Paulette Phillips: The Secret Life of Criminals, Clues & Curiousities [catalogue]

Introduction

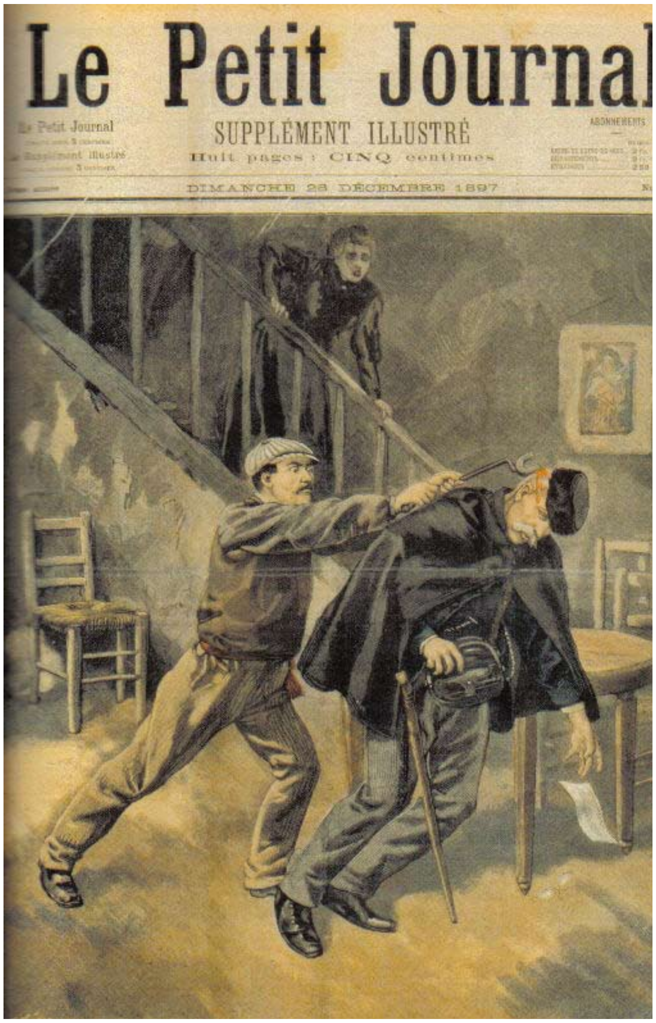
Mary Misner & Francine Perinet

Cambridge Galleries has enjoyed a shared enthusiasm with Oakville Galleries in mounting concurrent exhibitions and co-publishing the catalogue documenting the work of Paulette Phillips. The ongoing partnership between our institutions demonstrates our commitment to presenting challenging exhibitions of contemporary art through joint resources. Together our two venues have been programmed so as to give increased exposure to Paulette's compelling video and film installations —all created since 1999. By joining forces we have been able to magnify the artist's message and present her work to a wider audience.

Curator Gordon Halt of Cambridge Galleries spent many hours in conversation with the artist focussing on recent video installations which exhibit recurring themes and concerns of this Toronto-based artist's 20 year career. The images in this body of work are both gripping and troubling and will no doubt provoke much thought and discussion. Curator of Contemporary Art, Mamie Fleming has selected Paulette's installations at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens for their focus on particular historical events. Works such as Dogwood Pond, Smut and The Floating House all contain references to social histories which have, in turn, bolstered the artist's interests in emotional states of being, and narrative construction.

Cambridge Galleries gratefully acknowledges the ongoing assistance of the City of Cambridge, The Canada Council for the Arts, The Ontario Arts Council and Membership. Oakville Galleries is indebted to The Corporation of the Town of Oakville, The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Members of Oakville Galleries. We are grateful to them all for their support.

A special thanks is extended to Lewis Nicholson for his elegant design and to the writers Kathleen Pirrie Adams and Gordon Halt for their important contributions to the interpretation of Paulette's practice. Their essays take the reader to the many diverse realms explored by the artist.



