

A TEXT UPON A TEXT UPON A TEXT

by Andrea Geyer

17

I am wondering if many of my readers have not stood before a masterpiece of lovely sculpture or a remarkable painting of a young girl, her very abandonment of draperies accentuating rather than diminishing her modesty and purity, and asked themselves the question, "Where is she now, this model who was so beautiful? What has been her reward? Is she happy and prosperous or is she sad and forlorn, her beauty gone, leaving only memories in the wake!"

—Audrey Munson, *By the "Queen of the Artists' Studios,"* 1921

March 2004. I am sitting at my desk in my studio on the 33rd floor of the Woolworth Building, located at 233 Broadway, downtown Manhattan. Ninety years ago the Woolworth, then the highest building in the world, was upon its completion pronounced the Cathedral of Commerce. Today, another moment in time, between terminated office leases and the rezoning of high capital, its floors high up, gutted, layers exposed over use, over decades. I look around, cables, paint and wallpaper, now high up and between purposeful designations, these walls house a temporary workspace for artists, donated by the owners and distributed to us by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.

Sitting still for a moment, time unravels around me. I look out the window. My eyes travel across City Hall Park, the bridges, over Brooklyn and the Long Island Sound. I turn my head left and suddenly meet the gaze of a woman. Across the Park, she stands

face to face: golden, barely dressed, balancing delicately on top of a ball at the tip of the Municipal Building. A fresh breeze seems in her face. The unfamiliar perspective lets me linger. I turn to my desk and look her up: *Civic Fame*, a statue by Adolph Weinman, commissioned by the City of New York. She stands for the union of the five boroughs, the young and strong municipality.

A woman posed. A city represented. A text doubled by another. An allegory. *Allos* = other. *Agoreuei* = to speak (publicly), or the impulse to appreciate the transience of things and to rescue them for eternity. I look again, this time walking on the street, I look up at her and wonder what was rescued from the oblivion of history, a young woman's body or civic fame? As days pass and I pass her, the body prevails. Traveling through my everyday and through the city, I recognize her not only atop the Municipal Building, but other places, on facades, in pediments, on pedestals. I notice a face, a wave of hair, a curve of a body, a gesture of hands, and a position of feet. Recognizable, I think, to my surprise, a slight familiarity carved in marble, in stone, in copper or bronze, or painted.

A woman stands, a body made permanent to represent glory, power, memory, peace, purity, virtue...the inexpressible, the infinite, the highest fullness of being as it sought form in the public space of an emerging metropolis. The American Beaux Arts. The revival of Roman and Greek mythology and the elevation of their virtues as universal. Humble human shapes in front, atop, along the public architecture of the early 20th century suggested a common ground of values to the diversity of a nation trying to find identity across many. Today these sculptures stand still, and the bodies they came from safely tucked away, drained for higher ends, under the embracing gaze of a public's (eternal) melancholy.

18

Like photographs, documents and newspapers, the sculptures prevail over time as objects, organized and reorganized, classified, qualified, evaluated, recognized, dismissed. As such, they are part of what is used to build our narratives, our genealogies, our histories. Of course there is the purpose marked in the moment of their creation and then there always has been, over and over again, a new, maybe slightly different claim within every present moment since, with different historians, politicians, passersby coming and going. Today I realize these sculptures still claim their space, here and now, in our present moment.

My new acquaintance across the park keeps me intrigued. I find a book published in 1999 by Diane Rozas and Anita Bourne Gottehrer: *American Venus: The Extraordinary Life of Audrey Munson, Model and Muse*. I am surprised to find a name, a story, Audrey Munson. She posed for *Civic Fame* in the early 1910s and many other sculptures, murals, paintings and stained glass windows. A model with a name. I read the book in a breath and am impressed by the fragments of the reconstructed life. Pictures, quotes, notes, hypothesis. A story of a model, a muse, an abstraction, she who is never meant to be represented but lends her body to the higher means of Art. Or no, I should say: she who lends the artist her body for him to meet those higher ends. Reading, I learn a lot about this woman but also I feel myself drained by the narrative. A narrative too familiar when it comes to women: She starts young and innocent, and beautiful of course—very—full of desire, then success, vanity, daring, struggle, misfortune, suffering, and at the end of

her life a somewhat happy ending. I feel I am watching a movie made in Hollywood, I don't feel the incoherence, the contexts, the complexity, the riddles, or radiance of a real life.

