

# Stuart Brisley

## *Louise Bourgeois' Legs*

Greg Beatty

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d'un baptême, d'une première communion, de l'enfance à la vie adulte, jusqu'à l'inexorable issue... Au-dessus de chacune, on peut lire « Bibliothèque familiale », un intitulé révélateur semblable aux en-têtes joliment ornés d'un vieux bouquin. De l'autre, imprimée à même le support de bois, l'idéalisation d'une réalité lointaine contenue dans les scènes de genre de Vermeer et de Bruegel ou dans l'imagerie religieuse empruntée à différentes époques, et qu'on nous force à regarder comme si on regardait discrètement, en retrait, par l'entrebâillement d'une porte. Cette réalité occultée et allusive fait contrepoids à la première.

Chaque séquence visuelle s'ouvre en fait sur un chapitre nouveau et divulgue sa dualité en un titre évocateur. La première illustre la passion, puis suivent l'union et le commencement, en passant par le dévouement, l'innocence, l'acharnement, la servitude, le savoir, la fierté, la solitude, l'ennui et ainsi de suite, jusqu'à la vieillesse, la maladie, la mort... Ce jeu d'associations s'étire et s'écoule alors en une suite narrative qui rythme le temps en autant de pulsations vitales, traçant un chemin de vie : la nôtre, la vôtre, celle de quiconque.

La figure du corps agenouillé est couverte d'une singulière topographie qui prend l'aspect de tatouages ou de stigmates indélébiles sur cet épiderme d'argile. Vertus, sentiments, émotions, qualités et défauts, apanage du genre humain et que chacun porte en soi, s'y trouvent consignés comme sur une carte géographique sur laquelle on aurait substitué les indications de lieux. Voilà donc la somme des expériences terrestres, bonnes ou mauvaises, venues alimenter la mémoire pérenne pour s'inscrire à jamais dans la conscience des êtres. La puissance évocatrice de la *Pietà*, magnifiant l'amour dans l'abnégation et la souffrance, donne à ce continuum symbolique force de conclusion. Œuvre tragique ? Mystique ? *Là où tu nous mènes* pose un regard touchant sur la condition humaine et sur la destinée universelle qui ne manque pas, au premier contact, d'atteindre le cœur et l'âme...

#### UN ART D'INTÉRIORITÉ ET D'ENGAGEMENT

Dans l'achèvement formel et plastique de l'installation, qui cache généralement au regard toute sa complexité technique, la mise en scène finale privilégiant l'accumulation d'éléments

et l'association d'idées ou d'images fortes, de même que son impact sur l'imaginaire collectif, sont prédominants dans l'art de Jacinthe Baribeau. Au début des années quatre-vingt-dix, l'artiste use déjà de métaphores puissantes, se laissant inspirer par des thèmes extraits de l'actualité médiatique. Ainsi, par analogie aux fausses défenses d'éléphants qui composent *Défense de tirer* (1992), elle pointe du doigt le braconnage de certaines espèces animales en danger d'extinction. Durant cette période exploratoire, les propriétés du médium sont poussées à l'extrême limite du mimétisme et de l'expressivité avec *Boat people* (1995), qui relate tout le drame des réfugiés de la mer en ne montrant qu'une épave brisée, grandeur nature, évoquant le rêve fragile soudainement anéanti. Les nombreux gros plans de mains d'enfants sérigraphiés sur plaques de céramique puis réunis dans *La fin du voyage* (2000) — qu'elle présentait à la 9<sup>e</sup> Biennale nationale de céramique de Trois-Rivières — dénoncent avec éloquence l'exploitation sexuelle des mineurs érigée en attrait touristique dans certains pays du Tiers-Monde.

Dans la production récente de Jacinthe Baribeau, il n'y a que profondeur et maturité. Profondeur du discours, certes, qui puise à même les préoccupations sociales et existentielles de l'artiste, mais aussi maturité dans la démonstration et surtout dans la démonstration des émotions et des attitudes intérieures. Son but n'est pas tant d'accuser crûment, de s'indigner devant les injustices de ce monde ou de faire des constats philosophiques que d'amener peu à peu le public à s'approprier les différents niveaux de conscience qui émanent de ses œuvres.

Parce qu'elle reconduit inmanquablement à nos propres retranchements culturels et personnels (valeurs, croyances et morale), cette négation de la superficialité dans le traitement comme dans le message participe sûrement au fait que chacun se sente à ce point concerné, voire bouleversé par la portée d'une œuvre comme *Là où tu nous mènes*. ■

Jacinthe Baribeau  
*Là où tu nous mènes*  
Galerie Materia, Québec  
1<sup>er</sup> septembre — 15 octobre 2000

## STUART BRISLEY *Louise Bourgeois' Legs*

GREG BEATTY



Stuart Brisley: *Louise Bourgeois' Legs*, 2000. Performance. Photo: Felipe Diaz.

