Document generated on 10/12/2024 5:45 a.m.

Espace Sculpture

Survivors, In Search of a Voice
The art of courage

John K. Grande

Number 33, Fall 1995

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9995ac

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)
1923-2551 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Grande, J. K. (1995). *Survivors, In Search of a Voice*: The art of courage. *Espace Sculpture*, (33), 40–42.

Tous droits réservés © Le Centre de diffusion 3D, 1995

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

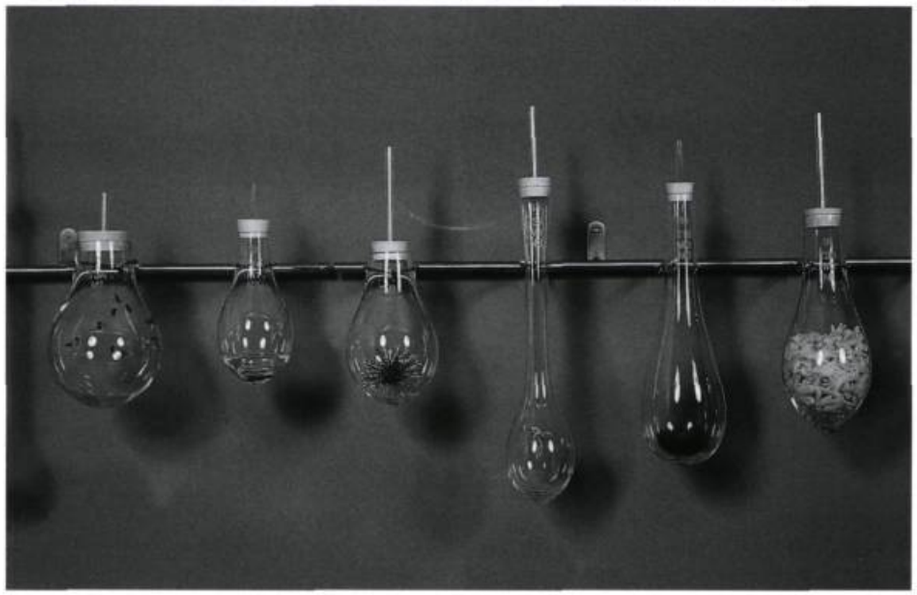
This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

SURVIVORS, *in search of a Voice*. The art of COURAGE

John K. Grande



Catherine Widgery, *Don't Touch/Please Touch*, 1994. Blown glass, stainless steel, and mixed media. 457,2 x 60,96 x 30,48 cm. Photo: Cheryl O'Brian.

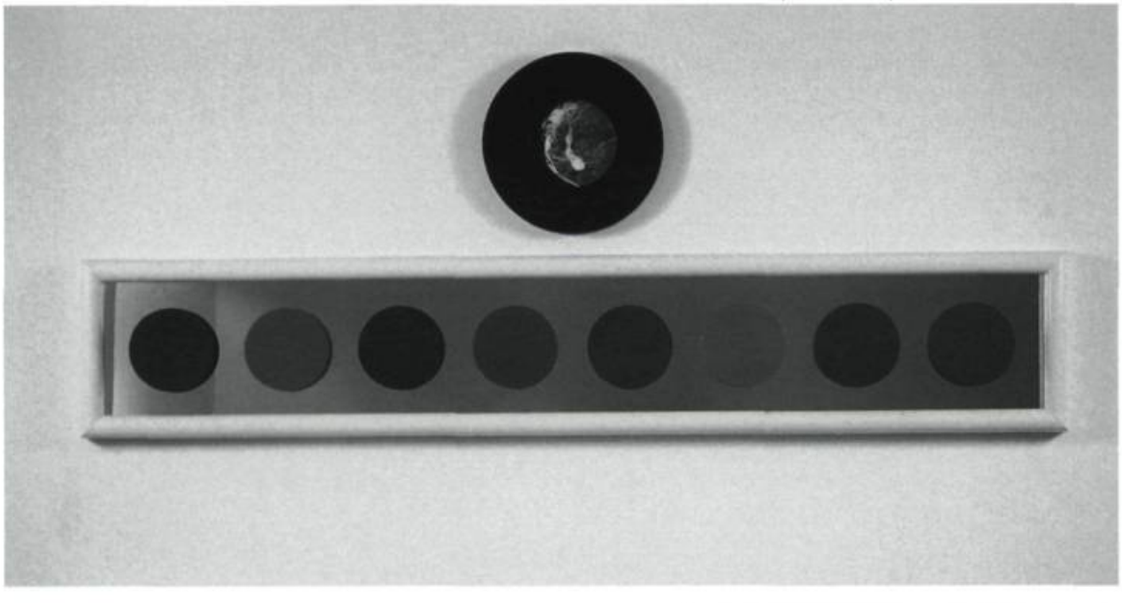
Aganetha Dyck, *Hive Bodice*, 1994. Wooden hive, glass bodice, beeswax, metal, and honey. 44,45 x 46,99 x 55,88 cm. Photo: Cheryl O'Brian.

