Introductory essay by Marvin Heiferman for the exhibition of RAINING POPCORN at the Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College 2001

Marvin Heiferman. "Serious Thoughts are Popping Up." In Sandy Skoglund: Raining Popcorn. Grinnell, Iowa: Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, 2001.

It was more than a quarter century ago that American artists began to turn to photography—with excitement and in growing numbers—acknowledging that it was the medium best suited to make sense out of the complexity of late 20th-century existence. Some artists made deadpan photographic images to document their conceptual investigations or to comment on the quirkier intersections of art and life. Others appropriated everyday commercial imagery, living under the skin of popular culture's pictures in order to understand how the photographs that claimed to represent reality had come to be as engaging as reality itself. Still another option, one pioneered by artists like Sandy Skoglund, was to explore photography's power to redefine reality by learning how to fabricate compelling fantasies and illusions.

That practice—which came to be known as tableaux or directorial photography—demanded a knack for storytelling, a sense of style, and a repertoire of convincing technical skills. And from her earliest major installations and photographic works to her most recent work, Raining Popcorn (2001), Skoglund has repeatedly proven her mastery of those skills. For two decades, she's been a canny pop-culture showman, producing appealing, yet ultimately disturbing artworks that never fail to attract viewer attention. It's hard to be blasé when confronted with Skoglund's signature, over-the-top psychodramas. And hard not to shake your head in disbelief or crack a smile when you find yourself, literally or figuratively, in a corner of the world where everything is covered in uncooked chopped meat, raisins, or jelly beans.

Skoglund's aggressive disregard of conventional good taste and "high art" seriousness often reads as humor and lightness in an art world prone to self-importance and pretension. But ultimately, behind the sometimes jokey and always raucous façades of her sculptural installations and photographic images, it is Skoglund's intention to trigger discomfort and self-reflection. It is the darker side of her imagination that gives the work its edge and depth, that keeps it from teetering into gimmickry and theme park insincerity. No matter how seductive or loopy her materials, imagery, or implied narratives might get, Skoglund is relentlessly focused on the production of metaphors that reflect human fear and vulnerability.

Behind the manic, matching props and the optical buzz of carefully calibrated color coordination lie more subtle, somber messages. Skoglund almost challenges her audience to wade through the distraction of surface patterns and to accustom themselves to the visual din to get to the essence of the work. And for those who do, something odd happens. A surprising calm settles over the work's hyperactivity. And Skoglund's lower-keyed, but more powerful juxtapositions and contradictions emerge: Humor co-exists with anxiety, the human with the animal world, and the banal with the apocalyptic. The work simmers down and reminds viewers of their smallness in a big, over-determined world where consumer culture, nature, science, and their interior gyroscopes regularly spin out of control.

Control lies at the core of Skoglund's work. Each project presents new challenges—the learning curve to master idiosyncratic materials, the logistics of mass production, long stretches of repetitive work, and repeated tests of willpower. From the conception of projects through extended periods of labor-intensive, factory-like production, to the final installation and photography, nothing is left to chance. Fortunately, Skoglund relishes that sort of challenge; she's always derived pleasure and satisfaction from hard work. To hear Skoglund reflect back on the joy and tedium she experienced on her earliest jobs—decorating cakes, hour after hour, on the night shift at a commercial bakery; selling shoes, perfume and even hot dogs at Disneyland—sheds biographical light on the content, process, and unforgiving intensity of her work.

Harnessing her skill and determination to create images for a world in which logic no longer rules, Skoglund aligns herself with artists and writers whose subject matter is the irrationality of modern life. Sigmund Freud, in a 1919 essay, "The Uncanny," was the first to describe the unsettling response one feels when confronted with situations that are simultaneously both familiar and strange, that trigger a kind of amazement, a sense of shock, and a thrill. That kind of exquisite discomfort inspired the earliest surrealist artists who responded to the horrors of World War I, and others in subsequent decades who responded to the dislocations of daily life by making artworks in which interior and exterior realities were experienced simultaneously.

Skoglund's work extends that tradition. Her work shares the theatrical flair of Salvatore Dali's hallucinogenic tableaux, the charmingly domestic preposterousness of Rene Magritte's paintings and sculptures, and the fancifulness of Man Ray's photographs. Ironically—given Skoglund's intense study and learned facility—there's something about her subject matter, choice of materials, and compulsive work habits that call to mind yet another group of artists—self-taught or "folk" artists. But while Skoglund might share their offbeat sensibility, unshakable sincerity, and transcendent focus, her visions are firmly rooted in her own cultural self-consciousness. From commercial photography, Skoglund has learned to meticulously craft the aura of perfection that transforms mundane realities into convincing illusions. She draws liberally from the conventions of science fiction and horror films, and the display techniques of natural history museums and store windows.

