

# VicToria Neal Ralston

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## Artist's Statement

Since the early 1990s, my work has involved the creation of conceptually-based sociopolitical objects, installations and performances formed from the deconstruction of dream and myth as they relate to the nature of perception and how one is influenced by emotion and longing, sense of flux and impermanence, and awareness of body and earthly form. I employ traditional theatrical techniques to create an entire atmosphere in the gallery which act as springboards for the larger questions of identity and existence. Densely layered, patina surfaces serve as screens for projected images, hand written texts, and surrounding soundscapes. Fabric and organic structures, "emotional holding tanks," for figures, shadows, and the viewer's own projected psyche, can form a central component in these metaphoric spaces.

The social spaces we share intersect with our interior spaces where we store our most beloved beliefs. Navigating these two worlds creates tension, passion, and sometimes repression. I strive to explore the human dilemma of being with oneself while also being with the other, the challenge of formulating a compassionate understanding of the human condition while inhabiting one's own vulnerability within that condition.

*Body Memory* is an installation piece investigating how we hold memory as a felt sense in our bodies and in turn how that affects our perspective and subsequent interactions with others. In another installation, *Is It Ok For Me To Be Here, fables on the contemporary south*, the space is filled with collected stories about individual experiences relating to one's sense of belonging. These personal stories, suspended on curing tobacco leaves, shape a pathway through the installation space. Emerging from within is a curing barn of narratives about racism, sexism, ageism, and regionalism. The barn itself houses a musical element adapted from a Jim Crow era song called "Jump Jim Crow." Throughout the exhibit, the space continues to evolve, as spectators are encouraged to add their own text. The accumulation of the stories prolongs the element of interaction.

I typically process themes through several bodies of work concurrently. As a performer of experimental Object Theater and as a puppeteer, I present the psychic drama in a different form. I work with string marionettes, shadow puppets, masks, and Bunraku style figures which I construct using traditional sculptural techniques. I employ techniques such as woodcarving, casting with bronze, ceramic, and plaster, sewing, material assemblage, and kinetic sculpture.

The emotional space that is created when a puppet is animated is one of immediate tension and drama. The performing object comes to life through its relationship with the puppeteer, who has the Sisyphean task of bringing an inert being to life. The puppet evokes compassion because it appears to be precariously poised between life and death. The puppet and puppeteer represent a dynamic, interdependent state of being, and I am endlessly curious about their relationship with one other.

The puppet acts as an innocent guide, leading the audience through various vulnerable psychological states. In identifying with the puppet, the audience is rendered child-like.

The often-melancholy puppet with its profound passivity helps the audience safely explore their own experiences of fragility. The puppet reminds its audience of their own paradoxical nature; like the puppet, they too are vulnerable and curious, lost and capable, wounded and spiritual.

In my work, I strive to form interactive conceptual spaces and performances that reconnect individuals to a quiet, interior moment of reflection about their roles and responsibilities in their communities and the world at large. My curiosity about the intersection of the self and the other often takes me out of the studio to discover themes and ideas that may shed light on the process of perception and how we relate to others, while I find endless enjoyment in the studio discovering the beautiful detail of materials and the intricacies of sculpting and fabrication to process and convey meaning through images.