

*BOMB*

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Petah Coyne by Lynne Tillman



Petah Coyne, *Untitled #875S-96/7 (Atlanta Gal)*, 1996–97, mixed media, 67 1/2 × 55 × 38 inches.  
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

Petah Coyne redefines energy, or maybe defines it. I met her in the summer of 1993, when we were both teaching in Bard's MFA program. We lived in the

same house but I never saw her. She was the proverbial mouse; I knew she was there because there were traces of her existence, like an empty can of tuna in the garbage. When I did see her, she was rushing out or to her room, to sleep or read. She's a burst of drive, and grace, too; of humor, delight and fun, when you can catch her. Back then, she told me the story of how she met her husband, Lamar, when she was 14. She saw this boy and told him, "I'm going to marry you." Then he ran and hid in the garage. She waited for him for two hours. She called to him, "Don't be scared of me, I won't hurt you." When his mother came home, she wanted to know what Petah was doing hanging around. Petah said, "I'm waiting for the boy in the garage."

When Petah and I spoke the other day, I reminded her of the story. She said, "I loved him. It was one of those instincts. I knew I had to get married. I had to take care of that to become an artist. And I don't know why I thought that."

And I said, "It was either marrying Christ or Lamar." Few artists, or people, generate as much good feeling as Petah does just by existing. And then there's her expansive work. Her usually bigger-than-life sculptures might borrow from natural elements—earth, hair, trees, wax—and hang from the ceiling or lie on the floor. She constructs environments, or habitats, in which single objects act and interact with each other, are entangled in space to compose imagined, fantastic worlds. Her recent photographs of brides are like dreams: concoctions, fragments of moments, moments already lost as they're lived. Petah lives and works in frenetic, long moments, with tremendous discipline, slipping in and out of view. It's amazing to have been able to sit her down for an hour or so, to talk.

Lynne Tillman I'm always interested in what isn't said. What's not said about your work? What do you feel is underreported? I don't mean misunderstood, but not talked about.

Petah Coyne It's all the associations that I make with the work. I don't know if it's important that the general audience see it, but many of my associations come from Japanese literature and culture. You wouldn't recognize those

associations unless you had read a tremendous amount about Japanese culture or were familiar with it. Recently, Martha Schwendener mentioned that my last exhibition was about obscuring objects by continually adding layer upon layer of white wax. Although the work was made before September 11, she felt it was quite reminiscent of the chalky dust and ash that blanketed the buildings and occupants of lower Manhattan with a premature “snow.” Her description reminded me of Butoh, the sixties Japanese dance movement, which was drawn from both the energy of death or a life consumed in both sorrow and joy. Butoh is also referred to as the dance of the dark soul. I was dealing with Hiroshima, catastrophes and almost panic.

**LT** Almost panic?

**PC** The way in which people panic afterward and then are filled with rage. Right after Hiroshima is when Japanese artists started doing Gutai.

**LT** What is Gutai?

**PC** It’s a post—World War II art movement. It isn’t exhibited much, because the ideas are more captivating than the work. It seems the conceptual intentions were to purge all formal painting of its traditionally rigid scope. It was about making work and destroying it. They’d hang large sheets of paper from trees and drive motorcycles through them. My impression was that everything was about rage.

**LT** When did you become interested in Japanese literature and culture?

**PC** When I was four years old we lived in Hawaii, where we stayed for three and a half years, an exorbitantly long time when you’re growing up and moving a lot.

**LT** Were you an army brat?

**PC** Yes, we traveled everywhere. We lived in a Japanese neighborhood in Hawaii; all of my neighbors, my classmates, everyone was Japanese. I felt I

was also Japanese, because they never made me feel there was any difference between us. To this day, I never wear shoes in my house. All the shoes go outside. I felt so comfortable then....

