English Report

Volume 50, Number 200, Fall 2005

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/52596ac

See table of contents

Publisher(s)
La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN
0042-5435 (print)
1923-3183 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this review
Younger members of the Acadian community. The Acadian passion for life and all things was likewise reaffirmed by the special presence of the renowned invitee Ousmane Sow from Dakar, Senegal — a very rare visit to North America.

John K. Grande

HALIFAX, N.S.
CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE
THE WURTH MUSEUM COLLECTION
11 August - 16 October 2005
The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia
1723 Hollis Street
Tel.: 904-424-5280
http://www.agns.gov.ns.ca

This is the only Canadian venue for this important exhibition of the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude. These two collaborative artists are well known for their large scale projects, particularly those that wrap landmarks like the Pont Neuf in Paris and the Reichstag in Berlin, but there is much more to their art than just wrapping things. Their most recent project was the installation work The Gates in New York City’s Central Park in February of 2005. This exhibition is an opportunity to see the creative process that makes their very large scale works possible. It includes small preparatory sketches, large collages and drawings, maps, scale models, and even some small scale early wrapped objects. There are eighty items in all. In addition there are also videos which show the artists working on their projects.

In no small measure it is the run up to the actual work that is the real art of these two artists. These two phases, or periods, are what the artists call software and hardware respectively. The software period can encompass many years as was the case for The Gates (1979-2004). This 'soft' period is where the concept and thinking take part. It is also when Christo makes his beautiful drawings. He alone does the drawings, but his wife, Jeanne-Claude is a very active, and an equal partner in all projects. A big part, and this is where Jeanne-Claude shines, is talking authorities into giving them permission to do the projects. From very early on in their work, the couple have made films and videos of this process. It is indeed an art to get the mayor of Paris to agree to let them wrap its most famous and one of its most busy bridges; or the mayor of New York to let them build miles of gates in Central Park. Christo is good at this, but Jeanne-Claude is superb. For the Running Fence (1972-76) project in California, they had to talk any number of land owners, not to mention two different sets of county officials, for permission to build their forty kilometre fence across a road.

The beautiful thing about this exhibition is that you can really see the thinking process of this pair of exceptional artists. As I have stated, the drawings are beautiful and Christo could have had a decent career as a conventional artist, but he and his wife have achieved something much more. They were environmentalists of the first order long before it became fashionable. Their work drew, and continues to draw, attention to both the urban and rural environment in striking ways that go far beyond the wall of art galleries which can so often limit an artist's production. Christo and Jeanne-Claude's last work is in documentation as their actual projects are only up for a limited time. The Running Fence was up for fourteen days, The Gates (all 7,508 of them) for sixteen days, and Valley Curtain (1970-72) for a mere 28 hours. The curtain project which placed a very large cloth, 12,780 square metres, between two mountains near Rifle, Colorado, should have lasted a bit longer, but high winds forced its removal. When a project's time is over all traces of the work is removed and the site is returned to its natural state. The artists also recycle their project material. We are left with the drawings which led up to the projects, and photographs and films of works in place.

Fortunately, as this exhibition demonstrates, the quality of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's documentation is first rate. Their attention to detail is exquisite. There are many drawings in this exhibition relating to The Gates that are stunning. Perhaps I was drawn to them because some of Christo's most recent drawings prove he is getting even better as a draughtsmen. It is wonderful when an artist continues to grow. I might be missing the point because Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work is an equal partnership and their completed work is more than the sum total of its parts. Drawing is only one part, but having taught drawing myself for thirty-seven years and I do know a good drawing when I see one. I do have this idea that drawing is the basis for all visual art, but I freely admit that I am biased.

The work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude raises questions of the very nature and purpose of art. Is art, to quote the title of Harold Rosenberg's book, The Anxious Object, awaiting the verdict of history or is it in the realm of idea, remote of the necessity of being a unique object? As a traditionalist I favour the former, but being realistic at the same time, I understand that art, particularly today's art, can be the latter. The art of Christo and Jeanne-Claude is a bridge between these two definitions of art. What I like most is the sheer beauty, be it in the thing itself such as wind on the cloth of the Running Fence, or the drawings leading up to a project. Both have the ability to invoke awe. It is not often that we have the opportunity to view the thought processes of artists in such detail as this exhibition does. It is a shame that the exhibition will not be seen in Canada outside of Halifax. I would go so far as to say that if you read this review before the exhibition closes in mid-October that it is worth a special trip to Halifax — you will not be disappointed!