I look again, now knowingly, not at a sculpture, but a body, not at any body, but at Audrey Munson. I look again at her face made in stone. I am trying to understand something of the mind behind this face that posed. What did she do before rushing to the studio that day, where did she come from? Did she pose in the morning, the afternoon, or the evening or an 8-hour day? Did she take the subway? Did she walk, was she scared of the anarchists' bombs exploding around the city? Did she pass the suffragists marching, or a picket line of young girls her age, fighting for just wages and healthy work conditions? Had she gotten hold of one of Margaret Sanger's educational pamphlets on birth control? Had she stopped at Union Square to hear Emma Goldman give one of her engaging speeches, which had yet again drawn a mob? Or did she pass the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, the Dada artist marching around Washington Square Park wearing an inverted coalscuttle for a hat, a vegetable grater as a brooch, long ice cream spoons for earrings, and metal tea balls attached to her breasts? Or did she have a plan to have a drink later at the bar where Djuna Barnes sometimes did readings, or maybe the Heterodoxy Club above the Washington Square Bookshop, where women met? Had she heard of Willa Cather, read her books? Or had she noticed a handsome European man, with hair combed back, called "Marcel" by his colleagues, at the café at the Brevoort Hotel? Or maybe she had to go home to meet a deadline for one of her articles, when she was writing for the *New York American*, a Hearst Paper. Or she may have been worried about her mother, getting older, and therefore she was ready to rush off, knowing that her mother was waiting impatiently for her at home. Or maybe, maybe she was not thinking anything except about her pose, and the artist, whose eyes were traveling over her body...

19

By now, weeks into my research, I realize, I know, I know right here, that I—no matter what—that I know nothing, will know nothing. Or to be less dramatic, I will always only know very little. I can only imagine. I can only find and combine and recombine the traces left, the traces Audrey left behind. Or better the traces that the media left behind about her and some photographers, and of course the artist, that used her as a model. I search an online database for historic newspapers on Audrey Munson from 1891 to 1960. It finds 3,500 matches. The print media then and today, not a very authentic source, I have to admit, especially but not only in Audrey's case, because the articles on her were mostly published in the yellow press. I know already that these accounts, even though contemporary to Audrey Munson, thrive on fantasies, or I should say desire, no matter if they celebrated or dismissed her work. I realize that like the sculptures I look at, the story of her life has many inspirations, many drives, many desires that form it. And yes that includes mine, and yours reading. But what is my desire? I am not a historian, I am not writing a biography. So what am I doing?

I find a record in an archive showing that Audrey Munson gave \$5 dollars (a day's salary worth) to the Suffragist movement in 1917. I am interested in the histories of women. I am interested in the fact that histories are still written as master narratives

following carefully planned, dominating ideologies, insisted upon as universal. I am interested in the scripts written for individuals within these narratives. I am interested in the forces that fit certain lives into these scripts, cutting away contradictions and ellipses. I am interested in Audrey Munson as an allegory, not for Peace or Memory, but for the thing that was employed to represent (universal) values and write histories, but was never intended to be visible. I am interested in insisting upon looking at what the builders of these buildings with their grand-scale statues of high virtues did not want me to see. I am interested in her, as a young woman, trying to find a voice, doing her job, working 10-hour days, seriously, committed, disciplined. I am interested in her, the one who is not named by history, in her goals and ambitions. And I am interested in connecting her biography to others, to other lives and events, and not to forget, to connect this life to the now, the here, the present moment.