In Canada to attend a performance festival at Le Lieu, in Quebec City, London (England) artist Stuart Brisley made a side trip to Regina as a guest of New Dance Horizons (NDH) and the University of Regina Faculty of Fine Arts. While here, he mounted his one-man show (augmented in this instance by NDH artistic director Robin Poitras), *Louise Bourgeois' Legs*.

For NDH, the production represented the most dramatic departure yet from its core mandate of contemporary dance. In this interdisciplinary age, the line between performance and dance is admittedly murky. But with its heavy emphasis on text, Brisley's offering was structured very much like a monologue. Where it did flirt with dance — and by extension, sculpture — was in its multilayered evocation of the body. The body has been a

consistent subject for Brisley throughout his five-decade career. Originally trained as a painter at the Guildford School of Art and Craft, he migrated to performance in the mid-1960s. As practised today, performance is dependent on scripted dialogue, rehearsed action and elaborate staging. By using his body as his primary instrument of expression, and improvising freely, Brisley eschewed those conventions and remained faithful to the discipline's formerly avant-garde roots.

In *Louise Bourgeois' Legs*, first performed at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London last year, Brisley assumed the character of R. Y. Sirb, curator of the exhibition *Ordure* (literally, rubbish or shit). Dressed in black, he delivered a series of disparate monologues on a stage outfitted with a long wooden table, two chairs, scattered plywood scraps, and a handful of props — most notably, a cloth-bound man-

nequin's leg and a bag of carefully preserved "turds." Fittingly enough, the origin of this surreal exercise was a dream Brisley had over a decade ago. It took place in a room with two green walls and an operating table. Present were Brisley, his wife, and a friend who was a reflexologist. On the table were a pair of legs, severed between the knee and thigh and covered by a white blanket, that Brisley instinctively knew belonged to octogenarian French/American sculptor Louise Bourgeois.

Throughout her long career, Bourgeois has shown a similar fascination with the human form as that evinced by Brisley. Commenting once on her minimalist/conceptualist oeuvre, she said, "To me, a sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture." By using a single leg as an index of her body, Brisley alluded to the sculptural practice, as popularized by Rodin, of having a fragment



represent the whole. Bourgeois has also been strongly influenced by psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of Luce Irigaray concerning the parent/child relationship. In numerous interviews, she has painted a disturbing portrait of her upbringing. Born in Paris in 1911, Bourgeois was the daughter of a prosperous textile merchant. Her status as the middle child between a sister and brother gave her a feeling of insecurity that was exacerbated by the excessively authoritarian and protective natures of her father and mother respectively. Further turmoil was visited on Bourgeois when her father began an affair with the family's English governess. Hoping to discourage the budding romance, Bourgeois' mother invited the woman to move into their home. Her strategy backfired, however, and the affair blossomed.

Of the four monologues presented, only one dealt specifically with Bourgeois. In it, Brisley identified several key parallels between the sculptor's life and his own performance. First, he revealed that Bourgeois' sister had an artificial leg similar to the mannequin's leg. Second, he noted that as a child Bourgeois apparently lived in a house on a riverbank where she was subjected to the noxious aroma and sight of untreated sewage from a nearby town. Finally, he recalled that in one of her more notorious flights of psychoanalytic fancy, Bourgeois reportedly confessed to having killed and eaten her father as punishment for his extramarital transgression. In fact, one 1974 sculpture is titled *The Destruction of the Father*. Like any other digestive process, the consumption of human flesh inevitably produces waste. Several times during the course of the evening, Brisley (in the guise of R. Y. Sirb) donned rubber gloves to handle the turds in his collection as he expounded on their source.

The three other monologues contained oblique references to Bourgeois. In one that discussed the Bill Clinton/Paula Jones scandal, for instance, Brisley highlighted themes of sexuality and adultery that figured prominently in Bourgeois' professional and personal development, while also commenting on the turbidity of American two-party politics: to wit, that the curvature of the president's penis, like the distinction drawn between the Democrats and Republicans,

depended on the viewer's perspective. Jones testified that it veered upward and to the left, while in Clinton's eyes, it was rightward-leaning. Brisley's wry conclusion? That the U.S. political scene was "a bloody, engorged pillar of mindlessness." A second tale, describing the rise of an obscure Ukrainian coal miner to a position of influence in the Soviet politburo, addressed the issue of Marxist class politics. At one point, Brisley referred to Bourgeois and her upper-middle-class family as "bourgeois," thereby implicating them — and artists in general — in an unjust and oppressive economic system.

