

Maelstrom and River Styx

Paula Gustafson

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peur" scrawled on one wall and balanced by the partially erased, "Il fait beau"¹ written on the opposite wall remind us that fear and death are the constant companions of life and indeed contribute to its beauty. Small windows, reminiscent of a film strip, are cut into the corridor wall framing tiny fragments of x-rays and small black and white wood-cut images of faces, hands and feet printed on acetate. Lit from the back, they act as narrative, a miniature exhibition within an exhibition, but then we remember, in a hospital it is the marrow of our existence that is held up to the light. In a hospital, it is easy to forget that outside it may indeed, "faire beau."

At the end of the corridor, a television screen draws us into its contained but animated space. Here we experience the hospital from the patient's perspective; we become the patient. The ceilings, the floors dominate, giving an uneasy sense of loss of middle ground, loss of self. In this world, the patient's body becomes the corridor, pulsing with the rhythm of shiny floors metered by ominous feet.

In both Storm's installation spaces, video monitors occupy a central location and are key elements for the comprehension of the work. Here, the opposing forces as per-

ceived in the immediacy of the woodcut's primitive gesture and the intervening distancing of video's modern technology are combined. We are reminded that woodcut was once a modern technology that also revolutionized the communications world. For Storm, they are all tools of expression, essentially the same, different only by degrees.

Storm uses video to explore her presence in two public areas within the city; the hospital and the mountain. I sense each of the video monitors as standing in for the body of the artist. Through the superimposing of moving picture planes, repetition, the piecing together and juxtaposing of the many fragments, she tells us her personal story about these sites as possible places for healing. One story does not negate the other, rather both are necessary and connected.

Storm's interest lies within the creation of space itself, and more specifically a contained empty space. Here, emptiness is not a frightening void, but rather a potential for existing, a place where emptiness can speak, and a space for sharing that existence. It is a space where the imperfections of life are accepted and appreciated for their particular beauty. I experience this installation and particularly the second space as an expression of the artist's appreciation

of the generosity and richness of life in Montreal. The presence of the mountain, as an essential part of this city is a central element in the experience of the second space. The corridor space physically compresses the viewer. Our shadows are ominously close and intrusive, obstructing our perspective. Pushed along by the space itself, we have little control of our direction; there is only advancing or retreating. But, once beyond the corridor, a giant image of forest and green falls on another constructed wall. Entering this quieter, reflective space is not so obvious. Its entrance works more like a tear in one's perception, a place where one arrives by accident, or by magic. Here, one must step through an imaginary barrier: the projected image of a fallen tree. Arriving unexpectedly in the expansiveness of this space we rediscover our breath.

To set foot here, as the artist proposes in the video is to "voir par la plante du pied", or to see through the sole of the foot. The words "plante" and "sole" although meaning essentially the same, can lead us to the richness of their respective roots; both connected in the ideas of planting and the soil. But, it is not the usual ground one walks on here. This is an open interior space, where art-

ist and spectator are allowed to dream and to play. The body can relax, foot prints crawl up the walls, feet walk on trees, the body becomes tree. As portrayed in the video, the horizontal of the tree is superimposed over that of the hospital bed. This tree, though imperfect and almost completely uprooted, lives on tenaciously leafing year after year - testimony to the fragile strength of our physical beings.

There is a paradox in Storm's work, one I have also sensed in many other artists' work. There is in her desire to disclose and explore as many points of view as possible, a determined almost frenzied resolve to at last reveal and encompass the essence of a reality. She continues despite the knowledge that success will only be partial and momentary. Succeeding does not even appear to be the objective; it is the search which is important. This installation is the attempt by Storm to explore and to communicate her insight into the nature of health and healing. ■

Hannelore Storm, *Un temple de guérison : lectures plurielles*.
Maison de la culture Plateau
Mont-Royal
March 1996

NOTE :
1. From: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mouches*.

Maelstrom and River Styx

Paula Gustafson

Any kid who has ever built a fort out in the bush understood what Peter von Tiesenhausen was doing with alder branches and blackberry vines during the week prior to January 25, when he was weaving his 24-foot diameter *Maelstrom* sculpture inside the Richmond Art Gallery. For gallery goers who watched the 36-year-old artist at work, it was easy to imagine his boyhood in Alberta's Peace River country, or the summers he has spent in the Yukon as the lead hand in a gold mining camp. However, why he was building a 17-foot

high sculpture shaped like a funnel cloud suspended from the ceiling of a gallery in the Vancouver area, required some background explanation.

