

Jana Sterbak, *I want you to feel the way I do....* (installation detail) (1983), live uninsulated nickel chrome wire mounted on wire mesh, life-size figure. Courtesy: The Ydesa Gallery. Collection of the artist.

# SONGS OF EXPERIENCE

A landmark exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada speaks with the voice of a new generation of artists

**G**eographically isolated from the art market and from the close-knit communities of artists, writers, curators and dealers that shape it — most notably those in Toronto and Montreal — the National Gallery of Canada is, for good or bad, uniquely equipped to pass judgement on the direction of contemporary art in this country. And this it does, every few years or so, selecting for temporary enshrinement a group of artists who, together or individually, represent important trends and achievements.

It is a difficult task, and for more than a year the movements of staff curators Jessica Bradley and Diana Nemiroff have been closely watched as anticipation about their show mounts. After months of preparation, their exhibition, *Songs of Experience* (May 2 to September 1, 1986 at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa), not only provides answers to those observers who've been engaged in a curatorial guessing-game, but also identifies a new mind-set at the NGC. The last special exhibition at the gallery before the new building opens in 1988, *Songs of Experience* is a weather-vane for institutional winds of change, a token of the cautious seriousness characteristic of museums here today.

Smoothing over personal and regional rivalries, encouraging (though not for the first time) the younger and lesser-known, the show demonstrates a new awareness of the gallery's national mandate, its responsibility, its place in history. At a time when art activity in Canada is especially lively and vociferous, Bradley and Nemiroff have opted for moderation and thoughtful response.

Throughout the mounting of the show

Robert Wiens, *Dream and Disillusionment*, from the series *The Tables* (1982), steel, clay, leather and mounted photostat. Table size: 61 x 61 x 81.2 cm (24" x 24" x 32"). Courtesy: the artist.

Jana Sterbak's sculptural installation (left), which includes a text projected on the wall behind the figure, calls to mind the boundaries between the public and the private self. "How," she asks, "can you be so comfortable only 5" to the left of me?" Robert Wiens's sculpture (right) is one of a series of six tables, each springing from a story told to him, recounted in the adjacent panel.

By PEGGY GALE

## Dream and Disillusionment

From the series *The Tables*, an old Cypriot table at Funchal Lake, Vincent Ferraro. He once told me of his childhood ambition, that one day he wanted to be an airplane pilot. His first recollection of the airplane was a great bird that men could fly. As a young man Ferraro found work at an airport, but was told that an Italian could not become a pilot. Faced with the prospect of performing only menial chores, and the growing realization that many of the best pilots who left, never returned, the dream faded. Ferraro said to me: "You know, that's when I had enough of the white man's crazy ways."





the curators have worked collaboratively, from joint studio visits to selection of the artists, conducting and editing of interviews and preparation of the catalogue essay and their progress has been marked by a struggle with conflicting factors. On the one hand, they admit, they felt a need to avoid "imposing a theoretical or thematic model before we went out and responded directly to the work." According to Nemiroff, "both Jessica and I have been influenced in our professional thinking by feminism and that has made us want to avoid some of the negative aspects of curatorial authority and mastery that can occur in an exhibition." At the same time, in order to assemble a coherent exhibition, "we always insisted upon maintaining curatorial control in the selection of the works. And we were thinking about the links that we want to make: giving the works a context and choosing works we felt were representative of the strengths of each artist."

While not wishing to abdicate the interpretive responsibility of the curator — "to get at the deep content of the work" — Bradley and Nemiroff were obviously aware of the work of their predecessors as they prepared their contemporary survey and consider their responsibilities somewhat changed. Tantalizingly, "We'll offer our analysis in the installation of the works and in the catalogue," says Nemiroff. Adds Bradley, "The exhibition is about relationships. We didn't want to present a series of one-person shows."

The thorough collaboration of the two curators marks a signal change of attitude at the National Gallery — one that can be traced to tensions within the institution as well as to larger shifts in the cultural and economic life of the country as a whole. A decade ago, with a strong director in the person of Jean Sutherland Boggs, a scholar who understood and supported wholeheartedly the work of her curators, individualism flourished. Little of note seemed to be happening at other museums, and the National Gallery truly was *the* centre of the country for contemporary exhibition and purchase. Its curators publicly took sides, established reputations and sought a heroic role for the institution.

