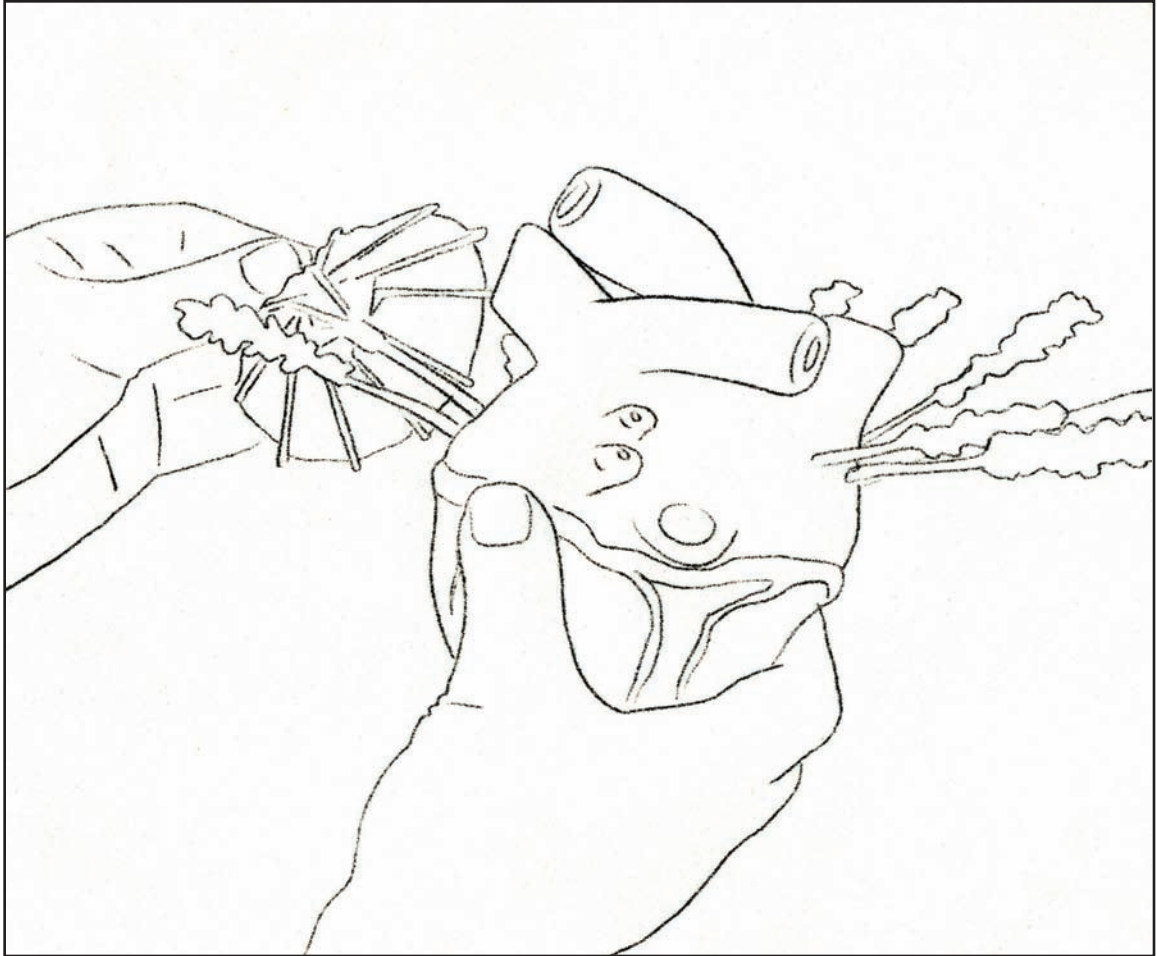


Paula Jean Cowan • bit



(cover)
gnaw, 2004
animation still
rt: 0:58

stick, 2005
animation still
(channel 1)
rt: 3:39

Corpulent. Portly. Obsese. Rotund. Overweight. Stout. Fleshy. Flabby. Chunky. Rubenesque. Oversized. Supersized. Plump. Chubby. Fat. They're not all derogatory terms. It depends largely on whether or not you have issues about body image—your own or that of others. Which is not to suggest that the issue of corpulence is entirely subjective—rampant obesity can create serious health concerns such as heart disease and diabetes—but the perception and definition of the “overweight” has remained a continual issue in mainstream culture.

