

IMAGINARY STANDARD DISTANCE

Allyson Clay



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Walter Phillips Gallery Editions

The Banff Centre

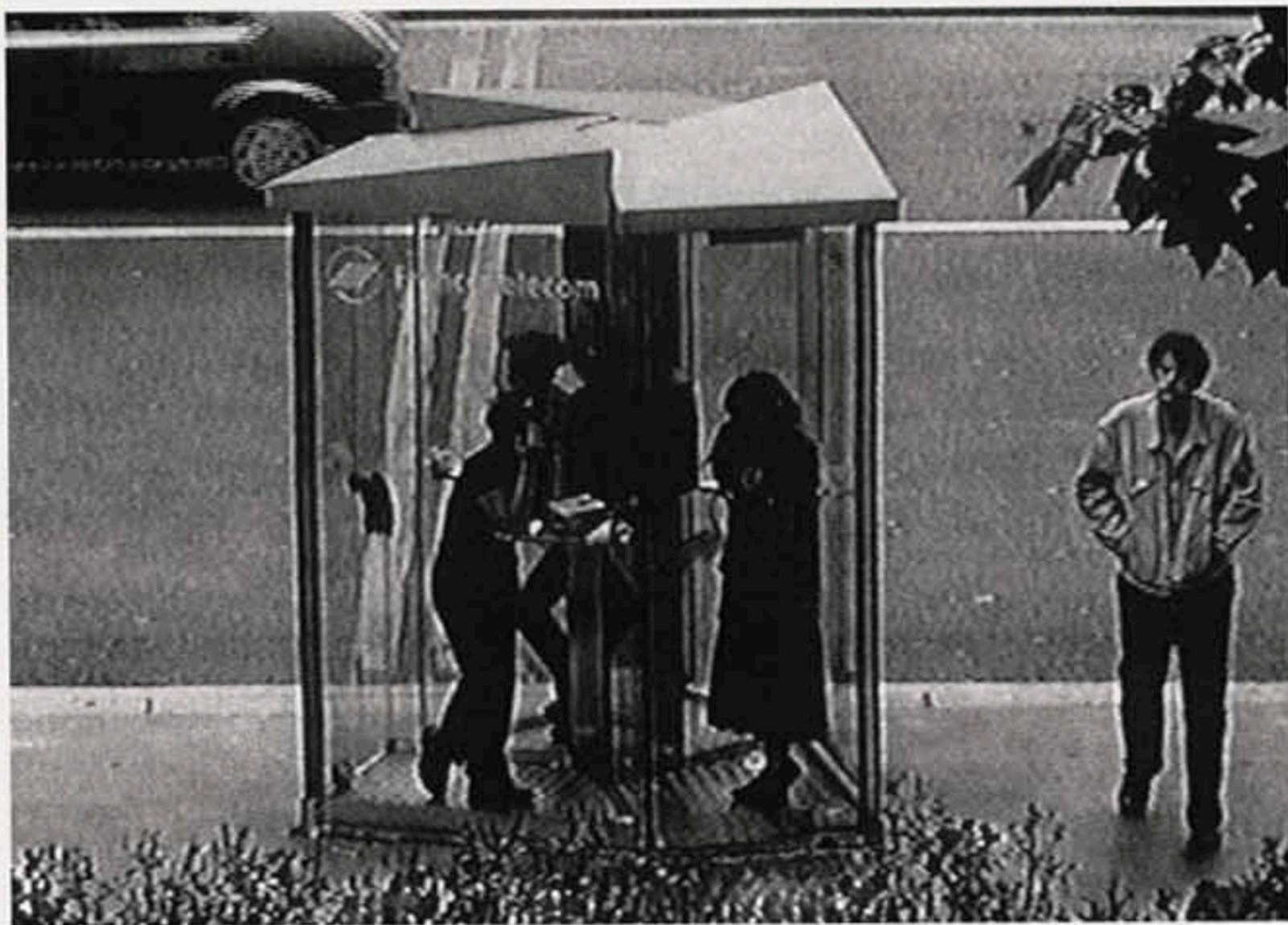
Karen Henry, Curator

Produced in association with the Kamloops Art Gallery,
Allyson Clay, and the Doryphore Curatorial Collective



