

FOREWORD & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Small but potent, *Dirt, Detritus and Vermin* evokes “the perverse interspace of abjection” described by Julia Kristeva in “Powers of Horror”. The three participating artists deploy stencilling, porcelain lace draping and stichery with consummate dexterity, yet perversely enough, the décor they collectively stage would be best described as “squalid.” By means of paradoxical twists, including trompe-l’oeil, the works in this exhibition lure viewers to confront the repellent and the unseemly—matter that is out of place.

The exhibition represents the third curatorial collaboration between Katie Belcher, MSVU Art Gallery Program Coordinator, and me. Following *Beneath the Surface* (2010), the current project returns to distasteful subject matter, but this time in the environment as opposed to within the body. I would like to thank the artists Cal Lane, Sarah Saunders and Janice Wright Cheney for the privilege of exhibiting their work, and also for cooperating to such great effect with Katie Belcher and our Technician, Stefan Hancherow, on the design of the installation. Traci Steylen, Administrative Assistant, smoothly supported their efforts.

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Ingrid Jenkner, Director, MSVU Art Gallery

ORNAMENT AND GRIME

In counterpoint to Lucky Rabbit Pottery’s decorative installation in the adjacent gallery, *Dirt, Detritus and Vermin* presents a room resembling an abandoned studio. The artists use the techniques of fine craftsmanship, but they subvert tradition by applying them to degraded materials and subject matter. The overall effect is to parody the immorality attributed to ornament by Adolf Loos in his polemical essay, “Ornament and Crime” (1908).¹

Loos influentially argued against the commodification of art through unnecessary adornment. He decried the elemental, primitive and even erotic desire to adorn; claiming that modern society (his “modern” society) had outgrown the decorative, allowing the creation of “pure” art. In fact, Loos’ own architectural interiors are not undecorated: “He was a master in the use of expensive figured marbles, which provide him with motifs and surface pattern, of beautiful brass detail, and the simple but lavish use of sleek and expensive wood...The absence of conventional motif and pattern is filled by other means.”² Under the influence of Loos and other modernist thinkers, craft was isolated from art, and receded into anachronism and regionality.³ Craft came to symbolize modernity’s opposite—tradition. In *Dirt, Detritus and Vermin* we aim not so much to engage with this argument as to poke fun at the debate that has persisted to this day.

Cal Lane’s interest in patterning is expressed through lace-sifted garden soil in *Dirt floor*. Does she highlight the beauty to be discovered in a base material, or does she emulate Loos by suggesting the degeneracy of decorative design? In her 1966 book, *Purity and Danger*, the influential anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests that dirt is simply matter out of place, meaning that something may be considered unclean according to its relative situation within to society’s categorizations.⁴ In this case, it is as if the dirt of the abandoned space had simply rearranged itself. Through the organization of the dirt into an attractive pattern, what otherwise seems out of place is removed from the realm of the impure—it now straddles the division between the appealing and the repellent.

The memory of her grandmother sifting powdered sugar through a doily onto a cake inspired Lane to adopt this process. She began by sifting powdered sugar through doilies onto tires—the lace interacting with the existing pattern of the treads—and eventually used soil to create large, in situ patterns. The process both mirrors and expands upon her grandmother’s. The size and position of *Dirt floor* recalls sand drawing traditions of Southwestern Native Americans, Tibetan monks and Latin American Christians. The installation process appears contemplative—Lane hand-sifts the dirt over a piece of lace laid down on the floor, bent at the waist and cupping the dirt in two hands like an offering. Observing the installation of this work felt so invasive that I left her to it, missing the moment when she lifted the lace to reveal the dirt imprint. With this final step, the process moves away from the meditative and returns to the domestic—the doily removed to reveal a perfect cake.

