Vie des arts

English Report

Virgil Hammock, Brian Grison, David Garneau, John K. Grande, Dorota Kozinska, Lori Beaman, Sophie Pilipczuk et Ji-Yoon Han

Volume 52, numéro 211, été 2008

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/58800ac

Citer ce document

I have forgotten what a great photographer Yousuf Karsh was. The photographs in this exhibition are, in a word, stunning. Karsh was best known as a portrait photographer. His 1941 image of Winston Churchill is one of the best-known photographs of the past century. The industrial images in this exhibition are a different matter and represent an unusual period in the artist's career. In 1951 Ford of Canada commissioned Karsh to photograph its Windsor, Ontario operations. The results of this commission, and two commissions from steel companies in Canada and the United States, are the core of this exhibition. Yousuf Karsh: Industrial Images originated at the Art Gallery of Windsor and was curated by Cassandra Getty who also contributed an essay to the beautiful illustrated catalogue which accompanies the exhibition.

So what's so good about these fifty year old plus photographs by a photographer whose work is thought by many critics today to be passé? Outside of technical brilliance it is the philosophy of the artist that takes this work out of the common place and puts it into the realm of real art. What he has done was to make heroes, icons, out of common working middle class men. He has done so without a hint of contrivance or irony. The fifties and early sixties of twentieth century Canada and the United States were a high point of industrial Capitalism. Indeed it was a paternal Capitalism on the part of both employers and unions. It was a Capitalism that Karsh truly believed in with all his heart and the photographs in this exhibition are a testament to his beliefs. Karsh is quoted in the catalogue as saying: “I have sought to portray the dignity, the pride of workmanship, the sense of independence I have found in these steelmen who work with their brains and their hands in a free economy under a democratic form of government. . . . They had a joy in working which transcended even the very excellent pay they received at the end of each week.” It is hard to imagine an artist today making such a statement with a straight face.

There are two photographs in the Atlas Steel series, a Canada steel mill since closed, in the exhibition of a worker named George Emerson that are good examples of Karsh’s industrial work. First, they are two wonderful examples of ‘straight’ photography; Karsh often doctored his photographs such as sandwiching two negatives together to form one image and many of the photographs in the exhibition are doctored photographs. The photographs of Emerson are the results of what Karsh saw and shot. Second, and this is common to almost every image in the exhibition, the subject is individualized and given great dignity by the photographer. Most industrial photography of the period paid little heed of individual workers. They were cogs in the machine, part and parcel of the company. Not so with Karsh, he saw the workers as heroes and archetypes of the North American dream. George Emerson stands tall, the tools of his trade in his hands, in front of the machine that he masters. Every detail is crystal clear. The lighting, as in all of the photographer’s work, is theatrical. Photographs such as these two need to be printed large, and they are, to mirror the heroic nature of the images.

Every worker in every photograph in the exhibition is identified by name. The captions list their age, their ethnic background, hobbies, if they were married or single, their whole history. Most were your average working Joe, but in these photographs everyone is a hero. Granted there is not a single woman to be found in these photographs, but this was the 1950s. The women who worked so ably in these same plants during the war had been replaced by the men returning home from war and had been forced back to their conventional roles as wives and mothers, but that's another story for another time. There is a need to look at this exhibition in its historic context and the 1950s are not the present.

Ethnic background was important to Karsh, as he was an Armenian immigrant who came to Canada as a fifteen year old in 1925. (2008 is the 100th anniversary of Karsh’s birth.) He believed in the mix of Canada's people and that anything was possible for those who worked hard to fulfill their dreams and this was certain the case with his own dreams. Within a few years of his arrival in Canada he was its most famous photographer and one of the most famous in world shortly after and all this after a short period of study with an uncle, George Nakash, and American photographer John Gruen. He was, to put it mildly, a quick study. Karsh discovered his trademark lighting by doing theatre photography in Ottawa in the early 1930s. The theatre taught him the drama that could be achieved with directional lighting. He became a master of multi lighting, which he used to good effect in his industrial photographs.

In a brief period of less than ten years, 1950 to 1959, Karsh did almost all of his industrial photography. Indeed, the three projects, the two steel mills and Ford Windsor plant are a majority of the work. If he had done nothing more than the Ford project, it would still stand as a milestone in the history of the genre. When I look a photograph such as Laurence Larsh 1951 Plant No. 2 End of Motor Assembly or Gou Crapper Putting Trim Cord on Rear Window Trim Line No. 1 I realize that a time has passed in our history and it will not be repeated and I believe that we are the poor for it.

