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Kirsten Abrahamson: *Diary of a River*

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Kirsten ABRAHAMSON: *Diary of a River*

Virginia EICHHORN

tion, adding to the sense of the uncanny, the chair/tripod couple is in dialogue with a small brass stag, a propane gas tank, and a video screen presenting mesmerizing images of flames from a campfire. The stag is pinned between the chair and the tripod. The fire becomes a metaphor for the sculptures themselves, precariously build, tended with care, fascinating and existing only for a brief moment in time. Sixty documentary photographs of extinguished campfires surround the sculpture.

In *Vaudeville*, as in *chanson du Vau de Vire* (song of the Valley of Vire in Normandy), which became a genre associated with satirical or topical songs sung on a stage, May directs his objects to perform another theatrical scene imbued with suspense and drama. The couple chair/tripod is propped high up—in Warsaw the tripod rested on a brick ledge that was part of the gallery wall while in Calgary it rests on gas tanks that echo the propane tank. They act as Damocles' sword, hanging over the scene like a constant threat. On the floor, an open umbrella holds in its fold another small brass stag. The stag is on his back in full extension and rest on a bed of charcoal.

Peter von Tiesenhausen's practice partakes of his environment. His work includes sculptural objects, land art, drawing, and paintings. Fire is a constant element/process that one finds throughout his work. He has burned large figures sculpted out of wood and drawn with burnt wood. In *Testament to Warsaw*, he poignantly engraved thousands of figures on narrow strips of charred wood. Small figures are scratched through a white wash to reveal the burned surface, as if they were scars in the wood. The artist worked in a public place, a parking lot behind the gallery. Rather than communicate verbally with passerbys, he decided to exchange with them visually by translating the physical presence of his surroundings into a visual script. Each figure becomes a visual translation offered as an homage to the people of Warsaw, in honour of their survival and perseverance through oppression. Von Tiesenhausen's allusion to the fragility

and tension inherent in negotiating a space, is also evident in *Acts of Resistance*. The artist has constructed a suspended bridge that crosses the width of the gallery space. In echo to *Testament to Warsaw*, *Acts of Resistance* is similarly made up of charred planks of wood marked with a multitude of small figures. Wisniewska witnessed the engagement of the Polish audience when confronted with their familiar and tragic history being recounted by a foreign artist.⁵

The diffusion of Canadian (not to mention Albertan) works abroad is always a time-consuming and complex affair. The warm reception by the Polish audience, as attested by the positive review of Lidia Bruszezewska, editor at *Spotkania z Zabytkami*, and the comments collected by the artists, abroad and back home, confirm the importance of these cross cultural exchanges.⁶ ←

There and Gone / Istnienie Ulotne
Galeria Klimy, Warsaw,
June 22 – July 13, 2005
Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary
September 9 – November 20, 2005

Mireille PERRON is an artist, a writer on art and culture, and an educator. Since 1982, her installations have appeared in solo and group exhibitions in Canada, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy. Her work explores the connections between gender, culture, visual arts, science, and medicine. She has also written and published numerous essays and reviews in various anthologies, magazines and exhibition catalogues. Mireille Perron lives and works in Calgary, Alberta, where she teaches at the Alberta College of Art and Design.

NOTES

1. Conversation with Walter May, October, 2005.
2. Campsites curated by Melanie Townsend and presented around the same time at the Walter Phillips Gallery of the Banff Centre. URL: http://www.banffcentre.ca/media_room/media_releases/2005/0707_campsites.htm
3. *There and Gone/ Istnienie Ulotne*, 2005, exhibition catalogue, Bozena Wisniewska.
4. Conversation with Wisniewska, November 2, 2005.
5. *Op. Cit.*
6. To see more images from these artists: Laura Vickerson: www.ccca.ca; Peter von Tiesenhausen: www.tiesenhausen.net

Deep within the Pharaoh's pyramid, sits a small room. It is virtually inaccessible save for a complicated series of small, hidden tunnels leading from the room to the topmost point of the pyramid. When the tunnels are open they allow the sun's light to penetrate through, illuminating the small room, positioned like the heart of the structure.

chamber. But upon further reflection, found it quite fitting. If one considers the location of the Queen's Chamber, and the purpose of the King's sculpture within it, the room becomes an evocation of undying love and protection—a testament to the power of emotion that will never die.

