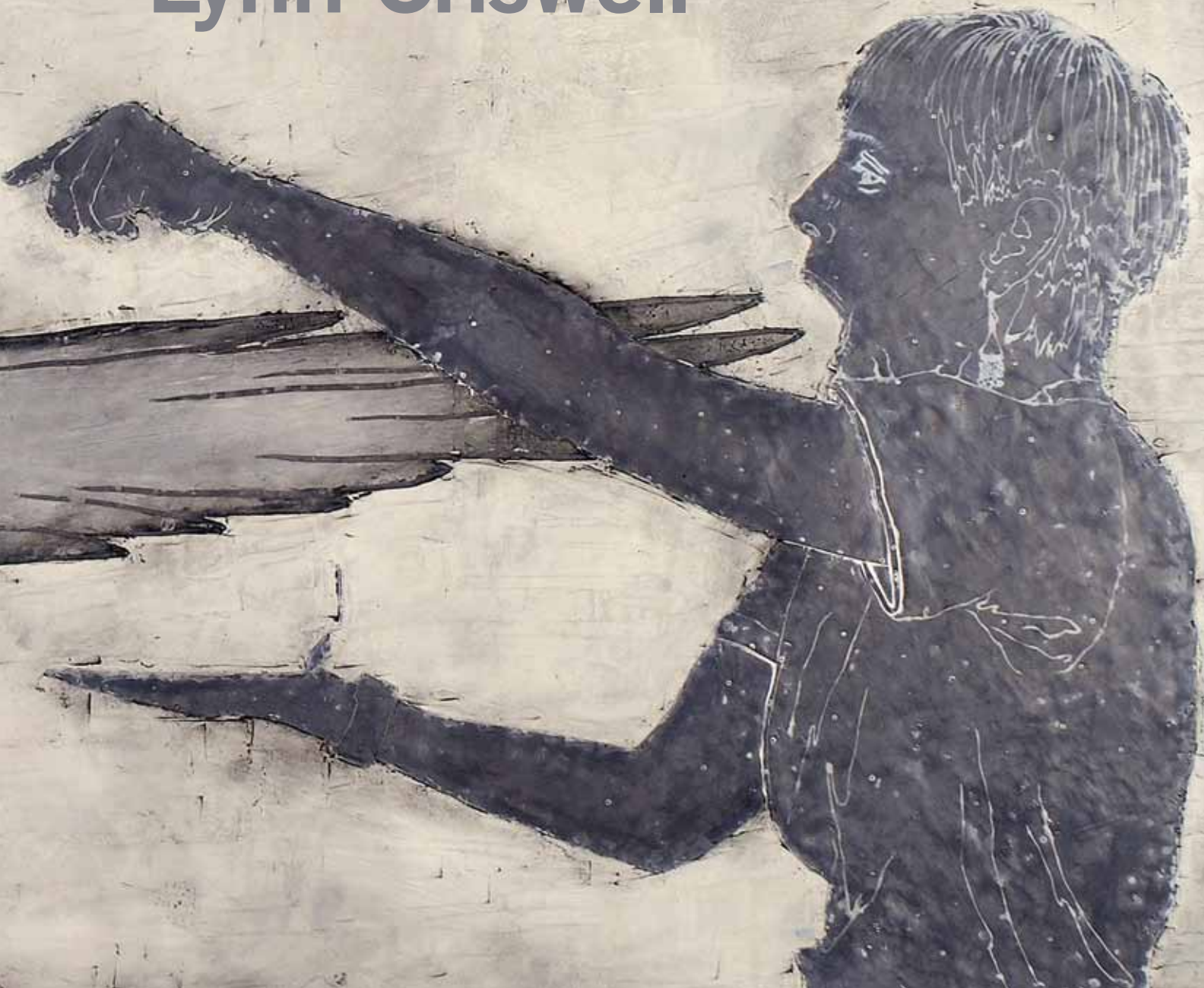


Lynn Criswell



**Lynn Criswell**

**Since the early nineties**, Lynn Criswell has been exploring the realm of childhood from all its angles. Her work continues to touch every bit of inner child still left in us. Her paintings are like short stories with a hint of analytical sense or subverted truth. As a child, Criswell experienced first hand the transition from the “proper” education model of the fifties to the more liberal approach of the sixties. As an artist and with the eyes of an adult, she revisits that part of her life. If the work seems fresh and whimsical at first, one should not underestimate the social implications that Criswell is exposing such as the rivalry between boys and girls, the gender discrimination that awaits girls as adults and how the two sides outgrow each other. Criswell poses these questions over and over hoping for a different outcome every time.

