

S K I N D E E P

THE BEAUTY AND RESONANCE OF GENEVIEVE CADIEUX'S INSTALLATIONS COME FROM HER MIXING OF MEMORY WITH DESIRE

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PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB WAYMEN

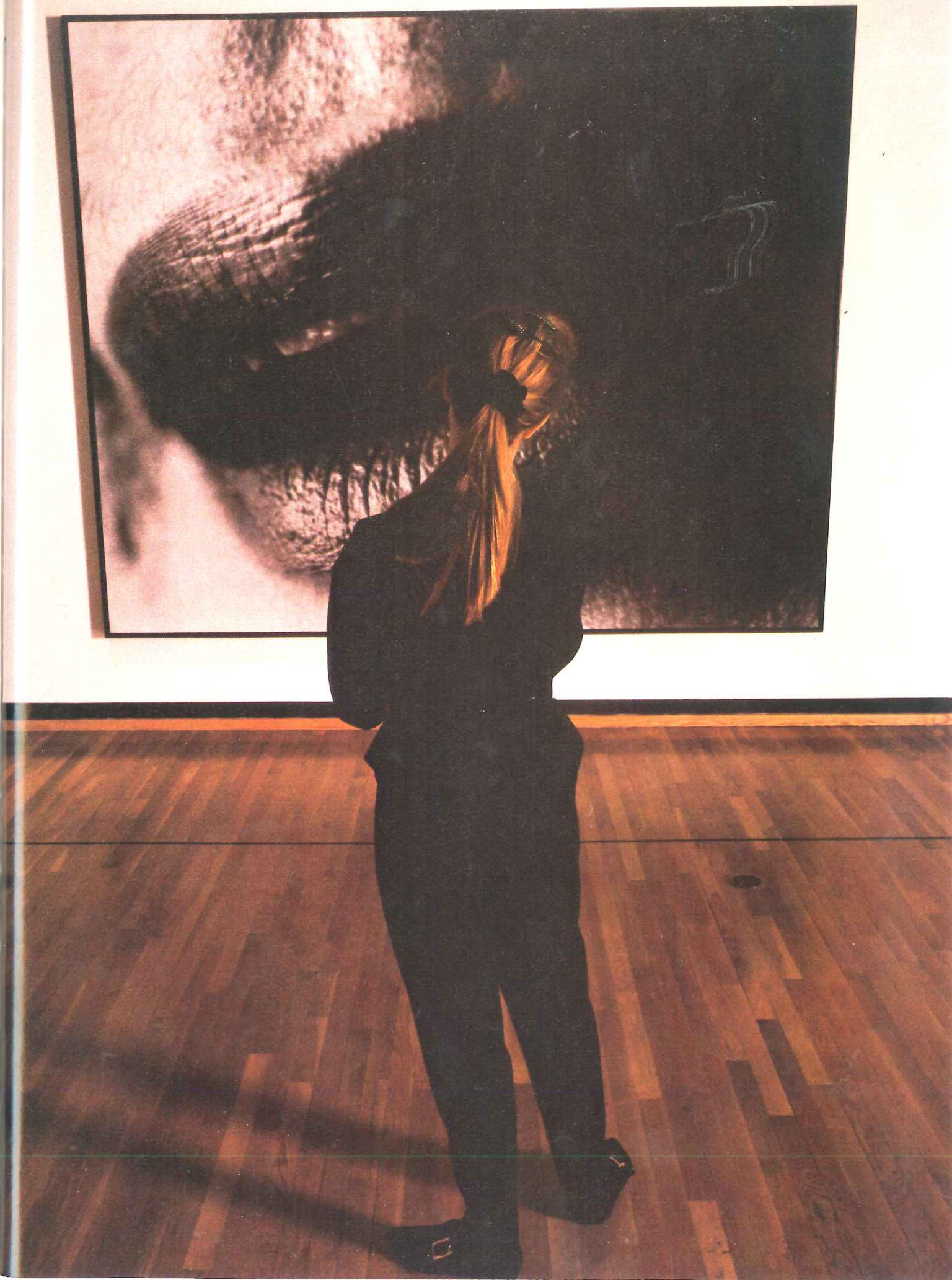
Framed by intellect, grounded in emotion, the works of Geneviève Cadieux have a haunting quality, a certain knowing anxiety. As Canada's sole representative at the prestigious Venice Biennale this year (May 27 through September 30), Cadieux's installations using large-scale color photographs recall both the heroic traditions of painting and the glamor of mass-media advertising. The work is personal yet conceptually charged, and whether or not one is fortified with readings on "the gaze," the viewer as subject, the body as site, the whole arsenal of semiotic and critical theory, there is no denying the work's stature and sensual power.

