

Natalie Bujold, Gayle Hermick

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NATALIE BUJOLD GAYLE HERMICK

ANNE GRACE

In a time marked by a refusal to acknowledge anything sacrosanct in art, there nevertheless seems to be an obsession in art making with citing its sacred past, most often manifesting itself in a high/low dialectic. These references often masquerade themselves as glib, but their pervasiveness is significant, suggesting a yearning towards a more innocent era. Natalie Bujold's and Gayle Hermick's works, shown in two adjacent spaces at Axe Néo-7 in Hull (February 28–March 28, 1999), come together in their recurrent pitting of folklore and modernism, handicraft and ready-made, the authentic and the contrived. The works comprise vernacular pop icons, found or meticulously crafted, and integrated into an array of objects, small-scale painting and large sculpture.

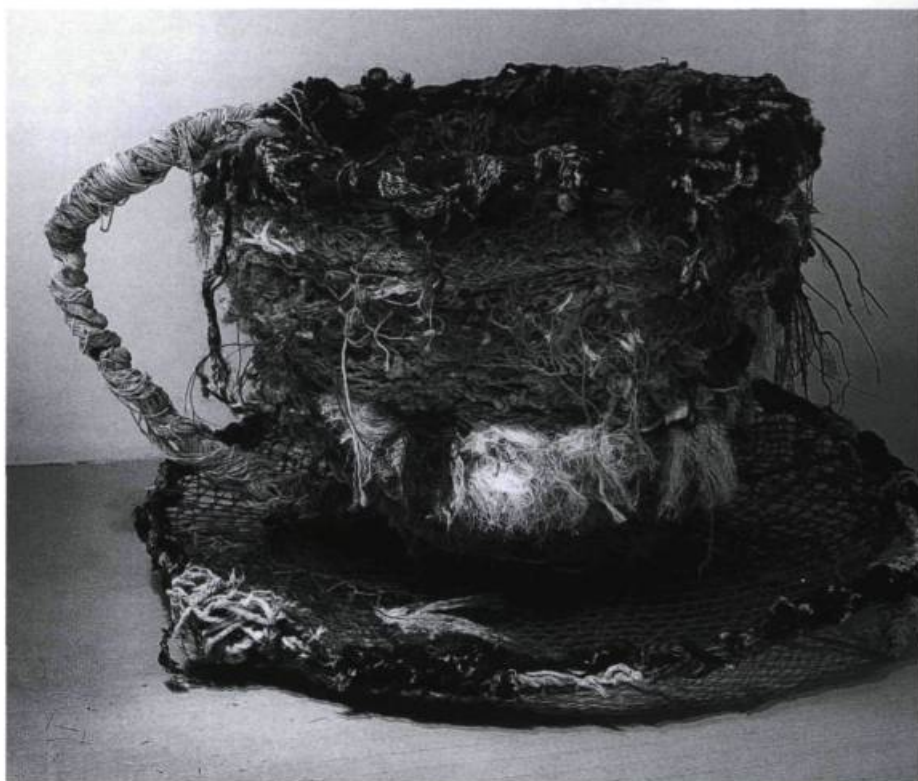
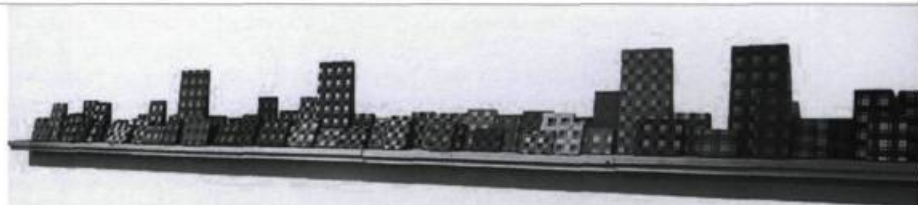
Bujold's installation includes a cornucopia of dozens of hand-knitted mittens and slippers strewn across the centre of the gallery floor, each stuffed and sewn closed. Child-sized, the cuddly objects invite manipulation, and on closer inspection, it is easy to discern the classic Phentex patterns from the more thoughtful colour combinations. Bujold, who had to pose as a student in order to convince the Sœurs de St. Joseph to give her these necessities of Québécois winter, can easily distinguish those of her favourite knitter by the integrity of the abstract pattern present in each production. In an adjacent enclave in the gallery, small forms are sewn together to form semi-distinguishable shapes—a mound, an oversized slipper, a bib—that hug the floor. There is an understated adeptness in Bujold's ability to incorporate Louise Bourgeois' and Robert Morris' work into these oddly satisfying metamorphosed knitted objects.

On the side wall, propped up on a shelf and in the random or-

der of a cityscape, are sixty or so small abstract geometric paintings. The tiny grids accurately reproduce the full gamut of lumber jacket patterns and, contrary to each of the knitted objects, the paintings are made by Bujold herself. Succinct, clever, tongue and cheek, the works exclude the current and prevalent pop sensibility. However, it is precisely because the works fit so well into this mode, yet do not betray the genuine origins of the motif, that equal allegiance is given to both. An authenticity rather than ambivalence towards these two distinct jurisdictions is present in all of Bujold's work. Humour provides the sole stability in these constantly mutable objects.

While Bujold consistently destabilizes the boundaries between high and low, Hermick borrows liberally from both, ignoring such distinctions. Merchandise from the Sally Ann and Meret Oppenheim's Surrealist teacup comprise equally useful raw material for sculpture, whose ultimate aim is to critique practices of labour and class based society.

Labour is suffused in the outwardly whimsical objects that make up Hermick's installation. The first of two four foot high teacups made by Hermick is a constructed iron frame, over which paraphernalia of Québecois and mass consumer culture—hockey skates and jerseys, hubcaps, dolls, brand name sweaters—are wrapped. The second teacup is made up of pieces of discarded fishing nets and debris picked up on the Caribbean beaches (the artist recently spend six years in Barbados), carefully woven into the massive sculptural form. The teacups are accompanied by a gigantic hand, welded of found industrial scrap metals, onto which is fitted an equally preposterously sized white cotton glove, poised to serve tea. The narrative which emerges from the installation is described by Hermick as a refer-



ence to the present day Barbadian custom of tea, a residual of the "phantocracy" era.

An obsessiveness in the construction haunts each of these objects, at once at odds with their formality, but congruent with the notion of labour. Hermick's earlier works, made and shown in Barbados, included a series of domestic objects constructed with disused farm and factory machinery parts, where manual work is an explicit, literal reference. While the material existence of the teacups are consistent reminders of transnational cycles of manufacturing, consumption, discarding, waste and recovery, their origi-

nal domestic function is entirely social. The teacup—in Canadian and American culture at least—has become somewhat of an anachronism in an era of vanity mugs and cardboard cups, and belongs to an increasingly outdated, leisure ritual. Thus, although the teacups may have recently become a hallmark of an elite, social class, they are indistinguishable here from the reused and recycled objects of which they are fabricated, participating in an environmental and social *vanitas*, where reminders of consumption, transience and emptiness abound. ■

Natalie Bujold, *Variation bûcheron*, 1998. Wood, acrylic on canvas. 6,40 m. Photo: Paul Litherland.

Gayle Hermick, *High Tea*, 1999. Detail. Photo: François Dufresne.