Vie des arts

English Reports

Dorota Kozinska, David Garneau, John K. Grande, Virgil Hammock et Melissa Lam

Volume 51, numéro 206, printemps 2007

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/2021ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)
La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN
0042-5435 (imprimé)
1923-3183 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document
GIANTS FASCINATE.

Perhaps it is our insignificant smallness vis-a-vis the vastness of the universe, the sheer, overwhelming expanse of sky that's at the root. The silent grand statues of Easter Island, the magnificent pharoahs of Abu Simbel and the enigmatic face of Egyptian Sphinx, all attest to our continual, unattainable quest to create giants in our own image. Few giants populate our contemporary reality, there are no new statues of David, no new giant Buddhas.

OR ARE THERE?

In the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, a gargantuan man squats in the corner of the hall, while in another room a giant baby holds court. These disturbingly realistic sculptures, many times the human size, are the work of Australian-born, London-based artist, Ron Mueck. Dwarfed by these enormous fibreglass and silicone 'humans', we are at once disturbed and mesmerized, faced with our unbearable frailty in front of our own, overwhelming reflection. Mueck is a master illusionist. His figures are frighteningly lifelike, with moles and body hair, drops of perspiration and sagging skin. It is not, however, the artist's intention to re-create reality. Mueck, who began his career making marionettes, confuses our senses by distorting not only the proportions of the figures but also their body parts and postures. Mueck's artisty lies first and foremost not so much in the scrupulous representation of the body but the emotional, psychological dimension of each sculpture. Some seem vulnerable, some apprehensive, some half-asleep, others strikingly alert, and every one pulling at our emotional strings.

There's a touching subtlety in the execution of the works, invested as they are with the artist's personal experience, and, by extension, our own. The incredible precision employed in the rendition of the pieces only further accentuates their vulnerability. Their nudity seems not only accidental but perfectly normal. There is nothing to hide, and nowhere to run. We are in front of our physicality and mortality, in all our greatness and smallness. After the initial, unavoidable shock these works provoke, we are left to ponder, to reflect, surprised as we are by our own unexpected reaction. An instant sense of understanding and compassion takes over and we are at once troubled and fascinated. We peer into the wrinkled, swollen eyelids of a newborn baby's giant face, looking for echoes of our own birth, our ears straining to catch that first plaintive cry that seems to welling up in our chest.

We respond with a startled look at the stern, questioning stare of a naked, bald giant crouched on the floor, that stops us in our tracks. The power of Mueck's works reaches beyond artistry and artifice, straight into our psyche, making him one of the most interesting of contemporary artists, and the exhibition one that cannot be missed, and will never be forgotten.

Dorota Kozinska
SASKATCHEWAN

MOBILE STRUCTURES
DIALOGUES BETWEEN CERAMICS AND ARCHITECTURE IN CANADIAN ART

January 27, 2007 to May 13, 2007
MacKenzie Art Gallery
3475 Albert Str.

 Regina, Saskatchewan

Art historians will some day designate the moment when ceramics saw itself as, and therefore became, art. While this event happened before Mobile Structures, the complexity and conceptual inventiveness of the works in this exhibition testify that the transformation has occurred and that, for ceramic artists, there is no going back.

When a material practice is not primarily functional or decorative but bound to ritual and engages (and questions and even undoes) its formal heritages (while still inhabiting it) and also engages worlds beyond its medium and métier, it is a particular expression of consciousness—it is art. While art is a special conceptual category, works of art are always manifested; they are inseparable from their material form and that medium’s history. In fact, some of our most intense intellectual pleasures with works of contemporary art come from seeing how they engage their histories and meanings rather than how they are just composed by them.

