

JEANNE SILVERTHORNE



WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

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PRESENTED BY
ROWAN UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
NOVEMBER 8, 2021 – JANUARY 8, 2022



(cover)
Self-Portrait as a
Fly with Eyeglasses, 2017
Platinum silicone rubber, wire, plastic
2.75 x 5 x 6 in.
Edition 3 of 3

Pink Bulb, 2016
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment
Dimensions variable (life-sized bulb)



ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Through cast rubber sculptures, Silverthorne embraces her studio as a metaphor for abandonment, collapse, and entropy as it relates to the absurdity of social constructs and the misguided perceptions of stability and constancy. Her rubber crates, workshop dollies, lamps and light bulbs are imbued with cast rubber weeds, vines, and insects, becoming humorous, comedic versions of their authentic counterparts. They teeter and bob in their flimsy and clumsy form as if they are about to collapse from their own “weight.” In their unsteadiness something is “not quite right” and we are compelled to wonder “what’s going on?” While her work is full of layered meanings that are at times conflicting and ambiguous, one thing is certain — it’s mutable. Today as we reflect on the work created between 2009 and 2021, it resonates with our current state of social isolation and displacement.

Mary Salvante

*Director & Chief Curator
Rowan University Art Gallery
and The Center for Art & Social Engagement*

(previous page)

History, 2012

Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment, wire
23 x 10 x 3 in.

Frozen Dandelions, 2012

Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment
12 x 10 x 10 in. Edition 1 of 2



JEANNE SILVERTHORNE
A COMEDIE OF ERAS ERRORS

I wish I could make this essay funny, but, like Philip Guston's cartoonish paintings from the mid-1970s, Jeanne Silverthorne's sculptures and installations, regardless of how wacky pieces may appear, are concerned with the serious issues of agency and identity. Her work often reminds me of Alfred Hitchcock's "MacGuffins"—innocuous, banal objects meant to stimulate suspicion and anticipation, but whose only purpose is to lead us astray. At other times Silverthorne's work makes me think of David Lynch's off-kilter aesthetic. In other words, Silverthorne's works are humorous in the 15th century sense of the word, which refers to the medicine of the ancient Greeks, which taught that the balance of the body's fluids, known as humours, controlled human health and emotions. It was not until the 17th century, when the humours come to be associated with such temperaments as the choleric, melancholy, sanguine and phlegmatic, that the imbalance of these humors begins to suggest "whimsical" or "amusing."

Beyond Silverthorne's affinities to Lynch and Hitchcock, her work also has a kinship to the institutional nightmares of Franz Kafka, the macabre realities of Stephen King, and the mirror world of H.P. Lovecraft, where some "thing," too large or small to be seen, invisibly lurks in the shadows. Silverthorne's work also has a deep connection to Mary

Fly on Bulb, 2018
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment, wire
5 x 4.5 in. diameter





Shelly's tale of Dr. Frankenstein — the novel not the movie — in which the “monster” was to be the new Prometheus, a demi-god who eternally suffers for the transgressive good he did. What these fables have in common is that each begins with a situation that starts out as fairly benign, ultimately turns dark and abject. Silverthorne's vision differs in that, the darker her subjects get, the more humorous the work becomes. As we know, humor is a defense mechanism, which masks our deepest and darkest existential fears. I suspect in Silverthorne's case what is at stake is the ruin and collapse of the mortal body and the self that inhabits it.

Though they do not look it, Silverthorne's works begin intuitively. An image pops into her head, whereupon she further develops and elaborates it and eventually comes to recognize the image's potential and theoretical relevance — its deep structure of associations and meanings. Cast mainly in rubber, Silverthorne's imagery and objects appear at times to be slightly inept and awkward, although they are consistent in their aesthetic, materiality, and the meticulousness of their making, despite their staged funkiness. If something looks like a ready-made, she has in fact fabricated it — actually everything has been hand-made, even the flies. This process results in inanimate objects that magically come alive — like the mops and buckets of water in the terrifying Disney version of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. In Silverthorne's case, her

Moth and Bulb, 2009
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment, wire
Dimensions variable (life-sized bulb)

animated objects act out scenarios which run the gamut from the maniacal and ridiculous to a perversity bordering on the cheery. Within these imagined plays of mistaken identity, misdirection, and inversions lies Silverthorne's comedy of errors.

