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Canada Exhibition Reviews

Pulse: The Alberta Society of Artists at 80 Years, Triangle Gallery of Visual Arts, Calgary, July 7 – Aug 24, 2011

— BY Monique Westra



Bev Tosh, RCA, *Tender Steel*, 2011, steel wire. Collection of the artist. PHOTO: Norman Dupuis.

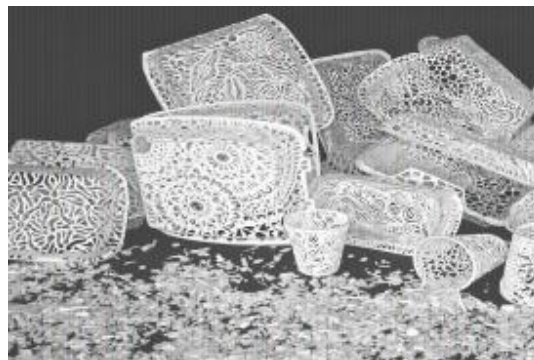
This exhibition celebrates the 80th anniversary of the 1931 founding of the Alberta Society of Artists in Calgary. It includes a small historical section featuring early works by well-known artists that recall the origin of the society, as well as a much larger section devoted to contemporary practice, which is the focus of this review.

Many of the over 250 artists currently associated with the ASA understandably expected a survey exhibition featuring a large number of artists. However, the curatorial approach taken by guest curator Mary-Beth Laviolette is bold. Instead of a wide survey, she presents a tightly curated selection featuring only 11 artists (all women), each of whom is represented by several works. This

strategy is consistent with the compelling title of the exhibition – Pulse – in reflecting the vitality and energy of art in Alberta today and yielding a more meaningful result than a staid, broader sampling ever could.

Laviolette introduces many artists whose names may be unfamiliar. Indeed, only Bev Tosh is a senior artist with a national reputation. It is clear that Laviolette's research was exhaustive and in the end, only two selection criteria prevailed: outstanding quality and currency of practice.

One common theme that underpins the work of all the artists is the innovative approach to media. For example, we see unusual supports and familiar fine art media adapted to new purposes (e.g. Kim Bruce's use of encaustic as a sculptural medium) as well as new approaches to photography (Roberta Murray's *Pictorialist* suite of photographs layered with watercolour) and fibre arts (Liv Pedersen's whimsical "shaped tapestry" faces on a black ground, woven intuitively on a small, rudimentary Dutch plank loom). With their sexually-charged, searing and humorous context, Barbara West's knitted everyday objects represent the most postmodern works in the show. Her installation, *Drinking Games*, subverts the benign and comforting activity of knitting into an agent of social commentary.



Eveline Koliijn, *Sublime Waste*, 2011, hand-cut, recycled Styrofoam cups and clamshell containers. Collection of the artist. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The most dazzling example of artistic ingeniousness in terms of medium is the stunning, all-white installation of Eveline Koliijn. Using an exacto knife, she has transformed ordinary Styrofoam containers into delicate and mesmerizingly intricate cut-out patterns that look like lace. But instead of simple decorative designs, the patterns reveal organic forms (e.g. plants, bees), reinforcing the paradox of using a ubiquitous, synthetic material associated with transience, waste, pollution and fossil fuels to conjure up the infinite complexity and fragility of

nature.



Linda Daoust, *Corporate Mothering*, 2010, ink, graphite, charcoal, oil stick and paint on watercolour paper. Collection of the artist. PHOTO: Brent Laycock, RCA.

Each artist in her own unique way seems fascinated by round shapes, organic forms and circular elements. This emphasis can be seen in the colourful oil on paper paintings by Linda Daoust, whose vital, organic and spontaneous images feature a profusion of rounded forms, concentric spirals and scratchy lines in brilliantly hued paintings of high contrast. One dominant colour - greenish blue – in her work finds uncanny visual resonance in many of Kim Bruce's strangely breast-like encaustic cones and links the work of both artists to the lyrical tonal orchestration in aqua of Lynn Malin's radiant grid of sketches mounted onto Plexiglas sheets. These translucent, floating images, like Daoust's work, hover between abstraction and landscape.

A gracious calligraphic response to the linearity of both Daoust and Malin can be found in *Tender Steel*, an extraordinary new work by Bev Tosh in which a monumental group portrait is rendered as a continuous line drawing in steel wire. The use of flowing, uninterrupted line symbolically represents the bonds, continuity and shared experiences of young women who left Canada as war brides during the Second World War. Another moving tale of departure by Tosh is sparsely recounted in *Strand*,

in handwriting which unfurls in a spiral of diminishing thicknesses of rough twine, hand-stitched onto a huge unadorned sheet of gently billowing, sepia-coloured fabric suspended from above. The fabric, which looks like silk moiré, shimmers like water and in this way "rhymes" with the fluid expanse of Malin's luminous grid.

The numerous connections between the various works in this exhibition lend a sense of cohesiveness to this fascinating and relevant exhibition. The Alberta Society of Artists should be proud and pleased.