ARTICULATE REMAINS:
RELIEFS, SCULPTURES AND ASSEMBLAGES BY JANE GENNARO

Gennaro's *Egg and Bones* series started with a story. Some years ago, as a relative newcomer to country living, Gennaro naively believed that the arrival of geese in her yard was a good omen. Local residents quickly disabused her of her embrace of the goose and told her that the best way to get rid of them was to find the nest and shake the eggs (killing the embryos). Gennaro took their advice, but felt guilty for having interfered with nature. Though she was later relieved of her guilt by the fact that raccoons invaded the nest anyways--and the geese came back next year too--questions arising from contrite feelings lingered on. Her intervention appears to have acted in the nature of epiphany on Gennaro's imagination, rearranging her ideas about how nature and humanity relate to each other. *Eggs and Bones* meditates on these issues, mounting real goose and hen eggs on canvases and objects altered by paint, then covering them in cheesecloth, as if to restore to the eggs Gennaro damaged their original place in a safe nest.
In *Eggs and Bones*, the idea of the nest has become a basic formal frame of reference for Gennaro's unique use of small canvases as well as pillows, bedding (*Mattress 2*) and, in larger sculpture, cribs or spring mattresses as mounts for her ensembles of eggs. The fact that, in her art, Gennaro often makes use of her own discarded bedding (as well as old nightgowns or towels from doctors' offices) also cause body and art to sometimes merge, when thinking about the general idea of eggs. The eggs are re-fertilized, if you will, by the artist's concern for them: in her care, the eggs morph into symbols with shifting meaning, moving from literal to the figurative--supported by metaphors of webs, seeds, shrouds, mummification--on to the purely abstract. By painting eggs white, for example, Gennaro seeks to symbolically restore their original fertility, while by arranging eggs in patterns on canvas they recede back into abstract symbols of perfection, hope or promise (in these moments, as in *Shaking the Goose Egg,* Gennaro is at her most Cornellian).

But there are other forces at work in Gennaro's art. Marina Warner wrote that fairy tales are often characterized by riotous shape-shifting, which naturally injects a feeling of wonder that "creates a huge theater of possibility in the stories: anything can happen" (*From the Beast to the Blonde*, 1994). Warner also discovered that women spun most traditional tales and did so while actually engaged in spinning (thus, the metaphor "spinning a tale"). The fact that Gennaro's *Eggs and Bones* series exists as a kind of epilogue to a performed monologue, *Shaking the Goose Egg*, reinforces the fact that the telling of the tale is the thread which pulls all of the artist's repeated retellings together, whatever media is used, but also gives her the freedom to pursue many possibilities. Thus, the way in which Gennaro's imagination draws the symbol in and then treats it in different ways, in different media, suggests that its gestalt is not so much a nest as the process of nest-building itself, translated into art. As a result, Gennaro's work is underscored by a more fluid, almost *baroque* imagination. In commenting on how the baroque started with the church but ended up somewhere else, Robert Harbison (*Reflections on Baroque*, 2000), remarked, "ornamental fervor is difficult to police and before one knows it, by incorporating wider references to the natural world (plants, water, rock forms) and secular activities (dance, theatre, pastoral rambles) we have ended up outdoors in some fundamental sense, in a looser universe" (p. 127). The interdisciplinary sources of Gennaro's imagination, also to be seen in her surrealistic hair drawings (or Trichotillomaniart) and hallucinatory cutouts from fashion magazines, reinforce this idea.

Kinderdraussen literally means "children outside", which one may translate either as "out of doors," "left out in the cold," or even in the sense of "outside the box." The ground for this body of work is a set of old handkerchiefs given Gennaro by her mother-in-law, all of them from the 50s or earlier. Gennaro also was looking at old coloring books from her childhood, with stereotyped depictions of cherubic boys and girls going back even further to Shirley Temple days. Gennaro fuses handkerchief ground and coloring book figure to create a window into her childhood, then twists our perception by gleefully adorning her idylls of childhood with collage elements and intensely- imagined borders composed of real snakeskins, bees, rodent skeletons, even a squirrel's claw and tail. Why does Gennaro do this? Just as girls were once not encouraged to play sports and thus ended up running and throwing "like a girl," little girls were and are supposed to shriek in terror at spiders, bees, snakes and rodents. By tossing snakes, and snails and puppy-

dog tails into her assemblages, Gennaro restores a balanced gendering to childhood. She accentuates the fact that she has incorporated a creepy crawler menagerie into her mementos of childhood by notably eschewing, in describing the contents of each collage, the polite phrase “mixed media” so often found in gallery wall labels, and meticulously listing every item. That Gennaro’s visual recipes read like a line from Macbeth, (“Eye of newt, and toe of frogge, wool of bat, and tongue of dogge, adder’s fork, and blind-worm’s sting, lizard’s leg, and howlet’s wing” (Act 4, scene 1)) again reminds us that while boys were let loose to glory in the grossness of nature, girls’ participation in that world, which they once owned, was curtailed a long time ago.

Some of the hybrids Gennaro creates, if you look closely at each *Kinderrausen* work, also suggests her unconscious activation of what Pamela Smith (*The Body of the Artisan*, 2004) has called the “artisanal epistemology” of artists who both imitate and play with nature, to place art and nature in a nondualistic continuum. Gennaro’s delirious play with natural forms reminds one of seventeenth century “wonder cabinet” art when, for example, a drinking cup might be fashioned from moulds of coral, rhinocerous horns, warthog tusks, shark’s teeth and even hound’s heads. Such menageries marshaled nature’s transformative powers, especially evoked in moments when the eye was tricked into thinking art was nature and vice versa, to enrich lives (and even imbue art with a healing power). Similarly, in Gennaro’s *Kinderrausen*, one is startled to find a snakeskin topped off by a real mouse skull, an artificial fabric bird elaborated from another snakeskin, dead bees in paper flowers, tortoise skulls and shells as flowers too and a baby rattle made from a tiny bird skeleton and that squirrel’s tail. The skeletons in Gennaro’s art, far from being morbid, seek to reconstitute childhood as an age of natural curiosity.

--Robert Mahoney, New York City