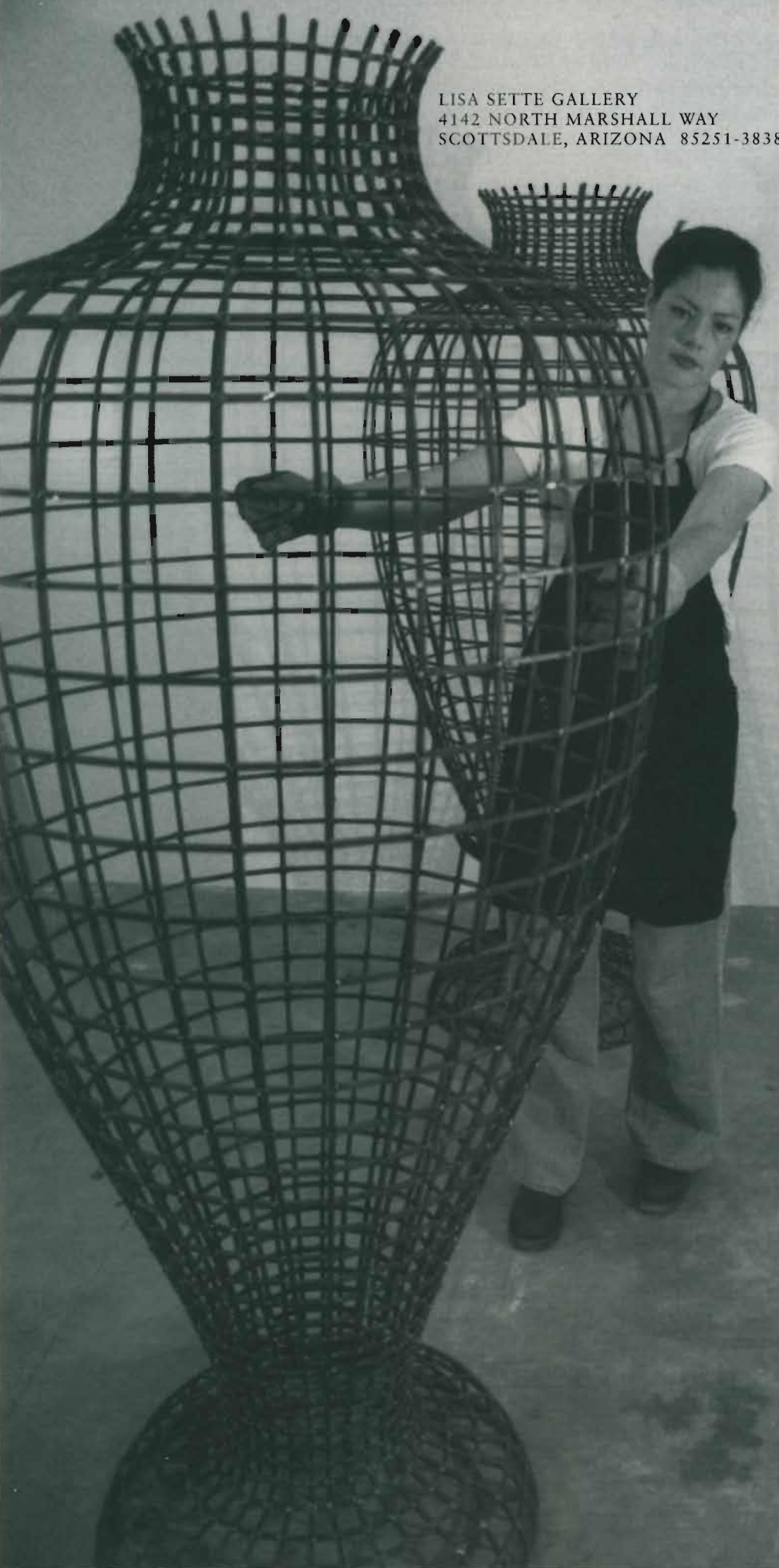


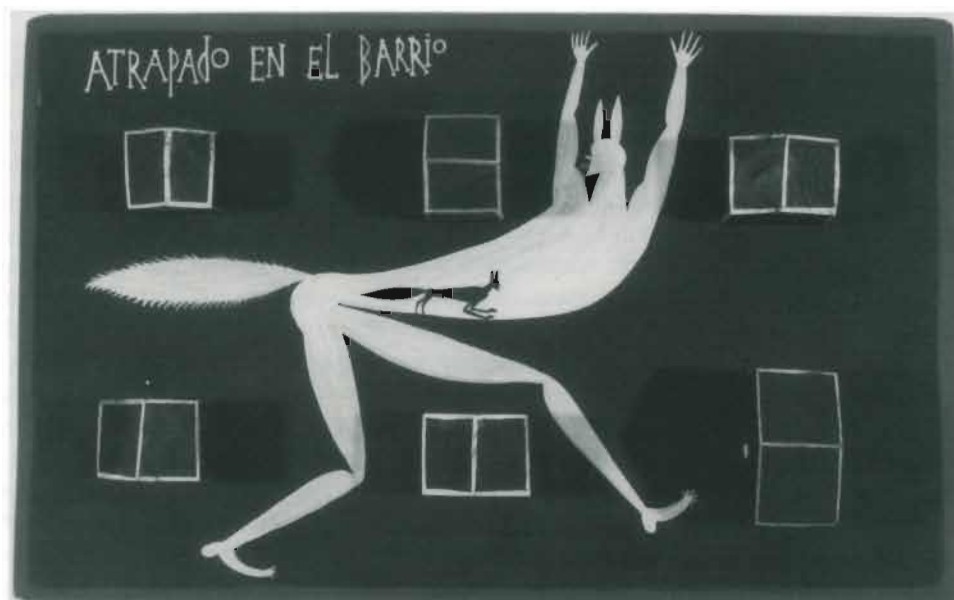
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LISA SETTE GALLERY NEWSLETTER

Volume 5, 1998/1999



Jose Bedia, *Atrapado en el Barrio*, 1997, acrylic, conte, mixed media on wood, 11" x 17 3/4" x 3 1/4"

The mixed media offerings of Jose Bedia emerge from a world rich with belief. The beings he represents likely entered human consciousness millennia ago during ritual ceremonies among the Yoruba and Kongo peoples in west Africa. Their names often come from the festival calendar of the Roman Catholic church. He gives them forms that recall the figures painted on Greek ceramics from the days of epic myth or by North American Indians on buffalo hides and rock walls.

Although Bedia's genealogy leads back to Spain, the daily experience of what Castro once famously defined as a Latin-African country shaped his world view. The artist was born in Havana just after revolution and trained in the School of Art of San Alejandro and the Superior Institute of Art. His formal training essentially followed the European tradition, with a bit of modernism from Cuban pioneers, other Latin American nations, and even the United States added in. Bedia's formal training, however, accounts for only one small element of his powerful individual vision.

European aesthetics play a major role in shaping our New World, but indigenous, African and Asian traditions also regulate the rhythms of our lives. Bedia doesn't simply borrow visually interesting elements from these non-European, "primitive" peoples, he uses elements which already have a given meaning and renews their significance within contemporary culture.

He seeks to employ "elements that contain a force at the level of universal symbol" in his work. Still, tracing the origins of the symbols he selects opens an alternative iconography that reveals the multiple sources of Pan-American culture.

The sticks on the floor of one of his installations are not easy references to nature, they are *garabatos* that generations of Cuban travelers have used to open paths before them. The simple iron machete, drawn, painted, or appended to an installation, instantly recalls the laborers of his nation's cane fields. It is also a manifestation of the powerful Santeria god, or *orisha*, named Oggun who rules both iron and the farmers and warriors who use it in their work.

Bedia's updated synthesis of the Caribbean's spiritual traditions helped renew contemporary Cuban art when they appeared in Havana's landmark Volume 1 show in 1980. He had already established his signature style. His strongly outlined figures had first appeared in posters that attracted visitors to earlier efforts by the "Six New Artists" featured in Volume 1. Ironically, a doctrinaire University official canceled the group's first planned show because he thought it focused on the "unpleasantness of our reality." To the contrary, the artist's work seems to tap the very roots that have sustained Cuban culture for five centuries.

