

ARTS

A L I V E

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Negotiating the Space of the City

by Karen Love

The duality of the city as being a place of danger and exploitation for women as well as a site of mobility, negotiation, pleasure and transformation is explored in the exhibition *Urban Fictions* at Presentation House Gallery. The idea for the exhibition began in conversations between several Vancouver artists and Lynne Bell, a teacher and independent curator who has taken on the task of curating the show.

Starting from a common interest in the notion of gendered space, these artists recognized their recent work, although made for different occasions, had in common certain themes relating to women and the urban landscape: mobility, danger and negotiation; migrancy, culture, identity; desire, exchange, and sexual identity.

The artists in the exhibition are Lorna Brown, Margot Butler, Ana Chang, Allyson Clay, Dana Claxton, Andrea Fatona, Melinda Mollineaux, Shani Mootoo, Susan Schuppli, Karen Ai-Lyn Tee, Cornelia Wyndgaarden and Jin-me Yoon.

Making work which begins in lived, everyday experience and moves to a critique of dominant versions of history and knowledge, the above artists re-negotiate existing ideologies of "women's place" in the city. Telling stories of city streets in Canada and contemporary metropolitan cultures elsewhere, they explore the western city as a space produced by a range of practices and representations. In doing so, they reveal both gender and the city as significant spaces for analysis and critical understanding.

Urban Fictions will include mixed media photo-based work—sculptural

and two-dimensional in nature—and video installation, plus city street projects such as Melinda Mollineaux's bus shelter poster which will be located in a high-traffic site in Vancouver. This work is drawn from the artist's experience as a black woman walking in the city, and looks at the recognition and acknowledgment which occurs when two black women pass each other on the street.

Other examples of work from the exhibition are Dana Claxton's video *I Want To Know Why*, shot in New York, Ottawa, Indian Head and Hold the Kettle Reserve in Saskatchewan, which will examine how imperialism and government-sanctioned oppression has destroyed people, particularly in First Nations and Métis communities.

Jin-me Yoon's work will explore how the maternal body negotiates work and the city, and Karen Tee's work will address the notion of a traveling self which, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's words, constantly has to negotiate between "home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture...between a here, a there, and an elsewhere."

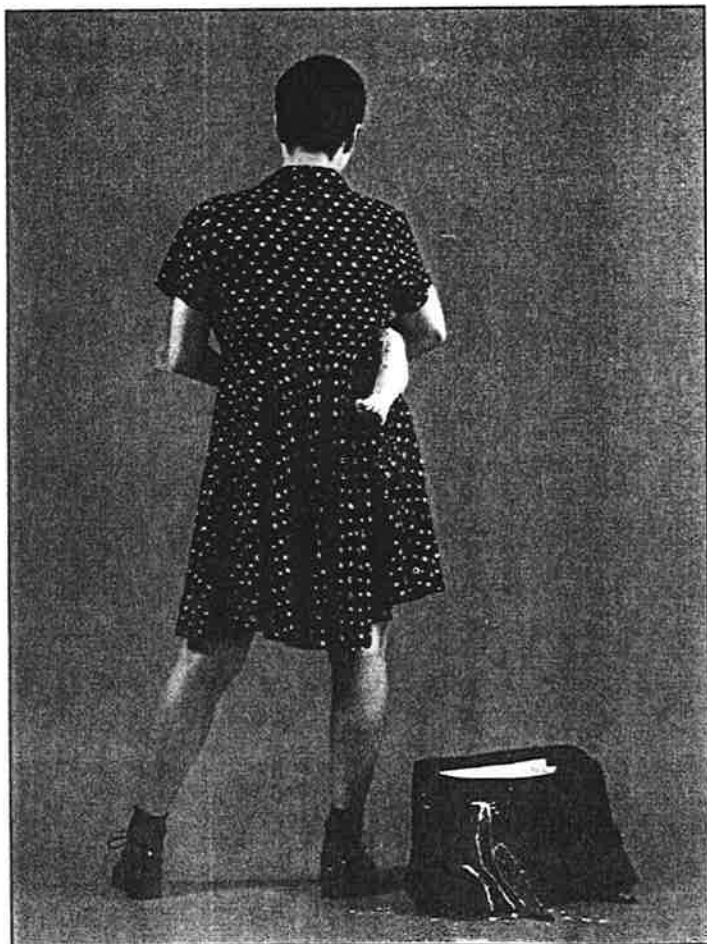
Associate professor and head of the department of Art and Art History at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Lynne Bell is also a writer, freelance curator and lecturer, and over the years has illustrated a particular interest in work which addresses women's issues. She and all 12 exhibiting artists will give a walking tour of the exhibition on the opening day, Saturday, January 13th, at 2 p.m., followed by a reception. Monday, January 15, at 7:30 p.m., there will be a poetry and prose reading by Larissa Lai and Marilyn Dumont. These events are free and open to the public.

