

ART VOICES

2008 / ISSUE 20

JIMMY MAC

RAJKO RADOVANOVIC

THE MAKING FROM NOBODY

JESSICA GOLDFINCH



\$4.95 US

1 1 >



0 74470 25020 3

GOLDFINCH IN FIVE PARTS

BY DAVID PARKER



1 WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO SEE

Jessica Goldfinch, by her own admission, likes to push people's buttons. When she decided to return to school, she told her mother she was studying to be an undertaker. In reality, she had decided to take up graphic design, but she found her own fabrication to be intriguing enough that she actually signed up for some courses in mortuary sciences.

Years later, she returned to Delgado Community College, this time as a guest artist honored with her first solo exhibition. Once again, however, she found herself to be the source of unease for people around her. School officials who had been initially gracious in their invitation changed their position once they actually viewed the works she was about to display. They found certain images too graphic, too controversial. They encouraged her to drop what they considered to be the more controversial works. Eventually, with the strong backing of the gallery director, Goldfinch prevailed, and her show opened exactly the way she had envisioned it. Just outside the gallery doors, however, hung a sign warning visitors that some of her works were considered "offensive, vulgar or graphic in nature," and "not appropriate for some viewers."

This was just the beginning of a career for the woman who would be known as a "difficult artist."

2 THEY DON'T HAVE SHRINKY DINKS IN EUROPE

Flash forward. Goldfinch sits in her third floor studio in the Louisiana Artworks building framed by huge windows overlooking the New Orleans skyline. She is surrounded by her sculpture, paintings, drawings, collage, and Shrinky Dinks. In one corner, a skull-like sculpture sprouts long, curling horns. In another corner hangs a surreal painting of three female bodies positioned into old-fashioned stirrups for gynecological examination. "Sigmund Freud talks about the uncanny," Goldfinch says. "It's the idea that something can be familiar and strange at the same time, so it creates a kind of tension inside of people."

She pinches the smooth surface of her wrist. "Think of blood," she says. "We need it, we have it, we know it's under our skin. But we don't ever want to see it."

This, she feels, is where she dwells as an artist. It's why people have such strong reactions to her works—she takes the familiar and pushes it into the realm of the unfamiliar. A piece entitled *Sub Conscious*, rendered in black and white on Shrinky Dinks, depicts a baby sitting on a white background. The piece is tiny, less than six inches across, and as the viewer draws closer the surreal and startling qualities of the image begin to emerge. The small body is deformed and the face is encompassed in some kind of breathing device. Where the baby's genitals should be, a large eye has appeared, peering back at the viewer.

In her installation *Life Catchers*, Goldfinch creates an enormous, chandelier-like cascade of translucent objects. It's only when the viewer draws closer that he or she realizes the objects are resin-filled IV bags adorned with silk flowers. Goldfinch takes alluring objects—like babies and chandeliers—and infuses them with the repulsive. The viewer is taken into the work and repelled at the same time. "The idea is that the work beckons," she says. "It draws you into this other place that you're not sure you really want to go."

3 MISSING LITTLE LEFT

Once, when Goldfinch was in police custody, the officer in charge of fingerprinting her discovered that a significant part of her left



pinky finger was missing. The officer was clearly startled by the missing anatomy and grew increasingly uncomfortable as he tried to figure out what to do with the small rectangle where her fingerprint was supposed to go. Finally, he found a pen and wrote in the box, “Missing little left.”

Goldfinch was intrigued both by the reaction of the man and by his written depiction of her hand. Right away, she knew that this moment would work its way into her art. Indeed, she eventually created the piece *Missing Lil’ Left*, an arresting image of two skeletal hands, the left one missing the last bones of the small finger.

Even more importantly, the moment offered Goldfinch an opportunity to peel back the human psyche and examine the way people observe and respond to both physical beauty and deformities alike. “People go to great lengths to assert their individuality,” she says. “They get tattoos, they buy specific clothes, they choose their hairstyles. But at the same time, there is this fear of being ‘other.’ We all want to be special, but not *too* special.”

