

# Contemporary Truths

Recent works of  
Tass Mavrogordato & Ann Newdigate

BY RUTH SCHEUING

## "Truth or Consequences"

Tass Mavrogordato & Ann Newdigate  
OR Gallery, Vancouver, BC  
July 4 to August 2, 1997

In the exhibition "Truth or Consequences," Ann Newdigate and Tass Mavrogordato have both taken the Bayeux Tapestry as their starting point. The three works shown are composed of individual panels or fragments arranged in a narrative sequence, reminiscent of the Bayeux Tapestry. This exhibition was curated by Anthony Kiendl for AKA Gallery in Saskatoon, to travel in various formats to the Dunlop Gallery in Regina and the OR Gallery in Vancouver BC.

Mavrogordato's piece, *Dying for It*, uses two different approaches to imagery and tapestry weaving. Three square centre panels represent parts of women's bodies (torso, mouth, vagina) taken from medical text books and these realistic depictions appear to be invaded by what looks like red blood cells. Each of these panels is flanked on both sides by stylized medieval-looking figures, carrying symbols of their professions, i.e. a scepter, a cross, two intertwined snakes, a skull, a recycling triangle, etc. The square panels are woven in a complex range of black and white shading, reminiscent of drawings, photographs or prints. The surrounding stylized figures consist of bold, coloured shaped tapestries, mounted directly on the wall.

Newdigate's *Ciphers from the Muniments Room: Arrival* is a series of panels, each about 11 x14 inches, mounted and recessed in imposing looking black frames, to form a solid panel. Each panel tells a self-contained story through images and texts. Some of the texts in the panels overlap and some highlight certain elements as if the reader was pausing while reading a text. As we approach the works to decipher the texts, a sound track, activated by motion detectors, begins to play. A female voice with a French Canadian accent speaks about Bayeux as a contemporary tourist setting. A male voice speaks about Bayeux during W.W.II and the sound of waves alternates with a popular song from the 1950's entitled 'Silver Dollars', played in a Big Band version. The words

ABOVE

*Ciphers from the Muniments Room: Arrival*; mixed media with audio component; 19 feet x 26 inches by 5 inches; by Ann Newdigate. Photo courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

*Ciphers from the Muniments Room: Arrival*; (partial view).

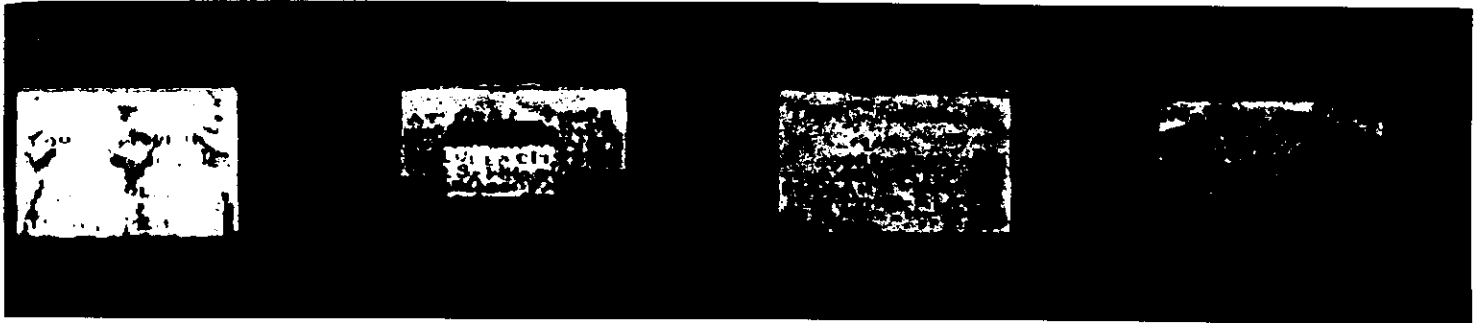
of the song talk about woman's happiness depending on her finding 'her man'. Newdigate builds up her imagery spontaneously with subtle shaded colours, in quite a 'painterly' manner. The texts are layered onto images and some of the words are highlighted in contrasting colours, while others blend into the images to be deciphered only with difficulty.

Newdigate's second work, *Ciphers from the Muniments Room: Letter*, uses a series of texts in a strange and vaguely exotic looking language, written in Pitman's shorthand, as I discovered later, which Newdigate was trained in as part of her first career as a stenographer. The individual panels look like pages from a writing pad. They are computer manipulated copies of woven panels, printed on unstretched canvas with ink jet outputting and hung on the wall like a banner. The copies appear to be slightly larger than their originals and somehow distorted and blurred. The meaning of the words remains hidden to most of us, because the texts are not translated.