Yousuf Karsh; Industrial Images ends its tour at Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, in a showing from May 8th to June 29th of this year. It is a fit location for an exhibition that honours working class people.

Virgil Hammock
The tide of Caleb Speller's exhibition refers to the three core issues of his life and art: the history of his body of work, his present creative self, and the inevitable transition of his physical and artistic self into history. This trinity will be embodied in everything he brings to and produces during his six-week residency in the installation he will construct through his work in the LAB. Walking around the installation and watching Speller work, the viewer will have entered the inner sanctum and history of the artist's creative life.

The installation occupies three walls of the small gallery. On the right hand wall, display shelves represent Speller's daily collecting of urban litter that is attractive and useful for his work; flattened pop cans, broken combs, bits of packaging. This collecting and displaying symbolizes his history and his relationship with the world.

Secondly, Speller himself, and the works of art he produces during the exhibition, become metaphors of his life and creativity as an inevitable link between his past and future. Against the gallery's end wall, viewers will observe an artist's worktable, drawings and materials, drawings pinned to the wall, and most important, the artist himself, working. While Speller is unsure what he will produce during his residency, or how he will respond to the visitors watching over his shoulder as he works, he nevertheless recognizes the magical role of the viewer in this process.

The third element in the installation is about a dozen photographs of the clothed, seemingly dead, body of a young adult male lying in the middle distance of various settings: schoolyard, supermarket, parking lot. These are speculative projections of the artist—reduced to a kind of litter—in his afterlife.

These simultaneously present and speculative photographs of Speller's end will prompt viewers to participate in the artist's art-making as an act of resistance. Like both the guardian angel and the angel of death, the viewer watches over Speller as he works in the gallery, just as other viewers will watch over his after-life.

However, the viewers' continuing presence in the world after the death of the artist also represents the real agenda of art in the world. Art is not for the artist as much as it is for the viewer. While the artist might struggle to remain infinitely creative and alive in the present, only the viewer is endless in the future.

In an attempt to reside exclusively in the present creative moment, Speller compulsively draws on anything, "just to keep it going," as he told me. To stop is to slip towards the future—the end of it all. This partially explains the seamless slippage among the different media and genres Speller employs, drawing as drawing, as painting, as design, collage, figurines, bowls, assemblages, installations, scrapbooks, even text, all produced in a frenzy of messy, funny-serious scribbling and doodling that reflects the burning comet of his physical and artistic being.

I feel as if I'm recording the days of my life, making something with each day to help myself feel like I'm using up my time... I see my work as some sort of partially written book made with pages from other books. When I have the opportunity to put a room together in a gallery... this is when the story becomes strangely written. It's an interesting way for me to hang my artwork.

Speller exhibits his whole life—using up his time—in this installation-performance. This could be an uncomfortable encounter for viewers, who were not Speller's physical life and history not already overwhelming with such ironically delightful drawings and other things.

Brian Grison
SASKATOON, SASK.

CITIES:

JOHN HARTMAN

Kenderdine Art Gallery
51 Campus Drive,
University of Saskatchewan,
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7N 5A8
Telephone: 306-966-4571
April 4 to June 27, 2008

Oil paint is coloured goo. It must be counted as one of human culture's major achievements that this gummy substance can be thinned and disciplined into the shape of a picture that can move us to tears, to delight, to thought, even action. From a painter's point-of-view, paintings divide into two categories. There are pictures that trick the viewer into seeing through paint to a scene, and there are paintings that, while they may coalesce into a resemblance, never let us forget their viscous material nature. There is a certain tense, almost participatory pleasure that comes from looking at paintings that is missing in our relationship with pictures. Rather than being astonished by mastery and veracity, when dealing with a painting you are in the trenches, vicariously sharing in the artist's struggle to rescue meaningful arrangement from muddy chaos.

