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An interview with Pnina C. Gagnon

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AN INTERVIEW WITH PNINA C. GAGNON

Sam Abramovitch : *Pnina, you have been involved in art for a very long time. I would like to know when you became involved with art, particularly art related to ecology ?*

Pnina Gagnon : I have always been involved. I lived close to nature, mostly outdoors.

S. A. : *Is there a particular reason why you started to emphasize ecology rather than other possibilities ?*

P. G. : It is a growing subject. Ecology and understanding the globe is something that always touched me in every aspect. For example, I worked on the human body as a topic and was exhibited at Concordia in 1978, and in my eyes humans were no more the finest creation of God. I slowly went towards what is outside the human content and towards the effects of man's deeds, towards what he can do with his hands. I painted hands for two years and then the deeds of his hands.

S. A. : *You mention, if I understood correctly, that you want to learn more about nature, about how society functions and also the saving of society and the world. We may come back to this, hopefully. Do you think that painting helps you increase your understanding the workings of the world and of nature ?*

P. G. : Yes, because when we see how waves reach shore, the beauty of nature, it is so total : Even in the routine of high and low tides and their force, you want to preserve the water's transparency and perfect salinity. I do not want to see seabirds choking with bits of plastic toys, or turtles with floating sheets of PVC and treating whales' cadavers as toxic waste.

S. A. : *I was under the impression that you said that working on subjects related to nature was one of your reasons to learn more about nature ?*

P. G. : Yes.

S. A. : *Do you think that, just from observing nature, you could learn more in terms of waves or do you not think that it requires a more basic scientific approach to understand why waves are big or small, high tide and low tides ?*

P. G. : No. I am interested in the endless possibilities of the movement and lines that occur around us – and depicting them. For example during two years I made a whole series about reflections – the light reflection, scintillating lights on the water – and I think that these lines never repeat, you can never see the same wave twice, and they will never be in the same order. It is so rich, like the moving shadows, with changes in different seasons. Of course, it can now be done with a computer.

S. A. : *This is not what I am trying to get at. By looking at one of your works, would I become smarter about nature or will I only see what you have on canvas or paper and admire it or dislike it or be bored by it ?*

P. G. : When I worked on the moving shadows insi-

de a house, you have a window with sunlight coming in and a plant casting a shadow. Madame Borduas – we were very close to her then – when she saw my work, she exclaimed that she never noticed these shadows moving on her wall. Because she saw my painting, she learnt something new.

S. A. : *Pnina, you obviously have been involved with ecology in its broad aspects, and most of your paintings are on that topic. Can you describe the point you are making with regards to your attitude towards ecology by describing two or three of your paintings or drawings to illustrate your point ? I know we are not looking at the work, but assuming that it is in front of us, as a viewer, would I see and understand your position ?*

P. G. : As an example, I have done a whole series of large drawings, in colour with inks, of fish, birds, frogs, elephants and turtles, each one in black and white and in colour, with different animals for each sheet. The rich colours in the works were to attract the eye, to make the subjects as colourful as I can, and the black and white to show their fate when they will be extinct. Many butterflies and fish are grey or silvery and very much alive, but would never be assembled on one surface the way I drew them. I wanted to do these two parallel series, in colour and in black and white. It was the only time that I tried to teach, to show people how beautiful nature can be if we let the animals remain alive, or how sad it would be if the world became grey and colourless.

I have recently done a project on gorillas whose mountainous domain is getting smaller and their livelihood restricted. It is easy to imagine that, in Canada, with such a large area, there would be room for polar bears but they become skinny. The changing equilibrium in the temperatures and the capacity of living creatures to survive in them is concerning me. In one of my works, I made a three-dimensions lean whale with discarded pulp. I painted its belly with bloody red, as if it were floating in its own blood. I take all this very seriously but I am not certain of my success.

S. A. : *Do you think that the viewer, by looking at one of the works you described, will become convinced of the importance of keeping the animals alive, or that the reaction would be that it is a good work of art done by a skilled person and not necessarily come away with the message "Long Live the Gorillas ?"*

P. G. : I think that, after 40 years of my work and learning, the series on ecology – saving the world, if you want – is also quality painting. I used specially designed paper with texture for the turtles and elephants to help give the work the look of animal skin. On the other hand, it does have a message. People