At Oakville Galleries the presentation benefited from the diligence of Exhibition Coordinator, Shannon Anderson, as well as Installation Officer, Angelo Pedari for his expert services. Cambridge Galleries acknowledges the installation skills of David Popplow.

Our final thanks are reserved for Paulette Phillips, an artist whose work successfully ignites the power of our imaginations. She richly deserves our continued scrutiny and appreciation.

Mary Misner, Director, Cambridge Galleries Francine Perinet, Director, Oakville Galleries

Nature, Disaster, and the Sleight of Hand

Kathleen Pirrie Adams

“What we see as spectacle is in fact a ceremony.” Louis Malle

Nature no longer offers its wonders in the form of landscape. Only the deeper details that are revealed in microscopic images, or those of distant galaxies—which in their impossible scale also suggest miniaturization — have the power to elicit our awe. Cellular, fungal, galactic, sub-atomic, soupy: nature seems to have seduced us with an array of visible shapes and forms that turn out to be simply an alibi for its chaos-loving complexity.

Before Linnaeus successfully established his classification system in 1753, numerous efforts had been made by explorers, gardeners, alchemists and collectors to create a kind of understanding of nature that would do justice to its variety and marvelousness. John Tradescant the Younger was one of these figures. A British explorer from the early 1600s, Tradescant made four separate journeys to Virginia to collect samples for his curiosity cabinet, The Ark, which was eventually to become one of England’s first public museums. His trips also supplied him and his father, who was the “Keeper of his Majesty’s Gardens, Vines and Silkworms,” with rarities from the New World, a number of which found their way into the standard repertoire of the British gardener.

Paulette Phillips and Michael Buchanan’s Dogwood Pond, (2002)1 takes Tradescant’s story as its point of departure. Using a simply constructed pine cabinet which sits on top of its packing crate, Phillips and Buchanan playfully draw attention to the fact that Tradescant’s collecting efforts, although consciously aimed at fashioning a comprehensive picture of the wonders of the natural world, in fact created the conditions for mutation. As a boat glides through the swampy water surrounding a pond, chimeras appear in the bushes: a dog-faced trillium, a tarantula lily pad, a rock made of spongy living coral.

On the one hand, Dogwood Pond asks its audience to try to imagine the radically different ethos in which Tradescant lived. One in which nature offered a spectacle and novelty created wonder. On the other, it raises the question of where we stand in relation to the creation of comprehensive bodies of scientific knowledge and the desire for control implied by them. The beaver pelt lining of the cabinet draws attention to the colonial legacy that subtends this story by suggestively evoking the economy of the fur trade, thus adding emphasis to the fact that the British ecosystem mutated as a result of exposure to New World life forms.

While the monstrousness of the Dogwood Pond forms is essentially categorical, Smut (2004) takes up the question of the creation of the moral monster. Research into the history of crime photography led Phillips to the case of Xavier Carrara, an 19th century French mushroom farmer who murdered a loan collector, took his money, and then disposed of the body by incinerating it and sprinkling the remains over his mushroom crop. A fascination with the oblique link between the world of fungi and spoors—where the word smut has its origins — and that of the media’s role in spreading information that attracts prurient interest, held her attention there.

Our culture’s fascination with crime, with its seductive puzzles and familiar narratives, has developed in us a habit of looking at the crime scene like a forensic scientist. We sort through the elements of the scene in search of the one that will explain the mystery of what happened. We search for the truth-delivering detail. When we look at historical crime stories we tend to shift into the role of sociologist, asking what the specifics of the crime say about its society. What role did Carrara’s status as a farmer whose crop grew in filth, without sunlight, have in the case? How could justice be done with the press characterizing him in such clichéd term — linking social station to bestial impulses? What can we make of the paradox of the mushroom’s status as a delicacy for the upper classes which is grown in shit?

