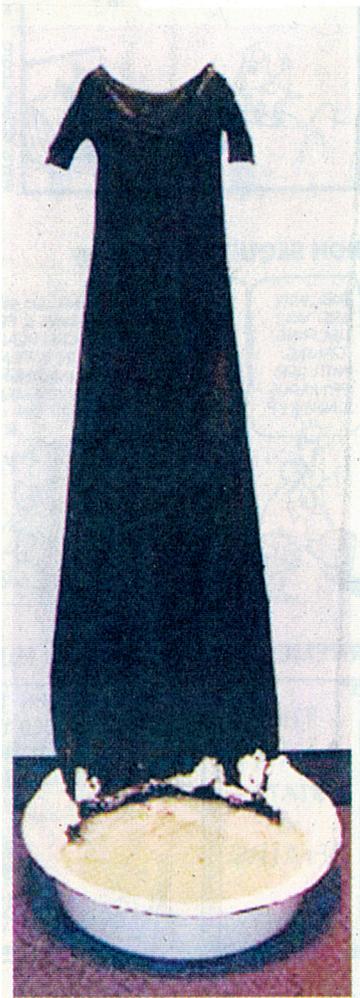


THE BOSTON GLOBE

# Artist's metaphor turns tragedy into innocence lost

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Salt-encrusted dresses hang from rusted wires in Esther Solondz's installation "They Left Their Clothes by the Water" at Gallery NAGA.

A simple, haunting image inspired Esther Solondz's installation at Gallery Naga, according to her Artist's statement: "Children come to the

water. They take off their clothes, leave them, and enter. In the water, something happens, and the children do not return.”

Literalists may think the short tale dire, but Solondz operates here in the realm of metaphor. Children represent innocence; the water might be experience. Once the children step into the water, they cannot return to what they once were.

In the past, Solondz has made mixed-media paintings of people on the edge of disappearance; the portraits were soft and hard to discern beneath shrouds of wax. She explored how we continue to embrace what we have lost, and how potent that relationship can be, despite the inevitability of change. In her last show at NAGA, she had one sculptural element: Children’s shoes in a salt-encrusted box.

Here, she plunges down the path that box opened. Solondz supersaturates water with salt, which creates an environment for salt crystals to grow. Salt-encased christening gowns and party dresses hang on rusty wires from wooden pegs. Tiny handmade leather shoes sit on the floor, empty and expectant, or in salty boxes. Great veils of gauze hang from the ceiling into basins of salt. Salt-encrusted books sport paintings of wistful little girls on their covers. Salt is a residue of flesh; all of this speaks to some part of our selves left behind. It’s the picture of vanished innocence.

Occasionally, the artist trades in salt for tar, white for black – a thread of tarnish, a hint of evil or shame in this otherwise poignant world of what once was? The tar is an interesting material, but its purpose here isn’t clear enough. Also, there are simply too many pieces to this installation: Solondz would have done well to pare it down, and to work with the lighting to better isolate the different components.

But these are mild gripes about work so moving it stirred unexpected memories in me of innocence lost. Basins filled with water, with salt growing over spare wax bowls inside them, are particularly affecting. They’re not as explicit as the empty shoes, and the salted dresses, but they’re riveting in their sparkling white crusts. They stand in for the water the children step into, never to return; all that is left behind crystallizes here.

Solondz takes a great and risky leap here, and despite some kinks to be worked out, it pays off. She, too, will never return.