



figure

Alison Ruttan:

Bippitty Bop and You

By Susannah Kite Strang

small paintings flank the bookcases in Alison Ruttan's Oak Park living room. They are oil on paper, elegant monochromatic abstractions that suggest exploded Asian calligraphy or painterly X-rays. Ruttan tells me they are representative of what she had been doing when she moved from New York in 1990 to attend graduate school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is clearly fond of these pieces from a decade ago; when I ask her to surprise at the difference between these pieces and her current work—so color-rich, exuberant, and redolent of sex—an anecdote unfolds. Ruttan introduces her lifelong fascination with teasing herself with images, admitting a tendency to open books to their ghastliest or most shocking pages, peek at the pictures, then slam the book shut. As she tells the story, her gestures mime the opening and slamming of an invisible volume, the punctuated by her infectious good-natured laugh. These austere paintings, Ruttan explains, rose out of one such relationship she had developed with a large medical dictionary.

Ruttan is enviably articulate about the processes she uses to create her work and the connections she draws between the images she creates. She explains her trajectory as an artist in a chronological and cumulative way, moving forward like a snowball gathering skills, resources, and information. She seems to assess completed pieces or series and distill each down until it becomes clear to her which of their themes or ideas will be carried over into her next work. A remarkable result of this is Ruttan's obvious enjoyment of older work. Several older pieces are up in her home, including a series of painterly single-word rebuses pairing words like "cock" and "evil" with illustrative images of the human eye. Ruttan laughingly explains that these paintings are from a time in graduate school when she was uncertain about what she wanted to do. It is the rare artist who chooses to live with the products of a long-ago period of frustration and dissatisfaction; Ruttan's affection for this work speaks volumes about her respect for herself as an image-maker.

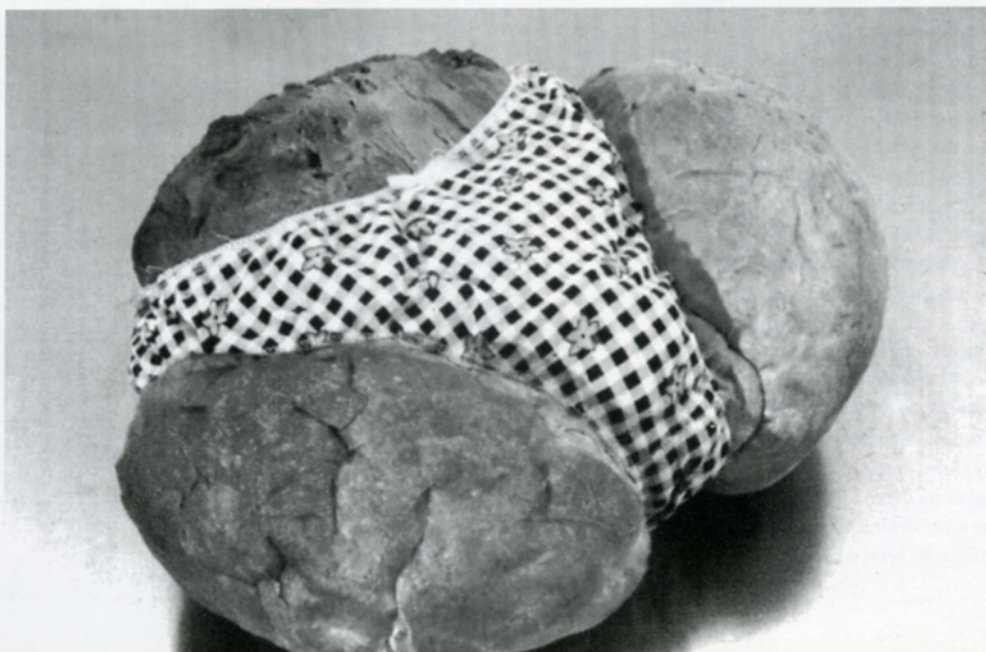
*Dough Girl* was the first more recent work Ruttan introduced into conversation. Made in 1994, *Dough Girl* is one in a series of sculptures in which Ruttan shaped bread dough into a rudimentary female bottom,

