revealed within the potential of these everyday, banal balloons, once they have been processed by the artist in an exaggerated, extravagant, and extreme manner. This repulsion can also be understood as a form of alienation from the now frivolous-grotesque. Thomson explains this alienation as caused by the fact that “something which is familiar and trusted is suddenly made strange and disturbing.”³⁶ The clash experienced between the word “happiness” and the apparent fakeness of its constituents and the lack of signifieds, the clash between the words “the end” and these objects awaiting an event to come, are all potential instigators of a shock—a surprise within the viewer that drives towards an incompatibility, thereby rendering the whole incomprehensible and ambivalent.

Like free expenditure, the grotesque shows an aberration of the ideal form as it is itself formless, nameless, and consequently incomprehensible and unfathomable. This closure from theory—symptomatic of an uncontrollable chaotic nature—creates a lack of fixity, a certain unpredictability. Like explosive free expenditure, the grotesque escapes the hold of boundaries and finds a niche in-between framing systems. Just as frivolity is found by Derrida to reside in the gap and interval, so does Geoffrey Harpham find that “[t]he grotesque occupies a gap, an interval; it is the middle of a narrative of emergent comprehension.”³⁷ Because the grotesque occupies this slippery space and is chaotic, it can, through our interaction with it, bring about a new, creative understanding which

³⁶ Thomson 59.

³⁷ Harpham 15.

causes the old boundaries of knowledge to break. By allowing us to view the promiscuous undersides of frivolity, the grotesque can offer a liberation from norm, from ideals, and from boundaries. It can bring about diversity and creativity; as Harpham writes “[c]onfused things lead the mind to new inventions.”³⁸ These frivolous grotesque objects, that I shall name “space fillers”, may have no intrinsic value, but they fill a void. Instead of there being nothing, there is something, and this unidentifiable, formless thing creates a referent to bring about difference. It disturbs the rational peace of mind to relieve monotony and blankness, and to convey the unexpected, the unknown. Space fillers reflect and disturb our thoughts, as they stimulate and endorse expansion.

Of course space fillers, being free expenditure as well, are achieved at the loss of any value; hierarchically they are ranked at the bottom of the aesthetic ladder. This is why in the series of paintings Celebration, by Jeff Koons, a clash occurs, as everyday trivial, anonymous objects such as celebratory bows, balloons, and trinkets are not only elevated to the status of high art but translated into a gargantuan size (approximately 3 x 5 meters) worthy of worship. In fact, Koons creates an ideal of these objects; he plays with the idea that they are frivolous, and in a sense “non-idealistic”, to reverse the situation and create a portrait of their ideal form. This is achieved by a slick portrayal of the objects; thoroughly realistic, the representations such as Pink Bow (1995-98, fig. 25) are perfectly crisp. But what the viewer is permitted to see in this ideal is a controlled and withheld form of information. For example, although many of the objects are placed on a metallic paper background none reflect the viewers or the real world; it is as if the

³⁸ Harpham 17.

ideal object was placed in a vacuum. Here then is an intrusion of the abnormal into the normal. Although the perfect bow in Pink Bow pretends a total objectification, its context is relentless in throwing back at it a perpetually distorted image of itself. And so, like its theoretical use which is to embellish, decorate, and participate in the masking process of the unknown gift, the bow is unknown to itself. Nor do we as viewers know where the folds of the bow end or finish, and it is even hard to distinguish the boundaries between the paper and the bow.

These distorted reflections are the many interpretations of the object, and we can wonder whether it is the interpretations that combine to form the object, or the object which has been translated into distorted images. Koons presents us with a constant iteration of the object, always out of phase with its origin. Within these portraits of frivolous objects, we lose their essence in the many reflective and deflective cracks of the metallic paper. Frivolity is distorted in Tulips (1995-98, fig. 26) to such a point that we wonder which is the balloon and which is the reflection, or interpretation. In their deformity, the reflections are formless and quasi abstract. Originally these forms were balloons, but they are no longer this as much as they are a mass spilling, bleeding, and oozing colour at us from all expanding directions. These grotesque deformities have so deviated from their origin that they suddenly transform to look like whatever the viewer desires to infuse them with. In Tulips, some of the grotesque reflections look like popping breasts, and others like donut holes. Suddenly we can read the title as implying other than the flowers “tulips”, and conceive of it as a slippage of “two lips”, which is quite congruent with the recessed tips of the balloons forming hairless, colourful female

genitalia. Thus the ideal form is perforated and lowered by a second interpretation, which deforms its ideal state, in the same manner as the metallic paper.

The grotesque can be considered a form of play with the absurd or abnormal, and play here is the to and fro motion located inbetween contradictions in place. By elevating the lowly, ordinary, and cheap decorative object to a high-standing point of admiration, Koons juxtaposes two opposites. Due to their iconic mode of representation these objects, as in the painting Hanging Heart (1995-98, fig. 27), can resemble religious icons. Yet, knowing that they are in fact only frivolous trivialities, they are devoid of any inherent religious *potentia*. As well, the latent sexual potential that can be perceived within these objects completely clashes with their inoffensiveness in the everyday context. There is, as in Munson's The Garden, a sense of suffocation when viewing paintings such as Pink Bow, Tulips, and Hanging Heart; Koons leaves no escape, no depth of space for our eyes, and nowhere else to gaze but at the distorted dimensions of the reflections. As pleasing and fun as these paintings may first appear, they can, after a while, be surprisingly oppressing as they reveal the grotesqueness hidden within the folds of their reflections.

Although the grotesque can cause alienation, it can also give rise to awe and wonder due to a loss of comprehension. As much as the frivolous objects in the context of art may be estranged and void, they can also enchant, mesmerize, and bring about a state of daydream. As Wolfgang Kayser wrote: "the estranged world appears in the

visions of the dreamer or daydreamer or in the twilight of the transitional moments.”³⁹ Frivolousness can induce wonderment and we will further explore this transformation and contradiction mainly through the art of Shelley Miller and theories of Gaston Bachelard.

³⁹ Kayser 186.

Chapter Four

Seen from afar it is not too clear what the temporary installation Pipe Dreams (2001, fig. 28) is made of. Working with the existing surface presented to her, Shelley Miller artfully decorated a side street wall of Montreal city with cake icing.⁴⁰ These decorations look almost like unconscious doodles drawn around existing structures. For example, the two embellished architectural towers seem to have been doodled atop the marks left by past buildings. Although from afar the cake-icing ornaments appear to be almost symmetrical, from up-close we can see how the details multiply and desert the pattern by branching off from it (fig. 29). Integrated to the graffiti, or integrating the graffiti to it, one is not sure exactly what one is faced with. Indeed, from a side angle one can easily mistake the icing to be graffiti. But if one ventures closer, it truly is the installation which has appropriated the graffiti (fig. 30). Staring at the ghostly, puffy ‘tags’, one sees how their clamour has now been atoned, how this act of vandalism seems to have been subdued by a myriad of cake-icing frills and lace which have hemmed and trimmed the edges of the bold dashes of writing. Miller laid thick luscious icing—delicate and fluttery, with beautiful colours—on what many would regard as the shameful underside of the city.

And so, mingled with the dirty brick, Pipe Dreams is almost like an hallucination, a double-take, on what reality offers us. Indeed, we wonder if this door that is highlighted by the icing is not in fact the door to the famous rabbit hole Alice in Wonderland chose to crawl into (fig. 31). Is this a secret doorway? And if so, to what

⁴⁰ This was located at 3675 St. Dominique street, Montreal city, Quebec.

might it lead us? This icing fantasy must indicate that the entrance is amazing and that it leads to some revelation or mystery. Indeed, as I am such an avid icing-lover, this installation upholds, for the briefest of moments, the vision of a wish come true. But before discussing thoughts of dreamscapes and fabulous candy worlds, I will first address the perceptions of the realist viewer. For this person may choose not to enter the fantasy, apprehensively knowing the icing to be inedible. Already aware of the sad truth, they stare at the ensuing disappointment caused by the collapse of the illusion.

This icing sugar can act like a light attracting a night butterfly. In a real-life setting, icing is part of what constitutes the special in the everyday, for it is usually a type of food people will have on special occasions. It is the reward one is granted for eating the cake beneath it. On a wedding cake the icing is the beautifying artifice, and it is what renders a cake attractive. But appealing and tasteful as it may be, cake icing is really but grease and sugar, not what is most desirable for a healthy diet. But the icing is necessary if one wishes to embellish and render attractive the old brown carrot cake. Icing is like a veneer and is part of the same type of artifice as the bows and ribbons we have seen in Balcaen and Koons. Out of context—outside the ordinary—this icing beautifies and embellishes the city, dressing it up as though it were about to hold a festival. Surprised and mesmerized at first, we are taken in by the desire to consume and enter this sugar-plum world. But here we can ask what is the exact necessity of this make-up, and what is it camouflaging? Just as make-up hides defects, the icing here beautifies in order to sidetrack us from glaring at possible problems, such as the causes for the deterioration of this alley wall. Why should there be graffiti in the first place? Is this indicative of a poor

neighbourhood, or of street gangs perhaps? Of course Miller has not erased the wrinkles; the wall has merely been accessorized, not completely transformed. It is more a question of blurring, of no longer being able to tell if this is a safe or a dangerous part of the city; the signals here are mixed, leaving more room for interpretation.

Just as in the grotesque moment, we have been fooled—tricked into desiring an icing that cannot be had as it is literally dirtied by the foul side street. In a moment of surprise, we are made to perceive the architecture of another world, but as the dream dissipates, so will the icing in time grotesquely wither away under heat and rain (figs. 32 and 33). Miller's installation is susceptible to the weather, and with the passing weeks, slowly but surely the icing disintegrates away from its hypnotizing mode. Because the sugar ornaments enter this decrepit state, like the other works in this thesis, Pipe Dreams has the capacity to contradict. The presence of this contradiction reveals an ability in frivolous objects to create distance between the mask and what is masked (or peripheral and centre). This distance then allows for both the mask and the masked to simultaneously seep through. Because of this distance both are individually recognised, even though they appear concurrently. The discordance between the beautiful and the ugly is then but a distance which relates the two together in the same space, and again this allows for a movement or flexibility within the whole which, in this case, is the wall.

We can also perceive this grotesque play of contradicting dualities at work in Before Le Rêve, Le Rêve, and After Le Rêve (figs. 1, 2 and 3). In this series of three photographs Shelley Miller shows us a tableau of a peculiar still life. Here a casino scene

unfolds with its familiar array of pernicious, vicious, and addictive things such as booze, stacks of money, chips, a roulette wheel, packs of cigarettes, and cigars. For some, these may be objects of attraction, recalling certain forms of entertainment, and yet for others they may be objects of damnable conduct. But like the vandalising graffiti tags, two distinct objects have been merged into one—the casino objects have been mimicked, iterated, and yet transformed into whimsical cakes. Again, we are fooled.

What at first seemed like objects of moral temptation have now become objects of physical temptation. In Le Rêve, the photo depicts an actual fantasy where people seem to indulge in gorging themselves on mouthfuls of cakes. Of course in the last photograph of the triptych, After Le Rêve, we witness the carnage that took place and which resulted in an apocalyptic vision of destruction of the beautiful, perfect cakes. Considering the triptych as a whole, again we see this play of a repulsive attraction between this enchanting beauty and its demise—that is, the icing and its crumbling destruction. Now that we have exposed the grotesque aspects perceived by this realist viewer, it would be wise to explore further the desire—the attraction—and to follow Alice down the rabbit hole in order to see what this illusion is.

Miller seduces her viewers on two levels. First, she toys with the represented objects themselves as forms of desire. For example, in Summer Collection (2004, fig. 34) she sculpted designer handbags and purses out of sand. In the work Eye Want You: LV (2003, fig. 35) a coveted Louis Vuitton handbag was copied and made into a cake. These consumable, marketed objects of sometimes great value, and hence great

desirability, are, for the most part, all depicted in a form which is also highly desirable—that of sweets. Of course, not all the objects depicted are desired by everyone, and neither is their form; nevertheless they do at the very least bespeak desire. That the objects depicted may be loathsome, despicable, or simply banal to the viewer is a possibility which may very well clash with that of desiring the icing. But this seductive icing can, in fact, act as a trigger to bring to life the illusory fantasy Miller creates. For she does indeed present us with fantasy-scapes.

