

REPRESENTATIONS OF INANIMATE OBJECTS IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN PORTRAITURE: ANNA WILLIAMS, VICTOR CICANSKY AND JASON DE HAAN

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Ernst van Alphen, art historian and cultural theorist, argues that portraiture “implies that the portrait refers to a human being which is (was) present outside the portrait.”¹ Anna Williams (b. 1984) Victor Cicansky (b. 1935) and Jason de Haan (birth date unknown) each create sculptural portraits using everyday objects which redefine the idea of the portrait. The artists anthropomorphize these objects, using them to symbolically take on feminine and masculine constructs of gender, and a personal identity. Similar to the way our clothing can be seen as an outward representation of our inner psyches, the mementoes and personal belongings selected by these artists become traces of lives and of the people who interacted with them.² Thus, belongings which reflect personalities and interests, can create a particular portrait of a person.

The portraits in this exhibition showcase the uniqueness of the people represented, but also the subjectivity of the artist as a portrait-artist.³ Anna Williams’ cast bronze sculptures represent portraits of herself and her family as domestic objects while simultaneously examining gender and personhood in contemporary society. Victor Cicansky’s autobiographical clay sculptures represent his artistic career and life in the Prairies as inspired by his love of gardening. Jason de Haan creates historically engaged portraits fusing readymade items with time-based interventions.



Anna Williams

A Family Portrait: Granny, Aunt Barbara, Mum (covered) and Aunt Bee. Each accompanied by their respective tea cozies

2009-2012

Varied dimensions

Cast bronze, fabric, thread and acrylic paint

Anna Williams Website

http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2463982_A_Family_Portrait.html



Anna Williams

A Family Portrait

2009-2012

Approximately 20 x 15 x 55 cm

Cast bronze, fabric, thread and acrylic paint

Anna Williams Website

http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2463982_A_Family_Portrait.html

Anna Williams' *A Family Portrait* (2009), as the title denotes, is a group portrait of her female relatives as teapots set upon long, stork-like legs. Each teapot is representative of the relative's outward appearance and inner character. The teapots are named after the women depicted: *Mum* (2009), *Aunt Barbara* (2009), *Granny* (2009), and *Aunt Bee* (2009). Accompanying each teapot is a tea cozy sewn from articles of clothing donated by the relative in question and embroidered with a phrase or drawing, associated with each woman.

For example, Williams depicts *Aunt Barbara* as an angular turquoise teapot with a matching large thin square handle and a rounded spout. The surface of this teapot is rough, as if worn by time. The tea cozy evokes the unique essence of this woman. Williams lists the ingredients of Aunt Barbara's "40-year Recipe": "2c love, 1c respect, 1c trust, ½ c security, 1/2c devotion, 1/3c resentment, 3tbsp white lies, 1 tsp tolerance, 3 children, forgiveness as needed, adjust to taste." This recipe describes Aunt Barbara as a mother who loves cooking and who seldom strays from recipes or routines.

Made out of bronze, a material known for its strength and solidity, Williams was able to raise the teapots up on thin bird-like legs. The stork legs animate the teapots and also refer to women as chicks (US) or birds (UK). This grouping of female relatives emphasizes that Williams' family is led by matriarchs. The teapots express both the daily tradition of drinking tea at 4pm, and the idea of the woman as reproductive vessel. Also significant is the historical connection of women and crafts, such as sewing and embroidery, performed in the domestic setting. As such, these crafts can be seen as evocative portraits of the women who produce them.⁴



Anna Williams

A Portrait of My Father

2008

Cast bronze and acrylic paint

Anna Williams Website

http://annawilliams.ca/artwork/2463958_A_Portrait_Of_My_Father.html

Portrait of My Father (2009) by Anna Williams continues the family theme. This object is a life-sized replica of her father's chainsaw cast in bronze and covered in pink acrylic paint. The sculpture has a double purpose. It is at once an autobiographical subject in that it conveys the artist's personal perspective of her father, and a historical narrative of maleness. Williams' representation of her father as a chainsaw relates to memories the artist has of her father with this much-used machine. The artist says she has vivid recollections of her father using his chainsaw, sometimes in unsafe or risky ways, such as when clearing a trail while on cross-country skis.⁵

Using her father as a model, Williams contradicts the stereotypical notions of fatherhood to reveal the divergent facets of the family man she loves and admires. The artist's appropriation of the chainsaw draws on the hyper-masculine concept of a strong, action-oriented male.⁶ The chainsaw, a tool typically wielded by rugged men, is an aggressive, violent machine with the sound of its loud motor and sharp, serrated edges. The chainsaw connotes the raw power and unbridled energy of manhood.

In contrast with the precise nature of the chainsaw, the artist's use of bronze casting, pink paint⁷ and polka dots reflects the nurturing and thoughtful side of her father and her image of a more ideal male. According to the artist, the polka dots also allude to her father's flashy, eccentric style of dress. As a mute, static sculpture, the chainsaw is no longer an extension of the male persona. The pink paint acts as a soft counterpart to the tool's aggression to signify the warmth, generosity, and caring side of Williams' father.



