



REBECCA RIPPLE

Orgy in the Sky

BY JESSICA RATH



Los Angeles-based Rebecca Ripple first intrigued me with word works that seemed to hollow out a place for the human body in banal furnishings. *thigh/blind* (2001), for instance, spells out “thigh” by cutting the word, letter by letter, into aluminum blinds; in another piece, “elbo” is sewn into a Home Depot rug. By 2004, she was creating room-sized word sculptures like *tongue (after Rubens)*. Built from pristine, hand-sanded layers of Styrofoam, the bulbous letters spelling “tongue” (varying in height from four to seven feet) make a fluid composition based on the figures in Peter Paul Rubens’s *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* (c. 1617). Through a wide-ranging formal tenacity, Ripple asserts that the medium for rational discourse — language — can be cowed into serving as her physical plaything. But how does a sculptor come to be inspired by Rubens’s fluidity and sexuality?

Ripple was brought up in a 1970s Catholic, suburban Long Island household that embraced rationality above all else. As she describes it, she was steered away from the culture of New York City or any thought or deed connected with sensuality. At the heart

Above: *lang(uage)*, 2009. Wood, plaster, and lace, 36 x 48 x 60 in. Left: *me please me*, 2008. Fabric, acrylic paint, plaster, and wood, 48 x 120 x 94 in.

of her work is a collusion of contrasting perceptions, joining the visceral perception of the body and the reasoning perception of thought. In her recent work,

she makes the point by literally fleshing out symbols, words, and physical articles from her past. In *lang(uage)* (2009), Ripple turns a dining room table into a body by cutting the top into folds and encasing it in plaster. Long tendrils emerge from under the table skirt, and a breast erupts from the top. A handmade, bobbin lace tablecloth spelling out the beginning of the word “language” spreads across the table in an apparent attempt to impose order and tradition on a writhing body.

Ripple, who received her MFA from Yale in 1995, is incredibly adept at adapting difficult trades to her work, like the excruciatingly detailed 17th-century bobbin lace in *lang(uage)*, which took more than two years to make. Ripple married the pattern’s traditional four-sided geometry with the five- or six-sided geometry of bubbles, thereby representing the unstable structure of the spaces between cells and pairing manmade with natural systems. When asked if her investigations into lace and other materials preceded the idea for the work, Ripple replied that she is driven conceptually, but is always seeking a place “where the materials have a language of their own...where the dialogue goes in a direction beyond my original conceptual intention.”

This was definitely the case in her re-creation of the plaid that she and her sister wore in their Catholic school uniform skirts. Ripple painted the parochial staple on sheer gauze in *me please me* (2008), a sculpture that asks to be chosen and demands to be pleased. Eight entities, really stumps of full figures, clad only in perfectly pleated skirts, lurch with masses of entwined, tendril legs. On their smooth white plaster backs, orifices appear to spit up and swallow letters spelling “please me.” Ripple based the forms of the moving mouths and the teetering legs on the surging bodies in Rubens’s *The Fall of the Damned* (c. 1620). The humps are derived from the curves of bathtubs, referencing one of the few sensuous forms found in the suburban, middle-class architecture of her home.

Ripple began to investigate her adolescence as she became “more conscious of my Catholic [upbringing] when the Bush administration was talking about absolutism...religion was a structure that we were being inundated with in the news. I was angry and trying to leave it behind...but then I decided that my upbringing was a microcosm of the issues of the day...a religious, rule-oriented world...a patriarchal omnipotence. The work is about the construction of myself, where it is cultural, where it is nurture.”

flock of Nuns (2009) offers another odd and captivating combination of baroque sensibilities and 1970s childhood dreams. Here, more than a dozen gilded brass forms outlining a distinctive type of religious headgear hover above the viewer’s head. Ripple grew



Above: *tongue (after Rubens)*, 2004. Foam and wood, 89 x 108 x 144 in. Below: *God*, 2006–07. Leather, velvet, glass, aluminum, and wood, 40 x 24 x 18.



up watching the late 1960s television series “The Flying Nun,” featuring Sally Field as a fun-loving nun who was able to get out of any situation, often with the aid of the long extensions on her hat. In *flock of Nuns*, Ripple “wanted the work to make that leap from something concrete to something transcendent. I want the nuns to be free...I want you to be in the place of decadence yet all couched in religion and morality.”

To spell the word *God* (2006–07), Ripple chose materials that originally attracted her as a seven-year-old child, her first Catholic school shoes. While the base is blockish and almost architectural, the letters are expertly sewn with folds of velvet and patent leather. She began creating a sexy shoe but ended up with a pedestrian Hush Puppy, eschewing style for immediate material properties: the patent shine, the matte plush finish of velvet, and the perfect stack of the heel leather. Ripple says that she was “seduced by the materials, and my intention is to seduce you as well.” *God* contains the fantastic appeal of new shoes and the solemn austerity of a reliquary for innocent faith.

For Ripple, clothing, home decoration, church ornamentation and, especially, Rubens’s paintings in her work reference the “small places where I had sexuality as a child. Sensuality seems to overlap so much with the church. It is interesting to me that [the church] allowed so much nudity. That it was all above board. It’s an orgy in the sky. A way of being a good girl and having the bad as well.”

Jessica Rath is a Los Angeles-based artist and writer.