Although in this instance Miller uses cakes as a form of art, they are, in a real life setting, objects which contribute to the construction of a special moment in a celebration. In fact, some cakes are almost at the core of the festivities when, for example, chanting and wishing occurs at a birthday celebration. During such events, eating cake is a moment when, like the ceremonial eating of the Eucharist in Catholic ritual, the celebration is taken in and processed through our bodies. They are, in a celebratory context, like a cumulative point, and one in which people may exaggerate and conclude with moments of excess. Cakes contain a moment of excitement, of anticipation almost like a focal point of desire. Hence Miller's cakes and sugar icing can take us back to a memory of celebration.

While it may not be the case for all, for some, at least, it may be that witnessing Shelley Miller's works is like witnessing an old childhood fantasy come to life. This first moment of encounter with Pipe Dreams, with the surprise of finding what seems like a magical castle made entirely of icing, can be like a child's dream come true. To better

understand this concept of the attraction possibly awakened by memories of childhood celebrations, we will turn to Gaston Bachelard who has written on the state of childhood.

In *The Poetics of Reverie* Gaston Bachelard writes of the state of childhood and its possible usage. What is the state of childhood, or “childhood space”, as he otherwise calls it?⁴¹ As he explains, childhood space is located deep within the human psyche. It is a state of being that is permanent within us, deeply embedded, suppressed and forgotten when we are adults. But as adults, it is still possible to use our imagination, often during profound solitude, and seek out this space. Although it may sound far-fetched, since to us childhood is long gone, Bachelard believes time to be something relative to the thinker, and childhood to be, in fact, a state of mind.⁴²

What this childhood state offers us is a place where our memories and our imagination can be most intricately bound and dissolve into one another. In this state, reality is taken and transformed by the imagination, manipulated and interpreted to become a new form of reality.⁴³ I believe children are capable of such mind-altering flexibility because they lack information concerning the world. In their world view there are many gaps that must be filled in order to explain their presence. Therefore, children sometimes create what for us are illogical equations. Hence, due to these gaps of information, it is easier for them to accept the unbelievable and make-believe. Childhood permits this swift back and forth between the everyday lived reality, and the created

⁴¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie* trans. Daniel Russell (New York: Orion Press, 1969) 108.

⁴² Bachelard 114, 130.

⁴³ Bachelard 108.

imaginary reality, but as adults we largely stop and dutifully commit to this unimaginative actuality. Adults will suspend their reality for the duration of a movie, a video game, a book, but, being passive in this imaginary journey, they know all along that it will soon be over—that it was just a movie, just a game, just a book. However, a child sees the world, in Bachelard's opinion, in its true colours, in its pure form, because it is unmitigated by social aspects.⁴⁴ The world is thus more “saturated” in the memories of childhood: “Childhood sees the World illustrated, the world with its original colours, its true colours. The great once upon a time (autrefois), which we relive by dreaming in our memories of childhood is precisely the world of the first time.”⁴⁵ Thus, for Bachelard, the world view which childhood offered was an unmitigated epoch, virgin and untarnished by social rationality, and the emotions at this stage were of a purer quality.⁴⁶

For Bachelard childhood acts as an archetype, a universal quality common to all. “[C]hildhood, in its archetypal quality, is *communicable*....However singular the feature being evoked, if it has the sign of childhood primitiveness, it awakens within us the archetype of childhood.”⁴⁷ This archetype is expressed in the experience of simple joy and happiness, as well as harmony with the universe in general. It is for Bachelard an inherently happy state, evoking a type of happiness which is pure and which always holds the possibility of new beginnings.⁴⁸ Lastly, archetypes remain at the origins of powerful images. In other words, they can be viewed as powerful signifieds. And although the

⁴⁴ Bachelard 117.

⁴⁵ Bachelard 117.

⁴⁶ It may appear as though Gaston Bachelard idealized childhood and generalized it as an innocent stage everyone was granted. I do not think this is the case. I believe it is not necessarily the purity of events but the interpretation a child may make out of any event which is what Bachelard referred to.

⁴⁷ Bachelard 127.

⁴⁸ Bachelard 124.

origins are often lost, as we have drifted away from them with frivolity, they can be triggered again through the viewers' own memories of past interactions with frivolity in an everyday context.

This state of childhood is indeed very close to frivolity. Many of the frivolous objects encountered in the artworks thus far are children's toys. The credulity with which children often accept this world makes it much easier for them to accept the presence of frivolity and its charms. But further, childhood space itself is like that of the frivolous moment. It is a moment of irrationality, and because it creates new beginnings, it is also in expansion. It resides on the border as it is neither completely one reality nor another.

Responding to the archetype of childhood awakens within us this space, which is a place where imagination is without restraint and logic is suspended. To reach this permanence of childhood we must enter a state of reverie, and this condition may be attained, writes Bachelard, by recalling vague memories of childhood. Childhood memories evoke the tales we invented for ourselves. These memories stir enchantment and admiration within us; they bring to the surface the fabulous and incredible. When recalling those memories, through the distance of time and the interpretation of imagination, they become a mixture of illusions. Thus to recall them summons within us a semi dream-like state — that of reverie.

Through memory, childhood is mediated, but it remains more than “the sum of those memories”, since memory is not objective.⁴⁹ Memory enhances the lived reality, focusing on certain feelings or details, and consequently blurring any potential objectivity of past events. In happy memories things become better and are perfected. Bachelard views this subjective process as one that is beautifying. The memory can’t escape imagination when it is relived; accordingly it is altered in some manner, thereby freezing the past sensations. That is why a mere detail may melt those frozen sensations and recall past memories. Even though the memory may be vague, the event not quite precise, the past feelings can be raised to the surface. Therefore, through phenomenological details, we are able to recall the traces of past emotions. Though truly vague, these traces are perfect to induce a dream-like state.

Bachelard’s state of reverie allows for a suspension of our concrete, fully formed, and identified selves. In fact, it can de-temporalize us and transport us to a frontier of “approximate beings; not fully complete as beings”.⁵⁰ This is because the state of reverie is issued out of the state of childhood. To be in a reverie, a dream, we must hark back to that state of childhood within ourselves that allows for the impossible and the imaginative. Additionally, a child’s “I” has not been fully concretized. Thus, in this suspended altered state of daydreaming, we are no longer fully formed nor bounded. Under this condition, we can give life to alternate realities: whatever we invent and

⁴⁹ Bachelard 126.

⁵⁰ Bachelard 111.

dream of in that moment truly exists. The reverie state then, allows for impossibilities to take place: “[r]everie extends history precisely to the limits of the unreal.”⁵¹

Bachelard foresees the possibility that signifiers may trigger the childhood dream space: “[w]ith an image which is not ours, sometimes with a very singular image, we are called to dream in depth.”⁵² Miller uses this archetypical childhood to stir within us certain details which may trigger perhaps vague memories. Icing, so often found on birthday cakes, can be such a triggering detail. The idea of the taste of sweetness, or that of celebration and cake-feasting can all be small details that touch hazy memories from our young lives. To call to mind these sensations can potentially sway us into glimpsing our past. Personally, I find Pipe Dreams highly evocative of the story of “Hansel and Gretel”. Particularly the moment when they encounter the house made of sweets:

and when they went up close to it they saw that the cottage was made of bread and cakes, and the window-panes were of clear sugar. ‘We will go in there,’ said Hansel, ‘and have a glorious feast. I will eat a piece of the roof, and you can eat the window. Will they not be sweet?’ So Hansel reached up and broke a piece of the roof, in order to see how it tasted; while Gretel stepped up to the window and began to bite it.⁵³

This is not the only children’s story in which architecture and sweets are intermingled. There is also the famous *Nutcracker* in which Clara encounters at the end of her journey a fabulous castle also made of delicious sweets of all sorts, and in more modern times there is the story of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl. All three of these children’s tales propose either edible architecture or tremendous feasting.

⁵¹ Bachelard 122.

⁵² Bachelard 125.

⁵³ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Hansel and Gretel,” The Classic Fairy Tales eds. Iona Opie and Peter Opie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) 242.

There are a number of reasons why feasting fantasies are appealing to children, but the main point is that those tales resonate in Shelley Miller's work and consequently can appeal and arouse the childhood state within adults.

These works can procure us an escape from the rational world, they can enchant and inspire childhood fantasies, lifting us into fabulous creations of our own. As Bachelard puts it: "[i]n days of happiness the world is edible. And when the great odors which were preparing feasts return to me in memory, it seems to me, Baudelarian that I was, that 'I eat memories!'"⁵⁴ The dream theme in Miller's work is quite obvious considering the way in which these evocative qualities reverberate in the very titles: Pipe Dreams, Before Le Rêve, Le Rêve, and After Le Rêve. As well, certain suggestive sentences such as "What do you dream in?" and "I dream in Prada" are incorporated in the work Summer Collection. Clearly, within these works the dream state is called into being. We can enter this dreamscape because, first of all, we are susceptible to the childhood state which has been triggered within in us by potent mnemonic details. Once within this state of alternate being, we can better accept and be swayed by the surreal presence of icing on a side street wall, or of people with handfuls of grotesque cakes, or again of magical purses made of sand. Of course, here, as much as we are 'de-temporalized' and transported within our inner selves, the ensuing disappointment shows us the exit sign out of this state. Pipe Dreams, in its inefficiency to truly supply us with edible parcels of sugar, reveals itself to be only that—pipe dreams. In After Le Rêve, we can attest to the aftermath of the dream state. In Summer Collection, the purses dissolve

⁵⁴ Bachelard 141.

into water as the sand is washed away with the tide. In the end, Miller's installations are ungraspable—like water they trickle down our hands, un-seizable. The sugar melts and washes off, the cakes are eaten, the sand dissipates; all evaporate like an enchantment at the stroke of midnight.

Dreams in Miller's work are not referring only to night dreams composed of fabulous surrealist scenes; they can also be daydreams or wishful thinking. Furthermore, they can also be understood as goals one wishes to attain, or things one desires, hopes, *dreams* to obtain. Like Freud's, this is a form of dreaming which is loaded with desire. In the fantasy state—the daydream state—all is possible, thus desires are fulfilled. The house in "Hansel and Gretel" is the result of their wishful thinking, the attainment of their desire, the answer to their hunger. In this dreamscape of desire, consumption of any kind is attainable and fulfilled. Dreams, desires, wishes, consumption: all of these themes merge in Miller's casino triptych. Here the casino speaks of a capitalist form of goods consumption, and displays the attainment and fulfillment of so many hopeful players through the absorption of the cakes. But as the cakes are eaten and consumed, by the same token all the hopes and illusions disappear within the consumers' bellies. This impermanent dream state is a vision which fluctuates and flickers—in this case from hope to disappointment—just like what constitutes the frivolous. Ever so ephemeral and peripheral, frivolity's objects such as icing, garnishing, and cakes, are only of the moment. The dream state they can potentially induce withers away just as they distance themselves into the gap that defines them. Between solid states of certitude and affirmations of being resides the dream state and childhood space. In this frontier

landscape memories run wild and expand, fantasies rise and grotesqueness is often present. There, frivolity takes its slippery foothold. In the space of a day-dream, one offers oneself the indulgence of frivolity.

The dream and childhood states merge with the arousal of desire to form an instance of wonder. In fact, Bachelard thinks that the childhood archetype is unveiled under the sign of marvel.⁵⁵ This is because in the childhood state nothing is determined, and there is this impression that anything and everything is still possible. Growing older, one is made aware of reality's capabilities and possible outcomes. I would say that what is wondrous for a child is the hope for the multiple possibilities held for the future. In fantasy narratives, wonder is witness to miracles made of dreams and wishes come true, and again, wonder gapes at the possibilities of the dream state that are engaged.

