

SPOTLIGHT REVIEWS

Inside: Richard Hamilton • Mike Gleir • Rosamond Purcell
The New Aldrich Museum • Whitney Biennial • Sara Veglahn

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The University of New Hampshire Art Gallery/Durham www.arts.unh.edu/gallery/html

CHAIN OF FOOLS: HOGARTH REINTERPRETED BY B. LYNCH

In eighteenth-century England, artist William Hogarth, the leading political cartoonist of his day, published a series of prints inspired by the dissipated lifestyle of the ruling class. The parallels with modern-day America are striking: We live in a time where folly and hypocrisy loom large. Executives from Enron, MCI, Tyco, and ImClone are tried on charges of misleading their investors in order to reap large profits for themselves. Gracious living guru Martha Stewart is convicted of lying to federal investigators.

One of Hogarth's suites, *The Rake's Progress*, is in the permanent collection of the University of New Hampshire. This suite recounts the tale of Tom Rakewell, a buffoon whose foibles with women and gambling became legendary. The UNH Art Gallery invited artist B. Lynch to create an installation using these eight engravings as a point of departure. In addition to the resultant installation, *Chain of Fools*, Lynch also created an environment called *Chain of Greed*; a video, *Songs of Innocence & Experience*, and a multipanel painting titled *The Seven Follies*.

Lynch's obsession with the continued relevance of historic works of art has been a sustaining force in her work for more than a decade. Her work is based on many sources, ranging from Greek mythology, early Christianity, Shakespeare's plays, her idol Hogarth, and contemporary mass media. She says, "In the end, Hogarth seems to say we are all likely to play the fool."

The Beggar King is a giant figure whose crown suggests he is king of an alternate form of society, outside of the pious conventions of the middle class. Dressed in a robe of rags, he holds a tin cup in a hook attached to an artificial arm. He faces four yes-men, represented by tablets covered with paper money and newspaper stock market pages, wearing neckties. Lynch calls these figures headless pawns of society "striving ceaselessly to acquire more" material wealth.

Lynch has framed each Hogarth print with proscenium curtains. Next to them are reliquaries illustrating Lynch's synthesis of Hogarth's narrative. Hogarth's print *O Vanity of Youth Full Blood* is accompanied by Lynch's *Folly's Crown*, which consists of a bejeweled gold helmet with velvet donkey ears.

The Seven Follies paintings resemble a Dürer altarpiece. They contain images of drunken debauchery, orgies, and other forms of excess. The purest of the lot, an aproned maid resembling Snow White, reads a book while standing amid depravity. She is flanked by a gambling, inebriated friar and a staged battle scene. Lynch seems to be saying that institutions are corrupted and that self-knowledge might enable us to be aware of our history in order to reach our aspirations.

The installation of this show in the gallery's upper balcony is distracting. Lynch's thesis is fragmented by the necessity of arranging sculptures around the limitations of narrow architecture. There is no way to be entirely ensconced by the work, which is a shame; as such, the audience is encouraged to passively view this work, as one does in a conventional exhibition setting.

The drama of the show's impact comes later, when the viewer is able to think about how the various historic and contemporary components of the show come together. Lynch is a catalyst for understanding integral parts of human nature. Her questioning research and resultant art practice suggest that what we need to admit is that we, as humans, are both sacred and profane.

Rich McKown



B. Lynch, *The 7 Follies: Praying for Luck*, oil on canvas, 32 x 24", 2002.



B. Lynch, *Shrines to Folly: Wishes Take Flight*, mixed media, 26 x 24 x 5 1/2", 1999.