Expanding Intimacy by Mackenzie Frère

Barbara Sutherland and Genevieve Goodhart: Expanding Intimacy

by Mackenzie Frère

The creation of an artwork in textile media presents an opportunity to engage with materials and processes that are a potent expression of both the personal and the social. The misapprehension that cloth, threads and dye may be used like any other media to create a work of art does not acknowledge the cache of social history and personal meaning embedded in even the humblest utilitarian textiles. The artist who recognizes this will intuit the wealth of tacit knowledge available in textile materials, processes and even her own body, accessing the simultaneous receptivity and expansiveness intrinsic to both object (cloth) and mindful action. Although dissimilar in form and execution, the works of two recent Fibres graduates of the Alberta College of Art + Design are the compelling results of intuitive approaches to working with textiles.

Genevieve Goodhart’s studio practice combines personal meditation, observation and mindful activity. The focus of her work in watercolour and hand weaving is the cultivation of a personal connection to the natural world. For Goodhart, the contemplation of plants and other elements of nature is a personal escape to a silent world of unexpected beauty. The painting process provides an opportunity for active contemplation of her chosen subject. In a recent series of paintings of a Norfolk Island Pine, Goodhart worked up several images that later became the inspiration for a woven hanging. Using a combination of multi-harness weave structures and tapestry techniques the artist built up an image with stranded threads inlaid on a ground of twills. In the finished hand woven piece North Island Pine Focus, an image of two draped fronds of the plant reveals itself slowly, and impressionistically. The screen of apparently tangled threads on the surface is stabilized by woven structure. As one moves closer the overall image dissolves to a complex surface of looping weft threads. The frenzied accumulation of threads in the work contrasts with the stillness of the overall image, foregrounding one’s perceptual experience of the work. In this series it is apparent that the artist favours revealing her natural subject, rather than interpreting or translating it. Goodhart’s ability to reflect the silence of the natural image in both her painted and woven work is evidence of her sensitivity to her subject and a self-consciously receptive approach to working. Resisting immediate apprehension Goodhart’s images bear a slower, more methodical reception placing the viewer of this work in the artist’s place. In this way, Goodhart’s personal moments of contemplation in nature are quietly expanded and reflected in the viewing of the work itself. Barbara Sutherland’s recent installation maybe all we have are seconds we see clearly, gently alters the space it inhabits. Five subtly-coloured silk skirts appear suspended mid-air and spinning in a small room. All that is audible is the shirring of fabric. Each fluttering, ephemeral shape rotates at a different pace, one slow and flowing, another whirling and frenetic. The initial inspiration for the piece was Sutherland’s childhood recollection of twirling herself around while wearing a skirt. In her attempt to recreate this singular joyful moment, Sutherland has created a (dis)embodied analog to intimate experience that is as expansive as it is localized. Simple and complex, the movement of the skirts is mesmerizing and perpetually changing. Sutherland’s kinetic skirt forms intimate the simultaneous presence and absence of a body or bodies, alternately unrecognizable and familiar . We often see cloth in movement on a body, but in the absence of a perceptible body, the apparently perpetual movement of these skirts has the uncanny effect of suspending time. From the different cut and subtle colour differences in the whirling skirts one might assume that there are indeed several bodies present then absent in the space. Alternately, the group of forms could be read as a series of moments in a woman’s life.

In her title for the work, Sutherland has specified “seconds” where one may see clearly. In the installation, these minute moments expand then disappear in dizzying succession as one observes the flow, rise and droop of swirling fabric. The expansiveness of this work creates a compelling space for the contemplation of the presence of cloth both as itself and as analogous to our own clothed bodies. The perception of textile media or traditional craft processes as a liability to art making is no longer relevant to a contemporary discourse of the fibre arts. The new textile artwork is one that incorporates the meaning(s) of cloth and its related processes without fear. Both Sutherland’s work with cloth in motion and Goodhart’s meditations on natural beauty demonstrate that today’s emerging textile artists are highly articulate in the language of their medium and are engaging in significant and exciting ways with the expressive potential of textiles in the visual arts.

Barbara Sutherland plans to install elements of maybe all we have are seconds we see clearly on a river in mid-August. Genevieve Goodhart’s online exhibition “Silence in Nature” may be viewed April 20 to June 22, 2007 at Poplar ArtCraft. (http://poplarartcraft.mackenziefrere.com)

Image List Artist Genevieve Goodhart 1.. Norfolk Island Pine Reflection 2006, watercolour on paper, 19 x 30 ¼” 2. Norfolk Island Pine Focus (detail) 2006 3.Norfolk Island Pine Focus 2006, mixed media, 3 ½’ x 4 ¼’ Artist Barbara Sutherland 1. maybe all we have are seconds we see clearly, 2006, installation dimensions variable 2.. maybe all we have are seconds we see clearly (alternate view) 2006, installation dimensions variable Contact Barbara Sutherland: kitka@shaw.ca Contact Genevieve Goodhart: genevieve.goodhart@acad.ca