

sculpture

December 2009
Vol. 28 No. 10

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org



**Form and
Experience**

\$7.00US/CAN



Clues to the Riddle of Human Experience

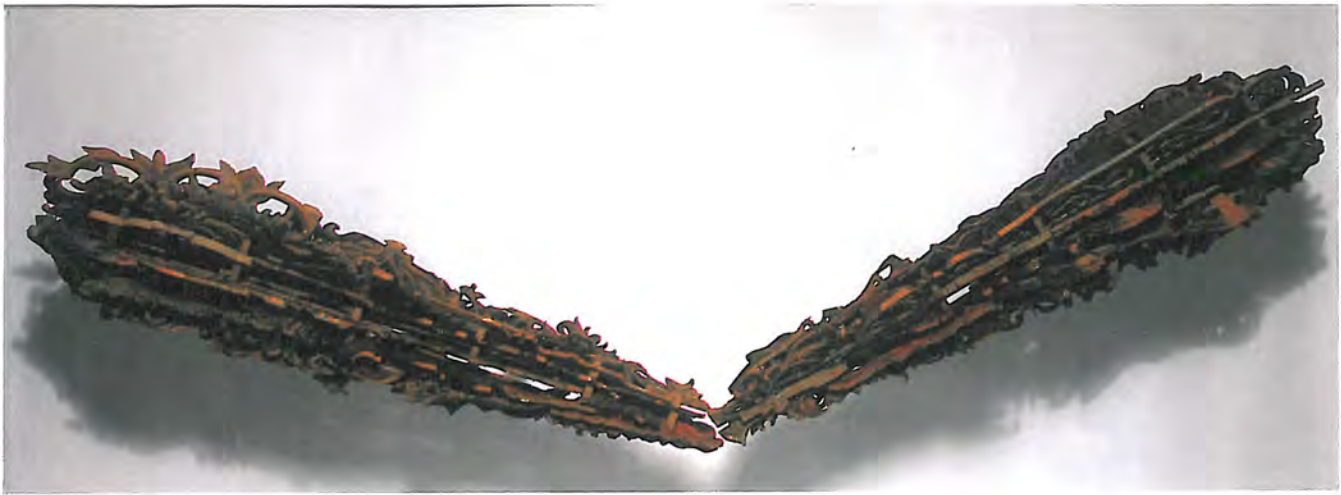
Christine Bourdette

BY LOIS ALLAN



COURTESY THE ARTIST

Asides, 2004-07. Leather, wood, cardboard, pigment, and wax, 44 x 13 x 11 in., each.



Going through the sculptures and drawings in Christine Bourdette's recent mid-career retrospective at The Art Gym on the Marylhurst University campus was like parsing a compendium of artifacts relating to human experience. Almost every one of the 50 sculptures attested to some aspect of the human body, or its presence. There were full figures, parts of figures, tools (of obscure function), animals, edibles and wearables, and abstract forms of mysterious reference but ample association. As

always, Bourdette's superbly crafted sculptures, from the representational to the fully abstract, were charged with ambiguity, mystery, and psychological depth.

Among the formal attributes that make these works so aesthetically satisfying are Bourdette's use of scale, volumetric form, and neutral, natural colors. Her practice of grouping sculptures adds another layer of formal and conceptual complexity. Whether to convey a sense of community through interrelationships or simply to bring about

Daedalus, 1998. Found wood from Indonesian carvings, 21 x 89 x 12 in.

a formal coherence, the arrangements create layered, psychologically provocative content.

Squatting Melissas (1987), an early group of six figures, is as impressive today as it was when it was first shown at the Portland Art Museum. Bourdette was inspired by a journey through Asia, where she observed how people naturally assumed squatting positions, a posture ubiquitous and routine in daily life. Social gatherings, business exchanges, family interactions, in fact, all kinds of communication were accomplished without need of chairs. Back in her Portland studio, she drew on that memory while constructing rough-hewn, rudimentary figures squatting in various attitudes. Their bent legs and arms are formed from found wooden sticks; their bodies and heads are wire mesh partly covered with plaster. Torsos remain open to reveal wooden frame interiors. One figure appears to be speaking to the others; one of the listeners leans back on straightened arms in disinterest. She's turned away from the others, who hold their heads, perhaps listening with skepticism or disbelief.

Although most of Bourdette's figures from this period are sketchily representational, some are closed, more naturalistic forms, though considerably simplified. By eliminating facial features (and in many



Far left: *Near a State of Nature*, from the "Alter Egos" series, 1994. Wood and leather, 32 x 8 x 10 in. Left: *Beloved World, Shrinking World*, 2002. Wood, cloth, leather, and dry pigment, 18.5 x 10 x 8 in.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

pieces, limbs as well), Bourdette focuses on gesture, suggested movement, and pose as vehicles to convey emotion. Two life-sized, closed figures, without facial features, can be identified, at least in regard to their sex, by their anatomy. *Cosmonaut* has two protuberances, his genitals and his tongue, which is sticking out; *Calling Home* has female breasts. Both are constructed with wire mesh and plaster, and the *Cosmonaut's* legs are covered with comics pages. Though enigmatic, these beings obviously convey certain feelings. The male figure's bent head and protruding tongue, plus his straight arms and legs, indicate disgust or revulsion, perhaps at the sight of his strange pants. The female subject of *Calling Home*, with her head tilted up and one hand covering her pelvic area, as if protecting her womb, may feel threatened and in need of help. Typical of Bourdette's work, both figures inspire empathy with their familiar gestures and situations. The title of her retrospective, "Riddles, Bunnyheads, and Asides," gives an apt description of the quiet humor behind her work.

By 1991, Bourdette was exploring abstract forms and moving away from humanoids. Still, her work from this period continues to evince a relationship to human experience. *Mother Molds*, three completely abstract pieces named for their leaning stances, seem to converse with each other. Open slats (originally Venetian blind slats) anchored on shellacked rings reveal interiors consisting of angled posts and criss-crossed configurations of wooden pieces. Although not identical, their similar form and structure contribute to a shared identity. The title suggests a double identity. Like actual mother molds, they seem to make a shield for an inner object; like human mothers, they protect interiors that serve a very specialized purpose.

Written language is the reference for a pair of freestanding sculptures, *Punch and Comma*, while *Echoes*, a wall-mounted group of six abstract pieces, pertains to spoken language. The irregularly shaped sheet metal forms in *Echoes* suggest sound chambers. Misshapen closed ovoids several inches deep, each with a vertical opening in its front side, allude to ears as well as to sound chambers. *Punch and Comma*,

which look like punctuation marks, are also made of sheet metal and wood. About two feet high, they seem to cry out for a text in which to serve.

As the first decade of the new century approached, Bourdette began experimenting with more refined materials: new wood, metals, fabrics, rawhide, and bronze. *Reliance* (1996), for example, is a long, narrow, wall-mounted piece in which black wire creates a cage for a yellow muslin tube 114 inches long. The Bunnyheads, mostly made of wood covered with rawhide, first appeared in the 1990s. The term was coined by Northwest filmmaker Jim Blashfield, who thought that the small sculptures topped with two elongated loops suggested refugees from another world. (He made a short film about that world, which was populated with Bunnyheads.) Bourdette used this image more often in drawing than in sculpture and never gave a clue as to what it meant. As in all of her work, she buries her intent in camouflage. Nothing is explicit: meaning is carried in the histories of her materials, the often peculiar physicality of the works,

Right: *Hamper*, 1998/99. Woven quilt strips, 69 x 44 x 14 in. Below: *Real or Imagined?*, 1995. Rawhide and wood, 20 x 27 x 10 in.





Left: *Reliance*, 1996. Muslin and steel wire, 114 x 16 x 18 in. Above: *Understudies*, 2001. Cotton twill tape and hair, 60 x 45 x 11.5 in.

their aesthetics, and their use of volume, space, and scale. Beautifully crafted no matter what material or technique, Bourdette's ideas, which come out of anthropomorphism and her close observation of shared, easily identified social behaviors, are incorporated in sculptures that compel immediate attention and lingering thought.

Now 57, Bourdette has hit her stride as a fully developed artist. She was born in 1952 (in Fresno, California), earned a BA in art at Portland's Lewis and Clark College in 1974, and since 1976 has exhibited regularly in Portland at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery and occasionally in other cities.

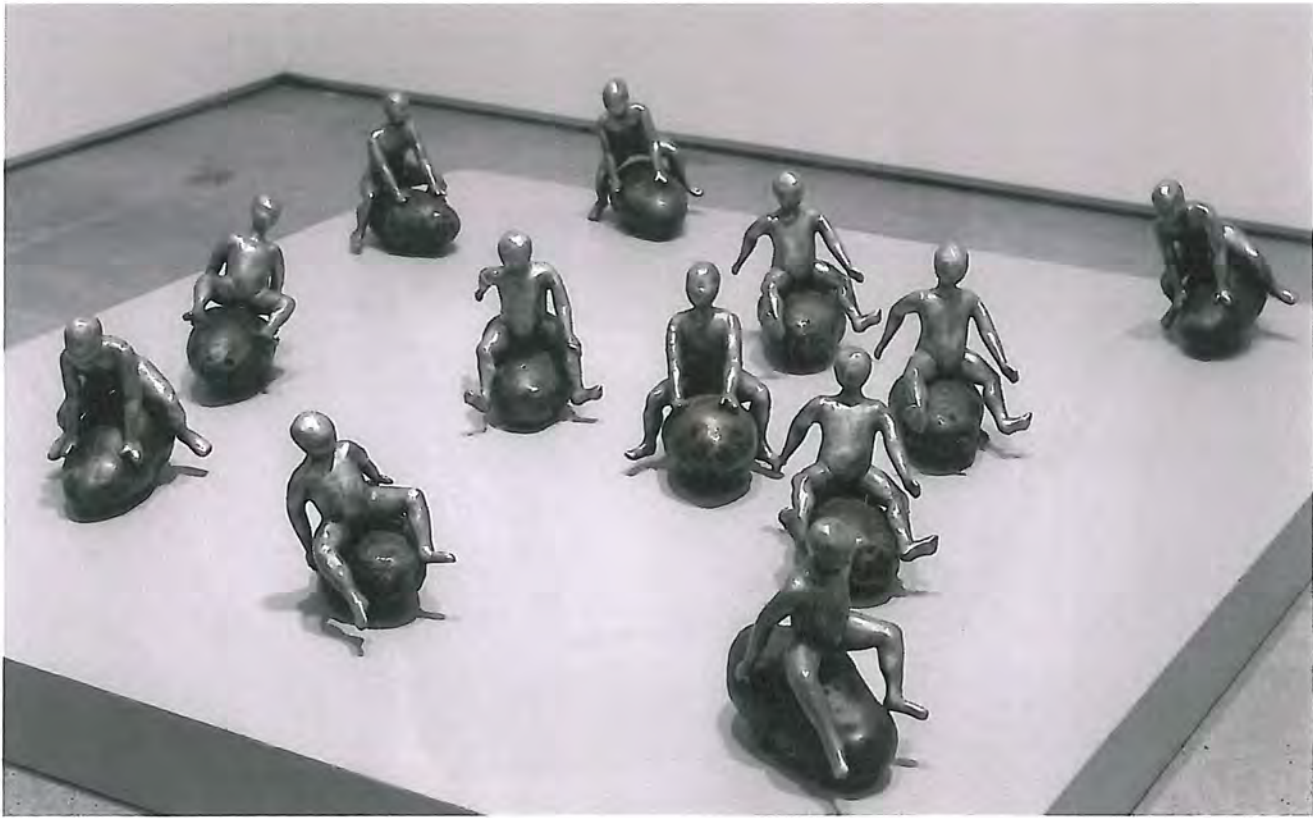
While her favored semi-austere aesthetic reflects the fact that Minimalism dominated the art scene during her formative years, she is obviously not a Minimalist. In fact, it's impossible to categorize Bourdette's work as belonging to any style or movement; her range of thematic ideas, materials, techniques, and formal strategies denies easy classification. Today, she cites her influences as Martin Puryear, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, and especially Eva Hesse for her experimentation with materials, forms, and unusual configurations.

