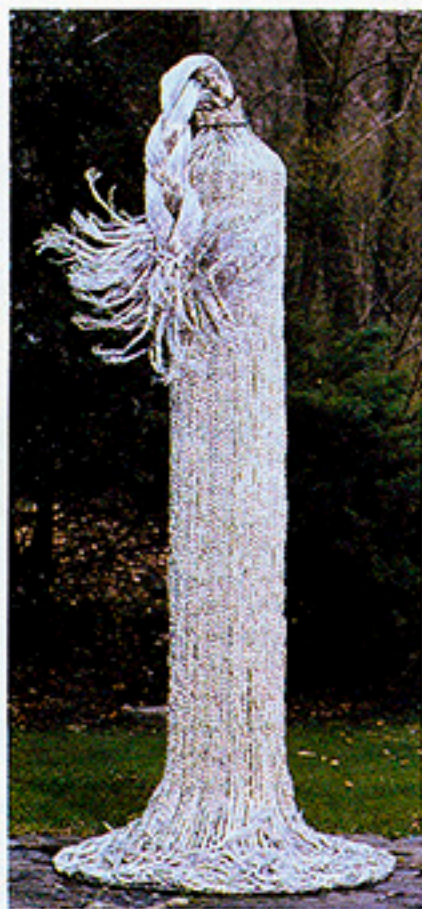


Focus

Niki Ketchman:
Fabrications

by Marty Carlock



Left: *Garden Gate*, 1998. Ribbon, paper, and colored pencil on handmade paper, 12 x 9 in. Below left: *Braided*, 1996. Steel rods, steel wire, and aluminum wire, 112 x 48 x 48 in.

It has become politically incorrect to characterize art as "masculine" or "feminine," but Niki Ketchman's art is both feminist and feminine. She is accustomed to hearing her work described as "sexy," "playful," or "monumental femininity." Ketchman turns a woman's wit loose on industrial materials. Her raw mediums are aluminum wire, steel cable, stamped metal, and PVC; and her tools are needle-nosed pliers. With them she weaves, braids, sews, does macramé—uses all those techniques categorized as women's work. What results are strong but ambiguous forms capable of yielding a plethora of meanings. Tongue-in-cheek, the artist satirizes male fantasies about women as sexual objects. Her current year-long, indoor/outdoor installation at DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts is loaded with possibilities for Freudian interpretation. Or perhaps it satirizes Freudian interpretations.

When she first turned to sculpture, the Connecticut artist simply created form with line in space. It was dense line, derived from scrawls she made in the margins of her sketchbook as she commuted to her studio in Manhattan.

Inspired to translate her linear musings into three dimensions, she began

working with pliers over an armature of welded rod and hardware cloth, turning malleable aluminum wire into black line in space. The randomness of her three-dimensional scribble, whimsical to the point of silliness, was part of the charm of such creations as *Split* and *Untitled* (both 1994). Ostensibly lacking seriousness, existing as visual comic relief, they are engaging but not so purposeful as the current work.

As her technique became more methodical and more ambitious, an unsettling content emerged. The sculptor did not set out to create ever zanier and edgier sculpture. But "when I saw where it was going, I went with the flow," she recalls. Weaving meant abandoning her expressive line for surface. It also opened the door to more color, more specific form.

Superficially, nothing on DeCordova's terrace looks like anything else. Yet all the pieces reflect Ketchman's interest in weaving with her wire. The first of these pieces is *Braids*, a raw aluminum, multi-braided column, easily read as a figure, that tosses its top down in a fat-braid ponytail. The recititude of the piece makes it look like a monument and that's the sculptor's little joke: it's a monument to hair.

Glitters is a bulbous blue phallic shape that opens into an orifice, a cleft,

Laced, 1997. Steel rods, aluminum wire, elastic, and shock cord, 93 x 60 x 48 in.

lined inside with blue glitter. The rim of the cavity is decorated with tiny metal rosebuds painted pink and green.

Though *Garden Gate* has two legs topped by a hirsute black tangle, this piece lends itself to interpretations other than the obvious one. One leg is made of spiraling, leafy steel vines while the other is squared off and screened; together they compose the opposition between nature and civilization, between the unfettered and the ordered. The screen pens in and/or shuts out; viney stuff embraces all.

Ketchman's *Mounds*, each five feet across, represent the breasts of Mother Earth, one dressed in chaste pink daisies, the other in black wire lace. Looping black wire also forms the triplicate base and capital of *Corinthian*, becoming a double entendre for black bodice and skirts. These are joined to the skinny column/torso with what look from afar like garter clips—but no, they are merely stamped-metal leaves.

A strip of stamped metal forms the core of *Fringe*, a spiraling work that evokes flimsy stuff like bordello curtains or a flapper's dress—yet the fringe is made of straight steel rod. The sculptor's comic view is perhaps best realized in *Laced*, an eight-foot purple object legible as either boot or corset. Toward the bottom it sags into folds, like aging flesh the corset can no longer shape.

For a small installation just inside the museum, Ketchman has raided the fabric district of Lower Broadway for doilies, boas, zippers, feathers, and fake fuchsia fur. She combines them in parodies of garter belts and showbiz costumes.

This sculptor does not abjure traditional women's roles. The mother of grown daughters, she has been known to undertake housewifely projects like making clothes, curtains, and slipcovers. Such interests feed the imagery of her present work, yet her sense of humor



enables her to render the trappings of femininity as a little quirky, a little laughable.

Ketchman, 56, might be a role model for women who have come late to art and interwoven it with family duties. She planned to become a dancer, but married young and found herself with an infant daughter at age 20. Sitting with friends to let their children play together, she and the other women began to draw each other to pass the time.

"I was fascinated," Ketchman said. She enrolled part time in a succession of colleges as her husband took jobs in Ohio and New Jersey. By the age of 29 she had earned a degree in fine arts from Farleigh Dickenson

University, and five years afterward, a master's from Montclair (NJ) State University.

Ketchman weaves together many strands of thought. She mocks male fantasies about feminine garb. She celebrates women's work, yet parodies it with weighty, heavy-duty materials.

She steps aside from much of public art and, by offering an alternative lighter in concept and in fact, comments sotto voce on its weight and solidity, its roughneck permanence, and its self-importance.

Marty Carlock is a regular contributor to Sculpture, Art New England, and other publications.