Panya Clark Espinal

The Silence and the Storm

10 January to 1 March 1998

The Texture of Images

Panya Clark Espinal remembers looking at an animal encyclopedia as a child and handling the reptile pages by their corners in case she felt the lizards' scaly skin. Such was the potency of these photographic images that, even today, they touch her memory with their texture. This kind of strong response to images is what has moved Clark Espinal onward in her work. For a number of years now the artist has pursued a career in which the physical, sculptural nature of imagery is brought forth within room-size works we call "installations."

This notion of "bringing forth, " certainly fits well with Clark Espinal's McMichael installation, *The Silence and the Storm*. As an installation piece, the work consists of all those elements which surround us: the warm red of the painted walls, the beams of light from the ceiling, the stone fireplace of the former living room, the sixty-four framed works placed side by side on the wall, the echoing grid of potted narcissi arranged below. Each of these elements may be appreciated in isolation, but when seen together, they take on new life and new meaning.

When we look at the paintings and the flowers in the glow of the room, there is a sense of emergence. The repeating pattern of oak frames enclosing sixty-four Thomson images is combined with the texture and layering of Clark Espinal's own painted panels. Each square of colour seems to have silently grown forth from the wall. When we shift our gaze to the floor we find another organic energy there as well. The narcissi blooms multiply into a field of white and green, anchored in an earthly mixture of gray stones in terracotta. The heady scent of the blossoms wafting through the galleries both precedes and follows

our encounter. There is an unusual richness to this work which lingers, both physically and sensually, long after we have parted from it.

Providing visitors with a combination of physical and sensual experiences has not normally concerned museums and galleries, although this attitude is changing rapidly as the 21st century approaches. Artist installations are perhaps one new model of creating exhibitions where the act of viewing a work of art becomes as important as the presentation of the work itself. As an artist exhibiting in a large cultural institution, Clark Espinal wants to provide more interactive encounters and has created a work which deeply influences our experience as a visitor. Her installation of *The Silence and the Storm* is, depending upon one's reading, a very personal response to issues which concern her as an artist. At the same time, it is a more complex commentary on what it means to be an artist who is also a viewer.

The Silent Practice

Laid out in the accompanying illustration are some of the elements which Clark Espinal has used in creating her installation. They are photographed as if you could touch them. Remember the artist's childhood experience? What we see are images of real things—a copy of David Silcox's book, The Silence and the Storm; transparencies showing the narcissi as they appeared in the McMichael living room (now Gallery 14); the paperwhites will be nurtured by the artist for the duration of the installation; Clark Espinal's pigments, brushes, palette, and tools—all are reproduced to look as if they were the "real thing." This trickery of reproduced images is something both enticing and disturbing to Clark Espinal, a concern which both this photograph and the installation hope to show.

In this illustration, the artist shows actual objects which are part of the artwork in Gallery 14. At the same time she suggests deeper meanings for them that are not necessarily visible to us. Her installation itself may be similarly approached: it has elements which we can see right away as well as more sensual, personal associations which are invisible. The "way in" to understanding Clark Espinal's work is to explore both realms, the actual and the emotional. In the artist's words, "When people view my work I would like them to be drawn first aesthetically and then conceptually. However, I am well aware that it is impossible to control how a work will ultimately be read, that every viewer comes to the piece with their own history, process, and interest."

And not only do you, the visitor, bring with you certain histories, so too does the artist. The work, as it is viewed within the gallery, is the place where these different thoughts and stories meet. There is no one answer to questions we may have about the artist's piece, only clues to possible readings. The sixty-four framed reproductions from David Silcox's book are those which

Clark Espinal has used when she was experimenting with paint in her studio. The book's images attracted the artist for two reasons: they are the same scale as Thomson's sketches and are thus more easily translated into paint; and they represent the seductive, nearly "real" quality of images which Clark Espinal both admires and mistrusts. It is also important to realize that the initial studio paintings were done privately before they were publicly exhibited. In deciding to bring her work to the McMichael, Clark Espinal did not want to simply hang her work on the wall. Instead, she tried to link the display of paintings to the gallery room in which they were to appear.

The artist found what she was looking for in the institution's archives. In photographs taken of Mr. and Mrs. McMichael's home during the 1970s, the metamorphoses from private home to public gallery is increasingly evident. In reviewing these photographs, the artist noticed a pot of narcissus flowers reappearing in at least three separate views. She writes: "Associated with the personal touch of everyday tending of the domestic world, these flowers injected an otherwise static environment with a transcendent, ephemeral presence. I imagined their fragrance—something picture-taking, documentation, and archiving could never replicate." Her installation, *The Silence and the Storm*, pulls these flowers out of their photograph (like the paint was "pulled" from Silcox's reproductions) and puts them back into the room. Clark Espinal reminds us that, even if the room is now for viewing works of art by a public audience it was, at one time, a space for family living and more intimate visiting.