Although three-dimensional objects make up the bulk of Bourdette's work, she also

produces drawings and collaborates with choreographers, filmmakers, and stage performers. She has been awarded public art commissions in Oregon, Washington, Florida, and Arizona. Her most recent commission for the city of Portland, to be finished this year, consists of a series of six very large stacked-stone sculptures with the appearance of ancient cairns. The work will be placed along the light rail system near Amtrak's Union Station.

While involved with the large-scale *Cairns*, Bourdette was also working on very small pieces, all elements in group displays. One, *Fellow Travelers* (2005),

COURTESY THE ARTIST



Above: *Fellow Travelers*, 2005. Cast bronze, 5.5 x 4 x 5.5 in. each. Below: *Waiting in the Wings*, 2001. Steel, cheesecloth, string, wax, and leather, 14 in. diameter.

which consists of tiny nude bronze figures astride potatoes, is as funny as it is mysterious. Quite realistic in appearance, these very active figures seem to be having a wonderful time riding their strange steeds as if they were bucking broncos. They allude to an opinion expressed by Bourdette that we're all in this together, so we might as well make the most of it. Another, ongoing project also consists of small figures. *Listeners* features half figures carved in balsa wood, with flounced skirts rather than legs. The poses, with arms raised and bent at the elbow as if cupping the ears, cause one to wonder if they represent the very human inability, societal as well as individual, to understand each other.

Just after returning from a mid-winter residency at the Jentel Artists' Residency Program in Wyoming, Bourdette spoke of how the magnificent winter landscape affected the drawings that she made there. From a distance, the images appear to be flowing configurations of small circles floating on a white, or near-white, background. Up close, the circles become bird's-eye renditions of human figures—the tops of heads with extremely foreshortened bodies beneath them. In describing these

works as social topography, Bourdette said, "I'm now chewing on the idea of similar topographical mapping in sculptures." The tiny half figures, for example, might be displayed on an undulating surface close to the floor, which will create the aerial perspective.

Evidence of Bourdette's ability, and preference, to work in all scales can be seen in another group of figures, *Asides*, which was produced during the same period as *Cairns* and *Listeners*. The 10 nearly life-size figures,

which lack arms and features, stand in slightly bent positions with heads looking downward. If we assume that together they are searching for something, we can interpret the piece as representing a societal, timeless, nameless search. When asked if her work is autobiographical, Bourdette replied, "I'm trying to say something about all of us."

Lois Allan is a writer who recently moved from Oregon to California.



Artist of Form—and Substance

 lclark.edu/live/news/9778-artist-of-formand-substance

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It was an unusual mime who sparked Christine Bourdette’s fascination with the human form.

“Unlike Marcel Marceau, Franz Reynders taught an insistent style of mime—very abstract and conceptual,” says Bourdette.

Reynders, who taught in Lewis & Clark’s theatre department, was a charismatic force on campus, remembers Bourdette. Although she never studied mime with him, she was captivated by a drawing class he offered. It focused on costume design, using a highly theatrical approach with the gesturing body as a medium.

Bourdette began her career as a painter, but quickly turned to sculpting after noticing that most of her paintings involved spatial concepts. Influences in the early days came from such widely divergent sources as minimalism and folk art.

Over the last three decades, she has become one of the most accomplished sculptors in the Northwest. Her pieces have been included in many private and public collections, including the Portland and Tacoma art museums, as well as public art installations in Portland, Seattle, and Phoenix. An enthusiastic collaborator, she has also worked with a number of choreographers, filmmakers, and other artists.

Bourdette’s consummate dedication to craft and skillful use of found and salvaged materials—including wood, leather, rawhide, rubber, plastic, fabric, and metals—have garnered respect from her clients and the art community. Wit, humor, and intelligence inform her work.



“The compelling issue that has driven my work for over 20 years has been the paradox of the human condition: its ornery, goofy illogic and the fact that we are all in this together,” she says. “My recurring themes include mortality, transformation, mobility, and deception. I love literature and have often been inspired by myths and fairy tales and the ways in which archetypal stories have come to bear as we solve our problems and find our way through life.”

Riddles, Bunnyheads, and Asides, Bourdette’s 2008 exhibition at the Art Gym at Marylhurst University, featured more than 50 sculptures and 6 drawings, created from 1987 to 2008. The exhibition included human figures—such as the *Squatting Melissas*, influenced by her travels in Asia—as well as anthropomorphized bunnies, birds, and elephants. All provided rich commentary on the human condition, in a myriad of quizzical, humorous, provocative ways.



Over the years, the financial rewards associated with public art projects have allowed Bourdette to support herself as an artist. For example, *Time Flies*, a “sequence of hurrying, swarming, flying, and time-related images” (porcelain enamel on steel panels), is on display at the Portland Airport Station, which is part of the Tri-Met MAX Light Rail system.

“I love the collaborative nature of public art—dovetailing on the work of architects, engineers, and government agencies,” she says.

Most recently, she has turned her attention back to drawing—specifically to the subject of maps. She’s enamored with the historical representation of places that are at once literal and abstract, shapes of countries and towns, and how people live and behave in community.

“I love that once a work is complete, I throw it out there and see how people react,” says Bourdette. “I believe in ambiguity and welcome an array of reactions.”

—by *Pattie Pace*

The Chronicle Magazine

Dec 2008 / Jan 2009

Oregon

Christine Bourdette at The Art Gym

Garth Clark, the writer/gallerist/critic, recently gave a talk at the Pacific Northwest College of Art titled "How Envy Killed the Craft Movement." In a funny, incisive and articulate manner, Clark (who has been a proselytizer for ceramics in particular and craft in general for nearly three decades) laid out the reasons for the craft movement's demise. He is of course referring specifically to the line that runs from Victorian England through the various flowerings in the '50s to its apex in the late '70s and '80s, not necessarily the current punk rock/DIY impulses that affect everything from design to contemporary art (see the most recent Whitney Biennial). High craft died, according to Clark, because it wanted to be high art, or at least be invited into the same clubs. The result of the envy fostered production that was neither smart art nor sensual craft. Any artist who came of age in the '80s is bound to be affected by craft's brief ascendancy. Artists such as Ann Hamilton and Janine Antoni grafted a postmodern sense of expanded practice onto an insistence on the sensuality of handwork and materials. In Christine Bourdette's twenty-year retrospective at The Art Gym, *Riddles*, *Bunnyheads* and *Asides*, those craft influences become very acute.

Bourdette's use of material is the first thing to strike the viewer. From the earliest works to her most recent, the material is consistently rough-hewn: wood, plaster, wax, corncobs, and the like. She clearly revels in the physicality of the material as it is. Bourdette's other consistent meditation is the human figure and its proxy, the vessel. It's striking to watch her maturation from the late '80s up to this point. The earlier work still has the

imprimatur of the times; *Riddle Ace* and *Foresight* (both 1987) and *Totem* (1986-87) reflect the interest in neo-expressionist primitivism prevalent in the late '80s. The figures contain some of the subtlety of the later works but still have an unintended awkwardness



Christine Bourdette, *Asides*, 2004-07, leather, wood, cardboard, pigment, wax, 44" x 13" x 11" each, at The Art Gym, Marylhurst University.

to them. There seems to be a conversation going on between the early works of Kiki Smith and Antony Gormley. The large vessel pieces like *Strapless* and *Tattler* (1992) contain that last incandescent moment of the craft movement merging with fine art. Bourdette's poetic sympathy with the tradition of the woven and carved vessel infuses these human-sized sculptures with life. However the influence of artists such as Martin Puryear who fused post-minimalism with craft is inescapable. Through the '90s and up to the latest work on view, one witnesses Bourdette coming into her own. A standout later work is *Asides* (2004-07) in which a group of half-sized anonymous figures huddle and mill about in a crowd. These armless, faceless figures enter the viewer's space in a powerful way. One must confront the scale of the human body. If the vessels are proxies for the figures, these voodoo like figures are proxies for viewers.