The Bayeux Tapestry is attributed to Queen Mathilda, but represents more likely the effort of a group of women under her supervision. The central band represents scenes of the Battle of Hastings and various stages and important events of this war. The borders, above and below, show a series of domestic, intimate and erotic situations, as well as dead soldiers, echoing the heroic main narrative from a common person's perspective. The whole depicts news coverage in a society that could not read. It also is a heroic testimonial for the winners and a historical document.

Mavrogordato uses the formatting into 'main frame' and 'marginal' to talk about another war. In the original Bayeux tapestry, women show up mainly in the borders—while the men are in charge of the main events. In Mavrogordato's work, women have become the central subjects, while the men who play subordinate and largely cartoon-like formalized roles, are placed into the margins. The emphasis is on individual stories rather than one generalized history. Individual women's bodies are the subjects in this contemporary depiction of war against disease and death and the various medical, political and social ramifications of diseases such as cancer and AIDS.

Newdigate uses the Bayeux format to talk about a women's history that does not show up in history text books. She uses the marginalized stories of women's experiences as her only narrative content. *Ciphers from the Muniments Room: Arrival* questions the truth of a 'grand narrative' of established history of North America



and instead focuses on the untold histories of women, who came here. Many women were brought to the new world as brides. Her source is a Grade 4 history textbook entitled *The Romance of Canada*. One of the panel reads:

"the great majority of the newcomers were young women, because like most young countries the colony had a surplus of young men."

Another panel reads:

"At first there were complaints that the immigrants included city girls, who did not make good farmers' wives, but the *mistake* was soon corrected." (my emphasis)

This sounds more like mail-order catalogue shopping than either a story of romance or the heroic birth of a nation. Some panels in Newdigate's narrative take individual words from other panels in order to emphasize a certain meaning.

Through the use of shorthand, her work *In Ciphers from the Muniments Room: Letter* speaks to and about a very specific class and age of working women. To most of us, the meaning of the message will remain hidden unless we consult with an 'expert' and trust their interpretation. In this way the marginal becomes the only content and we are no longer the main audience, but the outsider.

The title of the exhibition, "Truth or Consequences," makes us look at assumptions of any truths. The works clearly question historical truths and assumptions of what or who is important in terms of subject matter and as art, and both artists refer to specific periods, historical facts and ways of thinking. Also when we examine the word 'tapestry' it usually refers to textiles that are 'constructed through the weaving process of discontinuous wefts that cover the warp with pictorial weaving', although in some periods and countries, tapestries can refer to any pictorial textile works. Mavrogordato's tapestry weaving clearly mimics an embroidery process, it is really a contemporary construct with the look of traditional 'truth'. The Bayeux Tapestry is not a true tapestry, particularly in comparison with medieval tapestries.

As we approach the end of the second millennium, Mavrogordato uses contemporary social issues and fears in a sim-

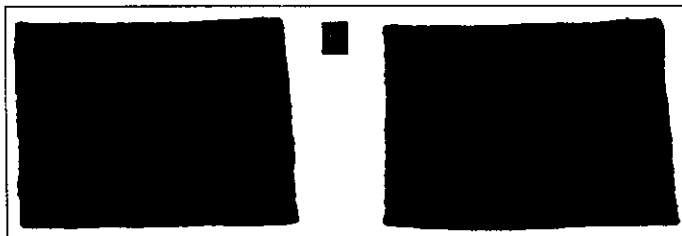
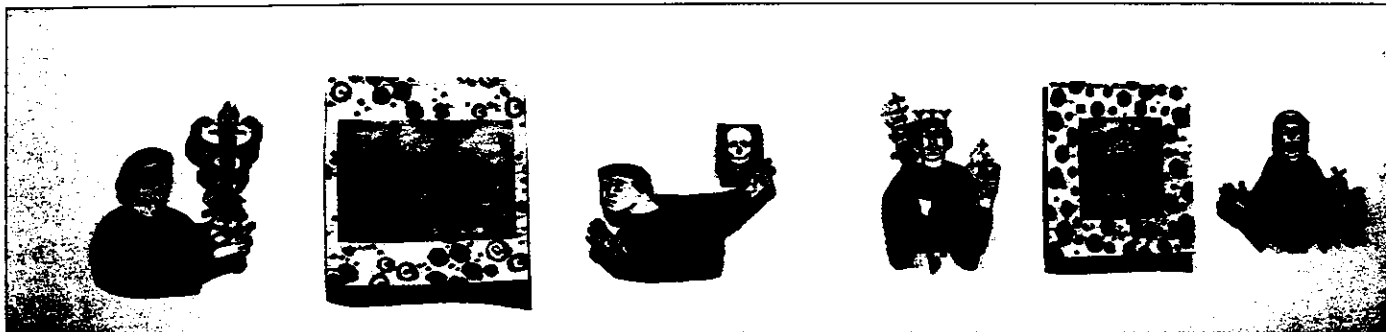
ilar manner that medieval society represented versions of the end of the world around the first millennium in their tapestries. Similar imagery is found at the turn of the last century in works by Kandinsky, which show biblical interpretations of the Apocalypse. Mavrogordato blends medieval symbolism and contemporary imagery through a most meticulous attention to detail. The works seem to belong to a different century or millennium, but speak about topical issues.

