

CATFIGHT

Heather Pesanti, *curator of Artpace residency.*

E.V. Day

Though originally trained as a painter, the New York-based E.V. Day transforms readymades often associated with the female gender – including clothing, undergarments, fishnet stockings, accessories, wet suits, opera costumes, plastic tongues, skeletons, and children's toys – into installations, sculptures, and two-dimensional works. Day's oeuvre blends feminist undertones with the playful and the terrible, as well as a deep love of morbid beauty: her work tends towards the divinely grotesque, inspiring fear and, in some cases, tickling revulsion, while simultaneously provoking the viewer to gasp at its beauty. Her objects and installations have an "in-your-face" boldness, both literally and conceptually, with bright colors, aggressive forms, culturally-loaded materials, and a wicked sense of humor.

Day's performative "exploding couture" works are perhaps her best known series. These spectacular installations consist of garments and accessories ripped, shredded, and suspended from taught lines of monofilament, or fishing wire, appearing to literally explode in dynamic motion and action in space. Particularly notable was *Bride Fight*, 2006, a work originally made for the lobby of Gordon Bunshaft's Lever House in New York City (a 1952 modernist building built a decade before Bunshaft unveiled his museum addition to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery) and consisting of two wedding gowns ripped into pieces, pulled, and then stretched taut on wires from floor to ceiling. The forms appear bird-like in motion, ascending outward in all directions as gloves reach towards each other and a lone pink undergarment stands out amidst a wash of white. The next year, Day made *Portable Cat Fight*, a mobile sculptural work featuring two fighting cat skeletons suspended on wires in a cage atop a red mobile cart. Their delicate bones convey elegance and a sense of the organic, while the sparse industrial square shapes of the housing suggest a nod to Minimalist roots. This unlikely juxtaposition of elements seems integral to Day's practice.

For *CatFight*, her Artpace installation, Day's felines have grown up. The artist began with an idea that had been percolating in her mind since *Portable Cat Fight*: the idea of an epic battle between two saber-toothed cat skeletons. The particular draw to this imagined moment, according to the artist, was the image's "ambiguity: it might be comical – think of classic cartoon image of a cat with its tail caught in an electric socket, the silhouette of its skeleton flashing on and off – or at the other extreme, a primordial fight-to-the-death scene, mano a mano."¹ The resources and time of Artpace's residency allowed her to pursue this idea; by happy coincidence, the artist discovered that these prehistoric felines roamed the caves near San Antonio during the Ice Age, and a local skeleton of the cat resides in the Texas Natural Science Center at the University of Texas at Austin. After ordering the replica skeletons, Day began to piece together their bones in an improvisational manner. The resulting installation at Artpace comprises the skeletons of

¹ E.V. Day in email correspondence with the author, May 27, 2011.

two of these massive beasts installed in a frozen embattled embrace. One seems to be losing, pinned underneath the other; but the sense is that it could be any cat's game. Silver-painted snakes made from toy modeling sets surround and peer up at the cats, an added element of sly humor and playfulness. The viewer can walk 360 degrees around the installation, inches from the massive, long-toothed jaws open wide and bony paws clawing at each other, stepping into, as the artist has stated, "a space of spectacular (in the literal sense) propulsive energy, whether ... sheer violence or a more nuanced natural force."² As an added "feminine" touch (with a wink to the problematization of such assumptions), and in the artist's characteristic nod to punk glamour, Day painted the immense saber teeth and claws in silver leaf, a color that reflects the lighting and mimics the glistening effect of the fishing line strung throughout the installation.

In her exploration of space, materials, color, and form, Day is a formalist. In a traditional sense, her work walks the line between abstraction and figuration, taking representational elements then transforming or fragmenting them; but the suggestion of the figurative, even just by nature of a particular material she uses, always remains. Her work also offers new possibilities for contemporary notions of drawing in space. In the lineage of artists such as David Smith, Gego, Richard Tuttle, and Fred Sandback, Day uses lines and mass in space (rather than simply on a two-dimensional surface) to examine and critique perceptions of two-and-three-dimensionality. Monofilament becomes her drawing tool, along with the sculptural elements she is suspending along the lines with wire. In such works, the shadows generated by the lines of her piece, heightened with dramatic lighting, create secondary and even tertiary drawings on the floors, ceilings, and walls. Viewers pass through these drawings, interacting with the work itself and watching it change as they move around it. As an installation, *CatFight* is dynamic while frozen in space, capturing a magical, mythical place where two fierce creatures are immobilized in perpetual, timeless battle.

² Ibid.