Jeannie Mah’s “Iznik Tiles and Portuguese Sidewalk” consists of three large colour inkjet murals of Ottoman Empire era Iznik tiles. Below these are three smaller inkjets of Portuguese tile sidewalks with patterns that echo those above. Hovering on brackets centered on the Iznik images are three Minoan inspired ceramic vessels decorated in homage to her two sources. Mah exceeds media so she can speak from beyond the pot in order to speak back to the pot. These few signifiers trigger a wealth of information and ideas that originate in ceramics but also suggest a more expansive history and philosophy. The installation describes the exchange of visual vocabulary, materials and methods not only among the Turks and Portuguese, Muslims and Catholics, but also with the Chinese. Mah seems interested less in short term narratives of colonial oppression than in the long term fact of métissage, the rich and inevitable exchange, mixture and hybridization of everything in multiple directions. There is no sense of loss here, because the question of origins and authenticity are themselves questioned.

Ruth Chambers’s filigree arches hover like ghosts. It is a spectral architecture, a return of the Modernist repressed: the feminine, the Romantic, abundance, nature. Chambers’ ceramic architecture (rather than architectural ceramics) imagines a new ornamentality, but because it is offered in this drained and fragile form that literally depends from the host building, it appears less utopic than melancholic. Jeremy Hatch’s porcelain cast of a tree house yearns for the moment when everyone designed and built their own shelters. This impulse is less nostalgic than it is human. His tender apparition recalls but protects a childhood memory, the artist has the pleasure of making the house but denies us the pleasure of playing in his fragile fortress.

Rory MacDonald has invented clever portable kilns that fire a glazed pattern on to a brick wall. The resulting tattoo reminds us of ceramics and architecture’s once intimate liaisons: from ceramic tile on Islamic temples to art deco office towers. This relationship took a blow with the strain of Modernism that saw decoration as not just superfluous but as a crime (Adolph Loos). MacDonald’s gesture, if actually performed, might actually be criminal. His ceramic graffiti has a similar relationship to ceramic decoration that conventional graffiti has to murals. Both actions express a desire for aesthetic intervention, for decoration, for colour, for public participation in the design of the built environment. But there is also evidence of decay, loss and late-coming. MacDonald uses a blue willow pattern that mumbles in translation: the design blurs and drips. Perhaps the kiln needs tinkering, or maybe the wall resists the application. In any case, the concept (desire) outstrips the design: the expression, possibility and inspiration is more important than the literal image.

If this show can be relied upon as a bell-weather, contemporary ceramics continues to be a hybridized activity. Most of the works in the exhibition mix ceramics with other media; most are non-functional or not only functional. And all seem to address not only another discipline (architecture) but also see themselves self-reflexive. Even though there is no architecture here for ceramics to dialogue with, if we take the exhibition’s title seriously, what would a renewed dialogue look like? If ceramicists were to re-engage architecture as artists, the result should transform both fields. While Frank Gehry’s architecture has been seen as a meeting of architecture and sculpture (strongly aided by engineering), it is a sculpture of some vintage. While art mediums and histories may be somewhat stable sources of inspiration, real collaborations with contemporary artists who are in flux about the identity and meaning of their practices would be much more dynamic. What would it mean to have architects engage with contemporary ceramic artists? I am looking forward to Mobile Structures II: Architectural Vessels or Mobile Structures II: Taking it on the Road. 

