

HOMING INSTINCT  
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by

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## HOMING INSTINCT

### INTRODUCTION

*A fairy tale is most of all a work of art, about which Goethe said in his prologue to Faust, "Who offers many things will offer some to many a one"... This implies that any deliberate attempt to offer something specific to a particular person cannot be the purpose of a work of art. 1..*

The above statement seems an appropriate place to start this discussion of my M.F.A. Exhibition, for I do not expect the viewer to derive the same satisfactions from my work as I have derived from its creation. I have come to recognize that the viewer, by necessity, approaches a work of art from his or her own experiential and political stance, thereby unconsciously projecting that position onto the reading of the work. I do not, therefore, attempt to offer anything specific to particular persons through my work, but rather to express my own feelings, thoughts, and creativity in ways which are satisfying to me. If I do strike a familiar chord in the lives of others through this work, then it can be said to 'succeed' beyond my expectations. This paper represents an attempt to explain the technical and creative processes by which this work came into being. Like an open book, however, it is not the last word on the work's content or meaning.

I have titled the exhibition "Homing Instinct" as a way of loosely connecting what has been, and continues to be, a search for a personal visual language which expresses my identity and my physical sense of place in this world.

A personal preoccupation with my situation as an Australian citizen and a Canadian immigrant is central to my artistic output of the last three years. This is balanced with concerns of a more technical and formal nature, such as colour, line, shape, positive and negative space, movement, and surface texture. The development of 'concept' and the development of 'image' (abstract or representational) must go hand in hand, for it is my belief that a successful work of art is one in which the two strike a balance. The aesthetic marriage of the formal with the conceptual is of uppermost concern to me as an artist.

### ICONOGRAPHY

Most of this work was produced within the last 12 months of my MFA program

following a two month return visit to Australia (Christmas 1987-88). This visit is key to the subsequent development of the metallic leaf imagery on paper. This trip was also pivotal to my work for it reaffirmed my roots at a time when my painting was undergoing a period of reassessment and change. It gave me permission to express feelings for my country of birth in a distinctly personal manner, while at the same time adding to my personal confusion as to where and what 'home' is. The following is a quotation taken from my diary, written at 35,000 feet above sea level, after a 17 hour flight, and shortly after sighting the north east coast of Australia:

*I am filled with a need so urgent to write my longing for this land... to embody in words or paint coloured testimony of my emotion. The ragged coastline and red earth stretching below me; the summer turbulence of high cumulus and my inner restlessness.*

#### LANDSCAPE AS 'PLACE'

At the beginning of the MFA program I adopted a simple horizon line as motif, using the minimal format of earth and sky as a field in which to experiment with colour, texture and manipulations of paint, pencil, and mixed media. These early 'landscapes' have strong formalist overtones and are inspired to a large extent by Otto Rogers and the Emma Lake school, both primary influences at the time. The physical and spatial affinities between the Canadian prairies and the Australian 'outback' made this seem a logical means of exploration. However, because the landscape motif necessitates a physical, objective distance, thereby implying an 'outsider' viewpoint, these images were inadequate as a metaphor for my emotional connection with 'place'. Although they were effective as a means of developing skills in paint handling, I became increasingly aware that the paintings were an unsatisfactory substitute for the landscape itself.

As a result of my dissatisfactions I began to paint figures, returning to the landscape only occasionally throughout this period. Under the guidance of Professor Stan Day, I began to enjoy the work of Matisse, Gauguin, and the Fauves. While I was still conscious of searching for a more personal visual language, these artists became major influences for a time. I felt a natural affinity with the figure through my interest in dance and movement, and I was captivated by the 'apparent' ease of Matisse's line and composition as well as his undisguised love of beauty. Kandinsky's associations with music and visual language

were of interest to me also, as was his expressive use of colour and line.