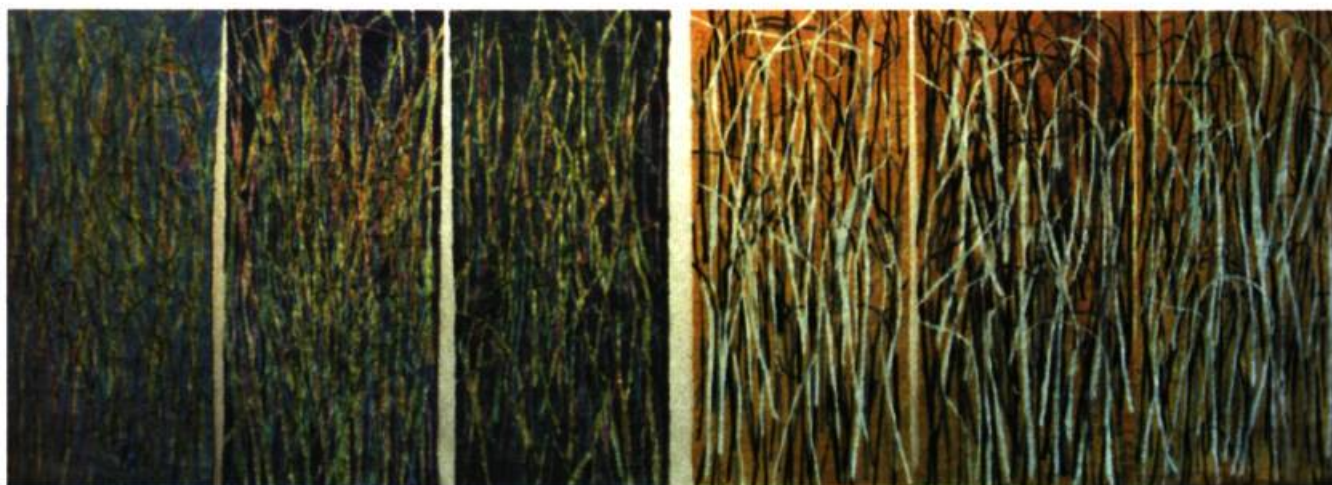
can be aware of the message, as I remarked in my exhibition at the Maison de la Culture Côte-des-Neiges a few years ago. Many children saw it, and it created a reaction, as well: Greenpeace people were outside, signing petitions dealing with the fate of the whales. In addition, less dramatic than the others, I exhibited my whales series in a gallery at a funeral home and published a catalogue at my own cost to show the seriousness of the situation.

S. A. : *Do you think that the message you wish to project might be clearer to the viewer if you depicted the animals as victims of the industrialization of the world rather than how great they look ?*

P. G. : I am just an artist. When I was young, I thought about politics but I chose the career of a graphic

artist. I am not as eloquent with words as Al Gore in his recent movie concerning the environment. He speaks with a voice that can change the political scene and can influence young or older people who are interested in these changes. The real change will not come from a political decision. On the contrary, what we see is that politicians are really interested in war and in more killing. Each time a tank goes on the ground, it destroys everything, and it takes years to regrow.

S. A. : *If you talk about ecology, you are forced to talk in terms of society, and a concern with society includes politics. If the world is going to do without wars, without destruction, without famine, society would have to change, and that would have to entail different basic political and social arrangements.*



Prina Gagnon, *Les quenouilles*, 1997. Six panneaux. Centre d'exposition de Baie-Saint-Paul.

P. G. : Who is calling for change ? The globe is being ruined, and our children and grandchildren will not have the same world we had.

S. A. : *How change can occur in society is another discussion I would be delighted to have. I just want to make one point in terms of your work. If it is concerned with the ecology, it becomes political to the extent that it implies economic and social considerations. You are an artist and, as you are involved in ecology in your art, then directly and indirectly you are involved in politics. My question to you is whether you think that your art can have a political effect on society.*

P. G. : I am sure that it can, in a slow way. As younger people are interested in it, not just in colour and shapes, they want the best things for their lives. I believe the young generation will try harder to save the world.

S. A. : *Then you think that art can have an important effect on social decision making ?*

P. G. : Yes.

S. A. : *You are of the opinion that an interest in painting to the extent of going to museums, galleries and hanging paintings on their walls will have an effect on them and their social attitudes ?*

P. G. : Yes. This is a quiet revolution. It is more like evolution. It is like nature : It has the same force and a similar diversity. People are a product of nature.

S. A. : *I have difficulty with that because I look at large corporations who collect and are supportive of art, and they do not seem to be affected by it, in their decision making, in terms of their behaviour. Their actions are based primarily on the making of profit and all that this implies.*

P. G. : Maybe they would be worse without the paintings on their walls. But I agree that people are blocked, even some people who love nature. I am very much against nature being ruined. I have pity for the animals more than people.

S. A. : *I find that humorous. Given a choice between humans and animals, you are for the animals. My outlook is somewhat different. I think that the basis of our society is the human being. We are here and trying to survive, and this is becoming more difficult for human beings, but your concern is that the animals should have precedence over humans. Strange choice.*

But to get back to the previous point : You feel that people who look at good art will become more sensitive to the evils of society and will try to change, although the opposite is taking place ?

P. G. : I am putting my hope in the youth who are less fixed in their ideas and ways.

S. A. : *Prina, all artists are very serious about their work and now and then undoubtedly think about their place in the history of art. Where would you place yourself in terms of art history.*

P. G. : I think that I am formed by conceptual art; my mind is cerebral. When I look at my work for the past 40 years, I see a system and there is thought as things happen like that.

S. A. : *Your work does not seem to need a written explanation unlike most conceptual artists.*

P. G. : Perhaps I am not a pure conceptual artist. I think that a whole group of people could have done my own work, if I would tell them to do that and that for my project.

S. A. : *As a closing remark, Prina, do you, as an impure conceptual artist, have a message to the readers of this text ?*

P. G. : The message is : As reality can be not so good, we need more imagination, and art is imagination.

S. A. : Thank you.

THIS INTERVIEW WAS DONE BY SAM ABRAMOVITCH