



Lifeworks

The memorabilia of madness

Vera Greenwood's installation *High Ground*, recently on view at the Ottawa Art Gallery, is a remarkable reconstruction — and deconstruction — of a family history disturbed by unacknowledged mental illness. The first section of the work chronicles the arrival of the artist's grandfather in Canada and her father's childhood in Alberta. Artifacts (real or purported) displayed in glass cases offer what first appears to be a benign excursion into prairie history. But the viewer soon finds evidence of a brutal past: the two-by-four that the artist's father, Alec Greenwood, saw his father flog a horse to death with when Alec was five; a gold tooth recovered from the ruins of a house that, at the age of six, he watched burn to the ground with all of its inhabitants inside; the gloves that his father wore when he tried to strangle Alec that same year. The question arises: to what extent did inheritance and traumatic events lay the ground for the illness that would later manifest itself in Alec?

The second part of the installation stands in darkness. The viewer is



Vera Greenwood *High Ground*, installation detail.

obliged to inspect each item by flashlight in a pseudo-forensic exercise that begins with Alec Greenwood's military records. It is fascinating to read the

sometimes conflicting reports, which note his lack of physical coordination, "dull mentality," "poor attitude," and occasional insubordination. One report describes him as "a surly, disgruntled individual" and declares that "Nothing is wrong with him from a psychiatric standpoint." If, in its purest intention, diagnosis is a form of knowing and not merely of labelling, Alec Greenwood was more obscure in his own lifetime than he is now, after his death. What is lamented is less his illness (which the artist believes to have been paranoid personality disorder) so much as his essential unknowability.

One puzzles over the fact that this incompetent, uneducated man fathered six children and built largely with his own hands a house on "high ground" that he purchased for \$100 on the outskirts of Calgary. The rooms were never finished past the drywall and two-by-fours, on which Alec recorded the names and telephone numbers of people he believed to be conspirators. The installation replicates the family



Vera Greenwood *High Ground*, installation detail.



home with an impressive inventory of domestic artifacts in gyprock rooms. From appliances to clothing, crockery, games, savings coupons and sewing patterns, these memorabilia of the fifties have a haunting effect, especially to a viewer of Greenwood's vintage. But the soul of the installation lies in the accompanying typewritten file cards that provide an account of the artist's growing realization that her father was odd. This realization expressed itself as a desire to be one of the kids from an adjacent, wealthy neighbourhood, as if the feature that distinguished her family from others was not its dysfunctionality but its lack of affluence. The youngest child, Vera appears to have had a special bond with her father; at the age of 15 she would sit for hours watching him play solitaire while he conducted half of an imaginary conversation. But the emotions she records include pity, resentment and remorse. At one point she writes:

Dad was a passive presence amongst us most of the time. His wife and six kids would buzz all around him and he'd stay calm, lost in his own world. He'd come straight home from work, eat, pace, talk to himself, play solitaire. ... We all craved peace at home and most of the time we got it. We were very good at gaging [sic] Dad's moods and we could walk on eggshells when necessary; we'd usually just clear out. My Mom took up bowling and bingo in a big way. We knew from experience what topics to avoid at all costs ...

High Ground is a courageous work. In achieving a reconciliation with her memories, Vera Greenwood has the advantage of a deep sense of irony and an artist's awareness of beauty in all its unlikely forms. Reflecting on the unplastered stoneboard of her family home she is able to note: "After 30 years it was all discoloured, especially in the kitchen near the gas stove. It was quite a beautiful colour, actually, a golden brown."

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Illness and metaphor

Schizophrenia

Lucrezia Warren Smith, sitting by her husband's side on a seat in Regent's Park in the Broad Walk, looked up.

"Look, look, Septimus!" she cried. For Dr Holmes had told her to make her husband (who had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself.

So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him, in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness, one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks.

It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t...o... f...

"K... R..." said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say "Kay Arr" close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper's, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. A marvellous discovery indeed — that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life! Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling, with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses' heads, feathers on ladies', so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion —

"Septimus!" said Rezia. He started violently. People must notice.

"I am going to walk to the fountain and back," she said.

For she could stand it no longer. Dr Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he were dead! She could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible; sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down; all were terrible.

From Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).
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