

# Artfemme: Women at Work

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*Our collective voice must grow stronger for the singers in our midst both to deserve and to defend our gifts, our gifted.*<sup>1</sup>

As any woman who is an artist in Canada will tell you, the obstacles facing her are numerous and formidable. Working in the absence of any real emotional or financial support structure, and in the presence of a thought-to-be sacrosanct male aesthetic still taught in universities and prevalent in art communities, she is even more at the mercy of the chameleon-like public and institutional taste than is her male counterpart. Those few professional female role models which do exist in academe and the art world seem, in their scarcity, to promote the idea of the "Superwoman." Yet, miraculously, women continue to train and to work.

With respect to the visual arts, International Women's Year provided an incentive to address the isolation of female artists and the absence of a support network. While the National Gallery's "Some Canadian Women Artists" is now only a memory, institutions like *Powerhouse* in Mont-

real, *Women In Focus Gallery* (Vancouver) and *Womanspirit* (London) continue to bring female creativity out of obscurity. The movement to establish professional equality in the art world is also kept alive by the strong voices of, among others, Avis Lang Rosenberg, the feminist art historian; Jane Martin—see *Women Visual Artists on Canada Council Juries*<sup>2</sup>; and sculptress Maryon Kantaroff.<sup>3</sup>

A new chapter in Canada's art history began when the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) doubled as art gallery and *Artfemme*, an exhibition devoted to the work of local women artists, was presented to the Ottawa public (September 20-October 29).

Women artists in Canada face two fundamental problems: lack of funding and lack of exposure for their work. As the Council is not a granting agency, we are limited in the ways in which we can directly combat the first problem. We can, however, address

the latter issue and *Artfemme* is a significant undertaking for us in that direction.

(Mme. Lucie Pépin, President, CACSW)

To female Canadian artists and others involved in the Canadian art scene, *Artfemme* stands as an affirming statement about professionalism, change and diversity. In its balance and attendance to detail at every stage, it owes everything to its talented curator Jennifer Dickson, R.A. In its exciting range of style, imagery and medium, it owes everything to eleven women from different generations and a range of experience. Some, like Jerry Grey, Leslie Reid and Jane Martin have established reputations as Canadian painters; others like Carla Whiteside and Johanne Fleury are just beginning their careers.

There are not, strictly speaking, any common themes running through the exhibition. Each artist works in an idiosyncratic way and according to a personal vision. There is, however, one 'element' common to over half the works of art; that is, that they are unquestionably the creation of women. I suspect that this reflects a growing acceptance of the female voice in art, although negative attitudes and connotations still abound.

The issue of female imagery (or perspective, point of view, etc.) is a thorny one. Opinion which sees it as self-indulgent or shallow battles with opinion which maintains it represents a long-overdue alternative to a mainstream aesthetic created by men. Lucy Lippard's *From the Centre*<sup>4</sup> testifies to a significant number of women artists who have thumbed their noses at the Mainstream Imperative. Judy Chicago's *Through the Flower*<sup>5</sup> documents the struggle of creating as a woman, a struggle which "The Dinner Party" has made worthwhile for many. The case for 'female centred' art is a strong one and there is now a great deal of encouragement

in art and art criticism for women who choose to explore a female aesthetic.

When women create out of a sensibility to a female experience, it is possible to identify certain qualities or characteristics in their art: colours which are considered 'feminine' and which are often used in a particular way; a fastidious attention to detail; images of growth, confinement, motherhood, domesticity; autobiographical detail and body (e.g., reproductive) functions are a few. Recognizing and promoting the 'female voice' in art represents not only a stylistic revolution but an important stage in the process of self-knowledge.

Betty Davison's cast paper sculptures, mounted on masonite and framed, are exquisite pieces of joy. There is a quality of lightness and gentleness about them, although they are not by any means passive. They seem, with their story-frozen-in-time format, to be on the one level very pleasing and accessible; the term "narrative imagery" has been suggested. A second glance, however, reveals the enigmatic, the elusive, the ironic. In Davison's "The Fallen Apples," she recreates the garden of Eden but, instead of recalling that moment where, according to biblical history, Eve led mankind into sin and guilt, she leaves the apple untouched, untested. As it is written, the story is the archetypal model for the ensuing events from our historical and cultural heritage—the enactment of laws, the development of social mores, the rigid demands of role modelling,—which condemned female independence. Nevertheless, this is political commentary that does not incite to riot but instead demands reflection. "Pie in the Sky" is another example of art that makes its point through humour. Rather than being angry or heavily political, it is the plastic equivalent of a wicked "one-liner." Has a blender, shredding and mixing paper pulp ever enjoyed such artistic revenge? At first the viewer



*FALLEN APPLES* by Betty Davidson.

is seduced by its prettiness and innocence: pies, cakes, ice cream cones and cookies ooze sweetness and domestic harmony which depends on that giving-away type of creativity so typical of women. But then, creeping into the consciousness is all that whiteness and the absence of spatial references and one realizes that the pies and the cakes have all fled the kitchen. All the sweet gifts have abandoned their earthly home and are floating about in space, defying gravity, out of reach of appreciative husbands and children. Reality is transcended.

