

StFX University Art Gallery

ANNE O'CALLAGHAN
MATERIALITY

2011

STFX UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
February 15 to March 13, 2011

MATERIALITY	ANNE O'CALLAGHAN
Curator	with collaborative artist Margaret Nicholson Tila Kellman
Introduction	Bruce Campbell RCA, Gallery Director
Essay	Materiality , Tilla Kellman

The StFX Art Gallery is please and honoured to be hosting this exhibition by Irish born, Toronto based, internationally known artist Anne O'Callaghan. I am grateful to art critic, curator, and writer Dr. Tila Kellman who first proposed that Anne exhibit here in Antigonish.

In discussing her exhibition, Anne proposed that she enter into a collaborative project with a local artist of our choice. Unanimously Tila and I agreed to ask StFX Fine Art Instructor Margaret Nicholson to participate, as Margaret has numerous collection based pieces in her body of work. I thank Margaret for readily agreeing to be part of this wonderful project.

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Season Sponsor: the MacLeod Group, and Exhibition Sponsor: A.A. Munro Insurance

Bruce Campbell RCA February 2011

“For me the act of collecting alters the nature of the temporal: the object becomes removed from its original context, creating a new order; an order beyond temporality; a shift from natural time and order to cultural time and order. This reframing of the objects, its classification and reordering is predicated on the serial, a constant element in my work, and formal interest/aesthetic value”

Anne O'Callaghan

MATERIALITY

The Primate Cathedral of St Mary of Toledo in Spain has a famous collection of vestments extravagantly embroidered in gold and silver thread, and studded with tens of thousands of pearls, diamonds and other jewels. Their surfaces are so encrusted that they erupt into three dimensions, like strange growths. One features a detailed gold skull and crossbones tied with a fluttering pink ribbon. The collection represents centuries of accumulation. The Cathedral's most famous chasuble exists only in paintings (including one by Velázquez), as a gift from the Virgin to St Ildefonsus, the 7th century Archbishop of Toledo. However, Toledo hosted a permanent tribunal of the Spanish Inquisition from 1485 through the 18th century, so many of these vestments are associated with some of European Christianity's most flagrant abuses of "Others." In a crowd of waiting tourists, Anne O'Callaghan found herself wondering what everyone was expecting to see. Despite their beauty, the vestments bear witness to a convergence of great wealth, symbolic and political power sufficiently dominant to justify horror. This perfect storm of art, faith and politics embodied in vestments led O'Callaghan to explore what, or maybe how, these problematic materials could mean today to a diverse audience.

Looking at clothing is always gendered and invites embodied perception. As a woman who used to sew, I can feel the extraordinary skill with stiff, scratchy thread and tangly silk by the hands of anonymous women who lacked voice and social power. Chasubles, the word derives from "little house" in Latin, are vessels for the human body, a privileged, male body, stiffly encased and transformed by glorious raiment intended to inspire awe and obedience, especially from the back--the faceless side. Do we imagine that their cut and materials provide shelter and warmth, or do they weigh and entrap? Do they permit or impede movement? Do their liturgical colours and shimmering gems gladden the heart, or remind you of your lesser value? Visually, the smothering embroideries augment the cloak's physicality: heavy, spiralling everywhere. Since wearing Catholic chasubles is prohibited from female experience, an erasure haunts these garments and creates a gendered boundary that charges the divide between encrusted outside and silky inside. So, does the interior softness of silk, its allure enfolded by a cloak of privilege and power, provide a seductive, dare I say feminine space hidden within the stiff, symbolically laden outer surface?

Art historian James Elkins has noted that art history and theory traditionally veer away from engagement with materials, despite their centrality in late Modernist art practice. Conceptualist art, prominent since the 1960s, devalues making and materials in favour of the governing idea. While the "fear" of materials as craft, as insufficiently intellectual, has driven the lack of theoretical and critical attention, Elkins has argued, refreshingly, that the usual framework for modern art discourse suffers from a lack of words to account for materials. Attention to materials demands verbalization of sustained contemplation while discussions of ideas, in contrast, advance quickly from one to the next.¹ So, in our "fast", globalizing mix of cultures, attention to materials and their meaning is a difficulty to be overcome.