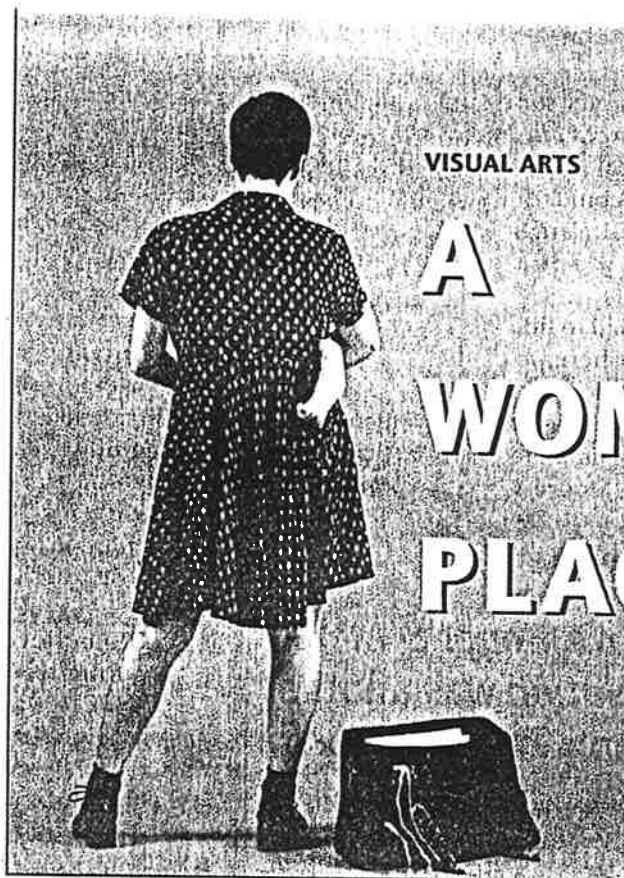
Urban Fictions will be at Presentation House Gallery until February 18th. ☺

Karen Love is the director/curator of Presentation House Gallery. Written in collaboration with Lynne Bell, guest curator of the Exhibition *Urban Fictions*.

Jin-me Yoon, Oxford & Hastings, 1995. One of two life-size colour photos.

Photos: taken by Susan Stewart





12 women artists explore the gendered city

by Pat Feindel

*"There are eight million stories in the
naked city; this has been one of them."*

As a child I used to hear this voice-over postscript to the TV series *The Naked City*, and shiver with excitement imagining those eight million lives, out there teeming in the streets of the city.

That voice affirmed the fascination of cities – their capacity to contain so many varied people and worlds, coexisting in parallel spaces and times, often never meeting or overlapping. It hinted at the narrative potential of the urban world, at the stories lying dormant, hovering at the edges or outside the frame of whatever story we were told.

Though that 1950s notion of "eight million stories" recognized diversity of a sort, it did not begin to convey the complexity of the urban

environment, nor analyze or challenge the social and economic forces that shape the daily lives of city dwellers. Yet with an innocent prescience, it pointed to issues that are at the heart of critical thinking about urban spaces today.

This month, 12 women artists take up some of those issues in *Urban Fictions*, an exhibition of photo-based mixed media and installation work at Presentation House. The show grew out of conversations between several Vancouver artists and curator Lynne Bell (Chair of Art and Art History at the University of Saskatchewan, and independent curator), during which they realized they had been exploring, from a variety of personal locations, themes related to women in the city.

Urban Fictions begins with the assumption that urban spaces are gendered – the product of representations and practices that define women's "place" (physical, economic, social, and psychic) in the geography of the city. But the city itself is not monolithic: while acknowledging it as a place of exploitation

and danger for women, the exhibition also looks at ways that the city acts as a site of mobility, pleasure, resistance, and transformation.

The artists start from the details of everyday experience and develop these to challenge dominant versions of history and knowledge, and renegotiate ideas about women's place in the city. One of their many renegotiations occurs in the realm of memory and cultural identity.