20 I am interested in who Munson might have met, with whom she talked, discussed her ideas. I am interested in her views on politics, the city, the arts. I am interested in her judgment of the men who worshiped her, had her picked up in fancy cars, invited her to parties. I am interested if she actually was the party girl of the tabloids, having fun, living wildly, or if she was the character of her own narrative, decent, hardworking, resisting pleasures. I am interested in who might have been her lover. There are rumors of a man called Hermann Oelrichs, from a rich Long Island family, who supposedly married her in 1916. I read this in her mother's letters but I cannot find a record of the marriage in the city history. Maybe Audrey was not interested in marriage at all and just kept up the facade of such a search for a husband to soothe public opinion. Maybe she was attracted to women, or maybe she wanted to stay independent, making choices on her own terms. Maybe she felt men only fetishized her body and did not appreciate her mind. Or maybe the traumatic failure of her parents' marriage and her mother's struggle had made her weary of the dependencies marriage brought along. I am interested in looking at her convictions, of taking her seriously in her endeavor, ignoring the drama of the story written around her. The craziness, the despair. But I am not trying to dismiss the struggles or the suffering that she surely endured, but looking closely, to me it seems obvious that her life was not driven through or by them. Why choose to look only at them and not at her bold moves, her passion for art, her determination, her clear decisions, her hard work?

I am interested in all of this, even though I know I will be unable to find clear answers to my questions. But I am interested in insisting upon the reality that nevertheless these answers existed when Audrey was still alive. Not knowing them now does not eliminate their existence. I am interested in reopening our understanding to the fact that Audrey Munson actually was a life lived, and of who Audrey Munson was as a person in it. I do not want to write or rewrite her story, but I would like to insist to leave it open, to be rewritten, constantly imagined, recontextualized over and over again, with any glimpse we catch of a sculpture or of a painting that we pass.

Audrey Munson was probably a girl like many others, with dreams and desires. Born in 1891 in Rochester, New York. The family moves to Providence a few years later. Her parents divorce under unknown circumstances in 1899. To her mother Katherine,

a practicing Catholic, the divorce must have been devastating. Her father Edward, a real estate man. After they separate, Katherine stays in Providence until probably around 1909, when Audrey finishes her studies at the St. Francis Xavier Academy for girls. Audrey's own stories tell that her career as a model starts in 1907 but only in 1909, she and her mother show up as registered in the New York City Municipal Archives. We don't know why but they probably moved because the city was the only place for a divorced Catholic woman to live and a place for her to find work. Young Audrey wanted to be a dancer and to study music, I read. Her father tells that Audrey could not sit still seeing a theater performance as a little girl, she was so excited she had to stand up, and stay like this through the entire play. After moving to New York, Audrey's desire to be seen is brought together with the coincidence of "being discovered." A photographer follows her walking down 5th Avenue. Audrey names him as Ralph Draper. I try to find his studio, his name in city archives, photographers' registers, with no success. I find a set of photographs of Audrey, with another man's signature: Oscar Sholin. I suspect that he might have been the photographer in the story Audrey tells. He had set up his studio at the studio building at 51 West 10th Street, a building also housing studios by the famous Beaux Arts sculptors Isidore Konti, Adolph Weinman and Daniel Chester French, among others, sculptors that all would work with Audrey eventually. But to return to the story: upon the photographer's invitation, and with her mother's consent, Audrey, still a teenager, has the courage to step first in front of a camera, then in front of an artist, then in the nude. I often wonder why Katherine Munson, the religious person she was, would have given her consent. I have to suspect that it was the potential income that the women most likely needed. Continuing my research, I find many different stories of Audrey Munson's first introduction into the studios: once she is alone, once with her mother, once in love with the photographer, who suddenly dies. But however the past unfolded, once Audrey entered this world, she quickly became a wanted model and part of a scene of influential sculptors, artists and their financial backers. Beauty and sincerity and the willingness to work hard were her capital. In the city's directory of 1909, Audrey lists herself as an actress, 18 years old. After 1915 she will call herself, in this same directory, an artist.

21

In a successful play the principal actors and actresses who contribute to its success are given due praise. Even a chorus girl or a soubrette who does her work exceedingly well is honored in the reviews. And such honors mean increases in salary and a step at least one notch higher on the road to fame and prosperity. Not so with the artist's model. She remains ever anonymous. She is the tool with which the artist works, and none may do her obeisance, though she provides the inspiration for a masterpiece and is the direct cause of enriching the painter or sculptor. The best she can hope for is to be "recommended" by the artist to a brother artist and thus her engagements become more regular and numerous.

