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Controlled *Passion*: A Conversation with Petah Coyne by Jan Garden Castro

"This looks like art," a tough-talking policeman pronounced, looking around at the fairyland of wax-bathed figures, birds, chandeliers, scarlet and blue feathers, worldly and otherworldly forms. Petah Coyne's "White Rain" exhibition had a visceral immediacy not easily communicated in photographs. She draws heavily on art and literature, Catholic legends, and intuition to create her seductive, visionary worlds. "White Rain" was conceived as a female and an American response to the "black rain" from the fall-out after the bombing of Hiroshima at the end of World War II; its message is eerily relevant to New York in 2002.



Installation view of "White Rain," installed at Galerie Lelong, 2001.

Coyne's work is in numerous public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the High Museum, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art. In addition to solo and group exhibitions at these institutions, she has shown at Galerie Lelong, the Dublin Museum of Modern Art, the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, the Moscow Institute of Contemporary Art, and the Centre International d'Art Contemporain de Montréal. She received an honorary doctorate from the Cincinnati Art Academy in 2001 and has been awarded prestigious fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the Joan Mitchell Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Asian Cultural Council. Current projects include a solo exhibition at the Frist Center for Contemporary Art in Nashville and an installation in "Artists Take on Detroit" at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Among future projects, Coyne will exhibit at the Albright Knox Art Gallery in 2003, and a survey of her work will travel in 2005.

Jan Castro: *You told one interviewer that in medieval Catholicism, birds take the soul to heaven. In "White Rain," the work Josephina features a figure being swallowed by a funnel of scarlet birds. What are your associations here?*

Petah Coyne: I've always been interested in birds, and this exhibition has both real birds and birds that I've made by hand. The red birds on top of *Josephina* are actually discarded feathers. They have been dyed red and put back together. The feathers came out of China about 10 years ago. They're incredibly crafted.

For me, the figure's head is being consumed by the birds. Not long after that, her body. It's a funnel coming down, at least that's my impression of it, and the victim will be swallowed up or taken away—very much like what we were taught about the Holy Spirit in Catholicism: it approached, consumed, and then you were transformed into something else. That, coupled with Catholic cardinals, who wear impressive red hats. When a cardinal dies, his hat is taken and hung from a rope at the top of his cathedral, next to those of his predecessors. When the rope gets old and rots, the hat falls to the ground. This is to remind the current cardinal that he, too, is human and will be judged—a warning to use the power the church has placed in his hands with great care.

I thought this was a beautiful synthesis. It relates to the piece called *Descent*, which is about a lone female figure descending to Hell. She is passing a whole group of niches, each filled with birds over 100 years old. My interpretation is that the birds are waiting. They're in purgatory; they're watching. They're beautiful—they were real birds and have been preserved. As in Catholicism, the soul is gone, the body remains.



Untitled #992S-01 (*Descent*), 2000–2001. Mixed media, 88 x 109 x 7 in.

In one of these niches, next to one of my favorite birds, I've actually buried my grandmother's pearls, pearls I lusted after as a child. You can see them. They are earthly goods. Giving an offering, a ransom of sorts, to see if I could stop her descent is similar to praying for a soul in purgatory or limbo. For some reason, this particular person wasn't good enough to get into heaven, so she's making her descent. Through that descent, the most painful part is being surrounded by all of this beauty, all of the things of which she will soon be deprived. Then only Hell and a faint longing will remain.

JGC: *The birds are really 100 years old?*

PC: Yes. They're from a Canadian museum that has closed. It's a very Catholic idea to take a thing that is considered trash, basically no good, and to re-energize it and give it new life. Even though they have long been dead, the birds seem beautiful to me. Each one contains a personality, the residue of a life lived.

That relates to a book by Yasunari Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*. It's about a very old man who goes to a secret house for old men. There, they pay to sleep with drugged virgin women, who never move. The mingling of death and eroticism is at times suffocating, yet the author intrigues us with his description of each "sleeping beauty." Maybe it's how her skin looks or a perfume she wears, but each comes alive with a full and complete personality. That's exactly how I perceive those long-dead birds.

JGC: *That brings us to the work about the two Marys.*

PC: *Mary/Mary* began with a statue of the Virgin Mary. She was facing the wall, and I was trying to make her gown very full, almost as if she were transcending. I was speaking a lot that summer with a good friend named Mary, who was, coincidentally, pregnant. She kept commenting on her size and saying how big she had gotten. One day, I looked up and realized that I had made this particular Virgin Mary pregnant, a synthesis of my friend and the Virgin, which is why I call her *Mary/Mary*.



Untitled #945S-01 (*Chinese Landscape*), 1992–2001. Mixed media, 103 x 117 x 350 in.

I should probably say that my use of Catholic imagery is partly tongue-in-cheek and partly irrational fear that all the dogma may, in fact, be true. I try to use both my humor and my horror of it all. I like that edge. Because of all the stories the nuns told us as children, I think of the Virgin Mary as the representation of "all women"—the best any woman can be. We were told that we should be exactly like her or at least aspire to be that ideal type of woman. So, I look at her and see all the things I would have liked to have been, but also all the things I can never be.