Dana Claxton's video, *I Want to Know Why*, rhetorically demands, in a crescendo of pulsing music and repeating voice track, an explanation for the suffering and premature deaths of women in previous generations of her First Nations family. Claxton juxtaposes and manipulates imagery that alludes to her heritage (e.g., details of teepee structures, an image of Sitting Bull) and to colonial culture (e.g. the Statue of Liberty, New York's Manhattan Savings Bank with sculptures of Indians carved high on its facade). The resulting work intervenes loudly in the silences of colonialism and confronts monumental architecture's erasure of history.

A documentary video by Andrea Fatona and Cornelia Wyngaarden also resists erasure – this time as a result of urban development. Through family album photographs, video excerpts, newspaper clippings, and interviews, *Hogan's Alley* explores the history of a black community that existed in the first half of this century around the Main Street area north of First Avenue. The Alley is now paved over and occupied by the southeast off-ramp of the Georgia Viaduct, but interviews with three women bring it vividly to life. The interplay between their differences in class and sexual orientation, and their overlapping experiences makes this a rich documentation of urban history from a female perspective.

Creating a sense of place or community, however ephemeral, also underlies Melinda Mollineaux's photo-based bus shelter posters. With one poster exhibited at a bus

shelter on Granville mall and a second in the gallery, Mollineaux explores how the politics of vision and visibility operate for her as a black woman in the city: "Walking around the city, the space isn't mine. What's peripheral, off to the side, is my authentic vision, while the 'normal view' is peripheral to my own subjectivity."

Jin-me Yoon makes a less direct reference to public transit and the politics of vision in two almost life-size photographs (shot by Susan Stewart) entitled "Intersection." One image presents a maternal figure, her back to the viewer, with milk dripping down a baby's leg onto an open briefcase. In the other, the same figure, her back again to the viewer, wears a man's suit and holds a breast pump behind her back like a gun.

As Yoon points out, "Things are not easily contained within categories," and her stark images suggest the tensions and instability that trouble the boundaries of any urban location. While taking the form of bus shelter fashion advertising, the photos confront the viewer with contradictions between women's intersecting identities – between public and private, male and female, and "performed" and suppressed identities.

Additional works by Lorna Brown, Margot Butler, Ana Chang, Allyson Clay, Shani Mootoo, Susan Schuppli, and Karen Tee have many more "stories" to tell. And none of these artists is content to settle for the status quo: whether sensual, poetic, abrasive, or witty, each "fiction" interrupts or renegotiates limiting notions about "women's place" in the city. *Urban Fictions* seems to say, "There are eight million stories in the naked city, and many of them are women's."

Urban Fictions is at Presentation House in North Vancouver until February 18. Wednesday–Sunday 12–5 pm, Thursday 12–9 pm. Call 604.986.1351 for more information. ♪

PAT FEINDEL is an ambivalent urban dweller, as well as an editor and writer.

Two Saturdays, separated by a week of reflection: two Saturdays of encountering **Urban Fictions** at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver.

On the first, I arrived at the exhibition opening with a friend. We hadn't seen each other in a couple of months and spoke eagerly together about our recent travels in opposite hemispheres, about families, friends and lovers, about exhibitions, films and books — and the oddly intersecting orbits of our individual experiences.

We spoke about disturbing incidents, insulting remarks and threatening behaviors that our different ages, genders and cultural origins

VISUAL ARTS

ROBIN LAURENCE

(he is a young man of Asian descent, I am a middle-aged woman of European descent) seemed to provoke as we passed through crowds of strangers.

Presentation House was teeming with visitors, hundreds of guests who squeezed around the artists as they talked briefly about their work. Unlike the world beyond the gallery, a sense of safety prevailed in this crowd, a collective urge towards understanding.

The exhibition of photographic, video and installation art (at 333 Chesterfield, North Vancouver, to Feb. 18) explores themes of women negotiating the urban landscape. Issues of "gendered space," of safety and danger, pleasure and mobility, cultural origin and sexual orientation, fashion and maternity, domesticity and the public realm, identity and anonymity, history and representation, all are developed here.

Organized by guest curator Lynne Bell, the exhibition includes 12 mostly Vancouver-based artists: Lorna Brown, Margot Butler, Ana Chang, Allyson Clay, Dana Claxton, Andrea Fatona, Melinda Mollineaux, Shani Mootoo, Susan Schuppli, Karen Ai-Lyn Tee, Cornelia Wyngaarden and Jin-me Yoon.

On the second Saturday, I came alone to the gallery. Outside, light snow sifted down from a low, cold sky. Inside, a few quiet visitors looked at the work on display or flipped through books and catalogues in the gallery shop.