To some extent, Cadieux is already known in Europe, having been singled out for applause in *Fokus: Canadian*, an overview of recent Canadian art presented at the Cologne International Art Fair in November 1986. Important pieces were included the following year in the exhibition *Emotope* in West Berlin at the Staatsbibliothek and the XIX Bienal de São Paulo in Brazil, as well as the 1988 Biennale of Sydney in Australia. But Cadieux is poised for much greater international response, for in addition to a New York show at the Fawbush Gallery in 1990 she is included in a large outdoor exhibition in Newcastle, England, and in *Passage de l'image*, mounted and toured by the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. She also has solo exhibitions scheduled in 1991 at Kunstraum München and the Centre d'art contemporain in Geneva, and in 1992, a solo exhibition is slated at the excellent Nouveau Musée in Villeurbanne, France. In all, a remarkable trajectory.

One of Cadieux's first shows was in

1981 at Galerie France Morin in Montreal, selections from a series of photo-emulsion images on Plexiglas titled *Illusions*. These hazy, life-size images of single standing figures appeared in sequences of four or five panels, punctuated by ghostly blue neon. The blurred edges, milky surfaces and the washing presence of the lights with their wires and transformers all seemed to shift before the viewer's eye in a murmuring dance. These striking pieces were well received and led to sales and several exhibitions outside Montreal. But Cadieux felt them to be a dead end with no obvious next step, and retreated to her studio to read and think. Three years of questioning. She was collecting things — old projectors, photographic plates — and trying out different ideas and forms of presentation. She worked with holography and film, but found them too costly and the studio/laboratory requirements impossible for her at the time. In retrospect, this extended period of searching was an important base for what followed, but so long a period alone without clear results must have resulted in a severe tempering of will and desire.

She finally returned to photography. For a three-person exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal in 1984, Cadieux presented her first real installation work, *Voices of Reason/Voices of Madness*. A much-enlarged slide of a woman's face was projected on two opposing walls of a darkened room, the one in color having a steady gaze with brightly illuminated eyes, the other a black and white image of the same face but with an anguished expression, mouth open as if in a cry. The latter slide shifted constantly in and out of focus, the projector



a quietly infernal presence, while the periodic sound of a sharp blow shattered communion between silent spectator and looming faces in the dim light.

