Our Bodice, Our Selves

DEBORAH SMALL

May 16 – June 29, 1991 • Artists Space
Our Bodice, Our Selves

An essay by MADELEINE GRYSZTEJN

Deborah Small's work is a lesson in lesser known histories — those that have been silenced under the pressure of the History to which we commonly subscribe. As a rammager of ideas and images, both pictorial and literary, Small has an ingenious knack for bringing together disparate cultural elements which, when placed side by side, let intellectual sparks fly. Small's work generally present themselves as a network of material scavenge from existing sources and transferred, by xeroxing, to wall panels of ten of equal size and arranged together in large grids. This systematic, graphilike deployment of images lends each installation a rational, even scientific air, and thus a veneer of truth: it anchors the artist's revisionist examination only not of history, but also of history as fiction, in a format traditionally assigned to prove quantifiable facts.

Small's first large-scale installation, titled Half a Still Life/Still a Half Life (1983), set the stage for installations that followed. In this early piece, composed of 106 identically sized wall panels based on the periodic table of the elements, Small investigated the shared etymology of "bikini," the 1946 innovation in women's swimwear, and Bikini Atoll, the Pacific island site of twenty-three U.S. nuclear bomb tests conducted between 1946 and 1958. A book, made by Small for the exhibition, and mimicking in its language the deceptively naïve parable of a "Dick and Jane" primer, disclosed how the term "bikini" conflates the psychosexual effects stimulated by a scantily clad "bombshell" with the climax of a prodigious chemical explosion. In this book there also appears the following sentence: "male domination and imperialism are not flip sides of the same coin but one continuous ugly face that manifests itself in different guises." Here we perceive what are to become Small's abiding concerns: a conscientious investigation of language, by turns playful and pointed, and a sharp awareness of how our discourse, and the history this discourse fashions and perverts even as it records, points to the intersection of sexism, patriarchy, imperialist imperative, and even racist postures.

Small's recent installation, New World [Women] (1989), attempts to expose the ways in which the Spanish conquistadores' sexual mores and fantasies colored both their vision and their representation of the "New World" and its female inhabitants. By casting, from the outset, native women as lewd and lascivious, these unsympathetic "arrivistes" could rationalize acts of extreme cruelty, humiliation, rape. Again, Small has here made language both the central impetus behind and the critical focus of her installation: she uncovers for the viewer/reader a narrative by Michele de Cuneo, a fellow voyager with Columbus, that unwittingly constitutes the first documentation of rape in the New World: "while I was on the boat, I captured a very beautiful Carib woman, whom the aforesaid Lord Admiral [Columbus] gave to me, and with whom, having brought her into my cabin, and she being naked as is their custom, I conceived the desire to take my pleasure. I wanted to put my desire to execution, but she was unwilling for me to do so, and treated me with her nails in such wise that I would have preferred never to have begun. But seeing this (in order to tell you the whole even to the end), I took a rete-end and thrashed her well, following which she produced such screaming and wailing as would cause you not to believe your ears. Finally we reached an agreement such that, I can tell you, she seemed to have been raised in a veritable school of harlots.

Much of this installation's resonance derives from its clear articulation of the way in which women have had roles thrust upon them by society's arbiters; and how subsequently these roles, or forced positions, are used to perpetuate further sub-ordination. What Small reveals in fractured but potent doses of archival material is the invisible—but the unacknowledged—yet pervasive tenets of our culture, tenets by which society unconsciously defines itself, justifies its actions, and propels itself forward, tenets so ingrained they surreptitiously mold our very identities, more often than not tragically. By probing these unstated assumptions as they are bedded in literature (including history) and art, Small shows them to be structures — men-made, fictitious, fallible, and thus capable of being debunked. For her inquest, Small's method of choice is the collage, which by definition breaks up, wrenches open and disrupts the familiar. Seemingly rational, earthy codes weighted with a received History and Meaning are scrambled and overturned, in the effort to erode extant meanings and to invoke new histories, new maps of significance.

