

Sculpture

January/February 2003

Vol. 22 No. 1

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center

Below: Julianne Swartz, *Garden
Details, Imported and Com-
pressed*, 2002. Mirrors, ground
glass, lenses, string, mylar, and
found objects, dimensions vari-
able.

New York

Susan Graham

Julianne Swartz

Schroeder Romero

In his 1994 novel *Sophie's World*, Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder uses the example of a father levitating off his seat at the breakfast table to illustrate philosophy. As the father floats above his family, the wife is shocked and understandably distressed but his son is amused. For the toddler, life is infinitely surprising, and his father's trick is only one of the riddles he encounters every day as he discovers his world. But neither sees that amazing world as a habit, so she is irritated and unsettled when her husband's illogical behavior upsets her preconceptions. Like Gaarder's example, Susan Graham and Julianne Swartz overturn stale assumptions with philosophical and child-like marvels.

Graham crafts guns and tiny space vehicles out of porcelain or a mixture of sugar, egg white, and resin. Her guns resemble intricate lacework or Victorian valentines. Just as Eva Hesse and Jackie Windsor use repetitive movements to combine high Modernism with handcrafts, Graham defuses the weapons' violent associations

through feminine media and methods. Though strongly within feminist art's methodological tradition, Graham's impetus is less political than psychological. She began creating sculpture inspired by the insomnia she experienced after the birth of her child. In past work, Graham created unique, tiny beds out of her sugar mixture. The guns are products of the same nighttime anxiety. She sweetens them to nullify their significance as deluded fears pestering sleepless nights. In a final stage, she places some of her sculptures in dreamy cyanotype photographs created through hand-coating emulsion on printing paper, producing a contact print with large negatives, and then exposing the paper and negative directly to



BOTTOM: COURTESY SCHROEDER ROMERO, NY

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images, depicting satellites, space, and space travel, appear as soft as pastel drawings and recall the tender futurism of Ray Bradbury's story "Dandelion Wine."

Swartz also uses prosaic materials, but where Graham creates fantasies, Swartz alters the way commonplace items are seen. In her site-specific installations, she

exposes neglected brilliance in unremarkable spaces. At Schroeder Romero, a series of lenses and mirrors was set in the hallway leading to the gallery's second-story garden. The lenses themselves are sparse and unappealing, but through them a radiant hazy Eden was visible. Swans, a wooden owl, flowers, and glimmering light were reflected in the upside-down views. The mirrors placed by the garden entrance corroborated this sweet impression with disjointed perspectives of the outside splendor. In the lens, the garden was ideal. Through the mirrors, it seemed a less magical but an eclectically decorated, warm, and welcoming space.

Only outside did the deception become clear. Though the garden and its curious items were charm-

ing, they were far from the idyllic vision Swartz created. The gorgeous swan seen from the lens was actually a wrecked, cracked, plastic lawn ornament. The owl was in a similar condition, and while both were actually on separate sides of the balcony, they appeared together in Swartz's illusion. Yet the image Swartz produced was never divorced from

reality. Changes in time, light, and movement were also reflected through the lens and altered the fantasy in real time.

In an accompanying installation, Swartz set a portal lens next to the gallery's outside window where it reflected a building across the street. At dusk a trainer on the building's roof released his pigeons into the sky, creating a rare, beautiful moment as seen in the lens. The moment was particularly moving because it was not recorded, only perceived through Swartz's unassuming object.

Swartz's lenses affect a space by creating a dreamy alternative to boredom, much like Graham's careful sculptures act as fragile substitutes for sleep. Both Swartz and Graham spark philosophical wonder with simple tools. They disrupt our blasé responses by validating the enormous beauty that can exist in small gestures and forgotten spaces.

—Ana Finel Honigman