

Erin V. Sotak

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ground



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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AUSTIN, TEXAS

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ground

IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES

Erin V. Sotak's installations, performances, and photographs hover on the permeable border between the visual and performing arts, between the time-based activity of a medieval Japanese Noh drama and the immediacy of photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment. Replete with social, political, and psychological references, her work mirrors a host of dueling oppositions: repulsion verses seduction; self verses other; interior verses exterior; ownership and power verses lack of control and powerlessness; and maker verses viewer. Dichotomy and juxtaposition structure her artistic practice, as she formulates visual strategies to articulate the interior landscape of the human psyche.

In all her work, Sotak seeks to influence the viewer's experience by employing what she describes as "controlled viewing."<sup>1</sup> Her early work consisted of monumental photo-graphic murals with images partially obscured by expressionistic paint strokes. She mediated portraits of herself alone as a child, and with members of her family, with color and gesture, adding emotional and psychological content to what had become for her a sterile medium. "Black and white photography didn't convey enough emotion. I wanted to change the documentary element of these pictures by adding an additional surface for the viewer to decode."<sup>2</sup> Ultimately these works migrated off the wall into three-dimensional installations combining photographs, utilitarian objects and natural materials such as sod or jelly donuts. Access to the visual information in the installation—sometimes in the form of a performance—was always controlled; viewpoints were orchestrated or enforced through peep holes, curtains, or video monitors—devices that forced "three dimensional reality to be viewed from a single access point, much in



*Apples and Oranges*. 2004, Installation with sound, and photograph

the same way one would view a photograph."<sup>3</sup> Later Sotak photographed the performances and presents the images as stand alone work, not merely records of an event.

Like many artists of her generation (Sotak is in her late 20s and studied photo-graphy at the University of Arizona, before receiving her Masters at San Jose State University in 2000), Sotak is deeply involved in concepts related to the body politic and the politics of the body. Her actions convey sonorous undertones of feminist rhetoric, and her imagery relies to a degree on skewed domestic themes—equal parts Victorian concealment and contemporary celebration,

of the body. Between these poles she interweaves emphatic mythologies with universal resonance.

Voyeurism is a key element. Another is the verbal gymnastics of her titles, which are crafted to both inform and entertain. *INher/OUTher* is a performance in which she moved 150 pounds of flour from one point in a simple white room to another, handful by handful. She called this obsessive but strangely meditative activity "Tedious. Mindless. Numbing. Labor."<sup>4</sup> I did not see the actual performance, and so can only comment on the extant photographs. Here, the artist presents herself dressed in white, kneeling in front of a mound of white flour, alone in a stark white room. The double entendre of the title gives a hint to the meaning of the action and the image—private and public states of being. They are hauntingly beautiful, conveying both spiritual pain and physical pleasure.

There is a measure of existential humor—part absurdity, part emotional anguish—in Sotak's work, especially when she confronts the difficulties of interpersonal relationships. She does this explicitly in *Call Me For Dinner, sometime* (1999), *A Peeling*, and *JACKPOT* (2000). In *Call Me For Dinner, sometime*, Sotak formulates a tale of love and woe, offering the maraschino cherry as a symbol of female sexuality. In this piece, she engages in time-based performances in which she passed hours, licking clean the cherries and nailing them to a

table-top covered with pages from a telephone book. Sotak also sealed 110 pounds of bananas in vinyl to the underside of the table. (*Call Me For Dinner*). In *JACKPOT*, Sotak performed in a wedding dress dyed red. She pitted 80 lbs of fresh bing cherries, stained a wood table with the juicy meat and then saved the pits in glass mason jars. One can view this series as a complex and sardonic tone-poem to the notion of life as a bowl of cherries, unrequited love as the pits, and sex as hitting the jackpot by aligning three cherries on a slot machine. A twelve foot bed is the central character in the *A Peeling* narrative; strewn with 1,500 dried, brown banana peels, the bed becomes a kind of abject altar where the elegantly white-gowned Sotak repeatedly selected an “appealing” peel, and crawled to the headboard and notched it with a corkscrew: commentary on objectification and sexual stereotypes.

Tables, beds, and chairs are symbols that play a key role in many of Sotak’s performance/installation vignettes. In her work, they become metaphors for generosity, sexuality, and angst. In her ambitious new project for *Women & Their Work*, Sotak has constructed four distinct stations combining everyday objects with allusions to the five senses—sight, sound, smell, touch, and to a lesser degree, taste. “All four of the installations address aspects of relationships and control, loss of control, and choices—good or bad—and the ramifications,” Sotak told me. Each gives a sense of serenity disrupted by unseen yet powerful psychological forces. The four—*Icarus Dreams*, *Weight*, *Apples and Oranges* and *ground*—propose a visual and verbal pun that provides the viewer with cued points of entry into the artist’s layered creative process.

