

COHEN

nancy

A HANGING BALANCE

A major strand of my work has always been body-related — thinking somewhat abstractly about how it has felt to be a woman and negotiate the world. This shifted from a focus on bodily organs and issues of sexuality to thoughts of how people (myself and those close to me) negotiate their environments.

My sculpture has always been intended to engage viewers physically — to produce a visceral sensation of bodies interacting and to draw one, emotionally at least, into participation in that interaction.

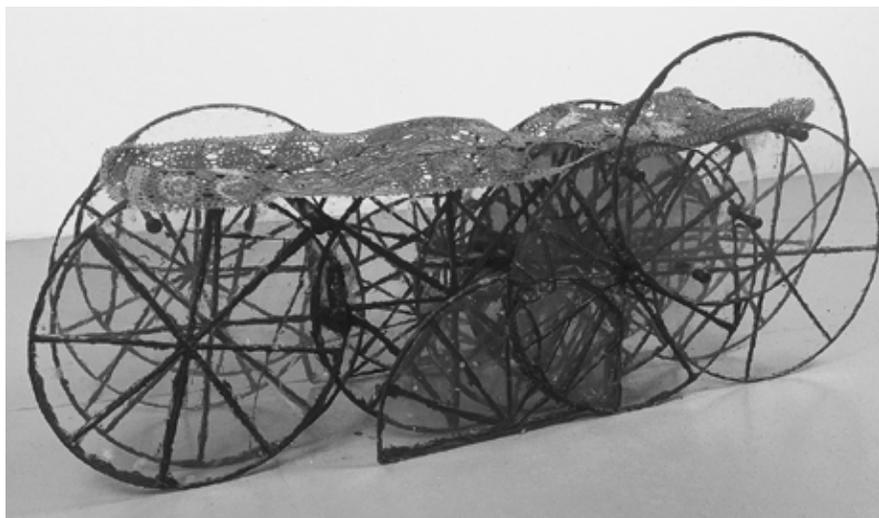
The "Wheel Chair" (*right*), "Hammock" (*below*) and "Gurney" (*next page*)

Series were among the first pieces I made that more literally invited physical interaction, while at the same time, preventing or even repelling it. The "Wheel Chair" is immobile and unresponsive — a too-fragile repository for fragility. The hammocks make



longstanding concerns in my work — balance, weight, vulnerability — personal for the viewer. What would happen if I lay there? The delicate, tenuous, ephemeral balance we all maintain is made literal in these pieces.

"Gurney" can be read as hospital bed or parade float. Many of my works with wheels relate to ideas of processions, yet though a procession is an orderly, formal movement of humanity; here in my gurneys, movement is immobilized and humanity, though implied, is absent. In fact, in all this work, there is an uneasy

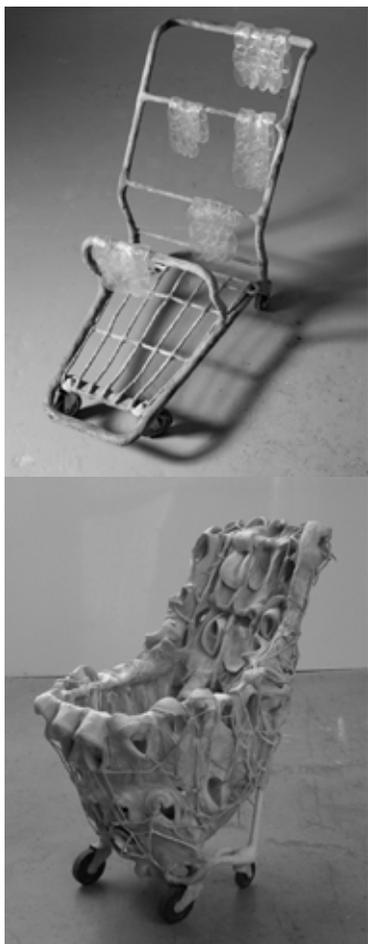


invitation to supply a human presence, an intimation of support that, however, cannot be realized.



