

In Search Of Self

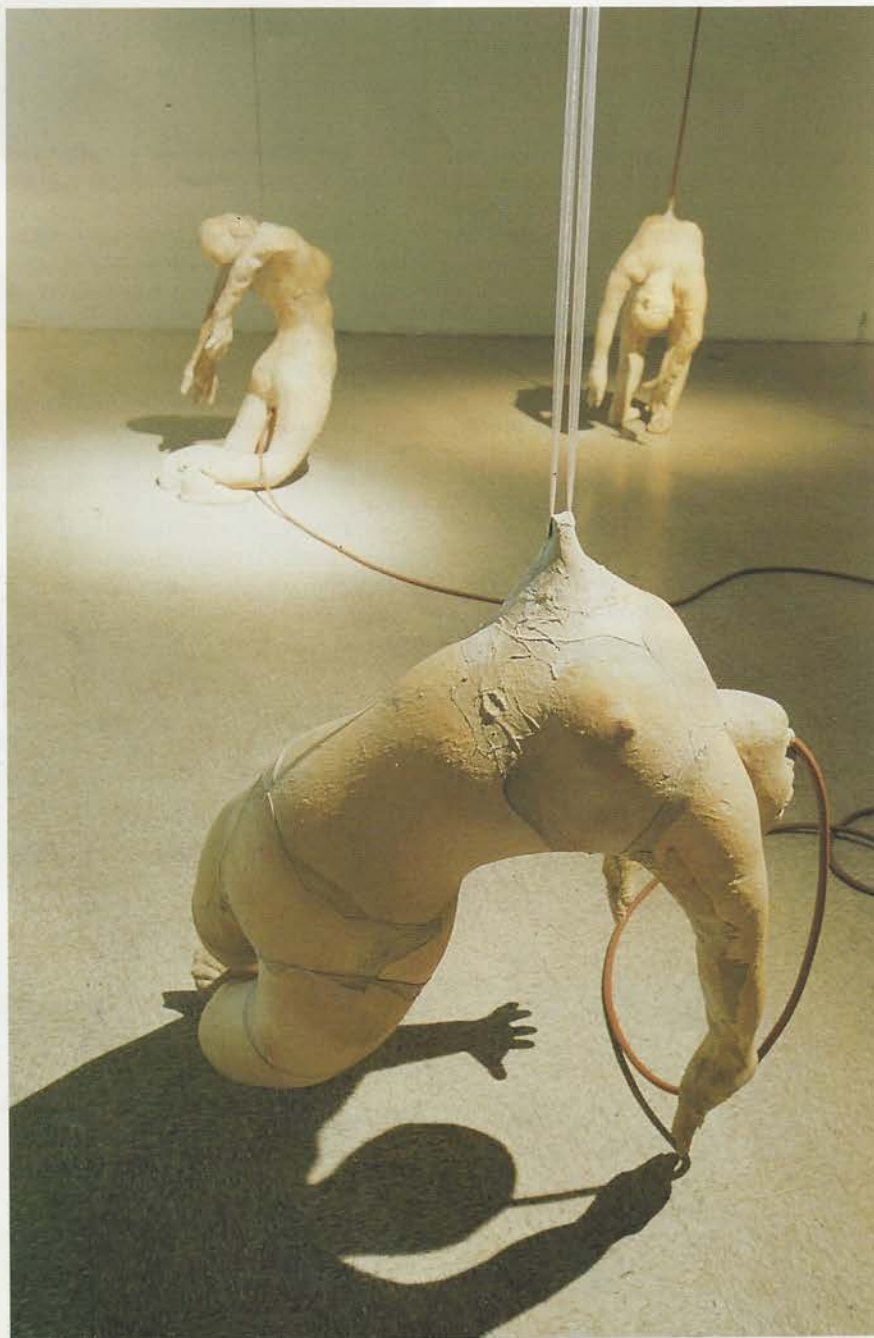
While some sculptors working with machines appear to emphasize the dehumanizing aspects of their relationship to humankind, Dierdre DeFranceaux wishes to remind us about what it means to be human.

By Alicia Miller

On a rainy November morning, artist Dierdre DeFranceaux turns on the air compressor in her San Francisco studio that runs figures from two kinetic sculpture pieces, *Rapid Cycling* (1998) and *Bending Over Backwards and Doing the Impossible* (1999). An air compressor slowly inflates several latex figures until they are almost full, then cuts off allowing the figures to gradually deflate over the course of two to three minutes. As the air pours into them, the figures twitch and turn in remarkably life-like ways. Yet, there is something poignant in their struggle toward fullness. This series of latex figures represents new terrain for the artist. DeFranceaux comes to this sculptural work from a background in painting, which was her focus during her graduate work at the San Francisco Art Institute. Her sculpture is deeply personal and its evolution has been as much an internal journey as an outward one, compelling her to confront a lifetime of psychological and physical disruptions in her own manic depression.

