Dream-work

Jocelyne Alloucherie is one of those rare artists who, while fully aware of artistic trends, has developed a singular vision that speaks to us by tapping into some of our deepest and most ancient – in the sense of belonging to the primitive and affective parts of the brain – sense of place. Like Proust's madeleine, the little cake that provokes a torrent of memories and associations in the mind of the central character of his *Remembrance of Things Past*, her works combine the most insignificant material triggers with a sophisticated understanding of what to say and what to leave unspoken. That is to say, since hers is a visual and tactile language, she reveals and conceals with theatrical precision, offering, through her carefully situated images, provocative glimpses of places long forgotten or never even imagined.

One of the important underlying insights in Jocelyne Alloucherie's body of work is the understanding that flux and change lie at the core of our being in the world. Images of mobility are embedded in the formal and referential structures of her work: on the one hand, the quasi-architectural, three-dimensional elements that create a path for the viewer, constantly shifting our perspective of the whole as we thread our way through a work; and on the other, the mobility of the images themselves, each carrying the last one further, like the development of a musical idea. The nomadic rhythms of her work, re-enacted in the experience of the viewer, embody the contradictory elusiveness of any experience of place: its vastness and its intimacy, its immediacy and its evocative associations, its foreignness and its familiarity – in sum, the oscillation between human perception and memory as they reach out to encompass the world, and all that lies beyond and within.

Beyond mobility, however, lie other strategies that assist the artist in her quest to invest the formal elements of her work with meanings that go beneath the surface of an image or structure. Three in particular come to mind because they traverse the entire body of work she has created: discontinuity, reduction or generalization, and displacement. Discontinuity is evident in the structure of what she refers to as her "configurations"; eschewing a continuous linear movement through the work, she introduces breaks and gaps that cause the viewer to pause and realign his or her passage. It is a slowing down common to all contemplation, but it also evokes the mental activity of remembering; our memories rarely consist of more than fragments of the past that return to mind. Our task, then, to find the narrative thread that links them together.

Alloucherie's use of generalization and displacement brings the viewer still closer to the symbolic charge of her work. Indeed, the quasi-abstract character of her work has a dreamlike quality that is the result of this activity, which has been developed both deliberately and intuitively in the course of her artistic practice. Her photographs, while sharing the indexical relationship to reality of all photographic images, are devoid of anecdote. Instead, she has sought extremes of light and shadow that strip away inconsequential detail, or framed her subjects so tightly that their original context is displaced in favour of an unfamiliar, psychic landscape. Yet at the same time, the surfaces of her three-dimensional elements are intensively worked so that in spite of their minimalist forms they have a sensual presence that offers a counterpoint to her images, which often appear to be on the verge of disappearing.

Displacement completes the symbolic transformation. It is evident in the constant slippage between the image and the object in her work; in the gap between the visible world of the photographs and the bodily memory of her sculptural or architectural elements. On a deeper level, Alloucherie looks for the strangeness that will allow the landscape to become a mirror that reflects the intensity of psychic experience.

Although consciously elaborated, these strategies have strong affinities with the unconscious processes that Sigmund Freud analyzes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In his chapter on the dream-work, the pioneer psychoanalyst distinguishes between the manifest dream content – what we remember of a dream – and the dream thoughts, which are the dream's latent or deep content. The dream achieves its minimalist, fragmentary form not through forgetting, as is commonly assumed, but according to Freud, through "the tremendous work of condensation that has been achieved."[1] In addition to condensation, "a psychic force expresses itself in the dream-work" through "a transference and displacement of the psychic intensities of the individual elements" of the dream content, giving the dream its feeling of strangeness.[2] It is not necessary to attempt to establish any direct connection between dreams and their content and Jocelyne Alloucherie's works; suffice it to note that her appeal to bodily memory and search for a mythic dimension to the image are grounded in intuitions about the hidden sources of psychic life that inform her artistic vision.

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With *Climates*, Alloucherie has created an "imaginarium of the north" that lies between fiction and reality, continuing the exploration of extreme and inhospitable landscapes that she had initiated with her earlier *Sirens* [note to translator: *Sirènes*] and *Waves* [note: *Lames*]. Made up of three separate trajectories through the exhibition space composed of photographs and related sculptural elements – *Land of Mist*, *Land of Blood*, and *Land of Snow* [note: *Terre de brumes, Terre de sang, Terre de neige*] – *Climates* immerses the viewer in a sublime universe of looming, mist-shrouded icebergs and violent, spectral storms. It is a disturbing world, full of foreboding, and, above all, inhuman in its louring, empty presence. Alloucherie's pure white, quasi-architectural elements, part wall, part promenade, offer, in their measured rhythms and protective defences, the only human foothold here.

