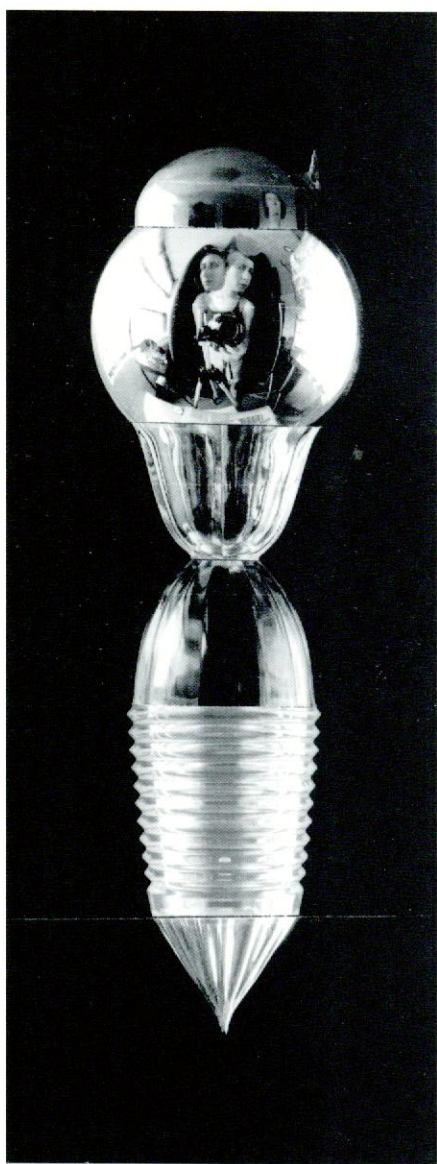


# V E S S E L S

Or Gallery  
May 11th to June 5th, 1993



Three-headed Vessel, 1992

The materials and effects of glass, mirrors and reflective light constitute persistent allegory and metaphor in Carol Sawyer's collage based photography. Here, a complex discussion on self-reflexive formalism is solicited by the work as Sawyer openly exposes her fetish for photographic materials, their inherent qualities and modes of representation. Evident as an exploration in the logic of materials, this closed system naturally leads the artwork to emulate its object of study. In this work we discover an icon of photographic practice, the collages closely resembling the barrel configuration of a camera lens—with an image bouncing inside it. Fortunately, Sawyer has occupied, in self portraiture, this strained position within, with twisted humour and familiar parable.

In the exhibition, eight black and white collage works are framed and displayed, under glass (of course) along the walls of the gallery. We find that ordinary household objects such as thermos glass, perfume bottles, Christmas ornaments, mercury glass vases and vials<sup>1</sup> have been photographed individually against a standard field of black. The negatives were then cropped and collaged together with tape, the lines of which are still visible in the final paper prints. Sawyer's deliberate collection of shaped glass and mirrored objects come together to form the basis of an ephemeral construction (the collage exists only as a negative; it is not a photograph of a collaged unit). In connecting the objects vertically, new objects are manifested. Enlarged to about ten times their actual size, the forms are monolithic, polished and gleaming. They are seductive and beautifully executed: whites are crystalline pure; blacks are velvety and deep. These items can not only be described as phallic and/or vessel forms, but manifestations that are cunningly polysexual. The interesting addition here is that, because the composite items are so small and so reflective, the photographer (Sawyer), by virtue of the act of photographing, is clearly, if distortedly, seen at various points, as *within* or *on* the construction.

