

Revenge of the Goldfish, 1981



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Sandy Skoglund's diluvian drama, Revenge of the Goldfish, is much more than kitsch over troubled waters. It is a striking reassertion of the traditional role of the visual artist as the maker of objects and the creator of fantasy.

Skoglund aims for "gut-oriented" art that is "immediately powerful as a visual experience." This piece has been referred to by critic Shelley Rice as "Revenge on the Minimalists." Indeed, a number of distinguished younger artists have recently reacted against the widely admired and influential sensibility of conceptual art, particularly art of minimal visual impact. This new direction in the United States and Europe involves, for many, a return to the use of figurative images and fictional narratives.

These artists are energetically making works with their own hands again, though some also use assistants extensively when financially feasible. Skoglund made each of the 123 ceramic fish in this piece herself. To accomplish this, she had to learn what was for her an entirely new skill, hand-building with clay. It took her six months to make the fish. First she made ten different basic molds. Subsequently she fashioned each fish with a different facial expression and a distinct body movement, accented by individually expressive fins and tails. Skoglund hand-painted each as well. She would not delegate the task of making the fish to others, believing that the artist's own personality comes out in such a subjective, hands-on approach. Having worked for many years in a conceptual mode, Skoglund has "discovered once again great satisfaction in learning and mastering new technical skills." With broad brush strokes everywhere, she acknowledges a return to expressionism.

To explore the aesthetic viability of "exaggerated, out-front imagery" Skoglund has apparently chosen a perfect vehicle: a fish story. The brightly colored scene is fanciful but also phantasmagoric. Whimsical, cartoon-like goldfish are, upon closer scrutiny,

atypically surly and aggressive. Though we cannot be exactly sure of what has taken place, Skoglund's tableau seems to unleash a range of primordial fears. The photograph informs us that the room was once inhabited by a mother and son. Have the fish taken revenge on Oedipus and his mother? Or is this The Massacre of the Innocents? Either way there seems to be a cosmic undercurrent to this story in which civilization is fated to end tragically and, as tradition dictates, with The Flood. (The viewer is encouraged to examine a related work, Max Ernst's disquieting painting, Europe After The Rain, 1940-42, which hangs in Avery Court.)

Skoglund shares a growing concern that whenever we tamper with the balance of nature we are unwittingly sowing the seeds of our own destruction. Goldfish, she points out, were first bred centuries ago by the Chinese who, in a search for brighter colors and decorative fins, in-bred mutant carp. Even today goldfish must be selectively bred to maintain the intensity of their colors. There is a species called Celestial, who have been bred to have their eyes on top of their heads. Unable to see ahead, they swim around bumping into things. The name of this piece again: Revenge of the Goldfish.

Skoglund's approach to photography, in which her subject is a meticulously created scene of her own invention, is not, of course, without precedent. In the nineteenth century Julia Margaret Cameron carefully staged her photographs, as did William Mortensen in Hollywood's hey-day of glamour and, more recently, Duane Michals. In the past few years, enough photographers have been exploring a similar approach to prompt critic A.D. Coleman to refer to this genre as "directorial" photography. Not simply content to appropriate found images, Skoglund seems interested in "making photographs" rather than "taking photographs." The unabashed theatricality of

Skoglund's work is intentional and not surprising when one considers to what an extent techniques of dramaturgy and stage design are integral to her success.

Skoglund's work also reflects her admiration for the technical (and aesthetic) achievements of commercial setup photography. She values the "glossy, shiny, bright color" she gets with Cibachrome. As in advertising photography, where elaborate effort commonly goes into staging the one nearly-perfect shot, Skoglund spends considerable time and effort constructing an installation for the purpose of taking one single photograph, usually printed in an edition of 30. Unconventional sources of inspiration for Skoglund range from late-night horror movies to Walt Disney (Skoglund once worked as a waitress selling hotdogs at Disneyland's Space Bar. She also was employed as a professional cake decorator and, briefly, as a go-go dancer).

Revenge of the Goldfish is Skoglund's sixth such room-size fantasy. The others were titled: Accessories, Ferns, Hangers, Spoons, and Radioactive Cats, all done in 1980. Each was fabricated in the same tiny rented room Skoglund has used as a studio until recently. None of the others was originally intended to be exhibited publicly, and all but one was dismantled once photographed (Radioactive Cats was exhibited independent of its photograph at Real Art Ways in Hartford, 1980).

