

ISABELLE SCURRY CHAPMAN

New Works



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

FEBRUARY 24 - MARCH 25, 2000

AUSTIN, TEXAS

by Sandra Goldman

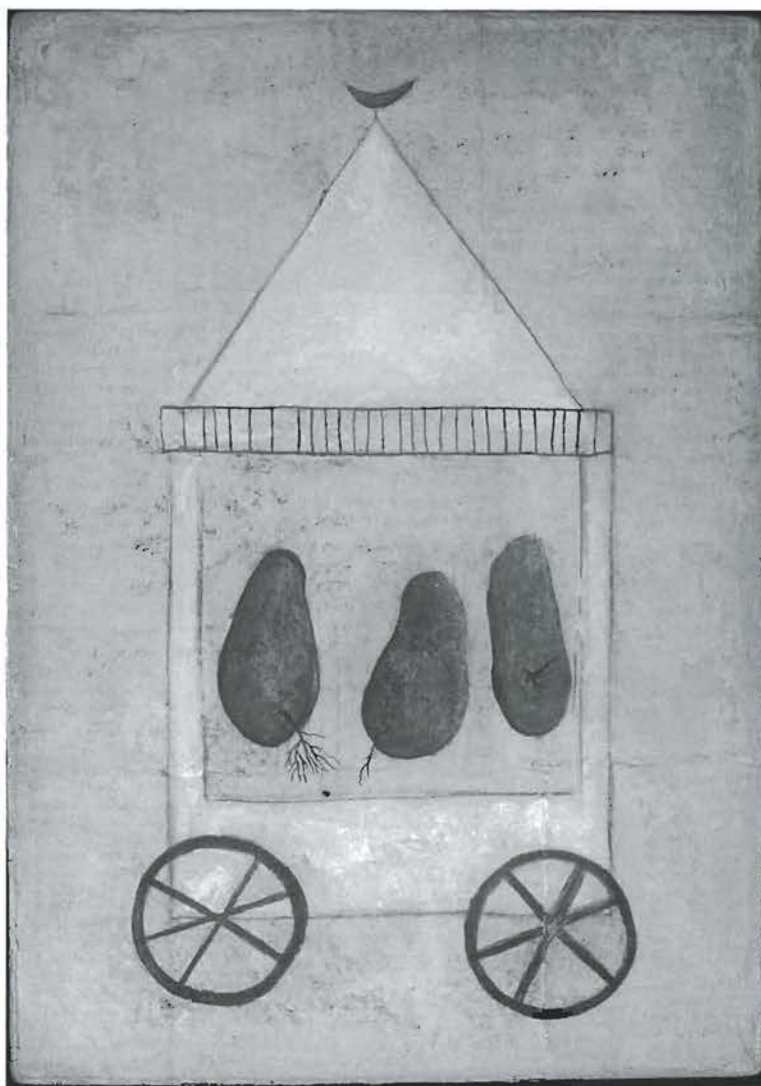
When Isabelle Scurry Chapman is not making art, she is hiking, river rafting, walking the beaches of the Gulf Coast or watching birds. "My goal is to be in nature," she told me recently. Chapman's reverence for the natural world is evident in her work, which suggests wonder for what she sees about her. Her juxtapositions of objects and images—plants, moons, roots, birds—evoke mystery and magic.

Chapman's daily regime includes journal writing, meditation, walking, and making collage, all of which feeds her painting. It is an artistic process, but it is also her spiritual practice. For Chapman, making art is a devotional act in which the making of the work is at least as important as the resulting piece.

But none of this came easily for her. On the bulletin board of Chapman's studio, there is a white glove stuffed with dried flowers. Hanging from the fingers are her childhood awards from various honor societies. She keeps this memento in her studio to remind herself of her previous life as an overachiever. As a child with dyslexia, Chapman had a lot to overcome. With great determination, she became an A student, winning honors and awards in all of her endeavors. As an adult, she continued to push herself to excel in her work. Trained as an occupational therapist, she quickly advanced in her field, eventually becoming head of a major program at the Texas Research Institute for Mental Health.

Chapman says that in helping others as an occupational therapist, she was trying to heal herself. The life she currently leads grew out of a need to stop a pattern of overreaching and slip into another mode of being in the world: one that is less about production than process.

Chapman began her artistic career as a photographer, but had to give it up when she broke two long bones in her ankle and was forced to stay off her feet for an extended period. That's when she began making her daily collage, which she credits as teaching her discipline.