Lane’s uses of the lace motif oppose masculine and feminine stereotypes, often appearing in masculinized materials such as plasma-cut steel, dirt or rust. By the same token, and in Loos-ian terms, Lane also “upgrades” domestic craft to “fine art” status. Lane recalls how, as a small girl, she resisted the feminine expectations imposed on her by others: “Lace became a symbol of this purity, or this tidy feminine beauty that I resented. I didn’t want to wear little dresses and sit still. I wanted to get into trouble, get dirty, discover and invent.”⁵

The juxtaposition of the delicate femininity represented by lace and the coarse reality of filth extends to Sarah Saunders’ *hankies*. In this exhibition, the porcelain handkerchiefs are scattered across the gallery floor, as if used and dropped. Yet such is their fragility that were they to be dropped—or even breathed on too vigorously—they would shatter like new layers of ice. Saunders has replicated fine lace handkerchiefs in a state of use, insisting on the normally unspoken connection to the filth that they conceal. I’m intrigued by the attention to decoration of objects reserved for such base experiences as blowing a nose, exerting oneself or giving in to emotion. There is also something particularly transfixing about the fact that this “detritus” is not to

be discarded but collected, washed and reused. Yet the delicacy of the lace, nostalgic appeal and whiteness all serve to draw us into the work. In this way, Saunders pits refinement against repulsion.

The crisp white of the hankies launches another prod at Loos’ purist endorsement of white modernist interiors and the myth of white cleanliness. “In making white our iconic colour, we assert that we are regaining civility...Whiteness is a *sign* of visual cleansing, just as a white shirt is the *sign* of a cultivated man and a white tiled bathroom with white enameled fittings had become a *sign* of physical hygiene, irrespective of its real cleanliness.”⁶ Yet in the case of the crumpled hankies, white signifies nothing. I’m reminded of the piece of lace that Cal Lane used in her installation—the light-coloured lace has darkened to beige after several passes of soil through its fibres.

Janice Wright Cheney’s recent sculptural works include rats made of cast-off fur coats. Produced especially for this exhibition, *Encroach* bridges her current sculptural practice and earlier insect-themed embroideries. In her catalogue essay for *Janice Wright Cheney: Disorderly Creatures* (Rodman Hall Arts Centre, 2001), Lianne McTavish comments that Wright Cheney “is attracted to creatures the average person might find repulsive: cockroaches, earwigs, moths and centipedes...Sometimes, however, the unruly beasts run amok, infesting her work. They creep into old books or are camouflaged by the pastoral patterns of antique fabric. Even as Wright Cheney’s work is infused with a passion for insects, it also relates the impossibility of mastering them, of completely pinning them down.”⁷ Making every effort to capture the features of the cockroach, Wright Cheney worked from a specimen in her insect collection. She experimented with a variety of textile and craft-based media including pounded leather and pig intestines before settling on the onion skins.

While Cal Lane tests the gendered associations of dirt and lace, and Sarah Saunders discovers the unhygienic in a feminine accessory, Janice Wright Cheney engages the viewer more dramatically, evoking the abject by means of trompe-l’oeil illusion.

If dirt is simply matter out of place, then impurity has more to do with boundaries than with the matter itself. Mary Douglas proposes that the body is a model for these boundaries and explains the visceral reaction of humans to abjection. “[The body’s] boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious. ...We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to the social structure reproduced in small on the human body.”⁸ According to Rosemary Betterton in *An Intimate Distance* “defilement occurs when the body’s borderlines are transgressed.”⁹ Food is the primary source of abjection as it enters from the mouth—the separation between the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the Other—directly confronting the boundaries of our bodies. Hence the taboos that exist in most cultures surrounding unclean food, sexual practices and bodily wastes.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva elaborates on Douglas’ explanation of the importance of order in our understanding of filth. “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is savior.”¹⁰ Janice Wright Cheney’s roaches embody this theory. Their presence is a trespass. They signify the presence of rotting food, the smell of which can trigger a gag reaction. They leave trails of bacteria in their wake and are considered in most cultures to be one of the lowest life forms, yet they are closely connected to us humans, given their attraction to our filth.

Intimacy and abjection are duel currents throughout Wright Cheney’s work. A previous project, *Bodice of Fleas* (2001-2004) featured embroidered insects on the bodice of a dress. “Fleas were constant companions to humans during the early modern period, and were even awarded erotic connotations because of their intimate knowledge of the human flesh on which they feasted.”¹¹ Other Wright Cheney works bear embroidered silverfish and other insect pests hiding in the corners of handkerchiefs.