**Her latest work also** refers to her youthful exposure to the moral principles of Aesop’s fables where animals take on human characteristics to impart lessons of the beauty of being wise, honest, forgiving and kind. These fables remain a popular choice for the moral education of children today throughout the world. In a similar vein, Criswell’s work poses, defines, and celebrates human acts in an invented territory cohabitated by specimens of flora, fauna and northern California native birds. She moves them along a journey through an obviously staged narrative. Her work is figurative certainly, but Criswell could be described as a minimalist, relying on one or two figures, one or two objects, a colored background and perspective. The composition seems simple and easy;

on the contrary, every element in her paintings must be carefully staged. Even her “palette” is comprised of two materials, lead and oil.

**Lynn Criswell’s paintings are** endless journeys between the past and the present and it is our pleasure to present this work for her third exhibition at LIMN Gallery in San Francisco. I would like to thank Elise Archias for her most thoughtful essay.

Christine Duval  
 Director and curator  
 LIMN Gallery

Cover: **Mouth To Bird**  
 2008  
 Oils, sheet lead and plaster on birch panel  
 43" x 88.5" x 1.25"

**Can Jump Low ▶**  
 2003-2007  
 Oils, sheet lead and plaster on birch panels  
 60" x 60" x 1.5"





**A Statement or a Question**

2008, Cast bronze and aluminum, sheet lead and fabricated steel  
59" x 24" x 14"



**Memory Lead**

**Lynn Criswell's two- and three-dimensional work** offers a visual language that gives form to memory. It evokes both the isolated definition of individual memories and what the undirected, uncertain event of remembering is like. Unlikely dualities contribute to the work's complexity. Criswell places recognizable figures in ambiguous relations. She combines the flat virtuality of photography with insistently physical materials. She deploys clear, carefully balanced compositions to organize and contain prickly or difficult subject matter.

**Criswell's work is figurative**, placing her within a long tradition of California painters and sculptors (Joan Brown and Robert Arneson clearly belong in her same chapter of history.) And yet her figures are several steps removed. They come to us via photographs, old photographs from the 1950s and 60s or outdated toys from the same era—thus from across a great distance in time. The people and objects in Criswell's work, though specific and precisely juxtaposed, are isolated from one another, floating or perched in a space that is not quite part of the three-dimensional world we know. If they communicate with one another, they do so mutely. It is up to the viewer to make the connections between the various elements. Or perhaps it is not that we ever definitively resolve the uncertain connections—Criswell's work remains inscrutable—we simply register them, with her.

**Register. Etch. Stamp. Inscribe.** Such words are useful when describing Criswell's art. They are appropriate both to the techniques she uses and to the subject

matter she takes on. She borrows the qualities of photographs for her assembled artworks, evoking not only the past world of 1950s and 1960s America that her choice of images represent, but also the large role that flat image-documents in the twentieth century play in determining what we remember. Beyond the flatness, the stamp of the photograph can be found in the figures' poses—seeming either too tense and staged or too accidental and ungraceful to have been invented by the artist. We see it too, in the way the believability of the figures' bodies rests in their seeming accurately mapped rather than convincingly modeled bodies. Limbs and facial features are proportionally placed, but the person as a whole seems strangely immaterial and stiff.

**Criswell's figures are further** distanced from the viewer via a process of even greater flattening and reduction as they are carved into and cut out of thin sheets of lead, before being fastened with tiny nails onto wooden panels. The figures have been deftly, painstakingly extracted from their original photographic context and formed into new, decidedly more concrete incarnations of what they had been before. In carving her figures out of metal, she turns the photographic image into something much more solid and permanent. A memory etched wherever it is memories reside—mind, body, psyche, hippocampus—is evoked well by a form that has been carved into, and cut out of lead. Memory, in Criswell's version, involves both a selection of fleeting details and a process of inscription. Yet the lead adds connotations

of the photographic as well. The grey of the lead makes it particularly light absorbing and dark. Often accented with white lines, the leaden figures appear like photographic negatives. They suggest simultaneously a glossy document and a dull, tough, metal badge. Fastened like flat cut out dolls to wooden panels with many small nails, they create an even spray of polka-dot-like pock marks across faces, chests and legs.

**In Criswell's recent sculptures**, assembled cast aluminum toys walk planks of steel at chest-height toward metal birdhouses with openings far too small for them to enter. Obscure narratives are suggested, connecting the activity at the top with an object lying three feet below at the sculpture's base. In *A Statement or a Question* (2008), for example, a girl-doll body with a woodpecker head approaches the house on the platform, while below, leaning against the sculpture's shaft, sits the life-sized, flat, metal cut-out face of a girl with bangs and wavy hair. Though oversized, the cut-out seems to supply the missing face to the doll up top. A minimal number of forms and legible, simple construction give the viewer a set of relations that are right out in the open, and yet difficult to read. Neatly cast in silver aluminum, arriving at pop art via surrealism, the figural arrangements are strangely quiet, vaguely threatening at times.

