



OR GALLERY

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Frances Grafton

Stripped of Sense

OCTOBER 8 TO 31, 1992

The Or Gallery continues its fall programming with a new installation of drawings by Vancouver artist Frances Grafton entitled *Stripped of Sense*. This project consists of a series of large format, black and white drawings based upon photographs the artist took of the severed heads of Gothic sculptures, once situated in the Gallery of Kings in Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris. The stone sculptures were systematically destroyed during the French Revolution because they were mistakenly identified as representations of French kings. In fact, they were representations of the kings of Judah. Had their true identity been known, it is questionable whether their destruction would have been executed so thoroughly. As it is, apart from a few fragments, only the heads remain identifiable. These were discovered by chance in 1977, carefully preserved in a 'grave' in a hotel courtyard in Paris.

Frances Grafton's work has been concerned with identity, how we define our edges in the flux of circumstance, how labels are attached and who attaches them. The particular nature of the history of these destroyed figures is not evident in the presentation of the drawings, Frances Grafton regards them as non-specific: what is evident is the senseless violence. This history of victimization by virtue of their identification (in this case mis-identification) as 'Other', moves the work beyond the particular.



Stripped of Sense, an installation of new work at the Or Gallery, will be Frances Grafton's first solo exhibition since graduating with a Masters degree in Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia.

OR GALLERY, 314 W. Hastings, PO Box 1329 Station A, Vancouver V6C 2T2, (604) 683-7395

Frances Grafton

Stripped of Sense

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"I walked along the road with two friends. The sun went down—the sky was blood red - and I felt a breath of sadness—I stood still tired unto death—over the blue-black fiord and city lay blood and tongues of fire. My friends continued on—I remained—trembling from fear. I felt the great infinite scream through nature."

Edvard Munch 1895¹

The palpable silence of Frances Grafton's drawing installation, *Stripped of Sense* is derived from an apparent contradiction. On encountering the works, our expectation of a perceptible cry proportionate in volume to the large scale of the visages, is met instead, by a vast silence. These are not, after all, faces within nature, caught like Edvard Munch's in an oscillating landscape constructed to reflect a romantic personal vision. They are faces drawn with reference to the landscape of the photograph. Indeed the strategies that Grafton has undertaken in realizing *Stripped of Sense* have made the viewing experience one that cannot be separated from the filmic: the black and white world before talkies, in which sounds of love and protest were similarly inaudible, is here recollected—but not reconstructed.

Behind these works is a story, and it is that aspect of *Stripped of Sense* that threatens to lead us into temptation—the temptation to engage the works based on prior knowledge, rather than with our eyes. The artist has, appropriately, given us the narrative of the mutilated heads that were photographed to become her subject. We learn that the fragmentation of the sculptures occurred during the French Revolution because they were mis-identified as representations of French kings, instead of being properly identified as kings of Judah. Our fascination with this history may cause us to believe it to be the thing that legitimizes the drawings. But we would be mistaken—these are not illustrations of a truth that may be read or told, they are themselves the embodiment of a truth which must be seen to be believed.

It is necessary here to refer to the condition of photography: much critical thought holds that the photograph is an artifact that speaks of death because it represents a moment that no longer is. The work of Christian Boltanski, for example—itsself preoccupied with the trace of the visage—extends this reading by extreme blurring of the photo to pull the face further away in time.² By enlargement, the eye-holes of his subjects become huge and skull-like, staring at the viewer with an implied gaze that becomes an absence. In Grafton's work such an absence also exists, contrived in the intense black areas. However, it is not only a reference to a photographic emptiness drawing us in, but a graphic one, which manifests the surface and pushes us away from itself.

And what are we pushed to? To the multi-variant graphite marks, the painstakingly drawn surface that can only be studied gradually, even meditatively. Frances Grafton has constructed a viewing experience that overturns the traditional filmic—some would say 'masculinist' one. Our initial reading of tortured and mutilated stone faces, captured photographically, gives way to a powerful awareness of landscape, of living body, and ultimately, of the slow and careful trace of the hand. The artist's engagement with the shattered representations has returned a teeming topography, rich with possibility.

Stripped of Sense is a work of considerable idealism—dare one say hopefulness? Some will see its insistence on placing marks of beauty within a context that recalls violation and loss, as merely problematic. Others will see this contradiction as a challenge to repair what is broken and to rebuild.

-Patrick Mahon, 1992



¹ Elizabeth Prelinger. *Edvard Munch: Master Printmaker* (New York, 1983) p.39

² Susan Tallman. "A Jewish High School in Vienna, 1931" in *Arts Magazine* (Oct 1991) p.20

Frances Grafton is a printmaker and visual artist living in Vancouver. She recently completed her M.F.A. at the University of British Columbia.

Patrick Mahon is a printmaker and teacher who is currently working at the University of Alberta.



Or Gallery

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Gallery hours: Tuesday to Saturday 12 to 5 PM

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the City of Vancouver, the Canada Council, the Province of B.C. through the Ministry of Tourism and Ministry responsible for Culture