THE BROOKLYN RAIL

PETAH COYNE with Jonathan Goodman

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October 2, 2018

On view

Galerie Lelong
September 13 – October 27, 2018
New York

Petah Coyne, now entering maturity as an artist, is anything but waning in her art. Her current show in Galerie Lelong & Co. is an outstanding compilation of pieces that incorporate taxidermied birds, which are pinned to or inserted into what are usually decorative elements or large masses of material—including waxed flowers and inchoate

bodies of cloth fabric. Helped by a team of collaborators, Coyne continues to address the large, imaginative themes of her career: concerns with magical narrative, a deep-seated regard for the primary value of materials; a strong sense of interaction between audience and artwork (one piece in the show can be looked at from the top of a flight of stairs made especially for the exhibition). Coyne deftly balances the presence of good and evil in no uncertain terms—much as one might find in fairy tales, which have influenced her. This interview is intended to shed light on her themes and practices, as well as portray her ebullient enthusiasm, so much a part of her character. As we sat in the midst of Coyne's contrivances at Galerie Lelong & Co. in Chelsea, I found her work making a statement at least as forceful as the excellent replies given in response to my questions. It was an inspired afternoon.

Installation view, Petah Coyne: *Having Gone I Will Return*, 2018. © Petah Coyne. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

Jonathan Goodman (**Rail):** I've known you for a long time; we're friends as well as being comrades in arms. I've always been impressed with you work. It's a combination of a deep, searching emotion, sensuousness, and a high sense of play, as well as incorporating

abstract and figurative elements. Let's start the interview with the beginning of your life. Please tell me, what kind of family did you come from, where were you born, where did you go to school?

Petah Coyne: Well, that's a lot.

Rail: Let's start with your early life. Where were you born? What kind of family did you grow up in?

Coyne: I grew up in a military family, so we traveled all over the world. I was actually born in Oklahoma City, but my family arrived from Germany the day I was born. That day a hurricane came into town. My mother was watching the hurricane coming right for the house, and she saw it split in two and go north and south. That was the moment her water broke. The wind, she said, was tremendous. The movers had just pulled up with large moving vans, and were calling to her to take shelter under the truck. She replied, "But I have to get to the hospital." She was trying to call my father to come pick her up, while the movers kept trying to pull her under the truck. She was so large they couldn't quite get her underneath the van. That was my beginning.

Rail: [*Laughter*] You began with a bang and have yet to end with a whimper!

Coyne: Oklahoma is an exciting place because the weather changes there on a dime. I was back not too long ago, and I really loved it. But we only lived there three months. We moved fifteen times before I was even twelve. The place I loved most was Hawaii. For four years we lived in this gorgeous Japanese neighborhood. We were the only caucasian family; I went to an all Japanese school and felt as if I was Japanese.

Rail: So that's the basis of your interest in Japanese culture.

Coyne: The Japanese are always hospitable; they made me feel connected and part of the community. We never lived on military bases except once—for eight months. My parents did not want this for us. They insisted we live locally and immerse ourselves in the various cultures. Even when we settled down (I think I was twelve when we finally did), we had moved to Ohio to a very conventional neighborhood. But then every summer my parents took us to a new part of the world. They wanted us to know that there were many ways to live—and choices to be made. We went to southern France, to Holland, spent one summer on a ranch, another on a farm, and even one with the Amish. That was particularly hard for me as I just turned sixteen. The Amish insisted I cover up my yellow Camaro, I wasn't allowed to wear miniskirts, and we started every day at their church.

Rail: This was where?

Coyne: In Amish country outside of Columbus, Ohio. Looking back, I learned a lot, but I was in a rebellious phase. I was sixteen, and the last place I wanted to be was somewhere among the Amish. Still, every year we traveled—we went to Russia one year during the Cold War. My mother commented, "You will see that the Russians are also just people. They want what we want." We took a train across Russia, and went into inner Mongolia. After I graduated from college the only place I could think to go to experience this much multicultural living was New York City.

Installation view, Petah Coyne: *Having Gone I Will Return*, 2018. © Petah Coyne. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

Rail: Where did you go to college and what did you study?

Coyne: I first went to Kent State. Art was the only thing I wanted to study. My family was supportive. In high school I didn't want to go to high school, so my parents said, "Okay, figure out how you don't have to go to high school."

Rail: Your parents are amazing.

Coyne: When I was young, my mother was especially supportive. She taught us a hunger for knowledge. Once there was a beached whale on Waikiki Beach, she took us out of school to study that whale. If there was anything exciting going on anywhere, we were there. When I didn't want to go to school, I went to the principal and said, "If I can test out of my classes, do I have to go?" He said, "Well, what do you want to do?" I said, "I want to go to the university to study art." He said, "Okay, if you test out you can go."

