

Lalie Douglas: *All is not as it seems, Part II: The Corner of Your Eye*

Lalie Douglas: *All is not as it seems, Part II: The Corner of Your Eye*, Neutral Ground Artist Run Centre and Gallery, Regina, Saskatchewan Residency, dates: August 5 - 25, 2011 Exhibition dates: August 20 - September 24, 2011

Margaret Bessai

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Margaret BESSAI

This past summer in Regina, Neutral Ground Artist-Run Centre and Gallery hosted a residency with Montreal-based artist, Lalie Douglas, an open-studio for the production of her installation, *All is not as it seems, Part II: The Corner of Your Eye*,¹ on exhibit from August 20 to September 24, 2011. The installation filled the gallery space with an environment that re-investigated and enlarged on themes and subject matter initiated in two earlier projects created in Montreal, *Stories of the Sky Sold Underground* during *Art Souterrain*, (2011) and *All is not as it seems at Centre d'exposition Circa*, (2010). Douglas also produced variations of her gallery works and placed them on display outside of the gallery space, in the shop-windows and street corners of surrounding neighbourhoods, to be discovered by chance.

Subject matters developed during Douglas' previous installation *All is not as it seems* include domesticity and artifice invoked through viewing models of houses. The effect is marvelously described by Barbara Winoski as "a kind of ontological peep show." (Curatorial Statement, *Lalie Douglas: All is not as it seems*, Montreal, 2010). *Stories of the Sky Sold Underground* further developed questions around perception through viewing stations that gave subway visitors conflicting visual evidence. *The Corner of Your Eye* uses strategies from both of these prior works to bring questions around the act of looking to bear on the domestic and the mundane. Our culture is awash with images; representations of things and people are so common that in discussing them we often elide the words that make it clear we KNOW it is not a pipe we are looking at, but a picture of a pipe. Audiences casually overlook the artificial aspects of representation in order to comfortably sink into subject matter. Douglas overcomes this by using deliberately simplified images, flat stage sets, and by limiting the view to several

specific points, and mediating this through a lens.

Entering the gallery space transforms the visitor into a theatre insider, working back-stage. The gallery walls are only partially painted with illusionistic skies, the other half, presumably unseen by the imaginary theatre audience are left white. Large flats blocked areas of the gallery off, showing unfinished backs. The inward-facing walls create fields, a lake, trees, bushes and houses in a simple graphic style that act more as signifier than realist portrait of place. There is no public access to this finished interior. Instead, the gallery visitor is invited to see more by peeking through the square holes cut as house windows in the set walls and by looking into viewing portals, monocular and binocular lenses installed at different levels.

Each viewing opportunity, some partially obscured, some through a distorting lens, shows different pieces of information. Looking through the back of the house set, a reflection reveals flames on the roof. Tiny houses opposite are also in flame. The clouds in the sky over a

lake are held up by scaffolding, a little like a 1930's hotel sign. In a different scene, scaffolding holds the stars in the sky over a house. Through the distance of the lens, the scaffolding seems diminished, the image more magical. Some of the viewing lenses reveal tiny animations, or subtle changes from the unmediated view: a day has turned to night. The cumulative effect of these multiple views, and changed scenes ranges from a quick laugh over semiotics to a deeper questioning of our consensual reality.

The view through the lens is so often accepted as simply reality, that artists who use the lens must defend their aesthetic craftsmanship: photographers and film-makers are dismissed as technicians; photo-realists, including the renaissance painters recently "outed" by David Hockney for their use of the camera obscura, are accused of "cheating." (Paul Lieberman, *LA Times*, "Artistic Fact or Optical Delusion? David Hockney claims many famous paintings were traced using camera-like devices." December 3rd, 2001.) [Article quoted in full at: Hockney



Lalie DOUGLAS,
The Corner of Your Eye, 2011.
Installation view.
Photo: John G. HAMPTON.

documentary website, <http://www.koopfilms.com/hockney/articles.html>] The mediation created by the lens is irrefutable when placed side by side with the real object. How is it then, that in Douglas' installation, the image in the lens seems to come to life? In contrast, the actual view shows us a flat theatre set. Which is more real?

