

GAIL CHOVAN

NO TRACE OF NOW WILL REMAIN



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

JANUARY 20 – MARCH 1, 2018

AUSTIN, TEXAS



White gown, 2018, Edwardian + Victorian garments, human hair, 60" x 72" x 48"

Cover Panel (left to right): *Valéry*, 2017, wood, Victorian costume and shoes, neon, 48" x 18" x 18"

Rimbaud, 2017, wood, Victorian shirtwaist, neon, 48" x 18" x 18"

NO TRACE OF NOW WILL REMAIN

In May 1871, French poet Arthur Rimbaud writes two letters, known as the “Lettres du Voyant” (“Seer Letters”), pronouncing his artistic credo: to be a poet one has to be a “seer.” “The Poet makes himself into a seer by a long, involved, and logical derangement of all the senses,” he writes. Rimbaud illustrates this in his sonnet “Voyelles” (“Vowels”), where words are more about how they sound and the colors they evoke. (He’d assigned colors to specific letters. “Black A, White E, Red I . . .”) “I invented colors for vowels!” he later says. Rimbaud’s writing is aural, visual, and tactile. Gail Chovan’s work—an assemblage of materials, including Victorian-style garments, vintage accessories, human teeth, hair and domestic effects accrued over decades—similarly disrupts the senses. She, too, establishes herself as a seer, nullifying delineations, challenging suppositions, and thwarting associations—between subject and object, object and adjective. The philosophical departure begins at the prophetic end of a Rimbaud poem from his collection *Les Illuminations* (*Illuminations*): “What will become of the world when you leave? No matter what happens, no trace of you now will remain.” Chovan adopts and adapts this dictum as the title of an exhibition that counters it, exploring traces of one’s existence as an inevitability of infinite forms.

One of the most provocative pieces is *Polio*, a child’s tarnished leg brace, housing two bones and adorned with Victorian beading. It evokes a story that is likely at least partially true. A sick and mangled child who spent his youth in a brace and, in adulthood, was weighed down by a limp. Hundreds of thousands of people left this trace behind. The single brace represents an era, an epidemic and a disability. And it is beautiful. *Polio* hangs on a wall and



No Trace of Now Will Remain, 2018, (gallery view), steel, glass, gloves, human hair, Edwardian and Victorian garments, dimensions variable

casts a graceful shadow that, in natural light, will move effortlessly throughout the day.

Sartorial remnants play an integral role in the exhibition. For Chovan, who has a background as a designer, clothing—even tattered and discarded—carries with it tales of former inhabitants. The owners may be long deceased, but their life stories are secreted in fibers and hinted at in lingering scents and stains. Without form these objects appear deflated; their potential as remnants is stifled as is their ability to assume or encourage new stories from other people. Form, however, does not necessitate a corporal underpinning. Chovan illustrates this with *Insanity*, a timeworn and partially buckled straightjacket suspended from the ceiling and sprouting tassels of human hair. Dramatic lighting in a purposefully dim space emphasizes its presence in the world. Structural and shadowed constrictions speak to a menacing past and lend themselves to

new or newly imagined narratives—about an asylum, internal chaos, an artist, or an eloquent piece of sculpture. “These pieces are about what was, and they are also about life and birth,” says Chovan, addressing the antithetical nature of the proclamation: “no traces of now will remain.” “It is true and it’s not true,” she explains. “There are [physical] traces of now that will remain, and when this very moment passes, the moment itself is gone. What is left is what we make out of the tangible curiosities, be it pieces of clothing, beads or human hair.”

Hair is a recurring motif in Chovan’s work as well as a personal signifier for the artist, once known for her cascading mane. “For fifty years, my hair was my identity and strength,” says Chovan, who, in 2008, lost her hair to cancer. “So, I think it’s always interesting to see hair used in different contexts and unexpected ways.” Chovan keeps a locket with strands of her late parents’ hair. It serves as a

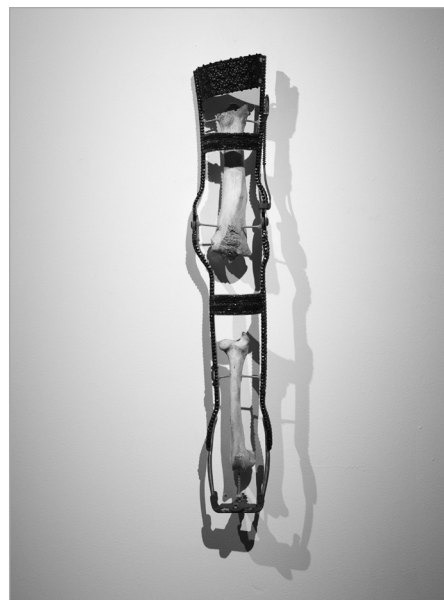
memento mori, as does the hair in her work. It is an homage and a celebration of the beauty that can be found in or created from death. Here, death does not represent absence or lamentation. The exhibition repeatedly complicates pervasive connotations, starting with the notion of a gallery space. Instead of a light-filled room, viewers step into silhouettes that create a stage-like setting for silently theatric oppositions. *The dark is not so dark...* is exhibited on the wall in a string of neon light. On one level, it is a statement about the color black, which is predominant in the show. In effect, the black in Chovan's work is akin to Yves Klein's blue. It is an antidote to limitations. Any void it connotes is about possibility rather than a portent of things to come. There is also a more personal element to the statement. "The quote is evocative of Z's whole life," says Chovan, whose daughter, Zelda, is blind. "She sees with her hands, they are her eyes. She's always touching what's around her. I can't imagine what color means to Zelda, but she lives such a rich life." Chovan encourages people to touch her work, to experience the

