

The Body

Alternating currents of wit and wrath, passion and intelligence, run through all of Jana Sterbak's work. The result is art that is at once deceptively simple, demanding and even slightly dangerous

Walking through a gallery can be a strangely desolate experience. We wander around like guests at a cocktail party, desperate for some connection. More often than not, after saying the same smart things to the same five people, we leave burdened with more ideas and untouched. There are rooms full of art that engage the mind but can't pierce through the skin of our self-consciousness.

But to come across an object by artist Jana Sterbak is a different sort of encounter. Her three-dimensional pieces reveal the secret lives of a whole range of familiar materials — cast iron, chicken wire, muslin, meat. These objects have an immediate, visceral effect; at the same time, they are the embodiment of an intriguing and witty train of thought. They heat up, cool down, crackle with electricity, give off a bad smell and behave as if they actively resent being objects. They are droll and literal — the *Flesh Dress* is a simple frock sewn from 60 pounds of flank steak, a piece that turns the body inside out to better expose our mortality. The *Seduction Couch*, a suavely curved chaise made of perforated metal with a Van de Graaff generator at the foot of it, delivers a mild but distinct shock. Even when the image describes a violent sort of isolation — for instance, the caged woman figure in *I Want You To Feel The Way I Do* — the form hooks the senses and demands a connection. Sterbak makes it clear that even in the dead space between

quarrelling lovers, or between a piece of art and the person who steps into its magnetic field, something is always happening. She makes this chemistry visible, and slightly perilous, in her work.

Sterbak's art is rooted in the body and aimed without apology at the emotions (including some not very nice ones). The mysterious ways in which we affect one another, above and beyond language, are given a sympathetic analogy in her work. At the same time, her deceptively simple pieces — so easy to read you scarcely notice the intellectual afterburn — throw off cool waves of paradox. They are cold things that give off heat, images of entrapment that radiate power, a couch that promises to wake you up. Her ideas are embedded so deeply in the materials and the form she chooses that it is hard to separate what is happening to us from what we think about it. This is appealing, and rare. Overtly sensational, secretly cerebral, her objects work at resynthesizing thought and feeling, subject and object, mind and body — all the tiresome little dualities that make us break the world down into isolated fragments, of which we are one isolated part.

Rummaging around in the new physics, Sterbak found scientific grounds for her metaphors (in fact, one of her works, *I Can Hear You Think* [1984-85], is dedicated to physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking). "I do not think of myself as a discrete entity," she wrote in notes to an exhibition of her work last year at the

BY MARNI JACKSON
PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY
BY PAUL ORENSTEIN

MEASURING TAPES
(1979-82). IMAGES
COURTESY OF GALERIE
RENE BLOUIN



Electric

A

s the *Flesh Dress* rots, it shrinks, assuming a shape like medieval armor and a color like blackened bronze. By making work that is so fiercely physical, Sterbak ends up pushing it in the direction of metaphysics



ABOVE: ARTIST AS A COMBUSTIBLE (1986), 30-SEC. PERFORMANCE

RIGHT: VANITAS: FLESH DRESS FOR ALBINO ANORECTIC (1987), MEAT, METAL, PLASTIC. PHOTO BY LOUIS LUSSIER

Winnipeg Art Gallery. "In fact I think there is no such thing, on the emotional, social, economic, even the atomic level." (Or as the noted lay physicist Lily Tomlin put it, "We all time-share the same atoms.") Sometimes this symbiosis is not entirely welcome, as in the drawing entitled *House of Pain* (1987-88), a crisp blueprint of domestic dangers featuring a "Krazy Glue shower" and a "Glass Shard swimming pool." As private as this document appears to be, it instantly elicits a rather shameful sense of recognition. Who hasn't mulled over equally explicit and ridiculous strategies of revenge? This rage is so precise and detailed, it's a joke. Sterbak's humor and detachment help us confront feelings that, for better or worse, keep us human. In the same way, *I Want You To Feel...* doesn't so much amplify the artist as illuminate our own absurd, painful memories of betrayal, parting and all those unmailed vengeful letters.

I Want You To Feel... is her most theatrical piece, a headless female figure fashioned out of chicken wire — a cage-dress, or transparent dummy, with uninsulated nichrome wire coiled around it. Thick black cords are plugged into two wall outlets. As you approach the piece, an electronic eye ("which anyone can buy at Radio Shack," says Sterbak, who likes her technology old-fashioned and readable) activates the piece, causing the nichrome to heat up and then cool down. You can feel the heat if you stand close enough, and above the figure, projected in white letters on the wall, is a rather lengthy, scathing text: "I want you to feel the way I do: there's barbed wire wrapped all around my head and my skin grates on my flesh from the inside. How can you be so comfortable only five inches to the left of me? I don't want to hear myself think, feel myself move. It's not that I want to be numb, I want to slip under your skin: I will listen for the sound you hear, feed on your thought, wear your clothes..."