The departure of Boggs in 1976 marked her recognition of the encroachments from the outside: administrative hedges and boundaries imposed (one assumes) for reasons of tight money and loose egos. Though delayed, the internal response was specific. In 1979 the curatorial department was evacuated. Contemporary curators Pierre Théberge and Brydon Smith left their jobs, Théberge moving to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as chief curator (a position he has since left), and Smith shifting

internally to become assistant director of collections and research, a largely administrative post. Mayo Graham and Bruce Ferguson, both assistant curators of contemporary art, left that same year to work as independents and Dennis Reid, curator of post-Confederation Canadian art, moved to Toronto to take a similar position at the Art Gallery of Ontario. It was virtually a clean sweep of those concerned with the art of this century.

The transition remains incomplete, for even today, the National Gallery does not officially have a curator of contemporary art. Jessica Bradley had been teaching at the University of Ottawa after a stint as a special projects officer at the Canada Council Art Bank. She was placed on contract by the NGC in 1979 and only given a permanent position a year later. Diana Nemiroff had been an art critic, the Quebec editor for *Vanguard* magazine, and had freelance curatorial experience. She was hired by the

**T**he question posed by this exhibition is not so much whether art should be representational, but how it is. Why this form rather than that one? Why this reference or quotation? Content takes priority.

gallery in the fall of 1983. Both have been kept at the "assistant curator" level, their authority apparently held in check. *Songs of Experience* is their first joint exhibition.

At one time the NGC reported every two years on the state of contemporary art in Canada. Biennales had been popular everywhere — the form persists in the international sphere, with the shows in Venice, Paris and São Paulo. But by 1973 this regular enumeration for Canada was seen to have outlived its usefulness. When Pierre Théberge and Brydon Smith made their cross-country assessment that year they decided on a six-person exhibition entitled *Boucherville Montréal Toronto London 1973*. It included work by Jean-Marie Delavalle, Henri Saxe, Robin Collyer, James Spencer, Murray Favro and Ron Martin. The brief catalogue introduction spelled out the significant change in approach. "This exhibition...does not attempt to be encyclopaedic, but rather diagrammatic and symptomatic...We purposefully avoided including better-known artists who had already received considerable attention in national and international exhibitions." There would be no more biennales at the National Gallery.

In 1975 Mayo Graham mounted *Some Canadian Women Artists* (Shirley Wiitala, An Whitlock, Colette Whiten, Leslie Reid, Mary Pratt, Sherry Grauer and Gathie Falk) and in 1977 she organized *Another Dimension* (Ian Carr-Harris, Murray Favro, Michael Snow and Norman White). Then 1979 brought the great curatorial exodus and *Pluralities* followed in 1980, with its four guest curators: Philip Fry, Willard Holmes, Allan MacKay and Chantal Pontbriand. There were 19 artists included in this exhibition, which, according to an introductory statement, "speaks of variety, of vastly different forms and ideas operating freely within a single system....No preconceived theme or purpose ruled the selection process; rather, this consisted of four individuals casting their separate lots together." The degree of variety referred to by the curators was only too evident in the installation: Stephen Cruise's dream images and Gary Neill Kennedy's politico-cultural

