



FULL CIRCLE

True, patriot womanhood:
the 30-year passage of Joyce Wieland

By JAY SCOTT

"The Power of the World always works in circles," said the Lakota Sioux wise man Black Elk, "and everything tries to be around." The circle, according to the Austrian psychoanalyst C.G. Jung, is humanity's collective symbol of psychic wholeness. The circle — trying to be round, trying to be well rounded — circumscribes the 30-year career of artist and filmmaker Joyce Wieland, the first living Canadian female to be granted a retrospective by the Art Gallery of Ontario. Wieland herself is both rounded and well rounded, a plump woman whose physical form reminds one of her softly inflated motherly quilts. At a visit last fall to the University of Toronto's Innis College to screen films she shot years ago but has only recently completed, she was wearing a black sheath over her rounded contours, and she was wearing blue rhinestone circles, sparkling twin hoops that dangled cheerfully from each ear, and she was wearing glasses, dramatically doffed and donned, that were also round, and she talked, as she so often does, about the necessity of circular integration, about combining the demands of life and art, of politics and painting, feelings and films, males and females, reason and passion.

Even when painting the most powerful portion of the male anatomy (*Balling*, 1961), this most Canadian of Canadian artists, this most feminine of feminist filmmakers, a woman who has been called everything from a whimsical poseur to an earth mother to a shaman, sees the phallus hermaphroditically, as a rounded and strangely passive and oddly feminine and eerily welcoming shape: in the painterly penises of Joyce Wieland, a womb is struggling to be born. In Wieland's static visual work, all yang seeks to become yin: in her films, the male strives for absorption into the female. Male artists — even and especially one of Wieland's acknowledged early sources, Willem de Kooning — tend to treat absorption by the female as an act of conspicuous consumption, as a retrograde perversion all too apt to be accompanied by the gnashing mastication of *vagina dentata*. In her recent paintings Wieland treats the flight into the female as a return to a rococo Eden, as a romantic journey into a mythological paradise, pastel in purity and lambent with love.

