

... that's all the facts when you come to brass tacks," wrote T.S. Eliot, "Birth and copulation, and death." Pat Lasch's art commemorates those facts—in the past with great austerity, now with elaborate flourish. Her ancestors, her loves, her child, and all the names, dates, ceremonies, and rites of passage that comprise their lives are the subjects of her art. But, except for her early incorporation of literal names and dates, and her frequent inclusion of documentary photographs, the art she makes is symbolic and abstract. She doesn't represent events or people; she honors them, turns them into totemic objects, and sometimes uses them in a metaphorical exorcism.

Lasch's recent sculptures bear a superficial resemblance to many-tiered wedding cakes which is reinforced by the icing-like look of their acrylic paint surfaces. The pigment is, in fact, applied the way icing is—squeezed through pastry tubes—but in the hands of an expert confectionary decorator like Pat or her father Fred Lasch, who trained her in the technique, the marks it yields can be as precise as those gotten by pencil or pen. As a young girl Lasch worked full-time in her father's Queens bakery, and by the age of 14 was so adept at the cake decorator's craft she iced her sister's wedding cake. Forgotten during the years of studying art at Queens College and of marriage and young motherhood, her training came back to her in the early '70s, providing her with a new way to make art without referencing it to traditional male mediums and techniques.

Like the majority of those women artists who have "made it" during the last decade, Lasch's career began in earnest in the late '60s when her marriage ended and she began to make art

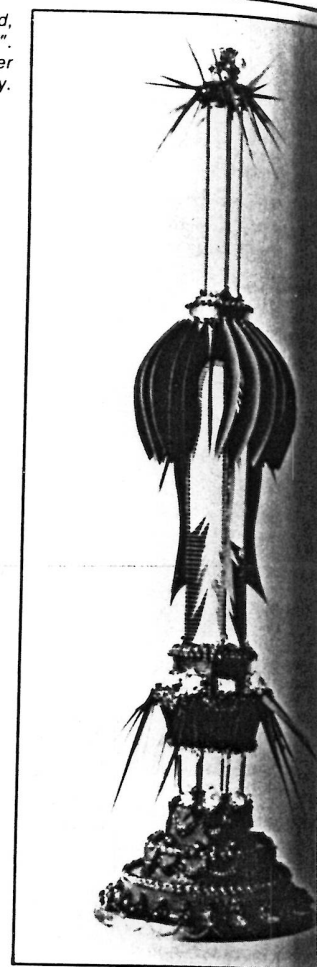
## PAT LASCH: DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION

APRIL KINGSLEY

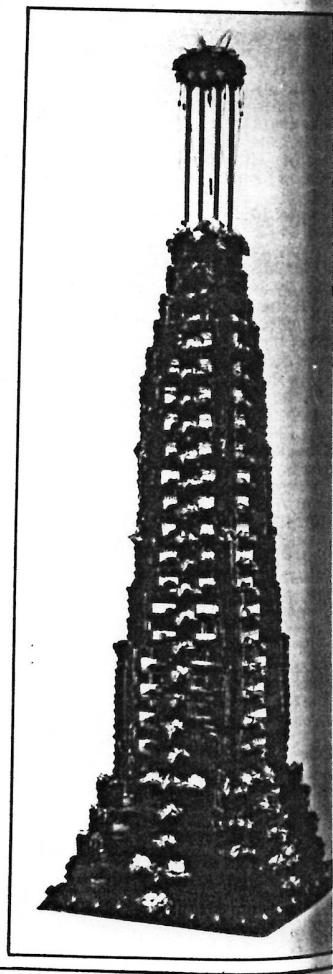
full time. And, like many of those women, she found her voice sounded clearer and truer when it wasn't singing the songs with which men had so long been identified. Oil paintings on oversized canvases, steel or bronze sculptures, even drawing from the nude, that old standby, made little sense to the emerging woman artist of the early '70s. By 1972, when she and the very concept of "women's art" was introduced to the art world in the historic *13 Women Artists* show on Soho's Prince Street, Lasch was already sewing metallic threads into raw or dyed muslin instead of putting paint on canvas. The work looked "Minimal," which was the current mode, but with a big difference. Having been sewn, it made specific references to the traditionally female craft of needlework (at which, incidentally, both her mother and her grandmother excelled), and being gold or silver on white or purple it created a sacerdotal aura. Religious references were rare in the heyday of hard-edge, and Lasch underlined them by the arched-altarpiece-like silhouettes and tondo shapes she used. Her work had nothing in common with the dull predictability of the minimalist grid. Then too, this work was highly personal, almost diaristic, a tendency which ran directly counter to the impersonal, machined, generalized stance of Minimal Art.

