
VANCOUVER/SEATTLE

Sculpture by

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SURREY ART GALLERY

During the last four years the art press has lionized contemporary painters who use figurative motifs while providing relatively little exposure or serious exploration of the work of sculptors of figurative subjects of the same generation.¹ The works in this exhibition by four young sculptors, Lionel Doucette and Lyse S. Lemieux of Vancouver, and Walter Lieberman and Debra Sherwood of Seattle, consist of figurative motifs and other examples of representational imagery. The thematic content and the artists' presentation of that content is similar to those seen in the work of other sculptors and many of the more interesting young painters. Common characteristics and strategies include themes of political and/or social significance, or personal responses to public events;² new symbols created out of old ones;³ a rigorously staged presentation of the work;⁴ odd scale relationships;⁵ portrayals of emotions of anger, confusion or outrage;⁶ and a pervasive use of allegory.⁷

Doucette and Sherwood create tableaux with fully three-dimensional figures in fibreglas and clay, respectively, while Lieberman and Lemieux make low-relief panels of glass which incorporate figurative motifs. All four explore themes of political and/or social importance using pictorial means. Sherwood's larger than life size ceramic goddess/human figures set in the implied architectural skeleton of a temple form the structure of an extended allegory on Woman as sustainer and protector of cultured and civilized values. Lieberman's sandblasted glass panels explore war, pacifism, poverty and alienation. Lemieux's suite of glass relief sculptures, *La Déchirure* (literally, to tear, to rend), suggest windows which illuminate ever-present structures of enclosure and confinement. One of the groups of pieces within the suite, *The Figurative Ones*, describes recent events in Central America. Doucette's *tableau vivant* of life-size cast fibreglas pieces present figures which bear mocking witness to stereotypical notions communicative of artistic creation and exchange. The imagery used by these four artists is never merely literal nor so esoteric as to be indecipherable. The artists invent symbols which are rich in associations and open to varied but related interpretations. Although they create timeless archetypes placed in generalized settings, they use these devices to address specific, contemporary issues.

Of particular interest is the way in which each artist approaches symbolism. Lieberman extends the role of Everyman to include the T.V. watcher in *Talk to Me...*, the corpses in *Sometimes it's difficult to determine the political affiliation of the dead*, and the disillusioned middle-aged man in *Untitled*, managing to make them all aspects of the same universal image of human error and folly. Often these artists create new symbols using older forms or reverse traditional attributes to create new types. Sherwood's figures as symbols of womanhood draw on sources as diverse as Minoan, American folk and Classical Mediterranean art. Doucette invents new attributes for his characters, replacing the writer's quill pen and expression of rapt attention with typewriter keys and a grimace of anger in *The Poet*. In *The Reciprocate*, where the figure represents ideas about commercial exchange, Doucette replaces a man in a black business suit with a naked blue man whose gestures define his role. Lemieux's fragmented world in *The Figurative Ones* is a rigorous look at the effects of civil war complete with traditional images of power (*Le Roi et La Reine*) and new ones (*Aiming at Campesino Home*).

Although these works were not designed specifically for the Surrey Art Gallery, all four artists feel free to manipulate elements of the setting such as light, sound and architectural features, following the examples set by artists of the 1970's active in the area of site-specific and installation art. The pieces in this exhibition are staged so that they are seen in a certain sequence. Relative position is particularly important to the work of Doucette and Sherwood. Doucette places his two figures so that the viewer sees *The Poet* first, and uses dim lighting and a sound tape loop to create an atmosphere of loneliness. Sherwood's goddess/human figures stand within a "temple" as caryatids or statues used as columns. They are spotlighted to increase the aura of majesty and religiousness of the works. Lieberman and Lemieux use staging in a less dramatic and overt manner. The twenty-four panels of *La Déchirure* are arranged around the edges of the gallery with each panel hung slightly away from the wall so that it casts a shadow or "drawing" of itself. Lieberman sets his curved panels at waist height and lights them to emphasize surface qualities, making each piece read as both object and image.

Scale relationships between the viewer and the material viewed also play an important role in many of these works. Doucette's figures are life-size so that despite the strange and bizarre aspects of them, the viewer acknowledges that they inhabit his or her world. Sherwood's goddesses are slightly over seven feet tall; not so tall as to overwhelm, but with a majesty born of size which renders their status as merely human figures ambivalent. Lemieux's world is emblematic and miniatureized, especially in the pieces which contain windows and doors used for constructing doll houses. Her cosmos is detailed, precise, yet can be inhabited only by the imagination.

