

GALERIE LELONG

528 West 26th Street New York, NY 10001

T 212.315.0470 F 212.262.0624

www.galerielelong.com

13 rue de Téhéran 75008 Paris

www.galerie-lelong.com

The New York Times

October 6, 1998

By JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI

Steadily Weaving Toward Her Goal; Petah Coyne's Art Strategy Has Its Scary Moments

Petah Coyne, a small woman clad in an oversize T-shirt, stood in the center of Galerie Lelong on West 57th Street one recent day and started to explain her latest artistic odyssey. "Two years ago, I had the hair and the animals," she said.

Now she was installing 15 intricate sculptures that look different from anything she has done in the past. In some works, horsehair is woven and tied like Irish lace and nestled with antique stuffed birds, beetles and foxes. In others, statues of the Madonna are shrouded in rivers of horsehair braids.

The show, which opened on Sept. 11 and runs through Oct. 16, is called "Fairy Tales," and Ms. Coyne's layered tableaux are meant to be dreamy and mystical, evoking spirituality and afterlife. A wall hanging that yokes two birds in flight, for example, is about her older brother, who died a few years ago. "We're going in different directions, but we're still connected," she said.

It all seems so coherent now. But as Ms. Coyne talks about the creative process, which is, after all, a much-studied but still elusive subject, it is clear that while she was going through it, it remained a mystery even to her. None of her work is really planned, though Ms. Coyne tries to peer into her own mind by changing materials every few years.

"It's like having the rug pulled out from under me," she said. "It makes me focus on what I'm trying to say."

Ms. Coyne, who is 45 and married, is the daughter of a military father whose family moved many times before settling in Dayton, Ohio. Her mother, a writer, strove to give her children experiences as well as education. Ms. Coyne was not permitted to watch television, for example, but was taken to live both among the Amish and in the south of France for summers.

Ever the artist, Ms. Coyne was home-schooled as a teen-ager so she would have more time for art. Today she acknowledges the influence of artists like Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois, and feels apart from the prevailing contemporary art movements that deal with political themes, the body and disease.

For her current exhibition, Ms. Coyne simply began working. There was no moment of inspiration. She arrived at these sculptures intuitively, by trial and error, in a two-year labor-intensive process that eventually involved 30 helpers, mostly unpaid interns.

In hindsight, she tells how she was influenced subconsciously by a 17th-century tale she learned on a fellowship in Japan, by her upbringing as a Catholic and by a visit to Guanajuato, Mexico, where she saw how the hair on the "macabre mummies" there grew after death.

In the past, she has worked with sticks, mud, black sand, dead fish and car parts. Last time around, she decided to work with wax, assembling dense chandelierlike sculptures adorned with satin ribbons, artificial flowers and stuffed birds, after a friend sent her a box of candles.

This time, the hair also came from a friend, the artist Ann Hamilton, who had used horsehair to make a huge, undulating carpet as part of her show at the Dia Center for the Arts in 1993-94. When she dismantled the installation, Ms. Hamilton offered the horsehair to Ms. Coyne.

Ms. Coyne also took on another challenge. Her works have always hung from the ceiling. "Never before have I been on the floor or the wall, and I wanted to see if I could," she said, speaking of the shift in perspective. "It requires a different way of thinking, like a sculptor going to painting. It was the tougher challenge, more than changing media. It throws you so off you don't even know if you're an artist anymore."

Grappling with both changes, Ms. Coyne twice postponed her show at Galerie Lelong, taking apart what she had done and beginning again. "You don't know that it's not working until you're finished with something," she explained.

This time in particular, she added, "I feel vulnerable because the pieces are so new." Usually, Ms. Coyne completes her works in a new medium in perhaps a year, then keeps the sculptures in her Brooklyn studio for another year, sometimes tinkering a little further. "I'd feel like I'd lived with them for a while" before sending them out into the world, she said.

For the Adventurous And for Museums

Ms. Coyne has exhibited widely and won many awards and fellowships. She was featured on the cover of Art News magazine two years ago. She has works in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, among other institutions.

"Her work appeals to the adventurous collector," said Jack Shainman, the dealer she left a few years ago for what both describe as business and personal reasons. "I always did well with her."

But she dared not ask for more time from Galerie Lelong. The dealer is a new one for Ms. Coyne, who does make her living as an artist (her works fetch \$9,500 to \$35,000).

When she signed on with Lelong in a flowers-and-champagne celebration last fall, she had promised to be ready for a show by March. At the time, Mary Sabbatino, Lelong's director, was acquainted with Ms. Coyne's previous work. She was aware of the new ingredients -- the hair, the Madonnas and the birds. But that's about all she knew. "It's an act of faith," Ms. Sabbatino said, describing the relationship between gallery and artist. "You believe they'll deliver a great new body of work, but I had no idea what she was doing."

At the time, Ms. Coyne was not sure either. "Somewhere inside, I knew where I was going," she said. But unlike many artists, she works "organically," without drawings or jottings on paper.

