



ARTS

“Shana Hoehn: Hauntings” at Women & Their Work

Vintage hood ornaments are reimaged as sculptures that expose the historically distorted treatment of women’s bodies

REVIEWED BY ROBERT FAIRES, FRI., AUG. 23, 2019



Ghost of Spirit of Ecstasy by Shana Hoehn

Have you ever seen the ghost of a hood ornament?

Probably not, unless you've recently been to Women & Their Work, where several are standing silent watch in the dimly lit gallery. Detached from the automobiles they once adorned, the gleaming, idealized human figures – almost exclusively women – no longer know motion as they did in whatever life they had. Now, they're still, as dead things are, and in the way of dead things, they've been transformed. The features of some of the figures now appear flattened and indistinct, as if blurred. Some have had their forms elongated or twisted into exaggerations of their original shapes. Some have changed shape altogether, their original forms visible only in the shadows they cast – that is, if they are discernible at all. Almost all have acquired second selves, an additional face or complete body to complement the first. These are ghosts that, in being freed from the machinery they were designed to bedeck, have metamorphosed into something larger and more fantastic than what they were – and now reveal something about what a simple object like a hood ornament may truly represent.

Shana Hoehn is the medium responsible for gathering all these automotive spirits into Women & Their Work. She's been studying for some time the appropriation of the female form to decorate means of transportation, from the prows of ships to the sides of planes (think World War II) to the hoods of cars. It aligns with a larger study she's undertaken on the depiction of women's bodies in art and popular culture (a sample of which is available to visitors of this exhibition in a broadsheet titled *The Sirens*). In them, women are repeatedly shown prone or with their backs arched to an extreme, limp and helpless, and in the case of the early 20th-century hood ornaments in "Hauntings," idealized with bodies smoothed to Art Deco perfection. The 13 sculptures here take that historically distorted view of women and distort it further, creating female forms dramatically different from the ones embellishing the fronts of Cadillacs and Rolls-Royces: Some are flatter, some thicker, some abstracted, some absent any human form at all. In the inky bronze *Lady-jet and evil Giacometti*, the winged woman, instead of pointing the way forward, is crashing face-first into the ground. In *Moth emerges from Lady-jet cocoon*, a woman's upside-down face tops a stretched body straining upward, as if its thin form were tightly confined. These ghosts are pointing to the confinement women have experienced for ages, the cells in which they've been held too long and are fighting to escape.

But however ghostly they may be in most respects, these figures are far from incorporeal. Hoehn has conjured them in a variety of sturdy materials – ceramics, wood, aluminum, steel, bronze – and they catch what limited illumination there is and hold fast to it, the glow that bathes each object providing not only a beautiful sheen but also a sense of its heft. These spirits are solid and often dense – we can tell what they'd weigh in our hands if we could hold them. And we *want* to hold them. Hoehn's craftsmanship is such that it creates a tactile magnetism, attracting our sense of touch. We want to run our hands over the smooth surfaces, to feel the textures and rough edges, to catch our fingers on the numerous points. You'd be hard-pressed not to notice all the points on these sculptures: on tips of wings and fins, on tops of heads, on elbows, on stars. Just because the past is past doesn't mean it has no sharpness. It still can prick you, and therein begins the haunting.

“Shana Hoehn: Hauntings”

Women & Their Work, 1710 Lavaca

www.womenandtheirwork.org

Through Sept. 5

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