

Vessna Perunovich
Artworks 1998-2004

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[See table of contents](#)

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VESSNA PERUNOVICH: ARTWORKS 1998-2004

DEBBIE O'ROURKE

working on his *Minnow Lure* piece for years to come. Completely constructed of corrugated metal, this "bug-eyed" hut comes complete with a heater, a doorbell, peepholes and candy green seats. This work is meant to be a functional work of art that can be used as an ice fishing hut. Adams has described this work as having a



KIM ADAMS, *Minnow Lure*, 2004. Photo: Liz Lott and Snapdragon Photography.

"pop can" look to it. And indeed, in a wonky sense it does.

Catherine Kozyra is a well-known Thunder Bay artist. Her idea for this project evolved from the image of "fishing for the Leviathan" as represented in the Book of Job in the Old Testament. This hut is comprised of a geodesic style dome made of translucent space age fabric. The fabric is stretched taut into shape by an exoskeleton composed of PVC piping. The translucent shell of the tent is covered with a loosely woven semi sheer flesh coloured gauze whose fibres have been pulled and separated creating the openness and organic lines present in natural gut. Synthetic sausage casings, not too unlike the natural casings used in some of my earlier architectural structures, are attached to the gauze fabric creating a subtle effect of marbles veining upon the outer structure. The completed "hut" resembles the tents that are made

by Native Canadians and Inuit. It seems somehow subversive though. These skin tents would normally be used in the summer and there is an intentional sense of disjunction created through its situation on a frozen lake. The work has a strong organic feel to it even though it is constructed out of man-made fabrics and materials.

Susan Detwiler is known as an artist who uses fabric in unique contexts. She has been known to work with road kill and hunter's blinds in the past. For this show, Detwiler has clothed a hut in snowmobile suit material, given it pockets and a sash and in this way "humanized" the structure. The use of the wool and flannel, stuffed with polyfill, gives to the hut a layer of extra protection. This "protection" is something that humankind has needed in dealing and surviving in the natural world, however now it is more often than not the environment that needs protection from humankind. And on another level, the work simply references our desire and need for warmth and comfort. The hut is titled *Red/Green*.

Ice Bubbles by Ernest Daetwyler consists of several smaller bubble-huts that people were invited to enter into. Daetwyler was inspired to create these works by a young girl that he knew, who told him that she'd like to get her family and friends into bubbles and then fly away. It is a whimsical installation that speaks about new life, childhood and our simple, yet profound connections to the lake and nature. Within each of these bubbles hangs a dream catcher, made of chains and locked. In these huts one doesn't catch fish, one catches — and ostensibly gets to hold onto — dreams.

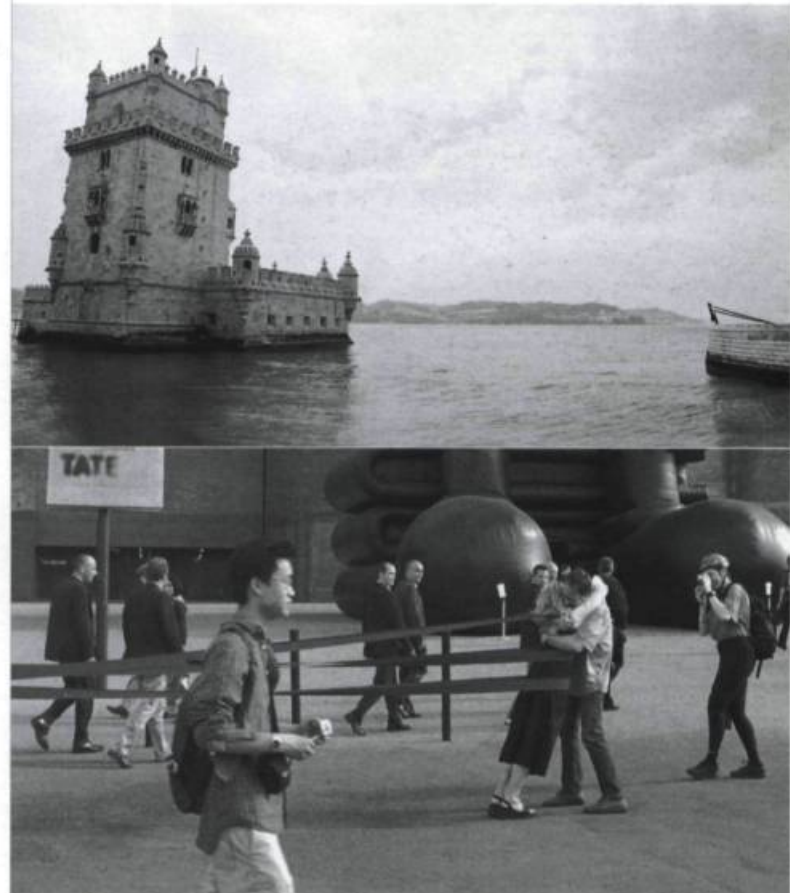
Taken together *Ice Follies* balanced the profound with the fanciful, the spiritual with the sensual, and the unorthodox with the practical. It celebrates both community and creativity. Far from being a folly, this project showed itself to be smart and engaging. Simply put: *Ice Follies* is cool. ←

Ice Follies
WKP Kennedy Gallery,
North Bay, ON

A child is singing. A mother's voice entwines with hers in an aural helix that seems to inspire a flame to dance. Through the magic of projected video, this flame is suspended in mid-air above a child's crib. It burns quietly, reassuring like the first fire tamed to pierce the darkness of mankind's long nights.

