

## Espace Sculpture

**Michèle Karch-Ackerman**

*Lost Margaret*

Virginia MacDonnell Eichhorn

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## Michele Karch-Ackerman: *LOST MARGARET*

nology," wrote novelist Arthur C. Clarke, "is indistinguishable from magic." Close enough.

Occupying the floor of one side of the gallery, John Jeffreys's *Auto Info Moto* (1994) comprises an enormous mound of paper, the apparent byproducts of an office environment. A thick black line laid out on scattered sheets of bond paper forming a flat plain surrounding the mountainous interior outlines the entire piece. Closer inspection reveals that the outline is that of the shape of the United States—the "lower forty-eight," to be precise. Resting on the line is a small clear-plastic human head (anatomically correct), set atop a carriage comprised of some electronics, an appendage resembling an eyeball peering downward from the end of a bent stalk, and a set of small wheels. On a wall nearby is a remote control device. We can, it seems, make this thing move. We do, and it does, in jerky forward motions, tracing the black line which itself turns out to be an extended line of text, all rendered in upper case, stating things like "WE DONT EVER WATCH ALL 100 CHANNELS BUT WE LIKE TO KNOW THEY ARE THERE IF WE WANT TO." The eyeball attached to the front of the head's under-carriage is actually a small optical reader focused on the line of text and translating the figure of black letters and ground of white space into the shuddering, discontinuous motions of this little machine.

Occasionally Jeffreys's machine goes off course, lurches to an unintended stop, and needs our help in getting itself back on track. It's reassuring to know, in spite of all the tectonic activity metaphorically going on underfoot, that we still have a place in the greater scheme of things. ■

*Art and Technology:  
Paradise Refracted*  
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery,  
Oshawa, Ontario  
January 17—March 17, 2002

Transformation is an integral component for the reading of work by Michele Karch-Ackerman. In her recent exhibition, *Lost Margaret*, which was held at the Grimsby Public Art Gallery, transformation works on a thematic, technical and compositional level.

Inspired by her re-reading of L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series, Karch-Ackerman was particularly struck by the story of Anne's loss of her first baby. This child, formally named Joyce but called Joy by Anne and her husband Gilbert, was still-born. In dealing with her grief, Anne and Gilbert visit an old friend of theirs, Captain Jim. While they sit together by the sea, Captain Jim tells Anne the story of his lost love, Margaret. Fifty years ago, he tells Anne, Margaret fell asleep in her father's dory and drifted out to sea. It was believed that she drowned during a thundersquall, although her body was never found. The Captain says to Anne, "The sea took her from me, but some day I'll find her. It can't

keep us apart forever." He then tells Anne that as long as someone is remembered, they are never really gone, and when he dies it will be Anne's memory of his story that will keep his Margaret alive. It was this passage that provided the stimulus for Karch-Ackerman's body of work.

Until very recently, stillbirths, infant death, and the loss of young children were all too common occurrences in people's daily life. It is something that contemporary society has distanced itself from, not wanting to acknowledge it perhaps, in some atavistic superstition that to do so will increase the likelihood of it happening to us. However, it was, and remains, a fact of life. Karch-Ackerman noted how infant and children's death was the subject of, or occurred in many of her readings, ranging from letters and journals written by eighteenth and nineteenth century pioneer women such as Susannah Moodie through to the children's literature of the same period. She noted how these fictional and real men and women dealt with their grief upon losing

their babies and children.

Concurrently with these readings, Karch-Ackerman also began to explore and discover lost and forgotten pioneer gravesites. In one such place she found a very simple grave marker, a suspended iron heart, with the simple inscription "Martha, Age 3". While the gravesite was overrun with bush and trees, Karch-Ackerman found that the feeling wasn't actually one of neglect, but that the new growth over the gravesites was an affirmation of life and continuing spirit. For her, these children weren't dead and gone, they had not ceased to exist; rather, they had experienced a transformation.

Inspired by the gravesite discoveries and in conjunction with her readings, Karch-Ackerman created two important bodies of work, *The Sweet Breath of Trees* and *Flower Girl*. In both exhibitions, she incorporated natural elements such as flowers and trees, found historical photographs, text and ritual. The rituals were designed to work on two levels: aesthetically and metaphorically. Karch-



MICHELE KARCH-ACKERMAN. *Performance ritual*, Pouch Cove, Newfoundland.  
Photo: Martin K. Ackerman.



Ackerman's *Lost Margaret* uses the same elements with the same simplicity and effectiveness.

