

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Making Special

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

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## ABSTRACT

The definition of art as “making special” implies taking care and doing one’s best to produce objects which are accessible, striking, resonant, and satisfying to those who take time to appreciate them. My work comments on our human condition and human experience, and on the general themes of humankind’s basic needs of shelter, safety, love and belonging, and those events and emotions that surround ordinary lives. These ideas are expressed lucidly and directly, with a visual language firmly rooted in the vernacular, the language of everyday life.

The exhibition consists of pieces belonging to three separate series: **Architectural Constructions, Altarpieces and Icons.** The accompanying support paper positions the work in its art historical context and explains my choice for a mode of delivery. The paper concludes with the criticism and evaluation of my production during the MFA program, and hints at the future direction of my work.

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## DEDICATION

To Randy, Kate, Jake, Andy, Chris, Elena, José and Amanda, for supporting me in the pursuit of my dreams; to Genghis Canis and Attila the Hound, just for being there.

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I write from a happy ignorance. As Milan Kundera once said,

I don't write to preach a truth but to *discover* a truth.



## INTRODUCTION

Looking back on my development as an artist, I recognize some of the main influences in the evolution of my own concept of art—my concept of what I do in the studio in a socio-historical context. Making art is one of the traits that sets humans apart from other animals. As long as it is not defined too rigidly, we can trace the appearance of art to about 28,000 years ago, when people got the urge to express themselves on cave walls.

Art has meant many different things at different times. The word, as used today, probably derives from the Renaissance terms *arti* and *arte*. *Arti* were the crafts guilds established in the 14th century, and *arte* was the craftsmanship required of members of those guilds. During the Renaissance, art became a technical and interpretive record of human experience. Whatever else it is, art is essentially the making of objects through the skillful handling of materials.<sup>1</sup>

Until the late 18th century, the word ‘art’ meant what today we would call ‘craft’ or ‘skill’ or ‘well-madeness.’<sup>2</sup> The insufficiently appreciated fact is that the abstract concept of ‘art’ is a construction of western culture, with its origins in England and

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<sup>1</sup>Otto G. Ocvirk, Robert O. Bone, Robert E. Stinson, and Philip R. Wigg, *Art Fundamentals, Theory and Practice* (Dubuque: William C. Brown Company, Publishers, 1960), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), p. 40.

Germany during the Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Until then, society had not considered art as an entity in itself, apart from its context of use or the content it portrayed. The new field of aesthetics was developed and concerned itself with the principles, such as taste and beauty, that governed the arts and made them into 'fine' arts. The work of art became a 'world in itself', a vehicle for a 'special kind of knowledge', whose only purpose was 'to be' and to provide opportunities for enjoying an 'aesthetic experience'. Viewers could no longer naively admire art with the old standards of beauty of conception, recognition of subject matter or accuracy of representation: art became an ideology with principles articulated by a few critics whose pronouncements became more important than the works themselves, and appreciating art became an elite activity requiring apprenticeship and dedication.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to remember that although 'art' as a concept seems to have been born fairly recently, the arts have probably been with us from the earliest times, as have been the ideas of beauty, transcendence, and the realities of the human condition (birth, suffering, love, loss, desire, hope, death) which have supplied the subject matter and the conceptual seeds of the arts throughout human history. I believe that the creation of art objects is an essential part of our human nature.

Ellen Dissanayake<sup>5</sup> suggests that elements in the arts are inherently gratifying and appeal to emotional, perceptual and cognitive areas of our intelligence. Some elements that appeal to the senses (vision, touch) are vivid colour and polished surfaces, while repetition, pattern, continuity, clarity, dexterity, contrast, proportions, etc., appeal

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 120 pp.

<sup>5</sup> Dissanayake, p. 51.

to our cognitive faculties, and stimulate and intrigue our intellect. In the visual arts, value has been placed traditionally on skillfully made objects of polished stone, burnished metal, vivid paint and ornate and soft textiles<sup>6</sup>. One of the primary reasons why we make art is because it is physically, sensuously and emotionally satisfying and pleasurable to ourselves and to others.

I view art as a medium of expression, a communication between maker and viewer. The language of visual signs speaks to us from all the known civilizations. If the language is sometimes unfamiliar, it is largely as a result of a cultural veneer, but beneath that veneer the principles of the art language remain the same. Joseph Campbell<sup>7</sup> calls art ‘the making of things well’. He says that it is the production of objects of ‘divinely superfluous beauty’ that ‘open up dimensions within’<sup>8</sup> and create an ‘enchantment of the heart’.<sup>9</sup>

My own definition of art is borrowed from Dissanayake, who calls art ‘making special’. She says,

To make something special generally implies taking care and doing one’s best so as to produce a result that is—to a greater or lesser extent—accessible, striking, resonant, and satisfying to those who take the time to appreciate it.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Reflections on the Art of Living: A Joseph Campbell Companion* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), p. 136.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Dimension, Selected Essays 1959-1987* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), p. 194.

<sup>10</sup> Dissanayake, p. 224.