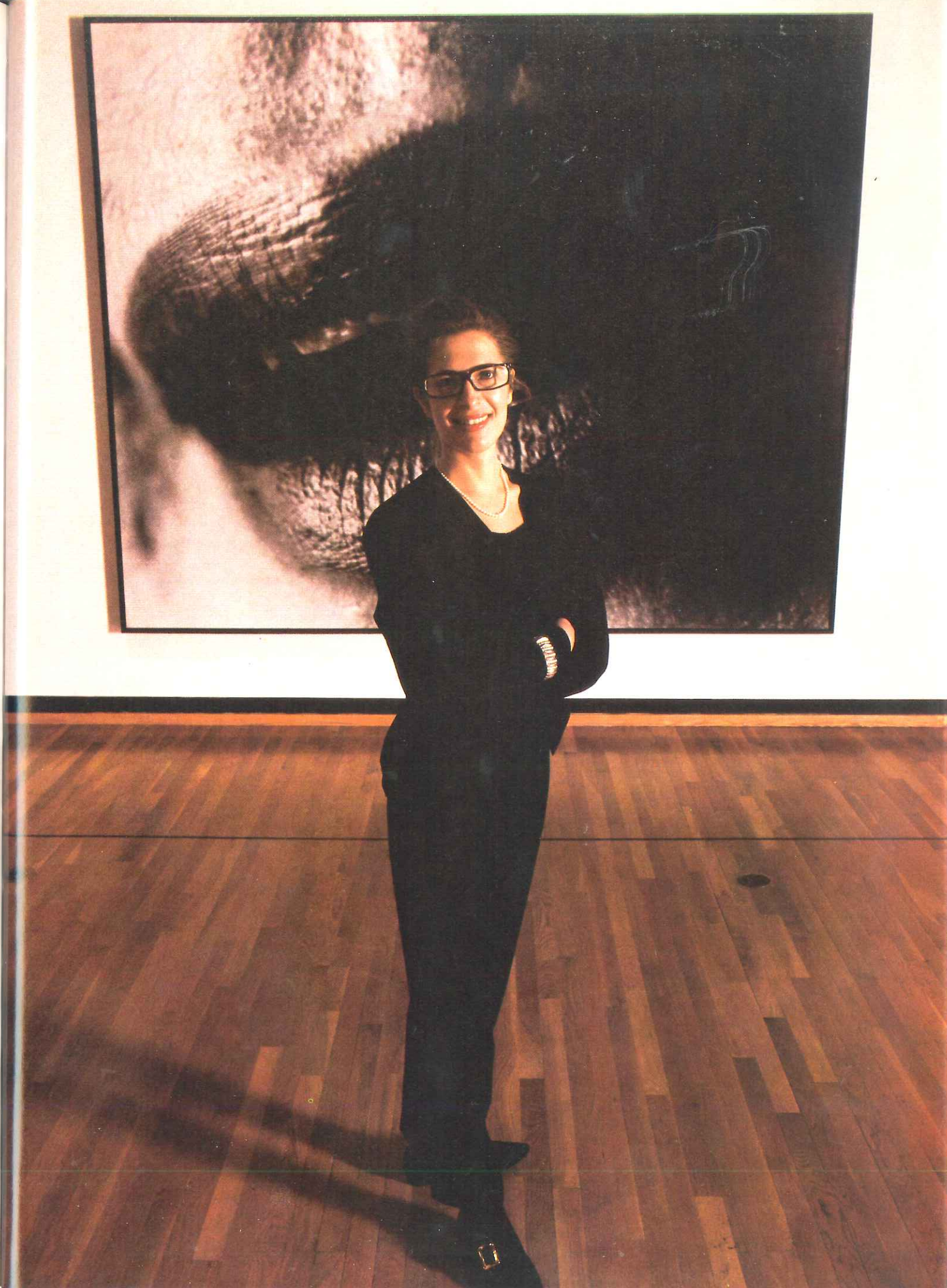
Cadieux's father bought a movie theatre when she was a teenager, and it is tempting to extrapolate from that and see the film screen as Cadieux's natural scale and the darkened room as a comforting environment. Of course, cinema is the place for projections of all sorts — the light cast up on a screen, the narrative often a substitute for the viewer's mundane existence. Movies are larger than life, both physically and emotionally, and issues placed within that charged context are immediately altered, and more easily assessed. Cadieux's own use of magnified or enlarged images is of a different order, however, the subjects often having a personal source. As we see here, her works offer no easy narrative line or casual interpretation.