**LT** (*laughter*)

**PC** Oh no, you still have your shoes on!

**LT** I'm glad you didn't force me.

**PC** I would never, that would be very impolite—the Japanese would never say anything that would make their guest feel unwelcome. My parents went to Japan and China a lot, and they would always bring back things and tell us exotic stories. I also read a lot of Chinese literature when I was young, and then, in '92, I went to Japan on an Asian Cultural Council Rockefeller grant. That really turned my world upside down; I made radical changes after that. Women's writing in the 1950s in Japan was very restrained, but so passionate, it gives me goose bumps even thinking about it. Everything is not what it is, which seems very Catholic.

**LT** You're often referred to as a lapsed Catholic.

**PC** Very much so.

**LT** I wonder what lapsed means. It's one thing not to be a practicing Catholic, but to lapse is something else, to disconnect, not be involved.

**PC** You can't disconnect.

**LT** Bataille writes sex scenes on altars; only someone still connected would care.

**PC** But that is what Catholicism is about. You're kneeling in front of this naked man up on a crucifix.



Petah Coyne, *Untitled 1017P01*, 2001, Gelatin silver print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Julie Saul Gallery, New York.

**LT** In an early piece, when you'd first moved to New York, you hung dead fish from trees around the city. Looking at photographs of the dead fish, I think, Here's a new girl in town, walking around a strange city, seeing dead fish in stores. It's as if you identify with them. You begin saving them, collecting them. It's odd, because you're collecting corpses and trying to keep the corpses from decomposing. What did you put on them?

**PC** We put Rhoplex on them, which didn't preserve them. Then we used polyurethane, but if there are any air bubbles in it, the maggots still get in.

**LT** You hung dead fish from a tree in front of a house in the suburbs. Such a weird thing.

**PC** Do you think so?

**LT** The idea that some suburbanites would like to awaken to dead fish hanging from trees in their front yard.

**PC** I never assumed they wouldn't.

**LT** That's what's strange. But you had to get the fish out of your loft; they were a health hazard.

**PC** After five years of living with decomposing dead fish.... But perhaps first we could talk about the fact that I almost always work intuitively. My mother trained me to trust my instincts. As I get older, I trust them more. Women have this instinctual ability to know stuff we shouldn't know. I don't know how. When I arrived here in New York, I worked at Chanel during the day. I did their in-house advertising. It was the height of beauty—many of the women were having their legs operated on to make them thinner—and then at night I would go and buy dead fish. I was like an alcoholic. I'd say, I'm not going to spend another cent on dead fish, but I couldn't resist. For me, I was saving the fish from being eaten by someone. I was going to give them a better send-off. And in addition to all that, I was also working with people who were terminally ill.

**LT** You were working at Chanel, and you were working in a hospice?

**PC** I was going to Boston every other weekend. I worked for a physician there. My job was to go in and talk to his patients and listen to them, because their families couldn't, it was too painful. I was also looking for something that was more real than what I was seeing in the galleries. I couldn't relate to it, and I couldn't relate to Chanel.

**LT** What year was this?

**PC** This was 1978, 1979. The gallery situation was so intimidating. Susan Lubowsky Talbott, who's now the director of the Des Moines Art Center, also lived in this building, and she kept saying to me, "Just keep working. I don't understand what you're doing. And don't try to show this stuff, nobody's going to want to see it." So for five years, I worked by myself. Susan kept saying, "Just keep going." In Boston, I was working with people who'd been given a month to live. They could opt for surgery, and I could often watch the surgery, which was fascinating. There was a mourning, and other rituals similar to both

Catholicism and Japanese culture, both multilayered and complex. Just as you left one layer unscathed, what you were presented with wasn't the insight you wanted to attain, but a dozen new thoughts and questions. I was so moved by what people confided to me. The dead fish would then be as close as I could get to their passing. Many of the patients died. A few didn't. I tried to figure out why. What was their strength? Their power? I was trying to put those thoughts and energy into my work.

