

JILL BEDGOOD

Deadly Sins & Worldly Virtues



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

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AUSTIN, TEXAS

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*"Hence thou mayst comprehend that
love must be The seed within yourselves
of every virtue, And every act that
merits punishment."*

— Dante, *Purgatorio* (canto XVII)

Jill Bedgood locates her mixed-media installations *Deadly Sins/Worldly Virtues* somewhere in the nebulous frontier that separates good from evil. Turning away from the archetypes of Heaven and Hell, she peers instead into a shadowy realm somewhere in between. When Dante formulated his own cosmological taxonomy in the early 14th-century, he recognized the church's concept of Purgatory as this midpoint. Populating it with a hierarchy of imperfect souls, he arranged his penitents according to the Seven Deadly Sins. First came souls whose excessive love spawned pride, envy, and anger. Next were those whose deficient love brought sloth, and finally those whose perverted love bore avarice, gluttony, and lust.

The painter Giotto, along with other Renaissance artists such as Bosch and Bruegel, brought this subject into the visual realm. During a recent visit to Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua, Bedgood was drawn to a series of small genre scenes depicting the Seven Deadly Sins. (The chapel, appropriately enough, was built to atone for the sins of Rinaldo Scrovigni, a notorious usurer). Fascinated by these small paintings, which are usually overlooked in favor of the larger scenes from the life of Christ, Bedgood noticed that they are located lower down on the wall beside the pews at eye level, thus serving as constant visual reminders to the faithful.

Exploring the nature of evil, Dante found these Deadly Sins to be deplorable, but not necessarily damnable. Giotto



Slothfulness/Inertia.

2000, Mixed Media Sculpture: Decal transfers on fabric, pillow, granite. 10" h. x 25" l. x 19" w.

presented his Deadly Sins along with the Heavenly Virtues, suggesting some sort of continuum from good to evil. Both suggest there is a line that must be crossed. Intrigued by this restless boundary, Bedgood asks us to consider how in our own times "do human acts cross a line into sin and into evil?" How is circumspection turned to vanity, innocence to jealousy, or justice to vengeance? What transforms fortitude into lassitude? When do the guileless become grasping, the temperate voracious, or the lover licentious?

In approaching these questions, Bedgood grounds herself materially in her art. Physically investing herself into each work, she sculpts, casts, paints, sews, and assembles an incredible array of objects meant both to delight us with their exquisite construction, and repel us with their revelations. Cloth is delicately hand-stitched. Wax and lipstick are struck into medallions. Images are drawn onto decals and transferred. Bedgood moves smoothly from tiny oil paintings to large abstractions, from cast bronze to welded steel. "The activity of making the work," she explains, "allows

me to feel what goes through someone else's mind." Traces of this process, like forensic evidence, force visceral reactions as we examine the ritualistic way she has used candles to pierce through steel wool, for example, or hair to sew up wax paper. Coarse ropes strain as they bind an empty chair. A stained cloth presses claustrophobically downward. Rock crushes a pillow. A dress hangs empty.

With each work we are placed bodily into uncomfortable confrontations. Significantly, none of these installations include a human prop to diffuse the directness of the encounter. In the spirit of Goya's *Los Caprichos*, Bedgood implicates the viewer in each equivocal tableau, allowing us physically to realize our own complicity or victimization. These encounters are private and personal, as she points out: "All these things happen with no one around."

Belying the effort of its construction *Slothfulness/Inertia* conveys the very ethos of torpor while preying upon our hidden desires. A granite sphere (a head perhaps?) has fallen and come to rest,

nestling in peaceful slumber within the plushness of a pillow. What effort is required to frustrate gravity and move the weight? Too much. Our attention is drawn instead to the pillow itself, covered attractively with beautiful hand-made transfers facetiously depicting the familiar arboreal mammal. We laugh at the pun. This is an item of comfort, luxury, and guilty pleasures.

Equally seductive but more ominous in tone, *ur.organ@4sel.com* presents us with a cast bronze heart protected by a delicate glass casket that is lined with deep red velvet. Heavy yet fragile, vital yet lifeless, it is priceless yet open to the highest bidder. Transplanted, a heart is the vital organ capable of bringing life to a body racked by disease or excess. Placed in a reliquary, it is the sacred heart of Jesus miraculously restoring flesh and spirit. It is precious, singular, and insufficient to meet demand. Playing on the conflict inherent in desire, Bedgood allows us to see it as an image of hope or of greed. A hag gnawing on a heart was once the personification of envy. And yet the heart was also a symbol of love when pierced by an arrow. Its motto: "Amor vincit omnia" (Love conquers all).

The dichotomies Bedgood sets up in her work seem always to return to the tension between what she describes as "indulge" and "indulgence." The work is about "wanting to indulge yourself," she explains, but it is also about accountability. Critical of the quick fix offered through the religious indulgence – payment to avoid punishment for sin – Bedgood echoes Erasmus' 16th-century reproach: "What should I say of them that hug themselves with their counterfeited pardons?"