In the '90s, she was known for her dysfunctional arrangements — rubber wiring whose forms reference entrails, organs, and circulatory systems, evoking a sense of the dismal, the abandoned, and vulnerable. In more recent years, she has taken to making beautifully crafted faux-wood, rubber crates. While these crates are all functional and serve as storage units, plinths and pedestals, they, too conjure up a sense of the body, as the sculptures within are packed, unpacked, and packed up again, reminding us of the transitory nature of all things. Yet her crates also invoke the counter-message of deep storage, where things are buried away leaving behind a mute presence, which is preserved for retrieval in some undetermined future. Perhaps there is also a cloaked message in these crates of what Silverthorne has come to understand to be the plight of the artist.

Taken at face value, Silverthorne's works can be appreciated the way one might a good New Yorker cartoon — beyond its humorous sophistication, viewing demands mental agility — the capacity to adapt as one finds oneself confronted by the work's complexities, ambiguities, and



**Earth, Globe, Caterpillar, Flies,
Ants, Beetles**, 2018
Platinum silicone rubber, foam rubber,
fluorescent pigment, wire
Approximately 6 x 10 x 7 in.

Poppy Juice, 2017
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment
20 x 40 x 20 in.





contradictions. One needs to reflect on the inevitable destiny of, for example, the flies and flowers, which function as memento mori in her works. Like Freud's fort-da game in which an infant is surprised to see an object disappear and then reappear, Silverthorne's tableaux strategically consist of antagonistic and antithetical elements: if something is comic it is countered by some note of high seriousness, such as her use of newspapers, which suggest the reporting of "facts" but contain comic strips. This economy of serious/ not serious, appearances and actualities, reflects how Silverthorne subtly expresses her intellectual interests, while conveying her sense of pain and outrage as ready-made identities and memes displace self-reflectivity and agency.

Given their mix of messages, it is difficult to say definitively what Silverthorne's works are about — just when you think you can, the work slips its frame, only to reassemble its contents. For instance, while playing with the metaphors of collapse and entropy, we watch her introduce images of nature taking over the ruins — filling them with new life. Optimistically, there is a profuse amount of activity: swarms of flies inhabit the ruins; weeds, fungi and flowers push up through floorboards. Some of the weeds and fungi portrayed are known to have the capacity to produce altered states of consciousness, which is in itself maybe the perfect allegory for Silverthorne's art. Given her themes and iconography, it should be obvious that underlying

Looking at a Caterpillar, 2017
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment
11.5 x 24 x 18 in.

Silverthorne's work is a political aesthetic, but one that has nothing to do with advocating for, or protesting against, specific social issues and conditions, or in aestheticizing them.

Silverthorne's politic is informed by the idea that in times of ethical and political crisis when everything seems to be out of control, positions of power and powerlessness are impossible because they, like meaning, are always already becoming unfixed. She expresses this experientially rather than conceptually — by employing shifts in scale and content, which metaphorically play with the viewer's sense of logic and control. These variants are not always physical; sometimes they consist in flipping the norms of existence and the given social order upside down as when flowers attempt to commit suicide and skeletons come alive. The chaos and humor kindled by her subversion of assumptions and expectations result in works that verge on the carnivalesque. But, given her non-binary logic, Silverthorne presents all of this in a matter-of-fact manner, despite its often monstrous nature. It is by these means that she drops us down a rabbit hole, where we come face-to-face with the unforeseen complexity of social, cultural and sensory engagement.

Vocal about her indebtedness to the feminist artists of previous generations who were straightforward, clear, insistent on their political message and social demands,

***Rolled up Studio Floor
with Dandelion***, 2011
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment
28 x 26 x 9 in.





Crates with Skeletons, 2020
Rubber and resin
Large rubber crate
17.5 x 33.5 x 48 in.
Broken rubber crate
18.5 x 10 x 19 in.
Skeletons
8.5 x 2.5 x 2 in.
Overall dimensions
36 x 33.5 x 48.75 in.

