

Article

Dr. Karen Jacobs, *Apoptosis*, pending publications, 2011

***Apoptosis*: Martha Russo and Katie Caron**
Denver Art Museum, June, 2011



Written by Karen Jacobs:

associate professor of contemporary literature and visual culture, University of Colorado, Boulder

A stand-out piece at the Denver Art Museum's recent show, *Marvelous Mud*, curated by Gwen Chanzit, is "Apoptosis," a collaborative installation by Denver-based artists, Martha Russo and Katie Caron. The installation was one of a group of commissioned site-specific pieces installed in the multi-angled Anschutz Gallery under the subtitle "Overthrown: Clay Without Limits," June 11- Sept. 18, 2011. This arresting, monumentally scaled multi-media construction instantly engages the eye with its intricately cascading dark and light elements that sweep up and across a towering space, at the same time that it inventively interrogates our ideas about systemic connection. The brightly lit globes that ocularly 'oversee' the installation appear to gaze out from an abstracted work of figuration whose contents demand a fresh method of mapping, one equal to its ambition perpetually to morph into new forms.

"Apoptosis" combines porcelain, paper clay, glaze materials, colored pigments, assorted tools, steel and hardware, silicone, LED Lights, compact fluorescents, electrical cables, wires and conductors, utility poles, abaca paper, and beeswax, in a 17' high installation that spans 18' and connects to a sloping wall that is 30' long x 6' 7" wide. The elements coalesce into a perilous, seemingly gravity-defying angle as they slope upward and jump to an adjacent wall. The artists used approximately seven tons of clay, and one and a half tons of metal and mixed media to create nearly four thousand components, including thirty-six hand cast paper spheres coated with silicone that dominate the upper tier; one hundred fifty lighted, slip-cast, translucent porcelain forms, many of which incorporate metals ranging from standard hardware and wire to vintage tools; and two hundred

hollow metal spheres. This eclectic mixture celebrates clay in ways that subordinate its core material identity to its immense versatility and connotative elasticity.

The palette is darkest, appearing almost charred, at the base, which spreads laterally across an angled wooden platform and lightens incrementally upward; it then shifts abruptly to the brightly illuminated large spheres that dominate the upper third and contain the piece's most colorful elements. The top-heavy composition and dynamic web of twisting lines give "Apoptosis" a powerful sense of reciprocal movement, animated as an unfolding emergence from below while simultaneously threatening collapse from above in uneasy, unstable trajectories of flow. This dynamic of contraction and expansion is reproduced at the cellular level of the installation's components as well, in the sense that while clay shrinks in firing, some of the metallic elements actually grow, and the artists have entangled these elongated blackened metal tentacles with clusters of dark lines in ways that strengthen the piece's vertical axis. The complex itineraries traced by *Apoptosis's* innumerable skeins inevitably evoke the image of a network—an image resonant with such organic forms as the human nervous system as well as such inorganic forms as analog and digital webs; but they also gesture beyond the network in ways resonant with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome as a mobile, non-hierarchical, process-oriented alternative to static or totalizing maps. Symptomatically, the piece's nearly four thousand components are unnumbered and can never be reconstructed the same way twice, despite the structural scaffolding supplied by large utility poles that ensure the continuity of basic shapes and compositional ideas.

The artists clearly are more concerned with creating pathways or zones that momentarily organize trajectories of looking than they are committed to stabilizing and fixing them. Certainly, the strategy captivates our attention long enough to create curiosity and the possible recognition of the piece's constitutive elements. An old kiln transformer box mixed into the litter of objects that transition into the floor is one of a series of referential gifts available to those who can identify it, a reminder that the piece is meant to celebrate the medium whose boundaries it so insistently challenges—clay. Telephone cables and power lines allude to the communications grid that joins public and private, inside and outside. But, fundamentally, Russo and Caron seem invested in deferring the seductions of naming, the better to prolong a sensory engagement anchored precisely in the experience of sustained *disorientation*.

In apoptosis, the process of programmed cell death for which the installation is named, cellular material is reconfigured over the course of an organism's development into new shapes, forms, and functions—a dramatic cellular ecology in which innovation rises, as it were, from the ashes of destruction. (In human embryonic development, for example, cellular webbing between emerging fingers dies off to enable the hand's mature articulation.) While the process might reasonably recall a modernist-style ethos of creative destruction, such a resemblance would be a misleading way of characterizing the piece overall, since it fails to capture the ways in which Russo and Caron's reconfigurations mark an ongoing, unpredictable process, the endpoint of which remains elusive—a decidedly postmodern ecology. To be sure, "Apoptosis" internally mimics bodily processes and systems, but not in the service of their visual reproduction per se. Instead, the installation seems to open up those processes and systems, and the resulting ambiguation of inside and outside, clean and unclean, organic and industrial, familiar and unfamiliar, prompts a sensation of uncanniness and abjection rather than a triumphal circuit of creation or completion. "Apoptosis" can best be read as a kind of *deconstructed* body that has dangerously breached its borders, or even as a fossilized, decayed industrial process, the origins and utility of which have been anachronistically obscured. A sense of real-time perishability links these otherwise distinctive lexicons, a perishability that widely evokes marine debris, breached organs, leakage, contamination, and combustion. The paper-covered spheres that float up from the top of the construction, glazed in their mottled, stretchy silicone membranes, contribute to an iconography of birth and slick decay. And yet the bright ocularity of these illuminated globes brings a pop-lightness to the piece as well, in which these looming bug-eyed orbs seem to return the viewer's gaze in a playful bid for dominance.

Russo and Caron, both members of the faculty at the Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design in

Lakewood, bring remarkably compatible but distinctive sensibilities to what is their first sustained collaboration. The muted organic subtlety of “Apoptosis” is typical of the palette and forms of many of Russo’s other large sculptural installations, which also achieve intricate, dynamic surfaces through densely arranged, smaller, usually clay objects. Undoubtedly, the conception of “Apoptosis” owes something, too, to Russo’s background in developmental biology. The more disciplined spherical geometries as well as the bright, dramatic bursts of color and experiments with light are indebted to Caron, whose work has consistently explored theatrical effects and illusion, often in imaginary worlds realized through an engagement with electronic and other non-ceramic based media. Russo and Caron’s forms recall the lyrical organicism of Petah Coyne, while their engagement with bodily processes can read like a deliteralized version of Roxy Paine. The installation’s exuberant optical experiments bring to mind Olafur Eliasson’s work. The contrast between Russo’s more muted palette and organic shapes and Caron’s vivid colors and fascination with the artificial arguably produces the most productive tensions in the piece. Yet both artists could accurately be described as makers of layered environments. The two aesthetics come together with an uncanny synergy in this memorable piece.

Biography

Karen Jacobs

Karen Jacobs is Associate Professor of English at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She received her BA from Washington University (1982) and her PhD from the University of California, Berkeley (1993). Dr. Jacobs specializes in twentieth-century and contemporary American literature, visual culture studies, and critical theory. She is the author of *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Cornell 2001); the editor of the English Language Notes special issue, *Photography and Literature* (2006); and the editor of a translation of French critic Liliane Louvel’s *Poetics of the Iconotext* (Ashgate 2011). She has also written on queer theory, collective memory, and public art. She is currently completing a book titled *Trace Atlas: Itineraries of Postmodern Literary Space*, for which she just received an NEH fellowship.