



“How’m I Doin’?”

NANCY DAVIDSON

SHOSHANA WAYNE GALLERY

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MAEBE (detail) latex, fabric, rope, plaster 1997 144"x 96"x 96"

COME ROLICK WITH THE QUEEN

NANCY DAVIDSON is court dresser for a harem of gargantuan hermaphrodite weather balloons. She laces up and costumes each crayola colored body to vamp their largess before us, more modestly scaled, humans. Floating belly-breast-buttocks up, her apparitions are the protagonists of bad taste and rude jokes. As Davidson unleashes raucous sexuality freed from anatomy and morals, fashion is the yardstick for their excess: gender is constructed but fertility and propagation are inevitable. Merging the movie star with the fairy tale in "How'm I Doin'?" Davidson cuts loose contemporary characters of the carnivalesque.



NETELLA latex, fabric, cotton 1997 48"x 96"x 60"

"Maebe", a towering fem-ish figured royal blue balloon is our first guide to the show. The twin swell of her balloon body emerges from the bosom and bottom of an enormous powder blue satin corset, forming an hourglass – though by no means wasp-waisted-figure. "Maebe's" chitinous femininity is a direct descendent of Mae West's voluptuous but hard boiled saloon style challenge to sexual codes. Maybe a man, or maybe a woman, there is nothing natural about "Maebe's" femininity. "How'm I Doin'?" is her question: completely confident of her allure, she challenges the possibility that she might appear excessive in her will to womanhood. The chasm between the glitzy glamour of her outfit, and her more than curvaceous proportions leads to a jarring rift with the societal ideal. Like the old aunt who smothered you in the fleshy cleavage of her embrace, "Maebe" is terrifying and funny at once.

"How'm I Doin'?" powerfully realizes the state of being between states, from the effervescence of the balloons Davidson dresses, to the gender of the characters they represent. Each roly-poly partial body is endowed with a tiny phallus: its six inch long inflation nozzle. Stopped with a knob of plexi, the nozzle is tucked away in their outfits, or revealed in shy limpness. The penis becomes the clown of the body and phallic power is relocated to the full-to-popping figures of the balloons. The bulk of the balloon is pregnantly voluptuous, pressing out of a garishly seductive dress associated with "the weaker sex", and perfected by those enacting femaleness such as transvestites and strippers. Impregnation is unleashed from the female body onto all of the forms in the show, infecting them with the regeneration and abundance of spring ripeness.

Big round butts take center stage in "Buttress", a tower of rope-cleaved red balloons. Skin tight silver lame short-shorts titillate us with a view of too much perfectly round latex flesh, and a peek up their stacked neighbor's buns, each set of buttocks reflected in the shorts below it. Here and there a dangling nozzle can be seen between the sunburnt-to-a-light-pink cheeks. "Buttress" is the burlesque behind of Brancusi's "Endless Column" and baby's got back!

While Davidson's sculptures are humorously exaggerated characterizations, they are not slapstick clowns. They turn their bottoms up, but they don't fall down (with the exception of their phalluses). Their elaborate garb disguises the temporality of their nature, but they are subject to the effects of time, the latex skin sunburns, sags and deflates in its six month life span. This parallel to human mortality is the bite in the buoyant optimism they exude, a coupling which makes them fundamentally carnivalesque.

Davidson's most ominous piece is a forest of flowers, grouped in threes and fours, spookily somnambulant incubators. Bulbous blue and green heads droop from arched stems with weighted fullness; nozzles dangle from their segmented centers. In keeping with the intrinsically hermaphroditic nature of plants, Davidson has not garbed them in festive gender attire. As the only heads in "How'm I Doin'?" the fact that "Forest of Flowers" represents a visceral rather than cognitive bodily function inverts the usual hierarchy of mind over matter. Their pregnant belly/heads, petal-less and about to go to seed, are as portentous of death as of life, and their sickly sweet blossoming infects the rest of the show.



FOREST/BUDIETTES latex, rope, steel, rubber 1997 each unit approximately 96"x 96"x 36"