The predominant sounds when I arrived — lively Afro-Caribbean music from Hogan's



DETAIL from *A Day Like The Kind of Day That Always Follows The Day Before* by Allyson Clay

Exploring the plight of women in urban settings

Alley, a video about Vancouver's black community made by Andrea Fatona and Cornelia Wyngaarden — seemed wonderfully incongruous with the white walls and grey carpet within, the grey sky and white snow without. Incongruous, too, with the hush of high art and critical theory.

Because of the exhibition, I reflected on how I had travelled through the city to get to this place. I thought about the incidents — sexual and cultural, personal and professional — that had inflected the language of my transit from home to gallery.

I thought about the people I'd encountered, the looks, the comments, the interactions. And I thought about two men I'd seen harassing a woman bus driver and the choices we can and

can't make about safety, mobility and visibility in the urban environment.

Susan Schuppli's six freestanding light boxes, part of a 1994 series titled *Nightwalker*, address opposing ideas such as pleasure-and-danger, opportunity-and-risk that confront women in the city at night. Using grainy and blurred black and white photographs and brilliant red text, along with allusions to Surrealism and psychoanalysis, Schuppli examines the ways in which the urban environment shapes female identity. She also articulates the consequences — and necessities — of breaking out of the domestic realm, of asserting a female presence abroad.

Jin-me Yoon's *Intersection* investigates the experience and conditions of contemporary

motherhood, or what she calls "maternal subjectivity." This strong new work comprises two large, color photographs, keyed in size, hue and luminosity to advertising and fashion photography — and to issues of labor, consumption and gender roles.

Each image is of a young person with close-cropped hair, taken from behind. In one, the model (Yoon herself) is dressed in a black, baggy-legged business suit, a neat, paper-filled briefcase nearby and a contraption for expressing milk held, as if in shame or self-negation, behind her back. (The contraption looks like a space-cartoon weapon.)

In the second photo, the model has on a knee-length dress and is holding a baby, whose naked leg extends around her waist. The baby's leg, the mother's dress and the attendant briefcase are all dripping — I mean, dripping — with milk. It's a funny and sobering pairing.

In *Intersection*, she asks us to consider the politics of "lactation" — the places and conditions in which women are permitted to nurse their babies.

Ana Chang's photo-audio work *Move* covers the "moral dilemma" of public transit passengers who witness an incident of harassment. Chang situates herself both centrally and peripherally with respect to the narrative; the incident described is low-key, "banal," almost a non-incident — but on reflection, important because of what it typifies, both sexually and culturally.

Other artists who deal with issues of "race" and culture within the gendered urban landscape are Melinda Mollineaux and Karen Ai-Lyn Tee (who each employ photographs and text), and Dana Claxton, Andrea Fatona and Cornelia Wyngaarden (who employ video).

Claxton's powerful and disturbing videotape *I Want To Know Why* screams pain across many generations of native women — the pain of displacement, despair, descent into patterns of self-loathing and self-destruction.

It demands an accounting. It demands to know why.