Bedia's fertile mixture of sources and inspirations unites epochs, crosses cultures, and ignores boundaries, updating the richness and depth of the New World's ethnic mix. His deeply felt drawings and installations emphasize the Americas' potential for constant innovation and remind us that the "primitive" is at least as relevant to our identities as the airplane, the skyscraper, or the automobile.

K. Mitchell Snow

NOT JUST PLAYING AROUND: DAVID LEVINTHAL'S BARBIE SERIES

Her face and body have launched over 110,000 website references. Her footwear collection leaves Imelda Marcos lusting in the dust. She's the American cultural icon that can honestly boast of more permutations than the Blessed Virgin Mary. And now she's the star of artist David Levinthal's latest photographic series: Barbie Millicent Roberts—or as she's affectionately called by millions of pre-pubescent fans and hardcore adult collectors alike—Barbie.

Better known for subtly grappling with hair-trigger sociological issues and sabotaging long-cherished cultural myths, Levinthal veers ever so slightly from his usual jaw-jarring themes in this most recent work; his latest undertaking casts him as the Irving Penn of the doll world. However, to echo the prescient words of one reviewer, "We strongly suspect that when Levinthal gets through with her, Barbie will be anything but vacuous."

The subject of Levinthal's most current series was first introduced to the American public in February, 1959 at a toy fair held in New York. Depending on which version of Barbie historical lore you want to believe, Barbie was the brainchild of Ruth and Elliot Handler, co-founders of Mattel Toys. After a trip to Europe, Ruth is said to have returned with a Lilli doll, a rather lurid German prototype produced in the mid-1950's, and a burning vision to create a semi-sophisticated female role model of Lilliputian proportions for girls like her daughter Barbara (after whom the 11-1/2" toy fashion model/homemaker/Renaissance teenager is named).

Lilli, however, was hardly the role-model type, having been inspired by a quasi-pornographic German cartoon character whose risqué antics could be caught in the German newspaper *Bild*. Her usual attire was revealing lingerie, heavy eye make-up, pouty lips and little else. The strumpet look was jettisoned in a Mattel make-over and Barbie was born, sporting a figure and breasts (a toy world-first) that have no basis in reality. Her original sideways glance and somewhat overly done make-up, considered a bit too come-hither, were surgically removed in the early 60's, though very little else has changed—other than her seemingly infinite costumes—through the intervening years. If the cultural truth be told, Barbie became and still is an important part of the socialization, not to mention fantasy life, of several generations of American females.

The Barbies that David Levinthal has chosen to immortalize in his 20 x 24-inch Polaroids, which have also been turned into a book entitled *Barbie Millicent Roberts: An Original*, date primarily from the early 60's through the mid-1970's. The artist borrowed his mini-models from Peter McGovern, an avid Barbie collector whose only stipulation to lending the dolls was having them handled by Laura Meisner, a doll dress designer and knowledgeable fellow collector. "Laura is an absolutely wonderful stylist," says Levinthal. "On the first day of shooting, she brought out a miniature steamer and started steaming the doll clothes and combing out the hair. I was delighted to use her because, frankly, some of these dolls are worth more than ten thousand dollars—I didn't want to be responsible for twisting and turning them."

According to the artist, using Barbie for subject matter was much trickier than it appears: "Years ago, I had done some photographs with Barbie and I was always struck by the fact that you couldn't really subsume the Barbie-ness of the figure, in other words, that you really couldn't make her anything other than Barbie. One of the things that intrigued me about this series was that I was taking that Barbie-ness and using it as a positive attribute; I began photographing Barbie as if she were Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face*."

Levinthal places the glamorous dolls dressed in various en vogue outfits (all of which are, by the way, pristine originals) against historically accurate backdrops that smack of the Happening



David Levinthal, *Untitled (Barbie Series 15)*, 1997-98, polaroid, 24" x 20"

Sixties and Swinging Seventies. Before undertaking the project, the artist meticulously researched the fashion photography of the time period during which Barbie was born and raised by thousands of doll devotees. Moody monochromatic sets, funky fake water-inspired backdrops, heavily saturated color teetering on the edge of underexposure, an overly warm color cast, shadowy directional lighting, surreal close-ups and dramatic cropping—all are a part of the visual lexicon Levinthal has drawn upon to place Barbie in the context in which she quickly became an enduring American image of femininity.

