

Dawn Southworth: Tableaus and Assemblages

On first viewing Dawn Southworth's recent work, one may feel as though he/she has come upon a group of relics that are familiar and yet strange, objects that seem to simultaneously exist in the present and the past. The artist's tableaus and assemblages present themselves as enigmas and conundrums of a sort - singular and serial constructions that prompt a broad range of speculative readings. Southworth invites us to piece together personal and symbolic narratives from her art, much as she assembles ideas and objects in her studio. There she gathers, cobbles, stitches, draws, and fastens a myriad of different images and materials together into poetic and unified visual statements.

Like other contemporary artists who are extending the rich modernist tradition of assemblage, Southworth has developed a highly personal visual vocabulary for her artmaking. She has done so by gleaning source materials that already evidence a life of their own: anonymous family snapshots, thrift store paintings, heirloom fabrics, pruned garden vines, scrap metal, and other shards from everyday life. A visit to her studio always reveals an enormous trove of such material, one that is constantly being sorted, added to, edited, and then transformed through re-use. Interestingly, many of the objects that Southworth gathers and recycles bear the touch and patina of other human hands and a history of work and tasks that are nurturing and devotional in nature. Her sources are redolent with evidence of humble labor, religious faith, medical healing, teaching and learning. Children's drawings, hand-embroidered napkins, old letters, worn linoleum, spiritual images, repaired items and much more all find their way into Southworth's highly personal tableaus. These mundane materials are transformed into art, but they never seem to lose their ability to hint at other lives and earlier purposes. She rekindles memories by re-illuminating the value of things that many people readily discard. She speaks directly and powerfully through the materials she collects and transforms.

Sometimes the materials Southworth uses are particularly charged with the history of her own relatives, immigrants who settled and worked in the industrial cities of New England. For example, the peppered wood that she uses in the boxes that frame and contain her tableaus, has been salvaged from old tack boards in a now defunct shoe factory in Haverhill.

Southworth's grandmother worked there for many years, laboring long shifts at the benches where she and other workers cut, tacked, glued,

and sewed the footwear that clothed others and earned wages that sustained their families. Southworth values the knowledge and memory of what they accomplish specifically and metaphorically. She transforms her insights and feelings on this vast human subject in subtle and powerful ways.

Let me add a personal anecdote to this brief statement. Shortly before Southworth's Addison exhibition was to open, she telephoned me to tell me that her friend, Charles Richards, a master cabinetmaker who helped her build the wooden boxes she uses in her assemblages and tableaus, had died suddenly from a heart attack. She wanted to be sure that her friend, whose life and caring had so contributed to her work, would somehow be acknowledged during her exhibition. Hence, this show is offered in tribute to the memory of Charles F. Richards Jr. , in the spirit and caring and humanity that guides Dawn Southworth's work as an artist.

Jock Reynolds, Director
(currently Director of the
Yale University Art Gallery)