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## Artpace's high-flying cat fight

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New York artist E.V. Day talks about her installation "CatFight" at Artpace. STEVE BENNETT / EXPRESS-NEWS

Linda Evans and Joan Collins have nothing on these girls.

Caught in the fang-and-claw, rough-and-tumble frenzy of feline combat, these cats — replicas of saber-toothed tiger skeletons, suspended in midair by glistening fishing line — are way beyond hair-pulling. This is life or death — with jewel-like accessories.

"It's a frozen moment of primordial drama," says New York artist E.V. Day, creator of "CatFight," one of three new installations in the International Artist-In-Residence 11.1 exhibition at Artpace through May 22.

The IAIR show also features an eerie, meditative video installation shot on Caddo Lake by Canadian/English video artist Kelly Richardson as well as a sculptural installation exploring the relationship between artist and viewer — via jazz greats — by Austin conceptualist Devon Dikeou.

Day has long explored the ways our society views (read: is threatened by) issues of femininity and female sexuality, often through sculptural works made with items of women's clothing.

She calls works such as 2006's "Bride Fight" "exploding couture" — the piece consists of two strategically shredded bridal gowns suspended from the ceiling. Her "G Force" series transforms thong bikinis into airborne fighter squadrons.



Day also has called her work “futurist abstract paintings in three dimensions.”

Recently, the 42-year-old artist — whose work has caught the collecting interest of institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art — completed two high-profile projects in New York.

“The Seducers,” which germinated during her three-month artist-in-residency last summer at Claude Monet's estate in Giverny, France, reinterprets the Impressionist master's flowers in kaleidoscopic imagery that alludes to the female body. And a suspended installation of (not exploded) New York City Opera costumes soars over the promenade in the newly renovated Lincoln Center throughout the spring season.

“CatFight” builds on the 2007 work “Portable Catfight,” which featured battling housecat skeletons in a small cage.

For her three-month Artpace residency, which began in January, Day returned to “the stop-action cat fight,” both attracted and repelled by its “deep-seated, primal drama.”

“Part of the work is playing with the clichés of the girl-on-girl catfight,” said Day, a Yale sculpture program graduate who was included in the prestigious 2000 Whitney Biennial with “Bombshell,” an exploded replica of Marilyn Monroe's famous white halter dress. “But it's also a truism. There's something to the idea about the competitiveness, the jealousy, the anxiety between women. And there's also this sense of titillation.”

Cue the snakes. Day has included five model-kit snakes in the installation — coiled, upright, fangs bared — like audience members on “The Jerry Springer Show.”

“Does a catfight really happen if nobody's watching?” she asks rhetorically.

Obviously male — insert your own symbology here — the snakes form a writhing ring around the cats, whose fangs and claws, accentuated with silverleaf foil, make them all the more feminine. Meow.

“I wanted to adorn them, to accessorize them, to bring out that female aspect even more,” said Day, who added that the “biggest challenge” was assembling the skeletal replicas — ordered from a company called Bone Clones Inc. — from hundreds of plastic bones that arrived “disarticulated in a bag.”

“It took us three weeks to get it right,” she says. “It was sort of like putting a puzzle together.”

Day's saber-toothed tigers are modeled on fossils from La Brea tar pits via the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, but she notes brightly that during her research for the project she learned serendipitously that the cats in the collection of University of Texas at Austin's Texas Natural Science Center were discovered in caves near San Antonio.

To achieve that frozen moment of combative climax, Day “looked at lots of pictures of cats fighting; I even adopted two cats after I got here.” Then she made sketches, finally relying on trial and error during the construction and suspension phases.

“I think of my suspension works as a kind of drawing in space,” she says. “The filament lines and the shadows created are very important to me.”