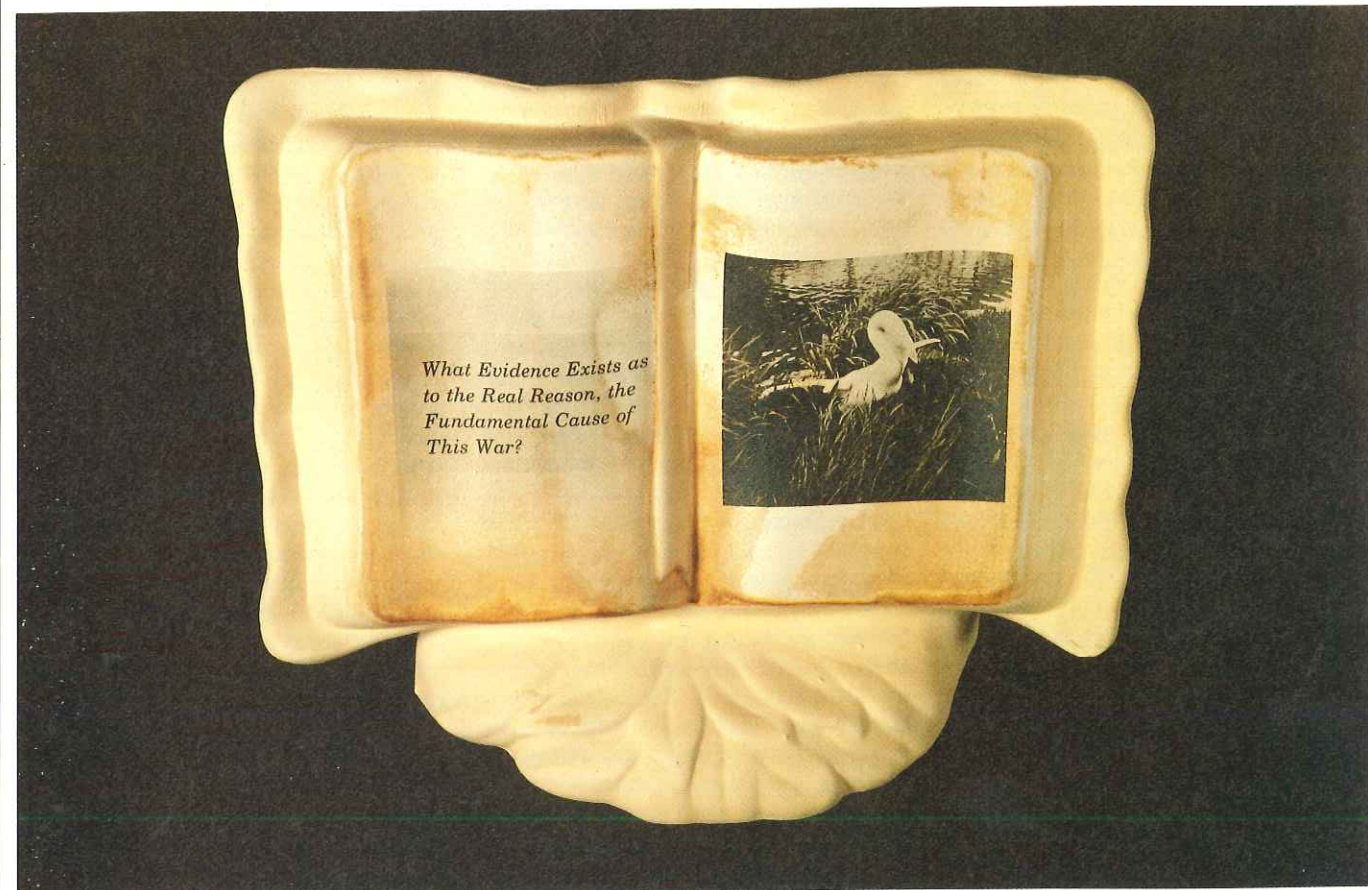
statements have virtually nothing in common, just as David Thauberger's glitter-spangled prairie scenes offer little comparison with Jeff Wall's elegant back-lit photo-portraits.

*Songs of Experience* follows within this tradition. It consists of a selection of loosely associated artists from across the country; it

Stan Denniston, *Dealy Plaza / Recognition & Mnemonic* (1983), detail first section, Ektacolour and gelatin silver prints, 1.5 x 9.7 m (5' x 32'). Courtesy: The artist.

Jamelie Hassan, *Primer for War*, detail (1984), photographic emulsion on ceramic bible form, 15.2 x 20.3 cm (6" x 8"). Collection: Art Gallery of Ontario. Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada.

Stan Denniston, one of several photographers included in the show, created his installation *Dealy Plaza* (one section of which is shown above) in response to a visit to Dallas in 1978. While there, he recognized in the site of John F. Kennedy's assassination (appearing here in the upper panorama) surprising echoes of a site in his home town, Victoria B.C. (seen below) where a childhood acquaintance of his was also mysteriously slain. Jamelie Hassan's sculptural installation *Primer for War* includes a series of ceramic books (left), coupling photos taken during her trip to Germany with personal musings on the meaning of war.





makes a statement about important work being done currently; and it stands as a definition of curatorial perception and purpose. But while previous shows identified and underlined the curators' viewpoints, now two curators speak with one voice and seek "shared ideas" and "identifiable issues", the "links and relationships" typical of the times and characteristic of the work they've selected. The exhibition is a testimony to hard work, good intentions and a sense of solidarity — a certain defence against the lack of interest of their institution and the perceived centrism of art production and taste-making in the country. It promises to be sincere, concerned and (happily) slightly illogical.