Unsparring as it addresses this question of culpability *No! place like home* exposes

predatory secrets and hidden suffering. Tiny shoes placed before a draped chair initially delight with their sparkling contents. Looking more closely, however, we see broken glass. Funerary rather than functional, these shoes might be spectral monuments to a childhood that once was. Pastel birds printed onto the dainty fabric offer the possibility of escape. But disembodied pink shapes float menacingly to encumber and obliterate them. Reminiscent of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, they suggest viscera, sexual organs, and obscene toys. A lightweight cast aluminum tiara has fallen to the floor amidst artifacts of glamour—a mirror and lipstick discs stamped with the words "indulge" and "indulgence." An innocence has jealously and hungrily been consumed, but the author of this violence has disappeared. The fabric has been turned inside-out, hiding, or perhaps protecting something

Exposing clandestine evil in *Cardinal Sin*, Bedgood creates a voyeuristic context both inescapable and frightening. Airing the dirty laundry, she hangs a cloth so that we see mostly traces and stains that have seeped through the painted front. Reminded of Agnes Martin's minimalist visions at first, we quickly make unsavory associations with the puckers and hairs covering the material. This levitation is not an ethereal flight caused by divine love. It is a perverse transverberation, an attempt perhaps to escape violations of the flesh. Below, almost clinical, an empty bed bears witness to fluids and flesh. From a tonsured target, hair spills out under the sheets, flowing bloodlike but leaving no permanent mark. Phantom shoes on the canopy above provide an orientation to the work while suggesting a malevolent presence. Who has placed an indulgence coin into the slot to participate in this economy between sin and virtue?

Bedgood does not always present the transgressor as external to the victim. In *Pearls before swine* she explores self-destruction through waste and excess. Transforming a necklace into diet pills, she funnels them into a rubberized bag stuffed with oily lamb's wool and bound with rope and surgical stitches. A rancid medicinal smell emanating from the work provides a startling disjunction between consumption and pleasure. But this consumption seems less about feeding the body, than excess through privation, a grotesquely fashionable phenomenon.

Fashion or glamour, a unifying theme for several of Bedgood's installations, is most overtly explored in *Fashionable Causes: Step Lightly/Land Mines*. Weighed down by a heavy bronze tiara, an ethereal lace gown treads dangerously over landmines caught in its train. Standing empty, the dress is a troubling corollary to the Emperor's new clothes, a modern day fairy tale about princesses and celebrities draped in the trappings of a haute couture runway. This is a creepy cocktail party where the guests, like their props, are vacuous. Bedgood sees her work in terms of modern deceptions – rationalization, betrayal, seduction, and masquerade. We deceive ourselves, as she suggests, when we fail to hold ourselves accountable for evil. Evocative and articulate, her work critiques but does not dictate behavior. There is no finger pointing. There are no strawmen. It is enough to take a good hard look and face depravity. This is not an easy thing, but then again, as Georges Bataille describes the process: "We flinch away and yet..." To approach Bedgood's work is to implicate ourselves. It lures us in, stings, and summons us again.

Anastasia Easterday, Ph.D.
April, 2000



Pearls before swine.

2000, Mixed Media Sculpture: Galvanized tin, pewter, pearls, cloth, rubber, lamb's wool, pills. 40" h. x 115" l. x 45" w.

JILL BEDGOOD

Resides in Austin, Texas

Bedgood has a B.F.A. from Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge and a M.F.A. from the University of Texas at Austin. Grants include a Residency in Bellagio, Italy, from the Rockefeller Foundation, to work on a proposal for a collaborative installation with Beverly Penn during October 2000. Other grants include the New Forms Regional Initiatives Grant, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, 1993-1995, Mid-America Arts

Alliance/National Endowment for the Arts Award in Sculpture, 1989, and an Art Matters Inc. Grant, New York, 1989. Exhibition fellowships include the City of Abilene Sculpture in the Park, Abilene, Texas, 1997-1998, and the Connemara Conservancy Sculpture Exhibition, Dallas, Texas, 1996. She was a fellow at the MacDowell Colony in 1988 and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts in 1994.

Bedgood has completed public art commissions for the City of Austin's Art in Public Places Program which include "Texas Mythology/Texas Reality" for the Austin-Bergstrom International

Airport, 1995-1999, "Twenty Botanical Paintings" for the Austin Convention Center, 1995-1998, "Community Quilts: Broken Dish and Tile Mosaics" in collaboration with Steve Wiman for the South Austin Senior Citizens Activity Center, 1993-1995, and "Playscape Designs" and "Phantom Ship Aquatic Bas Relief Wall" for Zilker Park Playscape, 1988-1991.

Bedgood has exhibited extensively in museums and alternative spaces in the United States.



This Panel: *No! place like home...* 2000. Mixed Media Sculpture: Wood, oil on cloth, aluminum, plaster, rhinestones, glass, rope, lipstick, mirror. 32" h. x 35" l. x 18" w.

Cover Panel: *Cardinal Sin*, 2000. Mixed Media Sculpture: Steel, steel wool, candles, oil on cloth, hair, charcoal, wax, and suspended cloth. 50" h. x 60" l. x 25" w.

Back Panel: *Ur.organi@4sel.com*, 2000. Mixed Media Sculpture: Bronze, brass, glass, fabric. 11" h. x 10.5" w. x 8.5" d.

(Martin Harris, photographer)



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