

Prospect 13: The Encounter by Suzanne Caines
MSVU Art Gallery, October 25, 2008 - December 14, 2008

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HALIFAX, NS

PROSPECT 13: THE ENCOUNTER BY SUZANNE CAINES

Sophie Pilpczuk

MSVU Art Gallery
166 Bedford Highway
Halifax, Nova Scotia
October 25, 2008 –
December 14, 2008

Suzanne Caines' current project *Prospect 13: The Encounter* is made up of three components that are spread out over time. In a first step she produced 22 fit-in-your-hand sculptures. She laboured for hours to create physical objects representing memories of locations that are special to her. Caines cast and hand-moulded plaster, spray-painted them in silver and then added hints of a pattern (unmistakably the print of a doily) in fluorescent pink paint.

Like the variations and changes that are grafted onto an original memory each time it is conjured, amorphous yet sometime familiar shapes protrude from recognisable elements (light switch covers for example) in Caines sculptures.

By the time of the official opening on November 2, the 22 sculptures had been given away and all that remains of them is a series of photographs displayed in a flat museum case.

The second component involves accosting individuals on campus without introduction or prelude. As they are walking

by Caines asks them to describe a memory of a location that is special to them. "I think of myself as making relational participatory art." She told me during an interview. British art critic Claire Bishop's writing really influenced my way of thinking about my work. I don't want to fix society I want to make people aware of their surroundings." The encounter is filmed. In twenty-two cases the individuals are rewarded with one of the sculptures. Others will simply be thanked for participating.

Caines exchanges the time embodied in the sculpture-hours – for minutes – the length of the encounter.

In the third component of the project Caines stretches out the minutes received by using the most evocative descriptions collected from participants to draw the places remembered. Drawings are displayed as they are made.

I was able to view 4 finished videos works at the official opening. Footage was taken of the encounters "conducted" during the first 4 days of the exhibition. These were then edited and added each day-one per day- to a separate monitor in the space. The four final videos range between 5 and 10 minutes in length



Encounter (still) 2008

and are looped. There are ear-phones for 3 of the monitors, audible sound from the fourth. The fifth monitor, perpendicular on the right to the bank of 4, is a live feed to the outside.

A sense of fluidity and edginess accompanies the slow pacing of the artist and the participant's dance in and out of the shot (some are center screen, some hang on the edge of the shot or back away to it, others yet are off screen: disembodied voices).

The background she has set for all the interactions is pitoresque and the ever-changing weather of the Bedford Basin captured in the video marks the passage of time beautifully.

The stories being told, combined with the psychological clues (awkwardness, judgement, eagerness, confusion, discomfort, genuine gladness, defensiveness) one perceives from both parties keeps the viewer captivated and alternatively identifying with Caines and the participants.

While Caines may have predetermined a method establishing who was to be awarded a sculpture, this isn't clear in the post edit videos. The most eloquent aren't necessarily rewarded and it is painful to watch Caines hand

over a sculpture to a person with whom she has had a short, unsatisfactory exchange. When a participant asks about the memory attached to the sculpture Caines affirms her artistic ownership by setting the parameter of the exchange. She will not be elaborating on her memories insuring no doubt that interest is peeked in the sculpture. The participant is left with an object to contemplate and remember the strange encounter by. A souvenir not made in China. The participant has also unwittingly become an art collector and taken on the responsibility for the object.

Suzanne Caines refuses to attach her creative worth to generating situations/relations that make people happy or offer up solutions for societal issues such as alienation. Her angle is more personal (and in her most recent work the angle is both grounded and personal creating a subtler more complex and compassionate work). Indeed in *The Encounter*, Caines manages to be creatively critical of society, the arts world and herself as an artist in ways that render clear and tangible the fragile, tenuous, brave quality of interactions that constantly play out on an ever shifting and uneven ground. □