"Part of where you are is where you've been" - *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* by Margaret Atwood [1]

The Canadian preoccupation with digging up our roots, as described by Margaret Atwood, underlines the formal and metaphorical aspects of Judy Davis' *Being Placed.* Davis creates a phenomenon of placement/displacement by manipulating objects and viewers within a specific installation, and in the process, alludes to the experience of transition from one cultural milieu to another. The assumptions, routines and memories carried from one situation to the next provide the raw material and conditions that activate the 'present' experience of this work.

The urge to organize perceptions, experiences and discoveries into languages, maps, patterns, graphs, and systems has an ancient history. And for good reason. Without the development of these common terms and frames of reference the rendering of human experiences, the exchange of ideas, and the ability to develop and expand on the previous ly discovered, would not be possible. Unfortunately this obsession to name and define our experience has lead to a fragmentation of reality; a fragmentation which could ultimately end in a total abstraction that no longer refers to it's source.[2] Two centuries ago, Goethe predicted this progression when he questioned scientific methods that "distorted nature by reducing it to what instruments or mathematics could demonstrate. As a consequence it became separated from man himself." [3]

As much as we may criticize current manifestations of scientific progress, the need to perceive, process and categorize information remains. Our cumulative experience establishes a thread of continuity in our day-to-day existence; these crystallized ex periences are stored in our memory until they are recalled by another event, an event which then becomes categorized with the 'now' remembered situation. However, this chain of associative experiences makes it difficult for us to conceive of a pure perception, a perception simply experienced and not analyzed or categorized with previous ex periences. If we could stop time - almost as a lapse of the synapses - and hold ourselves in a perpetual state of perceiving, not allowing the analytic process to quickly assimilate the visual, aural, tactile, spatial, and temporal information into past tense - the memory of having perceived - we could achieve what Robert Morris called the "present tense of space." [4] Morris' work and writing of the mid-1970's centered on this "presentness" as did the work of artists such as Richard Serra, Robert Irwin, Mary Miss and Alice Aycock. The dimension of time was introduced in these works; they required the movement of a body through a spatial environment and completely involved the viewer emotionally, physical ly, and intellectually, in a constant state of perceiving. It wasn't until the piece had been fully experienced, the viewer having physically moved through time and space, that the intellect could analyze, critique, and judge the experience, now past tense.

Mary Miss' five-part work, *Perimeters/Pavilions/Decoys* provides an apt example. Set in an open field, it consisted of an earth mound, three towers, and an underground atrium excavation with a ladder which reached above ground, all of which were set apart from each other and necessitated that the observer walk the field, from one part to another in order to totally experience the piece.

Through the development of site works and spatial installations, sculpture changed and with it ways of perceiving. The viewer's space and that of the spatial installations were coexistent. Sculpture was no longer a monolithic object to be viewed in totality but assumed architectural characteristics.[5] The space, the work of art, could not be experienced unless entered, and when entered could not be experienced until the viewer physically moved through the work. In this way these spatial installations stimulated a mode of perception which challenged pre-conceived notions of space, and questioned the familiar systems, routines, and models that have been developed to make sense of the world.

Davis' installation finds it's roots in this work of the 70's. It requires the physical in volvement of the observer to climb up the stairs to the raised floor, walk down the angled plane, weave through the sculptural markers/objects, step down into the room of working drawings, and then repeat this same pattern in reverse, step back up onto the ramp floor, walk up the ramp, down the steps and exit the space to complete the gestalt. The process of viewing the complete piece, however, does not follow a linear pattern because Davis punctuates this experience structurally, encouraging points of discovery and subjective reflection.

Not until we as viewers are propelled into the space by the steep angle of the ramp can the subjective or analytical process begin. Associative relationships unfold as we move through the narrow tunnel-like space. The nine cement forms that protrude up out of the ramp/plane, shift with our altering point of perspective. We note angles: the angle of the floor, the angle of the forms in opposition to the floor's angle and the angle of their shadows cast across the floor and up the walls. The totemic sculptures stand independent and yet not without relationship to each other; equal in height (9') they share the existing gallery floor and the ramp as support. Walking the ramp, we begin to sense a relationship between our own physical being and that of these objects: the verticality, the definate front and back, and the human scale. The slope of the ramp and the narrowness of the space make it impossible, however, to line up with the sculpture on a flat surface. This lack of a single profile forces us beyond an initial reflex response to an extended subjective reflection. By decreasing the angle of the ramp to slow down the our pace, Davis encourages us to circle the forms. However, since the ramp is never flat, there is no resting place, no place where movement could stop for a period of time to allow for contemplation. Instead we continue to be subtlely moved towards the opening/doorway at the end of the right wall. This opening has steps that lead down onto the existing gallery floor and into the "drawing room".

Within the "drawing room" the more traditional experience of the art object is represented: each drawing on paper can be viewed in its totality and simultaneously intellectualized and critiqued. Davis has anticipated the natural progression from the state of perceiving to analysis and acknowledges this in the placement of this inner room at the end of the ramp room. These drawings represent the process of developing form, placement, relationships, angles, and colours, all of which inform the final spatial environment. Although they suggest alternate installations, none of these drawings represent the total. The drawings provide us with a bridge from thought to sculptural form but in no way convey the temporal.[6] The final installation stands alone as the culmination of the artist's thought process.