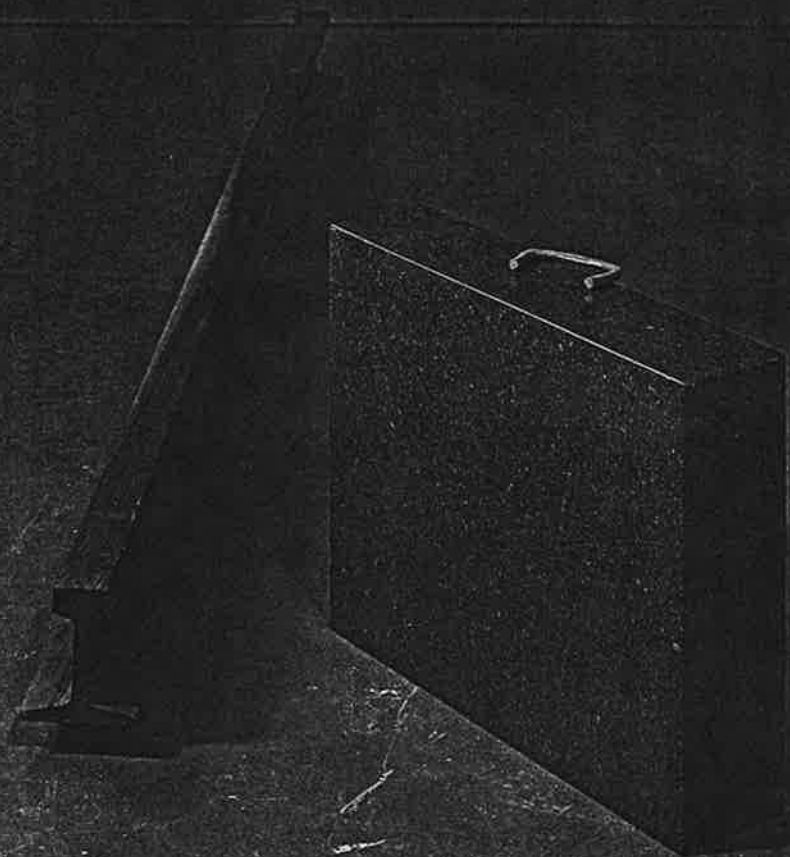
PARACHUTE

20

THE
YEAR

Illustration
by David
Gardner

t r a n s i t n o



life-giving substance (a mother's umbilical connection with her fetus, for example). More recently, this latter association has been ominously subverted by blood's emergence as an agent of transmission for life-threatening diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis C. Here, Polataiko's blood serves as an index of the radioactivity that continues to render uninhabitable a portion of his former Ukrainian homeland. Its placement in a cast iron bathtub recalls the concrete "sarcophagus" that Soviet authorities hurriedly built over the decimated Chernobyl reactor to control the spread of radiation.

While the circumstances surrounding *Cradle's* execution invite environmental interpretations, Polataiko resists viewing his installation as a cautionary warning against nuclear power. "*Cradle* reflects my interest in the process of mutation," says Polataiko, "and the parallels that may be drawn between biological transformation and changes in the realm of politics or culture. In the case of Chernobyl, uncontrolled radiation impacted on the human genetic code. But it also served as a catalyst for the Soviet Union's collapse." Instead, he is interested in exploring the significance of radiation as a transforming agent in human society.

As a major cause of genetic mutation, solar and other forms of cosmic radiation have been a driving force in the evolution of life on this planet. Admittedly, the vast majority of these mutations were lethal to host organisms. But select mutations did lead to genetic improvements within plant and animal species. In identifying radiation as an agent of ideological transformation as well, Polataiko resorts to a second biological analogy. Radiation is the "ultimate virus": "It is undetectable by the human senses. No life form is immune to radiation. Even death is not capable of stopping it as it survives by infiltrating the genetic code. In this sense, I see radiation as a viral agent of collective memory."

Mounted on the gallery wall are six oval "paintings." In fashioning these works, Polataiko

applied wallpaper to sheets of dry-wall, then smashed a circular hole with his fist, which he proceeded to repair using plaster and paint. The resulting trompe l'œil effect serves as a metaphor for the type of Orwellian historical revisionism or erasure practiced by totalitarian regimes such as the former Soviet Union. Indeed, when the Chernobyl reactor exploded, the Soviet government initially denied there was a problem. But as radioactivity spread throughout northern Europe, it was forced to disclose previously restricted information. For Ukrainian citizens such as Polataiko, who were immersed in a surreal visual/textual/linguistic environment created by the colonizing force of Soviet propaganda, this duplicity in the supposed age of glasnost destroyed the Soviet government's last shred of credibility and legitimacy.

By selecting white wallpaper with a multi-coloured "check" pattern, Polataiko alludes to Suprematism, a non-objective art movement founded by his fellow countryman Kasimir Malevich during the intellectual ferment that accompanied the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. With its emphasis on the symbolic use of line, colour and form, Suprematism sought to authenticate painterly space by dispensing with the illusion of perspectival realism. By celebrating the æsthetic purity of such geometric shapes as the triangle, square and circle, Suprematism also sought to capture the idealistic spirit of what Malevich believed was an emerging Socialist Utopia. But as history records, his dream was brutally crushed by the oppressive force of Stalinism.

In addition to the formal references to Suprematism, *Cradle* is rife with allusions to the seductive power of illusion. These include the mirror-like shape of the six paintings – what is a mirror, after all, but a mechanism for creating a two-dimensional image of reality – the implied artifice of wallpaper as a decorative medium and the highly reflective nickel-plating on the bathtub. The last allusion is particularly interesting. As viewers stand over the tub, they can study

their reflection in its flawless surface. If they wish, they may open a valve-like peephole to view the contents within. When they do, their facial reflection is displaced by a shadowy tunnel which affords them a glimpse of Polataiko's blood, its opaque and ruddy richness accentuated by the glare of gallery lights. As they contemplate this eerie sight, the vaguely disturbing aroma of clotting and decaying blood mixed with anticoagulants begins to permeate the gallery.

