VISIONARY TRANSFORMATIONS

Barbara London

Introduction

Multi-media artist Barbara Steinman uses cameras, computers, and everyday materials to discover new potentials for growth and change. Like her colleagues, Bill Viola and Gary Hill, she makes provocative, environmental installations. Offering valuable insights, she has assumed the ancient role of a prophetic seer. Drawn from the natural world, her universal myths have become personalized and ritualized. Both formal and sensual, her work looks at quotidian reality. Preoccupied with metaphor that is generated from the commonplace, she might focus on such ordinary objects as a map, a tablecloth, or a "stereoptic" panorama found in an antique shop.

Steinman's social conscience comes from a deep seated humanitarianism. Growing up on the periphery of the dominant, Frenchspeaking culture of Montreal, she has drawn upon her studies in literature and psychology to develop an effective visual vocabulary distinctly her own. She is exploring the connections between such fundamentals as power and control, memory and time, creating thoughtful work that is both disarming and demanding. Probing awareness that is beyond the limits of language, she examines relationships between the individual and more global systems. She is concerned with truth and the reasons for its obfuscation. Involved with abstraction - an abstraction away from rational control and literalism – she renders views that reflect greater correlation between the unconscious processes of the body and the world.



Methodologies and Work

Steinman searches for those elusive, "crossover" areas between cultures and disciplines. Always looking for analogues, she is involved with broad definitions of consciousness and knowledge, exploring the places where art, science, and psychology merge. Electronic technologies expand her options and provide an intriguing forum where she is able to join different sources, transforming what is familiar and taken for

granted. She contemplates how the mass media (especially electronic forms) have shaped our ideas about nature and our sense of place, and how our urban lives tend to be led with only minimal direct contact with the outside. Her quest is into the meaning today of exile and what we imagine as lost paradise.

Made with readily available materials, Steinman's video/photo installations are often triggered by social crisis. A specific location, an evocative quotation, or a historical photograph becomes the foil for much larger issues. In the process, the familiar becomes monumental. One of her first video installations resembled a spare, V-shaped stage set that was centred around a pair of large windows. Entitled Chambres à louer (1984), it consisted of two separate platforms each complete with a draped armchair that faced a wall with a radiator and window. In lieu of a pane of glass, the bottom third of each window contained the glass screen of a monitor, depicting fixed views of what purportedly was the street. Closed venetian blinds covered the remaining two-thirds. Assuming the position of "voyeurs" in these seemingly uninhabited apartments, viewers could sit comfortably but awkwardly in either old chair and stare "out" through the monitor screen. Visible off in the distance was an echo of the space – a model of the installation with tiny television sets showing the same street scenes. Chambres à louer explored our relationship with "reality," often isolated from one another and away from home, separated from the external world by magazine pictures, television, and thick glass.

Contemplating the past, subsequent installations look at how individually and collectively we get from one difficult moment to the next. *Genotaph* (1985-86) is "about absence, a disturbing, unnatural absence that is the result of deliberate removal or censure." It mixes the physical with the intangible, and touches our feelings about loss and displacement. Taking a sentence from Hannah Arendt's *Totalitarianism*, Steinman divided the words into sections engraved into three stone slabs.



"The radicalism of measures to treat people as if/they had never existed and to make them disappear/is frequently not apparent at first glance." Placed upright in the centre of a darkened room, these tablets are part of a barely discernable but massive pyramid. Suspended above this structure and parallel to the floor is a sheet of glass that reflects the video image of an eternal flame generated by a monitor concealed within the imposing monument.

Placed in opposite walls of *Cenotaph* are a pair of arched windows composed of two-way mirrors. Nearly indecipherable, grainy slides are projected onto the surfaces for just a few seconds. Viewers have only a vague sense of what the slides are — anonymous grave sites, book burnings, and the faces of the "disappeared" of many different ethnic and religious backgrounds. These historic images refer to the relentless diaspora of this century. They also represent the colliding perceptions found at the edges of collective memory, that is coloured by what a society catalogues or represses, authenticates or reinterprets as fact.