THE BANFF CENTRE

Walter Phillips Gallery Editions



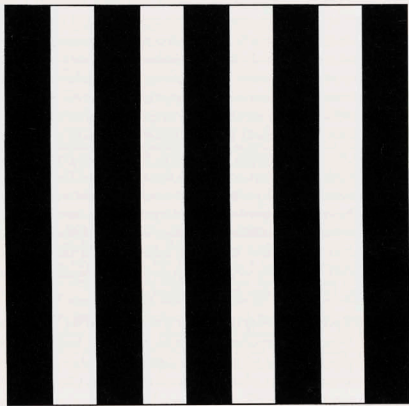
"Traces of fantasy inhabit my body...."

Phelan talks about the "grammar of the body" in performance as being metonymic, associative, rather than metaphoric. The body appears ultimately as itself, outside of narrative. It acts within the social, using various props of language and material, but it is the inability of these props to entirely encompass the individual subject that the body in performance brings to bear. It reminds us, like Bataille's ideas of the lack inherent in language, that the true self exists outside of any particular social formation. "Subjectivity can only be 'had', that is to say, experienced and performed...in the admission and recognition of one's failure to appear to oneself and within the representational field." The potential this offers is "...to learn to value what is lost, to learn not the meaning but the value of what cannot be reproduced or seen (again). It begins with the knowledge of its own failure, that it cannot be achieved."¹⁷ Clay's strategies of text and image affirm this impossibility of representation and at the same time make an effort to speak out by playing with the notion of absence and presence.

I	Using either cedar, hemlock, pine or fir, build a stretcher with bevelled edges	I
touch	13" square and 1 3/4" deep. Over this stretch medium weight linen	read
your	and size with rabbit skin or hide glue. Prepare the glue by softening	that
mouth	glue crystals in water in the proportion of 1 3/8 oz of glue to one	art
face	of water and heat in a double boiler until dissolved. Apply two	inspired
	coats to the raw linen. Prime with manufactured lead or flake white	him
face	thinned with turpentine. The primer coat will dry in about 48 hours,	to
breath	after which the surface is ready to be painted on. Make a	prove
to	medium out of beeswax and linseed oil by measuring 4 fluid oz of	he
mind	linseed oil and adding beeswax until the level of the oil reaches	was
wet	4 1/2 oz. Warm this mixture in a double boiler until the wax dissolves	in
to	(do not allow to boil) and cool this to room temperature. On a glass	charge
wet	or marble surface, use a muller to grind carbon black pigment into	even
myth	portions of this medium alternated with pure	if
of	cold-pressed linseed oil until the consistency is thick but tractable.	it
her	Next make white oaint by mulling titanium or zinc white pigment	required
always	into the linseed oil and wax mixture alternating with pure	occasional
yes	linseed oil as before until the paint is thick and tractable.	mutilation
look	On the dry lead white surface draw two vertical lines with graphite to	and
not	divide the surface into thirds vertically. Divide each of these	penetration
at	three columns into three equal vertical columns by drawing vertical lines	of
but	in graphite. Paint every other column white beginning with the second	the
into	column from the left. While the white paint is still wet, paint the	surface
me	rest of the columns black. There will be five black columns including	with
eye	two on the left and right outer edges, and four white columns, all	gentle
to	of equal size. make sure all edges are clean and even.	strokes

Performance and Painting

In the late 1980s Clay began transforming her painting practice from the mute sensuality of paint and canvas to an engagement with "the text," intervening in the inherent structures of painting practice. Starting at the beginning, with a detailed account of stretching the canvas and preparing the linen, she interjected a subjective voice into the language of this physical activity. In this series, called *Lure*, each disjointed text is paired with an austere hard-edged black and white painting. The sensual voice interrupting the logic of the instructional text is startling, seductive, personal, and disorienting: a subjectivity erupting wantonly into the presumed order, like speaking in tongues. For the next seven years, Clay's paintings had voices. Initially, in the series *Paintings with Voices*, they are unheard. The title alludes to the texts that underlay each painting. These are not made public. Only the irony of the attempt to create a hard-edged labyrinthine maze using a thick luxuriously-brushed surface hints at the expressive effort. In the next two series of paintings — *Traces of a city in the spaces between some people* and *Some places in the world a woman could walk* — the artist plays the line



Eye to Eye from *Lure*,
1988

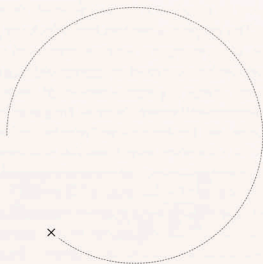
between architecture and the social. These diptych works pair faux surfaces with classic skies and austere colour fields with photo-silkscreen images — employing multiple devices of painting to address representation and abstraction and the complexities and failures of both. Texts are overlaid on the painted surface, to interrupt the viewing with a personal, imaginative fragment.

