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DENISE MARIKA: BODY ACTIONS

Issues of boundaries, barriers, and confinement are central to Denise Marika's work: Her subjects are claustrophobically confined within the frames of her pieces, whether a video monitor or strips of steel. Yet emotionally there are no boundaries; our extreme discomfort when looking at her work is the result of our close identification with her subjects and their actions. And while human figures are contained within the boundaries of the pieces, their nakedness suggests that the barriers between them and the world have been removed.

In the video installation *Ash*, the image of a woman rubbing ash on her naked body is projected onto an uneven landscape of soft grayish rubble contained within a heavy rectilinear steel frame on the floor. For the viewer, the unexpectedly loud and abrasive sound of her hand rubbing against her own skin is uncomfortably visceral. As she gradually covers her skin with ash, her image seems to grow fainter; it becomes harder to distinguish her body from the rubble onto which it is projected, as if her skin no longer offers separation from the external world. Given that ash symbolizes the inevitability of physical decay and death, as well as mourning and penance, we are left to wonder if her intent is to anoint or to erase herself.



Denise Marika, *Ash*, video floor projection on ash, steel frame, 75 x 63 x 4", 2004.



Denise Marika, *Gnaw*, video, flat screen monitor, 12 3/4 x 11 1/2 x 2 1/2", 2005.

Gnaw is starkly presented on a video monitor mounted to the wall; what one first sees is a frame filled with the image of dirt. That this is a barrier is revealed as Marika breaks through the dirt from behind by deliberately biting, chewing, and swallowing. Bite by bite her disoriented face is revealed, upside down and at an angle to the rectilinear screen. This image is difficult to watch, and the sound of her chewing is as harsh and difficult as the image itself. But by the end of the piece she has stopped chewing, and just her eyes move. For all her painful effort, she has exposed, not freed herself.

While the video installations explore issues of boundaries and confinement in terms of a lone person, two installations of stills from previous video pieces explore these issues in terms of a psychological, emotional, and physical conflict between men and women. The seven narrow, vertical, steel channels of *Battle* frame disconnected slices of a nude man and woman engaged in physical battle. The colors and the images reference Greek vases from the sixth century B.C.; while slightly larger than life-size, these images are not heroic. The three horizontal steel frames of *Hug* aggressively contain images of a man's arms wrapped around a woman's chest from behind. Their relationship seems to vary from frame to frame, from holding to pushing, from embrace to antagonism. Echoing the other pieces in the exhibit, these figures feel trapped not just within the physical confines of the piece but within the boundaries of their bodies, minds, and emotions as they repeat their situations ceaselessly across time. We stand by helplessly, connecting intimately with the images on a deeply emotional level yet always remaining physically outside of the frame. *Mary Bucci McCoy*