The abstractness of contemporary responses to crime which tends to forgo moral judgment in favour of the a-ha! moment of nailing the evidence or closing the case, is reflected in the materials and spatial relations Phillips works with in Smut. Fabricated mushrooms, a pile of ash animated by the rhythmic sounds coming from a speaker, and a chunk of fool's gold floating in mid-air create a representation of the incident that is ephemeral and inconclusive. Illustrations from the French newspaper Le Figaro documenting the crime at the time it occurred, although fascinating, do little to establish the certainty we seek from understanding. The horizon of the crime has no vanishing point. Murder remains incomprehensible and our understanding of it essentially inconclusive.

If the secret of criminal life is paradox, then perhaps Phillips's point is that the question of what is in evidence (in any given case) says little about what evidence itself is. In the video piece "It's about how people judge appearance." (2000), a woman walks along beside a wall, every few steps violently bashing her head against it. Almost unwatchable, the image takes hold in the imagination without invitation or welcome. Any desire to erase it seems only to drive it deeper. Obscene, but not necessarily criminal, the violence of "It's about how people judge appearance" nevertheless shares in the secret of Smut.

Like boxing, ("The Sweet Science of Bruising" as Joyce Carol Dates, following Muhammad AN, refers to it) self-abuse dramatizes, sometimes tragically, the limits of the physical. Of course it would probably seem counter-intuitive to suggest that the piece might be read as the image of an assertion or seeking of freedom. But for a woman of a certain age, a test of limits, an ordeal that separates self from the body, might have sometimes seemed to be the only crack through which agency, intention, or will could emerge. The lack of pathos or sense of the pathetic—the single-minded determination of the woman smashing her head against a brick wall —is as chilling as the act itself. The hoped-for happy ending of empowerment, nevertheless, remains as uncertain as the results of any other prize fight. For inside the paradox results are always random.

Ecstasy (2001) shows a striking-looking woman wandering aimlessly in the snow. She removes her fur coat, dress, tights and undergarments and lays naked in a field. There is no indication of how she got there, why she is dressed the way she is, what she is doing, or why. A complex story is reduced to a few elemental gestures.

The video provides the most descriptive treatment of a story that has haunted Phillips for years: a childhood memory that hovers around each work in The Secret Life of Criminals series. It seems that everyone has a memory of a such an event (often shockingly violent) that divides before from after. Irrespective of what one has seen in the home, it is this indirect encounter with victimization, rage, abjection, misfortune, or evil that makes the wider world present in one's mind. The trial of the parents of a child left for hours in a sealed car during an August heat wave; the murder-suicide of a suburban family; the dead body of a woman found months after her disappearance, naked in the snow, her clothes folded in a neat pile half a mile away... Disaster is not what happens to us or our surroundings. It occurs within. It is not just one of a range of possibilities, aspect of the star that, according to etymology, is the source of the calamitous event.

Cinema can hardly resist the magnetic attraction of certain scenarios. While photography favours the empty street, film is drawn to the dynamic rhythms of busy public spaces. Embracing this attraction, Crosstalk (2004) monitors the passage of a stream of pedestrians moving across an intersection. As they walk by, many turn to stare quizzically at something just above and beyond the point where the camera might be stationed. Their movement, or public behaviour, is ordinary, but their faces, which turn away from their inner thoughts as they gaze outward toward an unspecified scene, belie their concern about the event on the other side of the street.

The scene has an eerie feel that subtly connects it to the images of September 11th but is, in fact, as directly related to formal manipulation as to any referential aspect. Discomfort at the thought of a possible disaster on the other side of the screen is directly tied to the way in which Phillips has created an absence at the centre of this vignette through her use of the unfulfilled expectation of the audience that this shot will find completion in its reverse shot. That the corresponding scene which reveals the spectacle commanding the gaze of the passers-by is on display on a monitor an already familiar version of the real. Disaster is the outer limit of the thinkable. As remote as the unfavourable nearby doesn't really resolve the tension the video projection creates. The drama of the piece, it turns out, isn't really the result of particular events so much as the artist's perceptual sleight of hand.