Virgil Hammock
on Afro-American roots, dedicated to Fernando Ortiz.

As paintings, these works illustrate this religion. They become embodiments of stories of the woods and seas, of the bushes and trees, and of men and gods that are every bit as epic as the ancient Greek stories of Homer and equally as nature-sensitized as any ecologist's. Ochún, a great beauty in this religion is painted by Alemanno and carries symbols - a heart with an arrow - a bell and a fish. Dressed in a flowing dress Ochún is accompanied by an image of the sun and peacock feathers - all overt symbols associated with beauty. The painterly collaging continues with Yemaya, considered mother of water and life. The allegorical style is attractive for its simple and forthright intertwining of sea imagery. A boat, for instance - the old mastied sailing kind - rides on waves that are this goddess' hair. This merwoman's very clothing becomes an embodiment of the seas. Changó the Santería king of blood and fire is vividly portrayed in red clothing breathing fire with his machete, sword and rooster - formidable and fear-inspiring protagonist. Eleguá, a tiny sprite-like figure with magical powers who is said to open doors has a kite flying in the air beside her. There is an atmosphere of serendipity and chance to this. She is clothed playfully, has a mask and carries a walking stick.

What makes Alemanno's interpretations so revealing is that they are her own readings of what these Orishas represent. She does not copy other peoples' visions or renditions of these highly personalized Gods. In so doing the artist communicates to us, just as the dance and music that are part of Santería something of that homegrown sensibility and cultural vitality. With colour and cadence, these vividly charged depictions intuitively communicate the lively wisdom, the living traditions, often unrecorded in written form, and kept alive through the verbatim of the Santería religion whose fusion of voodoo and Christianity, even ancient Yoruba African culture feels strangely post-Modern for all its hybridity!

John K. Grande

DISTANCE POINT: PAINTINGS BY LEOPOLD PLOTEK

June 7th - August 20th
Maison de la culture
Cote-des-Neiges
5290 Cote-des-Neiges
Tel.: 514-872-6889

A simple and unpretentious presentation of ten paintings by veteran Montreal painter Leo Plotek at the Maison de la culture Cote-des-Neiges continues to reveal this artist's incredible adeptness and dedication to the painterly process... Plotek is definitely not asleep at the easel these days! Visitors to the show saw some very compelling paintings, among the best this critic has come across in years. Assembled as a kind of preoccupation with life altering moments in the lives of artists and philosophers throughout history, Leopold Plotek's recent exhibition dives into the theatics of his subjects with a poetic versatility and unpredictable prowess.

What is evident from this show is the artist's recent return to all things representational, particularly over the last two years. This marks a change from Plotek's more often seen interior landscapes. The present foray is specifically into works that make reference to (a) history. These paintings are very similar to Leopold Plotek's recent exhibition dives into the theatics of his subjects with a poetic versatility and unpredictable prowess.

In referring to the "distance point" that this show draws its title from Plotek states: "...This is a point in perspective geometry whose purpose is obscure to the viewer but important to the painter. The key thing here is that it does not occur within the picture itself, yet helps determine almost everything in it. Just like inspiration." Entering the gallery the first painting one sees is a painting that depicts William Blake as a young boy lying in bed, receiving his first vision of God. As the boy nonchalantly gazes at the apparition of God's mimificent face peering inside Blake's bedroom, all is still and suspended in time. The scene offers the viewer a portrait of God as an unmitigated guest, a presence that the young Blake would later pay for with a beating by his father for divulging this anecdote out loud.

