

Jennifer Odem: Time Before Land

by Stephanie Bowman



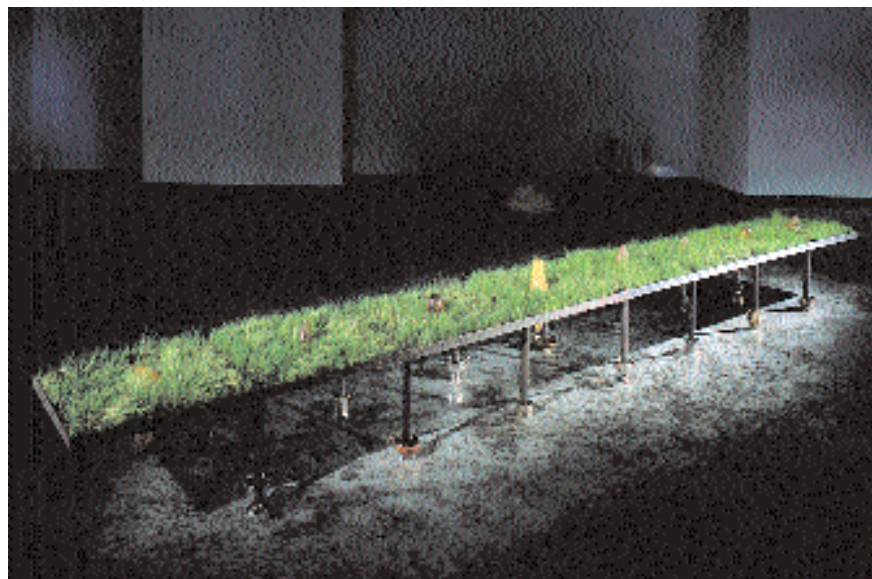
Relentless technological acrobatics take a toll on the human psyche. Often they are ignored because their potential to do great good is equaled by their potential to do great harm. Why then does a clanking drawing machine toddling awkwardly across the Salt Flats of Utah elicit wonder and awe? Perhaps it is because rather than marking time forward it marks time back, reminding us that our modern-day environmental malaise is technologically rooted in the beauty of the Renaissance, spiritually rooted in the Middle Ages, and biologically bound to prehistoric man.

Odem's garrulous, offbeat, ironic sculptures are a sensitive and intelligent analysis of our present relationship to nature. Our current practice of land exploitation and abuse is represented in Odem's forms, while her

materials remind us of a reverence for the land now largely forgotten. Odem exposes the hypocrisy of our unwavering faith in a technology that exchanges life for death in subtle and obvious ways. She collects objects and transforms matter to explore the cir-

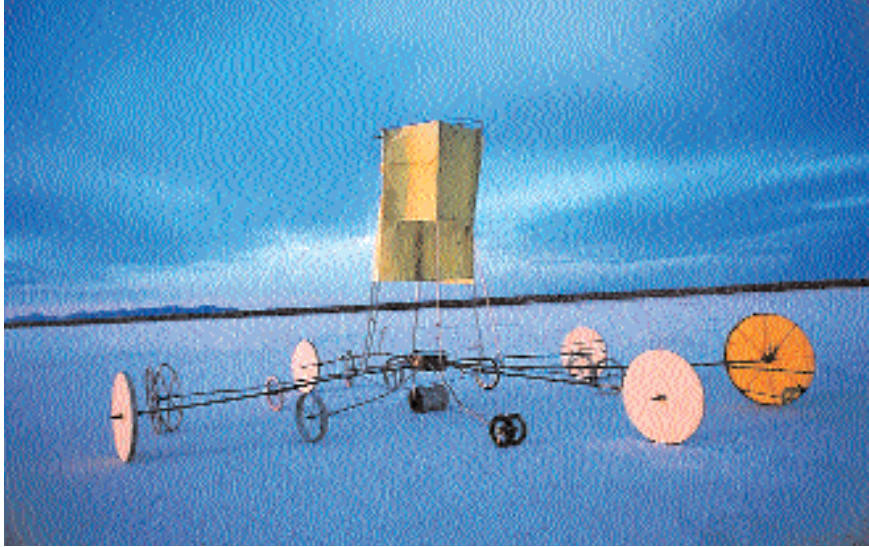
cular interdependence between ourselves, history, nature, and time. Theodor Adorno believes that the measure of aesthetic success is found in whether or not the formed object is able to awaken the content sedimented in its form. Odem's absurd forms sequester the spirit of our age. Manufactured materials are nudged past their pretense of nobility, and the futile arrangements made to guard against an uneasy awareness of our humble state are exposed. Fake bright blue fur and medical tubing, ephemeral lace embedded into impermeable Hydrocal plaster, cast iron and rabbit fur, cheap hardware screen and polished graphite, antique goblets and grass colonize our imagination—the banal and trivial are intermixed with the majestic and profound. The energy of Odem's work springs from the impact these incongruous elements make when they meet.