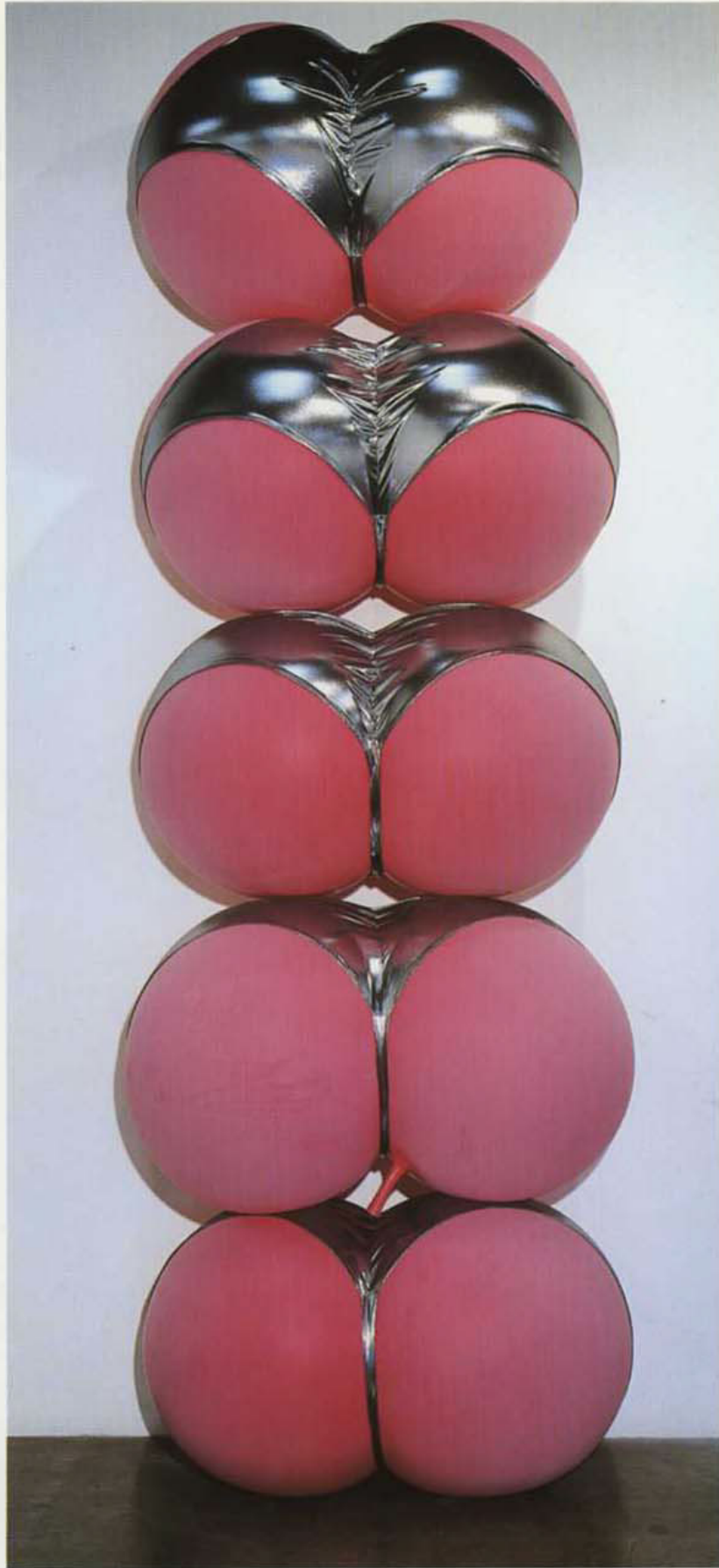
Intrinsic to the ancient carnival is the ritual uncrowning of the Old King by the copulation of the New King with the Queen. This uprooting instigated by the Queen, catalyst of change and continuity, is symbolic of the shifting seasons and the cycles of life. Immortality is conceived of as lineage rather than the Christian belief of immortality as ascension through death and resurrection. In the carnivalesque lineage, woman's role is robust, powerful and earthily sexual. Davidson generates all of the creatures in "How'm I Doin'?" from this perspective, but in "Elivissa", she goes further by collapsing all three carnivalesque bodies – the Old King, the Queen and the New King – into one, Elvis, "The King".

"Elvissa" is the most sexually ambivalent character tethered at the heart of "How'm I Doin'?". On the one hand, "Elvissa's" phallus poking out of a specially designed pocket on the front piece of her white jumpsuit, and the macho open collar revealing a grassy knoll of blue plastic chest hairs, indicate manhood. On the other hand, the name Elvissa fictionalizes/feminizes the rock star sex symbol Elvis. Corsetted like aging Elvis must have been to create a manly figure from his overindulged gut, "Elvissa" takes masquerade full circle: "The King" is corsetted and lavishly dressed to look like a woman or drag queen to look like "The (young) King". The ideology of contemporary culture is reflected in "Elvissa's" self-contained image of rebirth.

Breast Enlargement
Nose Improvement
Tummy Tightening
Ear Reshaping
Body Contouring of the Hips and Buttocks
Liposuction
Removal of Facial Buccal Fat Pad
Laser Skin Resurfacing
Penis Enhancement

The surgical search for cosmetic perfection and the reversal of the effects of aging is a quest for immortality. "Maebe", "Elvissa" and "Buttress" are the 'Before' figures of late night infomercials for Phen-Fen diet plan, or the 'After' of tabloid coverage of Liz's struggles with her weight and men. Inflating these cultural apparitions to parade size floats, Davidson reorients us to see our body fears with childlike wonder. Absurdly rearranging bulges of pure bulge balloons by elaborately outfitting their clearly ephemeral bodies, Davidson gives us an opportunity to laugh at ourselves and rollick with the Queen.

– INGRID CALAME



BUTTRESS latex, fabric, rope 1997 130"x 50"x 33"