

A black and white photograph of a landscape. In the background, a tall, thin, dark tower or spire rises against a light sky. The foreground is dominated by a large, dark, textured area that appears to be a field of low-lying vegetation or a dense thicket of trees, rendered in a high-contrast, almost abstract style. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

ALLYSON
CLAY



3 9345 01179726 7 06



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
W.A.C. BENNETT LIBRARY

N 6549 C55 1993

A. CLAY

ALLYSON CLAY

Recent Work

ESSAY BY JUDITH MASTAI

This exhibition is funded by The Canada Council and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, an Alberta Lottery Fund beneficiary

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the artist Allyson Clay for her work on this project, Frank Costin and John Klintworth of Costin and Klintworth for facilitating the exhibition and Judith Mastai for her essay. I am grateful to both Nana Hashimoto for her assistance and Charles Cousins for his design of the catalogue. Finally, I am grateful for the support of the Director, Alf Bogusky, the Chief Curator, Elizabeth Kidd and the other staff of The Edmonton Art Gallery.

Kitty Scott

Curator of Contemporary Art

Exhibition Curator: Kitty Scott

Supervisor of Publications: John Tuckwell

Design/Typography: Charles Cousins

Photography: Harry Korol

Film Output: Colour Four, Calgary

Printing: Sundog Printing Limited, Calgary

The Edmonton Art Gallery is a registered non-profit organization funded in part by grants from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, an Alberta Lottery Fund beneficiary, the Art Associates of The Edmonton Art Gallery, the Canada Council, the City of Edmonton, the Edmonton Community Foundation, Holly Ball Benefit funds, the Museums Assistance Program of the Federal Department of Canadian Heritage, and President's Circle funds, all of which we gratefully acknowledge.

E A G



The Edmonton Art Gallery
2 Sir Winston Churchill Square
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 2C1
Canada

All rights reserved

ISBN 0-88950-128-9

The Postmodern Flânuese

Judith Mastai

Printed in Canada

Copyright 1993

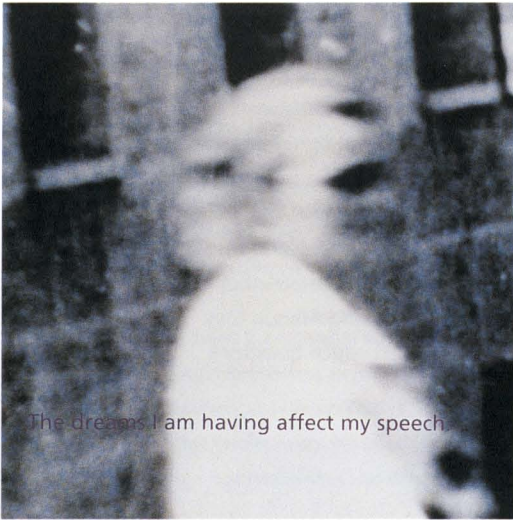
Foreword

The Edmonton Art Gallery employs a variety of means to communicate and interpret its programmes, in language that is appropriate to the art work presented. In this publication, Vancouver-based writer Judith Mastai discusses Allyson Clay's recent paintings with reference to feminist visual art theory and practice as well as to anthropological and sociological texts. Mastai describes the artist's most recent series, *Some places in the world a woman could walk* as an attempt to synthesize and respond to conflicting ideologies of feminism (situated within the postmodernist project) and painting (rooted within the masculinist tradition of modernism.)

This publication is one of three catalogues prepared to accompany a series of solo exhibitions of recent work by artists Mary Scott (August 7 - September 19, 1993), Charles Gagnon (September 25 - November 7, 1993) and Allyson Clay (November 13, 1993 - January 3, 1994), who are producing art which questions and plays within painting's histories and traditions.

3

Elizabeth Kidd
Chief Curator



The dreams I am having affect my speech.

The novels she was reading began to affect her daily routines. She walked with determination and took unfamiliar routes. Her appearance and her voice changed. She was promoted at work.