Odem's work is more clearly understood if you accept the psychological similarity between the medieval period and our own. We are no



Above: *Fertile Print: Red, Ochre, Iron*, 2001. Cast hydrastone, pigment, and graphite, installation view. **Right:** *Opened Ground*, 2001. Found elements, grass, steel, and rubber, 23 x 200 x 20 in.

PATRICK WONG, COURTESY OF WOMEN AND THEIR WORK, AUSTIN, TX



longer confused by the natural forces of wind, fire, and rain, but we now must come to terms with natural forces harnessed for unnatural purposes. Our cultural paranoia is based in the notion of a future as perilously insecure, unpredictable, and undependable as the world of Rabelais. Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, writing about Rabelais, said, "The acute awareness of victory over fear is an essential element of medieval laughter" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 81). Objects such as Odem's *She Bear* invoke images of ancient breastplates, but the playful inclusion of rabbit fur covered with lace disarms our assumptions about what a female warrior might look like or represent. The irony in *She Bear* supports the notion that "the people play with ter-

ror and laugh at it and the awesome becomes a comic monster" (Bakhtin, p. 81). Odem's use of irony allows laughter to shroud our uncomfortable reaction to the vulnerable underbelly of science.

In *Opened Ground*, delicate table feet made from antique serving vessels support the monolithic iron table, on which are pieces of manicured lawn. The land is dominated and forced to submit to penetration, abuse, and control. Male/female metaphysical and physical relationships are represented in the multiple breast forms and phallus shapes breaking through the grass, echoing the kind of affair we frequently have with the land. *Opened Ground's* table form becomes a site for communal restoration and familial relationship. Serving cups pinned to

the floor by the weight of the table conversely could be viewed as support for the structure. According to Albert Camus, the ambiguities of social thinking arise from the fact that while life, joy, and peace are theoretically extolled, murder, greed, violence, hatred, and war actually keep the machine running. Odem's work acknowledges this while at the same time her elements come together to reveal that "the most human thing about us is our eternal childlike hope that somehow, someday the deepest yearnings of our heart will come true" (Alan Watts, *Nature, Man & Woman*, p. 29). The innocent charm and disarming juxtaposition of materials and idea disempower the glacial forces of greed and abuse.

New life depends on biological or emotional vulnerability. Hearts or bodies must be opened by force or love for new life to emerge. *Fertile Print Red* moves through space carting a large, cumbersome portal. The vase-like virginal opening could be the place for possibility and new life or it could be an exposed, obvious target. Human relationships are usually founded on life and too often end in attack, but biology must exact a toll on its own behalf. Women's reproductive ability builds one generation after another whether or not offspring invent the wheel or the atomic bomb.

Like Plato's "first world," Odem's works record what is truly real. They are about time and yet exist outside of it because they reinterpret historical forms into the new and original. *Wheel of Fortune's* unsteady, wobbling form moving across the desert like an inquisitive child reminds us that technological achievement is born by the wonder of innocent and benign child-like inquisitiveness. However, the potential violence of iron and steel warn us that the environmental guillotine is something we constructed ourselves.

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Above: *Wheel of Fortune*, 1998. Steel, wood, and plastic, 13 x 20 x 20 ft. View of work as installed at The Center for Land Use Interpretation, Wendover, Utah. Below: *Presence*, 2000. Cast hydrastone and copper, 12 x 24 x 12 in.

