The Island, the Sculpture, and the Rage

An annotation on Juliana Irene Smith's FINAL GIRL exhibition at SIC

by Christine M. Kaiser

You arrive at an island. Not a place to inhabit, but a place to enter and leave. The threshold says so plainly: visitors are welcome. What awaits is Juliana's performative sculpture Final Girl — a term borrowed loosely from the idea of performative installation, where a work lives in the synthesis of event and object, presence and representation, rather than conforming to either one alone. Tie dyed fabric is draped over wooden furniture, its surfaces layered with photographs — glued, silkscreened, collaged — documenting a childhood in San Francisco. Faces are overpainted, marked with red dots, masqueraded. Multiple video screens, loops both scenes at once, in the same present moment: warm on its surface, glimpses of family time, mundane every day and overlaid with a performative act of dry swimming, the artist wrapped in a golden heat blanket, treading through water that isn't there. The soundtrack underneath is 90s West Coast horror music, and it carries no fear at all — a choice as precise as anything else in the installation.

Red is the color that the artist keeps returning to — blood, violence, flowers, and ketchup. The exhibition poster itself carries the image: Juliana in a shower, thick red liquid dripping down her face, playful and unsettling at once. One color, doing four or five jobs simultaneously, coexisting none of them cancelling the others. That refusal to let red settle into a single meaning is a refusal of a single history and present demands.

A power element lies in Juliana's choice of material. Nothing is stitched. She uses glue and the silk-screening instead — a raw, unforgiving act placed deliberately at the center of the work, rather than hidden in its seams. Stitching repairs: it mends a memory, a garment, a story, carefully. Glue does something else entirely. It affixes patterns permanently, sometimes crudely, in a way that may never wash away. This is a formal decision as much as anything else — a choice to work against the grain of what fabrics and photographs are usually asked to do, and to make that difficulty visible rather than smoothing it into craft or traditional practices (like her mother used to do).

It would be easy to place this piece in a familiar lineage of sculpture undone through process, or through matter retreating into idea. Juliana's work touches those currents and belongs fully to none of them. What it resists is the object-status itself — the sculpture's inherent discreteness, its completeness, its claim to being bounded as a finished thing. That resistance is also, pointedly, not gender-neutral — it refuses the hard, industrial, self-sufficient authority long coded masculine in sculpture and history. Her piece is whole in itself, round, yet open to being approached from more than one side — nothing about it needs finishing, and nothing about it fulfills a narratives' impulse to have a start and an end. This is an anti-object, made in explicitly feminist terms, and made with total command of the materials doing the refusing.

Something else separates this piece from what came before it. Classical and Baroque sculpture used multiplicity in service of resolution — walk around the work long enough, and one body, one myth, completes itself. Juliana's installation belongs to a different lineage. The two video channels loop together, in the same moment, in the same room — and yet still refuses to cohere into one register. There is no vantage point from which the piece resolves. What's left is multiplicity, built and held on with purpose: no ideal body, no myth, only things placed together in the same present tense that keep their distance from each other anyway.

And yet the piece does not end in bleakness. Underneath the rage is something closer to resilience. A separate video shows a girl on roller skates, circling the sculpture again and again, around and around, never standing still — the same active, unresolved, unwilling-to-sit-still quality that runs through Juliana's performative sculpture. Final Girl is not an accidental title: in the genre the horror soundtrack borrows from, Juliana's final girl is the one left standing when everything else has played out. The visitor leaves the island without a negative feeling — and that is precisely what makes this work so strong. It holds rage, and it holds a difficult history, and still it does not send anyone away carrying weight they didn't come with. What holds all of it together is Juliana's own hand in every material decision, from the glue to the red to the loop that never lets two truths sit still long enough to become one.