

Wendy Toogood's A Nakusp Narrative: Autobiographical Memory and the Everyday by Amy Gogarty

When we are very young, every day presents us with wondrous experiences and sensations, which, sadly, disappear with hardly a trace. Later, vivid impressions shape our adolescent sense of self and are recollected with surprising clarity. As adults, external pressures and obligations corrupt our memories, merging one day into another so that only public events such as holidays, birthdays and the like mark and order the jumbled mass. Occasionally, our lives take a dramatic turn, enabling us to experience and remember a period of time with clarity. Such opportunities allow us to reflect and organize our recollections into a coherent personal narrative or autobiographical memory. In 2006, Wendy Toogood left her home of many years in Calgary, Alberta, and moved to Nakusp, a small village in the mountains of British Columbia. Her life changed dramatically as she adapted to a new community, a new pace of life and a new relationship with the natural world. She built an impressive studio in town to complement a rustic retreat she had previously established on a nearby plot of forested land. She began to document her experiences with drawings, which formed the basis for a series of some one hundred small fabric collages. Each collage features a stylized image of the artist surrounded by iconic elements. Collectively, they record the events of her life: building her studio, visiting friends, making wine or dressing windows for a local charity shop. Occasionally, world events in the form of radio reports, or local tragedies such as the death of a child, intrude on the rhythms of daily life. Installed in a straight line, the many images might read as days in a year, a linear representation of rational time. It is more appropriate, however, to see them as replicating the activity of the mind selecting and constituting the self through memory and self-reflection: a narrative of self.

Individual works reward close inspection. Within narrow restrictions of scale and format, Toogood's lively tableaux display a range of textile effects. Their overall graphic style recalls comic strips or Japanese manga. She establishes linear elements using free-form machine stitching, supplementing the outlines with hand work. Certain objects are rendered with spidery edges and skewed perspective, while others are lent volume with layers of contrasting fabric. Minutely stitched areas call attention to details in contrast to larger plain or patterned fields. Border fragments invade the picture plane or stand back neatly to frame the image. Most images are expansive and appealingly embellished with sequins, ric rack, appliqué or beads. In one, she delightedly shows off a new quilt her mother made her; the quilt is boldly executed with tiny scraps of patterned fabric. In another, she presents Barbie dolls she wrapped in tin foil to decorate a charity shop window. Several, such as those recording Canadian deaths in Afghanistan or a friend's hospital stay, are sober and self-contained. For most, visual and textual elements provide narrative clues, but others evade easy reads as their abstract elements conjure up mysterious rituals. The artist works intuitively, often mulling over drawings for some time as she contemplates how best to represent her experience. The repetition of her self-portrait grounds events in her recollected memory. Space expands and contracts much as a memory does, in a phenomenological rather than rational fashion. An interesting dialectic develops between her drawings, which evolve with a freedom born of speed, and the related collages. The latter are at once richer, with their seductive surfaces, and more formal due to the labour-intensive manner of their making.

Toogood's collages map the world of the everyday, a term much bandied-about if not sufficiently theorized in contemporary art. Much recent art focuses on banal, repetitive or overlooked activities in an attempt to dignify the ordinary, give voice to the dispossessed, reconcile art and life or introduce simple pleasures into the overwrought concerns of art (Johnstone 13). The everyday is thought to be democratic and thus linked by many to other altruistic concerns such as social justice, ecology, conservation and support for the local. Toogood's focus on the everyday incorporates notions of agency, process and transformation. Having achieved greater latitude to shape her immediate environment, she directs her efforts towards realizing the beauty of simple gestures, small discoveries and reiterating patterns of everyday life. Her aesthetic response to surface, texture, colour and composition govern the design of her personal space and her work equally: both are creative expressions of the desire to make a world. The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre criticized art as alienating with its focus on professional galleries, identities and commerce. He acknowledged it, however, as a valid means by which the everyday might be made visible (Johnstone 14). Lefebvre linked art-making to play, calling both "transfunctional"—something with many uses and yet not itself useful. A complex symbiosis of alienation and creativity define the everyday, ensuring it can not be approached directly (Johnstone 15). Instead, it is witnessed, revealed or caught by chance through tactics and ruses, accidental or intuitive processes and time-consuming activities that invite it as a partner or benevolent presence. In short, work that takes the everyday as its subject does so as a form of play.

Michel de Certeau famously distinguished between strategies—operations deployed by the dominant order, which "produce, tabulate and impose" space—and tactics, by which the marginalized and dispossessed "use, manipulate and divert" those spaces (30). Those who are marginalized must function on the field of the other, must submit to an order not of their making and over which they have little power. They confront this imbalance by "turning it to their advantage," interweaving or inserting forms of play into the machine. By means of such tactics, the marginalized find "ways of using" the dominant order for their own purposes; they "make do" (30). Toogood "makes do" with materials and subject matter she finds readily at hand, playfully constructing identity from personal memory. Art that addresses and incorporates the everyday is inherently political in that it asserts the subjectivity and experience of the overlooked against the ideological weight of the powerful and socially vested. In making such work, one must be open to chance encounters, stray attachments, surprising challenges and reflection. The everyday enters work not so much as a subject, but as a medium to be processed and worked through. Its presence is made visible through activities analogous to those by which the mind recognizes and processes daily events as memories constituting the self. Toogood's work valorizes the everyday

as a form of political tactic, championing the marginalized or overlooked. Through the power of art, she creatively transforms the raw material of lived experience into engaging works that celebrate friendship, community and the natural world. References

Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Johnstone, Stephen. "Introduction/Recent Art and the Everyday." *The Everyday*. Ed. Stephen Johnstone. Cambridge: MIT Press and London: Whitechapel, 2008. 12-23.

Klein, Stanley B, Tim P. German, Leda Cosmides and Rami Gabriel. "A Theory of Autobiographical Memory: Necessary Components and Disorders Resulting From Their Loss." *Social Cognition* 22.5 (2004): 460-490.1 The term "autobiographical memory" refers to individuals' ability to recall events in their lives and to be able to understand them as having been experienced by them. "Our knowledge of self is very much tied up with the 'story' of how what we have experienced has made us who we are, and how who we are has led us to do what we have done" (Klein et al 462-463). Wendy Toogood : A Nakusp Narrative, September 5th – October 4th, 2008 , Stride Gallery 1004 Macleod Trail SE, Calgary, AB Writer Bio Amy Gogarty is a painter and writer. Her paintings consider issues of representation as manifested in museums, archives, language and memory. She taught ceramics and visual art history and theory at ACAD for sixteen years prior to relocating to Vancouver, BC in 2006. She has served on national and international panels, written over eighty reviews,