

# ONCE UPON A TIME,

in a land called Vancouver, there lived an artist with a gift for knife-edged satire. Her idea of fun was to fill a gallery with a giant inflatable anime head that she called “an expression of the artist’s ego.” The tales told of her were equally inflated, like the testimony by the former circus clown (turned fiction writer) who had once been, as he told it, a scooper of elephant dung and a rubber-nosed rider of the tiny bike. He attested to the artist’s past life as a knife-thrower in a competing circus troupe—be it Barnum’s or the Shriners, little is known. Swearing on his clowning abilities and his fictional books, he wove a tale of a chilling skills demonstration at the home of an art collector, where the artist pierced the wall with the point of her mighty blade. The collector later moved, he said, taking that portion of the wall with her. Today all that remains is a cracked piece of gyproc—and below it, the words “Love, Myfanwy.”

This is all, of course, just a story, an apocryphal tale, but what follows can be verified. Myfanwy MacLeod was born in London, Ontario, named by her English mother for a fictional Welsh country girl who became an opera singer. Her art is the stuff of fairy tales and postmodern myths: like all good fairy tales, first it entertains and then it disturbs your sleep. The inflatable head, shown in a solo show curated by Reid Shier at Or Gallery in 1997, contained a hole that was not quite large enough for people to crawl through, though some did try.

In 1994, MacLeod studied at L’École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris during an exchange with the University

BELOW: *The Greeter* 2000  
Video projection  
OPPOSITE: *The Tiny Kingdom*  
2001 Wood, mixed media  
4.11 x 1.21 x 1.21 m  
All photos courtesy  
Catriona Jeffries Gallery



## GREETINGS from Myfanwy MacLeod

by DEBORAH CAMPBELL



Deborah Campbell, 'Once Upon A Time', *Canadian Art*, Spring 2005



"Painting is a wonderful way of getting rid of the days," he replied.

*Anecdotes of Modern Art (Chapter 3) (detail) 2004 Gouache, pencil, text on vellum 46 x 61 cm Photo Scott Massey*

of British Columbia, where she completed her MFA under the artist Jeff Wall. It was at the prestigious French art school that her work was deemed "American," a dismissive designation even then. Shortly thereafter, she attended a lecture at the Sorbonne by Jacques Derrida, the legendary philosopher (recently deceased) whose name is synonymous with deconstructionism. Derrida saw everything—life, gestures, the diners at a restaurant—as a text to be deconstructed. As he spoke, MacLeod felt beneath the uncomfortable seats and noticed something amiss—no gum! How strange! How to interpret this text? Later, while visiting a posh Parisian gallery, she took a piece of gum and stuck it to the gallery wall. Deconstruct that!

Such was the genesis of *Gum Table*, a piece that involved chewing two thousand pieces of strawberry-flavoured Hollywood Chewing Gum—eight hours of chewing each day for a week—and sticking them to a table. Rather than fighting the brash stereotype of the vulgar North American, MacLeod gave it form. The work was exhibited in the U.K. in London in 1994 and a similar piece, *Gum Corner*, followed a Canada Council residency in Paris in 2000.

To complete the project, she sought out bulk chewing gum

at a French supermarket in the 16th arrondissement, known for its upscale clientele. Lining up at the checkout, she noticed a woman in a fur coat eyeing her purchase.

"It's for my husband," she said, conspiratorially.

"Really?" asked the woman.

"No," she replied.

These particular social sculptures are the last of their kind. After she broke a tooth completing the work, her dentist forbade her to continue. Anyway, she doesn't even like chewing gum.

"I think there's a strong sardonic, satirical element to what she does," says Scott Watson, a professor of art history and director of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, which purchased one of her sculptures, *Wood for the People*, a kind of stacked barricade of concrete logs that was used as a blockade at a Power Plant exhibit in Toronto. The university intends to install the piece outside this summer as public art—as soon as they can find a way to ensure its security. "Young intellectuals love destroying works of art," says Watson.

It was Watson who curated "6: New Vancouver Modern," an influential (even prescient) 1998 show at the Belkin featuring work by MacLeod and by Geoffrey Farmer, Damian Moppett,

## IT'S THE STORY OF AN ELEPHANT RETIREMENT HOME

Steven Shearer, Ron Terada and Kelly Wood. All have gone on to considerable acclaim (and all but Shearer are now represented by the dealer Catriona Jeffries).

"I think that what ties her to other artists of her generation is a caustic refusal of the highfalutin values of contemporary art while nonetheless making work that's quite rigorous and is very aware of minimalist and conceptualist models," says Watson. "She is one of a generation of artists in Vancouver who are making work at a level that can be shown internationally." In the past year her *Bungle in the Jungle* series of 25 pencil drawings, each captioned with a line from the Jethro Tull song of the same name, has been included in group shows in Gdansk, Poland, and, most recently, at the Kunstverein Wolfsburg in Germany.

At the Fortune Garden Restaurant on Broadway in Vancouver, waiters scurry to and fro while MacLeod and I eat chow mein and discuss the writer David Sedaris, whose quirky, anecdotal, autobiographical work has much in common with her own. Her satire employs humour to make serious points. It calls to mind, as well, the work of Jonathan Swift, the 18th-century author of *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*, which encouraged Irish famine victims to make the best of things by selling their babies as food to the rich. As with Swift and Sedaris, MacLeod's humour has a black streak that gets under the skin.

