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Esther Solondz *Beyond the Bone*



by Diana Gaston

For months, Esther Solondz tended her trays of iron filings, salt, and water, bringing about a strange alliance of alchemy, drawing, preservation, and decay. The resulting work was presented this spring in *Beyond the Bone: Salt Water and Rust*, an installation at Gallery NAGA. In her last NAGA installation in 2002, she assembled scores of salt-encrusted children's shoes, Christening gowns, and clothing, which established an introduction of sorts for her new body of work; this installation picked up where the last one left off, delving further into the properties of her materials and the mournful undercurrents of lost children.

Here, in *Beyond the Bone*, Solondz presented a collection of portraits of young, mostly female, anonymous sitters, their faces presented on cloths tacked to the wall, stewing in salty trays, and embedded in wax basins. While the portraits might best be described as drawings, they are also imbued with the properties of photography, as she bases her imagery on found photographs.

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As such, the portraits hover between the two graphic media with the poignancy of a death shroud or postmortem photograph. So curious is her use of materials that virtually every visitor had to first inquire about the process itself before he or she could take in the larger installation. The images were developed by the chemical action of salt and water on iron, a familiar process but one generally not seen in such an exquisitely cultivated form. Solondz essentially rendered her portraits with iron filings, coaxing simple facial features out of the fine metallic powder onto

sheets of untreated cotton.

The cotton cloth was then folded in half, laid into a beeswax basin, and submerged in a mixture of salt and water. Over time the water evaporated and the saline solution worked on the iron filings, leaving a rusty imprint of a face on the cloth. Depending on how long she left the cloth soaking in the basin—usually one to three days—and the extent to which the salt water evaporated, the rust developed to varying degrees, yielding either very fine lines or more heavily mottled ones. Like the latent image of a photograph that appears magically in the darkroom in a chemical bath, the crudely rendered iron drawings eventually revealed themselves in deep amber tones, the rust burning straight through both sides of the folded cloth and fixing itself in the wax tray below.

Once she removed the cloth drawings, she could further develop the image embedded in the wax basin by adding chlorine to continue the action of salt on the trace iron filings. The collection of portraits presented here featured her failures as well as her successes, including faces that are imperfectly



drawn, smudged, or botched by the imprecise activity of chemistry, as well as those that are more representative of the original photograph. Some portraits are nearly subsumed by salt and decay, made all the more touching in their distressed state, much like a creased school picture, a discarded family snapshot, or a damaged daguerreotype.

The NAGA installation offered up a tightly edited group of the rust portraits, as Solondz has produced many, many more, and could have easily overwhelmed the space in a wash of staring, somber young faces. Instead she limited the double-sided cloth portraits to one discreet grid of rectangles pinned to the wall. The corresponding wax trays were placed carefully throughout the space, some mounted to the wall on individual shelves, propped up on the floor, or clustered together on a number of delicate white tables, proffered like specimens or sacred objects.



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The wax trays, while once purely functional as shallow basins for the preparation of the image on cloth, were here presented as compelling physical objects in themselves, the site of genesis, decay, and remembrance. The containers were arranged in various states, some filled with salt water and carefully tended, some parched and depleted, and others nearly abandoned to the proliferation of fulminating salt crystals. In showing the work in progress the artist revealed the surprising fierceness of her materials and their uncanny imitation of life cycles. In her materialization of the innate properties of salt and iron Solondz sets up a delicate balance of preservation and decay. Her portraits seem permanently rendered, essentially stained onto the ground, and yet still vulnerable to their own chemistry.

Her handling of these miniature salt beds explores the brutality of decay, the inevitability of growth and destruction, the element of salt as an immediate extension of the body, and the surprising geometric perfection of the salt crystals themselves, which assume the refined shape of a cube. The element of salt, long utilized for its preservative qualities in the curing of meat and embalming, is also an element that under certain conditions

can accelerate corrosion. Solondz manages the corrosive properties of her medium, but only to a certain point, frequently allowing the salt to take over the cloth, all but annihilating the delicate image below. An unlikely alliance emerges between the action of salt and the function of the photograph, each serving to preserve or fix the subject, however imperfectly. In its salty encasement and redrawn form, the photograph is seemingly impervious; even in its dislocated state without context or history, the image sustains the memory of a face that no longer exists.

