



Uneasy Pieces

works from the collection

5 December 2009 to 28 February 2010

Oakville Galleries

at Centennial Square

Curated by Marnie Fleming

The fact of storytelling hints at a fundamental human unease, hints at human imperfection. Where there is perfection there is no story to tell. — Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, 1997

The artists in *Uneasy Pieces* present us with a surfeit of flinching unease. Their work is the visual equivalent of turning on the taps of the bathtub and leaving the room: the flood is foreseeable, but we are still astonished when the water rushes over the edge.

Anxiety and apprehension are hardly new concerns in contemporary art, but they are quickly gaining currency in light of present global woes. *Uneasy Pieces* showcases works from Oakville Galleries' permanent collection that grapple with the fragile state of our world. From anxiety about economic recession, warfare and the violence of international terrorism, to concerns about consumerism and the decentered world of global capitalism, the pieces in this exhibition examine states of uncertainty and unease in contemporary life.

“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” proclaimed Theodor Adorno in 1949, anticipating the problem for artists after WWII, after Vietnam and now after 9/11.¹ His statement continues to register a deep unease that art has been rendered mute. How can human hands tell the tale of what they've brought to ruin? A question such as this continues to be an unshakeable worry about the possibilities of art.

In this current global landscape, there is no easy way to understand unfathomable events. As American feminist Susan Faludi observes:

*The intrusions of September 11 broke the dead bolt on our protective myth, the illusion that we are masters of our security, that our might makes our homeland impregnable, that our families are safe in the bower of their communities and our women and children safe in the arms of their men.*²

It would seem that our deepest beliefs have collapsed and given way to new realities, with a tincture of Cold

War paranoia added in for good measure. Yet creative endeavours of all kinds operate in this flux. Artists derive content from a need to question contemporary life and, hopefully, leave a larger, more definitive intellectual and moral footprint on this new age of muddled discontent.

And this discontent is muddled, indeed. The works in *Uneasy Pieces* point us toward a curious tension in the contemporary experience of anxiety: between those worries that are localized and external, attached to a given event or concern—such as terrorism or environmental collapse—and those apprehensions that are inchoate, inwardly-focused—perhaps existential rather than reactive. This split strikes at larger questions about the ubiquitous nature of the anxious, its ability to permeate, shift shape and attach itself to everything and nothing at all.

Unstable Events and Places

Some artists express their anxiety with the world by grounding their practice in a specific event or location. *Ghost Tower* (2003) by Susanna Heller is perhaps the most direct work depicting the rupture and tenuousness of a post-9/11 world. Having had a studio on the ninety-first floor of Tower One of the World Trade Center for fifteen months just prior to 9/11, she was familiar with views looking north along the Hudson River, as well as down the length of the Tower onto the streets of Manhattan. Before the destruction of the Towers, they were her beacon and the focus of her daily walk from Brooklyn into the city centre. In her mind's eye, the towers were ghosts that refused to be laid to rest. Heller's final act in creating this work (when she knew for certain the painting was otherwise finished) was to throw black paint onto its surface. The visual impact mimics that terrifying moment when the plane struck the tower. The resulting drips crawl erratically down the canvas like smoldering debris. For Heller, this act was a deeply unsettling experience, since she had “only one chance to get it right.”³ There is something magnificent in this “damaged”

Previous page: John Scott, *Untitled* (detail), 1984–1985, acrylic and mixed media on paper, 179.0 x 150.0 cm, collection of Oakville Galleries.



Susanna Heller, *Ghost Tower*, 2003, oil and rice paper on canvas and linen, 365.8 x 144.8 cm, collection of Oakville Galleries.



painting; she captured the raw reality of that blue-sky day disturbingly well.

In Wendy Coburn's *Untitled (buck)* (2007) we find an artist grappling with similar fears of vulnerability in a surprising and disquieting way. Rather than attempting a maximalist canvas to engage with attacks on the World Trade Center, she chose an intimate and highly focused

one. The artist presents us with a beautiful bronze buck, not unlike the kind often found on the mantel of hunting lodges. On first appearance, we note that the buck is not the classic ideal. His wounded ear suggests that he is a bit of a scrapper. Then, as we circle around the creature, we see that the animal's side is packed with an explosive device. The uncomfortable epiphany that the buck

Wendy Coburn, *Untitled (buck)*, 2007, bronze, edition 1/12, 26.0 x 10.8 x 25.4 cm, collection of Oakville Galleries.

is, indeed, a suicide bomber raises questions about the hunter and the hunted, and how fear and mistrust have seeped into our contemporary imaginations.