Throughout her career, Bourdette's work examines social situations and the pull of community. The most powerful works are groupings such as *Fellow Travelers* (2005), a gathering of several small childlike figures riding bronze potatoes; or *Voracious* (2001), a floor work made of cast bronze geese, pregnant with a nascent threat. In recent years, Bourdette has added other figurative motifs to her work. *Modest Exaggeration* (2002) and *Reach* (2002) use fragmentation and exaggeration to maximize expressiveness. Extremely long arms reach for banana clusters in a clear depiction of desire and longing and in *Beloved World*, *Shrinking World* (2002), a pair of wood and leather hands balances an arch of potatoes. The work seems to be entering a much more personal series of visual metaphors. Another recent cast member is the elephant. *Leviathan* (2001) is composed of a trio of small elephants; they are made from gauze, string, wax and steel and stand on a small wall shelf. The power of the elephants is shrunken by this blind, diminutive huddle. All of the

later work is imbued with a subterranean anxiety that does not exist in the earlier works; these latter pieces exhibit Bourdette at full power, using sculpture's most basic strength to great affect. This is an engagement with a global and very long tradition of the three-dimensional figure. Unlike the two-dimensional image, sculpture elicits a much

more intimate reaction as it exists within the space where we live and walk.

Bourdette is truly deserving of this kind of retrospective. The Art Gym is one of the few venues in the region that would dedicate a space to a mid-career retrospective. The beautiful catalog, with an accompanying essay by Linda Brady Tesner, makes a compelling case for Bourdette. If craft was killed by high art envy, Bourdette demonstrates how fine art benefited from craft envy.

—Daniel Duford

Christine Bourdette: *Riddles*, *Bunnyheads* and *Asides* closed in October at The Art Gym, Marylhurst University.

Daniel Duford is a freelance writer based in Portland.

CHRISTINE BOURDETTE "BIRDS EYE VIEW RECENT DRAWINGS"

shift.jp.org/en/blog/2008/10/christine-bourdette-birds-eye-view-recent-drawings



In conjunction with the exhibition *Riddles, Bunnyheads, and Asides* at the Art Gym at Marylhurst University (September 7 – October 22, 2008), The Elizabeth Leach Gallery presents *Birds Eye View*, an exhibition of recent drawings by Christine Bourdette.

While Bourdette is primarily known as a sculptor, drawing has always been an inherent part of her practice. Gesture and body language, which we interpret and misinterpret, have long been a driving force in Bourdette's sculpture and drawings. This selection of work explores the artist's continued fascination with human beings, crowds, and the dynamics of social interaction, mostly as seen from overhead. Seen from above, these drawn congregations of anonymous figures appear either in random or linear patterns, as social texture and topography, or as individuals in expressive sequences of movement.

Christine Bourdette "Birds Eye View Recent Drawings"

Date: October 2nd – November 1st, 2008

Open: 10:30 – 17:30 (Closed on Monday)

Place: Elizabeth Leach Gallery

Address: 417 N.W. 9th Avenue Portland, OR 97209

Tel: +1 503 224 0521

<http://www.elizabethleach.com>

Text: kazumi oiwa

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Exhibits hint at an elusive, supremely substantial artist

A detail of a work in progress in Bourdette's studio. Bourdette has a retrospective at the Art Gym at Marylhurst University and a new show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

MOTOYA NAKAMURA/THE OREGONIAN



By D.K. ROW | THE OREGONIAN

An interview with artist Christine Bourdette is a frustrating encounter for a reporter. Bourdette, a warm, charming and gracious pixie of a woman, possesses the rare ability of answering your questions without really revealing much about herself.

"They're trying to tell the story of all of us, not just me," Bourdette says about her sculptures, an ingenious melding of folk art, minimalism, conceptualism and plain old smarty-pants thinking. "I'm trying to find a way to say that we are all in this together."

What are these tremendously sophisticated sculp-

tures of "bunnyheads," squatting figurines and little birdies articulating? Many things. All of them are expressions of brilliant craft, for one; others are curious three-dimensional puns; still others seem topical commentaries, lamenting the AIDS epidemic, for example.

Indeed, one of the takeaways of the jam-packed career survey at Marylhurst University's Art Gym, "Christine Bourdette: Riddles, Bunnyheads and Asides," is that Bourdette is a slightly elusive but supremely substantial artist. She's the Northwest's finest observational riddler, but unlike clever artists who revel in making

Please see **BOURDETTE**, Page O14

Bourdette: So good, she can be easy to underestimate

Continued from Page O1

you feel stupid, she never gives the impression that she is trying to be obscure or obtuse. She's laughing with us, not at us.

Do blondes laugh more?

Laughing, you get the feeling from the Art Gym survey spanning more than 20 years, is something Bourdette does often. In "Fellow Travelers," cute bronze figurines straddle and balance precariously atop giant potato shapes as if they were bucking wild horses. In "Nostalgia," three huddled birds patched out of leather and rubber find mimicking neighbors in similarly shaped, cuddly black bananas. And in "Muss," a sassy blond wig tops out a queer, oval shape piece of wood.

"That's the blonde I could never be," quips Bourdette.

What's Bourdette laughing at? Maybe the same big and small things we are laughing at and are disturbed by. The gestures



MOTOYA NAKAMURA/THE OREGONIAN

Few Northwest artists fuse craftsmanship and observant, knowing ideas as brilliantly as Christine Bourdette, caught in her studio with her dog, Sam, and some of her sculptural works in progress.

between people. The way we use our bodies. The way some things look like other things. And let's not forget politics.

"Chris Bourdette laughs as much or more as anyone I know," says Terri Hopkins, the Art Gym director who assembled the show and has known the artist for many years. "But she's not a finger pointer. She's laughing heartily at all of this stuff."

Bourdette's just one of us, she's saying, though the details of a personal biography rarely make themselves known in her work.

A nice, quiet life

Bourdette, 55, was born in Fresno, Calif., and attended Lewis & Clark College, where she graduated in 1974 with an art degree. Since then, she has lived in Oregon, though for two years in the early '80s, Bourdette set up studio in Chicago. "I loved it," she says. "I took to it, and it took to me."

Portland drew her back — actually, it was a relationship. Such drastic moves, Bourdette says, have been rare in life. By her own account, she has had a quiet, modest existence free of upheaval, save traveling a lot as a child because her father — a food technologist — frequently changed jobs. Beyond loved ones and family, her life is simple: She reads, hikes and rafts, goes to her studio almost daily and hangs out with smart, artistic people.

Beginning in the '80s, Bourdette formed part of a close-knit

"Christine Bourdette: Riddles, Bunnyheads and Asides"

Where: Art Gym at Marylhurst University, Oregon 43, 1 mile south of Lake Oswego

Hours: Noon-4 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday

Closes: Oct. 22

Works by Christine Bourdette

Where: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 N.W. 9th Ave.

Hours: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday

Closes: Nov. 1

crew of Northwest artists who, like her, shared a masterful grasp of craftsmanship but were also worldly in their taste and cultural absorption: Christine Clark, Bill Will, Ronna Neuenschwander and Jim Blasfield, among others. Back then, they were the young lions of the scene. Now, most of them are in midstride with fruitful careers that have achieved firm traction in this region but not much beyond it, unfortunately.

For Bourdette, there have been many solo exhibits, particularly with her dealer, Elizabeth Leach, who launched a new Bourdette show Thursday. There have also been collaborations as a set designer with local choreographers. By 1992, when Bourdette was the first artist awarded the prestigious Bonnie Bronson Fellowship, she began receiving the honors bestowed upon venerated artists. In 2000, she was awarded a \$20,000 Visual Artist Fellowship from the Regional Arts & Culture Council.

Now comes The Art Gym show, which opened a few weeks before Bourdette's new Leach exhibit. It's a rich, deserving appraisal that allows the public to embrace — or not — an artist who has been so consistently good it's easy to underestimate her.

The observer and observed

There are several things this show, which arrives with a book and essay penned by curator Linda Brady Tesner, crystallizes about Bourdette and the local scene.

Northwest artists are often accused of being overly concerned with craft. I won't argue whether this point is valid. Rather, I'd declare that very few sculptors here make or produce things as well as Bourdette, something the range of this overstuffed show reaffirms: a strange, mystifying hybrid duck-mermaid shape made out of chopped-up fabric

from a quilt; numerous human-shaped figures made out of all kinds of materials, including wire mesh, wood, plaster, leather and shredded wool.

At times, Bourdette *does* obsessively strive with her use of materials and craftsmanship, as in the crinoline and tulle-based sculptures that look like tutus and bonnets decorating steel baskets. But if it's a Northwest disease, it's one that Bourdette has caught from her greatest influences who happen to be world famous: Martin Puryear, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon and Eva Hesse.

I also think that even though her work varyingly addresses issues of artistic formalism, social behavior, politics and more, Bourdette is fundamentally struggling with the human figure — even when she is making quizzical abstract shapes or her famously ambiguous birds and bunny ears, subjects that recur repeatedly in her oeuvre. But what is the meaning of all of these different figures, which alternately twitch, crouch, bend and crawl?

I think most of these figures are Bourdette or stand-ins for her or projections of how she feels about herself in relation to others and to the world. In her art, Bourdette is the observer and the observed, the looker and the model. That relationship between artist and subject makes me think about something the French realist novelist Gustave Flaubert was quoted as saying about his greatest creation, Madame Bovary: "Madame Bovary, *c'est moi!*"

Christine Bourdette, the ever-observational artist who doesn't disclose much about herself, has actually been telling us a lot about herself all of these years.

It's been great getting to know her.

D.K. Row: 503-294-7654 or dkrow@news.oregonian.com
Also: blog.oregonlive.com/visualarts



Christine Bourdette, *Asides*, 2005, leather, wood, wax, pigment, 44" x 13" x 8" each, at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

Oregon

Christine Bourdette and Mark Smith at Elizabeth Leach Gallery

Fatefully, Christine Bourdette and Mark Smith's exhibitions at Elizabeth Leach opened in the midst of the Katrina maelstrom. In their explorations of the fragile equilibrium of crowds and of public gathering spaces, both artists unintentionally presaged the chaos and tragedy that unfolded in New Orleans in late August and early September.

Whether abstracted or representational, the human form has always been the focus of Bourdette's work, serving through gesture, posture and affect as a barometer of the human condition. The three distinct bodies of sculpture—*Asides*, *Identification* and *Fellow Travelers*—in this exhibition evolved from Bourdette's interest in what she has described as "the psychological, physical and political dynamics" of the crowd. While she cites influences going back to the paintings of Pieter Breughel, Bourdette also studied more current events, including media coverage of last summer's political conventions, and the elements of paranoia and fear in a post-9/11 world. She recorded her thoughts and observations in a series of remarkable and elemental drawings, in which naked, powerless figures hide their eyes, cover their ears, or, in the case of *Believers*, bellow from between cupped hands.