Up until recently Tiesenhausen's artistic career was notable for his very competent landscape paintings. He still paints landscapes, but something happened five years ago that completely shifted his ideas about making art. In a lengthy interview at the gallery he explained that, soon after his first son was born, he thought he had better build a fence on his property near Demmitt, Alberta. "We live in the country, and I figured I should build something to keep the kid from running off into the woods," he said. At the time, he and his wife "didn't have any money to speak of," and the cost of a picket fence would have been \$1500.

"I remembered a Monet painting of a willow fence, a wattle fence, and I thought I could build one of those. Willows wouldn't cost me a cent, and they grow back at the rate of sometimes six feet a year, like blackberry brambles. So right away in the Spring I start to build this willow fence, and because it's not confined to being linear it went circling around the yard. One day I was walking back, looking at the fence curving up the hill and I thought about the ship I'd always wanted to build. So that Fall I built a 17-foot boat from willow sticks—inside my shop because by then it was kind of cold—and a friend helped me drag it out into the field."

Since his studies at the Alberta College of Art in the early 1980s, Tiesenhausen had done innumerable drawings. He says they were always "stiff and tight, but when I looked at this willow boat out there in the field, the lines weren't like that. After 25 years of trying, I learned how to draw! I was so excited, I started stretching big rolls of paper in the studio and planning the boat I was going to build when Spring came."

"I wanted to find the exact space to put the boat, so over the winter I walked the 50-acre field, knowing I wanted it on a horizon, probably on the highest point, so I could look at the lines against the sky and see it as a drawing. I finally found the spot

and stepped out the length and width. Then one day I went out fairly early in the morning and walked around the boat again, knocking the dew off the grass. There was this beautiful outline, sort of like an Andy Goldsworthy or a Richard Long environmental sculpture."

Tiesenhausen related how all during that winter he walked the path of the boat "like a complete lunatic, the fool on the hill, but I didn't want to lose the trace." In the Spring he had to go to Edmonton, to deliver a painting. While he was away, a Chinook melted all the snow. Driving home, he said he was "was terrified that my marks would be gone. I ran out into the field and there on the grass, all the snow was pretty much gone, except for this hardpacked trail, my snow drawing of the boat. It was just wonderful, and an indication to me that I was on the right track, I was drawing with the whole field, in the landscape."

From that revelation, he said "things just took off. The sticks reinforced my ability to draw, and my drawings were becoming richer and richer. I'd just sit in the studio and try to be as intuitive as I could be, hanging up a piece of paper and when I saw something clearly there I'd go and draw it. I'd see trees, things hanging up in trees, and think 'that's a good idea' and go off and build it. That's how the pods developed."

Getting a woven hive-like pod up into a sixty-foot tree was another matter. The first three pods took three weeks to build and hang. Tiesenhausen recalled "It was a hell of a lot of fun," although he admits that initially he didn't realize how big a problem it would be to accurately shoot an arrow with a rope attached over a branch at that height in order to hoist up the woven willow pods.

The Maelstrom sculpture he built in the Richmond Art Gallery is nominally based on those pod forms, but it was the first time Tiesenhausen has specifically constructed one of his works "dealing with architectural space" rather than an outdoor setting. He said the fresh cut saplings and vines from a vacant lot a block away from the gallery behaved different-

ly from the materials he has used previously, and he was thrilled to discover how strong blackberry vines are.

He also commented on the chalky algae-like scum and green moss growing on the reddish-brown alder branches, and the blackberry's acid green colour, remarking that he hardly ever uses charcoal to draw with anymore. "Lines made with sticks, green sticks and burned sticks are so much more expressive," he said. "Sometimes they break, or gouge the paper, but they leave beautiful lines. Or I make spheres of wood and char them, then roll them around on paper where they leave growth ring marks behind."

Writing about his 1995 *Making Myth in Landscape* exhibition at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, curator Katherine Lipsett remarked that, like many artists, von Tiesenhausen's "ideas come more quickly than they can be accomplished." A year earlier, during his residency at The Banff Centre for the Arts' Leighton Colony, he had built a seven-foot-long ice boat, loaded it with a big, rectangular rock, and floated it down the Bow River. He says the ice boat was like a mantra. "I have nothing to show for it except a couple of photographs, and no idea of how far it floated before it sank, but there's a big, squarish rock somewhere down river."