With this piece the artist has, for the first time, publicly exhibited the staged photograph with the tableau itself. This juxtaposition introduces many fascinating layers to the viewer's experience. First of all, it establishes a sense of time and a narrative sequence. We know from the photograph that sometime in the past two people were in this room and we know that they are now vanished. Though we do not know exactly why they are gone, their absence is vaguely ominous. Secondly, the juxtaposition invites an examination of the nature of photography itself. Skoglund is interested in "the

tension between what the real thing looks like and what comes through in a photograph." We are inclined, when presented with the original and a photograph, to examine painstakingly the difference between the two. Immediately evident is the fact that this is not exactly the same room in the photograph. The original room could not, of course, travel. This one is a casual replica, larger actually than the original. Skoglund has cunningly offered for comparison what Andy Grundberg has called "a fabrication of a fabrication."

Along with such epistemological considerations, the earlier mentioned mythological and sociological overtones and Skoglund's renewed interest in craft, Revenge of the Goldfish also offers a revitalization of traditional (and until recently out-of-fashion) formal compositional concerns such as manipulation of color and shape. Given the many layers of meaning in this piece, it is intriguing that the artist herself traces its rudimentary origins to a persistent desire to create something which combined the colors red-orange and blue, intentionally exploiting the characteristic of complementary colors to create active optical effects. Cartoon goldfish swimming in cartoon water turned out to be a perfect device.

Sandy Skoglund was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1946 and lived for several years, as a young teenager, in Windsor, Connecticut. She graduated from Smith College in 1968 and received an MFA from the University of Iowa in 1972. From 1973 to 1976 she was on the faculty at the Hartford Art School, University of Hartford. She is currently Associate Professor of Art at Rutgers University, Newark campus. Skoglund lives and works in New York City where she is represented by Castelli Graphics.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of MATRIX

Works in MATRIX:

Revenge of the Goldfish, 1981, mixed media installation including bed, dresser, two chairs and 123 ceramic goldfish, 10' x 16' x 16'. Lent by the artist.

Revenge of the Goldfish, 1981, Cibachrome color photograph, 30" x 40", edition of 30. Lent by Ira M. Bellach, New York City.

PLEASE NOTE: Sandy Skoglund will deliver an informal MATRIX Lecture on Sunday afternoon, May 2, 1982 at 2 p.m. The public is cordially invited.

Selected one-person exhibitions: Joseloff Gallery, Hartford Art School, University of Hartford '73; University of Connecticut, Torrington '74; Rutgers University, Newark, NJ '76; Real Art Ways, Hartford '80; Castelli Graphics, NYC '81; Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, MA '81; The Fort Worth Art Museum, TX '81; The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, MN '82.

Selected group exhibitions: Fine Arts Building, NYC '75; Invitational, 55 Mercer, NYC '77; Pictures; Photographs, Castelli Graphics, NYC '79; Interiors, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, NYC '80; Likely Stories, Castelli Graphics, NYC '80; Texas Gallery, Houston '80; Contemporary Photographs, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University '80; 1981 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC '81; Inside Spaces, Museum of Modern Art (Art Lending Service), NYC '81; SCHEMES,

Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY '81; Texas Gallery, Houston '81; New American Color Photography, Institute of Contemporary Art, London '81.

Selected bibliography about Skoglund:

Collins, James. "Reviews," Artforum, vol. 12, no. 5 (January '74), p. 73+.

Grundberg, Andy. "Artbreakers: New York's Emerging Artists," The Soho News, September 17 '80, p. 33+.

Staniszewski, Mary Anne. "New York Reviews," Art News vol. 79, no. 9 (November '80), p. 214+.

Trebay, Guy. "The Fish Knows the Way," The Village Voice, January 7 '81, p. 51.

Grundberg, Andy. "Fish on a Line," The Soho News, January 13 '81, p. 35.

Tallmer, Jerry. "The Goldfish are on the Move," The New York Post, January 17 '81.

Thornton, Gene. "Photography View: A Mixed Bag of Exhibitions," The New York Times, Sunday, January 18 '81, Section 2, p. 23.

Rice, Shelley. "Reviews," Artforum, vol. 19 no. 7 (March '81), p. 88.

DiGrappa, Carol. "Close Quarters," Camera Arts, vol. 1, no. 3 (May - June '81), p. 86+.

Tully, Judd. "Review of Exhibitions: New York," Flash Art, no. 103 (Summer '81), p. 55.

Freudenheim, Susan. "FOCUS: Sandy Skoglund," (brochure) The Fort Worth Art Museum, September '81.