Entering Steinman's carefully tuned environments, visitors have to relinquish control. Viewing is both a physically active and a contemplative process. Borrowed Scenery (1987) was made after the artist had visited Japan in 1985 and 1987 and had encountered the culture's numinous regard for nature. The work consists of contiguous elements. Filling the exhibition space is an enormous table that has a surface evocative of a formal landscape. Across the top is a carefully raked field of purifying salt resembling Kyoto's most celebrated rock garden. Prone monitors are installed flush with the surface, so that their screens depicting moving water look like bottomless ponds. Projected over the plane of salt is a slide sequence of barely distinguishable maps, those miniaturized, abstract surrogates for real places or territories. Three large, black-and-white photographs in light boxes are hung on an adjacent wall. One, of a luxury ocean liner, is labelled "tourist." The same boat is shown later during the 1930s carrying homeless Jewish exiles, and

is labelled "immigrant." The third, quite recent, photograph is of a small boat with escaping Vietnamese and is entitled "refugee."

The tranquil but imposing landscape in *Borrowed Scenery* pushes viewers up against the photographs. This confrontation initiates an examination of how we feel about someone who is an "other," whether the encounter is in our own neighbourhood or while we are tourists or as outcasts. "And a border, it has been said, exists only after it has been crossed."²

The title of Of a Place, Solitary/Of a Sound, Mute (1989) comes from the translation of "glukhol," the Russian word for silence. The installation is about the aggregates that make up existence including complicity, loss, annihilation, and survival. An immense, wooden caldera occupies the middle of the gallery. Peering past the wide curved rim, viewers see a monitor depicting hundreds of gold wedding bands being tossed one by one into a pile on a metal plate. The abrupt clanging permeates the space. This mournful sound provides accompaniment for the adjacent black-and-white photograph depicting a bare, outstretched arm. Next to this and cut to the same size is a sheet of glass etched with a number, which viewers automatically transpose as a tattoo. Exploring archetypal power, Steinman uses the past as a metaphor for the cyclical aspects of personal experience.

Steinman is sensitive to the estranged voices that rise up out of our polyglot societies, ³ formed by centuries of



colonialization and migration and affected by recent power shifts. In production, Steinman will use whatever technical means will make her initial, visual perception of the completed work tangible. The Giants' Dance (1989) began with a colour snapshot of a small, hastily scribbled bit of graffiti she saw on a Montreal wall. Enlarging the abstract photograph to larger-than-bus-shelter size, she turned what originally was a small, silent cry into a grand gesture with the seeming durability of marble. The Giants' Dance is a substantial work that feels weathered by prior existence. Reminding us that Islam and Judeo-Christian literature both described God originally as "I am," Steinman is suggesting that as individuals we are the same. As religio-ethnic nations we are made to believe self-righteously in our differences, which produces an historical path alternating between order and chaos.

Retrieving images that are larger than individual experience, Steinman touches upon the mythic essence of our being as in the photographs of Peter Campus and the installations of Ann Hamilton. Icon (1990) began with a small photograph of a "school of Pierro della Robbia" Madonna. Depicted in a Canadian museum's conservation lab report, this sculpture-relief is being scrutinized by a large camera lens. First, Steinman dramatically enlarged the photo to an over life-size, cibachrome print. Reworking the original through a video system, she made a second photograph. Enlarging this mysterious, veil-like image to the same size as the first, she presents the elegant, "processed" version in a radiant light box. The two large photographs cannot be seen at the same time because the first is installed at the entrance and the second on the opposite side of the same wall inside the gallery space. Along the far interior wall a pair of video monitors are set on simple stands, each framed by a rondel of frosted glass. One monitor depicts an empty test tube, the other, a similarly priapic test tube, is being filled with blood. This meditative video element adds to the sense that something intimate is reticently being divulged.





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-swordof-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.







Conclusion

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.