States of uncertainty are integral to the form and content of Colin Darke's creative output. His work here stems directly from his experience of living in Derry during The Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Troubles began in 1968 and continued until the second ceasefire in 1996 that led to the Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998. *Comm IV—War in an Irish Town* (1991) is a work by Darke that takes the form of a communiqué or “comm.” The comms were, in effect, tiny letters written in miniscule script on cigarette papers and frequently deployed by Republican prisoners throughout this contentious history to avoid detection by prison guards. Rolled or crushed into balls and then wrapped in cellophane, they were smuggled out of prison and delivered to the Republican leadership on the outside. In Darke's piece, cigarette papers were licked together to form a large horizontal sheet upon which the artist reproduced the entire text of Eamonn McCann's *War in an Irish Town* (1974) and is further punctuated with images of the iconic Free Derry Wall. McCann's narrative is about growing up Catholic in Northern Ireland. It is a classic account of the feelings generated by British rule and the beginnings of the Northern Irish civil rights movement. As viewers to this narrative, we are forced to draw in close to read the text in which the story unfolds. Darke's graphite rendering is offered as a metaphor for the fraught disparity between reality and political theory.

Turning from the turmoil and angst of what we've done to ourselves, Ed Burtynsky's work is premised on considering what we've done to our earth. Of his large colour photographic landscapes, Burtynsky has said:

*These images are meant as metaphors for our human existence: they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear. We are drawn by desire—a chance at a good living, yet we are consciously or unconsciously aware that the world is suffering for our success.*⁴

His photographs announce a new dispensation in which our environment must be rethought, not only at a geopolitical level, but also at a personal one. In the sweeping

images of *Ferrous Bushling # 6, Hamilton, Ontario* (1997) and *Ferrous Bushling # 9, Hamilton, Ontario* (1997), we witness landscapes transformed by the enormity of what has transpired. Burtynsky makes us take a deep look—no matter how upended it may be—at industry and the environmental costs associated with our consumption. Cultural obsession with disaster and heavy industrial stimulation are also taken up in Glenn Rudolph's black and white photograph of *Hall Creek* (1986), depicting a collapsed train trestle. It elicits a visceral reaction—evoking a roller coaster ride into hell—as the tracks plunge directly into the deep woods of the Pacific Northwest. Initially the photographs of both Burtynsky and Rudolph are quietly meditative, but the sense of anxiety that underlies their landscapes is unmistakable.

Amorphous Anxieties

The persistence of worries and tensions that are more broad and ill-defined are opened up in other works in this exhibition. For example, Monika Napier's *No Place Like Home* (2003) is an uneasy meditation on power, consumption and dysfunctional systems. Her title ironically contains both the longing for a fixed place of comfort—certainly what Dorothy yearned for in *The Wizard of Oz*—as well as an absence, a non-place. The hyperbolized extension-cord rendition of Dorothy's home-seeking ruby slippers initially appears funky and seductive, but the cords leading off to a wall socket make it clear that these slippers, while possibly turbo-charged for warmth, are certainly not for comfort. They prompt questioning: What has the nature of home become? When everything is plugged in and fully-charged, how do we connect emotionally? Napier interrogates home as a place of comfort and desire that can be reached just by clicking our heels three times.

This tension of uncertainty is also found in Ed Pien's *The Long Journey* (2008). Pien's large-scale Shoji paper cut-out locates a place in which we become strangers in our own dark world. The imagery consists of two figures climbing a tree in order to hurtle over a fence. The space in which they operate is vague and indeterminate. It is this uncertain quality that is both disturbing and



engaging and lures us into this irrational scene. At once fragile and powerful, Pien has always investigated the vicissitudes of the human condition, or “journeys” as he calls them, by drawing on mythical, historical, psychological and spiritual interpretations.

Similarly, Kim Moodie's overload of visual data in *Leopard* (1997) is analogous to the contemporary condition, in which bombardment by an overwhelming amount of information and stimulation is a daily occurrence. His fertile images shuffle figures, elements and continents to create a difficult entanglement for our gaze. So, too, do Louise Noguchi's conflated photographic portraits. In *Compilation Portrait #25* (1996) and *#27* (1997) the artist,

in traditional warp and weft technique, has woven her black and white self-portraits with images of convicted murders culled from the media. The resulting imagery unsettles any clear distinctions between genders, races, innocence and guilt. For Noguchi, the amalgamation distressingly implies that the capacity to commit a crime lies within each of us; we no longer know what or whom to fear.

