

Sylvia Ziemann: *Home (In)Security*

Sylvia ZIEMANN, *Home (In)Security*, Truck Gallery, Calgary,
April 29 - May 26, 2011

Mireille Perron

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The exhibition entitled *Home (In)Security*, by Regina artist Sylvia Ziemann, is composed of several 3-dimensional and low relief model-size houses. All houses, but one, contain narrative video screens and two have sound tracks. They are accompanied by one small figure pinned to the wall. The narrative video screens are displayed in three different ways: as televisions located inside the houses' rooms, as make-believe actions seen through the windows of the houses, or as a conflation of both ways. The actions on all the video screens are care-

fully in scale with their surroundings. The gallery is dimly lit thus the video screens illuminate the houses from the inside. The overall effect recalls the experience of walking along a suburban street in the evening and witnessing what is going on in various houses.

Media's representation of wars and conflicts determine to a great extent our understanding of these events. For instance, in the aftermath of September 9/11, the heightened coverage of a variety of struggles around the world was aimed at shaping our understanding of what constitutes security. In *Home (In)Security*, Ziemann explores the

effects of how media, mostly the news, has affected her/us in her/our domestic environments. The title borrows from the 2002 Bush administration Homeland Security Act (HSA). The Act was stated necessary in prosecuting the "War on Terror." It included, among others, a series of laws, dealing with a wide variety of surveillance programs. Many laws were widely criticized by civil rights activists for enacting serious setbacks to civil liberties protection, such as the right to privacy and obstructing the public's access to information. Most of the debates around security dealt with its public aspects such as border security in order to prevent terrorist attacks. What distinguishes Ziemann's contri-

bution is her intent to critically bring the debate back home.

The artist presents her/our obsession with home and security as a complex affair with many ramifications. In doing so, she intelligently undermines media coverage that often presents complex matters in simplistic ways. Issues such as the collapse of private and public spaces, protective measures to make our homes more secure, the psychology of fear from paranoia with the outside to safety and confinement, are all raised through the artist's careful recreation of domestic spaces. Ziemann ingeniously makes her viewers complicit by making them actively take part in her surveillance system. Each time we peek in

Sylvia ZIEMANN,
Home (In)Security, 2011.
View of the exhibition at
Truck Gallery, Calgary,
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Photo: R. ROWLEY.





the windows of her miniature houses, attracted like flies to the flickering light of the TV screens, we re-enact the invasion of privacy central to the exhibition. Moreover, the content of our illicit viewing echoes its sources by being disturbing.

The artist's narratives are based mostly on personal anecdotes. For instance, the work entitled *Fear of the Past* refers to the artist's 80-year-old mother's recent struggle with insomnia. *Fear of the Past* is also the only house without exterior walls, leaving its inhabitant without protection. Ziemann's mother is of German descent and watching the constant news reports of war in the Middle East has triggered her memories of growing-up in Nazi Germany. The artist recreated a bedroom where

her mother is in bed with her eyes wide open. On the bed is a small suitcase holding a Nazi uniform, while through the window, the war in her nightmare is raging. In another display entitled *Getting Ready*, Ziemann plays the part of a woman seemingly getting ready for work. After dressing and doing her hair, she finally puts on a balaclava, picks-up her gun and leaves the room. *Getting Ready* is an investigation into the disconcerting banality of evil. The theme of self-portrait and suicide bomber is repeated in *Bomber Woman Self-Portrait*: this is a small assemblage consisting of a little doll with Ziemann's face, dressed in a jacket lined with bombs. Furthermore, the doll is awkwardly pinned to the wall, in the middle of the exhibition, as if recalling an

unfamiliar voodoo ritual or a desperate wish to cast a protective spell. The work is based on the artist's bewilderment, as a mother herself, when she saw news coverage of another mother who became a suicide bomber. The subject of

the table in front of the TV, guns and bomb-making equipment are prominently displayed. Keeping in line with the theme of terrorism, *Hostages* presents an older woman as seen through the window of her house. Again played by the artist in disguise,



motherhood is also at play in *Post-Partum Delivery*, a work about Ziemann's disbelief when confronted with the news that a mother abandoned her newborn on a doorstep in Saskatoon in the depth of winter. When looking into this house, one sees unfolding on a television screen, the first person view of a female running through snow and placing a bundle on the doorstep of a house. It is worth noticing that the conflation of chosen anecdotes, from global to local, mimics the sequencing of daily news.

In an nearby house, again on the ubiquitous TV screen, *Shut In* presents an older man, discussing the facts of why and how he made his home secure. He repeats what we all have heard many times: if you make your house secure, thieves will look for another, easier house to break into. Such common comments are reminders that security and a sense of community no longer seem to go hand in hand. In a revealing way, the structure adjacent to the old man's house is a grey box with only a fisheye to look into. Entitled *Terrorist Cell*, again playing on a TV screen, a clip of George W. Bush is saying, "more and more troops" while the people behind him applaud. The clip is playing in a fast obsessive loop. On

the woman quietly knits while sitting on her living room sofa. She is disturbed at regular intervals by her obligation to check on the hostages tied-up in her closet. Under the porch of her house, one can easily identify a children's book, *Hansel and Gretel*, fittingly chosen for its theme of abduction. The well-known fable recasts the narrative into the abyss of our many ways to recount our fears of abduction.

With *Home (In)Security*, Sylvia Ziemann joins an esteemed group of Canadian artists, working on the subjects of war and terror and their related issues, such as Dick Avern, Rebecca Belmore, Douglas Coupland, Mario Doucette and Wanda Koop. In the artist's words: "We can hide in our homes or we can engage in the world." ←

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Mireille PERRON was born in Montréal, Québec. Since 1982, her installations have appeared in solo and group exhibitions in Canada, Europe and the United States. She is the founder of the Laboratory of Feminist Pataphysics. She lives and works in Calgary, Alberta, where she teaches at the Alberta College of Art & Design.

Sylvia ZIEMANN, *Shut In*, 2008. Interior view.
Photo: R. ROWLEY.

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Sylvia ZIEMANN, *Shut In*, 2008.
16"X 20"X 20". Mixed media.
Photo: R. ROWLEY.