The image radiates power and helplessness.

It suggests many things — a woman who feels caged inside her body, captive to her feelings and still throwing off heat despite the inert character to her left. It suggests power, deprived of a connection. But it is not confined to the obvious reading of wounded-woman-fights-back. It is also about being co-opted on other levels and it transforms the isolation and passivity of the art object into something more aggressive and unpredictable. A certain relationship — personal, cultural, political or perhaps a combination of all three — has frozen this female figure into a transparent, hot-wired suit of armor. But the object fights back, resisting this perception and putting the subject in the hot seat instead. "Since I have no choice but to have these feelings," the situation says, "you have no choice but to try to share them." It's a doomed experiment, as all estranged lovers sooner or later realize, but the impetus is very human.

Another difficult dialogue takes place in an earlier work, *I Can Hear You Think*, which consists of two small cast-iron heads lying on the floor. One head is wrapped with magnetic wire and attached by conspicuous black cords to a power source that creates an electromagnetic field. This is not a symbol but an event — the pull is strong enough to befuddle your watch and animate your earrings. One head looks inert and detached, while the other head stands apart in an invisible but powerful relationship to it. The piece gives thinking a specific density. This modest scene is pointedly cerebral, while at the same time aggressively sensible. "I want the material reality to resemble my idea as closely as possible," says Sterbak.

Sterbak came to Canada from Czechoslovakia in 1968, when she was 13. She has lived all over — New York for four years, Vancouver, Europe, and right now moves between Toronto and Montreal, where she describes herself, with some relish, as "totally detached." She somewhat perversely enjoys what she calls the "freedom of the lack of market" in Canada, where artists can develop, during the long stretches between shows, in a bracing atmosphere of benign neglect. ("The only problem here is that there is very little strife.") Raised on dialectical materialism, transplanted into the heart of



capitalism, schooled in minimalism, she has cultural perspective to burn and would rather not ally herself with any "ism" — even feminism. "It's not just about personal politics," Sterbak says, about her work in general, "it is also about being a colonial subject. Canada is a colony. I grew up in a country surrounded by bigger countries. I know what being colonized feels like." Her work, grounded in the body and "concretized emotion," seems to take its female point of view for granted, instead of making it the main point. In fact, her work avoids conclusions like the plague. "I prefer open-ended situations and I'm not out to be didactic — that's not the role of the artist." What happens when her work gets moralistic, as in *Flesh Dress*, which on the surface is an object lesson in mortality? "I just let it happen," she shrugs. "I kind of think of the moral aspect of my work as rather quaint and anachronistic. But I also think morals are going to come back in a big way."

In person, Sterbak projects the same introspective authority as her work. When I met her for tea at the Four Seasons Hotel in Toronto (her time, her place), she was already there in a corner, looking every bit as contradictory as her work: well-defended and transparent, tough and fragile, frank and indecipherable. You also can't help thinking that they don't make faces like hers in Canada. Her manner is measured and thoughtful, with surprising ambushes of warmth and humor. As a self-critical person to begin with, she has a kind of allergy to other people's interpretations of her work. When I repeated what critics had said about her work, a wonderful look of indifference came over her face. She cultivates her isolation. Although her original Toronto dealer, Ydessa Hendeles, will mention a number of artists in the same breath as Sterbak — Jannis Kounellis and Rebecca Horn, for example — Sterbak is still quite a solitary figure in the Canadian scene.

"Her work feels genuine to me," says Hendeles. "It doesn't have the aura of strategy. She's willing to address emotions such as pain and rage, which is unusual in this country. I think she's very brave to risk being hot in a cold climate. Rebecca Horn is now using electrostatic charges in her work — Jana's work pre-

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dates this, although of course people now may see it the other way round. I think, for instance, that her *Flesh Dress* will become more interesting as time goes by."

Vanitas: Flesh Dress for Albino Anorectic (1987) is a heavy and somewhat heavy-handed garment stitched together from flank steak. Photographs depicting a model wearing this visceral little number sometimes accompany the real thing, worn by a dressmaker's dummy suspended by a chain from the ceiling. As it rots, it shrinks, assuming a shape like medieval armor and a color like blackened bronze. The "live" dress is quite a shocker, conjuring up a flash of what that cold, clammy, fat-marbled stuff must feel like on the skin. It's a way of filleting the self into spirit and flesh for a moment, so that the "I" can feel the sensation of this ungainly and perishable body. *Flesh Dress* undresses us down to spirit.