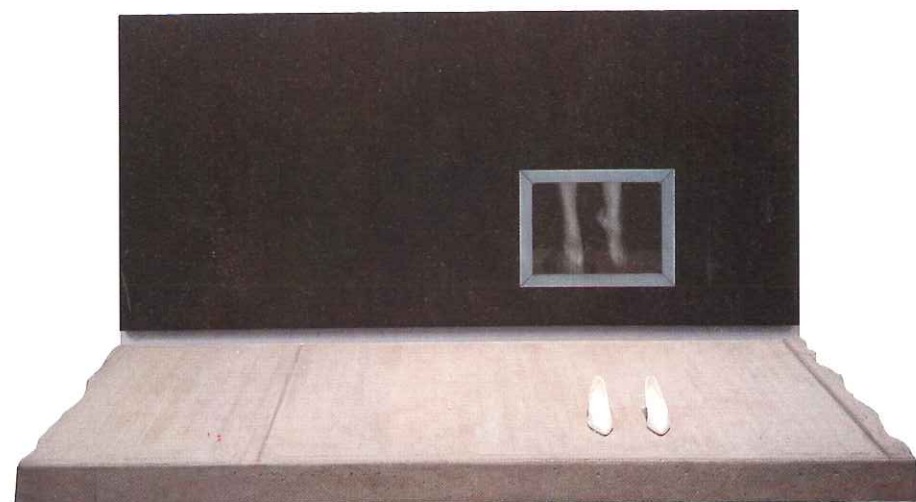
In 1985, Cadieux brought her interest in history and collected images to the foreground with *Ravissement* (Rapture) at Montreal's *Aurora Borealis* exhibition. She enlarged a found photograph of a woman in evening dress and used it to complement a similar one that she had staged. These were placed opposite a third photograph that had collaged elements and near a black curtain covering the entrance to an inner room. Inside was projected a 19th-century stereo slide of two nude women standing posed as if in conversation. A hanging square of opaque Plexiglas captured part of this projected image, leaving the figures in one image daintily veiled, or censored, by shadow. With the use of the two rooms and the separate placing of all the elements, visitors literally entered the piece, which revealed each part of the installation in turn. They also had to puzzle out the implications of "rapture," for concealment and discreet disclosure obtained in equal measure.

Three very large photographs comprise *The Shoe at Right Seems Much Too Large* (1986). Cadieux showed the work in *Lumières*, a group exhibition organized by the Centre d'art contemporain in Montreal. On one wall is a colored heat-responsive x-ray of a full-length female figure, and a framed, back-lit photograph of the shadow of a woman's body, life-size, the feet poised above a pair of high-

heeled shoes. Suspended opposite and "watching" is a hugely enlarged monochrome image of eyes with a constant flow of shadows passing over them. The title of the work implies self-doubt and confusion, an uncertainty of meaning and appearance that includes both fashion (body coverings or self-image) and substance (the body as flesh, its interior exposed). The impassive eyes calculate vision itself, measuring the physicality of space and its contents, measuring, too, the visitor as he or she seeks a proper vantage point.

During 1988-89, Cadieux was included in three exhibitions at Toronto's Power Plant, each with a different curator. For a solo show, Ihor Holubizky placed *The Shoe at Right Seems Much Too Large* along with *La blessure d'une cicatrice ou Les Anges* (The Wound of a Scar or The Angels, 1987), previously shown in Berlin, Sydney and at Galerie René Blouin in Montreal. *La blessure* is made up of two enormous reproductions, one a gouache rendering of Antoine de Saint Exupéry's Little Prince with the features of his face rubbed out. Under the portrait is printed, as it is in the book, "Voilà le meilleur portrait que, plus tard, j'ai réussi à faire de lui" ("This is the best portrait which, later, I was able to make of him"). The other image is an enlarged photograph of a nude woman seen from behind as she draws a butterfly on the wall. Taken from E.J. Bellocq's turn-of-the-century *Storyville Portraits*, this image was also literally defaced, years ago, possibly by Bellocq himself scratching the negative. Cadieux has taken the intimate scale of the two original portraits, each the size of a book and each intended to be looked at privately, and transformed them for public viewing. Yet the figures are damaged and vulnerable, inviting special care in deciphering. We catch the briefest glimpse of childhood memories through these two pictures: emblematic scars, poignant traces of the past. The rubbed-out faces are shocking, a denial of character and even existence, a mutilation preventing seeing (by them) while permitting looking (by us, voyeuristically). Is it the body that is in question, or that sense of self evidenced in the eyes, traditionally windows on the soul? Somehow, whatever the answer, the confrontation itself brings affirmation, even healing.