In my attempts at making special, I strive to create objects which are rich in textures and colours. When I design one of my pieces, my goal is to create works that invite contemplation through the deliberate organization of lines, shapes, values, textures and colours. I always try to create a beautiful object, appealing to the eyes through pleasing form and exciting surfaces. My pieces are intended to sublimate life's experiences. As intelligent humans, we crave commentary on our human condition and human experience, and the general themes of my work are humankind's basic needs of shelter, safety, love and belonging.<sup>11</sup> I deal with those events and emotions that surround ordinary lives. My main influences in art making have been my Catholic upbringing, especially the imagery in the churches, and the magic in the shapes, language and smells associated with the rites as they were practised previous to Vatican II. My love of reading has certainly been an enormous influence in what I do, especially as it fed my curiosity about the psychological motivators of human behaviour. Being from Colombia and having been raised in the noisy and intellectually stimulating milieu of my family has also exerted its influence, as has having husband, children and household, and my desire to express my vision of sublimity and transcendence and to acknowledge my place in the world.

Like Matisse, I want my art to be like a good armchair in which to rest at the end of the day. I take great pleasure including little clues to specific meanings. This is done

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<sup>11</sup> Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) postulated that human behaviour is ruled by a hierarchy of needs. In ascending order, these needs are physiological (hunger, thirst, sex), safety (security, protection, structure), love and belonging (roots, origins, family, contact, intimacy), esteem (self-respect, self-esteem and the esteem of others), and self-actualization (to be all we can be). He also identified two cognitive needs: the need to know and understand, and the need for beauty. John M. Darley, Sam Glucksberg, Ronald A. Kinchla, *Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991), p. 349.

in the manner of a mystery writer, and the enjoyment of the piece by the viewer is in no way dependent on deciphering all the symbols. My titles are word clues designed to elicit certain associations, and my images suggest not specific meanings but general ideas of life. I believe that the meaning of an art object is not limited to the artist's intent. A work of art is an expressive object, and what it expresses is the responsibility of the viewer, not necessarily the artist. My interpretation (as maker) is only one of many.<sup>12</sup> I agree with Robert Hughes<sup>13</sup> who says that when works are made with specific meanings they need a translation. I believe the ideas behind the art can be any, as long as they are expressed lucidly and directly, in my case with a visual language firmly rooted in the vernacular. Because I am aware of the fact that many viewers will always look for clues to the meaning of a particular piece, I sometimes add odd elements whose only function is to tease at a meaning that doesn't exist.

The socio-stereotypical formulas used to classify artists and their work into early, mid- and post-modern periods describe the early modern artist as having ties with the past, possessing advanced techniques, a mimetic aesthetic, old-fashioned content, and technical objectivity. These artists represent reality in a recognizable way and speak a language easily understood by the majority of the educated and intelligent public. Following this criteria, I would describe myself as somewhat like an early modern artist.

My objects are more that just the result of giving fantasy free rein; they give forms to feelings. I want them to be compelling by arousing, capturing and holding the

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<sup>12</sup> Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary* (London: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1993), pp. 72-75.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 185.

attention of the viewer. My objects become special in their exaggeration, repetition and elaboration of elements. Many of them make conspicuous use of symbols with hidden or arcane meanings that reverberate beyond their apparent significance.

I have typically worked in series. Each series is composed of pieces that relate to each other in medium and subject matter. In the past I have created series titled *Seashells* (12 pieces), *Goldfish* (<10), *Buses* (<10), *Fragmentations* (<5), *Musical Instruments* (<10), *Human Figures* (<10), *Immigrants* (4), *The Alphabet* (23), *Architectural Constructions* (34 to date), *Altarpieces* (7), *Icons* (11 to date). During the MFA program I produced three different series, each loosely related to the others. One series is of **architectural constructions** based on house forms; the second consists of **altarpieces**, also based on architectural shapes, that reflect on the wonder of existence; the third combines modern images within the formal shapes of the gilded **icons** of the 12th and 13th centuries in a humorous way.

I am satisfied with most of the pieces I have created during the MFA program, both in their final appearance and in the fruitful path taken toward their creation. Two things are foremost in my mind: the pleasure in the work and the pride in the results. Both are eminently present in these constructions.

## ARCHITECTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS

I had to achieve a kind of representation in stone of my innermost thoughts and of the knowledge I had acquired. Or, to put it another way, I had to make a confession of faith in stone. That was the beginning of the “Tower”, the house which I built for myself at Bollingen.

C.G. Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections.<sup>14</sup>

The longest-running and most extensive series I have created is the one dealing with architectural constructions. It started in 1985 with *City*, a painted wood construction. Other pieces were done in 1986 and 1989. The first house series was done in 1992 and has continued to this day.

I have long been interested in the premise that people’s homes are their self-portraits. We tend to surround ourselves with objects we like and which reflect our personalities and backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> Our houses are projections of ourselves, shelters for our daydreams,<sup>16</sup> containers for our souls, an extension of our unconscious, the unintentional expression of private imaginings, refuge for our memories, and embodiments of the personalities of their occupants.<sup>17</sup> My house shapes are symbols for the human figure;

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<sup>14</sup> C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 223.

