

## THE ARTS

# Patterns Recognition

M. Jordan Tierney Reconfigures Objects And Ideas In Her Mixed-Media Works

by Deborah McLeod

**Bricolage: Amalgamated Disintegration** | At Resurgam Gallery through May 27



BRIC-A-BRAC: Detail Of M. Jordan Tierney's "Ever Thus."

NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH CRITIC John Ruskin called it the Age of Ueber, describing the Victorians' self-aware skepticism about faith and the future. Maybe his descriptive reliance on color and mood helps us to see M. Jordan Tierney's new show at Resurgam Gallery, *Bricolage: Amalgamated Disintegration*, as somewhat laced to the era. It could also be the sumptuous visual decadence of Tierney's tactile surfaces, the coy, lush, vaulting ornamentation of turn-of-the-century style gathering into its folds. It might also include the literary period's love/hate fascination with science, society, politics, fashion, imperialism, individualism, commerce, and death.

Then, too, there is some hard, defiant evidence of Dadaism, another influence that saturates Tierney's collaged constructions. Those little messages divined and clipped from the newspaper that, once isolated, can be read like settled tea leaves. Freed of the confines and expectations of their original context they incline toward entirely different prophetic typologies. And in another Dadaist tradition, cutouts from magazines, watching eyes, massed floating heads, and gesturing figures indicate the human condition in a media-supremacy culture.

Through the introduction of photomontage and the desecration of conventional icons, Dadaism was originally a hostile takeover of any remaining vestiges of the Victorian standard. So it is interesting to consider in Tierney's imagery those two polarities as bedfellows. At least in America, time heals all adversarial wounds.

Tierney constructs her tableaux with several visual devices that are particularly her own. For years she has used the translucent, skin-colored tissue of dress patterns. Easily vulnerable to careless handling, these sheer diagrams whisper their dressmaker instructions with small printed words placed at crucial points along their margins. Pulled from small paper packets they can manipulate their compact, monastic flatness into a shape that will enfold and re-create a human form. These diagrams address skepticism by explaining the mundane--through their advice to cut and fold and dart--and through the metaphysical, promising something in a third dimension that might only be comprehended in one plane, walking each consecutive trusting seamstress through the construction process step by step. Tierney cuts, stretches, crumples, and pastes a pattern's arm or bodice or collar, complete with its instructions, along the ridge of a cemetery hill or flowing from a furrowed crevice, or as the striations of tree bark.

When she does this the pattern's small instructions seem to emanate from the earth: "cut along lines," "gather here," "arm." The instructions assume altogether different meanings.

Another of Tierney's stratagems is to import regulated systems into the collage of irrational dream imagery. Sometimes they are game boards that suggest rules of engagement and strategy, other times they are counting

or listing devices like the small encrypted key tags that show up here and there in her work. These key tags are most overtly present in "Nine," a highly systematized piece repeating the artist's own existential fingerprints. Why not 10, though? Besides the fact that it would blow the geometry of the work, possessing only nine fingers is full of both sinister and noble literary precedence. The most wonderful story of heroic amputation stems from a Chinese belief that the index finger of the favored hand is the body part connected to appetite.

Appetite is, in fact, a repeated theme in Tierney's work. Both "Home on the Range" and "Rapacious" have a great deal to do with insatiable American appetites. Spillages of manna as handbags and diamonds and totems of tires address appetite as a motif in these two works. The front window installation, "Short Term Planning," plunges in that direction, too, with mounds of shattered china plates trashed beneath a hovering wrecking ball.

A number of works in the show are set up as triptychs. Like dress patterns that are flat but propose awaiting dimension, diptychs and triptychs offer the same corporeal anticipation. They look like they could fold and become altarpieces or books, which was both forms' original liturgical function. The diptych "Bludgeonism" has a male and female side to its dichotomy. A blackened, turned chair leg attached to the left panel represents furnished formalism. It could just as effectively function as a merciless scepter or a menacing weapon. Across the page is an image less certainly perceivable. Is it an opened garment, a cleft area of bleeding flesh, or an enclosure that previously preserved a belief? It's an elegant and unnerving piece.

*Bricolage* is a French term for constructing something from whatever materials happen to be at hand. Tierney retains that serendipity as a guiding principle, and allows calculated happenstance to thrive as the principal wisdom of her work. There is an auspicious, extrapolative character to all of it. When diviners forecast, they gather objects together on a surface and draw conclusions from the interchange. Random and specific are generally considered opposite, but not necessarily during divination, when they begin to speak, resolve, and answer each other and ultimately the umber questions of the supplicant.

© 2007 Baltimore City Paper