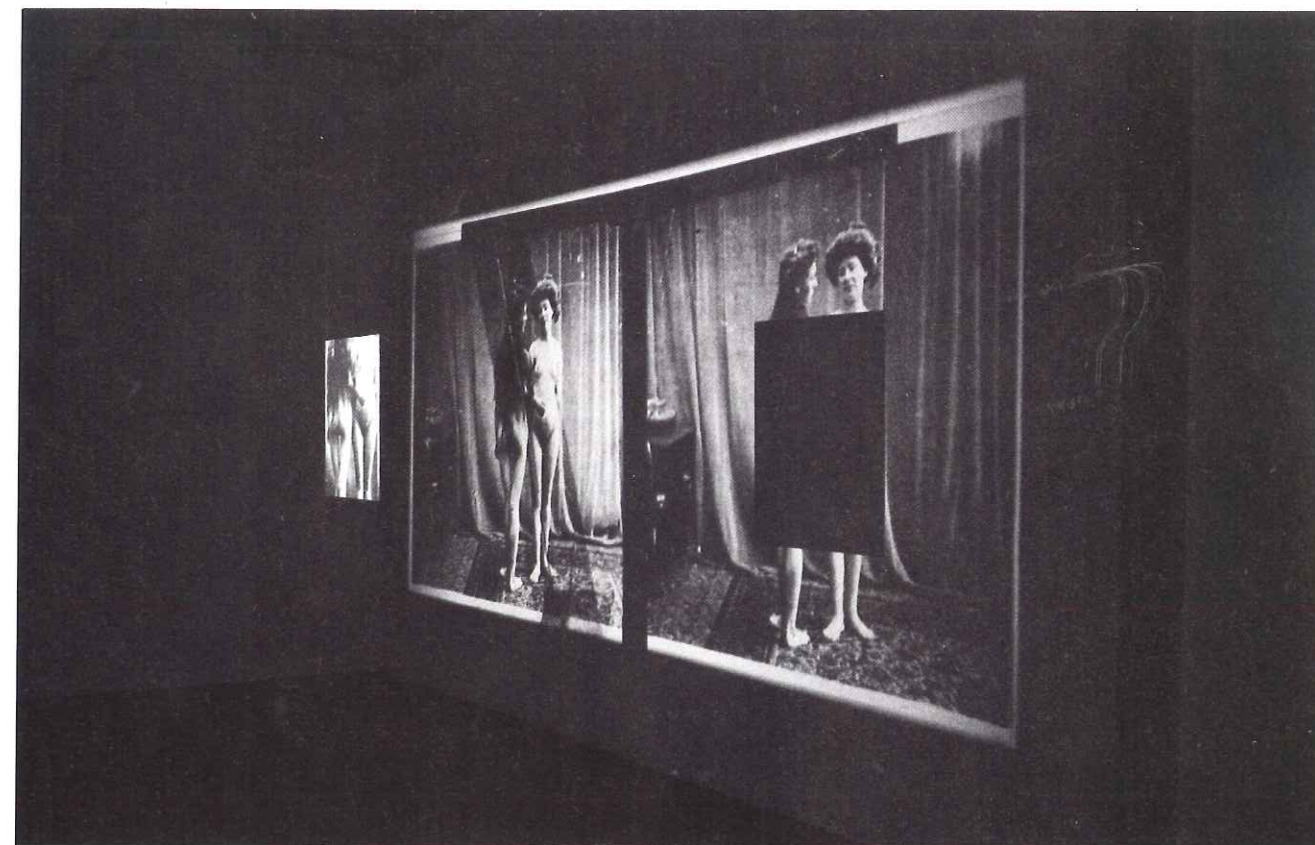
The phrase from *The Little Prince* re-surfaces the following year in the two-part *A Fleur de peau* (1987), but now in Braille, raised dots on a sombre lead panel, accompanied by a second panel of erratically reflective clouded mirror. "A fleur de peau" is a gentle sensation on the body's surface, something barely there, not unlike the touch required for Braille, or the mirror's soft obscurity. Skin is a sensitive surface, fragile and susceptible to age or disfigurement, recalling too the light-sensitive paper and chemical baths of photography. All are memory traces, recording the passage of time and events.

