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Esther Solondz, *They Left Their Clothes by the Water*, 2003 mixed media, installation view, NAGA



Esther Solondz

NAGA

Boston

Esther Solondz's extraordinary installation, *They Left Their Clothes by the Water*, was enigmatic and profoundly solemn. Taking up a whole gallery, the unsettling, yet somehow comforting assemblage of children's belongings alluded to an incident that was presumed to have taken place long before the viewer stepped in.

The installation turned viewers into archeologists. They could tell there was a story, but it could only be inferred from the absences and lifeless artifacts. From what was visible, a group of children had come to the water's edge, discarded their clothes, and disappeared. The water, too, was gone – evaporated or vanished – leaving only its crystalline residual salt behind. Where the children had come from or gone was a mystery.

Viewers entered the softly lit gallery and immediately encountered a pair of mittens and a salt-encrusted violet dress hanging from crude wooden pegs. The mineral crystals glowed like rhinestones; the soft pastel fabric breathed as if through ice. Along another wall, in the central space of the gallery, a dozen children's faces painted on books bore witness to the scene, like coined images of forgotten emperors. Several pairs of stiffened, hand-sewn children's shoes posed beneath them like distracted sentries.

Further along the same wall, Solondz hung a series of little girls' tights, stiff with tar and painted pink and white. Opposite them, six tattered bands of gauze covered salt-stiffened christening gown hanging from pegs. Another set of rigid gowns leaned against the far wall of the room. On the floor, nearly two dozen washtubs were deployed in rows, salt crystals engulfing them like hoar frost. There were no children. There was no water. There was no memory, meaning, or life.

Solondz's haunting, time-frozen forms evoked a drama where characters were irrevocably suspended between action and epilogue. Visiting this

installation was like inspecting the dusty dressing rooms of a theater where the actors had abandoned their scripts, props, and costumes. We couldn't know what had happened, nor why or how we should feel about it. The only certainty was that time had passed.