David Garneau

MONTREAL

ANDREW LUI

PURITY AND HARMONY

Han Art
4209 rue Ste-Catherine O.
Tel: 514 876-9278
www.galleryhanart.com

Describing Andrew Lui’s creative process is like taking a page from the I Ching. For it is as much Chinese philosophy as the vast artistic tradition of that culture that imbues his paintings. Sparse and strikingly contemporary, Lui’s compositions proclaim their own visual territory while his brushstroke harks at the fluidity of northern calligraphy. Admittedly at “the crossroads of post-modernity”, he has found his own voice, and from the plethora of personal and artistic experiences produced a series of works that opt for the lyrical and the aesthetic. Having honed his art over three decades, he is in a new phase, and while the pilgrimage continues uninterrupted, the pilgrim has changed. Highly sensitive, and enamoured of quality, this artist has no trouble attracting collectors. His acrylic
and ink on rice paper paintings are unusually accessible while remaining of the highest artistic calibre. Forever the humanist, Lui has not lost his interest in higher ideals, and the duality that lives in all things continues to be present in his paintings. Whether it is the dialogue between east and west, or between anguish and bliss, the artist's internal confrontation expresses itself on canvas in images of profound sensibility and mastery of plastic demands. Like most artists fascinated with the passage of time, Lui's choice of title for his series is self-explanatory. We are witnessing emotions in movement, fleeting before our eyes in a colourful parade of oblique forms, at once animal and alien. And there is no point seeking references to other artists and styles, for having absorbed it all, Lui is in full command of his own unique visual lexicon. His eponymous Pilgrimage I leads us into the series, a horizontal composition dominated by a stylized turquoise horse and rider in the company of earthy abstracted forms. A perfectly composed visual discourse is taking place between the lines and strokes of colour, a signature found in all of Lui's works. This harmony amid chaos also marks the painting titled East, West which picks up the visual equestrian theme but breaks the composition into two without actually splitting the image. A subtle tension underlies this otherwise colourful picture, a deeper message, perhaps a longing for union. In Triumph, what we feel is in fact what we see: a joyous swirl of movement, a vertical explosion of pure colour, and all held in check by a master at composition, his choice of colour and texture creates a delicate network of lines, the artist's unconscious tabula rasa, all held in check by a vertical explosion of pure colour, and all held in check by a master at composition, his choice of colour and texture creates a delicate network of lines, the artist's unconscious tabula rasa, all held in check by a master at composition, his choice of colour and texture creates a delicate network of lines, the artist's unconscious tabula rasa, all held in check by a master at composition, his choice of colour and texture creates a delicate network of lines, the artist's unconscious tabula rasa, all held in check by a master at composition, his choice of colour and texture creates a delicate network of lines, the artist's unconscious tabula rasa, all held in check by a master at composition, his choice of colour and texture creates a delicate network of lines, the artist's unconscious tabula rasa, all held in check by a master at composition, his choice of colour and texture creates a delicate network of lines, the artist's unconscious tabula rasa.
weather subtleties that made these works visually so salient for his collectors.

Peter Hoffer can likewise charge a landscape with the atmosphere of time, and it is one where the painterly cues and atmospheres rely on the act of construction, the fabrication of a sense of place. Actions such as to allow a field or sky area to include paint drips, swaths of brushwork to enhance the landscape subject remind us that these are indeed just metaphors for places we intimately identify with, even if we live for the most part in city or suburban environments. The landscape thus becomes an island, that exists as a metaphor in and of itself. These landscapes are ultimately separate from reality that exists within a private place in our own (collective) imagination. Landscape becomes a state of creation, where memory interacts with the action element, the assembled paint and surface effects. And so even while landscapes are constructed, layered onto by Hoffer they are not just constructed, more idealizations that visually promote a state of being. The actual context or place being represented is unimportant. Place exists as a generalized icon for something that supersedes any realist, or photorealist agenda. While these works are painted in oil their surface is covered with a thick layer of clear resin that furthers the visual reading and depth of the subject. The shiny surface resin effect attracts us like magpies to Peter Hoffer’s art, just as photographs do. We seek to look through these surfaces to discover what is beneath, these landscapes frozen in time, as it were, like leaves under the ice on a lake in winter.

What people really like about Peter Hoffer’s painting is the way he can capture weather, light, texture, and do it through painterly style, the brushwork effort, whether it is a copse of trees on a horizon, or an illuminated sky. Surface becomes surface... Hamlet (2006) has a colour and light effect reminiscent of the Hudson River school painters or the Eastern Township painter Allan Edson from the 19th century Opening (2006) literally opens up the sky with effects of vertical painterly brushwork. The suggestion is of a higher, and transcendental scale and purpose to that which the painter is representing is his accomplished eclectic way. In some of these painting actual background grain of the wood being painted on shows through, and a tension is achieved through accidental marking, strokes, that are less controlled, and related to the accidents that can bring an artwork to life. In Emblem (2006), a spray of growth in a field can be seen, while there are indistinct copies of trees along a horizon line. At times the brushwork and lines break into a style where the painting itself becomes the subject and the visual readable landscape recedes beneath all this contemporaneity, causing us to re-view the painting. We discover its artificial, constructed nature, and that it is our perception that ascribes a value or weight to all this.