In "Cities," John Hartman balances picture and painting. His eighteen large canvases are bird's-eye-view cityscapes: great metropolises—New York, London, Glasgow, Toronto, Vancouver—and smaller cities, Calgary, Halifax, and really small places—Owen Sound and Parr Sound. Most are ports. Buildings aggregate on rocks like coral and seem as fragile. While designed to evoke these places, the works do not picture them quite as a camera does. The scenes seen remembered, imagined and reconstructed from a number of references. I frequently saw people looking into the scrapes, cloths and smears for specific addresses. They told their companions about which cities they visited and how this or that painting captured a sense of the place but that things were wrong, or not quite as they remembered. Hartman is an unreliable witness of the actual but a poet of the visceral.

As paintings for painters, "Cities" is an embarrassment of riches. The huge, writhing Vancouver and Halifax triptychs are sublime, and Manhattan astounds. From a distance, these paintings describe space with the usual formal devices, overlap and a very loose analytic perspective. However, looking at the painting up close or from the side reveals a complex topography of thin and built-up paint—up to several centimetres in places. Most delightfully, these encrustations do not only appear in the foreground but often appear in the background. This normally flattens the images, but Hartman corrects this with atmosphere perspective. The works are battlegrounds where pictorial logic meets painterly desire.

I oscillate between elation and melancholy with these works. On the one hand, this is bravado painting. The paint is built up and demolished like a continuously renovating city. Some parts are tamed into place; other passages resist capture and nearly flee form. Some of the excited brush and palette knife work wrinkles with self-delighted confidence. Other moments face agitated uncertainty; they would rather not be part of a building. On the other hand, these are pictures. Their subjects are cities without people, the built environment's relationship to nature. This may lead viewers to an ecological interpretation. Some may see Hartman's cities as a cancer, others, may see an indivisibility between human nature and Nature. The painterliness of these pictures suggests that our substance is not so different from the material of the rest of the environment; we are from common clay. And yet, because his gaze floats above the fray, cool and remote, it creates a separation that is both elating and melancholic.

It reminds me of Leonardo da Vinci's late "Deluge" drawings. From his immobile and protected peak, Leonardo draws pictures of imagined natural disasters ruining the settlements below. Through his eyes we are both a part of and apart from the world.

David Garneau
Canadian artist Kai McCall spins quite a yarn in his curious compositions. A contemporary surrealist, he creates paintings impossible to place stylistically and as challenging to decipher.

His recent works continue to focus on the narrative, enigmatic as it may be, and always with myriad cultural and literary undercurrents. From British poetry to 17th Century painting, McCall assembles styles and personages into one-of-a-kind tableaux. They bring to mind the work of contemporary German artist Neo Rauch, whose monumental paintings owe a lot to the influence of Surrealists Giorgio de Chirico and René Magritte.

As in McCall’s compositions, incongruous encounters take place between characters from different historical eras, held against confusing fragments of architectural elements and without a clear narrative thread.

But while Rauch’s preoccupations seem to be as much with personal history as with the question of industrial alienation, McCall is clearly delving into the subconscious in his latest works. There are no specific stories behind the strange gatherings of personages; the image evolves by itself, its narrative as mysterious to the artist as to the viewer. This has allowed for a new flexibility in arranging the various elements: human, architectural, organic, bound by the ubiquitous surreal note. There are no specific stories behind the strange gatherings of personages; the image evolves by itself, its narrative as mysterious to the artist as to the viewer.

The historical and literary references are this time secondary to the strange drama taking place in McCall’s canvases. In Your Friend Little Bear, Tyrolean trekkers converse beside an enormous fallen tree stump that seems to be morphing into a soft bulbous matter, a red snowplough idles in a garage behind them. The mountain scene also includes a bunch of fluttering balloons, and the title of the painting offers little in way of explanation.

It is more about composition, colour and form, coming together, the figurative elements used as pictorial vehicles. The meaning is not what the artist sought in this work.

One will be hard pressed to find it in *My Struggle With The Worm* as well, and although the worm, or something resembling one, figures in the composition, it does little to help decipher this surreal battle between a romantic young man and the weird creature. It brought to mind a painting by Frida Kahlo, in which she regurgitates similar, disturbingly organic plasma.

There are, however, no morbid notions in McCall’s paintings. His palette is oddly muted, often recalling the tones of 1950’s illustrations and hand-coloured postcards. The bucolic scenery that serves as backdrop further confirms the reading of the painting.

