

reviews

Petah Coyne

Galerie Lelong
Through December 13

Petah Coyne is a metaphysical artist. It is impossible to approach her work without sensing that it is speaking to the audience in both physical and spiritual terms. Like the mystics, Coyne is firmly grounded in this world, but she also lives in an allegorical one.

The show—whose title, “Vermilion Fog,” derives from a Tadao Ando–designed Buddhist temple in Hyogo, Japan, where vermilion is the predominant color—is really two independent yet interdependent exhibitions, called “Unforgiven” and “Dante’s Inferno.” The former (named after the western directed by Clint Eastwood) is enclosed in a rectangular side gallery. Viewers can’t enter, but they can look at the sculptures through two portals, each festooned with Coyne’s signature wax flowers, or through a peculiar aperture, deceptively rectangular on the outside but obliquely angled inside. This narrow view opens directly onto *Untitled #1272 (Raise the Red Lantern)*, 2007–8, a dark piece made of artificial tree branches, pinecones, wax, and

black metal paint. The two portals, at the extreme right and left of the rectangle, give larger but still partial views of the seven works all hanging at different heights from the ceiling.

Such a sequestered space is fraught with ambiguity: it might be seen as an enclosed garden of virginity, especially because the configuration of the interiors of the hanging pieces seems to allude to the female sex. From this perspective, Eastwood’s title can be seen as a warning: if that space is violated, it can never be the same again. That idea is confirmed by the view through the narrow aperture, which can itself be seen as sexual and opening onto darkness. To enter this temple or private space is to penetrate the holy of holies, a privilege extended only to the initiate or to the deity who dwells within.

“Dante’s Inferno,” which fills the large gallery space, contains four uniformly dark works. The blackness recalls Dante’s odd mixed metaphor about hell, a place “d’ogni luce muto,” or where light is mute—a counterpart to Milton’s “darkness visible.” But Dante’s hell is neither silent nor uniformly dark, though it is a place of punishment. Coyne renders it static.

The single image that Coyne repeats again and again in this space is the taxidermied bird embedded in the dark, liquid-looking-velvet-covered constructions. The birds are the dead, who come alive through art. *Untitled #1234 (Tom’s Twin)*, 2007–8, refers to a twin who dies at birth, the missing half of the living twin, who will always feel an absence. *Untitled #1180 (Beatrice)*, 2003–8,

taking the name of Dante’s beloved, represents the dead body whose soul has gone to paradise, where it can only love God—not Dante. *Untitled #1205 (Virgil)*, 1997–2008, depicts the philosopher who is Dante’s guide through the inferno, another dead soul consigned to limbo through no fault of its own. While “Unforgiven” points to potential loss, “Dante’s Inferno” presents real loss.

What remains? These astonishing baroque structures, strong yet fragile. They are like memories, which are both real and metaphysical at the same time. Coyne reminds us that the work of art is what is left after the process of creation.

—Alfred Mac Adam



Petah Coyne, *Untitled #1180 (Beatrice)*, 2003–8, silk flowers, wax-cast statuary, taxidermy animals, silk/rayon velvet, tree branches, and mixed media, 136" x 116" x 104".