Audrey Munson, *By the "Queen of the Artists' Studios,"* 1921

Audrey Munson did not only pose in the studios, she also wrote articles for newspapers. In her writing I find yet another story. As an author she describes the artists' studios as a marketplace of vanity, speaks about the construction of beauty, about exploitation and the power of men around her. She advocates to leave corsets behind, and wear low heels. She warns of the lure that girls are exposed to when they are beautiful. And she also advocates for her profession, the artist's model, sometimes with a slight force of despair, defending herself and her colleagues, their hard labor and more than once elaborating on their share in the creative act while posing. She points to the fact that models are never credited but rather despised for their work; never considered creative but always indecent.

The studio is a veritable marketplace of vanities—the vanity of the artist that must be pampered and humored; the vanity of beautiful women that must be played on, drawn out and fostered, or in so many cases, submitted to.

Audrey Munson, *By the "Queen of the Artists' Studios,"* 1921

In her writing she also portrays the artist himself. High on her stand in the midst of the studio, she confidently returns his gaze. Reading along, I recognize an old struggle in the creative process: the Muse and the Artist. The woman and the man. The informant and the maker. An issue that is relevant still and again today. I also recognize Munson's critical, self-reflective mind. An object turned subject, and a voice speaking up over the noise of signification.

22

I cannot help but wonder how Audrey got access to the print media. Who invited her to write? I think it was around 1915 when she started to publish, she was 24 years old. Did she write these articles herself? Did she have a ghostwriter she told her stories to? She continued publishing those articles in the *New York American* and other newspapers across the country until the early 1920s. Her final series, *By the "Queen of the Artists' Studios,"* chronicled her career and those of other models in the studios.

At that point Munson could look back on 10 or 15 years of hard work. One of its high points is found in the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco where she is featured prominently as a model for most of the sculptures. In response, a newspaper calls her the "Exposition Girl." Artists seem to like her posing and her body and call her back again and again. Leaving paintings and illustrations aside and only considering the sculptures Audrey posed for, we can count at least 20 still standing in the metropolitan area and many more can be found across the country. We know of sculptures she posed for from her own writing, from the histories written on the sculptors that worked with her, and some are obviously visible to an attentive eye that will recognize likeness resembling Audrey's very features. But as we learn from Audrey herself, rarely is a whole sculpture taken from one model. Some of the sculptures might have been inspired by her face, the next time the hands, or her back, her breast, or her whole body, or maybe it could have been a movement, a gesture, an expression. Inspiration is complex, a breath or infusion into the mind or soul that can exceed the present moment of any studio situation. We won't ever know exactly, neither did Audrey and probably even the artist himself.

After 1915 Audrey Munson also starts to star in movies. Most of them inspired by Audrey's life, by the stories she lived and the stories she told. Being credited or not for the screenwriting, the storytelling is in her. In 1916-17, she moves temporarily to Santa Monica with her mother, living on 509 E Boulevard and lists herself appropriately a "Photoplayer." Thinking about her travel, it occurs to me that she must have done this journey across the country by train, taking days if not weeks at the time. Beyond Los Angeles, I find newspaper advertisements from many other cities that announce Audrey's appearance to introduce her movie, or simply being on stage. She must have seen a lot of the country, its thriving cities and its open and wild landscapes. In 1916, she and her producer are arrested for "indecent on stage" in St. Louis. I find a report of a court hearing but never any news of a conviction. In her own writing Audrey also tells stories of her travels to Paris, working in the studios of Montmartre. She tells of the museums and the Academy, of her encounters with other models and many artists. One of them Sarah Brown, a star of her own right in Paris, with whom Audrey stays, seemed to have captured Audrey's attention at the time. I wonder if she was invited to come to the salon at 27 Rue de Fleures. What would have Gertrude Stein said to her?

