

## **Social Consciousness in Canadian Art**

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Drawn from among the finest pieces in Hart House's permanent collection **Social Consciousness in Canadian Art** examines not only topics of social importance such as ecology, sexual diversity, First Nations identity concerns and human rights, but most importantly observes art as a communicative tool. Particularly so in recent decades, Canadian artists have embraced the opportunity to explore themes that affect us all very deeply and in effect have helped to deepen our collective understanding and concern for our fellow beings. Either by promoting awareness as a conscious element in their art or by expressing personal ideas, artists provide communities with valuable ways to develop consciousness of important social issues.

Art as a communicative tool is not as new an idea as it may seem. Objects announcing the dominant religion or promoting a tribal ruler were used as a means of communication well before the notion and practice of art for creative expression. Although artists are motivated by many and different things it holds true that human beings are to some extent influenced by the conditions of their environment. In our lives we are constantly met with issues that are politically, philosophically, emotionally and/or spiritually charged. Through the universal urge to interact with each other, or to make tangible our ideas on these topics, expression takes place in any number of forms

Because the creative process has the ability to act as a cathartic force it is not uncommon for a work of art to be an entirely intense and personal expression. Powerful emotions, translated into a vocabulary of symbols and other forms, can have any number of effects upon viewers. Of special interest is the fact that, intended to speak directly to an audience or not, art has the ability to stir the mind. Valuable opportunities are presented when art raises questions or challenges the status quo. For some artists, audience is not a consideration during the artistic process but in other cases artists are faced with a deep sense of self-awareness in what they do and specifically intend to create a reaction in others.

Whether motivated to create as a response to a social issue, or whether the artist's concern for an issue is so innate that the commentary expresses itself entirely naturally, the effect of sharing points of view with a wider community remains the same. Education may not be the conscious goal of an artist but through the creation of an object that conveys such considerations inevitably our understanding of the world is elevated as we engage in the exchange of emotions and ideas.

It cannot be disregarded that any given work of art is subject to multiple interpretations and so the idea of art as a communicative tool must be tempered with the realization that subjective visual symbols are not a truly accurate means of sharing information. Still, art is capable of inspiring new ideas by encouraging viewers to look equally within themselves and at the world around them in order to fully contemplate what they see before them. The ability of art to affect a viewer emotionally is highly significant and perhaps this is one reason why it remains such a valuable part of many cultures.

**Social Consciousness in Canadian Art** includes the work of 19 artists, six of whom were interviewed on the topic of this exhibition. Their comments offer a great deal of insight into the experience of creating art as a self-aware member of a diverse society. The contribution of art to our community (in addition to the benefits that may be derived from aesthetic objects) is important to our continued development as compassionate and thoughtful individuals. The artworks brought together for this exhibition illustrate this point.

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**John Scott's** art has been acclaimed for many things including its unabashed and sincere approach to the challenging realities that constitute contemporary culture. As an individual who originally aspired to be an art critic, political art that criticizes perhaps comes naturally. Concerning his fascination with technology and war imagery and its place in his art, Scott claimed it morally and aesthetically necessary for him to explore the realities behind those issues personally. So strong

was the responsibility he felt in the matter that in 1984 he traveled to Beirut.<sup>1</sup> Additional themes Scott has examined in his art include human rights, gender politics and the challenges faced by the working class. *Subject* and *Inquisitor* are two characteristic examples of Scott's intensely driven style of work that offers a narrative that is clear in its theme and form but never preachy.

**Eugenio Téllez's** works are relevant both to personal and collective histories and furthermore they consider the effects of collective histories upon the individual. Many of Téllez's artworks also examine the process of war but with an understanding that in order to forge ahead and create sometimes it is necessary to destroy - a truth evident in nature. Téllez embraces the commotion, noise and rage that he claims exist in the world before we find speech,<sup>2</sup> and as we see in *Dawn of the Poet*, with the transformation made possible by language it is possible to cast away that which prevents personal fulfillment. Indeed, *Dawn of the Poet* is a piece about the value and beauty of free speech and what can come to be when we focus on positive pursuits.