**Like the sculptural elements**, the cut-out figures in Criswell's paintings seem like individual terms in a personal dialogue with the past. They exist as inscriptions, stamped and outlined, their flatness making them

especially word like. Though Criswell's previous works often included text, the role of words has diminished in her recent work. She places an image-sentence, then, a rebus, on the wooden surface of her paintings, inviting viewers to read. The muted dialogue she offers can consist of childhood relations between boys and girls, between girls and those looking at them from behind cameras and from the audience at dance recitals. Her work leads us to ask what forces are at work in such relations? What desires? What messages are being sent?

**Look, for example, at *Second Twirl* (2008)**, a piece which clearly displays the "read me" effect in Criswell's work. From left to right, the picture offers a sequence of emblems. The sequence begins with a yellow rectangle. Bright, like a colored pane of glass through which sunlight is shining, the yellow rectangle anchors the left corner of the picture in spite of its thinness. Through this pane, we see (because it overlaps) the gray, leaden cut-out of a girl in a ballet costume (the second term in the sequence). Her hand is resting on her side in a choreographed manner. Her leg is extended at a diagonal, its slippered foot in a proper point. The girl is smiling, again more dutifully than out of any emotion. Her eyes, circles within circles, gaze vaguely into the distance. The straightish lines of her hair are crossed and given order by a barrette fastened across them. The tutu Criswell has given her is a beautiful, formless abstraction. The girl is good. She is doing it right, they are watching, and they will clap.



**Second Twirl**

2008, Oils, sheet lead and plaster on birch panels, 49" x 63" x 1.75"

**Resting on this girl** figure's left hand is the picture's third element: a bunny head, or bunny mask, also cut out of lead, but of a slightly different color, making it seem like it has been added by the artist, applied to the memory long after the fact. It is not the girl's mask—not as far as she knows, anyway. Next (term number four), there is a sad, sexy, fallen flower, its bulb and stamen twisted upward. It rests at the bottom of an empty expanse of wood-grained plane above it. Finally, on the right, the outline of a toy bunny rabbit looms (term five). Filled in with a wash of blank, creamy white, the bunny shape occupies almost half of the picture.

**No single reading can** be fixed on this frieze of terms. The final effect is more serious than light, more analytical than sentimental, in contrast to the tone that dance recitals and toys usually carry. The bulging bunny shape could easily engulf the flat, gray girl within its stay-puff mass. The yellow rectangular "glass," in contrast, can only cover a small part of her, though it electrifies the segment that it frames—causing her right side to writhe, waver, and radiate with a day-glo pink outline. The fallen flower forms a fragile connection between both sides of the picture, adding a note of advancing time between the girl's youth and the toy's emptiness. The final effect of the large picture is quiet. Criswell has made the past over into pattern—lines, shapes, and colors on a surface—it is the past, contained, within a well-planned pictorial system.

**The juxtapositions in other** pictures, such as *Boy and Girl Baked in a Pie* (2005) ask for a less linear reading than *Second Twirl*. The boy in this picture is larger than the girl, who slightly overlaps his arm. The girl's small and faded face places her at a distance. She steps backward, pulling against the arm she overlaps, binding the two in a strange, but strong, spatial relation. The boy is clothed—he wears a schematic, white suit. The girl is not what one would call "naked"—though all details of flesh are absent. It is more that the figure's clothes have been removed except for socks and Mary Janes, subtly but surely indicated by Criswell's deft outline. The boy's chest is marked off from the lower part of his body by the bottom of a rectangle. The rectangle interrupts the image, suggesting a frame around his head; in this, it provides a clue to Criswell's process of cutting out heads from group class photographs. (Criswell clips the heads of people who were important to her in some way, whether they knew it or not.)

**The rest of the** boy's body, then, one must surmise, has been drawn in. It is what Criswell has added from her imagination. It is more suit than body, with its narrow hips and thin waistband and hands disappearing, too flatly, into wavy equivocal pockets. The expression on the boy's face is much less dutiful than the girl's in *Second Twirl*. It is very much a boy's expression—the mouth slightly ruthless, the eyes intent, and both hovering unanxiously in the jowl-less, efficient symmetry of his face. The boy's stone-shaped teeth fit neatly into the space between his lips. They show without smiling.

### **Boy and Girl Baked in a Pie**

2005

Oil, sheet lead  
and plaster on  
birch panel  
80" x 49" x 1.5"



The girl in *Boy and Girl Baked in a Pie*, as mentioned, takes a step back on an invisible ground. The two figures, from two separate photographs, occupy different spaces, but they do seem to regard each other across the darkness that surrounds them. The overall effect of the picture is somber. The phrase “sexuality before it was understood” comes to mind, or, as Robyn G. Peterson has written, “the biases of gender training.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the boy was somebody’s heartthrob, the girl, a vulnerably ardent admirer; the boy, an object of desire before he had any sense of tenderness, and the girl, an agent giving away her power before she realized she did not have to.