*Songs of Experience*, once installed, will occupy the entire fourth and fifth floors of the present building, and include the work of 15 artists, ranging over painting, sculpture, photography, installation works and, in many cases, hybrids incorporating more than one medium. There will be no evidence of abstract work or its opposite, "realism", and no concentration on a single material or style. Many of the works incorporate language, often an actual text, as in Jamelie Hassan's ceramic and wood sculptural installation *Primer for War*. With its applied photo-images of swans and people, it offers a metaphoric development from aggression to fond interaction and nurturing. A new work, *Meeting Nasser*, incorporates archival photographs and videotape with text. Personal meaning, as always for her, infuses public images and references. Further examples may be found in Nancy Johnson's drawings with incorporated writings or Jana Sterbak's sculptural installation *I want you to feel the way I do...*, a life-size electrified "dress" with an extended quotation as a backdrop. Yet even without words themselves, the works have a particularly literary quality. Andy Patton's evocative paintings in near-monochrome colours use familiar images from the media environment, personalized through his touch and handling of tone and texture. Joanne Tod's polemical scenes and portraits that borrow from the news media or David Tomas's expository photo-related installations, with their interweaving of the theory and history of capturing images, ring equally in the memory, and Carol Wainio's paintings and Robert Wiens's monumental sculpture share a consciousness and exposition of history. All of these works are intelligent. The literacy of this generation can hardly be in doubt.

The presence of so much photography is unusual in such a generalized group exhibition, but is in tune with the introspective and questioning tenor of the show. Stan Denniston and Sorel Cohen, the most tradi-

tional of the group in their use of the photographic medium, present photo series that move forward within the parameters established by their recent works. Denniston's new piece, *How to Read*, adopts a semiotic approach, addressing visual codes present in the environment, and is less rooted in the personal experience that underlies such extended studies as *Dealy Plaza*. Sorel Cohen's latest work in her series *An Extended and Continuous Metaphor* further develops the sensual and painterly potential of the colour photograph, as she continues to study herself as artist, model and photographer. Meanwhile, Stan Douglas, a relatively unknown artist from Vancouver, will mount a performance-based installation incorporating a player piano playing a modified Beethoven sonata, and slide imagery of automatic weaving looms — an intriguing reflection on technology-in-history with a surprising echo of David Tomas's work.

nist image/text drawings of Nancy Johnson and Calgary painter Mary Scott, whose paintings incorporate writing applied over images taken from popular culture and the press. Memory and the reconstruction of personal and collective experience are concerns of Joey Morgan's. (Her installation, *Souvenir*, first seen in Vancouver last year, includes videotape with narrative, as well as musical and sculptural elements.) Renée Van Halm is showing a large three-dimensional installation and Wanda Koop a four-panel painting almost 20 metres long. Popular imagery and mass-culture concerns are visible everywhere, and ideas are repeatedly mediated by language — direct or implied — in every case.

The title of the show can't help but evoke thoughts of William Blake's cycle of poems, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and suggests that these artists, like Blake, look critically at their own time and place. The poetry of "songs" and the socially con-

Curatorial responsibility involves an interpretation of the moment. It's perhaps the contemporary curator's most difficult task. You don't have history to lean back on, or not a lot of it.

Recent writing about photography and its implications has been taken to heart by at least half the artists and can be seen — through its relationship to language and theory — to form a real underpinning for the exhibition. Conceptual issues have been subsumed into more general questions of imagery and representation, so that formalism and abstraction have become quite irrelevant — and are not discussed. The question posed by *Songs of Experience* is not so much whether art should be "representative", but how it is: why this form rather than that one, why this quotation, reference, or combination of techniques? Medium and style are secondary considerations as "mere" means of expression. The content or "message" takes clear precedence.

One can isolate different relationships between the artists; for example, Jamelie Hassan, Joanne Tod, Carol Wainio and Robert Wiens share an almost purely political content, each one's work challenging the thoughtless acceptance of capitalist values. The photo-based work of David Tomas and Sorel Cohen reveals political content as well, in their questioning of historical and ideological assumptions, as do the femi-

scious sense of "experience" are also implicit meanings in this title, but most importantly, according to Bradley and Nemiroff, the title should "strike people's imaginations, allow a wide variety of interpretations." They note that the works are strongly metaphorical, with a sensual and poetic quality.

