

The chair: ubiquitous, but rarely noticed unless it hurts.
A new show at Incarnate Word shows us the pleasure of the seat.

WATCH WHERE YOU SIT

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To say that chairs and people have a lot in common is to state the obvious. They both have legs, arms, seats and backs. Chairs and people are usually in the same place, often together. They are matched for function and mood; in many cases, like the Shaker straight back or gilt Louis Quatorze, they even dress alike. Chairs are so thoroughly woven into Western life that their essentialness is obvious. Usually we just ignore them.

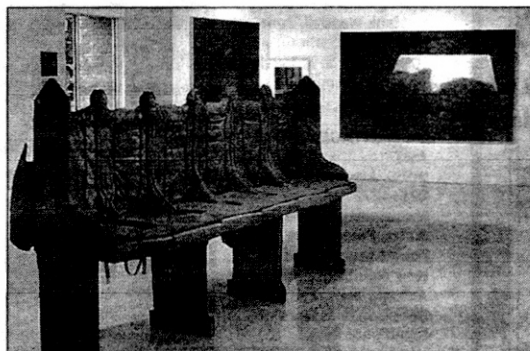
For artists, there is solid gold in the obvious. That's where the rest of us rarely think to look. At the University of the Incarnate Word's Semmes Gallery, Linda Lang and Marilyn Lanfear offer novel views of chairs that go well beyond mere function. Com-

panion, witness, symbol, and scapegoat are a few of the unusual roles given to chairs in this selection of paintings and sculpture. Consequently, one can't help but look at these common objects in new ways.

With titles like *Aged Dignity* and *Graceful Solitaire*, Lang's near-abstract paintings of chairs envelope her subjects in a thick, brooding atmosphere of muted colors. Through a twilight haze we see faint details — the dark curve of a padded back, the vague solid-

ness of a seat. Given the paintings' moodiness, these details communicate like complex character traits rather than surface description. Alluding to the eerie otherness of familiar objects, Lang notes in her artist's statement, "What is true of the chair is true of all artifacts we create. We design them; but once built, they shape us."

This intimate, tactile relationship is suggested in mixed media works that feature swatches of decorative fabric. Lang's oil and acrylic paintings propose a deeper symbolic role for the chair. The stuffed fauteuil with its back to the viewer in *In Between Light* is particularly dense with psychological withholding. If not for the chair's cutting blue stripes and yellow flecks, the looming, rounded form would be swallowed into the mottled gray of the painting's surface. Other chairs are even darker, less distinct, and more abstract. They have the weight of bodies, as well as the drama. Think *Wuthering Heights*, but imagine Heathcliff and Cathy on the misty moors instead of a fusty armchair in the drawing room. Lang's paintings are both murky and lovely, qualities that



Lanfear's *Confessions of a Pewperson (Baptist): To Be Worn by Six Members of the Family (Marilyn, Merle, Marjorie, Ben, Greg)*

complicate her prosaic subjects beyond simple pictorialism.

On the other side of the gallery, Lanfear's "chairpersons" include a church pew, two Chippendale chairs, and a Victorian sofa. Constructed from fabric, wood, and "notions," these quirky sculptures were designed to be worn in performance works staged in Texas and New York over the last two decades. The idea came to Lanfear years ago during the height of political correctness, when the sex-neutral term "chairperson" began to replace "chairman" in public parlance. Although they are meticulous representations of furniture, these objects are utterly non-functional as such. Rather, they fetishize verbal puns, symbolic language, and the storied past of Lanfear's family history.

Daddy's Chair: A Corner Chairperson evokes the "cornerstone of the family" in tweed and khaki remnants left to Lanfear by her mother, a master seamstress. One-legged, the chair is completed by two actors who, in performance, are strapped into the object and to each other. Hobbling in a square, the actors argue the details of a famous family story known as "the snakes and the medicine show." "It was a water moccasin, not a rattler; a Model T, not a Model A," goes the argument, but in the end the performers call a truce with pecks on the cheek. This emphasizes, as Lanfear says, "that sharing family stories is more important than details, which are probably only important to me."

Lanfear, whose past exhibitions of lead dresses and wooden cabinets made specific references to the material things of her family's past, acknowledges using the built-in nostalgia of found objects to entice viewers. But it's the fine details of her exquisitely crafted art that holds viewers long enough for her stories to seep in. "I try to be very specific in my details," says Lanfear. "I believe that if I'm true to my story, I'm more likely to remind you of yours." An obvious conclusion? Perhaps. But, then again, ignoring the obvious is our first mistake. ●

CHAIRS &

CHAIRPERSONS

Linda Lang &
Marilyn Lanfear
10am-5pm, Monday
thru Friday

4301 Broadway
829-3861

Free
Semmes Gallery
The University of
the Incarnate Word
Through April 6