ARTIST PROFILE: F. ALYSON POU
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By Angelo Lewis

F. Alyson Pou is an Atlanta-based artist who incorporates the use of film, video, theater, dance and installation into a highly individual, frequently autobiographical aesthetic.

Although her academic training is in printmaking, the 26-year-old Pou has found her voice by abandoning the what-she-calls, "Picture hanging on the wall" approach to art in favor of a process art which downplays specialization and makes the choice of materials subservient to the demands of the artist's initial inspiration.

A prime example is a piece she recently exhibited as part of a group show at Atlanta's High Museum, which focused on the work of the city's non-traditional, "avant-garde" artists. Pou's untitled work, which she later referred to as a meditation on the nature of women and powerlessness in our society, consisted of two continuously repeating films with soundtracks, which were screened in opposite sides of a small divided room. One was a pornographic film on which was spliced the following questions: "Where does the power lie? Is the promotion of lust the dominant effect?"

The second film was a series of close-ups of Pou having her hair cut. This was accompanied by a series of quotes about hair, of which the following (from Nietzsche) is an example, "When I think of women, it is their hair which first comes to my mind. The very idea of womanhood is a storm of hair – black hair, red hair, golden hair and always a greedy little mouth somewhere behind the mirage of beauty."

The preparation which preceded the High Museum – six months of research on legends and religious rites on the subject of hair, reading in the literature of the history of sexuality – is typical of Pou's process. What is somewhat atypical, however, is the sharp, political focus of the piece.

For Pou's feminism as it applies to her art is the method and form of non-specialization plus the willingness to sketch autobiographic minutiae: two characteristics the artist believes have been critically legitimized by the Feminist Movement. Pou sees specialization as a particularly male artistic concern and credits her liberation from this critical context to a break she took from her studies several years ago when she went to work as a costume designer. "What I did was mainly sewing and costume design. I really got involved with an identity with fabric and sewing – what has always been defined as female skills."

But an identity with fabric was only the beginning and before long Pou was incorporating skills such as dance and film into her artistic vocabulary. "If I have something I want to be involved in, I will follow that impulse. I come up with a lot of criticism because of that. If you don't identify with a specific discipline, you can't establish your credibility so easily. But I think that's being redefined and I think the redefinition, as it applies to the limitation of materials, began with the Feminist Movement."

An example of Pou's autobiographic bent is a mixed-media piece called "Motherlines". Pou had been asked a "life map" for a survey of Atlanta women artists for an exhibition at the Atlanta Art Workers Coalition Gallery. For the latter work, Pou gathered questionnaires from family and friends and assembled the material into a book.

A good portion of the book consisted of pictures and moments concerning the artist's family. But after the "life map" piece had been assembled, exhibited and filed away, Pou found there was more material concerning her family – specifically her mother – that demanded to be explored.

So, she took some time off and visited her mother in Memphis. Journalist-fashion, she interviewed her mother, "asking her specific questions about having children, her relationship with my father, our relationship, etc." Pou took some home movies and when she returned to Atlanta, gathered the whole experience into a piece titled "Motherlines" which combined the film, a scrapbook/diary detailing the process, a tape of Pou and her mother talking with a live broadcast of a "soap opera" on a television set. Pou's mother was one of the people who visited Image Film and Video Center for the performance, and although, Pou reports, her mother couldn't understand why anyone would be interested in her, the piece drew mother and daughter closer together. The presence of Pou's mother, various observers noted, helped make the piece complete.

But oftentimes in this young artist's work, Pou does not make conscious analysis of the subject matter until after the piece has been performed. "I'll tell you what happens. I get these images, sometimes from daydreams, sometimes from walking on the street seeing something…Images I just can't get rid of in my head and I have to work them out in some way. I do that through whatever project I'm working on, and later, after the project is completed, I go back intellectually and figure out what it is I've done…but that's always after the fact."

Consider: For "Cycles and Clues," which was performed inside Georgia State Gallery in February, 1978, Pou and a female collaborator performed an obtuse ritual which began with two, kneeling nude women and progressed through a series of stages that had Pou wrapping a towel around herself, putting on lipstick, walking over to a bare wall and then sitting in a chair at a table on which there were various bundles. "Each of the bundles was a glove wrapped in white thread and inside of the glove was a wad of my hair and two seeds. I had a pair of scissors around my neck and I picked up one glove, unwrapped the thread, and wrapped the thread around my wrist. I then opened up the glove, took the seeds out and put them in my mouth. I took the hair and put it between my breasts, beneath the towel. I then cut the finger-ends off the first glove and repeated the whole process with all the gloves…I then got underneath the table, unwrapped the thread from my wrist, made a circle on the floor with the thread and spit the seeds into my hand and put the seeds in the middle of the circle. I then came out from under the table and my performance partner stood up."

The actual "piece" was a film of the above ritual projected underneath the table where the ritual had taken place, viewable only if you crawled under the table. Meaning? "I figured out it was about an abortion I had had recently. I had split feelings about the nature of male and female energy… fertility, responsibility… the laws that don't allow women to make decisions about their own bodies… and I came into the piece with a lot of images…images about restraint and powerlessness, helplessness and immobility."

Perhaps the work which solidified Pou's reputation among Atlanta's avant-garde was "Personal Maintenance – Preserved Flowers", which was performed as part of the "36 Women Artists" show sponsored by the Atlanta Women's Art Collective, April of 1978. Until this time, most of Pou's work had been fairly formalistic and mostly utilizing fabric in soft-form sculpture through which Pou would sometimes choreograph the moves of dancers.

"Personal Maintenance – Preserved Flowers," however, showed that Pou was serious in her commitment towards mixing her media. It also showed the increasingly conceptual framework through which she operates. The piece consisted of Pou sitting on a white chair at the end of a corridor created by a white, veil-like gauze curtain. She faces a film loop on the wall at the other end of the corridor. A close up of a woman sitting on a toilet seat prying long, red nails off the ends of her fingers as each one fell between her legs into the bowl. The film was shown over a bank of live camellias, which Pou had dipped in wax. But what was most interesting about the work Pou called, " a symbolic statement about violence and ageing for women" was Pou's participation in the piece. She sat in the chair, never talking, scarcely fidgeting, for the six or so hours of the opening. "I was perceived as an object, which has a lot to do with the piece. People said things about me and the piece as if I wasn't there, some of which were very abusing."

Whether exhibiting what-she-chooses-to-call "straight forward sculptural pieces" or choosing to feminize and politicize the "happening" aesthetic subscribed to by post-Cageans (actually, the process aesthetic predates Cage by at least a century. Eric Satie, it is to be remembered, "performed" artists' paintings in the galleries of Paris), Pou's work is always interesting, frequently challenging and never dull. Whether the aesthetic of her post-modernist approach becomes the dominant aesthetic of an art of the future is an open question. But, in art as in life, the revolutionary concerns of the present frequently seem staid and traditional in the future. It seems a fair bet that Alyson Pou won't be left behind.