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Revealing Privacy

Surprenant/Hoogstraten, *Mercer Union*, Toronto, From
September 6th to October 6th 1990

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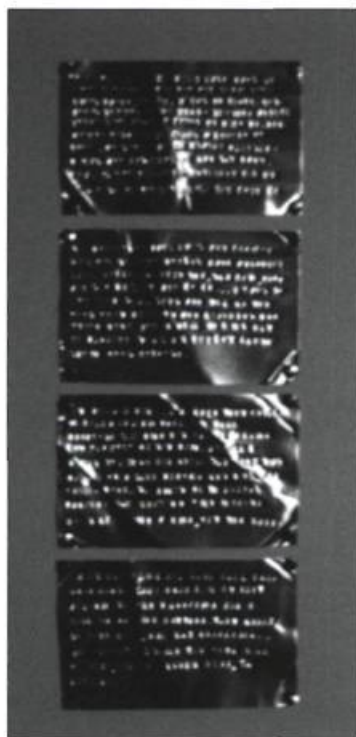
Surprenant/Hoogstraten, *Mercer Union, Toronto,*
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The current exhibitions at Mercer Union feature the work of two artists concerned with notions of revelation and privacy. Through the works of artists Janis Hoogstraten and Celine Surprenant, we are presented with two notably diverse examples of these issues. Janis Hoogstraten addresses them through a pictorial and textual installation, creating a narrative, while Celine Surprenant embodies these concerns through sculptural representations of personal objects.

Mercer Union's West Gallery is the site of Janis Hoogstraten's *Expeditions*, an installation that recounts the journeys of man and wife along an identical route travelled separately. Comprising of oversized drawings and inscriptions, the installation exists as a hybrid narrative. Without the benefit of the factual chronology, it is difficult to surmise the actual sequence of events, and Hoogstraten resists excessive revelation. Instead, she concentrates on the implications of collected and presented information. The fragmentation of the original account illustrates the tenuous nature of history, the notion that interpretation depends, to some degree, on context. The viewer is provided with excerpts from the pair's diaries, which serve as the sole concrete evidence from which the viewer might elicit cohesion for the components of the installation.

The first expedition, undertaken by the husband, Leonidas Hubbard, ended, we discover, with his tragic death. His expedition was followed by his wife's successful traverse, and the exhibition explores the influence of attitude upon experience. Hubbard's romanticization of the expedition was thought to be the reason for his demise, and one can surmise that his wife's triumphant passage was a direct result of her determination to protect her husband's reputation, though it merely served to confirm suspicions that his attitude was responsible for his failure.

Hoogstraten further dissects the experiences by reconstructing parts of their diaries, illustrating scenes from their journeys drawn from photographic reference points, and providing a map of the route travelled. Though the drawings dominate the installation, one is nonetheless drawn to four



Janis Hoogstraten, *His Diary*, 1990. Aluminum; 13,9 x 21,5 x 10 cm

small, punched plates of aluminum installed on one wall of the gallery. The documented passages are excerpts from Leonidas Hubbard's diary. The words are almost indecipherable, but the overwhelming impression is that of the difficulty encountered, as the laboured transcription seems to echo the actual journey. Marked up against this tediously produced representation of Leonidas Hubbard's diary is a portion of Mina Hubbard's diary, depicted by a large sheet of text neatly written on microwood. These written accounts effect an exploitation of experience for didactic means, but the medium suggests the stronger message.

The drawings that make up the remainder of the installation are detailed, technically proficient illustrations of a particular moment in each expedition. The visual excerpts from Leonidas Hubbard's expedition portray scenes that evoke hardship, illustrating the natural obstacles faced by Hubbard and his guides, and their seeming ill-

preparedness for the undertaking. One of the drawings depicts two prone figures half sheltered by a tent. This drawing is overlaid with a large, colored oilstick drawing of a tree on waxed paper. The overlapping of these paired images is indicative of conflict, and is a subtle demonstration of the victor in the challenge [nature]. In another large drawing, Hoogstraten presents us with an image from Mina Hubbard's expedition in which the organization of the group is clearly evident, and stands in contrast with the image of Leonidas Hubbard.

Though the installation is provocative insofar as the viewer's curiosity is piqued about the events alluded to, its impact is muted by that allusion. The work ultimately exists as a series of clues, and would certainly invoke greater pondering, but that the facts are hardly a mystery.

Celine Surprenant's monochromatic relief sculptures offer up everyday objects as artifacts. Surprenant transforms these personal items by roughly fashioning them into facsimiles of objets d'art, challenging the employment of recognized personal effects as instruments to demonstrate higher meaning. As sculptural representation, the viewer is afforded the opportunity to examine this meaning from various angles, and one discovers that Surprenant's use of these articles extends beyond any didactic means and, in fact, is intended to demonstrate exploitive implementation.

Although these objects are presented as artifacts, they are clearly not mimetic in nature, as their configuration has been modified and transformed, signalling import in the universal recognition of the object, but refusing implication as "popisms". There is, however, the retention of an unmistakable form, and this informs the viewer, much in the way Jasper Johns' *Lightbulb* (1960, painted bronze) does (though without the additional inference of mimesis), that the material used for the representation is as important as the object employed.

In this exhibition, a handbag, belt, scrub brush and valise are but some of the objects that re-enter with an immediate visual recognition, but an altered perception of their purposes. There is immediate evidence of careful selection since, although these items are not of an intensely personal nature, the references are significant in terms of general purpose. The handbag traditionally holds one's money, cosmetics and various papers; the belt



Celine Surprenant, *Untitled (Handbag)*, 1988. Mixed-media; 185 x 132 x 30,4 cm

accessorizes, but also conceals the body, acting as a fastener; the scrub brush denotes cleansing, fastidiousness or the erasure of evidence; the valise contains clothing, toiletries and keepsakes. The exposure of these items for cultural scrutiny challenges our notions of privacy, while it provokes inquiry into what lies beyond, what remains concealed.

With *Untitled (Handbag)*, the object has been intersected by a shelf, and this intervention of a second physical attribute has resulted in the "dissection" of the first object, the handbag. The viewer is, in this instance, permitted to examine the interior of the object, revealed by the skewing of the upper portion of the handbag by the shelf. The object has been petrified in this state, and its recognitive attribute has fulfilled its objective. The monochromatic aspect of the work creates a painterly condition for the work, and connotes its existence as a whole, the suggestion that both elements of its composition exert a singular impact.

Acting as "prompters", the works persuade the viewer to re-interpret the accessories of lifestyle, or perhaps more precisely, to re-evaluate the method of our interpretation, as they clearly demonstrate that our interpretive skills rely largely on recognition. Combined with the methods on which we base our opinions of art/culture, it maps out a dichotomy of perception.

Claire Christie