In her sculpture, particularly in the *Asides*, Bourdette translates the primal energy of these drawings into three dimensions. Nine individual figures, meticulously constructed of fine-grained, carefully seamed leather stretched over wooden forms, stand, lean and kneel in eloquent silence. The leather, although

stretched tight as skin, is not fully tailored, so that tabs and raw edges remain.

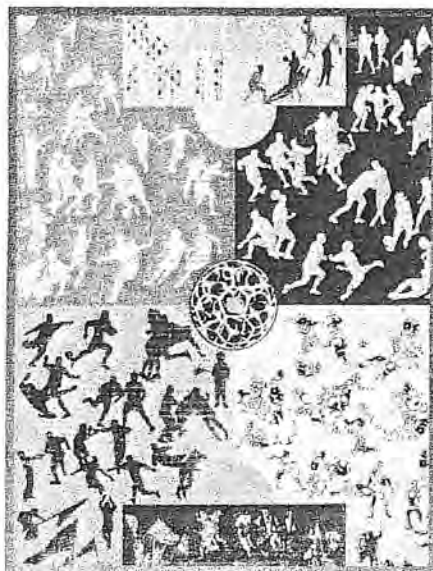
Through the alert set of their heads and the way one bends in to hear another, we sense the intensity of these men and women's interactions. While at first glance reminiscent of George Segal's similar groupings, Bourdette's work is different in two critical ways.

Her sturdy forms lack arms; instead, the raw edges of leather create flaps like short sleeves. And her figures are smaller than life: averaging approximately forty-four inches high. That critical scale difference puts us at a remove from these people. They become symbolic and we can project our own contests and conversations on their faceless, incomplete bodies.

Bourdette's sculpture and drawings amplify many of the themes in Smith's recent works, whose collective title, *Assemblies and Exhortations*, suggests his overarching thesis. In paintings such as *Night Arena* and *Contest*, Smith uses stenciled forms and cutaway views of public stadiums as frameworks for his meditations on the way crowds come together and interact in buildings intended for such rituals as sports events, concerts and conventions.

Smith gathers his stencils—athletes, performers and audience members—from the print media. His fascinating and effective hybrid technique involves collaging pieces of brightly patterned recycled fabric to his canvas, arranging the stencils on this ground, and then applying paint. Thus, the figures are revealed as colorful silhouettes, and the paintings simultaneously reference the immediately accessible imagery of pop art and the chromatic harmonies of American quilts. As Smith has noted, his desire is to "democratize the painting process."

In works such as *Contest* and *Fan Base*, Smith explores the violence that is inherent in any competition. Soccer players become combatants; outside the arena of the basketball game, men appear to be engaged in more deadly confrontations. This sense of an uneasy balance is also at the heart of *Night Arena* where, beyond the oval of the sports stadium and its sea



Mark Smith, *Contest*, 2005, acrylic, recycled fabric on canvas, 62" x 48", at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

of parked cars, the outlines of tangled branches and leaves allude to the forces of a natural world kept at a distance by lights and asphalt.

Smith's show also included related sculptures, made of clear vinyl, hand-sewn and tightly packed with clothing left over from his paintings. The scale

of these pieces made them seem like eccentric luggage and many of the shapes—*Basilica* and *Mosh Pit* were two examples—echoed the architecture in the paintings.

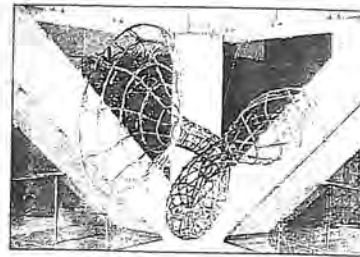
—Prudence Roberts

Christine Bourdette: *Small Universes* and Mark Smith: *Assemblies and Exhortations* closed October 1 at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland.

Prudence Roberts is a freelance writer based in Portland.

visual arts

gallery guide | reviews | events
THE OREGONIAN ♦ A&E ♦ FRIDAY, AUGUST 19, 2005



Many local public artists work frequently outside Portland. Tad Savinar, for instance, has completed some major public art and design projects across the country – but comparatively few here in recent years.

Sculptor Christine Bourdette also has made public art pieces in Portland. Her latest, however, is in Seattle, part of a \$5 million renovation of the Bank of America Tower.

Earlier in the month, her cast bronze piece on the east side of the lobby was unveiled. Composed of sprouting bud and flower shapes, "Bloom Cycle" **(pictured)** symbolizes blossoming life and offers the busy work force coming in and out of the building a bit of natural beauty, albeit cast in bronze.

Bourdette's piece is not the only artwork introduced with the new renovation of the 76-story tower. On the west side of the lobby is Seattle artist Dan Webb's sculptural composition "Heads Up." *Bank of America Tower, 701 Fifth Ave., Seattle.*

The Portland Art Center keeps building its small but loyal audience with monthly shows and other activities. Earlier in the month, it held a sale that raised roughly \$3,000. Executive Director Gavin Shettler is even contemplating a move from Southeast Portland to another space in Old Town.

On Saturday evening the center ends the run of its latest installation art exhibit by Jason Frank and Andy Brown, "Psychogeographical Maps." Shettler is throwing another shindig to celebrate the occasion. *7-10 p.m. Portland Art Center, 2045 S.E. Belmont St.*

—D.K. Row

ARTSRODEO

Stitch by Stitch

Elizabeth Leach Gallery

When needlework, stitching, and sewing first entered the fine arts landscape (as opposed to the applied or decorative arts) it was perhaps not surprisingly introduced by a generation of women in the late 1960s. In a time more drastically polarized along the gender lines than now, artists such as Eva Hesse, Bea Nettles, and Lynda Benglis began to create work that trounced the idea of "women's work" (knitting, darning, and decorating). Soon afterwards, in response to the ultra-macho artistic personas perpetuated by Richard Serra and company, male artists began to employ more "feminine" approaches to creating art, and soon we saw Richard Tuttle making cut felt pieces, and Keith Sonnier using gauze and flocking to post-minimal ends. A decade or two later, when it began to be hip to be pitiful, and I'm-a-loser-baby-so-why-don't-you-kill-me was a dominant mindset among artists before Beck ever sang it, Mike Kelley was darning together bundles of thrift-shop stuffed animals and sewing felt banners that proclaimed "Pants Shitter & Proud—PS. Jerk-Off Too."

Now, in our relentlessly image-driven culture in which icons, symbols, and techniques are being sampled and reconfigured without much, if any, reference to their original meanings and contexts, it's not surprising to see a new wave of artists use needle and thread to create art with radically different results. *Stitch by Stitch*, at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, showcases twelve artists ranging from young Portlanders to elder patriarchs, such as Louise Bourgeois, who are using textiles and stitching in a fine-arts context, and in ways completely unexpected.

One of the most surprising uses of needle and thread came from New Yorker Rob Wynne, whose portraits of Picasso, Dalí, Mozart, and Byron looked like ink line drawings but were actually thread sewn onto vellum. Most engrossing was the visible "underside" of the drawings—the tangles and knots of thread in back of the vellum that created a dense web of stringy pentimento. Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Le also used thread as a drawing agent in his ghostly white fabric piece. Le is best known for his photographic works, in which he literally weaves large-format photographs together into dizzying meditations on violence and spirituality. In *Stitch by Stitch*, he deviates on



VISUAL REVIEW



ART: CHRISTINE BOURDETTE

his technique, but remains thematically true to his better-known work. On a stretched white damask cloth, faces appear in white thread, barely visible to the viewer. They appear to be anonymous young men, but the numbers around their neck betray their fate—they are prisoners of the Khmer Rouge being sent to their deaths.

One of my Leach Gallery favorites, Christine Bourdette, was included, with one of her quizzical and evocative sculptures, "Reach." An arm at least six feet long reaches for an antlered bunch of bananas overhead. The leather that is wrapped around the form of the arm has the stitching of an old catcher's mitt, but also a flesh-like pathos that brings the horrors of Ed Gein to mind.

Mark Newport got back to some of those gender roles discussed earlier with his quirky embroidery work. Newport took resolutely "boy stuff"—comic books and Betty Page cards—and enhanced them with his own stitching. On an old *Punisher* comic book cover, for instance, Newport embroidered Punisher's outfit directly on the illustration. For good measure, he outlined the comic's title in blue and white thread. He also created "Freedom, Bedcover," a five-by-seven-foot quilt of comic book pages, also selectively decorated. Definitely a twist on what little boys are up to in those clubhouses after school. Another young artist, Katherine Nelson, just received her MFA from PSU and got a nice little rub in this show with the inclusion of five pieces, including a few books, a large multi-paneled wall piece, and "Harvest," a supremely inviting floor sculpture. "Harvest" is about three feet tall, looks like a mutant muppet, and smells like the best afternoon of your life. Its bottom half is a patchwork of cornhusks that have been dipped in beeswax, then stitched together to create its round form and aroma. The top half of the piece is a mess of floppy maroon cotton tubes that look like dreadlocks or alien tentacles.

I have to admit that when I heard about this show, my eyes didn't exactly light up. I expected a redundant show with women making dollies with appropriated quotes about how women should behave, and guys pathetically darning potholders with googly eyes on them. I did not expect this wealth of diverse and mature work, and left wishing the show was even larger and more comprehensive. Perhaps a sequel next Christmas? CHAS BOWIE

Regional Arts & Culture Council's Individual Artist Fellowships 2000



CHRISTINE BOURDETTE

Christine Bourdette's sculptural "artifacts"-- indeterminate vessels, vehicles, and humanoids -- owe their existence not to some remote archeological site but to the originality of their creator. In her work, however, nothing is explicit, much less didactic: significations are veiled in the histories of her materials, in the mystery of the interiors of the forms, and in their peculiar physicality.* The panel recommended Christine for RACC's Fellowship because of her great artistic vision, her extraordinary range and treatment of materials, and the overall strength and inspiration of her studio work. Christine will use the Fellowship to buy a year's time to focus more exclusively on studio work and to experiment with bronze outside the context and constraints of commissioned work.

*Adapted from "Contemporary Arts in the Northwest" by Lois Allen

The Individual Artist Fellowships are intended to honor and support artists of high merit, and to allow artists substantial, concentrated time to sustain or enhance their creative process. Last year performing artists Obo Addy and Mary Oslund received the prestigious awards. The next Fellowship grant cycle will recognize Literature and Media Arts.