Homewrecker (2004) offers another, not unrelated, staring match. In this piece, the face of a woman is seen intensely concentrating on a point in between the screen and the projector. In this space a small, barely discernible, spot hovers in mid-air. Like a diagram of a magic trick, the piece describes the idea of mesmerism without giving it a specific object. As if offering simultaneous commentary on psychology and art making, the piece demonstrates that, when dealing with the living scene, its structure can prove to be as important as what lives within.

Dogwood Pond's hybrid confusion of categories is echoed in The Floating House (2002), which presents an unusual combination of wood and water. An entrancing visual drama involving an iconographic Canadian farm house adrift in the blue-gray crook of a coastal bay, The Floating House offers no explanation for the reason why the structure (which is clearly not a boat) floats aimlessly and unpropelled, except by the movement of the water that threatens to consume it. Filled with the sounds of everyday domestic chatter, the house seems also to connect—albeit in an indirect way—with the rivetting dramas that animate many of the other pieces in Phillips's current body of work.

Without following the stylistic approach of melodrama, or its thematic preoccupation with suffering, sexual anxiety, or the conflict between individual desires and inflexible social structures, this image of the family home come unmoored is nevertheless suggestive of melodrama's emotional register, which includes a feeling of claustrophobia and veiled but irrefutable underlying tensions. (As exemplified by the classics of the genre: Imitation of Life, All That Heaven Allows, Stella Dallas, Dancer in the Dark...) The details of the domestic routines and struggles that animate family life, although hidden within the house, are manifest in general terms by the image of the house and through the noises that seep out of it.

Occasionally people actually see their homes float away, overwhelmed by natural forces. More often, families continue with their familiar routines while helplessly trying to ignore the rising tide of mental illness, suicidal feelings, alcoholism, infidelity, or related domestic disasters. In The Floating House it is, true to melodramatic form, the music that masterfully creates the installation's ambiance and guides our emotions in the face of this spectacle of sacrifice and oblivious sinking.

That one could drown unaware, or simply lay down and die, are human possibilities that stretch the imagination uncomfortably. So much so that they frequently create an ambivalence so strong that we feel inclined to take refuge in dehumanizing dismissals: Idiot! weakling! (The political corollary of this emotional tendency being the smug social Darwinism of the reactionary right.) The phrase "beating your head against a brick wall" occupies a space somewhere between this reckless lack of concern for survival and the obsession that can usher us into the realm of delusion.

For Phillips, these states of being, these emotional dramas, manifest an inescapable—and not entirely explicable—dimension of what it is to be human. Her refusal to render them as theatrical crisis not only gives each artwork's occupation of space priority over its temporal unfolding (thus requiring installation rather than screening), it also insists that we resist the temptation to solve the problem and accommodate ourselves to its sometimes uncomfortable lingering. When considered altogether, the works seems to make a plea for the neglected notion of the unconscious and ask us to admit the possibility of facing situations which a re not simple cases of misunderstanding or the not-yet-resolved. For when it comes to the secrets of criminals, of nature, or of disaster, we may, despite our most strenuous efforts, need to remain unreconciled.

Note

1 The work was commissioned by the Museum of Garden History in London, England, which asked twenty-three artists to use the lives of the people buried in the graveyard of the de-consecrated St. Mary-at-Lambeth church as the basis for an artwork.

