

ARTS •

Artist Leaves Humanist Legacy

A Presentation House show celebrates the life of Saralee James

VISUAL ARTS

Saralee James: revolutions and revelations

At Presentation House Gallery until July 19

• By ROBIN LAURENCE

A tragic air of incompleteness pervades the Saralee James retrospective, not because of the art itself, which possesses its own sense of fulfilment, but because of our knowledge, as viewers, that an artist's life and career have been cut off prematurely. Still, James's sudden death at the age of 58 is not what the show is about: it's about a living body of work. It's also about the desire, on the part of James's friends (who were essential in funding and organizing the exhibition), to celebrate a "relentlessly questioning" mind and a character of great conviction.

Because she came to photography, film, and video relatively late in life, James had much yet to accomplish. Which isn't to say that she had not, in her last 20 years, created a challenging body of work. Between her early studies in photography and her late projects in video, James travelled widely and documented extensively. Reminiscences by her friends, lovers, and colleagues, published in a small booklet called *Glimpses*, create a profile of a frank, outspoken, and endlessly curious person, someone as fascinated by other cultures and lifestyles as she was critical of her own.

However, James's images of Inuit elders and children, Guatemalan refugees, Cuban cockfighters, Sikh wedding attendants, Japanese peasants, local transvestites, and the homeless of New York City may or may not find endorsement in our current political climate. Given contemporary issues of cultural redress and appropriation of voice, curiosity is hardly sufficient moral justification for making (or taking) images of sexually, racially, or economically marginalized people. But then, notions of political correctness pivot uneasily on interpretation—was the dynamic between artist and subject one of empathetic exchange or subtle exploitation? For many viewers, James's work would appear to have more to do with expressing a political position and a concerned humanity than with privileged voyeurism: she seems to have genuinely identified with the people who were her subjects. Yet for some, that identification might be seen as paternalistic.

In all her work, James seems to have had a special affinity for the young and the elderly, an affinity that first manifests itself in her series of black and white photographs, "The North". Taken in Pelle Bay and other Arctic communities in the late 1970s, these portraits of Inuit men, women, and children make direct social comments about the encroachment of 20th-century white culture upon indigenous lifestyles. Ghastly incongruities in housing, clothing, and transportation inform all of "The North", yet its real subjects are the enduring individuals upon whom change is being enacted. A small child playing with a toy pistol, an old woman with tattooed hands crossed in her lap, a middle-aged man smoking his pipe between his Honda and a string of drying fish: all suggest an uncomplaining—even cheery—acceptance of acculturation.

The photographic record James made of her 1981 trip to rural coastal communities in northern Japan is quite different from her other work. Austere-ly composed and highly formalist in



Saralee James's photographs of Vancouver's transvestite subculture are intimate and affectionate portraits that reveal a touching vulnerability underneath the pancake and feathers—and that typified the late artist's interest in self-definition.

structure, these silver prints are not so much about James's response to the Japanese people as about her response to the Japanese aesthetic (and the social conventions and structures that aesthetic reveals). Although a couple of portraits are included here, most of the prints are architectural, still-life, and garden studies—stone markers, airing quilts, painted screens, sliding wooden doors, humble vegetables in tiled sinks. Priests and gardeners, pho-

tographed from behind or at a distance, function not as individuals, but as formal elements in an immaculate landscape of temples, shrines, pavilions, and groomed gravel paths. All is hushed and reposeful, cultivated and controlled.

James's 1981-83 "wedding" photographs—uncommissioned images taken on the "fringes" of wedding parties in Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Park—are probably the most con-

frontational works she produced. (In their aggressive mood and grotesque elements, they have much in common with the work of Diane Arbus.) Titled "Objects of Desire", this series of colour prints has James's own stated intent of studying "the rituals of marriage and the subtle mechanisms whereby the myth is perpetuated".

Actually, nothing about these works or the mechanisms they reveal is par-

SEE PAGE 26

Saralee James

FROM PAGE 23

ticularly subtle: the absurd costumes and nervous postures of the brides, grooms, and their attendants are underscored by the extreme angles and brutal framing and cropping techniques James employs. In many instances, the heads of the adults are entirely cut off, dehumanizing them and creating an extremity of focus on

the children who are being "indoctrinated". Again, James is compelled by the young, who laugh, twirl, pout, or droop with boredom at the margins of adult ceremonies. The conflict between the children's antic energies and the sex roles and gender moulds into which they are being prematurely pressed (dressed in miniature gowns and miniature tuxedos) is explicit.