Rail: That doesn't happen so often.

Coyne: That fall I tested out of my classes. In the afternoons I went to the University of Dayton. In the mornings my mother would take me to the local foundry, where I learned how to do lost wax, bronzing, and glass. I wanted to do everything, and it was so much more interesting to me than going to school. When I went to Kent State, I found the program style too rigid. It was too controlled. I told my parents I didn't like it. They said, "You started it. Finish the year, and then you can go anywhere you want." I decided I wanted to go to an art academy, so I enrolled in the Art Academy of Cincinnati. They taught drawing, printmaking, and photography. At the time I didn't like the style the sculpture professors were teaching.

Rail: Probably very conservative and conventional?

Coyne: Very conservative and very conventional! So I continued with printmaking and photography. They were a bit jazzier, but when I finished, I went back to sculpture. I also went back to Dayton [Ohio] to marry the love of my life, Lamar—someone I fell in love with when I was thirteen!

Rail: On the spot.

Coyne: On the spot. Thirteen, fell in love, married him. But sculpture was always a major part of my life. Alice Aycock, Jody Pinto, Donna Dennis all came to Dayton and gave a lecture, and their lectures blew me away. I thought that if all this work is being done in New York, why am I in Dayton? So I went home and told Lamar, "I have to move to New York. There's much more exciting work being done there. I can't stay here. You finish graduate school and meet me there." And he said, "I'm not staying here if you're not. Let's go." We left the next week for New York.

Rail: Were the three women artists you spoke of delivering feminist lectures? Did their talks influence your feminism?

Coyne: Jody Pinto was the most outspoken. She was talking about digging holes in parking lots. She would dig holes, deep holes, and fill the holes with plastic and red paint. It was about rape victims. I remember being shocked. I recall Pinto saying the work was made so her audience could see these atrocities. I remember thinking *my god*. I was also moved by Alice Aycock's work: particularly her low buildings—where you could crawl in and smell the earth. It seemed to me to be about death. And Donna Dennis was talking about her three-quarter buildings and two-third buildings—I think those were the terms—indicating she was building to size. At that point I don't think they were projecting their feelings about feminism just yet.

Rail: This was the late sixties? The early seventies?

Coyne: It was 1977.

Rail: During these formative years, you left Ohio for New York?

Coyne: Also in 1977.

Rail: And then you found an apartment and a studio?

Coyne: My brother, Tom, had just graduated from Columbia University in painting and filmmaking. He and a few friends had just moved into a loft in Tribeca. Lamar and I drove the car directly to his loft; I got out, and knocked on the door. He was shocked! I said, "We decided to move to New York. Can we stay here for a few weeks until we find somewhere to live?"And he said, "Oh, well, okay." He was living there with five other guys but he told me, "All right, come on in. You can split the rent with us for a couple weeks." Then we started looking for our own loft.

Installation view, Petah Coyne: *Having Gone I Will Return*, 2018. © Petah Coyne. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

Rail: Those were the days when you could find a loft.

Coyne: In Tribeca there were few lofts with a certificate of occupancy. But my brother's place was really beautiful and big: five thousand square feet, at 75 Warren Street. Many steps on the stairs were broken or missing. We only had heat Monday through Friday. We lived on the top floor, but by the time the heat rose to our floor, it was turned off on the first. In the basement they kept all the hotdog vending trucks, so the rats were legion. But we were only there for five weeks. We found a loft on Broome Street; where we still live today.

Rail: Yes, that beautiful apartment. Were you making your work in that apartment?

Coyne: Yes, in the early years. It is two-thousand square feet, and my brother, Lamar, and I all lived there. Tom did painting, I did sculpture, and Lamar worked. Lamar and I have been there ever since.

Rail: What was it like to be a young artist in New York? Can you describe your early work, its physicality? I remember the early work well—the marvelous hangings dropped from the ceiling, presenting a feeling of weight and gravity but also gravitas. How did you make them?

Coyne: I would go down and dredge the swamps in Florida. Sometimes I would collect stuff from Sanibel Island. Nature is so beautiful there. I put what I needed in crates and shipped them north. From those materials I would make big, big pieces. My only concern was making sure the pieces had emotional and physical weight.

I also became a listener in a hospital during this time—a profound experience. I mainly listened to people who were dying—many of which had been told they had cancer and only a short time to live. There were so many thoughts they couldn't share with their family, and the doctor was often too busy to talk—so they needed a listener. I listened, and it was really the most important, beautiful job I ever had.