**LT** Did you ever figure out why some died, while others didn't?

**PC** No. But I could tell who would and who wouldn't. Often I could do it by smell. It's so animal in a way. You could usually know two days before. The physician said that at that point, a patient's system begins to break down, so I was probably sensing that. At times the odor was so sweet, like when you smell babies' heads. My brother, before he died, smelled glorious. When he died, he turned bright yellow because of all the toxins.

**LT** He had cancer?

**PC** Yes. Interestingly enough, at that time, both my brother and I were living here in the loft with my husband, Lamar, and both of us had these lumps. We had biopsies; my brother's was negative; mine wasn't. So I wanted to figure out how these other people were staying alive, and I incorporated all this into my work.

**LT** But when did your brother die?

**PC** Six years ago. As it turned out, his lump *was* cancerous. We were extremely close... It's all so complex. And the art we make—life is so complicated, so interwoven, who can make sense of it? I think the only way for an artist to know or understand anything is to make work almost from a blind spot, and what you produce speaks to you; and as you get older, you know it more clearly. When you're doing autobiographical work, which we all are in

some way, because that's all we have, how can we make it as real? If we look at a book or a piece of art, can we know more about that person?

**LT** The sources for work come from our experiences, pathologies, knowledge, lacks; they're sources. What we make is different, and as far as I'm concerned, separate from the source. It doesn't really matter what happened to me.

**PC** I feel intuitively that it is one and the same.

**LT** Let's say, even if it were, when somebody looks at your art, if they feel that they have to know you in order to...

**PC** Not *have* to know, but I want them to know. What I would like is for them to feel what I feel. If van Gogh walked down the street, I would recognize him, because I feel him so succinctly in his work. I feel like I knew him, like I've had a meal with him. That's what I'm trying to do with my work, so that the residue of what's left is what you were.

**LT** Maybe it's a desire for immortality. When I look at your work, I don't think about you.

**PC** But when I read one of your books, I see you. I hear you saying the words because I know your voice. Even writers whose voices I don't know, I hear what I think is them. It's a personal thing, it's hard for me to articulate. But I want people to feel as if we had a communication. When I look at a van Gogh, I feel, on some level, I actually met him. I've looked at his work so much, and he left so much there for me. But maybe knowing isn't the correct word, because actually all I want to do is be in my studio and read. Those are the only two activities I love. It's very unlike to be in my studio and then come home at night to read. I want nothing else.



Petah Coyne, *Untitled 1031S-01*, 2001, Mixed media, 36 × 21 inches. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

**LT** In your catalogue *Black/White/Black*, you said: “I think of my girls as invalids that need constant tending and constant care.” It’s intriguing,

disturbing. You think of your sculptures as your girls, your characters. I understand that.

**PC** My girls.

**LT** But the idea of “your girls” reminds me of Henry Darger and his Vivian Girls. There’s something perverse about it, especially when you consider them invalids. Do you want to talk about that?

**PC** Oh God, I really don’t. It’s so uncool to talk about your work as “my girls,” as part of me, but I do. When I see them in museums, and I’m not allowed to touch them anymore, I think they recognize me, I think they’re happy to see me. I’m certainly happy to see them. And I do think of them as an extension of myself, it’s like pulling off my skin. But as invalids, I also don’t want them to breathe without me, which is really getting into the psychosis of it. I suppose that’s why I’ve made everything so difficult, so that if I don’t personally escort one of my girls to their new home, one of my people whom I’ve trained ad nauseam does. They’re not difficult to take care of, but...

