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FREDERICTON
BEAVERBROOK ART GALLERY
703 Queen Street
GENEVIEVE CADIEUX
Until November 15th, 2000
EUROPEAN MASTERPIECE SERIES: VENICE BY CANALETTO
6 July - November 15th, 2000
There are two very different exhibitions currently on view at Fredericton's Beaverbrook Art Gallery: works by Montreal artist Genevieve Cadieux, and a Canaletto exhibition. Cadieux is an artist who, though familiar Quebec viewers, has not been seen often in the Maritimes. This exhibition follows on the heels of her recent major show at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. The Canaletto show is an exhibition of etchings from the Arthur Ross Collection, a mementos for 18th century British aristocrats on the Grand Tour of European cities.
Early prints are mostly thought of as reproductions of other media, but they were very much a medium in their own right. Besides Canaletto, Rembrandt, Durer, Aronson, Tiepolo and Goya also used printmaking as an independent medium. Many of the prints in this exhibition are quite small in size. They demonstrate the remarkable skill of the artists in fitting detail into such a small space. A needle etching, the drawing tool, is not that easy to use and when you add that you have to draw backwards on the plate these little prints are exceptional.
In both his paintings and prints Canaletto's views are often a combination of the real and the imagined. Many of Canaletto's views of Venice are idealized although most contemporary viewers think of them as totally realistic. It is his imagination that makes him an artist rather than a copyist of photographic reality. There is a certain fluency in the use of optic devices in this work, most evident in the painting St. Mark's and the Clock Tower, but that is an issue best left for another time.
The Cadieux exhibition comprises only two works, Rubis (1993) and The Milky Way (1992), both of which are very large. The former, recently purchased by the Beaverbrook Art Gallery with funding from the Canada Council and Senator Richard Hatfield Memorial Fund, continues the gallery's active acquisition of contemporary and challenging Canadian art work. How these works are displayed is very interesting. Rubis is on one wall of the main lobby facing Dali's Santagio de Montréal. Changes in this lobby setup are often met with dismay by many gallery regulars particularly when the removed works are replaced by a difficult contemporary art work.
The Milky Way is not in the gallery at all, but installed on the roof of the gallery for all to see from the street and road. This is taking art to the people whether they want to see it or not very uncharacteristic of the staid Beaverbrook of old. Canaletto's Baths have done much to bring the face of contemporary art to Fredericton. Rubis, like The Milky Way, is a large photo based work.
Split in half, one side is a colour photo of the artist's mother's back and, on the other side, a microscopic view of a cancer infected blood cell. PostModern works such as this one place demands on viewers that are different from more traditional art. Because many postModern works emphasize the idea, rather than the execution, they may leave some viewers, who prefer craftsmanship to a lesson in sociology, quite unimpressed. However, I believe that Rubis can stand on its own as a beautiful and well crafted work of art.
Virgil Hammock

MONTREAL
SHIRLEY KATZ: RECENT DRAWINGS
Galerie d'Avignon
102, Laurier Street West
7 - 21 November, 2000
Artists who focus on the human portrait are often forgotten in a contemporary art scene bordered with concepts, ideas, and dogmas of technological innovation. The art of Montreal-based Shirley Katz stands out precisely because of her dedication to portraying the intricacies of the human figure. When Katz became a professional artist in 1979 the monotypes and mixed media pieces she experimented with were inventive and satirical. Since then she has turned her attention to making intimate large scale portrait prints. Using bold outlining, chiaroscuro, muted colouring and textural effects, Shirley Katz captures the personal idiosyncrasies, the markings of experience that are part of each person she depicts. Her subjects aren't beauty queens or idealized Adonis', but everyday people. The marks of their personal experience emerge amid the details, in the facial expressions, the bodily gestures and neutral backgrounds that go to make up each portrait. The expressions are reflective, and reveal their inner psychology, which is a kind of personalized modern day mythology. Caught in a moment in time they seem equally aware of the passing of time.
Shirley Katz considers two of her main artistic influences to be Egon Schiele and Alice Neel, but the dignity she imbues her subjects with is equally reminiscent of Montreal painter Louis Muilhsok's realistic paintings and drawings from the 1930s. Most recently Shirley Katz has exhibited her pastel portraits in solo shows at Galerie d'Avignon (1999) and the Centre culturel de Verdun (1998). Her work was represented at Pratt & Whitney's Les Femmeraines (2000) and a group exhibition organized by the Thomas More Institute this May. Shirley Katz will be the subject of a solo show of her recent drawings in the Hollywood Art and Culture Centre in Hollywood, Florida that begins April 26th and continues until June 25th.
As Katz states; "I draw the human form because it offers an infinite range of gestures and expressions: each one of these offers the opportunity to discover or invent new surfaces."
John K. Grande

