

Trigger

Katherine Knight, Sandra Meigs, and Colette Urban are artists whose works critique authoritative and institutional modernism. In Katherine Knight's piece, *Marguerite*, the formal integrity of the sculpture is disrupted by an audio voiceover projecting from within the piece, and in Meigs' work, *Angel Eyes*, pop culture comic book figures unexpectedly painted on a large scale evoke a sense of the ridiculous, commenting ironically on the presumption of the notion of universality present in much modernist work. The temporality of Colette Urban's performances and the underlying eroticism of *Blind Spot* which implicates each member of the audience individually, shatter expectations of an autonomous, self-contained work of art.

These three artists can also be seen to employ certain elements of critical feminism in their didactic approach to artmaking. Knight's resurrection of the otherwise anonymous life of a nun in *Marguerite* is an informed allusion to the question of the patriarchal tendency to censor many female contributions in history. Meigs' decision to make the central self-portrait panel pink is a self-conscious referencing of femininity and thus affects the point of view of her critical stance. And in all of Urban's performance work, the fact that the performer, herself, is female, is a self-conscious starting point for her social critiques.

In each of their works in this show, their sensual use of materials, their cool manipulation of the elements of theatricality and kitsch and their use of the comic, ironic and quotidian, drawing from dada, surrealism, pop art, *arte povera*, and conceptual art, trigger another level of involvement in the critical discourses of feminism and modernism.

Katherine Knight's installation, *Marguerite*, consists of a black coffin-like beam resting on two columns wedged into a corner of the gallery and containing hidden speakers. The spectator hears a female voice (the artist's) reading her 1981 poem *Marguerite*. The work is based on the true life story of Canada's first unclioistered nun, Marguerite Bourgeoys, 1620 - 1700.

The poem is a detached listing of objects, routines and events which circumscribed Marguerite Bourgeoys' life. In life she is confined within the architecture of daily routine. Knight, not without sadness and some irony, builds her image on the reality that there can be no such thing as an unclioistered nun, a nun who is not sheltered in the ritual of catholic abstinence. Only in death is she transformed; she becomes landscape.

In endless recital the echoing voice lists Marguerite's life, and frees her in her death into a cold winter landscape. Landscape is integral as an image of transformation and of freedom, where what is material takes root and grows into knowledge. In the landscape of Marguerite's death the wedge is transformed into a blackened tree stump after a forest fire: "I am landscape in November: I am forest stump left after fire./I am root black, wet after rain".

Marguerite becomes a metaphorical counterpart to Knight who is using the image to examine one aspect of the ritual and limitations surrounding her self-identity as an artist. The quiet violence of the wedge "Anger is the wedge/ Ache is the seedling" thrusting into the corner is an image of frustration, even defeat. Yet its stasis is suggestive of dignity, perhaps acceptance. The wedge ruptures the architectural integrity of the gallery while at the same time appearing confined by the converging walls.

The wedge seems to be a metaphor for Knight's role as an artist where she attempts to transform known or accepted objects which circumscribe daily life into transformative objects which embody new knowledge. Like the objects she incorporates in her other installations, the wedge, until viewed, is pre-transformative; a mute, ponderous frog-prince. The installation is dormant, incomplete, until the spectator, as catalyst, triggers a "phenomenon of transmutation" (1). Knight's intention is to transcend the physical limitations of the gallery through the spectator who, after experiencing the work carries new knowledge away from the gallery context, into the realm of the everyday. At the same time she offers the possibility that all ordinary things carry potential new meaning.

The inaccessibility of the persona of Marguerite, an seventeenth century nun, is an emblem for the experience of alienation within our contemporary culture. This reference to alienation could also be seen to apply to and comment on a female experience of exclusion from the traditional male history of art, or history in general, where female contributions have often gone unacknowledged. Knight sets up a tension in the work between the spectator's inability to access the persona of Marguerite, and the spectator's simultaneous participatory role. This tension is a disruptive tactic to ensure that the spectator maintains a critical distance from the work.

Sandra Meigs' *Angel Eyes* is a painting running over twenty-four feet long and consisting of six sheets of four by eight foot plexiglass painted in polyester and epoxy resin. It is a metaphorical self-portrait using cartoon-like images of a mosquito face, Persian cat, chick in a plaid beret, woman's head, snail face and a rearing horse. The panels rest on upholstered cushions of different colours and are hung from the ceiling in such a way that they lean out toward the viewer into the gallery space.

Angel Eyes is a piece about looking: about looking at, as well as about being looked at. As a self-portrait the traditional vantage point has been reversed and the spectator is thrust into the usual place of the artist, on stage, under the scrutiny of an audience of various comical creatures. The spectator is not allowed to have a complacent relationship to this piece, but is instead meant to feel slightly intimidated or even threatened by these movie-screen size bug-monsters and alice-in-wonderland beings.