Silverthorne feels what they achieved permits her to focus on the notion of a “self” capable of acknowledging and adapting to the contingencies and consequences of an on-going process of trial and error. Early in her career, and to this day, Silverthorne has identified herself as a feminist artist, but, since having set aside the most easily recognized of feminism’s messages to focus on an intricate critique of binariness, she has still been criticized for making “little dolls” and flowers, as well for having a self-deprecating sense of humor, despite the fact that side by side with these elements she replicates “machines” and their infrastructures. There is a lesson here in what happens when artists do not live up to their audiences’ expectations of obvious consistency; the price paid is people get pissed off. In their disappointment, one of the things they may miss is that by poignantly addressing stereotypically feminine subjects, and imbuing masculine genres with humility and dysfunction, Silverthorne continues to be engaged in a critical practice — but one which is informed by an expanded and deepened understanding of the nuances of the issues arising from gender, identity, and mortality.

Rose is Obsolete, 2013
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment, wire
18.5 x 13.5 x 7 in.

(following page)
**Wile E. Coyote (with Breasts),
Studio Floor, Overgrowth**, 2020
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment, wire
15 x 28 x 58 in.





SCULPTURE: “ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE STUDIO”

The thread tying together my over thirty-five years of art making is an obsession with the notion of the vanitas. This includes the image of the studio itself, seen as a kind of memento mori, a zone of collapse and entropy. This view is both metaphorical — in that the “studio” is figuratively silted over with layers of time and history — and literal. This was a place that had been hitherto occupied mainly by the romantically isolated male genius; as a woman entering the art world in the 80’s, entering the studio felt compromised.

The advent of digital technology and skyrocketing real estate costs that have brought much art to a post-studio state of production was already evident in the early 1990’s when I first began to treat the studio as a trope of exhaustion. And although I do include videos and photos in installations and have produced several digital sculptures, I remain someone who makes things by hand, working away in this outmoded place.

So how best to acknowledge this uneasy position and yet continue? If the studio is a ruin could it not then be excavated like an archaeological site? The “excavation” I embarked on initially involved “copying” in rubber the outmoded infrastructure and architecture of the actual studio space, inventorying contents by casting in rubber its artifacts and debris, as well as reconstructing its human occupants, and their emotions.

**Studio Floor with Dandelions
and Firefly**, 2010
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment, wire
13.5 x 25 x 13 in.





There is a concern with the after-effects of thought and making, of existing in the aura of the after. (The bare bulb is a fixture in countless studio representations and documentations from Guston and Picasso to Giacometti.) Meanwhile, in the dilapidation, everything goes to seed. Weeds and insects enter through cracks in the studio; nature begins to invade. Searching in the rubble, one finds not only lost artifacts, lost people, lost actions, but also lost art and art forms — many disappearances. Studio “genres” which are themselves “antique” or possibly extinct, such as the still life, the portrait, or the floral picture, come to the surface. Unearthing what has been buried, bringing the concealed to light, suggests “deep storage,” and many works address what is invisible or packed away: in crates, behind bubble wrap, in archival limbo.

There is, in all, a return of the repressed, be it weeds and insects, or the suggestion, as Bachelard writes, that “something hidden away might become something to be opened; something invisible might become something to be touched; something entombed might be brought to life.”

— Jeanne Silverthorne
Fall 2021

**Venus Flytrap, Xeres Blue (Extinct),
with Two Crates**, 2009–2019
Platinum silicone rubber,
Overall 53 x 25.25 x 48 in.

(following page)

**Studio Floor with Weeds and
Caterpillars and Mannequin**, 2014
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment
Approximately 11 x 28 x 24 in.





Fly Trap, 2017
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment
17 x 20 x 4 in.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jeanne Silverthorne is a sculptor who has been memorializing her studio in silicone rubber for over 35 years. As a woman entering the art world in the 80s, the idea of the studio felt compromised by the overwhelming presence of the “male genius.” By casting portions of her studio overrun with organic forms in rubber, a wobbly but archival medium, Silverthorne captures the feelings of emptiness and entropy she has come to associate with the studio through her sculptures, installations, and some digital works.