Certainly there is a physical world that our senses report on. Our mind compares this telemetry with what we have already learned, creating perception, a socio-cultural lens that guides our actions. Identity is held through abstract versions of the world in our minds. In Douglas' installation, we are in a gallery, looking through the windows of a house set, our reflection places us inside a house, and reveals flames on the roof. Moving the site of perception changes the conditions of the house and the inhabitant. Looking at our neighbour across the field we see a tiny house. Looking again through

single viewpoint, just as we warn our children not to accept advertisements as mirrors. However, the reading is more complex. Looking through the Douglas' binoculars aimed into a painted world, we see unchanging day has turned quite impossibly into night. The moment of realization is magical.

Magicians form another branch in the craft of creating illusion, and have developed a vocabulary to discuss the mechanics of the marvelous. An illusion, or magic

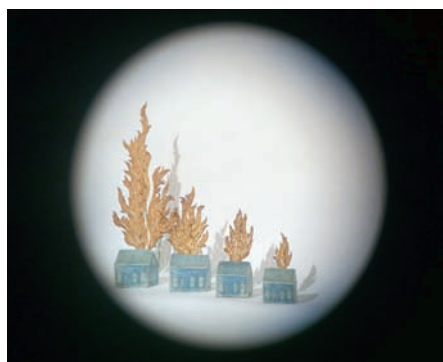
visible, a house that seems small through the trick of distance, because the edges of the diorama do not show, a reflecting mirror places us into the landscape. We accept this because we expect illusion to take place in a gallery or on a stage. The third step, the prestige, is delivered like a punch-line, a moment of the unexplained, the impossible. The woman seen in half emerges whole. Looking through a lens embedded in the wall of the set, aimed at a diorama, we see

Later, walking down the street, out of the corner of our eye, we spot a tiny house tucked in beside a teapot in a store window. Art has transformed reality.² ←

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Lalie DOUGLAS,
The Corner of Your Eye,
2011. Detail.
Photo: L. DOUGLAS.

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Lalie DOUGLAS,
The Corner of Your Eye,
2011. Detail.
Photo: John G. HAMPTON.



Margaret BESSAI, B.A., is a Regina-based visual artist working in the mediums of drawing, conversation and writing. Family, community, and collaboration are important to her work and her life. Her current research investigates the domestic sphere, finding humour in everyday life and the personal in history. Recent projects include co-curating an exhibition of Artist Trading Cards, *No Story Too Small to Trade*.

NOTES

1. The exhibition received support from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec.
2. The artist will be part of a group exhibition *Identités multiples* at Maison de la culture du Plateau Mont-Royal, March 1 to April 1, 2012, presenting the work of Claude Arseneault, Caroline Cloutier, Lalie Douglas, Emmanuelle Jacques and Geneviève Turcotte. The project brings together five different worlds that respond and are nourished as they progress in many directions, taking form through the multiplication of image sources and the successive generation of new elements, creating a reflection on identity, space and time.

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Lalie DOUGLAS,
The Corner of Your Eye,
2011. Detail.
Photo: L. DOUGLAS.

the lens, we see a nicer house. Identity is changed through perception. Sociologist Craig J. Colhoun writes, "Identity turns on the intellectual problems of self-recognition and recognition by others." (*Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, p. 22, Wiley-Blackwell, 1994) Reality, as we understand it, is a consensual fiction. If Douglas' work stopped here, we might infer a warning about the danger in basing assumptions on a

trick consists of three steps: the pledge, the turn, and the prestige. In the pledge, the illusionist shows how all of the pieces are quite ordinary, just as Douglas has invited us backstage. In the turn, the ordinary becomes extraordinary, despite our understanding that all components are mundane. Looking through the peephole of the stage-set in the gallery, we see another place—a sky, where unpainted walls are not

instead an image that is moving, dream-like. We understand that what we have seen is a fiction, but it does not diminish our sense of wonder.

What is really joyful about this incarnation of Douglas' work, is her reminder that fictions, are both lies and transformative realities. A concrete example of this is money. Some of our other inventions include beauty, justice, and the sublime.