Rail: I didn't know you did that.

Coyne: It was beautiful. I listened to many interesting people, and I would try to take a bit of that weight from them and put it into my pieces. It was a great gift they gave me. Some of the people who had surgery allowed me to watch the procedure—often they mourned the "bad part" taken out of them. I was with some of these people when they died, and to me that was as beautiful as birth—it truly was.

Rail: That's true, I've seen that myself. I have a question for you as a viewer and someone who's written on your work: What comes to me immediately is your love of nature along with a strong interest in death. The two seem to balance each other. Can you comment?

Coyne: There was a man who came to our house when we lived in Hawaii. He was a survivor of the Bataan Death March in the Phillippines. I was lucky to know him—I was only four or five. He came to our beautiful home and garden in the Japanese neighborhood. It's amazing that he would come to our house—someone who had been mentally and physically tortured by the Japanese. Even so, he would come to our Japanese garden and sit. When people came, our parents told us to be respectful and quiet—like snails in the backyard. I found out later he carried a bible with him during that forced march; he would write sentences on the edge of the bible's pages. Each week he would carefully develop a new sentence by writing just one word a day. He would contemplate all day on selecting the best word choice. That's what got him through. I understand he eventually wanted to give this bible to the Smithsonian. I thought: Here was a man that would spend all day perfecting one word choice. What would I write if I could only have one word a day?

Rail: To return to New York—how long were you in your first studio in Manhattan? You're still in that apartment, but you had your studio in New York.

Coyne: I worked out of our apartment for twelve years. Then I sublet a studio in Greenpoint. That studio was quite like a Dickens novel—cold, no heat, no bathroom, no running water. But it was a beautiful sky-lit space right on the water. I was there for twelve years—until

2000. Then I moved to my current studio in West New York across the Hudson. I've been there for eighteen years. The space is a dream.

Rail: Maybe you could describe the relationship between abstraction and realism in your work. You often make use of inchoate forms of abstraction, and then you have the most highly realized forms of realism in the taxidermied animals, which are treated to be as accurate and life-like as possible.

Coyne: Before I begin a sculpture I never know where I am going to go. This work here is totally abstract, but the one with the white birds is both abstract and figurative, as is *Ariyoshi*.

Rail: You're not leaning one way or another.

Coyne: No, and I feel that is something not every artist does in their work.

Rail: No, that's what makes your work as original and unconventional as it is.

Coyne: Thank you.

Rail: I know you read voraciously. You get up every morning at five in the morning? Four in the morning? You're a fiction reader more than poetry?

Coyne: 4:30 in the morning. Yes, I read fiction mostly.

Rail: How does your reading affect your creativity and why do you take a special interest in Japanese literature? You have spent a good amount of time in Japan; how has Japanese culture affected you and your work?

Coyne: That's a big question! I read voraciously, and now I'm also re-reading a lot. It's like visiting old friends. I just finished all of Dickens again.

Rail: All of Dickens?

Coyne: All of Dickens and Flannery O'Connor. That's probably my fifth time through Flannery. Now I'm reading John Steinbeck. He was a prolific writer, and how great he was! I first read him decades ago. I recently went back and read the hundred best fiction novels from North America. If I love one of the writers in particular, I read all of their work. Next, I'm going to read all the Nobel Prize winners.

Rail: There's more women in the most recent twenty-five years than there are in the first twenty-five years.

Coyne: Yes, I think that's why I'm going top down. [*Laughter*] But Japanese writing moves me deeply. Early on I received a grant from the Asian Cultural Council. I traveled to Japan alone for six months, spending my time wandering and reading. It changed me profoundly. I cannot explain it. I would sit in temples for hours and then go outside and read. It had a lasting affect on my vision.

Rail: Does the Japanese influence enter into your work?

Coyne: Yes, absolutely.

Rail: Can you describe how it this happens?

Petah Coyne, *Untitled #1388 (The Unconsoled)*, 2013-14. Specially-formulated wax, pigment, silk flowers, taxidermy, paint, thread, wire, floral tape, steel, metal hardware, maple, birch

plywood, aluminum, 96 x 60 x 12 inches. © Petah Coyne. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