The Secret Life of Criminals

Gordon Hall

Like a kaleidoscope the image multiplies, distorts and blends beyond recognition. In The Secret Life of Criminals (2000) the reflected video images of contortionist Jinny Jacinto's impossibly malleable legs twist and spiral up the inside of the cone and stretch until they seem to touch your nose. You are literally sucked into this woman's world, which is both familiar yet also so alien. Comprised of a stainless steel cone mounted over a small LCD screen, The Secret Life of Criminals has the appearance of a laboratory experiment. The viewer participates, looking through the cone at a putative criminal (as the title of this work invites you to believe) and becomes part of this experiment, to become both the investigator and the investigated, to lean over and look through the cone to see, and to become part of the image.1

Writer, performer, filmmaker, installation artist: Paulette Phillips has combined the varied facets of her art practice of twenty years to create The Secret Life of Criminals — a series of video installations that marry short dramatic performances and staged scenarios with the texture and three dimensionality of installation sculpture. The "apparatus of delivery" as Phillips call it—the projectors, the screens and supports — are the physical component of her work. These objects are not a mere media "means to an end" but are integral to her shaping our reception of her work. The apparatus of delivery is by turns disruptive or expressive, either confounding our habits of viewing or extending the metaphors and symbols of the recorded drama into real space.

Phillips's video installations disrupt traditional narrative structures and collapse the comfortable space we place between ourselves and the fictions we are invited to consider. Her fictions are, however, only half that —they are true stories heard, events seen and felt, investigations without resolution—facts that live large as both individual and collective apprehensions of the world. Influenced by the political theatre of Bertolt Brecht, and by contemporary theories of narrative, each work by Phillips is an essay into the space of the viewer.2 Each work is an attempt to blur the line between the observer and the observed, to compromise the viewer, to destabilize the leering, judgmental gaze and to engage us as inherently prurient—as both voyeurs and co-authors of the tragedies played out before us. Phillips invites us into scenarios and dramas and sculptural environments that penetrate our contentment and direct us to recall the source of our own compulsive narratives and adult anxieties. The viewer is never allowed the luxury of turning out the lights, to slump down in the anonymity of a dark viewing room to empathize with some tragic narrative, or to be swept away by the artful evocation of sublimity. We are instead constantly recalled to our physical circumstance, to our own position as observers and participants in the spectacle before us.

It is obviously staged, but that seems not to matter. The image is appalling just the same. "It's about how people judge appearance." (2000) is a flat panel video monitor, built into the wall and framed in pink faux ostrich skin leather. On screen, a woman walking in an alley approaches the concrete base of a loading dock. She deliberately, and with considerable force, proceeds to smash her own head against it. The camera follows her from the left as she steadies herself on the adjacent wall with her right arm and focuses on the concrete.

She is visibly counting:
One, she inclines forward, then pulls back.
Two, she inclines forward more strongly and again pulls back.
Three, she leans back sharply at the waist, closes her eyes and launches herself head-first into the concrete.
The action is accompanied by a sound — something like a pumpkin smashing or a watermelon dropped from a height — a sound that is very credibly that of a skull being crushed.

Phillips's unfortunate heroine bounces off the wall and the camera changes angle. We see her from the front now. She recoils and slumps to her knees with a bloody gash on her head. Steadying herself, she struggles to stand up, touching her hand to the wound. Phillips doesn't leave it at that, however. She plays out the scene twice more in different edits, before it is looped to begin again. You watch the loop once, twice, maybe three times before it becomes too much, and then you turn away. But of course the image remains.

Real and enacted violence directed at others is an ancient form of entertainment. Codified in folklore and myth, perfected as spectacle in the Roman games, rationalized as a source of wealth in professional sports and now a multibillion dollar corporate industry of film, television and electronic games, the representation of outwardly directed violence is an expression of the commonly held inner desire to strike out and to be decisively effective. We want to become superheroes. We recognize in our emotional responses to violence a primal desire for domination, a fantasy of freedom from coercion and an escape from feelings of powerlessness. Violence as spectacle plays a redemptive role in our popular culture and it is as American as apple pie, as Canadian as maple syrup, as common as dirt.