In light of Mary Douglas’ identification of the importance of boundary in the definition of purity, it is easy to see why insects are so often associated with the impure. “They defy human order, are still not fully classified in their abundant diversity, and tend to turn up where they are not supposed to be. Insects invade our sanctuaries. In museums, they gorge on rather than act as specimens; in houses, they disappear and reappear, like monsters.”¹²

At the centre of Wright Cheney’s practice, “is a reclaiming and celebration of the materials and skills long associated with the traditional decorative arts created by women.”¹³ By working with textiles and needlework, she aligns herself with a history of women artists and women’s work. *Encroach* is no exception. The fibrous skin of an onion is a textile, and the deep amber pigment has been used in textile dyeing for centuries. Saunders and Lane also engage with the tradition of women’s work—Saunders with reverence, Lane with defiance and both in response to personal history. This aspect of the exhibition asserts itself in the locale of MSVU Art Gallery, where the validation of women’s work as art has long informed the mandate of the gallery, as has its situation within a university focused on the education of women. This thought returns us to Loos and other theorists of his time. In her essay “Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory, 1900-1915,” Jenny Anger describes this position:

“Loos argues that the more refined man is, the less inclined he is to decorate—whereas children, Papuan natives, and criminals write graffiti, tattoo, and draw everywhere with reckless abandon. In an earlier article, “Ladies’ Fashion” (1902), Loos includes women with his underdeveloped, excessively adorned primitives...Naomi Schor has shown that the excesses of the purist aesthetic that Loos and his fellow modernists prescribe are forever mapped onto the feminine, specifically, ‘the ornamental, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence...[or] the everyday, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women.”¹⁴

Anger continues her gender-based critique with Karl Scheffler’s 1908 essay “Woman and Art” in which he:

“vehemently disassociates the abstract and the decorative, the masculine and the feminine...assert[ing] that ‘Woman’ cannot understand ‘pure form,’ because she thinks too amorphously. Man, on the other hand, can condense and therefore can create and appreciate abstract form. Scheffler says that Woman’s talents are decorative and ornamental; she excels, for example, at table-stetting, make-up, and house decoration...Further, Scheffler advises fathers to keep daughters away from the arts and crafts schools because the young women will face bitterness due to their lack of ability, the ‘lure’ of prostitution, and the threat of becoming masculine—albeit without ever having enough masculinity in them to create proper form.”¹⁵

Cal Lane’s work directly confronts this attitude, not only in the application of decorative stencil, but also in the refusal of “Woman’s” role; instead of cleaning dirt off the rug, she lays it down. The performative antecedent of her installation is especially moving. Her action is calm and contemplative, yet her stance is resistant and resolute.

The artists engage viewers in a double take, in which a convincing illusion collapses before one’s eyes. Cal Lane’s exquisite patterning is framed by loose masses of disordered dirt, as though hedged in by furrows in a field. Shattered remnants of porcelain swept into a dustpan at first appear to be nothing more than trash. Shards of lace reveal that the pan holds the remains of one of Saunders’ *hankies*, disclosing their true composition as brittle porcelain. Wright Cheney’s pests convince with their deep amber colour and sheen. Upon closer inspection we realize the thick carapace is merely an onion skin, its volume is increased by a layer of felt underneath.

Dirt floor is in constant danger of disappearing; one draft of air, if one moves past it too quickly, one mistaken step and the piece disappears. As a “dialogue of beautiful filth,” the installation does not revel in the feminine.¹⁶ Rather, it highlights the conflicts between expectation and reality, decorator and cultivator. Lane and her grandmother, order and disorder, permanence and impermanence.

Saunders’ *hankies* extend this dialectical confrontation in several ways. Their

appearance belies their material. Seemingly discarded, they are in fact works of art. The process of their creation also encompasses contradictions. Saunders dips the handkerchiefs in porcelain, forms them to her desired shape, and fires them in a kiln. The original handkerchief is burned out and no longer exists. Saunders began this process using inherited linen items of her grandmothers’. The heartbreak of sacrificing these mementoes highlights the transience of life and memory. Ironically, by attempting to capture these objects, Saunders actually makes the commemorative replicas more ephemeral than the originals, as fleeting as memory itself.

Encroach continues the illusion by activating the entire exhibition. So lifelike are these specimens that they appear to have been caught in time; their naturalism implies movement. They act as catalysts, poised to scuttle through *Dirt floor*, and shift the position of the *hankies’* folds. Acting as potential agents of change in this space, the roaches give the exhibition the sense of having a life after gallery hours.

Through fusing decoration with base materials and subject matter, Cal Lane, Sarah Saunders and Janice Wright Cheney confront ideas of filth, abjection, femininity, beauty and fragility. In progressive circles the gender-based hierarchy separating women’s work and “real” work, and the crafts from the fine arts, has long been a joke—this exhibition impresses on the viewer the absurdity of such arbitrary distinctions.

