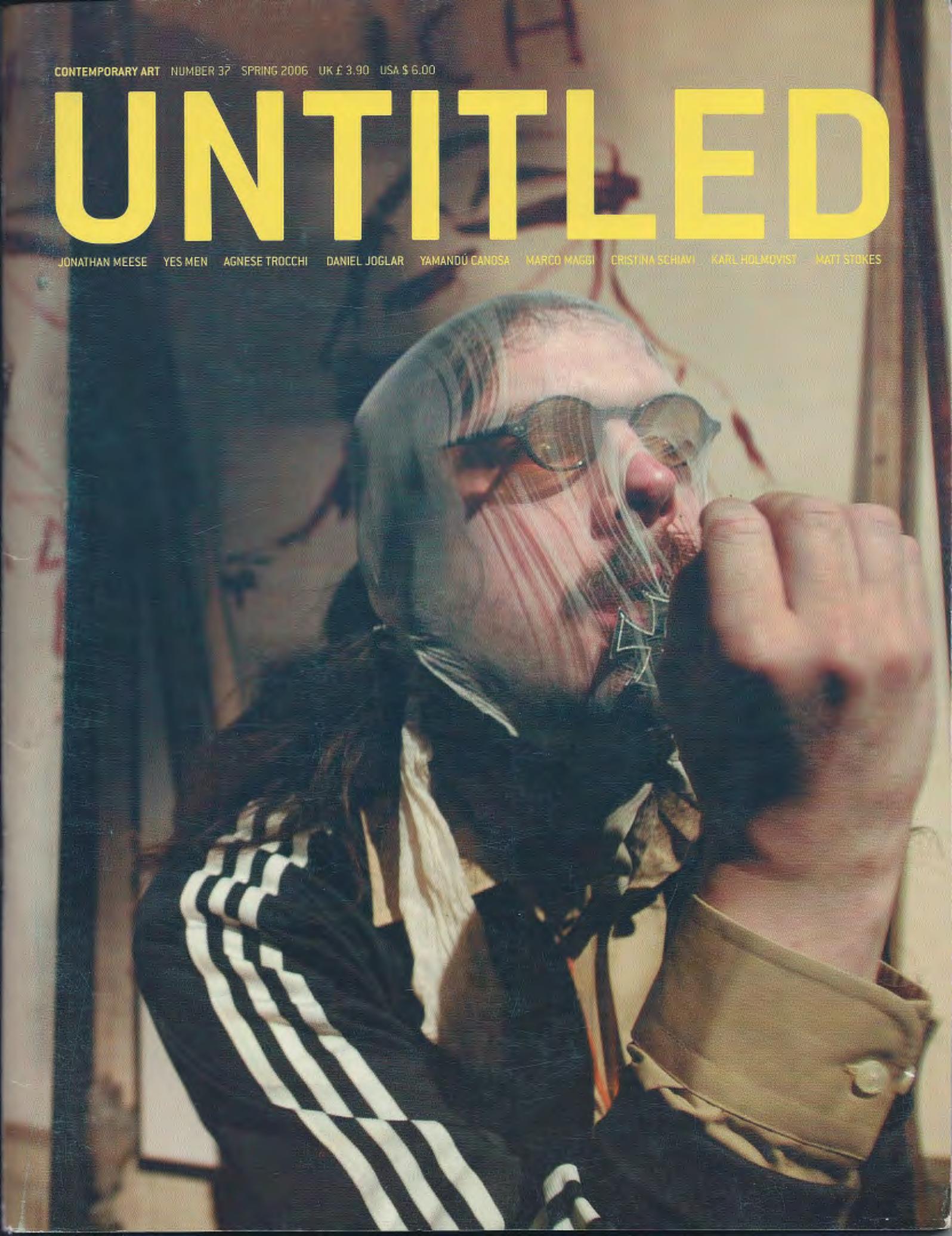


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JONATHAN MEESE YES MEN AGNESE TROCCHI DANIEL JOGLAR YAMANDÚ CANOSA MARCO MAGGI CRISTINA SCHIARI KARL HOLMOVIST MATT STOKES



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MARY JO BOLE

Weston Art Gallery, Cincinnati, USA
18 November 2005 to 14 January 2006

Reviewed by Mark Harris

'Dear Little Twist of Fate' was a great title for a show of some ten years of work that moved relentlessly towards ever more trenchant and seductive realisations of morbidity. With gorgeous memorials like these, patrons should be jumping the queue to die. It's an intelligent reprise of minimalism that takes art's melancholic patina at face value and steers it directly towards the tomb.

