

A Red Mirror

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The work of Helen Chadwick is remarkably diverse in its expression. There is a great variety of tone in the artist's oeuvre, from the high seriousness that she could adopt when examining important social issues, to the mischievous wit that was perhaps her more natural mode. There is also a great variety of form in the artist's work, which moves between the poles of performance, photography and sculpture in a kind of elaborate dance. This essay will show the richness of Chadwick's work, but will also attempt to demonstrate its remarkable intellectual consistency.

The desire to look beyond the self's usual boundary – to look past likeness, past gender, beneath the skin, within the cell – is the foundation of much of Chadwick's work. The artist's oeuvre is an extended exploration of the notion of self, pursued through a variety of different conceptual frameworks: including the flesh and the spirit, the individual and society, male and female. Moreover, the use of these opposing terms is significant, as one of the insights offered by Chadwick's work is that the self is never discovered as an entity, but can only be discerned in the relations between the black and white terms on which so much of culture is founded. This essay will attempt to plot these preoccupations as they manifested themselves throughout Chadwick's all-too-short career.

Early Work

Some of Chadwick's first recorded works, made while the artist was an undergraduate at Brighton Polytechnic in the early seventies, are small soft sculptures based on parts of the female body. The artist was soon branching out: 'To me the traditional media were never dynamic enough', Chadwick remembers. 'Right from early on in art school, I wanted to use the body to create a set of inter-relationships with the audience.'¹ One group of Chadwick's works at this time involved painting latex directly onto women's bodies, creating skin-coloured casts which were then accessorised to suggest clothes.

These clothes, which the artist describes as 'kind of pre-Punk, erotic artefacts',² were used in performances, including one which featured in the artist's degree show at Brighton: *Domestic Sanitation* (1976). In a film that was made of this work the satirical, feminist spirit of Chadwick's early enterprise shines through, as four outfitted women – including the artist – engage in a parodic round of grooming and cleaning. Another performance piece, *In the Kitchen* (1977), was first staged at Chelsea College of Art, London, where Chadwick studied