

LESLEE FRASER

NO SURE FOOTING



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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AUSTIN, TEXAS

LESLEE FRASER

Everything That Rises Must Converge: The Art of Leslee Fraser

Leslee Fraser grew up in Minnesota, born into a working-class family who values hard work and tangible practicality, yet who are also haunted – or perhaps, more properly, “blessed” – by the daily presence of the Divine. As a child, Leslee attended a Lutheran church that preached fundamentalism, including a rigid End Times theology which doomed

the contemporary world around her, and extolled the glorious world to come. Her first inkling that she didn’t buy fundamentalism wholesale came when Leslee was in her late teens, on a soul-saving church mission in Gibraltar. With forays to Spain and Morocco she had the following epiphany: “I thought, all these people, they don’t *need* to be Saved,” she laughs. There was a valid, very real, and equally “correct” world out there. It was as though she’d climbed the house where she was born, and could suddenly see other rooftops.

Fast forward a few years, when Fraser, now 22, falls in love and moves in with a biology student named Sid, whom she eventually marries. The couple moves to California, where Sid goes to graduate school and Leslee does her undergraduate work (she later earns an MFA from the University of Wisconsin in Madison). Leslee undergoes quite a paradigm shift, to use trendy language – a conversion from a fundamentalist Christian family model to marriage with a scientist, to whom evolutionary theory forms an integral school of thought, a sort of alternate faith. What we call Love, and its uses, continues to pre-occupy Leslee Fraser; not as an idealized, romantic-comedy trope, but as a natural force that both animated her rigid family dynamics and beliefs, yet became observable also as a biologic force in her life, and in the natural world.

Take her 2007 assemblage, *Forbidden Love #2*. In it, a rosy mother pig nurses a canid interloper, while her brood of piglets looks on, uprooted from the maternal sustenance. One little pig peers down from his mother’s broad back in seeming astonishment. Upon first glance, Fraser’s wry juxtaposition of predator and prey makes for a punchline-like shock; it’s both absurd and ominous, this ravenous wolf pup happily taking an offspring’s liberties. Yet, Fraser seems to say, doesn’t love make you forever vulnerable to loss? Isn’t *all* love fraught with peril? Doesn’t any act of giving, the most canonical and “natural” of which is mother-love, hold within it some terrible threat of possible undoing?

What Leslee Fraser’s art knows and imparts is that life is cruel; this is a tenet both of Armageddon-obsessed Christianity, and of Darwinian thought. The merciless forces of biology have taken her to some dark places over the past years; in 2003, she was diagnosed – after an agonizing process of testing, failed treatments, and uncertainty – with Reactive Arthritis, a chronic autoimmune disorder characterized, in part, by impaired



*C%*T!! Diptych*, 2008. Archival digital prints. 20" x 24" each.

mobility, fevers, acute fatigue, and eye problems. The pharmacological treatment includes steroids and immunosuppressants, themselves no picnic. Life with a chronic illness is a crisis wherein God – One who rewards virtue, punishes sin, and who is petitionable by prayer – would sure the hell come in handy.

In the absence of such a religious belief, and in dialogue with the “survival of the fittest” orthodoxy of evolutionary biology, Leslee Fraser asserts herself, through her art, as a skilled observer/fabricator, exquisitely conscious that the contradictions of life are both absurdly hard to take... and incredibly, improbably funny.

One of my favorite of her works is *Pushing Up Daisies*, an assemblage of “urns, ashes, and placards on shelf” festooned, quite gorgeously, with acrylic paint. There’s a high-Victorian decorativeness animating the piece, flirting as it does with Western art-historical values of symmetry, harmonious color, and triangular composition, and carried out with a distinctively feminine élan. Looking closer (her work, almost always, both invites and challenges the viewer to *look closer*), one notes that the porcelain-framed, engraved-metal placard adorning each urn reads: “I am certain that I am better than you.” Ashes to ashes, Fraser jokes. No internal monologue, belief system, social category, or set of aesthetic concerns protects us from mortality.

But the starkness of this realization is offset by the very real joy and care she takes in her materials. The creamy, light-diffusing glaze of the painted shelf, the silvery architecture of the urns, the raffish script of the placards; she makes a beautiful tableau. This unalloyed pleasure in artmaking is just as contagious (just as virulently infectious, one might say) as any pathologic process, and as such, feels like a little redemption. Perhaps this is where all art comes from; if you can’t forestall the inevitable, you may as well both make fun of it, and honor the beauty that’s so evidently there.

The pain of her RA bothers her less than the fatigue, she says, and neither bothers her as much as the nagging sense that biology is destiny; that chronic illness has rendered her, inexorably, as less-evolutionarily valid, somehow, as an organism. Self-pity is an omnipresent aspect of the human condition, but in one who battles disease, it’s a side-effect you have to work to creatively subvert. Fraser’s art does this. Before she got sick, she taught herself how to construct large-scale sculptural installations. Since having to wrestle with the “600 lb gorilla in my living room and studio,” as she jokes in her artist’s statement, she (like many species, as is surely not lost on her) has simply had to adapt. Her current works are smaller-scale, less physically demanding, perhaps, yet they resonate with ideational and lyric power.