Renowned for her socially conscious work as an artist, **Sheila Butler** has tackled many issues including media violence, popular culture, and the ideological boundaries that prevent people from having equal access to opportunities. With a desire to help fellow female artists Butler co-founded the Manitoba Artists for Women's Art, an organization that actively provides mentoring and other services to facilitate artistic development. Butler's canvases have been described as a battlefield of opposing forces: male vs. female, traditional vs. modern, mainstream vs. marginal and always a passionate inquiry into morality and survival.<sup>3</sup> As noted by Barbara Fischer, Butler explores exchanges between the past and present specific to her position as a woman and a woman artist<sup>4</sup>. *Boundary Walkers* however extends this concern in relation to all people observing the tensions created by psychological boundaries as we seek to determine what constitutes our "self".

**Cathy Daley's** series examining the female dress is both playful and critical by recognizing the empowerment and enjoyment women derive from donning the symbols fashion affords, but also taking note of the way pre-determined representations are thrust upon women thus making them "victims" of the media and fashion industry. Nancy Tousley wrote: "Instead of endorsements, her empty dresses are more like funerary urns for the idea that a woman is a vessel waiting to be filled"<sup>5</sup>, and this is certainly true as the concept of a woman's role continually becomes less something to define and more something for each woman to create independently. Clothing does not make the woman nor do the stereotypes that clothing often tends to convey.

**Evergon's** photography has regularly been described as a diary through which he addresses the issues of his own life and by extension the lives of a whole community, but it doesn't stop there. The dramatic intensity of Evergon's photography speaks to many people both in the gay community and beyond because his work ultimately encourages all individuals to explore their emotions and desires and come to better know themselves as unique beings. While the scenarios Evergon develops to photograph are often allusions to the histories, literatures and mythologies from which many so-called social codes are drawn, his art offers a deeply personal and contemporary interpretation of what creates the self. The introspective exploration that individuals undergo to establish personal identity, Evergon realizes uncovers themes that many share. It is for this reason that he often seeks the feedback of his models as a way to broaden his interpretations of sexuality and the constructions of gender. *San Juan Labos de los Tres Rios* offers an image embracing both the admired strength of a virile young man as well as a softness that challenges macho attitudes.

Most fascinating about **Denyse Thomasos'** forms are that even so simply designed they recall many things from the motifs found in textile arts to the highly calculated markings of the Minimalists. What may not strike a viewer without knowing Thomasos' biography is that she works with symbols referencing the history of her birthplace, Trinidad - a country fraught with a past of injustice through

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<sup>1</sup> Corbeil, C. "An Artist Needs to See War". *The Globe and Mail*. August 25, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Rivas, M. *Téllez Armando Hasta Los Dientes*. [http://www.ctc.cl/cultura/sala\\_arte/tellez](http://www.ctc.cl/cultura/sala_arte/tellez)

<sup>3</sup> Fischer, B. *Sheila Butler: Matters of Life and Death*. London: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1997. p 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p 7.

<sup>5</sup> Tousley, N. "Cathy Daley: Haute Coture". *Canadian Art*. Summer 1999. p 74.

slavery. She says: "I link...my personal history with my historical past. Slavery marks the start of my history; each stroke, a lash; each mark, resilience in the fields."<sup>6</sup>

In earlier works, in black and white, Thomasos intentionally evoked the structure of slave ships, jails and burial grounds, but more recent paintings such as *Dismantle #1*, take inspiration from the "neighborhoods of North Philadelphia with their purple walls, orange shutters, lime green fences and pink porches."<sup>7</sup> Thomasos' connection with her culture strongly defines the art she creates and offers opportunities for her to express ideas to new audiences. In a recent interview Thomasos noted: "People read politics in an obvious way. For me, the political is in the structure of the work. What I'm painting about is the structural psychology of a mind that has been disrupted and distorted through the black experience in the Western world."<sup>8</sup>

