

ALEX LIVINGSTON *Water* 2003 Oil and acrylic on canvas  
1.51 x 1.95 m

Installation view of Instant Coffee's *BASS BED* 2004-5



## THE COLLISION OF MATERNAL CULTURE AND SEX PLAY IS PROVOCATIVE

curator of Dalhousie Art Gallery, in her catalogue essay to this survey exhibition spanning 20 years.

Indeed, the figurative and representational painting produced by the likes of Livingston in the early and mid-1980s brought the ire of critics such as Benjamin Buchloh; Livingston, a student at the time, had defenders too, such as the late John Clark. While it's not necessary to defend Livingston today, this expansive exhibition seems to shout one message: in the right hands, the achievements of painting are limitless.

The sheer number of works here—more than 60 in the show, including working drawings and sketchbook pages—makes an immediate impact. The eye darts among vastly different forms and images, surface sizes, colours, lines. Livingston's concern with the multiplicity and interconnectivity of the natural world—that is, with what is natural to our world and our existence every day (animals, plants, humans, objects, cells, the cosmos)—ties it all together.

Starting with an early neo-expressionist work, *Haven* (1985), which once appeared on the cover of Nova Scotia's phone book (how infuriating for Livingston's critics!), the show is presented chronologically. Text panels signposting the evolution of Livingston's art from period to period could have helped underscore the startling diversity of the works in the show. (A single panel appears as an overview near *Haven*.)

The works on the walls, however, speak for, and among, themselves. A wall painted deep red is the background for selections from Livingston's fauna series, *A History of Four-footed Beasts and Other Curiosities* (1997-9), which was inspired by the work of Edward Topsell, a 17th-century British zoologist. The antiquated bestiary hangs across from Livingston's "biomorphic" canvases, which show us microscopic views of an organism's cellular energy. Livingston has also drawn from 18th- and 19th-century nautical engravings to produce the *Water Land Paintings Series 2* (2001-2).

The current works, from 2004-5, are black, grey and white abstracts of mingling lines. In their spontaneous and considered gestures, varying paint thicknesses and tonal range, they echo the biomorphic creations. Both are good examples of what Gibson Garvey calls the "teeming" quality of Livingston's practice. SEAN FLINN

### Instant Coffee

◀◀ 69 PENDER, VANCOUVER

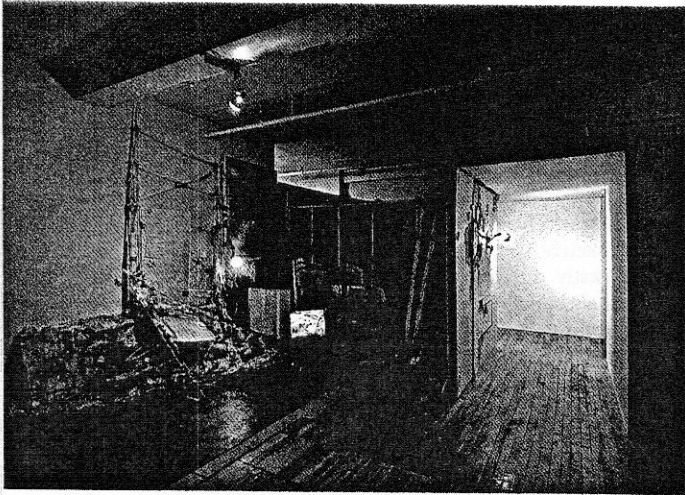
When the Toronto-Vancouver collective Instant Coffee declared last year "The Year of Love," few Instant Coffee watchers expected any eventual project to be very much about love. Instead, we expected lots of purloined pornography, tongue-in-cheek (and mouth) Valentine's celebrations and a few well-designed bits of ephemera (stencils, stickers, posters) made to poke fun at the very idea of affection.

Instant Coffee, after all, have made a career out of being playful party planners, of putting as little effort into actual (they would argue "traditional") art-making as possible.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I stumbled on the installation *BASS BED*—a giant, pillowy platform designed for snuggling, caressing and the inducing of hickeys. Instant Coffee made art! Real, physical art that you can look at and touch. I guess love means never having to say you spent your materials budget on beer.