Since its opening at The Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, an atypical venue for contemporary art at any time, *Survivors, In Search of a Voice* has, like its subject — breast cancer — been less about censure than containment. Like the recent spate of AIDS-related shows, this group show of works by 24 Canadian women artists has attracted much media attention, not always out of interest for the issues addressed or even the art, but because the media tends to homogenize opinion, reduce social and cultural issues to soundbites, videoclips, or printed tabloid and magazine matter. The better informed would not be surprised to realize art shows dedicated to causes have been going on for a long time. Medical funds were raised for the Red Cross in Paris during and after the Second World War from art exhibitions and similar events which often occurred during periods of social and economic strife....

Cause-oriented art and the disease of victim-itis are all about opening up artistic discourse to reflect new social and cultural concerns. Sweeping them under the proverbial carpet of Newspeak only suspends the inevitable. Even worse, some aesthetes suggest *Survivors* is just another example of art's subjugation to special interest groups. They warn the public of such shows because, by their definition,

Renée Van Halm, *One in Nine*, 1994. Mirror, paint, and wooden disks. 325,12 × 60,96 × 11,43 cm; and 58,42 × 3,81 cm. Photo: Cheryl O'Brian.

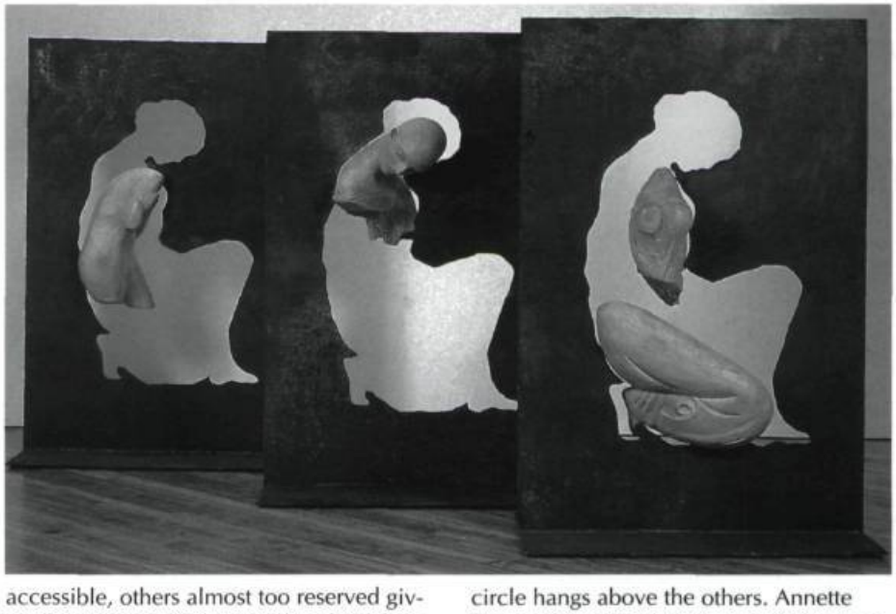
Susan Low-Beer, *Short Light, Long Dark*, 1994. Clay and steel. 3 × (182,88 × 121,92 × 60,96 cm). Photo: Cheryl O'Brian.



cause-oriented art is inept and distasteful. The question may no longer be whether art has a social conscience, but whether any of our writers, critics or media moguls do. Without freedom of expression and experimentation, art would indeed be in a dismal state. The proponents of an *art pour l'art* attitude may not know that the best art of the past has likewise always been a double-edged sword, fusing engagé social or cultural sentiments with one aesthetic or another. Look at Francesco Goya, whose portrait commissions sponsored by royalty were subtly sardonic comments on power relations between the artist and patron...

