

Cathy De Monchaux

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HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

It is entirely fitting that Cathy de Monchaux creates sculptural constructions specifically to be installed in corners of rooms. Her objects do not just hang on the wall or sit on the floor: They lurk, lying in wait to trap the viewer's gaze in lush, velvety folds or to impale it on spiky latticework. Because most of de Monchaux's pieces are hung at eye level, they invite close inspection. Surrendering to the impulse to approach for the near view, however, is often rewarded with the unsettling feeling that you have gotten too close to something you shouldn't be seeing.

The hallmarks of de Monchaux's art of the last four years, the period covered by the Hirshhorn's exhibition of eleven sculptures, include juxtapositions of recessive or protruding fleshy structures, often reminiscent of sexual organs, that are adorned with velvet, fur, restrictive metal hardware, and leather straps. *Red*, 1999, a shallow, almost cylindrical floor piece somewhat resembling a baptismal font, houses concentric rings of red velvet and a dozen long leather straps studded with buckles, which emerge from the heart of the font, extend up over the sides, and are anchored to its outer base. At first glance, these straps seem to be restraints of some kind, as if whatever is inside the oval might attempt an escape. But they could also be read as the legs or tentacles of a creature whose crenulated red-velvet brain pulses at the center of the oval. The way de Monchaux's materials can be variously read results in productive tensions: *Red* may represent an organic entity held in place by inorganic forces, or it may represent a single entity that monstrously combines the organic and the inorganic.

In the long wall piece *Making a day for the dead ones*, 1997, faded leather forms that evoke dessicated funeral wreaths or decayed flesh are attached to a grid of sharp-pointed brass blades. A close look reveals de Monchaux's obsessive attention to the details of fabrication and the elegance of her constructions. Those same details are what make the work disturbing: The longer you look, the more the numerous pieces of wire that hold the leather forms on the grid seem like brutal restraints, and the forms themselves begin to look less like dried flowers than like remnants of a massacre displayed on the victor's ramparts. The violence implicit in much of de Monchaux's work becomes explicit in *Strange animal*, 1998, in which small, mummylike figures are attached to another grid, as if hung on a gate. Gradually it becomes clear that most of these humans are damaged in some way; discreet red threads mark the sites of injury.

In addition to provocatively expressing what de Monchaux calls her own "tailor-made fetishism," this work constitutes an ongoing inquiry into the politics of display--the power relations implicit in the triangulation of presenter, viewer, and viewed object. Many of the elements that suggest physical restraints that force an object into submission and hold it in place are also the frames that present it to us as the subject of close, merciless scrutiny.

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