

Faye HeavyShield *Venus as Torpedo*

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Faye HeavyShield,
venus as torpedo,
1995. Detail. Dunlop
art Gallery. Photo:
Patricia Holdsworth.

Artists from marginalized communities have made great strides recently in gaining acceptance for their work.

But they still face limitations. Public expectations dictate that they address only those issues of specific interest to their community. Thus, they are sometimes denied the intellectual freedom accorded mainstream artists. In Faye HeavyShield's sculptural installation *venus as torpedo*, which consists of a red ochre structure protruding from the gallery wall, we are provided with a perfect example of this dichotomy.

HeavyShield was born and raised on the Standoff Blood Reservation in southern Alberta. Upon learning this information, we are tempted to interpret her installation as a hermetic meditation on Native cultural identity. But while there certainly are references to her First Nations heritage - the structure's resemblance to a sweatlodge, for example - the installation lends itself to a much broader reading.

Our first clue comes from a close examination of the sculpture. Although moderately minimalistic from a distance, it is composed of a selection of girl's and women's clothing. This clothing was dyed red by HeavyShield, then overlaid on a rib-like metal frame. As an academically-trained sculptor, HeavyShield lists among her influences Alberto Giacometti, Anish Kapoor and Louise Bourgeois. Despite her grounding in minimalism, which she attributes to her fascination with the prairie landscape's monochromatic simplicity, HeavyShield has incorporated some tonal and textural diversity into her sculpture. When black cloth is used as a base, for example, the dye has a darker hue than when white cloth is used. Similarly, decorative patterns in the clothing - most notably, flowers and checks - remain visible through the dye, while scattered buttons, embroidery, lace trim and elastic waist bands create subtle textural

variations. In Western culture, female clothing is rife with socio-political significance. But by sculpting her apparel into an enigmatic abstract form, HeavyShield encourages multiple readings of her work.

As noted above, *venus as torpedo* does contain references to Native culture. One relevant observation concerns the clothing's Western design. As an art critic, I recall seeing an exhibition by Metis artist George Littlechild which contained the photocollage *Convert to Catholicism*. The collage was based on a 1939 photograph of Indian children "celebrating" their first communion at a Residential School. Each boy was dressed in a black suit and tie, while every girl wore a veiled white dress. The discomfort on the children's faces as they stared forlornly toward the camera was heartbreaking. In this context, Western clothing was an agent of cultural imperialism. By using similar clothing to construct a "sweatlodge", HeavyShield dramatizes the extent to which Residential Schools smothered Native culture by removing children from their families. While enrolled in such schools, children were exposed not only to horrific abuse, but also assimilationist pressure through repression of Indigenous languages and spiritual beliefs.

In traditional Plains Indian tipi and hide painting, red ochre was a

common pigment. It was derived from impure deposits of iron ore. And there is an obvious reference to land in this installation which operates on two levels. On one hand, it calls our attention to the controversy surrounding Native land claims, and the vital link between land and Native cultural identity. It was the virtual extinction of the buffalo by white hunters in the late 19th century, after all, and the subsequent restriction of Plains First Nations to reserves, that led to the loss of Native economic independence. Alternately, the structure does establish a Native presence in what until recently has been a predominantly Euro-Canadian cultural institution. By allowing the structure to intrude through the gallery wall - albeit a false wall - HeavyShield evokes the concept of invasion. Because the wall remains intact, we perceive the invasion to be non-violent. Instead, we are confronted with the prospect of relentless growth in the form of a tree root or glacier that, over time, conquers all obstacles. Indeed, it does not seem beyond the realm of possibility that the structure could one day fill the entire gallery.