At its best, the art in *Survivors* awakens our sense of our own fragility and mortality beyond its main issue which is breast cancer. Judging by the broad range of people who have gone to the show, from old age pensioners and young school children to educators, doctors and the general public, *Survivors* is a success despite the media. If they have learned something about the many styles and forms art can now take from the post-production post-Mod to bio-sensitive to purely expressive, can that be such a bad thing?

The actual artworks on view are as diverse and varied as the breast cancer victims themselves. Some are cogent and accessible, others almost too reserved given the theme, others tailored to the theme with an aesthetic as anaesthetic and hermetic as specialized medicine. There are some very surprising and exceptional works as well. Susan Low-Beer's *Short Light, Long Dark* consists of a triptych of ceramic pieces set in cut-out metal silhouettes of a woman kneeling in classical pose, each similar but subtly different. The first is the "whole woman" not as yet diagnosed with cancer, the second has her breast removed, and the third, we are told, has faced her own mortality and survived the experience. Low-Beer's beatific, almost becalmed woman does not communicate any sense of the devastating effects of this disease, gently avoiding any sentiment of pain and suffering as if the issue was too delicate a subject to face head on. By contrast Renée van Halm's *One in Nine* (whose title alludes to the fact that one in nine women is going to be diagnosed with breast cancer) is a devastatingly effective and poignant work that hits the target dead on. Overtly formalist and coldly conceptual in its execution, the work consists of eight circles in various colours such as red, blue, green, violet and orange arranged in a horizontal line and framed. With an X-ray of a breast diagnosed with cancer inside it, a larger, more ominous black circle hangs above the others. Annette Françoise's quilted abstract, with its decorative patterned border and chaotic stylized arrangement of jagged shapes and forms within, is a succinct, albeit purely abstract expression of the feelings of confusion, anger and fear a breast cancer patient must feel. Vancouver-based artist Barbara Klunder's *MonkeyBusinessMen* points the finger at the legacy of the male patriarchy, business interests and general social apathy in a Joseph Cornell-type box



assemblage piece. When we open the door of Klunder's medicine cabinet that depicts three monkeymen — a doctor, a businessman and a photographer — who See, Hear and Speak No Evil in a polluted painterly wasteland, what we see is an image of a woman whose arms are crossed over her breasts. Underneath this are the words *Environment more Important than Profit.* In the lower compartment a "male" devil accompanies the collaged words *The Devil of Irresponsibility.* Pennies are arranged in systematized rows in front. The exterior of the box depicts a woman as guinea pig on one side and a canary in cancer's coal mine on the other. Not entirely devoid of humour, Klunder's votive offering has a black brassiere hanging beneath it in a nonchalant fashion with *Hope Springs Eternal in this Human Breast* sewn onto it in red thread. Sylvie Bélanger's *Comme une ombre sur le corps* is a more reflective multimedia piece consisting of three circular elements whose inscribed words *...can you see..tell me...do you feel,* address an unnamed breast cancer survivor.

Susan Schelle's *Calendar* of 12 wall mounted dinner plates with its various accoutrements of clothing incorporated in miniature silhouettes — pants, dresses, tops, shorts, bras and panties and a T-shirt — is almost too facile, a superficial oversimplification of the issue. Even if breast cancer survivors do pay great attention to their appearance, to the disguise or covering up of mastectomy scars, there is no sense of the feelings survivors of this disease experience. Barbara Steinman's triptych of gold framed mirrors with the words *Acceptance* to the left and *Resistance* to the right, with its various details of photographic studies for the conservation of a classic marble Madonna figure on top looks too esoteric, cloistered and arty to be taken seriously. I wonder whether the unwashed public would get Steinman's post-production message without a post-Mod dictionary of contemporary aesthetic codes on hand. On the other hand, Montreal-based Irene Whittome's *Unknown Woman* is one of the best works in the show and uses the same post-Modern language to great effect. Inside a pristine museological presentation case, two ostrich eggs have circular openings cut out of one end to look like breasts. In Whittome's own words "For me the egg symbolizes the fragility of life and the inevitability of death. By creating a hole in each egg, I prepared them for ovulation, and the birth and rebirth that follows. Even though I'm not comfortable being the translator of others' emotions, the truth was painfully apparent. On the issue of breast cancer, we're all partners in the art of surviving."

