



## ARTS

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# “Gail Chovan: No Trace of Now Will Remain” at Women & Their Work

The fashion designer-artist appropriates mourning rituals and their materials to make statements in this beautifully morbid show

REVIEWED BY MELANY JEAN, FRI., FEB. 23, 2018





*White Gown by Gail Chovan*

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Mourning at once acknowledges the absence of someone and insists on continuing their presence in the form of ritual beyond the limitations of a lifetime. In the Victorian era, it was a prescriptive and ordered process, casting a lacelike web of commemorations across society, with the threads of remembrance tethered by women, those most bound to mourning practices. Lace was one of several pieces of trim that marked a stage of this mourning process. Jet beading, mementos with hair locks, drab black fabric, and embroidered trim were other such markers.

Fashion designer and artist Gail Chovan appropriates all of these materials, some from actual Victorian-era clothing, and warps ritual in the beautifully morbid "No Trace of Now Will Remain." Locks of hair served as symbols of the eternal due to their resistance to the body's decomposition. Throughout the show, tendrils sprout from Chovan's sculptures like an infestation, an unsettling intrusion. Other specters haunt the space: anthropomorphized furnishings dressed in hand-embroidered garments, gasp-inducing gowns spewing hair and limbs, and a ring-around-the-rosie-like assembly of embroidered kid gloves.

The name calls to mind today's uncertain digital manifestations of mourning rituals, posts that address the deceased on their feeds and walls and the virtual lighting of a candle on commemorative pages. "No Trace of Now Will Remain," but more accurately, perhaps, so many traces of now will remain and in so incorporeal a space that few will register any lasting significance or require confrontation with the acts of death and dying. Chovan's work stands in direct contrast to that, using clothing to construct sculptures that speak to a literally missing corporeality and invite the viewer to confront and reconsider their fear.

The pieces divulge their creation, with loose strands of embroidery thread and visible globs of glue. For a designer as experienced as Chovan, the exposed construction of the garments is intentional, a tactile, textile form of mark-making that reminds the viewer of the intention behind each piece and serves as a point of differentiation from Chovan's boutique designs sold in her shop on South Congress, Blackmail Boutique.

In addition to unusual natural materials like bone, wood, leather, and hair, neon has a notable presence in the show. The medium, perhaps a point of collaboration with Chovan's husband, local neon artist Evan Voyles, punctuates the themes of darkness. The first instance is at the entrance, where a quote from the Paul Valéry poem "La Jeune Parque, or The Young Fate" is scrawled in neon once in French and again in English before entering the darkened exhibition space, where pieces are lit by dramatic spotlight or else bits of neon on the sculptures themselves: "Le noir n'est pas si noir"/ "The dark is not so dark." The Valéry allusion is fitting. In the poem, a woman languishes on the subject of mortality: "Light! ... Or else, Death! But let the quicker seize me!"

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## “Gail Chovan: No Trace of Now Will Remain”

Women & Their Work, 1710 Lavaca

[www.womenandtheirwork.org](http://www.womenandtheirwork.org)

Through March 1

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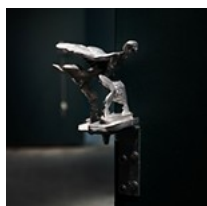
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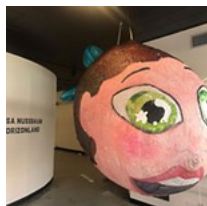


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