One could argue that while the issue—particularly for women—has lessened somewhat since the mid-60s iconic feminine images of Twiggy or Edie Sedgwick, it remains a pressing and everpresent image issue today, particularly for younger women. So, in response to all the above-listed terms, I offer up a word that sounds chubby but speaks deeply to a posture essential in addressing this persistent stereotype:

aplomb

A roly-poly word that bounces off the tongue. It refers to confidence or skill, particularly in trying circumstances. Grace under pressure. Poise. It refers to composure and cool. It is a self-possessed awareness and a stylistic ease. It was the first word that sprang to mind when I saw the absurdist animations of Paula Jean Cowan.

Rotoscoped from video source material, Cowan's animated vignettes all features a large female character ensnared in a series of situations that depict a variety of failures, foibles, and absurdities. Sampling donuts. Getting comfortable with a pillow. Salaciously playing with cupcakes. Performing a shell game. Dancing unselfconsciously. Caught in a bear trap.

Cowan's works are deceptive in their simplicity. The performative origins of the pieces lend the works a natural quality, despite their reduction into simplified line drawings that provide only the most economical reference of figure and ground.

The jittering lines that comprise the animations play into the nervous energy and underlying pathos of the bits,

though Cowan is not merely enacting herself as the butt of her own jokes. A buoyant unconcern is often readily apparent and we recognize a character that, despite her heavy-weight aspect, is ultimately more self-aware (and content) than self-conscious.

If she is caught in a bear trap in one video, gnawing her wrist in frustration, she is plunking cupcakes onto her breasts in another. If she has confused herself playing a simple shell game, she is dancing with ease in another. In the latter piece, the figure dances onto the screen through a single vertical line, a simplified reference that slyly defines the figure and ground for Cowan. Our heroine dances toward a table, upon which sits a pie. She exits, dancing, only to re-enter a moment later wielding a large pie knife.

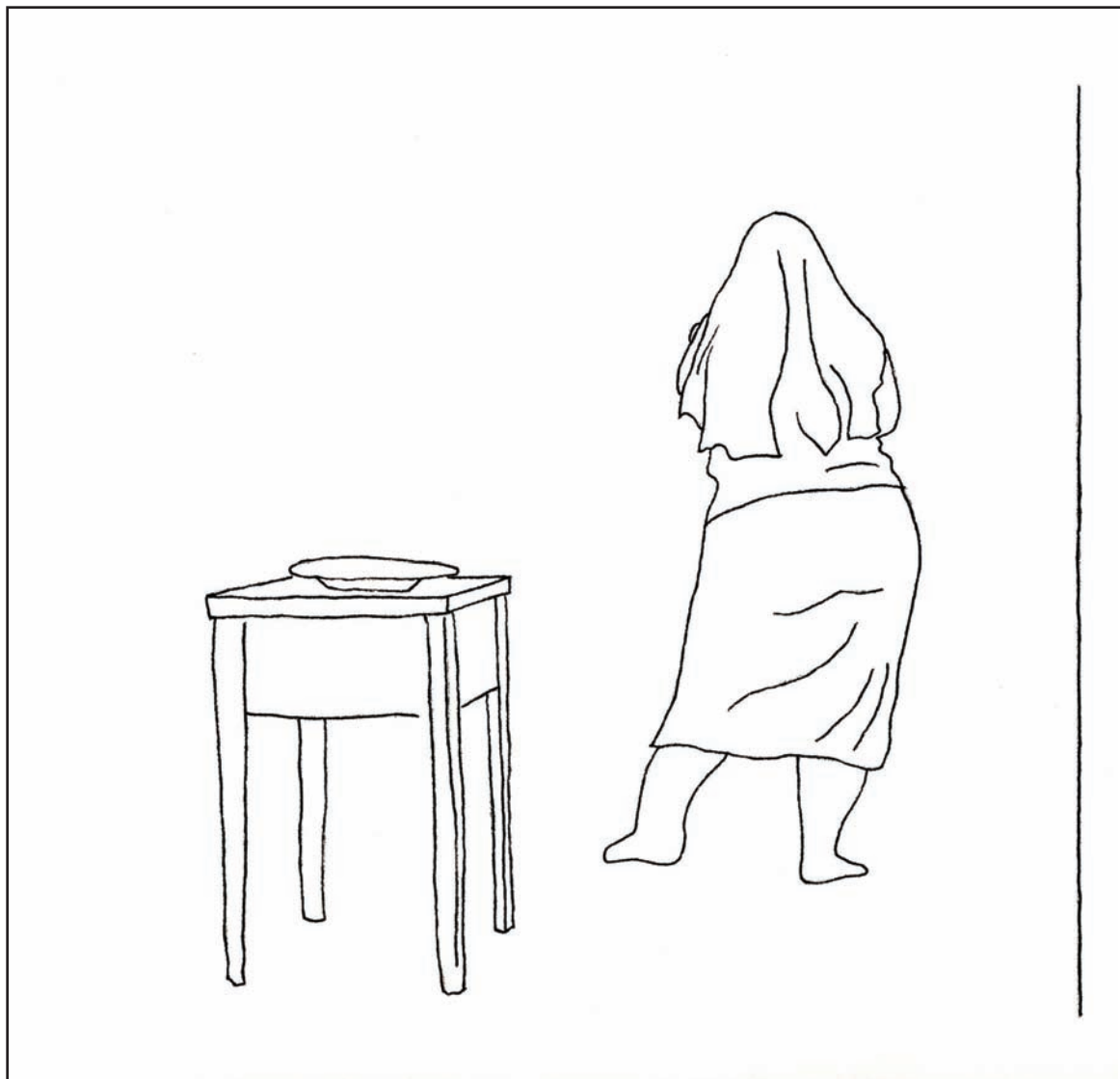
The pie is never sliced up and eaten, so there's no closure to the implied desire. And it's not quite a punchline, despite Cowan's use of the term “bit” to denote these pieces. Or, at most, it's a punchline left hanging, a suspended moment, a set-up whose realization remains uncertain.

