

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Castro, Jan Garden, "Conversations with Ghosts: Banks Violette," Sculpture, December 2005

Conversations with Ghosts: Banks Violette

by Jan Garden Castro

Inside a blackened gallery at the Whitney Museum of American Art, a burned church skeleton created from cast bonded Red Cross salt rises from a foundation of black mirror-like epoxy. The guard relates how one day when the air conditioning went off, the salt began to absorb moisture, then to weep—a tendency toward entropy that echoed the Smithsonian exhibition also at the Whitney. But when these 14 pillars of salt are cooled, their white surfaces glint like ice-encrusted burnt timber. An unworldly score drones, builds, and fades, as viewers participate in a constructed death ritual.

Banks Violette's untitled work can be experienced in many ways. The stark, romantic church frame is a serial construction based a single halved beam. Violette calls this approach a Home Depot version of the golden section. The pillars could refer to Lot's wife turning to salt. The eerie music, with its electronic thunder and droning, captures the desolation and silence of snow with added atmospheric disturbances. The 98-minute score also includes muffled church bells, the hissing of a grenade fuse, the buzz of a chain saw, and wind-fanned flames.

Violette's work conjures the burned church frame on a Norwegian black metal band's album cover. This, in turn,



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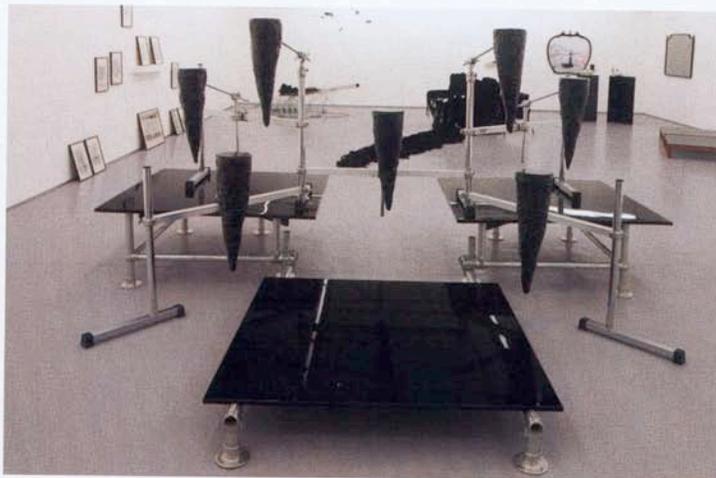
refers to a black metal devotee self-named Count Grisnackh, who torched a 12th-century wooden church in 1992, leading to over 100 church burnings in Norway. Grisenackh escalated his behavior by violently stabbing to death a rival guitarist from the band, Mayhem. He is presently in jail answering fan mail. The driver of the getaway car, Snorre Ruch, a guitarist for Mayhem at the time of the murder, also served a jail sentence. He now heads the black metal band Thorns, and he, Finn Olav Holthe, and Jon Wesseltoft have composed the subtle score for Violette's installation.

Curator Shamim Momin's catalogue essay links the literary, aesthetic, and art historical crests of Violette's work. Using Jorge Luis Borges's poem "Mirrors," she probes Violette's "Borgesian notion of time, in which objects retain a sense of the specific moment but can also expand to suggest...elastic moments of common experience and emotion." Momin points out varied

doubling effects, both in the work's construction and in parallels linking Violette's art, real life events, and art history. She discusses the implications of the piece's overt theatricality and its connection with the tragic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich, suggesting that both artists capture transient moments of tragic excess. For Momin, Violette's "fleeting moments of perfect balance" are "a subjective construction. You give meaning to something, yet there's no tangible thing there. It exists in the in-between spaces. Like true romanticism, it inherently has the possibility of decay and failure or destruction." She sees Violette as an artist investigating iconic devices, including the American flag, skeletal and ghost images, and creating original reconstructions of heavy metal music rigging.

"Arroyo Grande 7-22-95," Violette's 2002 breakthrough show at Team Gallery, looked at the ritual murder of a 15-year-old girl and the subsequent worship of her body by three members of the California heavy metal band Hatred. Violette invented opposing points of view, those of the murderers and the victim, noting, "I wanted to

Left: *ghost*, 2002. Epoxy, polystyrene, cast fiberglass, plywood, IV units, and water, 61 x 60 x 60 in. Below: *hate them (single stage)*, 2004. Polystyrene, polyurethane, tinted epoxy, wood, steel, hardware, and drum stands, 54 x 104 x 12 in.