The "dead" dress is surprisingly shapely, close to a real garment sewn together from hides or pelts. "In Montreal, after a few days the dress really stank," said Sterbak with satisfaction. Garment workers in the same building as the show, at Galerie René Blouin, came up on their lunch hours to marvel at the undress-in-progress. It isn't exactly a complicated piece: it confronts us with an accelerated image of dying — which, we are reminded, is not an idea but a fairly appalling physical process, although not without its own macabre beauty. The photographs also dutifully incarnate that familiar old phrase about women as pieces of meat. Not a pretty concept, if you put it to work. By making something so fiercely physical, Sterbak pushes it in the direction of metaphysics.

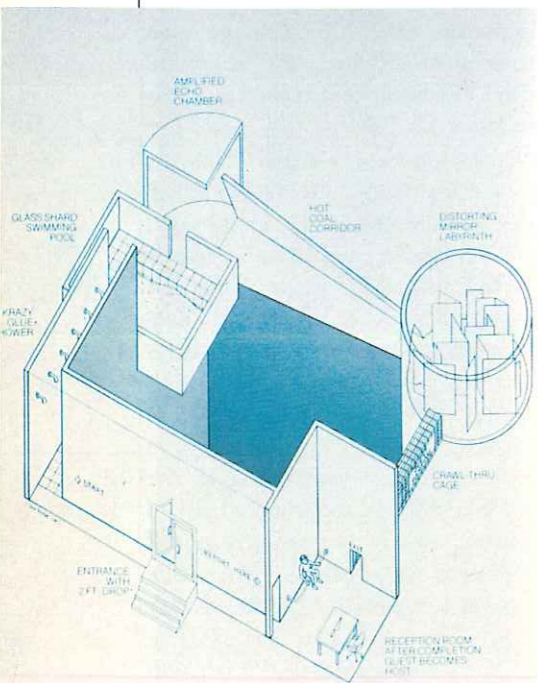
The more you try to nail these pieces down, the more they resist translation. Familiar, rather domestic objects — a house, a dress, a couch — turn into unpredictable subjects, capable of acting on us, instead of the other way around. They look vaguely mutinous in the context of a gallery, and this, despite their come-here-go-away ambivalence, is most seductive.

Seduction Couch is a see-through chaise of perforated metal, a skeleton of a bed that is lit so as to project a beguiling pattern on the wall. But seduction entails a degree of danger. Beside it stands a generator that throws off blue sparks and the odor of ozone. When you touch the couch (as everyone wants to), you get a harmless but arresting shock. It is the sort of couch on which odalisques once reclined and which some shrinks still use, with the velvet stripped away to reveal latent power and an ambiguous threat. It is a passive image wired for action. It says something unequivocal about the perverse, irrational nature of desire and suggests the ability of an object perceived as unthreatening and inert — as, for instance, art in a gallery or a woman on a chaise — to fight back, startle and disrupt. This somewhat Victorian chaise, an X-ray of the plush thing waiting to be ravished by our consuming gaze, turns into dangerous furniture. As René Blouin, Sterbak's Montreal dealer, explains, "When people see it, they want to touch it. When they touch it, they get a shock, which makes them wary — but it also makes them curious. Then, despite fair warning, they touch it again." He laughs. "It's like love."

Sterbak also does cool pieces. *Measuring Tapes* (1979-82) is an early work that consists of tapes spiralled into freestanding cones that can be worn on the fingers. The effect of the cone-claws is subtly creepy. They imply that the fingertips are a kind of brain, a cool, measuring brain, and that touch is intelligent, even critical. The spiralling tapes with their topographical ridges look like amplified fingerprints. A recent piece, included in Renee Baert's show at The Power Plant, *Enchantment/Disturbance*, was more formally presented and therefore less successful. ("Her work is so goddamned modest," laments Blouin with admiration. "No matter how I try, it always subverts any flashy presentation.") It was called *Standard Lives* (1988) and consisted of several wide, transparent measuring tapes (part of an edition of 30), imprinted with a Letraset pageant of stereotypes: babies with hair bows, girls in prom dresses, guys in cars, the happy couple, the woman on the phone, the man in the office, then a few brooding portraits followed by jolly old age. *Stan-*

I want you to feel the way I do: There's barbed wire wrapped all around my head and my skin grates on my flesh from the inside. How can you be so comfortable only 5" to the left of me? I don't want to hear myself think, feel myself move. It's not that I want to be numb, I want to slip under your skin: I will listen for the sound you hear, feed on your thought, wear your clothes.