Katie Belcher, Curator

NOTES

- 1 Loos, Adolf. “Ornament and Crime” (1908) in *The Theory of Decorative Art: An anthology of European and American Writings 1750-1940*. Ed. Isabelle Frank. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).
- 2 Brett, David. *Rethinking Design: Pleasure and Ideology in the Visual Arts*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). pp. 196
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- 4 Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1991). pp. 50
- 5 Cal Lane quoted in De Garie-Lamanque, Ève. “Une main d’acier gantée de velours, ou quand le décoratif se fait subversif.” in *Sweet Crude*. (exhibition catalogue) (Montréal: Éditions Art Mûr, 2009). pp. 69
- 6 Brett, 198
- 7 McTavish, Lianne. *Janice Wright Cheney: Disorderly Creatures*. (exhibition catalogue) (Fredericton: Rodman Hall Arts Centre, 2001). pp. 7
- 8 Douglas, 115
- 9 Betterton, Rosemary. *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). pp. 139
- 10 Kristeva, Julia “Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection” (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).pp. 4
- 11 McTavish, 10
- 12 McTavish, 10-11
- 13 Larocque, Peter J. *Trespass Intrusion*. (exhibition catalogues) (Saint John: New Brunswick Museum, 2010). pp. 10
- 14 Anger, Jenny. “Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory, 1900-1915” in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*. Ed. Christopher Reed. (London: Thomas and Hudson, 1996). pp. 130. Quoting: Schor, Naomi, *Reading in detail: aesthetics and the feminine*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1987). pp. 50-58
- 15 Anger, 13
- 16 Hartenstein Saatchie, Kay. “Delicate Monumentality.” in *Sweet Crude*. (exhibition catalogue) (Montréal: Éditions Art Mûr, 2009). pp. 20

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msvu art gallery

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ARTISTS

CAL LANE

Dirt floor 2011
sifted garden soil on mylar

Born in Halifax, NS, Cal Lane was raised in Saanichton, BC. Following her welding certification, she completed a BFA at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (Halifax, 2001) and an MFA at the State University of New York (Purchase, NY, 2005). Lane has exhibited her work nationally and abroad in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (Halifax, 2002-3), the Textile Museum of Canada (Toronto, ON, 2006), the Museum of Art and Design (New York, NY, 2007), Musea Brugge (Belgium, 2008) and the DeCordova Sculpture Park (Lincoln, MA, 2008-10). Lane received several awards and distinctions, including the 2006 Emerging Artist Fellowship and residency at the Socrates Sculpture Park (Long Island City, NY) and the 2007 Joseph S. Stauffer Prize from the Canada Council for the Arts. She was also shortlisted for the Sobey Art Award in 2004. www.callane.com