And so now we enter a state of wonder, but what is wonder proper? According to R.W. Hepburn, wonder has a life-enhancing character and its attitude is essentially other-acknowledging and non-utilitarian.⁵⁶ Wonder marks our failure to grasp; it is broken knowledge, and knowledge proper displaces it.⁵⁷ Wonder is also directed towards something else—towards something to which it is exterior and other. Wonder could even be at ourselves, but it would be felt towards something that is out of character. Since in the Bachelardian dream state the self is dissolved, everything resides outside the bound and determined self—even ourselves. We thus experience an unusual form of self; hence

⁵⁵ Bachelard 127.

⁵⁶ R.W. Hepburn, 'Wonder' and Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighbouring Fields (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1984) 144.

⁵⁷ Hepburn 136.

it is easy to wonder at our new liberation in this dream state. But if, as mentioned above, it is our lack of understanding which causes wonder, then can we ever know the object of wonder? I doubt that we can know with logic and reason the object of wonder. Even when we have knowledge and understanding of what caused the wondrous object to be, still we wonder at the presence of this object of contention. Perhaps this is because a habit has not yet been made out of our encounters with it. And yet it may simply be that the sheer presence of its being, its gratuitous existence, is reason enough for it being wondrous. Perhaps it is because in that instance the wondrous is experienced in a dream state where reason is forlorn and irrelevant.

There is a type of wonder which I believe is the one that is experienced in the dream state and towards frivolity as well, if frivolity, through detail, does indeed induce this dream state. Existential wonder is a type Hepburn describes as persisting, and which knowledge cannot displace, as it is wonder at the existence of everything.⁵⁸ I believe this is the wonder experienced at the boundaries of logic and reason, when we are in the space of free expenditure and where life moves without frames or structure. This wonder is the one at the Derridian gap, at this constant distance. It is the wonder experienced towards the frivolity of life's unreasonable expansion. Because the frivolous object is often distanced from its significance, and consequently becomes unknowable, wonder at its presence may be experienced. Although we may know how it was literally produced, the reason for its being is marvellous since the frivolous is other. To not be afraid of not knowing and to simply wonder and stare at the unknowable is to face the abstraction of

⁵⁸ Hepburn 140.

life's free expenditure; it is to accept the chaotic level of things. It is also to accept this state of the uninterpretable and the irresolvable. I believe there is even a contemplative act that accompanies wonder: a contemplation of the resistance of life to be suppressed and ultimately contained. Many of the works discussed in this thesis ask the viewer to simply contemplate objects. For example, Koons's paintings in the *Celebration* series present us with objects by themselves with no other object with which to interact. Thus they ask to be admired and contemplated.

In the same manner we contemplate the unlikely apparition of Shelley Miller's sugar ornaments on a brick wall. Upon encountering them, they induce a dream state in which the viewer is privy to a true vision, a wondrous city seems to creep in through the bricks. Between worlds, between being and not being, this architecture lures and seduces with the promise of a wondrous and impossible other world. In this wonder state, an ideal is contemplated. Like Saint John's apocalyptic ideal of the eternal Jerusalem, this architecture beautifies, embellishes, charms with promises of fantasies to be fulfilled. In this dream state, as we tilt our heads upwards to gaze at this marvellous object of contemplation, suddenly the empty frivolous detail becomes capable of all; even of momentarily transforming into the divinely fulfilling. In the casino triptych we are shown this promise being fulfilled; all desires are nourished, absorbed by taking in, by ingesting the divinely ephemeral. But of course, as we have previously seen, an ideal contains and determines a course of action, and in a state of free expenditure and grotesqueness, no such ideal can be sustained. Free expenditure will expand and thereby rid itself of the restraining ideal; it will outgrow it. Grotesqueness, in its debasing

attitude of contradictions, bears too much internal incoherence to support such a frame. That is why the dream state of frivolity is not permanent. Although Bachelard claims the childhood space to be a permanent universal form of being embedded in all of us, it cannot be permanently accessed through the dream space. Not with frivolity involved. The desires which combine to form a hopeful dream in the midst of frivolity are destroyed by its ephemeral passage. The moment dissolves. This is why Hansel and Gretel do not infinitely gorge themselves on the candy house, and it is also why a wicked witch appears to terminate this vision and transform the wonderful into the grotesquely scary. This is also why Saint John's eternal Jerusalem is only previewed as a momentary vision, and is not, in fact, a perfect reality we are all aware of. The object of frivolous wonder is held somewhat at bay; far from our reach, it is closed to our holding it still. Although it flickers, and oscillates between the ideal and the eternally disappointing, it still succeeds in spreading rays of hope which stimulate our desires.

Like the celebration, the wondrous-frivolous passes and is mourned. In its grotesque appearance it may be like a nightmare; in its wondrous enchantment it may be a missed daydream. I now propose we leave the arena of the artwork to come back to a setting of the everyday and consider the moment of celebration. All the works we have seen are somehow linked—in an everyday context—to instances of celebration. I would like to consider this last 'scape' as one which simmers with frivolity.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have maintained that frivolousness revealed in everyday objects caused these to be peripheral, superfluous, excessive, unsubstantial, without essence, and irrational. Henceforth, all of the artworks under study have been chosen because I thought they exuded frivolity. Frivolity, under different manipulations, has been revealed in fact as a form of free expenditure, which, because of its nature, can cause grotesqueness or wonder. With regards to the art of Munson I explained that free expenditure was expressed and that once witnessed, could in turn cause us to experience a grotesque moment. With Balcaen and Koons I exposed the possibility of grotesqueness within frivolity by bringing to light the contradictions at play within their work. As much as there was surprise and enchantment regarding the naivety and gayness of the work, there was also an accompanying disappointment. With Shelley Miller's work, we further explored this enchantment to understand that it is partly created through wonder, which in turn is triggered by a childhood state that permits us to be in a reverie.

All of these states—the state of free expenditure, the state of grotesqueness, the state of childhood, the state of reverie—all awaken strong “vivid sensations of disgust, of shock, of delight and so on...” which cause us to experience a Lefebvrian “moment”.⁵⁹ As we shall see, these works clearly emphasize the importance of frivolous objects to the construction of a celebration.

⁵⁹ Highmore 115-116.

In the work of the four artists discussed here, celebration is often evoked and pointed out. Jeff Koons chose to entitle his series with the very word “celebration”, and many of the objects that are depicted in these still lifes are those found during a party of some kind. Shelley Miller uses cake icing as well as cakes which are, more often than not, eaten during a celebration. Jo-Anne Balcaen’s balloons, ribbons, and bows are the same objects as those used to decorate a celebrated event. As well, the manner in which she disposes of the objects, such as on the wall, in an arch, in a decorative pattern, is similar to that of a decorated location for hosting a celebration. Portia Munson could perhaps be considered the one who uses objects which are less directly linked to celebration *per se*. But the manner in which she uses them is excessive, just like the excess taking place during celebration; it is also chaotic, as in The Garden, and Pink Mound, and it is free of boundaries, just as in a festival. Every time I have described an encounter with these art works, it has been done using a phenomenological description of a moment taking place.

More than once I have stated that it is during a celebratory context that we can encounter such frivolity. I would now like to explore some particular features of the everyday so as to better understand the celebration that takes place within it, thereby acknowledging this prominent location for frivolity.

Although the everyday can be perceived as overbearingly dominant and homogenized, it can also, as it is for Michel de Certeau, be heterogeneous. As de Certeau writes: “The heterogeneity of culture asserts itself, not just through the inventive

juxtapositions that people make, but through the stubborn insistence of the body, of childhood memories and cultural histories.”⁶⁰ This heterogeneity is constituted of people’s creative response to the everyday, thus allowing for personal difference and appropriation of it. Personal difference is established, amongst other strategies, by the creation of meaningful individual relationships between people and objects. For de Certeau, this appropriative act perforates the everyday with difference, or otherness, and consequently establishes a resistance to cultural homogenization.⁶¹ This resistance acts as a potential within the everyday, and although the negative conditions of its repetitive state are perceived, its redemption is always at hand. In other words, the everyday is already extraordinary as it contains the power to make “home” out of conformity, out of what is offered to us.⁶² The question then becomes how do we create such meaningful relationships with objects.

Objects containing frivolous elements help us to identify and personalize the everyday when we encounter them in a series of interactions taking place in time and space. It is the occasion and context in which a person interacts with an object that sets in motion the creation of a deeper relationship between person and object. I believe frivolousness not only identifies and singularizes through the difference it affords, but it also creates what Henri Lefebvre calls ‘moments’. For Lefebvre,

‘moments’ are those instances of intense experience in everyday life that provide an immanent critique of the everyday: they are moments of vivid sensations of disgust, of shock, of delight and so on, which although fleeting, provide a

⁶⁰ Highmore 148.

⁶¹ Highmore 148.

⁶² Highmore 148.

promise of the possibility of a different daily life, while at the same time puncturing the continuum of the present.⁶³

The resistance of de Certeau's everyday is congruent with Henri Lefebvre's understanding of the creation of the 'moment', except that for de Certeau resistance is the fibre of the everyday, whereas the 'moment' for Lefebvre is something more rarefied. In fact, the 'moment' could be understood as describing an intense occurrence of what takes place during a meaningful relationship in the everyday.

Moments can be quite personal and occur at any point, but one particular type of context that initializes moments is *la fête*. For Lefebvre, the celebratory moment—the festival, and in its ultimate form, the carnival—are instances that are part of the everyday calendar, but ones that give rise to intense experiences. During such periods, vivid sensations are stirred up due to the suspension of the everyday routine order; hence, they are times which may easily lead to excess and abnormal behaviour, thereby demarcating them from the known. Even though it is only passing and temporary, in its most intense form the carnival can suspend rules, limits, values, and regulations, and may even turn them upside down. The infringement of the boundaries which regulate our behaviours, movements, and actions in the everyday, results in revealing alternate possibilities to the everyday, and can thus transform it. During *la fête*, creativity is called to install a moment that will afford an awareness of intense experience. The extra-ordinariness which the moment of *la fête* can grant helps to create distinction in the homogenised everyday, but is also part of the chaotic state of that same everyday.

⁶³ Highmore 115-116.

If frivolous objects singularize and identify, then they can contribute to the resistance of (and to) the everyday. By acknowledging that a resistance to the everyday is built up with the help of objects, we might also consider that moments can be constructed out of objects of an especially frivolous nature. Through the creation of moments, I believe frivolous objects can also help create a consciousness of the here and now, an awareness which, when brought into the everyday, can lead to a possibility of choice and change. The more we experience moments—the more we are engaged in deeper and more meaningful interpretations of the everyday—the more conscious we become of the here and now. We acquire a consciousness of the moment because the latter furnishes us with a differentiation, an irregularity from our usual selves. It is when the irregularity is noticed that we are made aware that we are experiencing at all. Once we become self aware, once we introspect our response to the moment, we become conscious of our surroundings. To be conscious of the here and now does not preclude a state of reverie. Neither does it forbid irrationality and imagination to expand. It simply causes what is lived no longer to be mundane; the feelings liberate us from numbness, and commit whatever was lived to memory. To have consciousness of the present moment constitutes a body of memories for us, and it affords us with an awareness of the possibilities that lie before us. Consequently, being aware of the here and now stops automatic responses, permits us to analyse situations and decide the course of actions according to a personalized interpretation of the everyday. Moments in the structure of the everyday appear as differentiating marks that create gaps and intervals in a uniform texture. Moments are the instances in which we develop alternate responses to and new

abilities regarding circumstances. They also help us to deviate from established patterns of repetition and to improve ourselves upon facing adversity. Frivolousness in the everyday is an encounter with the irregular—the unreasonable that is fleeting—and also with detail and the almost unremarkable. It is truly that added extraneousness which enhances its peripheries to render them special. Frivolous objects of the everyday are the elements which grant the special to the ordinary. Upon their encounter in a celebration they may help us to identify the moment as being out of the ordinary, and if we are encountering them for a second time, they can act as memory triggers. They can thus, upon reacquaintance, establish a relationship with us that permits us to cross the boundaries of the rational, to permeate into the irrationality of imagination, and ultimately to create and expand beyond expectations. If celebration, as we have seen, is truly riddled with ‘moments’, then the presence of frivolity triggers the experience of moments. Celebration is simply the preferred location for frivolity—it is its playground, of sorts.

