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As The World Turns...

Outre Terre, Centre d'exposition CIRCA, Montréal. September 1th - October 9th 1993

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MONTREAL

AS THE WORLD TURNS...

Outre Terre, Centre d'exposition CIRCA, Montréal. September 11th - October 9th 1993

CIRCA's *Outre Terre* show is an eclectic array of responses to questions of cultural identity and norms of artistic practice. In an era of free trade, satellite communication and talk of a global economy these issues are increasingly up for grabs. A feeling of being overtaken by forces beyond our grasp, of an amorphous internationalism, is in the air. These works by Monique Giard, Randy Saharuni, Yves Louis-Seize, Renée Lavaillante and Catherine Widgery are surprising precisely because they seem to stand outside the latest fashions for intellectualizing artistic production. They arouse sensations and feelings through a simple respect for the communicative potential of the materials and media being used.

In a darkened, enclosed room set aside from the other artists' works, Catherine Widgery's installation pieces harken back to that era of colonial settlement when the tautological biases of a linear sense of time and place brought confidence to the settler's mission. The all too quaint literalism that pervades these pieces, linking objects more readily associated with the niceties of the parlour room and the Victorian water-closet, heighten our poetic sense of imagination, while exposing the Romantic bias of the New World mentality, its more primitive superstitions about the absolute, in a mildly ironic way. Each work thus becomes an investigation into the cultural coding that was a necessary part of our ancestors' survival gear.

The homespun self-sufficiency of the colonial era evoked in Widgery's *Memory* (1993), a replica of an old-fashioned free-standing bath made out of fiberglass, is almost whimsical. The posed portraits of anonymous people that appear on the pile of old tin-type photos that we find sitting in the bath look somewhat sacrificial, like freeze-dried souvenirs of a civility they themselves seldom knew but aspired to. Thus objectified, these people become mere objects of curiosity, twice removed from the physical struggle of their lives by the process of photographic reproduction and their containment in a work of art; the cultural values they espoused now seen to be as frail as they are intriguing, sentimentalized by the same Romantic biases that empowered them as colonists. *Vanitas* (1993) resembles a common parlour stool, a symbol of Victorian civility, femininity and quiet self-reflection. Its height has been exaggerated to the point that it seems perhaps tribal, a primitive icon that symbolizes the violence of the settler's survival instinct as much as their rustic spiritual values. There is something uncanny, almost threatening about the rough primitivism lurking beneath this seemingly innocent piece of furniture. The entire exterior of the piece has

deerskin sewn onto it, the eviscerated carcass of a once living animal and the clawed feet that form its base further echo the overall sense of muted violence.

Renée Lavaillante's two-dimensional abstract collage pieces are less concerned with objective or cultural definitions of meaning in a literal sense. Lavaillante has brought together a number of exploratory abstract drawings made at different times, reworking them into entirely new horizontal or vertical configurations. By layering varied intensities of darkness and light, she brings a sculptural and spatial dimension to the process of drawing in pastel, charcoal and pencil. Lavaillante's works are non-objective flights of fancy, less constrained by formalist notions of abstraction, that communicate a deep sense of brooding emotion. In *À supposer que l'on se heurte à quelque chose, no. 18* (1993), the process of building onto and partially eradicating the formal compositions of each layered sketch brings a paradoxical effect. The compositional angles, gestural markings and tonalities that load the surface plane of the piece have a primal, void-like intensity that draws us inwards at the same time as we become aware of the untouched areas that surround it. Devoid of colour, Lavaillante's work has the spirit of a two-dimensional installation.

Monique Giard's *Ailleurs* (1993)

is inspired by a visit to the villages in and around the mountains of Rif in Morocco, where the women work with clay as they have for centuries, making pots and other domestic objects. The five free-standing clay figures that make up one part of the piece have bronze appendages, hands and faces that are only partially visible, making these figures seem constrained, almost incapacitated. However, the gestural recreation of their garments suggests the opposite, a subtle bodily movement and a kind of archaic sense of beauty seemingly lost in the Western world. Gathered around a series of miniature facades of houses





Monique Giard, *Ailleurs*, 1993. Céramique, bronze, bois. Ci-dessus : à l'Hôtel-de-ville de Bruxelles, en décembre 1993.

placed on the gallery floor, the common domestic buildings one might see in these villages, these figures seem resigned to their place in the world, neither burdened nor entirely aware of their inherent poverty, but instead solemn and resolute. Off to the side, a bronze ballerina pirouettes atop a cabinet while classical Western dance music plays in the background. By juxtaposing these two entirely different elements in her sculptural installation, that of these Moroccan women who represent a lifestyle of culturally specific traditions and economic dependency and the ballerina who symbolizes the frivolous virtues of

our own society's passive "high art" entertainment culture, Giard's *Ailleurs* causes us to question which is the more meaningful without passing a final judgement.