SARAH SAUNDERS

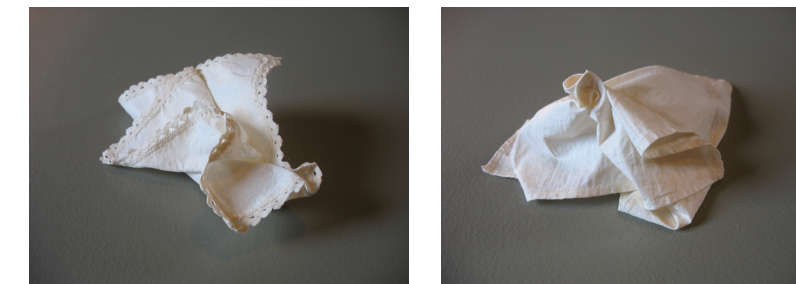
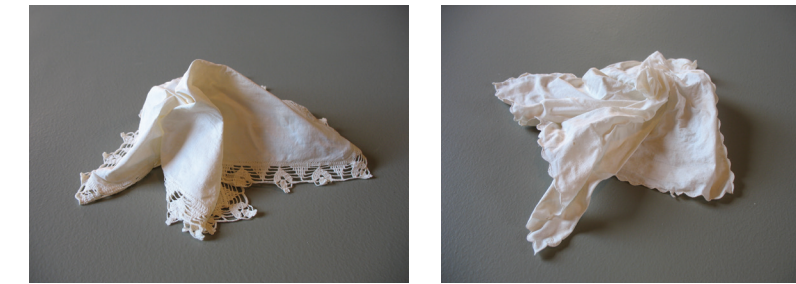
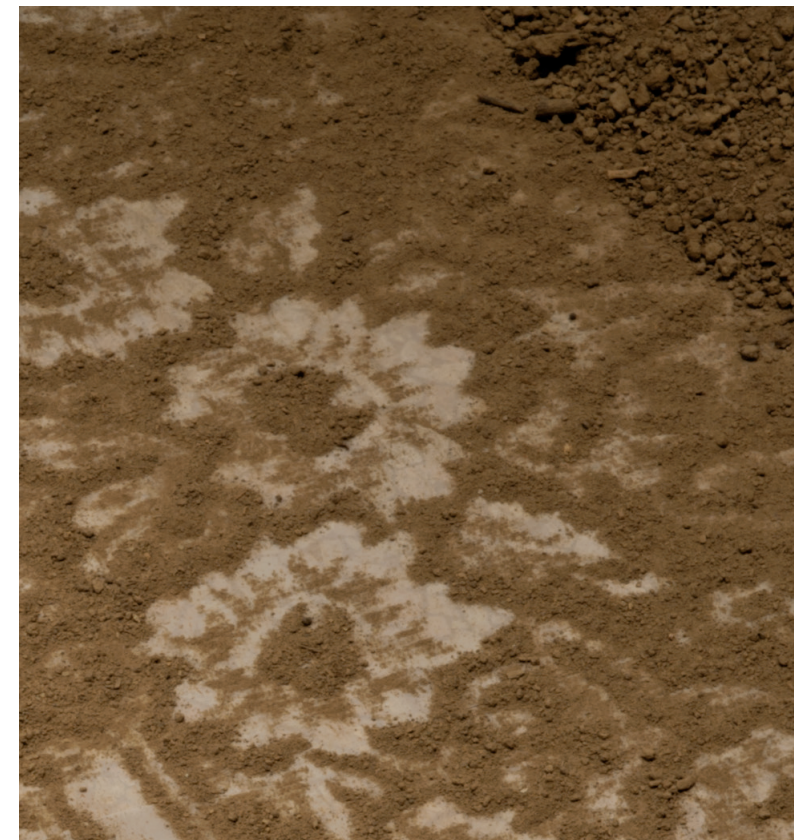
hankies 1-8 2008
fabric-draped porcelain

Sarah Saunders has exhibited both nationally and internationally, most recently in *Between Presence and Absence* at the Acadia University Art Gallery (Wolfville, NS, 2010). Her works are held in such collections as the Canadiana Fund, the Province of PEI Art Bank, Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Burlington Art Centre. Articles on her work have appeared in the international journal *Ceramics Art and Perception* as well as in Canadian publications on contemporary art. She has been awarded grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the PEI Arts Council, and the Province of PEI. She has a Bachelor of Design from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1989). Her formal art education at NSCAD was preceded by a B.Sc. in Biology from Acadia University (1985), studies in dance in Toronto and sculpture and drawing at the American Centre in Paris (1986). www.sarahsaunders.ca

JANICE WRIGHT CHENEY

Encroach 2011
30 cockroaches: felted wool, copper wire, onion skins, shellac and horse hair; found bucket and brush

Janice Wright Cheney completed a BFA at Mount Allison University (Sackville, NB, 1983) and an MEd in Critical Studies at The University of New Brunswick (Fredericton, NB, 2003). She currently teaches at the New Brunswick College of Craft & Design (Fredericton). Wright Cheney's textile-based installations have been presented in Canada and abroad. Solo exhibitions include *Trespass* (2011), *Disorderly Creatures* (2001), *History* (1997) and *Women & Fiction* (1995). Her work is in the collections of The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the New Brunswick Museum and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. She has received numerous creation grants from the New Brunswick Arts Board and The Canada Council for the Arts. She was the 2004 recipient of the prestigious Strathbutler Award for Excellence in the Arts, and has been elected to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (2009). Most recently, Wright Cheney was among artists selected for *Oh Canada*, the largest survey of contemporary Canadian art produced outside Canada (MASS MoCA, 2012). www.janicewrightcheney.com



DIRT, DETRITUS & VERMIN

Cal Lane, Sarah Saunders, Janice Wright Cheney