"Awaken VIII", 1999. Mixed media on wood, 20 1/2" x 14 1/2".

Chapman combines drawing, watercolor, and actual objects found on her walks, such as flowers, seeds and pods, to create compositions in her collages that serve as the basis for her paintings. They are small, executed on postcards and invitations sent to her in the mail, and the texts of the announcements and notes are often visible. After she completes her daily collage, she returns to work on whatever painting is currently on her easel. So at the same time she is creating a more monumental work, she is generating new ideas and material for the future.

Chapman says she always wanted to paint, but was thrown off course by her involvement in photography. She had taken some painting classes in college and when she was ready to make the transition, a

friend invited her into her studio to learn. With no formal art training, her painting remains a bit clumsy, a quality she embraces because she claims it is like her: slightly awkward and not particularly polished.

In Chapman's early paintings, women transform into trees with hearts whose veins and arteries root them in the ground. She acknowledges the relationship of these paintings to those of Frida Kahlo, somewhat embarrassed because citing Frida as an influence has become cliché. But as she points out, the connections are real and based on Chapman's family background. Her father was a cardiologist and her mother an avid gardener. The models and diagrams of hearts scattered throughout her childhood home were an especially powerful source of imagery.

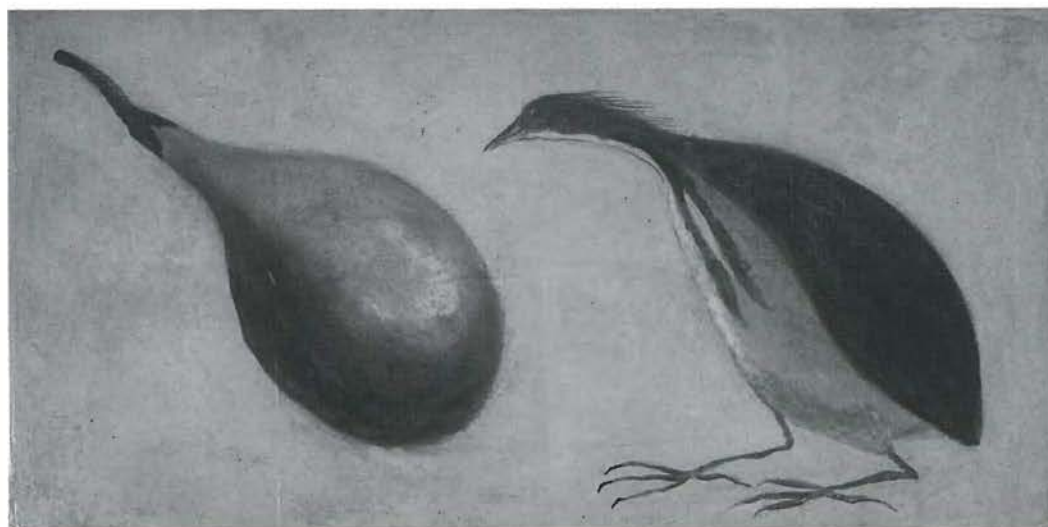
The parallels between the human body and plant life are more subtly suggested in Chapman's recent work. In *Reconnect III* for example, a cactus is sliced open to reveal an interior form that pushes its way up from the bottom, as if moving through an orifice. The thick web of roots reaching downward resembles human veins and arteries.

In *Reconnect III*, the interior form is an invention of the artist, but in other paintings, specific plant forms are represented. Chapman combines the real and the invented, respecting the identity of what she witnesses in the world while at the same time, allowing herself the freedom to evoke the awe she feels in the presence of nature.

Chapman's paintings sometimes include actual plants or representations of the plants or objects she has gathered during her walks. And many contain dried Angel Trumpets (*Brumansia*) which grow in her backyard. The paintings in the *Reconnect* series read like a diary of Chapman's discoveries, filtered through her imagination. The arrangement of the items on the canvas—a pod split open to reveal its seeds, an Angel Trumpet hanging from a crescent moon—makes them seem otherworldly. While the work is reminiscent of surrealism, it is more about the extraordinary quality of the real, the things Chapman encounters on a daily basis.

Chapman has a deep interest and admiration for cultures in which making images and spiritual practice are one and the same. On the day I visited, she showed me pictures of Hindu women painting blessings on the walls of their homes. The act is sacred and the result is a sacred symbol. Chapman strives for this wedding of product and process in her own work. In her series, *Awaken*, she has come one step closer to achieving that goal.