Other Hoffer paintings likewise enable the shrubs, fields, trees, to break apart into pure painterly effect. The confected nature of the scene, the artificial context, makes it delightful for the eye as we follow what is a field, or tree, only to re-discover it is all just paint and style, not an image at all. And the surface and material plays an essential role in all of this. Parallel achieves a balance between a formal 19th century academic style of landscape rendition and a pure painterly way with surface. It is this combination of old and new effect that make these idioms catch our eye. The confected nature of the scene, the artificial context, makes it delightful for the eye as we follow what is a field, or tree, only to re-discover it is all just paint and style, not an image at all. And the surface and material plays an essential role in all of this. Parallel achieves a balance between a formal 19th century academic style of landscape rendition and a pure painterly way with surface. It is this combination of old and new effect that make these idioms catch our attention, for representation, as the paintings in Peter Hoffer’s Element show at Nicolas Metivier at its best captures the inner essence of beauty.

John K. Grande

SACKVILLE

ANTHONY FLOWER
THE LIFE AND ART OF A COUNTRY PAINTER
1792-1875
12 January - 25 February 2007
The Owens Art Gallery, Sackville NB 61 York St., Sackville, NB E4L 1E1. Tel.: 506 384-2475

This is a wonderful exhibition of the work of a 19th century amateur New Brunswick artist. The exhibition provides an insight into the life, and the art, of early Canada. Anthony Flower emigrated to Saint John, New Brunswick from England in 1817 and soon afterwards moved outside the city to start farming. He remained on his farm for the rest of his long life and for the whole of this time he painted. It is not clear if Flower ever had any formal art education prior to coming to Canada, but, according to the co-curators of the exhibition and the authors of the exhibition catalogue, Laurie Glenn Norris and Ann Catherine Lowe, it was unlikely. What is clear, however, is that Flower was not what could be termed a primitive or folk artist. He took his art seriously and had in his possession at his death a number of instructional books on painting and drawing. We do know that he came from a solid middle class family, although he may have been estranged from his father, and that he was educated and literate.

There are a few works by the artist in the exhibition that predate Flower’s arrival in Canada including a delightful watercolour plant study of a rose bud done in 1804 when he was twelve. These works do illustrate the artist’s lifelong interest in art. It is likely at another time in our history that persons with a talent such as Flower’s could have made a living as artists, but in early 19th century New Brunswick art was a luxury and full time artists were few and far between. Life was difficult and at least as a farmer you could eke out a living on what you grew and raised. Soon after Flower roughed out his far from the St. John River fronted wilderness he married, in 1820, and his wife, Mary Green, was to become a frequent model in his art. These studies to my mind are the centrepieces of the exhibition. In spite of their sometime starkness you can see that he clearly loved his lifetime partner. In fact, he continued to paint pictures after her death in 1867 based on earlier works that he had done. One of this Mary Green Born 1794, Wife of Anthony Flower Born 1792, 1897 is an amazing portrait study that show an insight of the subject that can only come from the artist truly understanding, and in this case deeply loving, the sitter. Curator Laurie Glenn Norris states in the catalogue that we don’t know if Flower’s portraits really ‘looked’ like the subjects, but that he really wasn’t important to the over all quality of the work. I tend to agree to this premise, but I think that it was certainly important to Flower that his paintings looked like his sitters. Amateur realists artists of the time, and even today, put great stock into getting it right in making their picture as close to reality as they can. It is their effort that makes their work at times more interesting than so-called photo-realism or even photographs.

Mary Green Born 1794, Wife of Anthony Flower Born 1792, 1897
ink with watercolour over graphite on paper.
New Brunswick Museum, Saint John, NB.
There are awkward passages in some of Flower’s portraits where he attempted to show more than heads and shoulders of his subjects such having the head much to large for the body or faulty perspective. One portrait of a Mr. Richard Wells, who was a Saint John church rector, painted in 1824 has all these faults, yet it is one of the most interesting pictures in the exhibition as, like the pictures of the artist’s wife, he shows a deep knowledge of the sitter. Flower like many artist of the period copied the work of other artists usually from illustrations in popular magazines and hence there are painting in the exhibition of people such as Lord Byron, Jinny Lind and King Louis-Philippe of France. I would like to think that he did these pictures just to keep up with the fashion of the period copied the work of other artists.