Emotions of anger, outrage, confusion and despair are evident as well. Doucette's angry writer and Sherwood's wild-eyed statues are startling, visceral images. Lieberman and Lemieux do not portray characters in emotional upheaval but use the situations described in the work to evoke strong feelings in the viewer. The latter's *Aiming at Campesino Home* and Lieberman's *Death of Gandhi* and *Sometimes it's difficult...* evoke frustration at the idiocy of violence as a solution to political problems.

Doucette, Lemieux, Lieberman and Sherwood combine characters presented with symbolic attributes in generalized settings to create allegories. Doucette's companion pieces, *The Poet* and *The Reciprocate*, reconstruct the characteristics and principal operations of production and exchange. Lemieux uses symbols of power and victimization, of decay and regeneration,⁸ to describe pervasive incidents of violence, enclosure and confinement. Lieberman's vignettes clarify some of the central issues of pacifism, and illuminate cause and effect relationships between poverty, urbanization and alienation. Sherwood's installation invents a new way to examine Woman and culture.

Although these artists share ideas and strategies with many painters, their work is very different due to the materials chosen and the absence of illusionism so central to the new painting. Three of the four uses glass or fibreglas (Lemieux, Lieberman and Doucette) or clay (Sherwood), materials associated more often with crafts than with art objects. Matthew Kangas, a Seattle art critic, suggests that his city has nurtured a climate conducive to an art based on

an eclectic and ebullient use of craft materials and techniques which acknowledges "the pre-eminence of Idea and its inextricability from contemporary art".⁹ For example, Sherwood studied in the ceramics division of the University of Washington Fine Arts Department where instructors stressed intellectual qualities over craftsmanship. The Pilchuck School of Glass, in Stanwood, Washington, where Lieberman taught for a brief time, has promoted the use of glass as a fine art medium for many years. But already the most inventive and socially provocative glass work is being produced by young artists who, like Lieberman, live and work in the downtown core of Seattle.¹⁰ Without a similar tradition of sustained institutional support or even a loose group of artists working with the medium in Vancouver, Lemieux's interest in glass over many years is all the more remarkable.

With the exception of Lieberman, who likes both titles, these creators consider themselves to be artists and not craftspeople. Yet the technical assurance of their work is too obvious to ignore. The amount of detail and range of tonal definition of Lieberman's panels; the excellent casting of Doucette's figures (note the jeans on *The Poet*); the ambition of firing pieces as large as the halves of Sherwood's *Deité*; and Lemieux's precise symbiosis of composition and colour using irregular glass shards, all demonstrate standards of construction and an involvement with the physical limits of specific materials which are noteworthy for their rarity.

Their material choices are best understood not as an allegiance to craft genres but as a commitment to vernacular materials and notions of value. Use of quotidian objects and materials in works of art harks back to the work of Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters, through the assemblage works of the 1960's and 1970's by such artists as Edward Kienholz. Yet the finesse and detail of the work of Doucette (who uses the same fibreglas used to repair boats), Lieberman, Sherwood and Lemieux belies the casual look and impish inconoclasm of these earlier traditions. With the exception of Lemieux who often uses found objects in her panels, these artists tend to work with one material and to do so in inventive way. Their use of ordinary materials arises from a widespread reorientation in sculpture and

About colours, glass, necklaces and broken things. Nests, eggs and wombs, fences and small worlds. Notes about the small world.

Comments about things lost and things found.

The works are like puzzles — about women — about men. I want these works to laugh, to dance. 300,000 million Blue Zebras drown while crossing the Red River. After drowning they are transformed into inches of reality!

Lyse S. Lemieux

Lyse S. Lemieux's *La Déchirure* is a suite of twenty-four glass sculptures which hug the perimeter of the gallery space like windows to the outside world. Each of the twenty-four pieces is made from a one-eighth inch thick square of plain window glass measuring two feet on each side. Lemieux has affixed sundry objects to the glass; including shards of glass coloured with felt pen, beads, chicken wire fencing, pieces of rusted metal, plastic toys, miniature stuffed elephants, windows and doors pirated from doll houses, drinking glasses, wire, wooden dowling and other bits of wood, and blobs of silicon she uses for bonding the objects to the sheets. Although many of these are *found objects*, discards reclaimed and recycled by the artist, Lemieux uses them not to pose the question "what is art?", as did the Dada artists but for their evocative power as objects, and for their formal qualities of colour, shape, weight or density. She chooses the most effective visual and iconographic arrangement of a selection of objects before she fixes them to the glass panel and often uses a Dremmel tool to etch cryptic messages or words into the glass surfaces.

