

## "The Women Behind the Art"

By Hollis Walker

Journal Santa Fe and North

May 2, 2008



231 Delgado Street  
Santa Fe, NM 87501  
(505) 995 0231 PHONE  
(505) 986 0233 FAX

[eightmodern.net](http://eightmodern.net)

*Since I began this column a bit more than a year ago, I've tried to be fairly democratic in my choices of exhibitions to review, covering galleries and museums, group and solo shows, well-known and emerging artists, etc. I've also avoided writing about the same artist more than once. But I stopped in to see Nancy Youdelman's exhibit at Eight Modern and quickly decided that once a year is OK. Youdelman turns antique dresses and shoes into mixed-media relief sculptures, covering them with ephemera, photos and domestic notions- safety pins, buttons, strings of beads. Using encaustic wax, paint and, in a few cases, bronze, her works are preserves of the past, nostalgic, wistful and altogether lovely. Yet underneath some of those heavy garments there beats a feminist's heart.*

In "Gauranteed Forever," Youdelman has collaged an adult woman's dress of the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the setting for all of these works) with black-and-white photos, all of which have been ripped in half vertically. Images of families, groups of girlfriends, and individual women are split asunder and frozen in encaustic. Also collaged over the dress are large safety pins, that symbol of the careful and good girl ("Always keep one in your purse, just in case!"). But the pins are all closed on themselves, holding together nothing, certainly not the people pictured. And embedded in the wax among the pins and pictures are stringy branches or roots that appear to have grown into the dress, as if strangling its owner. Red and black paint mixed into and over the wax emphasizes the pain that prompted the picture-ripping.

Anger bubbles just under the surfaces of "Betty Potter" and "Ellen's Regret," dresses collaged with 1930s love letters written in the florid penmanship of the time. The letters came from a cache Youdelman bought on eBay of some 100 such letters, all written to the same man.

"Betty Potter" is a young woman's dance dress covered with Betty's letters. On pale green and white paper, they are framed in brown lace; strings of pearls snake down the torso. Photos of a young woman are attached, including one of a smiling twentysomething in a cloche and fur coat. But she tells only half the story. Ripped in half, the photo once posed her with her putative suitor. Now he, too, stands at a distance, a dandy in an overcoat and a silk scarf, literally

looking down his nose at the camera. We don't like him even before we read Betty's (aka "Skeezix" in her letters) words imploring Mr. Allen H. Watkins of Greensboro, N.C., (according to one collaged envelope) to write back to her: "Allen dear- What in the world has happened? I haven't heard from you in simply ages, in fact, you've never even answered my letter explaining why I could not go to Washington..." In the other, similar letters, Betty suggests a tryst at Virginia Beach and confides that she, too, loves to listen to violinist Dave Rubinoff on Sundays.

Now we see that her dress appears patchworked with the letters, and the brown lace is in bits and pieces. The year on the postmarks- 1931- was at the height of the Depression. Betty's letters aren't just those of a swooning young woman willing to debase herself for love. These are the desperate pleas of one who hopes to be rescued from what then would have been a miserable spinsterhood. And Betty is not a little bit peeved with Dandy Allen, it's clear: "You've never even answered my letter."

Worse, Betty is not alone. "Ellen's Regret" features a party dress with a tight bodice and flounced skirt onto which are collaged Ellen's letters to Allen. The notes comprise the torso of the dress, while the sleeves and skirt are covered with torn up black-and-white photos and flowerlike attachments. One complete photo of a young woman adorns the dress; clearly posed, she wears a taffeta gown with a tiered skirt and holds flowers.

Perhaps this is the image Ellen demands back from her erstwhile suitor when she writes, "Return the picture I gave you with that silly inscription." Ellen becomes more distanced with each letter; at first, she signs them "All my love," then "Sincerely," and finally, "Just Ellen." Having wrested hold of her heart again, she reasserts herself, telling Allen, "When we meet again...we'll probably have a much better time- by just being friend. ..."

These dresses with their compelling narratives are fascinating not just because of the letters but because Youdelman has made tangible the very real women who wrote them. In doing so, she elucidates the power disparity between the sexes at the time and how it played out in personal relationships- causing us to wonder about how much that power ratio has changed. Other works in this exhibit similarly examine memory, loss and longing for the past. A few, such as "Album 2008," are too perfect in execution; their symmetry and formality don't parallel the curious and random selectivity of memory. Still, I left the gallery this time eager to see where Youdelman's path leads her. Since she's made dresses and shoes for some time, surely purses and their secret contents can't be far behind? Staying tuned.