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Tentative Discourse on Tentative Equations

Lynn Hughes, *Tentative Equations*, Oboro Gallery, Montreal.
February 18 to March 19, 1995

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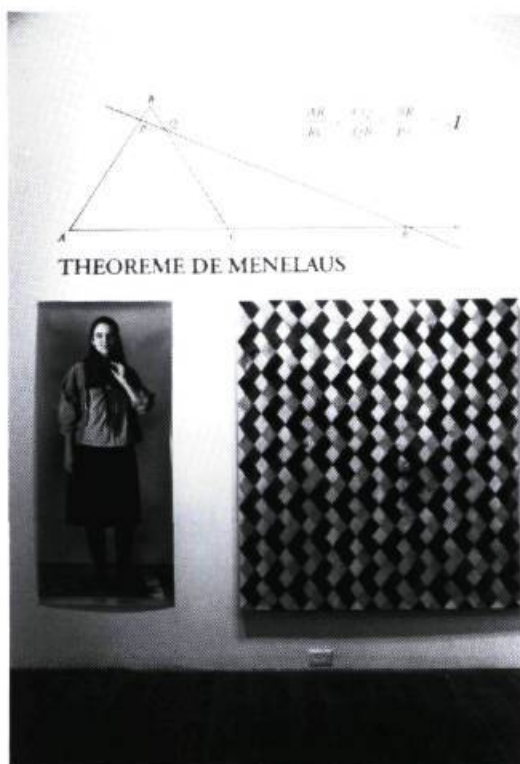
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MONTREAL

TENTATIVE DISCOURSE ON TENTATIVE EQUATIONS

Lynn Hughes, *Tentative Equations*, Oboro Gallery, Montreal. February 18 to March 19, 1995



Lynn Hughes, *Marie-Claude Périgny et son équation favorite + une peinture dérivée de celle-ci*, 1992-1994.
Black and white photo, paint on canvas, ink on wall; 243,8 x 303 cm.

The propensity of feminist discourses is a catalyst in Lynn Hughes' exhibition, *Tentative Equations*, presented at Oboro Gallery. The multiplicity and complexity of feminist perspectives present in our society is exploited in Hughes' investigation of mathematics and art. To congeal two often diametrically opposed fields of knowledge, art and science, is a project through which the artist hopes to derive at new solutions while dismantling binary forms of truth.

Hughes, predominantly known as a painter, has chosen in this exhibition to combine her knowledge of the history and philosophy of mathematics with her strong feminist convictions as an artist. The primary research for this project was to show the reality of women mathematicians and to contrast this with issues of feminism in art. The equation proposed by the artists in order to illustrate her process is composed of one photograph; one mathematical formula; and one painting. These are mounted on a wall with the photo and painting next to one another and the equation placed, like a pediment, above both of these.

She photographically documented women working in the field of mathematics at all levels (from grade school

teachers to doctors) in order to subvert androcentric perspectives of the sciences and to present a testimony to women's participation. The black and white photographs are almost life size and present the full body of the subjects, that being practicing female mathematicians. These are simple and direct representations which aim towards an embellished form of documentary photography. Set in a plain surrounding, the subjects are at times accompanied by personal memento such as a ball or pillow. They mimic advertisements and promote the role of women in science, while transforming the image of this academic and male dominated field through the presence of a gender polemic.

From this documentary departure point, Hughes played a symbolic relational game. She asked each mathematician to give her their favorite equation within their area of expertise and painted these onto the wall. Although a general art public is unlikely to understand these mathematical formulas, the artist derives a visually based interpretation from the formula's linear quality. The lines are themselves abstract symbols and here they are used by Hughes from a visual and art theoretical

$$H_n = 1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{4} + \dots + \frac{1}{n}$$

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Lynn Hughes, *Marie-Andrée Debien et son équation favorite + une peinture dérivée de celle-ci*, 1992-1994. Black and white photo, paint on canvas, ink on wall; 243,8 x 303 cm.

standpoint as opposed to a structurally mathematical interpretation.

