

GALLERY STRATFORD

Drowning Ophelia



Poor Ophelia

Divided from herself and her fair judgment, Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts

William Shakespeare (1564–1616)
The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark
Act IV Scene V
Line 48

DROWNING OPHELIA, on view from January 17 - April 4, 2010 at Gallery Stratford, delves into the timely and timeless allegory of Ophelia's loss of judgment and her subsequent watery demise in an exhibition of new media, video, photography, painting, and sculptural works by Janet Bellotto, John Dickson, Janieta Eyre, Sue Lloyd, Paulette Phillips, Mélanie Rocan, and Sharon Switzer.

The group show poses several questions such as: How do artists tell stories in their work? How does contemporary art reflect and reveal narrative traditions? How does the art of today record and describe the world around us? And must 'the real' be fictionalized in order to be thought?¹

¹ Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Trans., Gabriel Rockhill, MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall, (First Published: 2004, additional publications 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009) pp. 38

Concern for the state of the environment is often considered a modern phenomenon; however, even a cursory look through literature reveals both fear and fascination with water. Poets love water, particularly its transitory nature. They recall Heraclitus, the Presocratic philosopher's proverb: "You can never bathe in the same river twice," or the legend of Atlantis, first mythologized in Plato's dialogues. Of course, there is also *Noah's Ark* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in which Ophelia senses her prince abandoning her to a watery grave...

Images of water, sanitized and spectacularized, play a prominent and recurrent role in art as in business and politics. This is not surprising, given the essential place of water in life itself. Water is understood as mutable, sublime, sustaining, and destructive. Throughout time water has served as a representation of birth, death, placidity and violence. Water also transports the hero to his great adventures and carries him home. Water holds the promise of freedom, its surfaces inviting, and its depths mysterious.

DROWNING OPHELIA probes our watery relationship with nature by alluding to literature as a sea of dreams and fears, desire for meaning, justice, and pursuit of beauty and reveals contemporary art practice as a fictional stream to be investigated for cogent environmental reflection upon notions of sustainability.

Janet Bellotto's 2004 five-minute video loop *Torrential Drift* features moving imagery taken from a gondola-ride during the early morning hours in Venice. In this work, the artist captures the reflections of the surrounding architecture while passing through the canal.² It is interesting to see this fluid city as a reflection, the image acting as a premonition of Venice's potential drowning due to global-warming. In other words, we see the city already drowned.

In another series entitled *Diluvian Lure* the artist optically merges imagery from Pre-Raphaelite paintings, sea anemone and Italian landscapes. The central Lenticular photograph restages John Everett Millais' well-known 1852 Pre-Raphaelite painting, *Ophelia*, which pictures Shakespeare's drowning personae floating down river, her hair loosen in the stream; a necklace of violets still around her neck and an unfastened bouquet of many different flowers drifting away from her open hands.³

From Charlotte Bronte to Leonard Cohen, writers engage water for its ability to both recoup and drown and as a fluid symbolic presence animating our imagination and connecting to our ever changing, and often-conflicting, emotions.

²http://www.ccca.ca/artists/image_timeline.html?languagePref=en&link_id=10964&artist=Janet+Bellotto

³ Shakespeare was a frequent source of inspiration for Victorian painters. The Pre-Raphaelites focused on serious and significant subjects and were best known for painting subjects from modern life and literature often using historical costumes. They painted directly from nature itself, as truthfully as possible and with incredible attention to detail. They were inspired by the advice of John Ruskin, the English critic and art theorist in *Modern Painters* (1843-60). He encouraged artists to 'go to Nature in all singleness of heart, rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing.'

<<http://www.tate.org.uk/ophelia/>>

The stuff of nightmares, myths, and fairytales are performed in Janieta Eyre's 1995 photograph *Rehearsal #23*, in which the artist stages herself as Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*, "Lying, robed in snowy white/That loosely flew to left and right-/The leaves upon her falling light-/Thro the noises of the night/She floated down to Camelot."⁴ Alluding both to classical literature and the Greek custom of burying deceased unmarried women as brides of Christ, Eyre depicts a woman suspended between life and death. Dreaming or still unborn, there is a sense in this image both of peace and anxiety that lies floating on the water.

Sue Lloyd's 2001 works *Float*, *Night Storm*, *Twilight* and *Tangled* show a world impossibly split in two. The women in the top portions of her large digitally produced, photographs image women out on floating boats, searching with lanterns, and staring down into the depths. The bottom part of these new media prints depicts women swimming deep under water, literally separated from the top half of the work: metaphorically separated the others above, by time, space, and the physical constraints of the image.⁵ Deliberately constructed, each image is a compression of time and place, spanning years and continents. They are Canadian landscapes, but also places everywhere and nowhere.