Following the death of her mother, **Jane Ash Poitras** was adopted at age five into a German-Canadian home and was thereafter unable to access knowledge of her cultural ancestry. It was not until 1981, nearly twenty years later, that Poitras rediscovered her Aboriginal roots resulting in her becoming inspired to pursue the study of art. Exploring themes concerning the effects of colonialism, Aboriginal heritage and the experiences that are present as individuals seek to reconcile the two forces, Poitras' creations are charged equally with expressions of politics and spirit. Furthermore, Poitras' mixed media assemblages demonstrate a highly articulated consciousness about past and present cultures unifying the world through acknowledgement of shared experiences. Poitras is confident that her work "as an artist can assist in reestablishing a common pride and identity for North America's First Peoples as well as provide a greater understanding of First Nations culture to all."<sup>9</sup> *Spirits and Freedom* and *Ancient Peyote Spirit* are indicative of the intelligent sincerity that emanates from all of the work Poitras creates.

Although originally criticized by his ancestral community for disclosing traditional spiritual knowledge, artist **Norval Morriseau** has since been celebrated for helping to usher into the Canadian consciousness a renewed understanding of Aboriginal culture. Morriseau, who often describes his art as talismans of the future and images of respect of the past, has created for himself an entirely unique vocabulary of colour that has served to attract an exceptionally wide audience around the world. Concerning Morriseau's use of fish as a central theme in his art he is noted to believe that:

Just as a fish swims in any clear northern lake (in a medium that is virtually invisible to the eye) so we, if we are to live all right, should realize we live in a dimension on which our very existence, as people and artists, depends. The dimension is that of connectivity in life shared together in mutual respect... Fish, in spawning runs, seem to urge each other on, to reach safe and secluded lakes, with plentiful food supplies. Once there, they can live more non-competitively.<sup>10</sup>

*Fish Cycle* thus acts not only as a metaphor for the human need to respect each other but also reminds us to respect the other living things with which we coexist. When speaking to his students, Morriseau often talks of painting as something capable of arousing the empathic imagination in viewers. The arts, he says, can open our eyes to the needs of others. They are essential ingredients in a just society.<sup>11</sup>

**Robert Marchessault's** paintings are deeply moving in their ability to invite viewers into a moment of quiet contemplation and this is especially notable when one realizes that Marchessault himself has described painting as a meditative experience. As a Buddhist, Marchessault is keenly

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.pewarts.org/95/Thomasos>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/reviews/scobie/scobie9-21-99.asp>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.artists4kids.com/product12.php>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.webdelsol.com/LITARTS/Robert\\_Sward/Writers\\_Friendship/nash.htm](http://www.webdelsol.com/LITARTS/Robert_Sward/Writers_Friendship/nash.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

aware of balance in the world and evidence of this lives in his sensitively depicted visions of earth, water and sky. Though Marchessault has been described as creating art that reflects the turbulence of politics and human nature,<sup>12</sup> he acknowledges that art is something all people interpret differently and thus welcomes a variety of readings.

“Social issues form an ever present element in the mind-sphere. I am aware of them. My art making process is not a direct commentary on issues; it is a byproduct of my reaction to the world as a place I experience in order to learn. Ecology is a serious concern. The painting *Pond* can be viewed as promoting the idea of interdependence and connectedness.”<sup>13</sup>

As an individual regularly surrounded by the magnificence of the natural world, **Anne Meredith Barry** is privy to the drama of wildlife. Fascinated with the way the earth is at once strong yet fragile, she wishes to capture in her art the tensions between the normal processes of creation and destruction. She describes her art as very personal observations of things in nature that continue to change yet have ultimately existed over the course of eons. *Metamorphosis #1* and *Metamorphosis #2* demonstrate the pulse of life that Barry describes:

“Here, I live surrounded by an environment which is characterized by constant change... turbulent coastal weather, four dramatically different seasons, and the endless rhythmic migration of icebergs, whales, seabirds and sea creatures. Behind my studio the high cliffs, freshwater ponds and evergreen forests, are home to the land-based animals and birds. My neighbors and I inhabit the space between these worlds, aware of, and affected by both.”<sup>14</sup>

Barry’s strong involvement in making cultural education accessible throughout Canada reinforces a view that the intelligent sensitivity of her ecological representations can be considered messages about the importance of respecting the environment.