Some places in the world a woman could walk, 1993

ROUTINES

ACRYLIC, PHOTOGRAPH AND SILKSCREEN ON CANVAS

DIPTYCH: 61 X 121.9 CM

The Postmodern Flâneuse

JUDITH MASTAI

"THE TONGUE, GOVERNED FOR SO LONG IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE BY CONSIDERATIONS OF TACT AND FIDELITY, BY NICE OBEISANCES TO ONE'S ORIGIN WITHIN THE MINORITY OR THE MAJORITY, THIS TONGUE IS SUDDENLY UNGOVERNED. IT GAINS ACCESS TO A CONDITION THAT IS UNCONSTRAINED . . ."¹

The work of Allyson Clay provides an example of the struggles inherent in a woman's desire to develop a professional art practice. Clay's work has displayed a series of crises in subjectivity as she attempted to break free from under the powerful influences of male mentors and to break through to her own language. Clay seems to engage in a repetitive set of operations, marked by mimicry and then opposition. One might even go so far as to suggest that mimicry, transgression and provocation are means by which identity is formed; they are strategies to loosen the patriarchal tongues and break through to a language, a speaking voice, agency, subjectivity, "a condition that is unconstrained" from the governing social sphere.

In the case of Allyson Clay, this struggle has centered on painting. But how is it possible for a feminist practice to be centred on painting after the well-articulated discourses against it in the seventies and eighties? At least part of the problem is paint itself, a medium overdetermined by its patriarchal legacy. Clay's consciousness of the issues involved in developing a feminist practice owes much to the work of Mary Kelly who, in theorizing the problems and issues for her own practice, suggested that they may apply to women artists in general. Given the ways in which painting has been used historically for patriarchal representations of women and their social positions, the issue, put simply, is whether or not women should paint at all. As British critic John Roberts sees it, Kelly championed the use of "scripto-visual" techniques and media such as photography and video because they were less historically "loaded."²

Allyson Clay's practice mirrors these debates. Trained as a studio painter in Italy and Canada, her early work reflected the biases of her male mentors and neo-expressionist painting which was fashionable in the late seventies and early

eighties in Europe. Her "Boat Paintings," produced in 1980 while a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax, exemplify this style.

Shortly thereafter, Clay took up residence in Vancouver where she produced a series of private "exhibitions." The strong conceptual biases of the NSCAD program was evident in this phase of her career. Works were placed in domestic environments - the privacy of a friend's home or her own studio. The only public acknowledgment of their existence were calling cards mailed to Clay's friends and acquaintances as well as international curators. Whatever her rationale for these projects, this may read as a hesitation to "go public," not wanting to risk criticism or lack of recognition for one's work.

One key to Clay's evolving practice is a group of figurative works, produced in 1982 and since destroyed, in which she painted headless nudes, of both genders, cut off at the knees. These torsos begged essentialist answers to questions of maleness and femaleness, based on sheer anatomical difference. While these faceless nudes seem to counter a long historical tradition in which the female body was offered up to the male gaze, often with the face turned away (a convention which prevented confrontation or disturbance to the viewer's voyeurism), to me, the destruction of these torsos indicated an awareness on Clay's part that this route was a "wrong turn." More complex investigations of subjectivity and gendered representation were required. Rather than turning the tables and "victimizing" the male body, Clay sought to investigate the nature of the feminine.

The body, according to Parveen Adams and Jeff Minson, provides the principle of unity for the speaking subject.³ The politics involved with "the right to choose" and laws regarding the rights of women to control their bodies are essential to feminist politics and practices. Within the context of patriarchal social formations, this "right to choose" is transgressive; through the pursuit of this desire, women step outside of the social formations into which they were born. In art, no less than in other realms of human endeavour, transgression is required.

