



Cathy Wilkes  
*I Give You All My Money*

January 22–March 4, 2012

**The Renaissance Society**  
at The University of Chicago

# The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
4th floor
Chicago, IL 60637

**Museum Hours**  
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm  
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm  
Closed Mondays  
http://www.renaissancesociety.org

## Cathy Wilkes

### *I Give You All My Money*

### January 22 – March 4 2012

**Opening Reception: January 22, 4:00–7:00 pm**  
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00–6:00 pm

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Phone: (773)702-8670

## It Ain’t Pretty

From Praxiteles to Rodin, a central paradigm of figure sculpture has been the breathing of life into inert materials. The appearance of the mannequin within the fine arts, however, signaled a shift from registering the soul’s presence to a fascination with its absence, a condition synonymous with the rise of the commodity. This diagnosis was confirmed as early as 1912 by Eugene Atget, whose photographs of mannequin displays recast the Parisian store window as mirror to the modern subject. Desire, constantly piqued along the boulevard, was indicative of lack, a chasm created by the discrepancy between who one is versus who one wants to be. Situated at the locus of desire, the mannequins in Atget’s photos palpably reflect a void in the self. That the Surrealists should incorporate mannequins into their work not long after was all but a fait accompli. Lining the hallway leading into the 1938 Exposition Internationale du Surrealisme were fifteen female mannequins each treated by a different artist. Describing his submission André Masson wrote:

Her head is imprisoned in a birdcage, her face caught exactly within the cage door and her mouth masked, with a pansy directly over the opening...

She cannot speak; she is entrapped even as she is decorated, wearing at once too much and too little, dressed up and dressed down, naked and rendered mute, added to and subtracted from, but most of all entrapped.

Masson could very well have been describing a mannequin featured in Glasgow-based artist Cathy Wilkes’ *I Give You All My Money*, 2008, an installation featuring two artist-treated mannequins set amongst a pair of super market checkout counters. The head of one of Wilkes’ mannequins is likewise covered by a birdcage, a nod to Masson no doubt. Leaning back on one arm, this mannequin sits atop a conveyor belt, red and black paint smeared respectively around its torso and face. The other wears a nurse’s cap with a red cross insignia. Casually crossed arms resting on crossed legs, this mannequin matter-of-factly sits on a toilet. From a wire tightly wrapped midway down its skull hangs an odd assortment of objects—teacup, frying pan, piece of wood, string of brass bells, strip of red cloth. From its lower hand dangle three metal horseshoe forms. As chimes, these suspended elements signify a racket belonging to what could only be a charivari. Seated on a commode in public view, this mannequin is indeed subject to a ritual of shame that is the inverse of desire. This reveals the nod to Masson to be a gesture of appropriation, one that links these artists only for the sake of more clearly articulating the social and art historical turn of events that in fact separate a post-feminist Wilkes (b. 1967) from a Surrealist Masson.

*I Give You All My Money* is an eerie mise en scene, one whose art historical debts, be they owed to Surrealism or, say, the tableaux of Ed and Nancy Kienholz, would have to compete with scenes from well known films such as George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) or Francis Lawrence’s *I Am Legend* (2007). In these films, retail sites, replete with mannequins and zombies, become stages for existential reflection not on a post human but a post humanist world that is here and now. Set within an apocalyptic narrative, these scenes by default are a

dystopian critique of capitalism. While *I Give You All My Money* cannot avoid harboring similar sentiments, such social commentary is subsumed to the point of dissolution within a narrative driven more by its detailed components. Well before any critique, the installation’s many soiled dishes immediately and directly impart a sense of the abject. Punctuated by a stove, a toilet, and a white ladder, the installation proves anything but a cogent mise en scene of retail transaction. Given the manner these last three components allude synecdochically and symbolically to kitchen, bathroom and an ascension to heaven, *I Give You All My Money* is a highly compressed narrative juxtaposing the immaterial sacred against the materially profane. Such a reading is reinforced by the stacks of flat clay tiles, the sides of which, like the nurse’s cap, feature a cross. The white ladder references a heaven whose presence, nowhere felt in the installation, is its absence. As a stark white object, the ladder, in its visual purity, throws into staunch relief an all too earthly life defined by a never-ending cycle of shopping, eating, shitting and, as the installation’s title makes clear, sacrifice.

*I Give You All My Money* is a conspicuous title. To whom is this declaration of sacrifice addressed? Are they the words of disgruntled Whole Foods customers? Are they Eric Clapton lyrics? Is it a barb from husband to wife à la The Honeymooners? In any case, the nature of the sacrifice would appear economic. Wilkes’ work, however, consists of objects recurring as leitmotifs taking on symbolic proportion with the theme of motherhood achieving the clearest articulation. Since 2005, Wilkes’ installations have regularly featured strollers, jars of Bonne Maman preserves, childrens’ spoons, dolls and toys. Whereas the title signifies economic sacrifice, the objects have consistently refer-enced the sacrifices of motherhood, sacrifices entailing the flesh. As portrayed by Wilkes, the profane nature of motherhood operates as a literal foil to the symbolic sacrifices attributed to Christ. In this regard, the symbolic sacrifices of men transcend, i.e. serve to cover, the real sacrifices of women. Moreover, motherhood is a sacrifice, which the mannequins, as ideal female forms, could be read as unwilling to make. Worse than profane, motherhood is here caught between the rock of Christianity and the hard place of a post-feminism having yet to make peace with motherhood. The parade of a soulless vanity, a horizon on which heaven is nowhere to be seen and daily routines of subsistence come again as ritual sacrifice, make for a group of concerns whose net effect as an installation just ain’t pretty.