The image of a woman smashing her head against a wall remains indelible (forget the fact that she gets up and walks away in the end —this does not let her, or us, off the hook), as do many of Paulette Phillips's images, because that violence is self-inflicted. Self-directed violence, lacking the conventional de-sublimating energies associated with striking out, isn't widely consumed as entertainment. Buffoons and tragic heroes don't inflict injury on themselves—their injury is unintentionally the result of foolish neglect or unavoidable fate. We laugh at the buffoon, a subtle maliciousness, not far from violent fantasies of superiority and domination. We identify with tragic heroes mawkishly, as valiant characters like ourselves —comrades with whom we bravely, and at great sacrifice, strive against all odds. Clearly, "It's about how people judge appearance." recounts an unpleasant truth. Phillips's troubling image illustrates how far these fantasies of domination are from the lives we lead. Neither heroes nor buffoons, our demons are invisible and complex, as much the product of our own minds as invading foreign bodies. We pathologically internalize and nurture our psychic pain, obsess over our shortcomings, nurse our emotional injuries and repeatedly act out our dysfunctional narratives.[3] The subject lashes out, not at some other poor soul, but against the self, inflicting harm as a means of making emotional pain physical and visible—stimulating pain and denying pleasure to generate feeling and to stave off existential emptiness and hollowness.

Self-inflicted violence is an acting out of the text, " I feel like bashing my head against a wall," or "I want to injure myself," or even the milder and seemingly innocuous, "I want to deny myself pleasure." It is not a frustration against the outside, it is a revolt of the inside. Even if it doesn't present itself in such dramatic terms as head bashing, it may be more commonly manifest in, say, the refusal to participate in something that might be pleasurable or beneficial, or risky behaviour that verges on the reckless.

On another level, Phillips's protagonists are invariably female, part of the profile of the typical victim of self-directed violence. Making bad choices and repeat offending is clearly a universal malaise, but the particular masochism of self-injury represented by Phillips in her work speaks to us of a pathology most often associated with women and victims of sexual abuse. Andrea Dworkin provides a troubling narrative to this particular gender dysphoria:

The female life-force itself is characterized as a negative one: we are defined as inherently masochistic; that is, we are driven toward pain and abuse, toward self-destruction, toward annihilation—and this drive toward our own negation is precisely what identifies us as women. In other words, we are born so that we may be destroyed. Sexual masochism actualizes female negativity, just as sexual sadism actualizes male positivity.[4]

Or maybe not. Dworkin's pessimism leaves out the possibility for agency and makes all women out to be victims, while Phillips marvels at the motivation of her protagonists—that they are not frozen by their lives but moved to act in such a dramatic, if self-destructive, fashion.

0 sublime Goddess!
0 naked oneness!
What is the meaning of your nakedness?
Are you shameless. Divine Lady?
Yet even when discarding royal silks, and golden ornaments for earrings, bracelets, and anklets
fashioned from human bone,
you retain the dignity of bearing suited
to the daughter of a king.s

In the video installation Ecstasy, (2001) two asynchronous videos follow the progress of a woman walking in a snowy and barren industrial lot. Presented on a glass shelf, the image on the left is projected on its surface from above, while on the right another image appears on an adjacent LCD which sits in a depression in the glass. The projected image on the left focuses on the woman's journey, while the LCD images follow the ground, passing over the snow and the rocks and the stalks of dead grasses that crunch underfoot. The LCD image feels like a monitor — it operates the way our eyes scan the ground, like an extension of the self, a material sensor for where we are in the world. The projection, by contrast, feels like a narrative or a myth. It has the warm glow of the projected image, a reality even more ephemeral than the hardwired LCD screen.

We follow the image of the woman in the heavy coat and hood who emerges from the tall reeds. She tosses her hood back and loosens her coat to hang from her shoulders, and then to slide down her arms. She pulls the coat tightly around her, takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, then kneels down, pressing her forehead into the snow. She rolls on to her back, gathers fistfuls of snow on to herself, then spreads her arms and legs to make a snow angel.

