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Pat Schell *Process/Red*

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Pat Schell

Process/Red

SUE McCLUSKEY

The term "installation" is being bandied about with alarming frequency these days. In some art galleries, it has come to be synonymous with "anything goes." Call it "installation," and your art will be viewed through the rose-coloured lenses of legitimacy, ready to tint any old stuff with a shade of concept, whether real or imagined. Going back to the early use of the term, installation work used to be about art that was site-specific, taking the "environment" of the exhibition space into

consideration, as well as building, painting, or sculpting whatever it was that was going into that space. New Brunswick artist Pat Schell creates installations in the true sense of the word: space-conscious, adapted to their environment, and, finally, as ephemeral as the natural elements that inspire their creation.

While her work employs sculptural elements, she describes her process as the opposite of sculpture. She says, "It seems that when you dig into things with a chisel, you're looking for the end result in the core of something. I'm looking for the end result as a building process. In the architectural sense: I find the material, and I find the space, and I want to put it together that way."

Her most recent exhibition of work, *Process/Red*, shown at The Space: A Cooperative Gallery in Saint John, New Brunswick, exploits the urban industrial setting of the gallery space (a large, third-storey bare-bones room) by bringing elements from nature inside. Sticks, living plants, and stones are juxtaposed and contrast with the manner in which centuries of society have tried to tame and control the landscape.

Ascending the dark, narrow stairs into the gallery, the path to the main room is marked by groupings of brightly painted red stones, like trail guides.

At the top, in the gallery proper, rest a number of fish shapes, aquatic creatures formed entirely from land-based

materials, stones, twigs, and living grass, as well as manufactured items, such as tar paper and metal hoops.

With its choice of materials and strong flat colours, this show is similar in style to Schell's "land art" work in such previous exhibitions as *Sculpture Garden 96*, at the Acacia Gallery in Gagetown, New Brunswick, and *Delta*, first exhibited at the New Brunswick Museum, in

Saint John, New Brunswick. Like her work in those two exhibits, *Process/Red* is loaded with tensions and contradictions between its images and ideas, and continues Schell's explorations into these tensions between nature and artifice.

From the start, the red stones, by their unnatural painted colour and careful placement, serve to open the containment represented by the gallery walls, and to involve the viewer in the "process" of tracing a path to the core of the installation.

The recurrence of the stones in the main portion of the installation gives them the significance of a life-force or energy, as eggs contained within twig cages on a wall, or as a reflection of a spine in two of the fish images on the floor.

Because the established space of the gallery demands that a core exist, the largest section of the installation, four large images of fish, rests in the main room, grounded by more stones, some black, some red.

The most immediate and arresting of these is an upright sculpture that is similar to one called *Whale* in the *Sculpture Garden* of two years ago. That show placed sculptures in an outdoors series, making the entire yard of Gagetown's Acacia Gallery open up into an artistic space, where Schell's images were "planted" and tended. The specific weather demands of the outdoors environment as well as the visual space that included land, sky, and the surrounding river, all played into Schell's

choice of materials, scope, and presentation.

Like a transplant, the repeated image of the whale sculpture in *Process/Red* brings earth and sky indoors; the skeletal framework of the fish rests on living sod, death on life.

The fossilized status of the "bones" of the fish, and the living green base on which it sits, set up a tension between the living versus non-living objects in the natural world. Cultivated fibres in the hanging bundles of burlap twine, at each joint in the "spine," suggest baleen, itself a natural product used for centuries, contributing to the market demands which led to the widespread killing of whales.

But the image here is a soothing one in spite of the skeleton because of the comforting regenerative space provided by the grass base. The cultivation of living grass as part of sculpture that is contained within a gallery furthers the idea established by the red stones on the stairs: conventions, like walls and boundaries, are very easy to break, or at least to blur.

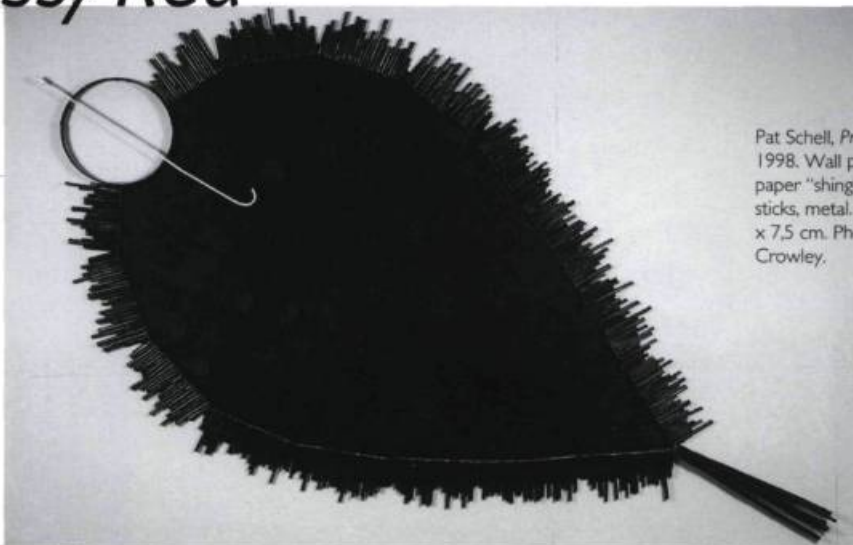
The living sod base becomes part of the design of a second fish image, in this case outlining a flat shape made by small stones painted black. While grass is not part of the immediate environment of any fish, in this case it successfully represents living nature. The open mouth and green organicism of the fish give it a live, in-its-element quality that is broken by the image on the wall across from it.

In this image, the fish is out of the water, hooked by a white cane, its green outline transformed into an angry red starburst of painted sticks. The violence of this image suggests the difficult though necessary process of taking things out of their initial element; as such, it becomes a comment upon the way people destroy nature and the way people cultivate nature and the way artists take items seen in nature and turn them into objects we hang on a wall, and even a comment on the difficult process of trying to catch an idea.

The idea of the fish image is landed in the final floor piece, the body being comprised of red painted sticks and stones, artistic manipulations of simple rocks and Japanese knotweed. The violence and movement of the previous images are repeated through the recurring materials contained here, though the overall effect is of a quiet distillation of form and colour.

Where Pat Schell interprets the natural world through the arrangement and reproduction of its objects and its shapes, *Process/Red* allows us to "read" the progress of such interpretation. In this exploration of opposites, she blurs the distinctions between land and water, between indoors and outdoors, and knocks down the walls which delineate the "space" of a gallery. ■

Pat Schell: *Process/Red*
The Space, Saint John
(New Brunswick)
July 1998



Pat Schell, *Process/Red*, 1998. Wall piece. Tar-paper "shingles", painted sticks, metal. 244 x 400 x 7.5 cm. Photo: Dave Crowley.