In this thesis I have tried to dress a frame that would hold back frivolity from drifting away, and in this endeavor I am doomed to fail, for it is a quest counter to frivolity’s very disembodied nature. It is understandable that Jacques Derrida wrote “frivolity defies all archeology, condemns it, we could say, to frivolity.”⁶⁴ To name and subject frivolity to a structure is impossible since its nature is to constantly run away from any referent. So instead, I chose to expose the possible affinities frivolity may have

⁶⁴ Derrida 119.

with other similar states. I believe that within the states we have discussed, frivolity is not a necessary agent, but it is certainly a common ingredient.

Characteristic to all of these states is a loss; a loss of reason, a loss of boundaries, a loss of usefulness, and a loss of logic. It could be said that Derrida's interval or gap is where expenditure occurs, and the loss of origin is in fact the loss of reason. Consequently, within all of these states there is growth; this is a place where imagination can truly develop, and because it is irrational there is no restraint on the multiplicity of possibilities and alternatives. In such a chaotic universe all that is known is destabilized, and the character of each element is shown to be capable of otherness, hence nothing can be framed. Objects, such as frivolous ones, because they reside on borders and belong to the category of neither-nor, are unknowable, and since they drift from their origin, they cannot possess a known essence—they cannot be essentialised. Thus, when in contact with rationality, such objects destabilize the known boundaries. Free expenditure breaks boundaries in its expansion; the gap or interval created becomes the space in between those boundaries which creates distance. The grotesque, filled as it is with contradictions, can only be something which destabilizes our logic—it defies, in a way, the known. The state of childhood fully accepts illogical interpretations. It is a state which allows for the unreasonable and makes room for the unknown. In the state of reverie, we indulge ourselves in the frivolity of dwelling on the inessential. There we can navigate all that our hearts desire without the rebuke of a determined behavior. In all of these states, the useless is prized—there is room here for the inessential, the banal, and the trivial. Between the known and the unknown, the useful and the useless, between all

the oppositions and contradictions—the hidden and the apparent, the peripheral and the central—there is a distance and the ensuing reverberations and oscillations of movement. This movement is the constant production of knowledge, the edifice of understanding is incessantly bombarded by destabilizing agents which seek to deconstruct. The gap, expansion, grotesqueness, reverie, celebration—all want to be free of restraints; all wish for order to be destabilized. Conversely, through the loss there also occurs a gain in creation and innovation. That is why we are sometimes compelled to experience the inessential; to desire the useless for reasons beyond ideal and immediate resourceful survival. Sometimes we may experience the need for a frivolous state.

Portia Munson, Jo-Anne Balcaen, Jeff Koons, and Shelley Miller all indulge in that need. They capture in their works moments of life's expansion through its detailing. Frivolity is a detail infused with time as it affords differentiation. Through the many emotions it can evoke, it is capable of creating moments of deep experience—negative or positive—which act as time markers. Completely silly and innocuous—yet it produces detail. The detailing of life is that which creates both structure and chaos. It is through details that we bestow distinction, that we categorize; but it is also because of these details that there is so much expansion, that there is a multiplicity of life. Although life iterates, it is never quite the same from one repetition to another—there are always those slight details that introduce a difference and create a distorted movement away from the origin. Frivolity, being the extraneous detail, resides in this movement; in the back and forth play between the layers of comprehension and dissolution.

If we ever experience a desire for frivolity, a need and a compulsion to admire it, it is because we like to gaze at the incomprehensible flow of life. If one finds beauty in what are trifling details, it is because in the inspection of those details one finds a moment untamed by the boundaries of the known. In that instant, one will find a gap—a lapse between the known essence, which is ever-so useful and rational, and the unknown. In that tiny detail of a pink bow rigidity ceases, for at that location there is a flexibility of structures. Like a ray of hope, the reflections of the bow present a myriad of new possibilities and alternate states. This bow destabilizes us from our rigid stance and lifts us into a soft dewy reverie.

If there is a need for the seemingly useless, that is because we need to be free from the bindings of use. In that instance, frivolity is then actually useful in that it is free of use. In everyday objects, frivolity flickers and only barely seeps through; gently, and without dominating, it can bring about chaos and intertwine it with order; thus a certain balance is reached. The unexpected bundle of icing in the form of a rose breaks down what one expected. Suddenly, one tastes the sweetness of the icing and remembers how different it is from other tastes. Plunged into a childhood daydream, one imagines diving into an immense sea of icing; but into that reverie slips the restraint of logic. As much as one has created the boundless, now there is material to be understood. Reason and understanding are called on to write about and to comprehend the frivolous, only to be once again seduced by its indeterminate state.

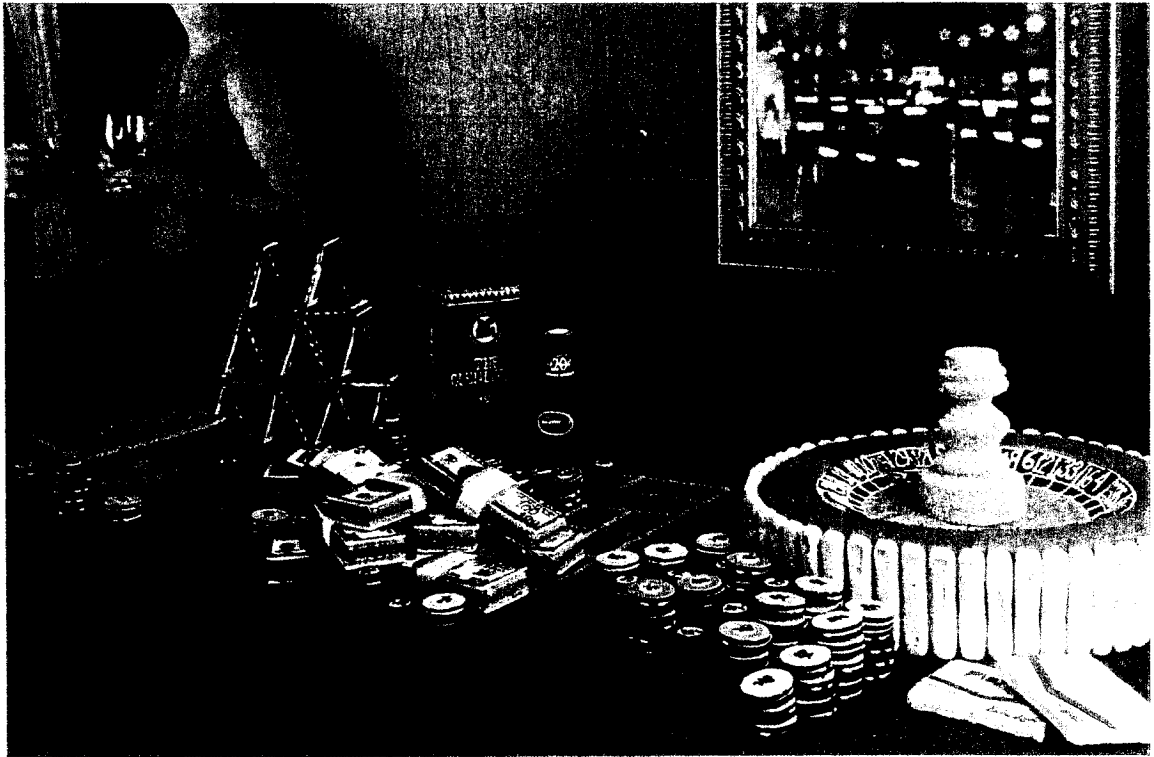


Figure 1. Shelley Miller, Before Le Rêve, 2005.



Figure 2. Shelley Miller, Le Rêve, 2005.



Figure 3. Shelley Miller, After Le Rêve, 2005.



Figure 4. Portia Munson, Pink Mound, 2002.

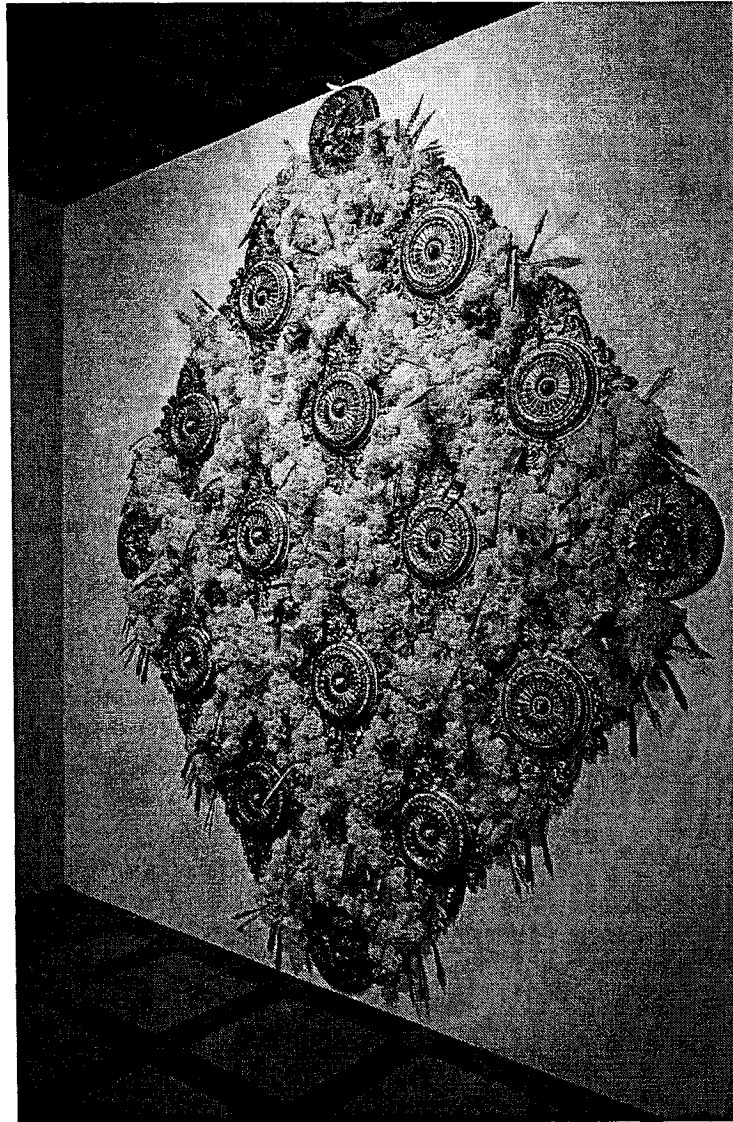


Figure 5. Jo-Anne Balcaen, Grotesque, 2000.



Figure 6. Boivin Family Photo Album, Birthday Party, 1980.

