

Petah Coyne's Waxworks: Petals on a Black Bough

Her pieces are both arboreal and anthropomorphic.
One even weeps.

By ANN WILSON LLOYD

ON a recent morning in her airy studio, Petah Coyne was finishing up some big sculptures — black, wax-covered, botanically inspired floral creations. They were stunning but a little scary, as if cultivated by a demented Mother Nature. “I love it when they look past maintenance,” Ms. Coyne said, “like a plant on somebody’s porch that’s kind of lost its mind.”

The artist, 51, concedes a long affinity for things run amok. In 1977, shortly after she moved to New York from Cincinnati, she filled her SoHo loft with installations of dead fish she found in Chinatown markets. When her husband could stand it no more, she hung the smelly things from a tree in her neighborhood, creating a public artwork.

Over the next decade, her materials grew more aggressive. For a solo show that cemented her reputation in 1987, she filled the original Manhattan space of the Sculpture Center with a spooky forest of decayed logs, roots, hay, tar and other things more often found in landfills than Upper East Side art houses. Before the opening, the Fire Department made her haul away much of the hay. Today, still a bit annoyed, she laughs about it.

In the 1990’s, Ms. Coyne became known less for the gritty works — mud, oily black sand, razor-sharp metal from shredded cars — than for a series of pristine, ultrafeminine, chandelierlike white confections of dripped wax, birds, bows and candles.

As the first traveling show surveying her career opens this weekend at the Sculpture Center (an adjunct show opens on Jan. 29 in Chelsea), it seems that she is reconciling those material extremes. Common themes emerge among broadly different works, like metaphors of transition and redemption, or the strength, poetry and absurdity embedded in base and kitschy materials.

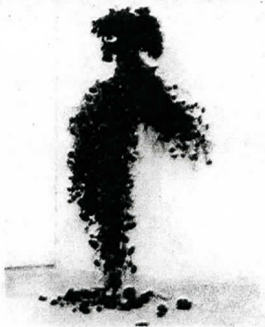
The survey starts with a 1985 hanging piece with its preserved dead fish and ends with the recent sculptures, shrouded in elegiac black wax-embalmed branches and flowers. Although the latest pieces look delicate, their wax is chemically formulated to last a long time, and they rest on engineered steel infrastructures. They are dark, dense and more dramatic than ever.

One of them will even weep. The whimsically titled 11-foot “Little Ed’s Daughter Margaret,” to be shown at Galerie Lelong, includes a nearly buried plaster religious figure with a hidden mechanism programmed to cause its eyes to well up and tear twice a day at unpredictable times — “possibly at night, when it is alone,” Ms. Coyne said.

“When it does cry, it will be a miracle for the viewer who just happens to be there and sees those few tears fall,” she said. “I wanted it also to be one of those instances where you as a spectator are not really sure it happened. Only a few drops of the water will be the proof, but even that

won’t last long.”

Ms. Coyne said she was unsure whether her intent in this piece was to mock or to deal seriously with faith. In her girlhood in a devout Roman Catholic household, she thought about becoming a nun; church iconography has pervaded her work since she first resurrected the sculptural potential of dead fish. But “Little Ed” is partly a spoof of the religious visions conjured in grilled cheese sandwiches or in the condensation on storm windows.



Three works by Petah Coyne: “Daphne,” top; “Little Ed’s Daughter Margaret,” above; “Brides in Mourning,” right.

More than parody, however, lurks within the sculpture’s elaborate tangle of vines. It has hundreds of wax-dipped flowers; remnants of a couture gown specially made for the figure by a dressmaker, then cut apart by the artist; two large stuffed fighting birds; and empty bird skins, which Ms. Coyne said reminded her of the flayed human skin tucked into the lower corner of Michelangelo’s “Last Judgment” in the Sistine Chapel. Most strangely of all, it incorporates a braid of human hair given to her by an elderly collector.

The braid, Ms. Coyne said, had belonged to the man’s mother, a Victorian woman named Margaret, a musician and early feminist who died when he was a child. “He had kept it all these years, and he came to me and said, ‘I need you to put this in a piece sometime when you think it’s right.’”

These buried elements, Ms. Coyne said, “are only there when you really look within the piece. However much time you spend, that’s what you’ll see. So it can be just an elaborate, beautiful thing, which is all that many people see, but I prefer it to have this deeper, darker, sometimes even humorous dialogue with people.”

Like Ms. Coyne’s early, grittier black works, the new dark waxworks suck up the light, which makes viewing them a challenge. She was particularly inspired, she said, by recent repeat visits to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, the recreated Venetian palace housing an eclectic collection that has been left exactly as Mrs. Gardner herself wanted it installed. “You have to slow down there and look for a long time to really see,” Ms. Coyne said. “And it’s not just the dim light, it’s also the overlay,” with objects displayed atop one another.

Like “Little Ed,” “Daphne,” a new black wax standing sculpture that will be shown at the Sculpture Center, is a blend of arboreal and anthropomorphic. Bristling, tangled and gothic in mood, it is inspired by the goddess who changed herself into a laurel to avoid being raped by Apollo. Sharp-eyed viewers may glimpse a face (with a fringe of bangs remarkably similar to the artist’s) tucked under a bough near the top. Discovering the tiny face transforms one’s initial sense of the piece. “I think Daphne is somewhere between the literature and life itself — this transition that we all go through,” Ms. Coyne said. The work is loosely related to “Life Interrupted,” a new black wax piece in homage to the performance artist Spalding Gray, who committed suicide last year. In a way, both works are about seizing personal control.

Strikingly neat, Ms. Coyne’s studio suggests the method that underlies the madness in these labor-intensive sculptures. Constructing them

takes months or years, she said. Every last flower and element is painstakingly placed.

The artist’s supplies, the fake and dead flora and fauna, are arranged in careful groupings: boxes of vivid silk flowers, foam slabs into which an array of wax-dipped blossoms are inserted, trays of vintage birds and squirrels preserved through taxidermy, pots full of black melted wax, branches, feathers and mundane materials like chicken wire and two-by-fours. In the studio’s bathroom, a cluster of found plaster statues of saints and virgins discreetly face a corner, their eyes turned away.

For Ms. Coyne, there is something especially Catholic about precious things hidden or turned away from the world. “At some churches, during Lent, they cover the saint statues with dark purple satin or velvet shrouds,” she said. “I thought they were much more beautiful and poetic than

way, because you had to remember what was underneath. I always start my sculpture with something that means a great deal to me, thinking I’m going to put it on a pedestal, but in the end, I protect and hide it.”

Similarly, a selection of Ms. Coyne’s black-and-white photographs that will be on view tend to obscure their subjects. She describes them as portraits, although the imagery — twirling monks, skipping brides, swinging piñatas — is partly masked by fluttering or streaking blurs of light. An ecstatic spirit runs through the works: they seem to capture Ms. Coyne herself, evanescent and always in motion.

Ultimately, she said, “I am trying for the essence of something — the same way Japanese literature never points directly at something and says it’s black, but just describes the darkness. It seems to me the way to tell the truth.”

PETAH COYNE

SCULPTURE CENTER

Through April 10 at
44-19 Purves Street,
Long Island City;
also Jan. 29-March 20
at Galerie Lelong,
528 West 26th Street.