In *Seeing Double* (2006), the head and chest of a girl with a 1950s hairstyle occupies the foreground with a frame beneath her neck that doubles as the sharp, square corners of a 1950s sailor-collar. Her face, neck, and the round part of her collar are dark lead while her arms, like her dress below the sailor collar, are rendered only in outline. They share the hue of the wood, stained a gentle maple color, that functions as the painting’s ground. Hovering behind her, beyond her space—and outside of her consciousness—are two giant bunnies, simply outlined with a sheer white wash. One is turned to face almost forward. The other is in profile, rotated toward the other, as if offering some secret whispered counsel into its ear. It is as if they are spirits commiserating over the young girl’s fate. There is a signifier of intimacy captured in the tiny overlap between the

bunnies’ heads, the one almost nuzzling the other’s cheek. Meanwhile, the imperfect rhyme between the bunnies’ short, withdrawn arms and those of the girl, truncated by the edge of the picture frame, create similarities that bring the disparate figure groups into closer relation. Often, the females in Criswell’s paintings are acting as they are told, dutifully waiting for the energizing spirit within them to be directed and controlled by external structures and rules. To have those rules embodied, in *Seeing Double*, by two big, soft rabbits adds a note of absurdity to the story. The painting makes fun of the whole process, placing ciphers in the directive role, again making a complicated or difficult aspect of a life decorative—contained within an arrangement of shapes.

Though it asks to be read like a language, Criswell’s work conveys something other than straightforward meaning. It has the impact of dreams, at times clear and evident, at others, difficult to be made sense of. To look at her work is to participate in another’s excavation of the past. Criswell’s language of images, objects, and materials is personal. The act of reaching toward something long ago etched into one’s mind is something most of us can relate to: a hairstyle, a collar, a color, or a toy that you couldn’t play with because it always scared you a little—she takes the insignificant seriously, and thus stages the process of exposing people and situations that have left indelible marks on the mind. Criswell pins the important details to a

bright, calm surface where they can’t wriggle away. She counters the lost or confused emotions that might normally accompany memory with humor and absurdity. A work by Lynn Criswell can be simple or complex, showing the ways that the irresolvableness of memory can become something we do not ever decisively figure out, but dwell in.

Elise Archias

Assistant Professor of Art History,  
California State University, Chico

<sup>1</sup>Robyn G. Peterson, “Lynn Criswell,” John Natsoulas Gallery, <http://www.natsoulas.com/html/artists/lynnCriswell/lynnCriswell.html> (accessed November 23, 2008)



### Seeing Double

2006

Oils, sheet lead and plaster on birch panel  
60" x 48" x 1.5"



◀ **La Traviata**

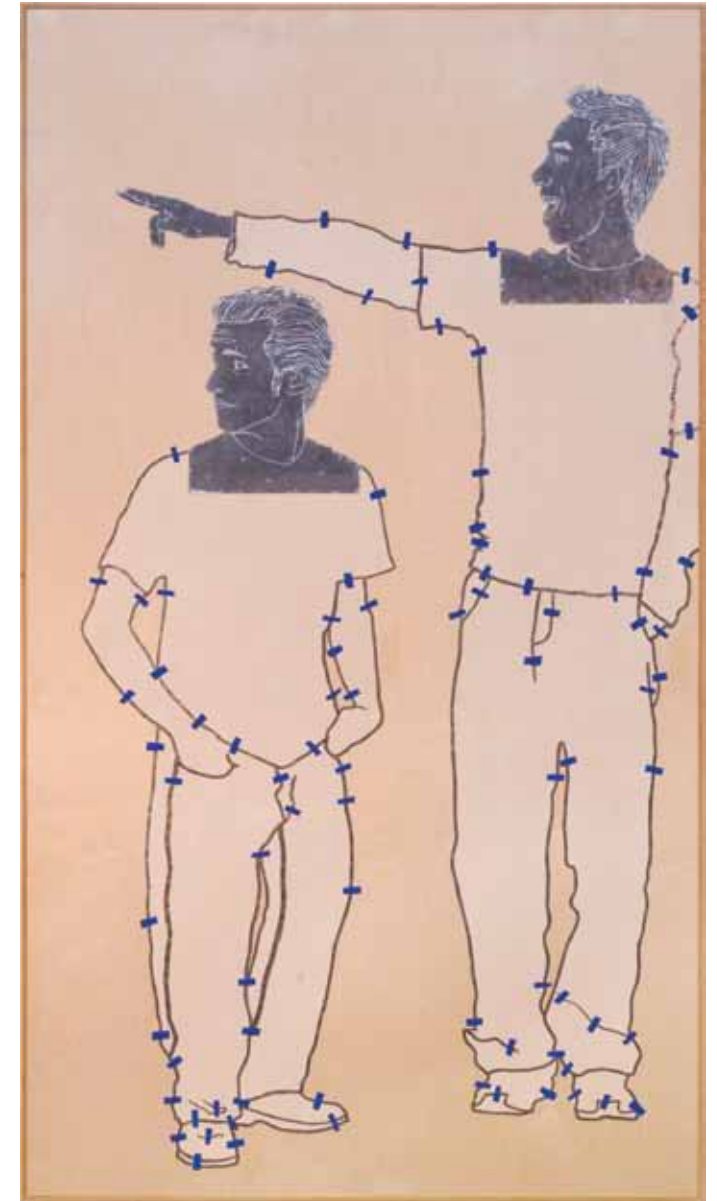
2009

Oils, sheet lead and plaster on birch panels  
60.5" x 64.5" x 1.5"