But such "ethnically-directed" readings, which are joined by even more forced interpretations overheard in the gallery such as the installation's resemblance to a raven's beak or overturned birch-bark canoe, are secondary to

HeavyShield's main motivation. Again, it is the clothing which betrays her intention. Although each piece is dyed red and blended into the sculptural surface, it is still capable of being identified. The various blouses, dresses, shorts, camisoles and other articles of apparel are indicative of a wide range of female experience. This diversity is at odds with stereotypical notions of female identity, such as that suggested by the word "venus" in the exhibition's title. As a name, "Venus" is most often associated with the Roman Goddess of Love and Beauty. But the term is also used to describe crude female ceramic figurines which archaeologists have unearthed at prehistoric campsites. These figurines, which were fashioned from mammoth fat and bone ash mixed with loess, were generally squat in shape, with exaggerated breasts and hips. This latter quality led archaeologists to speculate the figurines were connected with fertility rites. While not entirely disassociating herself with the romantic myth of Venus (lingerie is incorporated into the structure), HeavyShield is determined to promote a broader understanding of female culture- an understanding that encompasses more than just the blonde, porcelain-skinned beauty depicted in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1478).

The installation's elongated shape evokes several different

associations. Foremost is that of a torpedo, also mentioned in the exhibition's title. As a weapon, the torpedo highlights the need for women to protect themselves from male aggression. This interpretation is underscored by the clothing's "blood red" appearance. Alternately, the presentation of a phallic-shaped object draped in female clothing argues for a non-binary form of gender construction which recognizes the masculine component inherent in every woman's personality. In both interpretations, the implied aggression of the torpedo/phallus is softened by the cloth covering. In the former instance, this dissuades viewers from concluding HeavyShield is advocating violence against men. In the latter, the phallic-shaped object is transformed into a womb-like shelter. Finally, the sculpture resembles an unfurled tongue. Whether intended as an act of disrespect against patriarchal authority or not, the extended tongue gives voice to women's untold stories.

HeavyShield accomplishes this literally in the exhibition's second component, an audio-tape which emanates from within the structure. The tape contains a series of stories which HeavyShield has culled from her journal. With its allusion to the Native tradition of oral storytelling, and the inclusion of a repetitive chorus in

Blackfoot, the tape is strongly evocative of the artist's First Nations heritage. For the most part, the stories are grounded in HeavyShield's memories, her ancestors' memories and the rich legacy of allegorical myths and legends in Plains Indian culture. Taken together, they promote a sense of community among women and celebrate the strength and diversity of female culture.

Among the more poignant stories is one describing HeavyShield's own Residential School experience, which includes the following excerpt:

Friday night alone in the dorm made lonelier by the efforts of the nuns to be extra nice to her they bring out boxes of comics and she's allowed to stay up until ten staying awake only prolongs this ache better just to sleep to stare at the light coming from the stairwell the red eye of the exit light squinting to blur all that surrounds you this scratchy black blanket of night wanting to sleep and not dream this is the only time that she prays without being told to and what she prays for is not that she'll go home next weekend or that her mother will magically appear or that her bed will be dry in the morning she chants to keep all those thoughts at bay she whispers hail mary's sound to stuff the cracks to muffle the whistles coming down the tunnel

of no one else here but me no one else here she prays to no one it's only for the

sound of the words hail mary and the longer ones the creed the act of contrition I believe I am sorry ...

Like the sculpture itself, the tape possesses a minimalistic quality. It is played at a low volume, so we must draw near to hear its contents. When we do, we are seduced by the sound of HeavyShield's voice set against a background of forest bird calls and running water. Hearing these sounds within the confines of an institutional environment inspires a spiritual connection with nature in much the same way as the sweatlodge ceremony is said to create an altered state of consciousness among participants. Interestingly, HeavyShield elected to record the Blackfoot chorus at a lower volume than the English text. But this does not have the effect of subjugating her ancestral tongue to English. Rather, the chorus functions as a whispered exchange between HeavyShield and those gallery visitors fluent in Blackfoot.

It is human nature to fear the unknown. When confronted with an artist who does not share our cultural background, it is comforting to be able to limit the aesthetic and ideological range of their practice. But by adopting too narrow an interpretative strategy, we preclude these artists from participating in a broader socio-cultural debate. It is a sign of maturity among viewers to embrace work such as this installation as art pure and simple, without resorting to an ethnic qualifier. ■

Faye HeavyShield; *venus as torpedo*
Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina (Sask.)
September 23-October 26, 1995

Faye HeavyShield, *venus as torpedo*, 1995. Installation view. 12 x 2 x 2m. Dunlop art Gallery. Photo: Patricia Holdsworth.