It is critical to see these pieces in action to fully understand them. One figure in *Rapid Cycling* moves slowly from a crouching position on the ground, appearing somewhat fetal, to a nearly raised reaching position. But the piece is Sisyphean in design; the moment that figure begins to fully attain uprightness, the air cuts off and it deflates back into the ground. This deflation comes like a defeat, the air running out of each figure, as though it suddenly opted to quit, only to start up once again.

Rapid Cycling constitutes the first in this series of kinetic sculptures, and as such is a starting point for the larger body of work. The cycle between inflation and deflation embodies DeFranceaux's own struggle with manic depression. The mood swings—from mania to depression—though controlled in their intensity by medication are a strong component of her life. She tried to explore the territory of the disorder in her painting, but found herself frustrated, unable to find a way of visualizing in two-dimensional form the cyclical nature of her condition. Her painting work,



Dierdre DeFranceaux, *Bending Over Backwards and Doing the Impossible* (installation view; life size), 1999, latex, hosiery, air compressor, timer, and airhose, dimensions variable. Photograph: Courtesy of Dion.

DeFranceaux says. "...wasn't saying what I wanted to say. It wasn't talking about the highs as well as the lows. I had to either talk about one or the other, and I couldn't find a way to integrate the two." It was this that prompted her to look to other media for expression.

Movement is an essential characteristic of the manic depressive experience. It is the oscillation between almost uncontrollable bursts of energy and utter paralysis which define the phenomenon. Introducing a kinetic element into her work seemed a way of reflecting that movement. In a sense, this crucial transition for DeFranceaux pushed her away from painting and into sculptural form. She began by sculpting figures in plaster, which she painted over with latex. She then applied pantyhose over the figure to produce a surrounding skin. These materials offered another layer of meaning for her as she developed the work. Latex, in the AIDS era, is inevitably loaded with connotations of protection and immunity—it is the material which keeps us from being infected, another kind of skin between us and the dangerous outside world. Pantyhose also seemed significant to DeFranceaux as a symbol of femininity; it is both strong and containing yet seemingly fragile and delicate. The figures are literally patched together with these two materials, creating a casing which functions as a metaphoric construct of the self. DeFranceaux slices these casings off the plaster sculptures and then, in an act of self recreation, sews them back together. These sculptural constructions are a self-affirming process for DeFranceaux, a way of asserting her own ability to put herself back together in the face of difficult and debilitating experiences.

This work has also forced DeFranceaux to reconsider her conceptions of beauty. Beauty had been a central concern of her paintings, which are by and

large explorations of the female figure. Her women almost ooze sensuality. These paintings are lush and delightful to the eye, radiating a lavish sexiness. Yet, when DeFranceaux created the first set of latex skins, she nearly destroyed them. They were rough and raw in appearance and lacked the slick beauty of her paintings. In essence, she had to reconceptualize the pieces in her mind and let go of her previous ideals of beauty. In the end, she found the rawness of the latex skins far more

experience. Her most recent piece, *Bending Over Backwards and Doing the Impossible* reflects on the ongoing struggle for creative recognition—i.e. trying to make it as an artist. In this piece, the figures hang limply backwards, suspended by their rubber umbilical cords. As they inflate, they begin to move upwards; but inevitably, the life breathing air which fills them, cuts off too soon and they become limp once again. They are willing contortionists who never tire of their acrobatics, working determinedly despite their inevitable and repeated defeat. It is this constant grappling that resonates for DeFranceaux. Nevertheless, she feels it important "...the interpretation of the work be left open and that the focus lie in the dignity of the self-contained collapse and the subsequent struggle to ascend."

By integrating kinetic elements into her work, DeFranceaux has been drawn into an ever closer proximity to the machines that animate her forms. She confronts what is arguably a difficult interdependency between humanity and machines, to ascertain just how this relationship has become an integral component of modern life. She distrusts the increasing mediation that technology offers in our lives. "I fear the day when everyone meets their mate on the Web, and who knows, maybe you send each other sperm tubes in the mail and we don't even touch anymore. What happens to the mind when it's disconnected from the body?" Her means of remedying this potential disjuncture that our machine-age portends, is to integrate

an element of humanness into these pieces. However mechanized DeFranceaux's work may become, the work is ultimately an existential exploration of the human experience. It seeks to remind us, lest we forget, what life is really all about. Δ

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Dierdre DeFranceaux, *Rapid Cycling* (detail), 1998, latex, hosiery, air compressor, and timer, dimensions variable. Photograph: Courtesy of Michel Rauner.

communicative. They spoke about beauty in a very different way; the beauty of these figures is the beauty of imperfection. Their beauty is located in their strength, expressiveness, and visceral nature.

Though the work began as an exploration of her manic depression, later works moved on from this subject matter to encompass the natural rhythms of the life process. For DeFranceaux, such patterns are a quintessential property of our life