Towards a Feminist Visual Practice

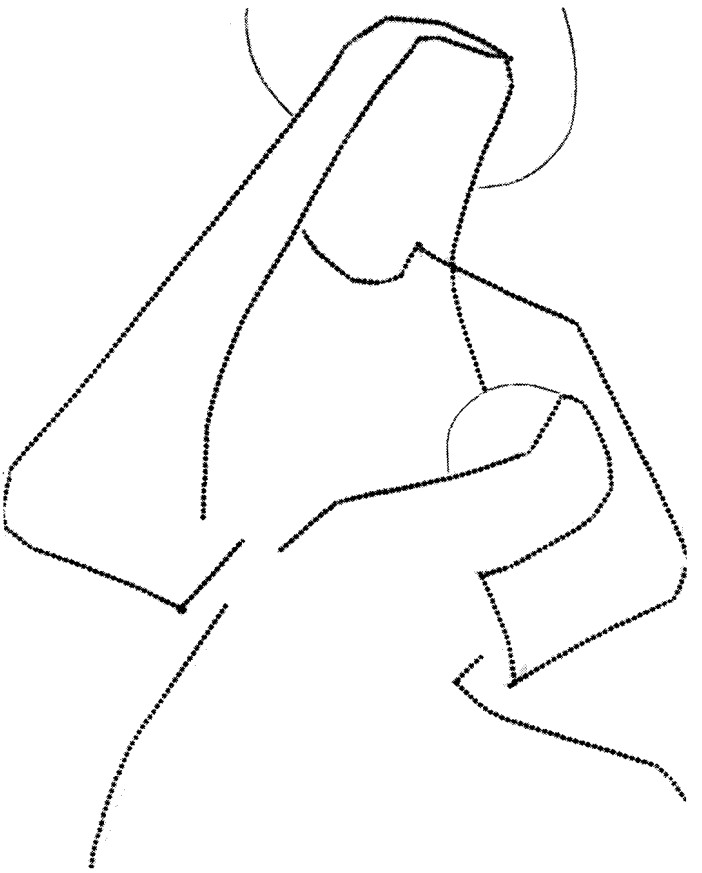
BY ALICE MANSELL

Over the last two decades, several types of feminist discourse have developed as the proper modes of critical studio practice through which women can speak, and be heard. Since issues of gender impact on and reflect the authority conventions of every other category (race, class, economic and geographic situation) by which the marginalized voice is identified, an analysis and location of these modes of feminist discourse may prove valuable in the task of addressing these "other" layers. The following discussions of modes of discourse mobilized in feminist art practices are not intended to function as overarching models with broad potential applications in all other considerations of marginality. They are intended to situate a practice of painting and drawing in a more productive intellectual and social position in the contemporary cultural milieu.

Implicit in such an endeavour is the assumption that art can function as an active participant in social dialogue and construction of culture. As such, it can function as a practice that does not primarily seek to validate the status quo, but to pose questions for "purposes of social melioration or transformation."[1]

The postmodernist practices of many Canadian artists have been enormously affected by the imperative voices of marginalized populations that have made themselves heard in a country with ostensibly communal aims. Government institutions that represent themselves as being devoted to equality of public support and opportunity have grown up, providing women with increased access to publicly supported funding, education and to exposure, primarily through publicly funded artist-run venues. Women and others on the "margins" are still underrepresented in large public galleries, collections, publications, and as faculty in post-secondary art programs, however.

The effect of the "success" of feminist artists in Canada is evident in the widespread adoption of artistic practices that utilize technological media such as photography, film and video. The use of such media, initiated by feminist artists in the 1970s, was based on a need to find other voices outside the mainstream



Left: *Linda: the Portrait*, A. Mansell, 1987, graphite on paper, 22" x 28"
Right: *Linda: the Icon*, A. Mansell, 1987, letra dot tape on plexiglas, 22" x 28"

concerns still vested in the high art practices of painting and sculpture.[2] These media forms offered opportunities for the wide communication of personal/political concerns without the "straitjacketing" implicit in the conventional and exclusionary nature of modernist high art practice that still held sway.

Another rationale for the adoption of mass media forms was that in order for artistic practice to have an effect upon the social order, it should speak with the language of that order. This critique of the economic and material commodity modes that dominate the culture by exploiting the use of those very modes, was soon adopted by mainstream artists in this country and worldwide. However, I would argue that in Canada this theoretical assumption has been more pervasive than in other national and geographic locales.[3]

The assumption underpinning much contemporary practice in this country has been that mass media work (image/text) will be *seen* to speak to and therefore be able to be subversive of the cultural authority of that commodity directed mass media. The efficacy of such an assumption can be seen in the practices of Martha Rosler and Jamelie Hassan, whose aims are clearly social and accessible.[4]

Another example of "artistic dissidence" employed by feminist artists is the adoption of an anti-mastery, anti-formal, anti-compositionally conventional, or in more proactive terms, a more intuitive, physically and emotionally expressive, and more interactive art-making practice, which makes use of the traditional sculpture, drawing and printmaking. These works, which often have a celebratory tone, are not identified primarily as art objects, except by their location in galleries, but rather as conduits for interaction, communication or confirmation of shared experience. The problem with this model of practice, as with all models of feminist practice, lies in the requisite identification, location and production of an audience.