There are no triumphal moments, but there is plenty of affable contentment. In one work, Cowan's character sits at a table and appeared to remove her heart, which she proceeds to stick with multiple pins before tucking it back into her shirt. It's a dramatic act that is performed with utter nonchalance. In a companion piece, we are presented with a hand simply twirling a cocktail umbrella—a piece with no narrative or even any suspended narrative, just a reiteration of a beautiful, peaceful moment.

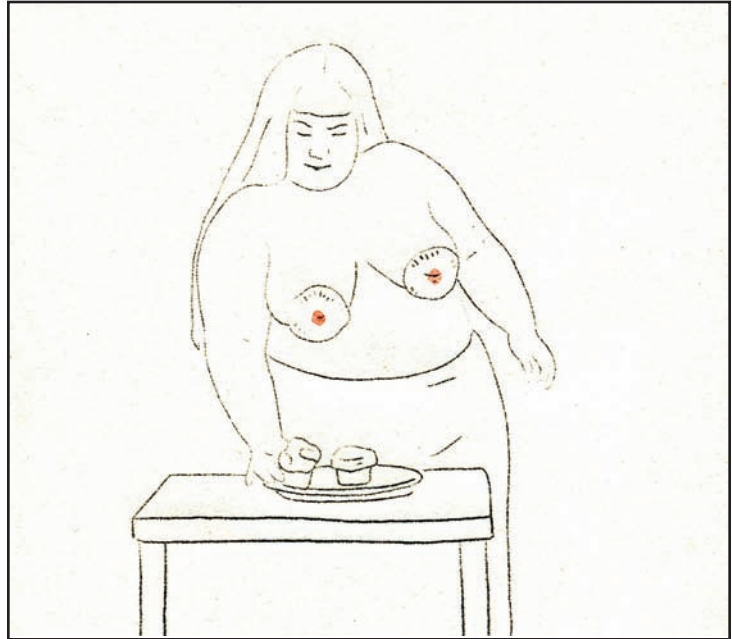
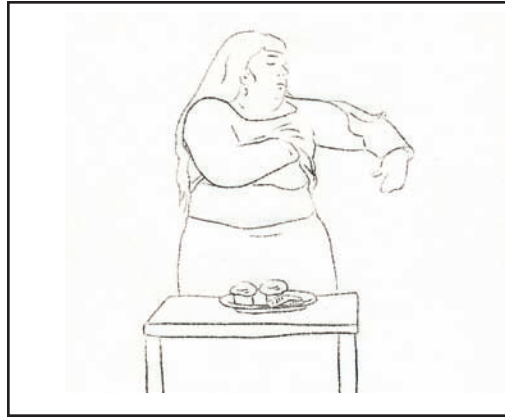
The most compelling element of Cowan work—and they are all extremely short vignettes—is how quickly you forget that her character is heavy-set. The self-deprecating humanity—that recognition of one's own fallibility combined with a relative lack of anxiety about it—soon predominates one's perceptions of our heroine. It becomes impossible to see the corpulent body here as any kind of liability, as anything undesirable.