Now I have your attitude and you're not comfortable anymore. Making them yours you relieved me of my opinions, habits, impulses. I should be grateful but instead ... you're beginning to irritate me: I am not going to live with myself inside your body, and I would rather practice being new on someone else.

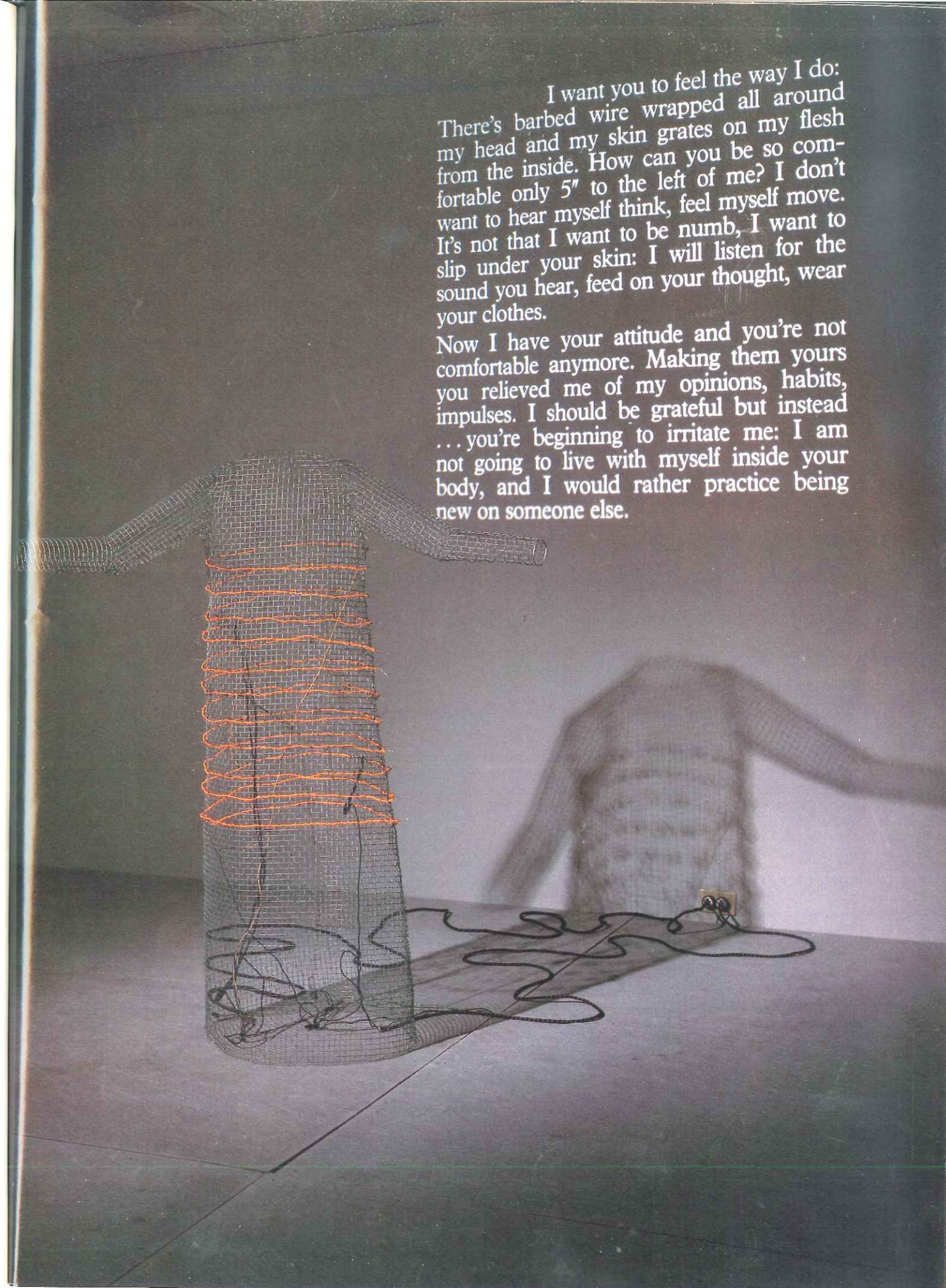


HOUSE OF PAIN
A RELATIONSHIP

TOP: *SEDUCTION COUCH* (1986), STEEL, ELECTROSTATIC CHARGE, VAN DE GRAAFF GENERATOR, 50 1/2" X 29" X 92"
ABOVE: *HOUSE OF PAIN* (1987-88), 53 1/8" X 40 1/4"

