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Sarah Jackson: Art and Community

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If there is a single motif that dominates Sarah Jackson's art it is change—the way things change, things in the process of change, the significance of change, the whole gamut. Then, finally, there is the technique of illustrating or registering that change. There must be few readers of *Atlantis* unfamiliar with her copier art, those memorable products of her collaboration with the copying machine that both record change as it is taking place and the final emerged form. The process is not unlike that which occurs in living organisms and in fact is a metaphor that Sarah Jackson feels comfortable with.

But Sarah Jackson is not just playing games with machines. It is apparent that the philosophy came first and the means of expressing it had to be found to accomodate the vision. It is her kind of almost naive openness to the possibilities within things that is expressed in all her art forms. It leads to what she calls "found art." Some of her most recent productions illustrate that point. The series "From a Gallery of Portraits/Beautiful Women of the Stage" had long been simmering in the back of her mind. Walking down Yonge Street one day a few years back, she wandered into a second-hand shop and there discovered some women's magazines published around 1914. She bought a bunch of them—some of them were meant for the "new woman" and had stories about successful business and professional women but others were romances, mostly written by men, she suspects, though the authors' names were those of women. She read the stories, looked at the illustrations and found herself thinking about these long lost illustrators, the writers and the characters they had created. She was impressed with the quality of work of the artists and yet she realized it must have been just their way of earning their bread and butter. In 1914, being an artist was a struggle. And the stories themselves, though mostly worthless, had once had wide popular appeal. The artist's work died with the outmoded stories—their art was not handed down as was that of the artists who illustrated the great 19th century classics of Dickens and Thackerary and Eliot. She felt compassion for them and wanted to revitalize their art, to acknowledge their part in the cycle that constitutes human history.

The illustrations fascinated her. The women in their trailing gowns, their angular bodies draped seductively but modestly in the direction of the man in tails with a sinister gleam in his eyes. Who were these women? What did they represent? What was behind that pose? The result of this probing is not only amusing but revealing. In the illustrations transformed by Sarah Jackson's copier technique the women move toward the men, disappear behind them and emerge transformed and transcendent. Sarah Jackson's vision has imbued them with a new life, an assertive one but one that is oddly humorous. It's as if these females are winking at us from the page and saying, "You didn't know I had it in me, did you?" A strikingly positive view of women emerges in the recognition of the potential that is there for wry self-revelation.


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Based on the more sophisticated magazine for the "new woman" comes an Art Book called "Exercises for the Growing Girl/Votes for Women." The first is a marvellously amusing commentary on the text from the magazine reprinted on the inside cover, a line or two of which should give the flavour:

> It is utter folly to lose sight of the fact that woman is no less akin to the animal kingdom than is man. There is no reason in the world why human creatures should differ from others in this respect and it would be hard for us to imagine any other creature in which the female was so assidiously prohibited from attaining her physical development as in the instance of human beings.

What follows is a reversible accordion book, the first page of which reproduces clearly a young girl in gym tunic doing exercises but, as the book opens and stretches to its full five foot length, so does the girl progress through the most extraordinary free floating movements, merging and whirling with the things about her, until in the last panel, she triumphantly asserts her affinity with the animal kingdom in perfect leonine confidence.

"The Bride's Dreams/The Doctor's Visit" is an extraordinary capturing of a bride's bored, resigned response to her male partner who both rushes toward her and is repelled or thrown back by her movement away from him until, in the last panel, she is alone, her bridegroom left behind in a whirl of colour and line striving like one who tries to push through piled snow or high waves. The woman's smile now is a sly one. Triumphant? Perhaps. But not incongruous. Sarah Jackson has taken the old illustrations with their pathetic reliance on stereotypes and created new and amusing interpretations of what was there. "The Doctor's Visit" is based on a series of postcards that Sarah Jackson's mother had collected and it too is a lively but perceptive statement on the undercurrents between a woman and her male physician in the decorous early part of the century. Somehow, the women always seem to penetrate the facade of propriety erected around them.

But the books, "artist's bookwork," Sarah Jackson calls them, are themselves a part of the fun and the aesthetic response. Entirely handmade, each is different, the black and gold design of the covers not only pleasant to look at but satiny to the touch. Opening so that there is a series on each side of the paper, they are fun to handle because the pasting is so skillfully and faultlessly done.The fine quality of the paper and the superior crafting of the books result in both the content and the form providing pleasure.

I asked Sarah how she came upon this form for her work and this lead to our talking about "Mail Art." We were in her studio at the Technical University of Nova Scotia where she is Artist in Residence and my eye was drawn to packages piled up on her work bench, packages that not only had all sorts of exotic stamps on them but that themselves displayed interesting drawings and bright colours on their papers wrappings or envelopes. As it turned out, and as I might have expected, "Mail Art" was not just another art form for her but it was also an expression of her philosophy as an artist and as a human being.

Sarah Jackson does not practice her art in isolation. One of her gripes against the art world is that it is organized around art galleries, museums and periodic exhibitions. Such institutions almost demand huge pieces—large paintings, monumental sculptures and open spaces in which to display them. And they are nearly always city centered. But "Mail Art," because it is small pieces that can be sent through the mail, permits a wide distribution of the artist's work. It means too that artists can communicate with each other directly. They can see what each is doing without having to wait for expensive catalogues or exhibitions in far off places. But it is not only that she enjoys common interests with other artists. For Sarah Jackson it is an oppor-

tunity to share her philosophy, her commitment to peace, her belief in freedom of political choice and freedom of artistic expression. The art books, copier art, postcards (some of Sarah Jackson's most delightful art is in that form) are all part of the "Mail Art" network of artists.