We watch her get up, slip off her coat, carefully fold it and place it on the ground. She removes her gloves and boots, places them beside her coat and begins to walk again, untying her hair and shaking it out. She removes her dress, her tights and her underwear, and lies down on her side in the snow, where she remains motionless. The LCD on the right holds this image—an image of a reclining (or is it recumbent?) woman who is "nude" and who seems to have become part of the landscape, while the projected image frames from above a woman who is "naked," lying in the snow, zooming in on the head, zooming out, zooming in again like the subject of some television homicide drama, then panning the ground and the tall grasses and the sky to begin the loop again. On the right and left the images overlap at the point where the woman and the ground appear to have become one.

Presenting the two images on the shelf, Phillips makes this narrative at once mythic and intimate. She illustrates a story the way one might imagine it taking place. She illustrates the prosaic detail of the woman making a snow angel. She undresses — not in a theatrical manner, but as one would undress before bed, privately, at the same time folding clothes and putting them away. As spectators and voyeurs we lean over the table on which this story is played out for us, shifting our attention from left to right and back again, from the mythic narrative on the left to the physical detail — "what is known" — the discovery of a body, her neatly folded clothes, and the cold hard ground which has become the theatre for this final sleep.

As an eight year old child in Halifax, the report of the discovery of the body of a naked woman in a nearby wood lot made an impact on Phillips. Decades later she researched the unexplained death of the woman who, according to some accounts, was "known to take off her clothes." Like Phillips's protagonist in " It's about how people judge appearance." her mythic heroine in Ecstasy is pushed (or pushes) to the edge of her existence, the place where life and its absence are closest. If the former work makes reference to clinical self-inflicted violence and masochism, the latter is less clear. Is this woman the author of her demise, or a victim? Was her walk in the snow as Phillips imagined it, or is this just a convenient fiction fabricated to make a terrible reality comprehensible? Marginalised, dislocated, dispossessed, Phillips's heroine is, perhaps, a woman who, abandoned by the world, simply returned to the earth.

0 Mother of the Universe,
this child is terrified by your naked truth,
your unthinkable blackness, your sheer infinity.
Please cover your reality with a gentle veil.[6]

"It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity,' a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic'."[7] Windows, picture frames and video screens are portals between physical and psychic spaces. We look through windows to connect to other worlds. As a literary convention, the view from the window can establish the space for the first person narration of the memory of another time and place, or of a dream. So it is that Paulette Phillips's video projection. The Floating House (2002), begins with the view of a bay as if one were looking out a kitchen window. Across the water, on a drizzly overcast day, a small clapboard house with a brand new cedar-shingled roof drifts into view. It passes in and out of the picture frame in a series of edits—sometimes closer, sometimes further away. A droning cymbal and voices—children and adults— and the chirping and squawking and barking of animals accompany the house on its voyage.[8]

The image of the floating house engages two large metaphors of feeling. Houses, frequently the subject of children's art, are often understood as a representation of the self. The representation of the house—its structure, functionality and stability—may be an indication of a fragmented or integrated personality and may reveal feelings of well-being or fears of loss, exposure or dysfunction. Water can mean many things, but it is often symbolized as either a source of life or its all-consuming opposite —deep, dark and unfathomable nature. Water can trigger deep fears of engulfment, submersion and drowning. In Phillips's work, water clearly plays both roles. A house floating on the water is both a dream and a disaster. It is a dream of freedom, of disembodiment — to float aimlessly, to be part of the world, to be in the world, but detached and above it at the same time. Rootless, adrift, the floating house is the ego in full flight from necessity, a meditative state, perhaps like that of a dervish, a feeling of eternity, like Rolland's "oceanic" state to which Sigmund Freud makes reference.9

The house comes into closer focus and we can observe the details in the windows. The window coverings move in the wind in a ghostly fashion, as though someone is pulling them aside to look out, and we scour the windows anxiously for signs of life. The sound track suggests the sounds of a family life that may have once fill this home. The building lists forward perilously, as the water reaches up to the bottom of the window sash. The camera tracks around the structure and the gentle bobbing feeling gives way to a slow but powerful spinning. The water appears choppier, darker, menacing, and the windows begin to fill with water. In the first part of the video, the house gently bobs across the bay. There is something magical and slightly absurd about this house that is cut loose from its foundations to be carried by the current. Quickly, however, the aimlessly drifting house appears to be have been sucked into a whirlpool. The water changes from buoyant and supporting to ravaging and consuming.

