

Nancy Youdelman

by Tom Collins

The haunted territory of Memory is artist Nancy Youdelman's preserve. Her antique, disembodied dresses and other articles of female attire are constructed, literally and figuratively, of the very stuff of recall; old photographs, letters, and envelopes, buttons, bric-a-brac, and even twigs, leaves, and the earth itself. Rummaging around in the past is usually the writer's task, and there is a definite, persistent literary aspect to these rather wraithlike, wall-hung and free-standing artifacts of the feminine. It is no surprise, then, to find that Ms. Youdelman majored in English Literature at California State University at Fresno. Added to this is a distinctly Feminist philosophical underpinning Youdelman gained while a student in Judy Chicago's first Feminine Art Program at Cal State Fresno in 1970-71, which program she followed to CalArts and a BFA in 1973, before taking her MFA at UCLA where she also studied sculpture with Oliver Andrews, who had previously taught Ms. Chicago. Indeed, the artist assisted at this time in the seminal Womanhouse installation with Ms. Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and other art students in the Feminist Art Program.

The key element in Ms. Youdelman's work is not its intellectual, academic foundations, however, but her intimate personal history and recollections of childhood recaptured. These have crystallized, and have found physical resonance, around the memory of her mother, who made dresses on a whirring Singer sewing machine for Ms. Youdelman and her sister, and took the girls for picnics in the cemetery after the death of her husband when Nancy was only nine.

Since her first clothing pieces at CalArts, such as "Button Dress" (1972), Youdelman has mined and combined these fertile tributaries of remembrance — one delightful, the other mortal — to create ghostly couture. The blue baby dress, "Sophie's Buttons," and free-standing "Gilded Baby with Leaves," with its implication that all that glitters one day turns to mulch, are exquisitely crafted examples of Ms. Youdelman's simple, direct and yet complicated mixing of memory and materials. Youdelman moves from innocence to experience with "Foolish Mistakes," a life-sized, wall-hung replica of a 19th century woman's wide-skirted ball gown made of zippers, buttons, strings of beads — all manner of sewing and seamstress accoutrements — covered in a bronze patina. Cut into strips and laid in neat vertical rows over this armature are old letters and several portrait photographs of women (one prominently at the bosom of the dress) all amber-tinted and transforming the European party dress into an odd Hawaiian grass number of shredded intimacies and images. Immediately you know that foolish mistakes are regretted in these fragments of beautifully flowing fountain ink penmanship.

Innumerable questions ensue. Who writes letters anymore, and in any sort of pen in any sort of hand? And is this writer in portrait? And are these even the same woman pictured? And what relation does the artist bear to all of this, other than as rédactrice and maker? And what is our relation to all of this?

In the end, Ms. Youdelman's stunning, ghostly couture projects a gothic impression like the Diaries of Anaïs Nin or the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. Pinned to the wall, they are intimations of mortality and remind us that, while personal identity is a psychic and physical construct of thought, word and dress, we are all concealed as much as revealed by what we wear, say and write. Ms. Youdelman's work indicates that identity is as evasive and unreliable as memory and that the past is always present. These are vessels waiting to be filled with a physical body and the mythical body of memory that clings beyond the past, beyond the grave.



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