With the 1920s times changed. Even though movies starring Audrey Munson were still playing all over the country making millions, the demand for Audrey as an actress and a model started to fade. Newspaper articles appear claiming that she got cursed with misfortune. Audrey tells two stories that she felt led to her demise: the Wilkins murder case and an incident at the Fashion Show. In 1919, Dr. Walter Keene Wilkins, her landlord, brutally killed his wife, and when arrested told the police that he did it only to be able to marry Audrey Munson. It was all over the press and on everyone's tongue. Audrey, in Canada on business at the time, was not reachable which let speculations inflate disproportionately and implicated her name deeply with the case. The Fashion Show incident, Audrey tells in her own words:

23

It was when I was playing in "The Fashion Show." A man prominent in the theatrical world came into my dressing room. I was in a bathing suit. He passed his arm around me and pressed his burning lips against my shoulder. I struggled to free myself. I struck at him. "Get away from me!" I cried out. "Don't touch me. I hate you. Your touch is repulsive to me. I would rather have a snake crawl over me than to feel your hand upon me." He released his hold. "Do you mean what you have just said?" he asked. "I do," I replied defiantly. But even as I spoke I shuddered. "You will have cause to remember this," he said—and left me. A few days later I was told the "Fashion Show" was to close. I had no explanation. The playlet had been drawing immense houses, but it was closed at almost a moment's notice.

—"Audrey Munson's Strange Life," *Movie Weekly*, July 1, 1922

Also the movie studios were not asking her back. Maybe she could not act, maybe the new censorship boards did not allow for more revealing films. At the same time Audrey was aging, now in her early thirties, her body was not that of a young girl anymore. It became impossible for her to find employment. With this lack of fame,



the invitations to social engagements and the admiration by the high society of New York ceded. After all she was not one of them. She only had served their desire for the beautiful, the daring, the scandalous, in the moment of its fashion. Money ran short for the Munson women soon after, and little or no savings had been arranged from the successful years. Audrey says in an interview, if she had known that it was possible for her career to end so suddenly, she would not have spent all her money at the time. Her pay as a model never much exceeded \$35 a week. It had been merely the gifts and invitations of the artists and the society that surrounded them that had afforded her and her mother a lifestyle much beyond those means. When despite their box-office successes even the promised royalties from her movies were not paid to her, Audrey and her mother were devastated. She had only received \$2,500 for movies that made millions. She sued the studios for the failed payment, but she was never successful. The lack of Audrey's income forced the women, who soon could not meet the day's needs, to move back north again, to Mexico, New York.

New York City to Mexico, New York. The 1920s. Audrey's fame had even reached this little town tucked in-between the rolling hills of mostly agricultural landscapes. People knew what she did—what she had done for a living. Her movies might have been shown in local theaters and had certainly been deemed scandalous. And with their arrival, it was also Audrey's person as such, that raised eyebrows in town. I am told by locals that Audrey was seen in unusual outfits, often wearing colorful scarves wrapped like a turban around her head. People immediately noticed her difference. A woman I meet tells me that she remembers as a little girl, her mother would storm to the sunparlor and close the curtains when Audrey passed by, so that the children could not see her: the woman "who had undressed for money." It is clear that Audrey Munson was not welcomed back upstate, people did not care about her fame, her life in the city, her travel, her stories. Mexico after all was a small town, a tight community of proper people, in which an independent, self-sufficient, creative woman like Audrey had no ground on which to be accepted. She was considered improper, and soon thereafter, plain crazy: the safe place societies reserve for those who are different and in their difference challenge the established values and norms. What Munson had described in her articles became her fate. Her work had made her an indecent person, desirable in marble and on screen but not in flesh and blood. Traveling from New York to Mexico today, as a researcher, my research assistant and I in our "city-look" are peered at strangely in a local bar in a town nearby. I can only start to imagine how Audrey must have felt 80 years ago.