Mary Pratt's *Bread Rising,* typical of Pratt's hyper-realist style, contains an image of bread dough mixed with superactive yeast rising out of a clear glass bowl. It is an effective painterly allusion to the elusive and resilient nature of cancer, the way cells multiply and spread exponentially once they have taken hold in the body. Mary Pratt states: "No matter how much I punched it down, the dough — the cancer — kept growing." As strong a piece as Irene Whittome's *Unknown Woman, Hive Bodice* by Winnipeg artist Aganetha Dyck approached the theme of breast cancer from entirely the opposite direction. Dyck's *Hive Bodice* was less about the psychological constraints, the feelings of containment and fear that breast cancer arises, more about the biological resilience and adaptability of the cancer cells themselves. Like all living microscopic biological elements that exist within the body, cancer cells cannot be seen by the eye. Dyck has assembled and selected various objects and placed them in a bee-keeper's box. Seeing the strangely fascinating and intricate patterns of honeycombs subsequently built around these objects by bees in a hive furthers the sense that cancer cells are indeed mysterious, volatile, adaptable. Gathie Falk's painting of row upon row of apples missing slices at the top, chunks in the middle and complete in the bottom is a painterly allusion to the experience of cancer surgery and the eventual hope of redemption and survival — a new view of life after the experience. Catherine Widgery's blown glass containers of various shapes and sizes, like breasts, look forlorn arranged as they are like test-tubes in a scientific experiment. The breast, usually a sign of female sensuality and fecund maternal nourishment, once diagnosed with cancer, becomes a clinical specimen set apart from its usual bodily function. The diverse elements Widgery has placed inside these "containers" — tiny childlike hands, a dandelion, moss, mysterious growths, a feather, snakeskin, a tiny replica of a man all tied up — conjure up images of the confusion of personal emotions and exposed vulnerabilities a breast cancer patient must feel before and after a mastectomy.

The most devastatingly powerful and least guarded of all the works in the show is Regina-based Donna Kriekle's glass table through which we can see a variety of sensual video images of the female breast, of a delicate flower, a pearl necklace, and then the gritty details of an actual breast operation. This is not easy to witness, but somehow Kriekle's piece, with the wires that cross over this table of images, leading from one chair across the table top to another, addresses the issue of breast cancer as a *reality* and not just as an aesthetic device. Our institutions, both cultural and medical, tend to hermeticize, formalize, and to lay exclusive claim to both artistic expression and physical illness as a metaphor. The pragmatism of the modern-day hospital demands a structural approach to illness just as the art museum art does of its artists. While some critics have claimed art with a cause belittles artistic expression, "Art is about generating meaning, no matter what bastion it takes on", one of the show's supporters stated. In the words of Joan Chalmers, funder and founder of the Woodlawn Arts Foundation who conceived and organized the show, "I believe that art and its creators should be on the cutting edge of social change... This exhibit is given to cancer organizations as an empowerment tool, as a vehicle to raise awareness of this disease and help the cancer community conduct fundraising."

If *Survivors, In Search of a Voice* can teach us anything, it is that we cannot really know the painful experience of breast cancer if we ourselves have not lived it, we can only empathize, try to understand the feelings of those who, by misfortune, are stricken with the disease. The art stands apart from this, something fellow women who happen to be artists have contributed in an effort to further public awareness of the prevalence of breast cancer in our society. With an impressive roster of exhibition venues across Canada including the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (Nov. 11, 1995 - Jan. 1, 1996), the Mackenzie Gallery in Regina (Jan. 15-Feb. 25, 1996), the Vancouver Art Gallery (March 20 - May 26, 1996), the Winnipeg Art Gallery (June 16 - Aug. 25, 1996) and the Glenbow Museum in Calgary (Sept. 14 - Dec. 7, 1996), this show demonstrates how important a role art can play in increasing public awareness of social, ecological, economic and ethical issues. Let us not forget this show is not at all about victims but survivors. ∎

L'auteur commente l'exposition *Survivors, In Search of a Voice.* Organisée par la fondatrice du Woodlawn Arts Foundation, Joan Chalmers, elle regroupe vingt-quatre artistes canadiennes, à qui l'on a demandé de produire une oeuvre sur le thème du cancer du sein. La multiplicité des propositions soumises a produit une exposition qui défie les tentatives des médias de réduire l'événement à sa seule dimension "d'art pour une cause". Treize oeuvres sont décrites ici. Chacune présente un rapport unique avec la notion de survie. Cette rencontre de différents points de vue stimule la réflexion et, pour reprendre les propos de l'organisatrice, amène : «un outil de pouvoir qui aiguise notre conscience face à la maladie, tout en aidant l'organisation dans sa levée de fonds.»