<sup>15</sup> Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home* (Berkeley: Conari Press, 1995), p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Witold Rybczynski, *The Most Beautiful House in the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 185.

my constructions are structures which reveal the identities of their imaginary occupants through the pictorial metaphors of personal histories.

The use of architectural forms as a vehicle to portray states of mind has art-historical precedents. For example, Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978) froze reality into a trance-like immobility and conveyed irremediable anxiety through his perspectives and his conflicting vanishing points, giving the viewer the sense of being imprisoned in a nightmare. In De Chirico's work, the plazas and palaces of Renaissance Italy are depicted in a mood of intense and mysterious melancholy. De Chirico's ensembles of disjunctive objects created a troubling dream imagery of great power and intensity. They present us with an enigmatic system of poetic metaphors whose meanings are deliberately obscure. Their illogicality creates anxiety and baffles the viewer.<sup>18</sup>

Whether by his juxtapositions of images or by startling contrasts in the scale of his painted objects, René Magritte (1893-1967) achieved startling effects in his paintings, which often had a disturbing impact on his audience. He also chose the titles of his pictures in such a way as to inspire mistrust and destroy the viewer's self-assurance.<sup>19</sup> Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) translated the poignancy of human yearning into his cage sculptures. These sculptural forms gave visual recollections of events and set a precedent for narrative sculpture.

Edward Hopper (1882-1967) used portraits of urban buildings as metaphors for spiritual vacancy, disenchantment and human isolation. By combining precise details with ambiguous situations, he created a mood of unmitigated loneliness.

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<sup>18</sup> Sam Hunter and John Jacobus, *Modern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), pp. 165-167.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.



Houses conjure up powerful emotions. Rachel Whiteread (b. 1963) made a cement cast of the interior of a Victorian terraced house in London's east end in 1993. *House* was a death mask of a particular space, anonymous history turned into a solidification of memory. *House* was also a monument to the complex cultural myths surrounding childhood, family values, and relations between men and women, adults and children. As such, it condensed personal feelings of both belonging and exclusion, and acted as reminder of the vulnerability and isolation experienced inside many homes.

Houses in general arouse memories and provoke thoughts about nostalgia. There is a sharp distinction between the word house and the word home. I have chosen to call my structures house constructions in order to distance them from the sentimental notions of domesticity. Most houses are orderly spaces containing objects of personal significance. Houses are archetypal symbols for the human figure. Houses serve as primary units of measurement and as points of reference for spatial politics; they are the human scale which determines the nature of our relationship with our environment and our culture.<sup>20</sup> Houses are central to our narrative of identity and belonging.

In the MFA thesis exhibition, I have included the following house structures: *Adolescence*, *Ancestry*, *Maternity*, *Marriage*, *Suburbia*, *Cocoon*, *Carapace* and *Village*.

*Adolescence* (47 x 71 x 14 cm, 1997; Figure 1) is heavily dependent on the contrast of its materials and textures. It consists of a piece of red cast glass, irregular in its outline and its organic colour, enveloped in a crisp, metal house. The front and back metal grids that make up the house are of different diameters, emphasizing the drawing-

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<sup>20</sup> Jon Bird, *dolce domum*, in James Lingwood, ed., *Rachel Whiteread, House* (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 119.

like qualities of the piece. The base is a rectangle of polished wood which has a pen and ink drawing.

Another piece heavily dependent on its own materials is *Ancestry* (62 x 66 x 28 cm, 1997), where an elm log and cast blue glass relate to each other in unexpected ways. As they dried, the vertical wood planks warped into gently twisted curves, softening the lines of the sculpture. The wood carries the names of my ancestors, making *Ancestry* a visual pun by acting as a family tree. If read the way it is intended, it also refers to my beliefs of being one with the universe.<sup>21</sup>

*Maternity* (127 x 31 x 28 cm, 1997) is a free-standing piece constructed of recycled plexiglas. It is a house-within-a-house, a pregnant house. The sanded surfaces of the plexiglas are milky and semi-opaque; the inside house can only be seen when the light hits it a certain way, as when the viewer moves around it.

*Marriage* (38.5 x 35 x 4 cm, 1997; Figure 2) has two pieces of cast glass framed in a wood structure. The cast glass has bubbles and flecks of organic material making them reminiscent of the frozen surface of ponds in winter. One side of the wooden frame has a drawing of a labyrinth, the other side has ghostly images of children. I am very happy with the patina I created for this piece, and the way the addition of silver leaf

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<sup>21</sup> In about 1852, the Government of the United States inquired about buying the lands belonging to Chief Seattle's tribe. I quote parts of Seattle's marvelous reply:

The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? ... We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us... The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors... The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father... All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it..."

Quoted by Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), pp. 41-43.

combines with all the textures to create a pleasing whole. *Adolescence, Ancestry, Maternity* and *Marriage* form part of a 'life cycle' and as such reflect on the various stages of the human condition (birth, growth, love, desire, hope, death) and on the rhythms and flow of life.

