

SUSAN CIANCIOLO

THE SUBJECT OF THE HEXAGRAM
THEREFORE, IS ONE WHO IS SIMPLE
AND SINCERE. THIS QUALITY IS
CHARACTERISTIC OF HEAVEN, AND OF
THE HIGHEST STYLE OF HUMANITY.
—I CHING HEXAGRAM

This exhibition, to some extent, is the story of a life, or of someone trying to give shape to a life. Not the complete story, which, in any case is beyond telling—the mass too big, not to speak of the repetition. What Susan Cianciolo has done is to make a cemetery or garden. She has saved parts of her work and ephemera and reworked whatever she could find, relying in one place or another, on mere chance, and on the simplest impulses we may know of art: to capture her state of mind at a given instant and to leave a trace on earth. It seems to be the nature of her engagement that she rediscovers the ancient world of art for herself; in a sense the history of her expression is a history of both remembering and forgetting as, over time, we choose to disown or embrace different aspects of the childishness and mystery invested in the making of any kind.

Biography often plays an ambiguous role in relation to what an artist actually does. An artist’s life and an artist’s work are neither synonymous nor symmetrical, but in respect to Susan Cianciolo there is a confluence between her career as a fashion designer in the 1990s and the work that would come after and outside of that industry. She entered the fashion world by the means of an apprenticeship that gave her walls to reach out and touch until she could put up some persuasive edifices of her own. She was involved with Kim Gordon’s X-Girl line and Bernadette Corporation’s early fashion shows and outdoor performances. She then started her own house, RUN, in 1995. RUN operated until 2001 with a refusal to explain itself and a ludic business model—nothing too legitimate, all of it off the cuff, what I might happily describe as a business that made inadequacy a virtue.

In the span of eleven collections, RUN presented itself against the industrial givens of the fashion business. Entitlements were challenged. The gaunt, praying mantis-like physique of models was one. The industrial system that governed fabrication and distribution was another. Clothes were one-of-a-kind and

made by hand, bearing the traces and decisions of many authors and ways of making, of learned and unlearned hands both. She once told an interviewer, “I have always collaborated with many people. I have made things with other artists. I feel that I am always collaborating with somebody in everyday life....It is opening yourself up and accepting other people’s ideas using you as a filter.”

The majority of this exhibition is a series of boxes that Cianciolo calls “kits.” They are her units of introspection. Part archive, part reliquary, part toolbox, they store and review material from the past two decades of her work, and more recently, the drawings and notes in which her daughter Lilac, now eight, learns to write, apologize, or eat her peas off a fork. In *Money Box Kit* (2008–2015), Lilac writes on popsicle sticks, “I go fast. an sometimes slow. an sometimes slow an fast.” Some kits hold the materials for the construction of future works, others are more past tense, though nothing is truly sedentary. They are elliptical. The details and observations accrue in such a way that they pull a viewer forward in anticipation of the next unexpected leap: a stray object, an odd gesture, a bald declaration, or the sudden intrusion of life. Some things are exactly as they were. Much of it though, has long since been transformed or rearranged to bring them forward. One alters the past to form the future.

Why embrace Lilac’s hand at all? Her inclusion is a provocation. It confuses the signal, charges it with something aberrant and incongruous and perhaps even “wrong.” A piece can be at once elegant and in shambles, mature and pre-pubescent, twee and truly emotional, full of idiomatic waywardness and under precise formal pressure. To work with Lilac is also a provocation about the transparency of life: Susan asks us to inhabit the ordinariness of her life with her child, which is sometimes banal and sometimes momentous, but all of it perforce ordinary because it happens in the course of a life, and happens, in different forms, to everyone.

The kits can be seen as a very long examination of the various compromises of adulthood and art. The interiority of childhood is the refuge of these works, the source and heat of everything; to have to travel away from it, as we all must do, is something akin to moving away from the sun. The inclusion of her daughter’s

work returns me to the filament and interiority of youth: It immerses me in those now-distant pungencies. The intensely romantic proposition of the kits is that the art of childhood is precious because when we were young we did not think about life, we simply lived. We did not think about how much we liked, say, drawing; we simply liked drawing, and became the drawing we liked looking at. You may find this proposition debatable, at best haplessly and touchingly sentimental. How naïve! How regressive! How gratuitous and solipsistic! There are grounds for this reputation: Cianciolo has ignored the issues of the day; her subjects seem to exist in a world without politics. That is one vantage. I’ve seen it that way, but I’ve also experienced her address as a way to reject the contextual and institutional approaches to making art.

I would like to make the case that Cianciolo’s work is a kind of refusal, a way to perform without any mandate or legitimation, in response to the desires of other people but without the pretense of fulfilling their demand. Perhaps what I find most resilient is how private the work is. She works to be alone with herself, and lives within the riddle, as Emily Dickinson would say. The kits themselves are introverted, so much so that showing them in public may be a flaw, but it is a beneficial flaw. They offer a tacit reproach to speed. To see their insides requires an attendant to unpack them. They aren’t just “on” the way a painting is on, and ask to be dealt with on the terms that they instantiate. You must submit and let go of your own speed. You are on your way once you do. The feeling can be a strong one, and it can take time—minutes, not seconds—to get over what you think you are seeing and to behold what’s there.

If we think of Cianciolo’s kits as an archive, as a place where the private enters the public sphere, it is only one more jump to think about the fact that they appear at a time when archives as we have known them are undergoing a great and perhaps catastrophic change. A tide is coming in and the kingdom of ephemera, with its promise of solitude and discovery, is in danger of being washed away. The physical possession of ephemera is becoming of little significance. Access to it will be what matters, and when the ephemera is locked away, it will disappear into the cyber. It will be like the genie—summonable but untouchable. Cianciolo’s private archive, however, is utterly touchable. Unlike an

institutional archive, her kits are not stable or searchable. They yield little. They do not aspire to be comprehensive. They are serendipitously made and sit between the promise of taxonomic order as divulged in the archive and the total devastation of that promise. They are as much about oblivion as reclamation, about what can be recovered and what is naturally lost. Information is one half of an archive. The upper half, as it were. The other half is what I delicately call loss. To make a series of works with one’s past is to destroy it, to use it up. I suppose this is true of experience as well: In describing a world you extinguish it, and in a show of recollection much is reduced to ruin.

To me, these kits seem at times to be signals of a long-lost world where one sees in the color of a box the promise of beauty, even pity. I am charmed and can fall backwards into their world, but another inestimable shape preoccupies my mind—the other side of life. Its shape is quiet and slow to emerge, but it comes, and the effect is immutable. I think of tombs and ancients who were buried among their belongings. The kits can be thought of as an extension of Cianciolo’s self, not separate from a love of life but rather as an extra dimension of it, and even of what comes after. The shape of death makes the kits like a good children’s story, full of adamant and fetid sweetness, like a German fairy tale, where once you are under the spell, you have to carry on to the finish—past the fun part, until your heart breaks—with whatever Cianciolo has begun.

SUSAN CIANCIOLO
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Please ask the attendant for assistance if you would like to open any of the boxes.

Susan Cianciolo was born in Rhode Island in 1969. She lives in New York and teaches at Pratt Institute.

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YALE UNION
800 SE 10th Avenue, Portland, OR 97214

