

Marisa Portolese, Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Montreal, September 18 to October 23, 2010

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Pietà, 2010, video still, 15 min 26 sec

Marisa Portolese

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While acclaimed Montreal-based photographic artist Marisa Portolese has always used people she knows as subjects in her work, her new photographic series, *Dream Weavers* (of which this show, “Pietà,” is a stand-alone excerpt), marks something of a departure. Here, she turns inwards, essaying an up-close-and-personal narrative involving members of her own family while constructing a poetic meta-narrative that is rife with feelings, memories, and the numinous.

Portolese has always been interested in the problem of empathy. Where better to experience empathy or its lack than in the family? Arguably, her whole preceding corpus has prepared her for this: shining a commemorative light on her own family history. She has always evinced an empathic relationship with her subjects, and this comes across thematically and liminally in her portraits. Now, in “Pietà,” her para-fictional narrative has an empathic thrust and necessarily operative overtones without succumbing to the baroque or melodramatic. Specifically, she focuses on the role of women within the family, and she does not shy away from intimate matters, autobiographical con-

cerns, and the complex relationship between mother and child.

“Pietà” includes small-, medium-, and large-scale colour photographs together with a video portrait (the aforementioned *Pietà*, 2010) presented as a projection. It is an ambitious and intuitively true dilation on the politics of the family and, like much of her work, eschews anything like a familial idyll in favour of a palimpsest fraught with both shadows and luminous talismans freed from the temporal and grounded in terrifically moving imagery. She courageously confronts and “works through” on a dual band – in the sense of both a creative feminist praxis and a deeply felt, self-analytic, no-holds-barred endeavour – the most difficult issues relating to gender, identity, displacement, and abandonment. She sifts through the tangled skein of complex connections, conflicts, alliances, losses, and attendant mourning endemic to family life with a deft, restrained touch. This empathic archaeology of her own family history is a poignant attempt to create an open and multi-tiered imaginative, mnemonic, and memorial space in which there are equal measures of emotional truth and aura-laden atmospherics, inviting the viewer to cross the threshold and linger there a while.

The images are juxtaposed with telling authority. For instance, *Calabria* (2010), with its commemorative ethos, speaks to *A Descent into the Maelstrom* (2010), an image of Portolese lying on the ground with her



mother at her side. The proximity is protective, and yet her mother wears an introspective expression, subtly persuading us that she is laying a wreath of remembrance there. Portolese offers a particularly stirring and stratified treatment of the complex relationship between self and other, mother and child, that, as she says, is necessarily “one of rupture and redemption.” Crisis, yes, but also hope, avowal, overcoming. In a word, transcendence.

In 1951, when Portolese’s mother, born in Italy, was five years old, she was sent from her native province of Sardinia to live with her sick aunt in the southern province of Calabria. She was never to return to live in her childhood home with her immediate family. Portolese says that her mother suffered immensely from this profound familial abandonment. Her complex relationship with her mother manifested the duality of love and hate, resulting in a lifelong ambivalence between expressing herself and keeping silent. This is at the heart of “Pietà,” which draws further inspiration from Michelangelo Buonarroti’s sculpture of the Virgin Mary holding the body of Jesus after the crucifixion.

The photographs offer pungent images with nuances of richly embroidered backstories from domestic life. Portolese employs introspective poses in this storytelling to convey to the viewer that something emotional – and momentous – is unfolding. Through physiognomy, facial expression, and the staging of the photo-

graphic scene, she seizes upon all the narrative potential and fluidity of the image as autobiographical conduit. She captures family members in quiet moments of reflection, and juxtaposes them with domestic space, landscape, and still life, in an effort to reference states of mind and effectively emplace the viewer in geographical and emotional places that trace out the truth of the tangled branches and deep roots of her own family tree.

In “Pietà,” Portolese has offered us a deeply private ceremonial, with ritualistic overtones, and a meditation on memory, damage, and loss that we all can meaningfully commune with. If her commemorative thinking is at perfect pitch here, it is not only because her own family preoccupies her, it is also because her emotive perception is so inordinately well honed. Here, she delves with confidence into a memorial essay that is less rote exercise than palpable evocation. It is no exaggeration to suggest that in her empathic thinking, and in this exhibition, she has not only celebrated womanhood with rare insight and élan, but has found a key to unlocking, inside the medium of photography, some of the innermost verities and secrets of personhood, as well.

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Runa Islam

Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal
Du 21 mai au 6 septembre 2010

«Si ton regard était plus subtil, tu verrais toutes choses se mouvoir»
— F. Nietzsche, *Fragments posthumes*

Soustraire le dispositif cinématographique à ses architectures et lieux de coutume pour l’implanter au musée fut de toujours un moyen d’interroger les mécanismes du film, de la perception, sinon la nature même du réel. En effet, ce type de migration médiatique provoque souvent, chez le média concerné, un démantèlement de

ses propriétés et une remise en perspective de ses fonctionnements. Dans le cas du cinéma – cette machine à (re)produire de la réalité – il semble que ce soit, de fait, les espaces de la perception et de la cognition visuelles qui en soient le plus distinctement dégagés. Qu’est-ce effectivement que l’exercice du voir ? Quelles postures du corps et de la pensée lui sont-elles attribuables et comment celles-ci influencent-elles le découpage de notre savoir ? Voilà autant de questions que soulève à son tour le travail de l’artiste londonienne d’origine bangladaise, Runa Islam.

Dans l’exposition que lui consacrent, en cotutelle, le Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal et le Museum of Contemporary



Be The First To See What You See As You See It, 2004, film 16 mm avec son, 7 min 30 s, permission de Jay Jopling / White Cube (Londres), photo Gerry Johansson

Art de Sydney (Australie), cinq installations conçues autour de projections de films 16 mm et une œuvre photographique font effectivement état de telles réflexions. Montée dans la grande salle arrière du musée montréalais, l’exposition instaure d’entrée de jeu un véritable face à face avec l’œuvre *Assault* (2008). Sur un petit écran suspendu à hauteur de tête, est projetée – par un projecteur posé sur socle – l’image muette du visage d’un homme androgyne assailli de jets lumineux de différentes teintes et intensités. Forçant le modèle à plisser continuellement les yeux, parfois même à se les couvrir de la main, l’œuvre semble dès le départ indiquer, dans sa manifestation la