**LT** What’s the process of making them, the level of difficulty?

**PC** Making them is the most difficult, because we turn them upside down, we invert them. We’ll spend ten years on a piece, and that’s a long time. Cost effective, not at all. I’ll work so hard on a piece for half a year; then it can sit for nine years. I just have to digest it, or I put it away, then bring it back out. They can sit there for years, but I need them, I need to know that they’re there, I’m still thinking about them. It’s the same thing with the work, and this is where I differ from a lot of other sculptors, I do not separate the piece from the space. It is one and the same to me. Sculpture is about that space. I have to place my work. Where it’s placed is imperative to everything, and the scale and whole space are involved. I die when these little pieces are hung in big museums. They aren’t meant to be. But if you’re always trying to control your vision, which is what you’re trying to do, or always inflicting your passion on that vision, on that piece, it is a huge job. I’ve done incredible note taking of

every piece, every place, the height of the ceiling, where we hung it, so that people can get a sense of it, because I need to have this girl be in your face, be aggressive, but at the same time extremely vulnerable. That's part of the process of making it. And I always want to know when they're moving. I want to know who has them. I need to know this, because they're such a big part of me. Invalids, yes, I like to breathe with my girls. I like people to walk in and be amazed that they are there.

**LT** You know what I like about your use of the word invalid, is that when I think about work, whether it's visual or written, it's the imperfections that matter, our flaws.

**PC** They're the most interesting.

**LT** A perfectionist knows you can't achieve all that you want to achieve.

**PC** The harder you strive for perfection, the greater the flaws. What to me is most interesting is being able to open up your overcoat, be totally naked, cellulite and all.

**LT** And flash.

**PC** And have your mom and dad standing there. If you can do that, that's what makes you the most interesting. Everybody tries to cover up those things. Are you strong enough, do you have enough ego to be able to expose that side of yourself? Because that's what it takes.

**LT** The invalid confounds the idea of the sublime, art, beauty, transcending everyday occurrences, fault and error. I want to ask you about changes in your work, the different materials, your use of colors, black and white. Then get to the bride, which is more recent work. You started out influenced by Degas.

**PC** Very early, in high school.

**LT** I think Degas is still there. The girls are sort of dancers, but ungainly; they're dancers who can't get up on their toes anymore, who have to be hung from the ceiling. I read that later, in college, you were influenced by Alice Aycock, George Trakas, the earthwork artists, who were doing large-scale sculptures. It's almost as if there's been a collision in your work between that and Degas.

**PC** No one's ever said that.

**LT** If you bring your love of Japanese literature and culture into it, with its sense of the extreme, black or white, delicate or harsh—Mishima's incredibly refined cruelty—I can see a trail of influences.

**PC** I do admire Degas, but I love all the others as well. It's very easy to get hooked into one thing, then carry that along, and it makes for a much easier career. I've purposely forced myself to change continuously. I always have to invent a new language.

**LT** How do you see the shifts?

**PC** When you have the big exhibition, usually in New York, afterward, that process is dead for you. You can't go back unless you reinvent it. The wax sculptures were always hanging from the ceiling; but this time the wax was spilled on the floor and walls, and only one was hanging. It's cyclical, too. The sculptures always deal with death, dead birds, taxidermy, dead fish, and yet beauty, too, like the pearls and other things that I use in these pieces.

**LT** It's a terrible beauty, not a happy beauty; one that's been achieved at a cost.

**PC** Like a volcano, where its lava runs over a town. I saw that when I was very little. It just took the town, and it was incredibly beautiful. But we were standing with the people whose town it was, so we felt their emotional horror as well. It's nature gone wild and you have no control, so you surrender to it. I think that all plays into the work.

**LT** But what is the bride? Where did she come from?

**PC** I think it's about pretense, all the work is pretense. They're hanging from the ceiling, seemingly very delicate and easily breakable. Instead, what they really are is a threat. They're extremely heavy, and if they fell on you, they'd crush you. So the work has all these dimensions. I'm interested in the bride who is really the bride past. I'm so far from a bride at this point that my white hair could be the bridal gown. I love Charles Dickens's Miss Havisham, who was left at the altar. Time stopped for her, everything in the house stopped, nothing changed. The wedding cake stayed on the table for 30 years, uneaten. She lived in that bridal dress, withered like grave clothing.

**LT** Maybe that's incorporated into the bride. She's an image representing time standing still. The bride's always new, always loved, always true. Fifty percent of marriages break up; but the bride is permanence, love, being forever young. She's almost like the cross, having withstood reality. Reality tells us being the bride isn't what it's cracked up to be. We know there's an emptiness.