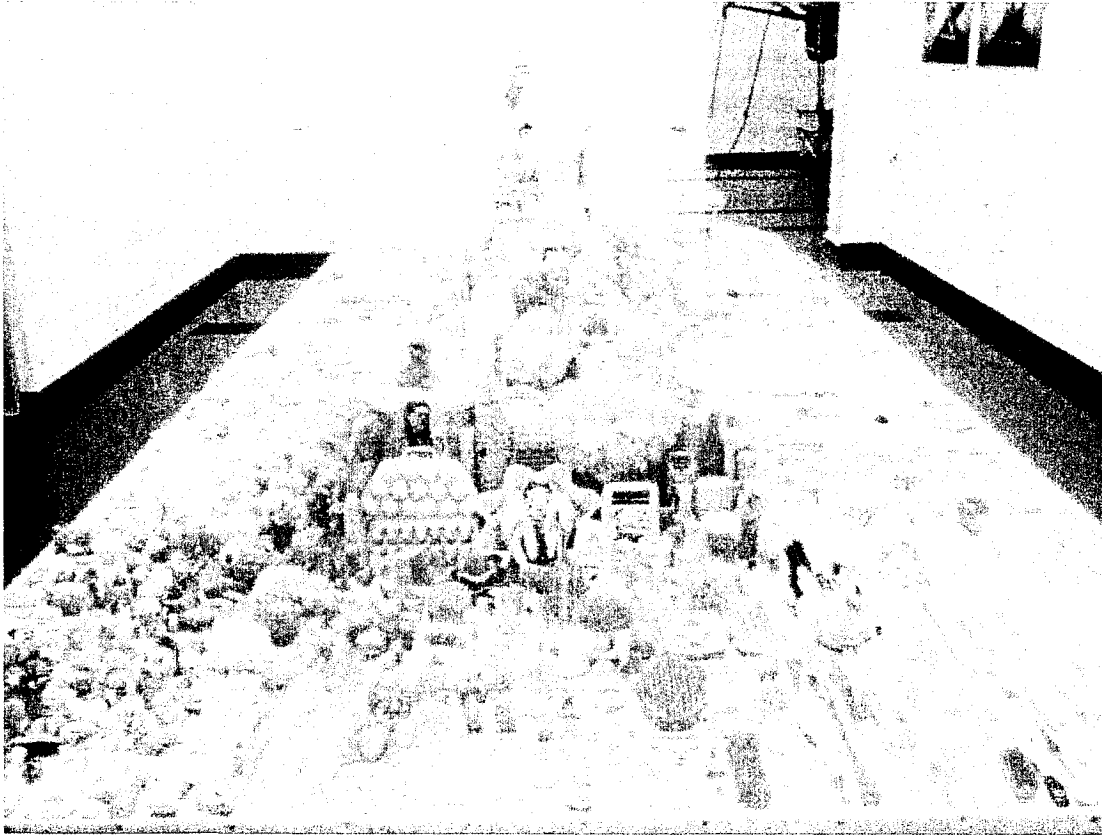


Figure 7. Portia Munson, Pink Project Table, 1994.



Figure 8. Portia Munson, detail of Pink Project Table, 1994.

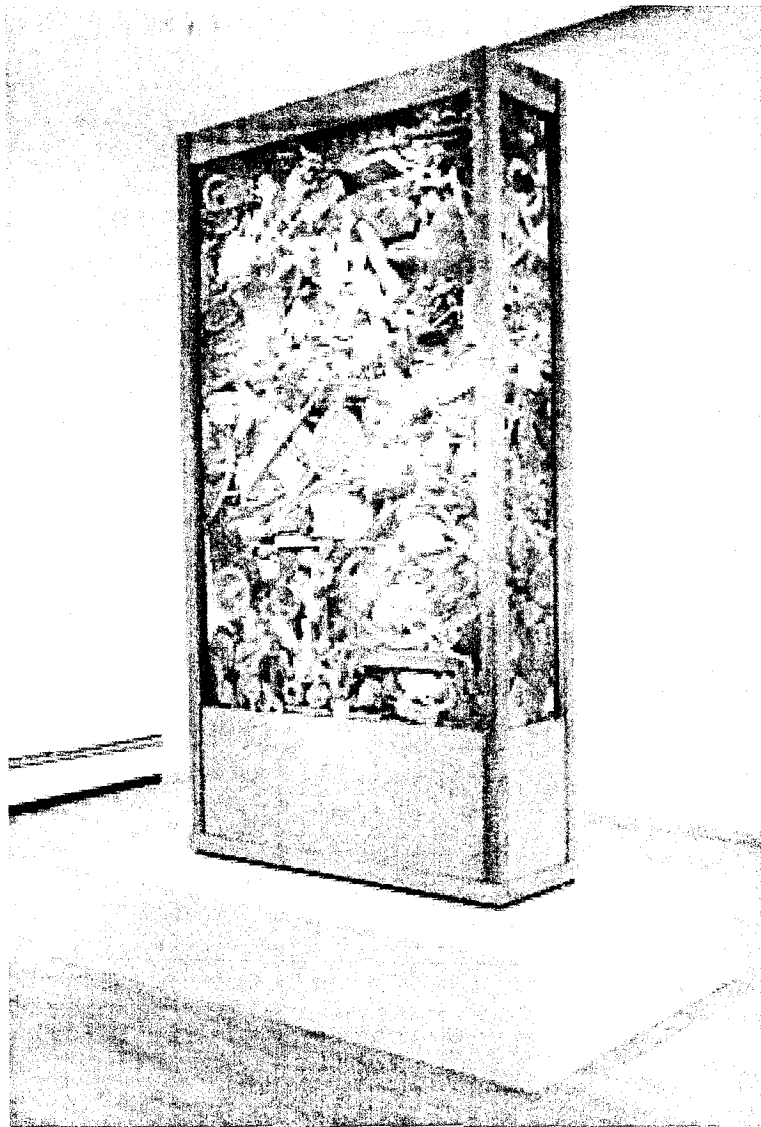


Figure 9. Portia Munson, Pink Project (case 2), 1994.



Figure 10. Portia Munson, Pink Project Vitrines, 1994.

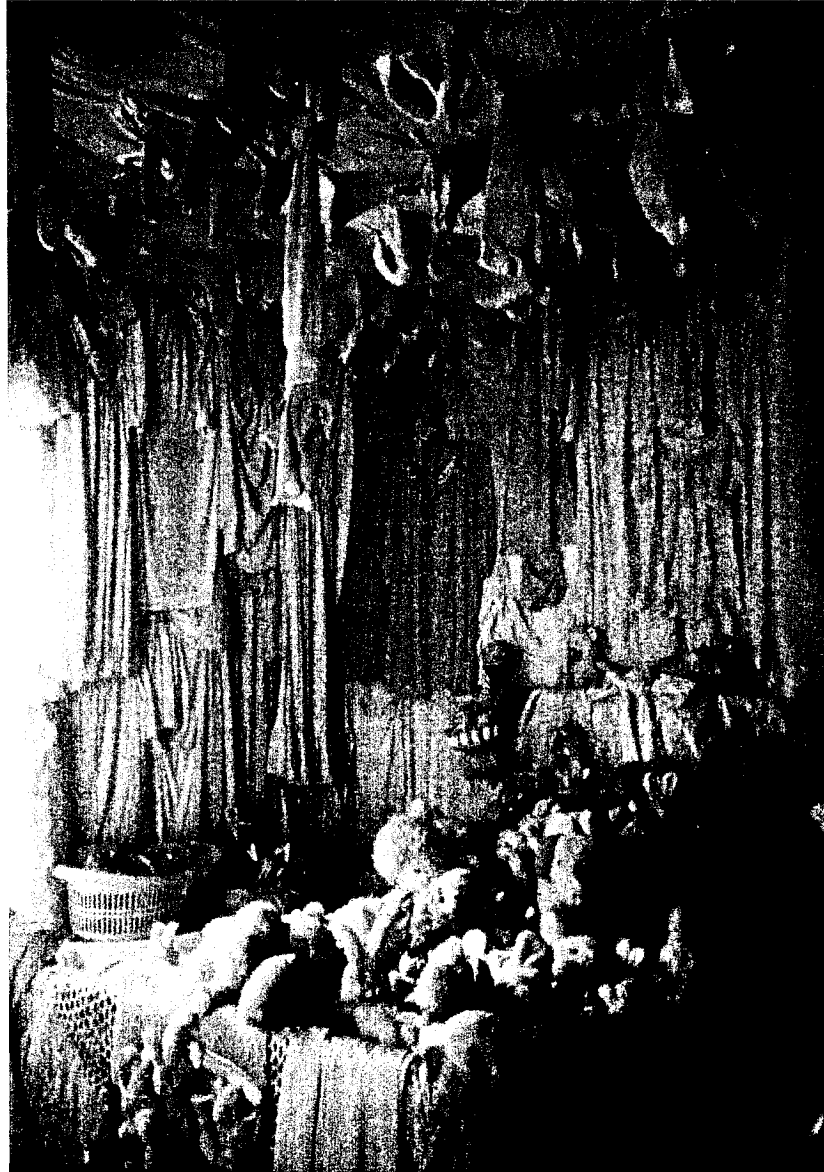


Figure 11. Portia Munson, Pink Project Bedroom, 1996.



Figure 12. Portia Munson, The Garden, 1996.

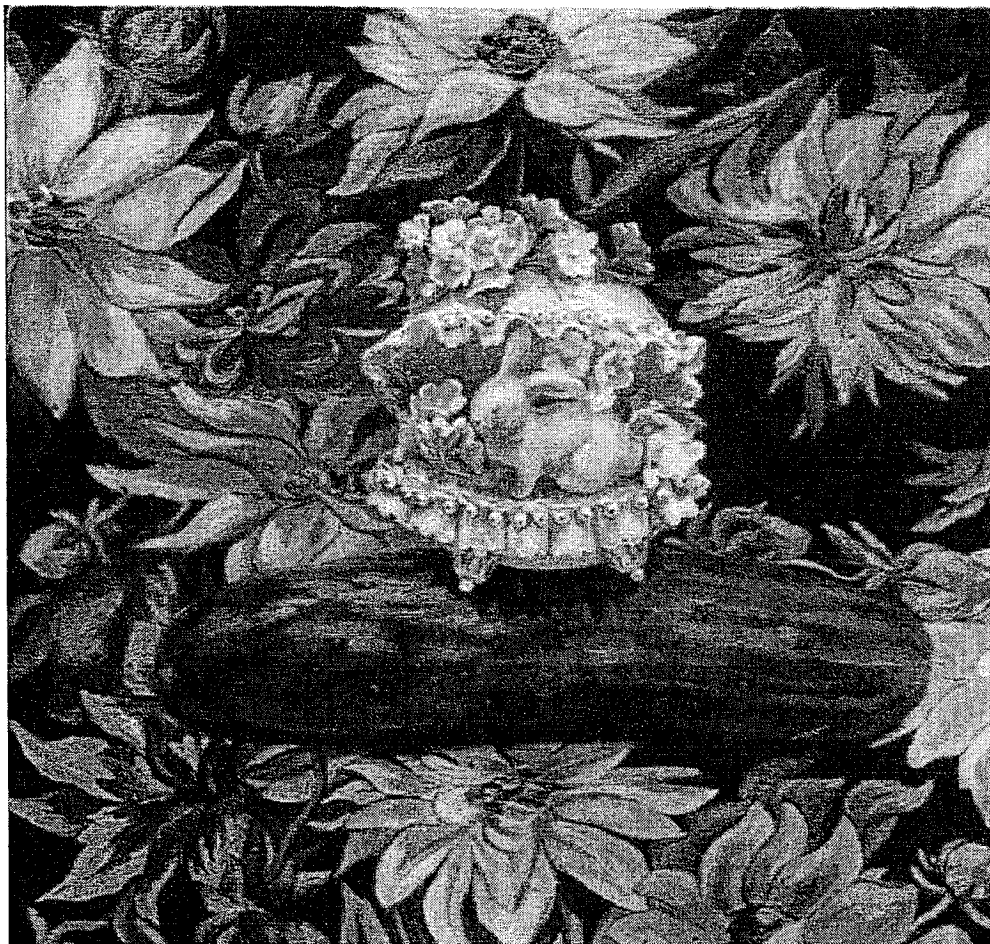


Figure 13. Portia Munson, Pat The Bunny, 1994.