The absurdity of a house floating languidly in a bay calls to mind the similar, strangely beautiful absurdity of the woman in Ecstasy who removes her clothes to lie naked in the snow. Like the way we unconsciously touched our hand to our foreheads after watching "It's about how people judge appearance." we root for the little house, identify with it—feel a sinking feeling as we watch it fill up with water and discharge its human artifacts to float on the surface. It seems only natural to identify with it as a container of human feeling and to pity its loss.

But for a brief moment all logic is suspended and we imagine that these things are not only possible, but also desirable. We are children again. We can cut loose our ties to the earth and drift away. We can shed our clothes and play naked in the snow. Then we are seized as Phillips's protagonists are engulfed by nature. We are consumed by their demise the way we are transfixed by any disaster, no matter where it takes place. We watch, not because we love to, but because we feel we must. We watch, because we are implicated as both conspirators and victims. We watch because we are part of this laboratory experiment. We watch because the creator and the destroyer demands it.

Is my Mother Kali really black?
People say Kali is black,
But my heart doesn't agree.
If She's black,
How can she light up the world?
Sometimes my Mother is white,
Sometimes yellow, blue, and red.
I cannot fathom Her.
My whole life has passed trying.
She is Matter,
Then Spirit,
Then complete Void.111

— Gordon Hatt
Curator, Cambridge Galleries

Notes

[1] The Secret Life of Criminals was in part inspired by The Female Offender, by C. Lombroso and W. Ferrero, published in 1903, a book which attempted to categorize and define the physical traits of female criminals.

[2] Cf. Among others Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” Image, Music, Text., Ed. and trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill, 1977, where it is suggested that a narrative is an ‘intransitive’ function, and that insofar as any meaning is to be made, it is made by the reader, not by the ‘author.’

[3] See Freud, “the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed” (18.20), in Felluga, Dino. “Modules on Freud: Transference and Trauma.” Introductory Guide to Critical Theory. [Last updated Nov. 28, 2003]. Purdue University. [Accessed December 26, 2003]. -http://www.purdue.edU/guidetotheory/psychoanalysis/f reud5.html ••. References are from Freud, Sigmund. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Trans. James Strachey. 24 vols, London: Hogarth, 1953-74.

[4] Andrea Dworkin, Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics, 1975. ••http ://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/OurBloodin.htmk.

[5] Kali is “The hungry earth, which devours its own children and fattens on their corpses ... It is in India that the experience of the Terrible Mother has been given its most grandiose form as Kali. But all this and it should not be forgotten is an image not only of the Feminine but particularly and specifically of the Maternal. For in a profound way life and birth are always bound up with death and destruction.” Elizabeth U. Harding, Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar, Nicolas Hays: 1993.

•”http://www.geocities.com/Area51/5hadowlands/5229/kali/kali.htmk and Rama Prasada, Devotional Songs: The Cult ofShakti, (1718-75), published in 1966 by Sinha Pub. Calcutta.
[6] Ibid.

[7] Sigmund Freud, citing his famous correspondence with Romain Rolland in Civilization and its Discontents, 1930. -http://www.freud.org.uk/religion6.html-.

[8] The Floating House was drawn from an oral account of the memory of being relocated in Newfoundland from a remote fishing community in an outport to a planned community with amenities. Conversation with the artist, December 31, 2003.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1769-1821).