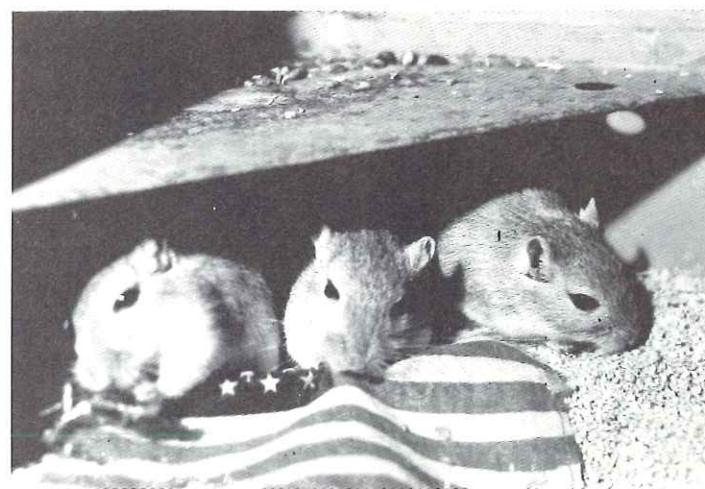
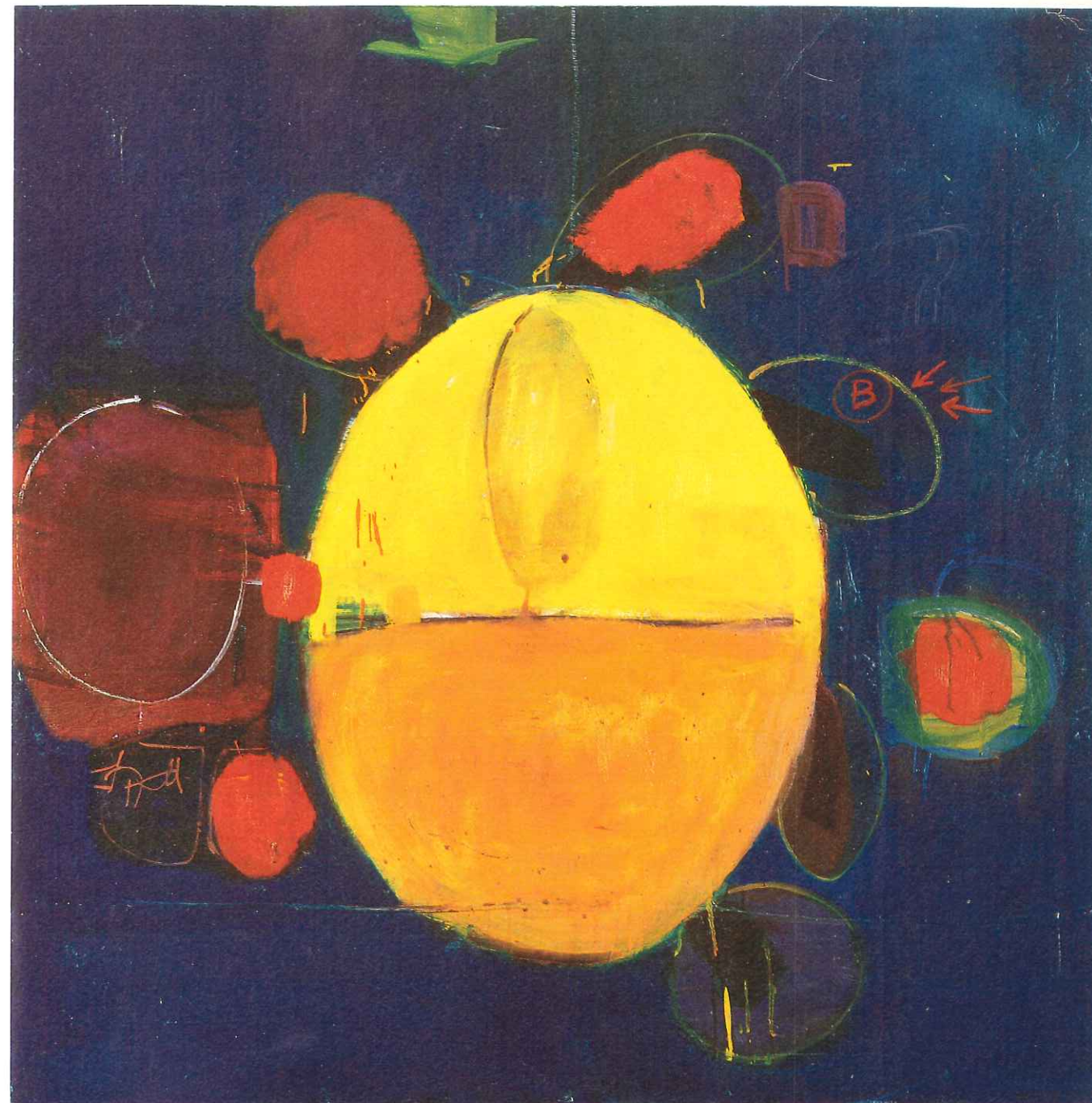
Is it any wonder her career has received a quarter of the critical attention received by (male) artists whose work needed far less explication? (Does anyone need to be informed more fully of the context of Jack Bush? Of Alex Colville?) The (male) critical justification for the lack of serious (that is to say, male) evaluation of Wieland so far can be found in *Contemporary Canadian Art* (Hurtig) by David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff: "Even now, after more than 25 years of work, there is a negligible

amount of critical writing on her contribution in any medium. There may be any number of reasons for this, but the most evident is the difficulty she has encountered as a woman in being taken seriously as an artist, even amongst her peers. . . . There is also the practical problem that a major part of her contribution has been in filmmaking, which perhaps has made her work less easily accessible. But in addition there is the difficulty faced by an artist who chooses, as Wieland has done, to work in a variety of media, each of which may interest a somewhat different audience. The impact of a continuous body of work can thus be fragmented, its direction and context made difficult to define and assess."

