

ARTFORUM
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Beverly Semmes

SHOSHANA WAYNE GALLERY

Beverly Semmes's second solo exhibition at Shoshana Wayne Gallery was billed as an homage to Annie Oakley. A photo of the marks-woman staring down a barrel graced the show's announcement, three of Semmes's trademark dresses-as-sculpture sported exaggerated right arms, possibly alluding to Oakley's trigger hand (though she was actually an ambidextrous shooter), and twelve crystal vessels subtly referenced the glass balls that Oakley was known for shooting as part of her act. But the muse who guided Semmes in the studio was still not too overweening a presence in the gallery, and this was all for the better. Rather than clinging to a backstory with a literalness that might have left viewers wondering if Semmes's garments were the emperor's new clothes, the show got on with the business of presenting a rich and insistent materiality and of elaborating a formal proposition that transcends specific narrative to address broader questions of identity and attitude.

Entering the gallery, viewers were confronted by the aforementioned crystal containers, each one made from a coil of molten glass. These are objects that embody multiple contradictions—looking wet even though they're dry, appearing soft while they're actually hard and brittle, conflating the erect with the slumped, unifying elegance and clumsiness, and suggesting the possibility of a vessel that is itself a fluid. The crystal pots are clarity incarnate, their dazzling plays on concept, materiality, and appearance making them the slick cousins to the other vessels on view: Crudely formed by hand from clay, then painted in electric orange-reds, these seem to be molded from pure color. Illuminated by dangling bulbs and looking like ice stubbornly refusing to melt, the crystal pots faced off with *Prairie Dress*, 1996–2006, a gunnysack made of deep-red velvet. The garment's chiffon sleeves are so long that the left one creates a puddle of pink fabric on the floor and the right forms a pond of orange. This was the largest work in the show but also the least interesting, little more than just another of the artist's usual suspects.

The work Semmes presented in the back room is fresher. Here, four more dresslike velvet sculptures—two with stretched right arms, one with long trailing braids, and one with a hole in the middle—seemed at first to bring things back to Oakley, but they also ultimately occupy a curious middle ground between this specific reference and



Beverly Semmes.
Prairie Dress, 1996–
2006, velvet, chiffon,
and glass, 6' 9" x
13' 4" x 23' 6".

other, more purely functional or more obtusely coded meanings. These works, too, embody an abundance of contradictions: Their design is simple in conception but complex in execution. Semmes intertwines the attitudinal gestures of the expressionist, the Minimalist, and the fashionista to produce objects that are tough and frilly, hard and soft, loose and precise, showy and homely, serious and funny.

What might seem like simple riffs on the basic form of the dress, indulgences in fabric, or plays on geometry are in fact considerations of how form exudes a personality. Semmes's approach achieves a balance between the demands of history painting and portraiture and those of pure, referenceless object making and results in works that are allusive rather than straightforward. If she set out to make works about Oakley, she failed, but she succeeded in the much harder task of making works in sync with the sharpshooter's idiosyncratic spirit.

—Christopher Miles