With echoes of Tiepolo and a hint of Velasquez, McCall’s *Drop* is monumental tableau resembling old religious paintings. A heavenly stream is trickling into an outstretched hand of a young man, his eyes raised to the firmament in rapture. The curious oval backdrop in this master composition is an example of the artist’s surreal handling of the landscape, a giant overpass warping into a domed ceiling.

McCall finds his models, both architectural and human, in clippings from newspapers and magazines; visual notations that stimulate his imagination, and sooner or later find their way into his unusual scenarios, or what he calls “illusion of a story.”

The sense of false drama is particularly compelling in works such as *Lemon Tree* and *If I Was A Puppy Dog*, both limited to two players engaged in intriguing visual dialogues.

In the latter, a small boy is kneeling in front of a man in a suit standing on a sofa, a giant cushion poised above his head. There is an uncanny resemblance in the feature of the two personages, and the Freudian undertones are impossible to ignore.

That same sense of unease permeates the seemingly innocent picnic scene in *Lemon Tree*, where a young woman in a summer dress is being observed from above by a man leaning against a pickup truck behind her.

She is twisting to look at him, a lemon in her hand, others scattered beside her. Her crimson dress focuses the eye, but attention is inadvertently drawn to where it slides up along her thighs, revealing just a blur, perversely more intriguing.

The man is featureless, the tension instead captured in his unnaturally nonchalant stance and the painfully twisted trunk of the tree next to him. The sense of hidden violence in these works is never brought to fruition, mitigated by the painterly composition and the flat, muted palette.

It is as if the artist was not prepared to sharpen the lines and the colour, to confront the unconscious vision that lies just beneath the surface of his paintings. McCall’s battle with proverbial demons has not yet reached its peak, and when it does, the results could be spectacular.

Dorota Kozinska
MONTREAL

RAFAEL SOTTOLICHI

S'ÉTRANGER

Galerie Orange
81 Saint-Paul Street E.
Montreal, QC
Tel.: 514 396-6670
www.galerieorange.com

The free-for-all that is today's art scene cannot be easy for the artist. Anything goes, while the creative mind struggles to remain viable without the guidance of an established trend. From classical to abstract, from conceptual to surreal, the enormous individualization that is the mark of our times makes navigating the art world a daunting task, both for the artist and the viewer.

As for the critic, what is called for is an open mind and willingness to set expectations aside.

Such attitude proved the perfect recipe for viewing an exhibition of recent works by Montreal artist Rafael Sottolichio, which held a number of surprises. Divided into distinctly separate series of works, including a collection of small format paintings done specifically for the exhibition, incorporating, extending as it were, one corner of the gallery, it showcased Sottolichio's original talent.

Versatile and prolific, he bases his art on photography, which in his creative process substitutes for drawing. It is also the gateway into an understanding of the world of media and technology that has so irreversibly altered everyday reality and our relationship with it.

Sottolichio takes the subject head-on, exploring the plastic potential of this kaleidoscopic landscape of symbols and data, of shifting images and virtual spaces. This is his world, and his attempt at recording it through results in works that are fresh and curiously familiar.

The latter sensation comes from Sottolichio's use of actual spaces, photographic images of interiors and urban scenes which he transposes onto canvas before transforming it into a painting.

The painterly aspect of his works is particularly intriguing and hints at the artist's yearning for abstract expression. This "desire to paint" manifests itself in the colourful magma oozing, spilling into otherwise realistic scenery; in the bright pop-art specks that litter the steps of an escalator, in the grotesque, Baconish figure suspended against a giant industrial crane.

Galerie Orange
4209 St. Catherine West
Westmount, QC
Tel.: 514 876-9278
www.hanartgallery.com
May 17 to June 15, 2008

An exhibition of sculpture is always a treat if only for the pleasure of interacting with a three-dimensional work of art. It is also a rare experience, as contemporary sculpture remains less marketable than other visual arts. This does not in any way imply a paucity of contemporary sculptors, and the exhibition of Belgian artist Anne-Sophie Morelle at Han Art Gallery is a case in point.

A figurative artist focused on the human condition, she produces bronze sculptures at once classical and contemporary.

Educated in the European academic tradition, Morelle soon developed her own style under the critical and ultimately transforming guidance of the Belgian contemporary stone and marble sculptor, Philippe Desomer. His avant-garde approach to sculpture encouraged the artist to expand the parameters of her work, releasing an inner vision that found its ultimate expression in sculptures of quiet formality and profound emotional component.