Difficult: three times in one paragraph. It has been difficult for Wieland because she is a woman, and it has been difficult for critics because she has been *too* womanly, meaning that she has been too recklessly fecund; she has refused to stick manfully to one form. The Indian world of Black Elk may move in a circle, but the male world of New York artists, as Wieland found when she moved there with her then-husband Michael Snow (also an artist) in the early '60s, moves (or thinks it does) in a straight line, and any other form of motion is considered atavistic, feminine, whimsical or simply masturbatory. It is reductionist to report that Wieland had difficulty being taken seriously solely because she was a woman; while Louise Nevelson, Georgia O'Keeffe, Jaume Quick-to-See Smith and Judy Chicago undeniably experienced the arrows of phallic sexism, their work was assertive enough to attract serious (male) attention from the beginning. Wieland, on the other hand, experienced clucking condescension because she was a particular kind of woman, a woman's woman, a woman whom men felt free to patronize: artistically speaking, she was antimacassar to her husband's easy chair. All along, she has refused to compromise, to butch up her act, and she has therefore stymied the theorists who insist on seeing her feminism but not her femininity.

In the early '80s, while the hip new female artists of Toronto were smearing giant canvases with violently political and assaultive images — the inner and outer worlds seen as alienated, sadomasochist arenas of unrelenting Teutonic pain — Wieland was working in coloured pencils, for God's sake, and was making small circular, neo-rococo mythological keyholes that quoted the blue skies of Tiepolo ("I am now beginning to understand what the artist Giovanni Tiepolo was all about," she said) and that had titles such as *The Venus of Kapuskasing* (1980).

Superficially, it would be hard to conceive of a more feminine



(OPPOSITE) *THE ARTIST ON FIRE* (1983), OIL ON CANVAS, 106.7 x 129.5 cm (42" x 51"). COLLECTION: ROBERT MCLAUGHLIN GALLERY. COURTESY: ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO.

(LEFT) FILM STILL FROM *RAT LIFE AND DIET IN NORTH AMERICA* (1968).

(ABOVE) *TIME MACHINE* (1959), OIL ON CANVAS, 114.5 x 81.3 cm (45" x 32"). COLLECTION: CROWN LIFE CANADA. COURTESY: ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO.

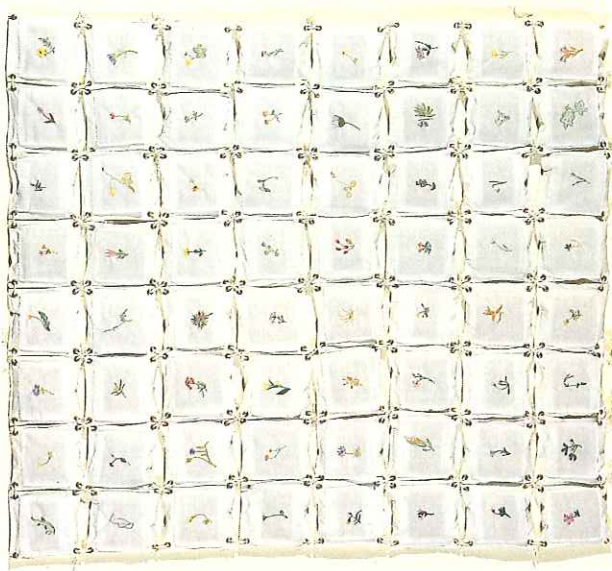


PHOTO BY LARRY OSTROM



(OPPOSITE TOP) *CONFEDSPREAD* (1967), PLASTIC AND CLOTH ASSEMBLAGE, 150.5 x 201.9 cm (59" x 79 1/2"). COLLECTION: NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA.

