

Redressing art history: heirlooms in lead

BY JOHN EWING

If you ask me a question and the answer could be yes or no, I'll probably tell you a story," says Marilyn Lanfear. As life philosophies go, this one is unmistakably Texan. As an artist's statement, it's pure Lanfear, who for decades has constructed homespun narratives with surreal dimensions. Currently at the Artists' Gallery, Lanfear's "Stories Without Words" adds a piquant new stitch to a broad career that has spanned painting, performance art, and sculpture. In this exhibition of new work, Lanfear has punched, hammered, and soldered lead to produce detailed replicas of children's clothing from the late 19th century to the present. Combined with antique chairs and "whatnot" shelves, these disembodied outfits cross the line between heirloom and totem, revealing the artist's dual passions for history and the carefully crafted object.

"I try to avoid the sentimental but realize that I walk a very thin edge," Lanfear explains. "I hope these things tie into someone else's expe-



PHOTO BY TOMMY HILTZGREN

rience so they will think of their own story." Some of the pieces are inspired by old family photographs; others come from sketches of garments from the Witte Museum collection. What they all share, however, is a devotion to the outdated domestic art of handmade objects. From a funeral viewing gown to an Easter dress, the lead garments link objects to traditional social ritual.

The resulting effect has an uncanny potency, at once active and frozen. Designed as if being worn, the garments' swelling forms and soft folds suggest the shapes and movements of children's bodies. The pitch-black recesses seen through necklines and sleeves, however, indicate a tangible, impenetrable void. A museum director once asked Lanfear why she made these objects without bodies. Unsure herself, the director offered a theory: "You want your audience to put in the figure." Lanfear is pleased by this perverse quality. "That's why these are 'without words' — I want viewers to bring their own," she says.

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Like the innovative folktales of Sherwood Anderson and Thornton Wilder, Lanfear evokes the past and its stories with a distinctly Modernist sensibility. As a critical nod to history, this style depicts the transition from rural, small-town society to the modern, industrial age. Regarding the past itself as a moth-eaten heirloom, Modernism either aggressively rejected tradition or transformed it into memory with a wistful farewell. Minus some act of transformation, change meant irrevocable loss. In Lanfear's case, the transformation is a memorial in lead. As a signifier of the machine age, her choice of material is biting wry.

If these objects are perceived as heavy or "sentimental" by some viewers, it's not because they are made of lead. If they are Modernist, they speak of an age when losses and gains were in such stark contrast that they told a single story, the same story, to the entire world. As a child of the postmodern era, I recognize vernacular differences in Lanfear's work and the art of my generation. Whereas Modernism staged a reaction to history through new forms and materials, my generation finds itself adrift in indiscriminate possibilities, where time doesn't seem to apply. And the concept of a past, much less a future, seems almost absurd.

But Lanfear is no dupe to nostalgia. By incorporating Surrealist flourishes, her work capitalizes on the hardest strain of Modernism still active today, one that is well-suited to current art practices. Like René Magritte's painting of a pipe inscribed 'this is

not a pipe,' Lanfear's objects are delightfully absurd. Uniformly gray, the simple array of swimsuits referencing the famously exploited Dionne quintuplets is titled *Red Suit (Marie)*, *Blue Suit (Yvonne)*, *Green Suit (Cecile)*, and so forth. The suits are mounted on what appear to be vintage hangers from the 1930s but are, in fact, Lanfear "forgeries." Of course, clothing made of lead is absurd at the root, but nothing new to the artist, who has performed with wearable furniture and is currently carving curtains out of wood. Just as Magritte spoke of the "treachery of images," Lanfear's brand of Surrealism is a subtle prod to rethink visual information, to look beyond or around the obvious.

"It matters to me whether or not people respond, but it doesn't matter to me that I be fashionable — although that wouldn't be hard," says Lanfear. Maybe age and experience let artists off that particular hook. With an MFA degree from UTSA and a divorce behind her, Lanfear caught the wanderlust in the early '80s, establishing herself in New York with performance pieces, gallery shows, and a group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. A teaching stint in Oregon took her West before the South Texas native and her stories recently came home to roost. "I learned a long time ago that I could make something look perfect, as if it were machine-made," says the artist, recalling earlier projects and bygone priorities. "But the hand touch is very important, and I want people to enjoy that. I guess I'm trying to give pleasure." ■

"*Stories Without Words*" runs at the Artists' Gallery through September 30. For more info, check Exhibits Ongoing listings on page 34.