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Catherine Carmichael at Parisian Laundry

Catherine Carmichael, *Parisian Laundry*, Montreal. Febr. 19 - March 4, 2006

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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Montreal

“MAGPIE’S NESTS AND THE LEFTOVERS FROM THE DAY”

Catherine Carmichael, Parisian Laundry, Montreal. Febr. 19 - March 4, 2006

“Play is the supreme bricoleur of frail, transient constructions, like a caddisworm’s case or a magpie’s nest in nature.”

Victor Turner¹

m agpies are notorious for scouring the countryside omnivorously from on high, their beady eyes looking near and far for any glitzy baubles that might enhance the architecture of their nests. In her new work exhibited at Parisian Laundry (also her

Concordia MFA graduating exhibition), contemporary bricoleur Catherine Carmichael has brought her own magpie’s sharp eye to bear and has built out of myriad drawings and ephemeral materials a nestlike structure that creates a most peculiar mental climate and is just as diverting to the viewer’s eye and mind as the magpie’s stolen treasures.

Working non-traditional materials with her usual nonchalance and decidedly reductive aesthetic, Carmichael explores themes central to her body of work – liminality, play, improvisation – within a clearly elastic and ecstatic conceptual structure.



With the Parisian Laundry show/site specifically in mind, Carmichael's intention was to create her very own magpie's nest – a tentlike, semi-opaque structure papered over with hundreds of her own small drawings. This stand-alone ephemeral structure on posts, entitled *Tempo* (2006), beckoned us in, and seemed to offer us a haven of deep quiet despite the ceaseless babble – a true “speaking in tongues” – of its carapace of drawn elements. It was accompanied in the exhibition space by a massive ball of crumpled, discarded Cellophane sheeting.

The tent/nest/structure was invested with overtures of radical ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy. Interestingly, these are characteristics of liminality itself. Inside Carmichael's frail, ephemeral and even tenuous installations, the sense of disorientation – a key characteristic of generic liminal states, after all, and of the experience of Carmichael's work in particular – is paralleled by one of spatial dislocation, temporal elasticity and ecstatic psychic rupture. Time slows down and flattens out inside her installations, and our habitual understanding of time begins to stretch, slacken

and dissolve therein. Carmichael makes us sensitive to liminal states we ignore and, in so doing, she opens up the parentheses on thought itself.

Carmichael explores the layered meanings of the liminal in work that evokes the ephemeral and the systematically overlooked with an eye to releasing signifiers that have disappeared in the cracks and holes of our experience in the lived world. The word *liminality* (from the Latin word *lĭmen*, which means “threshold” or “boundary”) is employed by Victor Turner as a characteristic of the secondary stage of a ritual; in effect, a rite of passage that necessitates and entails a radical change in the enactor.

Carmichael's tent or nest in the Parisian Laundry show is at once environmental construct and wholesale absence of structure. It is an “antistructure” or, better yet, a “hyper-structure,” as Turner says. In anthropology, liminality refers to a limit-experience that places the complicit viewer in unfamiliar circumstances and surroundings. All is new and strange, and renegotiation is necessary before one can assimilate the new and ambiguous landscape, and solve it from the inside out, starting with a self tethered to the ordinary and bewildered by what seems an exotic surfeit of nothingness.

For the Parisian Laundry exhibition, Carmichael decided to use an actual tent (She has a large collection of tents, not incidentally.). She wanted an ephemeral structure that would be “something and nothing at one and the same time.” When the tent was installed, around 400 drawings were attached to its outside in a random manner. These miniature epiphanies together gave a powerful aura to an otherwise unglamorous hut.

If her Parisian Laundry installation integrated drawing, it also worked with collage on a large scale, for the drawings collaged onto the surface of the nest constituted an environmental installation that reminded one more than anything else of Kurt Schwitters's famous MERZbaus. Drawing upon the neglected detritus of everyday life, scraps of paper and fabric, shards of wood, and other leftovers – the whole marginalia and effluvia of the world – Schwitters built assemblage environments that the viewer could step into and live vicariously from within. His “cathedral of erotic misery” arguably prefigures what Carmichael calls her “poorest of churches,” which, like that of the magpie, has two sections (its humble interior and its extravagant exterior) and, like Schwitters' MERZbaus, at least five dimensions.