This longing for perfection and the impossibility of its complete attainment seem clearly figured in this piece. I actually cut apart a chain link fence, and although I covered it in silk flowers to give it beauty, a seduction of sorts, it still does its job, keeping the viewer at bay. The face of *Mary/Mary* is barely visible, only if one

really cranes one's neck. And even then, her face is dripped in thick wax, barely discernible against the wall. This is how the Catholic church presents its most sacred images, almost there, but mostly hidden.

JGC: *Chinese Landscape has another hidden figure. To me, that was a stunning and tender work. The surprise of seeing the Madonna hidden in the crevice in the wax was a little unsettling. It reminded me of Duchamp's *Étant donnés*.*

PC: That was exactly my intention. It's the flip side of Duchamp, but no less erotic. His work was from the male point of view and mine is from the female. It took us over five years to make that piece. We started in '97 or '98. She used to be more exposed. We made the front of the wall, and I never felt that it was quite right. It sat for maybe a year, and then I knew what I needed to do. Originally, that piece started out at four by two by two feet. Then it grew to eight by four by one. That wasn't good enough, and it had to be eight by 10 by one. It finally ended up 10 by 10 by two feet.

JGC: *Let's talk about the technical aspects—your special wax and the construction of the base.*

PC: All of my pieces seem fragile. But that is deceiving, because they're all begun with steel understructures. Yet I want each one to look incredibly delicate and to have that feminine sense of appearing soft and seductive. But as any number of women have shown, we have an internal strength and drive that is hard to fathom.

As far as the wax is concerned, I always use a commercial chemist to make the formulas. I expect this work to have its own lifetime, long past my own. Each flower we attach is made from silk, and each bird wing is rewired so that nothing can fall apart.

JGC: *What about your exquisite surfaces?*

PC: For a number of years, I had been using what we call "chandelier wax," made for the pieces that hang in the air. But making a wall wax is a very different animal. The chemist had to invent a new formula. To get the surface texture, we often scar the work with razors, and we are not beyond sculpting those drips ourselves.

I've studied Chinese landscape painting, especially the work done in the 16th and 17th centuries. That is the period I love most. When I began working on *Chinese Landscape*, I stepped back, as I often do, and immediately recognized its sources—the feel of the landscape paintings, the lengthening that can stretch across vast areas.

On the front of the piece, there's a seagull covered in black silk ribbons. Seagulls seem almost clumsy in how they take off and land, and I thought it would be a challenge to take something so awkward and make it seem graceful. I'm hoping that people don't recognize exactly what the imagery is from the front. It's only when they go around the back that more is revealed. But you'd be surprised at how few people look inside. We lit it by cutting a hole in the front that sent light through to the back, illuminating just a bit of the figure.

JGC: *I've read that you were home-schooled. Could you describe your art education?*

PC: My mother is a writer. In my early years, we traveled all over the world because my father was military. Everywhere we went, my mother always made us live in "real" neighborhoods—no army bases for us. She absolutely did not want to raise a troop of "army brats." In Germany, we lived in



Untitled #989S-01 (Miss Scarlet), 1999–2001. Mixed media, 82 x 52 x 26 in.

the German neighborhoods. In Ohio, we lived with the Amish for a summer. In every location, we were encouraged to study the beliefs and customs. I always felt more connected through these experiences. When I was very young, we lived in Hawaii in a Japanese neighborhood. That was the home I loved the most.

My mother was a great teacher, but not in the traditional sense. To get us interested in visuals and reading, she would take every opportunity to expose us to real life. Once when a large whale had beached itself on Waikiki Beach, she ran to get us out of school. Moving us as close as she dared, she told us to pretend we could put our hands on the whale and feel its labored breath. Then she took us home and read us *Moby Dick*. The images came alive for us in a really profound way.

I didn't like school at all; I felt like I never fit in. My parents told me that if I didn't want to go to school, I had to figure out a way, within the system, to not go and they'd stand behind me. The easiest solution seemed to be to test out of classes. So my mother began to tutor us in the summers. Every room was a different lesson. One would be the history room, another the math room, and we'd move from room to room every 45 minutes. We really hated doing this in the summer while all of our friends were playing. But throughout the school year, I only signed in for homeroom and then immediately left school to work on my art. Once when I wanted to do some bronze casting, my mother took me to the local foundry, and we learned how to cast and pour bronze. She was a great role model, fashioning whatever was needed to reach our goal.



Untitled #978(s)-99/00, 1999-2000.
Mixed media, 144 x 206 x 53 in.

