

Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman at Vanderbilt

by Susan Knowles

Last year, Vanderbilt University's first artists-in-residence Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman conducted an art "boot camp" at the school's Peabody College. They were invited by Chancellor Gordon Gee and Dr. Constance Gee, an arts advocate who teaches art in public policy at Peabody and holds an MFA in painting from Pratt Institute, after Chicago delivered one of the first talks in the Chancellor's prestigious lecture series, which, in 2005-06, included Laurie Anderson, Lucy Lippard, Peter Eisenman, and Al Gore.

Chicago, whose ground-breaking exhibition/installation project, *The Dinner Party*, will be permanently housed at the Brooklyn Museum beginning this year, is highly regarded for her innovative art practices related to the Women's Movement of the early 1970s. Since 1999, she has been involved in a number of short-term university teaching situations that continue to engage unexamined or marginalized subject matter. At Vanderbilt, she and Woodman, a photographer who is also her husband, created an atmosphere designed to foment artistic innovation and prompt a finished body of work from each of the selected participants—12 Vanderbilt students and an equal number of artists chosen from the Nashville community. The range of age and experience—from freshman non-art majors to new art school graduates to artists in their 50s and 60s—made the learning (and teaching) curve a steep one.

Together with Vanderbilt art historian Vivien Green Fryd, Chicago and Woodman initiated

a process whereby each of the seven men and 17 women could arrive at a theme and direction for his or her work. The pedagogical method was based on the meeting-circle dynamics of consciousness-raising, in which everyone, in turn, speaks their own conscience and, at times, offers praise and criticism. Fryd also led seminars on issues in contemporary art tied to what was emerging in the group sessions. Woodman focused on the physical drawbacks of their host building, a 1925 McKim, Mead, and White structure originally designed as a museum, then adapted for use as art studios before being deserted for new state-of-the-art facilities. Finding room for 24 installation projects in threadbare quarters presented a challenge. So too did the consciousness-raising process facilitated by Chicago, which netted an astonishing variety of "identity" issues ranging from gender to religion, mental and physical health, and political and social justice.

The result of the semester-long effort was a three-week exhibition, "Evoke, Invoke, Provoke: A Multi-media Project of Discovery." The first large gallery contained the work of five women. Most striking was a wall of eight canvases depicting the same young Japanese woman in different outfits, her slightly oversized head perched at the same angle in each painting, like a string of paper-dolls. Ph.D. math student Fumiko Futamura outfitted herself in the garb of a straight-A model student, a Harajuku fashionista, an Asian sex fantasy, a Banana (yellow on the outside,



Top: Clay Carroll, *[White Space] in Work Space* (interior view). Above: Installation view of Nöelle Janka, *Decrepit at 21*; Kristina Carrillo-Bucaram, *Reaching into Thin Air: A Family of Emotions Created by a Family of Things*; and Fumiko Futamura, *Self-Portraits as Other People's Preconceptions*.

white on the inside), and four other personas defined by Japanese or American culture. In doing so, Futamura examined subtle but damaging expectations and assumptions associated with being Japanese-American.

Vanderbilt undergraduate Kristina Carrillo-Bucaram arranged life-sized coiled-clay vessels representing members of her family, including the dog. Although differentiated by height, by curved or straight sides (women and men), by glaze or no glaze, and the positions of their hands, they all appeared phallic. Carrillo-Bucaram's own tower-like form reached "into thin air," as her statement said, for answers to a male-dominated family power struggle.

In Nöelle Janka's *Decrepit at 21*, a large mound of wax encased numerous prescription bottles, cigarette packs, empty Diet Coke

cans, and a pair of mannequin legs and arms. Suspended above were a bouquet of flowers, a pair of high heels, some running shoes, and a corkscrew. Janka's statement refers to "invisible" illnesses such as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Uneven Hips, Sinusitis, Anxiety, and Depression, as well as misdiagnosis, over-diagnosis, and trial-and-error solutions. Even though the art-making was rudimentary, the installation was affecting and clear.

Several participants had rooms to themselves. *Anonymous 13*, music student Eric Allen Smith's brilliant-red shoebox of a space held a gallery of photographs and interviews about AIDS. The photographs document Smith's friends reading the words of people publicly interviewed about HIV. The color shots seemed dreamy and wistful, a poignant contrast to the real-life stories below. An impressive



Clockwise from above: Erika Johnson, *Something Borrowed* (detail). JoEl Logiudice, *Releasing the Rage*. Amanda Dillingham, *Consecrated Appetites* (video still).

multi-track sound component combining the recorded interviews with a 24-part chorale wafted through the space like echoes in a cathedral.