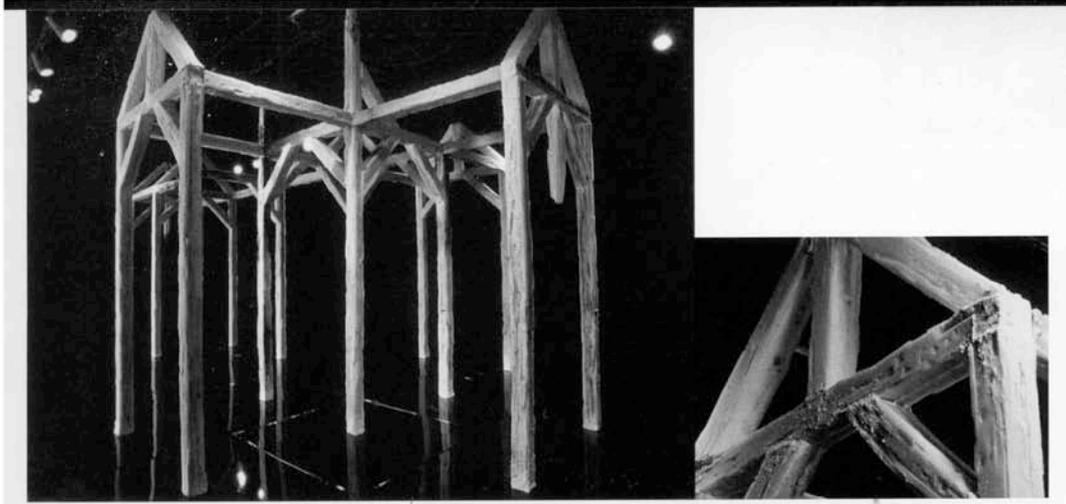


COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TEAM GALLERY, NY

Sculpture 24.10

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depict a 'true crime' story involving degenerate kids who believe in a fiction too much and lose touch with reality." At the 2004 Whitney Biennial, he presented a gothic installation of heavy metal-inspired sculptures and drawings. Teen suicide inspired by Curt Cobain is another potent theme.

Violette's materials and processes have not received as much attention as the sensational back stories to his work. Discussing his serial construction method for the Whitney work, he says: "A piece of wood that I demolished was cut in half. That was cut in half and demolished again. A mold was produced from each successive demolition. When you cast something into a mold over and over, the cast degrades. It's a structural correlate to the idea of copy-cat crimes—the mold collapses on itself or the series of criminal episodes collapses through repetition." Regarding his use of Red Cross salt, Violette explains, "That kind of iron cross is in the iconography of heavy metal, and it's manufactured by a company called Cargil, which used to have a mining operation in the town that I'm from, Ithaca. The first time that Smithson used salt in an exhibition of earthworks (Cornell University around 1967), he took salt from this mine. When I was growing up, the mine had shut down. In addition to my own history and the

site's weird art historical pedigree, upstate New York was an economically devastated area, so the mine closing represented the economy drying up. Salt is beautiful, delicate, and crystalline, but also corrosive. It allowed me to document a pretty horrific crime, and this particular salt had weird intersecting associations." The posts are polyurethane reinforced with fiberglass, with wood inserts, sheathed in up to a half-inch layer of salt. Violette created the dark epoxy base with burnt wood and used a blow torch to finish the reflective surface—these processes, too, mirror the crimes central to the work.

Violette identifies with Smithson's entropic processes, noting, "Language systems are predisposed to collapse: a lot of what I do references sub-cultures in which people seal themselves off and elaborate a language that becomes more and more complex. The logical conclusion is to make it end tragically to prove

they're not acting." The aesthetic behind Violette's labor-intensive installation mirrors pointless tragedy with more potency than the daily news, encompassing diverse associations for each viewer.

After Violette dropped out of high school in Ithaca, he worked as a tattoo artist and became a fan of cult metal bands, artists including Cady Noland, and films including *The Night of the Living Dead*. He polished his art credentials with a BFA from the School of Visual Arts and an MFA from Columbia University. His 2005 exhibitions include Galerie Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels (with sub-audible music by Stephen O'Malley); the Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York; P.S.1, Long Island City, New York; and Galerie Lisa Ruyter, Vienna.

Jan Garden Castro is a contributing editor for *Sculpture*.

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Above and detail: *Untitled*, 2005. Bonded salt, salt, polyurethane, polymer medium, ash, epoxy, wood, galvanized steel, and steel hardware, installation view. **Right:** View of Violette's installation at the 2004 Whitney Biennial.

