



**JACKIE WINSOR**  
**P.S.1, New York**  
**26 Oct 97 - 1 Mar 98**

In 1980 I was invited to select a show of Canadian artists for the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, where I was then Director. I would have included Jackie Winsor but she had left Canada aged 11 and moved to the USA. This, I was told, rendered her ineligible. Perhaps nationality in such cases has to be about passports, but there is a deeper association which any artist has with his/her "roots" and if you look at it like that Winsor is very much a Canadian - from Newfoundland, in fact. That she didn't show in Canada between 1979 and 1996 and that she is so little represented in collections there attests to the sensitivity with which a move to the States is regarded - understandably so as Canadians often watch their own re-marketed as Americans: Jack Kerouac (born of Canadian parents but raised, like Winsor, in Massachusetts), Joni Mitchell, Neil Young - and Agnes Martin, whose work is admired by Winsor and with which her own has clear affinities.

Winsor was, as she puts it, "raised poor." She comes from generations of people who lived off the sea, and some of whom died in it. Newfoundland is doubtless a stern kind of place: the wind blows hard... But she keeps up ties and is proud to do that. She arrived in New York just as women artists were storming the barricades: "the women's movement circa 1970 was the tide which swept Winsor into local then national attention." (1). Lucy Lippard included her in *26 contemporary women artists* in Ridgefield, Connecticut in 1971, now considered by many a landmark show. As one might say of Bridget

Riley (of about the same generation) - feminism was about the right to be treated equally, not an agenda to be made manifest in Winsor's art.

She started out, in other words, when Minimalism was triumphant (and, it might be added, mainly male). And when there was a kind of love affair with industrial materials too. When P.S.1 re-opened recently, they mounted a large retrospective show of Winsor's work. The earliest was *Rope Trick* (1967): a single six-foot length of very heavy rope standing on one end. It is in fact supported by a rod within: and right there, Winsor has already struck out on her own. A thorough-going minimalist would reject that concealed support. Winsor chose to make her sculpture in the way she did, I suspect, because rope was so important to her as a material (used in several other pieces too) with all its connotations, its feel, its colour (it has an intensely evocative smell too, for anyone who grew up near the sea). Secondly, her preoccupation with outside/inside, with concealed interiors, is implied here and this went on to be one of the key elements in her work. The concealed steel rod was not a cop-out but a good secret.

The P.S.1 show included another early work, *Brick Square* (1971): an open square is formed on the floor by bricks laid simply the way a bricklayer would. It's curiously unsatisfactory and felt, in the context of the other work around it, like a cul de sac, like an exercise in something which lacked the elements Winsor really needs to put into her work. *Nail Piece* (1970) seems to have borne more fruit: huge numbers of nails have been hammered into a long plank of wood - they form a surface. By the late 1970's, though the work is retaining the formal shapes of minimalism - typically, the freestanding cube or sphere - we find there's a great deal of work going into surfaces, often rendered rich in texture and colour. In one, *Burnt Piece* (1977/8), it is the application of fire which produces the surface Winsor wants. In other works it is the application of pure pigment; in one, the entire surface is covered in gold leaf. It's noteworthy that the colour remains a sculptural component, not a painterly add-on. And what we see (again, *Nail Piece* is the progenitor) is also a register of labour, of action - she made a piece once when the action was to dynamite it. As she has said "My idea ... was to bring together opposite elements, the known and the unknown, form and force - putting the boxes through these rugged ordeals and letting them come out with beauty marked on them, with the quietness that comes after rough experiences." (1)

The element of "inside/outside" manifests itself in a number of sculptures that have small "windows" in them, or apertures formed in other ways, through which an interior can be seen - this

varies from being barely visible to being strongly coloured. "Inner life" is a fashionable phrase, but seems a useful one when talking about Winsor's work: though using rigorous methods, and minimal shapes, it is very much about the unknowable, "the other" in an existential sense. I don't mean to imply any easy illustrative approach here: I mean that all her work has that kind of presence. I'm reminded, if it's not too extreme an analogy, of how survivors of torture say they retain that inner place, a place to which they go and from where the worst pain never quite winkles them out.

In recent years, Winsor has shifted from the floor to the wall. It wasn't an easy shift; only when she found a way to feed her preoccupation with the "inner" did she find a form which satisfied her - and that was to make pieces which are wall-mounted, but recessed. The wall has to be recessed to receive them: you can't be changing your mind as to where to hang them! They are small, compared to other work Winsor has made - but it is precisely in that way they demand a place to be that they meet up with the same concerns which animate the big floor-based pieces. You could say they were stubborn. Yet they are, of course, open in a way the earlier work was not and in that sense seem more, well, relaxed. As Winsor expresses it "Relaxing into silence is like leaning back, and these pieces lean back into the wall."<sup>(1)</sup>

Winsor's work has hardly ever been seen in Britain. With visible signs of weariness at all the recent clamour for attention in our galleries, it might be just the right time.

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(1) John Bentley Mays: "The Winsor Posture"  
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