While the stitching process—long and laborious as needlework always has been—was a partial reliving of her female ancestors' lives, the images these stitches accumulated to render are symbolic of the whole genealogical process: the two who make one each came from two more who were four in all, whereas you who are one make one that is only half-you and so on. *Six Generations* (1977) charts this narrowing geometrical

Pat Lasch, *Ivar's Tower*, 1980. Wood, paint, paper, and metallic thread, 34". Private Collection. Courtesy Lerner Heller Gallery.

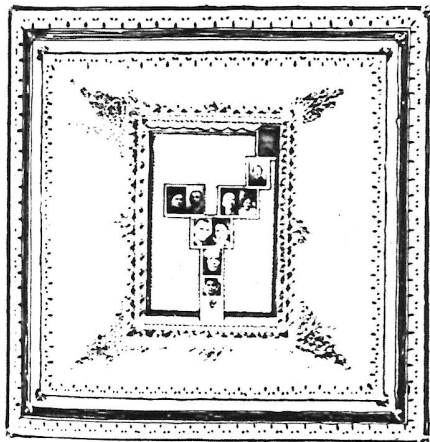


Pat Lasch, *Wilhelmena's Funeral Tower*, 1980. Wood, paint, hair, and skull, 40". Courtesy Lerner Heller Gallery.



progression with photographs rendering the genealogy highly specific and "realistic." In her earlier work it was handled abstractly. *Four Generations*, a purplish dyed-muslin work of 1971, diagrams the lifespans of her mother, grandmother, father, and self in connected, dated circles. One particularly austere and poignant piece of 1973 consists of two dissimilarly tall arched panels fused into one, the larger half containing a single half-circle fading out near the midpoint, the smaller arch containing a securely complete circle. Its title is *Ancestral Patterning in Death*, and the work apparently deals with a lost parent. The stitching in the early pieces (which, like Madame La Farge's knitting, records information) is replaced at the middle of the decade by threads of pigment which weave mats, borders, and frames around actual photographs. Progressive portraits from babyhood to adulthood are embedded in the centers of three to five small panels which are then decorously embroidered with paint. The fascination we have for family albums is augmented by the decadent Victorian sweetness of the lace-curtain and gingerbread architecture motifs which surround the pictures.

Digging for her roots in the 42nd Street Library she found a great-great-grandfather on her mother's side named McGrath who had lived in a wedge-shaped building on Hudson Street. He had kept his severed finger (a souvenir of the Civil War) pickled in a jar so he could be buried with it. One of his rowdy sons had been shot in the head, while Lasch's father's father had died falling down a chimney. Lasch once said she's "interested in the deaths of everyone," but she is clearly most interested in those of her own family. Sometimes the stories feed directly in-



Pat Lasch, *Six Generations*, 1977. Oil and photos on muslin, 24 x 24". Private Collection. Courtesy Lerner Heller Gallery.

to her work, as they do in recent pieces which incorporate strands of black hair that hark back to hearing that "all that was left" of her father's mother, Wilhelmena (with whom Lasch clearly identifies) when she was removed from the common grave in which she was buried when her son was only six, was "her long black hair."

The Irish can be a morbid lot, and so can Germans, even the most outwardly bumptious Bavarians, particularly when they are also Catholics. Lasch feels that the influence on her of the wakes, weddings, christenings, and other "passage" or transformation ceremonies she witnessed as a Catholic youth of Irish-German descent, must have been powerful. The heavy odor of carnations, lilies, roses, and incense; the dark recesses of the church aisles; the monotonously intoned responses to the unintelligible Latin semi-song; the ornate encrustation of the altar; the whole engrossing ritual of Catholicism with its chalices and candelabra, embroidered altarcloths and vestments, its mysteriousness of presentation and the way every sacred heart, crucifix, and page in a prayer book are elaborately embellished—all of this has left traces in Lasch's art. Since she generally uses white or pale hues (signi-

ficial in Austria or the flamboyant finials on our own Grace Church on Broadway. But there are also non-Western "religious" buildings which bear comparison with Lasch's particular style of adorning structures. Some particularly ornate Indian or Ceylonese temples look as though they might be sources for her very bizarre *Wilhelmena's Funeral Tower* (1980) which has a tiny weasel's skull on its top. Then too, it is tempting to see Mayan temples beneath some of her paint-encrusted surfaces. This is particularly true of the large, very recent "cakes" where there is a stepped or multiple level structure.

