

# VISIBILITY:

## THE SLIDE REGISTRY OF NOVA SCOTIA WOMEN ARTISTS

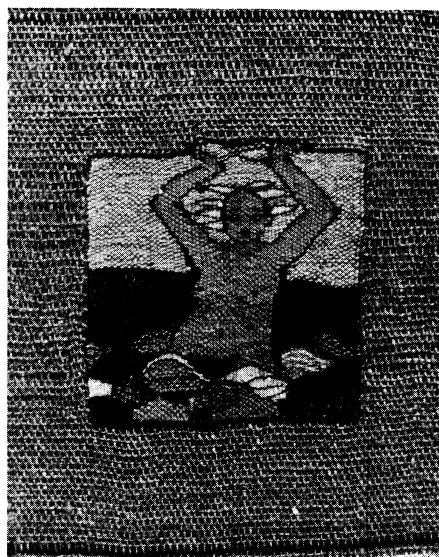
Gayle R. Davis

*Gayle Davis nous parle d'un registre de diapositives formé en vue de la promotion des ouvrages artistiques des femmes de la Nouvelle Ecosse.*

The Slide Registry of Nova Scotia Women Artists was established in 1975, International Women's Year, by Mary Sparling, Director of the Art Gallery of Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax. With her support and the administration of registry curator Elizabeth Shatford, the membership has grown to include almost 100 Nova Scotia women artists in a collection of approximately 600 slides. A special project completed in spring of 1981 developed the registry's audience and membership and structured the collection for accessibility as an educational and curatorial resource.

The Nova Scotia registry is unique in its province-wide focus, but it joins several other Canadian Women's art organizations: Powerhouse Gallery in Montreal, Womanspirit in London and Women in Focus in Vancouver. These groups follow the precedents of the Women's Art Movement which began in the early 1970s to combat sexist discrimination in the education, exhibition and marketing systems of the art world.

The first women's slide registry was formed in 1971 by the Women's Ad Hoc Committee in New York City to bring long-denied attention



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to professional women artists. The concept of women's slide registries as an inexpensive alternative exhibition 'space' has since spread across North America.

It is hoped that the visibility and documentation provided by the registries will fill a void in art history and offer contemporary role models for younger women in the arts and advance the careers of women artists.

The gender-specific nature of women's art centres, galleries and registries such as the one at Mount Saint Vincent University has aroused some heated controversy. Those protesting separatism not only charge 'reverse discrimination' but also criticize the groups for creating an 'unrealistic' environment for their artists, insulated from

the 'tougher scene' of the larger art establishment.

They argue that all-women exhibitions allow the mainstream to take less responsibility for its discriminatory practices. Then, anti-separatists say, women's art organizations become 'ghettos' and are incapable of significantly changing the larger society.

Those favouring separatist art associations see eventual integration as the desired goal. However, they know that social change is slow and that it is accomplished only when prejudices are confronted directly. Toward that end, separatist organizations insure that women's art is constantly in evidence, not to be ghettoized, but to gradually become an equally-valued part of the total art system. Proponents of separatism argue that until there are equal opportunities for men and women in all phases of the art establishment, all-women structures are needed.

The Nova Scotia registry supports a non-hierarchical, inclusive philosophy, also inherited from the larger women's rights movement, with an unjuried, unlimited membership policy. Any women artist born and/or living in the province is eligible to join. There is no membership fee. An artist simply loans six slides of her most recent art to the collection, provides relevant biographical information and updates both her slides and news of her professional activities yearly.



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In addition to slides of members' art, the registry includes individual vertical files and a registry book which contains each artist's statement about her work and details of her professional achievements. All of this information is cross-indexed according to the member's home region in the province, and to the media, content, style and approach used in her artwork. The collection

and its supporting materials is thus particularly rich and organized for efficient use by the general public as well as by collectors, researchers, curators or teachers. The registry may be used in the gallery or borrowed by advance arrangement with the curator.

Because the registry has an open membership, a wide variety of artwork is represented by both tradi-

tional and *avant garde* artists. There are fifteen categories of art content indexed in the registry, each with its own range of styles, approaches and choices of media. The scope of the collection is indicated by a brief consideration of the three figurative works illustrated here by members Susan Gibson of Canning, Trudy Callbeck of Dartmouth and Suzanne Swannie of Halifax.

In *Alongside the Quaywall*, Gibson creates a realistic image of her child using a family snapshot as her source. The formal aspects of her work, her painstaking 'photo-dependent' drawing process, is all-important. She intends to convey no didactic social message or private family sentiment. In contrast, a more fanciful, emotive approach to the figure is demonstrated in Callbeck's watercolour *Memories of P.E.I.* An array of colourful decorative motifs form the abstracted 'landscape' of the memory, serving as the dynamic background and repeating the patterns in the dress and hair of the contemplative central figure. In *Pink Mood*, Swannie uses wool tapestry in small scale to depict the movement of a figure in dance. Her medium, usually associated with decorative art traditions, takes on new expressive qualities in this image.

This diverse art collection has been used quite extensively in its six-year history, in galleries and by many art organizations as well as schools. With each new audience, the Slide Registry of Nova Scotia Women Artists furthers its goals: to promote individual women artists of the province, to record their contributions as a regional group, and to stimulate discussion about art by women in general. This growing collection of contemporary artworks deserves the continued attention of the public and the art community.

1 Suzanne Swannie, *Pink Mood*, wool, 6" x 6", 1978.

2 Trudy Callbeck, *Memories of P.E.I.*, watercolour, ink, 14" x 18".

3 Susan Gibson, *Alongside the Quaywall*, pencil on harumi, 46" x 37".