(LEFT) FILM STILL FROM *THE FAR SHORE* (1976).

(OPPOSITE BOTTOM) *THE WATER QUILT* (AND DETAIL) (1970-71), EMBROIDERED CLOTH AND PRINTED CLOTH ASSEMBLAGE, 134.6 x 131.1 cm (53" x 51 1/2"). COLLECTION: ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO.

or feminist work than Judy Chicago's collection of china vaginas, the notorious *Dinner Party* (1979) wherein famous women such as Emily Dickinson were reduced to genital platters, but Chicago's "collective" work (the task of constructing those hot plates was farmed out to unpaid women) was as preeningly aggressive as any peacock's sexual display, and was promoted by its indefatigable maitresse with all the masculine pizzazz of P.T. Barnum. Wieland's far more interesting and complex effort to elevate traditionally female crafts (embroidery, knitting, quilting, even cake-baking) to the status of high art came years before Chicago, in the legendary 1971 "retrospective," *True Patriot Love*, at the National Gallery of Canada. Accompanied by a catalogue that was itself a work of art (in the best Dada-surrealist tradition, Wieland appropriated an actual museum monograph, *Illustrated Flora of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago*, and filled it with her own notes, photographs and found objects), *True Patriot Love* also contained artifacts fabricated by other women—paid and credited—and it was furthermore political, not only in a feminist but in a deeply nationalist sense. It conjoined the two journeys that have marked Wieland's career, the journey across and into Canada, and the journey around and into her own womanhood.

Wieland's difficulties in gaining critical attention might be ascribed to her penchant for dabbling too promiscuously in too many media but Andy Warhol never had that problem, nor did General Idea in Canada, nor did Wieland's own husband. The difficulty was not with the forms she was using, but with what she was saying, in a remarkably consistent and integrated way, in each medium she adopted. She was asking Canadians to love themselves and she was exhorting women to love themselves. The first request no doubt embarrassed feminists for whom the only viable ism was a nation of women (for Wieland, Canada has always been female), and it no doubt appalled men for whom any variant of nationalism was evil (Wieland has stressed that she approves of nationalism only in weak countries). The second crusade mystified women for whom consciousness-raising and its goals of self-enlightenment and political (specifically feminist) awareness seemed passé, naïve or self-indulgent, and it baffled men for whom the notion that women must recognize, come to terms with, and then reject the anti-female feelings with which they have been inculcated (often by their own mothers) is some

sort of paranoid feminist fiction. It was not, the plethora of her technical strategies aside, difficult to get a handle on what Wieland was saying. But what she was all too evidently saying—that women were pretty keen creatures and that Canada was a pretty keen country—made a lot of people blush. Wieland herself understood the nature of her opposition perfectly. "I had a tough time getting into history," she said at Innis College, "because people didn't think it was worth writing about this shit I was doing."

A few people did think it was worth writing about, but they were primarily committed feminists and their papers, understandably defensive, were occasionally impossible for a lay person to decode—they were academic and esoteric in the extreme, and they had little to do with an artist who has invariably underlined her desire to speak clearly to all people. (And who does.) Although Wieland has defined herself as feminist for more than 15 years, she is neither comfortable with, nor does she comprehend, the more arcane theoretical practitioners of feminist criticism, most of whom nonetheless wax polysyllabic about her.

"When film got into theory," Wieland declared flatly at Innis in response to a question about the body of theoretical writing her work has generated, "that was the end of vision. I don't know what the hell theory has to do with seeing."