In the classic feminist film by Yvonne Rainer, *The Man Who Envied Women*, the main character is never pictured in the image. She is a character who is made present by her absence, represented by her voice as she comments on the activities in the film. She draws attention to the construction of the story and to the act of viewing itself. Rainer's fragmented approach was meant to confront popular film as a fetish through which we continually reaffirm secure values with the simplifications of narrative structure, a distraction from the true complexity of our lives. Rainer refuses to give satisfaction.¹⁸ Likewise Clay's pictures interject their multiple voices into the conceits of painting. Though the text is disembodied, it is active, performative: it lures the viewer into a self-conscious relationship with the experience of viewing. The texts are banal segments of everyday occurrences, they offer no resolution, no clear identity. They refer to open-ended, elusive subjects, contemporary with the viewer's experience, standing out against a backdrop of painting but not easily contained therein.

Clay returns to an image of herself in *Double Self Portrait*. This time she is seen from a distance, dropping books from the window of an apartment building: a perplexing image. Has she lost her head? The artwork has the connotations of lived experience, of urban apartment life gone momentarily awry. It takes place at the window, the threshold between private and public space. In *Reading Machine*, due to the magic of video, the books also return, only to fall again, their pages spreading in the sunlight, flapping ineffectively in relation to this experiment in gravity and anti-gravity. (The relationship between gravity and seriousness should not be overlooked.) Who among us has not wanted to throw away the rule books and start again? The scenario is pleasurable, satisfying an impulse for spring cleaning, a fresh start. *Reading Machine* is situated on a lectern. In the shelf below are stowed several old, damaged books: *The Collected Essays of Marx and Engels* and others. Socialism and economic influences on culture must also be at play here. The very materiality of the books grounds this work. What we learn about this piece, we learn by association. The lectern is a position from which to speak. It sits in the space as an invitation and creates expectations of the person standing behind it. It physically situates the viewer in a position of responsibility in relation to others in the space, draws them into the performance.

The presence of the performing body (whether it is the viewer at the lectern, the shaky hand holding the camera in *Improper Perspectives*, the absent body of the texts, or the elusive body represented in the self portraits) operates against abstraction, implicating the artist and the viewer within the social construction of meaning. Clay's work is actively positioned to disrupt the prevailing accumulation of abstract, scientific, impersonal

information as classifiable data. In a world restructured by technology, making strange is a way of operating against convention, towards a quiet revolution, maintaining space for human ingenuity and change. As Donna Haraway says in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, "Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility."¹⁹



YOU CAN BEGIN ANYWHERE, IN A STREET, in a city. Map out a perimeter through walking, defining the outside edges of a neighbourhood. You need not conform to official delineations, they are not barriers. This is a vernacular space you know through familiar routes, ritual avoidance, trespasses, or stories. There is always the question of being in the right place. Your stuttering visibility as you travel across regulated spaces can work against you, or not. Perspective is a significant factor. If you pay close attention to the look of the buildings you pass by, you'll miss the architecture. It's a fine tissue in between. A body can tear through it. There's no noise, but consequences. This is not a passionate venture, only an outline that erodes. There are things I can't remember but I know I should. Only the scent of pines under cloudless heat, lavender old, and tucked away, waxy awkward magnolia flowers distracting my breathing, and calligraphic cigar smoke, scribbling in the aromatic dome of in-dolent summer evening after evening with a pungent reminder of place, not here. It's the luminous cast of rascal desire. A lure. She's alone, like you, and you notice you've been following her. You change your pace to make yourself separate, confident, directional, and on the boundary between two different spaces. This performance should be carried out without interruptions. (Perhaps you faltered, changed direction, started over.) You'll return to a place you've been before. You know this through walking. Quite possibly this is where the performance ends. You know through walking when it ends. This time there is no one waiting for you, the denouement is spacious, intimate. A part of the city has moved inside you.