The paintings in *Awaken* combine elements of Chapman's earlier work—the evocative use of plant forms, the green background, and the square format—with images inspired by her recent visit to India. She took the trip to observe animal life, but became fascinated with the small temples she encountered throughout the country. Big enough to hold just one person at a time, they are built for



"Awaken XII", 1999. Mixed media on wood, 12" x 24".

individual devotion. Chapman was also taken with the carts she saw on the streets, carrying not only commercial goods but also traveling shrines. Impressed with the way spirituality is fully integrated with everyday life, she incorporated the shapes of the temples and carts into *Awaken*. She also added the bright colors of the region to her previously muted palette.

Awaken IV is an homage to Gandhi, inspired by the site of his cremation where wild marigold petals are scattered. Chapman fills her miniature domed temple with rows of the small yellow flowers and adds a wing flying from the dome, a symbol of the spirit world suggested in other paintings by the presence of birds. Similarly, in *Awaken II*, Chapman paints the image of an Indian cart with a tree growing inside of it, rolling over a bed of seed pods. In these and other similar works, Chapman evokes the spiritual practices she witnessed in India at the same time she creates her own small temples of devotion to nature.

In all of Chapman's painting, there is a visible grid underneath the surface formed by entries from journals and daily writings. (The writing visible in the collages gave her the idea of what to do with the reams of paper she was using.) As the painting is worked up, the writing becomes embedded in layers of green paint, which has been

scraped and repainted and scraped again so that it resembles patina. The writing below the surface is evidence of the artist's thoughts, a kind of murmuring in the back-ground that gradually comes to the fore. In *Reconnect*, the writing is apparent, but illegible. In *Awaken*, Chapman allows us to see more of what she has written, and it is personal in nature. As she allows her words to become legible, she invites her audience to see that she is struggling.

In sharing her personal struggle, Chapman draws attention to the courage it takes to be an artist in a culture that measures success in terms of wealth, power, visibility, and title. There is little external recognition. The artist has to generate it for herself. As her writing becomes part of the completed work, Chapman lets us closer to the living, breathing human being present beneath the surface of the work. In doing so, she reminds us that making art is a process of discovery and that it is also a good way to live.

SAUNDRA GOLDMAN
Phd. Art History, writer and critic,
lives in Austin, Texas.
January, 2000

LAUREN LEVY

New Works



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

FEBRUARY 24 - MARCH 25, 2000
AUSTIN, TEXAS

ISABELLE SCURRY CHAPMAN
Lives in Houston, Texas

EDUCATION

- 1970 B.A. (Sociology)
University of Mississippi, Oxford, Ms.
M.S. (Occupational Therapy)
Texas Women's University, Denton, Tx.
1986- Studies in Art, University of Houston,
1989 Rice University, Glassell School of Art,
Houston, Tx.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 **Isabelle Scurry Chapman and Laura
Levy: New Works, Women & Their Work**,
Austin, Tx.
1999 **Under the Moon**, Galveston Arts Center,
Galveston Island, Tx.
In the Gardens of My Mind, UT Health
Science Center of Houston, Tx.
Angels and Goddesses,
MCT Fine Arts, Houston, Tx.
Isabelle Scurry Chapman: Photos Lee
Davis Library, San Jacinto College, Pasadena

JURIED EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 **Juror's Choice: Members Exhibition**,
Selected by Susan Weaver, Associate
Curator, Dallas Museum of Art,
Women & Their Work, Austin, Tx.
Critic's Choice, Dallas Visual Arts
Center, Dallas, Tx.
Is This A Joke Or What?, O'Kane
Gallery, Houston, Tx.
1998 **20 x 20 x 20**, LSU Union Art Gallery,
Baton Rouge, La.
Bucking the Texas Myth III, Dougherty
Arts Center, Austin, Tx.
Critic's Choice, Dallas Visual Arts
Center, Dallas, Tx.
Lubbock Arts Festival Gallery,
Lubbock, Tx. (*Merit Award Winner*)
1997 **Critic's Choice**, Dallas Visual Arts Center
Dallas, Tx.
Open Show, Art League, Houston, Tx.
(*Prize Winner*)
1994 **VAA 11th Annual Show**, NationsBank,
Houston, Tx.
1993 **Human Ritual**, Gallery 201, Austin, Tx.
(*Juror's Choice*)
Running Water Draw Exhibition,
RWD Gallery, Plainview, Tx.
Heritage, Art League, Houston, Tx.
VAA 10th Annual Show, Two Houston
Center, Houston, Tx.
Dishman Competition, Lamar University,
Beaumont, Tx. (*Honorable Mention*)
Assuming Less..Understanding More,
Innova, Houston, Tx. (*Award Winner*)
Art League of Houston Exhibit,
Houston, Tx.
Texas Photographic Society Exhibit,
Amdur Gallery, Austin, Tx.
**MFP Photo National Traveling
Exhibit**, Michigan.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 **Small Format Four**, Humanities Fine Arts
Gallery, Univ. of Minnesota, Morris, Mn.

