

Queer and Uncanny: E.G. Crichton's Archaeology of Desire **by Jeffrey Escoffier, 2000**

"Each archaeological site is like a book, each layer of soil like a chapter, and each piece of bone or stone like a word. Archaeologists are trained to "read" sites, to understand the meaning of each object, each layer, and each type of soil." Brian Hayden, *Archaeology: The Science of Once and Future Things*, (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1993, p.17)

"The finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it." Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, (New York: Basic Books, 1962, p. 144)

Over the past decade, E.G. Crichton has developed a unique approach to exploring history and making art. Its special character is the result, in part, of the historical terrain that she chooses to investigate: that of lesbians and other women whose history has been repressed and is therefore often secret. It is precisely this terrain that has spawned a creative methodology of excavation through the strata of history and memory that she then "reconstructs" in the form of a three-dimensional palimpsest. Her method is an archaeology of desire.

Crichton's artworks are deconstructions and re-creations of lost narratives. In a form of fieldwork, she excavates the accumulated debris of a particular subject. And like an archaeologist, she fashions her work in layers from the artifacts that have survived. Crichton is preoccupied with the repressed material of history that returns to disrupt the present, challenge contemporary identities, and re-configure the aesthetic that Freud identified as "uncanny." In his book "Compulsive Beauty," Hal Foster has explored how the uncanny destroys any distinction between real and imagined and between animate and inanimate. The artifacts that Crichton uses - both concrete and ephemeral - are configured in uncanny ways to evoke the specific dreams, fantasies and desires of lesbians, spinsters and deviant women.

Dark Bride is a powerful example of the way that she invokes a lesbian from another era. This piece uses both sound and visual projections to suggest a struggle between external influences and internal passions. In a physical corollary to the time-based

sound and imagery, a long strip of luxurious silk first suggests the screen upon which memories are projected, then transmogrifies into paper upon which fantasies are written; finally, it issues into the train of a wedding dress, the ultimate symbol of absence by which lesbians in the 1940's and 50's were socially haunted. Crichton juxtaposes the vernacular expressions of lesbians to the testimonies of experts who defined homosexuality in terms of perversion and sickness. Projections of typewritten text, haunting photographs as negatives, and sounds and voices from speakers inside the typewriter mingle the testimonies of psychoanalysts with the lesbian's confession of her secret shame.

In *Broken Record* Crichton returns to the 1950s with a vintage exercise record that guides young women through a series of physical exercises devoted to one body part at a time. The exercise record is a social instrument to shape the bodies and desires of women; but the erotic fantasies invoked in *Broken Record* disrupt the disciplinary lessons. All the elements of the installation - light, turntable and sound - are activated when we look into the mirror. Looking into the mirror alerts us that our presence is an intrusion. But then something else happens. Projections of an open mouth, then a rose appear on the light bulb suspended in front of the mirror. This seductive imagery distracts our glance and allows us to forget that we are intruding. We are both aware of our intrusion and encouraged to forget in a perfect demonstration of the epistemology of the closet. The viewer/voyeur/intruder knows the secret yet is allowed to pretend *not* to know the secret. Inside the historical closet, panic, hysteria, and anxiety prevail. As the turntable revolves, alphabetic beads spell out a line from a psychoanalytic case history: "The patient, a young woman, single, slender, mannish in appearance, came to analysis because of acute states of panic during which she claimed she felt paralyzed from the waist down and found it difficult at times to move her legs." Through deft juxtaposition of familiar objects, quotations from experts, and imagined fantasies, Crichton invokes the intense anxiety of the 1940's and 50's sexual closet.

The present always writes over the past, and history is continually disappearing under the text of the present. But the erasure is an uneven process. Power, either of those who run the world or of resistance, can accelerate it or retard it; material objects resist the erasure of time; and the most ephemeral elements - our fantasies, desires, and

secrets - evaporate with our memories. In her pursuit of an archaeology of desire, Crichton pays special attention to the delicate tissue of the secret. She reconstructs the space of the secret in the place where most secrets die: the closet and the grave. In *Cinderella*, the viewer is offered a key to enter a utility closet. We open the door and find it filled with the generic white forms of shoes and clothing, ghosts from Cinderella's unsuccessful quest for happiness. There are voices, too, of women telling complicated and articulate stories about their sexual identities, desires, childhood fantasies. These are stories most viewers won't hear outside of the constructed closet of this work.

Crichton is the gatekeeper to this world of secrets, a labyrinth of tales and dead ends. She has a key to the secret chambers, and sometimes will allow us the transgressive pleasure of looking in. Her works *Hush I* and *Hush II* both use a keyhole as a medium for re-constructing the space of secrets. *Hush I* seduces us to look through the keyhole in an isolated brass door plate. Fragmented iconic images pass before our voyeur's eye: a light bulb, a fragment of a nipple, a pointing finger, a closed eye. As viewer/voyeur, we must patiently watch the vertical movement of images in order to piece together a narrative. In *Hush II* the act of eavesdropping through a similar keyhole activates a sound track of young girls chanting and clapping a jump rope rhyme. Underneath these "innocent" sounds one can hear unmistakable sexual moans. *Hush I* and *Hush II* are beautiful evocative works that simultaneously recreate and dispel the mystery of the space of secrets. The voyeur and the eavesdropper are invited into the space of secrets without having to admit knowing those secrets. Crichton has again invoked an uneasy space between pleasure and guilt.