Art historical theory surpasses even film theory in abstruseness but a great deal more has been written theoretically about her films than about her paintings. There are those (Innis film instructor Bart Testa is one of them) who think the reason is that Wieland is "more important" as a filmmaker than as an artist, and that opinion stands by default in the United States, where her films are well known and her other endeavours unknown. But for Canada (with Wieland, a recognition of what is "for" Canada has been of supreme importance ever since she learned to love her country during her American hiatus), her paintings, pastiches, collages, sculptures, lithographs, quilts and perfume (*Sweet Beaver*, marketed at the National Gallery in conjunction with *True Patriot Love*) are at least as significant as the films. Her films have received the bulk of the attention for two reasons. When she was living in New York (1963-1970), she was welcomed warmly by underground filmmakers, and her work was accorded praise from Jonas Mekas in the *Village Voice* and from the esteemed film historian P. Adams Sitney; that praise validated her not only in

FILM STILL FROM PIERRE VALLIÈRES (1972).



(OPPOSITE) COOLING ROOM I (1964), MIXED MEDIA CONSTRUCTION, 73.7 x 58.9 x 27.9 cm (29" x 23" x 11"). COLLECTION: MARIE FLEMING. COURTESY: ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO.

New York, but in Canada as well. She has said that she did not exhibit paintings in New York because the city's art scene "terrified" her, that its avant-garde film culture was by contrast informal and benign. She threw her considerable energies into filmmaking.

Later, when she did begin exhibiting wall work again, it was only in Canada. The pre-eminent American art critics therefore remained ignorant of her existence, even as her filmmaking presence in New York spawned a cottage industry of feminist analysis that continues to this day (the AGO catalogue essay on Wieland's films is by an American, Lauren Rabinovitz.) Back in Canada, there had grown up a substantial feminist film sorority that paralleled the activities of sister scribes to the south, but the attention paid to the films resulted in an imbalance—certain significant exhibitions that should have been judged as major breakthroughs in a major Canadian career (*True Patriot Love*) were instead categorized directly by feminist film critics as footnotes to the films and indirectly by male art critics as footnotes to Michael Snow.

There is in truth scant variation—tonally, texturally or thematically—in Wieland's work, regardless of the medium. Depending on the image in question, the influences of Jasper Johns (*Number Picture*, 1963), Robert Rauschenberg (*Stranger in Town*, 1963) and Jim Dine (*Heart-Break*, 1963) along with Miró, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg and de Kooning, are sometimes obvious in the early paintings, but that very obviousness is sometimes deceptive, in that many of Wieland's individual icons, particularly the erotic ones, were created prior to similar images by more famous male colleagues. (In later years, Wieland would in turn influence Wanda Koop, Charles Pachter and possibly Jennifer Dickson.) Wieland transferred her iconography to celluloid with dramatic results—superficial Pop meets politicized discourse in the film *Pierre Vallières* (1972), wherein Wieland focuses entirely on the lips of an eloquent separatist, echoing and expanding her paintings of lips, several of which (*West 4th*, 1963) in themselves echoed film strips.

In fact, her oeuvre is notable for its wholeness. Those circles and lips (and those circular lips) can be found not only in the paintings and in *Pierre Vallières*, but in other films as well—in the feature *The Far Shore* (1976), when the hero and heroine silently mouth words to each other through magnifying glasses, and in *Water Sark* (1965), where domestic items on a kitchen table are presented with reverence and are filmed through glasses of water, and in *Reason over Passion* (1969), in which Wieland mouths the national anthem, and most of all in *Birds at Sunrise*