The Regional Arts & Culture Council wishes to thank the following Fellowship Program panelists: Emily Ginsburg, Michelle Ross, Louis Mateo, Stephen Hayes, Rachel Hibbard, Rae Mahaffey, Deborah Horrell, Mary Kay Guth, Kay Slusarenko, Richard Kraft, Darcy Edgar, Ed Carpenter, Rita Robillard, Terri Hopkins, Norie Sato, Beth Sellars, Larry Thomas and Cynthia Addams, Chair.



Regional Arts &
Culture Council

Serving the Communities of Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington Counties
RACC is a non-profit 501 (c) 3 corporation

What are you working on?

Christine Bourdette: Drawing for a start

In the process-heavy medium of sculpture, preparation is everything. And for most sculptors, the preparation begins with drawings.

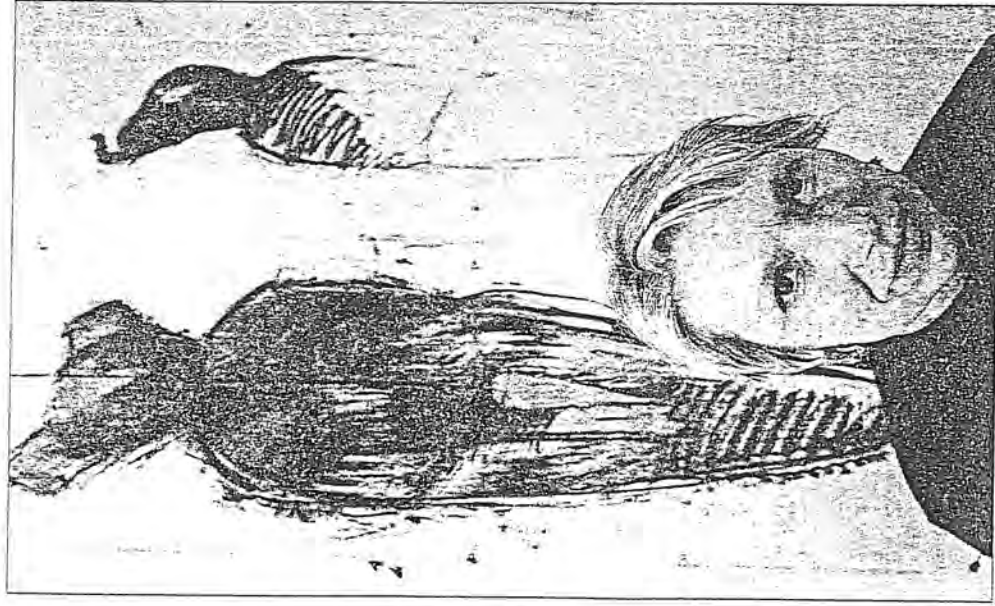
Few local sculptors use drawings as extensively and as well as Christine Bourdette. But for Bourdette drawings aren't mere preliminary studies. Possessing the same wit, sense of humor, anthropological suggestiveness and post-pop sensibility as her well-known sculptures, Bourdette's drawings stand on their own as compelling artworks.

In 1992, Bourdette was the recipient of the first Bonnie Bronson Fellowship, awarded in memory of the late artist who died in a climbing accident. And recently, Bourdette, 47, received one of the two much-coveted Regional Arts and Culture Council Visual Arts Fellowships, which are awarded to veteran members of the visual arts community for at least 10 years of artistic distinction and service. (The other winner was photographer Terry Treutlein.) The \$20,000 cash fellowships are the largest single grants awarded locally to visual artists and are to be used to fund a project over the next year.

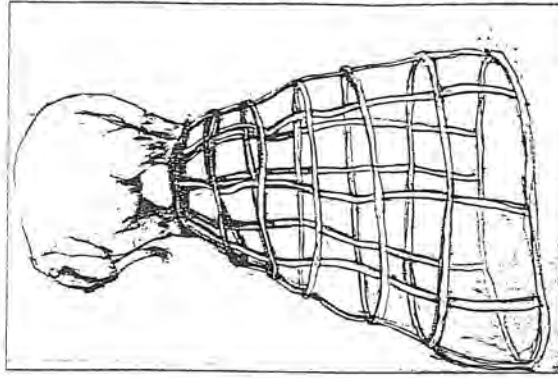
Bourdette, of course, plans to make sculptures, experimenting with two relatively new materials for her — bronze and cast iron — instead of the softer materials, wood and leather, that she usually favors. But before the sculptures begin to take shape, she's once again gone to the drawing board — literally — to draw.

— D.K. ROW

Christine Bourdette, shown here in her studio, is using her new grant money to make sculptures out of bronze and cast iron. Two preliminary drawings, titled "Sages," are in the background.



PHOTOS BY MARY BONDAROWICZ



Before it becomes a sculpture, it's a drawing: "Fragile Circus 2," a charcoal drawing by Christine Bourdette.

Christine Bourdette talks about drawing

I make a lot of drawings as a way of working towards a sculpture. I've learned that drawing really enriches the sculptural process. It gives me a sense of where it's all going. I've worked with the figure a lot in the past; sometimes it's been more abstract, sometimes less. But I've always thought of the figure as a vessel — hence a lot of the forms I use are vessel-like. The things a vessel can contain, in particular a form suggestive of the human figure, can suggest what humans embody or contain.

In a way, I think it makes sense that it veers into animal forms. As I was drawing, I landed on this image of an elephant. I've always liked it because I've always liked images that embody opposites: The elephant is endangered, but it's also a symbol of strength, too, the way it interacts with our world as part of a circus or being hunted. It's in a precarious situation. I'm at the point where I'm using drawings where the elephant is the figure, but I also have a drawing where the elephant is the cage.

I'm also doing these drawings for the sake of the drawings. The more I've drawn, the better the drawings have gotten. There's a whole lot of other stuff here. It's a relief in one way because there's an immediate gratification you get from drawing that you don't get from sculpture, which is so labor-intensive and takes so long by comparison.

I need to think of them as jokes in a narrative sense, but more in a visual way. It's my personality. I tend to be a fairly optimistic person. But I look for the dark things as well. A sense of humor is a way of surviving adversity. I tend to not draw on my own personal experience. Let me put it this way: I don't tell personal stories. The always looked outside. Art is definitely about communication, making some connection with other people. I'm not interested in telling my story. I'm more interested in the human story, other people's story.

My sculptures are usually around human size in scale. If I take this elephant image and transform it into a sculpture, do I want to make something elephant-sized? I'm going to translate this into a sculpture but not into a literal scale. It may not look like it literally at all. I'm just working things out.

The idea of the fellowship is to let me experiment with the casting process, with bronze and possibly cast iron. Each one has a different limitation. I'm interested in the bronze because the structural part is in the material. I'm interested in playing around with new materials while making the kind of forms I'm used to making. Now my sculptures can be made out of these sturdy, permanent outdoors materials. I love cast iron as a material because of its heaviness and texture, its rudimentary quality.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Arts fellowships go to Bourdette and Toedtemeier

The **Regional Arts and Culture Council** has awarded its first **Visual Arts Fellowships** to two longtime artists: sculptor **Christine Bourdette** and photographer **Terry Toedtemeier**. The \$20,000 fellowships will help fund a continuing project over the next year. Bourdette will focus on studio work and experiment with bronze sculpting; Toedtemeier will work on prints that will form the basis of two books.

Forty-two applicants were considered for the fellowships, which rotate among the different arts disciplines. Last year, the fellowships for the performing arts went to musician **Obo Addy** and dancer **Mary Oslund**.

Artistic merit and achievement over at least a decade and an active role in the Portland art community were the main criteria for the awards. Bourdette, represented by the Elizabeth Leach Gallery, is a well-regarded studio sculptor and public artist who received the first Bonnie Bronson Fellowship in 1992, given in honor of the late artist to an artist of standing and committed community involvement. Toedtemeier is one of the region's pre-eminent photographers, best known for his documentation of the Pacific Northwest's geological landscapes. Toedtemeier is also the curator of photography at the Portland Art Museum and was a co-founder of the Blue Sky Gallery.

— D.K. Row

ENTERFELLOWSHIP

VISUAL ARTS

BY KATE BONANSINGA

743-2122 EXT. 312



Up and Away: Christine Bourdette's *Daedalus*

Two excellent exhibitions by Portland female artists pay indirect tribute to the late Bonnie Bronson.

Women of Distinction

Bonnie Bronson was a well-recognized figure in the Portland art community of the late 1970s and '80s. With her wall constructions, paintings and drawings, she attained a public stature that eluded many of her female contemporaries. A foundation was created in her name after her accidental death at the age of 50 on the slopes of Mount Adams; each spring it awards a Bonnie Bronson Fellowship Award to a female artist of distinction living in Portland.

The eighth recipient, Harlem-born Adriene Cruz, who is nationally known for her work in textiles, accepted the honor on March 29. The ceremony took place, as it does each year, at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, where a few of Bronson's pieces enlivened the rear gallery. *Chac VI*, a carved-wood wall sculpture, painted green, blue and reddish-orange, with just a splash of yellow, looks like a fantastic ship sailing from the Far East. *Nepali Windows*, a series of abstract watercolors with a similar palette, references inviting, exotic landscapes.

While Bronson's work was an obvious choice to set the stage for the commemoration, Leach's two other solo shows, which are still on view, were equally appropriate. Both **Christine Bourdette** (who won the Bronson Award in 1992) and Susan Harlan are laudably accomplished

women who live in Portland.

Christine Bourdette titles her show of sculptures and drawings *Sustenance*. Images of potatoes, human figures and sets of wings recur throughout. Wings are prominent in two pieces that draw on the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus. The wall-mounted *Daedalus* is a club-like form set on its side and paired

with a three-dimensional mirror image. Constructed from old, decorative wood molding, it's an odd set of wings, awkward in its weight but powerful in its promise. *Icarus* sits on the floor, like two sculptural infinity signs crossed at their centers. The wood that composes it is charred, like the wings of its namesake.

In *Icons*, a miniature cast replica of the ancient Greek sculpture *Winged Victory* sits next to a bowling-pin form with rabbit ears. The latter, one of Bourdette's signature forms over the past several years, is covered in stitched rawhide. In this pairing, an icon of history and femininity is balanced by a humble, comic alter ego. Humility is represented by the image of the potato, which appears in several of the drawings. In one, a graceful, white-winged figure is surrounded by this dirty root vegetable, plentiful and substantial. With such grounding, she can fly free and high.