The quiet night bursts into a wall of yellow flame that gives way to explosion after explosion. As the gallery blazes, feather-shadows tremble against the flames as if in that millisecond on the very edge of the atomic shock wave that follows the flash, the edge of the End of Everything. The voices continue their loving song under the dance of shattered atoms.

The explosions reverse, flames sink into the cool floor where white balloons huddle like sheep around the legs of the crib. High above, like the mobiles we hang for babies' amusement, the large white feathers rotate unharmed. This is one of mankind's most longed-for impossibilities: to be able to undo what is done, to return to the intact day before. According to currently-known physical law, time's lack of reversibility isn't a foregone conclusion. We only know it's so because despite all our efforts, the egg has never been unfried, the crash reversed, or the loved one de-killed. If a critical mass could be reconstituted, then Sarajevo or Hiroshima would grow back like a crystal, and one would have another



VESSNA PERUNOVICH, *Desire & Desillusion*, 2003. Performance with elastic ribbon. Tower of Belem, Portugal. Photo: Boja Vasic.

VESSNA PERUNOVICH, *I Hug the World and the World Hugs Me Back*, 2003. Performance. Tate Modern Grounds, London, England. Photo: Boja Vasic.

chance to say to the lost child, "wait, I'll walk with you today."

Those in the know are aware that the voices of the child and mother in this installation both belong to artist Vessna Perunovich, recorded at different speeds. The crib in *Cradle* is an illusion created of white dress-maker's elastic, suspended between floor and ceiling. It has the raw vitality of a sketch, yet is read instantly as an antique iron crib. The video-projection was made with the help of the artist's filmmaker husband, Boja Vasic. Since 2000, he has been using his skills to help Perunovich incorporate projected video into her

installation and on-site works.

This artist caught my eye in 1998, with constructions that seemed to focus on a theme of domesticity and intimacy but were already politically-loaded. In her work, a bed is also a body, a relationship, a country. Her visual language has an archetypal simplicity and universality, employing a simple palette of white, red and black. The black is the darkened gallery, the theatre of the mind with the unknown lurking at its edges. Her white is distressed: barbed, cracked or weathered, its purity is infused with vulnerability and sensuality.

The red Perunovich employs is

specific: deep, brilliant, visceral. Fibre stands in for flesh, for the heart. When she discovered that colour in a set of tights, she bought thirty pairs and set out to play, creating synchronous relationships with found objects, from iron bedsteads to battered silverware, tools, and brass instruments. These history-laden objects, played against her concise palette, gave rise to a series of profoundly articulate installations and sculptures.

Recently, rolls of wide crimson elastic tape inspired *Transitory Places*, a series of world-wide performances and interventions where historic sites replace the vintage objects, and the artist's body is an object in the design. In *Desire and Disillusion* (Portugal, 2003) the crenellated old-world Tower of Bellem breaches the sea like a stone iceberg or a barnacled whale. A hundred yards away, perched on a stone wall, a tiny human figure leans over the water toward its beckoning bulk. She's prevented from falling only by the merest thread of crimson, stretched as if to restrain a small child: an umbilical, or a thread of blood, family ties or DNA that binds her to the land.

With the larger scale facilitated by the travelling performance and projected video, Perunovich's work has been invaded by optimism, as if the cosmos itself is reassuring us that our relative powerlessness is a good thing. The immateriality of the recent works evokes the universe as described by contemporary physics, where solidity is an illusion and all is in flux. Though the couple's collaboration began while their Yugoslavian homeland was being bombed by NATO, Vasic's photographic contributions have added new colours to his partner's palette.

A sparkling, transcendent blue surfaced in the performance *Crossings*, held in Cuba in 2003. Three figures, dressed in white and lit only by a projected video of the sunlit sea, shimmer blue and white against the night. One of them, the artist, begins to wrap the others in bands of wide elastic cloth. As they disappear under the wrappings, the couple's individual identities merge into the shape of an azure boat. The wrapping finished and