The Storm of Discussion

In an earlier work entitled *Research and Discovery*, Clark Espinal worked from images reproduced in issues of National Geographic. She began making replicas of some objects found in the magazine because she wanted to "connect" with these objects by making them herself. Through this act, the artist says, "I played out a very specific desire to have access to these objects which were distant to me in this particular medium." And yet, what was the result? She had fabricated objects which she could touch but they weren't the "real thing," no matter what she did. In trying to get closer to the source, the artist had, in fact, moved the objects one more turn away from the original. Clark Espinal's fabrications had created a "tense oscillation," writes Barbara Fischer, "in which each object is slowly hollowed out from within, to leave us with its *simulacrum* - the unsurpassable, final disappearance of the original" (See Fischer. *Re-enactment: Between Self and Other*. The Power Plant 1990, 6)

In *The Silence and the Storm*, Panya Clark Espinal's response to this "disappearance of the original" has been to view the Thomson paintings not as representations, but as objects. As an artist, she focuses not on the imagery within each work, but on the physical presence of the pieces in her search to find what is most authentic for her. "As an art viewer," she says, "I sometimes feel that even the so called `original' artwork feels troublingly mute in its ability to voice what it represents. In fact, this is partly why I've gotten caught up in the physicalness of paintings as objects, as panels covered with a thick coloured medium applied in patterns which we, magically, after centuries of cultural and visual conditioning, see as `landscapes' or `still lifes'. There is no end to the cunning series of lies and tricks played on us by representation."

In overlaying her painted panels, Clark Espinal sets up an unexpected relationship between her work and the Thomson reproductions. In so doing, she reminds the viewer to look twice at a work of art, to see its image and the memory it saves for us, but also to feel the painting's presence in the room as an object here and now. The same is true of the narcissi; the artist saw their image in a thirty-year-old photograph but she brought the blooms back to life by placing real flowers in the gallery. By combining these elements, Clark Espinal creates a space for us which is at once visually, sensually, and spiritually charged. There is, in the place between the real and the reproduced, room for both the silence and the storm.

Rebecca Duclos
Program Coordinator

PANYA CLARK ESPINAL

Born in Toronto, 1965.
Lives and works in Toronto.

EDUCATION

1984-1988	Ontario College of Art, Toronto
Summer 1982	Parsons School of Design, New York

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1995	*At This Point*. Toronto Sculpture Garden, Ontario
	Re Appearances. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario
1994	*Re Appearances*. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario
	Like Ancient Pots . . . Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta
1991	*Research and Discovery*. Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
1990	*Decalog*, 10 Years at YYZ. YYZ, Toronto, Ontario

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1997	WORK/SITE 15 Years in the Toronto Sculpture Garden. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario
1996	ARCOS DA LAPA. A "mail-in" Project of projections on the Arcos da Lapa, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
	ODD BODIES. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario
	DIORAMA. Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Alberta
1995	STONE POWDER FORT YORK. Fort York, Toronto, Ontario
1994	SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION. Atlantis, London, England
1993	SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION. 20 Richmond Street East, Toronto, Ontario
	OUT OF PLACE. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
	ARTEDOMANI, 1992 Punti di Vista, Incontri Internazionali d'Arte, Roma Galleria Comunale d'Arte, Spoleto, Italy
1991	VISIONS '91, Les cent jours d'art contemporain de Montréal. Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal, Québec
1990	THE SALVAGE PARADIGM. Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
	RE-ENACTMENT: BETWEEN SELF AND OTHER. The Power Plant, Toronto, Ontario
1989	SCRUTINY. YYZ, Toronto, Ontario
1988	NEW WORK. Gallery 76, Toronto, Ontario

SELECTED AWARDS

1988	Governor General's Medal, Ontario College of Art

GRANTS

1997	Visual Arts B Grant, The Canada Council
1995	Visual Arts B Grant, The Canada Council
1994	Travel Grant, The Canada Council
1993	Visual Art B Grant, The Canada Council
1992	Project and Travel Grant, The Canada Council
1991	Visual Art Grant, The Ontario Arts Council
1990	Project Grant, The Canada Council

COMMISSIONS

1996 - present	Toronto Transit Commission, Design for Bayview and Sheppard Station, Toronto, Ontario
1996	The Whitby Psychiatric Hospital, Mosaic in patient-care unit foyer, Whitby, Ontario
1995	Central Neighbourhood House, Donor Recognition Artwork, Toronto, Ontario
1994	Covenant House, Toronto, Ontario
1992	The Queen Elizabeth Hospital Foundation, Nature of Giving Donor Recognition Artwork, Toronto, Ontario

COLLECTIONS

The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario

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