

Dorothy Iannone and Sarah Pucci

HANNAH HOFFMAN GALLERY

Sarah Pucci was born in Everett, Massachusetts, in 1902 and died there at the age of ninety-four, never having lived more than four miles away, spending a few years in an apartment in East Boston and two and a half decades at the house she bought in Medford. She worked in candy factories—Schrafft's, Foss—putting designs on chocolates, and at the Leopold Morse garment factory, the Navy Yard, and General Electric.



Sarah Pucci,
*A Heart That Sees
You*, ca. 1990,
beads, sequins, pins,
foam, locket, stand,
13 x 11 3/4 x 2 3/4".

She outlived two husbands and had just one child, Dorothy Iannone. At fifty-seven, Pucci began to create a distinctive kind of craft object, covering Styrofoam forms in sequins, beads, and fake pearls. For more than three decades she turned out spangled spheres and hearts, some two hundred of them, always destined for her daughter. As soon as one was finished, she would mail it to Iannone in Berlin, Düsseldorf, London, or Reykjavík.

They are devotional objects—tinsel impressions of church regalia—captivating in the countless little acts of maternal zeal they record: the repetitions of fastening, gluing, trimming, each jewel stuck on with aging fingers, year after year. “I didn’t care about art,” Iannone quotes her mother: “I made the objects for *you*.” We can call them sculptures, even if Pucci just called them “balls,” but we cannot pry them from the account of their making or their itinerary. They depend on Iannone’s authority as an artist and on the storytelling that has often accompanied their exhibition. Perhaps for this reason, though not this reason alone, I can’t help but find affinities between the glittering curios of the Catholic widow from Everett and the erotic beatitudes of her itinerant bohemian child.

Iannone first presented her mother’s sculptures in 1972 at her friend Daniel Spoerri’s Eat Art Galerie in Düsseldorf, and occasional showings have followed, whether staged by Iannone or, more recently, not. The latest, organized by curator and writer Scott Portnoy at Hannah Hoffman Gallery, featured fifteen of Pucci’s pieces, dating from the 1970s to the 1990s. They sat on pedestals arranged in a row running the length of the long exhibition space on a strip of blue carpet—a display, like the work itself, both mannered and domestic. We saw wreaths, globes, circles, and hearts, some incorporating little goblets or figurines as structural elements, others embedding a medallion or mirror among the dense patterns of sequins and gold trim.

Ecstatic ornamentation and horror vacui are qualities Pucci’s art shares with her daughter’s well-known paintings and sculptures (qualities pointedly absent, however, from the four Iannone works in the show: spare, elegant paper-and-gold-leaf collages from 1962). Iannone added another commonality in turn: She solicited a life story from her mother to accompany the sculptures, much as Iannone’s own work is consumed with autobiography. Initially printed in the catalogue for a mother/daughter show at Ludwig Forum for International Art in Aachen, Germany, in 1980, the text mixes seemingly minor trivia from Pucci’s life (learning to drive a Maxwell) with more poignant recollections (a vision of the Virgin Mary while breastfeeding, or the exact sums of money set aside every week in order to send her daughter to college). Many of these details appeared in the autobiographical texts accompanying later shows that, like the myths, varied slightly with each retelling.

Iannone reads something closer to her mother’s original narrative in her video *Sarah Pucci: A Piece About My Mother and Her Work*, 1980, which was also on view. In a tightly framed shot, she displays several of Pucci’s sculptures against an all-black ground and backdrop, the vignette calling to mind a puppet theater or a QVC product close-up. Occasionally a hand enters the void, reworking the cramped staging or ushering pieces in and out of the frame. Iannone inserts family photos and grumbles that the colors aren’t right. She plays a tape of her lover and muse, Dieter Roth, reciting a scatological stream-of-consciousness tribute to Pucci. Later, Iannone recounts a mystical, orgasmic dream she had while sleeping in Pucci’s bed and delivers her own lilting tribute to her mother in an unplaceable pan-European accent—in any case, not the voice from Everett. “I had to fight you every inch of the way,” Iannone slips in among her otherwise adoring declarations. In this way, we get a glimpse of friction threading through the rapturous mutual regard: Even from great distances, it’s all rather claustrophobic.

—Eli Diner