

Into the Living (An installation by Wendy Trusler)

“let us make an anthology of recipes,
let us edit for breakfast
our most unspeakable appetites ---
let us pool spoons, knives
and all cutlery in a cosmic cuisine,
let us answer hunger
with boiled chimera
and apocalyptic tea,
an arcane salad of spiced bibles,
tossed dictionaries ---

(O my barbarians
We will consume our mysteries)”

A journey through Wendy Trusler’s studio encompasses: a passageway through regions of geographical experience, the intimate territory of one’s kitchen/home, or the body’s terrain. Shelves, anatomy texts, forged tools, spoons, ladles, and old glass bottles live beside wax coated recipes and small paintings. Slate tiles, and miniature boards painted with encaustic, appear in each room. One gleans fragments of memory in a living archive. Memories here are as wide as they are deep, for one cannot help but ponder the years Trusler has spent traveling as a cook for northern tree planting or Antarctic expeditions. Her studio is in Peterborough. I think about this area and its rich history of survival and habitation in the wilderness through the pioneer experiences of Catherine Parr Traill and Suzanna Moodie. Each alcove and shelf brings one close to the bone of this artist’s determined visceral encounters. Her raw perceptions in the landscape or home allow us as MacEwen says, to ‘consume our mysteries.’ The senses are palatable in this work as hands knead dough for bread across the longitudinal and latitudinal lines of a geography for the tasting. A community of living is present in this archive of tools or in the short passages scored into wax covered slate. (She learns Russian while crafting the next recipes for dinner on an Antarctic ecological expedition.)

I think she should bring several installations to the Mill gallery as well as her new work in progress for the third floor loft. After all, the stories are too interlinked for us to think of

breaking them apart. They edge towards an interlocking of rooms/dwellings, landscapes. These interior/exterior spaces transcribe a living topography into 'Theatres of Memory'.

“ A *locus* is a place easily grasped by the memory, such as a house, an intercolumnar space, a corner, an arch, or the like. Images are forms, marks or simulacra (*formae, notae, simulacra*) of what we wish to remember....The art of memory is like an inner writing.”

'Odes to Anatomy' showcases anatomical textbooks as the body opens, dissected and exposed. Rembrandt's muse is present in the guise of his painting 'The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp'. An anatomy theatre is filled with students observing the dissection of a cadaver by Dr. Tulp, as an open book lingers in the right hand corner. In this installation, shelves, cabinets and glass boxes contain carefully re scripted texts. Trusler cuts into and dissects books, inserting objects and floating specimens through whole pages. The dimension of reading the body (as a book) is operated on as she wills the poetic intentions of healing into her sutures. Personal and close at hand experiences linger as transcendent waves float above, while the body encounters surgery, diagnosis and healing. Titles, 'Ode to Soul', 'Ode to Strength', 'Ode to Epiphany I and II etc. become cabinets of curiosity as a ruler, jaw brace, hair, a pigeon egg and stove parts are inserted into the body of each book. A small jar of trapped milkweed or a lace butterfly are planted in others. Starting here one enters a beginning. The body itself finds levels of orientation, an invisible compass in order to navigate through lived terrains.

Books are an integral part of Wendy Trusler's work as we move towards elaborately constructed recipe texts made for 'Things Conspiring to Tell the Whole Story'. Her menu plans, calendars, location maps and utensils are bound into shingle covered tales. In 'Spice Book Work', pages are coated in beeswax and carefully unfolded out from an intricately crafted lattice of woven twigs. The cedar shingle cover is cut into, revealing in an oval opening - cinnamon sticks, star anise, and bay leaves. A landscape contains not only the memory of a forged territory but holds within its lived experience the necessities of survival. These are journals that weave the experience of eating into the very journey. A

wooden spoon embeds itself into another cover. Time unleashes a choreography of motion as the kitchen comes alive with travel, hunger and the spices of the earth.

The installation, 'Dancing in the Northern Kitchen' and two films 'Another Kind of Dance I and II' comprise a complex set of relationships. The body literally dances in the kitchen as memories of getting to a site meld into the very cutting surface of each beeswax narrative. Impressed, scratched, painted and drawn lines are embedded in an array of hinged accordion books that line a series of 12 pine shelves. Three sections break away, settling onto the floor in a curvature of suspended motion. Painted encaustic and oil is applied over small reproduced images of places. Incised recipes and travel logs score the surface turning Trusler's experiences as a cook for tree planters in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia into,

"rhythms of the everyday."...."Using the accordion bookwork form, I set out to examine the connections between cooking, art and dance."

