



Lifeworks

Almost like a signature

When Saskatchewan-based artist Linda Duvall was growing up in the village of Newington, just north of Cornwall, Ont., her family “rarely went to art galleries, and when they saw contemporary art, they would frequently say, ‘I don’t get it.’” Duvall’s multimedia installations reflect her concern with making art accessible to the viewer. Grounded in everyday life, her themes may appear to be simple, but her collaborative working methods, by which family members and friends lend their voices, images, handwriting and handiwork to the exploration of a subject, succeed in allowing the viewer to consider both the commonality and the complexity of a shared experience.

The recent installation *She Still Worried* grew out of the unusually high frequency of blindness in Duvall’s family. This history was not made coherent by a single diagnosis but was, as Duvall describes, simply a “family fact” that went “unquestioned.” To create *She Still Worried*, eight members of Duvall’s family sat together to model little figures out of a cinnamon and applesauce dough, an activity with resonances from childhood. The relatives who were not visually impaired made the figures with their eyes closed; thus, for everyone, vision was supplanted by a tactile and olfactory experience. Duvall was surprised to find that she could not distinguish between the resulting figures on the basis of whether the maker was sighted or blind; on the other hand, each participant had a distinctive style of modelling them.

In the installation the approximately 300 figures mounted in rows on a wall are emblematic of familial ties and form a kind of record of the hours the relatives spent together talking. Under the figures is a 23-foot frieze consisting of video stills that capture the participants’ eyes at precise moments of opening and closing. Duvall was interested in “the awkwardness of the sighted relatives who tried to keep their eyes closed, but whose natural tendency was to rely on

their sight.” These images are somewhat enigmatic, since they “do not reveal the degree of sight available to any of the participants.” Running above the images is a text describing the artist’s reaction. Part of this reads: “It felt like doing the dolls that her grandmother used to make with her She wondered why she couldn’t tell which ones were made by the sighted relatives and which were by the blind family members Or which were made by the children and which by adults Each person had quite a distinctive style of making these things — almost like a signature She still worried about going blind.” The viewer might be led to contemplate the meaning of disability within the context of a family, the connections between past and present generations, the joy and the liability of genetic bonds, and the tension between family “traits” and the uniqueness of each person in whom they appear.

She Still Worried was exhibited at the Definitely Superior Art Gallery in Thunder Bay, Ont., in the summer of 1998



and at the Moose Jaw Art Museum in the fall. Duvall teaches in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

Anne Marie Todkill
Editor, The Left Atrium