Coyne: This exhibition, *Having Gone I Will Return*, is completely inspired by Japanese culture. We curated the show to feel as if you are walking into a Japanese garden. When you first enter, you are welcomed by *Untitled #1388 (The Unconsoled)*—three almost-living gates, or screens, adorned with sumptuous flowers in white and red, with birds flying in and out—very seductive. Then as you walk past the gates and enter the main gallery space, the first piece you see is *Untitled #1289 (The Year of Magical Thinking)*,which is hung on the wall—layers and layers of lavish velvet folds that twist and turn into darkness. When you break from this reverie you turn and see three even darker psychologically complex works. In the center is *Untitled #1379 (The Doctor's Wife)*, the pinnacle of the exhibition, and hanging beyond is *Untitled #1408 (The Lost Landscape)* and *Untitled #1375 (No Reason Except Love: A Portrait of a Marriage)*. The contrast of the delicate white birds in *Portrait of a Marriage* propels you forward as you begin to walk the path around the work and explore the intricate sprawling landscape that is *The Doctor's Wife*. *Lost Landscape* reveals an unexpected bulbous heart at its side and draws you back to *The Doctor's Wife*. Once you have completed the path you ascend the observation deck to take in a more comprehensive view, just like the intentional use of perspective that you would find in a Japanese garden. You look hard at the intertwining elements and the juxtaposition of the two figures in this monumental work. *The Unconsoled* and *The Doctor's Wife* are both named for works by Japanese authors, Kazuo Ishiguro and Sawako Ariyoshi. The title of the exhibition, *Having Gone I Will Return*, is a combined English translation of two Japanese expressions for saying goodbye.

Rail: How do you name your works of art?

Coyne: Very slowly. *Untitled #1379 (The Doctor's Wife)* was twenty years in the making, so it had a lot of names—at least five. I called it *Starry Night* at one point. Unlike our own names, given permanently at birth, my sculptures' names keep changing over time.

Rail: That was my next question: are these names meant to shape our initial response?

Coyne: Not necessarily. Viewers are welcome to apply their own interpretations or if they would like to investigate further, the names are there for them. I originally never named them, so I am open to whichever method the audience chooses. Around 1989 the wonderful art historian Ann Sutherland Harris said, "You should name them. You call them your girls, so you should name them." She was right. The first piece I named was *Frida* after Frida Kahlo.

Rail: Let's return to the past. What were you trying to achieve with this early work?

Coyne: My early work had a lot to do with vulnerability, with being out of control—seeing and listening to the cancer patients; that's what I felt I should do. They were powerful but fragile. They encompassed nature, but it was a nature that you never would have seen. They

felt wild.

Rail: Your art is so obviously labor-intensive. You have a team of young people who help you. Do you need to train them in techniques? What are some of the techniques that go into making the details? Is it hard work collaboratively?

Petah Coyne, *Untitled #1375 (No Reason Except Love: Portrait of a Marriage)*, 2011-12. Specially-formulated wax, pigment, silk flowers, taxidermy, chandelier, candles, ribbons, black sand from pig iron casting, resin, paint, black pearl-headed hat pins, chicken-wire fencing, wire, cable, cable nuts, quick-link shackles, jaw-to-jaw swivel, silk/rayon velvet, 3/8" Grade 30 proof coil chain, Velcro, thread, plastic, 81 x 71 x 66.5 inches. © Petah Coyne. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

Coyne: Yes, everything is very labor-intensive, and all the wonderful young artists who help me really do a lot. They make all the components that go into the pieces. I teach them how to wax and wire the flowers. I teach them sewing, and how to cut the fabric, so that they can help to sew all the elements together once I have placed and pinned them perfectly. I would prefer if I could do everything myself, but it's not possible.

Rail: Can you talk about the kind of thinking that this current show represents for you; is it a continuation or change? What relationship does it have to your earlier work?

Coyne: Yes, it is a large change. The emotional pitch is deeper. The sense of loss is heavier. It is akin to Kawabata's *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*, where memory and longing intermingle in such a pervasive way. This last exhibition Mary Sabbatino, Vice President and Partner of the gallery, graciously granted me the freedom to do what I needed to do. This, along with the help of Nate McBride, an architect who can see space magnificently. Also, Jessica Maliszewski, my assistant, has been crucial in making sure all the sculptures, which look so complicated and difficult to move, are actually able to move with as little effort as possible. With these things we were able to seriously change the look and feel of the gallery. When an artist can do this, the emotions come into play.

Rail: Yes, the show also has the weight of work by a fully mature artist. Did you work out the installation?

Coyne: Yes. We laid it out at least five times. We kept turning everything around. But the turning point was when Mary said, "No, we'll build another beam there under the sky light to hang that work." That instantly freed everything, and it all fell into place. The audience doesn't typically get to see all the work behind the scenes that goes into a final installation. But Jon and Paul, the head installers, get a lot of kudos for those kind of "heavy moves"—they are brilliant at their jobs.

Rail: One of the exciting experiences of your work is seeing how communicative the photographs are. Are the photos taken by you alone?