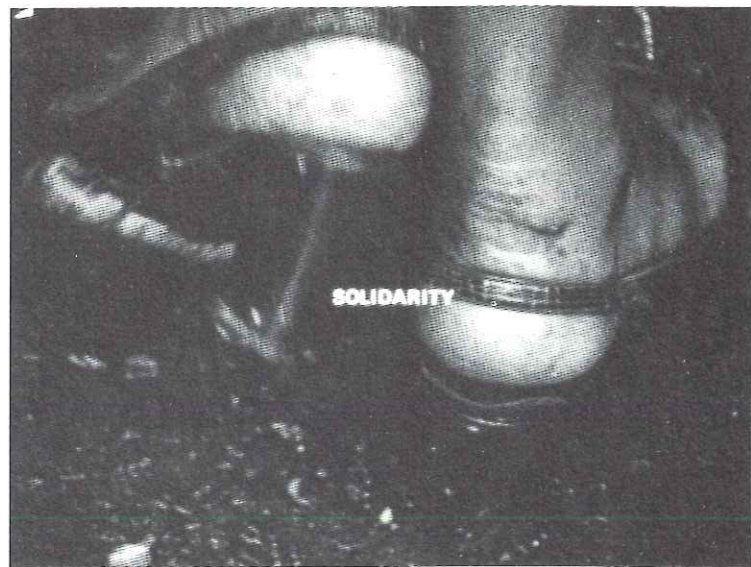
(shot in 1972, completed in 1986), which literally sees through a circle—Wieland photographed birds through cardboard tubes ("I like peeking into that intimacy a lot," she said) and in the process exalted them, both sensually and spiritually, in a fashion that recalls O'Keeffe's canonization of flowers. Even the name of the cinematic device Wieland so frequently favours is flowery and feminine: iris.

Wieland's cross-fertilization of form is sometimes political yet humorous, as in her Thurberesque cartoons and her film *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968), in which gerbil political prisoners escape to Canada and celebrate flower and cherry festivals, only to have their sanctuary invaded by the United States; or in *Solidarity*, a powerful film consisting of close-ups of the feet of striking workers at the Dare cookie factory ("These people were on their feet a lot," Wieland explained ingenuously at Innis) that ends with a close-up of a dog's feet; or in the bustling busyness of the collage *Laura Secord Saves Upper Canada* (1961). In both films and wall art, words and numbers are sporadically used as design elements, or as a means of augmenting meaning and complexity: the word *SOLIDARITY* appears on the screen for the duration of the film of the same name; there are the quilts that spell out "Reason over Passion" or the words of the Canadian anthem, and there is the kapok wall hanging *The Water Quilt* (1970-71), featuring flaps of flowers that when lifted reveal pages from a book warning Canadians of American plots to exploit their resources.

Not all Wieland's work is overtly political, but because the personal images (*Artist on Fire*, 1983, for instance) invariably carry an art historical context and a feminist resonance, their very existence can be perceived as a political act. There are paintings partly about paintings, just as there are films that are in part about films, but Wieland is neither a minimalist nor a structuralist—she does not paint to analyze paintings *per se*, or shoot films merely to "de-construct" them. Her analysis is usually playful rather than dourly pedantic, a "Gee whiz, look at this!" poke at the viewer. Wieland has created impressive and self-reflexive works devoid of humour, however, and none is more impressive, self-reflexive or humourless than the monumental 90-minute movie *Reason over Passion* (derived from Pierre Trudeau's assertion that reason over passion is the theme of his writing), a marathon film about Canada, filmed from one coast to another, interrupted by an extended optic autopsy of the prime minister's head. Yet, even that film is a celebration. Wieland's attitude towards the Trudeau slogan may be ironic, but the movie is not; as a camera held



PHOTO BY CARLO CATELANZI



(OPPOSITE TOP) FLIGHT INTO EGYPT (AFTER TIEPOLO) (1981), OIL ON CANVAS, 55 x 60.5 cm (21 1/2" x 24"). COLLECTION: THE ARTIST/THE ISAACS GALLERY. COURTESY: ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

(LEFT) FILM STILL FROM BIRDS AT SUNRISE (1972-86).

(OPPOSITE BOTTOM) FILM STILL FROM SOLIDARITY (1973)

alternately to car and train windows records the photographic reality of landscapes painted so exhaustively by Christopher Pratt, Ron Bolt and the Hallowed Septet, Wieland moves with a delighted stride through the seasons.