Perimeter from Loci,
1995-2000

Feminine wiles: the politics of space

An artwork of heroic proportions is impressive on the level of a monument. It commands space. It assumes authority. To work small is to take a position in relation to authority — to leave space. It is no more or less determined. It is strategic, provocative.

As the architecture of the city produces its inhabitants, organizes bodies in particular kinds of ways, so too does the art gallery. It is a space organized around the act of looking, and ideally of seeing. This presumes a position from which one is enabled to see, to participate in discourse. Clay's strategies of scale and open-ended narrative are intended to incorporate the viewer within a conversation between bodies, a space of shifting and interconnected positions. "Vision is *always* a question of the power to see;..." says Haraway. Haraway distinguishes between "situated knowledge" of distinct identities defined in space and time, and the disembodied "cannibal eye" of so-called scientific objectivity. She argues for a discursive subject, one that continues to discover itself in relation to a complex field of influences, that is multidimensional and unfinished. She says of this feminized subject, "The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another."²⁰ This view operates against a simple unified subject, seeks engagement, inventiveness, and can be profoundly and creatively subversive. The socialist/feminist subject seeks networks, mobilizes associations, as the source for a dynamic synergy. This is potentially the space of intimacy, Bataille's erotic communication.

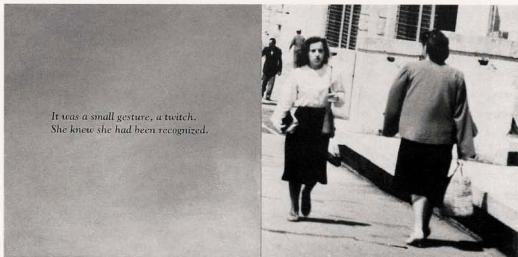
"...the denouement is spacious, intimate."

At the *Intimate Technologies/Dangerous Zones* conference at the Banff Centre in April 2002, Nina Wakeford stated that "intimacy is always political."²¹ Clay's sensual colours, range of mediums, elusive stories, and small moving images intend to draw the viewer into a relationship. If the perspectives are "improper," they invite the viewer to collude in their transgressions. With transgression comes excitement and vulnerability, an agitated edge that threatens stability. These are the material affects of language, of architecture, of intimacy.

In *Twitch*, Clay pairs an image of two women passing each other in the street with the text: "It was a small gesture, a twitch. She knew she had been recognized." The subject is caught out unexpectedly in a brief encounter, an exchange of glances. Edward Casey explores the power of the glance, which, with "...its meek slenderness," is disarming, unsettling. It is an interruption in the self-absorption and presumed order of things. It contains a "penetrative force" that can bring down nations, ruin relationships, in an instant. Casey invokes Henri Bergson's notion of the *durée*, in which each point in time in a person's experience contains the entirety of both memory and potential. It

encompasses the whole of oneself. The glance is a personal exchange that can be as affirming as it is unsettling. It is quintessentially social and wholly intimate — its generative force touches more than one person and alters both. “For the glance upsets the assurances and reassurances” of security and is a point of knowing, of disruption, a place of change, of revolution. The glance is essentially mobile, the advance guard of change.²² It is a moment of recognition, revealing new possibilities that had formerly been hidden or not even conceived.

Allyson Clay works with the delicacy and force of the glance. The art works seek association. They contemplate art and the social and propose a new vocabulary of possibilities. The invitation to intimacy and the pleasure of the material forms cannot be separated from this active agenda. The images and texts provide points of entry, create spaces, twist and turn through the maze, and trace the trajectory of a woman through the city, through the social, and through the history of art making.



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

*Twitch, from Some places in
the world a woman could walk,
1993*

Endnotes

1 The architectural fragments in this case refer not only to Allyson Clay's interest in the architecture of thought and the built environment of the city, but also to the brief references to much more complex theories that I have woven into this text.