Flower like many artists in the 19th century was a Saint John church rector, painted in 1824 has all these faults, yet it is one of the most interesting pictures in the exhibition as, like the pictures of the artist’s wife, he shows a deep knowledge of the sitter. Flower like many artist of the period copied the work of other artists usually from illustrations in popular magazines and hence there are painting in the exhibition of people such as Lord Byron, Jinny Lind and King Louis-Philippe of France. I would like to think that he did these pictures just to keep up with the fashion of the period copied the work of other artists.

Robert Hood

Robert Hood exhibition in Sackville was a Saint John church rector, painted in 1824 has all these faults, yet it is one of the most interesting pictures in the exhibition as, like the pictures of the artist’s wife, he shows a deep knowledge of the sitter. Flower like many artist of the period copied the work of other artists usually from illustrations in popular magazines and hence there are painting in the exhibition of people such as Lord Byron, Jinny Lind and King Louis-Philippe of France. I would like to think that he did these pictures just to keep up with the fashion of the period copied the work of other artists.

Following the closing of the Anthony Flower exhibition in Sackville it travels to the Rooms in St. John, Newfoundland from 16 March to 13 May, the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John room 4 June to 3 September and, finally, to the Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown, PEI from 23 September to 2 December. If you happen to be in one of these places when this exhibition be sure to catch it. It is worth your time.

Virgil Hammock

NEW ZEALAND

ROBERT HOOD

Out of Erewhon” at the Christchurch Art Gallery in New Zealand features thirteen young artists, among them young sculptor Robert Hood who constructs a wooden building situated atop of the entrance to the carpark directly across from the gallery. Hood is the newest recipient of the Oliva Spencer Bower award, a national prize in New Zealand deserving of much regional and national fame. In “Sentinel,” Hood uses the entrance to the carpark as an impromptu gray pumph for the work. At night, there is a warming quality to the empty building, as the work is filled with rich and mellow light, beckoning. Hood elaborates: “I like the idea of collective memory and how now it exists in some photos and the memories of the people who saw it. The light in the building always seems to provoke the question what is it?”

Hood is a part of a young group of New Zealand artists that have all become increasingly concerned with larger themes of alienation and melancholia. “Sentinel” reflects these lonely themes, acting as both post outposts situated in the extended regions of the world (what could be further than New Zealand?) as well as beacon, exuding warmth and light throughout the dark night. “Sentinel” implies a type of sinister surveillance, as well as the idea of standing on guard, or enforcing protection. Hood’s outdoor installation deliberately challenges traditional concepts of permanence and longevity in public sculpture—“Sentinel” is only shown for a couple of months before it is painstakingly dismantled. Hood has deliberately constructed the installation based on this impermanent principle, stating further that the visual impact of the sculpture will only last in people’s memories—“...albeit impermanently, of course.”

Melissa Lam

HONG KONG

THE IKIRO PROJECT:

TAKAHIRO SUZUKI IN HONG KONG

1a space, Hong Kong

Unit 14D, Block C, Cattle Depot

Artist Village, 83 Ma Tau Kok Road, To Kwa Wan, Kun., Hong Kong

Exhibited recently in the form of an installation at Hong Kong’s contemporary 1a space, Suzuki’s participation in Ishiro Murakami’s group show “Strangers,” is the knockout exhibit of an otherwise humdrum show. The premise is based on 4 Japanese based artists arriving as foreigners in Hong Kong and given 3 weeks to create site specific installations.

For over fifteen years now, Japanese artist Takahiro Suzuki has installed more or less ephemeral renditions of Ikiro, obsessive repetitions of the Japanese word for ‘be alive’. Suzuki’s projects began in Tokyo, installations largely consisting of various forms of the word Ikiro written in Japanese characters on rice paper, distributed in a post office in Berlin (2000) or in Washington Square Park in New York (1996). The project has traveled all around the world, varying from city to city, always including the obsessive scrawl of the same two characters, or the same English word interrogating the process of meaning and preservation.

