



Organic Dissolution

An Installation by Susan Beiner

by Andrew Buck



It says something about an artist's work when you wake up thinking about it. It takes hold of you and seizes your imagination. Consider for a moment Ann Beattie's short story *Janus* about an enigmatic, yet charismatic, ceramic bowl; or alternatively, the short fiction piece, *The Giver*, which takes place in a world devoid of color. The contrast of these two literary works alludes to differences between George Seurat's *Sunday in the Park on the Island of Grand Jatte* and Susan Beiner's new installation *Organic Dissolution* recently on exhibit at the Clay Art Center (www.clayartcenter.org) in Port Chester, New York. Seurat's painting, while technically sterile, is a vibrant mass of color. *Organic Dissolution*, on the other hand, erupts with vitality and life force without much use of color at all. It makes me wonder, if the central mass of *Organic Dissolution* were placed in a gallery in front of a Seurat, would the colors in the painting start to dance off the canvas, float through the air like dandelion seed, and adhere to every minute surface of the porcelain? These imaginative thoughts, which came to me as I looked at Ms. Beiner's installation, must have been triggered by an electrical charge, an electron valence, brought on by the pure whiteness of her new work, which touts only occasional hues of purple. So given such dynamic interplay with the work, why did my heart grow wistful? Somewhere deep inside of me there was an uneasy feeling. The song "Where have all the flowers gone?" played on the edges of my mind and gave rise to the foreboding, serious question, "Where have all the colors gone?"

Beiner's installation involves a mostly pristine white, circular, amorphous mass streaming with conjoined porcelain flora and fauna whose dynamic presence approaches the aphrodisiacal, yet ironically hints at sterility. On the walls, elements of the construction process are assembled and displayed as sculptural elements along with graphite renderings, providing confident yet intimate views of the central form. It seems that the border between scientific and artistic vision start to blur in this project which centers on careful observation, careful execution, and careful consideration of our world's manipulated food chain and ecological systems.



1–3 *Organic Dissolution* (overall installation and two details): 8 ft. (2.4 m) in length, porcelain, foam, thread, Kanthol wire.

4 *Drawing #1*, 21 in. (53 cm) in height, pencil and watercolor.

All photos: Susan Beiner.



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5 *Germinating*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, porcelain, rubber, thread.
6 *Remnant 1*, 5 in. (13 cm) in height. 7 *Remnant 3*, 5 in. (13 cm) in length.
6 and 7 are both porcelain, Kanthol wire, foam, and thread.

To say the work is fecund would be an understatement. My wife couldn't stop talking about it. In fact, most people at the opening preview, drawn like most for the social encounter, couldn't stop talking about the central form or take their eyes off of it. This may have been because of the all-at-once simplicity and complexity of the piece. It is involved, very involved. Each small unique elemental form, then the next, and the next, and again the next draws you in. Then, occasionally a cousin or brother or sister of one element or another sprouts up. The teeming mass is very much alive. However, in this seeming paradise, where unity in diversity is manifest, there is a subtle message: don't get too close. There is an eerie edge, questions arise about what these small biomorphic forms really are and what they hold in store. Assembled together, this is a big thing; not necessarily of monstrous proportions, but of a sufficiently large scale to be dominating. Vacillating between poles of attraction and distance, of "do not touch" and "go ahead and lick the frosting," of fertility and sterility, of unadulterated nature and engineered reality, viewers are drawn into orbit around the work.

Viewers walk around the center piece, altering their routes as they draw near to the sculptural wall pieces and two-dimensional renderings, taking them in. Something else is going on in the wall sculptures, which is as equally important as the cake-like central form, but perhaps not as seductive or savory. The material residue, the flotsam, is being re-worked, re-defined. In doing so, Beiner addresses the unsightly underbelly of waste production and its transformation, the project of our times, of sustainability.

Sustainability suggests vulnerability. This work raises questions about human vulnerability when confronted by organic dissolution, wherein lies hope and threat. We already live in a man-made world, surrounded by the synthetic, from microwave ovens to motor oil. "Better living through chemistry" was the motto, remember? However, the all too real Bhopal disaster in India and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear meltdown in Japan serve as reminders that it's not all good in an engineered world. Disruption to the food chain through genetic engineering or nanotechnology is the next technological blunder waiting to happen. This raises the question, "Is dissolution a precursor to or byproduct of synthesis?" Perhaps Beiner's work will remind us of the fragility that accompanies the creation or synthesis of the new, the delicate interrelationships that permeate the world we live in, and of the perseverance and vision required to shape it. In that sense, this work takes on meaning and import outside of itself by raising questions of pressing social significance, making it all the more relevant today.

Susan Beiner received her MFA from The University of Michigan, and a BFA from Rutgers University in New Jersey. She currently teaches at Arizona State University. She has exhibited both nationally and internationally and has received several awards and participated in residencies.

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