The mathematical formulas combined with the photographs are suggestive of photo/text based installations; except that in this example the language is

math. The artist is using the subversive photo/text combination, in order to incorporate this more acceptable form of feminist artistic production (that being photo/text based work) within her own work which is predominantly painting. In this sense, she presents a

critique of both the didactic (feminist photo/text) and insular (male painting) forms of art making. It is clear in presenting a combination of photo/text work and painting that Hughes locates herself somewhere between these two modes of art making.

The paintings, which are the result of her documenting the mathematicians, differ greatly in style depending on the type of mathematics and the role that women play in the evolution of this field. They are inspired by her knowledge, intuition and relationship with that particular field of mathematics from which the formula was extrapolated. Her relationship with the mathematician, and her visceral reaction to the visual configuration of the formula, both very personal experiences, also played seminal roles in the painter's inspiration.

The resulting paintings are in fact strikingly subjective, personal and surrealistic. The artist, while adhering to a relatively rigid theoretical research has indulged her imagination in the actual painting process. Hughes claimed, at an artist's talk that she gave in the gallery during her exhibition, that the research also presented her with the possibility of expanding her practical approach to painting. She was able to participate in art production outside of the studio, in a more social context and alleviate the painter's isolation. Therefore one must question if the project is not very much about the process of arriving at a painting.

The *Algebraic Number Theory* explores the deconstruction of mathematical structures and for this reason the artist has chosen to visualize the abstraction in math. The painting represents a linear grid of dots which is flooded by literally organic formation – flowers. The *Inclusion Différentielle* formula is pathologically conceived and fundamentally based on looking for solutions within gaps. This painting is flavored by a medieval and dark aura which is inferred in this type of mathematical research. The absences of form and fragmentation presented in the painting create its very subject matter. *Opération d'Addition* shows the simple way of visually identifying mathematical addition. The painting of a large mouth represents the child's entry into the symbolic order through the naming process wherein the location of ownership, language, is emphasized. *Fractal Geometry* is used to explain natural phenomena and results in a dramatic landscape and abstraction painting. The artist chose to use a violent and expressionistic mode of painting which is centered within an unrealistic representation of a gold frame. Within a mass of garish colors a small serene landscape

emerges contrasting two opposing relationships towards nature - as the benevolent and the destroyer. This juxtaposes nature's infinity with its inherent instability and unpredictability.

One can sense the layering of scientific process onto an artistic one. Hughes does not strictly adhere to the photo/text formula in her feminist discourse and yet her paintings remain singularly unmarked by didactic inclinations. It is difficult to say if the research and photographs serve to justify the paintings' whimsical imagery, or if these have been incorporated with the paintings as a perfunctory introduction to her imaginative subjectivity as a painter. It is clear however that an intuitive process takes over during the painting's execution. Hughes presents us with two divertedly opposing art processes, the documentary and the imaginative; two antithetical methods of searching for truth.

Sandra Harding in her book, *The Science Question in Feminism* states that "coherent theories in an obviously incoherent world are either silly and uninteresting or oppressive and problematic, depending upon the degree of hegemony they manage to achieve. Coherent theories in an *apparently* coherent world are even more dangerous, for the world is always more complex than such unfortunately hegemonous theories can grasp." That the artist is unable to corral her three elements into one clear statement or conclusion must be seen as part of its strength. Her theory is not homogeneous: it is porous, unsteady as a three legged chair, but it nonetheless invites the viewer to contemplate. The binary oppositions of science/art, male/female, reason/intuition and rational/irrational are destabilized. Empirical perspectives of truths based on polar opposites, which are indicative of an androcentric and subjugating science, are put into play in this quasi artistic science or scientific art. Hughes' equations repudiates rational oppositions and for this reason cannot be read in a linear fashion. Her research and interest in mathematics is part and parcel of the painter. The research becomes supplementary to the paintings and the paintings bring this research into a gallery context. This supplementary approach is important in that it does not emulate the male binary opposition but instead proposes a fluid approach to "truth" or "truths". By blurring and rubbing these variables together gender and epistemological totemism are debased.

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