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## **Sandy Winters**

*Pretexts and Subtexts: Sandy Winters, (catalogue) essay, August 2004-2006*

### **Recording the Universe**

**By Eleanor Heartney**

From Frankenstein to the Matrix, popular and serious culture is full of warning tales about the dangers embodied by unbridled reliance on technology. Created by man, technology assumes a life of its own in these narratives, evolving into an empowered servant which has the potential to overwhelm its master.

One such parable is the story of the Sorcerer's apprentice, so memorably enacted by a beleaguered Mickey Mouse in the Disney Classic *Fantasia*. In this animated cartoon, apprentice magician Mickey has been instructed to mop the floor. When his master departs, Mickey casts a spell on the mop and bucket to do the job themselves. Alas, this scheme is too successful as they splinters into hundreds of clones who relentlessly splash water on the floor until the whole castle is in danger of flooding. Order is only restored with the return of the master magician, who retracts Mickey's spell and returns the legions of mops and buckets back to their original singular state.

I couldn't help thinking of this story when I viewed a partial installation of Sandy Winters' *Pretexts and Subtexts* in her studio last winter. Wrapping around the walls like uncontrolled eruptions of ivy or kudzu, drawings of cartoonish plant and machine hybrids exuded a similar sense of blind, unreasoning force - like Mickey's mops, they were at once humorous and unsettling in their adherence to imperatives beyond human control.

Winters has created an almost feral art work. It is designed to expose the improvisational nature of the creative process, thereby revealing a synergy between the explosive forces of the human imagination and the unreasoning power of nature. It is no accident that the forms that emerge from her brush seem to have a life of their own. They are rounded and bulbous, with the illusionistic definition of identifiable objects. But despite our willingness to accept them as possible entities in the real world, they are also irreconcilably strange. Lengths of what appear to be plumbing pipes and joints may end in apparatus that resemble giant shoes or deformed telephone receivers. Intestine like coils become parts of some mysterious machine. A soft propeller may power weird seed pods. In some cases the images break out into three dimensions, but even that affords the literalist no help. A section of aluminum tubing protrudes the wall like some kind of strange religious icon, while a painted bellows contraption blows air into a real dress. Strapped wooden contraptions sit on the floor like the inner workings of old fashioned hoop skirts, while a similar shaped image painted on the wall reads as a cage.

Winters notes that she has been inspired by the myth of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and revelry, who served in ancient times as a representative of the intermingled forces of creation and destruction. The Dionysian rites were frenzied, orgiastic affairs in which the god's acolytes were as apt to kill or maim each other as they were to procreate.

For Winters, this myth reflects the nature of the creative process, where new forms and ideas emerge from the destruction of old ones. She has

dramatized this notion in a gallery installation in 1999 in which she worked by day in the gallery drawing on the walls while the gallerist erased part of each days work that night. Here this is suggested by the improvisational structure of the installation, which will be reconfigured to fit each space on the tour, with new elements added and others discarded. After being reconstructed at each venue, it will then be dismantled; elements like wall drawings which are unique to the venue will be destroyed. Returning to the Dionysian metaphor, Winters likens this to the process by which vines in the vineyard are cut back each season so that they will grow back more fully the following year. She points out that the metaphor can be extended to the evolution of modern art, whereby new movements and ideas rise out of the destruction of old ones.

These works also convey a larger point about the complex relationship of nature and culture in the contemporary world. In these works, it is almost impossible to disentangle organic forms from mechanical ones, and they both seem to be driven by the same demonic forces. Thus, it is possible to read a cautionary note in these works, which remind us that technology, is a double edged power, at once promising to make the world better while rendering it more dangerous.

Part Guston, part Loony Tunes, part Rube Goldberg, with a knowing reference to the mechanized sexuality of Duchamp's Large Glass and a nod to the apocalyptic frisson of Hollywood's romance with androids, Pretexts and Subtexts blends humor and anxiety in an irresistible mix. Winters opens a window into her creative process in order to help us reflect on our own.

Eleanor Heartney is a new York-based art critic and author of Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art