Kirsten Abrahamson's *Diary of a River* represents a four-year journey in the artist's life. It was a journey where, she admits, she



The room is known as the Queen's Chamber. Oddly, it does not contain the Queen's sarcophagus or reliquary or statue. Instead, the only thing within, the item that is illuminated and warmed by the sun's rays, is a sculpture of the King. This sculpture is thought to represent his Eternal body, the one to which his spirit can return to when his mortal remains no longer exist.

I thought it curious that the room would be called the Queen's, rather than the King's or the Pharaoh's

Kirsten ABRAHAMSON, *Diary of a River*, 2005. Detail. Ceramic and mixed media. 3.04 x 6.09 x 1.98 m. Photo: Garry Roll.

didn't know what was going to come "down the river" when she began the work—and she could never have expected what happened either. Life, sometimes—often times—, is like that. And the fact that Abrahamson, rather than withdrawing or ceasing to produce work, let her work react to the events she was experiencing,

strengthens and adds to its power. *Diary* is consciously, deliberately, and most accurately used as both title and description of this work. A diary is a journal of one's own experiences—physical, spiritual, emotional. It is assumed that it is also intensely private and only for the eye of the diarist. Yet diaries, by reason of their very purpose—the recording of events or actions—, always allow for the possibility of others “reading” them. For example, Lucy Maude Montgomery always intended that her journals be passed down: she once said that if her letters and diaries—her private thoughts—came to be forgotten it would break her heart. There is much to be learnt from other's experiences.

During *Diary of a River's* construction, five people Abrahamson loved passed away—including her husband. In the midst of this, the artist moved from one end of the country to the other, returning eventually to her hometown. The initial work—a kind of push-me-pull-you kind of boat—became the metaphorical inspiration for this large-scale installation. From the beginning, Abrahamson felt that the river had to be there, be part of the work. The river, as defined by the platform, holds together the start and the end of this narrative.

The imagery in the work is personal but accessible. As is appropriate in something that evolved as a “diary,” people in Abrahamson's life influenced some of the elements and aspects incorporated or reflected within. Universal symbols, rivers and boats have been used by many cultures, through many periods, to represent—or indeed, to make sense of—our earthly existence, and to try to grasp what lies ahead. From Greek and Egyptian mythology to Norse legends, from Virgil's journey as envisioned by Dante to the ancient burial boats of Vietnam, to Peter von Tiesenhausen's woven willow vessels in the fields of northern Alberta (his way of trying to understand mortality)—humanity's collective unconscious understands this metaphor. Abrahamson then populates this ancient and elemental symbol with her own personal imagery, which, nonetheless, remains accessible, almost intuitively understandable. One symbol, or image, works on many different levels.

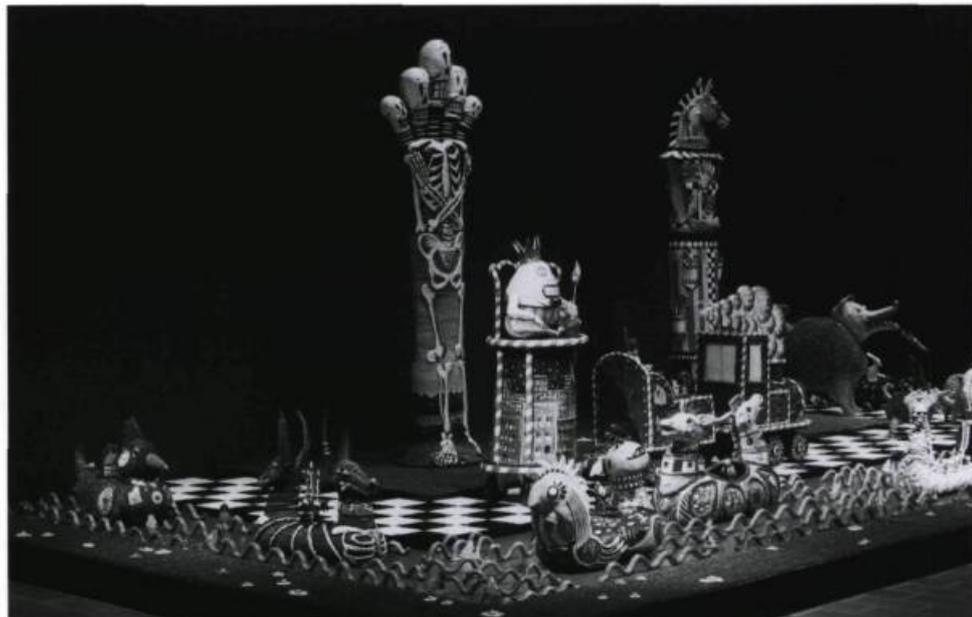
A deer head boat was inspired by a friend of hers who was reconnecting with his Native family and culture. Her children's drawings and imagery (rather than images)

become integrated throughout the work as repeated motifs. Her fish are random people—students, friends, a guy at the bus stop—that have come into her life for various reasons.

