

**The Ironic Turn Conference**  
**The Bauhaus, Weimar, Germany July 2003.**  
**Janet Jones, Department of Visual Arts, York University, Toronto, Ontario.**

**Artist Presentation:**

**Title: *Painting Feminist Geography: Urban Drifts***

I have always loved to “drift” through the streets, alone, in the core of a big city: Montreal, New York, Toronto. From the time I was 'let loose' as a young woman it was my sign of freedom, I was unreachable, my coordinates unknown. But, even in my naiveté I realized I was being watched, I was part of a cat and mouse game. At times I was afraid but there was also a perverse pleasure in testing the limits of safety, in transgressing the boundaries. In my initial forays, as a young woman, I was a flaneuse, entranced by the ebb and flow of the crowd but more importantly dazzled by the commodities on display. Different from the flaneur, mostly because I too was on display and gazed upon by the flaneur. But now, as I circumvent these spaces I gather evidence, I am a spy in enemy territory perhaps still in the guise of the flaneuse but well aware that I am acting a part. I try to blend in, to become homogenous with the crowd.

Panopticonic space has extended beyond the prison to everywhere and we may now find comfort in the thought that we are being watched. The airport, the most intense site of scrutiny, brings there to here; becoming the new zone of conflict in our attempt to contain the boundaries, stop the flow. As Virilio writes, the airport plan'...has become a function of the risks of 'terrorist contamination' and the disposition of sites conceived of as sterile zones for departures and nonsterile zones for arrivals". ("The Overexposed City", p.10 *The Lost Dimension*). As we travel through cities we are primarily watched not by the desiring flaneur who entered the urban scene in Baudelaire's 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris but by the electronic all seeing eye of the surveillance camera.

Now that the boundaries between the real and the virtual have become fluid, we can no longer think about these spaces in a binary way. They blur in our imaginations and memories. In this fluid space, places and events from everywhere merge with our lived experience. The public invades the private as media images from elsewhere cast their electronic glow across our living spaces. Are these images of real events? Are they staged? Are they digitally altered? Is this information or misinformation? But what we now may realize as we look at images of the 'other', somewhere, over there, out there, far away that they are us and there is here. Space has collapsed as near and far have ceased to exist.

Utopia when translated from the Greek means nowhere. Instead of conjuring up a place of unimaginable perfection or, in contrast, dystopia, place has become unanchored, drifting and interfacing. Our sense of place is vanishing. Here is the same as everywhere - the MacDonald's in Beijing looks and tastes the same as the MacDonalds down the street - as international capital colonizes the world, stamping out the local or making it into an 'exotic' tourist commodity to be bought and sold. People have become urban nomads, at best traveling from job to job their dismantled possessions ready to be set up yet again. Why else is the IKEA parking lot always full? The word 'Home' creates longing for another place another time- a romantic notion - anyplace but here, any time but now.

My paintings begin from the hundreds of black and white photographs I take when traversing the city. These function as my sketches. I am particularly drawn to public spaces that are traditionally the site of male dominated corporate and institutional power; bank towers, headquarters for multi-national corporations, and the underground passage-ways that control the flow of people and link the skyscrapers. I soon came to realise that these spaces, as non-places, both everywhere and nowhere, are reminiscent of all of the futuristic utopian and dystopian images of the city, from its imagined perfection in H.G. Wells' *Things to Come* to William Gibson's cyber-punk dystopia, *Ciba City*. In this kind of space,

photographing also becomes a transgressive act done with the knowledge I am under electronic surveillance; surveying the surveyors, moving faster than the security guards.

*Panorama* oil on canvas - 6' X 10" 1999

These paintings were begun at the residency Women and Paint at the Banff Centre for the Arts. Instead of responding to the natural environment that tends to fill everyone's vision, I chose to photograph the details of the interior of Banff Centre for the Arts - a series of modernist, institutional buildings. Unlike my other photographic experiences I was free to dwell on the overly familiar, to ponder the uncanniness of the everyday, to feel horror in the sterility of the white and chrome washrooms, to see the world through my view finder, to creep and edge myself through the florescent light and shadow. The extreme horizontal format and the title of these paintings reference and subvert the traditional panoramic landscape shot so popular in the history of Banff.

My reason for choosing a small segment of a photographic image to paint and manipulate from the many possibilities is determined by my ability to construct a narrative connected to the photograph. But this narrative is of a very particular kind – it always contains an event, an outbreak, a transgression, a release from the quiet and deathly sterility of these environments. The event attempts to shatter control and logic, to put into contention power relationships. I try to keep the occurrence open for interpretation and not pinpoint a specific incident, country or socio/political situation. The event happens everywhere, and nowhere-simultaneously.

The monochrome gray scenes in my paintings function like sets to be infiltrated and rendered chaotic. The quality of the event changes subtly from painting to painting and is best understood by a close look at the coloured shapes that float across the surface. They are subtle, minimal and covert. They elude to, perhaps

what I want to happen, perhaps what I fear will happen, perhaps what is already happening, perhaps all of the above.

*Nowhere, Everywhere 30" x 10'*

Lately, in the group of paintings *Nowhere, Everywhere*, these narratives have extended beyond the boundaries of the nonplaces of super modernity. The here has been superimposed on the elsewhere, images experienced mutating into those known only through electronic transmission.

I see the surface of my paintings as hovering somewhere between screen and skin, caressed by my touch but with no tracking of the hand/brush visible. The colour is purposefully fake. Life has turned into still life, frozen on the screen, reflected in glass, observed, recorded, transmitted, digitized. Seductive in its virtual perfection. Beautiful but dead.

In all of these paintings, the implied narrative coupled with the intense colour and more importantly the extreme contrasts of light and dark evoke the sublime but not the sublime in nature, seen in the work of late 19<sup>th</sup> century painters such as Friedrich and Turner. Now that nature has been observed, measured, subjected to experiments and tabulated as part of the enlightenment project, it may retain its beauty but not the sense of terror or awe intrinsic to any definition of the sublime. In our ability to evoke this emotion 'god' has been replaced by 'man'. Within the modernist paradigm, man's technological achievements have become sublime. The atom bomb exploding, a cruise missile striking its target, can, in a schizophrenic way, divorced from the real, from lived experience, evoke the techno-sublime. But in assuming this role of 'god' have we become May Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein? In part, I hope my paintings help to ignite this question.