Until the AGO retrospective, the single most ambitious summary of Wieland's devotion to women and ecology, and to the necessity of preserving and nurturing each in Canada, was *The Far Shore*, which was and remains her one inescapable failure. Her supporters argue that the movie, a domestic melodrama designed to have a thoughtful political subtext in the manner of Douglas Sirk's Hollywood films, failed because it was too arty for the general public and too commercial for the aesthetically initiated, and that both groups were unduly intolerant. Re-screening the picture 10 years later reveals the depressing truth. What was risible a decade ago — the dive of the heroine (Céline Lomez) into a lake so she can swim to "the far shore" to tryst with Tom (Frank Moore); their climactic lovemaking, carried out clamorously in the icy water — has become even funnier with time, and the inept acting and dialogue inexorably undermine the cinematography of Richard Leiterman while coating Wieland's pretty pictures with the unmistakable glaze of sugary sentimentality.

In the short film *A and B in Ontario*, shot in 1967 and completed in 1984, Wieland wittily reviewed the war between the sexes (and parodied the navel-gazing insularity of the avant-garde) by turning herself and the late Hollis Frampton loose with movie cameras; they spend the entire film playing cinematic hide-and-seek with each other. In *Phantom Paint* (1983-84), she again essayed the war between the sexes, but this time in serious terms, and symbolized the battle, as she had in *The Far Shore*, as a deathly contest in which the male quite literally represents death while the female is the vehicle for the transmission of life. When filming experimentally and painting neo-classically, Wieland is in full command of her materials, but in *The Far Shore*, control has passed to a narrative form with imperatives that can be met readily by hacks but only with great effort and luck by artists of Wieland's stature. To make a successful narrative film (thoughtful or thoughtless, it doesn't matter), the ability to second-guess an audience's reaction to a line of dialogue or to a bit of business is all-important; otherwise, the message is lost in unwanted laughter. Wieland, who has announced repeatedly that she doesn't care what people think of her, is not a woman suited to make movies for the masses.

(Judy Steed, Wieland's associate on *The Far Shore* and several other films, said the original concept was "fabulous. Joyce had planes dropping love letters to the heroine out of the sky — in 1919! — and other wonderful surreal things. There was no money to make her concept.")

After making *The Far Shore*, an experience she has said almost "killed" her, Wieland returned full circle to the circular compositions with which she had commenced her career. But the "stain painting" circles at the beginning — those passive and abstracted "sex poetry" penises that were shapes fundamentally sans insides — were replaced by circles that teemed with interior mythological and allegorical life. In 1986, Wieland affixed to the footage of *Birds at Sunrise* a golden dot and left it there for the duration, glowing in the upper right-hand corner of the frame. "It suggests another world, or outer space, or something," she said. So does her recent wall work. The early circles were very much of this earth (were very earthy, in fact) but the paintings in her 1981 *The Bloom of Matter* show sought to elevate earthiness to the realm of the sublime — as the title of the exhibition indicated, Wieland was after an apotheosis of the erotic. Goddesses, flowers, trees, deer, rabbits (Wieland's earliest influence was Beatrix Potter) and Wieland herself are combined in a personalized mythology that remains feminist and political (see *The Birth of Newfoundland*, for example), but the presentation of that mythology rejects utterly Pop's vocabulary of distance and irony.

How did Wieland arrive at this synthesis? The cultural myth promulgated by male U.S. citizens is that they are potent in their rectitude and all-powerful in their actions; the birth of humanism in the heart of an American male requires questioning the self-dramatizing sexism he has learned and the unthinking patriotism he has been taught. Wieland is the antithesis of that paragon of reason over passion, the powerful North American man — she is female and Canadian, and her art is a fascinating public record of her quest to affirm that in the case of Canada, thinking patriotism is a positive and life-enhancing act (Canadians have to be taught to love their country; Americans have to be taught not to), and that in the case of her own person, self-embracing affection is a positive and life-enriching attitude. The later work no longer needs to teach or to preach; it rhapsodizes instead of criticizing. The macho power of North America does not move in the work of Joyce Wieland. The Power of Black Elk's much older world does.

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