In a world of televisions and computer monitors how often do we truly connect visually with the world around us? Challenging our ways of seeing **Wanda Koop’s** “Sightlines” series explores not only how we look at things but also how those modes influence memory and establish narrative. *Black Line (Sightlines)* carries a particularly emotional level because the black marking imposed over the landscape, though offering a chance for multiple interpretations, seems daunting if not outright violent. The bridge is framed by what evokes a weapon scope and one can’t help but wonder if the sign of “civilization” in the landscape has become a target. On the other hand, has violence become such a regular part of our visual vocabulary that the image can just be taken for granted?

Koop too is an artist well recognized for her contributions as a volunteer and community activist for numerous causes, in particular Art City, a community-art studio she established to benefit inner-city families by giving them opportunities to create murals and other public art projects.<sup>15</sup> Of her life and how it translated into her art Koop says: “What I bring to my art operates on all levels. It is social and political as well as visual. And education is a really important component of my painting and video practice.”<sup>16</sup>

At a very young age **Gershon Iskowitz** was separated from his family who were murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. The effects upon him were undoubtedly traumatic but it was his

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<sup>12</sup> Algie, J. “Chatsworth Artist’s Work Shown at Toronto Gallery”. *The Sun Times*. June 7, 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Excerpted from Robert Marchessault’s response to an interview via email, November 30, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> [http://collections.ic.gc.ca/waic/anmere/anmere\\_e.htm](http://collections.ic.gc.ca/waic/anmere/anmere_e.htm)

<sup>15</sup> Laurence, R. “Moving Pictures”. *Canadian Art*. Spring 2000. Vol 17., No. 1. p 85.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p 86.

devotion to painting (an act punishable by death were he caught) that Iskowitz believed kept him alive: "Why did I do it? I think it kept me alive. There was nothing to do. I had to do something in order to forget the hunger. It's very hard to explain, but in the camp painting was a necessity for survival."<sup>17</sup>

Following liberation Iskowitz spent time in France and Italy studying art and though he eventually decided to begin a new life in Toronto in 1949, he continued to produce drawings and paintings similar to what he had created in Europe - expressionistic depictions of the horrors he had witnessed. However, over time his attentions were given towards the effects of colour above issues of descriptive representation. Iskowitz claims that it was his first helicopter ride in 1967 that took him above Churchill Manitoba that inspired him to embrace dazzling patterns of colour. From then on his paintings took on a wholly unique appearance that reflected his thriving spirit in his adopted home. *Autumn Landscape #1* is representative of how a work of art can communicate the deepest expressions an individual has about his surroundings; the personal journey experienced by Iskowitz is a remarkable one and his ability to communicate his concerns for the world around him resound deeply in his painting.

The two drawings, *D.P. Children* and *D.P. Mother Feeding Child*, created as part of a series based on the displaced persons camps **Aba Bayefsky** visited while in Germany, were first exhibited at Hart House in 1948. In 1942 at age 19 Bayefsky enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and two years later was commissioned as an official war artist in the Canadian Armed Forces. The horror Bayefsky witnessed changed his life forever and as told to Laura Brandon, Curator of the Canadian War Museum, it was the determining factor in everything he has done since.<sup>18</sup>

"I believe that art and politics—by politics I mean human interaction—go hand in hand. I'm a people painter. I'm not out on a mission, but I would like to think that what I have done will leave a record of what transpired. I am very sensitive to anti-Semitism, and would have thought that after those camps it would disappear...to me it is central to what I think and what I do."<sup>19</sup>

While a sapper with the Royal Canadian Engineers **Bruno Bobak** won first prize in the Canadian Army Art Exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada and in 1944 was appointed an official war artist. Known for his "serious glimpses of humanity,"<sup>20</sup> Bobak's watercolour paintings such as *Cross Country Convoy* are signature to his style in the early portion of his career. Critic Desmond Pacey in an article on Bobak discussed the artist's concern over violence in the world and his belief that genuine art must be a product of the artist's engagement with his contemporary environment.<sup>21</sup>