Another painting shows the great American poet Hart Crane in a frozen mud - leap into the blue sea on the journey by ship he took to New York from Cuba. This moment in time is captured eloquently as Crane leaps from the bow above the green waves. We see a lifesaver at the bottom corner of the work. Perhaps this is an ironic metaphor for what the poet was ultimately trying to escape. Again, the element of time is suspended as if from the depths of a dream. Lastly, we see a painting that depicts jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins ascending the stairs up to the Williamsburg Bridge to practice his music undistracted by fame and fortune. East River Blue, Sonny Rollins on Williamsburg Bridge is a mass of black and blue brushwork articulating the night sky above New York. The picture has a peaceful ambiguity, an atmosphere that resounds as if from the depths of a dream. The patina of antiquity marries even with passion. This is what makes for a compelling work of art. The theatrical element is most evident. The paintings develops a dialogue with silence. It reverberates like an effective monologue might do on stage. In fact, these paintings seem to represent states of consciousness that call to mind the stage. Although some of the works are unrelated by subject, their common ground is the anecdotal moment brimming with poetic nuance. The role of the artist as underdog is highlighted, and Plotek embraces the accident, the vulnerability that underlies much of history's great ones.

Isak Elliott Augustine
GORDON SHEPPARD
WATERVISIONS
Aug. 11 - Sept. 11th
Salon Bibliocafe
4231 boul. Saint-Laurent
Tel.: 514-277-7778

WaterVisions show brings a sharp focus on nature's place in our lives. As a primordial source or site for reflection on our inner being, nature has inspired countless artists and photographers. For Sheppard, nature is not a monument in the forest for the trees! These works became a paraphrase for our unconscious thoughts, the kind that link us to our dreams and innermost reflections. Some are out of focus, or suggest the movement of reeds, water and there is a tension between the surface of things, and what we cannot read clearly, as such, these works become a paraphrase for our unusual cultural vision of life and afterlife, of our place in this technology saturated culture but this has not lessened our ability to read and intuit something from the incredible forms and life around us. This is not conscious but unconscious but the result of habits, behaviours developed through the use of our latest developed tools and machines.

As photography Sheppard's work is incredibly passive, accepting of the subject – nature. In this sense his art is truly environmental and as a photographer he is not at all caught up in any trend, but stands out as an eclectic, enigma, and reveals his love of nature, so abundant in our land that we often can't see the forest for the trees. These works are incredibly sensitive to the fact that as humans we largely ignore nature, and do not perceive its details, elegance, and growth forms – particularly the vivid real life colour and connectedness of each element to the next. Gordon Sheppard's WaterVisions show is a defense of nature and a cry to re-generate our links to nature. We may ignore nature in this technology saturated culture but this has not lessened our ability to read and intuit something from the incredible forms and life around us. This is not conscious but unconscious but the result of habits, behaviours developed through the use of our latest developed tools and machines.

Just as our links to nature are embodied in these large scale colour photos works, Sheppard does not take it all too seriously, presenting these photos in beautiful presentational hinged frames that have a twist of Duchampian irony to them. After all, the museological presentation sometimes takes precedent over the culture, rather like nouvelle cuisine, as the presentation does with food. And so Sheppard shows how well he understands the notion of art as a presentation in everyday life, even a replacement for old fashioned theatre. He likewise leaves us with a sense that these underwater images of algae and water weeds, or lilies that beauty still plays a role, and can contribute something to us in our rush, speeding through life without taking the time to enjoy the view. Sheppard's photos are a metaphor for the brief and passing nature of human life. In the text accompanying the show Sheppard mentions that these works arose out of his reflection on having cancer. He regained an important respect for the body and the way we treat it, and began to photograph nature in the Eastern Townships soon after. Like Monet's Water Lilies, there is something uncanny about the way these nature photos attract us, as if we were mere magpies drawn by some primordial force to these ancient contemporary places and images. Simple and tranquil they are imbued with a spirit of place. The subject is nature. The subject is us, as we are nature. Beautiful!

John K. Grande

SUSAN VALYI
OUT ON A LIMB
September 6th – 17th
Sandra Goldie Gallery
1360, ave. Greene
Tel: (514) 935.2355
Fax: (514) 935.7236
E-mail: art@galeriegoldie.com

Transforming found objects into works of art is far from a new concept. From Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, to Quebec's own Armand Vaillancourt, artists have been inspired by the quotidian. Even the great Picasso, with his famous adage claiming to find rather than seek, tinkered with discarded fragments, creating the delightful Boy and Young using toy cars, or the famous Bull's Head constructed from the handlebars and seat of a rusty bicycle. The whimsical sculptures of Ontario-based artist Susan Valyi pick up the theme of metamorphosis in an exhibition of her recent works at Sandra Goldie Gallery in Westmount.