*Cocoon* (58 x 44 x 31 cm, 1997; Figure 3) is made of bent aluminum rods and bars mounted on a wooden base and refers to the protective and enveloping notion of house. *Cocoon* is spare and elegant, both in its minimal elements and in the contrast between the aluminum surfaces and the black waxed base.

*Suburbia* (five modules, each 45.5 x 38 x 4 cm. 1996; Figures 4 and 5). Each one of the five houses has an identical shape and each has a different architectural detail symbolic of everyday life: a door, windows, a picket fence. Each one represents the façade we present to the world, the dividing line between the public and the private aspects of our lives. The outward calmness shelters a sense of melancholy and isolation hinted at by blind windows, shallow entries and by the elements being placed slightly askew.

*Village* (eight components, each 30 x 30.5 x various ~6.5 cm, 1998; Figure 6). While *Village* and *Suburbia* relate to each other, *Village* is even more subtle in its ideas. Here, each of the architectural details is presented in faulty perspective, that is, the angles go in the wrong directions, be it in the doors, window, staircase, etc. Mixed signals perhaps hinting at unease, at something below the skin. The surfaces, with their faded and corroded verdigris patinas, complete the image of controlled and hidden decay.

The latest piece in this series is *Carapace* (56 x 45 x 20 cm, 1998; Figure 7).

This and *Marriage* are very intimate pieces with gentle nuances of meaning. The house structure in *Carapace* is created by the precise placement of three flat pieces of differing materials, each 5mm thick, on a block of blond wood. The shapes of the vertical wood piece and the folded aluminum piece echo each other and make-up the roof lines. The sand-blasted glass rectangle forms a back-drop and provides the door and window. The path is created by words of associated meanings, starting with carapace, the name of this piece. A carapace is shelter, but a weighty shelter; it is also the hard shell of a tortoise or crustacean and could be seen to mean isolation and aloneness.

The overall style of these sculptures is naturalistic in that it depends on physical reality, socially stylized in that they reference signs and symbols created by society. Other sources of input are a very personal expression, and the substitutional elements that encourage a participatory input and reach out to the tactile sensibility of the viewer. These pieces are also very much about the process and the pleasure in making them. The aesthetic, the form of delivery, is expressive and intuitive, with mimetic imagery.

## ALTARPIECES

When I think of art I think of beauty. Beauty is the mystery of life. It is not in the eye it is in the mind. In our minds there is awareness of perfection.

Agnes Martin, *Beauty is the Mystery of Life*.<sup>22</sup>

*Altarpieces* has an aesthetic vocabulary specifically developed to express my vision of the sublimity, perfection and transcendence of reality. These ideas are not to be confused with religion. Beauty and happiness are the subject matter of art. Art expresses abstract emotions of beauty and calm. By illustrating my own experience of perfection, I hope to awaken the viewer's memories of past experiences of it. These pieces are intended as an appreciation of the continuum and rhythms of life, they are about discipline and perseverance; these are objects that communicate abstract responses of contentment and serenity, and place art in relation to life.

*Altarpieces* consists of four house shapes (*Shrine*, 45 x 65 x 21 cm, 1977; *Retable*, 45 x 57 x 28 cm, 1977; *Reliquary*, 46 x 58 x 14 cm, 1977; and *Sanctuary* 46 x 61 x 16 cm, 1977; Figures 8 to 11) and three boxes (*Storage Box for a Spirit I*, 26.5 x 59

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<sup>22</sup> Agnes Martin, "Beauty is the Mystery of Life", in Barbara Haskell, *Agnes Martin* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), p. 10.

x 18 cm, 1998; *Storage Box for a Spirit II*, 45 x 18 x 22 cm, 1998, Figure 12; *Storage Box for a Spirit III* 61 x 19 x 22 cm, 1998). *Altarpieces* contrasts man-made and natural objects (findings). The names of the altarpieces relate to niches containing sacred relics or objects, in this case, these objects are natural findings (a bird's nest, a wasp's nest, and porcupine quills) chosen for their beauty and to act as the focal point at which the whole universe expresses itself.<sup>23</sup> Every nest, every quill represents a unique manifestation of the whole, each one is a footprint or an echo of the whole world.

I have presented each natural finding as an enchanted object, with a beauty comparable to a great oriental carpet, an illuminated manuscript, or intricate embroidery. I want the viewer to rediscover in them the magic inherent in religious ceremonies. Joseph Campbell says that the artist is one who interprets the inherent divinity of nature,<sup>24</sup> and here is divinity interpreted.

The spectacle of the world can be fascinating. "The world is a spell, an enchantment, an amazement, an arabesque of such stunning rhythm and a plot so intriguing that we are drawn by its web into a state of involvement where we forget that it is a game".<sup>25</sup>

*Altarpieces* has quotes in Latin, taken verbatim but out of context from the Saint Andrew Daily Catholic Missal<sup>26</sup>. These quotes reinforce the spiritual feel of the pieces.