Abrahamson's medium is ceramic—ceramic that engages, enthuses, and seems to come to life. With meditations upon mortality inherent to the very materiality of the medium—the earth from which we come and to which we return—, her use of clay is both figurative and fitting. This is an incredibly ambitious work, whose scale ranges from the very small to larger-than-life. Amazingly, Abrahamson didn't lose anything in the firings, something that almost never happens. She approached this work almost as a drawing in 3-D rather than as a sculptural project. Its arrangement as a tableau reinforces that aspect, while at the same time echoing the friezes and dados one finds in ancient pyramids and tombs. As the project progressed, she got freer and more physical in her treatment of surfaces. The early parts of the installation are calmer and earthy or neutral in colour. Later components are treated more intensely, with vibrant and rich colours, serious cross-hatching and dynamic painting of surface. Initially, the project may have been conceived intellectually, or conceptually, but by the time it was finished, the artist had abandoned any reserve she might have had and gave herself over to it fully and unrepentantly.

In one sense, the entire work—quite rightly—could be read as a self-portrait. But within it there are smaller self-portrait elements. When *Diary of a River* began, Abrahamson, her husband Ric, and their children, Emily and Eli, were living in Calgary. When Ric received diagnosis of a terminal illness Abrahamson began wishing that they could come back east, home to family. One component, which she calls *An Apple for the King of the Night Circus*, evokes those desires for safety and release. Abrahamson, as a train engine puffing and exerting all of her energies, pulls along her family, their memories of Calgary and reminiscences of her mother's home—guided along by a compass pointing east.

In the back section of the tableau are two large figures. One



is a skeleton with five heads—each representing a person who has passed on. With heart in one hand and clock in the other, crushed fruit beneath its bony feet, this figure seems to be a contemporary memento mori. But it isn't one that seems to be about doom or fear—oddly enough, one almost has the feeling they are smiling at us, letting us know we don't really need to fear that transition from life to death—in death they are united and not alone. The other figure, standing a few feet away, is also life-size. This figure is a horse, holding a burning candle to show us her life is not yet extinguished, but holding up a watch to show she is aware that time is passing. She looks away from the five-headed figure, as if in denial, not wanting to acknowledge that those people are gone. Her mouth is wrapped, indicating that she cannot speak, cannot give physical voice to her feelings about her loss. A second small bandage on her shin reminds us of the hurts that have and are being suffered. The Horse is wearing an apron that carries with it symbols that show all the different roles the Horse (artist) has assumed in her life so far.

Two of the last segments that the artist created were a boat, called *May 24th, 2004*, and a large turtle. *May 24th, 2004* depicts a skeleton boat. The skeletons that make up either end of the boat represent the fear that people have of death. Inside the boat, however, are skeletons that actually seem happy—they are those who have already passed on and are waiting to welcome us, assuring us that we have nothing to fear. The Turtle was the last piece that Abrahamson created for this installation.

Carrying upon her shell the Tree of Life, it reminds us that while there is grief and loss, there is also optimism and longevity. Home is always with you. And no matter what we suffer, things will be okay.

Abrahamson's work isn't so much a memorial as it is a representation of what we all go through at a certain point in our life: what is going to happen? How much time do I have? What do I do now? And always—what does it all mean?

The Queen's chamber in the pyramid allowed that bit of light to get through, keeping a path open between the King who had passed away and the life that continued on around him. I think Abrahamson has achieved much of the same effect with her *Diary of a River*. This work memorializes loved ones that have passed on. But it allows a “path” between the two worlds of existence to remain open. She acknowledges these people's passing, but integrates them still within the events that happened, and continue to happen in everyday life. Death does not end things—it transforms them. Ultimately, her work is about the many transitions and things that happen in life, in living. Death and illness are two of them. Art and love are two others. ←

Kirsten Abrahamson: *Diary of a River*
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Kirsten ABRAHAMSON,
Diary of a River, 2005.
Detail. Ceramic and mixed
media. 3.04 x 6.09 x
1.98 m. Photo: Garry Roll.