When I did paint landscapes they had a more expressive, fauvist palette. In reaction to the earlier 'minimal' landscape studies both landscape and figure studies incorporated flat pattern and line more compatible with the Japanese tradition. The figure itself often became one of the few 'restful' elements in the composition. 'Behind Hibiscus' was an early example; however, I did not become aware of this tendency until I painted 'Recuerdos de l'Alambra', which became the study for 'Ukiyo e the Floating World'. Both of these paintings embody a conscious attempt to 'pack-in' as much pattern as possible and still retain a strong overall structure. I was still learning a great deal about colour in these pieces, while the use of acrylic and mixed media enabled me to build up layers and textures and rework unsatisfactory areas over and over again.

#### FIGURE AS PLACE

The often random placement of figurative elements in these paintings began to offer a wide range of interpretations both for me and for the viewer. While affirming my own love of colour and pattern and playing with the incorporation of the figure into these 'patternsapes', I was also creating a field for the imagination. The figure not the landscape now provokes questions of place. Why is it there? Does it belong? In essence, the 'homing instinct' in these paintings is even closer to home than in the landscapes for they deal with residing in one's own body.

In 'Ukiyo e The Floating World', for example, it is unclear whether the figure is real or imaginary, floats in space, lies on the floor or is part of the wallpaper. Nothing is solid. The plant appears to float in space, while the rug is a composite of floral motifs hovering in a field of yellow gold. This painting attempts to deal with the way in which our perceptions of reality are determined by our experience. For example; I remember waking early one morning on a camping trip to see the sun rise over a calm lake. A dozen pelicans floated silently on the surface, their reflections in the pink and gold glass waters appeared to glide in unison with their 'real' image. For a moment I saw the world in reverse and caught a glimpse of matter as a delicate balance between personal perception and forces of nature and gravity.

While the composition for this painting and many of the figure paintings involves

a conscious manipulation of images in space, the selection of those images is sometimes random: a figure from a life sketch pinned to the wall, a plant and table from still life studies, the pattern from a vase on the window ledge, and the carpet a conglomeration of images from books and fabrics. The same selection criteria, or lack of, was operational in 'The Red Couch', and to a lesser extent in 'Rebirth of Botticelli's Venus' and 'Medusa'. In 'The Red Couch', images from magazines, sketches, and objects in the studio became a new reality in which both the cat and the female figure appear similarly independent and abstracted, comfortable yet slightly awkward in their seating arrangement. The cat can be seen to lie on the floor or to be standing. The green figure on the red couch hovers because of her pose as well as a result of the use of complementaries. This painting was my first attempt at a large scale work in oil on canvas and as such represents a technical milestone in my development.

Both 'Rebirth of Botticelli's Venus' and 'Medusa' were begun in 1987, yet neither was completed until early 1989. The reasons for abandoning the nude were multiple. Their progress was interrupted by, among other things, my trip to Australia and the consequent body of work on paper which constitute the remainder of the exhibition. I felt a need to resolve figure and ground relationships, inherent in the metallic leaf and the painted surface, by dealing with these on a smaller scale. I also needed time to resolve my feelings about the depiction of the female nude as symbol. As a dancer and a woman I share a kinetic sympathy with the female figure; at the same time I recognise the potential stereotype problematic of the female nude as an 'object' of sexual contemplation/gratification. Both paintings were inspired to some extent by Nancy Spero's exhibition at the Mendel Art Gallery in the fall of 1987. The connections she drew between woman as symbol/object of myth throughout time and across cultures, (Egyptian, Roman, and Greek, through to the current day) intrigued me. Obviously Spero was saying much more than this. At the time these works were conceived, however, I was not so much concerned with the feminist dialogue or with deconstructing myths of femininity as I was concerned with making visual cross-cultural references (Byzantine, Renaissance, and Australian Aboriginal), in a personal attempt to examine the female figure as a visual symbol. I also wished to explore the incorporation of metallic leaf as a time reference. While the use of the nude is problematic in one respect, in another it is central to my concerns. Metaphorically speaking,

to be naked is to bare one's soul, to show the undisguised self. While these paintings are not in any way self portraits, they are a celebration of self, for if we can not be at home in our own bodies where can we be at home? At the same time I feel that the avoidance of depicting nudity, male or female, is equally problematic and represents another kind of repression.

