Lowly resume

Temma on Earth

by Joyce Kubiski
brochure from exhibition at The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s depictions of the body have occurred with increasing frequency in contemporary art. Often these images have focused on how our understandings of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and health act to socially construct representations of the self. Tim Lowly's work fits into this broad categorization, focusing its subject on those who have no political voice of their own - the child, the mentally impaired, the sick, the downtrodden. His images question our modern notions of health and wellness, and challenge our concepts of the type of body that is fit to be seen. Although Lowly's work has political aspects, it is free from the specific agendas and despotic moralizing that often characterize ideologically motivated art. One of the most striking features of the artist's work is its multivalent character and its receptiveness to personal translation. Indeed, this is the intention of the artist, who has said that he "wishes to create parables and allegories that invite meaning."

Much of Lowly's work over the past 13 years, and the focus of the Snite Gallery exhibition is about his daughter Temma, who has been severely multiply impaired ever since her heart and breathing stopped for a critical period of time shortly after birth. Perhaps these sympathetic images of Temma could only have been created by someone so personally involved in her life, yet Lowly resists a maudlin pull on the heart strings, and rather engages the intellect to seriously consider the nature of her reality. In the painting "As the Earth Waits," Temma lies on a wind-sculpted sand dune; the monochromatic color scheme equates her body with the earth. She is separated from us by a calm distance in which she is neither marginalized, nor stigmatized, nor represented as some odd and alienated other. It is her world that is brought to the center and the artist challenges us to consider how her experience intersects with our own. It is this mysterious and often spiritual quality that pervades all of Lowly's images of his daughter.

In the graphite drawing, "Study of Temma on Earth," the unusual bird's-eye-view has placed the viewer in the position of a floating soul, detached and observant above the body it once occupied. We look patiently down at this sight. Time is meaningless, and there is a serene understanding of the power of the spirit to overcome corporeal limitations. Although few will experience life as Temma does,

there is a message of hope here for others who may come to experience a body ravished by age, a personality derailed by mental illness, or a mind emptied by dementia.

Lowly's work has taken a new direction with the installation piece, "TDL," in his use of materials - paper, plastic, ceramic - and his dramatic exploration of space. Five life-size images of Temma and several more intimate wall mounted pieces explore the ability of the mind and senses to accurately evaluate the world we live in. The figures of Temma depict her lying on the ground, head tilted slightly in an upward gaze. They are constructed from a variety of materials, varying from porous unglazed stoneware to a smooth milky-white plaster. These varying textures reflect the figure's slow and ethereal mutability, like some stubborn chrysalis waiting transformation. A walk among these figures reveals our own alienation, and the failing ofour senses in a temporal world. Lowly has said that he is "interested in imaging the value of being, apart from the capability of doing something." Certainly these images of Temma beg the questions, how shall we define humanity, and what is it that we most cherish?

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