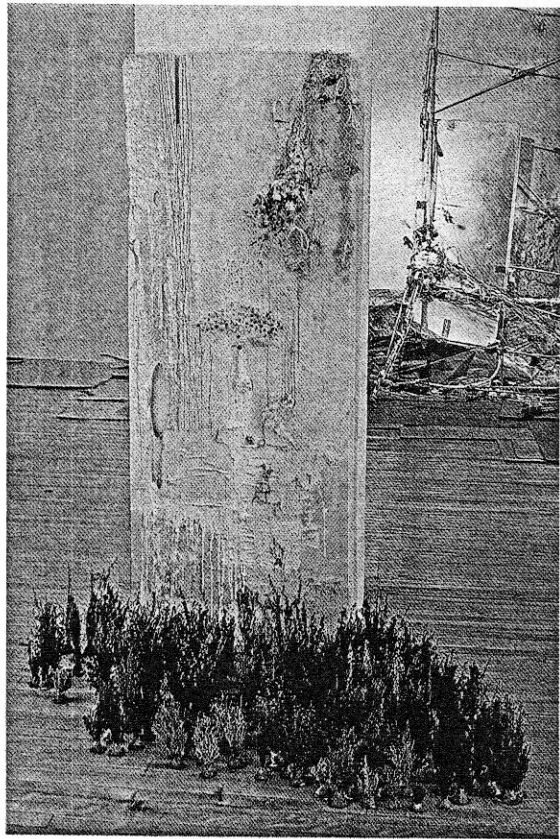
The *BASS BED* is a simple enough affair (pun intended)—a really big horizontal couch equipped with hidden subwoofers and an ancient rum-pus-room turntable. The gag is, you put on a sexy 45, hop in bed and, as the band Shriekback sang in the '80s, let your spine be the bass line. Hardly the most complex device, the *BASS BED* reminded me of those vibrating recliner chairs furniture stores sell at the Canadian National Exhibition. However, the carefully chosen accompanying decor showed that IC were offering more than a quick rub-down.

Aging, fibrous (and very ugly) afghans covered the bed, making it look like something from a seniors'-home TV lounge. There is something relieving about an ugly afghan—it mutes all questions of taste and restraint. Also



Installation views of Tricia Middleton's *The Woods* 2005

PHOTOS GUY L'HEUREUX



on hand were a truckload of attractive, decor shop-worthy stencilled pillows, a specially made romance-novel wallpaper and dozens of neon-coloured doily posies and crochet squares constructed from the itchiest of nylon fabrics.

The collision of flowery (grand)maternal culture and sex play in this work is provocative and charmingly goofy—it's as if the collective seeks to deconstruct its own bedroom-farce naughtiness with tea cozies and sachets, to both acknowledge and undermine our baser libidinal drives while thwarting our romantic attachments to the idea of Romance.

Cecilia Berkovic's clever romance-novel wallpaper succinctly conveys this attraction-repulsion. Depicting the spines of hundreds of bodice-ripper paperbacks and cassettes—the titles of which have been attacked with a black marker until only the word "love" is visible—the wallpaper is both a tribute to and a literal erasure of the corporate love industry.

Not content to simply assemble their love shack and leave the romance to chance, Instant Coffee staged a series of events with the big bed acting as centre stage. For a couple of cold mid-winter weeks, a down-at-heels end of Vancouver got its groove back. R. M. VAUGHAN

## Tricia Middleton

◀◀ CENTRE DES ARTS ACTUELS SKOL, MONTREAL

**T**he *Woods* by Tricia Middleton is an installation of oil painting, assemblage, video and architectural constructions, deconstructions and reconstructions. The woods of the title have their etymological and ideological genesis in phenomenology and literary sources. While the materiality of Middleton's practice is unmistakable, her title also intimates a haunted place that harbours the unknown, and the exhibition is suffused with a conflation of the two.

The double doors of SKOL open onto a clean, white facade that gives way to a blind-cornered corridor; at its bend is a painting that fills the wall from floor to ceiling. Its lunar surface, cool blue and cratered, exerts a magnetic pull that channels you through to the gallery proper. Your passage, however, is not unencumbered; the space is fraught with interruptions. The clean drywalled surfaces give way to cardboard and insulating foam cobbled together with an excess of plaster and holes stuffed with dyed cotton puffs and sparkles. These curious materials, so physical and oddly cute, would seem the antithesis of the luminous, toothpaste-blue surface of the painting. Or perhaps not: odd bits of lint and dust are part of the painting and seem to be holding its layers of pigment together. The impossibility of a perfect surface allows us access.

Once through the corridor, we see its framework anew as an elaborate stage set providing background and support for another series of works. Housed in a corner and piled high up the gallery wall are tumbledown structures made of dowels and tape, cardboard and glue, unlit and seemingly abandoned. Nestled within is a small, richly coloured video projection, the subject of which is the collection of objects that surrounds it—but in the video, the assemblages are intact. The camera pores over them in careful consideration of the minutiae of each construction, at times reducing the complex objects within the frame to halos of colour. Is this aura made evident by the mediating eye of the camera or a simple perceptual trick?

While phenomenology and other philosophical systems have afforded that matter is sentient, it was Einstein who bolstered this belief by famously proving that very small amounts of mass equate to great amounts of energy. In *The Woods*, Middleton reanimates this thinking. She demonstrates the artist's role as a medium between tangible materials and the expression of energy. Haunting. JAKE MOORE

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