In both the title of Meigs' work *Angel Eyes*, and in the portrait of the dreamy blue-eyed girl, there is a suggestion of placid reverie that is not endorsed by the scale of the work and which introduces another level of tension in the spectator's relationship to the work. This central image of the girl, dressed in pink, with a pink background, who does not return "the gaze", recalls the supposed innocence of comic book stories and childhood. But on such a huge scale it loses its intimacy and the girl seems to become complicit with patriarchal ideology that is associated with

the notion of monumentality. In other words implicit in this work is a critique of a traditional high art stance and its possible complicity in maintaining the patriarchal status quo in the structure of society. As a self-portrait it suggests Meigs' awareness of herself as a female artist working within the structure of the gallery system.

The cushions that the panels rest on suggest Oldenburgian soft pedestals, humorous, at once innocuous ordinary objects foreign in the context of the gallery. Humour is a tactical ingredient in Meigs' work. By being humorous, the work is more readily accessible, but by decontextualizing ordinary images and objects, she questions what really is accessible within a gallery.

Colette Urban uses "performance as a method for questioning social conventions. The performances often address issues in an archetypal male/female relationship" (2). In her performance, *Blind Spot*, Urban proposes that the role of art is an instructional one, offering ways to begin to understand where changes need to be made in unequal social situations which are made acceptable merely by virtue of a long tradition.

In this opening night performance, Colette Urban, dressed in a turn-of-the-century style black widow's dress, and tied to the wall with rubber cords attached to each leg and arm, writhes and moves on a hay-strewn floor. A tango playing on an old record player outside the gallery can be heard by the audience on the inside watching her. Also the taped voices of children reading ballroom dancing rules (the rules for leading and the rules for following) come from a speaker within a *papier mache* rock placed close to the hay. A spotlight isolates the rock. A camera on a tripod positioned in the audience points towards the performance with a flash which goes off at regular intervals.

Blind Spot is also about looking, about voyeurism and the objectification process. Because self-imposed bondage is so sexually suggestive the audience observing become involuntary voyeurs. Their gaze traps Urban, the performer, into the role of victim which is reinforced by the presence of the camera amongst the audience, an emblem of objectification.

The straw on the floor under Urban's feet suggests a barn, and the idea of a fettered animal. Reaffirming this allusion to the tradition of female submissiveness are the cards handed out to the audience which contain an exercise for the female partner on learning to ballroom dance, the last phrase of which reads, "wait for the lead".

The reference which most pervades the performance is the humorous but grotesque image of the black widow spider. The male of this species binds the female in silk while mating takes place. Then the black widow devours her mate. This provokes a consideration of the macabre ways of Mother Nature whose shadow is cast not only over the animal world, but over the structure of human society as well.

Nature has traditionally been used to affirm gender roles, and to justify male supremacy in society. The black widow spider corroborates the image of women as castrators and confirms that it is better to subdue them. Urban suggests alternatively that submissiveness in women, leading to their easy objectification or victimization, is a consequence of cultural conditioning; taught and ingrained in both sexes.

After the performance and for the duration of the exhibition, *Blind Spot* joins *I Feel Faint* and *Every Fly has a Shadow* as one of her three works in the gallery in which Urban displays the respective props and costumes from past performances. Drawings for each of the performances also accompany the costume and prop tableaux, giving an indication of the activity and its mood. *I Feel Faint* and *Every Fly has a shadow* have similar themes to *Blind Spot* in their portrayal of the artist restricted by accepted social and also artistic conventions. *I Feel Faint*, with the juxtaposition of the labyrinthian spiral and the audio with a speech by the Apollo astronauts to Boeing employees, also becomes a multi-layered critique of accepted notions about women and their approach to artmaking. In *Every Fly has a Shadow*, the car headlights, the oar and the rake suggest speed, travel, and accomplishment. However, contradicting these attributes of motion, are the cement pedestals intended for her feet during the performance.

What is important to note in these tableaux is that these accessories are not presented as documentation of the events. Because of a decisive absence of photographic or otherwise objective visual account of each performance the tableaux remain as possibilities for further performances. They invite the spectator to consider him/herself as the performer, much as window displays in department stores invite the public to enter into that world of fantasy. However, here the message is more to the effect that once the artist has finished, and made her statement, it is now the spectator's turn to assume the guise and "take up the cause" of the re-evaluation of social traditions.

Because the work of Knight, Meigs and Urban is often site-specific or time-based, it risks being less visible than traditional art forms. This is an intentional stance which is the result of their interest in critiquing and opposing accepted social and artistic conventions. Although their approach sometimes runs the risk of appearing anarchistic, they are not interested in merely pulling apart or breaking down the accepted norms. Their continuing presence in gallery situations affirms their commitment to a more flexible institution of art where the experiences of real life are not as clearly separated from the experience of art.

Each of these artists demands a high level of participation on the part of the spectator. As the spectator moves from one work to the next the issues triggered in one piece are affirmed and developed in the next piece. Their common range of references is perhaps explained by the fact that they all did their undergraduate work at the same place (the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design). This group exhibition is intended to reinforce their continuing connection and shared commitment to a critical approach to artmaking.

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Footnotes

1. Salt Seller. The Writings of Marcel Duchamp (Marchand Du Sel), "The Creative Act", 1957. Oxford University Press. 1973. p.140
2. Urban, Colette. Artist's Statement, 1987.