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Once Upon a Time and Forever After

Ghislaine Charest, *The Artist's Heart*, Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montreal. February 17 to March 30, 1996

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[See table of contents](#)

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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

MONTREAL

ONCE UPON A TIME AND FOREVER AFTER

Ghislaine Charest, *The Artist's Heart*, Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montreal. February 17 to March 30, 1996



PHOTO : PIERRE CHARRIER

Ghislaine Charest, *Le beige*, 1996. Photographie n/b sur film duraclear, tissu de peluche, frêne; 102 x 81,5 cm.

Ghislaine Charest's exhibition *The Artist's Heart* takes us into the central artery of her childhood. Charest brings us to this apex by kindling invented childhood memories - both hers and ours - through the use of staged photography involving stuffed animals and the representation of children in historical paintings and fairy tale illustrations. Through this *mise-en-scène* she conjures up a childhood extending far beyond nostalgia.

Upon entering the basement of the gallery, the viewer is confronted with a world of mute animals and children. On the floor sit seventeen small and heavily worn out stuffed animals conferring in a circle arrangement. The animals range from monkeys and bears to dogs, and each one possesses a small hand crafted ceramic bowl placed directly in front of them with a small pebble nesting inside. Here, these toys are part of

their own society, perhaps exchanging stories of their lives with children. What would they say if they could speak ? Certainly, they would reveal the secret bonds between children and their favorite bed fellows. These animals immediately conjure up the complexity of childhood : ranging from the affection and privilege that they are bestowed to the violence and sexual advances they may silently endure. The viewer's adult presence feels like a form of trespass, an outsized evil giant in relationship to the small animals and he/she is summoned to grapple with his/her childhood-self in relationship to the present adult-self.

On the walls hang a series of black and white photographs which collide the rare representation of children in historical seventeenth and eighteenth century European painting, such as Hals, Rubens and Goya, with the twentieth century teddy bear. In each image a real teddy bear is photographed directly in front of the child (usually as a detail within a larger painting) juxtaposing the object with the image of the child. In many of the images (a series of 6 photos is presented) the teddy stares out to the viewer, beseeching us to look in and imagine the relationship of that child to the stuffed animal. The photographs are printed on a transparent film and pinned onto thick plush synthetic materials which could be used for making stuffed animals. These materials are predominantly austere in colour, the dark green, rust and beige or brown echo the colour schemes of the photographed paintings and also of a more nostalgic era of childhood. The fact that the photograph and fur are sealed under glass gives an alien feeling to the otherwise very tactile relationship we have with stuffed animals, letting the images occupy an untouchable space.

In many of the compositions we see a tender moment between the child and teddy and yet an overwhelming sadness prevails. The teddy bears are the echoes of a past childhood (the childhood of a present day adult) mingled with the past and distant childhood of the portrayed child in the painting. D. W. Winnicott defined the transitional object as a thing which the child

chooses to give him/her comfort and which remains irreplaceable to the child until it is abandoned or replaced. The transitional object of our twentieth century childhood is the stuffed animal and in these works the artist has given these to children of a much different era, one where childhood was more akin to a miniaturized form of adulthood and filled with responsibilities and labour rather than teddies. The stuffed animal also signified a shift in the twentieth century's conception of nature. The historian Keith Thomas, in his book *Man and the Natural World*, writes about this changing status of the animal in our society, from feared beast to tamed pet. This acculturating of nature parallels the relationship children have with animals, as both benevolent (such as teddy bears) and dangerous (in the roles of wolves in stories like Little Red Riding Hood). This liminality of love and fear is also at play in fairy tales where beasts occupy a significant role.

In the upstairs project room Charest has set up four photographic compositions entitled *Juste avant la nuit*. These are, like the images downstairs, also printed on a transparent film and composed with the figure of the on looking teddy bear. The images are hung atop imitation sheepskin which extends far beyond the frames. The first diptych, *Les deux blancs*, represents Gustave Doré reproductions from *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Little Red Riding Hood*. In the second diptych, *Le brun et le noir*, we see Lewis Carroll's illustrations : one from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and another from *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. In all of the illustrations there is a moment of tension : Alice must decide if she will follow the rabbit; Little Red Riding Hood is startled at finding herself in bed with her wolfish grandmother.

This appropriation of fairy tale illustrations, far from being naive, offers a history of codified story telling. Fairy tales, which evolved and changed through generations of predominantly female oral histories, contained adult contemporary issues of their time. In her book *From the Beast to the Blonde - On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, Marina Warner traces the history of



PHOTO : RICHARD-MAX TREMBLAY

Ghislaine Charest, *La ronde des oursans*, 1996. Installation; animaux de peluche, céramiques, galets. Dimensions variables. 205 cm de diamètre.

fairy tales and their popularization through print by male authors such as Charles Perrault in the eighteenth century and the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen in the nineteenth century. Many of these stories, in their more original forms, told of the various hardships of life in an allegorical way and were clearly intended for adult audiences. It was only later that these tales were abridged for child consumption where they now may be located somewhere between the fantastical and the real, or the adult and the child.

These tales present a moment of decision making, a point at which morality and desire impact one another, much like life's arduous journey which is filled with these very contradictions. Bruno Bettelheim further develops this notion in *The Uses of Enchantment - The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, and demonstrates how fairy tales help children come to grapple with psychological problems such as : the Oedipal complex, moral decisions, anxieties and fears. By permitting the child to explore these through fairy tales, with often grotesque scenarios where the extremes of good and evil are battled out, the child is able to confront his/her own personal problems and dilemmas within a fantastical scenario. Warner explains how harsh reality is attenuated and rendered more palatable in fairy tales through the use of fantasy and how these can be symbolic for both adult and child readers. She

states that : " Fairy tales similarly concern themselves with sexual distinctions, and with sexual transgression, with defining differences according to morals and mores. This interest forms part of the genre's larger engagement with the marvelous, for the marvelous is understood to be impossible. The realms of wonder and impossibility converge, and fairy tales function to conjure the first in order to delineate the second : magic paradoxically defines normality ".

We sense, in Charest's work, that she is delving back into that memory of childhood and its various influences in order to find the seminal experiences which are intrinsic to her present day adult-self. By conjuring and re-examining the marvelous in fairy tales, sensual relationships with teddy bears and the repositioning of childhood within historically mutable perspectives she creates an atmosphere ripe for the de-segregation of childhood within the adult sphere. And, in this context, the teddy bear becomes a surrogate traveler, a kind of astronaut sent out to find out more about this planet called childhood which we all once inhabited and remains a part of us today.

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