

Jennifer Vanderpool
Yum! Yum!
Urban Culture Project
Kansas City, Missouri
April-June 2007

Jennifer Vanderpool: The Pleasure of *Informe*

Pleasure only starts once the worm has got into the fruit, to become delightful happiness must be tainted with poison.

Georges Bataille

Jennifer Vanderpool's current work can be seen as a contemporary contemplation of Georges Bataille's concept of *informe* (usually translated as formless or formlessness). Her installations invite viewer-participants to experience pleasure and delight. But the pleasure is always tainted with the "poison" of uncertainty. And the delight is wrapped--sometimes literally wrapped--in discomfotingly dissonant images and materials.

French philosopher and critic Bataille introduced *informe* as an assault on the dualism imbedded in Western thought. He sought to destabilize fixed bipolar oppositions such as high/low, human/animal, culture/nature, and beautiful/ugly by inserting a third category—the formless--that resisted rational containment. Decades later, curators Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois organized an exhibition based on the term, asserting that they "wanted to show how one of Bataille's most radical ideas--the idea of the *informe* as that which breaks up any form, category, concept or meaning--can be seen as an operative principle in a number of modernist works." Certainly it is "an operative principle" in Vanderpool's art.

Vanderpool destabilizes the high/low dichotomy by using deliberately "low" materials in the "high art" context of her work. She shops at working class stores (rather than elite commercial venues), gathering cheap, shiny metallic trinkets; plastic flowers in bright, "tacky" colors; and acrylic yarns dyed with day-glo pigment. She focuses on the clichéd and outré, the detritus of industrialized excess.

Sometimes, Vanderpool transforms her urban frippery into magical incantations of nature. Under her alchemical hands, the plastic of mismanaged petroleum products becomes gardens and forests and swamps. When she does this, the artist is dismantling the traditional culture/nature opposition and working in the *informe* outside the two categories.

At other times, city shop rubble—all artificial composed and artificially colored—becomes a kitchen or a bakery, a queasy offering of inedible sweets. But the artist's sometimes sickening overabundance of images and objects is not merely "poisoned." It is also a smart overturning of traditional gender categories. Vanderpool brings the private, the domestic, in a word, the feminine, into the male domain of the public and official. In doing so, she subverts viewers' expectations and, again, engages the *informe*.

Vanderpool often incorporates disconcerting sounds and smells into her installations, heightening the viewer's sensual involvement and exacerbating the experiential discomfort. But the discomfort is always countered by delight. Vanderpool's work may exist outside of categories and may therefore be, technically speaking, monstrous. She may be working like a modern Medusa, that is, like a monster with a woman's face and hair composed of writhing serpents. But this Medusa is not frightening. She will not freeze anyone who gazes upon her. This Medusa is laughing. (I am referring here to Helene Cixous's brilliant essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa" in which she urges women to work against the old bipolar oppositions.)

Jennifer Vanderpool laughs through her art of *informe*. It may be poison to anyone who is locked in old ideas. But there is great pleasure for those who are willing to play.

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March 2007

Pasadena, California