

NEW YORK

Janine Antoni
LUHRING AUGUSTINE

In the works on view in Janine Antoni's recent exhibition, the body veers between mythical symbol and stubborn flesh and blood—it can be a tool, a vehicle for something else, an expression. In *Tear*, 2008, the blinking of a gigantic eye, shown in a large video projection, produces the sound of a wrecking ball crashing into a building (the wrecking ball itself is also part of the work and was shown, dented and the worse for wear, not far away).

In *Conduit*, 2009, Antoni has created a set of gargoyle-shaped copper apparatuses through which a woman might pee while standing up, and traces of verdigris are evidence that they have indeed been used. Rather blameless activities (blinking, peeing) are here granted a larger-than-life power, elevated to the destructive, the triumphant. *Conduit's* gargoyles, displayed like relics, each on its own pedestal, were shown with a photograph of the artist urinating off the side of the Chrysler Building, next to one of its own gargoyles—a fantasy about power enacted through one of our lowest bodily functions.

Tear and *Conduit* hark back to work by feminist artists in the 1970s, in which the ordinary was turned into the empowering, and male institutions and inventions were creatively, and sometimes aggressively, undermined. Antoni's own work from the '90s mined similar veins, relying on a strong undercurrent of bleak humor—the feminization of drip painting as she painted with her own hair in *Loving Care*, 1993; the sly warm-



Janine Antoni,
Inhabit, 2009,
color photograph,
116½ x 72".

ing up of Minimalism with the cubes of chocolate and lard in *Gnaw*, 1992—but *Tear* and *Conduit* feel less brisk than didactic. They rather surprisingly brought to mind Matthew Barney, another artist given to using his own body as an instrument in the struggle against natural

limits and as a measure of the built environment that surrounds him (and who conceived part of a work around the symbolic possibilities of the Chrysler Building). But Antoni's struggle is not so much with the laws of nature as with the laws and conventions that have sprung up to manage them, and where Barney seems to celebrate the purest potential of the body, Antoni turns both body and act into symbols, which can paradoxically drain her works of power.

Except when it doesn't, as in *Inhabit*, 2009, a large photograph that features Antoni in her daughter's bedroom, suspended in midair by a harness, its anchoring lines shooting out like the points of a star, the lower half of her body encased in a dollhouse. Here Antoni's symbolism is layered and complex, mirrored in an ambiguous relationship to power and drudgery and ecstasy, and in a visual system that includes multiple shifts in scale (the room, the dollhouse, and the dollhouse within the dollhouse; the artist, the dollhouse's implied inhabitants, and the spider that has taken up residence in the dollhouse kitchen), a mix of deep perspective and flatness (the harness's ropes appearing at once to race toward a vanishing point and to create a halo for the artist's body), and the enigma at its center—the benevolence of Antoni's expression and gesture, despite the awkwardness of the setup and the emotionally and historically charged subject of motherhood. Here she draws on a long history of images of sacrifice and power, not limited to the serenity of that venerable artistic trope, the risen Christ displaying his wounds; the dollhouse, moreover, opens like a triptych or, indeed, a tabernacle: the site where the symbolic materials of bread and wine become the real materials of flesh and blood.

—Emily Hall