CATHERINE YOUNG BATES - VISTAS VI
Galerie d'Avignon
102, Laurier Street West
March 28 - April 16, 2000
Renowned for her bright colourful canvases of the Eastern Townships landscape of Quebec, an area that attracted Goodridge Roberts for its cultural, earthy character in earlier times, Catherine Young Bates is exhibiting a series of new works at Galerie d'Avignon that mark a major shift in her approach to painting. Since April 1999, Bates has been producing multi-panel paintings that
Though painted in the landscape, and sky when walking out of doors. View

We sense an unseen energy and movement pervading the whole scene. Another 10-panel piece Mount Oly's Head (1999) recreates three different levels of depth: foreground, mid-ground and sky. The sky seems to go on forever. The brushwork varies according to each specific section of the piece. The trees and mountain details are painted in a traditional landscape style, while the sky section to the right is freeform, abstract and gestural. It reflects: “A growing concern for the land, the planet, the possible cooperation between mankind and nature, the social uses and misuse of nature”. In Spring (2000) the sense of a rebirth and awakening of the land is captured through Bates’ intense colourful brushwork. Her strong identification with the landscape places Bates’ work firmly within the Canadian landscape tradition of Maurice Cullen and J.E.H. MacDonald, yet she takes it all a step further. The surface of a field is made to express in microcosm what Bates’ multi-panel pieces do in a macro-cosmic way: the universal energy found in nature that permeates all things. Among the most visually rewarding works in this show are the two-panel studies which achieve the same land-sky-land effect from bottom to top in micro-scale that the multi-panel pieces do.

Catherine Young Bates’ painted vistas likewise move back and forth from this uneartly cosmic vision playing with the earthbound/skybound dimensional shift metaphor in Clouds (Spring Vision). This painting evokes a feeling of pure joy in light effects worthy of Monet. The transparency of Bates landscape vision is furthered by the vivid yellows and cloud forms in the centre of Clouds (Spring Vision). The horizons at the top and bottom anchor this piece, making it an earthbound landscape. Early Autumn (2000) has Bates’ classic expressive brushwork, and an animated sense of the atmosphere of sky and land.

As a personal document of the Nazi persecution of the Jewish people, these works recreate a life experience full of a tragic humanism, but are also painted with a great colourful sense, a near psychic beauty and intense emotion reminiscent of Marc Chagall, Raoul

PETER BOWYER
FLOWER

The Toronto Sculpture Garden
115, King Street East
May 10 - September 15, 2000

Tall, quiet and lovely, Flower stands in the middle of the Toronto Sculpture Garden. A hybrid of sorts, this 27 foot galvanized steel form at once references a typical urban lamp post and also an optimistic futuristic flower. While smaller in stature than a utilitarian lamp post it is larger than any indigenous flowering plant should be. Rooted in concrete this towering form is married to the city-scape it informs and reflects. This union is both physical (the concrete) and visual (the sky line). Peter Bowyer, the artist responsible for this addition to the city-scape, is a Torontoian who has been well received nationally. In recent years he has been featured in shows at the Power Plant, Paul Petro Contemporary Art, and Galerie Optica. Bowyer has also been involved in several interesting group shows housed in found spaces, artist run centres and public institutions. This said, it is not a surprise that a team of engineers and fabricators were called into action to help realize Bowyer’s Flower. It is easy to imagine tourists coming upon the site holding their panaromic disposable cameras vertically in an attempt to capture Flower in its entirety, with their family clustered around its base. Will it be the less memorable, more ephemeral experience of Flower