The *Storage Boxes for a Spirit (I, II and III)* have image transfers which are floorplans of medieval and gothic cathedrals and churches. They also have the Service

<sup>23</sup> Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), pp. 78-79.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, p. 122.

<sup>25</sup> Watts, p. 129.

<sup>26</sup> Dom Gaspar LeFebvre, *Saint Andrew Daily Missal* (Saint Paul: The E.M. Lohmann Co., 1949).

for the Mass of the Dead written on them and then partially erased, so that only fragments remain. The interior volumes are negated by a criss-cross of dowels, to reinforce the idea that the boxes are only to be used for storing immaterial spirits.

These boxes are all made out of very old lumber. When I cut the wood and constructed the various pieces, the wood started to warp slowly, so that the finished boxes all look slightly askew. I like that: it was almost as though nature wanted to play a part in the creative process.

*Altarpieces* are socially stylized, referencing signs and symbols created by society, especially by the use of Latin in prayer, a custom that ended in the Catholic rites as a result of the Vatican II (1962-1965) ecumenical council. They reflect a personal expression of my beliefs and my wonder at the beauty of the world.<sup>27</sup>

Most people who see my *Altarpieces* are reminded of Joseph Cornell's boxes. Cornell (1903-1972) has many and illustrious fans, including Octavio Paz (1914-1998), the Mexican Nobel laureate (1990), who wrote a poem entitled *Objects and Apparitions: For Joseph Cornell*.<sup>28</sup> Paz calls the boxes 'monuments to every moment', 'cages for infinity', 'memory weaves', 'condensation flask for conversations', 'incoherent fragments', 'creator of ruins'. Cornell has not been an influence on my work. I feel that my *Altarpieces* share only very superficial similarities with Cornell's boxes. They have in common their intimate size and their use of found objects. However, Cornell's boxes are eccentric and surrealistic images of his dream world, each one a collection of discarded objects, ephemera and memorabilia combined with his own private fantasy and

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<sup>27</sup> It is humbling to feast on the delicate beauty of a papery wasp's nest, the gradation of colours in a porcupine's quill, the intricacy of a bird's nest, or the mathematical precision of a chambered nautilus's shell.

<sup>28</sup> Reproduced in Dore Ashton's *A Joseph Cornell Album* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), pp. 115-118.

resulting in enchanting ‘junk’ constructions. They include romantic bric-a-brac, nostalgic photographs, astrological illustrations, and bits of writing. By comparison, each one of the *Altarpieces* includes a single finding, presented as a sacred object, a sensitive connection to the whole of existence. Both Cornell’s boxes and the *Altarpieces* do, however, share a feeling of authentic experience, a sense of privacy and personal sensibility, and both use austere language to create enigmatic constructions and poetic documentations of inward life.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hunter and Jacobus, p. 284.



## ICONS

Great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend.

Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space.<sup>30</sup>

The *Icons* are my latest series. These playful constructions have a distinctive flavour, created partly by the tension between popular art and sophisticated art-historical references. This work includes the formal austerities of Constructivism and is also extremely personal. They are a curious fusion of early Christian icons with modern figures acting as deities. They are enigmatic and filled with visual puns. They are counterfeited objects of contemplation, reflecting our desire to fuse ancient myths to our everyday existence.

Icons were small panel paintings popularized during the Byzantine period. The icons' origins are of great antiquity, deriving from early Roman portraits on wood. Early icons date from about the 12th century. In their compositions they exuded calm, order and simplicity and were intended to inspire contemplation and devotion. These pieces were supposed to be read pictorially and were educational aids for pre-literate Christians. The surface splendor provided by the gold leaf and the simplicity of forms,

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<sup>30</sup> Bachelard, p. 33.

together with strong patterns and bright colours were meant to make them more visible in wavering candlelight and through clouds of incense.<sup>31</sup>

Icons were devotional holy images (paintings or carvings) usually within a conventional shape (altarpieces, quatrefoils, tondos). Their images were venerated as representations of sacred powers which could cure spiritual or physical ills. They were spiritually potent and had sacramental-magical powers.

In their use of bright colours and rich surfaces, my *Icons* also have definite roots in folk art traditions. The term 'folk art' is a paradox. The word 'folk' suggests something common and ordinary, of the people. The word 'art' refers, among other things, to the unique quality of individual inspiration. Folk art is a mixture of naivete and sophistication, tradition and innovation, cultural repetition and individual invention. It is usually the personal expression of a collective belief.<sup>32</sup>

Folk art, by definition, is art by and for a people.<sup>33</sup> It is sincere and straightforward, and reveals the character and interests of the people who create it, and the forces that mold their lives. It is created by artists who work mainly for their own gratification and the applause of their families and neighbours. Consequently, these artists are very much in tune to their surrounding culture; they are the voice of the people.