then put it to rise and baked it in a pair of women's underwear. The result is both wholesome and abject. Even to look at a photograph of this piece is to get caught up in a flow of sensory descriptors: doughy, crusty, moist, a tender bread contrast messily with rough, lumpy, bulgy flesh. The object itself is both a truncated female body and an overgrown sexless loaf in panties. Any urge—whether to tear into it, to eat it, or to see what it looks like under the underwear—puts the viewer in a compromised position. Ruttan described a gallery opening that featured *Dough Girl* and similar pieces as marked by the smell of fresh-baked bread. One can imagine how such a sensory referent to home and Mom would further complicate these pieces. Bottoms, bulging thighs, and what could quite possibly be someone's mother's underwear play off of the scent of bread like a dirty joke you're not quite old enough to understand.

Each piece in *Substitutions and Equivalents*, a separate but interconnected series from the same time period, is a spread of actual pages from the original edition of *The Joy of Sex*, to which Ruttan has added a watercolor illustration of a cookie. Each cookie is different, as if secretly coded for a specific sex act, and the funny plays on ideas of appetite, desire, and forbidden pleasures are readily accessible to the viewer. In one piece two cookies are painted on text above a post-coital couple sharing a loving look. The cookies (speckled with colorful M&M's) float above their heads like thought balloons. This image is sweeter than the others, suggesting a shared pleasure rather than the rewards, obligations, or imbalance implied by much of the series. Ruttan tells me this is her favorite and I am not surprised; it immediately becomes my favorite too.

The next segment of Ruttan's narrative covers her initial use of pornography as source material. The first of these pieces were altered porn magazine images with the erotic image—everything from breasts and genitals to high heels and other fetish objects—cut out of each page in perfectly round holes. The results are oddly beautiful; the limp, glossy pages still function as pornography despite the absence of anything explicit—because of the genre's overwhelming recognizability. The viewer is challenged to examine his or her own response and question the origins of the arousal that porn is designed to

Alison Ruttan  
*Dough Girl*, 1995. Bread and underwear.  
Images courtesy of the artist.



Alison Ruttan  
*Untitled (Yellow)*, 1997. Digitally composed photograph, 40" x 30".

generate. Spending time with this work causes the cutouts to vibrate between censorship, taking out the dirty parts we have been promised, and titillation, forcing our imaginations to fill in the holes. I found these pieces to be intriguing and rich, with the range of sensory experience that can only be provided by a book-like object. It was hard to resist sticking my finger through the holes, which also provide peepholes to the next page; while handling them it was impossible to avoid projecting imagined naughty parts into the pictures where once there was something overtly sexual. For Ruttan, though, retaining the bound format of the porn magazine was more of an exploration into the fine-art potential of a complex and highly politicized source of imagery than any particular attempt to critically "occupy" the space of the magazine.

The body of work that followed, begun in the mid '90s, boosted the pornographic imagery onto the wall. A series of digital prints of display images from porn magazines were printed much larger, yet still shot full of holes in all the right places. Now, highly color-saturated magazine images of gourmet food fill the circles. These pieces are optically mesmerizing; food bubbles float in front of sex, while at the same time sex is a semi-permeable veil concealing food. *Carmel Custard* is a particularly dizzying example of a later piece in this series where the many holes in the image begin to follow a pattern dictated more by the artist's design than by the location of erogeous zones. Ruttan's layering of human appetites is both playful and thought-provoking. Ruttan selects her pornographic images based on what she sees as commonality of experience, as well as using those expressions of sexuality most readily available in the media. Her goal is to present the sex acts that come closest to being "mainstream," with the hope that this will be most likely to stay within each viewer's comfort threshold. Whether one experiences a piece like *Praline Supreme* as a tease where the "good parts" of the porn are hidden behind distractingly sweet candy balloons, or as a statement in which tempting food meets tempting flesh to comment plainly on the baseness of human appetite, these images are provocative.