shapes and textures. Hands are a focal point in more than one piece, including an installation of ladies' dress gloves, each resting atop a pedestal in what looks like glass elbow pipe and with words embroidered in the fabric. The words, such as "Spaghetti", are playfully abstract, and goading. The stitching begs to be touched as much as it begs for a backstory. By creating visual art that is not dependent on vision, Chovan subverts the hierarchy of the senses.

Stitching is abundant in the exhibition's most tactile work: *White Gown*. Pieces of Edwardian and Victorian clothes have been seamlessly transformed into a gown that is evocative of Cotillion balls. Beneath a spotlight, the faceless dancer is ethereal and dreamlike. She could be making her debut. Though the torso is without arms, shirt sleeves hang to the bottom of the dress. From each protrudes an arm-length glove that has been resuscitated with stuffing. The hands are grounding and mobilizing. They will help make for a grander entrance as will the tassels of black hair budding from



Transparent: Love is Blind, 2018, steel, glass, and kid glove, 8" x 6" x 12"



Polio, 2017, leg brace, Victorian beading, and bones, 30" x 8" x 6"

the jacket. Artist Louise Bourgeois, whose mother ran a tapestry business, also used clothes in installations, often stitching fragments of fabric together and into new forms. "Clothing is an exercise of memory," wrote Bourgeois, who used her own clothes in her work. "It makes me explore the past: how did I feel when I wore that?" The clothes and artifacts in Chovan's work are similar in that the artist culled her materials from objects she's amassed throughout her life. They each come with memories of a moment—when "now" was a Parisian flea market or the ire of a twelve-year-old boy with impossibly matted hair. (Chovan used scissors to liberate her son's dreads. They, too, are part of the exhibit.) In this way, Chovan mingles her life with those of strangers—the people to whom the shirt, the hair, and the brace originally belonged and whomever else lay claim to them. Many of these people have left the world; all of them have left behind traces that remain.

Tobin Levy, writer and editor, based in Austin, Texas.

Gail Chovan

EDUCATION

1988	Diplôme Level II, Stylisme, ESMOD, Guerre Lavigne, Paris, France
1988	Diplôme BTS, Modelisme, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Appliqués Duperré, Paris, France
1984	MA, French Literature, New York University/ Université de Paris III, Paris, France
1980	BA, French, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2017	Defiance, No. 21. Secret House, Austin, Texas
2017	Defiance, No. 20. Galerie Virginie Louvet, Paris, France
2016	Less is More, Collection No. 19. Galerie Eva Hober, Paris, France
2015	Scar, Collection No. 18. The Daphne, Austin, Texas
2014	Unprecious, Collection No. 17. Secret House, Austin, Texas
2013	Aesthetic Ghosts, Collection No. 16. Delta Millworks, Austin, Texas

2013	Abiquiu, Collection No. 15. Church, Los Angeles, California
2011	De Quoi avez-vous peur? Collection No. 14. Justine's, Austin, Texas
2010	Thirteen, Collection No. 13. Blackmail, Austin, Texas

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2017	Good Mourning "Tis of Thee. Demo Lab, Austin, Texas
2017	Boxes of Light. El Cosmico. Marfa, Texas
2016	Less is More, Collection No. 19. GSDM, Austin, Texas
2015	Scar, Collection No. 18. Galerie Pierre Alain Challier, Paris, France
2015	Unprecious, Collection No. 17. Galerie Pierre Alain Challier, Paris, France

SELECTED TEACHING

Current	Lecturer, Division of Textiles & Apparel, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas
2017	Visiting Instructor, Paris College of Art, Paris, France
2011–2016	Instructor, Université de Paris: Cours de Civilisation Française de la Sorbonne, Paris, France



The dark is not so dark..., 2018, neon, 12" x 30" x 4"



Insanity, 2018, human hair and straightjacket, 36" x 24" x 18"

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 40th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,899 artists in 312 visual art exhibitions, 125 music, dance and theater events, 16 film festivals, 30 literary readings and spoken word performances, and 626 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, the New York Times, ArtForum, and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Women & Their Work reaches over 650 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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GINNY'S