Small's most recent project explores an aspect of history and literature in which female sexuality, sexism, and patriarchy blatantly cross. In Our Bodice, Our Selves (1991), Small illuminates a singular but popular literary phenomenon: the captivity narrative. The first literary form unique to European settlers and peculiarly inspired by the "New World" and its hazards, the captivity narrative was originally a first-person account of events, often hair-raising, experienced by the abductee of an "Indian-de- mon." From its Puritan inception in 1682, the captivity narrative was immensely popular; and it continued to fuel the American imagination as it underwent successive incarnations—from diaristic document and religious parable to frontier adventure to sentimental romance—reflecting the colonial community's character and expansionist impulses. In Small's installation, the illustrations that accompany early examples of this literary form are juxtaposed with images taken from a phenomenon successfully contemporaneous genre, the historical romance—a.k.a. the bodice- ripper—which, conventionally, throws a white captive heroine and an Indian abductor/hero together. Historical romances, none other than the drugstore paperbacks boasting embossed covers depicting a couple in

and ruthlessly uprooted by "devils incarnate" who submit her to physical and spiritual afflictions, arduous journeys through the wilderness and pagan temptations which she is able to withstand only through her faith in God and her perpetual invocations of biblical passages. Humbled by her ex-

periences, she is finally delivered by Providence (in the form of an earthly ransom) from this "lively resemblance of hell." This captivity narrative successfully distilled and crystallized the Puritan situation in the New World. Fearful of the deep woods and the native population, Puritans turned them both to holy ends—into scourgies of pride and embodiments of evil, from which white men and women were to emerge chastened and purified. The early captivity narrative, highlighting the contrast between Puritan (English "civilization") and Indian ("barbarism"), was the figurative location where the choice between "nature" and "culture" was exercised over and over again. Its distinctly religious framework of suffering and deliverance, together with its high drama and prescribed stock characters, was to permanently influence the vision of America's "errand into the wilderness."
It is surprising to learn how profoundly the captivity narrative helped drive the frontier mythology and continues to permeate our literature, history, and art. Well into the nineteenth century, as American colonists pushed westward, the ever-popular captivity narrative followed the receding frontier from New York, to Ohio, to the Far West. As the native population increasingly became an obstruction to coveted land, the captivity narratives were adjusted to suit new generations of frontierspeople who wished to see the Indian as an unindividuated, "merciless savage."  

The expropriation of Indian lands and the eventual extermination of Indian tribes were thus rationalized. The captivity accounts became increasingly standardized, sensationalized and outrageously propagandistic, recounting "the gory details of violent physical abuse willfully inflicted"  by this arch-villain upon "helpless virgins"—captive who, "if not already murdered, are perhaps reserved for a more cruel and savage fate."  

The fiction was frequently given a sexually titillating spin, adapted into a kind of "folk pornography," the offshoots of which still run deep in American thinking, even shaping female fantasies. Nothing either encouraged nor roused the colonists more into abominating—even into killing—the Indian population than the tales of endangerment to "white womanhood," and her protection became the excuse for horrific massacres. 

The female captive became, in the visual arts, an icon of American westward expansion, a symbol of the imperiled Christian community in a hostile land. Appearing first as pamphlet illustrations, captivity images have spanned the gamut of visual art expression, from cartoon to fine academic painting and sculpture. No one story has magnetized artists' interest more, however, than that of Jemima Boone, Daniel Boone's daughter, who in 1776, at the age of fourteen, was captured with two other young women by Shawnee and Cherokee Indians and held for three days before being rescued by Boone's party. Collapsing a large number of visual renderings of this one narrative into a single wall piece, Small demonstrates their formal or super-

Jemima Boone and captor, from a painting by Charles Wimar, detail from Our Bodies, Our Selves, 1991

All other photos: details from Our Bodies, Our Selves, 1991

Front cover photo: Photos courtesy of Philipp Scholz Rittermann
them is actually tethered at the neck to an Indian. The potential defilement which titillated viewers of earlier captivity images here gives way to a blatantly salacious and utterly false vision of a “fate worse than death.” Significantly, Smoll does not use these images within a visual matrix of events relating to the life of Daniel Boone, the avatar—white, male, empowered and enprivileged—of westward expansion. In this way Smoll shows the captive to be the object less of Indian “depedrations” than of the white man’s far larger design of a complete dominance over nature and “savage” native peoples.

The unkempt hair, the ripped decollatage—these are visual cues also found on the covers of bodice-riders; and it is a strange but apt meeting of imagery when Smoll juxtaposes the captivity narrative with the pulp romance. With as little literary pretension as visibility (because it is a mail-order phenomenon), the bodice-ripper is the hugely popular descendant of the captivity narrative. Remarkably unchanged in structure from its progenitor, the typical bodice-ripper removes a beautiful, innocent, and helpless female from familiar surroundings and throws her, unwillingly, into the hands of a “coppery captor.” She is, like Mary Rowlandson, brought into “a vast and desolate Wilderness, I know not whither,” and made to face grave dangers which allow her ample opportunity to demonstrate how virtuous, plucky, and resourceful she is. Her maidenhead is constantly threatened but steadfastly defended, until she is united with the hero in marriage and (socially sanctioned) wild, wanton sex. But, in these romances, it is the brooding, sometimes brutal Indian who is elevated to the stature of hero. No longer a threat to society’s order or an obstacle to its expansion, he is revelled in as the forbidden, exotic Other. Lifted bodily from the captivity narrative, the wicked Indian has become the libidinous lover; and, though preserved largely intact from earlier fiction, he has been tamed and humanized by the heroine’s nurturing powers.