A comment on the photographic process itself, Randy Saharuni's *Untitled* (1993) anatomizes the one-dimensional character of the photographic medium by extending its visual effect outwards into the actual environment, presenting the photographic effect within the subject even before it has become a photograph. In the centre of this photograph, a field of yellow flowers and grass has been partially flattened by a rectangular



Catherine Widgery, *Mémoires*, 1993. Photographies et fibre de verre.

“window” of glass while the border areas remain *au naturel*.

The steel boat in Yves Louis-Seize's *De l'origine et de la dérive des espèces* (1993) is so geometrically precise and the three ceramic forms on burnished logs that surround it so ambiguous they suggest two altogether different levels of experience. The former is a linear, Platonic symbol of conquest of the unknown by rational means, as empirical as Mercator's mapped projections of the world. The ceramic forms are procreative metaphors that allude to animal, vegetal and human forms at various stages of emergence and growth. We see them as living presences, part of life's endless cycle of transformation. The boat is not just an allegorical symbol of travel, but more an inherited cultural memory, yet we see no point of destination or departure. The three miniature “Hear no evil, See no evil, Speak no evil” monkeys that sit precariously at one end of the boat are the very incarnation of the hereditary superstitions that still link us with our pre-conscious origins in the natural world; the instinctive, less rational side of human nature. Heightened by the background sounds of a sea swell, *De l'origine et de la dérive des espèces* enacts a journey that takes place beyond our collective human memory within the context of all-pervasive energies that are invisible and mutable. This strangely metaphysical work shapes our sense of time and evokes a universal feeling of permanence that is as abstract as it is relativistic, what George Steiner in his book *Real Presences* refers to as “the openness to unknowing distinctiveness of myth”.²

In the recent series of CBC radio lectures titled *Art and the Marketplace*, American critic Arthur C. Danto reified the moribund values of the late 20th century's semantic bias when he stated: “Nature doesn't have any artworks”. The bits and bytes of cultural information or data that move instantaneously here and there along the electronic highway are interchangeable and neutralized. The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of the word data: “known facts or things used as a basis for inference or reckoning” now seems as archaic as those old world settlers' romantic conjectures about God, country and the heathens. “Known facts or things” are like a stack of dominos, as relativized by technology as history itself. The inner power of art lies precisely in its relation to a continuous

environment and its ability to move us *beyond ourselves*. In a sense, words such as *art* or *data* conspire against the innately poetic or metaphorical potential that lies at the heart of the artistic impulse. They confound us because they have no basis in any specific reality. The global village is now upon us. In the film *Baraka* we are provided with an endless onslaught of fractious, idealized images from around the world in segments that are as short as possible. Instead of evoking natural feelings of permanence, of being at one with where we are, we are provided with the capital of distraction, decontextualization and dislocation. The artists who have participated in *Outre Terre* have taken a different tack. Their works reaffirm that art can only truly be universal if it is a direct response to the specifics of cultural experience, can only communicate a deeper understanding by re-affirming the place of permaculture in our worldview. It is all about control of the human spirit, this superstitious belief that technology can somehow provide us with solutions to the human dilemma while ignoring our basic need to re-connect with nature.³ An enlarged version of *Outre Terre* with works by the same artists travelled on to Brussels, Belgium, where it could be seen at, the Hôtel-de-Ville de Bruxelles and the Centre culturel francophone de Watermael-Boitsfort, this January.

JOHN K. GRANDE

NOTES

1. George Steiner, *Real Presences: is there anything in what we say?*, Faber & Faber, London, 1989, p.222.
2. *Art and the Marketplace*, recorded at Glenn Gould Studios in Toronto, aired on CBC Radio's *Ideas on Friday*, November 12th, 1993.
3. Electronic mail art recaptures that sense of experiential immediacy in new and interesting ways. In an event at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Bill Bartlett, an E-Mail artist, received instant images produced by the natives of the South Pacific island of Rarotonga beamed off satellites thousands of kilometres above the earth's surfaces. These images were then instantly flashed on a monitor at the VAG, projecting scenes of life in the Cooke Islands while gallery patrons produced images for the viewers at the other end. The interactivity in this form of art is as immaterial as it is undivided by time and space. E-mail can be produced anywhere and challenges old-fashioned concepts of higher and lower denominations of culture, the context of the gallery as site and even physical distance. How does E-mail art really improve the conditions of life on the planet at the primal level?