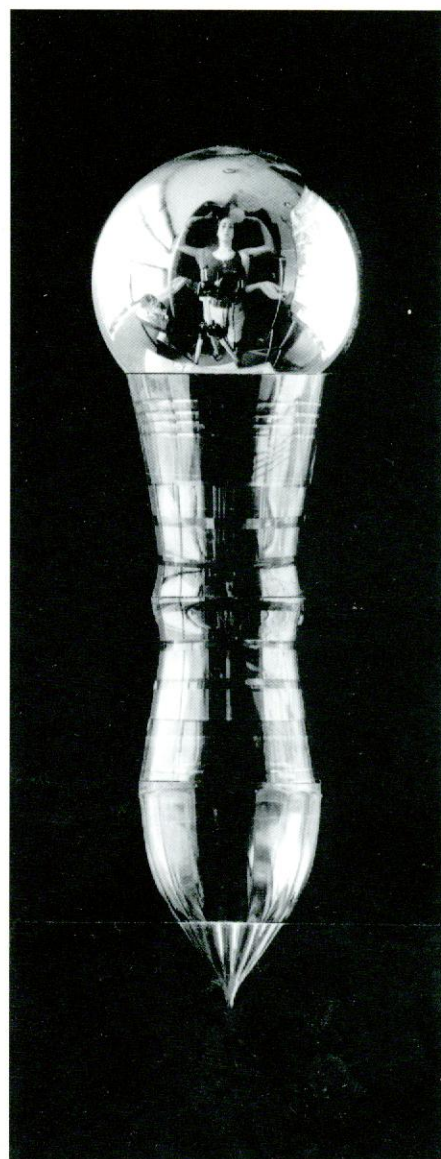
Playfully, her concoctions begin to take on the connotations of a funhouse carnival mirror's undulating perspective. However, as viewers of the work, we are invited to see not ourselves, but rather, the contorted artist reflected back upon us. Her search for personal identity and sexuality have clearly become compromised by the so-called veracity of photography and the restrictive confines of popular representation; and thus she seeks escape through a bending or distortion of these realities. As the woman in a world of objects and objectification, she plays up a transformative fantasy wherein pleasure, or perhaps her only alternative,



is derived in portraying herself as *bent*; as freak. In contrast to Lacan's "mortifying" mirror stage, wherein the image is the trap of imaginary capture; this is surely the *other* side of the mirror—to recognize the sight of ourselves as we know we are not. (Lacan gets it right when he refers to it as a "stage"—one we've all walked on a few times). As he observes, "the armour of alienating identity" is a "narcissistic shield, with its nacreous covering on which is painted the world from which [the ego] is forever cut off" (Some Reflections on the Ego). Certainly though, we can read the forms symbolically in this context as swords or authorial sceptres, voluting in and out at the seams and crowned with "enchanted" spheroids—ready to defend against external forces.

Sawyer's fantasies structure a discourse on female subjectivity while contrasting an impoverished public image in order to express hostility towards and sabotage women's cultural confinement. With the conflation of a bold sexual sign and outrageous self portraiture, Sawyer insinuates, in ridiculous form, the imprisoned, sexually defined woman, inconceivable outside the phallic order. Although these scenarios sometimes verge upon a lone drama (to and for herself at the moment of creation); like the Janus personification in many of the works, she points to its possible double meaning for women. Interpreted elsewhere as a Vanity, preparing for the voyeur, she invites us to judge her, as a woman judges herself for others. Sawyer also appears as a Kali type destroyer, challenging conventional notions of beauty with many unshaved underarms. This is digressive camp, especially since it rests atop, or within, a voluptuously imagined sexual toy. Yet by almost all feminist accounts (as women struggle to reinvent themselves) the female artist is definitely on thin ice with regard to identity related explorations through representation. Suffice it to say, that if we are to accept Sawyer's rather wry commentary, her conclusion suggests that female subjectivity and much of what we consider sexuality are still, like the proverbial genie in the bottle—waiting to get out.

-Kelly Wood



Four-armed Vessel, 1992

1. Her choice of found objects have a history not unlike the artist's own manufacturing. In the seventeenth century, European glass-makers produced what was then known as "watchballs". They were glass spheres, lustered to resemble shining silver and capable of mirroring a whole room in miniature. Designed to hang in the middle of the room, they represented a emblem of good luck and were said to protect against the malign influence of witches. Consequently, their name became corrupted to "witchball" and they survive today as the reflective Christmas ornaments Sawyer has used in setting up her double entendre.

**Carol Sawyer** is a Vancouver based artist who works in photographic mediums.

**Kelly Wood** is a Vancouver artist and writer whose montage photographic work explores the humorous aspects of gender politics.



**Or Gallery**

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Gallery hours: Tuesday to Saturday 12 to 5 PM

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the City of Vancouver, the Canada Council, the Province of B.C. through the Ministry of Tourism and Ministry responsible for Culture