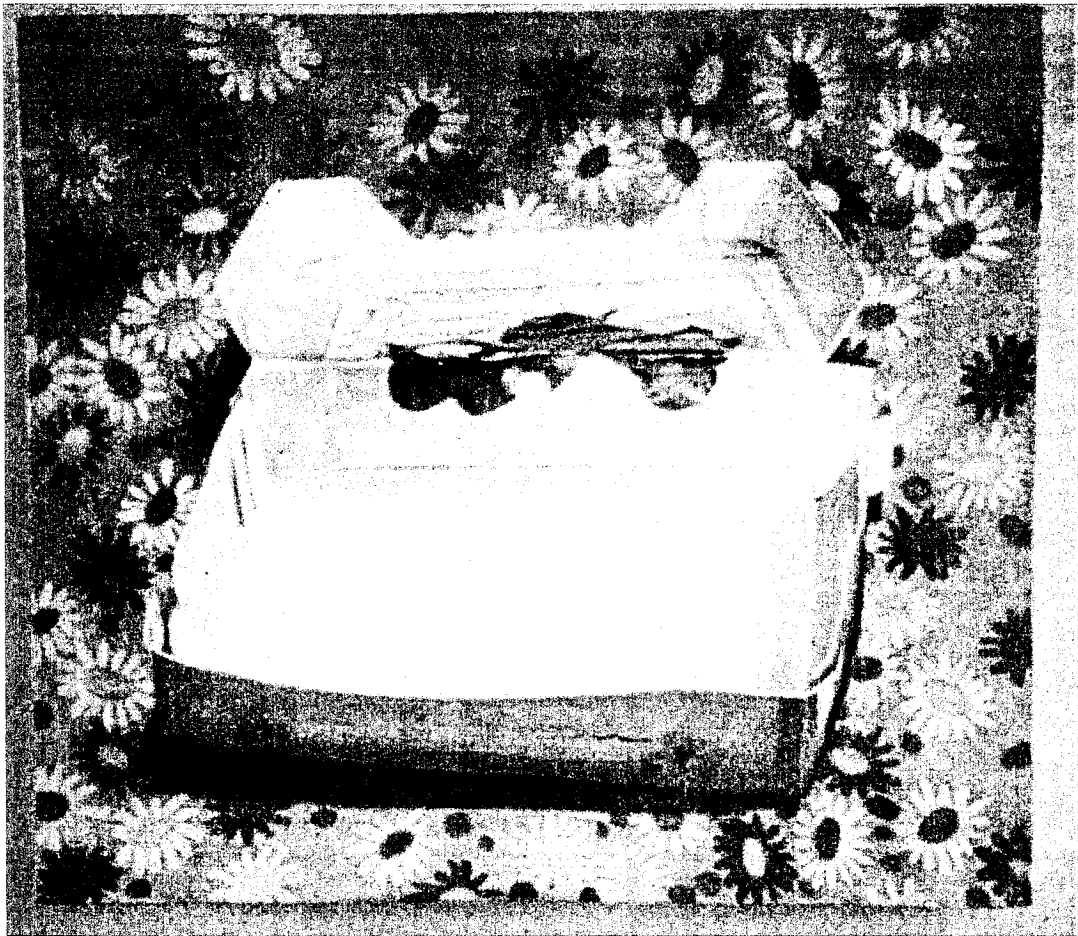


Figure 14. Portia Munson, Pink Donuts, 1996.

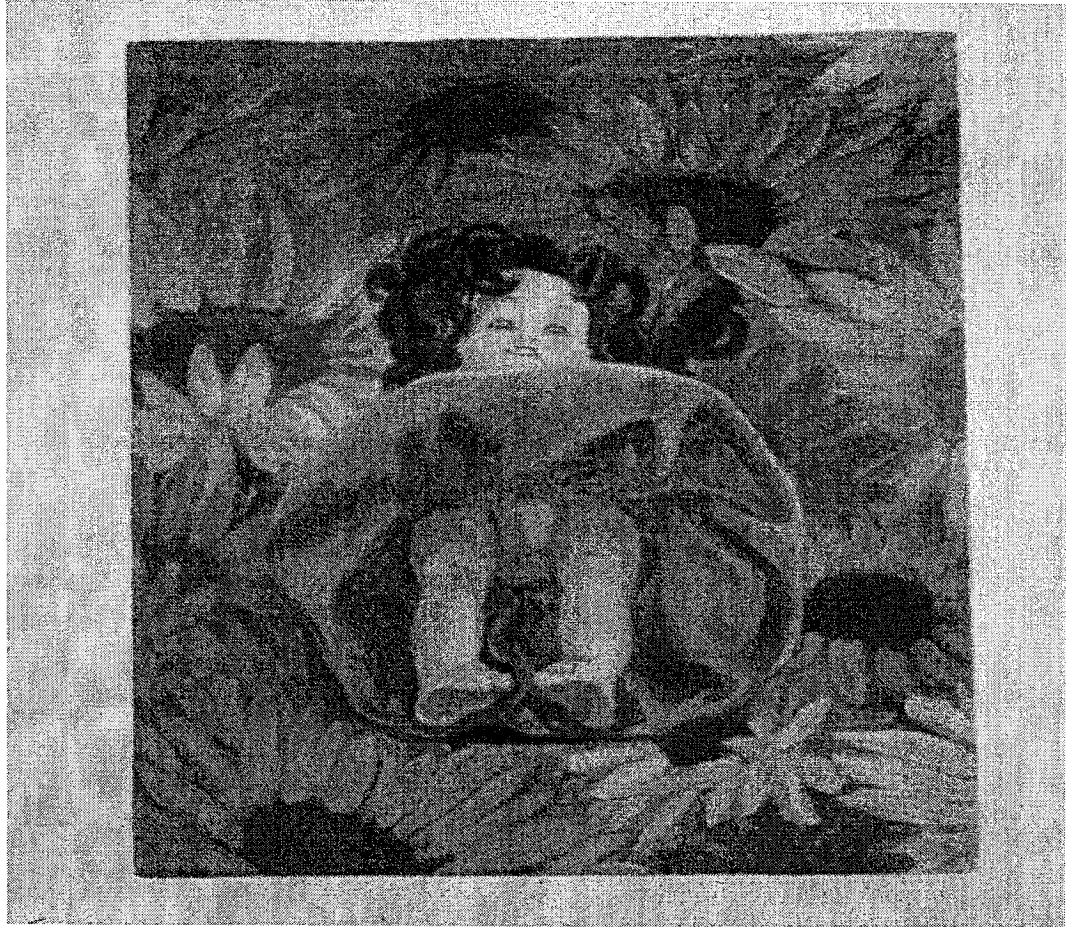


Figure 15. Portia Munson, Untitled 2, 1998.

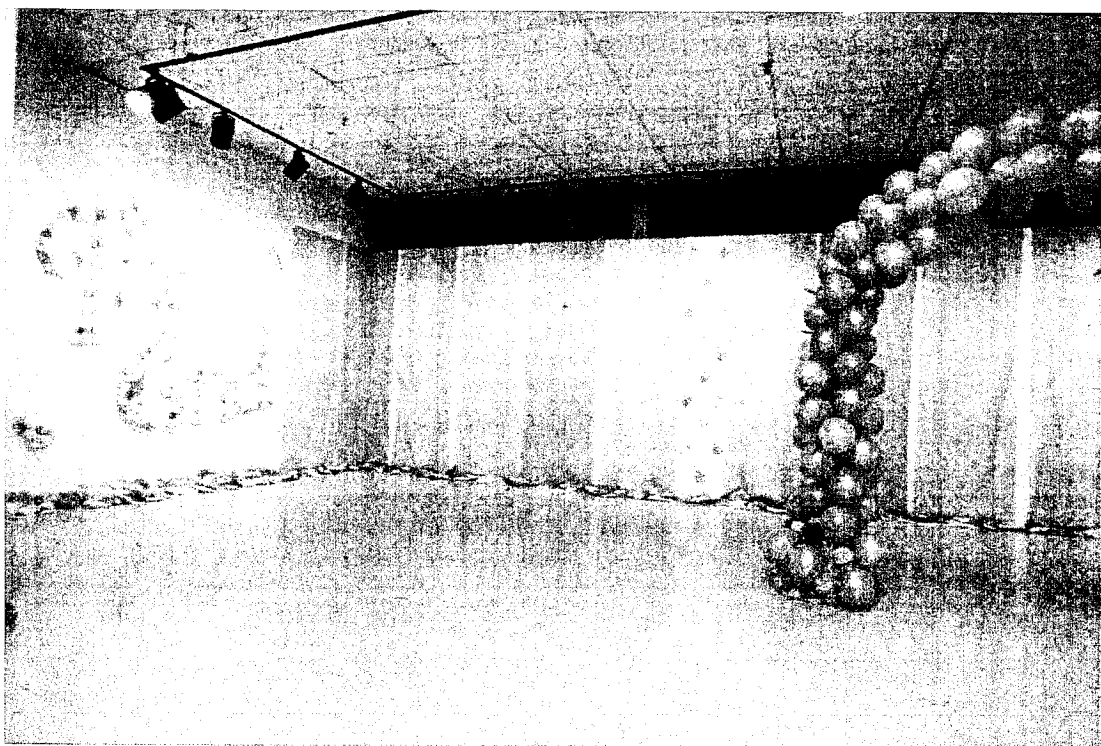


Figure 16. Jo-Anne Balcaen, The End, 2000.



Figure 17. Jo-Anne Balcaen, Happiness, 1999.

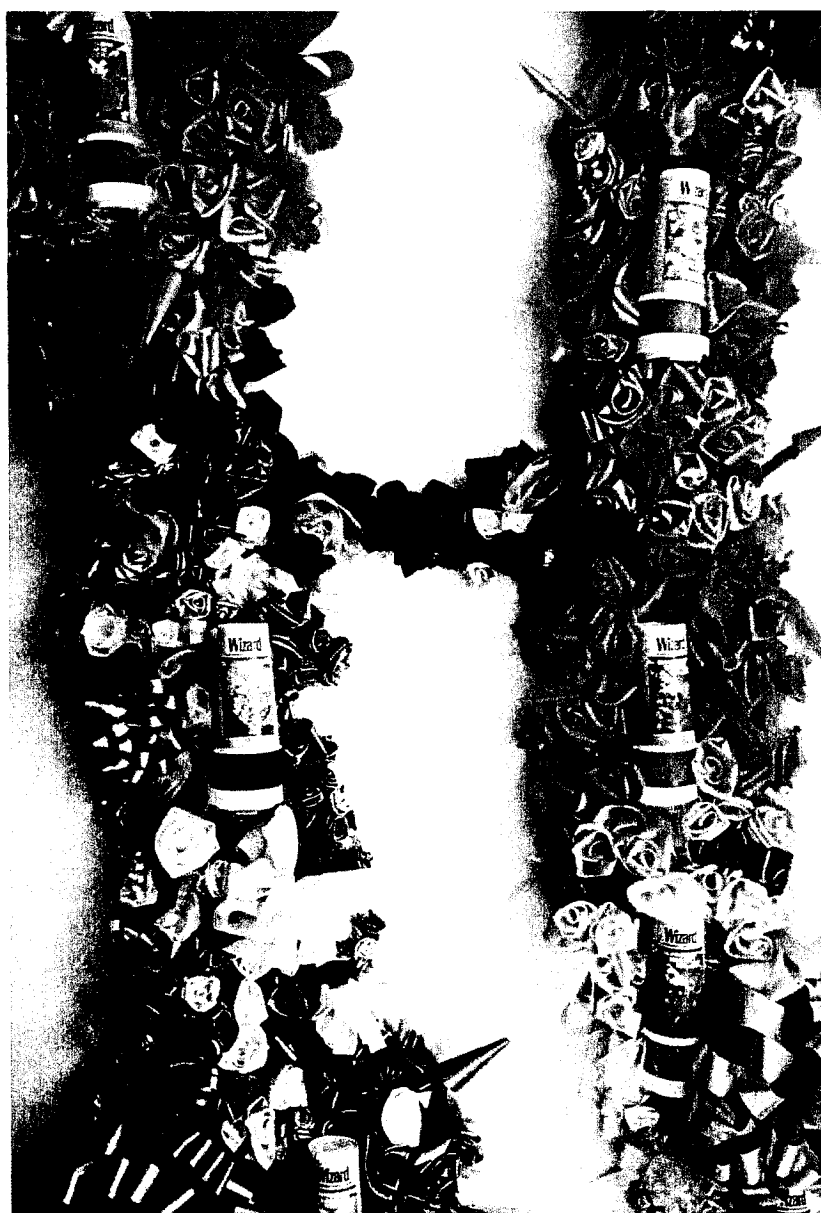


Figure 18. Jo-Anne Balcaen, detail of Happiness, 1999.