Her first task was separating Ms. Hamilton's salt-and-pepper rug, which used horsehair from China, into black and gray strands and washing them. She also did research. Ms. Coyne had seen Victorian jewelry woven and braided from human hair in an exhibition, and she called on a researcher at the New York Public Library to find her an illustrated book about it.

After studying these 100-year-old patterns, Ms. Coyne set out to make them more contemporary. "For three months, I worked alone, from 7 to 7 in my studio, five or six days a week," she said. "I just started messing with the materials, like a cook. In the beginning, you're doing battle with the material -- you have to let it be what it is. I began with making simple jewelry, but it looked so contrived."

Ms. Coyne says she felt pressure: "You're thinking, can I rise above this? Can I make something out of something I know nothing of that says something?"

And what is she saying?

"That comes," she said. "I know the issues I'm dealing with."

Critics and curators have noted that Ms. Coyne's work speaks about contradictions and conflicts, between, for example, beauty and decadence or purity and sexiness, as well as about life's cycles. Rebirth is another recurring theme, an obvious one in her new sculptures. Most of her animals were stuffed by 19th-century taxidermists; she bought them from museums whose dioramas had been replaced by high-technology displays. "This is the residue of life, discarded things, and I'm trying to give them a second life," she said. "That means, I guess, that I believe in heaven and hell."

"Did you know that in medieval Catholicism, birds take the souls to heaven?" Ms. Coyne added a moment later.

17th-Century Kyoto Inspires Madonnas

The Madonnas have a different genesis. In the 17th century, when the poor people of Kyoto were building a Buddhist temple, the women were asked to cut off their hair, which was braided into

ropes used to haul trees from the forest. Seeing the braids on display in Japan, Ms. Coyne was moved, saddened by the women's loss for their faith.

As these thoughts ran through her mind, Ms. Coyne and her assistants worked on all the sculptures at once, not one at a time.

Late last winter, feeling stuck, she invited an artist friend over to look at what she had accomplished and review it -- something she had not done since her early 30's, when she was a member of an informal group of artists who criticized each other's work. "Usually, you don't want feedback," she said, "but I was really having a difficult time with this."

She was right to worry. Her friend gave her a thumbs down, and she postponed the exhibition until April-May and began making changes.

Weeks later, she invited a second artist friend to view her revisions.

Both times, she said, "They laid into me. I felt a failure. One friend said to me, 'It's the worst you've ever done.'" They said it was too pretty, too decorative, too obvious. The next day, everything was in shreds.

"The second time, I was brutal, because I was ready to trash the whole thing," she explained. Mentally, she felt she had made a leap, and in June, Ms. Coyne finally began to feel good about the direction of her work.

"I said for sure I'd be ready in September, so that's when I got interns," she said. Eight of them at a time came, mostly from art schools. "It was like a sewing circle," Ms. Coyne said. "I wouldn't let them talk. We listened to books on tape. Because this is 'Fairy Tales,' a lot of the books on tape were fairy tales.

"My payback to them was to have visiting artists come at lunchtime that they could talk to. They were so great. It was so hot, and they wove eight hours a day, four days a week."

Even then, when Ms. Coyne was plowing ahead with determination, she was fragile. "I asked them not to comment on my work," she continued. "I'd get very insecure. You're so vulnerable in your studio unless you're braced for it and ask for an opinion. It may change what you're doing."

The Sculptures As Surrogates

In the race to finish, Ms. Coyne was working 90 to 100 hours a week in the studio. "It would have taken me alone 15 years," she said.

Ms. Coyne said she could not possibly have children: "There's too much labor in the studio." For years she has called her sculptures "my girls." "Each one has such a personality," she said. "I like to fuss over them. They're like invalids; they can't live without me."

As she installed the works at Lelong, she said that except for her assistants and her husband, "No one has seen them, not even my parents."

"I never think about how people will react," she said. "That would be too horrifying. I'd love to just put it up and disappear, go to China."

Ten days later, on the night of her opening, Ms. Coyne was dressed in a long black dress and black lace shawl, a bouquet of irises and lilies in her hands, greeting her friends and friends of the gallery. She smiled constantly, not showing the conflict she feels about yielding the results of her labors. "I always feel so sad" when the works are sold, she said. "I'm afraid, horrified, to go back to the studio. It will be so empty."

But within days, Ms. Coyne seemed ready to move on to something new. In between the hours she spent on jury duty, she was out photographing the city's architecture, particularly 18th-century buildings, reading William Faulkner, thinking about the way people whisper and contemplating the possibilities of working with cement. Where this will lead she is not sure. About half of Ms. Hamilton's gift of hair remains, and she might use that. But, she cautioned, "I won't be weaving it, like this."

Photos: Petah Coyne installing "BZ CD Put-Put" for her exhibition at Galerie Lelong. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. E3); Petah Coyne with "BZ CD Put-Put" at Galerie Lelong, where her show runs through Oct. 17. At right, some earlier work, including "Untitled 473," shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1987. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times (above); Galerie Lelong (below))(pg. E1)