**PC** There's the beauty of not knowing. Brides have that. I just photographed all these debutantes and brides; they were beautiful, even when they were at their most self-conscious and showing signs of awkwardness. I'm really not interested in the fresh, new bride. From my vantage point, I'm much more interested in being past your prime. All these wax pieces are the parties afterward, the residue that's left. It's not about fresh, new. It's about a type of beauty that's long after, which is more beautiful than what's promised to the bride. But it's not a beauty we're accustomed to looking at.

**LT** But how do we see that in the brides, that it's afterward, say, in the wax sculptures?

**PC** Because the wax pieces are half-melted, the images don't read sharply anymore. The big floor pieces shown in the middle of Galerie Lelong were two "virgins" sharing one arm. Most people thought that arm was just a lump of wax, they didn't see that the two brides were each holding a baby; actually, it's

my sister holding the perfect baby, I'm holding a headless one. Everything was melted into what looked like the floor. If I had made them fresh and new, you would read everything as softer.

**LT** In the Lelong exhibition, the wax sculptures gave a sense of dissolution of, say, the bride. But your show at Julie Saul Gallery, which was on at the same time and included both sculpture and photographs of brides, didn't feel that way. Especially not the brides.

**PC** The sculpture we exhibited with the photography was in part made in reference to Mishima's *Spring Snow*. *Spring Snow* was the first volume in a series of four books—his last works—about the four stages of life, and it was about innocence and beauty, but with a twist. My exhibition was about youth and vitality—not from the bride's vantage point, but from my vantage point—similar to Mishima writing about spring snow, with a little bit of a twist. The snow is beautiful but also Victorian, it's a repressed and restrained beauty. Or when you read Joyce, it's like having someone who is Catholic sit on your head. That's the way I felt about the photographs; the brides are beautiful, but they have someone sitting on their heads. The brides are allowed this much running room, but it's definitely a dog walk. So, *Spring Snow* was the title for the Julie Saul exhibition. *White Rain*, one of the wax sculptures at Lelong, mimicked the black rain that fell on Hiroshima after the bomb. The sculptures were meant to be incarnations after everything had turned to ashes, but there was a beauty returning. I don't see them as brides, yet. I call them "the nuns"; the nuns are Christ's brides, and it is true I always think of them as virgins. All this Catholicism gets mashed in with all this other stuff and plays a huge role. I've read a lot of church doctrine; I'm fascinated by the twists and turns of how they explain it. It's unbelievably sexual and, of course, not supposed to be. The same thing with the brides. That image is not supposed to be about *after*. It's supposed to be about fresh and new. But it's not at all.



Installation view of *Fairy Tales* at Galerie Lelong, 1998. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

**LT** Seeing your work, I feel I'm in a place to wander, a fantasyland of invented narratives. Your interest in fairy tales is in the work. You've said you often go away and just wander around. It connects with your moving a lot when you were a child.

**PC** Although I never want to move again in my life. Traveling like that is so important, because you become nothing. I was in Japan for six months, and I truly just wandered from one place to another. When I got tired, I stopped; when I was energized, I wandered. There would be weeks when I didn't speak to anybody. It makes you listen differently, look differently, it makes you think differently. No one bothers you, no one cares, which was thrilling. It's monastic. It draws you closer to what you are. And also because you're challenged—not on your home turf, you're not always comfortable, and you go into these states. The pace in New York is almost killing, and so to wander and see what happens outside is really a luxury. For the trips, my research is to read literature. When I went to Mexico, I read a tremendous amount before I left;

then I just wandered around. In Japan, I felt the most comfortable; I was never threatened there at all. It was such a relief to roll into a town at midnight and not be afraid to find my hotel by myself. I don't think you can do that in many places. It's very freeing, but it also makes you question everything. You leave this place you've been wandering in, then go back to your studio, and you see immediately where your work is lacking.