On the lower floor of this large gallery Mary Jo Bole installed several gloomily-hued rectangular and oval slabs that on a closer look revealed intense detailing in their carving, mosaic work and enameling. The sides of the sombre *Ossified Alliance* (2003-05), were exquisitely carved in clay, their classicising motif of grey shapes, heavily intertwined, realising the idea of that final embrace between those interred and those surviving, where letting go feels impossible. The rim of another piece was inset with jewel-like medallions while its large central photogenic image on steel floated three rows of pearlescent flowers on a pool of lapis lazuli. The garlanded slanting walls of a third work, *Granny's Necklace* (1997-2000), rose up a couple of feet to support an intricate grisaille mosaic derived from a montage of thrift store photographs. Portraits of Edwardian women set in the roundels of a necklace framed a line of white-gowned 'Ladies of Rochester', a forgotten vaudeville troupe, looking here as if they were engaged in a ritual from the next life.

Bole's reflections on the iconography of death are thorough and intense. For a sculptor her background literature is untypical, taking in Chas Adams's book of grim cartoons, *Dear Dead Days*, the magazine *Morbid Curiosity* and Michale Lesey's photo journal titled *Wisconsin Death Trip*. This last is a disturbing tribute to the immigrant settlers of Black River Falls who, in the 1890s, died in disproportionate numbers from disease, violence, poverty and hard living. Their clenched lips and bleak stares erode the boundary between our prosperity and their kind of hopelessness. Whatever twist of fate lured those unfortunate Europeans to try their luck in Wisconsin is a legacy towards which Bole ruefully aims her work. As a Midwesterner she's inherited that failed past as something to which her present is still accountable, like unhappily avoidable deaths that continue to call on the living. For Bole the glowering faces continue to peer out of the photographs asking to be dealt with. Her consummate understanding of materials is for a better confrontation with that leftover haunting, a committed tribute to the untimely deceased. She talks their language and gives them the best the living can offer in these limpid translucent enamels and obdurate clay forms. Besides historical aptness, Bole's motivation in learning to use these obsolescent techniques and materials is for the expressive density that contemporary installation and sculpture can gain from them. She has often tracked down factories where she can study these processes. Just in time, as it closed down last year, the photogenic drawings were developed at Dedouch Company, in Illinois, while the larger steel images were made at a Californian factory.

The monument plaques were one of the best parts of her show. Usually around ten inches high, and often in groups of five or six, their slightly convex oval surfaces seemed to glow with an interior light, like clouded mirrors. Usually with motifs of wilting or dried flowers stained in dusty pastel colours, their backgrounds were a wide range of indecipherable hues, from muddy browns and dirty Prussian blues to an occasional faded ruby. It's hard to classify this kind of work. Closest perhaps to those morbid late-80s Ross Bleckner bouquet paintings, but more adept at holding to the very edge of lugubriousness, like beguiling advertisements posted by Charon for holidays on the Styx. They gained strength too from making no attempt to hide their love for the traditional fabrication of funerary ware. Though in no way pretending to be so, they indicated possibilities for future painting in their unconventional combinations of chromatic specificity and plangent image.

As a third striking component, around a hundred of Bole's representational watercolour drawings covered an entire wall. Not much was overlooked by this omnivorous vision – a comparison of spermatozoa lay between drawings of barbells and a witch; there were sections for hummingbirds and for graveyards, for pointillist maps of America and drawings of display cases from museums. Adjacent to these was a series of enlarged studies of dead mosquitoes, with the observational precision of scientific drawings. These were beautiful works, exceptional in their inventive use of medium and treatment of motif. This tireless interest in everything visible was the inverse of Bole's focus in her sculptural work, the one representing an encyclopedic encounter with the living world as much as the other kept one foot firmly in the grave.

Mary Jo Bole, Wall of Drawings, Mixed Media, 1961 – 2005