At her studio, a stone's throw from Dalhousie University, Sarah describes a Mail Art/Copier Art Exhibition planned for Halifax. "Mail Art" artists from all over the world have responded—Nepal, she exclaims excitedly, and Thailand, Korea, Brazil, Yugoslavia—from all over. The announcement describing the proposed exhibition conveys the excitement she feels at providing Halifax with the kind of meeting of artists that she experienced in Philadelphia where, several years ago, she attended her first Mail Art exhibition. (They called my work "Classy," she grins.):

> There will be works on display from all over the world. Noted Mail Artists like Chuck Stake from Western Canada, Dogfish and Furry Couch from the USA and others like Joan of Art and Bob Dog will all be represented. As well the Arts and Technology Festival will feature music, dance and video all relating to the arts and technology. This will be performed by Maritime artists.

But all this takes money and more time than should be devoted to it goes to collecting funds. If the exhibit doesn't materialize, it will not be because Sarah and her colleagues have not put tremendous effort into urging governments and private agencies into supporting an innovative and intriguing art development.

An interest in collaborating with other artists in other media is also characteristic of Sarah Jackson. When I first met her a few years back, it was to review her book *Particles* and one of the things that interested me about that book was that her drawings were accompanied by the poems of two very young poets, Susan Flemming and Sarah Jackson's daughter, Melanie Jackson. An established and mature artist herself, Sarah Jackson was proud to exhibit her work beside that of two novices, and well she might be since their work was not only good but displayed that kind of youthful vitality and optimism that is so much a part of her work.

Further proof of Sarah Jackson's commitment to the belief that artists can work together, that one art form complements another, is found in two interesting books co-authored with poet Margaret Harry in a collection called *Origins of Humanity and Gods* and *Spirit Journey*. The latter became, finally, the basis for a performance by Dance Exchange and for a video. Against a backdrop of photographs by Gerard Dolan, the reading of Margaret Harry's poems in both French and English, Francine Boucher, dancer and choreographer, danced to music by Stephen Tittle, the whole production originating in Sarah Jackson's drawings. This production has now been video taped and should soon be available to a much wider audience. This kind of collaboration suggests that for Sarah Jackson there is no such thing as peripheral or ephemeral art forms—the distinction between art and craft seems lost in her work. Even the pieces of lace that she uses in copier sculpture enjoy as much value in her eyes as the expensive papers and fine inks she uses in her drawings.

And perhaps one last anecdote can sum up that view I have of Sarah Jackson as a kind of Renaissance woman in her ecclectic approach to art. On her worktable lay an art book series called *Sheba* which appealed to me. Her *Isis* I was already familiar with—Eastern mythology, Greek and Roman mythology were a natural hunting ground for all kinds of art. But *Sheba*!

"It just came to me one day," she said. "Out of nowhere—out of intuition. Isis came to me the same way. I had a figure, a form, an idea and I thought, Isis. I had to look her up later," she

said, amused. "Sheba came the same way. I think of these women as part of my history, part of the cycle of human life. They lived, or they represent women who lived. Now I want to revitalize their lives, transform them and integrate them into my own life cycle. This time I used sculpture—that's my training, sculpture. I sculpted the figure Sheba first." She showed me how the material, pieces of black lace, would be laid on the photocopier; how the stiff material fell into forms, how spaces were created and shapes emerged. Then, when the form was photocopied, she manipulated the image on the paper reforming the sculpture until "Sheba learning," "Sheba on a Camel," Sheba in a whole series of life events emerged. Curtain tassles, stiff net, lace gloves—all at one time or another have expressed her wry and often erotic humour.

A few years back, after an absence of some time from Halifax, I happened to stroll down Spring Garden Road. It was a beautiful summer's day—the chip trucks and ice cream vans were lined up outside the Public Library and people sat on the stone wall enjoying their treats in the warm sun. Suddenly across the way in the grounds of the old architecture building things were beginning to happen. Chairs on the lawn, a microphone being set up, a theatre for a puppet show, people gathering and stretching out on the green lawn. Children were with their fathers and mothers and friends, old and young, rich and poor gathered around for something special. That's new, I thought. Later Sarah Jackson told me how the Summer Arts Festival began.

> Spring Garden Road is a lovely name for a street," she said. "And then the grounds of the old Technecial College provide a green belt right in the downtown area. What a marvellous place to get together with other artists—magicians [I saw Bruce Armstrong's magic that day and heard Susan Fleming read her poetry] dancers, singers, writers - all sorts of performers. At first people were shy, their response was uncertain, they were not used to outdoor entertainment in Halifax. But in succeeding summers they came and enjoyed themselves.

Now the Festival is almost a Halifax institution thanks to the support of the City itself, other benefactors and the work of Sarah Jackson, her daughter Melanie and the arts community. There is "high art" and Sarah Jackson has made here contribution to that. But there is also postcards, art books, video, Mail Art, and Festivals. All these are evidence of her belief that art is community, an expression of democracy. It is art that is developed not in isolation but in conjunction with other artists for a variety of audiences.