After her move, the media was still following Audrey and repeatedly observed the lack of a husband in the supermodel's life. There had been news in June 1915 of an expected marriage to a Marquis Dinelli, an Italian man who had a studio for piano and singing lessons in the city. But it never occurred. In 1921 the *Syracuse Herald* and other newspapers report that Munson *would* marry, but only if she could find a man as physically beautiful as herself. The response is overwhelming. Hundreds of men offer themselves to Audrey Munson via letters to the respective papers. Audrey supposedly picks a man from Chicago, a wealthy man making his money in construction, a war aviator. She reports to a reporter that this man is her 7th love, recalling in several interviews her

memory of a gypsy woman who had predicted to her as a child that she would marry that very 7th love. Meanwhile Audrey and her mother live in different houses probably owned by Edgar Munson in and around Mexico, but only ever so long until the property is sold and they have to move on to another building. For a while they live on the farm of Fred Croft, I am told, where Katherine Munson was employed as a housekeeper. It must have been a strange and challenging transition from all the social life and attention that Audrey was used to in New York City. There was certainly nobody Audrey could feel close to, or someone who would respect her for who she was. Her mother Katherine worked hard to make their living. Financial worries were real. The marriage with the Chicago man never took place.

26 On May 27, 1922, Audrey tries to take her life by swallowing poison. Papers report that this incident occurs after Audrey received a telegraph that called that wedding off, but her mother describes her daughter's desperate act as a response to their financial struggles. Probably a little of both, plus the dire reality of her life in front of her, as rejected, living under poor conditions in the countryside in complete isolation, after a fulfilled life of stardom, public attention and celebration. Audrey survives the poison and recovers from her suicide attempt physically but probably never quite mentally. After a few more articles, things quiet down around her. Besides, in search of yet another scandal, the public eye loses interest in her, now not glamorous but suffering. There is no fame in the struggles with poverty, and the struggles of the mind especially not if the mind and poverty in question belongs to a woman. I find a picture in a newspaper, Audrey has six large dogs standing around her, that keep her and her mother company. On my research trip to Mexico I am fortunate to encounter Ralph Schmidt, a senior Mexico resident. He remembers when he was about 8 years old, once in while he would see Audrey passing by the farm he lived on. She was roller-skating, he tells me. His memory, today still vivid, describes Audrey pushing a lawnmower in front of her to keep balance on her skates on the dirt road. "She for sure was a beautiful women," he tells me with a smile.

Audrey made one more attempt to earn respectable money from her expertise. She founded The Audrey Munson Producing Corporation. In the pamphlet she writes:

DEAR PUBLIC:

The reception given my work in the past has been highly gratifying and now after a little rest, I feel that my future productions will meet with still greater favor.

The Audrey Munson Producing Corporation will receive my very best efforts in every way, both in Art and on the screen... My associates are experienced, successful in past enterprises, and of the highest integrity, under whose management the success of the Corporation bearing my name is assured.

My work has heretofore made millions for a few, and now an opportunity is given where all can share the huge profits formerly made by a handful of men who exploit great artists for their own personal gain.

I cordially invite you to join with me in this enterprise and solicit your subscription to even a small amount of our stock, and urge upon you the

importance of prompt action for there is but a small block of stock offered...
Yours Sincerely, Audrey Munson.

It is under this statement that I find her very own signature, her handwriting. I feel I am very close.

The Corporation never achieves any success. By the late 1920s Audrey is completely isolated, not even reporters are welcome at the Munson's house anymore. I read somewhere that she most likely abused drugs to soothe her depression. She might have had some correspondence. I hear about her trips to the post office. I never find any of these letters. On June 8, 1931, on her 40th, Audrey is admitted by her mother and with the help of a local judge to the St. Lawrence State Hospital for the Insane in Ogdensburg, New York. Probably her mother admitted her with what would be named today a severe depression, or maybe because of drug addiction. Or was it because her way of thinking, her voice, her determination, that could not find anyone to listen, had to be designated in a woman of 40 years of age, as mad?