Coyne: I took the early photographs of my sculptures and installations.

Rail: They are outstanding images. But now you have professionals do it?

Coyne: Yes, but we work closely together. Images of my work mean everything to me. I have been working with Christopher Burke for a while now. We always discuss every shot beforehand. Chris is a wonderful photographer. For this exhibition he and his whole team went above and beyond.

Rail: This goes back some in your career, but is an important question: You work so much with taxidermied animals, usually but not always birds. What is the role of these dead animals?

Coyne: That's a good question, and of course that is what they are, but when *I* look at them I do not see "dead animals." When I look at them I see my "childhood," I see "beauty," I see "hope," "fantasy," "femininity," and "fairy tales"—anything but death.

Rail: Who are some of the artists who have most interested you? Can you say why?

Coyne: You might be surprised. The minimalists really influenced me. Especially Sol LeWitt and Robert Mangold because of their use of space. I have both of those artists in my home, and I love them so much. They create space for you to think. Next is Arte Povera—my favorite artist from that group is Jannis Kounellis—

Rail: —the Greek artist who went to Italy and died just a year ago? He was an extraordinary artist!

Petah Coyne, *Untitled #1242 (Black Snowflake)*, 2007-2012. Specially-formulated wax, pigment, taxidermy, candles, tassels, ribbons, hand-blown glass bulbs, chicken-wire fencing, wire, steel, cable, cable nuts, sash weight, quick-link shackles, jaw-to-jaw swivel, silk/rayon velvet, 3/8rdquo; Grade 30 proof coil chain, Velcro, thread, plastic, 71 x 75 x 50 inches. ©

Petah Coyne. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.
Coyne: I love his work. My favorite pieces were his loosely wrapped wool pieces. He was a huge influence. Other names I must mention: Rebecca Horn, Frida Kahlo, Yayoi Kusama, the list goes on and on. I could name 5,000 artists—there are so many talented ones. It is so much fun to look and watch artists grow and change. It is New York's gift to those of us that live here.

Rail: What is the current role of women in sculpture? Is your art overtly feminist?

Coyne: I had to look up "overtly feminist" in the dictionary. [*Laughter*] "Openly, publicly" is what overtly meant. And do you think it's not?

Rail: I think it is, but I would like to hear you be specific about how it is. You said something to me twenty years ago that I still repeat to my classes. You said to me that sculpture had been the province of men, and the time for women to make sculpture was now.

Coyne: In the seventies I started out saying historians will answer these questions for us because they can see better. I can't—I'm in the middle of it. But I do remember nobody cared what we did. At that time, nobody cared. It was so much fun to make sculpture when nobody was looking at any of us women in the eighties. We would get together for big dinners, show slides of our artwork—we'd project them on buildings across the way, or onto walls. If anyone was new to the group, we would say, "Let's do a studio visit!"

It was so much fun because there was no competition. Nobody was showing. Everybody was sharing; everyone was equal. Then, when we started to show, we were supportive. We'd put spit in our work to hold it together; we'd use paper plates as materials—we were using things few had thought of.

Rail: What about sculptures being made today by young people? Can you name two or three people who you think are up and coming?

Coyne: There are so many good artists now. Every chance I get, I look. Two artists I find really interesting are: Chihara Shiota—a Japanese artist—and Zarouhie Abdalian.

Rail: Where is Abdalian from?

Coyne: New Orleans. I saw her work on the Lower East Side about three years ago. I was blown away. She was also in the last Whitney Biennial. At the show in the Lower East Side, you looked both down and up on her work. At the Whitney you looked sideways at it, and it was all turned around. Both artists work installationally and take risks.

Rail: What do you want to do in the next five years?

Coyne: We have several exhibitions lined up.

Rail: Are these small retrospectives?

Coyne: In addition to Galerie Lelong & Co., I have a wonderful dealer in Taiwan that I began working with five years ago: Nunu Hung of Nunu Fine Art. We have already done two exhibits with her and are planning another large solo show in the next year or two. We are also working with Amy Gilman at the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin, to do a traveling exhibition with universities beginning in 2021. The exhibition would focus on literature and tie the art into the curriculum with the students. What I would really also love to do is public sculpture—it has been thirty years since I last did public work and I would love to move in that direction again.

Rail: That would be terrific. Your sense of scale would be very successful in a public context. I think it makes sense you should return to your early art-making too.

Coyne: The other thing I would love to do is to develop a monograph. I have yet to have a significant monograph done on my work. I would like it to show the full depth and range of my work; people do not always have a sense of my entire oeuvre.

Rail: You need that.

Coyne: Yes. That's what I would really love. Those would be my two projects.