'Fictionality' is fore-grounded in Lloyd's backlit 2002 digitals titled *Flood*, *Swamp*, and *Swimmers...* The Aristotelian dividing line between reality and fiction is highlighted by the artist's refusal to have her new media water-soaked photo-based works line up or match. In-as-much Lloyd evokes both the pastoral tradition of picturing the land as a generous and fertile Mother Earth (providing us with rest, diversion and solace) while activating the other equally primal understanding of the earth as chaos and death. For Lloyd, both views of Nature and Mother Earth are in play at once.⁶

Temporality, memory, and loss weave through Paulette Phillip's 2002 *Floating House* video projection with 5.1 surround sound, shot on 16mm film and transferred to DVD, as does the very contemporary fear of being drowned just as Atlantis was. The conceptual artist's work broadcasts a spectral vision of a maritime house adrift out on the Atlantic Ocean as the force of the sea pulls it under. Paulette explains that her work questions the implied stability of structures like "human nature," knowledge, and architecture and how over time these structures are contested, disappear or get reclaimed by nature. She writes, "My interest in the psycho/socio nature of phenomena – how and why things appear – is guided by research into histories where the romantic oscillates with the scientific."⁷

Connecting the aesthetic to the political John Dickson's works *Franklin Expedition*, *Oil Spill*, *Leviathan*, *Sinking Ship* and *Cyclone* are all made using found components such as wine-bottles, water, cork, and magnets and in the case of *Cyclone* a small motor. These five

⁴ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1842

⁵ <http://archive.gallerytpw.ca/index.php?c=show&id=0103&h=archive>

⁶ Alex Wilson, in *The Culture of Nature*, states: "Pastoralism has a long history in Western culture. It promotes a view of nature as a kindly mother, a refuge from the demands of urban life. The Earth, in this view, is a garden if Eden, generous and fertile. Mother Earth provides us with food, rest, diversion, and solace. Nature in this tradition – and it is an ancient tradition, predating both science and Christianity – is an analogue of the female body. The pastoral tradition is the obverse of another Western tradition – equally primal – which understands nature as chaos and death." from "Nature at Home: A Social Ecology of Postwar Landscape Design"

⁷ Paulette Phillips, Artist Statement November 2009

sculptures are excerpted from Dickson's larger 1996/97 series, TEN SMALL NAUTICAL DISASTERS. The DISASTERS are based on the idea of the 'ship in the bottle', which is often associated with a tradition in folk art that expresses a naive nostalgia towards a life at sea. Describing the context of his work, John writes,

In my bottles I use real water, sand and rocks, and carve small vessels out of cork that really float (or sink). Much of my effort has been directed towards the stabilization of very dynamic situations. The floating ships are held in a fixed position by magnets inset into the shelves that cradle the 1.5 litre wine bottles. Algae, mould growth, and condensation inside the bottles create little isolated eco-systems complete with weather conditions. In some cases I've chosen to inhibit this 'natural' behavior while in others I have accepted it as thematically appropriate - Nature is the cause of most tragedies at sea. In my bottles humanity is not always the victim. One of the 'DISASTERS' shows a listing tanker, the waters surface covered by a slick of black oil. Some of the scenes depicted are based on historical events - the Titanic and the Franklin Expedition - while others are not specific in their references - a ship sinking among icebergs. Others [sculptures] are pure fiction and fantasy - a sea monster, Hollywood under water. They all depict tragic situations that subvert the naive and cheerful character of the traditional 'ship in the bottle' by alluding to a darker and more complex relationship between humanity and nature."⁸

Blurring the borders between the logic of facts and the logic of fictions, Mélanie Rocan's small 2009 oil paintings *Crashing Waves #1*, *Crashing Waves #2*, and *Swimming #1*, along with her large scale 2007 oil, *Caught in Hula Hoops*, are informed by what the artist describes as a "female consciousness," and speak of the fragility of human beings and the reality of the subconscious state. In these paintings Mélanie captures a distressed beauty, which suggests an inner emotional condition of highs, lows, and psychological unease.⁹ These works linger between darkness and playfulness, depicting figures that are either part of their environment, pierced by their surroundings or forced to transform into the natural environment. Rocan's imagery is haunted. It shows humanity intertwined with nature, suggesting that if one goes under - so does the other, because the artist paints them co-mingled as one and the same.

Comedy and the sublime share appearances in Sharon Switzer's digital video suite *Falling From Grace* presented on multiple plasma screens. This duo of new-media works present scrolling text and footage taken during a night drive in a car, a static shot of a lake at night lit by a searchlight and animated by a continual cascade of raindrops, bracketed by a third white-on-white screen that reveals reveries like, "I once won a free trip to heaven but I needed the cash so I sold it on eBay." Both the whimsical and sad aspects of the sublime are summoned in Switzer's three-part work by way of compelling cloud and water imagery,

⁸ John Dickson, Artist Statement 2009

⁹ <http://www.melanierocan.com/statement.html>

jumbling up themes of memory, stillness, language, and storytelling, while obliquely dealing with subjects of loss, yearning and hope.¹⁰

Perhaps the increasing frequency of wild fires, hurricanes, and floods along with their accompanying costs to the world's forests, urban centers and shorelines, leads artists and their audiences to focus on 'what happened' and 'what could happen' more often.

Clearly, the string of major disasters throughout the world in the past decade is causing a new awareness of the significance of water.

If the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought, then Janet Bellotto, John Dickson, Janieta Eyre, Sue Lloyd, Paulette Phillips, Mélanie Rocan, and Sharon Switzer's works on show in *DROWNING OPHELIA* bring this about by provoking us to think about our own stories, set in motion by water in our time by referring to the possibilities and potentialities found in art and literature.

Carla Garnet
Guest Curator

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¹⁰ In *The Critique of Judgment* (1790) Kant contrasts “the beautiful”, with “the sublime” explaining that the sublime is not a matter of form, but is found in formless and limitless phenomena