In an article entitled "On Sexual Politics and Art," Kelly argued that "it is at the moment of our entry into language that we take up a feminine or masculine position in the symbolic structure of our society. Learning to speak is dependent on the ability to conceptualize absence and establish difference." Kelly also stated that "because of the coincidence of language and patriarchy the 'feminine' is (metaphorically) set on the side of the heterogeneous, the

unnameable, the unsaid; and that insofar as the feminine is said, or articulated in language, it is profoundly subversive."⁴

With the destruction of her painted torsos, Clay crossed a line against essentialist feminism and, simultaneously, began transgressing the canons of her male mentors through a deconstruction of painting. For example, in *Lure* (1988), Clay mimetically imagined "generic abstract painting" in a text and then critically intervened by interpolating a repressed, subjective, "hysterical" voice.⁵ Here Clay evolved a unique style in which text and image play off each other to place the viewer in a critical position.⁶

Clay's voice is female, and so is her imagined spectator. In the series *Traces of a city in the spaces between some people* (1990), she introduced the allegory of a woman walking through the city experiencing chance encounters, often with other women. Clay's new work, *Some places in the world a woman could walk* (1993), further develops this allegory, incorporating postmodernist turns on familiar metaphors of modernism. In these ten works, Clay juxtaposes photographs (her first use of the medium) with subtle paintings of skies, in diptychs or triptychs, which have texts silkscreened over the surfaces. *Some Places* is a confident work about women meeting each other and interacting, aware of the inherent anonymity and potential danger of their freedom as well as the potential threat their public strolling poses for men.

Janet Wolff, a cultural sociologist, has observed that the "peculiar characteristics of modernity... consist in the transient and 'fugitive' nature of encounters and impressions made in the city."⁷ However, as Wolff was well aware, this possibility existed only for men. The life of the "flâneur"⁸ was not available to women. Writing about George Sand, the nineteenth-century woman novelist noted for dressing in men's clothing, Wolff stated, "The disguise made the life of the *flâneur* available to her; as she knew very well, she could not adopt the non-existent role of a *flâneuse*. Women could not stroll alone in the city."⁹

The traditional space of women in modernity was a private space - the home - or, as art historian Griselda Pollock has pointed out, extending from time to time to a theatre loge or the park.¹⁰ But in Clay's post-industrial city, women do enjoy the pleasures of the street as well as the related pleasures of chance encounters. Their strolls take place in unidentified European, South American or Canadian cities and towns, in which factories, water towers, crowds, architecture, traffic and remnants of classical statues form a jumbled poetics of place.

*It was a small gesture, a twitch.
She knew she had been recognized.*

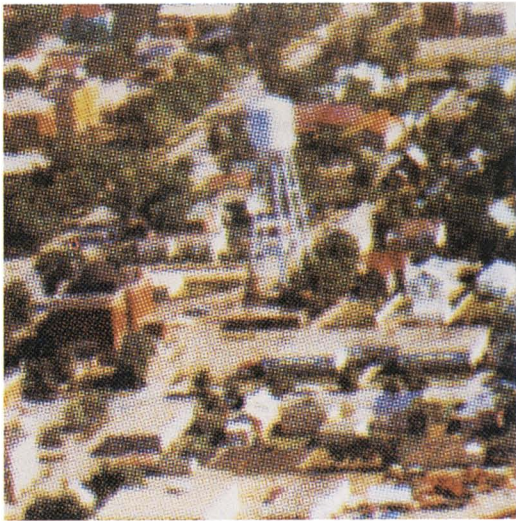


Some places in the world a woman could walk, 1993

TWITCH

ACRYLIC, PHOTOGRAPH AND SILKSCREEN ON CANVAS

DIPTYCH: 61 X 121.9 CM



She told me she could walk all the way to Regina without putting holes in her shoes.

Some places in the world a woman could walk, 1993

REGINA

ACRYLIC, PHOTOGRAPH AND SILKSCREEN ON CANVAS

DIPTYCH: 61 x 121.9 CM

One can hardly escape recognition of the relationship of the form and content of these works to those of other Vancouver artists, and particularly Ian Wallace's series, "My Heroes in the Street." While painters in the first half of the century struggled to define the unique contributions the medium of paint might offer to representation in the face of photography, the discourse of the last half of the century seems to acknowledge that the issues generated by "mechanical reproduction" lead painting. Wallace's work sought to juxtapose painting and photography and to transpose the turn-of-the-century flâneur into the post-industrial environment - city streets, malls and airports. Clay mimics Wallace's works but introduces a significant transgression: the flâneur becomes the flâneuse.