For **Vestment** and **Waiting**, after seeing the Toledo chasubles, O'Callaghan rolled layers of liquid latex in a hemisphere on to a wall. Latex is found in special cells just under the bark of tropical rubber trees (it is not the sap), where it forms a protective, bug-resistant layer, like a cloak. White, milky and very sticky, when diluted it can be thinly applied to surfaces. When peeled off O'Callaghan's wall, one side was smooth and the other was lightly textured by the roller. It is a soft, cloth-like ma-



“ Vestment”, 2006 (latex, cast bronze and real thorns 120” x H variable



“ Vestment”, 2006 (detail) latex, cast bronze and real thorns 120” x H variable



" Vestment", 2006 (detail) latex, cast bronze and real thorns 120" x H variable

terial. However, it is also skin-like and rather creepy, redolent of hospital and infants' beds, condoms and the surgical gloves worn by doctors and security personnel. While latex is the material of choice for special effects make-up and can be painted directly on the body for fetish clothing, latex customarily functions as a barrier against contamination; it keeps things apart.

The difference between the two sides of these delicate sheets has been reduced as far as possible to a condition of *tabula rasa*. Light can even shine through them. **Waiting** trails in voluminous blank folds from a small tabletop across the floor. **Vestment** is something of a double blank; it bears the delicate imprint of a plant, a trace of absence of the kind of life that produced the latex. Western concepts of meaning and discovering the truth revolve around metaphors of "getting below the surface" and "seeing what is underneath." As well, based on their differences between outside and inside, the materials of the Toledo chasubles suggest a sexually charged, patriarchal structure of meaning that adds the pair, dominant/suppressed to outside/inside. Feminist critique over the last few decades has demonstrated that patriarchy has traditionally governed interpretation of meaning in Western languages and art. O'Callaghan's latex reflections on the chasubles, then, can be understood as participating in that critique, starting with reducing the difference between the two sides of a material usually employed to prevent contamination of one side by substances on the other.

In a violent gesture, **Vestment** and **Waiting** have been slashed and punctured multiple places, permitting flows that cancel positions of inside and outside, dominant and suppressed. If you walk around to see the other side, "below the surface" or "what is underneath," nothing more is revealed. "They are just latex, nothing more," says O'Callaghan. Most surprisingly, a heavy-handed attempt has been made to stitch up the slashes with huge thorns. Some are smooth and brown from hawthornes, while others, rough and dull, are cast from bronze. Christian culture interprets thorns as signs of torture, sacrifice and resurrection, but long before Christianity, hawthorne symbolized death and re-birth as the "maybloom" of English poetry and song. Stitching up the slashed sheet, as a metaphor for the structure of meaning, is a thorny issue. It's a rough repair, not convincingly held together, but the size and materials of the thorns, real and their artifacts, imply a certain desperation.

Skin forms a different impression. It looks like the flayed, scorched animal hide, but it is actually an impression taken from a rock. O'Callaghan spent six days rolling latex directly on to a granite knoll in the Canadian Shield. Leaves, twigs, dirt and bugs falling on to the surface were entombed. The sun burnished the colour. It looks raw, dried, fleshy and uncomfortable. After it cured, she peeled it off. The underside contains fragments of moss, lichens, twigs and sand that were lifted from on the granite by the sticky latex. Over a year, the granite reacted to this rough treatment by slowly bleaching nearly white, like bones from a flayed carcass. **Skin** is also clearly visible from both sides, and both sides carry detritus from its immediate environment. Inner and outer, stiff and soft, male and female no longer make sense, but a radical gesture was required to put these notions on an equal footing.

As Toledo's collected vestments and O'Callaghan's and Margaret Nicholson's collections of natural and domestic objects show, collecting transforms its objects. As Walter Benjamin remarked on his passion for collecting books: "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories...and a very mysterious relationship to ownership." But rather than creating a meaningless dump, "to a true collector the acquisition of an [object] is its rebirth."² Thus, a collection bestows a new order of intelligibility for its objects that drives creative renewal for the collector.

“Waiting”, 2010 (detail) latex, cast bronze and real thorns 144" x H variable





O'Callaghan collects natural objects in carefully considered series of size and texture. She creates new relationships among them by careful placing and by subtly rubbing them with powdered graphite, or a good cleaning. They become natural objects complicated by human desires--hers and a viewer's.

