

ARTFORUM

SUMMER 1996

REVIEWS



Portia Munson, *The Garden*, 1996, mixed media. Installation view.

PORTIA MUNSON

YOSHII GALLERY

It was on the one-year anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing that I returned to Portia Munson's recent installation—a re-creation of a child's bedroom that colonized every inch of the gallery's exhibition space. That day it resonated eerily with the barrage of television images showing the aftermath of the terrorist act that destroyed a day-care center: parents and grandparents stood in bedrooms that seemed caught in a time warp, furniture and stuffed animals arranged as if their occupants would return at any moment. Munson's installation echoed these chilling rooms: around a child's bed were arranged small armchairs, a settee, and dressing tables, all with flowered upholstery; the room itself scattered with throw rugs and crammed with flowered cushions, bouquets of fake flowers, knickknacks, padded hangers, empty heart-shaped Valentine's Day boxes, and hundreds of small stuffed animals—mostly bunnies. A tent of stitched-together floral housedresses comprised the room's walls and ceiling, this patchwork of garments creating a metaphor for maternal surveillance. Sewn to the surfaces of Munson's pink-fringed throw rugs were flayed toy bunnies, their button eyes peering mournfully from beneath a layer of dirt tracked in by visitors to the show.

That Mike Kelley has "done" stuffed animals before rendered this installation only slightly less compelling. Munson's toy-filled room was evocative less of childhood fears and traumas than of the hysterical parental desire to prevent the child who rules over this domain from growing up.

Beds and chairs were covered so completely with stuffed animals that to sit down one had to perch uncomfortably on a surface shared with a flock of small inhabitants. There was something ominous about this claustrophobic stage set: the plethora of bunnies, symbols of fecundity, brought to mind the notorious case of Diane Downs, who despite having shot her own children soon became pregnant again—a creepy coincidence of death and germination. As if to exacerbate this doom-laden atmosphere, Munson had created an altar of sorts, a pair of candles before a garlanded, gabled vitrine filled with bunnies, their faces smashed against the glass. With perverse humor, Munson seemed to be offering those looking for consolation a mirror image of their anxiety.

Munson called this installation *The Garden*, a title that certainly echoed the predominant floral motif, as well as the video loop of a fertile garden that was reflected in a corner mirror. In the lurid colors of a television on the fritz, butterflies fluttered among budding time-lapse flowers and sprouting mushrooms. This video was at once an ironic distillation of the bedroom's intensely unnatural life, and a kind of corny redemption of the unhealthy desires and deep-seated fears it housed. If Kelley's stuffed animals embody a profound sense of disillusionment—the realization that innocence never existed and that childhood experience can be reduced to a collection of tawdry objects—Munson's bespeak a femininized nervous breakdown, as her little pink bunnies proliferate fruitlessly to dam the flood of loss.

—Faye Hirsch