TORONTO
LIFE OR THEATRE?
THE WORKS OF CHARLOTTE SALOMON
Art Gallery of Ontario
317 Dundas St. W.
Until July 9th the Art Gallery of Ontario will be hosting an extraordinary exhibition of the little known works of German-Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon. An educated Berliner from a rich cultural and intellectual milieu, Salomon packed her life’s experience into two sketchbooks of paintings done in the south of France while in exile from 1940-1942. When her life was threatened Salomon wrapped them in brown paper, labelled them Property of Otilie Moore and gave them to a local doctor stating “Take good care of it. It’s my whole life.” The package miraculously survived but Charlotte Salomon, who perished at Auschwitz six months pregnant with child aged 26 did not. The collection of 800 extraordinary works incorporates images, text, and musical references to Bizet, Schubert, Mozart, Bach and Gluck are on view in Toronto.
that local pedestrians will remember? It is these habitual passers-by who will see the form melting softly into the dusk of many summer evenings and blossoming sensuously into the dawn. Flower is perfectly planted in the garden of sculpture in the season of sun and sky.

Elizabeth Fearon

TIM HAWKINSON
The Power Plant
Contemporary Art Gallery
231 Queens Quay West
June 17 - September 4, 2000

With the finesse of inspector and a simple playfulness American sculptor Tim Hawkinson walks us through his psyche and the role we/me fills and informs in a mechanical/biological environment. Curator Philip Monk has selected 16 works from 1997-2000 in an effort to coherently represent this internationally respected artist’s intentions. To further illuminate and place Hawkinson’s work in context, both L.A. Weekly art critic Doug Harvey and Monk have created catalogue essays. As in past Hawkinson exhibitions in New York, Japan, and Los Angeles, it is the text on the wall cards that will most immediately help the viewer to understand this complex work.

A case in point is Bird (1997) which stands 1 x 1 x 1.75 inches. This piece is a bird-like skeletal structure one may freely associate with flight, museum visits, and extinction. When we realize that this fragile form is made out of the artist’s ground fingernails and super glue it acquires a deeper resonance. We associate it with our life span, individual sacrifice, toxic adhesives, and contemporary cement.

While Bird is certainly not the centre piece of the exhibition, the intensity of this small work is hard to deny. The main attraction is definitely Pentecost (1999) which was Hawkinson’s contribution to the last Venice Biennale. A sprawling, mechanical, faux wood grain, sonotube tree-like construction it is fitted with 12 perforched human figures. The number 12, of course, references the number of apostles. These “apostles” tap out Christmas carols with different parts of their bodies. We recognize Pentecost to be an artistic re-interpretation of the biblical speaking in other tongues. However all the bodies are based on the artist’s own body.

Viewers too may be in a heightened state of bodily awareness in the heat of July and August! It is a joy to imagine the sort of complex reading that will ignite the imaginations of gallery visitors while the perspiration from their bodies is cooled by welcome air conditioning.

Elizabeth Fearon

KÂXLÂYA' QEVÎLÂS:
HEILTSUK ART AND CULTURE
Royal Ontario Museum
June 21, 2000 to Spring 2001

Never before comprehensively exhibited, Kâxlâya 'Gevîlas: Heiltsuk Art and Culture presents and takes a look at objects from the ROM's collection of North West coast native Heiltsuk art. The original descendants of a coastal tribe whose geographical area covers over 13,800 square miles of islands, land and sea where they have lived for over 2,000 years, the Heiltsuk nation now live 300 miles north of Vancouver. The Heiltsuk people, their art and culture is once again thriving though in the 10th century they came close to extinction due to disease, and the changes wrought by contact with white colonial culture and economy.

As the central place of Heiltsuk culture in Northwest coast Native art is still not well known, this show plays an important role in bringing Heiltsuk culture, the art and artifacts of the peoples of Bella Bella into public view. Co-curated by Martha Black, curator of ethnology at the Royal British Columbia Provincial Museum and Pam Brown, curator of ethnology at the U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology Kâxlâya 'Gevîlas: Heiltsuk Art and Culture examines works and artifacts of Heiltsuk artists created at a time they came into contact with white culture in great detail.