Climates, then, is as much about feeling as about place. It translates the vague sense of fear and alarm many today have about our changing environment – melting icebergs, rising water levels, extreme and unpredictable weather events – into shapes and images that materialize the deep source of that fear. It comes from the awareness that has been forced upon us of being irrevocably uprooted, of belonging nowhere, of having no home. The icebergs that once downed the mighty ship Titanic and later served as an attraction for tourists off the northern coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland now scare us with their imminent disappearance. They have become in our imagination markers of a long temporal interval that threatens to close. In the exhibition, the brooding images of these giants, lined up along a wall, are confronted with their double: a low, segmented wall inlaid with panes of handmade, frosted glass that pushes up, uncomfortably close, to the photographs as if to block them from view or, perhaps, to pull us even closer. Peering through the glass, their image is distorted. It is not about us, yet it is all about us.

The photographs that make up *Land of Snow* and, in particular, *Land of Blood* are, without a doubt, a major accomplishment [note: tour de force] in the context of Alloucherie's work. Such images of nature disturbed have instilled fear in humans since the beginning of time, yet artists struggle to make their full intensity real. To simply photograph a storm, as we know from The Weather Channel, distances it; it becomes someone else's weather, not ours. Alloucherie's images are composites, part photograph, part drawing, re-photographed and produced on a monumental scale. Using coloured sands gathered from the banks of the St. Lawrence river – that vast estuary pushing into the continent that brought the Europeans with it – she draws by blowing sand over the image, as though by the wind. It is a controlled, delicately calibrated performance that

belies the violence of the image it produces. The result is close-up images of impending destruction, such as might be glimpsed from the deck of a ship before seeking shelter. In counterpoint to this amorphous imagery, the fragmentary three-dimensional structures of *Land of Blood* open and close before us, welcoming and distancing us from this inhuman chaos.

Sand is a material that Jocelyne Alloucherie knows well; it was the substrate of her first installation at the Musée du Québec in 1973 and since then has appeared in many of her works as a sculptural element. Granular and crumbling, it resists form; it is a metaphor for the fleeting nature of time and the folly of human dreams of permanence; geographically, it could be described as the material memory of place. Yet it appeals to her for its fragility and fluidity; long before the images in this exhibition were made she had noted the similarity of its grain and that of the photograph, observing that "it makes and breaks form at will" and speaking with obvious pleasure of its ability to "suddenly combine once again, allowing images to surge forth."[3] Surely they have never surged forth with such eloquence as they do in these works.

Drawing back from the level of detail and specificity of place that the materiality of sand affords, we can catch a glimpse of an ongoing narrative in Alloucherie's œuvre, seen as a whole. One of her earliest sculptural forms was a succession of framed openings, suggesting a path to follow; then, towards the end of the 1970s, came a rudimentary structure that could be understood as a primitive shelter or dwelling-place, a mere roof with four supporting pillars. Later, a vision of the garden was articulated that would recur in her work in various forms, both those of the East and of the West. In subsequent work, she merged collective and personal memory in her exploration of the oscillating relationship of the protective interior and outside world and the antimonies of near and far.

The built environment entered her work obliquely, through intimate images of shadows registered on walls and pavement. This work led her to reflect on the mythical space of the labyrinth, whose very form is structured by indeterminacy, and to contrast the negative place it holds in the imagination of the West with the certainty and expansionist vision of "a West that defined itself from the beginning as the Navel of the world."[4] It was followed by urban streetscapes – a misleading description, perhaps, for these upwardly skewed images that reveal only sky, framed by the angular silhouettes of lofty buildings. Precarious images that seem deliberately intended to decentre the prevailing street-level view, they embody a nomadic gaze, as if the artist were making her way through the tall hedges of a labyrinthine garden with only the changing light of the sky to guide her.

A whole human history of desire is resumed in these images: a path, a shelter, a garden, a room from which to look out as well as inward and backward into the past, and a labyrinth that is a place of risk but also of opportunity. The present work embodies a new, though perhaps inevitable, sense of danger and loss through its violent images of a tumultuous nature beyond human control. Yet the rhythmic ebb and flow of Alloucherie's fictive storms, registered through the exquisite balance of an infinitely malleable material, a refined technology, and the artist's knowing gesture, speaks to the art of the storyteller, whose task is to reconcile the dark forces of nature with the human longing for a home.

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[1] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 3rd Edition, 1911 (1900) p. 93. PDF consulted online 6 July 2012.

[2] Freud, p. 101.

[3] Jocelyne Alloucherie, in conversation with Sylvie Parent, 1999, in *Jocelyne Alloucherie: Conversations et œuvres choisies (1993-1999)*, (Montreal: Éditions Parachute, 1999), p. 59.

[4] See Jocelyne Alloucherie, "Between Images and Objects," in *Jocelyne Alloucherie: Ombres*, exh. cat. (Montreal: Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2001), p. 25.