In 2004 I made the first of two "Itinerant Couple" (*left*) sculptures. I had been watching a homeless couple in my neighborhood for quite some time. They were often sleeping, bodies interlocked, in the doorway of a closed store or in the gazebo of our local park. At the same time

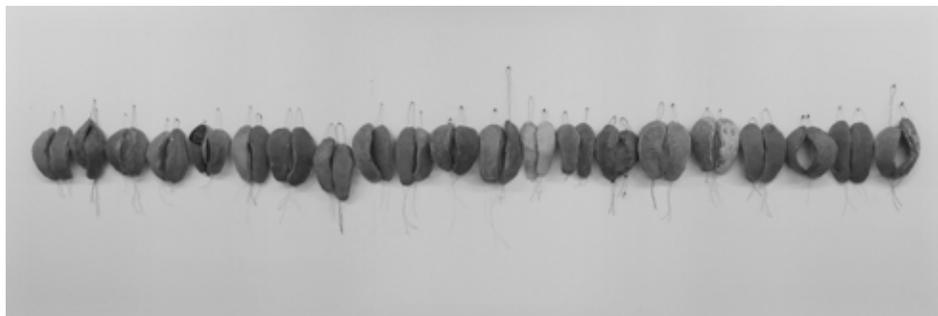
I found an abandoned shopping cart where the cart itself had been removed and re-engineered to function as a kind of hand truck. Those two ideas came together for me. I re-engineered my own abandoned shopping carts into two portable beds. I wove the surfaces out of old belts — as if the material that could hold a body might somehow help shelter this pair — and then I covered it in a skin of translucent paper — rendering it dysfunctional to actually lie on. The second pair of movable beds I made in cement — they were sturdy enough to sleep on. In this case the cement surface referenced the hard ground of my urban neighborhood, while the impressions of belts crisscrossing the work suggested the need to hold one's belonging together. These portable beds, poised near each other reminded me of two figures in conversation.



Six years later, I made one more shopping cart piece. "In Pulverum" (*left*) leaves the frame of the shopping cart intact with the cart removed. It is encrusted in cement and feels rough. Draped over the ribs of its structure are delicate glass forms reminiscent of linen tea towels. It is an absurd piece and a sad one. I can bring to mind the futility of moving it around a city — offering up a very delicate but completely dysfunctional item and referring to an elegant object that would be utterly useless to its owner even if it was made of a more practical material.

In 2009 I read J. M. Coetzee's novel "Slow Man" where the protagonist loses a leg in a bicycle accident and chooses not to get prosthesis. This was concurrent to the daily articles about Iraq veterans getting their body parts blown off by I.U.D's. I began exploring the concept of missing limbs by incorporating rough cement castings of parts of the body, some transformed and

others left evident. Each piece also juxtaposed the cement form with intimate materials directly related to particular individuals. "Supply" (*below*), my most significant piece in that series, came from the fantasy of being able to choose a new body part to replace the one you'd lost.



Thinking about the body is inherently tied up with vulnerability. We each have our particular struggles but ours could easily be anybody else's and vice versa.

The 2011 scooter pieces were very personal. They originally belonged to a teenager, now a young woman, who is part of my family. During a precarious time in her life she used them as her primary mode of transportation,



no matter how unsuited they were to the weather outside or the distance away. Broken from overuse, the scooters seemed a metaphor for her overall situation.



In "Orphan" (*above left*) her old scooter was encrusted in cement, the broken wheels and handlebars recast in glass and made immobile. An object intended to be a toy becomes a necessity and a very insufficient one. In "Solo" (*above right*) the scooter has a rider though not quite a human one.

The merging of body and support which began then is of continuing interest and is evident in "Remains" (*left*) as well. The translucent package being carried on the aged hand truck is a sagging body itself.

Aging was clearly the next vulnerability coming round the bend. As my parents struggle in their late 80's and 90's I have been making work about walkers. Again, the sculptures become both body and support. Again, the wheels are necessary



all photos: Edward Fausty

but barely function. This time, there is also joy caught up in struggle, as in “Two-Step” (*left*) where the figure/walker, precariously balancing, perhaps even dancing, is to some extent, defying its inherent instability.

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Humans are fragile, vulnerable, tenuous, and yet we maintain equilibrium; we endure and persevere. My sculptures are precarious

and delicate yet they are in their own way strong and sure. Like us, balancing surprisingly well against the odds.

Humanity is easily broken or torn, but it lives on and finds or makes the necessary systems of support. It is my goal that in this work, as in our own lives, elements hang in the balance, each one necessary, vulnerable, beautiful and above all interdependent.