In *Icarus Dreams*, Sotak combines Victorian high theatricality with an allusion to classical Greek mythology,

creating a contemporary scenario of diverse elements that coalesce into a symbolic visual narrative. From the title we infer the reference to Daedalus—artist, architect and engineer—who fashioned wings of feathers and wax to enable him and his son Icarus to escape from the Labyrinth of King Minos. Daedalus instructed Icarus to be cautious—to not fly too high, in order to avoid the melting rays of the sun. Impetuous and young, Icarus ignored his father and, in his unfettered joy in the power of flight, perished. Sotak’s scenario posits a double sized Quaker bed, coated with fragrant beeswax, and on which lays a mattress split open in the center to reveal its black feather stuffing. Nearby, an elegant black gown hangs sentry, the front sewn with feathers. What are we meant to infer from this almost surrealist meeting of seemingly unrelated objects? Perhaps the artist is implying that with incautious exuberance and ill-conceived choices comes the possibility of a physical or emotional fall.

In *Weight*, we see the residuals of an obsessive process: a chair is bound and completely covered with, according to the artist, 55,874 yards of pink silk thread. This renders a utilitarian piece of furniture into a softened, anesthetized presence. The chair is positioned on the end of a wood plank. Hanging from the back of the chair is a blue glass mason jar filled with eggshells. Next to the chair is a pile of unwound thread, and fastened to the adjacent wall is a bobbin winder. *Weight* is obviously implicated by the balance, but waiting is implied by the chair; the work is a streamlined visual poem that activates simple allusions to make an impressionistic statement. When asked, Sotak admitted that “I was thinking about people waiting or not waiting, choosing.” *Apples and Oranges* features a simple wooden dresser positioned on a wood floor. The top drawer is filled with oranges; green apples are strewn on the floor. From the dresser emanates the soothing sound of crickets chirping. *Apples*

and *Oranges* is about choosing too, or more explicitly about the functions of decision making, “the idea,” Sotak explains “of comparing things that are not parallel.”

*ground* is perhaps Sotak’s most personal work in this exhibition, and the only installation that includes a performance. Positioned in the gallery is a six-foot-long table with a functioning drawer on either end. One drawer is filled with handmade porcelain teeth; the other with white powder—the residue of ground up teeth. Placed towards the left end of the table is an old-fashioned grist mill, the type of implement used on farms to grind grain into animal feed. For a period of time, Sotak stationed herself at the table, carefully removing the teeth from one drawer, replacing them with teeth from thousands piled across the length of the table, then grinding them in the mill, and brushing the residual crushed powder to the other drawer. Although this work finds its inspiration from Sotak’s own dreams of losing her teeth, or interactions with insensitive dentists, many viewers will find the performance and the installations simultaneously compelling and repulsive. In *ground* the artist performed for a predetermined period of time, long enough to emphasize her actions as a cyclical function, short enough to leave the evidence of the cycle and allow viewers to make the visual and mental leap from the full teeth to ground dust. “I don’t want to trap someone in the gallery with me with no escape. Viewers should be able to choose how long to be engaged, but see my actions long enough to understand the cycle of activity.”

Sotak approaches art making as equal parts head and hand, philosophy and labor. Couched in the vocabulary of personal memory and experience, her installations and photographs transform mundane objects and activities into a universal expression. “I have always been



*CALL ME FOR DINNER, sometime.* 1999, Installation and Performance, and Type C print

preoccupied with daily routine and repetitive cycles of behavior. Each day, we engage in what I think of as the absurdity of static repetition, and we are not always sure what we are trying to achieve.” In this new body of work she has pushed the boundaries of her craft, seeking new metaphors for our human routines.

Terrie Sultan  
Director of the Blaffer Gallery

University of Houston

- 1 Artist statement, 2004
- 2 All quotes by the artist, unless otherwise noted, are taken from a telephone interview conducted by the author, March 24, 2004
- 3 Email letter to the author, March 8, 2004
- 4 Erin Sotak. *Voices of Art Magazine* (Volume 11, issue 2, 2003): 9.

## BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

Erin V. Sotak received her B.F.A in photography from the University of Arizona and M.F.A. in photography from San Jose State University. Over the past six years she has taught traditional black and white and non-traditional photography as well as drawing and mixed media courses in college and university settings. As a photographer/installation and performance artist, her work incorporates a variety of media including video, film, sculpture, clay, textiles, painting, and woodworking. Her work has been exhibited nationally in Texas, Arizona, California, Delaware, Georgia, Ohio and internationally, in Colombia and Slovakia. She is grateful for the support of her family and loved ones who make art possible.



This Panel: *Icarus Dreams*. 2004, Installation and Type C print  
Cover Panel: *ground*. 2004, Installation, Performance, Type C print



*Weight.* 2004, Installation and Type C print

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Now celebrating its 26th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,733 artists in 223 visual art exhibitions, 102 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 274 work-shops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women

& Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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