The temple or shrine in miniature was frequently used for reliquaries in the Medieval era; they were taken over for secular use during and after the Renaissance to glorify the noble and wealthy by association. Lasch reaps the harvest from all these references and adds on a few of her own. *Ivar's Tower* (1980), which starts out more or less like a traditional four-tiered round cake (with a highly untraditional black "icing"), evolves on the next level into an ornate, flower-laden basket with sharp, spiny protective projections, and then turns into a sort of Art Deco rocket ship, with a revolving roof vent, or fat pastry tube, out of which a small, flower-bedecked object surrounded by more spines seems to have been shot. As if this associational collage weren't confusing enough, the configuration in toto is clearly phallic. Inside the main shaft of the tower Lasch has suspended locks of black hair; thus *Ivar's Tower* becomes a totem or fetish in which the hair has been enshrined. Many primitive peoples believe that possession of a person's hair puts him or her in their power; that not only is a person's strength bound up with his or her hair but even with life itself. One need not know of Lasch's great-grandmother's disinterment nor know anything about Ivar to sense the ritual or magical force of this piece.

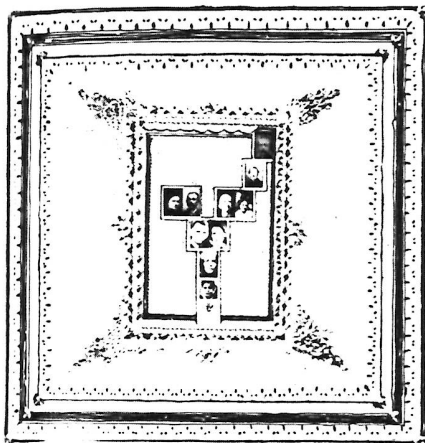
Like Meret Oppenheim's *Fur-Lined Teacup*, that quintessential Surrealist *objet de contredit*, *Ivar's Tower* puts two sickeningly unpairable things together: hair and implications of ingestion. We are somatically disturbed by the very idea, and this provides part of the work's power. The other major psychological factor is its shiny black color; as she said of this or another effort, "I felt ill after finishing that black cake—the heaviness of the black." Black, of course, is the color for mourning, for death, and for those who work in the service of God. But black is also the color of rainclouds and of the rituals some primitive tribes perform to get rain. In ancient Vedic India a black man was sacrificed, black food eaten, and black robes worn in rain-getting ceremonies when the need was desperate. Black magic—black orchids—*fleurs du mal*.

Lasch's art tenuously resolves extremes. The celebratory festive air lent by the florets and lacy tracteries on one of her new eggs with their connections to Easter-time confections is challenged, if not contradicted, by the funereal blackness of the piece and its bomb- or coffin-like heaviness. A Liliputian-style imprisonment is suggested by the way thin wires and paint hold the egg down or, in a new gray piece, trap a bat skeleton on its surface. The egg seems to emanate force-waves that might be evil but are seductively beautiful at the same time. The repressing power of these resolved dichotomies (life/death, good/evil, growth/decay, love/hate), which seems now to be at peak strength, was first felt in such time-conscious mid-Seventies works as *Helen Richter Lasch* (1976-77) where three time-separated photographs of the artist's mother embedded in painted "frames" that denote her three major painting styles (past: grids; present: needlework-imitative, icing; and future: floral) provide a poignant glimpse into Everywoman's aging process. Like a personalized update of the Renaissance theme of the three ages of man, this piece is a version of the "vanitas" concept which has so long engaged the western world's artists. The insistent artifice of Pat Lasch's work, its fragile and temporary appearance (which belies its solid construction), its frivolous, seemingly playful nature—in sum, its sheer beauty



our Generations, a purplish dyed-muslin work of 1971, contains the lifespans of her mother, grandmother, and self in connected, dated circles. One particularly austere and poignant piece of 1973 consists of two dissimilarly arched panels fused into one, the larger half containing a single half-circle fading out near the midpoint, the smaller arch containing a securely complete circle. Its title is *Ancestral Pattern in Death*, and the work apparently deals with a lost parent. The stitching in the early pieces (which, like Madame La Farge's knitting, records information) is replaced at the middle of the decade by threads of pigment which weave mats, borders, and frames around actual photographs. Progressive portraits from babyhood to adulthood are embedded in the centers of three to five small panels which are then decorously embroidered with paint. The fascination we have for family albums is augmented by the decadent Victorian sweetness of the lace-curtain and gingerbread architecture motifs which surround the pictures.

Digging for her roots in the 42nd Street Library she found a great-great-grandfather on her mother's side named McGrath who had lived in a wedge-shaped building on Hudson Street. He had kept his severed finger (a souvenir of the Civil War) pickled in a jar. He could be buried with it. One of his rowdy sons had been shot in the head, while Lasch's father's father had died falling down a chimney. Lasch once said she's "interested in the deaths of everyone," but she is clearly most interested in those of her own family. Sometimes the stories feed directly in-



Pat Lasch, *Six Generations*, 1977. Oil and photos on muslin, 24 x 24". Private Collection. Courtesy Lerner Heller Gallery.

to her work, as they do in recent pieces which incorporate strands of black hair that hark back to hearing that "all that was left" of her father's mother, Wilhelmena (with whom Lasch clearly identifies) when she was removed from the common grave in which she was buried when her son was only six, was "her long black hair."