Smoll’s “bodice-ripper” polyptic, derived from this genre’s book art, is awash in soft and sensuous shades of purple, blue and yellow. Repeatedly we see a couple in period (or very little) costume embracing in a quintessentially “Western” setting half-curtailed by hothouse flowers and dotted in the distance with a tepee, canoe, or lone butte. The same clues to racial and cultural differences appear in panel after panel: the woman is fair, with full rounded breasts, her bodice unlined, uncorseted, or exposed; the man is buffed, bronzed (rarely really dark-skinned), generically handsome, and is dressed in buckskin and bandana. A sinuous armpit is often used for the cover title, which announces in passionate word couplings either the nature of the relationship or one of the protagonists appearance and character (e.g., Silk Savage, Comanche Bride, Autumn Fury, Savage Heat). Smoll also makes use of the book’s cover copy, lifting into her installation verbal descriptions like “voluptuous,” “sensual,” “fierce,” “forbidden,” “delicious,” and “scorching.” Apart from the erotic scenes, much of the bodice-ripper’s plot revolves upon the heroine’s being broken—domesticated—into the lay of her abductor-seducer’s land: her learning to build a tepee, to cook ground mesal cakes, to gather maple sap. Indeed, these stories implicitly restate and reendorse one of the central social myths in which romance readers, as members of a patriarchal society, are necessarily embedded: that of an exclusive and permanent union between man and woman in which the sexual division of labor charges her with domestic and nurturing tasks. Again and again the reader visits this union in Japan, confirming its inevitability and escaping the injustices and dissatisfactions borne out by such an arrangement in the real world.

Smoll’s polyptychs reiterate visual clichés in order to underscore the narrow and inexorable margin accorded to female representation and behavior in the realms of both history and fantasy. Visual repetition, and consequently visual attenuation, is further accompanied by Smoll’s incorporating lists of words gathered from captivity narratives and bodice-riders that define women solely in terms of “innocent purity,” “vulnerability,” and “chaste beauty,” in keeping with the woman’s “heroicism,” “sorrows,” and “stoicism,” or the Indian’s “savagery” and “heathenism.” The words, like the images they complement, build a “paissable of language” around the woman, the Indian, and the frontiersman that inhibits the reader/viewer’s transcending the prescribed norms. The poverty and constraint of image, language, and choice is reflected in Smoll’s very technique: not only is her material, both visual and verbal, scavenged from existing sources, it is also depleted through color xerox reproduction, i.e., through a removal upon removal of an already mediated image which leads to an exhaustion and flattening of a “frontier synec- dogy” even today. Whether the subject is Indian or infidel, the fictive terrain of America’s “Old West” or of the recent Middle East “Desert Storm,” the same narrative structures and cultural archetypes govern our readings of events, of history: the patriarch cum righteous protector, the barbarous and swarthy villain, the innocent women and children in a foreign, inhospitable terrain, the stock characters are all in place. Small, in trafficking—in deft stitching—between past and present images and representations, exposes their likeness. She employs the cliché only to challenge our continuing complicity before it, urging us toward a more discursive, unprogrammed, individual way of thinking. Her installa-

tions encourage us to set ideas and images loose from their received narrative prison so that, by perceiving the world much more richly, we may actually make it so. [8]

NOTES
The title of this essay was suggested by Robert McDonell. Many thanks to Prudence Carlson for her illuminating editorial insights, and, of course, to Deborah Smoll for going unswervingly of her time, generosity, humor, and thought-provoking observations.


7. Leverrier, Ibid., 64, 83. The violation of captivity was highly unlikely given the fact that tribal law prohibited rape among Eastern Indians who were the protagonists of most of these accounts.

8. Mary Rowlandson, Ibid., 37.


11. In this way, Smoll also interiorizes and extends a symbolic of her own pioneer roots and family history into the larger story of westward expansion.

Deborah Small currently lives and works in San Diego, California, where she is Acting Director of the Warren College Writing Program at the University of California, San Diego. She has worked collaboratively on numerous inter-disciplinary projects, and is currently working on 1492 which will be published by the Monthly Review Press.

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