Susan Harlan likewise represents that which lies below and above us.

>>>

Sustenance by Christine Bourdette
Place and Language: *Passing from Hand to Hand* by Susan Harlan
Elizabeth Leach, 207 SW Pine St., 224-0521
Ends April 17

Past Bonnie Bronson Fellowship Award recipients include Christine Bourdette, Judy Cooke, Nana D'Agostino, Judy Hill, Carolyn King, Ronna Neuwenschwander and Lucinda Parker.

Down and Dirty: Susan Harlan's *Archaeological Site 3: Lower Yantze*



Susan Harlan:
Deadlines by Day,
Paintings by Night
 is currently on view
 at Clark College's
 Archer Gallery.
 It includes the
 artist's early trial
 drawings, travel
 journals and recent
 studio paintings.

continued from page 57

Her layered paintings in ink on linen over a gessoed panel are abstracted maps or charts, some of the earth and others of the heavens. The artist spent last summer in Turkey and Greece and visited several archaeological digs. Some of the paintings that sprang from this experience indicate overviews of the gridded sites; others, such as *Fresco Night*, reveal the dim light of a starry night sky. In *Sita: Paestum* a carved outline of a figurative form is filled with squiggles of life. *Passing from Hand to Hand* includes a reference to

human ribs or lungs and a spinal column, a favorite subject from Harlan's past work. Though her palette is dark, tending toward blacks, browns and deep grays, a bit of color appears in a few of the pieces. *Veil I* and *Veil II*, placed inconspicuously in the gallery, are the smallest but strongest pieces, with lighter hues and livelier lines.

The exhibitions are conceptually compatible. Both speak of the importance of getting one's footing, of knowing one's history in order to chart and sustain a life course. They're also aesthetically compatible:

Both artists use primarily neutral colors, peppered with occasional bits of brightness, and both maintain a formal, considered quality. The labor and thought that went into each piece, and into the overarching themes between them, rings clear.

These artists have chosen different paths to making their marks on the world. Bourdette has successfully completed several public art projects and is currently working with ZGF Architects on the design of the airport MAX line. (The canopies at each stop are her focus, and she'll also create several works of art for the

terminal station.) Susan Harlan is a professor of art at Portland State University, and her aesthetic impact on her students has been obvious since she arrived in Portland from the East Coast about six years ago. But both are united in having chosen to represent some of life's polarities in their art: Bourdette reveals the earthbound crumbliness of the potato and the feminine beauty of a Venus poised for flight; Harlan portrays the sectioned-off earth and the expansive sky, one of the last things that Bonnie Bronson saw on her final ascent of Mount Adams. **WV**

visual ARTS

Through a trial by fire

Sculptor Christine Bourdette explores the tensions of duality in her latest witty sculptures

By D.K. ROW

Special writer, *The Oregonian*

Few local artists' work embodies the virtues of intelligence, wit and humor as well as those of sculptor Christine Bourdette. Yet the biggest problem with the artist's previous exhibition, in 1996, was what one critic aptly described as a lack of struggle in her work. For all its virtues Bourdette's quirky constructions — reminiscent of mock bowling pins and little bunny ears — relied too much on the shallow and the pithy: Beneath the smart veneer was just a witty, throw-away one-liner.

In her latest show at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery, little sense of a mighty internal struggle is evident — pain isn't necessary to make great art, though it may help. But Bourdette seems to have set out to more concretely address ideas that floated only prettily on the surface in her last show.

Called "Sustenance," the exhibit comprises several sculptures that reveal dual meanings and tensions that arise from dichotomous constructions. With Bourdette, opposites not only attract, they live together and, in the right instances, flourish like little bunnies.

So, in "Icarus" two large, rabbit-ear constructions made out of wood cross to form what could be giant oars from a ship. But the comic ordinariness of the objects is elevated by a small last step, the burning of the surfaces to a flinty charcoal, thus imbuing them with a gravitas earned through a symbolic trial by fire.

Similarly, in "Crib," an oversize, wood-crafted bowling pin seems merely like an object of containment. It is, but with a funny hitch that to a degree usurps its serious purpose: Inside the winding, cage-like sculpture — whose lone bunny ear rises vulnerably — is a basketful of dried corn on the cob.

In the show's funniest work, "Hamper," a huge blanket of packing cloth has been cut into strips, reassembled into a figure that vaguely resembles a question mark, which has been hung on the wall. There it sits, a stately piece of stripped cloth if ever there was such a thing, looking like a big fish lost in dry land as a few strips straggle limply near the floor like a tail.

To say the least, these are exceptionally made and

review

Christine Bourdette

WHERE: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 207 S.W. Pine St.

WHEN: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through April

Mel Katz

WHERE: Laura Russo Gallery, 805 N.W. 21st Ave.

WHEN: 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays, through March 27

smartly conceived objects. They mix slick and strenuous craftmaking with deep and funny thinking to produce some serious works of kitsch — a duality that the artist surely is happy about. Critics and collectors also will be happy with this show.

Katz's epiphany

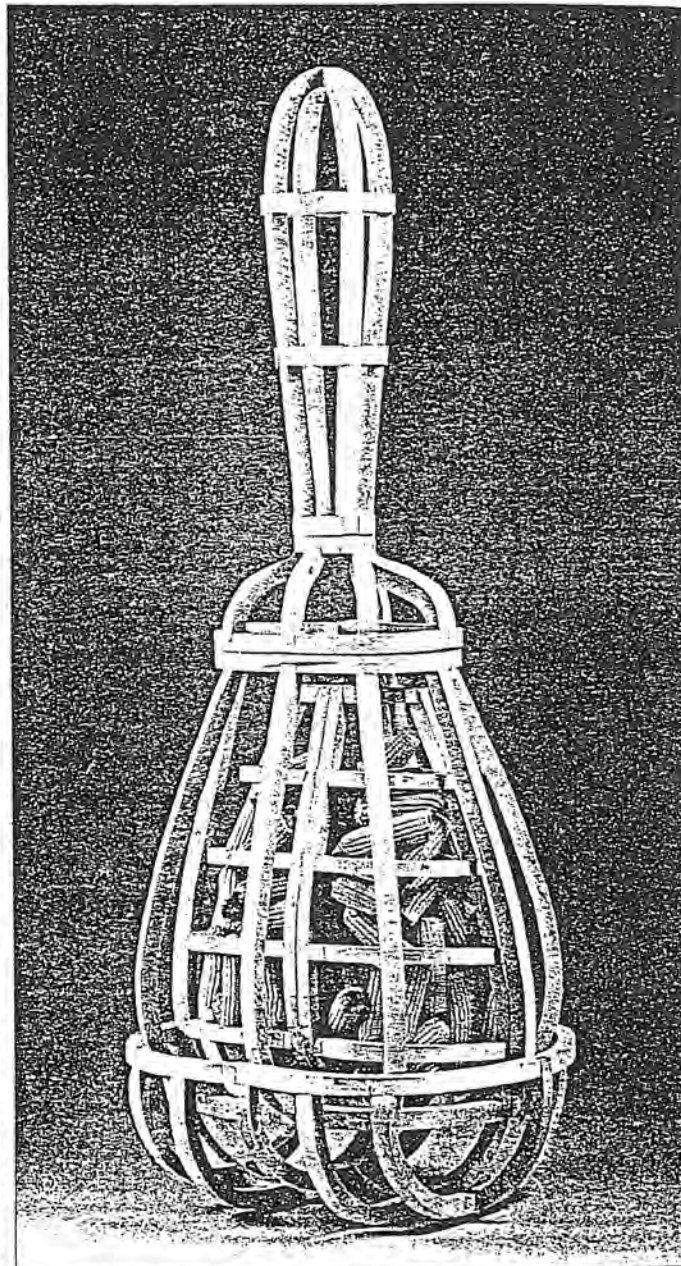
These are celebratory days for one of Portland's most influential artists, Mel Katz. This month, Portland State University honored Katz for a lifetime of teaching and making art, gathering works by 47 past students for one exhibit and assembling a selection of his own work from a 30-year period in another exhibit.

But in a separate event from the goings on at PSU, Katz is presenting a new exhibit of steel sculptures at the Laura Russo Gallery.

Perhaps the most telling characteristic about these magisterial works is their collective sobriety. Indeed, the sculptures, which were created in part by use of computer programs and laser technology, retain the artist's trademark playfully ecstatic curves and linear forms influenced by abstract expressionists.

But for an artist who began as a painter with an equally free-flowing sense of color and whose sculptures were frequently hampered by their glitzy colors, the new sculptures are, by comparison, visually tame. In fact, in one way the Brooklyn transplant seems to have finally settled down into a more calm Northwest state of mind.

That's mostly good because it emphasizes the one thing Katz's art has long been about: a three-decade-long search to reconcile painting conventions with three-dimensional sculptural processes. Now, for Katz, sculpture seems to have finally



GREG KOZAWA

produced its own set of formal problems and virtues.

Knowing this, the most compelling work in the Russo show is "Alphabet," a series of familiarly shaped pieces of steel lined on the wall like a group of individual symbols — or an alphabet. They're elegant, simple and beautiful, particularly if you know that Katz's father was a tailor whose cut-out paper clothing designs littered the walls of

his home. Turns out, Dad and the garment trade — not Arshile Gorky or such minimalists as Donald Judd — were Katz's biggest influence.

For an artist who was often better known for his accomplishments outside the studio (besides teaching, Katz co-founded the historic Portland Center for the Visual Arts), what an appropriately ironic personal legacy that is.

Christine Bourdette combines high craft with an idiosyncratic approach to form in "Crib," a 72-inch-high sculpture of wood and corn.

PORTLAND, ORE.

Christine Bourdette at Jamison/Thomas

A Portland artist who has been showing since the mid-'70s, Christine Bourdette gave this recent exhibition of wood sculptures and pastel drawings the apt and unassuming title, "Devices." It is, in her words, "about the contrivances we create for weighing and measuring

Christine Bourdette: *Chicken or Egg*, 1994, wood, 45 by 44 by 6 1/2 inches; at Jamison/Thomas.



ourselves in the world, about literally and figuratively trying to get a handle on the complicated aspects of human endeavor." In several sculptures, a wooden rod runs between two objects in a scalelike arrangement. Another group of vertical works consists of forms that look like clubs or tools or heads. All the sculptures are fixed to the wall and are made from cleanly cut and smoothly sanded natural wood with a pristine and direct beauty.