Mavrogordato has used this combination of a traditional looking process with contemporary imagery in much of her other recent works. They speak of graffiti, AIDS and contemporary punks in London, as well as comic book heroines in a most refined and archaic language of medieval formal tapestry weaving. It is not always clear which part is tragic and which is parody in her approach.

Newdigate refers more directly to the narrative approach and how pictures become the conveyors of historical truths. She overlays different forms of language, visual, textual and oral, each giving different information, all representing an aspect of truth. She speaks about dominant and dominated languages. Shorthand as a language captures statements by men, of a certain class, period and formal office correspondence; but in most cases it will be understood only by women. Women thus propagate a language that they were not able to influence.

Newdigate has used language as a strong element in much of her other recent work. These physical woven words are often taken in unchanged form from news stories about Apartheid in South Africa during the 80's and 90's. They make us stop and pay attention to the daily flood of information which we receive, without acknowledging their content.

Both artists have pursued their interests and ideas over an extended period and their processes are integrated conceptually in their art practice. Thus, they express some strongly felt concerns through the language of tapestry weaving, which has an old and complex history of its own and which provides its own historical context to the interpretation of contemporary truths.



ABOVE *Dying for It*; by Tass Mavrogordato. Photo by Reid Shier.  
 LEFT *Ciphers from the Muniments Room: Letter* (partial view); digital printout on canvas; 22 feet x 26 inches; by Ann Newdigate. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Ruth Scheuing is an artist who works in textiles. She has exhibited her work across Canada and internationally. She teaches in the Textile Arts Program at Capilano College in North Vancouver, BC., and also writes occasionally and was published most recently 'Not a Fairy Tale' for *Inversions*, Mentoring Artists for Women's Art (MAWA) in 1996. She received the Chalmers Award in Crafts in 1996.

A catalogue will be published by Anthony Kiendl with financial support from the Canada Council. It will be available after March 1998 at AKA, Dunlop and Or Gallery, and will contain essays by Lani Maestro (Canada) and Richard Dyer(U.K.).

# Glitter

BY SHEILA ROBERTSON

**"Celebration"**  
 Metal Arts Guild 50th Anniversary  
 Saskatchewan Craft Gallery, Saskatoon, SK  
 July 11 to August 10, 1997

**AK**

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**A**lthough I don't wear much jewelry, I love to look at it. Thus, scrutinizing "Celebration," a recent touring show of metal work at the Saskatchewan Craft Gallery, I felt a bit like a kid in a candy store.

My eyes darted from a jingly, silver and patinated brass neck-piece, to an elegant tourmaline and paladium ring.

The show, organized by the Metal Arts Guild of Ontario, wasn't all wearables. It included flatware, bowls, a chalice, cutlery, a teapot and even an elaborate photo frame.

The show had great appeal for general viewers. Uppermost in our minds were questions like, "Could I wear that?" or "Wow! How much would that cost?"

The answer to the latter question was, "Plenty." Donald Stuart's luxurious set of triangular gold cufflinks and tie tacks, inlaid with lapis lazuli and set with diamonds, was valued at \$6,500. Mary Heller's wide, colorful bracelet, of fabricated/cast/cloisonné silver, enamel and semi-precious stones, was worth \$3,000.

While the public oohed and ahed over the glitter, these inventive and intricate works held an extra fascination for other artisans. They were eager to study the award-winning designs by some of their contemporaries. In their minds, the key question was more like "Could I make something like that?" or "How would I improve on it?"

Organized in 1996, the exhibition marked the 50th anniversary of the Metal Arts Guild. The guild has members across Canada and the United States, but most of those represented in this show were from Ontario and Quebec.

This exhibition was a special version of the Guild's biennial, juried exhibition. It featured 50 new works on a celebratory