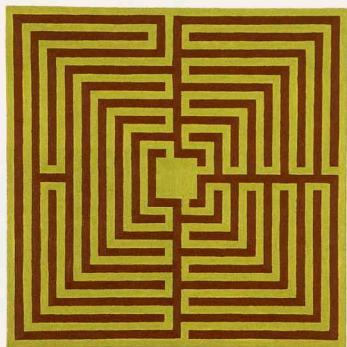
2 Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998 edition, original 1989), 51-54. Hollier writes about Bataille's article "Architecture," first published as part of the "Dictionnaire Critique" in the surrealist journal *Documents*, 1929.

3 *Ibid.*, 64-68 and 112.

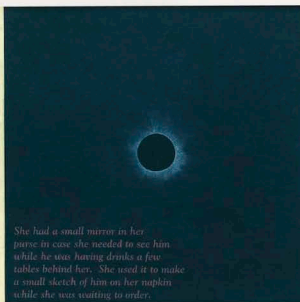
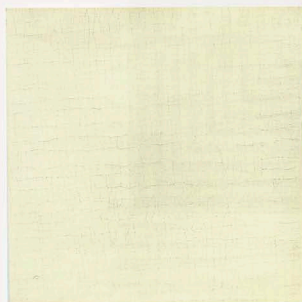
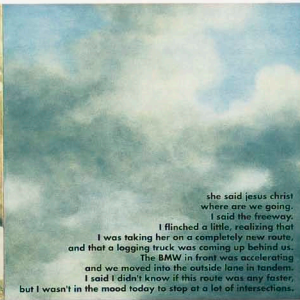
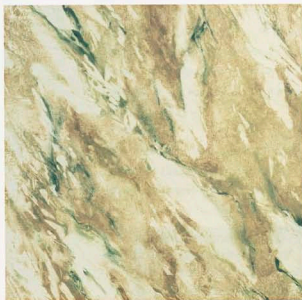
4 "Panopticism" from *Discipline and Punish*, in Paul Rabinow, ed., *Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 206-211.

5 *Ibid.*, "Introduction," 17-19.

- 6 Ibid, "The Means of Correct Training" from *Discipline and Punish*, 192.
- 7 Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 289-286. Colomina discusses how Le Corbusier represented women in photographs and drawings. They are always looking away or at the man of the house. In one image depicting a chaise-longue, the woman is actually looking at the blank wall behind her rather than at the camera. Colomina discusses this in relation to the rationale of the house providing the man an ambient view of his surroundings. In contrast, the woman "sees nothing."
- 8 Ibid, 6-11.
- 9 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 10-25, in which Crary explores distraction as a central feature of modernity.
- 10 The Twin Towers is also a story of capital, a lesson in architecture. And, so the story goes, in the course of time the structure became so powerful it began making idols in its own image, the one became two, twins, that mirrored and reinforced each other to the point of distraction and raised their haughty heads in their presumed invincibility. Until one day it was made graphically clear that control is never complete; the structure is always vulnerable. Change comes at unexpected moments, forcing global politics into harsh relief. In reaction, the forces rally, shore up the surveillance systems, subject the bodies under their control to more and more incursions, looking into pockets, shoes, listening everywhere, and probing interiors until the delicate balance between liberties and disciplines quietly moans and shifts.
- To return to that September morning and the twin monuments — leveled, replaced in space and memory by people falling, running, crying: the human aspect of capital, the labour that supports it, the effect on people's lives, the anger that it creates in its consuming passions. Following Bataille, can this violent rift in the architecture be a potential space from which some new, generative change may arise?
- 11 Colomina, 7-8. The quote from Barthes is from *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 98, as quoted by Colomina.
- 12 Ibid, 8-9.
- 13 Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, paperback edition 2000, first published 1999), 15.
- 14 E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1961), 302-303.
- 15 H.W. Janson, *History of Art*, Fifth Edition (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. & Prentice Hall, Inc., 1995), 704-705.
- 16 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1996, first published 1993), 158-161.
- 17 Ibid, 91 and 149-152.
- 18 Ibid, 71-92.
- 19 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.
- 20 Ibid, 92-193.
- 21 This comment was made during the discussion of a case study presented by Dr. Wakeford. She teaches in the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey, UK.
- 22 Edward S. Casey, "The Time of the Glance: Toward Becoming Otherwise," in *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures*, Elizabeth Grosz, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 80-91.