Anne-Sophie Morelle

Han Art
4209 St. Catherine West
Westmount, QC
Tel.: 514 876-9278
www.hanartgallery.com
May 17 to June 15, 2008

Colorful, empty phantom silhouettes of passers-by float in a shopping mall interior in Sottolichio's Escapes Publics/Public Spaces series, their presence as fleeting as the flickering neon light casting no shadows. They resemble Bruce Nauman's neon figures, and echo the American artist's notions of body and identity, and the phenomena of spatial awareness.

Human alienation in the face of technology takes a different shape, literally, in several large canvases where the photographic underpainting is subverted by shape and colour of the composition. The figures forming a crowd of people waiting at a train station in Où êtes-vous?/Where are you? are definitely corporeal albeit not entirely human. Suspended as if in a matrix, they are featureless, one-dimensional, dare one say... virtual.

A giant industrial crane, seen head-on, exploring the plastic potential of this kaleidoscopic landscape of symbols and data, of shifting images and virtual spaces. This is his world, and his attempt at recording it through results in works that are fresh and curiously familiar.

The latter sensation comes from Sottolichio's use of actual spaces, photographic images of interiors and urban scenes which he transposes onto canvas before transforming it into a painting.

The painterly aspect of his works is particularly intriguing and hints at the artist's yearning for abstract expression. This "desire to paint" manifests itself in the colourful magma oozing, spilling into otherwise realistic scenery; in the bright pop-art specks that litter the steps of an escalator, in the grotesque, Baconish figure suspended against a giant industrial crane.
They bring to mind the artwork of German Expressionist sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck, and there are indeed unusual parallels in the art and life of both artists despite their separate epochs.

Like Lehmbruck, Morelle first worked in the medical field, which at one point saw her posted to Zaïre with an NGO team on an anti-polio campaign.

What she saw and experienced marked her and echoes in many of her pieces.

Working in a hospital during World War I, Lehmbruck, too, witnessed much suffering and pain, all of which later found expression in his original sculptures. Beginning in a traditional manner, he created his figures as a more reflective stance, a different creative approach to the unforgiving working conditions described in his wartime experiences.

In Faire c'est défaire, the couple is not so much embracing as leaning into each other, with the man gripping the woman's arms as her back melds into him with childlike trust. They are both tragically vulnerable, their stooped bodies roughly moulded, tattered somehow, painfully incomplete. A hint of dress anchors them in some form of physical reality, but they remain anonymous, alone in their silent drama.

A very different universe is offered by Le guépard, an imposing sculpture both in format and expression. The unusual coupling of a young child and a giant cheetah combines sculptural and narrative elements with a particular virtuosity and sensitivity. The roughly hewn body of the cat juxtaposed with a soft, smooth treatment of the child produces a visual and tactile experience unique to this medium.

It is reminiscent of an equally incongruous pairing in Barry Hangan's bronze sculpture, Cougar and Horse, in the entrance hall of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The smooth, classical treatment of the giant steed is in joyful contrast to the roughly moulded body of the cat perched on its back.

Morelle's classical training finds its way into several single figures, whether of a standing boy flapping an antique kites, or a giant blue angel of Gothic proportions, where her use of patina adds a subtle colour note.

The aesthetic changes in several sculptures in which the artist aims at a more realistic rendition, but devoid of an emotional component, works like La Grande Dame simply fall flat and verge dangerously on pretension.

It is when she departs from the formal and the narrative that Morelle truly finds her voice. In a smaller piece, Grace, featuring a seated figure with legs extended in front of it, the artist seems to have suspended her work, abandoning it in its unfinished, primordial state. This is the most abstract of the sculptures in this show and the most powerful, its barely-formed human shape speaking volumes. Without a defined compositional context, all that is left is emotion encapsulated, a prelude to a new visual dimension.

Morelle would do well to continue on this path.

Dorota Kozinska

The images are photographs of, predictably, fish. The fish are dead and posed perfectly on beautiful porcelain, on wax paper, and with each other. These images are simultaneously stunningly beautiful, macabre, and sometimes humourous. The image "Sea urchins are sometimes eaten with a mother of pearl spoon" blends the orange-pink innards of a smashed open sea urchin (accompanied by two urchins who remain unscathed) with the pearly rose hues of shrimp (heads on). Reminiscent of the Dutch still life tradition, these images convey both violence and calm. Unlike that tradition, there is a critical edge and social commentary in Wonnacott's work that is absent from their 17th century precursors.