By offering viewers a graphic look at life's most precious fluid, Polataiko comments not only on modern humanity's alienation from the body's physical reality, but also on our disavowal of our atavistic past. Human history is replete with violent socio-political and religious rituals, from blood sacrifices to visceral divination (a shamanistic practice where the liver and other vital organs of sacred animals were examined for prophetic purposes) to bloodletting by medieval doctors. Even the Christian rite of Communion contains a symbolic reference to the consumption of blood. By denying our pagan past, Polataiko seems to suggest, we run the risk of committing our own act of historical revisionism, whereby biological instincts that once sustained us are suppressed in favour of culturally-determined patterns of behaviour. *Cradle* seeks to dig beneath this veneer of civ-

ilized enlightenment to explore a host of primordial impulses that lay buried in humanity's collective unconscious.

Artists who incorporate bodily fluids such as blood, urine or semen into their work generally do so at their peril. The line between theatricality and sensationalism is fine, and artists who step over this line are usually dismissed as publicity hounds. In incorporating his own blood into *Cradle*, Polataiko adopted a deliberately understated installation strategy. He did not splash it on the gallery walls in imitation of a grisly murder scene, neither did he allow it to pool on the floor. Rather, he placed his blood inside a sealed cast iron bathtub. Out of sight, but not out of mind, just as it is was when it flowed through his veins. In this sense, the tub functions as a metaphor for the human body. Granted, Polataiko's austere container is considerably stronger and heavier than the flesh and bones that serve as our structural framework. But balanced delicately on its four chain-link supports so that even the slightest touch or vibration caused it to sway gently in the spot-lit gallery, the nickel-plated tub and its companion paintings offered a compelling mediation on the fragile preciousness of human life.

— GREG BEATTY

URBAN FICTIONS

Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver,
January 13 – February 18

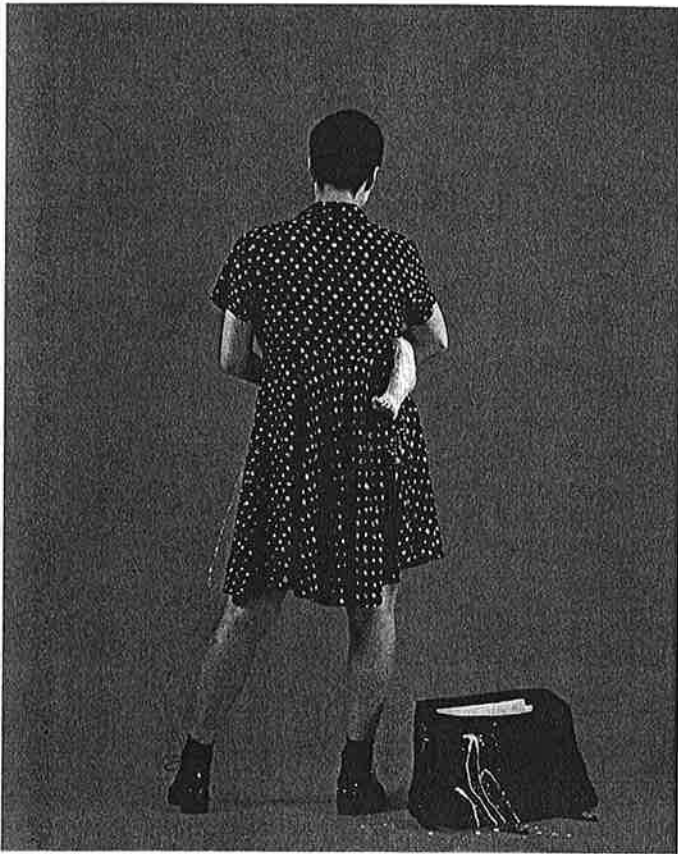
Vancouver – the edge between shifty Pacific Rim geopolitics and the Continental Divide.

Vancouver – a colonial site of massive cultural, socioeconomic, political and technological convergence.

Whether instigated by these conditions or others, Vancouver has been subjected to a vigorous postmodern auto-critique unlike any other Canadian city. Involving visual artists, writers and archi-

itects since the 1970s, it has encompassed the topics of urban sprawl, modernity, the landscape and European encroachment. Its trajectory can be traced from the conceptual work of N.E. Thing Co. to the photographs of Stan Douglas and onwards to the projects herded by outsiders under the term: *Vancouver School*.

"Urban Fictions," guest-curated by Lynne Bell, is the latest exhi-



JIN-ME-YOON, INTERSECTION, 1995; PHOTO: SUSAN STEWART

bition that contributes to this discourse. Featuring the works of twelve Vancouver-based women artists, the exhibition sets itself apart by presenting nuanced works that respond to specifically gendered and sometimes racial experiences of the city.