Concurrently with "Objects of Desire", James made a series of back-

stage and dressing-room photographs at BJ's, a Vancouver transvestite club. Although they share elements of theatre with the wedding photos, the black and white images of drag queens and female impersonators, donning make-up, wigs, and costumes and scrutinizing themselves in mirrors, are much more intimate and affectionate—even joyful. Where "Objects" examines conventions James clearly regarded as imprisoning, "BJ's" suggests that freedom is engendered in a ritual of un-convention—of crossing gender boundaries, of transformation, of otherness. Beneath their mood of gaiety, however, these men reveal a touching vulnerability—the vulnerability of the transitional state.

Where many of her still photographs are about others, James's videos seem to articulate aspects of her own life and culture. *Rose Belkin* shakily profiles James's mother; the contrast between the robust young woman of the early family photos and the frail, forgetful nonagenarian of the later family videos (struggling to remember her own daughter's name) is very sad—yet a strong sense of family endures here. *L'Actualité* uses James's own criminal trial (for her involvement in anti-sealing activities) as a vehicle for meditating on the nature of truth, memory, perception. Even *Solomon*, James's last and most accomplished video, which profiles an elderly New York City street person, is a means by which James could examine her own culture, her own religion, her own politics. Through her dispossessed subject, James finds a place for herself, a home within her own values. ■



Saralee James

CUBA: COCKFIGHT (1980). The Saralee James exhibit is in the Presentation House Gallery until July 19.

Relevant realities

Saralee James surveys the human spirit; Bryan Melvin's iconography of the night

Saralee James, *revolutions and revelations*. Presentation House Gallery, 333 Chesterfield Ave., N.V., June 12-July 19.
Bryan Melvin, *Neon Magic*. Gateway Gallery, 6500 Gilbert Rd., Richmond, June 9-July 7.

BY NOW it should come as no surprise that one of the most respected art galleries in Greater Vancouver is located here on the North Shore.

By restricting the focus of its exhibition program to the art of photography and capitalizing on international sources, Presentation House has acquired a reputation among art critics and gallery-goers alike for providing a venue that is consistently intelligent, engaging and critically praiseworthy.

The current exhibit at Presentation House is no exception.

Saralee James, revolutions and revelations, which runs until July 19 at Presentation House Gallery, is a retrospective exhibition that commemorates the art and life of a Vancouver artist for whom life and art were inextricably linked. On display is a comprehensive body of work that surveys her accomplishments in the fields of photography, film and video.

These works are eloquent testimony to the artist's unshakable compulsion to reach into dark sequestered regions of society in a bid to come to terms with the human spirit. The real subject of Saralee James' work is the human condition and the dignity of the common man. It is an obsession that led the artist on the numerous and sometimes dangerous excursions of which this exhibit provides ample evidence.

The importance of this show lies



Ron Falcioni

ART REVIEW

not so much in the mere excellence of the photography, which was the artist's real medium, as in the sheer honesty and

integrity of the documentation. There is, in fact, nothing particularly innovative here. Indeed, any pretence to technical "artiness" would have undermined the force of her inquiries.

It is with a kind of innocent inquisitiveness that we follow the artist into the cockfight pits of Cuba and transvestite clubs of Vancouver in the early '80s.

It is with a concerned and sympathetic heart that we are permitted to encounter the inhabitants of a Guatemalan refugee camp or the natives of Pelle Bay in the Northwest Territories.

Always it was James' acute sense of social consciousness and responsibility that dictated her perspectives and defined her quests.

The video *Solomon*, produced in New York just before her death in 1991 — and unfortunately the only work in the video program of more than marginal interest or tru-

From page 38

From page 26

ly significant esthetic value — is a kind of swan song that perfectly embodies the documentary spirit of her work.

Ultimately, Saralee James was a social crusader who championed the plight of the disenfranchised and the dispossessed by preserving it for posterity. And like many of the great photographers of our times, she did so with an ingenious and forthright simplicity.