- 1997 **Women on Women**, New Art Gallery,
Houston, Tx.
Really Red Show, West End Gallery,
Houston, Tx.
Flora Bella, Galveston Arts Center,
Galveston, Tx.
Classically Inspired, Hooks-Epstein
Gallery, Houston, Tx.
Images in Nature, V, Martin-Rathburn
Gallery, San Antonio, Tx.
Samantha's Garden, McMurtrey Gallery,
Houston, Tx.

AWARDS

- The Wayfinding Project, Cultural Arts
Council of Houston and Harris
County, Tx.
1998 **PASTA Grant**, given by Cultural Arts
Council of Houston and Harris County, Tx.
1996 **MAA/NEA**, Fellowship in Painting and
Works on Paper
BIBLIOGRAPHY
1999 **Is This A Joke Or What?** (Catalog)
O'Kane Gallery, Houston, Tx.
1998 Victoria Hodge Lightman, **A Garden Pew,
Houston Sidewalk**, (October)
Lubbock Festival Gallery, Lubbock
Magazine, (April)
Critic's Choice Catalog, Dallas Visual
Arts Center, Dallas, Tx.
C. Larson, **Small Format Four Hits HFA
Gallery, University Register**, Morris, Mn.
1997 Mid America Arts Alliance/NEA Catalog
1994 Susie Kalil, **Wink Wink, Houston Press**,
(March 24-30)

LAUREN H. LEVY

Lives in Austin, Texas.

EDUCATION

- 1986 B.F.A in Studio Art and B.S.N. in
Nursing from the University of
Texas at Austin.
1989- Studied Metalsmithing at the Oregon
1991 School of Arts and Crafts, Oregon.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 **Isabelle Scurry Chapman and Laura
Levy: New Works, Women & Their Work
Exhibit**, Austin, Tx.
1998 **Lauren Levy, Quack's Bakery**, Austin, Tx.
1996 **Lauren Levy**,
1995 **Texas French Bread Bakery**, Austin, Tx.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 **Celestial Seasonings: A Loose
Interpretation IV**.
1998 **Juror's Choice: 1998 Member's Show**,
Women & Their Work, Austin, Tx.
Selected by Lynn Herbert, Curator
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Tx.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1995 **The Austin Chronicle**,
Hanging the Best of 1995, Rebecca Cohen