RIGHT: *I WANT YOU TO FEEL THE WAY I DO... (THE DRESS)* (1984-85), NICKEL-CHROME WIRE MOUNTED ON WIRE MESH, ELECTRICAL CORD, TEXT. COURTESY THE NATIONAL GALLERY

SEDUCTION COUCH COURTESY OF YDESSA HENDELES COLLECTION



Sterbak presents the pillows on pedestal-beds, which turns the objects into a 'dense situation,' a sort of cold, modern bedroom where the usual activities (passion and dreams) have been replaced by things like 'Aesthetics'



ABOVE: ETHICS, VIRTUE, SEXUAL FANTASIES, AND REPUTATION (1987), EMBROIDERY ON COTTON

RIGHT: GENERIC MAN-VERSION I (MEMENTO) (1987) 4" X 5". A VARIATION ON PROPOSED 10' X 12' BILLBOARD IN REGINA (1989)

dard Lives is witty in an editorial sort of way, but it doesn't have the resonance of the best of her work.

What her art does best, it seems, is to give us specific locations for emotion. In *Golem: Sensations as Objects* (1982), she arranged seven little manhandled hearts in relation to a trail of equally woebegone body parts: a bronze spleen, a lead penis, a rubber stomach, a lead hand, leading up to an as yet undamaged heart. These small, rather pitiable objects make us feel for ourselves and lay down a visible history. This gesture of turning the body inside out and isolating parts of it has the paradoxical effect of reintegrating perception with feeling.

Several works suggest not just a thinker hungry for connection but a writer fatigued by the "tyranny of language." Early in her career, after studying art in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, Sterbak concentrated on critical writing, but she found this got in the way of her work. "I see it happen with other artists," she says. "The more they work on theory, the more their art lags behind their theoretical thinking. I found eventually that in order for my work to have the maximum oomph, I had to stop writing."

Reading, however, continues to be a regular source of ideas and inspiration. Euripides' *Medea* was one of the catalysts for *I Want You To Feel The Way I Do*. In the play, a woman who has been dumped for a richer bride presents the other woman with a crown and a dress that consume her in flames. All the great and darkly comic articulators of alienation — Max Frisch, Beckett, Kafka, Heinrich Böll, Gunter Grass — are as important to her as visual influences.

But the writing that she deserted in order to explore the physical properties of matter crept back into a few relatively recent, literate pieces that almost work like concrete poetry. *Attitudes* (1987) is a series of white cotton pillows bearing unusual monograms: "Greed," "Virtue," "Reputation," "Sexual Fantasies" and other modern motives for coupling. It's

not a "female craft piece" — Sterbak ordered the monograms from a company just like any customer, which was part of the idea. "Monograms are a big thing in New York especially. It's a bit like buying ripped jeans or pre-faded denims — it's consumable, fake history. I was also responding to some of the reactionary sexual attitudes and loveless couplings I saw around me, which I associate with the 'new wealth.'" One little footnote pillow also says "Disease," a new word to enter the bedroom, where it is now safer to sleep with certain ideas than people. She presents the pillows on pedestals that are beds, which turns the objects into a "dense situation," a sort of cold, modern bedroom where the usual activities (passion and dreams) have been replaced by things like "Aesthetics." Homeless desire turns up in another work, a transparent piece of white muslin embroidered with the word "Desire" in gothic typeface, a ghostly document like a see-through tombstone. For Sterbak, words are as dense and volatile as certain metals.

The word made flesh works the opposite way around in several other pieces in which Sterbak plays with dictionary definitions. In one, a piece of text consisting of white letters sewn onto black felt explains that the word "boudoir" derives from the French "boudier," meaning "to pout," which makes the bedroom more accurately *The Sulking Room*.

Sterbak herself doesn't maintain a formal studio, just a "thinking room." "That way I can move around a lot," she says. The craft aspect of her work is not critical to her — she likes to work with engineers and electricians for the actual construction ("It's my way of being in the world"). In notes to her exhibition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, she explains how she likes to work. "I write down my ideas as I conceive them. If I feel, half a year later, the necessity to produce them, I do so. Most of the time, I don't. This way of working is the most efficient that I have found." The result of this patience is a small but potent body of work that manages, with its alternating currents of wit and wrath, passion and intelligence, to make us feel.

Jana Sterbak is showing work at Galerie René Blouin to March 18; Artists' Space, New York, March 2-18; the Regina Art Gallery March 16 to May 5; and the National Gallery October 5 to December 3.