**Jason & Quinn Post Production** ▶

2009

Oils, sheet lead and plaster on birch panel  
79.5" x 44.5" x 1.5"







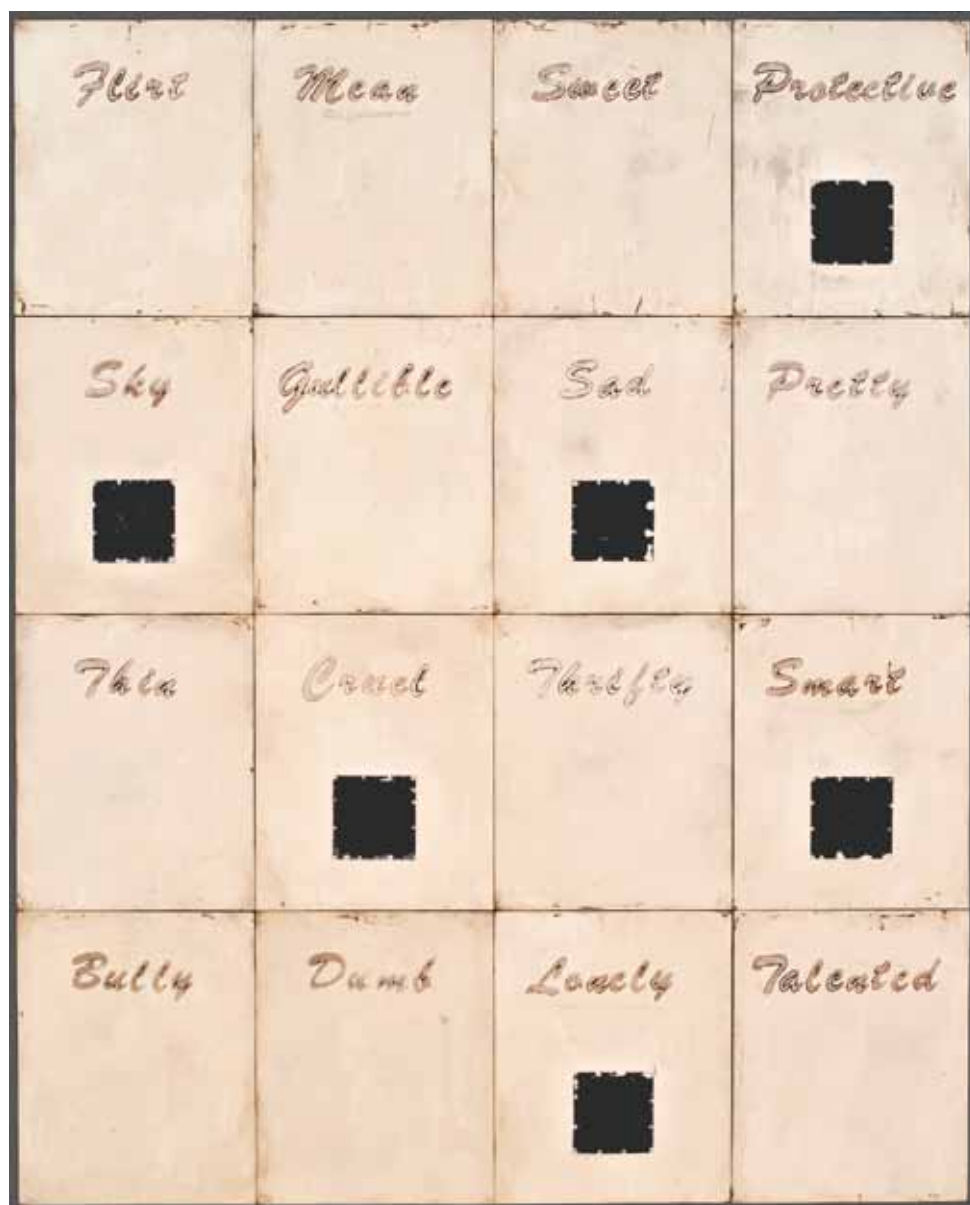
**The Meeting of  
Chicken Boy & Sonya**