Organizing an exhibition is a curiously private affair; it's a moment when personal insights and experience are publicly avowed. But, in shaping history, past and present factors are equally important, and subliminal pressures can have visible effect. Even in advance of its appearance at the National Gallery, the organization of *Songs of Experience* begs certain questions. How have the two curators' private decisions been affected by the collaborative process? How will these private choices look when presented as an institutional statement?

National Gallery press releases carry the customary caveats: *Songs of Experience* does not attempt to be a cross-country survey, it merely looks at current concerns, newly articulated. Yet the curators are peculiarly ambivalent about who and what must be considered in mounting a large group show. Although studio visits were



scrupulously conducted in 12 centres from Halifax to Victoria, no one east of Montreal was included in the final choice. On the other hand, while refusing to accommodate every one of the regions in the country, Bradley and Nemiroff felt that a narrowly defined theme and a group of only a half-dozen artists as originally planned would be quite unacceptable. The gallery's national mandate was not an overriding consideration, but it does loom large. Similarly, although the issue of "representation" helped determine many of the choices for the show, a full exploration of that theme would have meant a predominance of Toronto artists in their early 30s, an imbalance that was clearly to be avoided.

The working title for the exhibition, *Image/Object/Text*, indicated three focal points, and a largely theoretical approach. But, say Bradley and Nemiroff, "we weren't going to do a semiotic analysis and we didn't want people to expect one" — hence the change of title. A direct application of recent theory in a show that would serve only to elucidate a critical position was rejected as inappropriate to the spirit of the work and its issue-oriented content. "A lot of the artists are attempting to make ethical or moral choices or to comment upon them through their work and their experience," says Nemiroff.

A glance down the list of artists, however, shows that perhaps the chief common denominator is age. More than half the artists were born between 1951 and 1953 and the remainder lie close to these dates. Bradley and Nemiroff would surely have selected the generation on the basis of "early maturity" rather than birthdate, yet such consis-

tency does seem remarkable. None of the artists has been included in previous National Gallery exhibitions, although several are represented in the permanent collection.

Curatorial responsibility comes up again and again in conversation with Bradley and Nemiroff. As Nemiroff summarizes, "Curatorial responsibility involves an interpretation of the moment. When it comes to contemporary art, it's perhaps the contemporary curator's most difficult task. You don't have history to lean back on, or not a lot of it. You have to deal directly with the work and come to some conclusions about it to identify the character of the period. It's not as simple as topicality, it's also a — can I say — 'typicality.'" This approach has encouraged a choice of lesser-known artists — all to the good — and has deflected response from local favourites and identifiable 'scenes' in the interests of generality. Bradley and Nemiroff felt that they were going against the (local) grain in some of their choices, but the personal response they felt to the artists as unique individuals and the relationships, at the same time, that could be located between these same individuals, were combined to offer logic in the final list. While from outside there is little linking these artists together, they do tend to relate separately to external foci — and what the curators have referred to as a "culture of images".

The exhibition itself will vindicate the curators, for there is much work here that shines, and there are many faces unfamiliar to the country at large. But if one asks about the absence of John Scott, Sandra Meigs, Rae Johnson, William Gorlitz, Janice Gurney —

Joey Morgan, *Souvenir, A Recollection in Several Forms: II. Murmurings* (1985), doors, doorframes, curtains, lighting fixtures. Installation at Park Place, Vancouver. Courtesy: the artist.

Joey Morgan's installation employs sculpture, video, music and story-telling, physically recapturing Morgan's memory of personal experience. In this three-part installation, a video monitor recounts the tale of a perfume bottle handed down from Morgan's grandmother to her own mother. In the section above, entitled *Murmurings*, she arranges a series of doorways in the space, inscribing on them passages from the video narrative.

all so eminently suitable to the "links and relationships" located in the group of artists selected — one can expect to find an answer only in their Toronto address. John Massey, one supposes, is too "senior" to be included, although Renée Van Halm, present here, might have been considered overexposed as well. Oliver Girling, Shelagh Alexander — these are names that have been collected perhaps too often in group shows recently. There is not one francophone artist to be found among the 15 artists and one might wonder about the absence of Quebec artists Raymond Gervais, Geneviève Cadieux or Raymonde April. But each visitor's personal list will differ from each other, and one must trust the interlock of choices and comparisons made by Bradley and Nemiroff. One can perhaps only regret the present rarity of contemporary exhibitions at the National Gallery of Canada, and wish for more variety and constancy of dialogue. [CA]

Peggy Gale is a Toronto critic and independent curator.