Folk art usually has a cultural framework and reflects the regional, linguistic or religious boundaries of the group. Latin Americans have an especially rich heritage of

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<sup>31</sup> *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1980), pp. 249-251.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Bird, *Canadian Folk Art: Old Ways in a New Land* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Bishop, *American Folk Art: Expressions of a New Spirit* (New York: Museum of American Folk Art, 1983), p. 6.

folk arts and crafts dating back to the colonial period. Among these folk arts, *retablos* (paintings of religious images on wood) are particularly important. The worship of household gods is as old as mankind and in Hispanic America this was combined with Catholicism's deeply ingrained image-worshipping traditions. The folk artist's response to these needs was to create *retablos*. The term applies to gilded, painted screens on churches and also to small votive paintings.<sup>34</sup> *Retablos* were created by artists who displayed their devout feelings and flaunted their ingenuity in overcoming the technical difficulties of media.

*Icons* reflect my Catholic roots and my upbringing in Colombia. Colombia has a rich heritage of folk art traditions, of people creating objects to accompany them in their earthly and spiritual activities. Colombian folk art is usually a curious amalgam of pre-Columbian civilizations, traditional indigenous creations, as well as European and African cultures. During the colonial era (16th to 18th centuries), due in part to the flamboyant, baroque tastes of the European colonizers and the need for ecclesiastical furnishings for the churches, a flourishing religious artifact industry was born. Modeled initially on the styles and tastes of Europe, ecclesiastical art underwent local modifications. Although the iconographic motifs remained unchanged, the pieces acquired a definite local flavour in the rich colouring, the looser style, and the appearance of local characteristics in the faces and clothing of saints and other religious figures.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Gloria Kay Giffords, *Mexican Folk Retablos* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), p. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Liliana Villegas and Benjamin Villegas, *Artefactos: Colombian Crafts from the Andes to the Amazon* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992), pp.16, 35, 159-160.

In their techniques of assemblage and painted wood, my *Icons* are also reminiscent of the work of Marisol (Marisol Escobar, b. 1930). Hers is a sophisticated and theatrical folk art with a deadpan approach and touches of humour.<sup>36</sup> She takes common images and presents them in a new context. In her characteristic work, she creates an interplay of objects and illusion. Her work is a brilliant autobiographical theatre with magical transformations. She has created replications of familiar masterpieces, among them Leonardo's *Last Supper* which she rendered in a life-size frieze of carved and carpented wood, with the artist herself appearing as an onlooker.<sup>37</sup> My work connects most strongly to the work of Marisol. However, I did not become aware of her oeuvre until recently, and I cannot say I was influenced by her. We share many biographical elements, including a Latin American heritage and an international upbringing, which might be the reason for the shared multicultural-female aesthetic approach to art making.

My *Icons* strive to retain the conventional shape and splendor of the historical icons and substitute the madonnas and saints with images of modern life. The *Icons* are my depictions of the parade of reality, everyday scenes and events represented in simple, flat areas of colour. They make irreverent use of familiar and banal images in a quasi-religious setting. The images are fragmented and childlike in their simplicity, evoking the large-piece wooden puzzles we played with as children: life as a game. In these

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<sup>36</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966), p. 101.

<sup>37</sup> Hunter and Jacobus, pp. 311-312.

pieces, I have chosen to cast myself in the role of a 'detached, amused, lenient, affectionate and ironic spectator of life in the 20th century'.<sup>38</sup>

The first piece in this series was *Self-Portrait, Past and Present* (diptych, each 66 x 41 x 13 cm, 1996, Figure 13). The overall shapes are of Russian icons. The piece is autobiographical and reveals my strong introspective seam. Each half of the diptych is built at an angle giving the impression of doors opening, to complete the idea of past/present/future. I had been ruminating on the idea of making 'puzzles' for a long time and I finally solved most of my pictorial problems in this self-portrait. The inscription is patterned on the way the medieval stone carvers would sign their work (Cecilia made this).

*Juventutem Meam* (46 x 55 x 20 cm closed; 46 x 110 x 20 cm open, 1997, Figure 14) followed. This piece works like a hinged altarpiece, with three panels. The figures of the nuns and of the priest are tall, spare and elegant and are arranged in procession much like the mosaics of Justinian and Theodora in the church of San Vitale (Ravenna). The girls in the centre panel are individualized in their poses and are more fluid and life-like. There is a pattern of whites that travels across the piece (the wimples and cornets of the nuns, the shirts and socks of the girls); the lines of perspective on the floor tiles converge in the bowtie of the central girl. When closed, *Juventutem Meam* looks like one of the small rural churches in Colombia. This is another autobiographical piece and it refers to my happy memories of boarding school.

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1980), p. 344.

*Belonging: The Swim Club* (35.5 x 34 x 2.5 cm, 1998, Figure 15) is a group portrait. The predominant colours are provided by the gold leaf and the bright blue which used to be the most expensive pigment because it was made from powdered lapis lazuli. Hokusai's *The Great Wave* is in the background.

*Five* ( 42 x 28.5 x 3 cm, 1998) is a festoon of partial and complete paper dolls. It has bright colours and interesting shapes and repeats the number five several times: five dolls, wooden knobs, notches in the frame, etc.