2009

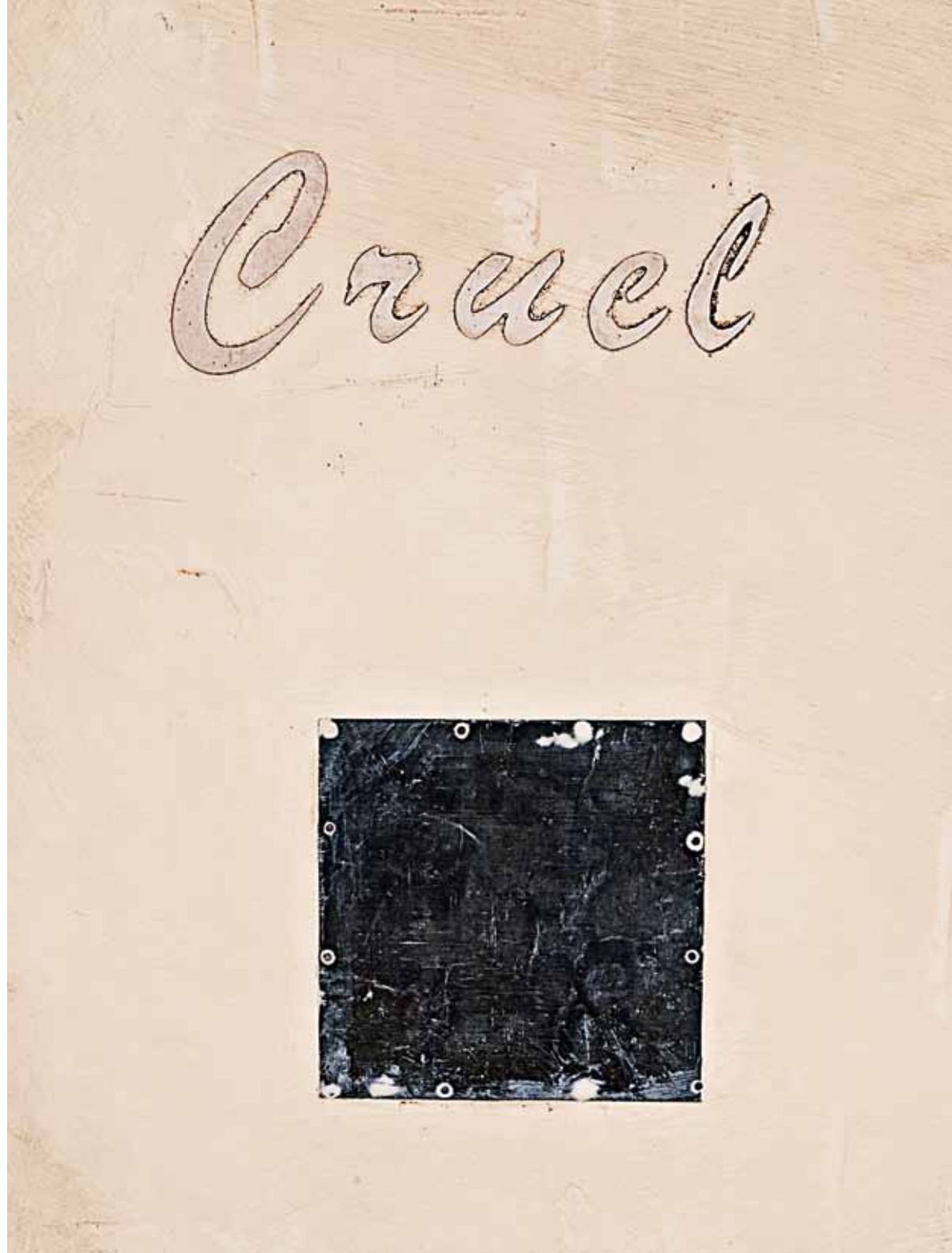
Oils, cast aluminum,  
sheet lead and plaster  
on birch panels  
61" x 64" x 1.5"

**Detail ▶**





**Winners & Losers**  
 2008-09  
 Oils, sheet lead and plaster on birch panels  
 57" x 44.5" x 1.5"  
**Detail ▶**





**Not To Be Trusted**

2008

Oils, sheet lead and  
plaster on birch panels  
66.5" x 48" x 1.25"

◀ Installation view, 2008



◀ **Place**

2008

Oils, sheet lead on birch panel

60" x 60" x 1"

**Ruffled Momento** ▶

2007

Oils, sheet lead on birch panel

60" x 44" x 1.5"