A must see for enthusiasts of North West coast Native art, Kâxlâya 'Gevîlas: Heiltsuk Art and Culture brings together approximately 50 objects from the ROM's collection including tools, basketry, ceremonial puppets, bows, walking sticks, staffs, blanket boxes, musical instruments, jewellery, painted masks and fishing gear. Many of these were collected and donated to the ROM by the Reverend Dr. R.W. Large, a Methodist missionary who lived among the Bella Bella between the years 1898 and 1910. When he collected these treasures of Northwest coast Native Art, Reverend Large combined the somewhat contradictory approaches of the museum professional and the missionary, but the Heiltsuk people were encouraged to actively participate in creating works for the collector. Interestingly, Bella Bella was not a traditional 19th century native community but a new model Methodist village at the time. The Heiltsuk used European tools for their crafts and artwork worked for wages in fishing and other industries, dressed in European style clothes, lived in single family dwellings, learned English, and practiced Christianity. Despite these changes, the
When Urge donated the objects he procured with the collaboration of the Heiltsuk peoples to the Ontario Provincial Museum in 1901 and 1906, he greatly helped future ethnologists by actually attributing some of the donated works to five known Bella Bella carvers/artists: Chief Robert Bell (1859-1904), Captain Carpenter (1841-1931), Enoch (died 1904), General Dick (1822-1902) and Daniel Houstie (1880-1912). Thus a lineage of traditional Heiltsuk art is now partially established.

The thorough, entertaining and insightful catalogue for this show demonstrates, Godwin is, in his promiscuity with materials, techniques and ideas, beholden to no school of art or thought. He is an eclectic sensualist who seems to trust only that which he can mix, roll, spread, attack, and seduce with his hands. There is an orderness in these works, and a desire to please, but they always seem on the verge of falling apart, evaporating. Because the grids are veils layered rather than woven, they are fragile. If they hold ideas, experiences or simply the trace of their making, it is a bond that seems ready to dissolve the instant we look away.

Davis describes Godwin as "a random abstract thinker." His thoughts are abstract and random because his heart and hands are elsewhere occupied. Godwin's strength is not intellectualism or even his apparent spirituality. He does not build (Newman-ish) portals to the infinite but constructs pleasurable experiences for the present moment of seeing. The best example of this, and of Godwin's humour, is High Rise #1. From a distance, the purple and ochre grid painting looks out of step with the other works. Up close, and especially after reading the title, you see a photorealist painting of a brightly lit, modernist apartment building, complete with balconies and uniform drapery. Painted in 1970, it has the irreverent freshness of works by recent artists who are making playful twists on formalism. Like the man, Ted Godwin's paintings are gregarious, playful and take up a lot of room. They are spectacles not to be missed.

David Garneau

Ted Godwin: The Tartan Years (1967-1976) originated at the Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary and is on view at the Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina from May 12th to July 16th.

Daniel Houstie (1880-1912)

Carved cedar

Photo: Brian Doyle

Though the Heiltsuk peoples are not all in agreement that their heritage be kept in a museum, and many would now like these artifacts returned to Bella Bella, this show helps educate the public as to Heiltsuk ceremonies, rites and rituals, their links to the land and sea where they live. As a gesture of respect to the Heiltsuk peoples, the ROM is sending a complementary travelling exhibit, based also on the ROM's collections, to the Heiltsuk Cultural Education Centre in Bella Bella, British Columbia. Accompanied by video, archival and contemporary photographs as well as audio recordings, this show is a remarkable record of traditional Heiltsuk culture. Fifteen artworks by contemporary Heiltsuk artists will also be on view thus establishing links between past and present.

John K. Grande

REGINA


Mackenzie Art Gallery
May 12-July 16, 2000

There is another overwhelming temptation for writers who have met Ted Godwin to precede comments on his work with a description of the man himself. Paula Gustafson, for example, leads a 1992 Clydescope article with "Ted Godwin is a big, garrulous bully—head of a man...a social animal, louder than anyone else at a party, intimidating lesser mortals with grand gestures and truly awful crude jokes, his booming vitality camouflaging his other, equally robust persona of poet. A first meeting with Godwin— with his meaty handshake, theatrical presence, hyperbolic opinions, instant confidences and horrid甘oss—is enough to inspire anyone to become a diarist. More a figure from fiction (Henry Miller? Jack Kerouac?) than a living person from Regina? Godwin's paradoxical balance of Falstaffian extraversion and mad monkish studio practice is a key to why his paintings differ from his painterly heritage and more intellectual or introspective colleagues.