*The Garden of Eden* (51 x 38 x 3 cm, 1998) has the shape of an open spanish fan, with a hedgerow of trees, one with apple-like holes in it. The silver leaf over the dark bark of the wood creates a look of storm clouds and an atmosphere of impending doom, contrasted with the shiny inviting foliage. The spokes are some of the 'findings', elements discovered in wood shops and hardware stores. The brown spoke amid the green ones, and the red knobs on either side are there only to hint at a non-existent secret meaning.

*Centenary Band* ( 62 x 33 x 3 cm, open, 1998, Figure 16) is in the shape of an altarpiece. This one does not follow the conventions of traditional altarpieces, where the side panels were subordinated to the central one. In *Centenary Band*, the image is arranged procession-wise, the width of the three panels, with the main figure (the conductor) on the right panel. Centrality is not the only convention disregarded; frontality was also dismissed, to reinforce the sense of stagecraft, and to include some of the figures as spectators of their own action.

*Centenary Band* has a series of vertical off-whites (the players) contrasted with the rounded black heads, placed to simulate musical notes on a score. Viewed straight on, the piece is almost monochromatic, with only a small green head and an ochre tuba disturbing the ivory/black arrangement; as you move sideways, all the colours appear on the sides of the wooden pieces, making the image gay and vibrant.

The *Icons* series places great emphasis on social stylization in the emulation of ancient icon shapes and in the extensive use of gold and silver leaf to recall precious religious artifacts. These objects also have a solid expression aesthetic which is very personal and self-referential, making specific allusions to my Latin American background and my Catholic roots.

Some of the repeated design elements in this series are the cloissoné effects with the inherent amusing effect of the joining and separation of the many puzzle pieces; the shine of the surfaces and the vibrancy of the colours; the dualism of the quasi-precious frames and the familiar and banal images. Careful consideration was given to each of the design elements in these pieces, their outside shapes, the fragmentation of the images, their colours and textures.

## CONCLUSION

Most of the people who have criticized and evaluated my production during the MFA program (professors, visiting artists, other graduate students) seem to agree that its strengths lie in the use of materials and in the range of techniques and skills that they evidence. These sculptures have received many positive comments on the way they flaunt textures, colours and surfacing in general. Other positive comments have addressed the delicacy of approach and professional delivery.

Criticism has included the limiting of the iconography to the ideas of a thoroughly rational and polite social order and to the self-imposed restrictions that arise from my conservative background and the reluctance to use my work as a means to shock and titillate the viewer. This comment has been addressed by introducing elements that hint at a duality within public and private images. By choice I have avoided the style of ‘confessional self-portraits’ and argumentative autobiography popular with some artists (Frida Kahlo comes to mind). My work tries to evoke feelings by using forms from the past, recharged with sophistication and elegance. These objects are meditations on introspection and self-sufficiency.

Because most of the pieces are fairly uniform in size, the main criticism of these works has to do with scale. Henry Moore has said that there is a right physical size for every idea.<sup>39</sup> I believe that right physical size is related to human size and that intimate

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 596.



size is what you can encircle with your arms. My work is intimate and introspective and I want my viewer to get close enough to appreciate the nuances of shape, colour and surface present.

The ideas reflected in these creations are important in that they required planning to arrive at their satisfactory completion. These ideas are not limited to the artistic intent. A sculpture is an expressive object, what it expresses is left largely to the viewer, with the original notion only one of many possible interpretations. The original concept may have been very specific and the viewer may never know what that original thought was; however, that viewer who empathizes will share the sense of resolution and completion and identify mentally with the beauty of the piece.

Recently, my work has started to change to reflect the pride I feel in my inherited circumstances of family, education, religion and country and in my strong desire to pass this pride on to my children. I respond to life in a more light-hearted way and I am content. I realise that my folk art tendencies are a desire to communicate in the vernacular, the homely speech of everyday life using themes and subject matter that are ordinary rather than monumental. I want my work to be a reflection of the value I place on my individuality, and my refusal to conform to current fashions. My pieces are created with skill and integrity. I want the pleasure I felt in making them to be evident to the viewer. My works do not aim at specific meanings, but instead reflect on the general ideas of life, the human experience, love of nature and acknowledgement of the life-force. These ideas I try to express lucidly and directly, with a visual language rooted in the traditions of making special.

## DEFINITIONS

The following definitions were used in the context of this paper. They are a useful map for exploring the territory.

**Style** is the distinctive presentational modality or strategy in art. Style can also be described as the set of psychological sources or channels through which information flows into the artistic production. Style does not refer to the content of the art but to the way in which the content comes into the art.

The three main channels that determine the style of these works are naturalism, mimesis and social stylization. In **naturalism**, information comes directly from sensory observation. Naturalism describes work based on a reasonably correct simulation of physical nature but is not bound by the expectation of literal correspondence. In **mimesis**, the model determines the appearance of the artifact. Mimesis demands the deliberate recording of factual information and is bound by the authority of the model as a source of information. We call the style **socially stylized** when it makes reference to the rituals, signs and symbols created by a particular society.