Commenting on his own work, von Tiesenhausen wrote in the catalogue for *Projects*, his 1995 exhibition at The Prairie Art Gallery, "I sometimes call my structures 'interactions'. The end result is often very different than the initial idea. Nature dictates the limitations and peculiarities of the materials. Wind and weather change the look and feel and even the meaning of the projects." During the six-week *Maelstrom* exhibition, the enormous sculpture went through subtle shifts in form and colour, and lost its natural, resinous aroma. Like his ice boats, natural changes that occur with the passage of time also factor into von Tiesenhausen's work. ■

Peter von Tiesenhausen: *Maelstrom*
Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond B.C.
January 25–March 11, 1996

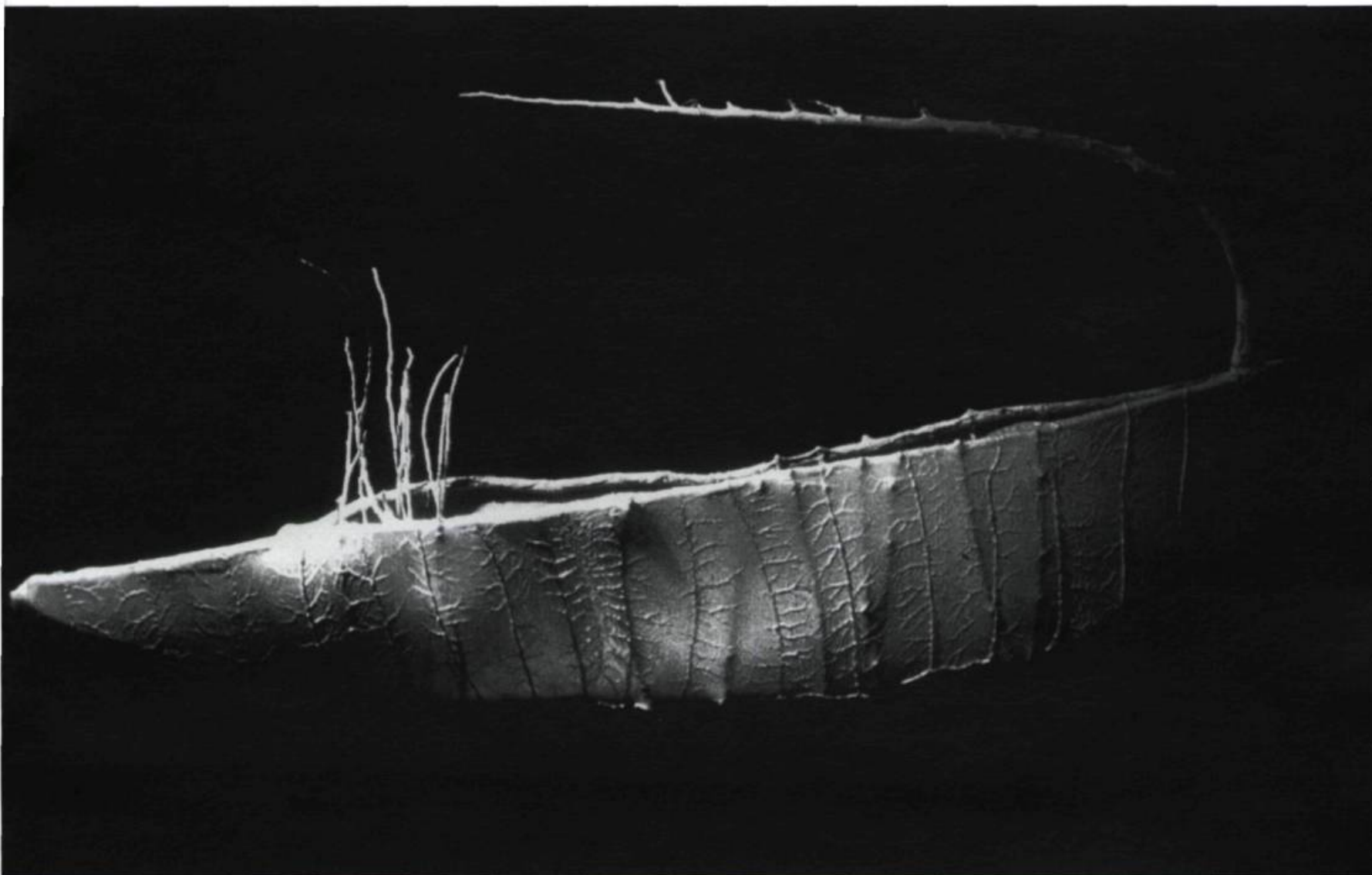
"Guts" is a yin-yang word whose meaning shifts