I used a random motif selection in both these works and was surprised in 'Botticelli's Venus' at the coincidental echoes of shape between the Renaissance figure emerging from a half shell and the Australian Aboriginal image of the serpent, symbol of rebirth and fertility, as a circular snake with a single breast in profile and a tree growing from its belly. This 'accident' of form could lead the viewer to interpret this painting as a cross-cultural reference to woman as a symbol of fertility. Although the resultant juxtaposition of two very different means of representing women has the potential to open up questions of female representation within patriarchal societies, this was not my original intention.

In formal terms these paintings are an attempt to marry a number of spatial and cultural opposites. These include flat, decorative, and repeated images from a 'primitive' nomadic culture (also apparent in Byzantine mosaics and illuminated manuscripts) and modelled Renaissance figurative art. The gold leaf and oil paint also act as figure and ground opposites. These paintings, therefore, represent attempts to resolve a number of complex issues of both form and content.

#### TURNING POINT:

While I was in Australia, three events seem to have had a major impact on my artistic development. These included recent family events, a major retrospective of Sir Sidney Nolan's paintings in the Art Gallery of South Australia, and the Australian Bicentenary celebrations which were underway during 1988. All served to reinforce a growing realization of the connection between events, people, and place, as well as time and distance.

Over the period of some forty thousand years of occupation in Australia the Australian Aboriginals had developed an art which reflected the complexities of an entire belief system, religion, lifestyle, and mythology which was inextricably connected with the land and its natural cycles. Obviously I could never hope to understand the intricacies of aboriginal symbolism, however, their 'art' began to make some kind of sense to me as an infinitely

rich language of symbols and knowledge. Hitherto I had appreciated it only in terms of a western formalism.

Nolan's apparent 'folk' style of the Ned Kelly series, his use of 'naive' (i.e. non mathematical) perspective, bright colour, and simplified form belies its narrative and symbolic complexity. While Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly bushranger series deals with the reality and myth of a man as outsider in a harsh environment, Aboriginal art deals with quite the opposite. This seemed ironic in the context of the Bicentenary celebrations which celebrated 200 years of 'white' occupation in Australia, not to mention its history as a penal colony. I recognise that I am a part of that history and as a result any 'adoption' of aboriginal iconography can be viewed in terms of colonial appropriation. By the same token, the changing face of Australian culture has resulted in a significant two way exchange between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal iconography. The resultant hybrid activity and the recent conspicuousness of traditional and non-traditional aboriginal art has resulted in a wider white community respect for Aboriginal culture generally. It remains to be seen whether the same satisfactory cross-cultural exchange can have wider social implications.

As a language which expresses 'place' and the connection between the land and its people, Aboriginal art seemed to offer so much more than 'landscape art' or 'figure', or 'figure in the landscape', all of which I had experimented with in my earlier work. I therefore began to adopt aspects of aboriginal art in a series of paper works. In a sense these early works represent my initiation into the language of aboriginal perception and as such they are transitional pieces. I would select certain motifs and rearrange them into new compositions, interpreting them with an intuitive use of colour. I continued to experiment with the metallic leaf through variations in proportion of figure to ground, thus affecting their integration, separation, and composition. Eventually these same motifs began to take on more personal meanings and I began to give them new significance by rearranging them on the page or by incorporating non-aboriginal imagery.