Silverthorne’s sculptures are seen as excavations of the studio that has been neglected and haunted by the “vanished voices” of deceased artists, family, friends, and studio assistants. Natural forms such as dandelions, sunflowers, and insects contrast with the remains of the studio that is both metaphorically and literally frozen in a state of collapse and decay. Searching through the rubble unearths lost artifacts, lost art forms, and brings to light what has been concealed or hidden in a state of deep storage.

Silverthorne came of age as an artist when women sculptors frequently used Eva Hesse as inspiration and this was true for Silverthorne as well. Another major influence was the early sculpture of Ree Morton. Her work also aligns with the “handmade ready-mades” of Robert Gober and the pop exaggerations of Richard Artschwager, among others. In its quiet and poignancy, however, it serves as a counterpoint to the severity of male formalists such as Serra, Judd, and Andre. Jeanne Silverthorne

received a BA and an MA from Temple University. For over two decades she showed at the respected McKee Gallery, up to David and Renee McKee's retirement in 2015. Her one-person museum exhibits include PS1, New York, the ICA Philadelphia, Phillips Collection, Washington D.C, Whitney Museum, New York, and a collaboration at The Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, MA. In 2017, she was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship. Her work is included in many major museum collections, including MoMA, New York, MFA Houston; SFMOMA, CA; and the Whitney Museum in New York. Jeanne Silverthorne currently teaches at School of Visual Arts (SVA) New York and is represented by Marc Straus Gallery, NY, and Shoshana Wayne Gallery, LA.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saul Ostrow is an independent curator and critic. Since 1985, he has organized over 80 exhibitions in the US and abroad. His writings have appeared in art magazines, journals, catalogues, and books in the USA and Europe. In 2010, he founded, along with David Goodman and Edouard Prulehiere, the not-for-profit Critical Practices Inc. (criticalpractices.org) as a platform for critical conversation and cultural practices. His book *Formal Matters* (selected and revised), published by Elective Affinities, will be launched Spring, 2022. He served as Art Editor at Bomb Magazine, Co-Editor of Lusitania Press (1996–2004) and as Editor of the book series *Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture* (1996–2006), published by Routledge, London. He has an MFA in Studio Practices from the University of Massachusetts and was from 1969–1996, a practicing artist.



O Rose Pink, 2009
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment
18 x 20 x 12 in.



Double Dolly with Fly, 2022
Platinum silicone rubber and wire
9.25 x 18 x 12 in.

About the Artist

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JEANNE SILVERTHORNE What's Going On Here?

Through cast rubber sculptures, Silverthorne unearths her studio as a metaphor for abandonment, collapse, and entropy as it relates to the absurdity of social constructs and the misguided perception of stability and continuity. Her rubber crates, bookshelves, tables, lamps and light bulbs are imbued with cast rubber weeds, vines, and insects, becoming humorous, comedic versions of their authentic counterparts. They tatter and tickle in their flimsy and clumsy form, as if they are about to collapse from their own "weight" in their unhelpfulness something is "not quite right," and we are compelled to wonder "what's going on?"

Silverthorne's sculptures can be seen as excavations of the studio that has been neglected and haunted by the "vanished voices" of deceased artists, family, friends, and studio assistants. Natural forms such as dandelions, sunflowers, and insects contrast the remains of the studio that is both metaphorically and literally frozen in a state of collapse and decay. Searching through the rubble unearths lost artifacts, lost art forms, and brings to light what has been concealed or hidden in a state of deep storage. Today as we reflect on the work created between 2009 and 2021 it resonates with our current state of social isolation and displacement.



Rowan University Gallery
Installation View
2021

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Crates with Skeletons, 2020

Rubber and resin
Large rubber crate 17.5 x 33.5 x 48 in.
Broken rubber crate 18.5 x 10 x 19 in.
Skeletons 8.5 x 2.5 x 2 in.
Overall dimensions 36 x 33.5 x 48.75 in.

Double Dolly with Fly, 2022

Platinum silicone rubber and wire
9.25 x 18 x 12 in.

