

*Lifeworks***Bodily paradox**

paradox - n. 1. a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement that is or may be true: religious truths are often expressed in paradox. 2. a self-contradictory proposition, such as: I always tell lies. 3. a person or thing exhibiting apparently contradictory characteristics. 4. an opinion that conflicts with common belief.

— *Collins English Dictionary*

Every element of the art of Diana Thorneycroft brims with paradoxes. Even the title of the 10-year retrospective of her work currently on view in Ottawa at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, *Diana Thorneycroft: the body, its lesson and camouflage*, is resolutely self-contradictory. The 40 large-scale, exquisitely printed black-and-white photographs included in the exhibition simultaneously attract the viewer with their stylistic beauty and repel with their disturbing content. This work draws on autobiographical experience and then obscures itself in deliberately theatrical scenes. It uses traditional artistic conventions to explore decidedly unconventional terrain. It arouses intense emotions and yet remains curiously emotionless, generating volumes of questions but studiously avoiding authoritative answers. This work is not easily pinpointed or pigeonholed. Its



Collection of the artist

Diana Thorneycroft, *Untitled (Mask)*, 1990

infuriating ambiguity has led audiences to describe it as both “brave” and as “sick.” When touring the Thorneycroft exhibit, the viewer immediately confronts its controversial elements. The challenge is to look beyond the controversy to gain some insight into the

meaning of such work. This is a difficult undertaking but, if the viewer is willing to make the effort, the rewards are many.

Thorneycroft's art focuses on the human body, a subject as old as the history of art. Because her work originates

in autobiographical material, she chooses to photograph her own body, naked and luminescent, like classical Greek statuary. She places herself into elaborately staged, dramatically lit scenes with decidedly nonclassical associations. In an early series of self-portraits from 1989 and 1990, she portrays herself as members of her family. In these works she costumes herself in masks constructed from photographs she took of each individual, strapping on a prosthetic penis when she is playing the role of her brother and father, fake breasts when she plays her mother. She includes props in each scene that identify the individual: airplanes and a toy gun for her brother, a slotted spoon for her mother. Thorneycroft uses instantly identifiable, emotionally loaded props in her unconventional approach to picture-making. She is not afraid to confront taboos — in this case, the sexuality of one's parents and siblings.

First suture

The mother shakes
but the child flails
with terror
a four-inch gash
on her perfect brow
The father waits outside
pacing, raging
his answer to fear
Hold her
still please
My junior hand
trembles under taut rubber
to small choking sobs
My needle much too close
to that sea-blue eye
Her mother sings a lullaby
to calm us
It goes
in and out until
I cut the last knot
I am
not breathing

Allan Peterkin
Psychiatrist
Toronto, Ont.

This also allows her to contradict their accepted meanings with new ones of her own invention, creating additional opportunities for paradoxes in her work. Consider the possibility that these images are neither portraits of her family nor self-portraits of Thorneycroft pretending to be members of her family. Choosing to wear prominent but obviously fake sexual organs and to display common objects clearly associated with male and female roles suggests that these photographs may be more about gender stereotypes. But even this reading is probably too simplistic; Thorneycroft's slim, almost androgynous body creates a requirement for her to don synthetic male and female attributes in order to be designated as either sex. In doing so, she obscures the division between the sexes and establishes the paradoxical world that is vintage Thorneycroft.

All of the oppositions inherent in Thorneycroft's work are evident in *Untitled (Snare)* from 1994. In this photograph, she straps herself into what appears to be an electric chair. Her head is bowed and wrapped in plastic; her upper body is slumped to the right. Her attitude suggests that she is dead, until one notices her right leg, with its arched foot and pointed toes. Although subtle, this visual clue emphatically subverts the dominant message of death in the scene. Tucked into the leather restraint on one arm is a large, fur-covered hoof; into the other, a pig's foot. Bound to her abdomen is the severed tongue of a cow, which curves to counter the shape of her torso. These props allude to the memory of a trapped rabbit from Thorneycroft's childhood. Despite the evidence of dismemberment, they are rigid, silent and



Diana Thorneycroft, *Untitled (Snare)*, 1994

completely bloodless. Physically binding herself with these objects shows that she identifies with the rabbit's fate, but she also detaches herself from it by signalling that she is very much alive. To increase the level of paradox, light reflects off the surfaces of the animal remains and animates them, and a row of lizard-like creatures suspended in front of Thorneycroft's head engages in a strange, legless dance.

As one continues to tour the odd, contradictory world of Diana Thorneycroft, the remarkable consistency in her artistic vision becomes all the more stunning. She adheres to the use of her own body to explore content drawn from the dark side of life. She heightens the impact of her work with an insistence on communicating her concerns through a language of paradox. Her consistency of vision anchors the work with integrity. Once this is recognized, the viewer can then accept her imagery and begin to contemplate its many implications.

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