If, at 67, post triple-bypass and post alcohol, Ted Godwin is a painter version of his earlier self, that self must have been truly terrifying. Cataapulted to (relative/Canadian) version of his earlier self, that self is a big, garrulous bully—head of a man...a social animal, louder than anyone else at a party, intimidating lesser mortals with grand gestures and truly awful crude jokes, his booming vitality camouflaging his other, equally robust persona of poet. A first meeting with Godwin—with his meaty handshake, theatrical presence, hyperbolic opinions, instant confidences and horrid甘oss—is enough to inspire anyone to become a diarist. More a figure from fiction (Henry Miller? Jack Kerouac?) than a living person from Regina? Godwin's paradoxical balance of Falstaffian extraversion and mad monkish studio practice is a key to why his paintings differ from his painterly heritage and more intellectual or introspective colleagues.

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The art of the Kwagiulth people of the Northwest Coast of Vancouver Island is sophisticated and of the highest quality to be found anywhere in the world. Like the people who make it, Kwagiulth art is inextricably connected to place and tradition. Their interpretation of a coastal environment is unique in that it transcends physical and geographical boundaries. It speaks of physical experience grounded in a nature-based spirituality. The Kwagiulth established a society in which a connection to the four realms—the Sky World, the Undersea World, the Mortal World, and the Spirit World—dominated their daily existence making possible a rich oral vocabulary. This, in turn, has informed their elaborate rituals of celebration. Art making in this context is a cultural process: to speak of Kwagiulth art is to speak of cultural property.

Through My Father’s Eyes pays tribute to the diverse artistic practice of Richard Hunt, a Kwagiulth artist and carver and celebrates his commitment to the ancestral traditions of the Kwagiulth people. The exhibition includes over 100 works created by the artist in a 52-year period, and occupies two galleries in the Greater Victoria Art Gallery. Selections loaned by the Hunt family, the Royal B.C. Museum, private collectors, and from the artist’s collection include masks, carvings, ceremonial regalia, totem poles, prints, jewelry, and art on clothing. Hunt’s strong, confident and stunningly beautiful work is further accentuated by the actual exhibition context, which uses recorded sounds of drumming and chanting, subsided lighting, and has its walls painted in colours that simulate the artist’s palette.

The inclusion of artwork by various other Kwagiulth artists, members of Hunt’s extended family encourages viewers to appreciate the complexity of the Kwagiulth art form. A kind of artistic exchange takes place between Richard Hunt’s carving and such works as a Mungo Martin Thunderbird Mask, a magnificent Killer Whale by Henry Hunt Sr., a rare Tony Hunt Bee Mask. The patina of exchange is most visible in two model poles. One is carved by Henry Hunt Sr. before his death in 1984 and depicts an eagle, a crest that belongs to the Kwagiulth at Fort Rupert often used by the semior carver. Richard Hunt’s response pays tribute to his father’s last carving. Three eagles are incorporated into the piece, two at the front, and one at the back. The similarities and differences between the two poles create a silent dialogue between son, father, and grandfather: making the expression, “through my father’s eyes” seem quite literal. A Wolf Headress (c. 1985) made for Hunt’s daughter, Sarah to attend Henry Hunt’s memorial potlatch, personalizes the gallery experience of his carving, as does the inclusion of Richard Hunt’s Thunderbird Headress, used to initiate the Hamtsa Dance. Two serigraphs use designs that are playful and contemporary, illustrating the gallery experience of his work, and include both formal and narrative elements. The first, a print used to raise funds for a Big Brothers and Sisters golf tournament, depicts an eagle on a golf green. In the second, we see a dancer mimicking a hopping Brother of Thunderbird. It is a brilliant evocation of a traditional Kwagiulth design, full of vitality and humor.

Over the years, Richard Hunt has produced a large number of artworks, many of which form part of the Royal B.C. Museum’s Potlatch Collection. Members of contemporary aboriginal families may now borrow these ceremonial objects for use in their (now legal) Potlatch celebrations. During his career as a carver, Hunt’s whose Indian name was Gwe-là-yà-gwe-là-ga-ù-gis, literally “a man that travels and wherever he goes, he potlatches” has traveled extensively throughout the world giving carving demonstrations and educating people about his culture. His artworks are now in international collections, including the totem pole commissioned by Queen Elizabeth II for Windsor Park, England. Since leaving the B.C. Provincial Museum in 1986, Hunt’s work has become increasingly popular. He continues to produce masks, serigraphs, clothing designs, jewelry, and larger objects for private and public collections. Richard Hunt’s designs were included alongside other aboriginal art in the 1994 Victoria Commonwealth Games, the same year he was awarded the Order of Canada, and he recently completed a monumental public art sculpture for Vancouver’s International Airport.