In the 1930s, the St. Lawrence State Hospital for the Insane was a repository not only for people who were mentally sick but also used by the surrounding communities to place relatives that could for all kind of reasons not be cared for by their families. The hospital is located on expansive grounds north of the town of Ogdensburg on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. Set up as a self-sufficient community, it had its own power plant, a farm, a little store, a trolley station, a ferry boat for weekend rides, a summer camp, a police force, a fire station, a post office, a theater, a baseball team, a bowling alley, and a beauty parlor. There were weekly dances and theatrical plays. The buildings were designed according to the Kirkbride Plan, with high ceilings, allowing maximum space and light for all patients. There were verandas surrounding most buildings for patients to enjoy the view of the river and the fresh air. The wards were furnished in a friendly manner with rocking chairs, carpets, sofas, and pictures decorating the walls. Food was cooked from the hospital farm's own produce and meat. The buildings were surrounded by lakes and beautiful flowerbeds. The lakes were used to cut large ice blocks that were conserved in sawdust for summer refrigeration. All was operated and cared for by patients under supervision and according to abilities. In the year 1934, female patients made 123 single and 26 double mattress pads; 2,300 towels and 168 aprons from flour sacks; 30 pairs of socks knit from handspun wool; 102 embroidered dresser scarves, 74 stand spreads and 1,100 knit washcloths. An annual report from the same year reads:

27

Promptly following admission each new patient is encouraged to participate in some sort of occupation, not alone for the results produced by the labor, but especially because of its therapeutic effect. The beauty parlor continues to be an important means of interesting the patients in their general appearance and rendering them more contented and cooperative. The corresponding heightening of self-respect and interest in the environment frequently provides a starting point on the road to improvement and recovery. During the year, 13,896 treatments of various types—hair

trims, curls, finger wavers, shampoos, manicures, facial massages, etc., were given.

There were also radios on the wards that patients could operate, there were pianos, games and a patient library. In 1934 the hospital also prided itself on its weekly talkies: feature pictures, comedies and newsreels, shown at the hospital's own theater, Curtis Hall.

It is unclear what treatment Audrey receives. Her mother cannot visit her often, due to the cost of the train ride. The hospital is 150 miles north. Katherine is also an old woman now. She moves to Oswego and takes a room with a shared kitchen and bathroom. She will live there until her death, unable to invite Audrey to come back home. But she writes letters to relatives about the sad fate of her daughter, about the betrayal and injustice that she had encountered. Audrey remains at the hospital. By the 1950s, her parents are both deceased and Audrey does not receive visitors anymore. She is on her own, making her own life within the community of the State Hospital. There is no indication that Audrey was on any medication. I am told that she was spending her time in the library and caring for the many cats that lived on the grounds. I am also told that she took great care of her appearance, making all kind of remedies for her skin including ingredients from milk, to yogurt, to urine. Audrey stays at the hospital, despite the waves of patient downsizing and the tremendous changes that occurred in mental hygiene since the 1950s. "She was a very modest fine lady," I am told. In the 1980s, the hospital
28 decides to place Audrey into a nursing home, 30 miles north of Ogdensburg in Massonia. Audrey, in her nineties now, has her own room, which she keeps neatly organized. I am told she had a doll that she cared for a great deal. But once in a while she left the home to go on a little excursion on her own. She would cross the four-lane highway in front of the nursing home to reach the little strip mall and visit the local bar. At the bar, she would have a couple of drinks and I imagine conversations filled with her breathtaking memories. The caretakers at the nursing home had to go repeatedly to collect her. They would carry her back against her will, because she had been enjoying herself at the bar and did not want to leave. After a while this behavior was not considered tolerable, an petite old lady in her nineties, crossing a highway, having some drinks in a bar... They sent her back to the St. Lawrence State Hospital for the Insane .

Some years later, Audrey gets an unexpected visitor. A niece from her father's second marriage had learned about her famous aunt, who before had never been discussed in her family, because she was in a mental institution. Darlene had contacted the hospital to find out what happened to her aunt Audrey. To her surprise she finds Audrey alive. She drives up to Ogdensburg and meets with her. Darlene brings her two sons. Audrey after some hesitation is happy to receive family and is delighted to meet the young boys. They stay in touch with Audrey for the remaining years of her life. In 1991 they celebrate Audrey's 100th birthday together. Audrey supposedly asks for a bottle of wine and an airplane ride as gifts.

I meet a male nurse, now retired, who tells me that he had a special connection with Audrey. He would see her walking the long halls of the hospital, always a striking

posture, always wishing him a good day. He recounts that some time after her 100th birthday, when her health had declined—she had broken her hip and was forced to stay in bed at this point—he visited her in her room. Another nurse present suggested that Audrey sing her favorite nurse a Valentine song. Audrey, with no teeth, and barely any hearing left, sang him a fine little melody. The song is certainly kept in sweet memory today. He still smiles when he recounts it to me. In 1996, just short of her 105th birthday, Audrey dies at the hospital.