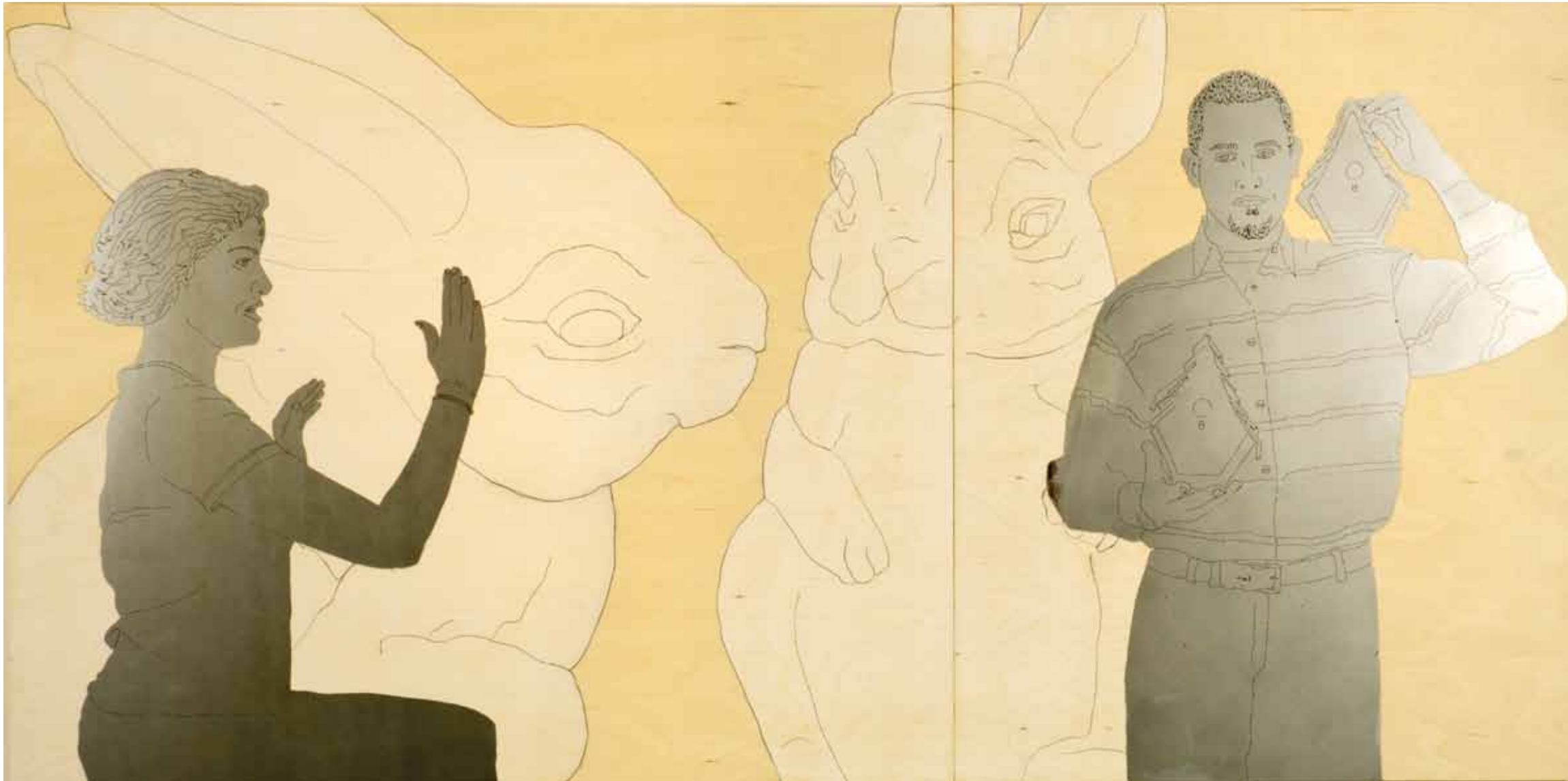




**Jack Robin** Detail  
2008  
Cast aluminum, sheet lead and fabricated steel  
65" x 25" x 14"

Installation view, 2008 ▶





**Silhouette**  
2008  
Oil and sheet steel on birch panels  
48" x 96" x 1.5"



**Agreeable Dialog**

2008, Oils, sheet lead and plaster on birch panels, 43" x 45" x 1.5"



**Favorite Kitty**

2008

Cast bronze & aluminum, sheet lead and fabricated steel  
72" x 24" x 14"



## Biography

### EDUCATION

1981 California State University, Chico, M.A. Degree

### PUBLIC ART COMMISSIONS & RESIDENCIES

- 2009 Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission, Sacramento, CA  
Site: Sacramento International Airport
- 2005 Artist-in-Residency at Kurtz GmbH, Wiebelbach, Germany
- 2003 Art in Public Places Award, State of California  
Capitol East End Project, Sacramento, CA  
Tamara Thomas, Fine Arts Services Inc., Los Angeles, CA
- 1998 Chico Arts Commission, awarded public arts commission, downtown Municipal Building, Chico, CA



### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 "The Perils of Morality," LIMN Gallery, Seattle, WA
- 2008 "Perils of Morality, part one," LIMN Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2007 "Show and Tell," LIMN Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2002 "No Peace For The Inner Child," John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA
- 2000 "The Next Lesson," Redding Museum of Art & History, Redding, CA  
"Personal Iconography," UNI Gallery Of Art, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, Iowa
- 1999 "Parables," Michael Himovitz Gallery, Sacramento, CA
- 1998 "Double Edged Faces," A.I.R. Gallery, Gallery II, New York, New York
- 1997 "New Work," Michael Himovitz Gallery, Sacramento, CA
- 1993 "Recent Sculpture And Paintings On Panels," Michael Himovitz Gallery, Sacramento, CA  
Redding Museum, Redding, CA

### TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 "Kunst und Kultur bei Kurtz" - Art and Culture at Kurtz, Kurtz Holding GbmH Co., Wiebelbach, Germany
- 1994 "Objects and Subjects," Athenaeum Music and Arts Library, La Jolla, CA  
"Black And White In Color," Spectrum Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1985 "Recent Work," Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, Monterey, CA

### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2006 "Bedtime Stories," LIMN Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2004 "Uncrossing XX," LH Horton Gallery, San Joaquin Delta College, Stockton, CA
- 2004 "New Tales To Tell," San Luis Obispo Art Center, San Luis Obispo, CA
- 2000 "Sassy Sexy Sweet Sordid Surreal," Jan Baum Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 1996 "California Art Index #17," Merging One Gallery, Santa Monica, CA
- 1995 "Art & Survival," Vartai Gallery, Vilnius, Lithuania
- 1992 "Discovery! Contemporary California Narration's," American Cultural Center, Brussels, Belgium
- 1990 "California Eccentrics," University of Illinois, Champaign, Illinois  
"New Work," Klabal Gallery, Minneapolis, Minnesota  
"Write On! Letters, Words, And Art," Arizona Museum for Youth, Mesa, AR
- 1985 California "Artists Look At Architecture," TransAmerica Pyramid, San Francisco, CA
- 1984 "3-Dimensions," Fox Fine Arts Center, University of Texas at El Paso, TX  
"San Francisco Art Commission: Celebration Of Form," Ft. Mason, CA
- 1984 "Glassworks," Richard Nelson Gallery, University of California, Davis, CA
- 1981-1984 "Americans In Glass," Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, Wisconsin, Traveled throughout the U.S.A. and Europe.

### SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- Austin Conkey and Michael Smith, San Francisco, CA
- Anne Croco, Bellevue, WA
- Brent and Barry Davenport/Zorthian, San Francisco, CA
- Janet Edson and Don Margolis, Davis, CA
- Francesca Freedman, Palo Alto, CA
- Mark Friedman and Margie Soloman, Sacramento, CA
- Gregory Ghent, San Francisco, CA
- Nonie Greene, San Francisco, CA
- Jimmy Hasson, Granite Bay, CA
- Kincaid and Thrans, Acanthus - Architectural firm, Sacramento, CA
- Carsten Krog, Pres., Teknik, Grindsted, Denmark
- Walter Kurtz, Kurtz Holding GmbH & Co. Kreuzwertheim, Germany
- Bernard Kurtz, Kurtz Holding GmbH & Co. Kreuzwertheim, Germany
- Livingston and Mattesich (Law firm), Sacramento, CA
- Michael Himovitz and Chuck Miller, Sacramento, CA
- Lois Madison, Seattle, WA
- Prohaska and Vargus-Vetter ARTLINKS, New York, NY
- Diane Plumlee, Granite Bay, CA
- Anna Rosella, Seattle, WA
- Melanie and Steve Sievers, Stockton, CA
- James Snidle, San Francisco, CA
- Marianne and Laci Tazlari, Wertheim, Germany
- Jan Spencer, St. Paul, Minnesota
- Janice Stone Thomas, ASID, Sacramento, CA
- Tucker Ellis & West Law firm, Los Angeles, CA
- Lilo and Gunter Weisbrod, Wertheim, Germany



## CATALOGS

- 2005 "Kunst und Kultur bei Kurtz" - Art and Culture at Kurtz, Kurtz Holding GmbH & Co. Wiebelbach, Germany
- 2002 "No Peace For The Inner Child," John Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA
- 1985 "3-Dimensions," Main Gallery, Fox Fine Arts Center, University of Texas at El Paso, Texas
- 1981 "Americans In Glass," Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, Wisconsin

## SELECTED CRITICISM

- JBR/Breuninger, "Kunstwerkstatt bei Kurtz," Fränkische Nachrichten, July 30, 2005
- Hess Harvey, "Three-in-one exhibition at UNI Gallery of Art hits 10 on scale," Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier, September 15, 1999
- Kimi Julian, "Women's Work," Sacramento News and Review, February 4, 1999
- Victoria Dalkey, "Lynn Criswell Looks Back," Sacramento Bee, January 26, 1997
- Glowen, Ron, "Life's Journey," Artweek, October 25, 1990
- Singh, Saunthy, "Defined By Medium," Artweek, April 13, 1985
- French, Christopher, "Continuing The Art-Craft Discourse," Artweek, May 12, 1984
- Simon, Richard, "Here's A Crystal-Clear Example of Glass As An Artistic Medium," The Sacramento Union, May 8, 1984
- Winter, David, "People Who Live In Glass Houses...," Times Tribune, January, 1984



### **She Never Could**

2001, Cast aluminum, sheet lead and wood, 12" x 17" x 12"

**Imprint**

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