In *Comparing Apples and Oranges*, a bowling-pin shape crowned by elliptical ears resembles a rabbit. This poignant and humorous character recurs in Bourdette's works. Here it is balanced by a weighty, spiked club. Both rest in basket-like vessels attached to the ends of the rod. Whereas the rabbit seems lithe and mobile, capable of springing free from its nest, the club's spikes poke through the basket, fixing the weapon in place. Does this pairing represent the clever, swift hare poised against a hindered rival? Or is this a bunny of the *Playboy* sort, in which case the club would be masculine? In *Hurry Up* the bunny seems more correctly associated with Easter, springtime and beginnings. Its partner across the pivot point is a wooden hourglass, suggesting the inexorable effects of time. In *Chicken or Egg*, a carved funnel form is weighed against a caged egg. The egg, in its fresh, uncluttered incipience, is heavier, tipping the scale against what reads, in the context, as a tornado of adult-life distractions and complications. Here the cage seems to protect.

The five vertical sculptures may also be about a loss of innocence. Each consists of half of a solid oval shape (head) mounted on a vertical rod (body). *Domino's* head is covered by a wooden cage that looks like the protective mask of an ice-hockey goalie. One might also think of a muzzle or a false front. From this sober facade of maturity the bunny ears shoot out like a bit of resurgent childishness. Or, if the ears are associated with femininity, perhaps the masked head refers to the masculine qualities that women adopt in order to be taken seriously.

Bourdette's pastels relate to the sculptures, although they are gestural and less resolved.

Whereas the sculptures are ironic, touched with humor, the pastels are humorous, spiked with irony. Overall, the exhibition alludes to life's checks and balances. Whether the rabbit is taken as a metaphor for innocence, action or womanhood, its experiences are darkly comical and have, one imagines, bitter-sweet repercussions.

—Kate Bonansinga

Art in America
March, 1995

Sculpture shows: bodies of art

Christine Bourdette and Dana Lynn Louis mount very different but enchanting exhibits

By JOEL WEINSTEIN
Special writer, The Oregonian

Of this month's several interesting sculpture shows, Christine Bourdette's at Jamison/Thomas Gallery and Dana Lynn Louis' at Laura Russo offer the same enchantment. Out of the most common materials from the mundane world of construction, they have created companies of simple figures whose forms, postures and skins suggest the most poignant endeavors of the human heart and flesh.

As successful as both artists are at creating highly evocative works from almost nothing, their artistic realms are remarkably different.

Bourdette's gathering is airy and elegant, a world of bodily talk that reveals rich inner lives. She uses basic, cheap materials — strips of lath, hunks of plywood, found pieces of corroded sheet-metal — but they are so attentively placed and worked that every line, every surface counts in her telling of tales.

On one of the walls of the gallery is a row of knoblike forms made of sheet-metal. Each consists of a collar and an ovoid face with a small opening, a yawning slit that could represent any of the body's orifices.

Physical comparisons notwithstanding, it is actually language that may be the source for this work. Bourdette once mounted a gallery installation, based on phonetic legends, that was as complex as a novel. And it is easy to construe this latest piece as a chorus of garrulous mouths.

With subtle variations in the shapes and tilts of the faces and the configurations of the mouths, each piece speaks a different way: loud-mouth, earnest philosopher, plaintive complainer. They are as alike as volumes on a bookshelf, and as different.

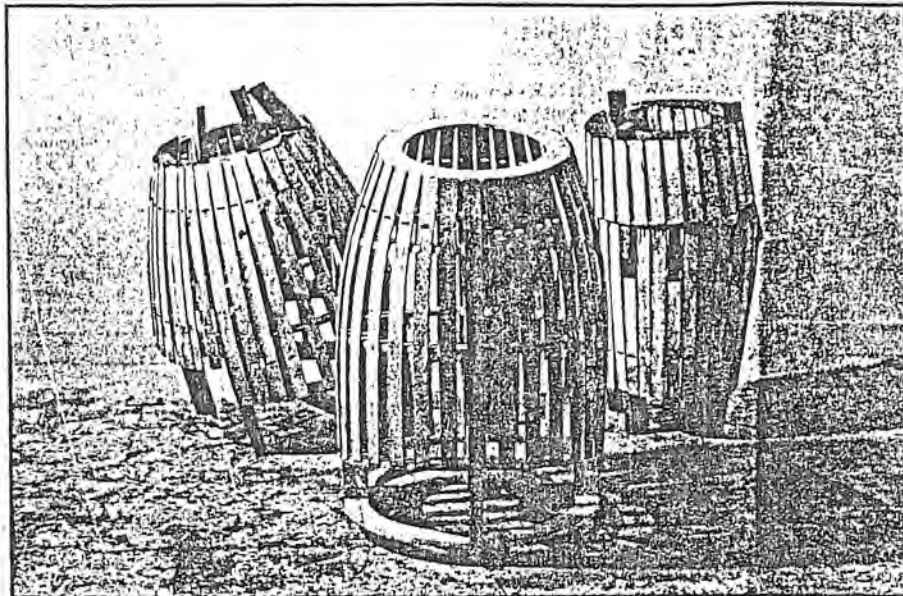
At center gallery are three fat barrel-forms made of stout wooden hoops and lath staves: "Mother Mold" Nos. 1, 2 and 3. They are angled so that they seem to beckon with the magnetic pull that mothering exerts, though they are mothers of radically different kinds.

No. 1, for instance, is restrained and sensible, an orderly arrangement of neatly spaced, unpainted staves, very sturdy, very upright.

No. 2, on the other hand, leans boldly forward. Its hoops are darkly stained and shellacked or painted white. The hem of its skirt of staves describes a gracefully looping arc, and the staves themselves show unpredictable gaps and overlappings.

When you look down the mouth of this piece, you discover another astonishing dimension. Within this complexly nuanced sculpture — it is both skeleton and skin, inside and outside — there are different-colored sections of hoops whose varying tangents and intersections create their own intricate world of geometric abstraction. This mother's inner life, too, is surprising and heady; a revelation of how keenly Bourdette sees, hears and thinks.

Spent forms



VISUAL ARTS

Christine Bourdette

WHERE: Jamison/Thomas Gallery

ADDRESS: 1313 N.W. Gilman St.

HOURS: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays

CLOSING: Feb. 27

ADMISSION: Free

Dana Lynn Louis

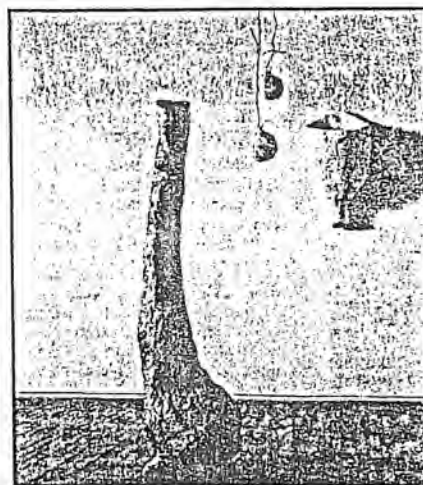
WHERE: Laura Russo Gallery

ADDRESS: 805 N.W. 21st Ave.

HOURS: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays

CLOSING: Feb. 27

ADMISSION: Free



DAVID BROWNE
Above: Christine Bourdette's "Mother Mold" occupy center stage at the Jamison/Thomas Gallery. Her show "Sequences and Assemblies" runs through Feb. 27. Left: Dana Lynn Louis' mixed media "Works In Progress" at Laura Russo Gallery have a surprisingly animated feel to them.

mon gestures that speak for the heart and intellect, Dana Lynn Louis's show is decidedly more creaturely. Her installation at Laura Russo looks at first glance like a choreography of fleshy beings bubbling out of the primordial ooze; organisms revealing themselves like unspoken anxieties. You might have the unsettling impression of viewing internal organs that have somehow found the light of day.

Louis' fragrant work is made of thinly painted plaster, beeswax, wire, cellophane, doghair and other common effluvia. More than 40 pieces fill the gallery in distinctly theatrical poses. They lie on the floor and dangle from the ceiling and walls like membranous sacs with vents and long-necked mouths, resembling nests, ancient vessels, sea creatures, living organisms, vacated exoskeletons; things with animal life, subterranean residue, great antiquity. Like Bourdette's show, some of the pieces are paired in postures of communion, although of a darker sort.

One chalk-white plaster bag-form hangs listlessly from the wall on a rope, perhaps exhausted by expelling the hairy ball that lies near the vent at its bottom end. Looking on, a long-necked greenish bulbousness arches the fist-sized knob of its head in an attitude of wonder and pride.

Then there is the two-legged torso-

whose blotched red skin implies a kick from the piece that hovers above it.

Everything here appears to be shaped by hand, and some of the pieces are crudely rigged with rope or wire pushed through still-wet plaster. For the most part, the forms look supple or spent, primitive rather than just roughly done.

One of the most impressive consists of a low platform — 15 feet long, very near to the floor — lined with 31 little bladders, double vented, smooth-skinned, as yellow as plucked chickens in a Mexican market. With their sweet beeswax smell, their protuberant fullness and their orderly arrangement, they seem like things recently alive, now collected and awaiting further use.

Perhaps as much in memory of the crowd-pleasing erotica extravaganzas at the late Northwest Artists' Workshop as in celebration of Valentine's Day, the Portland art world uses February to mount an unusual number of shows devoted to sex. For an act that depends so much on spontaneity and imagination, this ritualized exhibition is becoming obligatory — and therefore tiresome.

Yet, it's interesting that these two sculpture shows generate more sensual heat than several galleries hung with more florid examples of

VISUAL ARTS

Room with a view

Christine Bourdette's sculptural installation transforms a gallery

By RANDY GRAGG
of The Oregonian staff

Christine Bourdette probably won't ever get a job as an architect. But in her current "remodel" of the Hoffman Gallery at the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts, she has created one of the more striking gallery environments seen in Portland in some time.

Bourdette's "Capacity" is a sculptural installation that succeeds where so many similar endeavors fail: in the fusion of image with space.