Spin functions within the space of an old hope chest, a repository of the romantic and marital fantasies of women in earlier periods. When we approach the open trunk, an ephemeral somewhat eerie and slowly rotating face appears on the inside of the lid; closer inspection reveals it's mirror image nestled in the trunk, the light from a video monitor coming through an amplified wedding veil that spills out of the chest. The faces change - there are ten or twelve different women and girls - and their eyes transition from open to closed and back as they turn around. The sound track is a collage of the spoken epitaphs of unmarried women, a sing-song chant by a group of

young girls with questions like "Who will I marry....Who will my husband be...." and deep earthy moans that counteract the ethereal visual display. Above the trunk, a translucent image of a grave stone hovers over the chest. *Spin* communicates a strong sense of the circular flow of anticipations, fantasies, and regrets.

In her on-going project *Quasi Lapis*, Crichton investigates the representation of women in cemeteries through a series of digitally altered photographs of gravestones. Each photograph is scaled to the size of a gravestone and framed to look like a picture in a Victorian parlor. She gives us a close-up view of each stone, zooming in on the words chiseled in slate or marble. One epitaphs reads "Sacred to the memory of Miss Grace, dressed in lace, teardrops falling down her face." On another are the words "In memory of Miss Miriam Wood, daughter of Mrs. Sarah Wood, consort of Miss Mary Day, who died Octr. 19, 1810 age 83 years." And in the place near the bottom where one expects to find an uplifting religious poem, are the barely discernible words "Two old maids lying in a bed, one rolled over to the other and said when I tickle you on the knee, if you laugh you don't love me, when I tickle you on the thigh, do not laugh and do not cry." Gravestones are signs of erasure; they tell only the most fragmentary stories - year of birth, year of death, and perhaps a "memento mori." But in her images, Crichton re-invents the lives of the women who are buried. Instead of being "carved in stone," these markers are "quasi-lapis," that is "sort of stone." They are representations with their own form of unstable engraving, re-written narratives translated to a different medium. Unlike the original gravestones, these images cross historical time periods. They are palimpsests overlaid with layers of time, desire and memory.

Historical time is not a homogeneous continuum. The dimensions of history are rhizomatic and spread in myriad directions. Race and class, gender and sexuality, tradition and change, technology and geography create a multi-dimensional grid within which history can be mapped. Crichton's piece *Pure* juxtaposes the stories of two different women in disparate time periods whose obsessions and fantasies are linked through the space-time anomalies of the uncanny. Carved into the right door is an anecdote from the artist's childhood in which her mother washes her mouth out with soap for talking back. On the left door, a story unfolds to establish the historical context: a psychiatrist treats a young lesbian by investigating her childhood traumas.

She was obsessed with a birth mark which her grandmother told her would spread if she masturbated. The quote on the left door, a plea to God "Please don't make me brown all over," mingles racial and sexual fears. One door has a peephole through which we see a video loop of soap rotating and exploding. On the other door, a shelf holds a glass vial through which a dark substance drips slowly onto a stack of cast white soap. A white explosion and a spreading dark stain enact a drama of purity and impurity, a tangled semiotic of race, sexuality, and fear.

A palimpsest can be a sheet of paper, a canvas, skin, a membrane, a layer of memory, a field of debris, the earth's crust - all surfaces upon which inscriptions are etched and erased with new layers constantly laid over earlier ones. One of Crichton's earlier works, *Gains and Losses* from 1992, creates a continuous Mobius strip of framed photographs along the walls of a parlor. They resemble family portraits except that there are no faces - only surfaces of skin. Skin, the wall of the human body; public skin and private skin. The parlor wall creates anxiety because skin can signify so much: age, beauty, ugliness, race, gender, the membrane between internal organs and the world. This work establishes the surface membranes upon which different historical processes and her own creative process will write. As one of Crichton's early explorations of the surface upon which inscriptions are made and erased, *Gains and Losses* prefigures her dialectic of writing, erasure and over-writing.

From fragments in a hope chest, a body part, a piece of lace, a spoken text, a representation on a surface of some sort, E.G. Crichton's work manifests powerfully evocative visual and auditory palimpsests. Her recovery of familiar objects through an uncanny erasure and re-inscription of meaning draws her viewers into a seductive web of both distance and empathy. This process is at times disturbing. Crichton's installations excavate the layers of memory and history by erasing the present and re-writing the past.

BIO: Based in New York City, Jeffrey Escoffier writes on dance, lesbian and gay studies, and social theory. His essays have been published in *Raritan*, *Found Object*, *Ballet Review*, *The Nation*, *New York Times Book Review*, *San Francisco Chronicle Book Review* and the *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*. He is the author of *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (University of California Press) and a biography of John Maynard Keynes (Chelsea House). He is currently working on a book about the choreography of Mark Morris.