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Diane Landry: *The Magic Shield*

Gil McELROY

What with an ambitious new building for Toronto's Koffler Centre for the Arts scheduled to open in three years to replace the old, recently demolished structure, the Koffler Gallery has, not surprisingly, begun utilizing off-site venues for exhibitions. *Diane Landry: The Magic Shield* was the second of the gallery's shows to utilize the satellite approach, situating a new installation of Landry's at the Beaver Hall Gallery, a small venue located at an artist's co-op on McCaul Street just around the corner from Queen Street in the city's central core.

Despite the accessibility of its downtown locale, it's an easy place to miss, save for an A-frame sign advertising the show sitting on the sidewalk out front of the building housing the gallery. Inside, just down the end of a main floor corridor, is a non-descript interior room — no windows — with polished concrete floor, a central pillar, and exposed overhead pipes and ductwork. Oh, and it's dark, all the overhead interior lighting having been shut off.

In other words, it was an absolutely ideal place in which to situate a Landry installation. *The Magic Shield* comprised two narrow beds situated side by side, which were individually lit from below and by small hangings lamps from above. A couple of video monitors on opposing walls completed the show.

Okay, that's a vast simplification of things, for while we may have initially summoned up an idea of what it is that constitutes that domestic piece of furniture that is a bed when we first encounter the contents of this installation, Landry's work quickly exposes it — our idea — for the simplistic caricature that it most certainly is. These beds are not the passively inert things of the domestic realm, not just utile pieces of furniture. Rather, they're phenomenological beds, active devices that are in motion, disturbed and restless. Any possible connotation or denotation of rest, of calmness, of relaxation connected with the idea of a bed as a passive thing quickly goes out the windows that this gallery doesn't have.

So, to the specifics. Both of Landry's beds are constructed around old iron head and footboards that were once part of extremely narrow, almost cot-like beds. Landry extended the height of the legs in order to elevate the surfaces of the beds much higher than they had originally been designed to be, all so as to make room for the activity-inducing elements of these installational devices. For the stage-right bed, a large circular hoop of plexiglas is attached beneath the rectangular frame on which a mattress would normally have been placed, circumscribing a large ceiling fan above which are vertically suspended dozens of pencils — HBs — and on the eraser tip of each one hangs a metal key. Within this pencil/key matrix are four small electric motors with wooden rotors that slowly turn independently of one another and bang up against the pencils/keys to create the

Diane LANDRY, *The Magic Shield*, 2009. Detail. Installation. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.

sound of something somewhat akin to that of a wind chime. The larger ceiling fan beneath goes independently through its own cycle of activity, firing up to a speed at which it sounds like a washing machine on the spin cycle and which succeeds in blowing a powerful enough downdraft to pull at the thin paper covering — a kind of duvet or sheet, if you will — laid out over the mattress frame above, sucking it down flat and evidencing that this bed is without an occupant — or even the merest suggestion thereof.

Bed #2 — the one stage left — is lower in height, unencumbered by anything akin to the plexiglass skirt of its neighbour, but equally kinetic, for beneath its paper duvet/sheet is the whole wide world. Okay, that's a bit of a metaphorical stretch in trying to say that Landry employed volumes of an old encyclopedia — or, more accurately, one cover and a number of attached interior pages — as kinds of cams mounted on independently powered electric motors, fourteen of them situated along the length of the bed in two paired lines, to spatially activate things. Attached to the rotors of the motors at one corner of what was left of each book, the encyclopedia-cams slowly rotated in a vertical plane, rising up high enough to brush against the paper duvet/sheet laid out above and lift it slightly.

This bed isn't like its neighbor; it doesn't evidence emptiness. Viewing it from a standing position without seeing all the technological bells and whistles tucked away beneath the proverbial sheets, this bed is a thing consumed with evident unease, as if hosting a couple of bodies ever in restless motion. Despite the very narrowness of the bed, a chasm or rift separates it into two very distinct sides. There is no suggestion of closeness, here, no hint of any form of intimacy or affinity shared between the two halves. The implicational intentionality of the presence of bodies — of humanity – also starkly manifests the clarity of aloneness and isolation. Two to a bed, perhaps, but each decidedly to his/her own beneath the sheets.

Landry's work, taken as a whole, has never been about hiding the metaphorical buttons and levers, has never been about the imperatives of creating an aesthetic equivalent to the Land of Oz where she stands off alone and hidden as the all-powerful controlling Wizard. Rather, she's always presented things straightforwardly and up front without benefit of metaphorical masks or curtains; encountering her work, we're very much included in every aspect of what it is that makes it tick. In a nutshell, Landry's work has always been available. So the paper duvets/sheets covering the technological guts of these beds of *The Magic Shield* could conceivably be seen as rather problematic. Is Landry trying to make things difficult for us, to indeed proffer herself as some kind of Wizard in this installational world, pulling all the levers and generally manipulating things from behind the curtains? Are we supposed to consider the activity of the duvets/sheets — or a quiescent lack therefore, in the case of one of the beds — as an aesthetic idea meaningful only unto itself, entirely outside of technological considerations? Are we to probe no further into the technological machinations behind *The Magic Shield*?

Not bloody likely, for in the darkness there is light. Truly. Landry's careful use of illumination is entirely indicative of her intention to render things clearly. The lamps hanging above the beds provide just enough light to meaningfully deal with the surface of things — the restlessness of the paper duvets/sheets — but the illumination down below in the netherworld of these beds is there to evidence what makes everything tick, to literally shed light upon things.

Arguably, *The Magic Shield* makes us work for it, getting us down on bended knee to look — even marve — upon the underneath of it all. Passivity is always an option, of course, but it's really not much of one, affording access only to a few layers of the work. Seeing what makes Landry's work tick, having a gander at the wonders of the goings-on beneath the covers, involves us at a truly participatory level, and thereby engages us in a process of decision-making, impacting directly the meaning of the installation. The installational use of lighting — no illumination in the room save for the lamps hanging just above the beds and, critically, the lighting that is beneath them both — is a dead giveaway that we are indeed fully meant to bear witness to the technological goings-on and include it all in our comprehension of this work as a totality.

And so if we have to get down on hands and knees to check under the metaphorical hood and gaze with delight upon the complex, Rube Goldberg-like wonders that power the microcosmic world of Diane Landry's *The Magic Shield*, then so be it. It's a marvelous thing to behold. ←

Diane Landry: The Magic Shield
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Diane LANDRY, *The Magic Shield*, 2009. Details. Installation. Photos: Isaac Applebaum.