Paintings with Voices #4, 1989



Freeway Challenge, *from* Traces of a city in the spaces between some people, 1990

Vista, *from* Traces of a city in the spaces between some people, 1990

Opposite

Danger *from* Some places in the world a woman could walk, 1993



I begin to enjoy the presence of danger.



Foreword

In the fall of 2000 curator Karen Henry joined the staff of the Walter Phillips Gallery on a one-year Curatorial Fellowship. The Fellowship facilitated work on a number of projects including a video portrait and forthcoming publication on the curatorial work and writing of Doris Shadbolt. During her tenure, Karen acted as a consultant to gallery staff, resident artists and curatorial interns. This publication and touring exhibition, *Allyson Clay: Imaginary Standard Distance*, are also a result of her fruitful time in Banff.

The exhibition is a mid-career survey of the work of Vancouver-based artist Allyson Clay that incorporates aspects of several bodies of work made between 1988 and 2002. It demonstrates Clay's flexible and studied use of a diverse range of media and skillfully illustrates the juncture at which she moved away from painting towards more narrative and text-based performative works. Concerned with issues of identity, gender, and the boundaries between public and private space, the work in *Imaginary Standard Distance* negotiates the margins between seduction and intervention, curiosity and voyeurism.

This catalogue provides an overview of Allyson Clay's diverse artistic practice. Although a mid-career survey, it is in no way intended to be the definitive statement on the work of an artist with many years of artistic production to come.

On behalf of the Walter Phillips Gallery, I would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to Allyson Clay for the opportunity to work with her. Our gratitude also goes out to Karen Henry who not only served as curator of the exhibition, but editor and coordinator of this publication. Thanks to Lisa Robertson for her sensitive literary response to the work and to designer Robin Mitchell for her adept handling of the subject matter. Walter Phillips Gallery Curator Melanie Townsend, acting Director of the department during most of the period when this project was produced, ably oversaw its production in consultation with Karen, Allyson, and the gallery staff. Preparator Mimmo Maiolo, Curatorial Assistant Charlene McNichol, and Gallery Attendants Sarah Fudge and Julia Sivorn must also be acknowledged for their dedication and professionalism.

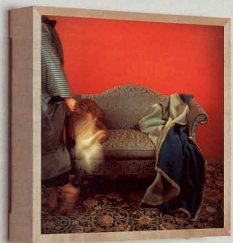
Our gratitude to the lenders for making the exhibition possible: the artist Allyson Clay, Janice Andreea, Lucy Hogg, Coleen and Howard Nemtin, David MacWilliam, the City of Burnaby, Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Kamloops Art Gallery, McCarthy Tétrault, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, the Kenderdine Gallery at the University of Saskatchewan, and the Vancouver Art Gallery. Thanks also to the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, the Kamloops Art Gallery, and the Art Gallery of the Greater Victoria for their timely commitment to extending the reach of the exhibition and artwork through their venues.

The Walter Phillips Gallery is grateful to our financial partners for help in producing this catalogue: the Kamloops Art Gallery, Allyson Clay, the Doryphore Curatorial Collective, and a private donor. Finally, our thanks to the Canada Council for the Arts, as its generous funding makes this publication and our other programs possible.