The Hoffman is an unusual gallery, a bit like a massive sunken living room with 20-foot ceilings lit by a high horizontal window the size of a double-garage door.

Essentially, Bourdette has given the gallery a new ceiling. Or, depending on where you're seeing it from, she's given the balcony a new floor. The dividing plane is a collection of wire mesh squares evenly suspended by delicate black wires. Consequently, as you descend the stairs into the gallery, you experience Bourdette's very basic theme: moving from above to below.

Out of such a simple beginning, Bourdette builds a three-dimensional story that deals delicately and abstractly with the idea of dualities, both physical and metaphysical: beginnings and ends, birth and death, construction and destruction, inside and out, mobility and immobility.

REVIEW

Christine Bourdette

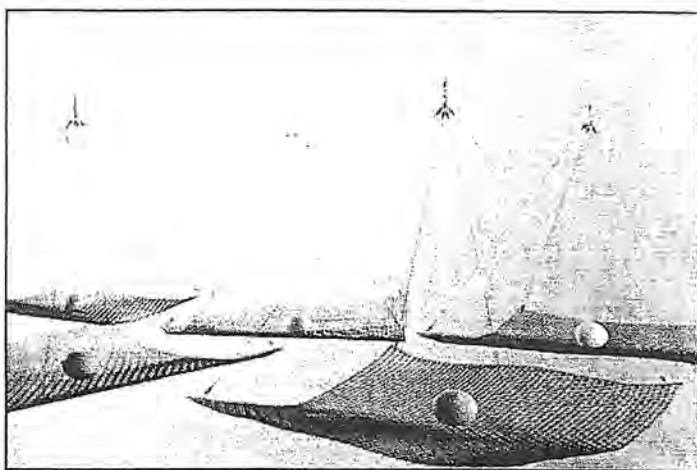
WHERE: Hoffman Gallery, Oregon School of Arts and Crafts
ADDRESS: 8245 S.W. Barnes Road
HOURS: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays; 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays; 9:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Sundays
CLOSING: Oct. 31
ADMISSION: Free

Within — and without — the dynamically minimal space that she's created, Bourdette has arranged a series of objects: some made, some found, some sturdy, some fragile, some elegant and some frumpish.

Atop each of the wire-mesh squares, she has centered a fresh egg — in a sense, populating "the above" with the beginnings of life. It's a pretty and fanciful image. Yet darker possibilities lurk: the fragile shell protecting possibility from immediate disaster and the inevitable changes that will occur as the eggs begin to rot during the month.

On the floor below is an encampment of poetic objects: a huge, rather crude mortar and pestle; a tall, spindly surveyor's tripod topped by a bowl half full (or half empty) of water; and one of Bourdette's trademark quirky mobile forms, a large corroded-steel thing shaped like an oversized, stove-heated iron that's pushable on hidden wheels.

On the periphery, looking on like bystanders, are humanoid forms. The three rocking lattice vessels seem like a family — a kind of ma, pa and baby basket. And off in the corner is a coat rack topped with the remains of an old rubber raft and equipped with wheels that will only allow it to turn in place.



Christine Bourdette explores the heavens and what's below in her enticing installation at Hoffman Gallery.

The many allusions cast by each of these objects are subtle. The mortar and pestle seem ancient. The bowl-topped tripod feels both technical and spiritual. The basket family looks like a series of traps. The rubber raft is redolent of a spy or sentinel.

An artist less certain of herself might have left out these bystanders. Alone, the tripartite of the mortar, iron and tripod would have more symbolic power — a sense of "important objects" ahead — but the overall installation would have required far less interaction. The arrangement now entices you to meet each of the elements as though this were an intimate party of potentially interesting guests.

"Capacity" represents a new-found and much-needed restraint in Bourdette's work. She is among the region's most fascinating form-makers, most gifted craftsmen and, especially, one of its most deft synthesizers of minimalist concepts with folk-art proclivities and abstraction with figuration.

But her last couple of shows have been a bit overcooked, the clarity and spontaneity of her ideas suffering from too much attention to craft.

It's a Northwest affliction. Perhaps it's the general slowness of sales of sculpture or perhaps it's the region's work ethic. But sculptors here seem to labor too long on their artwork, spending more time fussing than thinking. And, for a time, it seemed Bourdette was catching the plague.

But with "Capacity," she is recovering nicely. Rather than sculpting the items that are collected and hung in the gallery, she is conspiring with them, allowing the materials — their textures and their forms — to sing in their own voices.

Goethe once called architecture "frozen music." And indeed, much more than being an architect of this temporary Hoffman Gallery remodel, Bourdette is a composer — unthawing a melody of space and objects played in the dualities of major and minor chords.

■ MORE BOURDETTE: This artist has been busy. An exhibition of her recent monotypes is also on view this month at the Wentz Gallery inside the Pacific Northwest College of Art, inside the Portland Art Museum, 1219 S.W. Park Ave. (Hours: 9 a.m.-9 p.m. daily.) The show is testimony to her remarkable versatility. And it's evidence that, instead of hitting the arid creative plateau of so many midcareer regional artists, Bourdette is finding plenty of new fertile ground.

PORTLAND or

CHRISTINE BOURDETTE at Jamison/Thomas Gallery



Christine Bourdette's most recent work is a wry twist on the text-as-image vogue. No words, no message, no story: Bourdette's is a visual commentary, one with the silent eloquence of a Marcel Marceau skit. Sculpturally simple, these works evoke attributes of language and verbal exchange in Zen-like, poetic understatement. Hollow forms with skins of old, mottled sheet, metal, wood slats, or thin plywood fragments lean and bend toward one another. Single pieces stand alone in oracular dignity. All are abstract, without direct reference to the figure, but their verticality and volume carry an implication of humans, and in particular, the uniquely human practice of language in the everyday yet extraordinary experience of dialogue. A group of three, for example, titled *Mother Molds 1, 2, 3*, are clearly engaged in their own confab. Each projects an openness to the others but at the same time hides an inner identity. The open, barrel-like forms of all three are constructed of narrow slats with shellacked rings anchoring the slats. The similarity of materials and formation contribute to their

shared identity while the private "self" of each is conveyed by interior rings and posts in angled and criss-crossed configurations. By these complex arrangements volume is defined, outer structures reinforced, and associative connotations enriched.

Six irregularly-shaped, wall-mounted sheet metal forms titled *Echoes* suggest sound chambers. Somewhat ovoid, several inches deep, and projecting from the wall rather like ears, each has a vertical opening in its front side. Unlike the *Mother Molds*, the interiors of these pieces are invisible — dark holes in which silence rather than sounds reverberate. A pair of similar but free-standing pieces also made of sheet metal with wood in addition, when placed nearby, signal an editing function. Shaped much like their referential title, *Punch and Comma*, they punctuate the uniform flow of the *Echoes*.

Although Bourdette's sculptures might easily be classified as minimalist because of their spare, abstract appearance, or *arte povera* because of the commonplace, re-cycled materials she favors, neither term is truly applicable. In fact, her wide range of forms, media, and techniques makes any classification difficult. She has explored performance, site-specific installations, video, film, and artists books in addition to traditional media. One common, underlying thread runs throughout: she has consistently drawn on a deep affinity for human endeavors and her oeuvre is steeped in anthropological references. Earlier works were more explicitly associative; she seems now to be focused increasingly on paring down the expression of an idea to its irreducible essence.

Bourdette's recent exhibition, "Sequences and Assemblies," featured these new sculptures and was accompanied by thematically related drawings. Soft colors against a white field gave bulbous forms a delicacy that was in decided contrast to the bulky monochromatic sculptures. In both sculptures and drawings, however, the actual works in their physical presence

embody the artist's rich mix of rigorous rationality and intuitive playfulness, of elegance and rough-hewn plainness, and most importantly, of intellectual seriousness leavened with heart.

— Lois Allan

SAN FRANCISCO ca

ENRIQUE CHAGOYA at Paule Anglim Gallery

It was refreshing to see in Enrique Chagoya's recent show socio/political artwork that eschews a contentious stance in favor of an at least initially disarming approach. Born and raised in Mexico City and now living in the San Francisco Bay Area, Chagoya focuses on the political and social tensions between Mexican and American cultures. However, like Jose Guadalupe Posada, the famous Mexican graphic artist of the late/19th century, Chagoya allows an element of humor to flavor his work even as its content raises thorny issues of cultural difference.

Although there is no denying pain and horror, one can still laugh at the human condition. It may be ironic laughter, but the thread of hope is what Chagoya, like Posada before him, clings to. His work might be faulted for its ingratiating quality; yet as one lingers in the company of his meticulously crafted and socially piquant art, the message is conveyed forcefully but without bludgeoning.

Chagoya infuses motifs culled from Mexican folk religion and Catholicism with a contemporary quality by layering them with references to popular and corporate American culture. This layered use of images is given its most dramatic effect in the painting *Didactic Retablo (Powerful Hand)*, based on the religious icon of the wounded hand of Christ, on the top of whose fingers are placed the instruments of the Passion. Chagoya has transformed this symbol into a capitalist icon. The stigmatized hand which would have spouted blood now issues forth a torrent of crude oil. Above the fingers the instruments of the Consumer Passion are displayed: a B-1 bomber, a Jasper Johns Target painting, a gold brick, a Coke can, and a television set. Capping the base of the hand is the Batman logo.

Our consumerist society's hunger for the "new" and "exotic" is succinctly expressed in *Didactic Retablo (Free Trade)*. The portraits of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo are emblazoned on two bags of corn chips, respectively named 'Dieguitos' and 'Fritas.' America's free-trade agreement with Mexico is seen not bringing the promise of prosperity to either side of the border, but exploiting Mexican culture for the benefit of American consumption.

The most complex piece in the show, rich in its dense use of images, is a mixed-media work on paper that spans over ten feet. Entitled *Tales from the Conquest/Code*, it is a compendium of subject matter ranging from (but not limited to) comic book heroes (most notably Superman) to pre-Columbian gods and symbols. Mimicking the form of Aztec codices, its loose narrative structure informs the viewer about the destructive role of Western society and values on the history, culture and religion of pre-Hispanic Mexico. *Tales from the Conquest/Codex* ultimately proved the most rewarding work in Chagoya's exhibit because it defies a simple reading of its "text".