Nicholson's amassing of thousands of women's aprons and handmade doilies collected from flea markets, country auctions and junk stores, speak of her desire to save these as relics of lives of housework and family. Rather than escaping their histories, bear potent witness to thousands of hours of caring domesticity by thousands of Nova Scotian women. The aprons hang from laundry lines like colourful prayer flags blowing in the wind, or in masses from pegs reminiscent of former women's institutional or industrial workplaces. No matter their new context, the bright colours speak of hope and desire for happiness amid lives based on a lot of drudgery. Her countless hand-crocheted doilies mounted on netting spread like constellations above our heads. For Nicholson, every apron and doily represents a memory of acquisition and knitting a new fabric of salvage and re-birth: a new order imposed on chaos. Viewers, on the other hand, come face to face with many times the prescribed 10,000 hours to attain expertise. On the face of it, expertise was the daily experience of these women, today forgotten and devalued in our hi-tech mania.

Tila Kellman Antigonish 2011

Notes.

- 1 James Elkins, "On Some Limits of Materiality in Art History," saic.academia.edu/JElkins, 2008, p. 7
2. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library," *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, NY: Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 61, 62

“These aprons represent my mother,” says Nicholson, “They represent the whole generation, a generation that has stopped with me.”

Margaret Nicholson









My artist practice incorporates a wide range of media, including photobased work, installation works, sculptures, artist books and text-based works. Certain elements, i.e. the intersection between man and nature, constantly appear in my works, forming new configurations and arranging the space differently. Since the 1990s, my work could be characterized by its focus on landscape as metaphor and perception. . Employing a variety of media and forms of expression, I generate visual narratives that explore and expose the complex natural and human histories issuing from specific sites. It is my intent that my manipulated photographic images and installations work like a catalyst: a reservoir of possible meanings that can unravel many discursive journeys. This work is part of an ongoing exploration of the value and meaning of objects. The works are made of latex and are combined with both found thorns and cast bronze thorns. In the early 90's I spent some time in Toledo, Spain and became fascinated by a Cape. A magnificent garment studded by gems and gold embroidery. I was not the only one, we tourists lined up in droves. But the back-story was not so magnificent, the wearer the Grand Inquisitor from the Spanish Inquisition. Starting in 2004 I created a series of large latex wall hangings that use natural elements-thorns, intertwined with the latex, the thorn both natural and cast, acting as sutures. My first large latex work was a response to the Ethiopian hunger crises. Latex painted on a large rock and then peeled off. This I called Skin. In 2006 I made Vestment 2, a direct reference to the cape I had seen in Toledo and my way of addressing the excess/brutality of governments hiding behind a screen. These works are both beautiful and disturbing. Like that cape that I saw many years ago, the viewer can accept it at face value, or wonder, ambiguity an important part of the work!

Anne O'Callaghan, February 15, 2011

Margaret Nicholson is an artist and lecturer at StFX. She has been a practicing visual artist since 1985. She is a multidisciplinary artist. Her practice includes painting, drawing, satire, illustration, sculpture, installation and the written word. The work often includes issues of domesticity either its artifacts, as with 1000 Aprons or the cultural influences of church and childhood resulting in work that is sometimes playful, sometimes dogmatic or both. She has exhibited widely across Canada and her work can be found in public collections of the Canada Council, Province of Nova Scotia, City of Ottawa and her work Westray is on permanent display at the Museum of Industry, Stel-larton, NS.

TILA KELLMAN teaches at St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish. She is the author of Figuring Redemption: Resighting My Self in the Art of Michael Snow (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002, rpt. 2010) and is active as a critic and curator. Interested in spectatorship, her research is in contemporary interpretation as it intersects the problem of the self. Kellman grew up and was educated in Berkeley, California. In 1972 she received an MA in biogeography, studying regeneration in old-growth forests in coastal B.C. After moving to Ontario in 1976, she became a professional potter. Returning to York University to earn an MA in art history, she became fascinated with spectatorship and the problem of the self. After completing a Ph.D. in Social & Political Thought, she published her book interpreting Michael Snow's practice as the question of the viewer's self-recognition.