There is something inherently compulsive in the act of collecting, and the artist here reveals her own penchant for collecting in her tireless seeking, categorizing, and repurposing of anonymous photographic portraits. She has long incorporated such found photographs into her work, drawing on her own collection of turn-of-the-century cabinet cards and vernacular family photographs. The images turn up in her paintings and artist books, and they are the basis for the rust drawings shown here. Her reinvention of the photographic image, redrawing it only to cultivate it in another chemical composition-through salt and iron rather than light-sensitive materials and light-is fairly novel.

Certainly others, such as Robert Heineken, Susan Rankaitis, Sigmar Polke, Adam Fuss, and Marco Breuer, have reimagined the properties of the photographic image through similar experimentation and a healthy disregard for traditional darkroom practice; in Solondz's treatment, however, she turns the photographic image back upon itself, revising its very chemical properties and upending its descriptive clarity. Even so, for all their sculptural presence and reliance on drawing, the rust portraits retain a strong affinity to the original photograph in their ubiquity and formal structure.

The young girls who look out at us are drawn awkwardly, but that hardly seems to be the point in the amassing of this kind of tenderness. They speak to the artist's fondness for the human face, particularly the imperfect face, and the stage of youth when the soft, malleable features are not quite fixed. Solondz is intent on translating the image through her own tracing, drawing, and redrawing from the photograph, imagining and internalizing the faces of hundreds of unnamed girls. In the act of redrawing the portraits she very nearly removes them from their photographic state, and they become her girls, her children, her faces to meditate on and adore.

The sheer repetition of faces on the gallery wall somehow underscores the sameness that comes with unfamiliarity, but occasionally an unusual set of features breaks the pattern—a high forehead, a close set of eyes, a slight grimace when a smile was intended—and the individuality of the young sitter emerges. She draws and redraws these faces, undeterred by her own limitations as a draughtsman, but compelled all the same by the act of describing and the process of regenerating the photographic image.



And yet for all of their earnestness, and the naïve, childlike quality of the drawings, these faces are infused with a kind of melancholy, a premonition of death that filters our view of them. Much as Christian Boltanski's appropriated photographs serve to



memorialize the dead and transform the photographic image of an anonymous sitter into a remarkably poignant representation of life and the inevitability of death, the photographs that Solondz redraws serve as a kind of private memorial to imaginary children.

Her clumsy drawings of unknown faces suggest the significance of the recently departed, as though made by grieving parents or forensic scientists, doing their best to remember the slightest details. The installation as a whole deftly navigates a precarious line between the morbid and the sentimental, and what ultimately sustains the conceptual integrity of the work is that the images are

etched in decay, an abrasive, gritty chemistry that delineates and suspends the children's sweet faces.

The portraits alone, at least in the small number shown here, do not have the same poetic beauty and immediacy of the earlier salt-encrusted objects of children's clothing, but, as said, they are compelling in the compulsion and meditation of their making and the vulnerability of her materials. In Solondz's Providence studio, she stockpiles enormous bags of salt. A few salt-encrusted shoes and children's clothing remain scattered about, in and among the numerous beeswax basins that she produced for this most recent installation, but her more active experimentations with salt can only be described as massive, towering salt sculptures that are suspended from large bowls near the ceiling and trail down to the floor.

The structures of the salt sculptures are trained by simple strings attached to the basins of salt water that spill out over the sides, giving the salt crystals something to latch onto in their freefall to the ground. The artist tends the voluminous salty objects carefully, monitoring their water levels and gently encouraging their growth. It is unclear what will ultimately happen to them, if they will grow unendingly or if they will collapse under the strain of their own weight, but they continue to have an active presence in her space and in her imagination. The transformative element of salt is the source of endless poetic ruminations for Solondz, and chances are we'll be seeing more.

Gallery NAGA - www.gallerynaga.com

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