

## Talking back to art history

By Nancy Tousley, Impressions Blog for Calgary Herald, December 9, 2008

Only a sculpture by Luanne Martineau can look cuddly and fierce at the same time. Cuddly, that is, if you could gather up all the trailing parts of these things, which look as if they are unravelling and coming apart, and pat them back into shape, into something resembling a solid body.

Even so you might not want to get too close, except to look (although you are dying to feel the tactile material), because there are so many wondrous appendages and holes — toes, labia, vaginal openings, sphincters, could that be a penis) — poking or trailing out of the woolly stuffs Martineau fashions into soft constructions.



*Dangler (2008) by Luanne Martineau, wool, felt, silk and organza*

It would be ridiculous to call Martineau a textile or fibre artist just because she works with a fibre artist's materials and techniques. She transcends the category. The Victoria-based artist explodes the human body and remakes it into a messy abstraction whose parts are soft and dry, braided, bulbous, twisted, felted and so forth. No straight limbs and smooth curves here.

Dangler, a new work, plays the endgame with the tradition of the female nude. For all of her abstraction, Dangler's big, red, pendulous breasts leave no doubt that she is a she. The same for her huge Marilyn Monroe smile, all that there is, really, by way of a head. She is strung up from the ceiling like so much meat and her insides appear to be tumbling out onto her lap, but she just can't stop grinning.

She is in extremis like a torture victim, but her abjectness is so over the top that she is horrifying and comical, tragic and hilarious. Martineau is not going to allow you a comfortable place to settle into while you examine the incredible and beautiful ways she has worked wool, felt and silk into surfaces that make you think of painting.



*Another view of Martineau's Dangler*

She is going to point instead, with her maniacal use of labour-intensive "women's materials" and "women's hand work," to painting history: Willem de Kooning's famous series of Women, with their large eyes, toothy smiles and big breasts, in which he went at the female body like a slasher with a paintbrush, and to Chaim Soutine's paintings of fleshy sides of eviscerated beef. One also thinks of the bulbous forms of Louise Bourgeois's sculpture and, although the figure is prone, of Giacometti's Woman With her Throat Cut.

A misogynistic de Kooning Woman is Dangler's direct antecedent. The abstract expressionist painter worked on the female subject for a decade, the 1950s, with a destructive intensity that raised feminist alarms. Dangler, Martineau's post-feminist response, is savage social satire, in which 1950s violence and domination meet 2000s abjection and formlessness.

What are we to make of the encounter? Several things. Martineau is talking back to art history and the social and political contexts of the '50s and '60s, working through a modernism that shut craft out of the conversation. She knocks the wind out of the idea that so-called crafts cannot be intellectual or critical or full of visceral power. She plays the high art aesthetics of female form against the low, and the transcendentalism of abstraction.

More pointedly, Martineau directs to look right at de Kooning's aggressive aesthetics, without the frame that puts a painting at a distance. Dangler is in our space, nearly lifesize. She is art about art, but she is also more. She is not simply a representation.

"There is this idea that it's all allegory," Martineau says. "When you literalize it, it becomes incredibly aggressive. It breaks through the distance, idea of the window on the world is gone. You can see how violent representation can be, and is, when it is fully realized.

"This is an interesting time in terms of the way the body is being altered now. People are doing it on a common level that is brutal. There is this idea of a perfect society that people are genetically and surgically manipulating. I think it's an incredibly violent time.

"For me this isn't fantastic, it's real."

*Luanne Martineau, Starshake, an exhibition in Toronto at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, which includes Dangler, is on view through Dec. 20, 2008.*

*The artist will show at her Calgary dealer, TrepanierBaer Gallery, in May, 2009.*

