

I doubt if I were alone in finding The Josephine Table (1990) the most extraordinary work in Janise Yntema's first exhibition (1993). A sculpture 98" x 100" x 30", it was a portable wagon displaying artifacts from the life of a neighbor recently deceased. The theme was biography—not of oneself or even someone like oneself (to recall two modes already familiar in the art world) but of someone else (who wasn't even an artist). The dominant image were many photographs of a woman passing from childhood through family life, adult years, and old age. Roughly sixty photographs were suspended on wire filaments from crossing barbed wires, so that they spun around in aleatory ways and were never entirely visible from any single point. As the viewer necessarily moved about, he or she discovered that on the top of the wagon were other evidently personal objects: doilies, empty honey jars, rusted tools, clock parts, old keys, door handles, etc. The whole resembled a coffin, with the gathered objects suggesting some primitive rituals; its aura distinctly religious. I can't think of another recent work of visual art that is so richly biographical (rather than autobiographical) and for that alone The Josephine Table suggests a future, not only for Yntema, but others. I'd like to see it again.

Otherwise I find Yntema's art to be dark and layered in ways reminiscent of Albert Pinkham Ryder (especially his famed Death on Horseback). One theme of her painting is working from the two-dimensional space into objects that approximate reliefs and are not quite sculptures; my sense is that this line will be further developed.

May I also commend her statement that appears here as an introduction for its enviable clarity and accuracy. When she first approached me to contribute to this catalog, I made some general notes that I thought would become an essay. Then she showed me this statement that articulated those generalizations better than I could. Always admiring those artists who did not fear revealing their ultimate purposes (e.g., Ad Reinhardt, Moholy-Nagy, John Cage), in contrast to pettifoggers, I chose instead to write about the single work of hers that I remember best.

Richard Kostelanetz on Janise Yntema