This work was inspired by Wonnacott's shift in diet. In the front cover of I remember and I forget, he states, "At the beginning of 2007 I was obese. I realized that I had to improve my health and I changed my diet and lifestyle. I monitored the caloric value of everything I ate and consumed a diet heavy in fish". In an interview, Wonnacott commented that he was "amazed that I could command the deaths of these creatures from thousands of miles away". His work constitutes a sort of requiem for fish and raises more serious questions about the ways in which the creatures with whom we share this earth are served up for our pleasure.

The opportunity to subscribe to The Fish List is still open. Email the artist at justinwo@rogers.com

Lori Beaman
There were 12 people in the expedition, including the two Hind brothers, two crown surveyors, five French-Canadian voyageurs and three Innu guides. The party got lost in the early stages of the journey, and had it not been for Domenique, Chief of the Montagnais of Lake Ashewanipi (who happened to be travelling with his family by canoe along the Moisie River), the mission would have failed.

Though Natives and Innu did not use maps, the perfect knowledge of navigating their environment enabled them, nevertheless, to draw detailed ones, surprising European explorers from Cartier and Champlain down to Hind. Examples of such maps are very rare. There is a copy of an original birch bark map from 1822 on display.

Two exhibitions currently share the exhibition space of Dalhousie Art Gallery. Defiant Beauty: William Hind in the Labrador Peninsula and Ursula Johnson: The Urban Aboriginal Guide to Halifax, NS

The Urban Aboriginal Guide to Halifax, NS as a large (5 x 9 ft) hand drawn map of the city to be mounted on the wall, and a guidebook to finding traditional foods (rabbit, eel, local produce), lodging, spiritual places (parks and cemetaries), historical and cultural sites and tax free shopping. The piece is cheeky and Johnson turns the tables by making herself "the immigrant to a new land and the coloniser of an existing culture." Funny, when you think that first Nations cultures have been here for over 10,000 years and those original European colonizers were really the first immigrants. Little coloured flags, red for culture, white for spiritual, green for food, riddle the map and looseورو-ecro-associations of geography lessons, battlefields and police investigations float up in my mind. The legend is big on Ursula Johnson's map, the colours punchy. Green spaces punctuate the city. The water of the harbour is deep blue. Dykhuis has a long history with maps in his own practice. "Every map has a built-in point of view. Look at what is in the center, what is included and what isn't." Johnson offers a new perspective of the city, one that is both refreshing and useful. These two exhibitions are a part of the citywide exhibition series Creative Diversity: Artistic Perspectives on Immigration to Canada and will be on display until April 27.

Sophie Pilipczuk

HALIFAX, NS

DEFIANT BEAUTY: WILLIAM HIND IN THE LABRADOR PENINSULA AND URSULA JOHNSON THE URBAN ABORIGINAL GUIDE TO HALIFAX, NS

Dalhousie Art Gallery
6101 University Ave.
Halifax, NS
www.artgallery.dal.ca
14 March to 27 April 2008

HALIFAX, NS

Two exhibitions currently share the exhibition space of Dalhousie Art Gallery. Defiant Beauty: William Hind in the Labrador Peninsula chronologically documents the journey undertaken in 1861 by Henry Hind to assess resources and the Aboriginal people of the Labrador Peninsula. Henry's younger brother William, an artist, made over 150 drawings and paintings of the voyage. Hind alternates mid-range, wide views and close-ups in his depictions. The use of a camera lucida perhaps affected the way he found his views and chose to crop his subjects. The result is a contemporary feel. Peppered amongst the works are detailed and insightful comments in both French and English by Gilbert Gagnon whose passion for the subject brings the expedition to life.

London's Tate Modern and the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris have collaborated together to present a retrospective of the mischievous mistress of pure geometric form and the implacable poetess of sculpture, Louise Bourgeois.