Earth, Globe, Caterpillar, Flies, Ants, Beetles, 2018

Platinum silicone rubber, foam rubber, fluorescent pigment, wire
Approximately 6 x 10 x 7 in.

Fly on Bulb, 2018

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment, wire
5 x 4.5 in. diameter

Fly Trap, 2017

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
17 x 20 x 4 in.

Frozen Dandelions, 2012

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
12 x 10 x 10 in.
Edition 1 of 2

History, 2012

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment, wire
23 x 10 x 3 in.

Light Bulb, Hanging, Hook End, 2020

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
Dimensions variable (life-sized bulb)

Looking at a Caterpillar, 2017

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
11.5 x 24 x 18 in.

Moth and Bulb, 2009

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment, wire
Dimensions variable (life-sized bulb)

O Rose Pink, 2009

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
18 x 20 x 12 in.

Pink Bulb, 2016

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
Dimensions variable (life-sized bulb)

Poppy Juice, 2017

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
20 x 40 x 20 in.

Purple Fluorescent, 2013

Platinum silicone rubber, fluorescent pigment, wire
24.25 x 20.5 x 5 in.

Rolled up Studio Floor with Dandelion, 2011

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
28 x 26 x 9 in.

Rose is Obsolete, 2013

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment, wire
18.5 x 13.5 x 7 in.

Self-Portrait as a Fly with Eyeglasses, 2017

Platinum silicone rubber, wire, plastic
2.75 x 5 x 6 in. Edition 3 of 3

Studio Floor with Dandelions and Firefly, 2010

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment, wire
13.5 x 25 x 13 in.

Studio Floor with Weeds and Caterpillars and Mannequin, 2014

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
Approximately 11 x 28 x 24 in.

Top of The World, 2014

Resin, rubber, wood, wire, motorized turntable
45 x 22 x 23 in.

Venus Flytrap, Xeres Blue (Extinct), with Two Crates, 2009–2019

Platinum silicone rubber
Overall 53 x 25.25 x 48 in.

White Bulb, 2021

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment
dimensions variable (life-sized bulb)

Wile E. Coyote (with Breasts), Studio Floor, Overgrowth, 2020

Platinum silicone rubber, phosphorescent pigment, wire
15 x 28 x 58 in.



Purple Fluorescent, 2013

Platinum silicone rubber,
fluorescent pigment, wire
24.25 x 20.5 x 5 in.



ROWAN UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY WHERE THE UNIVERSITY MEETS THE COMMUNITY

Rowan University Art Gallery serves as a vibrant cultural destination for South Jersey, the Rowan community, and surrounding region. We are committed to cultivating an inclusive, accessible, and just environment that encourages dialogue and collaboration between exhibiting artists, students, faculty, and the general public through the presentation of interdisciplinary art exhibitions, artist talks and other public programming. Our mission is to present diverse forms of contemporary art by professional artists with content that is thought provoking, relevant, and timely. With our exhibitions and programming, we seek to engender curiosity and a passion for contemporary art, enrich the quality of life for area residents, and create a welcoming and inclusive cultural destination at Rowan University.

Top of The World, 2014
Resin, rubber, wood, wire,
motorized turntable
45 x 22 x 23 in.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rowan University Art Gallery is honored to host this exhibition and we greatly appreciate the assistance of the artist on the selection of the work. Special thanks to Saul Ostow for the use of his thoughtful and inspiring essay and to Susan Bowman for her beautiful catalog design.

Additional thanks go to our Art Gallery Student Assistants Emma Butts, Isabella Cristinzinai, Kevin Curtin, Victoria Esquillin, and Emerson Harman.

This exhibition was made possible in part with funding from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

This exhibition is a Rowan University Art Gallery production curated by Mary Salvante.

Photography:

Courtesy of the artist

Spread on pages 38-39 and on page 40

by Constance Mensh www.constancemensh.com



Made possible by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, a partner agency of the National Endowment for the Arts.



ROWAN UNIVERSITY
ART GALLERY

Light Bulb, Hanging, Hook End, 2020
Platinum silicone rubber,
phosphorescent pigment
Dimensions variable (life-sized bulb)





WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

JEANNE SILVERTHORNE