**LT** What bothers you most about your work?

**PC** That I don't have enough time. I'm so afraid I'm running out of time. I've felt that since I was 20. I hardly socialize at all anymore, because I just don't have the time or energy or need, I guess. I have so many ideas in my head in so many different directions, but to actually get them out, well, you have to work with them a long time. I'm approaching 50. I'm planning to go to 123.

**LT** You and I have talked about perfectionism, shooting for perfection.

**PC** Shooting and missing completely, which is so beautiful.

**LT** People often say art is making order out of chaos, but your idea is that you make ordered chaos. What's your ordered chaos?

**PC** I think it's most clear if you look at my office today. We have three people working. I just do piles for everybody; it's all these circles working together. All interconnected. Unfortunately, nobody but me knows how they're interconnected, but everybody has to do their part; and if they don't all finish all their piles, it throws the whole system off. Everybody has a certain amount they have to do; then there's more piles of what I'd like them to do. We usually all only get to what we have to do, but that's the chaos. I have to have everything seemingly extremely organized and in place, because my life is complete chaos, and the traveling.... I've now made over a thousand pieces.

**LT** No wonder you have no time for a social life.

**PC** Yes, and I care about the pieces more than anything. Isn't that crazy?

**LT** I don't think so. What's a typical day for Petah Coyne?

**PC** At my best, I'm up at 5:30 a.m., but I've been very tired lately. I usually exercise, by riding my bike to the studio, get there by 7:00 or 8:00. My studio assistants and I work there until 7:30 or 8:00 at night. Then I come back here, to my home and office, and three to four hours of whatever is boiling over on my desk. One day a week, Thursday, we do office work, same hours. Friday, I teach half a day and look at art half a day.

**LT** What about the weekend?

**PC** Saturday, I'm back in the studio, it's my only day alone in the studio. And Sunday, I always say I'm going to take off, but I never do. I end up reading half the day, if I'm lucky, and then the other half I have to do paperwork. It's very, very hard for me to be pleased. I am the most hard-driving woman you'll ever want to meet. I'm not proud of that, that's my nature, that's how I make my work, and I expect if you work for me you'll be of the same nature. There aren't very many people who can work for me.

**LT** I remember seeing George Trakas, Alice Aycock and Harriet Feigenbaum building their work at a museum in Nassau County. They worked 15-hour days. Kiki Smith is always working.

**PC** She works like a dog. It takes so much labor to make a piece. I wish I'd been Donald Judd, that would be just heaven. Then I could just dictate. I think his pieces are exquisite and beautiful. It's just not my nature.

**LT** What does the photography you're doing now mean to you?

**PC** I used to think it was very different from the sculpture, very separate, but it's not at all. I went to the Detroit Art Institute after the photography exhibition opened at Julie Saul's and made what were essentially the photographs in 3-D. For me, the process is different, photography is a faster way of talking. I've actually always shot film, but I'm such a perfectionist about the printing process that only recently have I found someone who can print the way I want.

Steve Rifkin, a perfectionist beyond. I can tell him the emotions I want the photo to have and what I want it to look like, and he can do it, which is very unusual.

**LT** But the flatness of the photograph, it's so different from sculpture.

**PC** See, I don't see the photographs as being flat. Especially these, probably because they're so black and white.

**LT** But as an object, it's flat. Photographs don't take up space the way your pieces do, it's conceptually very different.

**PC** I guess. But when I shoot, I run, which is very physical. I chase my subjects, or I run and jump with them.

**LT** Have you ever seen Bonnard's photographs? He used them as studies for his paintings, and he shoots people running, an arm in the frame, no head. Just beautiful.

**PC** He has such a tender place in my heart, because he painted his wife, even when she was 80, as if she were 20. In his head, he saw her that way. That's how I'm hoping Lamar will see me.

—*Lynne Tillman's most recent novel is No Lease on Life. This fall, a collection of her short stories, This Is Not It, will be published by D.A.P.*

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