A peripatetic scavenger, Valyi is particularly drawn to smooth pieces of driftwood, metal fragments of all shapes, but most of all to antique shoe forms which she collects by the boxful. From foot to leg to torso, her sculptures grow almost organically, assuming their newfound bodies with bashful consternation. They waddle and hover, some on tiptoe, others firmly grounded, a tad lost in their unfamiliar surroundings. Suspended in motion, Valyi's Skating Club is an armless athlete, one giant foot on an old skate, the other high up in the air, its pirouette interrupted. Next to it, Foot to Bill is a study in stillness. Made of a pair of wooden legs and a scythe blade, it resembles a curious humanoid bird, the tip of its metal beak resting on the floor.

As if belonging to the same family, Lead foot Auntie is an avian creature on mismatched feet made of shoe forms, one metal, the other wooden. Despite its bulky parts and featureless head, Valyi's irreverent creation emulates a mixture of coquetry and defiance. It is, indeed, the inherent personality of each piece that takes the viewer beyond the tactile and the visual, but the artistic value of the works lies in Valyi's eye for the quirky. Without sacrificing the aesthetic, or giving in to parody – with the exception, perhaps, of Lulu, a hapless hammerhead creature – Valyi's 3-dimensional composites offer an unusual visual experience. They are uniformly organic, given to odd postures and stances, and best appreciated on their own, separate from their fantastic family.

Dorota Kozinska
OTTAWA

DANIEL RICHTER: PINK FLAG WHITE HORSE
National Gallery of Canada
June 25 - Sept. 10th
www.nationalgallery.ca
Tel.: 1-800-319-2787

There is none of the certainty we associate with paintings that deal in fabled stories, epics or history in general. In Dream South, we see naked dancing figures in the distance, a partially constructed house, Pop pink Day-Glo trees, gnome-like person and a stooped green-nosed man (a gardener?). The cacophony is delectable and amid all the decadence of Zurberes (2000) we sense that this crown of masked men and monkeys amusing themselves to death are nearing the end of their party. A crowd huddled together in an bright orange inflatable life raft, suggests a loss of meaning in Bas (2002) are there by necessity. Unlike Gericault’s Raft of the Medusa this group of survivors are not heroic, just lost and drifting and floating in a dark sea of uncertainty about their potential present. Lost in a loss of context(s).

Various codes of behaviour are reinvented and we recognize traces of symbolism in the ghoulish caricatures of these post-human mask-like faces that populate these paintings. In another painting the figures look like they are literally dematerializing, either from some disastrous and inevitable force or because of the death of substance. Tefzen (2004) has a bear and a clown and a dog... what could be gloomier in a Kathe Kollwitz kind of way, becomes painful and hard earned fun. The masks we see conjure up images of Ensor, and the stolid figures (alienated and solemn) and skull calls to mind the Norwegian Edvard Munch’s The Scream.

Above all, it is Daniel Richter’s love of painting for and of itself and his willingness to challenge our assumptions about style that truly make these works live. They do not make it easy to accept any singular and clear vision of the world we live in. He adopts as many styles as he needs to achieve fabled post-nuclear effect. From drip, to abstract, to figurative, to cartoon-like annotation, all these stylistic maneuvers are held together by a strong sense of what exactly the artist intends to communicate... that is angst, and a sense of density, compaction and simultaneous dematerialization of the body/object. Pink Flag – White Horse is heroism gone awry in an era of abundance. It’s a folkloric maelstrom where the signposts have shifted.

