So Above, So Below: Andrea Geyer's Audrey Munson
By Johanna Burton

April 26, 2004: I arrive late and flustered at the Woolworth Building for a meeting with Andrea Geyer. Geyer had been working there for nearly a year, having been awarded space through the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and her days were now quickly winding to a close. An artist whose practice rarely requires a proper studio (and which in many ways calls into question the virtues and values of studio production altogether), Geyer's stint of formalized studio time could be seen as a kind of counterintuitively radical departure from her usual ways of working. I was looking forward to hearing about what she had done while in residence there.

I knew the famous Woolworth building, of course, but as I struggled to find and then enter it, I realized my acquaintance was purely abstract. I had always encountered its impressive height and girth from some distance; I had never been inside before, nor even noted the whereabouts of a public foyer. Thus, for nearly half an hour, I walked literally *around* the Woolworth, frustrated, trying to locate myself, before finally looking up—way up—and realizing in doing so that I was standing directly in front of what I was searching for. Going inside, I gave my name to a security guard, who pointed me in the direction of an elevator. Thirty-three floors up, Geyer and a number of other artists occupied a vast unfinished space, the windows of which offered breathtaking aerial views of the city.

But for Geyer, the view offered much more than pleasure. It gave her a quite different vantage on the kind of terrain she normally covers in a much more on the ground fashion. The urban setting, with its palimpsest of visible and invisible histories, implicit and explicit rules, regulations, and deeply set codes of behavior, has long been the site upon and within which Geyer works. Her interest in identity—and primarily in the relationship between gender, class, ethnicity, and politics—manifests in works that reveal subjectivity as inherently unstable and therefore rendered compulsory and perpetually monitored. It is in condensed situations, such as large cities, that Geyer locates the most evident (and yet simultaneously the most transparent) iterations of enforced subject positions. In previous works, she has used both language and image in order to court the feel of the "documentary" while frustrating any expectation for "pure" information. In this way, Geyer insists on resituating the "factual" precisely *within* the affectual, the personal, and the experiential.

In *Cambio de Lugar_Change of Place_Ortswechsel* (2000-2002 in collaboration with Sharon Hayes), for instance, Geyer interviewed over fifty individuals from a handful of large cities. In asking each participant to describe the way in which they relate to such terms as "feminism" and "woman," Geyer charted the ways in which gender operates more as a complicated, shifting differential than any neat binary. In *Interim* (2002), a newspaper project, Geyer's fictional female protagonist navigates the urban, post 9/11 landscape; she is never represented visually, but readers are privy, via the printed page, to her experiences as a stranger in an unfamiliar city as well as to a mix of private thoughts

and current events. Presented within the ostensibly banal exercises of daily public life, the character is both general and singular, bound by her circumstances and yet constantly—and necessarily—exceeding them.

So here, in the Woolworth building, high above the city instead of deep in its folds, I wondered: what would Geyer take for her subject? The answer was clear enough as I turned the corner into her portion of the shared space. Tacked, salon style, covering nearly every available inch of her walls, were pictures of a woman. Or, better said, *images* of a woman: here she appeared in a photograph illustrating an old news story; there her recognizable figure was rendered in marble. She was, it seemed, capable of flipping between being subject and object, person and artwork, individual and metaphor. Geyer proceeded to tell me the story of Audrey Munson, an artist's model who got her start in the early 1900s. Though it was hardly uncontroversial at the time, Munson made the decision to pose nude early in her career. She was soon the most sought after model by sculptors in New York, who found her strong visage and penetrating beauty to bend naturally to allegorical subjects. Indeed, appearing in at least 15 sculptures around the city, Munson became a materially manifested symbol of "Inspiration," "Memory," and "Justice"—these the themes of just some of the artworks created around and by way of her image.