The exhibition includes installation works produced by Lorna Brown, Margot Butler, Susan Schuppli and Karen Tee. Allyson Clay and Melinda Molineaux contributed photo-text works while Ana Chang mounted a photo-audio work. Both Jin-me Yoon and Shani Mootoo have photographic pieces in the show. There are also two videos: one by Cornelia Wyngaarden and Andrea Fatona; the other by Dana Claxton. All these works engage in the construction of narratives and collectively constitute an anthology of stories about women in the city and, for many of the participants, stories about their Vancouver. And while each theme varies from nocturnal emboldenment to racism to cultural dis-

placements, at each work's centre is an attempt to de-subjectify the city and re-subjectify women and their specificities.

Shani Mootoo's *The Urbanites' Fiction*, focuses its narrative on the articulation of desire, and through desire situates a subjectivity. Relying on the informal conventions of the snapshot, the work tiles together standard commercially developed and printed photographs. This mosaic is arranged into thematic borders and friezes. On its outer edge is a frame of New York subway images, then a border of city maps, anatomy charts and floor plans. At its centre is a sequence shot from an airplane. Other columns and friezes include the artist's trip to Mexico and her brother's trip from Trinidad to the Rockies. Whether functioning as an archive of personal relationships – queered, coloured or Otherwise – or as a record of touristic fulfillment, the snapshots reveal subjects not only traversing context, sites and geographies. They show

that the very terrains crossed are the motivator and the desired object.

The concept of sensualized terrains are also considered in Lorna Brown's installation, *Scour(ge)*. In the installation, wire brushes are laid out in a large circle on the floor of the gallery with their bristles facing up. The bristles form words. Broken into quadrants to make four sentences, the work describes four women – N., S., E., and W., (the cardinal points) – walking through and impacting upon the city. For example, one set of brushes reads, "E. honed her joints sharp on the exteriors of buildings." Accompanying the brushes are tear sheets which further elaborate these promenades with S. imprinting the street she walks on and N. climbing a hill, breathing deeply. These descriptions of labour draw attention to the impact of women's work outside the domestic realm. Even if it is read negatively as burden or positively as mythic female strength, the installation nevertheless asserts women as larger than life figures within the public realm of the city street.

Greater representational ambiguities and tenuousness exist in the de-subjectifying/re-subjectifying process of Jin-me Yoon's photographic diptych, *Intersection*. One photograph shows an Asian woman, her back to the viewer, in a black dress. The leg of an infant hooks around her waist from the crook of her arm. Neither of their faces can be seen. Milk drips down from the pair into an open black briefcase. The other half of the diptych shows a tidier arrangement. The woman, now dressed in a black business suit, holds a breast expresser like a gun behind her back. The briefcase is shut. In both images, the figures are photographed against a blood red backdrop.

Ostensibly, *Intersection* does not contain any direct reference to the city. Yet it is laden with a parallel iconography set up by its use of the language of fashion photography. The dress, briefcase, the baby, the expresser (as a weapon) and its accompanying milk are representations of com-

peting economic and societal imperatives draped over the woman. This gendered coding of the labour of motherhood and the labour of wage-earning into human-scaled elements only emphasizes the permutative condition of the city. By not literally articulating the city's presence in the background and articulating it through inference in the foreground, *Intersection* illustrates a condition of proscription and instrumentalization. It is an exercise in *drag* that the urban economy demands. It is an exercise in legibility.

While the drag components are visually more complex and draw the narrative attention of the viewer, it is the stark emphatic red background that provides a multiplicity of meanings. And, through its multiplicity, allows an associative reading where links among race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. can be drawn. In other words, though the background is simple, it is by no means mute. Depending on your perspective, the red is a symbol for happiness and good fortune, passion, anger, danger, the historical avant-garde, modernity, menstrual blood, the stop light, the red light district and, ultimately, it is a sign for the city. Such collisions of the signified, such crises of surety of meaning are analogous to another type of urban experience/alienation.

What then exiguously remains to assert an individual subjectivity are fragments. Nestled in the rigid tectonics of the literal foreground and the figurative background are only the back of a head, either the legs or the hand and the counterpoise of the model's body. The hair is Asian. The hair is short. The legs are smooth and pale. The hand is firmly grasping the expresser. The fingernails are short and neat. The posture, assertive. And so the narrative begins with the woman/artist/narrator as subject present. In the vast monologic matrix established by Yoon the narrator, Yoon the protagonist emerges from its interstices.