Art student Clay Carroll created a successful conceptual piece by making his own white cube in the middle of a shared workspace. Visitors were asked to don shoe coverings before entering the pristine cubicle. Inside [*White Space*] in *Work Space*, white shelves in separate wall displays held neatly stacked white T-shirts (and one orange one), a rack of white spades (interrupted by orange), and white fluorescent lights (one painted orange). Carroll examined both his need for control and its disruptive effect.

A former office area was transformed into four deep narrow spaces for video works. In a brilliant stroke, Amanda Dillingham, a recent graduate of Watkins College of Art in Nashville, covered a wall with communion wafers on which she showed a

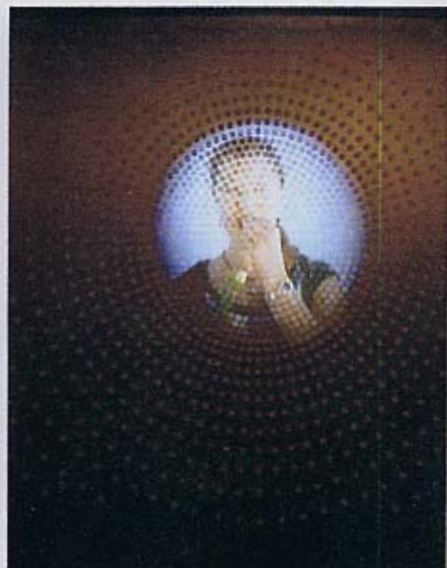
video of a woman eating flowers. Her statement discusses proscriptions against food and women in the early Church, eating disorders, and the hierarchy of the honeybee. By positing the queen-nurturing model as an alternative to the Catholic patriarchy, Dillingham opened a discussion around issues of women and food, both real and metaphorical. Derek Gibson, another Watkins graduate, created a personal homage to housework—a nod to Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's 1972 *Womanhouse* project. Inside a mausoleum-like space bearing the names of 100 influential women, Gibson screened his own performance as a tie-wearing domestic on three flat-screen monitors. *You Want a Piece of Me?*, a video loop by Watkins professor Jason Driskill, referenced sexual imagery in advertising and the increasing objectification of the male body. The fast-paced, well-edited piece challenged viewers to look at

Driskill's youthful, attractive body in a selection of stereotyped poses. In Nashville artist JoEl Logiudice's chapel-style installation, black walls held two cross-like forms composed of red, white, and black screws, tips pointing out. A handwritten list of statistics on sexual abuse covered the end wall. It was sobering to read that most instances of abuse occur between people who know each other while standing in a narrow room between points of metal.

An installation by Nashville artist Laura Chenicek was similarly disturbing, with artworks embodying the ways in which society devalues and marginalizes the individual "voice." After creating six acrylic-on-canvas landscapes, Chenicek slashed, turned inside out, partially covered over, amended in black and white, and otherwise altered her works in a powerful, and probably painful, exploration of negation.

A double-sided block of wooden lockers, where generations of students once stored art supplies, allowed Nashville artist Ben Vitualla to represent two parts of his experience. On one side were stencil-like painted scenes from his childhood in the Philippines; on the other, starkly rendered in black and white and interrupted by random patches of color, the faces of his relatives in this country. A row of targets with airplanes above them added a footnote about living in the shadow of the American military and the cultural fracture it creates.

Alex Krusel also dealt with American imperialism. His eye-catching screenprints on clear overlay were affixed over a background of woodblock prints drawn from early world maps. The screened images included the corporate logos of McDonalds, Exxon, GE, Wal-Mart,



Coca-Cola, and Mickey Mouse, as well as crossed-out profiles of more than 20 Latin American victims of "regime change" and the shadows of bombers flying over Central and South American countries where the United States has fostered conflict.

Erika Johnson's elegant and carefully crafted *Something Borrowed* was a larger-than-life wire cage containing family photographs, bird's nests made of wire, and large thorn-covered branches. Taking up the issue of gay marriage, Johnson used apt symbolism to state an equivocal position: desiring the recognition of society and the protection of civil rights while resisting the intrusion of local government into private life.

Other projects looked at divorce, religious beliefs, non-traditional relationships, poisonous female friendships, third world economic exploitation, the ruination of idyllic societies, corporate greed, and the war in Iraq. Working up until the final day, freshman Lindsay Baker—a future curator no doubt—constructed a model of the completed show with detailed mock-ups of every installation.