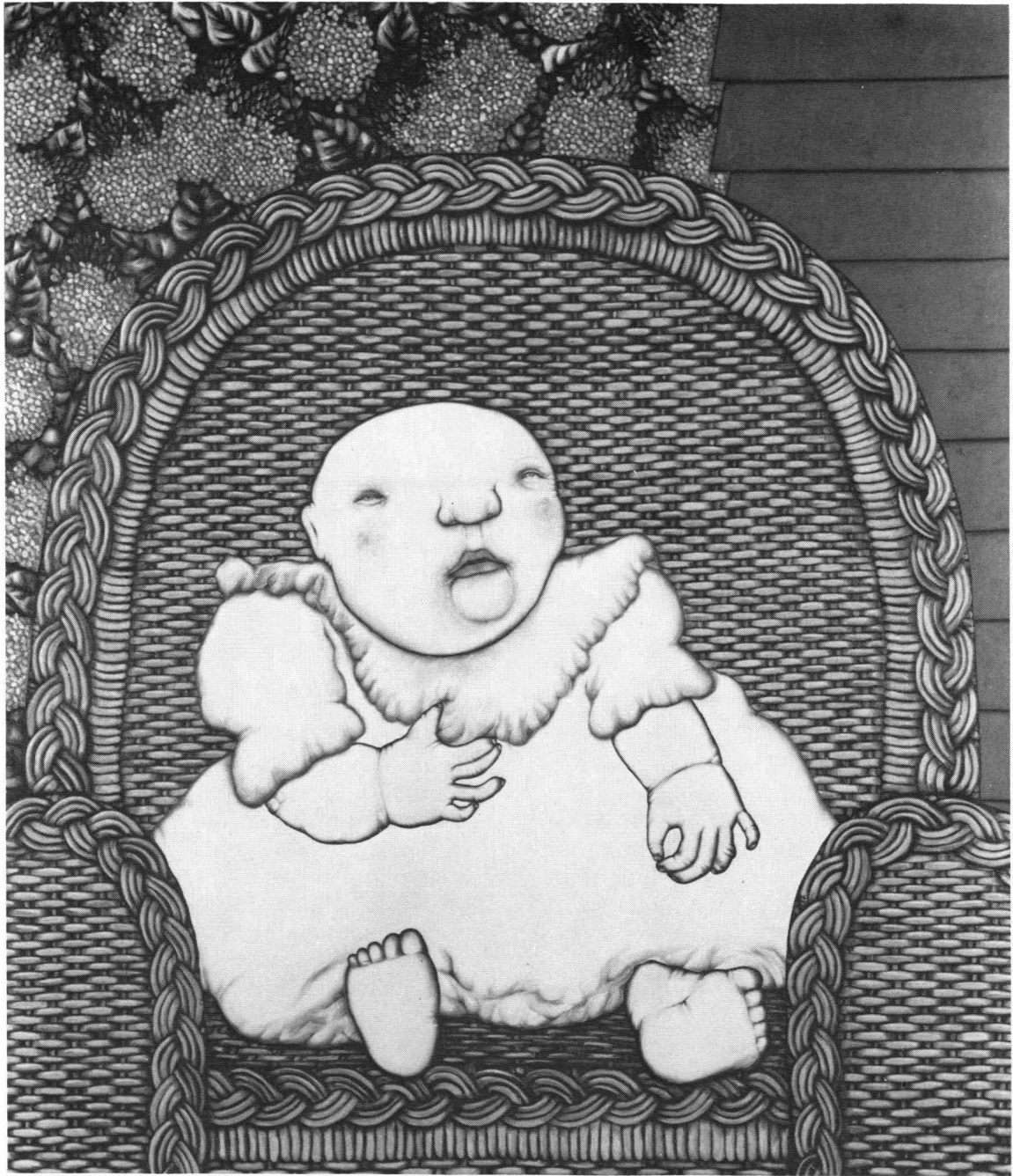
Probably more than most artists women make art to escape, overwhelm, or transform daily realities. So it makes sense that those women artists who do focus on domestic imagery often seem to be taking off from, rather than getting off on, the implications of floors and brooms and dirty laundry.<sup>6</sup>

