



Poetry

out of

Chaos

by Jan Garden Castro

A Conversation with Judy Pfaff

Judy Pfaff's installations confront sculptural and architectural concepts—mass, scale, inner and outer space, multiple perspectives—yet they also contain raw emotional and sensory chords that may surprise and confuse viewers. Born in London, Pfaff earned a BFA from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and an MFA from Yale. Her 1980 exhibition at Holly Solomon Gallery, "Deepwater," was soon followed by installations at the Whitney Biennial, the Hirshhorn Museum, and the Venice Biennale. Her recent installation at André Emmerich Gallery displayed her continuing propensities to have fun, to explore materials and science, and to celebrate gut-level human emotions. She transformed the gallery by mixing welded steel, plaster, rubber, plastics, graphite, an uprooted tree, and other materials from architecture, art, and nature.

Jan Garden Castro: Your installation, *Round Hole Square Peg* (1997), casts the pure geometry of the cube and heavy metal architectonic frames against flowing elements that both interact and open the gallery space. How was the work conceived?

Judy Pfaff: I moved upstate two years ago and I live on the Roundout Creek in Kingston, close to the Hudson River. I look at simple things all day—the river flowing, the wind blowing, rain on the water's surface. Sometimes storms come through and the water rises, adding drama. I was trying to get that imagery into uptown New York City. To have it seem natural threw me for a loop.

As I was planning the installation, I realized that the gallery is not easy to

see as a whole. Its many rooms each have their own feel and ceiling height. In looking at the floor plan, a kind of Greek cross appears. The shapes have something to do with the body: a strong center spine and right- and left-hand orientations. Discovering these elements gave me an understanding of how to proceed. As I looked at the space, one thing that dawned on me was that a window was behind the lead wall. Another theme—the flow of steel lines—runs through the whole thing. That's what I wanted to do with the holes and the lines—make the little rooms into one being, one entity.

Castro: Are those water lines on the wall?

Pfaff: They are level lines, eye lines. The heights were determined by the heights of my assistants (Dylan Farnum, Barbara Spann, Rob van Erve, Stephan von Muehlin, and Nick

Emmet) and that of Yugin, the son of Jim Yohe, the executive director of the gallery. The holes unify the entire installation: you can see through the walls. As someone passes on the other side, the hole fills up, then empties. Holes do that. When we were installing, we talked to each other through the holes. Yesterday, I saw André [Emmerich] walking by; it's those flashes you get—a performance aspect, peeking, a relationship that can go through the wall. Penetrating something is a fabulous way of communicating.

There's an image in a Genet play of two men in prison. They have no contact with each other except for a small hole in the prison wall. To share a cigarette, one man blows the smoke through the hole to the other man. It's a moment of love and intimacy—so simple.

Castro: It reminds me of portholes on shipboard, and also of the Oriental tendency to make round openings.

Pfaff: Yes, I look at a lot of books on Asian art. One of my first teachers, David Diao, was from mainland China. He told me that what I was doing was way too Chinese for him. My work extends out; it doesn't have an object center. You see through—through the piece, through the wall, through the window, and out. Its center is the world.

Castro: You also connect the imagery of large flows of water with the body's circulation.

Pfaff: All of the big and little things collapse on each other. True metaphors are very liquid and seek many levels.

Castro: The installation has an incredible unity, and at the same time, each chamber has a different theme.

Pfaff: That just happened. I didn't plan that. Structurally, because the rooms have drop ceilings, I started working with straight lines. As I was constructing, I thought, "That's a room, and in that room lives a sensation or a necessary mood." One room looks Buddhist and shrine-like. I was surprised by that reference. I thought of doing things to



obliterate it. It is easy to obscure imagery quickly just by pouring a bucket of black paint on it. I thought, “Let it go, Judy. So it’s a funny Zen room. I’ll figure it out later.”

Castro: Jim Yohe compared one of the forms in the installation, a double square with a round, built-up circular clay image, to a three-dimensional mandala or a Buddhist stupa.