Again, Goldfinch identifies the uncanny in her situation. As a result, she creates works that walk a tightrope of emotional tension, playing *with* the viewer’s expectations and then *upon* their fears. She draws images from vintage fashion magazines and catalogs and then adds unexpected flourishes like leg braces or shriveled limbs. In her installation piece, *Still Life With Apples*, Goldfinch presents an idyllic antique table set with a blue tablecloth and covered in translucent red apples. Upon closer inspection, the viewer realizes that instead of cores the apples are filled with human fetuses. The familiar veers toward the unfamiliar, and like a scalpel, the realization cuts through the audience.

4 PUNK ROCK GIRL

When Goldfinch dropped out of high school, she informed the school counselors that she was off to pursue a career as a bass player in a punk rock band. She is the first to admit, however, that her talents lay elsewhere. “Let’s just say I’m better with clay than I am with the guitar,” she says.

Still, she did stay plugged into the New Orleans punk scene, managing and promoting shows, working events and creating fliers and art. She is an artist who speaks as easily of the influence of the Ramones and the Humpers on her vision as she does of Jacqueline Bishop, Douglas Bourgeois, and Frank Netter, the famous medical illustrator. It’s in her punk rock roots that one can see the origins of much of her dark sense of humor, ironic worldview, and her sense for outsider art. “Punk rock has such a twisted, playful way of handling un-playful matter,” she says.

Rather is a terrific example of that playfulness. Toying with the adage “I’d

rather have a bottle in front of me than a frontal lobotomy,” the piece shows a graphic illustration of a figure with a significant piece of his head removed. A pair of hands delicately maneuvers a surgical instrument through the man’s right eye. Clearly, a bottle of almost anything would be preferable to this man’s predicament.

In her most recent solo show *Holy Cards and Other Visions of Mortality* at CoLab Projects in New Orleans, her trademark blend of humor, tension, and playfulness were on vivid display. Taking well-known images from religious texts, prayer cards, and paintings, Goldfinch performs what she calls a “collapsing” of religions. She combines elements of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hindu, ancient Egyptian, and even more religions into provocative compositions. *Walla Jesus* depicts Jesus Christ with six arms and nailed to an elaborate crucifix. *Saint Mariam with Child* depicts the traditional Catholic saint peering out from behind a Muslim veil. Meanwhile, *Praying Hands* is a sculpture in cold cast bronze of the famous Christian prayer position, only closer inspection reveals that the hands are malformed with seven fingers each. “One of the themes of my work,” Goldfinch says, “is the pull between science and religion.”

As such she uses her macabre humor to poke holes in religious dogma, to humanize the deified, and to paint vivid portraits of the middle ground where religious mythologies overlap with similar characters, stories, and themes.

5 IT’S BETTER THAN MAKING FAKE ID’S

Goldfinch may indeed be considered a “difficult artist,” but only in the best sense of the word. She moves seamlessly from two-dimensional to three-dimensional work. Her influences are as diverse as her media. Her work is riddled with biology, philosophy, religion, word play, punk rock, and dark humor, making her difficult to categorize: post-modernist, or pop-surrealist; fine artist, or outsider.

Her recent success, however, indicates that no matter how difficult she may be to categorize, her work is gaining notoriety and recognition. With representation in the U.S. and Europe, it seems likely that Goldfinch made the right decision when she decided to pursue her art rather than a business making fake ID cards. Art, after all, does not typically involve a hefty jail sentence.

No matter what one makes of her work, the unflinching delivery of her style and imagery cannot be argued or disputed. “People who look at my art often say I must be deranged and unhappy,” Goldfinch says, “but actually, it’s just the opposite. I try to use art as a metaphor for life, which is extremely beautiful and extremely disturbing.”