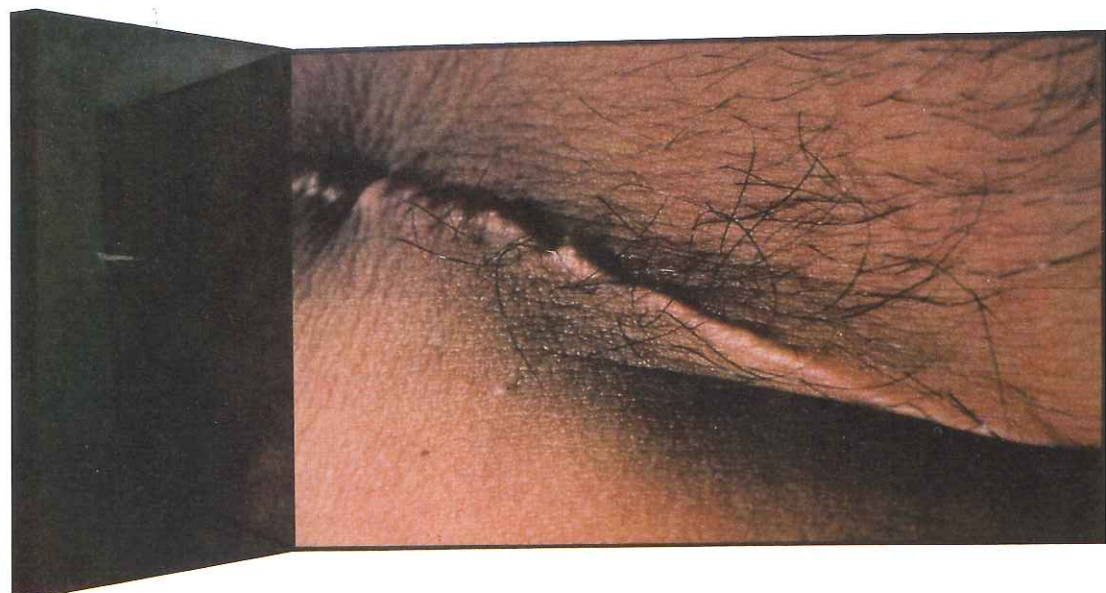
Cadieux's concentration on eyes and the sensitivity of skin and touch led her to the image of mouths, then scars. For Renee Baert's *Enchantment/Disturbance* at the Power Plant in 1988 she showed *Trou de Mémoire, la beauté inattendue* (Lapse of Memory, Unexpected Beauty). Angled against a darkened mirror is a color photograph, again hugely enlarged, showing a segment of skin with small hairs, puckered in a scar. The site of the scar cannot be identified, nor the sex of its owner, but somehow one is reminded (horribly) of mouths, eyes, even genitalia, now sewn closed. The "trou de

mémoire" is literally a "hole" in the memory, a loss or denial of fact, and recalls the memory holes of George Orwell's novel *1984*, those slots where all conflicting or implicating information slipped away without a trace. Orwell's use of the term was ironic, as is Cadieux's, for her stitched-up slit enforces memory by remaining forever visible on the surface of the skin. Yet she reminds us of the "unexpected beauty" of this mark and memory lapse. Forgetting is also to be desired, permitting desire again.