JGC: *How did you become interested in Japanese literature?*

PC: My parents had been to Japan a number of times and always brought back treasures. Captivated by their stories, I read a lot of Japanese literature. Then in 1991, the Asian Cultural Council, an arm of the Rockefeller Foundation, gave me a fellowship. For six months I was able to just travel and observe; nothing was asked of me. Being there and reading a book every day, or at least a book every other day, I began to understand Japanese thought much more clearly. Often as I read and wandered about the country, I couldn't remember if I'd lived the things I thought about or read

them. Today my greatest pleasure is reading Japanese literature; it's my secret escape.

JGC: *How have you expressed sexual difference in "White Rain"?*

PC: Women and men are so different, and I think that we address different issues in our writings and in our vision. Because this is the first century of women sculptors of any kind of quantity, the differences between the genders are more apparent. I enjoy looking at and thinking about these differences. In many of the art schools, it seems 75 to 80 percent of the sculptors are women. Why is that? Possibly because we have no history, we're totally free to make our own history. And we're making a different history, which is thrilling to me.

I don't express ideas consciously. It's more when you step back. At mid-life, this exhibition is very much about looking back and looking forward at the same time. Recently, I moved my studio, and all of my works passed before my eyes. I began to pick and choose different materials from those I had used in the past. Materials such as black sand, birds and feathers, soil and flowers, chicken wire, and even the statue of the Virgin, which I first used in 1984, came back in this body of work. In the last year or two, my ideas are more about architecture, and sculptures leaning against the wall or becoming walls themselves.

There's a piece that for me is extremely tender, "sisters" or "twins." It's about my sister BZ and I, and our family connections. BZ is holding a perfectly formed baby, and my child is headless and broken. Nonetheless, just a different kind of baby, one that is more interesting to me. We're all in a

puddle, melting together. It's the melting that's so beautiful—and sad. Beauty comes when you least expect it, and that beauty is the kind I love most, although often I am criticized for it. Seduction and the power to seduce cannot rely just on that beauty. It must be poised to reveal yet another layer, possible a darker layer but, at the very least, something more.

That was the impetus for this body of work based on Masuji Ibuse's book *Black Rain*, which is named for the rain that fell after the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. Those who returned to look for their family members found their skin stained from it. And even though they had not been at Ground Zero when the bomb fell, they too would eventually get "the sickness." This illness rendered you a social outcast who needed to be hidden from neighbors and friends.

The exhibition is called "White Rain." As an American, I felt I also had a staining from the atomic bomb, a responsibility for it. There is a sadness in creating all this. I felt as if the white rain was mine to carry, just as the black rain was theirs. On September 11th as I watched victims walk up Broadway away from the devastation, I could not help but think of Butoh. Everyone in the vicinity was covered in white ash, which was literally the pulverization of the buildings, including the ashes of the people who were caught in them. It's still hard to say this, but this image of Butoh, the dance of the dead, born in Japan in 1959 to portray anger and rage after Hiroshima, was now here also. The porcelain white with which the dancers cover themselves ironically exposes them and the humanity of their souls.



Untitled #996S-01 (Sister/Twins), 2001. Mixed media, 111 x 80 x 37 in.

JGC: *In Kabuki, too.*

PC: Yes, but Kabuki is much older. Butoh is about violence, sexuality, repressed anger. In its infancy it was never supposed to be performed in theaters, but in alleyways, in the forests, or on rooftops. It is much wilder, which fits with its character, a total abandonment of the traditional formal Japan.

I think that's what has happened to us. I hope that September 11th will make us better humans. Already New York is a nicer place to live, even though it's much more frightening. Every day when the wind blew the right way, we could smell the smoke. You almost couldn't breathe because of the mixture of emotions that overwhelmed you. I do not believe anyone living here will be able to smell fire again and not have a wave of sickness come over them.

JGC: *You've worked with interns on various projects, but you've also said that you need to develop your work over time, without consulting others. Could you discuss the need to work without consulting others? Or is this still the case?*



Untitled #961S99-01
(Mary/Mary), 1999–2001. Mixed
media,
104 x 84 x 310 in.

PC: I have three assistants, and they're all part time, because they're artists themselves. When we are in the studio, I've asked them not to say anything about my work, on any level. I don't need to know what they think. When you're in your studio, you're at your most vulnerable. I want it to be completely my sensibility. To get to that place—to be able to be free—you have to be completely comfortable with your surroundings. I try to use and trust my own instincts. For myself, I can go to that space, and I know exactly what I need to do. When I'm out in public, finishing the piece, I again go to that place. I've learned where it is. It's that zone, maybe our subconscious, and I trust it, more than I trust anything else.

I'm trying to use that instinct more in my personal life. I think women in particular are given this intuitive instinct. My male sculptor friends know less what I'm talking about when I refer to it. My women friends know exactly. But the tragically humorous part is that we don't trust this, our greatest gift. I can still hear my mother's voice: "You have this incredible instinctual power and you must learn to trust it." So that's what I try to do. Sometimes I don't even look at it, I just make it. That's my collaboration—with the outer limits.

Jan Garden Castro is a contributing editor for *Sculpture*. She is curator/author of *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne* (Japan Museums and Jane V. Zimmerli Museum at Rutgers University, 2002).