Her current process is fascinatingly instructive: in order to keep healthy, she does a great deal of walking. Her RA has made her body more temperature-sensitive, making indoor walking preferable, especially during the long, brutal summers in Texas. Combining her indoor wanderings with the rigorous eye of a visual artist, she has turned to shopping as a form of intellectual exercise. It’s ironic, to be sure; one of the aspects of contemporary American culture which she critiques is our relentless commercialism. How to buy things which point out the absurdity of things we buy?

Often, Fraser employs subversive brutality to make this point; implied violence is a dark and effective humor that courses through Fraser’s intimate-scale montages. She not only asserts that each individual life is finite at its outset, but tells stories, over and over, of our complicity in one another’s undoing.

Look at *Endless Forms Most Beautiful*, featuring that most omnipresent gift-card emblem of kitsch, the *Precious Moments* figurine. Or *Precious Planet*, starring a plump pink

cherub in a fluffy white snowsuit. Taken in their mundane context, these are saccharine representations of humanity at its most noxiously, commercially adorable. However, in *Endless Forms*, the big-eyed tot transforms into a bloody-eyed representation of Nature red in tooth and claw (or in this case, eyes), who pauses in some sort of melee with a de-tusked elephant. And in *Precious Planet*, the tot menaces a pair of baby fur seals with an upraised club. Fraser is illustrating, using the objets d’crap that litter our world (and minds), that in our human need to appreciate ourselves as ultra-special, ultra-cute and therefore ultra-worthy, we threaten the lives of our fellow-beings.

Within the evolutionary framework, everything’s a competition. Even religious ideologies, Fraser suggests, are locked in battle. An uproarious example of this is in her piece *Cock Fight*, where with a figurine of Jesus on a donkey, a seated figurine of the Buddha, two miniscule chicken models, and some deft sculptural antics with Fimo craft clay, Fraser posits two titans of faith as little more than brutal contestants. The sexual double-entendre, as with all Fraser’s titles, is winkingly deliberate.

This is the triumph of Leslee Fraser’s art; that it both acknowledges and transcends its limitations. Biology is a blunt object, no less than traditional cosmology. Illness is real and inescapable, as are violence and death. But in that alchemical instant wherein an artist conveys an abstract idea to a perceptive viewer, delivering a shock, a laugh, a second look, a deeper understanding – this communication contains both a neurological, perceptual reaction, and something ineffable. Something, dare I say it, Divine.

Sarah Fisch
Associate Arts and Culture Editor
for the *San Antonio Current*



In Our Image, 2008. Found objects. 24" x 14".

LESLEE FRASER

Born in Minnesota. Lives and works in San Antonio.

EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin-Madison, M.F.A.

University of California-Davis, A.B.

SELECTED SOLO / TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2007 *Fraser/Fleming*, Runnels Gallery, Portales, NM

2002 *Joey Fauerso and Leslee Fraser at the Honey Factory*,
San Antonio, TX

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2006 *GroupGroup!*, Commonwealth Gallery, Madison, WI

2003 *Arts and Eats*, Blue Star Contemporary Art Center,
San Antonio, TX

Red Dot Gala, Blue Star Contemporary Art Center,
San Antonio, TX

2000 *Multiples 4*, NFA Space, Chicago, IL

1998 *25th Gala and Auction*, Artemisia Gallery, Chicago, IL

1996 *Thrift Store Project*, Phantom Gallery, Sacramento, CA

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2003 Biography and bibliography editor, Artpace,
San Antonio, TX

2002 Co-founder and curator, The Bower art gallery,
San Antonio, TX

The Bower was an artist-run exhibition space. It provided exhibition opportunities not only to artists whose work is commercially viable, but also to artists whose work is experimental, ephemeral, or conceptual.

Instructor, 3D Design, Southwest Texas State University,
San Marcos, TX

2001 Visiting Artist & Colloquium Project Assistant, University
of Wisconsin Art Department, Madison, WI

Liaison between invited artists and critics and the Art Department. Promoted weekly lectures, created and implemented the guest lecturer's itinerary, and procured venues and equipment for each lecture. Assisted the guest artist or critic in using the facilities.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

2003 Smith, Lewis, "Bower Gallery: G. Farmer/W. Reid,"
Voices of Art, volume 11, issue 1, 2003.

2002 Olivo, Benjamin, "Fashion Place: The Bower,"
San Antonio Express News, 14 April 2002.

"Texas Art News," *Glass Tire*, 5 June 2002.

2000 Tyree, Joshua, "Buy and Sell Shop," *Isthmus*, 3 March 2000.

1995 "Thrift Store Project," *Uptown*, May 1995.



Above: *Cock Fight #2*, 2008. Found objects. Dimensions variable.
Cover Panel: *Forbidden Love #2*, 2008. Found objects. Dimensions variable.



Precious Little, 2008. Found objects Dimensions variable.

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 31st anniversary. Presenting 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 1,805 artists in 256 visual art exhibitions, 110 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 20 literary readings, and 373 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on 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 1,800 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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