

**Drew Shiflett (catalog), essay by Kathleen Cullen, 1993 New York City (The Interart Center, New York, NY, March 11 – April 24, 1993)**

**Drew Shiflett**

When I first encountered Drew Shiflett's sculpture I was drawn to the Gustonesque-quality of the early work. There was something about it that (as in Gusston's late work) made me feel as if I had just entered an existential territory, a Waiting-for-Godot holding area, what Norman Bates called the "private trap" that each of us is caught in. Shiflett's work has a passing resemblance to much recent "junk art" (which uses formal devices going back to Robert Rauschenberg). But Shiflett creates something more personal and desperate, something approaching a feminist existentialism. There is no presumed formalist order, deconstructed, in Shiflett's work: there is no wall with crawl space on the other side of it. Things start from scratch. She is putting things together again in her own personal way, creating her own habitat.

Some definitions of habitat, which seem pertinent to Shiflett's work. Habitat: a zone where destruction or fate has removed all the complacent buffers of life and reduced one to one's "personal resources" to survive. Habitat: a private territory rebuilt "from nothing". Habitat: a delirious zone as well where every scrap of salvage is a fetish with incredible symbolic and ritual meaning. Habitat: combining the groggy sense of shock, the relief of survival, the hope for a fresh start. Habitat: a zone where every small step is a major stride, a zone of highly charged meaning and highly ritualized forms. The major ritual forms in Shiflett's work expressive of this existentialism are that of the threshold and the vehicle.

There are few ways in which Shiflett suggests that her work is meant to transport the viewer across a threshold in a zone of extreme emotional duress. In her forms and how they freely associate with traditional images of SOS situations, and in her coloring, Shiflett's sculptures seem to carry you along to a kind of emotional North Pole (the extreme conditions of weather there, and the symbolic situation of being the end of the world, has made it a metaphor for extreme emotional states since at least the Romantic era). "Arch" is a gateway into a private or hidden emotive world similar to that of the icy lair into which the Penguin in "Batman Returns" ends up in after being abandoned as a baby and adopted by penguins (the new mother) in the zoo. Dripping icicles, with all sorts of weathering effects, it is the packed surface suggesting warmth which gives this piece its broader emotional feel. Then there a sort of "Mad Max" feel to "Ship". The title causes mirages of famed iceberg shipwrecks to rise up. Its form and general appearance reach back to Caspar David Friedrich's icebergs and forward to Anselm Kiefer's recent bricolage airplanes – a kind of end of the world that wasn't. The blue and white tones of "Wings and Aluminum Feathers" have the same associations. The primitive bricoleur overloading a vehicular structure suggests visions of angels or funeral pyres. In "shooting Houseboat" the vehicular way of symbolizing thresholds and transports is again expressed. But it is cozier. Fragile boat-people souls meet a Fairie Queen mode of transport for a journey to an underworld stirring beyond the crawl space. This time the mache recalls memories of Santa's workshop (cozy bliss), piñata festivity, or kitchen table craftmaking of ages long gone (childhood).

**Kathleen Cullen**