The Ikiro installation at 1a space is particularly moving. It consists of a complicated sheltered room, one only enters when a small blue light appears in the corner. A telephone rings in the corner and the conversation continues in Cantonese. There are awkward passages in some of Flower’s portraits where he attempted to show more than heads and shoulders of his subjects such having the head much to large for the body or faulty perspective. One portrait of a Mr. Richard Wells, who was a Saint John church rector, painted in 1824 has all these faults, yet it is one of the most interesting pictures in the exhibition as, like the paintings of the artist’s wife, he shows a deep knowledge of the sitter. Flower like many artist of the period copied the work of other artists usually from illustrations in popular magazines and hence there are painting in the exhibition of people such as Lord Byron, Jinny Lind and King Louis-Philippe of France. I would like to think that he did these pictures just to keep up with the fashion of the period copied the work of other artists.

Following the closing of the Anthony Flower exhibition in Sackville it travels to the Rooms in St. John, Newfoundland from 16 March to 13 May, the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John room 4 June to 3 September and, finally, to the Confederation Centre of the Arts in Charlottetown, PEI from 23 September to 2 December. If you happen to be in one of these places when this exhibition be sure to catch it. It is worth your time.

Virgil Hammock

NEW ZEALAND

ROBERT HOOD

November 24th, 2007 – February 16th, 2008

Chistchurch Art Gallery

Address: corner of Montreal and Worcester Boulevard, Christchurch, New Zealand

Out of Erewhon” at the Christchurch Art Gallery in New Zealand features thirteen young artists, among them young sculptor Robert Hood who constructs a wooden building situated atop of the entrance to the carpark directly across from the gallery. Hood is the newest recipient of the Oliva Spencer Bower award, a national prize in New Zealand deserving of much regional and national fame. In “Sentinel,” Hood uses the entrance to the carpark as an impromptu gray pumph for the work. At night, there is a warming quality to the empty building, as the work is filled with rich and mellow light, beckoning. Hood elaborates: “I like the idea of collective memory and how now it exists in some photos and the memories of the people who saw it. The light in the building always seems to provoke the question what is it?”

Hood is a part of a young group of New Zealand artists that have all become increasingly concerned with larger themes of alienation and melancholia. “Sentinel” reflects these lonely themes, acting as both post outposts situated in the extended regions of the world (what could be further than New Zealand?) as well as beacon, exuding warmth and light throughout the dark night. “Sentinel” implies a type of sinister surveillance, as well as the idea of standing on guard, or enforcing protection. Hood’s outdoor installation deliberately challenges traditional concepts of permanence and longevity in public sculpture—“Sentinel” is only shown for a couple of months before it is painstakingly dismantled. Hood has deliberately constructed the installation based on this impermanent principle, stating further that the visual impact of the sculpture will only last in people’s memories—“...albeit impermanently, of course.”

Melissa Lam

HONG KONG

THE IKIRO PROJECT:

TAKAHIRO SUZUKI IN HONG KONG

1a space, Hong Kong

Unit 14D, Block C, Cattle Depot

Artist Village, 83 Ma Tau Kok Road, To Kwa Wan, Kun., Hong Kong

Exhibited recently in the form of an installation at Hong Kong’s contemporary 1a space, Suzuki’s participation in Ishiro Murakami’s group show “Strangers,” is the knockout exhibit of an otherwise humdrum show. The premise is based on 4 Japanese based artists arriving as foreigners in Hong Kong and given 3 weeks to create site specific installations.

For over fifteen years now, Japanese artist Takahiro Suzuki has installed more or less ephemeral renditions of Ikiro, obsessive repetitions of the Japanese word for ‘be alive’. Suzuki’s projects began in Tokyo, installations largely consisting of various forms of the word Ikiro written in Japanese characters on rice paper, distributed in a post office in Berlin (2000) or in Washington Square Park in New York (1996). The project has traveled all around the world, varying from city to city, always including the obsessive scrawl of the same two characters, or the same English word interrogating the process of meaning and preservation.

