

Michelle LaVoie ~ Artist's Statement: Of Paper and Skin

This writing comes from excerpts taken from a public lecture on my work, which I have given at Memorial University, Corner Brook Newfoundland, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia and at Queens University Kingston Ontario.

“Speak, at the same time. It is our good fortune that your language isn’t formed of a single strand or pattern. It comes from everywhere at once. You touch me all over at the same time. In all senses. Why only one song, one text at a time?..... between us the house has no wall, the clearing no enclosure, language no circularity. If our pleasure consists in moving, being moved, endlessly. Always in motion; openness is never spent nor stayed.”

Luce Irigaray - from When our Lips Speak Together

This series of works, titled Of Paper and Skin, came at a time when I had been working across media. I had just finished a series of photo -etchings, and I had simultaneously been working with digital images of the body, and doing quite a lot of my own writing. The work came together, when I realized that all of these sources were speaking about same thing, from different places, with different voices.

Each of these sources were another way into an interior landscape, of thought, touch, sense. I realized that I could weave all of these various strands and sources into one, to speak together. I found that I could let photo -etching, digital imagery, and text speak, each themselves, with their unique voice. I realized that the gallery could be my canvas. Texts and images could be actors upon that stage. The audience’s reading of the work could be the play itself. It was alive.

With photography, I stopped trying to represent the body through metaphor and went straight to the thing itself. Audience had always been important, but now instead of reaching out to the audience, I could bring the audience inside the work itself. The audience’s reading of, and interaction with the work became an important part of the work and wrapping the audience in the environment became a way to engage audience.

One source for this work would be my reading, particularly James Joyce’s, Ulysses. I was inspired by his poetic narratives which collapsed past, present and future tenses, which blur the boundaries between action and thought, punctuation disappearing.

A quote from James Joyce:

“Glowing wine on his palate lingered swallowed. crushed in the winepress grapes of Burgundy.
Sun’s heat it is. Seem to a secret touch telling me memory. touched his sense moistened remembered.
Hidden under the wild ferns on Howth. Below us bay sleeping sky. No sound.”

It became important to me to set up images and text together so that each piece, image and text would read on its own as well as in combination, association with every other text/ image.

Skin:

is body
is container of energy
is vulnerable
is pulsating
is alive
is what we know and feel on a body level
is the site where we touch the world and the world touches us is universal
we all have it and exist within it

Rain :

is nature
is outside, exterior
is light
is window
is reflective surface
is meditative
is cool
is wet
we feel
is repetitive, and pattern
is veil

Rain and skin together read into each other to become the cool touch of rain upon the surface of our skin. I am interested not just in the structure of language as an end in itself, but how language communicates, how we perceive and construct meaning. For me, this construction of meaning is not separate from the body.

We hear the steady pattering of rain which connects with our heartbeat pulsing just under the skin. We see, we feel the repetition of the words, in the phrasing, in the timing, in the pacing, as we walk through the work. The text, softly spoken, heard internally, like a whisper, like a prayer.

Different languages put together, verbal and visual, start to create a poetic narrative in which meaning is not fixed, but fluid. I play with the gaps and the overlaps between multiple images, between images and texts, and between texts, for it is within these gaps that we create, find and sometimes lose, meaning.

These images grew out of questions and interests that evolved over time, issues of language, perception, communication and audience. I believe that meaning is a web of presences and absences, as Roland Barthes calls it a "tissue of signs". I also believe that everyone who reads a text brings their own experience to the text, and that each viewer will interpret the text differently, in effect, reinventing the text, or in this case text/ image.

These ideas came into my work, as I conceived of the overall structuring of this series of works. This work consists of image pairings, large scale photo- etchings of rain, computer plots of skin, and vinyl lettering placed directly on the wall. The rain acts as shimmering beads of light, the ink in the paper, physical, sensual. The computer plots of skin, enlarged beyond recognition, hyperreal in detail, read like aerial photographs. The body is a landscape, measured, mapped and printed by a commercial mapping device, the plotter. The text is written on the wall. The gallery becomes the canvas, and the stage. The audience's reading becomes the play.

This work tells a story, and in the telling touches upon sense, desire, loss, renewal. Its structure is circular, like one season passing into another. Below the surface, the work touches upon the structure or syntax of language; the poetry possible when words and images read together. This structuring exists in the phrasing, in the pacing, the spacing, of word and image. As the viewer walks through the work, they read image into image and image into text. In the end, the viewer passes through, not only seeing, but having an intimate experience of the work.