Northwest Focus

PETLAND

An installation by Kathryn Glowen

October 7 - November 16, 1997
When Life Becomes Art

By some accounts, installation art is as old as the cave paintings at Lascaux, but its elaboration as an identifiable art form had to await the 1960s evolution of Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptualism and late twentieth-century Postmodernism. Perhaps its most central defining feature is the way installation crosses the great ART-LIFE divide.

For at least two centuries a keen debate has raged between those artists and critics who argue for “art-for-art’s sake” and others who argue that art must be connected to life. When art does not intersect life, when it exists in its own arcane world, it can be dry and empty, though still retaining formal beauty. But when art thoroughly and radically intersects life, whole new worlds open up... worlds where people are born, where they live their ambitions and aspirations, and where they die. Through art, we may come to know more of those personal worlds, and we may come to know about ourselves, as beings that are connected with all of life in an intricate web. Like spiders, we weave our webs, but we can never attain a standpoint outside of our experience to see what we have spun.

Kathryn Glown’s PETLAND accomplishes this unusual feat for Mamie L. Rand. Rand (1894-1995) worked as an accountant and amateur musician; she raised show animals, including chickens and goats. And, more pertinent to this exhibition, she was the chief proprietor of Petland, a pet shop she owned for thirty years in Spokane, Washington. Glown met Ms. Rand through her husband’s aunt, Esther Kline, who was Rand’s neighbor, care provider, and guardian. During several visits with Rand before she died, Glown obtained permission to create an installation environment with Rand’s personal and professional possessions.

PETLAND consists of the ephemera of a life; it is a remarkable collection and an even more remarkable invention. The installation represents an aesthetic finalization of Rand’s life. Although we may say that both art and life are ultimately open-ended—that they are “unfinished,” to use philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s term—there is another sense in which each person’s life is finalized in death. Nevertheless, that person’s work can live on through others. While this is obviously true in the artistic domains of culture, where an artist’s or poet’s or dancer’s legacy may be extended and developed by others who follow, it is seldom true of the lives of the less famous. Maybe every life is chaotic until one attempts to bring order to it. That urge may be internal, although certainly many people do not even begin the process. Some of us carry a proclivity toward introspection and meaning-making, while a lucky few may be commemorated by others.

Art has always served a variety of functions—as entertainment, as personal expression, as cultural criticism. But Glown’s installation, like monuments of all kinds, is about commemoration, and it raises many questions about our traditional understanding of what constitutes a monument. Especially, what does it mean to be an artist? Just what is being commemorated here? Where does the one woman’s life end and the artist’s aesthetic refinement of that life begin? The viewer must decide.

As is true of much contemporary conceptual art, from works by Ed and Nancy Kienholz to Group Material, the viewer’s relationship to PETLAND is crucial. While the artist’s working process is one of reduction, clarification, and self-conscious reaccentuation, the viewer must try to elaborate, to expand her or his world view in order to piece together a woman’s identity: her life, her values, her interests, her faith, her love of animals, her interest in physical culture, her efforts to keep herself in business. In Dress of Years, Mamie’s years are marked with 101 butterfly tags, each of which is pinned to her christening dress, and offset by the photographs and mirror in which the viewer sees both Mamie and her- or himself. Related to the medieval Book of Hours, popular prayer books in which separate parts of the day are designated by specific readings and images, this piece quite literally marks time. Many of the individual pieces in PETLAND implicitly ask us, what implications does this life have for us? What can we learn about commitment, endurance, and love?

By contrast, Knick-Knack Handkerchief is less personal, but aesthetically just as powerful. The piece consists of 69 small shelves, each of which juxtaposes three or five exquisite handstitched or embroidered handkerchiefs with small animal figurines that Mamie had collected. The viewer must look at these old objects in new ways, reevaluating the role things have in our lives. This work, as well as others such as the Worried Pup dress hangers and Nippy-Creamy-Sharp-Mild, asks us to reflect about our own materialism and consumer greed.

The question of what happens to us when we die has many dimensions. What happens to the body? What
happens to the spirit, that vital life energy that makes the eyes sparkle and the limbs move? What happens to all of the accoutrements of a life, the stuff we have accumulated, especially if we are collectors, as many Americans are? Piles of fabric, pillows, cages, aprons, stools, a bed, animal feed . . . everywhere the detritus of a life. But here all that stuff has been recycled, so that “making do” becomes “making art,” to paraphrase the title of Verni Greenfield’s book.²

In fact, PETLAND is about recycling, memory, and time. Mamie Rand, like many Americans, had no direct heirs. How is it possible to keep the dignity of her memory? All of us exist in particular chronotopes, specific juxtapositions of time and space. In the installation Glowen uses a variety of material artifacts—photographs, letters, magazines collected by Rand—to help the viewer enter into Rand’s unique time and place. But if the installation stopped there, it would be disappointing. By its persistent collaging of often disparate elements, Glowen successfully evokes multiple narratives, thus allowing PETLAND to function as both a window into one woman’s life and a panorama that encompasses heterogeneous life possibilities.