Several other channels inform the work discussed. **Process** is important because these conceptions were influenced by the physical materials and processes used to create them. **Personal expression** embodies personal character and personality as it is imprinted on artistic notations. Much use has been made of **substitutional elements** that

engage the imagination and encourage participatory intimacy between the viewer and the work of art. Sometimes **illusion** plays a part. This refers to the recording, storage and transport of visual information (for example in the use of perspective).

**Aesthetics** refers to the set of distinctive communication modes that an artist uses; the logistics of artistic delivery. Aesthetics can also be described as the strategy of artistic production and delivery. Two strategies of production and delivery are evidenced in these works: an expressive aesthetic and a mimetic aesthetic.

**Expression aesthetic** is intuitive in that it records insights or understandings without conscious reading. Artistic expression places the imagination and intelligence of the artist at the command of the art and produces one-of-a-kind originals. Expression suggests the intimate flavours of personal sweat and blood; it requires strong emotion, sincerity, spontaneity, inspiration, commitment and deep beliefs. Expression is the reaction to demanding internal powers and beliefs.

**Mimetic aesthetic** involves the imitation of specific aspects of the physical world in a relatively neutral and objective manner.

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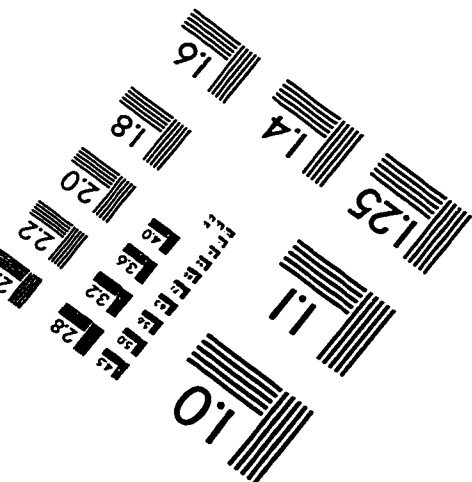
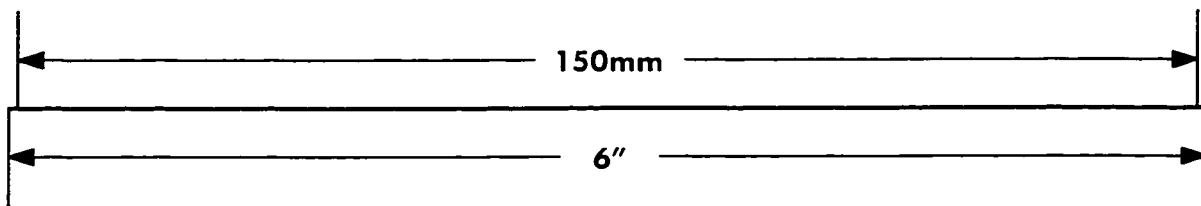
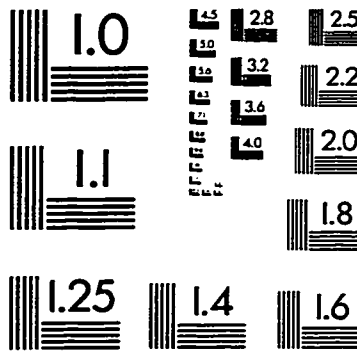
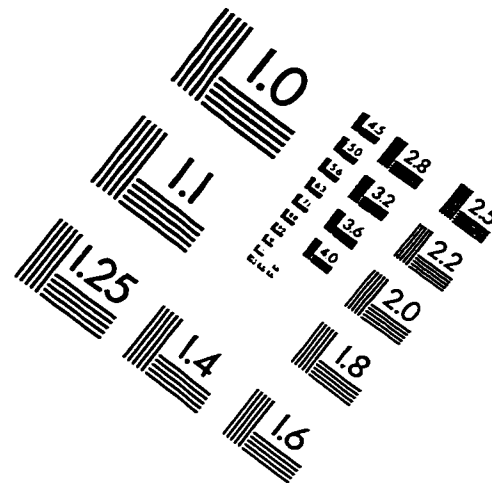
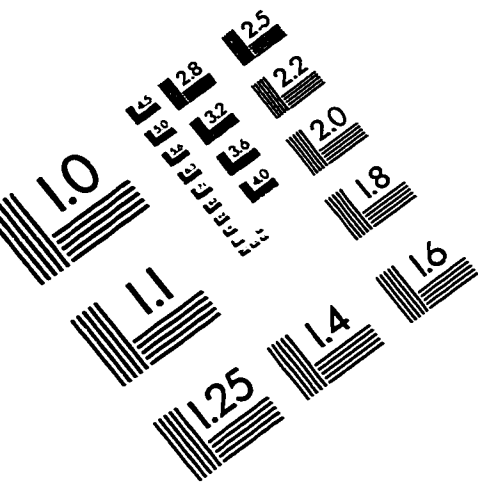
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