with the telling. If I were to say that Washington state artists Peggy Vanbianchi and Emily Standley had guts, you would assume they had courage and stamina. If I told you they worked with guts, stitching and forming the slippery intestines into kayak-like sculptures, your mental picture would immediately change channels.

Well, Vanbianchi and Standley do work with guts; the same kind of cow guts and hog guts that butchers use for sausage making. "We called it vellum when we were trying to get the Waterfront Centre Hotel commission—no one wanted us to say guts," Vanbianchi explained in an interview at the Canadian Craft Museum. Whether it was their delicacy with language or the innovative nature of their proposal, they got the commission. Their paint-embellished and embroidered mariner's map of the crenulated British Columbia coastline was installed in the Vancouver hotel lobby in 1993. Functioning like a memory-receptor, its aged parchment appearance triggers romantic notions about 16th century nautical charts, animal hide artifacts decorated with tribal symbols, and elaborately tattooed bodies.

Vanbianchi said it was a logical step from making illustrated maps to making vessels for imaginary voyages. "One day I was looking through a book of Eskimo art, and there was a picture of a skin boat, loaded with women, and with a sail on it," she recalled. Their recreation of the book photograph became *Borealis*, the first of the ten sculptures in the River Styx exhibition.

"We cut sticks from trees for the framework, then we took the wet gut and laid it over the branches," she explained, adding that draping the gut and stitching it is probably the least pleasant part of the construction process. "It doesn't smell great, and it looks awful, but after a couple of days when it dries, it's just phenomenal. It's like a drum. We try to



Peggy Vanbianchi & Emily Standley, *Caspar*, 1994. Gut, mixed media. 127 x 121.92 x 35.56 cm.

make the skin of the boats loose, but it takes up any slack that we leave."

The gut covering is white when the sculptures are new, but it soon ages to a transparent yellow. The salt crystals the gut is packed in, when it comes from the slaughterhouse, remain on some of the sculptures. Instead of washing off all the salt the two artists often take advantage of its textural effect, rubbing inks and dyes onto the encrusted surface. Other interesting surface textures come from the stitched seams and the natural veining of the "casings", reminiscent of rivers and tributaries.

Chant, for example, is an almost 10-foot long kayak shape with upraised, curved bows. Despite its large, functional size, the pod form suggests vulnerability, partly because it appears to be fragile and structurally unsound (it's not), and partly from the idea it conveys about being able to see the skeleton beneath the skin.

In her artist's statement Vanbianchi explains that, as she works

on the boat sculptures, "the shapes that emerge often resemble cocoons, insect wings, or sea mammals. I develop these zoomorphic sculptures both consciously and unconsciously. The unconscious development occurs during the early stages when I select the sticks for the keel, ribs, and gunwales, and begin to assemble the skeleton of the boat. Often, it is not until after I have attached the gut that I become consciously aware of the emerging shape." In some of the sculptures she and her partner have given the branches a chalky white plaster coating to emphasize their resemblance to bones.

But Vanbianchi's and Standley's life-size gut boats are not representative objects, they are vessels for mythic voyages, for spiritual journeys, for explorations into the territories of fantasy. Vanbianchi refers to them as "part of a personal longing...for earlier times and a way of life more directly connected to land and sea."

She admits her choice of mate-

rials and motifs puts her in a position similar to a cultural tourist who looks at ancient relics and supposes he or she truly understands their meaning. Yet if Vanbianchi is guilty of appropriating traditional techniques, the justification lies in the collaborative way she and Standley have worked together for fifteen years. Originally textile artists, they shared a fascination for the process of transforming fibres into cloth; an art that is inextricably entwined in human history. Their sure use of texture, pattern, and surface decoration is from the universal language of weaving. Symbolism and Abstractionism may have been named by modern Western art, but they have always been there in the decorative motifs of ancient textiles, baskets, and carvings.