The Ikiro installation at 1a space is particularly moving. It consists of a complicated sheltered room, one only enters when a small blue light appears in the corner. A telephone rings in the corner and the conversation continues in Cantonese.
BOOK REVIEWS

AUDREY NIFFENEGGER:
The Three Incestuous Sisters

Published by Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York
www.abramsbooks.com
Can $38.95

Whether it is true or not that a picture is worth a thousand words, it was exactly what happened with Audrey Niffenegger's book project. What began as a literary endeavour, soon turned into an art album, as the words slowly gave way to the images, disappearing from the pages one by one. Maybe that's why the pages are not numbered, for the words are still finding their place. Or maybe because this is truly a work of art, a collection of colour plates, achtint images of great sophistication and power of expression. With an elegant economy of means, Niffenegger creates illustrations that resemble the colour planes of the Nabi, in solid, muted tones. The artist chose the format to reflect the quiet sophistication of Japanese prints, telling a poignant story of siblings rivalry in breathtaking, static images. The players are caught in emotional moments, suspended in fear or anguish, struggling with inner confusion. Their faces remain expressionless; everything is in the gestures, the theatrical dance of bodies and limbs. Niffenegger's achtints are like visual haikus, so simple yet so complex, and so strangely mesmerizing. An air of mystery permeates these works, and the laconic phrases, at times but a word or two, barely hint at the turmoil hidden behind the half-closed eyes of the heroines. Each colour plate stands on its own, a story onto itself, and together they weave a tale as old as the world, with dimensions of a Greek tragedy. Niffenegger's fantastic imagination creates unique, surreal compositions, as when representing one of the sister's headaches as a flock of birds pulling at her hair. A child yet to be born floats in a starry firmament like an embryonic astronaut. The book, with its dark trappings evokes our common childhood, its fears and magic, drawing from some Jungian collective unconscious, speaking in a language we all understand. "This is a book of my heart, a fourteen-year labour of love," says the author in an afterword, and that uncommon, gentle persistence shows in every place. There is nothing to add and nothing to subtract, and the sparse text accompanying the illustrations becomes yet another graphic accent. The meaning is all in the pictures that call for an equally uncommon appreciation.

Dorota Kozinska

Old wine in new botdes, but what a bottle! Simon Schama's Power of Art refreshes discourse, and an historical view of art, doing this with the paraphernalia, and lingo of our times. Rembrandt, for instance, is compared to an E-Bay addict, and the list of media and Hollywood metaphors goes on and on. This is discourse on steroids, post-historical reconstruction according to the new conservative agenda, as art, we are told, has power. What kind of power? Whose? Why? Such questions are conjured up by Schama's spin cycle hyperbole, but what is ultimately in the wash.

As Picasso once stated, "Art is a lie which makes you realize the truth." and therein is the rub. Indeed it is this sensitivity to the mind set of our times that makes Schama a particularly skilful vulgarizateur of art. His best success Landscape and Memory word tome captured the imagination of a far broader public than usual for art, and this in an era where new media, and computer generated this and that are drawing all the kudos... Art may be a circus these days, but it still requires its interpreters. In this fascinating book Schama, who is a Professor of Art History at Columbia University, sometime culture critic for The New Yorker and essayist for The Guardian, puts a spin on everything, but the real game is the word play, not the facts, events, personalities being brought back into being. Enthusiasm is Schama's best suit and he wears it well. We learn of Rembrandt's courage in the face of rejection of the commission Claudius Civilis during his final years, his consummate self portrait in the face of despair is truly a dialogue with history itself, rather than the mundane patrons, and powers that be. The same goes for Bernini. Schama captures this way... "Before Bernini, sculpture's preoccupation had been with immortality (...) Bernini took the task the Latin for their usual condition of "standing" - out of statues." Simon Schama's Power of Art deals with eight art world personages from the pantheon in all... Caravaggio (Painting gets physical), Bernini The miracle worker), Rembrandt (Rough stuff in the halls of the rich), David (airbrushing the Revolution), Turner (Painting up a storm), Van Gogh (Painting from inside the head), Picasso (Modern art goes political) and Rothko (The Music of Beyond in a city of glitter). The titles are as alluring as a Slushie! The weakness of popularizing is likewise its strength... over-simplification and caricatures of meaning result. They draw you in, then leave you standing... Interpretation makes way for the power of word play, for and of itself. Sometimes Schama takes it all too far as when Rembrandt's nudes are seen to be "symphonies of cellulite" Or Van Gogh's famous A Pair of Shoes (1887)..."The boots were an emblematic self-portrait f the pilgrim still tramping that long, lonely road between earth and heaven - only now that he had abandoned formal religion, Van Gogh was after a heaven here on earth." Art does have a relation to power, and much of history is forgotten adulterated by the powers that be. Regardless of the wordspake this book is a great read!