"But look," Geyer coaxed me to a window, where we stood high enough above the city that it met my eyes as woozy topography. This was how Geyer had found Munson. Peeking in at us, from the top of the Municipal Building was "Civic Fame," a gold female figure perched upon a round ball. If much of Geyer's work concerns itself with rendering transparent the social contracts in which we all participate, here she had been handed a strange case study. Munson, who died in 1996, is a figure at once omnipresent and totally forgotten. At the height of her career, which came on the heels of that career's inception, Munson appeared to have the potential for meteoric stardom, but she didn't foresee the brief attention span nor the fickleness, of her public. When the appetite she had whetted for her young face had moved on to search for new young faces, she did not merely take things in stride. Instead, she wrote a column, "The Queen of the Artists' Studios," which not only detailed aspects of her own life, but also revealed the complicated demands of and ideological assumptions about the life of a model. Protective of—rather than competitive with—an up and coming generation of models, she tried, in print, to create a space in which matters practical (how hard it is to pose for hours on end, for instance) and personal (the sexist behavior she experienced from some patrons) would demystify and perhaps re-humanize the profession in which she took large part.

However savvy she was, Munson was still vulnerable to the increasing dismissal she felt as she, no longer at her prime (she was approaching thirty!) struggled to garner jobs and attempted, unsuccessfully, to catch on as a film actress. By the time she was forty, she had been jilted in love and was often spurned socially. With no money left, she and her mother moved into a small apartment in Mexico, New York. A botched suicide attempt in 1922 led to her eventual placement in a state hospital for the insane in 1931. She lived in Ogdensburg, the site of the hospital, until she died, over sixty years later.

There is no doubt that Munson's story is a sad one, and it is difficult not to focus (as I can't help but do briefly here) on the dramatic details of her life. But while Geyer addresses the emotional and economic poverty that attended much of Munson's life, her book is constructed to more compellingly and overtly address the reoccurring patterns by which women are rendered invisible by patriarchal powers in the context of history. Using Munson as just the central figure in a much larger nexus, Geyer's book is operative less as a straightforward narrative and more as a collage. Within its pages, the artist brings together documents, quotes, newspaper clippings, and photographs that point us to a time in which many young women sought agency in the social and political sphere of the city. A group of commissioned essays by Cynthia Chris, Andrea Ray and Justin White extend Geyer's own deliberations and address historiography, censorship, and the history of psychiatric institutions of New York Sate. Rather then simply parcing the details of Munson's life, Geyer decides to break them down, to let them unfold in many directions and only partially. Encountering Munson this way, readers necessarily extend beyond her particulars, to critically ask why—historically and today—such stories are kept hidden or, more insidiously, are presented as isolated, decontextualized, narratives of personal suffering that don't take into account the social or political landscape of which they form a part and to which they respond. Indeed, Geyer's project is partially designed to call attention to a woman who, though nearly disappeared in one sense, is nonetheless still everywhere around us. In addition to creating a book, *Queen of the Artists Studio: The Story of Audrey Munson (Intimate Secrets of Studio Life Revealed By The Most Perfect, Most Versatile, Most Famous of American Models, Whose Face And Figure Have Inspired Thousands Of Modern Masterpieces Of Sculpture And Painting* (the title culled from Munson's New York American column), in which Munson is portrayed as historical figure and case study, Geyer produced a map of New York City. Within this map Geyer locates every extant Munson sculpture as well as sites significant within the bursting sphere of the city in Munson's time: From Anarchist strongholds to Garment worker strikes to Duchamp's favorite bar. The artist has also set up a fund to pay for a headstone—Munson currently lies in an unmarked grave.

Geyer's is a project that returns Munson to history but also renders her *in the present*, which is the manner in which the younger artist encountered the elder in the first place. Questioning the deeply inscribed hierarchies that would have Munson destitute and outmoded by the time she was thirty, Geyer nonetheless insists that she never stopped having—as person or image—affect or effect of value. In re-positioning Munson as central to the city in which her image is reiterated multiple times, Geyer also demands that we take into account the stubbornness, intelligence, and beauty of a woman who doesn't go away and who demands that we contemplate the ways in which such disappearances continue, if not always so dramatically. If in the past, Munson was asked to stand for beauty, virtue, civility, and purity, for Geyer she stands for a kind of persistence, with all its complications. To look closely at one person, Geyer seems to suggest, is to open up whole pockets of forgotten history and, in so doing, to remobilize calcified, regulated understandings. Following Geyer's gaze and looking at Munson from the 33rd floor of the Woolworth Building, suddenly all of New York City looks a little bit different.