

Loss and transience, rust and salt permeate 'Beyond the Bone'

By Cate McQuaid, Boston Globe Correspondent | June 3, 2005

You may feel an eerie chill as you walk through Esther Solondz's new installation, "Beyond the Bone: Salt Water and Rust," at Gallery NAGA. The gallery is filled with faces that have coalesced out of iron dust and salt. They have the weird magnetism of a Mary or Jesus figure appearing amid mold and watermarks on the side of a building or in a grilled cheese sandwich, minus the religiosity and the skepticism.

For Solondz, it's another eloquent riff on loss and transience, anchored in her ever-deepening engagement with her materials. Here, the artist has crafted beeswax basins. She uses iron filings to draw a face on the bottom, then lays a folded cotton cloth on top. Finally, she fills the basin with saline solution. As the water evaporates, the iron rusts into the cloth and the basin, while the salt crystallizes over the image. When the cloth is removed, the image remains.

Step into the gallery, and all you see at first is a single basin filled with water on a waist-high pedestal; look down into it, and the sad, open face of a girl looks up at you. It could be a vessel of holy water inside a church.

Basins with blurred faces at the bottom are displayed throughout the gallery, and one wall is tacked with dried scraps of cotton. Each carries a rust-drawn face, and sometimes, on an unfolded cloth, the face's faint mirror image.

Saline-filled beeswax containers also sit on pedestals of various heights. Here we witness the simultaneous processes of decay and coalescence, as iron rusts, salt crystallizes, and the faces slowly solidify. The shadowy portraits -- all of women and children -- are haunting enough. This added demonstration of the artist's process is fascinating and heartbreaking. Solondz evokes the finality of "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," but even in loss, she assures that those who are gone stay etched in the hearts of those who remain.