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Silvia Levenson: Views That Hang in a Precarious Balance

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We currently live in an era in which precarity has become a central social and cultural issue. That is why Silvia Levenson's choice of medium in her current exhibition at The Bullseye Connection Gallery in Portland, Oregon, "I See You're a Bit Nervous," is particularly relevant for the current global socio-economic context. The exhibition calls specific attention to the domestic condition - its stability always already impacted by the effects of work (or lack thereof) and the outside social environment.



Although [Silvia Levenson \[http://www.silvialevenson.com/\]](http://www.silvialevenson.com/) does not explicitly use the word "[precarity \[http://www.silvialevenson.com/\]](http://www.silvialevenson.com/)," nevertheless, I think it is absolutely relevant to her work. Though definitely not a new term, it seems to have become iconic within the last decade or so and is sometimes referred to as the dark underbelly of capitalism. The current definition comes from the French (*précarité*) and is defined as the state of insecure, unstable employment confounded by vulnerable social conditions, often pushing to the point where survival itself becomes threatened. However, it should be identified that precarity is an ambiguous term which also refers to a growing movement of individuals determined to succeed, make themselves visible and, just simply, to live.



Silvia Levenson
Any Way You Want Me
2005
kiln-cast glass
12.875" x 30" x .625"
Courtesy of Bullseye Connection Gallery
Photographer: R. Watson

According to Levenson's CV, she was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1957, but currently lives and works in Vigevano, Italy. She emigrated to Italy in 1981 from the place of her birth due to the crises and chaos of the "[dirty war \[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirty_War\]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirty_War)" (1976-1983). It is estimated that some 10,000 - 30,000 Argentinians were killed during this period, most had left-leaning views. Evidence of various human rights violations and war crimes were later collected by a truth commission set up by president Raul Alfonsin. Their grisly findings astonished the world.

A reflection of her own past experience and the condition of many others like her, faced with varying degrees of precarity - other artists, freelancers, travelers, contractors, etc. - Levenson's installation is fragmented and grouped into themes or categories that are apparently separate, offering impressions of loneliness and isolation so manifest in a manufactured society. Set up like the layout of a house, near the entrance to the exhibition is a curtain laced with pink grenades that marks a kind of foyer, three different rooms offer viewing at a distance as well as close-up, and

a pink bench offsets the screening of *Something Wrong*, a DVD Levenson made with her daughter. With this exhibition, Levenson says she's "investigating family relationships where a subtle violence exists – which is sometimes clearly visible." The conditions of these relationships are fragile, complex, delicate, opaque and often painful, qualities also implied by Levenson's rosy-hued glass, which ties the whole exhibition together.



Silvia Levenson
 Are You Lonesome Tonight?
 2005
 kiln-cast glass and mixed media glass
 16.25" x 12" x 2.875"
 Courtesy of Bullseye Connection Gallery
 Photographer: R. Watson

I was probably most struck by the strong presence of borders and barriers, as home is generally thought to be characterized by cohesion. Each piece seems to be created with immense effort. The use of a mold to create many of the pieces, each one perfect with imperfections, reminisces to factory work during the rise of industry and gestures to a sense of "use value" and object commodification. Each piece in the exhibition is neatly placed and productively isolated. The chilling *Are You Lonesome Tonight* – three pink guns in what appears to be a first aid box or cabinet, at first seems to offer a solution to that loneliness. However, Levenson's guns are entirely unfunctional, perhaps even molded from toy guns. The fact that they are on display suggests the spectacular unfunctionality and dysfunction of so much of what is modern and manufactured in our "quick and easy fix" society, implying that this type of solution offers no solution at all.

Levenson's pink gun plaque *Love Me Tender*, a tongue-in-cheek nod to a popular Elvis song, brings to mind America during the 1950's. According to UK music teacher and researcher Michael Blacklock in his essay, "A Brief Overview of the Birth of Rock and Roll within the Cultural Climate of 1950's America," the decade emphasized family values and was also characterized by materialism. Americans were enchanted by "the promise of new and better lives, brought about by advances in new technology." However, "the children of the 1950's were, by today's standards, almost a repressed people."

As is the nature of installation art - art made for a certain space that utilizes unique aspects of that space - it is interesting to note that Levenson's exhibition is located in a building that used to be a factory for processing and smoking fish. Moreover, tucked inside a room that basically used to be a meat locker, the title work *I See You're a Bit Nervous* is an intimate table setting for two, designed to make anyone edgy (the pink and white checkered tablecloth and *Lamp* above incorporate razorblades encased in glass, hanging at the edges.

With the ongoing war on terrorism omnipresent on our minds, imposing itself like the latest high fashion, Levenson's installation recalls similar events from the past, while at the same time asserting itself as absolutely contemporary. This suggests the utterly contingent relationship of the past with the present (not without future implications). Levenson's, *Always on My Mind*, makes visible apparently confined situations that, not unlike a pressure-cooker, are potentially explosive. A precarious balance is maintained. Each rosy, blown glass pot is inscribed with a word – from left to right, largest to smallest, they read "protection," "safety," "security," "trust." While history can seem like a series of isolated events, boxed into a distinct static taxonomy, it is actually all twisted together in a malleable and fluid fashion. But appearance alone can be deceiving. The exhibition continues at [The Bullseye Connection Gallery](http://www.bullseyeconnectiongallery.com/index.cfm) [http://www.bullseyeconnectiongallery.com/index.cfm] through November 30, 2005.



Silvia Levenson
 Lamp (detail view)
 2005
 kiln-cast glass and mixed media
 13.25 x 20 x 20 inches

Courtesy of Bullseye Connection Gallery
Photographer: R. Watson

References

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-<http://www.musicjournal.org/03rocknroll.htm> Please contact the author
[mailto:jendawson@nonstarvingartists.com] for reprinting and distribution.