

The Art of Labour
Yellow Box Gallery
St. Thomas University
September 15th - November 30th

Opening Remarks

Welcome, everyone, to the opening of **The Art of Labour**. This is a dream curation for me and I am grateful to the Fine Arts Department and St. Thomas University for supporting this exhibition.

I would like to extend a special welcome and thanks to the women artists whose work and artistic vision is so generously shared with us through this exhibition.

Take a moment to identify yourselves so people can connect a face to a name. **Carol Collicutt, Janice Wright Cheney, Jackie Bourque, Julie Gray, Allison Green, Danielle Hogan and Tara Francis.**

I was asked yesterday about how long I had been planning this exhibit and I thought if I said, “all my life” it would seem a bit dramatic, so I said “about a year.”

In truth, I have always wanted to fill a gallery with the work of women. The voices of women. To give space, to take up space.

This exhibition presents the work of 7 Maritime artists whose labour-intensive textile work sets a series of visual and conceptual challenges before the viewer, setting up metaphoric material imbalances. These women have taken iconic objects associated with nature and culture, and transformed them through material investigation into something

else. Sometimes disturbing, sometimes humorous, at times heart wrenching and defiant.

One of the most striking elements of this exhibit, for me, is how each person changes and corrupts the association of textile production and its association with mundane, taxing labour. In fact, they embrace the repetitive task they have set for themselves. It is the repetition that allows the idea to unfold, slowly; it becomes a meditation, and as Allison Green writes, “Repetition is a comfort... because it reminds us of the familiar routines in our lives. Repetition can be humbling and even thought provoking.” She concludes, “I choose to work in materials and methods that remind me of my place—in an ecosystem, as well as a home.” Her work evokes Victorian wallpaper patterns, Kaleidoscopes, and the metamorphosis of organisms. Through thoughtful observation, she offers us new patterns, new relationships.

The theme of home and security, or lack thereof, also asserts itself in this exhibition. Artists like Julie Gray and her meticulously reproduced cookbooks in needlepoint are mind-bogglingly complex. They act as a tribute to her still-living grandmother. Cookbooks have very little monetary value, yet the recipes and the smells and tastes they provoke are passed down and enter our memories and become part of who we are and where we come from. Julie, like others in this exhibit, takes this notion further and presents and translates the de-valued commodity into a precious object of art. Julie’s artwork also points out the special relationship between different generations of women, and the handing down of knowledge and craftwomanship.

Much textile work engages overtly with the Nature/Culture dichotomy. While examining these works together, one cannot help but be struck by the presentation of **both** nature and culture simultaneously, both materially and conceptually, in this exhibit. Some works are made from

natural materials, yet depict moments of cultural identity—specifically dealing with societal expectations of women. Others depict objects which are replicas taken from nature. Their very fakeness exposes their cultural production.

Our relationship with textile, and with cloth in particular, is both personal and intimate. It is also politically charged, with cultural expectations and commercial value. Women have a long, complicated history with textile work. As Danielle Hogan writes in her statement about her conceptual journey, “Over the last few years I’ve come to better understand the conflicted feelings that are stirred up by textile works as Femffects.”

She goes on to explain that these are the “‘lesser-than’ impressions that sticks to textile pieces when we present them in gallery auction and museum environments.”

Danielle’s meticulously beaded masks, which are decorated with tassels, crosses, and flowers, all point to ways in which women have been represented and essentialized. Danielle’s work, however, refuses to give us an easy or comfortable answer to a complex dynamic. These objects have elements of both empowerment and oppression tangled up together.

Carol Collicutt’s delicate wedding dress could be made of silk (expensive, exclusive, rare, natural fibre) or rayon (similar luster, cheap, mass-produced in sweat shops). But it is made of gut. Something hidden inside the body, **Every Body**, taboo and polluted and visceral; related to our deep feelings rather than to intellect. Carol strips it from the body, cleans it to a shimmering shine and transforms the slippery-salty tubes into softly iridescent cloth. The resulting work looks antique, heirloom. And in a way it is. It is a sign of the internalized expectations

women face, that have been passed down for generations. It points to a delicate balance; a turning of the inside out.

Tara Francis's series *Trade Goods* holds up an uncomfortable mirror to a devastating part of Canadian history, the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples into Euro-Canadian culture. She represents both the Residential School system, and immoral trade practices, through her delicate quillworks. She writes about wanting to create work that addresses loss of culture and its ongoing ramifications. The very act of using tradition quillwork is a powerful act of preservation, and represents for Tara an act of ceremonial healing.

She writes about the piece "Residential School":

With each quill, I was drawn deeper into these children's suffering, I felt their fear, their innocence, and the weight of oppression that runs through my people's DNA. The children have guided my hand, and asked me to share their story, in hopes it will help heal our future children, bringing these atrocious acts into the light, in a step towards reconciliation.

Nature/Culture is often set up as a polar duality. The artists presented here resist this simplistic binary. Nature permeates the man-made in invisible ways, just as we can trace the ways in which culture/industry has corrupted and interfered with nature. There is no easy line between the two, and a symbiotic relation is always in flux.

Janice Wright Cheney writes about her work "Lessons in Nature":

This wooden beam was once part of a large tree in an old growth forest. The tree was quite likely a few hundred years old when it was felled to make timber. The large pieces became beams, and these were used to build a school, a building where students were taught lessons in nature and culture. Time passed. Eventually the

school closed, the building was renovated and the beam was replaced. Separated from function, now it's simply a piece of wood.

The theme of being in nature, and establishing a respectful relationship with nature, is touched on by many of the artists. Their art provides them with a place of reflection, and inspiration.

Jackie Bourque's minutely reproduced beach stones become submissive soft pillows, that lure and seduce. We all know the experience of collecting rocks on a shore. Staring out over an abundance of graduated greys and purples, and beginning the search for that one (or three!) precious stones that we pluck from the many. By our act of selection, we make things special and we search for this specialness. Jackie has selected the special rocks for us. Enhancing them by matching the colour saturation and hue, the pattern, line and contour, she reproduces the natural environment in felted wool. The swollen stones take up space. They change. They transgress their purposeless purpose and their functionality is altered.

The time-consuming, repetitive nature of textile work is *transformative*—and not just into a form of artistic expression and conceptual depth. Many of the works presented here bear witness to a personal, creative and intellectual journey. These women are patient observers. They offer a healing journey that reclaims, resists, and represents contemporary Fine Arts practices in a new and exciting way.

Kim Vose Jones

Always respectful of,

THE ART OF LABOUR