#### FORMAL RESOLUTIONS:

'Oenpelli Big Red', for example, was the first in this series. It shows an X ray view of a Kangaroo curved in a circle and tightly cropped by the edge of the page. In this piece I have attempted to resolve the disparity between the metallic leaf ground and oil paint by

using similar copper/gold and earth colours in the figure in areas proportional to shapes in the figure. In 'Namarrkon, Lightning Spirit' I have attempted to break down the even surface of the copper leaf by painting over it with dots. I have used similar strategies in a number of paintings. In 'Cave Dwellers # 2' and 'Tectonic Turtle' the dots act as rivets reinforcing the metallic nature of copper and gold leaf. This contrasts with the aboriginal significance of dots, which could often represent, interchangeably, paths, earth or sometimes footprints, while cross hatching might represent flesh, water, or land.

In 'Angry Serpent' the leaf is broken up into areas of copper and gold to create variety in the ground. 'Crocodile Dreaming' represents a very different strategy in breaking up the ground. By building up rich textures with a palette knife, simulating the texture of crocodile hide, I have significantly altered the reflective quality of the leaf, while in 'Man's Best Friend' I have used leaf dust to create quite another reflective quality and texture. This piece also represents early experiments in oxidation of the leaf as yet another means of breaking up the ground, thereby setting up more complex spatial relationships with the figure. 'When the Earth was Young' represents perhaps the most complex and satisfactory resolution of figure ground relationships in my work to date. This results from an elaborate interaction between the colours and textures of the swimming creatures and the firey pool which surrounds them.

The use of gold and silver leaf in work having recognisable 'primitive' references offers an interesting paradox. The associations of metallic leaf with Gothic religious art and illuminated texts as well as twentieth century technologies, and reflective glass architecture fascinates me and brings the added element of time as well as place into these paintings. The passage of time is also a significant influence on my connection with place for it heightens my confusion. This, as well as formal concerns of integration, sustains my interest in the use of this captivating medium.

#### PERSONAL SYMBOLISM:

In terms of iconography 'Lindy Chamberlain Takes the Stand/Human Sandwich', 'Pleasing the Serpent', and 'Angry Serpent' are the result of a conscious effort to reconcile personal experience with a variety of external influences. 'Pleasing the Serpent' deals with the experience of having to dance to the beat of someone else's drum. The physical

and psychological demands placed upon individuals by others is embodied in an appeased serpent which sleeps coiled under the earth, while a row of colourful figures leap about in ritual dance. 'Angry Serpent', is a natural progression in this discourse on the human condition. The angry serpent heaves the earth up, resulting in tumbling turmoil. This painting is also influenced by my readings on the Geo-mythology of earthquakes, as well as aboriginal 'Dreamtime' mythology. 2.

'Lindy Chamberlain Takes the Stand' is equally complex in its imagery for it represents both a universal metaphor of the human condition and a symbolic narrative of a particular event. This piece deals with the recent trial of the innocent Lindy Chamberlain who was wrongly convicted of murdering her infant daughter, Azaria. The child was in fact taken by a dingo while the family was camped at Ayers Rock in central Australia in 1980. The rumours and prejudices which surrounded her case, in effect, tried Lindy before the jury heard her case. The composition represents Lindy sandwiched between an oppressive crowd of frantic figures which could represent the jury, gossip mongers, or the media, and the snake, an ambiguous symbol which could either represent conventional attitudes towards motherhood or Lindy's personal determination not to give in to pressures of convention. On each knee Lindy balances the evidence; the scissors allegedly used to cut her baby's throat and the dingo itself. The most vital evidence is found significantly in the margins. These are the dingo's footprints which lead to the body of Azaria. Aboriginal trackers who followed the dingo's trail were able to support Lindy's claim; they were not, however, allowed to testify in court on the grounds that their evidence was unscientific. This reflects white society's marginalization of aboriginal culture as 'backward'. Viewers unfamiliar with this event can interpret this painting in other ways. For example, it can be seen to represent my own concerns as an artist and a woman, often trapped between conventional behavioral expectations and personal goals, or at a more universal level, the disparity between truth and assumption.

This painting represents a more complicated attempt to develop a personal language of metaphors which, while they may remain ambiguous, can be read at many levels, the least of which is a purely formal appreciation of colour, composition and texture. Like a fairy tale it "offers some to many a one".

