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VISUAL ARTS

Review

Ladies on Lady

Six Calgary artists re-imagine the Statue of Liberty

TAKING LIBERTIES

By Elizabeth Clark, Celia Meade, Cecilia Gossen, Kim Bruce, Isabelle Hunt-Johnson, Louise Williamson.
Opening Reception Thu, May 25, 7-10 pm. Through June 17, Harcourt House Arts Centre (3rd Floor, 10215-112 St.) Info: 426-4180, www.harcourthouse.ab.ca

Perhaps it makes sense that a group of artists from that most American of Canadian cities would choose an icon of U.S. idealism as a departure point for a group show.

"*Taking Liberties* is meant to be a multidisciplinary, contemporary interpretation of Lady Liberty," explains Calgary artist Louise Williamson. "We all work in different mediums, and at one time we all were at the Burns Visual Arts Society, the longest running arts group in Alberta, with a 25 or 30-year history. We were talking about the Statue of Liberty one day, and we decided to do work around her and inspired by her and see if we could show it together."

The only real boundary was that the work must remain "more tongue-in-cheek. We wanted something humorous, not a serious cultural critique or anything anti-US," adds Williamson (*God & Country*, the show running alongside *Taking Liberties*, by Ontario artists Scott Sawtell and Matt Bahen, takes an unapologetically critical view on US policy and American militarism).

The whimsical tone of the show shouldn't imply a "dumbing down" on the part of the artists, who approached Lady Liberty with investigative rigorousness that included an appreciable amount of research on their large subject. "We kept getting excited when one of us came across another piece of information. There was a lot of history and a lot going on."

The artists range in background, age, and preoccupations, and their work reflects their broad differences.

"Elizabeth Clark used 'clothing as metaphor' as kind of her theme," says Williamson of Clark's mixed media work of the Lady's "bulletproof vest made out of tampons." Colleague Celia Meade recently moved to Australia, but her enormous panoramic photo-collage has a fatigued Lady asleep on the Brooklyn Bridge, torch snuffed out, "oblivious to transgressions against liberty" potentially threatening the country and planet.

Responding to data suggesting that the majority of American carry a mental picture of the Statue as blonde-haired and blue-eyed, Cecilia Gossen created triptych wooden relief sculptures showing the Lady as an African American, American Indian, and a redhead, each engaged in much more modern activities than bearing a torch in a toga. Williamson relates, "They are almost like Byzantine altar pieces—very colourful, with different things attached to them, like a corset that actually does up."

Drawing on her architectural training, Kim Bruce's wax encaustics include images of blueprints of the Statue that "are representational of the 12 Steps up to Liberty and the underlying foundation." *Modernizing Liberty*

biologically rather than architecturally is the focus of Isabelle Hunt-Johnson's pieces, beautiful watercolours overlaid with diagrams and notes for plastic surgery designed to bring the Lady up-to-date with today's beauty ideals.

Louise Williamson's contribution involves "a fiction I made up. The Statue has so many symbolic features, and some symbolism is a topic of speculation. There are seven rays in her diadem, and they actually mean, in reality, the seven seas dividing the seven landforms of the earth."

Williamson relates, "I pretended that the sculptor, Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, had a vision and underwent a profound spiritual conversion. His vision was about the Seven Deadly Sins [from Catholic theology], and I imagined the rays as representing those."

Embroidered tea towels display a tableau of Lady Liberty beholden to each sin. "It's meant to be like something you'd buy in a gift shop. Surreal and kitschy," she explains.

Williamson reflects on the show's intent and the challenge of separating a nation's symbol from the nation. "We think of her as an archetype. She's such a symbol of hope and new beginnings, and we wanted to see how she could be taken in different ways. Deconstructing and reconstructing, in a way that wasn't nasty towards the U.S., meant we could engage in more of a humorous second look."

CHRISTA O'KEEFE

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