Figure 19. Jo-Anne Balcaen, detail of The End, 2000.

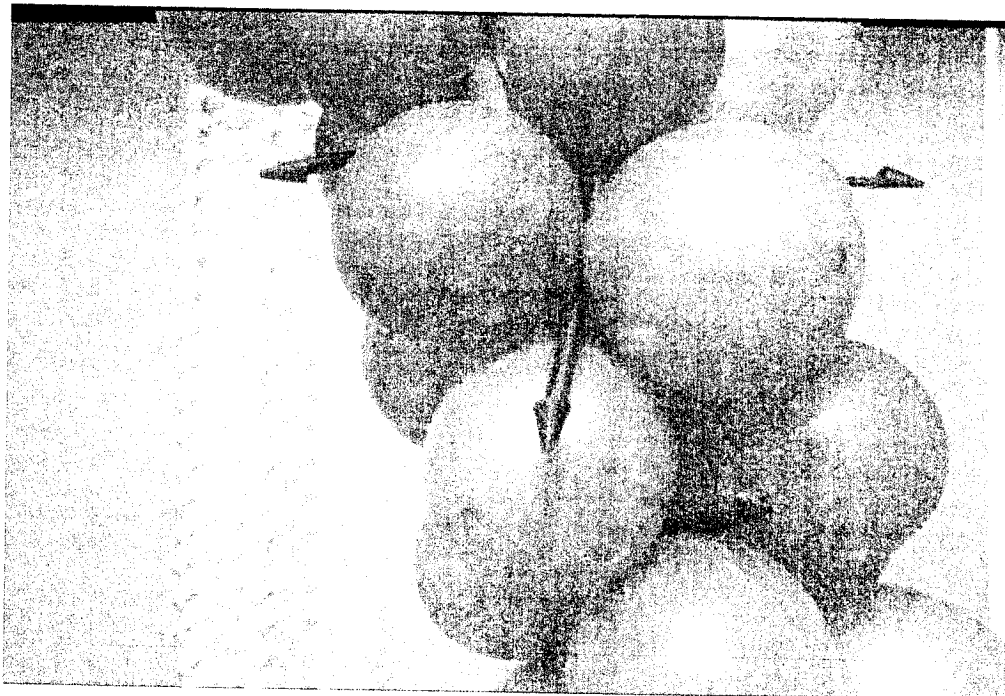


Figure 20. Jo-Anne Balcaen, detail of The End, 2000.

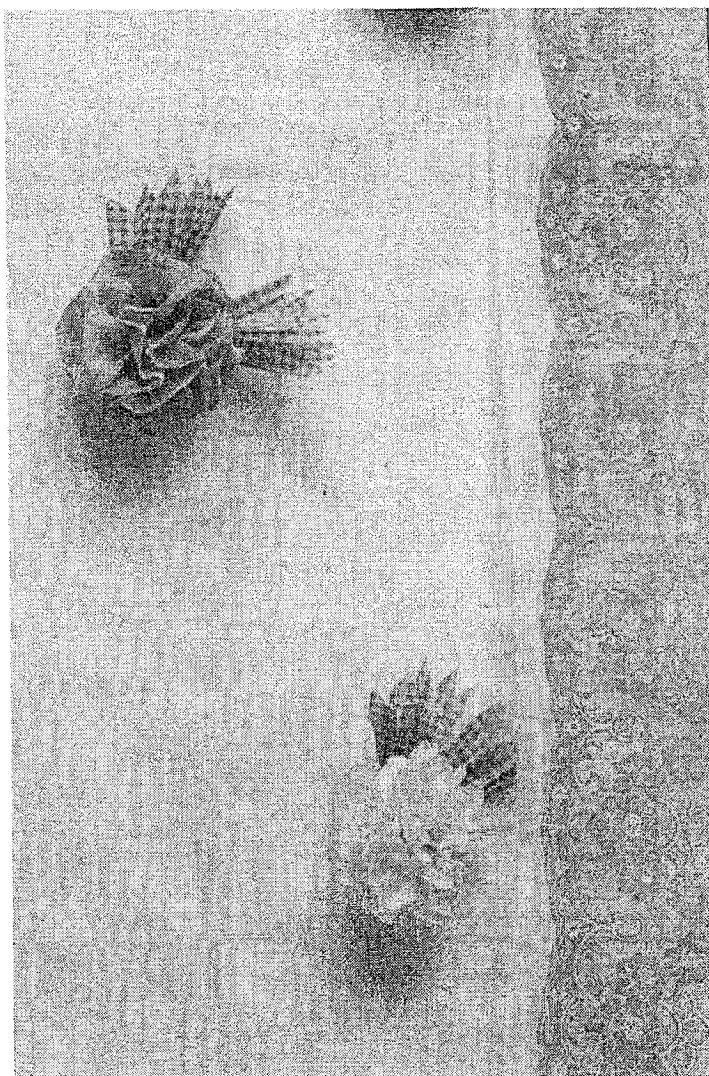


Figure 21. Jo-Anne Balcaen, detail of The End, 2000.

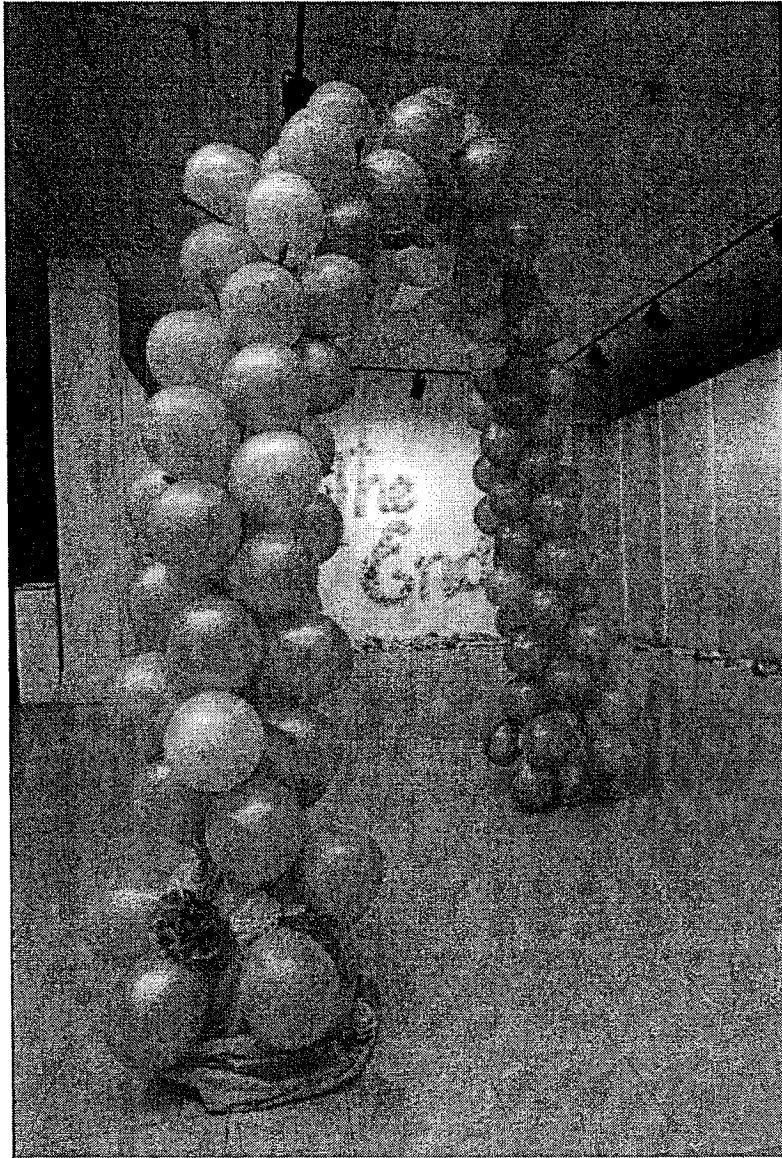


Figure 22. Jo-Anne Balcaen, detail of The End, 2000.



Figure 23. Jo-Anne Balcaen, detail of Grotesque, 2000.

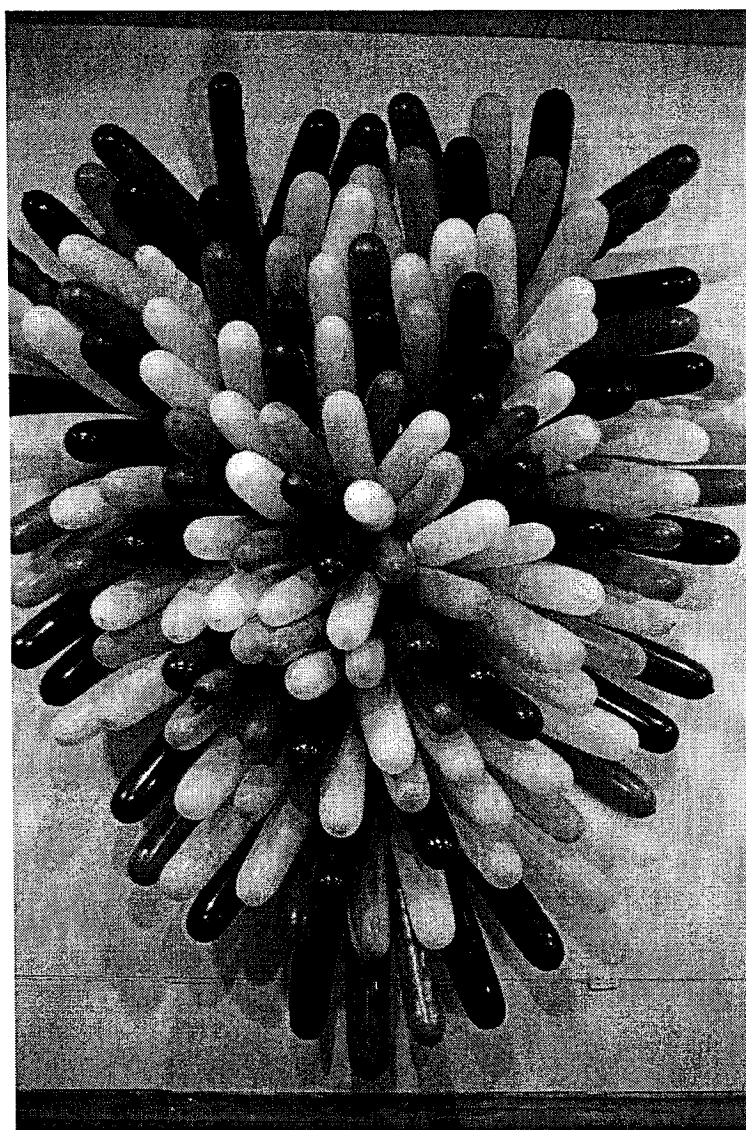


Figure 24. Jo-Anne Balcaen, Blow, 2001.



Figure 25. Jeff Koons, Pink Bow, 1995-98.