It becomes strong, funny, admirable, with loads of aplomb.

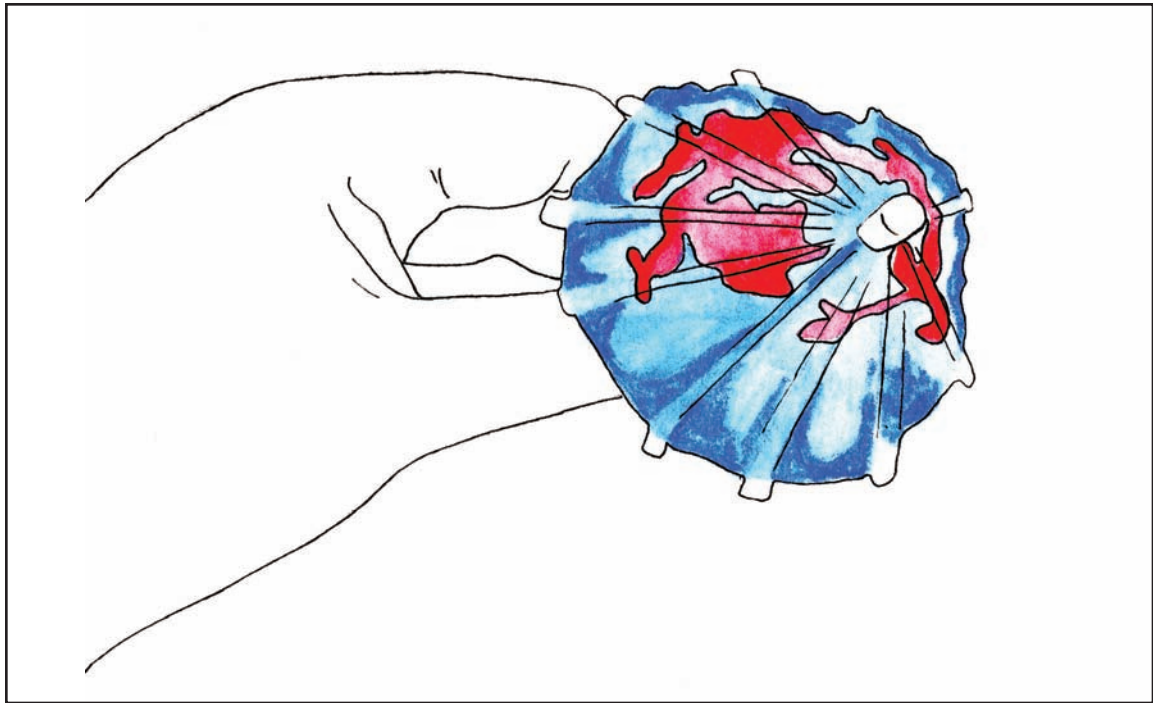
John Massier
Visual Arts Curator



dance, 2004
animation stills
rt: 1:30



cupcake, 2005
animation stills
rt: 1:50



twirl, 2005
animation still
(channel2) rt: 3:39

PAULA JEAN COWAN • bit • March 3 – April 7, 2007

Paula Jean Cowan has been a bakery clerk, deli-girl, grocery clerk, produce manager, accounts receivable clerk, bookkeeper, receptionist, children's art instructor, buyer & seller of used books, print & photo technician, truck washer, auto assembly line worker, parts inspector, and switchboard operator. She is also a practicing artist from the London, Ontario area who works with a variety of media and currently teaches printmaking at the University of Guelph and foundations studio at the University of Western Ontario. She firmly believes that fat chicks will one day rule the world.



The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



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