

Derosia

R.H. Lossin, Art Agenda, May 13, 2022

ART  AGENDA



Em Rooney, *Lover's Year*, 2022. Steel, aluminum, gold foil, copper, 94 × 128 × 7 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Derosia, New York.

## Em Rooney's "Entrance of Butterfly"

by R. H. Lossin

April 9—May 14, 2022

Derosia, New York

"Entrance of Butterfly," Em Rooney's third solo show with Derosia (formerly Bodega), consists of six large sculptures and the looping, 11-minute slide show that gives the exhibition its title. The artist has previously integrated photographs into her sculptures, but here the 80 color stills are disaggregated and projected at a notably small scale in a separate gallery: their relation to the sculptural forms is symbolic or narrative rather than material. If these representational images suggest context or content for their more abstract, three-dimensional counterparts, it is only in the most provisional way. The wall-mounted sculptures, titled with reference to films and natural processes, have a descriptive power of their own.

*trouble every day* (all works 2022) is the approximate size and shape of a headless dress mannequin. Impaled on the steel strip that secures it to the wall, the candy-wrapper quality

bestowed by Mylar and coated rice paper is at odds with the violence of a disarticulated female torso. This shape, at once a replica and an encasement of the female body—shiny, blue, aggressively corseted by sharp, rhinestone-studded petals (synthetic whale boning and all)—invites us to dwell on the often incompatible demands made on women's bodies (literally, materially on them). The Caribbean travel advert palette is enticing in a way that makes me suspicious of the politics of my own taste, but the title implies the unlikely agency of this dominated and partial body.

The other reading of *trouble every day*—made clear by the show's collective theme of insect incubation and, by symbolic extension, pubescence and womanhood—is as massive, synthetic pupa. Something obvious once named, but I suspect that I was not the only one to see breasts and a waist first. Mannequin and pupa are very different objects—mutilated, fake, aggressively empty female form on the one hand, and protective layer for a new form of life on the other—but hardly incompatible. Together they produce a theory of femininity in which limitations and catharsis, nature and nurture, violence and rebirth are co-constitutive. The perpetually emergent state of this pupa reinforces the threat of the title and reconfigures what might have been a harmless, playful everyday trouble into something unseen, sinister, always already about to happen.

Other sculptures in this sequence also conflate bodies and carnivalesque costuming. *One in a Wake* and *Ecllosion Sequence* simultaneously evoke elaborate garments and body parts—the former insistently vaginal and the latter a massive fan or bow, the color of raw meat, adipose, and flayed skin. That carnival and carnivorous share a root word seems relevant here, whether or not the connection was intentional.

*Ecllosion Sequence* is flanked by *Madame Charpillon* and *Lover's Year*, both of which lack their companions' sumptuary aesthetic, but whose titles form a couplet of serial seduction. The name of one of Casanova's lovers is assigned to looped steel strips suspended away from the wall and held together by hinges that are, in turn, immobilized and robbed of their function by chunks of colored resin filling the crevasses created by the joints. *Lover's Year* lies flat against the wall, aluminum and gold foil coils woven with copper wire into a shape that brings to mind both wings and medieval military banners. What relation these titles have to the structures they name is left open, but their placement on either side of a sculpture whose name describes the process of emergence from an egg or cocoon, invites us into a narrative structure that has the basic components of coherence: a character, an action, and a literal timeline.

The butterfly-to-woman trope risks feeling overdetermined, but Rooney seems to like the difficulty of navigating this sort of territory. A 2020 show, "Women in Fiction" at Francois Ghebaly in Los Angeles, was dominated by massive flowers. Rooney doesn't strike me as particularly interested in clever, ironic gestures. She is serious about these women, these flowers, these butterflies and veiny, alien torsos. The primary concern here is actually using these symbols anew—not commenting on their use by others. This is a bold move. Disavowal continues to be a wise approach for women who wish to be taken seriously. The scale of these works is a hedge against the baggage carried by the female—a category that still implies the minor, diminutive, and fragile. But still, to put together a show about women as biological entities and beneficiaries (willing or not) of a known symbolic inheritance risks reinscribing normative gender roles as well as casting Rooney as a limited, hyphenated artist. "Entrance of Butterfly" is a collection of shiny ruffles, sea shells, rhinestones, and materials associated with kitchens, but it is anything but limited. Whatever normative claims it is making lie far beyond the miserable, pinched imagination of heterosexuality. This was a leap; the landing was exquisite.