## THEMATIC DIVERSITY AND CURRENT ART THEORY AND PRACTICE:

I feel this exhibition represents my evolution to a new starting point, the achievement of rudimentary technical and iconographic tools or vocabulary with which to write my message as an artist. The thematic diversity of this body of work reflects not only the diversity of my interests but the extent of my search to broaden this vocabulary. It also represents an evolution in my sensitivity to the medium of metallic leaf. While I am only just becoming aware of its potential as a metaphoric reference to time, the intrinsic beauty of its reflective surface continues to hold my interest.

The wide variety of influences operational in my creative process are also reflected in the thematic diversity of this show. These include personal experience, children's art, folk and 'primitive' art, the 'old masters', illuminated manuscripts, geo-mythology and geophysics, as well as the work of Henri Matisse, Paul Gauguin, Sidney Nolan, Margaret Preston, Les Midikuria, Tolsen Tjupurrula, and countless other artists of whom I may not even be consciously aware. In this sense the work can not be categorised (nor would I wish it to be) in any theoretical grouping or movement. In some senses its richness and profusion of colour and pattern represents a reaction to the minimalism of abstract formalism, while its resolution owes much to my appreciation of formal issues. I am not, however, interested in making paintings about paint or art about art, without somehow addressing wider issues of the human condition. I am conscious of a tendency in current art practice to make references to the past in order to clarify the present. This is of course nothing new. What is new and relevant to me as an artist is the concept of 'deconstructing' the past in particular through current art criticism. This 'deconstruction' represents an attempt to break down barriers which have marginalised through the construction of hierarchies the work of minorities, women, and those working in the 'lesser' arts.

My art is personally, socially, and aesthetically motivated. I am also optimistic. While my 'homing instinct' is as strong as ever and I continue to question where I belong, I feel the answer to my confusion must lie in the continual reevaluation of human histories and sense of place. In this sense my art gives me an appropriate avenue for exploration and provides a means for personal orientation in a world of constant change.

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" In the Beginning the Earth was an infinite and murky plain, separated from the sky and from the grey salt sea and smothered in a shadowy twilight. There were neither Sun nor Moon nor Stars. Yet, far away, lived the Sky-Dwellers: youthfully indifferent beings, human in form but with the feet of emus, their golden hair glittering like spiders' webs in the sunset, ageless and unageing, having existed for ever in their green, well watered Paradise beyond the Western Clouds....

Beneath the Earth's crust, however, the constellations glimmered, the Sun shone, the Moon waxed and waned, and all the forms of life lay sleeping: the scarlet of a desert-pea, the iridescence on a butterfly's wing, the twitching white whiskers of Old Man Kangaroo - dormant as seeds in the desert that must wait for a wandering shower....

On the morning of the First Day, the Sun felt the urge to be born... The Sun burst through the surface, flooding the land with golden light, warming the hollows under which each Ancestor lay sleeping....

So it was, on this First Morning, that each drowsing Ancestor felt the Sun's warmth pressing on his eyelids, and felt his body giving birth to children. The Snake Man felt snakes slithering out of his navel. The Cockatoo Man felt feathers, The Witchetty Grub Man felt a wriggling, the Honey-ant a tickling, the Honeysuckle felt his leaves and flowers unfurling.... Everyone of the 'living things', each at its own separate birthplace, reached up for the light of day....

The Ancients sang their way all over the world. They sang the rivers and ranges, salt-pans and sand dunes. They hunted, ate, made love, danced, killed: wherever their tracks led they left a trail of music.

They wrapped the whole world in a web of song: and at last, when the Earth was sung, they felt tired. Again in their limbs they felt the frozen immobility of Ages. Some sank into the ground where they stood. Some crawled into caves. Some crept away to their 'Eternal Homes', to the ancestral waterholes that bore them.

All of them went 'back in' ".

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