In *La Déchirure*, Lemieux uses glass as a support for the objects, and as both a solid material and a transparency or thin veil to the outside. Glass is an interesting combination of portal and barrier: it lets in light and information about the outside world; it is a "clear channel" but always distorts the information to some degree. Yet it is also a barrier to sound and weather. Finally, it is a fluid or liquid which sags and hence distorts more as it ages.

The suite consists of six groups of related images: *The Figurative Ones*, *Architectural Works*, *Nesting Works*, *Elephants Tumbling*, *Organic Maps* and *Central Core*. The works within each group are related by similar composition, objects used, and thematic content. The issues addressed are a result of Lemieux's frustration and sadness in response to certain events of political and social importance. She made *The Figurative Ones* while listening to radio bulletins about the wars in Central America. Had we learned nothing from the upheavels of the 1960's? Is war still seen as a solution to political conflict?

Rebel, the first piece of this group, depicts an androgenous figure who is the focus of triangular glass missiles. The composition moves the eye across the panel through the figure, his or her rifle and beyond; murderous aggression passes from individual to individual like a plague. *Le Roi et La Reine* and *Fractured* explore the effects of civil war and power struggles. The figureheads in the former are pulled apart by their lust in the same way that the figure in *Fractured* is torn by conflicting loyalties. *Angel Bringing Supplies* was inspired by a bulletin about bombers dropping cows instead of explosives which must have seemed miraculous to the Nicaraguan campesinos. Their expectations were shaped by frequent bombings like the one portrayed in *Aiming at Campesino Home*. Lemieux formed the cottage in this piece from chicken wire fencing, an allusion to the campesinos caged in their own homes by the forces of the left and of the right. The ramshackle construction suggests the gross disparity between means and ends — million-dollar machines delivering random, impersonal destruction to destroy rickety shacks.

The images of the five works of *The Figurative Ones* are made entirely, with the exception of *Aiming...*, with coloured glass shards. Lemieux uses them as an allusion to the cutting edges of shrapnel, and as an analogy: unity equals peace, fragmentation equals war. The shards never overlap or abut and so present an image of a shattered world.

The *Nesting Works* and *Organic Map* pieces grew out of a line of symbolism in Lemieux's earlier drawings of nests and enclosures. Using bead necklaces as a starting point, she began placing objects, either purchased or found, in and

around the nest motifs. Rusted metal scraps, the remains of a once useful tool were entwined with beads and broken light bulbs. The bulbs represent egg shells, and hence are symbols of regeneration and death, seed and skeleton. Lemieux etched messages or drew other simple images on the glass, endowing these pieces with the visual and verbal effects of a diary.

In *Beads and Rust #1* Lemieux noted the similarities of parking garages and armoured fortresses, punning on the work "park" as a green space (a piece of flat glass) and as a verb, to store a vehicle. The third piece of the group is a plea for a new ceasefire. *Tunic with Banana Breasts* consists of a piece of rich blue glass cut in the shape of a dress with its allusion to the mantle of the Virgin, with a reasoned statement about the indignity of marketing the bodies of women.

The *Elephants Tumbling* group began with the artist's discovery of these strange miniature stuffed animals. She surmised that they were handmade, probably for tourists visiting India, and enjoyed their different characters and expressions. The stories Lemieux wrote on the glass for these pieces suggest that humans, through their own fears and follies, may be an endangered species like the elephants.

Lemieux has used glass for many years. A 1982 installation titled *Chez Les Soeurs Blanches* exposed some of the societal and formal structures of the classroom using graphite-covered blackboards, plumb bobs shaped like pencils, and twelve tunic shapes cut from clear glass. Here, the transparency of the tunics suggested a denial of the imperatives of the pedagogical system: the tunics could not cover or obscure the people beneath them.

Like the 1982 installation, *La Déchirure* expands the symbolic, metaphoric and visual possibilities of glass. One is dazzled by the colour and light upon entering the gallery, a view greatly tempered by the subsequent perception of a serious moral purpose clothed in wistful playfulness. The underlying metaphor of *La Déchirure* is a perception of the world, a hall of mirrors which deceives a populace who in turn participate in the construction of social reality. Lemieux's work expresses sorrow, guilt, anger and frustration: sorrow for loss of a feeling of oneness with Nature, guilt caused by tacit acceptance of war and exploitation, and

anger fueled by frustration over regression or stasis in the social and political arenas.

J.Y.

Dimensions in centimetres, all works 61 x 61 cm. unless otherwise noted. All works collection of the artist. All works glass and mixed media.

La Déchirure 1984.