John K. Grande

TORONTO

SOPHIE JODOIN: DIARY OF K
Sept. 8 - Oct. 20
Edward Day Gallery
952 Queen St. West
Tel.: 416-921-6540
www.edwarddaygallery.com

Diary of K, #2 (detail), 2006
oil on mylar
Size 32 x 24

Sophie Jodoin’s latest studies of K. are a marked departure in terms of subject matter. While one always sensed a haunting sensibility, as if one were only partially understanding the subject being painted, or could not entirely grasp the emotions of the people being portrayed or the atmospheres that accompanied them, now we feel increasingly hemmed in, like voyeurs staring at the subject – this person whose anatomy and bodily form is distinctly not the norm. And Sophie Jodoin has always had an incredible facility for depicting the human body and the specifics of anatomy. This gift is something she acquired in part from her studies at the New York Academy of Art. In a sense her current vision and approach are rather like that we see in pinhole photography, or through the optical lens of a door designed to provide safety to those within and afford a visual readability of whomever might be ringing at the door. The artist/voyeur is protected by an invisible layer of interpretation that somehow separates him or her from their potential subject.

The current series, referred to as Diary of K: A Journal of Drawings, are precisely that – notional studies achieved over time and in sequence like a journal of travel notes might do. and these visual studies likewise reflect the passage of time. They are an ongoing study of one person under different conditions and over time. As a series they appear to represent something potentially private that is exposed, and like the sketches on black paper of Jodoin’s mother that preceded this series (which are on white paper), we sense this increasing objectification of things personal, that have sentiments, even spiritual attachments. Instead the denaturalization is accompanied by the sense these are fleeting studies, done in a time when speed (of the eye and hand) cause us to notice details as smudges, small portions of clarity within a broader indistinct otherness.

K is presented from frontal, side and rear views, carefully watched, recorded. In Sophie Jodoin’s own
words these works are... “The result of watching and making annotations about someone on a regular basis is quite similar to the work of an entomologist... K's particular dichotomy fascinates me - a strange mixture of monumentality and grandeur, fragility and vulnerability.” Jodoin captures the details. Some fragment like a face, or a hand, or a foot, become a paraphrase for the sentiment of being there at a moment in time. Arms are folded for a moment, or the standing figure stretches proudly, even defiant. One is reminded of Toulouse-Lautrec who sought out the unusual personages for his pastel works, or of Van Gogh who likewise had a fascination for the unusual detail, that became a reflection of some greater sentiment, disguised and lacquered over, but nevertheless accurate in depicting the state of the world, even if so intimate. In Jodoin's case, the world in inverted, and the private becomes public and vice versa. Even more surprising are the larger charcoal sketches that accompany the more intimately scaled pieces. The larger charcoal works give us a sense of how Sophie Jodoin achieves these renditions of form in space, albeit on a flat surface, and arrives at the more intense, smaller crystallized studies. There is something of the austerity of Kathe Kollwitz, and something like spots of clarity in suspension amid a more generally asepticized and clinical atmosphere. It is an intimate, and vulnerable space Jodoin has brought to us viewer/voyeurs. This landscape is the body, a persona under intense scrutiny like a mod in flame, is in a dance with light in the shadow of time.

John K. Grande

ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ

Stephen Bulger Gallery
1026 Queen St. W.
M6J 1H6
Tel.: 416-504-0575
www.bulgergallery.com

André Kertész, long considered one of the best "straight" photographers developed his work to become something of an anomaly, and less stereotypical of that tendency than most. One is reminded of numerous of his classic photographs from Paris and New York, after he moved there in 1935 and worldwide, when viewing this intimate and truly representative showing of his work.

Born in Budapest in 1894, Kertész's legend as a photographer arose from his particularly human view of the world, and the European sensibility he brought to urban scenes, the still life and subject portrait. There was more than a little tinge of romanticism to his approach, as is evident from an early view of Budapest dated 1924. This was something that endeared his work to later post-war generations of people. As reconfering a personality as you could meet, Kertész was preoccupied with freelance commercial work in New York with magazines like Harper's and Look. He became known for the commercial work, and it hampered his experimental artistic side to a degree that he abandoned it for art photography.

Seldom seen in Canadian galleries, Kertész's photographs on view at Stephen Bulger's Gallery include his vision of the Toronto skyline called "Smoke in Toronto" (1979), and "Washington Square in New York" (1966) from an aerial perspective. There are also a series of small contact prints (which was how Kertész liked to print his photos in the 1930s). Works from the Paris period include well known still life's like "Monet's Glasses and Pipe, and York" (both from 1956).