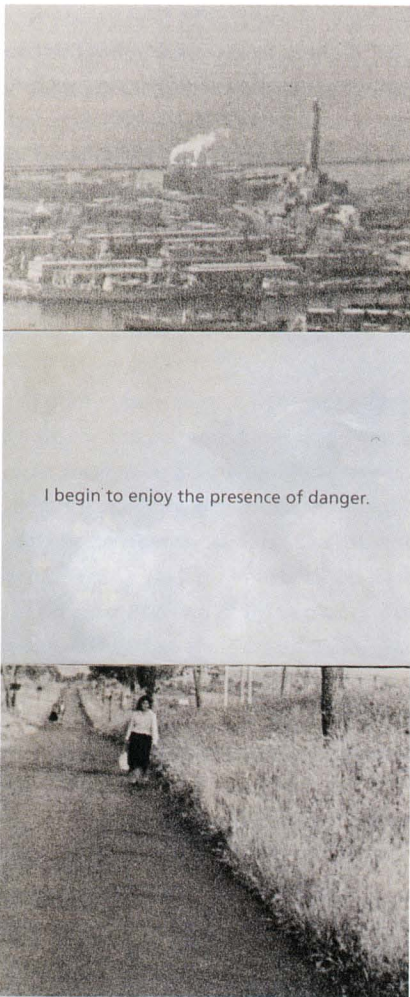
Clay's spotty, highly textured photographs remind us of pointillist paintings. Like Christian Boltanski's¹¹ portraits, or images reproduced many times on a photocopy machine, the photographs seem to be disintegrating before our eyes, evoking the passage of time, distance, memory, or a dream, half-real. The figures in her images are not heroic, not "heroines in the streets," but rather elusive, fleeting presences. In viewing these works, I felt positioned as the flâneuse on a city street but with a difference - I had the feeling of flying over and of swooping down on the scenes, as in a dream, rather than standing on stable ground.

Having experienced herself as an Other of modernity, Clay proposes the "postmodern flâneuse." This trope is an example of what anthropologist Michael Taussig calls "mimetic excess," in which the colonized assumes and conflates behaviours of the colonizer, providing "a welcome opportunity to live subjunctively as neither subject nor object of history but as both, at one and the same time."¹² Clay's flâneuse is postmodern in the sense defined by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman - "modernity conscious of its true nature."¹³ Rather than concede to colonization (and stay at home), or transvestism (to disguise her femininity), Clay's woman walks and talks too; strolls anonymously and is recognized.

Allyson Clay attempts to synthesize the complex problems of painting and feminist practice in the late twentieth century. Rather than make dogmatic pronouncements about the purity of paint or the necessity to use other media, she consciously embraces the complexities of the dilemma. I imagine that she would agree with Griselda Pollock's question: "In the name of what can feminists argue against ...women's right to participate in the modernist project...?"¹⁴ While some may argue that a postmodernist project might be more productive, more rewarding, less "tainted" by history, how can women artists avoid the his-

tory of modernism and of women's roles within it? "The debate for feminists involved in 'aesthetic practices,'" Pollock remarked, "cannot be reduced to a question of 'painting' or scripto-visual forms. It is a historical project, an intervention in history, informed by historical knowledges, which means not forgetting, in the act of necessary critique, the history of western feminism.¹⁵ A contemporary feminist practice can do no less than Allyson Clay attempts to do - to work with feminism, with painting and with history.

Judith Mastai, Ed D. has been the Head of Public Programmes at the Vancouver Art Gallery for five years. During that time she has developed a wide range of innovative programmes and has initiated new areas of research for the gallery. A number of projects have been community-based such as Rose Garrard's "Disclosing Dialogues" (1992), "Memory and Desire" (1992) and Eva Yuen's "Flowering Dragon: Dance With Moon" (1991). Many have involved residencies at the gallery for artists such as Sonia Boyce, Mary Kelly, Laboratoire, Glenys Johnson, Jeff Wall and Sutapa Biswas. In addition to her research and project work, Mastai edits the VAG Documents series. She wrote the catalogue essay for an exhibition of works by Terry Atkinson at the Mendel Art Gallery. Most recently, she delivered a paper on "Emily Carr, Canadian Modernist, and the Politics of Abjection" at Essex University for the conference, "The Fourth World: America 1492 - 1992."