The Irish can be a morbid lot, and so can Germans, even the most outwardly bumptious Bavarians, particularly when they are also Catholics. Lasch feels that the influence on her of the wakes, weddings, christenings, and other "passage" or transfiguration ceremonies she witnessed as a Catholic youth of Irish-German descent, must have been powerful. The heavy odors of carnations, lilies, roses, and incense; the dark recesses of the church aisles; the monotonously intoned responses to the unintelligible Latin semi-song; the ornate encrustation of the altar; the whole engrossing ritual of Catholicism with its chalices and candelabra, embroidered altarcloths and vestments, its mysteriousness of presentation and the way every sacred heart, crucifix, and page in a prayer book are elaborately embellished—all of this has left traces in Lasch's art. Since she generally uses white or pale hues (signifying birth, or one of the sacraments), inflected with or highlighted by brighter touches of red or green only in the rosettes or garlands, or uses purples or blacks (signifying death), her entire color system can be seen to have ecclesiastical overtones.

The elaborate flourishes on any given structure seem to relate to both late Gothic and late Baroque or Rococo religious architectural embellishment. One is immediately put in mind of the wonderfully festooned surfaces of Verzehnteiligen Cate-

chism buildings which bear comparison with Lasch's particular style of adorning structures. Some particularly ornate Indian or Ceylonese temples look as though they might be sources for her very bizarre *Wilhelmena's Funeral Tower* (1980) which has a tiny weasel's skull on its top. Then too, it is tempting to see Mayan temples beneath some of her paint-encrusted surfaces. This is particularly true of the large, very recent "cakes" where there is a stepped or multiple level structure.

The temple or shrine in miniature was frequently used for reliquaries in the Medieval era; they were taken over for secular use during and after the Renaissance to glorify the noble and wealthy by association. Lasch reaps the harvest from all these references and adds on a few of her own. *Ivar's Tower* (1980), which starts out more or less like a traditional four-tiered round cake (with a highly untraditional black "icing"), evolves on the next level into an ornate, flower-laden basket with sharp, spiny protective projections, and then turns into a sort of Art Deco rocket ship, with a revolving roof vent, or fat pastry tube, out of which a small, flower-bedecked object surrounded by more spines seems to have been shot. As if this associational collage weren't confusing enough, the configuration in toto is clearly phallic. Inside the main shaft of the tower Lasch has suspended locks of black hair; thus *Ivar's Tower* becomes a totem or fetish in which the hair has been enshrined. Many primitive peoples believe that possession of a person's hair puts him or her in their power; that not only is a person's strength bound up with his or her hair but even with life itself. One need not know of Lasch's great-grandmother's disinterment nor know anything about Ivar to sense the ritual or magical force of this piece.

Like Meret Oppenheim's *Fur-Lined Teacup*, that quintessential Surrealist *objet de contredit*, *Ivar's Tower* puts two sickeningly unpairable things together: hair and implications of ingestion. We are somatically disturbed by the very idea, and this provides part of the work's power. The other major psychological factor is its shiny black color; as she said of this or another effort, "I felt ill after finishing that black cake—the heaviness of the black." Black, of course, is the color for mourning, for death, and for those who work in the service of God. But black is also the color of rainclouds and of the rituals some primitive tribes perform to get rain. In ancient Vedic India a black man was sacrificed, black food eaten, and black robes worn in rain-getting ceremonies when the need was desperate. Black magic—black orchids—fleurs du mal.

Lasch's art tenuously resolves extremes. The celebratory festive air lent by the florets and lacy tracteries on one of her new eggs with their connections to Easter-time confections is challenged, if not contradicted, by the funereal blackness of the piece and its bomb- or coffin-like heaviness. A Liliputian-style imprisonment is suggested by the way thin wires and paint hold the egg down or, in a new gray piece, trap a bat skeleton on its surface. The egg seems to emanate force-waves that might be evil but are seductively beautiful at the same time. The percussive power of these resolved dichotomies (life/death, good/evil, growth/decay, love/hate), which seems now to be at peak strength, was first felt in such time-conscious mid-Seventies works as *Helen Richter Lasch* (1976-77) where three time-separated photographs of the artist's mother embedded in painted "frames" that denote her three major painting styles (past: grids; present: needlework-imitative, icing; and future: floral) provide a poignant glimpse into Everywoman's aging process. Like a personalized update of the Renaissance theme of the three ages of man, this piece is a version of the "vanitas" concept which has so long engaged the western world's artists. The insistent artifice of Pat Lasch's work, its fragile and temporary appearance (which belies its solid construction), its frivolous, seemingly playful nature—in sum, its sheer beauty achieved through means we associate with quick consumption—make it the very essence of the "vanitas" ideal. Looking at it, one senses the futility of both life and art while simultaneously enjoying every ravishing taste it offers.