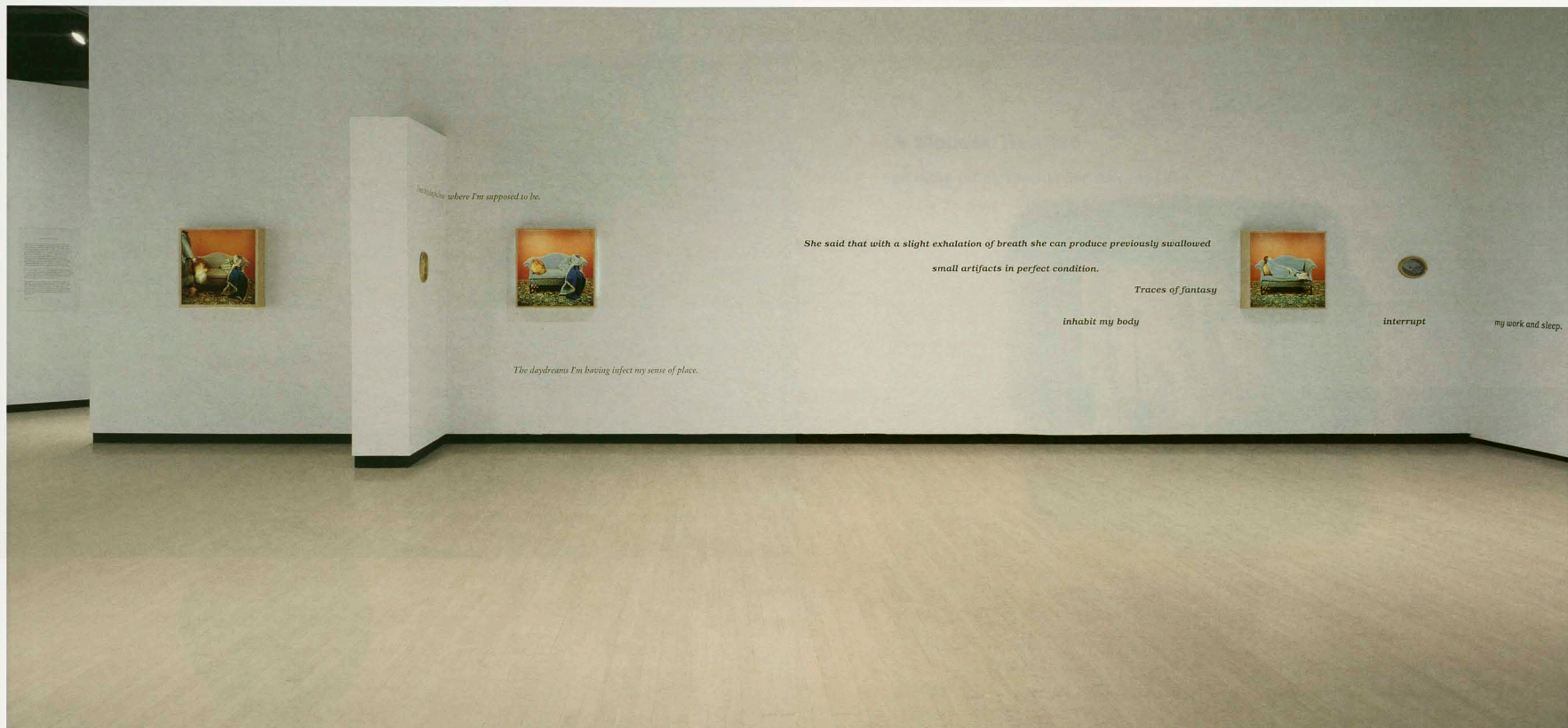
Anthony Kiendl, *Director, Visual Arts and Walter Phillips Gallery
The Banff Centre*



Private Floating World, 1995-1998



Untitled III (self portrait), 1995–1998



Untitled I, II, & III, 1995-1998

Installation, Walter Phillips Gallery, 2002



detail, Quiet Enjoyment, 1999-2000

LISA ROBERTSON

A Modest Treatise

an essay on perspective for Allyson Clay

It was a warm September evening.
We dissolved corporeally into air leaving only our look.
The night was populated with images.
Some were moved easily to pity.
Some were sharp and suspicious, some credulous and pure.
Some were haughty and bitter.
Some human.
Some malleable and obsequious.
Some were gay.
Some were shy, solitary and austere.
Some liked to be praised by our work.
Some suffered when criticized.
Some were cruel in their arrogance, weak in danger, and so forth.
It would be a waste of words to describe them all.

It was a warm September evening and we entered its spaciousness,
which was not classical.
It was pleasant to violate the canons of proportion.
It was pleasant to imagine their life.
We placed our body in relation to their mystical privacies.
Nothing ever happened.
We were invisible.
Our architecture was also invisible and specific and vast and it faltered.
Our architecture faltered in its complete originality.
We called it civic lust.
The romance of proportion was not for us.

It was a warm September evening.
We smoothed the horizon.
Here were the particulars of idling.
Here were the particulars of malleable proportions.
The verb was the plane of picturing.
The painter's work is horizontal.
Against history we looked and against poetry also.
We looked against space that is.
A lady's reach must exceed her grasp.
A lady must exceed space or falter.
Faltering was smooth.
This is mannerist ecology.