An element of irony attends any attempt to describe the spatial and temporal in words, or even by drawings or photographs. Space has no adequate form of representation or reproduction. Photography is actually antithetical as it converts visible aspects of the world into static images. The most notable critic of this phenomena is Walter Benjamin. In his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin holds that the work of art eminates an aura when the viewer is in its presence and that photographic reproduction disallows this experience.[7] This limitation is further amplified with space-oriented work as the viewer must not only be in the presence of the work but be actually located within the work. While acknowledging the difficulties inherent in this attempt to reproduce that which by its very nature defies reproduction, I must also admit to the alternate dilemma of limited accessibility to temporal installations, work that exists only for a specific period of time to be experienced by a relatively small audience. These installations are often labour-intensive and raise concerns that deserve a broader audience and more thoughtful consideration. Thus it is in this less than ideal space between these two conflicting realities that this essay is written, the floor plan drawn, and the photographs taken, in an attempt to translate a sense of the environment, the relationships, the forms, materials, textures and concepts at work in this installation.

Turning away from the drawings to step back up into the ramp room, our movement may be interrupted by the cement form which is embedded in the wall which divides the ramp room and the drawing room. This form plays a pivotal role in the installation by

providing a bridge between the three-dimensional ramp room and the two-dimensional drawings in the drawing room. Wedged within the wall, this form is literally caught between the two environments, a metaphor of the artist's experience of transition from one place to another and one medium to another.

To re-enter the ramp room is to be confronted with the same marks and colours of the drawings but now these marks/gestures appear on the back surface of the sculptural forms instead of the 22x30 sheet of paper. Here Davis crosses over a boundary that has previously distiniguished sculpture from spatial installations. Generally objects and materials were used in installations only to provide markers directing the movement of the body through space. Davis' forms are used this way initially but because of the rich texture and the immediacy of the oil stick markings attention is drawn to their formal structure and surface. The space is almost absorbed by these details of surface and form but the installation balances successfully between spatial concerns and those of the specific, self-contained object.

I have described one hypothetical approach - and of necessity quite linear - to this installation. One of the strengths of the work is the difficulty of predicting how any one individual will approach it. At whatever point one is drawn closer to these forms - which appear to be caught between creation and decay - one encounters a developed formal and textural language. Their skeletal structure is composed of reinforcement rod surrounded by hardware cloth. Cement fondue is poured into a mold containing this skeleton and the cement is then manipulated within this mold to alternately conceal and expose the inner structure. This attention to material detail has been inherent in Davis' work over the past 12 years and may be attributed in part, to her background in weaving and textiles. She studied weaving and glass blowing at the Alberta College of Art from 1973-1977 and like many other textile or fibre artists, developed an acute sensitivity to the inherent properties of materials and the process of construction – that the material be appropriate to the concept and the form leave evidence of its making. Davis used weaving techniques to combine contrasting materials: glass with cotton; clay with copper; and cotton with malable steel bars.

During the summer of 1977, Davis worked on a construction crew in downtown Calgary, an experience which would have a long-term effect on her work. Every day for three months she shoveled, mixed and poured cement. Not only did she become intimately aware o f the properties of concrete but she also experienced an altered sense of scale and an increased awareness of the political and economic realities that caused areas of Calgary to be gutted and rebuilt. This experience led Davis to combine concrete with barbed wire and slumped glass into more scuptural and aggressive forms.

In 1983 she completed her Masters Degree in sculpture at Mills College. Her work became less bombastic and aggressive; she began to build a vocabulary that left more room for the viewer, that dealt specifically with sculptural issues, namely the manipulation of form, concepts and space.

A teaching post in Grande Prarie, Alberta led her to bring a greater consideration of geographics into her art. On frequent flights from Grande Prarie to Grande Cache she observed the flat prarie country, the roads, markers of civilization, structures, and grids superimposed on the landscape. In her work, the cast cement forms began to reveal the inner grid structure and screens were placed inside the molds to create a stronger sense of the grid. The pieces described the artist's sense of isolation and feelings of displacement within this environment. Her work contained materials caught within a tight, confining structure, dynamics that also conveyed the tension of the intuition bound within an intellectual framework. The placement of these forms within an exhibition space restated the vastness, isolation, and subtlety of the north, both literally and metaphorically.

This installation at the CAG acts as a metaphor of her accumulated experiences, periods of transitions, changes in countries, climates, cultures, and economic and political situations. It seems most appropriate that the work that echoes the multiplicity of these past experiences be exhibited in the city she calls "home". It also seems no accident that these forms have a totemic quality. The epigraph is from Margaret Atwood's critical study of themes in Canadian literature and is taken from a chapter titled "Ancestral Totems", where she refers to the function of totem poles as "the visible presentation of mythic ancestral figures for the symbolic purposes of unity and identity, with the past and with the social group." [8] This installation, with its totemic forms, stands as a visual record of the artist's experiences: entering new environments, assessing relationships, perceiving structures, developing an awareness of her own physicality within this situation, remaining within the space for an extended period of time, and finally moving out of the environment and carrying with her the memory of the experience.

Davis offers us, as viewers, a parallel experience: "Access by the viewers, contingent on their past experiences, will facilitate understanding and realization of the similarities and differences between the concepts and exercise the common denominator of self". [9] This 'self' then carries forward the memory of this "present" experience.

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Footnotes

1. Margaret Atwood, "Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature", (University of Toronto Press, 1972),112.
2. See Jean Baudrillard, "Precession of the Simulacrum" in *Art After Modernism*, (New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984),253.
3. Roald Nasgaard, "Structures for Behavior", (Ontario, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1978), 44.
4. Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space", *Art in America*, 66, 1 (January - February 1978), 70-81.
5. Ibid., 72-76.
   See also Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern culture*, (Bay Press, 1983), 31-42.
6. Robert Morris, "The Present Tense of Space".
7. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechnical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, (Schocken, 1969), 220-222.
8. Margaret Atwood, "Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature".
9. Excerpt from writings by Judy Davis, 1986.