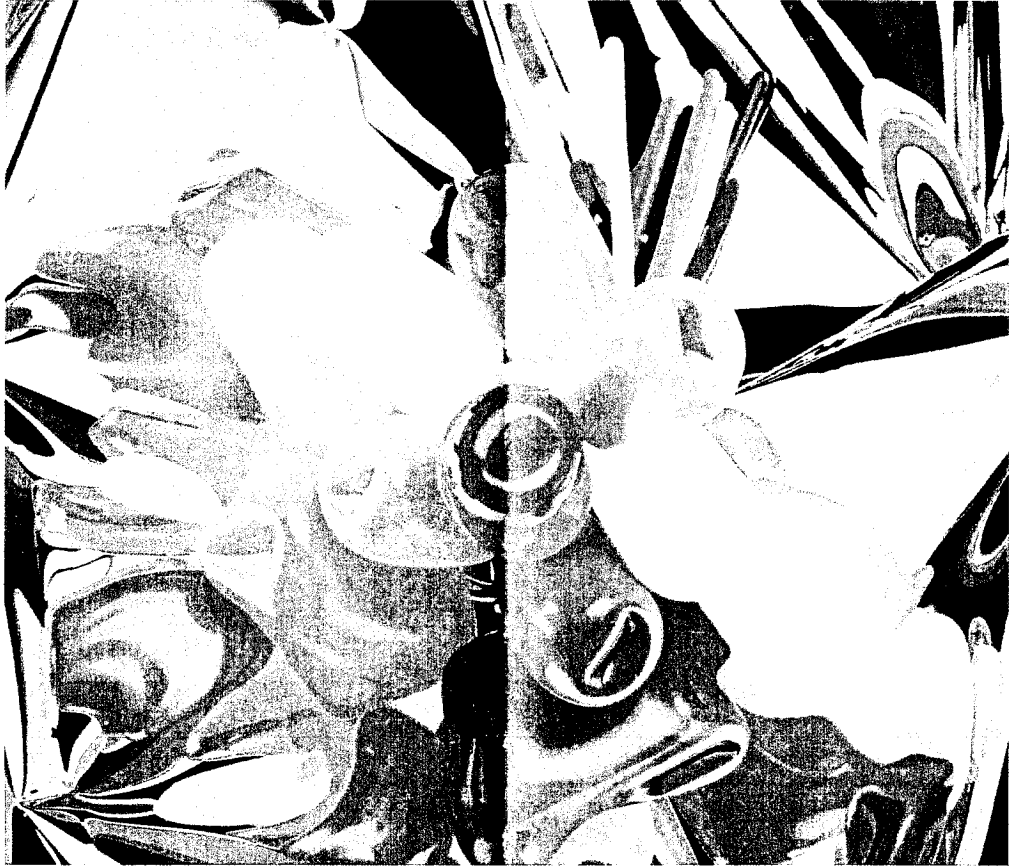


Figure 26. Jeff Koons, Tulips, 1995-98.

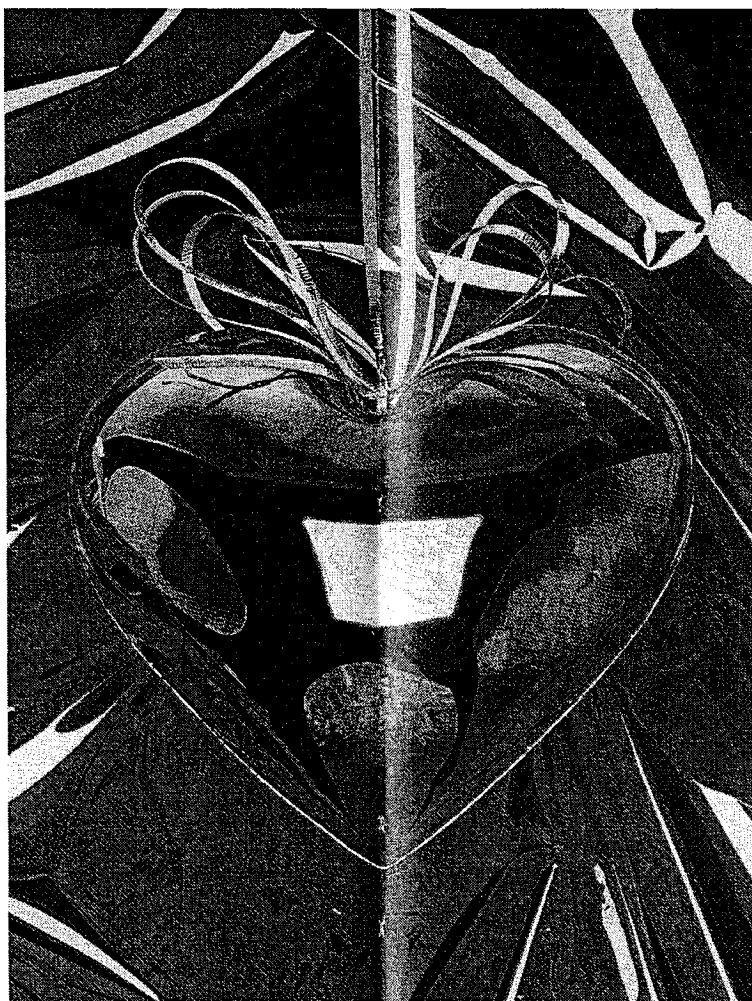


Figure 27. Jeff Koons, Hanging Heart, 1995-98.

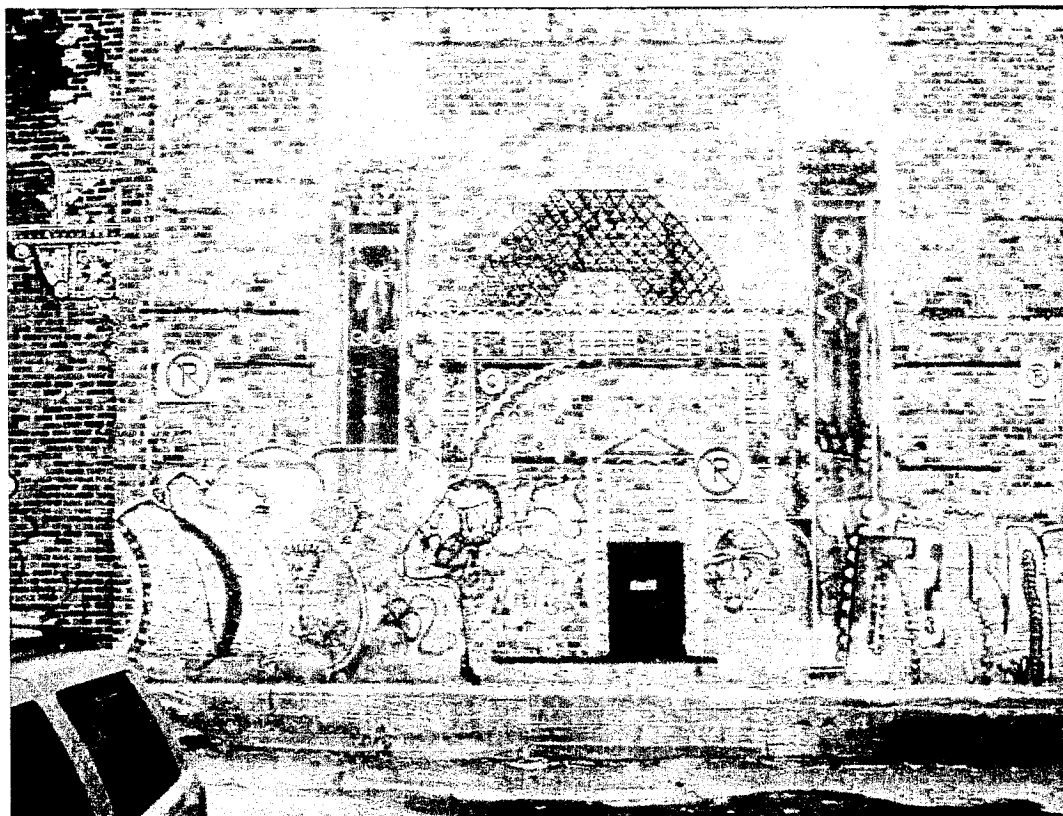


Figure 28. Shelley Miller, Pipe Dreams, 2001.



Figure 29. Shelley Miller, detail of Pipe Dreams, 2001.



Figure 30. Shelley Miller, detail of tags in Pipe Dreams, 2001.

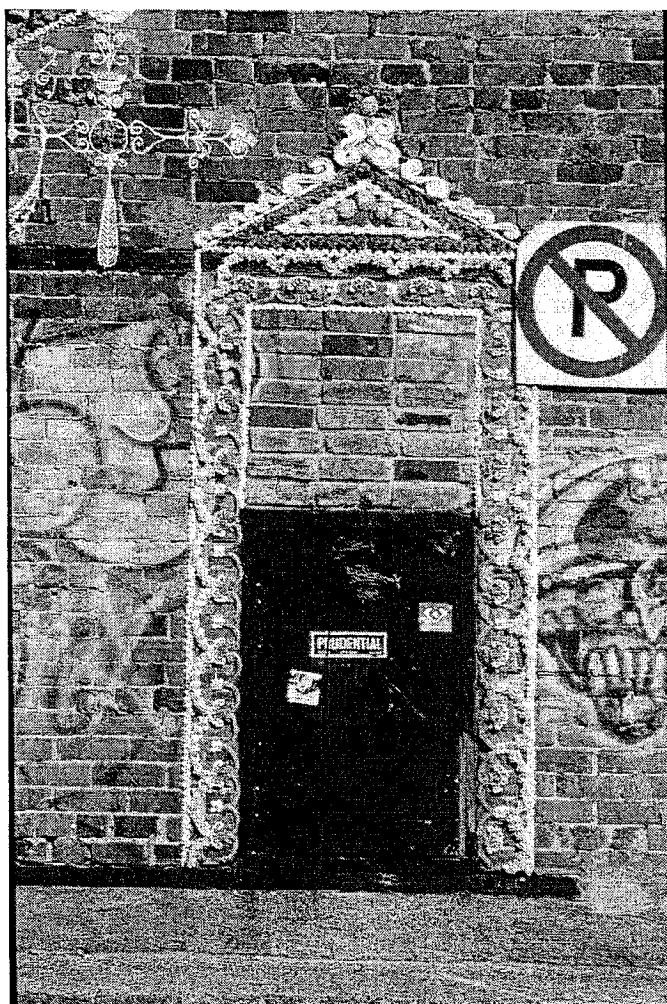


Figure 31. Shelley Miller, detail of door in Pipe Dreams, 2001.



Figure 32. Shelley Miller, detail of withering in Pipe Dreams, 2001.



Figure 33. Shelley Miller, detail of withering in Pipe Dreams, 2001.

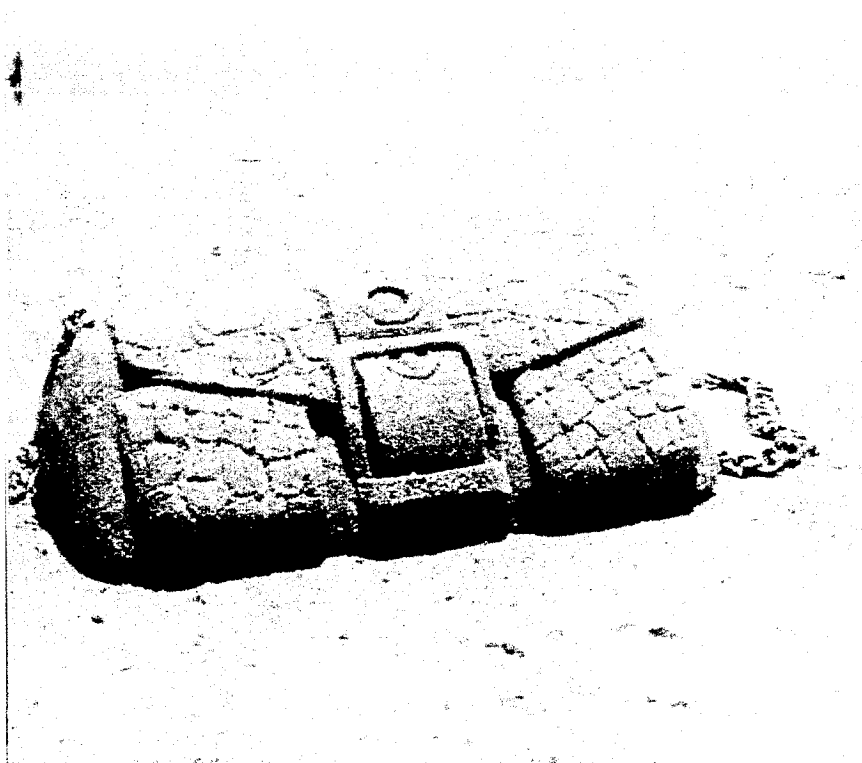


Figure 34. Shelley Miller, "Prada" in Summer Collection, 2004, page 5.



Figure 35. Shelley Miller, Eye Want You: LV, 2003.

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