Some places in the world a woman could walk, 1993

DANGER

ACRYLIC, PHOTOGRAPHS AND SILKSCREEN ON LINEN

TRIPTYCH: 182.9 x 76.2 CM

ENDNOTES

- 1 Seamus Heaney, "Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker," *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London/Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988) p. xxii.
- 2 See Mary Kelly, "Re-viewing Modernist Criticism," *Screen*, 22:3 (1981) pp. 41-62 (In 1989 and 1990, Kelly led three-week seminars at Simon Fraser University, where Clay teaches.) See also John Roberts, "Painting and Sexual Difference," *Parachute* #55 (July/August/September 1989) pp. 25-31.
- 3 Parveen Adams and Jeff Minson, "The 'Subject' of Feminism," *m/f*, 2 (1978) pp. 43-61.
- 4 Mary Kelly, "On Sexual Politics and Art," *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985* (London: Pandora Press, 1987) p. 304, 310.
- 5 Allyson Clay, *Lure* (Vancouver: Artspeak Gallery, 1988).
- 6 Using text to intervene and provide a critical position for the "reader" first appeared in the visual arts in the early seventies influenced by the first English productions of the plays of Bertolt Brecht in London and subsequent study of the German playwright's alienation techniques (verfremdungseffekte). Through oppositional texts, spectators were positioned to take an active role in contemplating an artwork and its historical context.
- 7 Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990) p. 36.
- 8 The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines "flâneur" as an idle man about town. Charles Baudelaire popularized the term as a "character" typifying modernity. The alienation experienced in large urban centres offered a degree of anonymity to the strolling voyeur and suggested the possibility of adopting a persona, even a secret life, outside of that conferred by one's familiar social environment.
- 9 Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
- 10 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (New York/London: Routledge, 1988) p. 73.
- 11 Christian Boltanski is a contemporary French artist who lives in Paris and teaches at L'École des Beaux Arts. His exhibition, "Lessons of Darkness" was shown at the Vancouver Art Gallery as part of the North American tour in the late eighties and featured historical photographs which had been rephotographed and blown up, creating an illusion of temporal distance and memory through the disintegration of the images.
- 12 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993) p. 255. Taussig's description of the Trobriand Islanders' appropriation and parodying of British cricket is a powerful example.
- 13 Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992) p. 187.
- 14 Griselda Pollock, "Painting, Feminism, History," *Destabilizing History: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, ed. Michèle Barrett & Anne Phillips (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992) p. 151.
- 15 Pollock, "Painting, Feminism, History," *op.cit.*, p. 170.

Allyson Clay

Born in Vancouver, 1953.

Lives and works in Vancouver.

Education

- 1983-85 M.F.A., University of British Columbia, Vancouver
- 1978-80 B.F.A., Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, Halifax
- 1977 Accademia di Pietro Vannucci, Perugia
- 1973-74 Loyola University of Chicago, Rome
- 1972-73 Temple University of Philadelphia, Rome
- 1971-72 Accademia delle Belle Arti, Rome

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1990 *Traces of a city in the spaces between some people*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, travelled to: Costin and Klintworth Gallery, Toronto; Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver.*
- 1989 *LURE and New Works (Painting with Voices)*, Costin and Klintworth Gallery, Toronto.*
- 1988 *LURE*, Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver.*
Great Strides, Stride Gallery, Calgary.
- 1987 *Allyson Clay*, YYZ, Toronto.
- 1985 *Hold It*, Western Front Gallery, Vancouver.
Allyson Clay, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.

14

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1991 *Telltale: Restructured Narratives in Contemporary Canadian Art*, Snelgrove Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.
West Coast Stories, University of Lethbridge Gallery, Lethbridge, travelled to Latitude 53, Edmonton.
- 1990 *Telling Things*, Art Metropole, Toronto.*
Memory Works, London Regional Art Gallery, London, travelled to the Glenbow Museum, Calgary.*

*(catalogue)

- 1986 *Fracture*, Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey.
Ricochet, Sala I, Rome.
Vancouver Now/Vancouver 86, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff.
- 1985 *Urban Circuit*, (N)on Commercial Gallery, Vancouver.
Four Painters, Houston-Farris Gallery, Vancouver.

