

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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## artillery

KILLER TEXT ON ART



Crime, 2009

### JINA VALENTINE

Patricia Sweetow Gallery  
July/August 2009

By DeWitt Cheng

Over the five centuries since the Renaissance, Christianity furnished, for better or worse, many of the dramatis personae starring in Western art's moralizing tableaux vivants. Modernist artists discarded that legacy, timeworn and bankrupt by the early twentieth century, in favor of new, private mythologies. But contemporary art is omnivorous, and the old-time fire and brimstone have returned, mutedly, in Jina Valentine's elegant, elegiac exhibition, "Lot's Wife." According to Genesis 19, Lot's disobedient wife, Irit, was transformed by Yahweh into a pillar of salt for looking back to her household goods in Sodom, one of the five doomed cities of the plain of Sittim (now in Jordan), with their bon bibants gone wild; she's the original desperate housewife.

This show is no fundie jeremiad, however; Valentine, who is conversant with contemporary art theory and artists like Traylor, Twombly, Dubuffet and Piper, and has previously used "material replete with its own history" to explore how the "autonomous world" of collected artifacts is imbued with vanished life, has created a postmodern meditation on embodied meaning and human frailty. She reinterprets myth for our thunderstruck and humbled nation. Valentine's artifacts - her "Five Cities" book sculptures, Pillar sculptures, Palimpsest manuscripts, and Husks installation - could form the core collection of a Museum of Faux Archaeology or Anthropology, in the dystopic tradition of nineteenth-century Romantic imaginings of some future Fall of the American Empire (e.g., Thomas Cole, Washington Allston, Elihu Vedder).

Valentine's book sculptures are composed of approximately two-foot lengths of paperback books joined together as if on shelves, but the pages are gone; only the covers are left, and even they are no longer intact, having been cut into what resemble dense clusters of bare hedge branches. The artist has traced motifs from the book covers onto drafting film and overlapped them, creating, in each case, a "nebulous, near-illegible mass of pop-cultural iconography" which she projects onto the book shells, cutting away the background areas in a process she calls "linear erosion."

In addition, she has subtitled all of the "five Cities" sculptures, satirically: Romance, crime, Psychodrama, Wealth Management and Self-Help, bestowing contemporary bookstore classifications for 5/7 of what were once labeled the Seven Deadly Sins of Lust/Luxury, Anger, Pride, Greed and Envy. The books are arranged thematically, of course, with mystery novelist Sue Grafton filed under Crime, for example. Finally, reposing inside these linear shells are the missing text pages, but reduced to a gray powder as if incinerated (though they're actually pulped as if for making new paper); we inevitably think of the World Trade Center skeletons amid their ashes, and other bombed-out cities.

Less harrowing are Valentine's other works. The three "Pillar" sculptures are dun-colored broken columns made from unlikely materials forced into a mold - earth, or flax paper with glue. The two wall-mounted inkjet-on-flax Palimpsest "manuscripts" mimic Dead Sea scrolls and other ancient writings, although the dense thickets of verbiage in these "textual megalith{s}" reveals such post-archaic signifiers as Janis Joplin, Ray Johnson, Josephine Baker, Andre Breton, Gilles Deleuze, Eminem, Emerson and Coca-Cola. A palimpsest is a slate that has been written on repeatedly, but imperfectly erased - a fitting symbol for human history. The glue-and-flax oil lamp forms on shelves that comprise Husks refer to Irit's household goods, and, perhaps to knowledge and illumination, which in biblical times was as fatally expensive as the good life.