Reflections on Making

Generation/Regeneration: Mrs. John E. Brubacher et al. 1989-1827

BY JANE BUYERS AND SUSAN SHANTZ

Susan: Jane and I are both interested in women's history so when we were discussing how to focus our joint exhibit at the University of Waterloo, we came up with the idea of using the name and life of a woman who had once lived on the land now occupied by the university. Hence, "Mrs. John E. Brubacher" (born 1827), the farmwife of the Brubacher house that is now a museum on the campus. Her name was Magdalena, but we chose to retain the name by which she is known in patrilineal genealogical records, the name which anonymizes her, and to fill in the particulars of her life ourselves. Our intent was not historical accuracy but imaginative response to her life, as well as to the lives of our own women ancestors.

Jane: The collaborative part of the exhibit consisted of choosing a common theme, then responding to that in our own ways. We met occasionally throughout the process to look at each other's work and discuss ideas. It's interesting that we both came up with these hanging shrouds — mine tea-towels and Susan's lengths of cheesecloth — to represent the fourteen children of Mrs. Brubacher. Apart from that, my part of the installation has less to do with the actual Mrs. Brubacher than with the lives of nineteenth-century women in general. In trying to represent Mrs. Brubacher I also became involved in remembering my mother and my earliest visual memories of being female. Those images were things like teacups, roses and lace doilies. Unlike Susan, I'm not from the Waterloo region and I was very aware of not wanting to project anything inappropriate onto Mrs. Brubacher, especially the Mennonite aspect of her life.

Susan: After we started working on the theme I found out that my grandmother had lived in the Brubacher house in the early part of this century. I don't think I'm related to Mrs. Brubacher, though her life was probably very much like the lives of my Mennonite women ancestors. Because I grew up in this area my connection

Mrs. John E. Brubacher's Kitchen, Susan D. Shantz, installation 3.5m x 25m x 16m

with Mrs. Brubacher was more intimate than Jane's. I easily projected my mother's and grandmother's lives onto her. In fact, I used plaster casts of my mother's face and hands for the installation of Mrs. Brubacher lying under her kitchen table reading. That's an activity my mother loves but only allows herself, with some guilt, when her more important housework is done. I imagined that Mrs. Brubacher's ghost, wandering across her land now occupied by professors, students and libraries, might also be interested in reading. So I placed her beneath her kitchen table in the quiet of death where she is finally free to indulge this desire to read.

Jane: My idea for the desk and books came from thinking about the university as a layer of another kind of learning over the land and life of Mrs. Brubacher. What did women in the nineteenth-century learn? Traditionally, a lot about fulfilling the "proper role" of being feminine. The books I made have texts about women's crafts — knitting, crocheting and so on — as well as phrases that convey the notions mothers pass on to their daughters, initiating them into the patriarchal family structure. The ruin on top of the desk is meant to refer to an institutional site – perhaps some future time looking back on our present which still upholds many of those same patriarchal values.

Susan: The suspicion of intellect, "reading," in our culture, struck me as akin to the traditional Chinese practice of binding women's feet. We look with horror on the physical abnormalities that resulted— but what about the psychological aberrations that come about when women's intellects are constrained? Perhaps these are some of the "neuroses" we inherit from our mothers, the "bitter milk" Jane refers to in one of her pieces. The metaphor that became central for me as I worked on the pieces over the summer, came from a line I found in Mrs. Brubacher's genealogy: "The kitchen became an operating room and the patient was put on the table."

Jane: I had a similar experience of premonition with "Mrs. John E. Brubacher's Garden in Spring." I'd started that piece before we'd even talked about this show, though I finished it later and titled it for this exhibition. It's unlike anything I'd done before, both in theme and medium, yet it fits perfectly into this installation. The images I drew onto the wood blocks are modified from old encyclopedia illustrations of the growth process of different organisms: an amoeba splitting, seeds developing into plants. Fertilization, regeneration. In a way, making this piece — sticking with it and getting it done — became about that as well. It was very intensive labour, carrying it through the various stages. The actual drawing, less so, than the time-consuming preparation of the 49 wood blocks — sanding them, painting them with gesso, then more sanding and finally a coat of wax over the drawings. It became a piece about labour.

Susan: The canning in "Mrs. John E. Brubacher's Kitchen" is some of my mother's from the past two summers. They're very beautiful — shining jars of cherries, pears, peaches, pickles, beans. A lot of work is represented by those jars of canning, yet in the home they have no monetary value. They might be worth a few dollars at a local market, but here in the gallery — a public space sanctioned by patriarchal culture — they are worth at least $100 each! By bringing things like teacups, tea towels, pieces of lace, jars of canning into an art gallery, Jane and I are both questioning the values traditionally attached to these things.

Jane: By using found objects and working in this installation mode we're subverting conventional hierarchical notions about discrete art objects with intrinsic value. The space becomes activated by a number of different elements and meaning is revealed only through the various juxtapositions.

Some people might question our inclusion of things like needlework and canning which have been part of women's oppression. But why reject these things that have been a part of our lives — our history — and have been excluded by male definitions of art and creativity? In both my work and Susan's there is a simultaneous celebration and critique of the "teachings" we've had from our mothers. These objects we use point to the strong bonds that exist between generations of women, but they also symbolize ways that women have been prevented from doing more ambitious, more public and profound things.

Susan: The table I used for Mrs. Brubacher's kitchen was my grandmother's butchering table on the farm; it was recently refinished and now resembles the varnished boardroom table of contemporary institutions. Perhaps modern women run as much risk of "dying on boardroom tables" as Mrs. Brubacher did of dying on her kitchen table. Can we, twentieth-century women, move into public spaces but define them with our own values?

I wanted to present an alternative image of the female body to that offered by mainstream culture when I did my three plaster-cast torsos. I cast them on a friend who is "overweight" by our culture's standards, and whose self-image has been greatly affected by that fact. I deliberately chose a body that revealed childbearing, gravity, time. It's a body that confronts the viewer with particularity because it doesn't fit any stereotypical norm. The three bodies are patched in various ways — with rawhide, lead and earth. Injured but healing.

Jane: Susan's work has a very strong physical presence – the way she approaches materials as well as the use of human figures. It's very corporal. I tend to suggest physical presence through architecture, rather than the body. In a way it's distancing — the forms are geometric, formal. I suggest the human but in a removed way, and the architectural spaces are always empty, so they really point to absence.

Susan: I think Jane lures the viewer in with objects and surfaces that are more refined than mine, then delivers a punch, often with a line of contradictory text. There's a hidden sharpness. In the exhibition I found that her phrases of text played off my pieces. The words added another dimension to my work— a verbal reference to something I was articulating in a more visceral, intuitive way.

Jane: Often the viewer is searching for a clear position on the part of the artist. Is this work intending to criticize or to celebrate? But art is open, ambivalent, contradictory and concerned with questions, not answers. Susan and I in this work, are celebrating and criticizing at the same time all those things that attach us to our mothers, and through them, the history of women.