Dense as the network of sources for her work might be, Skoglund is reluctant to articulate specific meanings for her imagery. She's learned from years of experience that regardless of her own motivations and feelings, viewers layer their own stories onto her uncanny images. Still, in the months before Raining Popcorn was completed, Skoglund was willing to discuss some of the new work's ideas and allusions. The downpours and drifts of popcorn would refer to the historical movement of glacial ice sheets that cut the hilltops and filled the valleys of Iowa with rich soil, creating fertile plains. The piece is an homage to the expansiveness of the state's landscape, where generations ago indigenous tall grasses were plowed under for farming. And as corn emerged from a diversity of cash crops to dominate the natural landscape, so popped corn overwhelms nature itself in Raining Popcorn.

Skoglund spoke, as well, of her interest in themes of disorientation, disappearance, and death, and of her need to explore the poignant, ephemeral nature of the physical world—its seasons of growth, the lives and deaths of plants, animals, and people. Skoglund described how she's been profoundly moved by witnessing people come to accept their own vulnerability and learn to forgive themselves and others for who and what they are. Gone are the furniture, the claustrophobic props, and lighthearted sight gags that characterized so many earlier pieces. Even the popcorn-pale tint of this newest work signals a change of tone and concern.

In Raining Popcorn, the junk food most closely associated with frivolous entertainment is used to detail a primal scene. For this project, Skoglund researched popcorn's historical significance and cultural associations. She learned that long before European explorers arrived in the Americas, popcorn was used to decorate the ceremonial headdresses and necklaces of the Aztec's gods of maize, rain, and fertility. Millennia later, Native Americans served popcorn at the first Thanksgiving feast in Plymouth and brought "snacks" to meetings with the colonists as tokens of goodwill during peace negotiations. It was only in the late 19th century that popcorn became linked with leisure time, and its popularity grew as it was sold by vendors at state fairs, public parks, and international expositions. By the time of the Great Depression, both popcorn and movies had become so popular and cheap, they became linked in the minds of Americans as affordable luxuries. When candy was scarce due to sugar rationing during World War II, Americans' popcorn consumption tripled. And although popcorn sales slumped mid-century, when television's popularity cut into movie theatre attendance, popcorn sales today approach a quarter billion dollars a year, thanks to the prevalence of microwave ovens. A world knee-deep in popcorn isn't far-fetched, considering that the average American consumes 68 quarts of popcorn each year.

Recent front-page headlines and features on the evening news suggest at least one other way to interpret the meaning of piles of corn in our daily lives. In fall 2000, environmental watchdog groups rang alarm bells when they detected that genetically modified StarLink corn, neither tested nor approved for human consumption, had made its way into a popular brand of taco shells and onto supermarket shelves. While Europeans have argued loud and long about the spread and safety of genetically modified foods, this was the first time Americans seemed to pay attention to the public health, economic, and ethical issues the situation raised. Corn—one of America's premiere cash crops—is used in the manufacture of chips, sweeteners, starch, oil, flour, and cereals. Within weeks, almost 300 corn products were recalled. Foreign sales of American corn were threatened. The nerves and finances of farmers started to fray. Devoting acreage to genetically altered corn had seemed like an especially good idea to farmers who grew StarLink for animal feed; the redesigned food product was engineered to poison the caterpillars responsible for yearly crop losses of a billion dollars. But somehow StarLink corn stored in silos got mixed in with corn sold for human consumption. To the food industry and for Iowa, the kind of bad dream, fantasy scenarios Sandy Skoglund specializes in can seem uncomfortably real.

The fascination Skoglund's works hold for viewers has always been triggered by the references and frictions, the uncanniness she so carefully builds into her environmental scenarios. Her signature strategy of leavening levity with terror rings true because it is a tactic long embedded in popular culture. From mid-20th century Cold War fear-mongering to the calculated plots of summer blockbusters, the juxtaposition of joy and fear, of giggles and screams is guaranteed to stir the American imagination. And it is precisely these kinds of oppositions that Skoglund—a populist artist, supremely uninterested in showing restraint—has so enthusiastically embraced and shrewdly exploited in this new work. In Raining Popcorn, sculpture and photography, culture and nature, nature and business, and art and life interweave to shape yet another compelling and open-ended scenario about the complexities of the world we live in.