John K. Grande
BURNT OFFERINGS

WANG TIANDE: REDOLENT OF INCENSE
Galerie Han Art
4209 Sainte-Catherine Ouest
Montreal
Tél.: 514 876-9278
www.galleryhanart.com
Du 8 mars au 7 avril 2007

The superior man bends his attention to what is radical. That being established, all practical courses naturally grow up.

— Confucius (551-479 B.C.)

How to move forward when anchored in a centuries old tradition? How to break free on wings laden with overwhelming expectations? Wang Tiande did it with head bowed in respect for his ancient culture, and with his eyes set high on the firmament of contemporary art. Without forsaking traditional Chinese tools of brush, ink and paper, he has transcended established parameters—both conceptual and physical—creating a body of work that is at once a testament to one man’s unwavering vision and spirit of commitment, and an illustration of the astounding changes transforming China, including its art.

Tiande’s use of Chinese paper has taken the ancient material into a contemporary realm, presenting echoes of traditional art in a new form, punctuating as it were this important expansion without losing touch with the past. Deeply rooted in the mastery and finesse of Chinese aesthetic, Tiande produces series of works that speak a sophisticated and unbearably subtle visual vocabulary, each a transformation in both time and space. He is working against a backdrop of profound discussions on the place of art in modern China, and the pull of tradition is powerful. Yet with artistic diplomacy, Tiande’s transforming process is taking place with great fluidity and avoidance of dramatic gestures. His spectacular Chinese Garment series is both an homage to traditional Chinese dress, and an evocation of the spirit of the future in a pattern of seared symbols. Delicate and monochromatic, Tiande’s paper dresses were born of a simple and most unusual process; one that was both intentional and accidental. While the format of the works had as its matrix the straightforward shape of the dress, they were actually sewn in a factory by young women wearing similar garments—the rice paper they were made of, however, was subjected to a more sophisticated treatment. The lettering in Tiande’s works is achieved with ash gently and patiently dripped onto it, the words forming like burnt offerings. It is fascinating to imagine the contemplation involved in the process, the controlled physicality of the gesture, the smoke and the scent, all prerequisites of an altar.

The sacred is further accentuated in the Digital Series, where vertical sheets of paper recall ancient scrolls, and whose title has little to do with technology—although the connection is undoubtedly fortuitous—and all aptly to do with the digit, hand-made as they are. The same method is used to produce these works, with two sheets of Chinese paper forming a beguiling three-dimensional space. Without the aid of help this time, Tiande paints and burns ancient poetry in barely decipherable symbols onto the paper that gently undulates, shifting and altering the image. These works, like the previous series, are the young artist’s continued statement speaking of respect for the past, for calligraphy in this case, and for the importance of finding a place for it in the ever-changing, globalized reality.

Few contemporary artists invest their creative process with such complex and difficult issues, as do those in modern China. Tiande’s brilliant fusion of the old with the new, combined with his involvement in the intellectual and academic discussion of the day, imbues his art with a unique spirit. Beyond the unavoidable analysis that his works provoke, lays the magical realm of beauty and aesthetic, and in this, too, Tiande has no equal. The scrolls in Digital Series present art at its finest, perfectly balanced, almost classical in its geometric, traditional form, teasing the eye with the seared edges of Chinese symbols through which other fragments of verse appear, ever so briefly. The texture of the paper, enclosed behind glass like a frail relic, offers its own universe, and the whole rests in quiet harmony, the mark of Tiande.

Dorota Kozinska