All artists are students of the human condition but Ken Lum's diptychs comprised of photographic portraits and accompanying texts of subjective statements pursue the matter with more rigour than the job strictly requires. *What Is It Daddy?* (1994) pre-dates the recent economic and political turmoil, but its inherent drama and anxiety

Ed Pien, *The Long Journey*, 2008, ink on cut Shoji paper, 144.8 x 193.0 cm, collection of Oakville Galleries.



What is it
Daddy?
What's the matter
Daddy?
What is it
Daddy?
Daddy
what is it?

have never seemed more relevant. The photograph is full of concentrated emotion and depicts a distraught man tenderly soothing a little girl while the opposing text reads, "What is it Daddy? What's the matter Daddy? What is it Daddy? Daddy what is it?" Both photo and text serve to create an underlying tension: the seemingly objective representation of an emotionally charged scene with an inwardly focused psychological landscape.

Many of Liz Magor's pieces suggest a condition of last resort for the derelict or disenfranchised. In *Humidor (brown)* (2007), worn leather mittens are stuffed with

cigarettes, suggesting pack-rat behavior. It speaks to furtive impulses and ideas about comfort and protection, danger and survival, as well as accumulation and alienation. *Humidor (brown)* is a storage space for concealed habits and yet serves as a foil for something that is faked. The mittens tease our visual certainties but are immaculately rendered in rubbery polymerized gypsum. Here the real and the counterfeit are entwined, "play[ing] with the notion of illusory appearances and disguise."⁵ As with Lum, Magor is able to bring to very simple subjects a sense of compelling ambiguity and trepidation.

Ken Lum, *What Is It Daddy?*, 1994, laminated colour print on sintra, lacquer, enamel on aluminum, 182.9 x 243.8 x 5.1 cm, collection of Oakville Galleries.



Deirdre Logue, *Why Always Instead of Sometimes* (stills), 2003–2005, multi-channel video installation, collection of Oakville Galleries.

An unease of quite another kind is evident in a video installation by Deirdre Logue. In her case, it is grounded in the fretfulness of being an artist— not being good enough, the pressure to develop a meaningful idea, disclosing private anxieties and misgivings—in ways that are both painful and humorous. *Why Always Instead of Just Sometimes* (2003–2005) is a twelve-channel video installation that repeats a variety of gestures over and over again for the camera, simultaneously framing them as both absurd and captivating. Played continuously, the videos present a narrative without beginning or end, yet capture life's strange continuum. Logue not only offers us a glimpse into the intellectual and emotional aspects of the creative process, but also, "her concern ... with an individual sense of dislocation [and] the broader anxieties that temper contemporary existence."⁶ We discover in her work a real connection to the human condition and what it means to be a part of a world that is radically unmoored.

Perhaps most aptly emblematic of our anxiety-ridden state is John Scott's crudely rendered amalgam of a rabbit and human. *Untitled* (1984–1985) is a terse summa of *Uneasy Pieces* and a stand-in for each of us: a damaged breed in a world of technological and militaristic threat. Like all of the works in this exhibition, Scott's bold and graphic work precisely burrows into troubled states of mind without presenting cathartic or utopian solutions. Instead, our anxieties, tensions and apprehensions of the current decentered world are parsed relentlessly.

The works in this exhibition address worries of war, economic recession and environmental collapse, and

highlight questions of socio-political concern quite presciently and unnervingly. Art critic Lucy Lippard has argued:

*... art has to come from lived experience—by which I don't mean you have to be bombed to make art against bombing, but that some part of you has to be able to envision being bombed, rather than just make pictures of it. If we can't imagine a person out of work, sleeping in the street, shot down, tortured by the police state, what hope have we of providing counter visions?*⁷

The works in *Uneasy Pieces* are intended to make us squirm in their presentations of "counter-visions"— of familiar worries, anxieties and discomforts. Like bifocal vision, they permit us to observe the troubled particulars of places and events, as well as those persistent anxieties that are entangled with our deepest fears.

— Marnie Fleming, Curator of Contemporary Art

¹Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 162. ²Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream* (New York: Picador, 2008), 15. ³Marnie Fleming, "Susanna Heller," *Og2* 2.2, March–May, 2005, 3. ⁴Niki May Young, "Photographing the Legacy," *World Architecture News*, Monday, August 11, 2008, http://www.worldarchitecturenews.com/index.php?fuseaction=wanappln.projectview&upload_id=10198. ⁵Shannon Anderson, "Burrow," *Og2* 4.2, April–June 2007, 4. ⁶Matthew Hyland, *Deirdre Logue: Beyond Her Usual Limits*, (Oakville: Oakville Galleries, 2008), n.p. Exhibition brochure. ⁷Lucy Lippard, "Battle Cries," *Village Voice*, December 4, 1984.