Throughout the hour-long performance, Brisley and Poitras engaged in a variety of independent and collaborative acts — once seeming to argue when Poitras couldn't read her assigned text because she had forgotten her glasses; another time building a plank-like construction that extended from a chair placed atop the table to which Brisley tied one of the turds while Poitras squatted at the other end to serve as a counterweight. On a third occasion, Brisley wet a Plexiglass sheet and ran his fingers along it to create an assortment of humorous but strangely plaintive sounds reminiscent of whale song.

From an art historical perspective, Brisley's performance recalled the agitprop of Soviet artists in the early stages of the Bolshevik Revolution who sought to rally the disaffected bourgeoisie to their cause. In its use of worthless materials like scrap wood and shit, it echoed the Art Povera movement of the 1960s, in which Italian artists critiqued the commodification of art under capitalism. Sharing the same goal as Piero Manzoni, who packaged and marketed his own feces in *Merda d'artista* (1961), Brisley (again in the guise of Sirb) sought to elevate the turds in his collection from artifacts — which they clearly are, by virtue of their being a culturally specific product whose composition, size and texture are dependent upon the diet of the excreting individual — to actual art.

While there is no doubting Brisley's sincerity, it's questionable how much appeal his low-key, bare-bones approach holds for modern audiences weaned on TV, blockbuster Hollywood movies and the Internet. Born in

1933, he is, unfortunately, the product of a bygone era. Contrast his languid, contemplative style with that of Winnipeg cult filmmaker Guy Maddin who, in discussing the impact of rock videos and TV commercials on his more recent work, said to me, "I love the idea of bombarding people with things — as long as

you're left with a residue, you've had a better than average [viewing] experience." Spectacle, I suspect, is here to stay, and artists who ignore this do so at their peril. ■

Stuart Brisley:  
*Louise Bourgeois' Legs*  
University of Regina, Sask.  
October 28, 2000

## CATHERINE HEARD *Our Darling*

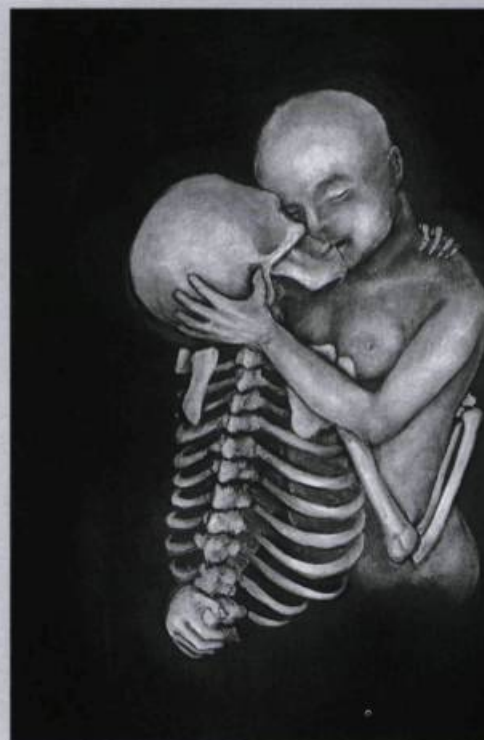
CORINNA GHAZNAVI

Viewing Catherine Heard's most recent exhibition is like walking through a cross between a scurrilous doll museum and a chamber of horrors. The walls are lined with figures trailing embryo cords, secretion tracts, or multiple limbs. Quite the most startling image is that of a small child hanging itself, head hung limp, one hand still curled around the fatal rope.

*Ennui* is the title of Heard's new body of sculptures, showing foetal or childlike figures encased in antique fabrics. Yet the pieces recall anything but listlessness or boredom, for they are gripping, somewhat horrifying, and endearing all at the same time. We would be wrong, though, to understand these images literally for, like most of Heard's other work, they are deeply rooted in allegory and informed by Heard's interest in history, medicine, psychoanalysis, and dystopian / utopian literature.

The baby or the small child is the site of birth, growth, and construction. It is most profoundly naked and unmarked while already implicated in the Oedipus complex. By using language — she has altered some of the fabrics with silk-screened texts —, Heard pushes the idea of inscription on the body, leading one into the complex debate over textual practice and what Margrit Shildrick terms "the interface between body, desire,

and language." Yet Heard's relationship to language is conflicted: we see a text-covered cord leading from the backside of one small figure into the mouth of the other, insinuating the feeding of lies. Another duo shows branch-like mutated limbs extending from one partner to the other, who turns away, holding its ears shut, warding off this torrent of words in the form of snakes and forked



tongues. In other pieces, the handling of text is more subtle, and throughout it remains fragmented. Because it has been silk-screened onto the fabric that in turn has been fitted and sewn onto the figure, we can only ever read partial passages. If the viewer remains with the piece long enough, a kind of story emerges around insects and decay, for example, but one is always left to

CATHERINE HEARD,  
*Vanitas*, 1999.  
Oil on Masonite.  
20.32 x 25.4 cm.  
Photo: Simon Glass.