The desire to equate the rhythms with dance steps alludes to the motions of travel, mapping and the choreography involved in the preparation of a meal. Through the action of still animation the artist shoots individual formations of these accordion books throughout a large space. When animated they are literally dancing about the floor in the film 'Another kind of Dance II'. One sees bread dough rising in a large bowl or the cutting and arranging of huge trays of vegetables. The film is projected just above tree branches set behind an accordion floor piece. A second film 'Another Kind of Dance I' is placed inside an old cast iron wood stove. Close up sections from 'Dancing in the Northern Kitchen', reveal small vignettes of film as sections of these journals are animated. Splices of real time enter the imaginary here as Trusler, edits in, sepia coloured footage of hands kneading bread dough or sections of moving highway. Travel and cuisine are in a state of becoming as the act of meeting others gathers at the table. Here one cannot help but ponder the words of Guy Davenport,

“ Archaeologists have recently decided that we can designate the beginning of civilization in the concept of sharing the same kill, in which simple idea we can see the inception of the family, the community, the state.....Going from dinner table to dinner table is the equivalent of going from one culture to another, even within the same family.”

We think of Trusler amongst a family of workers in the Canadian Wilderness sharing her menu with hungry planters.

In ‘Antarctic Chronicles’ the geography shifts to encompass shared international sites as she cooks amongst Russian and Chilean teams on an ecological expedition. Ocean travel maps the southern tip of the globe where light or darkness overtakes the landscape for months at a time. Table manners mingle with language lessons as the tongue reaches for sustenance of the body while translation fortifies the mind. Geography is all encompassing as she wanders through a wilderness where wind, water, icebergs, rocky cliffs, barrens and small abandoned shacks shape the terrain. There is a history of exploration as these ecological teams clean sites of abandoned tools, old rusty nails etc. These chronicles transcribe images and text onto the surface of black roof slate, a recycled material scavenged by the artist from building sites in Toronto. Layers of clear beeswax coats these craggy dark exteriors. Apparitions (Turner-like nocturnes) become scripted memories, menus or portraits at the site. Through such medium choices Trusler manages to convey the rawness of this wilderness experience. One can sense the aloneness of being at the end of the known world as Antarctic winds blow over less traveled territory. Encaustic slates are set in groupings, numbered to match journal entries. They sit above steel shelves. T lights (candles) are lit as rusty nails pierce certain shelves at angles. There is a stark body rising from this work with an existential edge not unlike some of the burnt book series constructed by Anselm Kiefer. These are not domestic recipes as much as chronicles of a cultural hospitality where diplomatic relations forge their own maps (relationships) at the table. A portrait alludes to Trusler’s Russian lessons as she transcribes phrases into the wax likeness of her volunteer translator. Antarctic Chronicles is a sublime archive.

In the third floor loft of the Mill gallery we encounter two installations. In 'The Whole Real Moment I & II', an old desk is carved into with text lines as a lamp and some pages rest on its surface. Into the missing seat of an aging chair is inserted a tattered leather bag containing 16 years of generated lists. Here the artist "explores the obsessiveness and weight of memory." The mind's endless recording of events, times and places burst out of the bag.

Small still life moments punctuate the remaining spaces. One is drawn to a chaise lounge just inside the squared-off opening between the loft beams. Here we contemplate, in repose, an interior marked by; a dreaming self amongst objects or, silent visual perceptions of a child's imaginary. Trusler fashioned a hanging web of fishing line with dangling strands extending from each line, cut at varying lengths. This is the warp and woof of 'Eternity Behind, Eternity Before'. On each of these transparent lines she attached small silver point drawings or encaustic paintings of objects, room interiors or outdoor images gleaned through window panes. A set of magnifying glasses are placed in proximity. We enter what Trusler herself describes as:

"...a catalogue of objects in my home, a record in delicate silverpoint still lifes. Here, I aim to decipher the roles that symbol and language play in coding memory.this suite of drawings is juxtaposed with small encaustic paintings...Following the fixed gaze of my son in his infancy, I was able to catalogue his earliest favourite things: afternoon light on the wall, wood grain on a blanket box...a play of shadows, colour and light. I felt I was witnessing the very beginnings of memory."

Moving from one installation to another in this exhibition, we sense an invisible spiral, a transcendent archive, which follows our sensorial experience. Wendy Trusler presents the viewer with tools, charts, images, anatomies as thresholds that mark our journey 'Into the Living'. What could be an obsessive collection of things transforms into an interior grammar of memory surfacing within the geography of lived experience. Perception wraps itself around objects or cuts into the anatomy of the self, remembering. These are maps for survival, orientation, hunting and healing. There is no room for nostalgia in Trusler's

sutured montages as one senses the raw openings crafted in these works. Tools become the organs turned inside out, a morphology of (human action) of being adapting to environments.

Maralynn Cherry (Curator)