Victor Cicansky

The Garden of Art

2005

Varied

Clay and glaze

Victor Cicansky Website

<http://www.cicansky.ca/chairsbooks/chairsbooks2.htm>

In *The Garden of Art*, an ongoing series of clay books begun in 1985, Victor Cicansky sculpts an anthology of his life. At once self-portraits and autobiographical texts, the title and design of each book links to the artist's professional development to give the viewer clues as to the significant periods of his career.⁸ Contrary to the old adage of not judging a book by its cover, Cicansky's book titles and covers hint at their contents. The titles are infused with humour and word play. For example, *Control of Insect Pests* is a book whose cover seems to have been devoured by the very insects the artist is trying to control. *Late Bloomer* is a double entendre that refers to a flower or plant that has bloomed after the others, and Cicansky's late start as an artist. As a younger man, Cicansky had been unsure about his career path and until his mid-thirties, he worked in construction. In 1970 he earned a Masters in Fine Art from the University of California, Davis, and subsequently pursued a career as a professional artist.⁹

The titles of the books also bring to mind art tomes whose purpose it is to educate the reader about art techniques and practices, artists and artworks, and key periods in the history of art. Cicansky's books refer to sculpture and painting, as well as art books he has read. For example, *Showing My Colors* can be seen as a reference to the palette of glazes and paints the artist uses to create his works. These are based on the colours found in his garden, a place where he draws much of his inspiration. *My Bronze Age* (2005) recognizes his recent bronze casting, introduced to him by friend and fellow Regina sculptor, Joe Fafard.¹⁰ *Regina: My World* alludes to his hometown and residence, the place that has stimulated much of his sculptural work and his years of growth as an artist, especially when he was an active participant in the Regina Clay Movement in the 1960s.



Jason de Haan

Lord of the Flies

2008

Used paper-back copy of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, 7000 post-its

Jason de Haan Website

[http://www.jasondehaan.net/Site/Jason de Haan %28Lord of the Flies%29.html](http://www.jasondehaan.net/Site/Jason_de_Haan_%28Lord_of_the_Flies%29.html)

Jason de Haan's practice involves the appropriation of pre-existing objects and time-based interventions that fuse history and the present to reveal the melding of temporal moments. *Lord of the Flies* (2008) is such a sculpture. It includes a copy of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* wherein the artist has marked the seemingly important passages of the book with 7000 post-its which stick out from three of the book's sides. Haan had inserted these post-its of varying shades of green, during the course of reading the book.

The title, *Lord of the Flies*, a translation of the Hebrew Beezlebub, or Satan, reflects the dark side of humanity the novel explores. The cover, illustrated by Paul Hogarth, features a boar's decapitated and bloody head atop a stake, to symbolize the inherent evil of man and its Satanic leader, aptly named Lord of the Flies. The novel is rife with allegorical characters and imagery that evoke brute force and evil in contrast with a moral civilized society where order and rules are obeyed.

For Jason de Haan *Lord of the Flies* is both a performance and self-portrait. The artist uses the performative act of reading and bookmarking to glean insights about himself, in his wish to "embrace the past and aim at the future."¹¹ Thus the post-it notes and bent pages connect the viewer to the artist as a past reader who leaves clues about his thought processes. At first glance, the post-its signify a record of the significant passages in the novel, but a closer look reveals an indiscriminating number of bookmarks. Marking every bit of every page of the book negates the analysis of its contents and instead raises the question: if all passages are marked, how can any of them really be seen as important?

NOTES

¹ Ernst Van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 239-256.

² Loren Lerner, "The Human Face," ARTH 298F Lecture (Montreal: Concordia University, November 30, 2010).

³ Ernst Van Alphen.

⁴ Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Scarlet Press, 1996) 72.

⁵ Anna Williams, "Artist's Statement," *Anna Williams*, accessed October 27, 2012.

⁶ Anna Williams.

⁷ On the topic of pink chainsaws, a quick Google search with the words "chainsaw" and "sensitive male" brought me to this image. It is disturbing to me that Hello Kitty now makes chainsaws, and they also make a pink AK-47. Again, here a whole bunch of gender issues can be examined with the juxtaposition of the color pink and these tools of aggression.

⁸ Mira Godard Gallery, *The Self-Portrait Show: A 50th Anniversary Exhibition* (Toronto: Mira Godard Gallery, 2012).

⁹ "Victor Cicansky," *Galerie de Bellefeuille*, accessed December 12, 2012. <http://www.debellefeuille.com/cicansky-victor-2/>.

¹⁰ Nancy Tousley, "Sexy Veggies: Artist Victor Cicansky Challenges Censorship With Ceramic Sculptures Of Sensuous Vegetables," [Final Edition] *Calgary Herald* (May 1995): E1.

¹¹ Jennifer Prosser, "Ghosts, Myths and Cosmic Allusions Haunt Jason de Haan's SAAG Survey," *Canadian Art Online Review* (October 8, 2012), accessed November 17, 2012 <http://www.canadianart.ca/reviews/2012/10/08/ghosts-of-lost-eras-haunt-jason-de-haans-saag-survey/>.

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