The essentialist notion that all women through their very biological identity as women will wish to and be able to interact with these works denies the communication interruption, scrambling and even silencing that race, class, ethnicity and location impose upon the receptivity and interactive opportunities available within the designation of human female. The audience may need to be as clearly identified as viewer-participants conversant with the terms of reference of the works as those viewer-participants addressed by the most self-referential and self-reverential of modernist texts. This conversation may be facilitated through the location of the works, inside or outside institutional supports; or through clear direction in the presentation and accessible symbology of the work.

And, since art today is very clearly complicit in the consumer and commodity agendas, reinforcing a value system that still denies a voice to women and the disadvantaged, it is important to examine the traditions within which it has been possible for ostensibly subversive work to itself become a commodity. The hazards of being absorbed, and of being viewed as complicit are very real and very daunting. However, the avenues offered by practices that exclude or avoid confrontation with the cultural authorities still residing in the conventions of painting and sculpture have not proven potent in effecting change "from the margin." Painting and sculpture are still at the apex of the high art hierarchy. Modernist structures of production and consumption still hold in this postmodernist time.

As an artist "trained" in traditional media practices, I was immersed in the study and use of historical and modernist art, which focused on painting and drawing as a preparation for the "real" work of painting. While this obsession with paint and making marks compelled me to continue to use these prepost-modernist media, in the late 1960s, I began to experiment with new media — photography, video, and site-specific drawing installations — in order to address issues of power and identity. More recently I have begun to investigate how these practices and their theoretical premises could function with more traditional media: the painting and drawing practices most familiar to me. My agenda is not to prioritize, and thereby exclude or devalue other artistic practices. Rather I want to articulate the premises of my own artistic practice, my reading and use of feminist theories.

Thesis

Expressive gesture, colour, and texture in paint handling serve to mediate against viewer interaction with the subjectivity of a painting. The paint handling serves as a marker for mastery of a bibliographic array of references to authoritative painter identities. Large, forceful, virile, extroverted marks command attention and denote value.

Experiments

Portrait: Drawn portraits in which a high degree of interaction with the subject is attempted are covered with an acetate "skin," upon which a selection of "expressive" paint-handling conventions are applied. The mastery of all techniques, and conclusivity, is not at issue.

Landscape: In an initial trial the image of Lawren Harris' *Maligne Lake* is painted, using close approximations of colour, paint handling, compositional devices and proportion. On its right margin are the words of Northrop Frye, used in the *Lawren Harris Retrospective* catalogue (National Gallery of Canada, 1968). The text is also rendered in a "painterly" fashion. Another canvas of equal size is prepared. Using landscape referents similar to those in Harris' work, an attempt is made to incorporate more specific descriptors and signs of personal memories/experiences of the site at Maligne Lake. In this edition, the name of the lake becomes particularly appropriate in the light of its metamorphosis from an abstract, idealized, purified sight to a heated, intensely coloured and glazed, vertiginous confrontation. The trial's success can be gauged by its efficacy in provoking questions about the stature of the original work as a "Canadian masterpiece," and its depiction of a Canadian landscape that has become a tourist mecca, an icon of nature, the frontier.

[1] Martha Rosler, "Teaching Photography: The Critical Issue," *The New Art Examiner*, Sept. 1989, p. 35.

[2] A discussion of these phenomena has flourished in Canadian critical journals. See Philip Monk, "Axes of Difference: Representation Versus Expressionism in Toronto," *Vanguard*, Vol. 13, No. 4, May 1984, p. 11; and John Roberts, "Painting and Sexual Difference," *Parachute*, No. 55, Summer 1989.

[3] There are many reasons for this: from the central funding of artists' work, to the pressures exerted by the American art market, to the lack of independent (i.e., non-institutional) financial and moral support for artists in Canada.

[4] Cautionary note: there is a tendency for such practices to be seen as the "right" style. Image and text may often be juxtaposed primarily for their referential power, their implications of theory mastery. Thus the work's capacity to counter the commodification pressure is compromised, and the works often become complicit in that pressure. Further, locating the work inside gallery walls can render the work undecipherable and inaccessible to its purported audience.