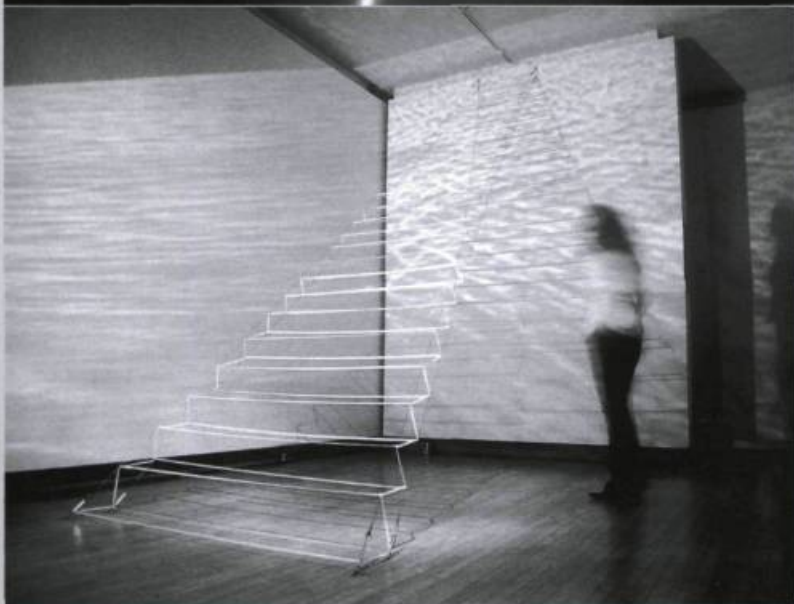
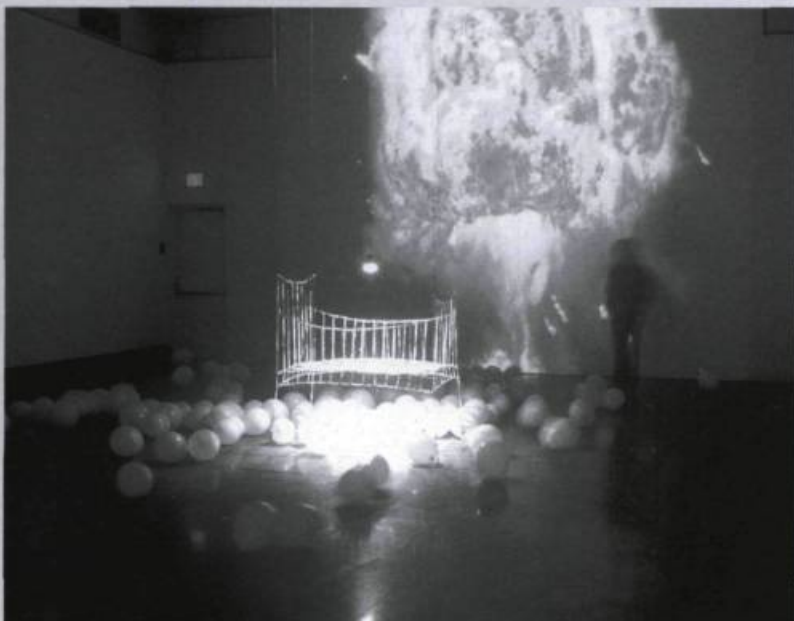
tenderly tucked in, the artist climbs into the vessel to join them.

A video of this performance screened at the Lonsdale Gallery in Toronto in April 2004. Its companion piece was an airy, life-sized staircase seen against the same large projection of the sea. Again, the staircase was an ingenious three-dimensional construct of dress-maker's elastic. Using a traditional feminine material, Perunovich has invented a technique that she uses to build objects as large as a house. Her humour emerges in smaller, playful and heartfelt artworks, such as the projected planet earth viewed through elastic structures that delineate a cradle or a white picket fence.

Through all the depth and, at times, the horror that Perunovich touches upon, a sense of play is constant. Elements are mixed and matched, concepts constantly reconstituted and refocused. An elegant optimism infuses the new works. In her current performance series *I Hug The World and the World Hugs Me Back*, the artist dresses in a black and white jumper that desexualizes her blond femaleness. Anchored to the local architecture by the ubiquitous red tether, she leans toward passersby, entreating them to hug her.

As an artist, Perunovich is a model of emotional health. She is able to face truths both horrific and transcendent: the horror of mankind evolving into the agent of its own impermanence and the daily miracle of waking up on a living blue planet. Human invention and cooperation could create the next big extinction. Or, if used to nudge away the periodic fallen asteroid that blasts away all larger life forms, it could give mammal-kind an extra few million years to play. Whether we end up shortening or extending our sojourn here, this existence is a miracle. Perunovich's *Cradle* reminds us that our kind is only a brief interlude of tender mammal noise between the flames. ←

Vessna Perunovich, *Cradle*
Kitchener-Waterloo Public Art Gallery
May 2004



←
VESSNA PERUNOVICH,
Cradle, 2004. Elastic
ribbon, video, sound,
motor, feathers, light
bulb. Dimensions
variable. Photo: Boja
Vasic.

←
VESSNA PERUNOVICH,
*The Other Side of the
Ocean*, 2004. Elastic
ribbon, video, sound.
3,3 x 2,4 x 4,2 m.
Photo: Boja Vasic.