From one exhibition to another, I kept coming upon the same pieces: in wood, bronze, carefully threaded like a string of pearls upon steely stalks—jubilation, obstinacy; Femmes-Maison, Enfant poignard, Quadratine; sky blue, marble, latex, fury; installations caged beneath a grid and those that trap the visitor underneath their tent; the spiders—monumental, exquisite; Passages dangereux, Precieux Liquides; old clothing, the fabric sewn and re-sewn, threadbare tapestry; drawings hanging on the walls, rosy spirals in oil-stick or mischievous Sainte Sébastienne woven of lead and sensuality.

How to organize such a retrospective? Both exhibitions chose to follow the risk-free path of chronology of works—with some exceptions, nevertheless, notably by exhibiting Cell (Choisy) in the first room, while the piece is not from the artist's early production. Such prominent placing of this sculpture can only be justified by the link between the Femmes-Maison painted in the 1940's and the marble sculpture representing the Bourgeois family's house in Choisy-le-Roi, which enchrones the Cell.

LONDON, PARIS, NEW YORK

LOUISE BOURGEOIS RETROSPECTIVE

Tate Modern (London)
October 2007 - January 2008
Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris)
March 5 – June 2, 2008
Guggenheim Museum (New York)
June 27 – September 28, 2008
Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles)
Fall 2008
Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden (Washington D.C.)
Spring 2009

London's Tate Modern and the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris have collaborated together to present a retrospective of the mischievous mistress of pure geometric form and the implacable poetess of sculpture, Louise Bourgeois.

From one exhibition to another, I kept coming upon the same pieces: in wood, bronze, carefully threaded like a string of pearls upon steely stalks—jubilation, obstinacy; Femmes-Maison, Enfant poignard, Quarantaine; sky blue, marble, latex, fury; installations caged beneath a grid and those that trap the visitor underneath their tent; the spiders—monumental, exquisite; Passages dangereux, Precieux Liquides; old clothing, the fabric sewn and re-sewn, threadbare tapestry; drawings hanging on the walls, rosy spirals in oil-stick or mischievous Sainte Sébastienne woven of lead and sensuality.

How to organize such a retrospective? Both exhibitions chose to follow the risk-free path of chronology of works—with some exceptions, nevertheless, notably by exhibiting Cell (Choisy) in the first room, while the piece is not from the artist's early production. Such prominent placing of this sculpture can only be justified by the link between the Femmes-Maison painted in the 1940's and the marble sculpture representing the Bourgeois family's house in Choisy-le-Roi, which enchrones the Cell.
The viewer is further informed, that the reference is to an old water reservoir in New York. But let us resist for a moment the temptation to accept this explanation, let's open our eyes... However imposing, the piece is not hostile; its rounded shape hints at a human form, even maternal. Its seemingly square silhouette is round, inviting. Its structure speaks not of enclosure but on the contrary, offers a way of escape through its punctured roof.

Its heavy laminated form ought to be quaking silently underneath the fissures and the patina, but instead the undulation of the concentric circles on the surface of the wood, the delicate variations in hue, carry but the echo of the material's indentations.

Engraved in rusty metal above our heads read the words: ART IS A GUARANTY OF SANITY. This is the chamber of the artist-architect—announced by this dilapidated sign, like a vestige of better times, that hasn't yet succumbed to the rain's erosion.

Ji Yoon Han


The visitor is invited to weave the artistic with the personal—the original work, and the origin of the piece. Moreover, in London as in Paris, the cebounography of the artist was particularly highlighted, taking up entire walls, as if to impress the notion that a work of art must be seen through the prism of the artist's private life.

Certainly, she herself has contributed to this misunderstanding, by constantly bringing up her childhood marred by her father. Yet she writes: The important thing is not where my motivation comes from, but how it maintains.

Couldn't we stop seeing her work as merely an autobiographical outlet?

Perhaps, to quote Robert Storr, we need to be reminded of the banality of the evidence that "to understand fiction or poetry, it is essential not to confuse the 'I' in the text with its author."

Storr also remarked that "if indeed the extraordinary production (of Louise Bourgeois) has finally received its full and complete recognition, one should all the more separate it from her charismatic persona, the short cuts that stood for a description of her life, and the motivations behind her vivacious narrative."

We should look instead.

A cask, immense. Or rather a barrel—rising upward like a bristling barricade, from which, seeping between soft, scented wooden planks, run streams of red wine, blood red. At the base one can read its title, Precious Liquids.