

Art in America

JUNE 1999

LINCOLN, MASS.

Niki Ketchman at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park

Niki Ketchman has recently incorporated a bit of fantasy and funkiness into her usually biomorphic, often gender-conscious forms. She works large—as Arthur C. Danto says in his catalogue essay, the artist “expresses . . . a certain monumental femininity.” Earlier, Ketchman constructed works which echo the organic shapes of nature—wire cocoons, large pod shapes that feel at once forceful and fragile, solid and open. Now she has made sculptures in which weaving and braiding, activities associated with women’s craft work, are celebrated both for their artisanal beauty and for their ability to convey erotic play.

“Fabrications,” the title of Ketchman’s show of sculptures, collages and drawings, puns on the various implications of her impulse. Ketchman has constructed objects—fabricated them—for the viewer; the sculptures are also fabrications in the sense that they are imagined. She trades on this complex of associations, creating fetishistic, feminine presences from forms and materials that might at first seem decorative but which speak to desire. Her *Mounds* (1998), for example, are large breast forms made of painted steel flowers and leaf images in braided wire.

The sculptures are libidinally humorous. Ketchman’s outsize blend of shoe and corset, *Laced* (1997), an 8-foot-tall, dark-purple sculpture of steel rods, aluminum wire and elastic cord, feels like a Pop monument to the female body. There is something vaguely menacing about its size and intricacy, and it implies a slightly wicked and somewhat comic sensuality.

Garden Gate (1997) presents

a rounded arch of bent black wire, supported on one side by aluminum mesh and ending on the other in a tangle of green rods and leaves. Its installation at the DeCordova offered the viewer a sense of passage toward the grassy grounds beyond, while its compound shape finds an odd merger in forms that look as though they have been created by different, even opposing, processes—industrial, natural. The idiosyncrasy of the work played nicely against the carefully laid out lawn.

Indoors, a small installation titled *Closet* (1998) claimed attention. Consisting of eight sculptures hung from the ceiling, it suggested the privacies of lingerie—among the materials used are lace, stockings, fake fur and doilies. The often theatrically colorful elements felt like fetish objects that look toward Surrealism as much as toward the artist’s dresser drawers. Ketchman’s work has its precedents—women artists have been addressing similar concerns for more than a generation—but her enjoyment of her craft and her comic outlook result in work that stays with you. [*Fabrications* will be shown at the Knoxville Museum of Art, Sept. 14, 1999-Apr. 23, 2000.]

—Jonathan Goodman

Niki Ketchman: *Laced*, 1997, steel rods, aluminum wire, elastic, shock cord, 7½ by 5 by 4 feet; at the DeCordova Sculpture Park.

