

JULIA RANDALL: BLOWN

Essay by Geoffrey Young

“the manifold meanings of every sensuous fact” Emerson

Don't be too quick to say what things are. Mull over what's before you. Engage with detail. Study the color, shape, transparency and illusion (representation is endlessly dramatic, endlessly shamanistic). Do Julia Randall's things speak of upsetting physiological, nay, microscopic organic relations? Do they show us integument, muscle, organs, fleshly matter, as if borrowed from images in Scientific American? Or do they suddenly appear as stunningly banal, as shockingly sensuous, as nothing other than the bubbles they are?

But we know they're not flesh, and we know they're not bubbles.

The teethmarks that seal air within the taut skin of the bubble become evidence, proof of what we're looking at. Julia chews, blows, then seals the deal with lips and teeth. Different flavors provide different colors, just as different quantities allow for different sizes. Selecting a “subject,” she then sets about doing the impossible: drawing the volumetric fact of a specific bubble with nothing more than the honesty of direct perception and colored pencils.

Bubble-gum has never had its laureate before, and now it does. The magic of Randall's touch and tonal discrimination conveys their “light as air” interiors, just as her exacting eye captures their damp exteriors, wet with saliva. Blown up to epic proportions, Randall's bubbles exist in a disturbing relationship to our own bodies. Though our mouths have had nothing to do with these pictures, still, there's something sticky about the memory of gum. We feel connected to them, as if we too could have provided the “subjects,” tasted the flavors.

When Bruce Nauman found himself bouncing balls off a wall in his studio, he realized that this was what “an artist” did, so he made a video-tape of it. Julia Randall's bubbles are the

acknowledgement of the same realization. She chews, she blows bubbles, she draws them. From such banal facts, wondrous things occur. In the 18th Century, Chardin painted a boy blowing a bubble through a thin straw, one of a number of paintings that documented what people just did, when left alone to themselves. Randall takes the Chardin challenge a step further; isolating the bubble independent of that which made it, she zeroes in, finding a way to convey the luscious, absurdly physical reality of something whose significance is otherwise dubious. And that's what I love about these works. They could so easily Not Exist, if the artist hadn't invested them and their reality with all of her attention and skill.

We are struck by the massive sculptural quality of some images, and are reminded that Oldenburg, if they were his, might have one cast 40 feet tall, and placed in a marquee setting. Other drawings seem alien, possessed of a consciousness we might be able to engage, but only if we were primordial ooze. In each case we sense the acute observation necessary to see the thing in the first place, and the remarkable skills the artist possesses with which she brings each work into being. Seductive and disconcerting, their hyper-real surfaces invite and repel. What are we to do with things this bright, this faithful, this oneirically present? And what of that air—that human breath—trapped inside, and for how long? A bubble must burst, almost by definition. Evanescence (the fragile present in the midst of transformation) is a constant theme in the long history of the still life, a tradition that undergirds Randall's studious exploration of the actual.

If you know San Luis Obispo, maybe you've been to Gum Alley? Gross and gorgeous, its walls are dense with the chewed gum that people stick on them, walls which photographers periodically document. Not bubbles, of course, but a bizarre material expanse nonetheless. And fifteen years ago the sculptor Michelle Segre worked with gum's elasticity for a spell, imagining it as delicately stretchable, effortlessly shapeable. But no one has drawn gum with the concern to make us feel the elusive nature of the air trapped inside (the *pneuma*, the wonder), the way Julia Randall has, nor explored the speckled stretch-marks and swollen surfaces with a mind to commenting on our own corporeal entities. A great bubble is one

whose skin is stretched to the breaking point, her drawings seem to say. One whose life is about to end. Pop.

But we know they're not flesh, and we know they're not bubbles.

What we're seeing is art. The elusive apprehension that something extraordinary is right before our eyes hits us. Exquisite is the word, then, and awe is the feeling. Julia Randall's work on paper is for all time.

