

# Lili Dujourie

## Nature's Lore

In the early 1980s, after a decade of making video and other camera-based works, Lili Dujourie turned to sculpture. Characteristically, her approach proved anything but straightforward. Many of the works she composed from velvet cloth over the course of the decade speak directly to issues specific to painting, its conventions, histories and traditions, while nonetheless assuming a sculptural presence. *Maagdendale*, 1982, was the first of this impressive group of fabric pieces. Titled after the (decommissioned) medieval abbey in which it was first exhibited, it seamlessly fuses religious associations with allusions to Renaissance and Baroque art.<sup>1</sup> Dujourie's artistic forbears for the Flemish primitives, frequently ennobled their renderings of the Virgin's domestic milieu with swags of luxurious drapery; similarly, Baroque portraitists like Van Dyck employed billowing fabric to impart grandeur and stateliness to their aristocratic subjects.

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<sup>1</sup> The root "maagd" of the Dutch word "Maagdendale" means "virgin". Though "Maagdendale" does not have a direct translation into English, the variant "Maagdendaal" could be translated as "virgin descent".



*Maagdendale*, 1982  
Velvet, iron, wood  
Private collection LD  
Foto: Daem Kristien

As a mode of stage setting, drapery in Dujourie's hands takes on a more self-conscious aura. Her approach is akin to that of Jacques Derrida who, in his seminal text *The Truth in Painting*, critiqued the conventional segregation of drapery and decoration from the core components within a work of art.<sup>2</sup> She too contests any relegation of the ornamental to the category of parerga, that which is supplementary or ancillary. By refocusing attention on what was formerly overlooked or neglected Dujourie highlights the means – the scenographic devices – by which the theatrical is instantiated in an art work, the subject ennobled, and the participation of the viewer solicited. Moreover, by elevating the ornamental and decorative to a central role she foregrounds that

which has traditionally been subordinated due to its associations with femininity and handicraft. By siting *Maagdendale* in the antechamber to the gallery at the Abadía de Santo Domingo de Silos she makes visitors reflexively aware of the staging of the event – the exhibition. Located at the threshold to the gallery, it functions as simulation rather than representation. For its luxurious crimson columnar form is counterpointed by an olive green swath whose bunched folds are gathered as if to create a passage-way to what exists beyond.

In the gallery proper Dujourie has juxtaposed works from two different series. Each of the three sculptures titled *Initialen der stilte*, 2005, is comprised of fired clay elements laid out on a spare table-top. Obviously modelled by hand, their organic shapes recall leaves and foliage, vertebrae and pot shards: they seem therefore to belong both to the realm of the natural and the cultural, the

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida. *The Truth in Painting*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 37 ff.

man-made. As still lives, they invite a close scrutiny that is forensic as well as aesthetic in character.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout Dujourie's oeuvre, the role of beauty in an art work has been an ever-present if subliminal question. More obliquely than assertively present in the seductive, sensuously tactile velvet works, this issue could have come to the fore in her most recent works given that they take flowers as their primary subject. Her interests, however, lay elsewhere: in the plants' medicinal rather than the aesthetic properties. Conceived for presentation at the medieval monastery in Silos, these new works explore the remedial potential of flowers, or, more precisely, the medical properties and virtues of certain plants that have been grown in Europe from Antiquity to the present day. Like the *Initialen der stilte*, they too might be deemed still lives.

Herbal remedies have a long history in the West. Well known to the Egyptians, during the Middle Ages they largely came under the purview of the monasteries, most of which had not only a general garden, or *hortus*, but also a separate physic garden or *hortus sanitatis*, located next to the infirmary and the physician's house (a typical example of this arrangement is the ninth century Benedictine monastery in St. Gallen). In the medieval period care for the sick – by monastic, ecclesiastical, and in some instances, lay persons – was therapeutic rather than simply custodial. Pragmatic and empirical knowledge was directly passed on through word of mouth as vernacular lore, or via illustrated herbals, whose texts describing plants and their properties were accompanied by formalized drawings of specimen. Often based on Classical writings, the books made in monastic scriptoria were devised for use with actual plants grown locally. The monks who cultivated medicinal gardens and copied ancient herbal texts also established apothecaries for the dispersal of botanical remedies to their communities. In the Abadía de Santo Domingo de Silos, founded in the early Middle Ages, the eighteenth century pharmacy that once

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<sup>3</sup> The series title may be translated as “Initials of silence” or “Initials of stillness (or, more rarely, of death)”. Like many of her poetically inflected titles, this one conflates various references: the genre of still life (“naturaleza muerta” in Spanish); abbreviation (as in the contraction signified by initials); and, *inter alia*, references to origins and beginning.

dispensed remedies to the local congregation has been preserved, and is now open to the public. However, the physic garden which provided the raw materials for the botanical prescriptions is now deployed to other ends, the growing of food for the Abbey's current inhabitants.

In assembling her roster of flowers, Dujourie selected only those which have been grown in the West since Antiquity and are still widely available. Each sculpture is based on illustrations which she has collected from a variety of sources including medieval codices, and botanical studies from the Age of the Enlightenment. Their forms are derived from those parts of the flowers, often greatly magnified, which are used in the herbalist's pharmacopiae.

Thus, for example, *salvia*, the sage plant, is traditionally used to treat anxiety, relieve digestive problems and soothe muscle spasms as well as serving as a general remedy for colds and flu. *Rosa Canina*, high in vitamin C, has also been used to defend against colds and flu as well as to prevent scurvy, while *Helleborus Niger* or Christmas Rose, though poisonous, has been employed to induce abortions.<sup>4</sup> Although the plants Dujourie has chosen and their remedies are often well known, the precise parts of the flowers culled by herbalists are far from familiar, as these sculptures make evident.

Today more than 80% of the world's population relies on

*Initialen der stilte*, 2007  
Clay, iron, wood  
Collection LD  
Foto: Daem Kristien



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<sup>4</sup> Pliny's *Natural History* outlines some twenty-four remedies that can be made from Black Hellebore, including remedies for insanity, paralysis, gout and joint pain. He warned however that ingesting it in large quantities and "with a sweet substance" was highly dangerous.

herbal treatments when dealing with medical problems. In the so-called Third World, this sphere of natural lore is well integrated into society's cultural fabric. In the West it is currently the subject of widespread revival, at both popular and professional levels. In taking up this venerable subject for her latest body of work, Dujourie also highlights aspects of the history of this site that often go unremarked.

### **Biography**

Lili Dujourie was born in Roeselare, Belgium in 1941. She currently lives and works in Lovendegem, near Gent. She has been exhibiting widely since the late 1970s. Among recent exhibitions in which she has participated are the Sharjah Biennial (2009); "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution", PS1, New York/ MoCA, Los Angeles (2008); Gwanju Bienal, South Korea (2008) and Documenta 12, Kassel (2007). In 2005, a major retrospective of her work was held at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels.

### **Bibliography**

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**Images**

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