The piece that first put her on the map was *The Fountainheads* (1996), a cartoonish resin sculpture of a frog riddled with "bullet holes" from which water sprayed, the way it does when a cartoon character drinks a glass of water following a shootout. After it appeared at an artist-run gallery in her first post-grad school solo show, the Vancouver Art Gallery included it in the group show "Topographies: Aspects of Recent B.C. Art," where it became a hit. The sculpture led to *Redrum*, a series of watercolours depicting murderous frog capers.

In "A Brief Overview of Personology," a 2000 solo show curated by Cate Rimmer at Charles H. Scott Gallery in Vancouver, MacLeod parodied the self-help movement and incorporated a video installation of herself as *The Greeter*, one of those ubiquitous, irrationally cheerful customer-service people one hastens to avoid at stores like Wal-Mart or the Gap. The artist Kathy Slade wrote the catalogue essay for the show, which was partly inspired by the book *How to Make a Man Fall in Love with You*, wherein corporate psychology is applied to the mating

game. "To me it was an interesting crossover between something very personal—how to fall in love—and something that wasn't personal at all—a language alien to intimacy," says MacLeod.

*The Greeter* wasn't the only occasion for self-portraiture. For "Universal Pictures," the Canadian contribution to the Melbourne International Biennial in 1999, MacLeod played an art-world mascot. Wearing a three-metre-tall blue-haired costume based loosely on the anime character Sailor Moon and brandishing a Flintstones-style club, she portrayed the "artist as superhero." The biennial is the art world's "equivalent of the Olympics," she says, "the prize being recognition, marketability and success." On seeing her in mascot regalia, small children cried.

Mayhem reigned. Kitty Scott, who curated "Universal Pictures" and is now curator of contemporary art at the National Gallery of Canada, recalls donning the costume so MacLeod could photograph her running about the lawn of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, where the biennial took place. MacLeod was obsessed by the fruit bats indigenous to the area and couldn't stop talking about them. For his part, the artist Ron Terada added the words "What is...?" to the Centre's signage, turning it into an answer to a theoretical *Jeopardy!* question and juxtaposing it with his own text-based *Jeopardy!* paintings. Geoffrey Farmer completed the Vancouver trio's contribution by placing an enormous white station wagon (based on the one featured in *Poltergeist*) on the lawn as a component in a faux film set.

Film references run through MacLeod's work as well. A wooden outhouse entitled *The Tiny Kingdom*, now in the National Gallery's collection, is a "cinematic readymade," says Kitty Scott. It was inspired by the movie *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, in which the outdoor "lavatory" is mistaken for the inventor's "laboratory" and airlifted to the kingdom of Vulgaria. It also conjures up ideas of artistic creation—is it art or is it shit?

Is it conceptual art? Not in a pure sense, since the work exists outside the realm of ideas. "It goes without saying that every work since conceptualism has to have an idea behind it," says the artist. "But I try to make my work more transparent, so you can see the story on the surface."

"MacLeod is certainly one of the most significant artists in Canada working today," says Reid Shier, now chief curator at Toronto's Power Plant. "She satirizes what it means to be an artist by looking at the social environment of the artist and people who make their living from the art world. I think a lot of her work examines the role of the individual within larger social structures. She's an iconoclast and some of her work poses questions about



*Don't Stop Dreaming* 2004. Speakers, CD, carpet, c-print 6 min loop

individuals who don't fit within social preconceptions. Her work analyzes relationships between the individual and the art world as a microcosm of larger social structures."

*Anecdotes of Modern Art*, a new series of drawings exhibited at the 2004 Toronto International Art Fair, offers an absurdist take on artists' careers and ambitions. Many of her drawings have incorporated ironic texts, and this series pulls phrases directly from the book after which the piece is titled. Some of the drawings were inspired by John Huston's 1952 film *Moulin Rouge*, others by *From Hell*, a film about Jack the Ripper featuring Johnny Depp, and yet others by 19th-century vaudeville acts. A drawing of a man pulling a cart containing skulls and bones from the catacombs of Paris, based on a Nadar photograph, is captioned, "Painting is a wonderful way of getting rid of the days," he replied." Beneath a drawing of a row of men wearing cabaret skirts with tuxedo shirts and bowler ties, high-kicking like showgirls, is the text: "A painter...Is painting a respectable profession?" In another, Jack the Ripper leaves a woman lying prostrate on the ground, his caped back receding as he

walks away. Below is the delicious caption: "Painting is no problem, the problem is what to do when you're not painting."

MacLeod has observed a marked Victorian, gothic sensibility—murky, macabre, sexual—in the practices of a younger generation of Vancouver artists: Geoffrey Farmer's *Hunchback Kit* and Dickensian *Blacking Factory*, Alex Morrison's *Housewrecker* video installation, Brian Jungen's whale skeletons assembled from stackable plastic chairs; and of course her own productions.

Opening her cabinet of curiosities—from which tumble folk tales, horror films, French children's stories, anecdotes from art history and the subtext and rhetoric of popular culture—she tells me a story that may underpin a future show. It's the story of an elephant retirement home in Tennessee, where Shirley, who has a gimpy leg, meets up with Jenny. Both were elephant performers in the same circus troupe many years before. Now retired, the pair take long strolls together, their trunks intertwined.

"Art is a lie that makes us realize truth," said Picasso, "at least the truth that is given us to understand." ■