LAUREN LEVY: NEW WORKS

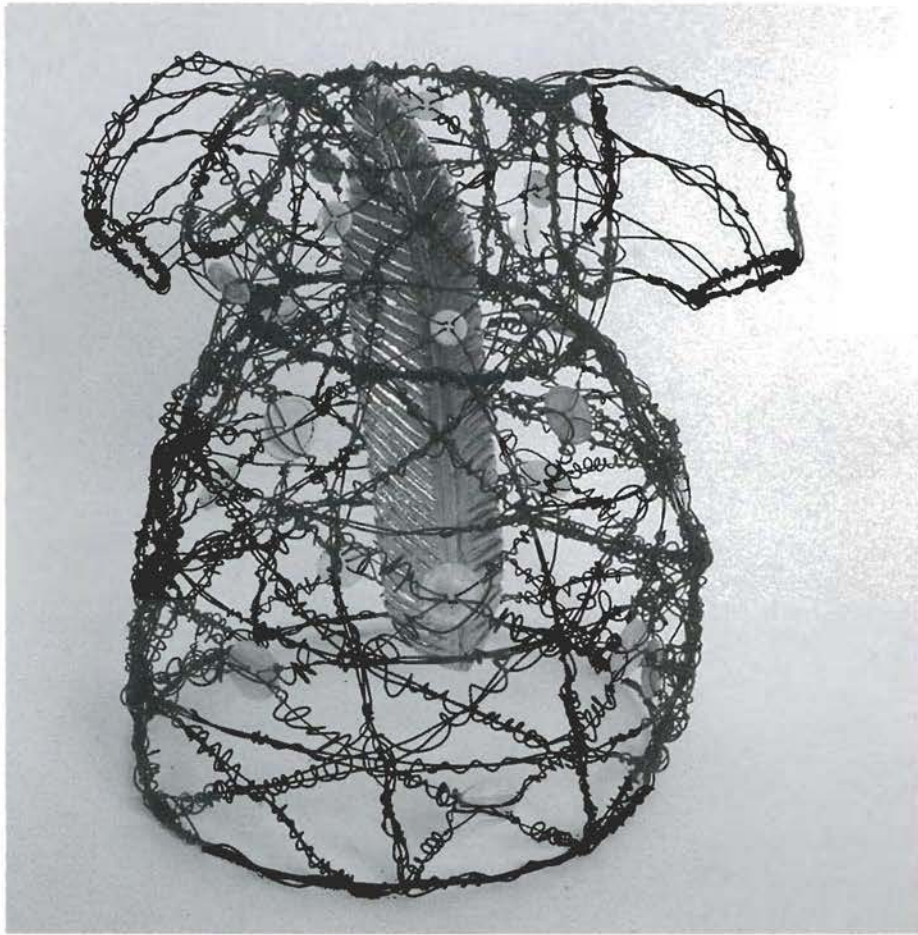
by Sandra Goldman

After a visit to Lauren Levy's home, I try to imagine Lauren's work outside the clutter of her house, away from her collections of toys, seeds, heads and plastic shoes. In the gallery, the work will stand alone, each one on its pedestal, little presences and big absences. These works are like ghosts, where little bodies might have been. Tiny corpses, specters of death. "The loss of a child is the one thing I could not survive" says Levy during our studio visit. She doesn't say it directly until weeks later when we meet again, but it is there, hovering over all her work: Death.

But the work is by no means ugly. The accumulation of shiny colored buttons on steel wires creates a jewel-like effect, which is to say that it is visually quite rich. Everything is here: form and color and texture. Especially texture. The buttons are all about touch, having been handled by the owners of lost garments. Levy says you can tell when a button has been used because there are signs of its handling. It becomes worn down, the color fades, and sometimes it gets scratched up.

The buttons themselves vary wildly, from natural carved wood to smooth plastic in day-glo colors. They come in different shapes and sizes and forms. Each work by Levy is a cornucopia of these objects, buttons piled on until there is no more room. "More is more," she says. "I don't like preciousness." By which she means the hoarding of things that might be of value. So she takes the rare green button in the shape of a maple leaf and the ivory one with a red sailboat painted on it, and heaps them on with everything else.

Levy takes pleasure in the physicality of making things: the selecting and handling of materials and the satisfaction of putting them together, piece by piece. As an art student at the University of Texas, she was bored by the emphasis on theory. After graduating and moving to Portland, Oregon, she sought a more technically-oriented approach to making art, enrolling in a metal-smithing class at the Oregon School of Arts



"Truss", 1999. Mixed media, wire, buttons, carved balsa, gold leaf, 17" x 17" x 13".

and Crafts. While Levy originally wanted to learn the craft in order to make her own elements for jewelry, she became engaged with the sculptural exercises assigned by her acclaimed teacher, Christine Clark. As a result of the course, she started to make sculpture.

At the same time she was learning metalsmithing, Levy began to knit, which played a crucial role in the development of her art. She became accomplished at the craft, using as many as 200 colors and varieties of yarn in a single garment. The work was stunning and complex, although she gave most of it away. Levy never intended to make clothes for herself, just as she never makes jewelry to actually wear. Rather, knitting—like making jewelry and working with buttons—appealed to her love of process and materials. "Knitting taught me that I could work on big projects in small pieces," she told me. After mapping out the structure of a garment, she could see it through stitch by stitch.

Levy intended to apply the principles of knitting to metalsmithing, but she never had the chance. Shortly after returning to Austin, she developed carpal tunnel syndrome and was unable to work. And then her first child was born and it became nearly impossible to get into her studio. By the time she had her equipment prepared for metalsmithing, her goggles on and her torches fired up, the baby would start to cry and she'd have to put everything away again. She needed to develop a technique that fit into her life, moving back and forth with a baby.