Without a doubt, the strength of this exhibition relies on Richard Hunt’s ability to carve masks of extreme beauty. Many of these masks have been created for ceremonial use and have been danced at Big House celebrations. They are infused with the magic of ritual and the ancient legends to which they are attached. When the masks are used in native ceremonies, a deeper meaning is extended to these objects in a way that can rarely be communicated in a gallery setting. Kwakwaka’wakw wakwakw chief, Robert Joseph expresses this idea profoundly when he says: “In a world of endless change and complexity, the mask has offered a continuum of endless change and complexity, the mask has offered a continuum of humanity. Through masks we affirm our connection to the universe. Through masks we identify our humanity. Through masks we affirm what exists between the moon and the stars. Through masks we conquer our fears of the ocean deep. Through masks we interact with the spirit world, our final destination.”

Through his art Richard Hunt identifies his humanity, affirms his ancestral inheritance, and reminds us of our final destination.

Linda Giles

VANCOUVER

THE NEW AVANT GARDE

MIRROR’S EDGE

Vancouver Art Gallery
750 Hornby Street, Vancouver, BC (604) 662-4700
March 18 – August 13, 2000
CURATED BY OKWUI ENWEZOR
CIRCULATED BY BILDMUSEET,
UMEÅ, SWEDEN,
TRAVELING TO TORINO,
ITALY AND TEAMWAY, SCOTLAND

Mirror’s Edge is the most challenging, important exhibition of contemporary international art to be seen at the Vancouver Art Gallery in recent memory. Thirty artists with ties to twenty-two countries present an extraordinary range of work.

The best way to enter the maze of this packed exhibition is with a sense of play and some abandon. Many of the pieces appeal to the real experience of the visitor, provoking a pleasurable anxiety akin to a circus funhouse as the unexpected and the unfamiliar yield new insights about self and that which exists outside of self.

Okwui Enwezor, born in Nigeria and working in the United States, focuses his writing and curating on contemporary African art in local and global contexts. Mirror’s Edge reflects some of the thoughts he will take with him as the next director of Documenta in 2002. Enwezor proposes a new avant garde that will transform Western dominance of cultural production and lead the way to a global culture. He believes some contemporary artists bypass and resist the binary oppositions of “real” and “fictive”, and seek to reclaim authentic agency in the discovery and representation of new experiences. Essential to this is the location of an intermediate space where the “real” and the “fictive” can interplay with surprising results.

While this show has neither a multicultural intent nor an ethnic viewpoint, it nevertheless departs from a Nigerian position. As Fisher notes, the avant garde that Enwezor identifies relies on “cultural producers entering the Western metropolis from hither to disenfranchised spaces, who had their own stories to tell…” Vinka Shonibare, born in London and raised in Nigeria before returning to England, creates historical costumes and settings out of his own crossings between cultures. Mural-size photographs of scenes in the life of a Victorian dandy—featuring Shonibare himself incongruously costumed as a British gentleman—parody historic salon paintings and feature films. He usurps a cultural position, and throws into question our ways of understanding history, moral codes and differences in others.

One of Shonibare’s scenes of a gentleman in a private library applauding Shonibare the erudite
Olu Oguibe whose interactive web-dandy Tayoti covers with felt-penned graffiti anthropological research project, in Mirror’s Edge. In this the absurdity of their insertion into phones, then electronically modified chirps are picked up by micro­
and popular entertainment with his ideas of self and other. Henrik temporarily transforming, as we adjust our tendered and perilous, but also poten­
anxious. Urban experience is disor­
making our passage confused and
messages and motion-sensitive images and comments. Random
in the viewing subject. Works such as these, and many others in Mirror’s Edge, do indeed appear to stage the correspondence between the Real and Fictive that Enwezor sees as the project of a new avant garde.
Joan Richardson

PARIS
THE TEXTURE
OF THE TRIBE
SYLVIA SAFDIE
AUTRES TERRITOIRES/
OTHER PLACES
Centre culturel canadien
5, rue de Constantine, Paris
March 17 - June 3, 2000

Keren No 4, 1999
Copper, book
79 x 76 x 3 cm

Montreal artist Sylvia Safdie made a strong showing of her recent work in an exhibition at the Canadian Cultural Centre on rue de Constantine.

