

Marion Penner Bancroft  
Or Gallery  
Vancouver  
September 8 to 20

In a single installation unit, *Transfigured Wood Part II*, consisting of three large black and white photographic murals and a carefully placed 4 inch high wooden walkway 12 feet in length, Marion Penner Bancroft explores the relationship between public and private histories and feelings of displacement. The murals were hung in a semi-circle, allowing the viewer to see all three from one central point. The scale of this work and the physical presence of the wooden walkway within the confines of the Or Gallery encouraged a participatory experience. "one which", in the artist's words, "happens in the actual as well as pictorial space."

Bancroft's images, unlike conventional photographs, downplay the camera's tendency to re-present reality and the viewers' tendency to read the images as simply re-presentations of the original. The mural on the east wall is a 90 degree panoramic *View from the Water of the Olympic Peninsula, Washington State, 1984*, made by overlapping negatives. The overlaps rendered portions of the picture faint, while others appeared dark, dense and mysterious. While the horizon line was constant, the varying densities within the photograph made the picture appear jagged, halting and fragmented. A series of black grommets perforated the top and bottom of the paper reminding us of the vulnerability of the material itself.

On the north wall hung a 50 by 40 inch mural showing a *View of Men on Board the S.S. Beaver, the First Steamship on the West Coast of Canada Built by the Hudson Bay Company and Brought in 1836 to Bolster British Power in the Fur Trade. The Beaver Operated from 1836 to 1870 as a Royal Navy Survey Vessel and Finally as a Freighter and Towboat*. Printed and enlarged from a copy negative borrowed from the Vancouver Public Library, the print bore the scars of having been the reproduction of a print reproduction of what was, in its "original" form, a 100 year old photograph. Scratches that reproduced remained; the surface looked rough, grey and foggy. Portions of the copy stand could be seen around the edges of the print while the mural itself was hung using large black bulldog clips, the kind used by photographers to hold "originals" on the copy stand.

The third and largest mural, *View from Inside Cargo Plane, Dream, 1984*, consisted of three panels, each of which contained a view of a forest in three stages of motion as seen through the window of a plane. I found this piece to be the most interesting since it went beyond presenting us with prints which referred to the photographic process. It became more than a two dimensional object, suspended, as it was, on a diagonal, off the wall, with corners secured by fishing line. It was, of course, reminiscent of the interior of an airplane but I found that this angled suspension



Marion Penner Bancroft, *Transfigured Wood Part II*, (1984), photographic murals and mixed media, courtesy: the artist

also served another function: it moved the mural into space normally occupied solely by viewers. In so doing it became confrontational, demanding that the viewers consider it not simply as a photograph appropriating reality, but as a three dimensional real-world object — something with which we would have to establish some kind of relationship.

The mural contained three airplane window views of trees, created by cutting out the window panels and replacing them with photographic images: the first view was static, the second in motion, and the third, totally blurred. The photographic images of the windows were themselves soft whiffs of suggested form, looking as though they were airbrushed on a black backdrop. The solid black

background contrasted with the black paper fasteners used to simulate rivets around the airplane windows. Wooden dowels were used on top and bottom to secure the mural. I found the tension in this piece to be particularly effective, approaching the dreamlike state alluded to in the title.

The three murals shared a number of characteristics. In each the viewer became an outside observer, a voyeur, passively looking at the landscape. The murals share a transitive feeling, a sense of displacement: things whizzed past a rapidly moving airplane, a horizon line became dim or dense depending on weather, men who lived over 100 years ago stood before you on the deck of a ship long since relegated to history. The result is a definite feeling of disassociation which Bancroft claims, in conversation, to refer to her relationship to her home province of British Columbia. She speaks of the contrast between the traditional Western framing device, which makes everything into "scenery" and the Native Indian approach which is far more fluid and immediate. "It's not like I want to get back to the land, but I want to be able to render visible some of the silent influences in the way I experience this place."

One of those "silent influences" seems to be men, more to the point, men as a transformative element. She referred, in an earlier work (*Transfigured Wood, Part I*), to men and their

machines transforming her neighbourhood environment. In *The View of Men on Board the Beaver* she represents men as agents of society's value of transfiguring reality. "The reason for using the Beaver was that it represented a certain presence in this part of the world — male, inquisitive, exploring, exploitative... The steamboat represented a territorial element, a certain type of contact that has shaped this province and determined the political, economic and social realities we are experiencing now." The beaver is also an animal which transforms the environment by chopping down trees and building dams. The men, the boat and the animal are part of the same symbol.

Although I could glean some of the thematic elements from the installation as it stood, I found that many

remained as minor undercurrents rather than emerging as major forces. This was due, I think, to the absence of context, or as John Berger would call it, a radial system which "has to be constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic."

What has always made, and continues to make, Bancroft's work exciting, despite and because of this limitation, is the place from which she produces her work and the place from which she asks us to view her work: both standing on the edge of what we know to be true. She is in effect following the dictum that we should learn to read our own reality in order to write our own history. Only then can we open ourselves to new truths, new observations and subsequent new arrangements of order.

"I am standing at the edge of what I know, facing what I don't know, and am trying to work from that place. I could turn around and do work from a place I know but then I wouldn't learn anything." And neither would we.

Paula Levine

From: VANGUARD

November 1984.