Unlike Yoon, the game of de-subjectifying the city and re-subjectifying the individual are

clearly played out by Allyson Clay. Her installation piece, *A day like the kind of day that always follows the day before*, draws more directly from local artistic antecedents and operates as counterpoint to them. The work is made up of two photo-transparencies in aluminum light boxes. One photo-transparency shows a Los Angeles freeway, the other a parked car in a warehouse district. The artist in the middle-ground stands nearly obscured by a telephone pole. Small in scale, these images interrupt wall-mounted text like punctuation. The text reads: "Day after day an invisible unfolding of seasons like constant traffic. I dream of smell and touch, burnt sienna and lime, sweat and water again and again."

In *A day like the kind of day* . . . , Clay constructs an idiomatic relationship to the bleak social landscape photographs of Rodney Graham, Roy Arden and Ian Wallace – especially Wallace's *Mélancolie dans la rue*, which hangs at this time in the Vancouver Art Gallery. Both her work and the work she draws attention to, dwell upon mundanity, capitalist development, suburbia and its facilitators: the car and the highway. But, where the aforementioned artists' works are stoic and silent and where *Mélancolie dans la rue* is nostalgic, Clay's work is lyrical. Through its iterative tactic – the evocative title, the wall-mounted text, the cameo appearance of Clay – the installation places the narrative voice within the frame of the artwork itself rather than having it reside outside the work. The authority of the city and the authority that artistic distance confer are not available.

It should be made clear that the curatorial motivation of "Urban Fictions" is, in some ways, to contest prior projections that have generalized the urban field – projections that obviate gender and race – and, more significantly, entrench the city as narrative subject or character. Such propositions state: the city does *this*, the city does *that*.

These strains of discourse that posit the city as a latent subject, though sometimes disguised as

technology or social landscape, find grounding in the alliance of semi-otically-derived theories (morphology and typology) and the neo-marxisms in architecture and in literature. For example, film theorists in the 1980s have claimed architecture as the la-

tent subject in all films. Taken through their internal logics, what is put forward is a meta-theory of the meta-city as the meta-subject. It is this unitarian theoretical blanketing that is resisted.

– JAMES JASON LEE

NICOLA TYSON

Entwistle, London, November 17 – January 11

**DOROTHY CROSS, CEAL FLOYER,
CORNELIA PARKER, HELEN ROBERTSON
AND BRIDGET SMITH**

Frith Street Gallery, London, November 17 – January 13

Even if indeterminate, post-referential subjectivities can now reasonably be taken as givens, art objects are still visited by their social and political contexts. In London at mid-winter there is ample evidence that visual culture locates a site where hegemony wavers. Two of the most interesting shows tug at the limits of the given-to-be-seen. British-born and New-York based artist Nicola Tyson's first exhibition of works on paper – figurative gouaches and drawings – first declares its debt to feminism, then to Surrealism, then to the artist's own paintings. The result is a suggestive play of the repulsive and the funny, possible evidence of an antagonistic sensibility at ease.

Tyson's aesthetic is as raw, sensual, clever as her means are controlled and economical. Her favourite device is to present bodily mutations as cartoonish distortions set off against stark backgrounds in opaque colours. Biomorph inventions Tyson refers to as "psycho-figuration," the images depict creatures performing a variety of acts. In one, a femme fatale sporting bunny ears displays her prominent buttocks with expressive frivolity. Conjuring notions of animal sex, thus a field of unbound sexual relations, it speaks to the power of transgression and taboo in cultural forms. Tyson's *Mummy*

(1995) is even more audacious. Representing spewing maternity with ferocious energy and in a

form suggesting ancient fertility figurines, it reads as alternately nightmarish or comforting, amusing or explosive. An image of archetypal hysteria, this deterritorialized body, fragmented, fluid, unbound, summons the ambiguity inherent in processes of constructing new identities.

Other of Tyson's investigations are recorded in a series of pencil sketches that display the extravagance of her imagination and draw obvious comparison to Germaine Richier, Hans Bellmer, even Francis Bacon. In the manner of Bacon, bodily orifices are, indeed, turned inside out, but Tyson is less venal, hence her art is less tortured. Like Tyson's paintings, to which this imagery refers, and with the works on paper, these notations twist gender, delivering metaphysical grotesques. The results are always intricately and wittily artificial.



NICOLA TYSON, MUMMY, 1995, GOUACHE ON PAPER; PHOTO: COURTESY ENTWISTLE.