



*Icon* quietly contemplates basic notions that have been taken for granted for so long. To start with, a statue of the chaste Virgin is a familiar religious icon venerated by legions of devout believers seeking comfort and expiation for their sins. Considered a valuable commodity, the statue is being scrutinized as it undergoes clinical, scientific restoration. In Steinman's work the statue represents an art historical object now displayed in a contemporary museum setting. In addition to questioning what is art and how does it get exhibited today, *Icon* also examines the "medical" gaze, that cold, analytical consideration of the human body. Finally, in a hierarchically rigid, male-dominated world *Icon* confronts the fact that women are traditionally portrayed in passive, sacrificing roles.

By re-photographing something and then putting the image through several different technical steps, Steinman is eliminating traces of her own hand in the process. Yet she confers very personal, emotional qualities on these almost painterly images with their separate histories. Enlarging material and blurring the distinctions between the camera arts, she treats photography as still video, and video as moving photographs. *Borders* (1991) is based on an ordinary tablecloth which depicts an idealized, decorative landscape. It represents the idyllic, safe places we try to go back to, submerged in our memory. She photographed the tablecloth's pastoral terrain with its pheasants, rabbits, and deer, each in its own sheltered area. Again she videotaped one section and re-photographed off a monitor. This "processed" still image of secluded deer takes on television's eerie glow, becoming more real and more threatened.

Centuries ago, scientists (and artists) used finely ground lenses to bring distant stars and minuscule atoms into the same, perceptible range. Today, computers are a much more potent means of deciphering and depicting visual limits. In *Vanishing Point* (1991), Steinman again questions how technology has affected our views of the natural world. Four large panels are based on a glowing, abstracted map. Printed on top of

this abstract field are different permutations of the same material: William Ruttlesby's mid-19th century, stereoptic photograph of the Scottish coast, and the fragment of a radar map. The work resembles a series of charts depicting pairs of eyes. The combined elements seem to refer both to vision as well as the soul, which in Ruttlesby's time was thought to be perceived in a person's eyes.

One material Steinman has consistently worked with is glass. Sometimes it serves as a protective but fragile layer in front of a photograph, or, as in *The Giants' Dance*, it gives paper the trompe l'œil feeling of stone. In *Ballroom* (1991) she used a large glass lens, drawing viewers into its centre point. Commissioned for Charleston's city-wide exhibition, *Places with a Past*, Steinman's chosen site for her new work was a small, round pump house. This claustrophobic little building now sits in a parking lot next to the historic, United States Customs house. In the wharf area, this was the hub of the flourishing slave trade.

With its in/tangible realities, *Ballroom* was a carefully choreographed system that targeted viewers as well as nature, pinning them between very different but coexisting times and spaces. Placed in the middle of the floor and covered with a thick sheet of glass was a large round photograph which referred to the strategic naval base nearby. This celestial-looking radar map tracing a nuclear submarine's movement refers to our technical abilities to make the invisible visible. Gingerly walking over the seemingly fragile glass surface, viewers could peer into the large lens set on a brass tripod to read, "where you stand/the centre of the world/is exactly." Looming overhead like the sword-of-Damocles was an elegant but massive crystal chandelier. The glass floor behaved like a projection screen, absorbing reflected light from the windows and the shimmering chandelier, as well as viewers' shadows. *Ballroom* goads our memories and perceptions, and traces our peregrinations. The artist seems to be asking how much do we want to reveal and how much do we want to understand about the citadels in our private and public lives.



#### C o n c l u s i o n

Barbara Steinman's emotionally charged, mixed-media work portrays life undergoing constant transformation. Even in suspended animation, one thing is always becoming another. Designed with definite places for spectators, these compact entities are waiting to be encountered in close dialogue. Not as straightforward as they first appear to be, they demand a concentrated kind of looking. Viewers can make discoveries about their own perceptions and about the world as they examine the seamless loop between yesterday's and today's reality. Embracing life, Steinman encourages us to look inward as we move ahead, facing new frontiers that exist somewhere between nature and the mind.

- 1 Barbara Steinman, *Echoes of Earlier Appearances* (Montreal, 1990), 24.
- 2 Steinman, 18.
- 3 The alienation and futility that characterized the perceptions of intellectuals, including "Existentialist" writers earlier in this century, now characterizes the consciousness of the common person today.