

## Constance Lowe: *Striking Likeness*

By **BILL ARNING**

We marvel at the deep red sunset and are entranced by the foaminess of the surf. That the red is caused by toxic fumes and the foam by pollutants can be briefly forgotten as man made catastrophes masquerade as, or perhaps actually become, natural wonders. For both wonders and disasters are defined by one's perspective and the explosive beauty of a nebula is seen as a tranquil, deep-sky jewel only from our safe distance. And what is true, of the beautiful, destructive clouds of the nebula is equally true of a building on fire.

For every either/or we encounter, we can also mutter "both" and "neither" as our response if our perspective allows for the possibility. Constance Lowe's installation operates in that place of our consciousness where dialectical and holistic thinking collide and fight to dominate our (re)construction of the world within our heads. Each and every piece in the installation gains in meaning when we consider its pedagogical potential through bodily, sensual and symbolic means to help us see past the seeming chasm that separates the two modes of thought and mentally reach a new unity.

Take Lowe's conspicuous employment of butterflies, unquestionably, a difficult image for a visual artist. Their history of Valentine's over-sweetness and decorative value makes of them an overt seasoning. Their over-weighted symbolism, like a top-heavy kayak, can be flipped into its perverse opposite, as Lowe has done here.

They appear mutated, strangely opalescent silver-white creatures who feed from what appears to be an irradiated puddle, the color of antifreeze. They appear to be in a reproductive frenzy, flirting and copulating. Of course, in nature that urge is tied to immanent death and the genetically programmed need to pass on genes, so these mating

rituals are also a *danse macabre*. They lay jewel-like eggs but what will emerge from the cocoons could just as easily be flesh-eating monsters as nectar drinking sprites.

Or not. With their metallic gleam they could be low-tech prototypes for robotic, remote-controlled butterflies, designed to be used as spies—complete with belly mounted video cams. Or the giant stalactite could be a natural resource that drops chartreuse nectar for its own evolutionary reasons, and the pale fragile-winged insects could be a rare species that evolved to live in pitch black caves and hence have no reason for pigmentation. I know such albino things exist—I watch the nature channel when my insomnia flares up—and while I have not seen cave dwelling butterflies they must exist on earth somewhere.

And who says this installation is intended to be set on earth anyway?

That Lowe is calling attention to her deliberate ambiguities as the subject-in-itself is made clear in her wall mounted shelf pieces, which appear to be kits. If we are indeed in nature, perhaps each is an entomologist kit to collect insect samples. The tools we see however are not jars and tweezers, but black and powder-white mirrors, an either/or again, a juxtaposition of opposites. We can specify the opposition as positive/negative, reason/emotion, good/bad, or, more wisely dispense with superfluous language and take these as embodiments of all such duos. For in fact, these objects are not opposites, as both extremes occlude rather than facilitate the mirrors' desired ability to be looked through. We see neither the room nor ourselves. Arranged with a deliberateness that conjures high math or the laboratory and equipped with handles, the objects induce a strong urge to use them. We know the task is at hand, but what we need—instruction sheets—is forever denied.

Mirrors are symbols of clarity, and of evanescence and the ability to change. They continue reflecting without recording, endlessly in flux as per the local stimulus. So Lowe's anti-mirrors should perhaps be

understood as models of an *idée-fixe*, fossilized mental constructs which obstruct what they should facilitate. In their powderywhiteness they still continue to seduce us, as every mirror does, since in order for the ossification process that produces the *idée-fixe* to commence, there must once have been a startlingly original, irresistible idea that we simply could not repeat enough. In their black/white-ness these are clearly easy-to-repeat dialectal constructs, and our frustrated desire to use them functions as a lesson in their archaic uselessness.

The next piece in this quixotic puzzle is a mural, which slowly offers itself up as an image of an ice-covered, burnt-out building. Ruins are always beautiful and this is no exception. We know that the habitat that is burned out is human. It is based on an archival photo but we do not know, and the artist does not tell us if anyone lost a life in the fire, but surely this event was tragic for someone. But in the world that Lowe has constructed here, that doesn't matter much, because everything already contains its opposite, and every object or event here is simultaneously an end and a beginning. It is only our viewpoint, or mode of interpretation, that can vary.

So, we are left with a desire for a multiplication of potential perspectives, which Lowe has, in one sense, already fulfilled. We are, upon entering the installation, doubled. As we walk in we become aware of a human presence among us. On the wall behind us hovers a coat, an official, antique-looking garment that reminds us of the expedition leader. As an unoccupied garment it is ghostly, and if we choose to regard her as another being we may, but if she is not a double of us, she is a ghost of another—a visitor to this cavern from centuries past.

Human nature's evolutionary advantage was our desire to use our intelligence to engage the world beyond mere sustenance, shelter and reproduction. Dialectical thinking was, and is, necessary in that evolution, but then we reach the limits of that mode of thinking. We add to that mode the reconciliation of opposites, and realize that everything

contains, implies, and proves that it is also its opposite. To stand inside Lowe's installation, we know that we are inside the head of some traveler through the end of the millennia. We slowly, grudgingly acknowledge that the head we are in just might be our own.

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