

Nancy Youdelman

Dress to Transgress
By Jill Battson
The New Mexican



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

eightmodern.net

"An association lurked in every fold: each fall of lace and gleam of embroidery was like a letter in the record of her past. "

- Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth*

The soundtrack of artist Nancy Youdelman's childhood was the whirl of a Singer sewing machine—the sounds of her mother stitching, hemming, and seaming dress after dress for Nancy and her sisters. Youdelman's recollections of sorting buttons, winding ribbon, and toying with notions have informed her work, which explores how memory is bound up in clothing and other personal belongings. Using found fabrics and materials, the sculptor creates objects that her recent work—*Threads of Memory*—opens Friday, April 11, at Eight Modern.

Youdelman's sensibility was forged during the pioneering years of the '70s feminist-art movement. She was a student of English literature and theatrical-costume design at California State University in Fresno when she met Judy Chicago, who founded the school's Feminist Art Program in 1970. Intrigued by the program—the first of its kind in the United States—Youdelman jumped academic ship and enrolled. "It was the most amazing time of my life," the sculptor said.

Under Chicago's tutelage, 15 women students rented an off-campus community-theater venue and remodeled the environment to reflect their personal experiences as women. Their work paved the way for new expressions of feminist art. During the program, Youdelman collaborated on a photographic project examining the various roles and images of women, creating and sewing the costumes. "It was so exciting to come up with these 'images of women,' and Judy, who was an incredible teacher, pushed us, especially me, way beyond what I thought I could do. I don't know what my life would have been like if I had not been part of that."

When Chicago was hired to teach at the California Institute of the Schapiro and encouraged the women from Fresno to join them. Together they created *Womanhouse*, an installation and performance space for women. Each artist was given a room or space of her own in a derelict 17-room Hollywood mansion. "First we had to get it into shape before we could even start doing anything

artistic to the rooms, and that took several months," Youdelman recalled. "I don't think I've ever worked so hard in my life!"

The installation ran from Jan. 30 through Feb. 28, 1972, and then the mansion was demolished. "After *Womanhouse*, I had the strong desire to do work entirely all my own and not collaborate anymore," said Youdelman. "That's when I started working with clothing." At CalArts, she attended a workshop led by Schapiro, originally known as a hard-edge minimalist painter. Schapiro had been experimenting with incorporating textiles and quiltlike imagery into her paintings. "She did spectacular, beautiful paintings with all kinds of colorful fabrics and shapes," Youdelman said. "In the workshop we talked about how women would do artwork that was different from men. For me it was the material we used, and I wanted to use sewing stuff, buttons and fabric and the like."

Visiting thrift shops as a teenager, Youdelman was amazed that other people could throw out photographs and memorabilia—objects that at one time held deep personal significance to someone. "I loved the old lace and Victorian photographs; they were just so beautiful. I could stare at those photographs for a long time, hoping to learn something about the people."

Youdelman began to create figurative tableaux to evoke fictional characters and feeling one gets when reading great literature. "As a child, I loved Edgar Allan Poe, with all the references of longing for someone who had died," she said.

The artist also explored the idea of memory by using clothing and accessories, transforming them with letters, photographs, buttons, and jewelry as well as leaves, twigs, and dried flowers. The constructions were Youdelman's way of paying homage to remarkable lives.

Threads of Memory includes sculpture of "disembodied" dresses, made from vintage garments that captured the artist's attention. To fabricate these works, she lays out each dress and pads it with tissue paper; layers the dress with plaster and acrylic; and then applies an assemblage of found objects. The exhibit also features bronze reliefs of baby dresses and bronze casts of shoes. Each work appears to be a portrait defined by the detritus of the subject's life.

Betty Potter and *Ellen's Regret*, from Youdelman's *Dearest Allen* series, are a focal point of the show. The artist created these works after acquiring a trunk of 100 love letters on eBay that had lain, forgotten, in Greensboro, North Carolina, for 70 years. The treasure represented the correspondence of 30 different women between 1928 and 1932. All the letters were written to the same man.

"They all have a pattern," said Youdelman of the epistles. "It was the *women* who were interested in *him*. The letters all start out very hopeful and end up with the ones that say, 'Why don't you ever write?' and 'I never see you.'" Youdelman made *Betty Potter* and *Ellen's Regret* – named after two of the letter writers – in response to her feeling for the women. She sculpted over clothing from the perios and adhered the womens' letters to the garments. "Ellen only wrote three letters. But it was such a dramatic change from the first to the last letter, in which she is furious because she's been ignored." The three letters are placed on the torso of the dress; the skirt features dozens of torn-up photographs dotted with dried gardenias. "The photographs signify events that either didn't happen or were regretted," Youdelman said.

Youdelman's work is infused with her own personal memories, especially of her mother. She has an old photograph album of her mother from the late 1930s, when she lived in New Orleans: "It was a person I didn't know," said the artist. "I knew her as someone who looked like she was burdened by a bunch of kids. She had curly hair and hoop earrings and looked very bohemian. It's fascinating to me what happens to that spirit."