She started collecting buttons at the junk stores and garage sales that she loves to frequent. Not knowing what she would do with them, she began sorting the buttons by color. "It helped me keep my sanity," she told me, "and it gave me satisfaction because it was a task I could complete." And then she figured out how she could use the buttons, stringing them like beads on a wire. Drawing on her experience knitting and her knowledge

of the way garments are structured, she came up with the wire framework, beginning with a small sweater. And then she filled it in with strands of beads, like stitches. One bead on top of the next, each forming a row, all lining up to form the larger whole.

The relationship of this work to knitting is most obvious in *Prolix*, with its patchwork of bright colors creating an obvious pattern. But if you look closely at other works, such as *Habitat*, you can see the wire armature underneath the vertical strings of beads, the horizontal and vertical axes that determine the length and width of each band of buttons.

Levy was able to work in this format in the house, putting the wire structures on top of tables where the baby couldn't get to them. And as with knitting, she could work in small increments, completing a single task in a small segment of time. It is well-suited to the interrupted life of the working mother, the fragmentation that characterizes many women's lives. Lauren's work is fully integrated into her life, with no clear separation between the creative act and everything else. The aesthetic by which she lives is the aesthetic by which she makes art.

Levy identifies with quilters and stitchers, enjoying the meditative act of repetition. And her emphasis on craft places her in the tradition of 1970's Pattern and Decoration art. Like feminist artists Miriam Schapiro and Faith Ringgold, Levy elevates so-called "women's work," pushing the boundaries of art and craft and probing the possibilities of her medium. While she is working in the domain of the feminine, however, these are not works about the glory of domesticity and child care. Nor are they sweet evocations of childhood fairyland. Rather, Levy's work suggests a multitude of adult feelings and emotions—sexuality, fear of death, loss, grief, horror—emotions that continue to haunt despite, and perhaps because of, the presence of children.

In most of Levy's work, every piece of wire is covered. Often she strings beads or more buttons to conceal the supporting wires and piles bunches of small buttons around the collars and edges of sleeves. The latter resemble the stitchery and beading that



This Panel: Levy "Viewer: Pleiku", 1999. Mixed media, wire, buttons, 14" x 8" x 8".
 Cover Panels: Chapman "Grace", 1999. Mixed media on wood, 15 3/4" x 19 3/4".
 Levy "White Flowers", 1999. Mixed media, wire, buttons, fabric, 12" x 12" x 8".
 Back Panel: Chapman "Awaken II", 1999. Mixed media on wood, 20 1/2" x 20".

sometimes trim sweaters and jackets. In addition, she often hangs things from her work: a necklace she has made herself, a selection of writing that has inspired a piece, tiny framed paintings of birds or eyes. These ornaments are like charms on a bracelet and they are often symbolic—like the birds that refer to the spirit world.

In recent works like *Flanders*, the button work is pared down considerably. Only a few evenly spaced buttons are placed along the outer armature. Inside, however, beaded flowers in hot pinks and bright oranges grow out of control, suggesting a heated sexuality which is often buttoned down in a polite exterior.

Levy's latest work addresses war. In *Ardennes*, a child-size sweater is woven together with camouflage-green buttons,

combining evocations of childhood with a reference to war, (*Ardennes* was the site of the Battle of the Bulge). Peering eyes in small frames hang from the garment accusingly, conjuring images of dead children resurrected as ghosts. In *Viewer: Pleiku*, a town in Viet Nam, she evokes the war with a camouflage house. The piece grew out of Levy's memories of being a child in the 1970s, when her family paid more attention to television shows like *The Brady Bunch* than the war. Mimicking a child's toy, Levy adds a peep hole to her house, like a viewfinder. We peer in and see nothing. Like the children's garments, the house is an empty casing.

A Jacket Shaped Hole in the Universe is built of steel wire and black buttons and suggests protective armor. It is a child's garment, however, a hooded jacket. A parent

might button her child into it, but there is no guarantee it will protect her.

Like Cornell, whom she admires, Levy is a connoisseur of popular culture, particularly plastic, the quintessential material of the twentieth century. Created as a durable alternative to more precious materials, ironically, plastic imitations quickly become collectors' items and pass into history. And so it is with the buttons that comprise Levy's work, which are remnants of previous lives. The buttons suggest the passage of time. They remind us of loss and death. Just as Levy's sculptures do—like *Nightie*, which resembles the garment of an infant girl. It is small and sweet and begs to be held like a child. But there is nothing to hang onto. The buttons are rigid, forming a dense, hollow shell. They only retain the memory of what was.



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

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Now celebrating its 22nd anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, 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 1590 artists in 192 visual art exhibitions, 94 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 148 workshops, in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and National Public

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