Levinthal is no stranger to photographically capturing, deconstructing and re-interpreting icons, an endeavor he's successfully engaged in for over twenty-five years. The artist-photographer, whose museum credits seem as numerous as Barbie accessories, has forged an illustrious career from dealing with prickly issues through the masterful use of small-scale tableaux carefully concocted with seemingly innocuous miniature figures and toys, many of which are a part of his own personal collection.

In "Mein Kampf," Levinthal revisited the horrors of the Holocaust through chilling Nazi death camp vignettes starring German toy model remakes of SS officers, including das Fuhrer himself, originally made for German children during World War II. Racism reared its ugly, but darkly seductive, head in his "Blackface" series. This group of elegantly photographed close-ups featured stereotypically racist memorabilia—referred to by collectors as "Negrobilia"—caricatures that reached their heyday of popularity in the pre-politically correct 1930's and 40's. (The series was apparently so unsettling that Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, which had curated the now legendary Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition, canceled a show of the work.)

And the seamier side of sexuality was explored in Levinthal's "Desire" series, in which he posed Japanese-produced sex dolls that less than shyly suggest all manner of S&M activities. "They are called adult sexy fantasy figures," explains Levinthal. "They're made in Japan, but they're really Caucasian women in bondage. You actually have to put these figures together. I once had Japanese students over and they were translating the Japanese on the back of the little plastic bag; they were laughing because the words were something like 'Not Suitable for Children Under the Age of 18.'"

Levinthal politely denies that there is any hidden subtext concerning gender roles in his Barbie series. "I think the photographs are of a period [the 1960's and 70's] and are represented in a kind of nostalgic, and very beautiful, way," he explains. "There's an inherent critical discourse that goes on just because of who the dolls are and what they represent. I generally find that I prefer subtlety in my work, even though sometimes people might say my work is not quite so subtle. Rather than focus so much attention on that kind of discourse," he adds, "I'd like to let it sort of emanate from the work in an almost subconscious way. The overt tends to wear thin very quickly."

Kathleen Vanesian



Luis Gonzalez Palma, *Hablo con Labios de Silencio (I Speak with Lips of Silence)*, 1998, photolithograph, 35" x 36"



William Wegman, detail, *Jack of Diamonds*, 1998, photolithograph, 25 1/2" x 20"

NOTE: Front cover image: Kim Cridler, works in progress. The photographs and essays from this publication may not be reproduced in any form without the permission of Lisa Sette Gallery.

MONUMENTS TO MEMORY: THE SCULPTURE OF KIM CRIDLER

A casual visit to the studio of sculptor Kim Cridler can easily pitch the unsuspecting visitor into down-the-rabbit-hole reveries. As you enter the studio's perfectly tidy, all-white interior, an 8-foot, steel-framed tea spout emerges from one studio wall, its airy intersections sheathed with hog intestine (sausage casing that becomes papery when stretched and dried). Each juncture of its imposing grid structure is punctuated by fussy metal bows. In a far corner, the wrought-iron skeleton of an enormous, two-handled urn looms, its neo-classical severity softened by steel swags of leaves and flowers fleshed out by a film of gossamer casing. Four giant, steel-framed crystal pendants—the shape of glittery lucas for antique chandeliers—dangle from a nearby wall, as two matching 6-foot vases stand watch over a smaller urn peppered with foil-backed rhinestones.

These monolithic refugees from some turn-of-the-century parlor are more than just reminders of the fashionable inevitability of recycled Greek and Roman decorative forms, more than a *mise-en-scène* from some Jeffersonian dream. And they are definitely more than steroid-induced, 3-D computer renderings of neo-classical ornamentation. They are, for Kim Cridler, who was raised on a Midwestern farm, totems of family history, of archetypal memories attached to simple, everyday forms we, as Americans, completely look past because of their blinding ubiquity.

"I grew up on a farm in Michigan and was trained as a jeweler," Cridler says of her background and its relationship to her current work. "I was making small, raised hollow ware, like that made by Paul Revere, and was fascinated with the history of that kind of work, which carried a lot of sentimental value in families. I learned about my family through these types of things; they had a value that surpassed the utilitarian. The reason they were important was the family connections, the memories and the kind of sentiment that was invested in the objects, not how they were used. I got away from making useful objects, and started making objects that were stripped down, torn apart, because I wanted to get to the emotional charge these things carry."