"Fibres were so seductive, and they had so many associations with so many other kinds of artwork," Vanbianchi recalled, "but I couldn't get the type of imagery I wanted. Textile work was just too pretty. Cow gut has a raw look about it

that I can use in many different ways. Once I started working with it, I just dropped everything else."

Three of the sculptures in the exhibition, including the *River Styx* title piece, are Vanbianchi's own constructions, made after the partnership ended last year when Standley decided to focus her talents on teaching. Although they are more abstractly modelled than the previous collaborative works, these newest sculptures eulogize both naturally occurring materials and animistic/spiritual fetishes.

Vanbianchi says she realizes she can "never really be an Eskimo, Native American, or Maori," but by working with the same kind of organic materials used throughout human history for the creation of both functional and ritual objects she says she is gaining a deeper understanding of their lives. ■

Peggy Vanbianchi &
Emily Standley: *River Styx*
Canadian Craft Museum,
Vancouver B.C.
February 3-March 24, 1996



Reçu à *Espace* : le catalogue monographique qui accompagne l'exposition *Jean-Baptiste Côté : caricaturiste et sculpteur*, qui se tient au Musée du Québec jusqu'au 20 octobre prochain. Conçue et réalisée par Mario Béland, conservateur de l'art ancien, assisté de Nicole Allard pour le volet caricature et de Denis Castonguay pour la recherche, l'exposition est la première rétrospective consacrée à l'artiste. Abondamment illustré, le catalogue comprend une préface de John R. Porter, directeur général du Musée du Québec, qui se penche sur l'aspect populaire (folk art) de la production de l'artiste, une esquisse biographique et un essai de Mario Béland sur le sculpteur, de même qu'un essai de Nicole Allard sur le caricaturiste. Plus précisément, le catalogue

comporte une chronologie, une esquisse biographique de l'artiste qui a vécu de 1832 à 1907, deux études sur sa production (caricature et sculpture), accompagnées de tout l'appareil scientifique inhérent à ce type de publication (catalogue des oeuvres exposées, liste des expositions, bibliographie exhaustive). Chacun des trois principaux chapitres est présenté comme une suite de courts essais abordant diverses questions liées à la carrière et à la production de Côté en regard de l'évolution de son marché et de ses pratiques : «Jean-Baptiste Côté, souligne Mario Béland, passa toute sa carrière à Québec. Après avoir travaillé avec l'architecte Louis-Thomas Berlinguet, il s'oriente vers la sculpture navale au milieu des années 1850. Il s'adonne de plus, durant les années 1860, à la

gravure sur bois et à la caricature dans des journaux humoristiques. Au cours des années 1870, il se tourne vers d'autres marchés dont celui de la sculpture religieuse qu'il exploitera jusqu'à la fin du siècle. L'inventaire de son oeuvre fait état d'une production aussi diversifiée que colorée se situant à mi-chemin entre l'art savant et l'art populaire : reliefs historiés de la vie du Christ, figures de proue, pièces de mobilier, personnages religieux ou historiques, enseignes de commerce, effigies commémoratives, allégories, animaux domestiques et exotiques, figures caricaturales et stéréotypées, monuments funéraires, etc.» (p. 19). (Source : Lise Boyer, Suzanne LeBlanc, Musée du Québec). ■

Errata

Des erreurs se sont glissées dans la transcription du texte de Suzanne Leblanc, *Leçons de relativisme*, paru dans *Espace* #36. À la page 43, on lira plutôt : «Le globe marqué du signe "plus" présente la

carte de l'hémisphère sud "à l'endroit", à l'endroit pour nous, bien sûr, de l'hémisphère nord, et finalement aussi pour toute la planète, puisque cette convention a gagné l'hémisphère sud.» —

«L'univers comportant l'atome de la planète se trouve maintenant condensé dans la concavité de l'orbe terrestre.» Nous présentons nos excuses à l'auteure et à l'artiste.

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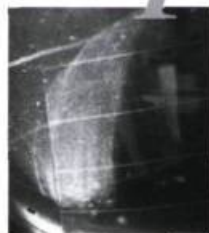
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