Kertész's renowned image "Suffragette Dancer" is as immersed in the atmosphere of its era as any photo could be. Kertész's New York close-ups of architecture and the urban landscape likewise bring a warmth to their subject. Kertész could be considered a precursor to photographers Angela Grauerholz and even Lee Friedlander, for the way he personalizes the particular, adding a dash of history and personal poetic style to the everyday. Stephen Bulger Gallery deserves praise for bringing this selection of some 50 Kertész photographs to Canadian audiences. A modest grouping of original Kertész photographs, this show is well chosen.

There is a richness of experience transferring images from matrix to substrate? I have used Queensland as an opportunity to explore that challenge.”

Above all Arnold Shives' Queensland series is truly a forerunner of artists studying their source content. Indeed a layman's simplicity, is truly his Queensland show evidences has gone full circle, awakening a stylist and expressive approach to landscape composition, not so distant and definitely related to Jack Shadbolt's approach to landscape, but the allusions to a pure abstraction one sees with Shadbolt. Indeed as Shives himself states in an exhibition note for the show, "The Engine Gallery exhibition, then, is a tribute to Australia, especially to the beaches and subtropical forests of southern Queensland... The work references the landscaper of eastern Australia, as well as Aboriginal art, but the references are rather tangential...I've employed as a unifying stylistic device, that is, relief printing. The stamp technique harkens back to my decades-long involvement in printmaking. From time to time, the question has arisen: how do I mine those fruitful years of experience transferring images from matrix to substrate? I have used Queensland as an opportunity to explore that challenge."

Vancouver-based Arnold Shives' latest show at Engine Gallery draws on his experience visiting the Queensland region of Australia in 2004. As time passes, Shives who studied with Richard Diebenkorn and Nathan Oliveira in San Francisco is becoming one of a rare coterie of artists still working in their original visually expressive and colorful language unapologetically by the vagaries of contemporary visual fashion. Indeed it becomes increasingly clear that many artists no longer draw on their individual experience or the external world for their source content. Indeed a layering of pre-existing visual auditory or filmic material has increasingly developed a theory driven, heavy ballasted overloading of visual language. And so it is a relief to see an artist drawing his narrative consistently and with a pure visuality from his own real world visual tactile reality.

The Queensland series is visually eclectic, and develops a kind of aerial perspective, integrating fragments of relief printworks, adding them onto the surface, and playing with line and color, in the overall composition. This child-like naiveté we see in a work such as "Estuary of the Tallebudgera" is truly reminiscent of David Hockney's "Painted Poets" series for its aquamarines, light desert-like colours influenced by the "cromia" of the Australian environment. The difference, however, is that Shives writes visual experience, including many angles, multifaceted perspectives onto the picture plane. He does this with figuration. No effort is made to abstract these competing elements as Picasso may have done. A coastline with water is symbolized by a series of repeating lines, a forested interior is generalized. In other sections of a painting we may read a series of patterns that are decorative, as seen in ceramic pots or textile design. The overall complexity that evolves as the areas are added to is one that equates for an inner state of being, for inner experience of the outer world. This almost psychological approach reminds one of Edward Munch as a distant cue, and coloristically Richard Diebenkorn from whom Shives drew a lot of inspiration much earlier in his career when he lived in San Francisco, the subject of an autobiographical book The Valley of Melting Sand published in 1999.

In a sense, Arnold Shives has gone full circle, awakening a stylist and expressive approach to landscape composition, not so distant and definitely related to Jack Shadbolt's approach to landscape, but the allusions to a pure abstraction one sees with Shadbolt. Indeed as Shives himself states in an exhibition note for the show, "The Engine Gallery exhibition, then, is a tribute to Australia, especially to the beaches and subtropical forests of southern Queensland... The work references the landscaper of eastern Australia, as well as Aboriginal art, but the references are rather tangential...I've employed as a unifying stylistic device, that is, relief printing. The stamp technique harkens back to my decades-long involvement in printmaking. From time to time, the question has arisen: how do I mine those fruitful years of experience transferring images from matrix to substrate? I have used Queensland as an opportunity to explore that challenge."
has now split over from his printmaking work for which he is renowned as one of Canada’s most senior and gifted, into painting.

John K. Grande

VICTORIA, B.C.