On entering the gallery at Grimsby one cannot help but feel that one has entered a special place, a space that Karch-Ackerman's installation has transformed from a typical, modern gallery area into an ethereal location. The exhibition is made up of separate but interconnected installations. There are repeated images and motifs used throughout. Each component is meant to assist the souls of young children as they make their way from our physical world into the spiritual realm beyond. Karch-Ackerman describes these as "Travel Kits for Young Souls." Each of the eight kits includes an "outfit" for the departed child. The outfit consists of a travel coat, which she "christened" in the Atlantic Ocean during her residency at Pouch Cove. The dipping of the coat in the ocean works symbolically on a number of levels. In Christian tradition, baptism provides the child with the gift of faith and eternal life. The ocean, being salt water, relates to blood (and thus life) as well as to life in the womb, where we all grew and lived before birth. Finally, Pouch Cove was the site of the recent and tragic deaths of three teenage boys, who drowned while playing a game that involved jumping from ice floe to ice floe. All of these elements combine to infuse Karch-Ackerman's ritual with a solemn and moving potency. The coats have been embellished with fragments from the *Lost Margaret* text and with xerographic transfers from fabric-covered Brownies buttons (c. 1922). Karch-Ackerman uses the Brownies images to have them act as guides and supports to help the children's souls find their way in the afterlife.

Other components in the travel kits include a complete handknitted woolen outfit—cable stitched cardigan, hats and mittens, and leggings, all of natural wool—, a hand-sewn sleeping bag, and a patchwork

quilt consisting of fragments of aged and stained cotton, antique lace, woolen garments, curtains, archival photographs of Brownies, fragments of the *Lost Margaret* text, and "secret" pockets containing "sea toys" collected at Middle Cove, Newfoundland. While the aged bits and pieces of material and cloth have been transformed into something beautiful and unique, they are also comfortingly infused with the history of the remnants of which they are composed. These quilts, outfits and travel coats are accompanied by hand-sewn aged cotton backpacks that feature xerographic transfers of a child's cable stitched knitwear pattern (c. 1950).

The other part of the installation consists of thirty-two hand-stitched aged cotton dolls, featuring more xerographically produced Brownie images and stuffed with moss, grasses, flowers and seaweed gathered at Pouch Cove, Newfoundland. Lying on a bed of sand and in contrast to the rest of the elements in the exhibition, the dolls are touching or remain earthbound. They

remind us that we are all of the earth and will return to it. They also have the inherent support to stay "grounded" as they guide the children's souls along their journey.

In the exhibition, the contents of the travel kits are suspended from the gallery ceiling. They seem to float delicately and impossibly before the viewer. They are not of this world, seeming light, delicate and moving. The effective lighting of the installation further works to enhance the central metaphor. Behind each small sweater, each little glove and diaphanous coat are one, two and sometimes three shadows. Until recently, the term shadow, or shade, was used to refer to a ghost or spirit. We cannot help but feel that the spirits of lost children are present with us in the exhibition.

Beneath each suspended installation and supporting the hanging sleeping bags, are tree branches. Here, Karch-Ackerman integrates the visual motif that she had used successfully in her earlier exhibitions. Once more, the image of the tree refers to growth, continuance and transfor-

mation. As well, these trees—(silver birch)—were marked and used by Native Canadians and early pioneers to find their way from one place to another. In this context, they serve the same purpose for departed souls.

Death, particularly infant and child mortality, is never easy to talk about. One would expect that an exhibition that dealt with the subject would be morbid and dark. Yet under Karch-Ackerman's hand the subject never becomes that. Instead, her work allows us to transform grief, despair or confusion into something hopeful and positive. We can remember those we have lost and help these souls on their way. And in remembering those who have been lost and sharing their stories—whether it be the boys of Pouch Cove, Martha Aged 3, Captain Jim's Margaret, or someone of our own—we ensure that they live on.

L.M. Montgomery's "Lost Margaret" text excerpted from *Anne's House of Dreams*. ■

Michele Karch-Ackerman:  
*Lost Margaret*  
Grimsby Public Art Gallery  
January 19–March 3, 2002



MICHELE KARCH-ACKERMAN. *Travel Coats*, installation, Grimsby Public Art Gallery. 8 hand-sewn aged cotton travel coats - size 4 - featuring fragments of L.M. Montgomery's *Lost Margaret* text and xerographic transfers of Brownies—circa 1922—on their fabric covered buttons. Photo: Martin K. Ackerman.