Colour choice and painstaking, almost compulsive detail are revealing characteristics of the mixed media collage sculptures of Susan Taylor and Jane Martin's paintings. Susan Taylor's "Pink Lullabies Crypt" is a pink nightmare of mementoes and symbols and accoutrements from the perfect little girl's world. It is a complex piece in that the emotional stimulus, which is part of it, is complex. On the one hand, one feels suffocated by this embarrassment of pink things; it is as well so obsessively, hypnotically neat. This neonatal environment symbolizes the apotheosis of the female child who has come to be identified with beauty and a mode of expression which relies on restraint and decorum. Pretty pink colours, order, detail on the small scale, all are symbols of social and psychological incarceration. And yet the artist herself reminds us that it is not quite that simple. For this is the time of Friedan's "second stage," when some of the uncompromising strictures of the women's movement have been relaxed. We can at least admit to thinking, as does the artist, "I realized, I believed, I wanted the myth to be true."

Another sculpture, "Get It While You Can," has its origins in the Roman Catholic reliquary box and contains various articles of contraception grouped around the Virgin Mary. Here are echoes of the demand by women for sexual freedom within the shadow cast by Church censure—a demand for sex without fear of pregnancy, a demand for an end to the double standard and a recognition of female sexuality, a recognition even of the fact that love and reproduction will always maintain the right to remain separate. While none of the works in *Artfemme* bears a strong feminist message—there are no manifestos—Susan Taylor's work maintains a high verbal profile.

Jane Martin's paintings represent the meeting place of a creative sensibility that is both female and androgynous. Her multiple composition, entitled "Wicker Chairs," shows members of a nuclear family seated in a garden. The feminine "eye" is suggested by the more than photographically accurate details of the weave in the chairs, the lilacs, the flower pattern repeated in the dress, the vibrant reds and blues. But in looking past the distorted features, the lifeless poses, we are asked to confront a place within each of us that is neither exclusively male or female. Understanding, the capacity for love—all that the family would wish to embody—depends on an acceptance of the life of both elements in us. "The single subject of my work is people; its single aim, understanding; its single motive, love." The physical ugliness mirrors a psychic pain and ugliness for which no one healing, cleansing action exists. On the other hand, the 'perfect' family unit also becomes the embodiment of a lost dream of togetherness and insularity and the fulfilment of procreation. Perhaps more than any other works in the exhibition, Martin's portray the often conflicting interests of the heart and the intellect and the creative spirit.

Leslie Reid is among the artists in *Artfemme* whose work has developed out of a singular vision that is not identifiable as either male or



*WICKER CHAIR #2* (1980) by Jane Martin, 28" x 24" oil on board.

female. Using landscapes, seascapes and vistas as subject matter, her work has, for some time, dealt with the threshold of sight. On both a metaphysical and sensory level, her lithographs and canvases demand a great deal of the viewer.

"Popham I" is an imposing canvas, physically large but tonally very understated. Starting from a photographic base, she has built up layer upon fine layer of acrylic with an air brush and compressor. The bathers, the beach, the horizon line all hover on the verge of disintegration. The effect is sensually appealing, yet somehow disturbing.

Sometimes I've called it a total ambivalence, a breathlessness, an almost choking feeling. It's so totally still and the effect on me is one of catching my breath and holding it almost to the point of suffocation. A lot of people see it as tranquil, but there is an edge to it that another friend who reviewed it called "scary." (Leslie Reid)