Considered by many to be an image documentary of the 1930s and the effects of the Depression, **Charles Comfort's** *Young Canadian* is without a doubt a painting conceived to represent the universal struggle during the conditions of the era. The man depicted appears young, healthy and strong but despite these favourable traits, his face appears clouded by frustration and it seems he is about to give up hope searching for the job he desperately needs. Although this image is designed to symbolize "every man", Comfort's close emotional ties to the subject matter become all the more evident when the viewer realizes the sitter is his friend and fellow painter Carl Schaefer. *Prairie Road* also captures a sense of the experience of the Depression era, but, owing to a vivid selection of colours, a glimmer of hope remains. Comfort's career was a consistently strong one and

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<sup>17</sup> <http://home.uleth.ca/sfa-gal/collections/late20th/Iskowitz.html>

<sup>18</sup> MacDonald, C.S. *A Dictionary of Canadian Artists: Vol. 1 A-F*. Ottawa: Canadian Paperbacks. 1967.

<sup>19</sup> Morse, J. "Aba Bayefsky". *Legion Magazine*. May/June 1998 <http://www.legionmagazine.com/features/warart/98-05.asp>

<sup>20</sup> Op. Cit., MacDonald. p 53.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p 54.

even following his years serving as an official war artist during the Second World War, he continued to paint intensely personal representations of the effects of his surroundings.

A recurring theme in **Brian Burnett's** work is the examination of humans and nature as we continue to urbanize our surroundings. What happens to the natural world happens to us. Following this, Burnett questions the mechanisms of society that are all too often motivated by greed, the effect of which impacts things far beyond us, leading to an impoverished human body and soul.<sup>22</sup> *Scrutiny Avenue* is an image demonstrating the harshness of urban life; the individuals portrayed are "unaware that there is a greater soul watching over them; oblivious to one another's misery and successes... The individual fallen on the street depicts those who so easily fall between the cracks in the so-called social safety net."<sup>23</sup>

As an artist who works with a variety of interesting media in an even more intriguing vocabulary of forms, **Micah Lexier** has created a strong reputation for creating challenging works of art drawn from a theme to which we can all relate: life. Interested particularly in developing systems of evaluation and measurement, Lexier has created a large body of work spanning several series that examines the human experience of time. It has been written that coinciding with the early days of AIDS, Lexier began creating art concerned with issues of mortality and a fear of premature death.<sup>24</sup> In this light one may look at *A Minute of My Time, July 17, 2000* as a piece commenting upon the brevity of life and the importance of making the best use of one's time.

A particularly important aspect about Lexier's work as an artist is that his social consciousness is not limited to objects but sometimes extends into the means of production. In a 1994 article in *The Calgary Herald*<sup>25</sup> about the development and installation of a public commission entitled *A Portrait of My Grandfather*, Lexier announced that most of the production costs for the piece were paid back into the local community. In addition it was revealed that since the hands of many were required to construct the sculpture, individuals at the Vocational Recreational Rehabilitation Institute were employed to complete the task that in turn contributed to a sense of pride and ownership in the community. This account speaks volumes about the impact a work of art can have upon those who come into contact with it and reinforces the positive role of art and artists in our daily lives.

**General Idea**, a Toronto-Based collective of artists AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, sought to inspire societal change through witty criticisms of modernism in their art. With a focus on the complexity of visual symbols as a battlefield for competing interests they created art that helped to educate against naiveties in the face of advertising and other corporate/government mandates. In 1980 Partz and Zontal both contracted the AIDS virus and thus the mission of General Idea was revised to bring about consciousness and education on that issue. As one among many stimulating works related to AIDS, the group appropriated Robert Indiana's celebrated LOVE image and created a "logo" in order to raise awareness of the disease. *AIDS Poster* is a pivotal work in Canadian art history and the ideas and emotions it demonstrates are an important example of how art can motivate for understanding and change.

