



View of Petah Coyne's exhibition "Above and Beneath the Skin," 2005; at the Sculpture Center.

Petah Coyne at the Sculpture Center and Galerie Lelong

To experience a room full of Petah Coyne's sculptures from the past 20-plus years at the Sculpture Center was not only to perceive darkly strange objects but to enter into the artist's enveloping consciousness. It is one that wrestles crude natural and industrial matter into organic forms. Coyne busily piles rosettes, drapes beads, binds with rope or wire, dusts surfaces with black sand or pours on white wax. References to decay and growth, the lumpen and the luminous, jostle. The works' black or white hues further signal yin/yang polarities. Here, earlier pieces were suspended from the ceiling as if tautly inert; more recent hangings were draped with strands or veils as if relaxing, "letting their hair down"; others surged up from the floor. What holds these oppositions in balance is Coyne's own centeredness, which puts her compulsive energy at the service of introspection.

"Above and Beneath the Skin," the title of this traveling mid-career retrospective organized by Douglas Dreishpoon of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, awkwardly assimilates the complex dualities of Coyne's work. Its references to "the body" echo the prominence of corporeality in recent decades' sculpture, and the emotionally loaded constructions do get "under one's skin." Coyne channels the expressionism of Jean Dubuffet's gritty, ferocious nudes. In her abstractions, figurative references abound—Coyne refers to the works as her "girls"—but together

they become an environment of growths, and one has the sense of entering a space teetering between fantasy and nightmare.

This span of Coyne's work displays her distinctive courage in grappling with signs of despair, with mortality and spirituality. The early bluntness of huge hanging, bound, excremental lumps in *Untitled #248 (Whitney Mud)*, 1986, is like a thought balloon connoting a bad mood. The delicacy of the floor-bound *Untitled #1093 (Buddha Boy)*, 2002, the subject's small face nestled within a low, conical accumulation of candles, beads, flowers and ribbons and covered with white wax, suggests a sweet devotional object piled with donations. But results are mixed. *Untitled #1187 (Life Interrupted)*, 1997-2004, mawkishly includes a sparrow carcass; and at Lelong, *Untitled #1111 (Little Ed's Daughter Margaret)*, 2003-04, "weeps" actual water—literalisms that reduce poetic to prosaic. Coyne's faint black-and-white photographs of blurred figures recall the Futurism of Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912); they seem anachronistic and thin.

More densely ambiguous works offer a freer imaginative space, such as the human-scale canopy of intricate wax-covered white flowers and birds that one can stand inside, as if embraced by a guardian angel (*Untitled #820 [MIT Peacocks]*, 1995), or the dramatic sweep of black and crimson roses around a tree in *Untitled #11103 (Daphne)*, 2002-03. That titular Greek nymph's devotion to the goddess of the hunt and refusal of Apollo's advances prompted her river-god father to transform her into a laurel tree.

Apollo's adoption of it as his botanical symbol associated the laurel with beauty, music and poetry, his domains, while its evergreen leaves symbolized eternal life; Christians adapted the myth to represent the Virgin Mary's purity and chastity. Coyne embeds the darkened laurel with flowers often pictured with the Virgin—red roses that refer to the blood and thorns of her son's Passion. Here some roses are black. Is that what happens to strong, independent women—they become celibate and associated with death? These exhibitions demonstrate Coyne's willingness to confront such metaphysical vicissitudes and manifest them in exploratory, muscular, engrossing sculptures. [After its New York appearance, the exhibition traveled to the Chicago Cultural Center, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Mo., and opens this month at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (Jan. 21-May 7, 2006) before concluding at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (June 9-Sept. 17, 2006).]

—Suzaan Boettger