

## Lifeworks

## Caught looking

Recently the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton acquired a major work by one of Canada's most important artistic exports of the 1990s, Geneviève Cadieux. *Rubis* (1993), a photographic diptych, juxtaposes the bare back of the artist's mother on one panel against an enlargement of cancer cells on the other. At over 2.5 × 3.5 metres, *Rubis* is gigantic, which is a signature technique of Cadieux's: the monstrous scale "makes strange" its subject. This cinematic mode of exhibition, though, is very much of its time, and many of the most successful artists of the 90s tended to work large.

A decade or two ago, when "sculpture" was usurped by "installation" and "aesthetics" was hung up in the old boy's club to make way for psychoanalysis and semiology, Canadian artists were especially well placed to make their mark in the international art scene. Canada had a sophisticated (if modest) structure of arts funding and a network of noncommercial artist-run centres unrivalled anywhere else in the world. Also, the proliferation of post-graduate degrees in fine arts across the country produced and supported an intensely intellectualized artistic atmosphere that exactly matched the mood on the international circuit.

In 1987 Cadieux exhibited a large diptych entitled *La blessure d'une cicatrice ou Les Anges* by setting it on the gallery floor, leaning against a wall. *La blessure* pressed a lot of buttons by refusing its pedigree as either painting or sculpture. Its provisional installation provoked viewers to imagine for themselves how they might have displayed it. But, quite apart from playing games with the institutional boundaries of objects and spaces, it was the juxtaposition of subjects, and their literal effacement, that so enticed critics. An image of Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince (the face erased, but still striking a pose of masterful self-confidence) was set beside a 19th-century photograph of an anonymous female prostitute (back toward the camera,



Geneviève Cadieux, *Rubis*, 1993. Colour photograph on plexiglass sheet, 268.6 cm × 358.8 cm. Purchased with funds from the Canada Council Art Acquisition Assistance Programme and the Senator Richard Hatfield Memorial Fund.

and drawing a butterfly on the wall). What was brilliant about this piece was how it evoked so many contemporary analyses pertaining to power and patriarchy and at the same time generated its meanings ambiguously, poetically. More to the point: it was big, smart and sexy.

As feminism gained entrance into the mainstream, intellectual debate shifted from the nature of political constructions to the construction of the subject. ("Boys read Marx and girls read Freud," I learned in graduate school, but these two heroes of the artistic academy really signalled the old and the new guard.) Artists abandoned the old ideological critiques of the museum and set out to explore the social and cultural production of subjecthoods. At the same time, the rapid escalation of technological consumption, the spectre of cybernetic utopias and AIDS ushered in wide-ranging discussions and representations of "the body." The late 20th-century obsession with rippling muscles and fat reduction notwithstanding,

artists tended to focus on the body-in-pain and to brood about its demise, not sing its glories. For a time, it seemed as if art-supply stores would have to burn their stocks of oil paint and plaster to make way for blood, excrement, semen and toenails.

These discourses start to sketch a historical backdrop for *Rubis*, a beautiful piece that revels in its own perversity. The title refers to the colour of the cells, and ultimately to the abstract beauty of the microscopic image. This seems innocent enough, and the syntax of the two panels isn't difficult to grasp. It's like a photograph with a caption: "This back is diseased." The rub comes when your gaze veers away from the all-too-human, monochromatic back and indulges in the exquisite abstraction of the cancer. In the end, it catches you looking, and there's nothing innocent about that.

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