At the vernissage, Carmichael slowly and methodically unfurled Cellophane from rolls, crumpled it up and taped it together into a rather untidy mass that was left on the floor of the exhibition space like the leavings from the biggest birthday party in the world. The pathos of this object was a complement to the apparent poverty of the nest structure. During the unfurling and the discard, Carmichael says she was “trying to think of all the people in the world, the mass as opposed to the numbers, and this fluid math-

ematics of humans kept me going.” The duration of the performance was approximately 30 minutes.

Improvised movement is a core aspect of Carmichael’s work, both in performance and installation. Earlier in her career, the artist was a dancer, and a gifted one, and dance still figures in her work at all levels. She mentions Isadora Duncan “standing in a room for hours on end until she was inspired to move... You find yourself in a place that you could only be because of the process that brought you there... There is a profound liberation in this.” We can see the truth of this in both the installation and performance in the Parisian Laundry exhibition.

Carmichael moves effortlessly between the liminal world and the life world, and makes sacred spaces out of the most picayune materials and modest of intentions – which nonetheless set and blur the boundaries between what is seen and what is felt, what is imagined and what is known, what is homely and what is wild and untamed.

Robert Avens has said, “The task of a bricoleur is to take the leftovers from the day and to shape them into new figures within a new setting.”² These remarks are highly relevant to Carmichael’s endeavors. She takes “the leftovers from the day,” both creative and incidental, and shapes them into brave new structures that form, inform and deform, twist and untwist and turn, and finally massage our cramped thinking so it may be better able to grasp the full breadth of the wayward and the ineffable. She addresses our blinding obsession with boundaries, and blurs them through her own movements in space, leading us beyond all false dichotomies, into the realm of the purely liminal.

Neolithic cave burials in Northern Italy have been said to display a double liminality.³ Well, so, too, do Carmichael’s conceptual endeavours. The “insides” of her pieces provide us with an experience outside the norm. They are liminal in the sense that, like the rock-cut tombs that were strewn across the countryside in out-of-the-way places, they are positioned outside the comfort zone of domesticity. If, as has been argued, one of the centralmost cultural tenets of the neolithic was delineating boundaries between the “domesticated zone” and the “wilderness,” well contemporary artist Catherine Carmichael brings the “wild” – in terms of the liminal – well within the borders of the ordinary, but still far from the beaten path.⁴

So Carmichael brings home to us an experiential and conceptual sense of liminality. No mere abstraction this, but a state of mind that is also the harbinger of changed consciousness. This gifted artist, a wise woman who lives constantly on the limen, the threshold, places the liminal at the core of her art. Hers is a high-wire act, indeed, for it is not easy to live on what has been described as a conceptual lintel, a place and moment “in and out of time, where direct experience of the sacred, invisible or supernatural order, either in the material aspect of miracu-

lous healing or in the immaterial aspect of inward transformation of spirit or personality” holds sway.⁵ Carmichael trades in place and non-place, presence and absence, plenum and void.

Carmichael’s “dwellings” are rife with the metames-sages of the magpie’s nest Victor Turner speaks of so eloquently in the epigraph to this essay.⁶ They are meant, of course, to free us from the strictures of old ways of thinking. Products of both left and right hemispheres of the brain are herein juxtaposed and intermingled.⁷ The result could not have been comfortably predicted but is powerfully constant and true : a reflexive limit-experience of overwhelmingly subjective freedom.

JAMES D. CAMPBELL

NOTES

¹ Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance*. (New York, PAJ, 1988), p. 168.

² See Avens, Robert “James Hillman, Toward a Poetic Psychology” in *Journal of Religion and Health* (Springer, Netherlands), Vol. 19, No. 3, September 1980, p. 186-202.

³ See Trubshaw, Bob. “The Metaphors and Rituals of Place and Time – an Introduction to Liminality or Why Christopher Robin Wouldn’t Walk on the Cracks.” *Mercian Mysteries* No. 22, February 1995.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See Turner, Victor. “Pilgrimages as Social Processes,” in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca and (London, Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 166-230

⁶ Turner, *op. cit.*

⁷ Turner, *op. cit.*



Catherine Carmichael, *Tempo*, 2006. Photos : Guy L'Heureux.