RICK RIVET’S SPIRIT BOATS

August 1st – September 1st, 2005
Acheringa Gallery, 665 Fort Street
Tel.: 250 393-8224
www.acheringa-gallery.com

Back in 1995 a Rick Rivet exhibition made it clear to me, for one, that he was among Canada’s finest contemporary painters. Rivet’s signature synthesis of Native themes and iconography merged with European painterly styles and sensibilities, both in roughly the same proportions,—an admirable demonstration of his Métis heritage. Rivet’s blending of source visions are uniquely Canadian, for they blend these disparate backgrounds. Now a decade has passed and I am amending that perception slightly. Now find Rivet to be, in many ways, a quintessentially ‘complete’ Canadian painter/printmaker, continually evolving his specialised visual language of synthesis and transformation.

Over the course of his career, Rivet has visually chronicled and united timeless, indigenous, formal understandings with imported (European) perspectives to render his so very Canadian millennial concerns. Addressing an essentially Post-modern, cognitive paradigm, Rivet’s paintings are an educated response to the problems confronting a society whose best hope rests in integrating diverse belief systems, uniting pluralistic cultural foundations, and reconciling rationalistic and spirit-based intellectual traditions. Rivet’s conscious fusion of representational styles can be compared to that of contemporary Native artists Jane Ash Poitras, Gerald McMaster, Joane Cardinal-Schubert and others.

Rivet was born in Aklavik, NWT, in 1949. He has studied, worked and taught art in communities across Canada. His signal iconography has naturally incorporated and synthesised cross-cultural themes and motifs, stylistic forms and philosophies. An abiding theme is that of the spirit journey—a migration of consciousness with its own iconographic lexicon and symbol set. It includes masks, shaman figures, pictographic ciphers, handprints, labyrinth schematics and animal forms. The recurring boat form seen in Rivet’s visual peregrinations can appear as if seen from above, or as a sectional mandorla (or ‘almond’) shape. It even could be a boat hull seen from the side. The boat images function as windows, portals or doors, as shield images, or as funerary insignia. In Rivet’s most recent series of small works, the Beothuk Mound series, it is this last aspect that emerges.

The Beothuk Mound series is a suite of monoprints in green, brown, or black inks. It is as if we, along with the dead, are looking out through the walls of the tomb—the cut-away panels that have become transparent—fine as dust. The series seems to depict the interior of the tomb or burial vault, bringing the viewer into its cubic heart, where the signs and signals of the honoured dead have been supplied as grave offerings. Foremost among these pictographic images is the boat hull motif, an allusion to traditional skin boats used on the McKenzie River. The boat hull sign glows white or glowers darkly, depending on Rivet’s shifting of the values. It looms out of the far wall of the tomb, itself a ‘starry vault’ in Rivet’s geocentric cosmology. Though planted deep in the earth, in the cosmological underworld of death and rebirth, the ‘ceiling’ panel, in many of the images, is strewn with stars. The ship form, supplied here, offers a vehicle or vessel for the dead. Like so many travellers in the afterlife before and since, they may safely embark upon their eternal soul’s journey.

One is left with profound questions when one sees Rivet’s work firsthand. Did the indigenous people of Newfoundland and the Beothuk Mound bury symbolic ship hulls with their honoured dead? When faced with an extinction event, did they, like Vikings, Celts, Anglo-Saxons or ancient Egyptians, inter their best hopes for cultural and personal revivification with the spirit travellers? Or is Rick Rivet, here and now in the 21st century, providing signs and symbols for a safe passage on the journey to rebirth, while also bringing these long-dead souls to life in our collective, Canadian memory?

Yoone Owens

BOOK

THE FIGURATIVE SCULPTURE OF MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ

BODIES, ENVIRONMENTS, AND MYTHS

by Joanna Inglot

University of California Press, 2004
154 pp, with index, illustrated. www.ucpress.edu

This highly detailed account of Magdalena Abakanowicz’s emergence out of communist Poland to becoming an international sculptor is both a rewarding read and provides some of the context with which the sculptor was working. As Abakanowicz once stated, infuriated that she was considered uniquely as a weaver early in her career: “I was weaving because it could be rolled up.” The difficulties of pursuing a career in communist Poland often meant that artists had to disguise their protest or contestation in an underground language of art.