

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

"Rosemarie Trockel." *Arts Magazine*. 1991.



Rosemarie Trockel, *Balaklava*, 1986, Wool. Courtesy Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston.

## Rosemarie Trockel

To start with, Rosemarie Trockel started with us; she chose to introduce us to her work by first introducing us to ourselves. By hanging a hand mirror at the mouth of her Boston ICA retrospective the way she might have hung a mirror in her front hall, she made us aware that we were guests in her home, allowing us to ready ourselves, letting us see our own glass house. To me, however, the mirror is as much about vanity as self-examination; concealed vanity, fear of self-examination. I didn't look, not then or ever.

At the back of this body of work—which includes knitted canvases, bronze castings of dead animals, sculptural arrangements in glass cases, drawings, floor pieces, and quirky apparel—is the oldest piece in the retrospective, *Scaredy-Cat* (1983). It sits on the floor in the corner of the upper gallery

and watches. It is quite obviously a kind of self-portrait. Her *Familiar*. It says a lot. Two slits peer from just beneath the top of a plastered cylinder, out of which pokes a piece of wood, like a tail. Seeing that bit of emotion and candor made me look at the rest of the work differently. It made me re-examine not only the vulnerability of the work, but also the fear, the anger, the touch, and, in the end, the humor.

Out on the floor, under the feline's guard-like gaze, are some of Trockel's most intriguing works: haunting arrangements on her customized pedestals and in her glass cases. These pieces recall Beuys in their biological/anthropological quality of inquiry. They struggle with significance, not form. They ask questions. Their inventive visual presence evolves through her personal, almost magical, use of materials, natural and

synthetic. Human hair, animal membrane, and wire can figure in a piece under glass that we hover over as though it were enchanted. Casts of conch shells hang on the ends of long handles like ladles in a kitchen or carcasses on meat hooks, pretty shells all in a row. A man's white dress shirt stands alone in a tall case—except for a small spider.

Trockel does many things. She is completely human, woman, artist, with all the power, diversity, and complexity that implies. Her work resists limitation. She has scope, mystery, and reach. If three push brooms painted black and hung high on a wall like crucifixes are an angry indictment against men for so much burden and brutality and so little promise and possibility, then is a silver cast of chewed gum likewise a "biting" metaphor for the waste of generations of women who have been used and then discarded? Or is the chewed gum just a whimsical insight recognizing a very funny, and even beautiful, little phenomenon she calls "mouth sculpture?" Is it both? Can the push brooms even be kind of sardonic in the way that a sorceress's getalong can become a crucifix?

Casts of dead animals pointed up just how mercurial her ideas were. Her humor was what was the least expected and most jarring. The dead animals elicit our compassion, and yet we are confused, or at least I was, by the party hat one of them is wearing on its head. Or is it a dunce cap? Is this woman-as-victim, like the image of eyes shining quizzically from one of her knitted ski masks, or is there something else going on? The comic dimension of this work lifted it to a height I have rarely encountered in either art or feminism. It is the power of laughter that makes her work so victorious. With humor, that Trojan horse, she tickles our ramparts and drives her expressions through the gates.

As this exhibition (which, after Boston, travels to the University Art Museum, Berkeley; MCA, Chicago; The Power Plant, Toronto; and the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid) shows, the source of Trockel's power is bound up in her art like religion. Her work resurrects the dominion of the matriarch, earth mother, goddess, and sorceress, and with their spirit instills in it a wisdom, strength, and grace of such intensity that she indeed brings something vast to life. In a tall room near the front of the ICA, Trockel installed a large machine that could manufacture art. Stretched out over a papered conveyor dangled dozens of brushes made from the hair of her artist friends. On the wall adjacent to the machine were samples of its quixotic glory. Call it magic, creation, what you will. (*Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, April 3–May 12*) Addison Parks