Selected Bibliography

- Bentley Mays, John, "A Telling Brush with Text-based Art," *Globe and Mail*, June 22, 1990, p. 66.
- Harris, Mark, "Allyson Clay," *Canadian Art*, Fall 1985, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 92-93.
- Johnson, Eve, "Paintings that are More than Pictures," *The Sun*, May 10, 1985, p. B7.
- Keziere, Russell, "The Paintings of Allyson Clay," *Vanguard*, vol. 17, no. 5 & 6, Summer, 1985, pp. 10-13.
- Salzman, Gregory, "Allyson Clay," *Parachute* #62, April, May, June, 1991, pp. 40-41.
- Wallace, Keith, "Fast Forward," *Canadian Art*, Fall, 1990, p. 45.
- Wallace, Keith, "What Meaning is," *Georgia Straight*, May 24-31, 1985, p. 5.
- Watson, Scott, "The Generic City and Its Discontents," *Arts Magazine*, 1991, p. 62.

15

Collections

- Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver.
University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Lethbridge.
Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa.
Pirandello Museum, Agrigento.

List of Works

Some places in the world a woman could walk, 1993

1. Routines

acrylic, photograph and silkscreen on canvas
diptych: 61 x 121.9 cm

Text, left panel: The dreams I am having affect my speech.
Text, right panel: The novels she was reading began to affect her daily routines. She walked with determination and took unfamiliar routes. Her appearance and her voice changed. She was promoted at work.

Courtesy of Gallery Costin & Klintworth

2. Twitch

acrylic, photograph and silkscreen on canvas
diptych: 61 x 121.9 cm

Text, left panel: It was a small gesture, a twitch. She knew she had been recognized.

Courtesy of Gallery Costin & Klintworth

3. Water

acrylic, photograph and silkscreen on canvas
diptych: 61 x 121.9 cm

Text, right panel: The open window on my left admits sharp sunlight and a smokey odor from nearby industry. She brings me the water then leaves. She sounds like a tree in the wind and then the door is closed. Everyday she brings me water but won't tell me where I am.

Collection of Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada, Toronto

4. Traveler

acrylic, photograph and silkscreen on canvas
diptych: 61 x 121.9 cm

Text, left panel: Traveling reoriented her towards past experience. Soon after arriving she began to have dreams in which she had violent encounters with people who in real life she had no passionate relationship with.

Courtesy of Gallery Costin & Klintworth

5. A Foreign Place

acrylic, photograph and silkscreen on canvas
diptych: 61 x 121.9 cm

Text, right panel: There were plants growing outside the windows with large leaves like cradles. There was no furniture in the room which looked like it might be as comfortable as these leaves. Everything was in place but I know you were here. You touched the wall as you entered. The sweat from your hand left an almost imperceptible mark. I am a stranger now. I choose to leave, to keep walking, wandering, moving, or to sit on the sidewalk edge, or in the sand, or just to sleep.

Collection of Janice Andreae

6. Danger

acrylic, photographs and silkscreen on linen
triptych: 182.9 x 76.2 cm

Text, centre panel: I begin to enjoy the presence of danger.

Collection of McCarthy Tétrault, Toronto

7. Instead

photograph and silkscreen on canvas
61 x 61 cm

Text: Instead, she pulls me towards her and we kiss. I give in, indulgent. A line gets crossed which before had seemed impossible.

Courtesy of Gallery Costin & Klintworth

8. It was different here

acrylic, photographs and silkscreen on canvas
triptych: 61 x 182.9 cm

Text, centre panel: It was different here than she had imagined.
Text, right panel: someone was singing.

Collection of Anne and Marshall Webb, Toronto

9. Regina

acrylic, photograph and silkscreen on canvas
diptych: 61 x 121.9 cm

Text, right panel: She told me she could walk all the way to Regina without putting holes in her shoes.

Courtesy of Gallery Costin & Klintworth