Wilkes’ work is ultimately personal. She has, in her words, “no expectation that an audience will participate” and “no need for someone to fully understand.” The separation between artist and viewer, “has remained unbridgeable.” For her, the ability for the artist to express their experiences and thereby achieve communion with the viewer is simply impossible. Admitting such failure, however, creates conditions such that “all objects can become transcendental.” It does not matter whether one uses a painting or a dirty dish to signify some aspect of the divine, relative to the subject both are mere base matter. By that token, *I Give You All My Money*, while it holds no burning bushes or blue light specials, is a very rich forest of signs.

#### Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION  
**Sunday, January 22, 2012, 4:00 pm to 7:00 pm**  
Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00 to 6:00 pm in Kent Hall room 107.

CONCERT  
**Tuesday, January 24, 8:00 pm**  
**Peter Evans, solo trumpet**

Over the past decade, the volume of solo trumpet work has made it a field, one blossoming into a beautiful array of styles and approaches from lyrically sentimental to severely stark. It is a field thick with talent making it all the more remarkable when something stands out as clearly as Peter Evans’ 2006 release *More is More*. This album managed to strike the full range of expanded techniques with a virtuosic attack that rendered the trumpet a hissing, whistling, gurgling cauldron of infinite possibilities. In addition to leading his own quartet, Evans has performed with the world’s leading improvisers. His solo gigs, however, remain legendary. He will perform in the gallery where he may finally have met his architectural match. This event will take place in the gallery. FREE

LECTURE  
**Sunday, February 5, 2:00 pm**  
**Dennis King Keenan**  
*Irigaray and the Sacrifice of Sacrifice*

Keenan, currently Professor of Philosophy at Fairfield University, Fairfield Connecticut, is the author of *The Question of Sacrifice* (Indiana University Press, 2005). In this concentrated and detailed look at questions surrounding the act of sacrifice, Keenan discusses both the role and the meaning of sacrifice in our lives. Building on recent philosophical discussions on the gift and transcendence, Keenan covers new ground with this exploration of the religious, psychological, and ethical issues that sacrifice entails. His lecture will be a close reading of Luce Irigaray’s seminal essay *Women, the Sacred, Money*. This event will take place in Cobb hall room 409 (down the hall from the gallery). FREE

GALLERY TOUR  
**Saturday, February 11, 1:00 pm**  
**Jennifer Scappettone**  
Assistant Professor of English  
Committee on Creative Writing at the University of Chicago

Scappettone will lead an informal discussion of Wilkes’ installation. Scappettone is the author of four collections of poetry, *From Dame Quickly* (2009), *Beauty is the New Absurdity*, (2007), *Thing Ode* (2007) and *Err Residence* (2007). She is also the author of several essays of criticism on figures such as Tan Lin and Jackson Mac Low. This event will take place in the gallery. FREE

LECTURE  
**Sunday, February 12, 2:00 pm**  
**Marsha Bentley Hale**  
*Mannequin Mystique*

No article on the mannequin is complete without a quote from Hale or a citation of her work. Hale is in the process of founding the Mannequin Museum, a virtual archive for the preservation of historical and contemporary mannequins in fashion, fine art, film and popular culture. For more than thirty years, Hale has been collecting mannequins and related photographs and historical data, a task she has likened to “doing a genealogy of this incredible extended family.” She has served as a consultant to institutions worldwide, including Disney, 20th Century Fox, Victoria and Albert Museum and the Smithsonian Institution. This event will take place in Cobb Hall room 409 (down the hall from the gallery). FREE

CONCERT  
**Sunday, February 26, 7:00 pm**  
**David Grubbs and Susan Howe**  
*Frolic Architecture*

Grubbs and Howe return for a performance of their third and most recent release *Frolic Architecture*. Frolic drops the listener into a soundworld that germinates wildly from this most multiple and heterogeneous of Howe’s celebrated collage poems. For long stretches, it is impossible to separate Howe’s real-time performance of her fragment-strewn text from Grubbs’s further deformations, scatterings, and layerings. These aberrant vocalizations are placed in a landscape in which individual pitches pulse autonomously within thick chords: gravel and cicadas duet. This concert is co-sponsored with Poem Present and the University of Chicago Department on English, committee on Creative Writing. This concert will take place in Bond Chapel. FREE

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Cathy Wilkes, *I Give You All My Money* (detail), 2008, mixed media installation, dimensions variable.

Essay by Hanna Walker. Layout by the J.N.C. Graphic Design, Chicago.