The exhibition brings together a critical mass of drawings executed on mylar in earth pigments and oil. In them, the artist traces dense microcosms of human figures and their shadows, all the while teasing out the texture of the tribe. These deftly delineated human forms wander through the vast translucent spaces of the mylar background in a variety of poses: lurching forward, suspended, or even flipped upside down like marionettes on an invis­ible string. Though always accompa­
nied by others, they project a sense of isolation — solitary figures reaching out even when shrinking down to nothing. These elusive normals emerge as silent interrogators of our own identity. At times, their configu­rations point to the transience of our earthly presence and to the charged, yet silent spaces between us. Other drawings resemble a gathering of miniature grotesmes, inconspicuous clay figures barely detached from the earth that has shaped the and from their dense and even messy surroundings. Digital imprints and obscured fragments of text might be embedded in the same earth.

Against the smooth opacity of the mylar, the figures assume a rich relief quality, stepping out into the viewer’s consciousness away from the territory of representation into one’s own discursive space. Ar­ranged in groupings variously titled Earth Notes, Earth Marks and Notations, among others, Safdie’s almost musical variations strike by their insistence. Like exclamation marks in a landscape of memory we struggle to recover. They are thematic explorations of journeys into the void, made up of unex-pected movements and secret codes. Safdie’s rigorous, disciplined probing into an ostensibly simple theme brings out the strength of her technique and the compelling thrust of her organic medium. The strong tactile quality of the earth — imbued figures simu­laneously provides a forward thrust, yet is literally rooted in the ground of its origins. The artist employs both scale and detail to conjure an almost cinematic sense of movement. The three-dimensional works in Safdie’s Paris exhibition, though fewer, have a natural affinity with the two-dimensional works dis­cussed above. Conjunctions, a wall installation of powerfully shaped stencils of wood with metal fittings, shares the tribal tension of the Earth Notes in a natural protection into space of a missing link. Threshold, a stone, aluminum and glass instal­lation on the floor, uses both optics and perception to remind us of the illusory quality of boundaries and what they conceal. Beer, a microcosm based wall framed in earth, creates a spatial inquiry vertically, reaching below the floor and through the ceiling to bring out the invisible. Finally, Keren, a superbly crafted copper barrel impels us to engage in an illuminated (and illuminating) circular walk around it, a walk which reveals and “turns” the leaves of a book standing at its bottom. Its text consists in our ability to see, to “read” the creative syntax, hieroglyphs.

Appropriately enough, the origi­nal essay that accompanies the beau­tifully-produced catalogue of the exhibition is entitled Sylvia Safdie and the Book of the World (Sylvia Safdie et le livre du monde). The author of the essay, French psychol­analyst and author Gérard Wajcman, provides a perceptive, and fresh, as­essment of Safdie’s work. His narra­tive is simultaneously structured as a case study of “Sylvie S.” — a gath­erer of objects, a collector of mean­ings — and as a voyage through her otherworldly voyage of discovery between a French writer and a Canadian artist, is deliberately brought about by the co-ordinator of the exhibition program at the CCC, Catherine Bédard, and is one of its most interesting features. As curator of Safdie’s exhibition, Bédard made imaginative use of the elegant spiral staircase which brings the spaces together. She appropriated the ground-floor ‘niche’ created under­neath the stairs as a miniature viewing area in which a recently com­pleted video by Montreal film director Doina Harap complements and explicates the theme of the ex­hibition in a broader context of Sylvia Safdie’s work. As well, the artist and the curator used the curved walls of the stairwell to create an intriguing ‘trackway’ of drawings and objects that ultimately lead the visi­tor to the space of the main gallery.

An independent, yet comple­mentary work which itself makes a superb use of the stairs is Abstraction (White), a 16 metre­long acrylic, canvas and metal installation by Montreal artist John Howard which is suspended in the stairwell and which draws its silent power from both the stillness of the signs executed upon the canvas and the implicit movement of the stairs along the metal rails of the balustrade. Howard’s own comment in an accompanying brochure, namely, that “the work is made to give points of reference and reflec­tion to the known unknown,” res­onates in this counterpoise. The viewer had a unique chance to dis­cover the work gradually and from multiple perspectives as its meaning emerges along the long and sinuous trajectory.

Irena Murray