The monumental scale of Cridler's sculpture, when coupled with the artist's signature use of a bare-bones grid structure and the pairing of discordant materials within her structures, lifts her work out of the purely iconic into the realm of the iconoclastic. Because of her imaginative, unrestrained approach, comfortably familiar forms are elevated from the merely ornamental to the architectonic, lyrical paeans to the associative powers of their very shapes. But the notion of the monumental, inherently austere, cold and impersonal, is also turned against itself by Cridler to evoke more intimate interior feelings, inherently personal responses on a very fragile human scale.

"This idea of the monumental is, to me, really significant," the artist explains. "The idea of a monument is that people use it as a place mark or marker to set their emotions, their sentiments, their memories of something. What I enjoy most about working on a larger scale is the physical interaction of building something that's my size—when I started doing this, it was because I was so pent up with being a jeweler, with feeling restricted."

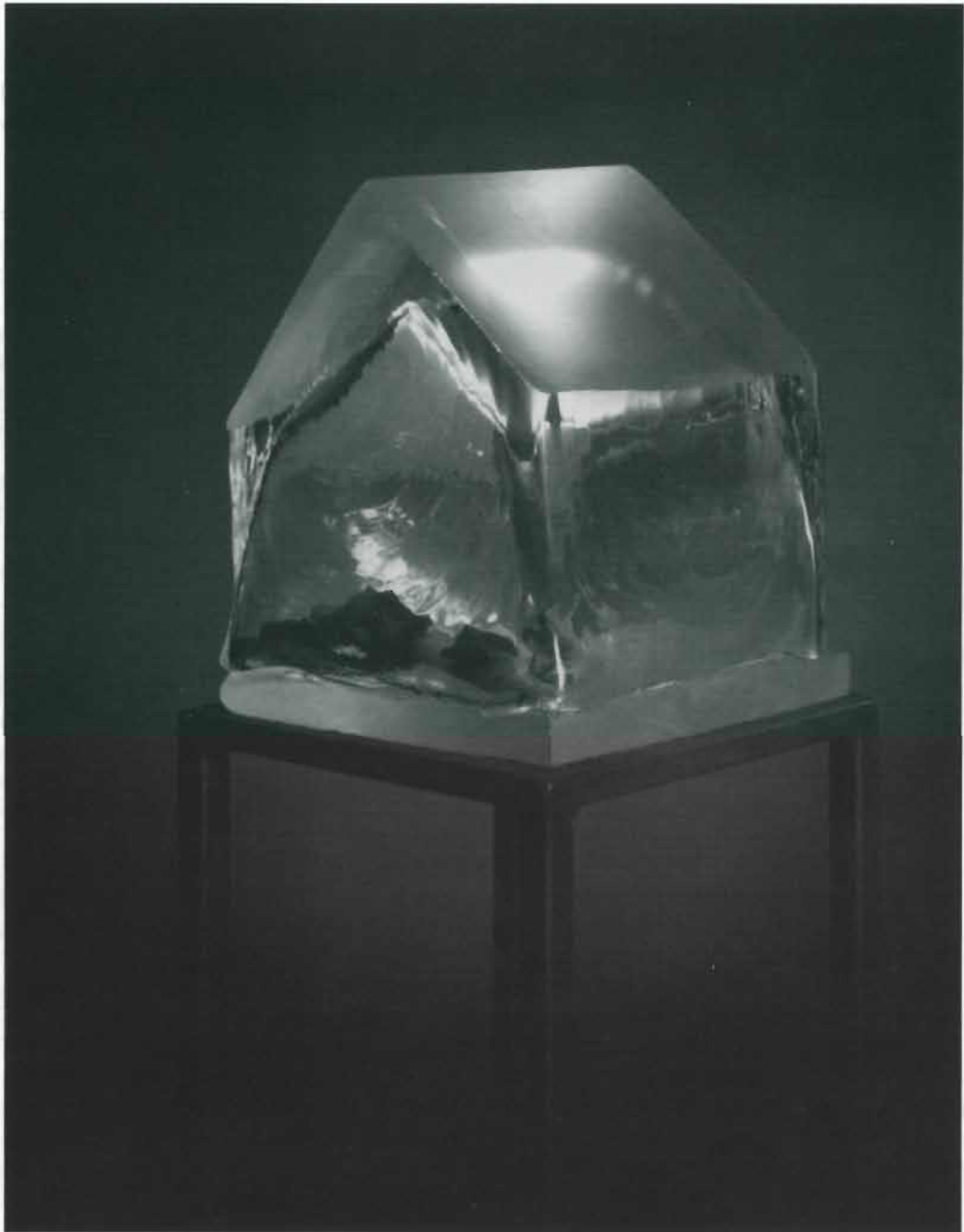
Cridler's chosen medium of cold steel rods, often accompanied by such unlikely materials as beeswax, hair, rhinestones, mothballs, gut, wire and silk, is a far cry from the precious metals she worked with as a jeweler. The inherent meaning and historicism of these materials and their ability to shatter people's expectations of form and function are what make them attractive to the artist: "What I look for in a material is its history because that's where the meaning lies for me. If I can get into the meaning behind the material and its human use, it's like a big soap opera. How do we use this material and what effect did it have on our culture are big questions for me," states Cridler.