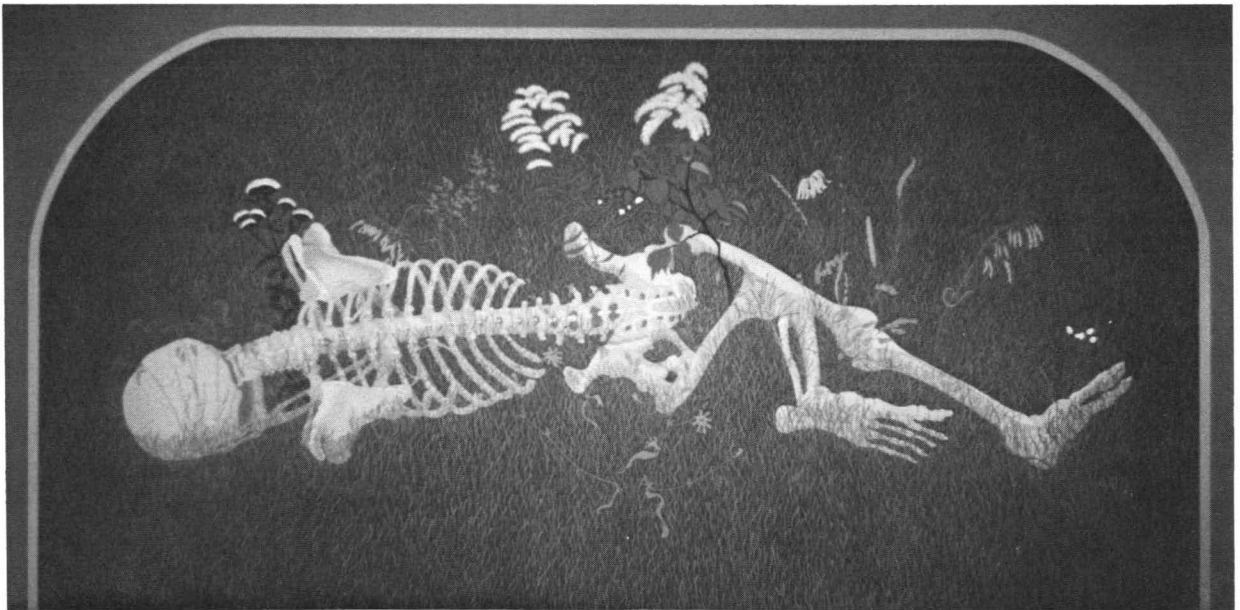
Attesting to a fierce intellectual and creative rigour, the build-up of layers of paint as fine as mist in whites, pale blues and green is so carefully executed as to produce an almost unearthly harmony of photographic image, paint and surface. Looking at the canvas, contemplating it as you must, the light and shaded areas begin to play perceptual tricks. Outlines come in and out of focus, images shift or threaten to disappear; there simply is not enough visual information to allow the brain to keep the images stable and clear.

Those familiar with Leslie Reid's work over the years will be aware of the enormous contrast that is provided by the lithographs and paintings of North American landscapes as compared to those which came out of time spent in France and England. The North American ones ("Popham I" originates in a photograph of a beach in Maine) present overwhelming chasms of sea and sky where human life and habitation always

seem out of reach. A ghostly whiteness predominates, whereas the European-based works are suffocating in their denseness and shade threatens to drown out the light. Hers is challenging work, forcing viewers to go beyond what they think are their limits of visual, artistic, and metaphysical perception.

It is impossible for any article to do justice to an exhibition featuring forty-four works by eleven artists. Nothing has been said of Johanne Fleury's intimate, biomorphic-based images which seem to be looking into the very centre of female energy and sensitivity, nor of Carla Whiteside's metaphysical compositions of pigment, graphite, twigs, which echo states of mind. Jerry Grey, who is perhaps most frequently remembered by the Canadian public for her "Great Canadian Equalizer" mural, exhibited four works which are colourful, somewhat emotional reactions to the Australian landscape. Mary Anne Caibaosai's drawings reflect her pride in and identification with her Ojibway origins. The sumptuous etchings by Clair Clouthier are clearly the work of someone who has studied and perfected the most technically demanding of the artistic crafts. Agnes Ivan's Euclidean shapes are the result of a creative instinct which seems dominated by the intellect; Suzanne Joubert provides an interesting contrast with her "memento mori" format, vibrant decorative shades and use of small household objects as painting surfaces. A catalogue which provides photographs, biographical notes, statements by the artists and a description of each of the works was produced and distributed by the Canadian Advisory Council.

As the collective voice grows stronger, women will take their places, in greater numbers and with greater confidence, in the history of the visual arts. Education, through the various forms of documentation, exhibitions, more equal representation on juries and museum boards are all part of the machinery of change. The isolated example of a Georgia O'Keeffe, a



*LE TOMBEAU DE PEINTRE (THE PAINTER'S GRAVE)* by Suzanne Joubert.

Louise Nevelson or a Mary Cassatt has at last given way to a vision of many.

#### NOTES

1. Jane Rule "The Seventh Wave" in *Branching Out*, Vol. VI, No. 1, 1979. Pp. 16-17.
2. Jane Martin, *Women Visual Artists on Canada Council Juries, Selection Committees and Arts Advisory Panels; And Amongst Grant Recipients from 1972-73 to 1979-80*, an article prepared for CARFAC.
3. See Maryon Kantaroff in "Breaking Out of the Female Mold," *Women in the Canadian Mosaic*, ed., Gwen Matheson (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1976).
4. Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976).
5. Judy Chicago, *Through The Flower* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).
6. Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Centre*, p. 56.