

FRANCES WHITEHEAD
TOUGH GALLERY

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The nominal topic of Frances Whitehead's installation at Tough Gallery was wormwood (*Artemesia Absinthium*). Off the gallery's main room is a small, disused, security vault, which functions as a secondary, usually supplementary, exhibition space. This time, it functioned as a kind of preface. In the vault, a dozen or so wormwood plants occupied a stand, growing horizontally toward a massive Gro-lite dish turned on its side. These plants are three years old, and thus germinated well ahead of the rest of the show. They are where the other work comes from: in Barthes's terms, they are the *punctum* from which the *studium* derives its primal jolt of energy and attention, although they are not in any final sense what it is about.

In the gallery proper, the first thing to catch the eye was an array of four huge, serpentine columns, made in sections out of white-glazed porcelain. Off to one side, a projector (half-hidden by a curtain made of violently green-tinted, plasticized rosin) stretched the image of a luna moth along a barely visible, anamorphic grid. On the other side of the room a sort of alchemical project seemed to be under way. Two conical, blown-glass vessels were suspended, one above the other, over a 600-pound cube of sugar. From the top vessel, which was narrow and deep, absinthe oil dripped slowly into the bottom vessel, which was shallow and filled with water. The cloudy mixture of oil and water then dripped on the cube, which dissolved, bottom-first, onto the gallery floor.

These materials are so rich in history and their arrangement so full of information that the whole of it became like a Pynchon text, ultimately strung together by sheer brute synchronicity. The perfect title for this show would be the one Whitehead used for her last show, "Trope," in which the title was *used* as a trope, and thus became a kind of perpetual-motion language machine, emptying and filling in an endless circularity.

It is possible to look at this work without thinking about its shadow text, just as it's possible to look though a Mesoamerican codex without trying to read it: you can enjoy the images and the artfulness, the immense, skilled labor, and the sheer oddness of it all. The problem is, once you begin to think of it as a text, and try to read it, it's like trying to swim in oatmeal: you drown in a surplus of information, all bound together in a dense tangle of puns. To "read" such a codex is to reverse-engineer a language through its metaphors: it's fun, but it's endless fun. The same can be said of Whitehead's project. My best guess is that she's trying to reverse-engineer the material culture of the Enlightenment through its left-over accidents of language. There is no end in sight, but there is endless pleasure along the way.

~Tim Porges



Frances Whitehead
Detail of untitled installation,
1996. Photo courtesy of
Tough Gallery.