To this end, the artist researches not only the materials she ultimately uses, but also the forms into which they will be molded. Most of the forms she appropriates are of neo-classical design based upon Greek models. These designs are an ingrained, enduring part of the American aesthetic heritage, originally adopted in this country because of their association with the grandeur of Athenian democracy and its connection to rational thought.

After initial conceptual legwork has been completed, and scale and materials have been chosen, Cridler then prepares a detailed schematic drawing of the work that doubles as a template. From there, she bends cold metal rods by hand to conform to the shape she has drawn, then laboriously cuts and welds hundreds of small wrought iron bars to her basic structure to create a stable grid form. Eventually, she grinds down each weld joint and concentrates on adding whatever decorative elements she feels will complete the piece. "I always have to think about size constraints," she notes. "Most of the pieces are split in half so that I can get them in and out of doorways."

For Kim Cridler, the wrought iron she uses to create her vessel forms is just as rich a material as gold because of the historical meaning attached to it. "I really got into looking at iron structures like bridges and buildings and into thinking about how we went from a stone building to a wood building to iron tresses which supported glass," states the artist, "into tearing apart this form and revealing the structure and how it was built. That's really what my work's about—tearing off the clothes of a particular tradition or function and getting at its historical, political or sentimental structure or skeleton."

Kathleen Vanesian



Mayme Kratz, *House of Remains #4*, 1998, glass and coyote bones, 8 1/2" x 7" x 7"

GALLERY EXPOSITIONS

January 7 - 10

Photo LA '99
Butterfield & Butterfield
Los Angeles

February 4 - 7

The Photography Show '99
Association of International
Photography Art Dealers
New York Hilton

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Lisa Sette
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Preparator
Director
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EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

OCTOBER 1 -
NOVEMBER 14, 1998
opening October 1 / 7-9 pm

AARON FINK

THROUGH THE ARCH
SEGURA PUBLISHING CO.
*New Editions: Claudia Bernardi,
Mark Klett, Luis Gonzalez Palma,
William Wegman*

NOVEMBER 19, 1998 -
JANUARY 2, 1999
opening November 19 / 7-9 pm

KIM CRIDLER

THROUGH THE ARCH
KEN KELLY

JANUARY 7 - 30, 1999
opening January 7 / 7-9 pm

MAYME KRATZ

THROUGH THE ARCH
BRAD DURHAM

FEBRUARY 4 - 27, 1999
opening February 11 / 7-9 pm

JOSE BEDIA

THROUGH THE ARCH
RICK HARDS

MARCH 4 - 27, 1999
opening March 4 / 7-9 pm

DAVID KROLL

THROUGH THE ARCH
WILLIAM MORRIS

APRIL 1 - 24, 1999
opening April 1 / 7-9 pm

DAVID LEVINTHAL

THROUGH THE ARCH
HEIDI KUMAO

APRIL 29 - MAY 29, 1999

KEVIN SLOAN

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