Everyone I talk to who has had the pleasure of meeting Audrey Munson in the later part of her life tells me that Audrey even at old age was an exquisitely beautiful person, physically and in her demeanor, with a gentle and modest character. Pat Mandingo, who did her hair for the last 10 years of her life, tells me that Audrey would always blush and shake her head when Pat told her how beautiful she was and how amazing her skin looked. All that Pat can repeat when I talk to her is that Audrey was a very special person. She was special, very special. No one describes Audrey as being mentally sick, confused (more than anyone is at such age) or under any sort of medication. All just tell me about her modesty, her striking posture, her smile and her beautiful white hair, which only very late in her life was cut short to a bob.

I ask everyone that I meet now who met Audrey, if they ever saw her writing in a diary. But I am told that it would have been hard to keep something like that private, away from other patients. And that even if it existed, it would have been nearly impossible for her to keep it. Putting together the pieces of this second part of her life, I find myself longing for her voice, for her thoughts, for her writing.

29

The part of the hospital where Audrey mostly lived is now closed off. One part, the Flower Building, has been converted into a prison. A new modern facility of the hospital barely houses patients. The old buildings that had been home for a community of 3,000 in its heydays stays boarded up, unheated and rotting away, on what is now considered valuable real estate. The patients and the flowerbeds are gone, the lakes are filled up. It all feels like a great loss. I walk along the grown-over verandas and wonder if Audrey would have been part of the official history books, if she had married and lived a family life. What would have changed if she had not been designated a mad person? Or what would have happened if one of the sculptors she worked with, one of those who owed some of his masterpieces to the inspirations she gave him, what if one of these men would have paid her a modest allowance, to stay and live in the city with people who heard her, understood her way of thinking? Instead she spent the majority of her life here at Ogdensburg. How much of it all was misfortune, how much was misogyny, discrimination, class, how much was bad choice on her part? I wonder what Audrey thought about in her later years, what she wished for and how she thought about her work that lay behind her. I wonder if she met people she liked at the hospital. I hear they allowed patients to have tea invitations with each other. I wonder if she picked up painting, or maybe directed or acted in one of the many plays that were put on at Curtis Hall.

Returning from my research trip, I find myself back on the street carrying folders full of copies of documents and images. Glancing up at her again, trying to meet her

gaze. I see Audrey Munson, a body, a life lived. Out in the street or in the Metropolitan Museum's vitrine, she stands a statue, an allegory, an unnamed woman, amidst the named busts of white men. I don't see the bronze or the stone anymore, I don't see a sculpture by an artist, but I see a body, hear a voice. I can feel her agency, now and then, standing solid in her fragile nudity. I know that these sculptures link together many histories, relations and anecdotes, my work and the work of those who have been working with me on this project have become part of and intractably linked to this maelstrom of Audrey Munson. And with this essay, I extend that link, that inevitable connection and insight to you as a reader. Because why would you care to read a story like this if not to retell?

The sculptures seen this way are documents of emotions, of desires, of power, of money, of exploitation, of morality, of change, of struggle. The sculptures become a code of reference that inevitably binds the public to the private and back to the political. They tell the story of one young woman and turn it into the story of many, a text, upon a text, upon a text, upon a text, folding the past into the present and into the future.

Audrey Munson's gaze returned in her writing, in her sculptures and in the story of her life, represents for me a line of demarcation that inserts into the everyday, not another truth, but meaning. Meaning that does not add up to a coherent story, a biography that can be written and shelved, but instead in its present fragmentation, and as a screen for all our current and past desires, it unfolds along the lines of a complex struggle of young women to have a voice and to be heard, to be respected, to be acknowledged, that Audrey Munson shared and shares still today with many others. For me and you, passing by, now and again now, always only in the present moment, these quiet sculptures can be a gentle reminder of this presence of endless moments, of many radical condensations of personal and political struggles woven into the fabric of New York City.