

Rebecca Belmore: *Rising to the Occasion*

Vancouver Art Gallery, www.vanartgallery.bc.ca, June 7 to October 5, 2008

David Garneau

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VANCOUVER, BC

REBECCA BELMORE
RISING TO THE OCCASION

David Garneau

Vancouver Art Gallery
750 Hornby Street
Vancouver, British Columbia
24-hour Info line: 604.662.4719
www.vanartgallery.bc.ca
June 7 to October 5, 2008.

A powerful female voice calls out the names of women who have disappeared from the streets of Vancouver's Downtown East side. She stands on the pavement, tears roses apart with her teeth and recites the names written on her body. The performance, *Vigil*, loses little of its fierce impact in the video documentation, *The Named and the Unnamed*. It remains visceral, unpredictable and affecting.

For twenty years, Rebecca Belmore's has picked at the wounds of our unresolved country. Her subjects are recent and past victims, especially of historical and gender and violence, and her indictment is against the systems that enable and perpetuate these crimes. She is not an actor playing a part but a human being responding to current events through her whole body and being in an effort to link these events to their historical resonances. Her body becomes a living memorial through which



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she calls into presence the disappeared, murdered, abused and dispossessed. No one with a conscience remains unmoved.

Our relationship to nature is another of her recurring themes. *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomamowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, was a traveling performance featuring a huge, wooden megaphone (seven feet long, six feet wide at the flare) that invited Aboriginal people from across the nation to speak to the land. The work enabled them to signify, to have a voice and to share their intimate relationship to mother earth. While her provocations are local and specific, they often resonate across locations, cultures and time. In her 1991, Havana Biennial performance, *Creation or Death: We Will Win*, Belmore, with her feet and hands bound, she struggled



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up a staircase moving a small pile of sand by hand from stair to stair. The work was about struggle, resistance and will power as positive ends in themselves. Whatever the particular meanings she may have intended, viewers could employ this open metaphor for whatever needs they might require. The novelty of her forms keeps them fresh and difficult to assimilate or forget.

Because Belmore's most important works are performance-based, mounting a mid-career retrospective is a considerable challenge. Curators Daina Augaitis and Kathleen Ritter have gathered many of Belmore's most important works. It is a pleasure to see these things and their relationships to each other. Unfortunately, not every piece bears the museum treatment. Separation from their original intervention



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sites and performative contexts has a few works seem more like rescued props than complete expressions. "Wild," a large canopy bed with a hair and beaver pelt blanket is missing its context and animating body. Originally, it was part of a performance in which the artist occupied Toronto's the Grange mansion and slept in this bed. It is an interesting remembrance but not nearly as powerful as the intervention must have been. Thankfully, the exhibition's screening room has all the relevant video documentation to bring these things to life. Most impressive is a recreation of Belmore's Canadian Pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennale, a video projection on a waterfall, *Fountain* (2005). Also terrific are recent photographs that show the artist as vital as ever. *Fringe* (2008) is

a self-portrait with Belmore lying naked on a stark white bed. She is seen from the behind—as if a reversal of Manet's *Olympia*. Her back has a hideously long scar running diagonally from her right shoulder to left hip. The wound is sutured with beaded thread. Belmore does not often employ traditional Aboriginal motifs. I wonder if in this exception if she is suggesting that traditional means might be a source of healing or that her injuries are collective, First Nations injuries?

While the themes are often dark and the attitude elegiac and angry, the resistance displayed here elevates the spirit. Supplementing *Rising to the Occasion* is a must read book, the most important collection of writings on Belmore's work to date and some of the best writing on a contemporary, Canadian First Nations artist yet published. □

1 *White Thread*, 2003
Inkjet on watercolour paper
amloops Art Gallery Collection
2007-001
Purchased with the support
of the Canada
Council for the Arts Acquisition
Assistance Program
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

2 *Untitled 2*, 2004
Three inkjet prints on watercolour
paper
Collection of Donald Ellis
and Mary Ann Bastien
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

3 *Untitled 1*, 2004
Three inkjet prints on watercolour
paper
Collection of Donald Ellis
and Mary Ann Bastien
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

TORONTO, ONT.

KATIE BETHUNE-LEAMEN MUSHROOM STUDIO

John K. Grande



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To April 15, 2009

Mushroom Studio, 2008
19'8" x 20"
Steel, foam, wood, rubber,
paint, furniture

For this, Katie Bethune-Leamen's first ever outdoor installation, the artist has developed a work that references the artist's place of work, and the process of her art. By way of intention, the concept calls to mind Vera Frenkel's *The Institute* conceived as a place of residence for elderly artists. In this case, the piece is three-dimensional and very much in place, whereas Frenkel's was mostly web, though a show at Hart House Gallery reaffirmed the concept and direction of that piece. Visually the piece has that same 1960s look, as do drive-ins and highway lunch stops and shiny diners, as well as over-sized road signs and billboards of those times. One would almost expect Elvis to appear in a set designed like this, but alas, he is in hiding. These structures emphasized an alternative, and built as architectural, or structural realities, they embodied a landscape of desire, one that propelled a post-war consumer economy. And these phenomena likewise inspired the Pop artists, notably Claes Oldenberg, James Rosenquist and others. Montreal's Orange Julep near Decarie, Colborne Ontario Big Apple bakery on the highway 401 west of Toronto, and so many others still linger on the landscape, roadside attractions that are latter day icons of the nostalgia of another era.

And so we now have clones of that era, and of Claes Oldenberg's Hamburger sculptures in newly generated works such as Paul McCarthy's *Blockhead* (2003) seen outside the TateModern in London. The caricature begets the caricature. Which source? Whose source? Katie Bethune-Leamen, on the other hand, takes a different tack, and approaches her subject with a certain sense of practicality. Both utilitarian and visually comic, this mushroom is architecture. Based on the *Amanita Pantherina* – a cousin of the red-capped *Amanita Muscaria*, its base has a door you can enter into, that contains the artist's miniaturized studio. Like an image from a children's fairytale, one would almost expect the Cheshire cat to be sitting there, or some Germanic folkloric figure. It all looks so surreal amid the downtown Toronto hustle and bustle of condominiums, hotels, shops, restaurants, parks and businesses. As Bethune-Leamen states: "By creating a workspace as an artwork, I am making a Moebius-strip cycle of production that proposes pragmatic questions about the usability of art, and the ability of artists to live through their art."

Mushroom Studio is lived-in art that can generate art. Art begets art. All this in the parentheses of time. The artist will be in her studio at times – quixotically – unpredictably – during the garden's opening hours. At various times throughout the year, the artist will be on site making art in her artwork. Visitors are welcome to stop by and chat about process!