Pfaff: The image of the stupa came about naturally. It began by looking at raindrops, all those concentric circles, and then by remembering that famous photograph of a drop of milk taken by Harold Edgerton, the scientist and photographer. Sometimes there’s a ridge on the side of the circle as the drop falls into the milk, and sometimes there is a rising center. I was trying to do that. I thought, “Here I am making raindrops, and in the middle of it I have stepped into this fantastically rich architectural image, which I received from nature.”

I found a book published in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for plasterers, which showed sweep molds, circular forms, as mountings for chandeliers. The molds are made on a rod that goes from floor to ceiling. It’s like a reverse potter’s wheel. We put bearings on a template, and instead of the wheel turning, the template turns to score in the lines. We poured literally hundreds of pounds of plaster on the floor of the gallery, and it all set in 10 minutes. The mess we made was unbelievable. We had eight or nine garbage cans of plaster setting at different rates at once.

The accumulation of imagery in the installation goes from the most ordinary to the most elevated. That is a gift. It becomes a model for the universe, a cosmology. We could all feel it. At an earlier time, I’d have been too embarrassed to use references I could

Opposite: *Round Hole Square Peg* (detail), 1997. Mixed-media installation.

not take credit for.

Castro: It is interesting that viewers circle the circular objects on the floor in a rectangular space.

Pfaff: I studied at Washington University with Nelson I. Wu, who used to talk about shapes and the significance of circumambulation around them. People have to go to the right around them. I’m so short I’m the only one who can move underneath the left-hand side. Without realizing it, viewers are walking correctly around the objects. I like that.

Castro: You have also built in the yin and the yang.

Pfaff: Yes. It has always been that way, too. I arrive with this entourage of welders, tools, and equipment, but it always looks like weaving in a funny way. A friend said to me, “You make it big, and then you make it go away.” There is an establishing of form and then emulsifying, softening effects.

Castro: The welding techniques were very sophisticated.

Pfaff: Dylan Farnum was the TIG welder. Usually I weld, but for this project, I bought a TIG welder. The joinery is so smooth and clean that the steel becomes soft and liquid.

Castro: How long did it take to create?

Pfaff: We had two weeks. I had planned a very different show. I had prepared many mural-sized drawings spliced with photographic panoramas of the river, casual images of the water’s surface, boats passing, and the occasional duck. Rob, my husband, printed and prepared these images. Then I changed my mind. We did not even unwrap the rolls. Two weeks shrink when the whole format changes.

Castro: How long was the conception process, before you got to the gallery?

Pfaff: This show was supposed to happen last year. I wanted the piece to reflect my new life on the river, but my studio warehouse in Kingston was not ready. It had no heat, no electricity, no walls, no windows, no doors. I knew I

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needed windows on the river.

Castro: Rob said you reconstructed the Emmerich Gallery space inside the Kingston studio.

Pfaff: I had never done that before. The dimensions were outlined in two-inch steel tubing inside my studio. I could see the gallery space in transparent volumes. It also suggested the subsequent aspect of rooms in rooms—and a structure to support other imagery.

Castro: Your use of color in this work is reduced.

Pfaff: Yes. Hopefully, taking the color out suggests the form and content. I have been using less color lately. I think, too, most artists have complaints about the way they’re seen in the world. My work has been written about as flamboyant, gregarious, and exuberant. In the past 10 years, I’ve reacted to the feeling that no one was seeing past the color. Underbellies—the structural, psychological, and metaphorical uses of color—were unread.

Castro: You had a coded color symbolism that wasn’t received?

Pfaff: Yes, and never addressed. I combined many systems, but I never talked about it. There’s always mind-coded color, not just “I like reds.” There was color that collapsed space, agitated emotions, directed the glance, and came from codified cosmologies. Structural things were happening in the color.

Castro: Let’s talk about tantra and other color symbolism.

Pfaff: Al Held was my teacher. In his early work, his color was physical; in his new paintings, he is obsessed with colored light. For a short while, I worked in the shop that printed Albers’s serigraphs.

Color has always been known to have a powerful, spiritual aspect—in Madame Blavatky, in people who