Appropriating and transforming images from the history of painting, **David Bierk** seeks to shed new light on original meanings without the typically distrustful view taken by other contemporary artists utilizing similar techniques. Instead Bierk offers these images in an attempt to find the facts of humanity that existed then and still exist now. The images are presented to us as "lost examples and broken promises of what our society once hoped to become; he critiques Modernism, and by extension the modern world. However, he does so constructively, always offering hope of redemption."<sup>26</sup> The eulogy series of paintings from which *A Eulogy* is a part, is a mournful

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.1340queen.com/burnett-pressrils.html>

<sup>23</sup> Brian Burnett, e-mail interview with Curator, January 3, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Holubizky, I. "Micah Lexier: Life Expectancy". *Art/Text*. 1998. pp 36-38

<sup>25</sup> Tousley, N. "Portrait of a Man: Sculptor Micah Lexier Captures a Life in Metal". *The Calgary Herald*. Saturday, August 13, 1994. G1.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.fassbendergallery.com/Bierk/bierk99.html>

embrace of the ephemeral aspects of art, life and humanity. The juxtaposition between contemporary and historical forms serves to reinforce this in a startling visual way that seeks equilibrium between the forces that dominate our daily lives. Bierk call his work a "continuous examination of the human condition" and explains that his approach "is to look back at what has gone before to consider the state of the present day, and to let the paintings become an expression of the resulting dialectic."<sup>27</sup>

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Art enhances our space but also our minds. When we allow ourselves to reflect upon art we are able to discover things about our relationships both with the world and with ourselves, hopefully towards an outcome that enlightens our perspective. The more often individuals make contact with art the more they are able to experience its possible position as a communicative tool because with regular exposure, the more readily this communication can transpire. Every work of art carries multiple meanings both to the artist and to viewers, and it is exactly this variation that differentiates art from other types of expression. Images that evoke strong emotions causing viewers to reconsider societal issues or the condition of the status quo demonstrate that art has the ability to inspire new ideas and redefine attitudes. Although an artist may not take intentional steps to elevate awareness on a particular topic, the very nature of art as a communicative forum allows for personal expressions regarding social issues to be conveyed to others and possibly affect viewers so deeply as to motivate change, hopefully for a better world.

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.savannahnow.com/diversions/stories/072001/ARTallafter.html>

The following quotes were excerpted from interviews conducted by the curator and, positioned throughout the exhibition, served to create theme-oriented reflections points for visitors to the gallery.

I'm a human being the sum of the events I've lived through; the social issues that affect me are primary to who I am and so when I create there is no gap between my concern for the issues and the expressions of my own art. I'm someone who began in and is rooted in the twentieth century and I have to interact with the next part of the era: that's where my work and challenges lie. I learned to ride a motorcycle made in the twentieth century of all the morals constructed in the time before it and now I need to ride that vehicle into the twenty-first century."

John Scott

"Social issues form an ever present element in the mindsphere. I am aware of them. My art making process is not a direct commentary on issues; it is a byproduct of my reaction to the world as a place I experience in order to learn."

Robert Marchessault

"Social awareness in a work of art is an integral component as well as a sense of entertainment, humour etc. Art that preaches in one area is as negative as the self ordained preacher who screams their message at you from the street corner. You just want them to shut up and go away!"

Brian Burnett

"In my artistic practice as a whole, I have privileged private studio production (primarily painting/drawing) but always within a broad context of socially engaged activist projects. I have given several artist's talks on the social activist aspect of my practice... Teaching has always been a part of my life and my engagement with students continues to enliven and inform my practice as an artist."

Sheila Butler

"When I make my work the themes that I deal with are the ones that I think about in my day-to-day life. It is not my intention to educate anyone about anything. My intention is to be able to make what I want to make and to put it out into the world where others take what they want from it. When I was younger I made a number of pieces that dealt with a variety of specific issues but over the years my work has evolved into a more general exploration of those ideas to the point that my current work is almost abstract. But my goal was, and still is, to connect with another person and that is why I love making public art or work that is placed in a public setting (like the artworks placed around Hart House). The more difficult or reduced or abstract that my work becomes, the more I desire and need others to connect with it."

Micah Lexier

"My current focus on the dress as a kind of emblem of femininity as social construction developed from previous bodies of work which looked at how women are or have been represented in popular western culture.

For me there is a kind of ambivalence, a kind of push and pull in relation to the image of the dress. An attraction on one level and also a distancing. What I am most interested in is how we internalize these images at the level of fantasy and how they resonate in memory as icons of beauty and desire. Its not so much a nostalgia for these forms as a kind of acknowledgement of how we have taken in these forms and how they still operate in the imagination."

Cathy Daley