Both life and art have limitations—points of entry and boundaries that define their perimeters and parameters. How can we enter into this life or that art, making sense of it within the larger web of existence? Nowhere is this question posed more poignantly than in Traveler, a mixed media assemblage. “Life is a frail moth, caught in the web of the years that pass.” So reads the quotation by Sara Teasdale that is embroidered onto a baby’s dress and pinned with a moth tag. The dress is encased in a box, which is attached to an old gate. Traveler is a metaphor for Glowen’s installation as a whole. Through it, PETLAND speaks to us: “Keep out!” “Come in!” “Stop and watch the spider’s insistent spinning.”

—Deborah Haynes
Pullman


Exhibition

*PETLAND* is an art installation by Kathryn Glowne. It utilizes personal effects, household items, ephemera, and other materials belonging to Mamie L. Rand (1894-1995) of Spokane, Washington. It includes other objects found or made by the artist. Created from 1995 through 1997, the installation was seen at the WSU Museum of Art, October 7 to November 16, 1997.

Biography

1941 Born Seattle, Washington, August 29
1959-60 Attended Washington State University, Pullman
1960-62 Attended University of Tulsa, Oklahoma
1978 Moved to 10-acre farm, Arlington, Washington
1991 Retired from Boeing to devote full time to art
1994, 95 Guest instructor in sculpture, Cornish College of the Arts, Seattle

ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1983, 91 Gallery II, Washington State University, Pullman
1984 Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham, Washington
1985 Pacific Arts Center, Seattle
1986 Skagit Valley College Foundation Gallery, Mt. Vernon, Washington
1987 Matter-Danz Gallery, Bellingham, Washington
1988 Art Center Gallery, Seattle Pacific University
1989 Eastern Washington University Art Gallery, Cheney
1990, 92, 94 MIA Gallery, Seattle
1992 Michael Himovitz Gallery, Sacramento
1995, 97 Seattle Art Museum Rental/Sales Gallery Streetspace
1996 Kirkland Arts Center, Kirkland, Washington
       Art and Soul Gallery, Ketchum, Idaho

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1983 *Reno-Seattle Exchange*, Sheppard Art Gallery, University of Nevada at Reno and Art Center Gallery, Seattle Pacific University
       *Women Artists Invitational*, Spokane Falls Community College Gallery, Washington
1985 *In (2) Parts: Seeing Double*, Bumbershoot Arts Festival, Seattle
       *Primal Plastic Pool*, Missoula Art Center, Montana

       *OK-USA National Sculpture Exhibition*, Cameron University, Lawton, Oklahoma
1987 *Beyond the Real*, Prichard Gallery, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho
       *Just for Fun*, Liberty Gallery, Liberty National Bank, Louisville, Kentucky
       *Contemporary Masks: Facing the World*, Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham, Washington
1989 Reese Bullock Gallery, Humboldt State University, Arcata, California
       *Not Vegetable, Not Mineral*, Port Angeles Fine Arts Center, Washington
1990 *Summer Arts*, California State University at Long Beach
       *Three Universes in the Atomic Café*, IDEA Gallery, Sacramento
       *Art Works for AIDS*, Seattle Center Pavilion
       *Northwest Annual*, Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle
       *Northwest Designer Craftsmen*, Bellevue Art Museum, Washington
       *View from the Edge*, Index Gallery, Clark College, Vancouver, Washington
       *Invitational: 100*, Fine Art Center, Anacortes, Washington
1992 *Art Discussing Life*, Prichard Art Gallery, University of Idaho, Moscow; Paris Gibson Square Art Center, Great Falls, Montana; Brigham Young University Art Gallery, Provo, Utah
       *Some Seattle "Materialists,"* International Gallery of Contemporary Art, Anchorage
       *Contemporary Icons*, Bush Barn Art Center, Salem, Oregon
       *39th Annual International Juried Exhibition*, San Diego Art Institute
1994 *A World of Maps*, Anchorage Museum of History and Art
       *Containing the Earth*, Contemporary Craft Gallery, Portland, Oregon and PANACA Gallery, Bellevue, Washington
       *Pacific Northwest Annual*, Bellevue Art Museum, Washington (also 1996)
1995 *Kunstkabinett*, Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle
       *Folle à Deux*, Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle
       *The Land*, Tacoma Art Museum, Washington
       *Ex Libris: Book Art*, Fisher Gallery, Cornish College of the Arts, Seattle
       *Mystery of the Magic Box*, Anchorage Museum of History and Art
       *In the Box*, D.O.T. Gallery, Portland, Oregon

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Anchorage Museum of History and Art
Evergreen Hospice Care Center, Kirkland, Washington
Seattle Arts Commission
Washington State Arts Commission
United Way of King County, Seattle
Bibliography

PERIODICALS


BOOKS AND EXHIBITION CATALOGS


California State University at Long Beach. Summer Arts. Long Beach, 1990.