Ruttan frequently articulates her interest in making work that appeals to broad audiences for a variety of reasons. In a subsequent series of digital prints Ruttan lays flat, brightly colored shapes over pornography. The absence of the photographic food images visually simplifies these pieces; the colored shapes remain firmly in the foreground like distorted balloon animals floating in front of the pornography's lens. The colors are candy bright and the shapes are now overlapping ovals, both childishly simple and immediately referential for anyone familiar with Modernist painting. Ruttan is delighted that this work pokes fun at the fine-art traditions in which she was educated. She "enjoy(s) flipping the high tone of . . . Greenbergian formalism and wedding it to material coming out of the lower end of contemporary visual culture."

*Bippitty Bop and bob, bob*, Ruttan's most recent works, continue this visual play in the form of short animated videos shown in continuous loops. In the former an abstract high-art blob with an unusual green appendage does a disarmingly cute dance to a cheery ultra-contemporary electronic soundtrack. Along with her other ongoing projects, this work is made on a Macintosh computer by laying flat shapes on top of individual frames in pornographic videos. All the photographic imagery is blocked out by solid colors, with a few select shapes abstracted into the resulting animation, which move with the inherent syncopation of the sex they conceal. This work is simultaneously adorable and disturbing, inviting laughter that becomes nervous as the viewer inevitably realizes the origins of the anima-

tion's movement. Once the specificity of sex becomes obvious it is hard to slip back into the safety of the cartoon. The "character" who so easily became the "bob" of the title has tricked us by becoming suddenly-so-explicit male and female organs. We are embarrassed to find ourselves still moving in time to the seductive beat of the music, as each movement of our own bodies matches those of the animation bouncing and coupling.

Ruttan's shift from print to video seems an inspired choice, activating her imagery in a way that enlivens and complicates her work even as the visual elements become increasingly abstract. Referencing sex through movement alone lends these video pieces a subtlety and sensuality unachievable in two dimensions, and Ruttan continues to collaborate with sound artist Jessie Goffin on the works' soundtracks to assure the slickness that the images demand. The move toward video, yielding work so much less marketable than her digital prints, will obviously negatively affect potential sales; one wall of her studio was hung with stills from *bob, bob* being examined for their viability as prints. Colors are being changed and potential images altered and refined to stand alone in two dimensions. There is a strong undercurrent of mediocrity in the way Ruttan works, an economy of artistic gesture that is practiced by her personal expansiveness and generosity of spirit.

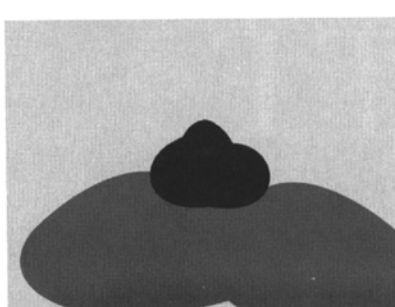
Ruttan's work has appeared in galleries consistently and successfully throughout her recent career. She is clearly comfortable within this milieu, though she spoke excitedly about possible outdoor projections of her video work. It was with some hesitation that I asked Ruttan to share her views on the recent shifts in Chicago's gallery scene, from the closing of the Randolph Street Gallery to the exodus of Ten-In-One and the Chicago Project Room to the loss of Beret International, where Ruttan showed extensively between 1993 and 1997. I expected a moment of mournful silence, or at least a sigh, but Ruttan was characteristically sanguine and upbeat in her response. She acknowledges and appreciates what these galleries were and how they helped shape the way Chicago artists were seen both here and across the country, but reminded me that "nothing lasts forever" nor, in Ruttan's opinion, should it. Ruttan is comfortably entrenched in her work without seeming weary or complacent. She effectively makes "artist" seem like a job that, if perhaps not practical, is at least viable and certainly lively.

In the effort to access a universal human commonality through pornography, Ruttan is choosing a fairly common means to a complex and resonant end. It is her generosity as an artist and her respect for the job she has created that allow her work to communicate to a diverse range of viewers. On many levels Ruttan is still playing the game of teasing herself with the shocking pages of a book. She reveals and hides images that titillate with frank flirtation and intelligent humor, knowing that we all have complex desires, that we all love the laugh or the blush or the cringe that comes with the tease. **NEW | ART**

Susannah Kite Strang lives in Chicago.

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Alison Ruttan  
*bob, bob (detail)*, 2000. Digitally created  
video animation. Courtesy of the artist.