A group of twenty-four sculptures

The Figurative Ones

Le Roi et La Reine
Aiming at Campesino Home
Fractured
Angel Bringing Supplies
Rebel

Architectural Works

City #1
City #2
City #3
City #4

Nesting Works

Beads and Rust #1
Beads and Rust #2
Beads and Rust #3
Beads and Rust #4

Elephants Tumbling

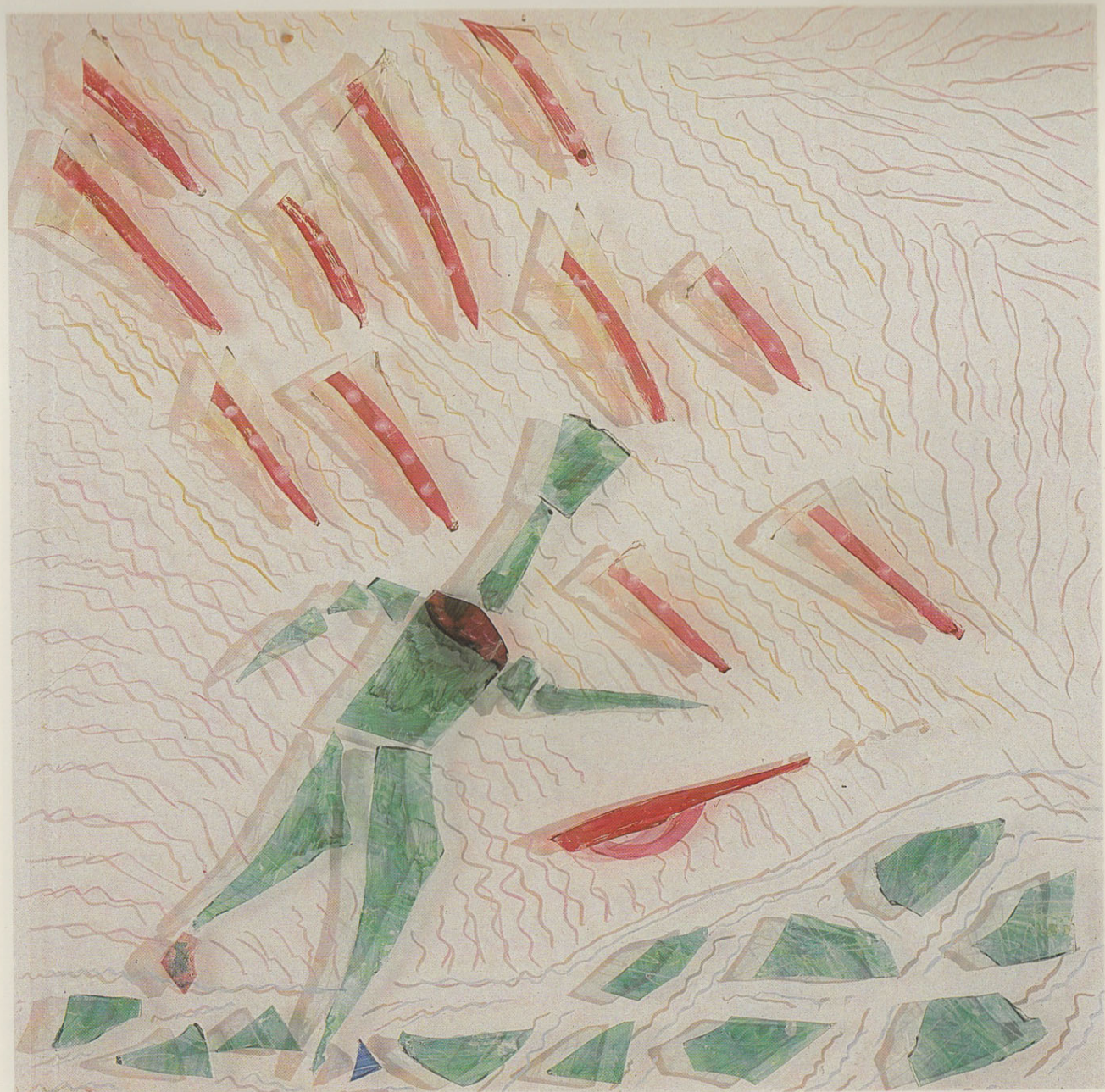
Elephants and glass #1
87 x 70 x 23
Elephants and glass #2
65 x 84 x 23
Elephants and glass #3
66 x 90 x 23

Organic Maps

Tunic with banana breasts
Green leaves and clear beads
Blue leaves and wired fence
Indian ball and blue elephant
Rust and world map
Pistol at heart

Central Core

Captured elephant
Tulip door



Lemieux, *The Figurative Ones: Rebel*



Lemieux, Organic Maps: Tunic with banana breasts