Also at the Power Plant, for *La Ruse Historique*, an exhibition organized by Chantal Pontbriand in 1988, was *L'inconstance du désir*, a black photographic backdrop to delicate porcelain shoes on a rough concrete sidewalk. The slightly blurred image of a pair of bare feet is framed under glass, floating or caught in mid-jump. Cadieux notes that she wanted the "real physicality" and "banality and ordinariness" of the sidewalk to counter her usual withdrawal from substantiality and the everyday in her other images. But "the fickleness of desire" is a tantalizing title for this combination of opposites. A leap into the void? She seems always of two minds.

Left: *L'inconstance du désir* (1988). Concrete, porcelain, glass, wood, enlarged photograph, 53 x 103 x 55 in. Photo: Louis Lussier. Collection: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Upper right: *Ravissement* (1985, installation detail). Projector, support, wide-angle lens, Plexiglas. Projection 8 ft 8 in. x 16 ft 5 in. Photo: Denis Farley. Collection: The Art Gallery of Ontario. Lower right: *Ravissement* (detail). Color photograph, gouache, paper, wood, glass. 18 x 24 in. Photo: G. Cadieux. Collection: The Art Gallery of Ontario





With her most recent installation at Galerie René Blouin in the spring of 1989, the suggestion and reference of her previous work continue. *Hear Me With Your Eyes* is made up of three photographs, each two-and-a-half by three meters. Two show us a woman's face, eyes closed and lips parted as she turns her head away; the third shows only the lips themselves. We may discover that the first photograph is of her actress sister, from an early black and white film relating to *Voices of Reason/Voices of Madness*; the second, in color, is the same woman in a similar pose photographed in subtle double-exposure nearly a decade later. The lips, while first seeming a detail from the previous image, are revealed on inspection as a staged near-duplicate. The work is simple in its way, but full of contradictions as we press for source or confirmation. Are these faces in pain? Ecstasy? Merely holding a pose? Being images of an actress who is also the artist's sister, are we right to read them as oblique self-portraits? The work's title was taken from a poem by Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, who lived in the late 17th century and was silenced by the Catholic Church for her views on education and

women's rights. We respond to the picture that the words evoke, as we do to the intimate and eloquent face.

Geneviève Cadieux's work continues to evolve. Investigation of the apparatus for construction and presentation of the image, or issues surrounding the active (male) gaze and the passive (female) image, evident enough in the earlier works, are fading now into a more poetic and personal exploration of memory triggers and cultural or personal recall. Her sources are deep ones, held close for inspection, and the extent to which such material may have roots in the artist's private life is far less important than its resonance, its ability to generate associations or break into memories of more general access.

Chantal Pontbriand, editor of *Parachute* magazine, is Canada's curator for the Venice Biennale this year, and has worked with Cadieux to mount an exhibition with visibility and impact. Cadieux has conceived a work specifically for the Canadian pavilion in Venice, responding both to the peculiarities of the architecture and the demands of the larger, international context. Having already achieved much, she is certainly ready for that public stage.

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ar right (top): *The Shoe at Right Seems Much Too Large* (1986, detail). Projection screen, wood, gold pigment, acrylic, photo transparency, halogen lamp, metal. 8 x 10 x 6 ft. Photo: Louis Lussier. Collection: the artist. Bottom right: *The Shoe at Right Seems Much Too Large* (detail). Light boxes, 9 ft. 3 in. x 40 in. x 10 in., 9 ft 3 in. x 66 in. x 10 in. Photo: Louis Lussier. Collection: the artist. Left: *Trou de Mémoire, la beauté inattendue* (1988). Wood, mirror, color photograph. Photograph 7 x 11 x 5 ft; mirror 7 x 4.8 x 5 ft. Collection: The National Gallery of Canada. All photographs courtesy Galerie René Blouin