It was a warm September evening.
It contained old men, youths, boys, matrons, girls, domestic animals,
dogs, birds, horses, buildings and provinces.
They were properly arranged.
Our technique was based on experience, not desire.
This was an ecology of distances.
We couldn't read them in the beautiful way.
What bodies want these buildings?
What do the shoulder, the wrist, the neck, in their various
flexures desire?
What does mortal flexure want?
As a form of modest ornament, we wish to articulate transitions.
We saw the stranger's wrist in the sugary light.
The soul is outside.

It was a warm September evening.
The monuments of the city were made known by the movements of
the bodies.
Each had the dignity of her movements.
Each sat at rest as pure and massy gold.
Care weighs so heavily.
Cloth is by nature heavy and falls to earth.
We wanted to describe the difference in sensation.
With grace the curtains when struck with the wind showed the citizens.
We designed all these movements for painting.
The rooms felt patient, like concepts.
We disliked solitude and we also craved it.
We have given thought to making our words clear rather than ornate.

It was a warm September evening.
The windows were as ripe as fruits bleeding sugars.
That grace in bodies, which we call beauty, is born of sugars.
We wanted to see if our bodies could amend space.
Narcissus, who was changed into a flower according to the poets, was
the inventor of changing.
Some think that sugar shaped the soul.
We were lonely and hungry and civic.
We moved upwards in the sweet air.
Its simplicity or complexity was not our own.

It was a warm September evening with feminist emotion.
Motion contracted.
The air was destroying the layer of the future.
We were still sand or gravel or stone slabs.
How could we speak or groan or scream?
We did not wish to disrupt their ceremonies.
We sought the ornament of moisture.
We needed to experience radical juice.
We played Roman games such as love, and change.

It was a warm September evening and the city and the sky were of the
same substance.
But that substance was not in itself liberatory.
It called for abundance and variety.
Here we refer to largesse in thought.
You must imagine that we were standing before a window through which
we could see
everything we wanted to depict.
Utopia is so emotional.
Then we get used to it.
This work was completed in Roman Vancouver.
This is a completely original treatise.

It was a warm September evening.
Nothing was both new and perfect.
We saw their lives in the hospices that were their lives.
Each sat at rest as pure and massy gold.
Each had the dignity of her concept.
Some stood erect, planted on one foot, showing the face, and with hand high and
fingers joyous.
In others the face is turned, the arms folded, and the feet joined.
Each one mounted her proper action.
Some were seated, others on one knee, others lying.
Some were nude and others part nude and part clothed.
The movements of the city were made known by the moments of bodies.
Care and thought weighed so heavily.
We speak here as an architect.

It was a warm September evening.
The windows became more expensive.
They were the ancient ornament of things.
We hovered just beyond the limit of the concept.
This caused a sensation of anticipation or love.
Narcissus who was changed into a flower was the inventor of changing.
The outlines of things are frequently unknown.
The things seen fit together rarely.
We never experienced space as unifying.
Always the city was a frictional edifice.

We wanted to be happy and graceful in our work.

It was a warm September evening.
We severally expressed our century.
Because of the corporal largesse of the century we wept.
Our freedom frightened the city.
We used to marvel and at the same time to grieve.
Other qualities rested like a skin over the surface of copiousness.
Still others flickered like a skin as on a living mirror.
Inside the texture of taxonomy we saw sensations.
Our emotion felt like a bundle tightly bound.

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There were so many things that don't exist.
This tradition was based on aesthetic experiments.
Our technique was based on desire, not experience.
We had dismantled the interior.
We were writing on the city, which was a screen on a clock.
All we wanted to do was deform a surface.
We wanted to experience the mortality of thought.
We saw no space prior to bodies and their intervals.
The secular niches were flickering luminously.
Space was a very fine condition of corpuscular light.
We witnessed immaterial tissues.
We embellished antiquity with our laughter.

It was a warm September evening.
What is painting but the act of embrace.
We had lived subject to others, as in paintings.
Sometimes we designed finely proportioned buildings in our mind.
We occupied ourselves with constructions.
We were subdivided by the thought of things.
We had not fulfilled our sense organs.
A painting is soft as Narcissus.
The encompassing element faltered.
It caused us to ask: How shall we use our freedom?
What shall we do with our senses.
We held them in our nervy hands.
We held our freedom.



detail, Improper Perspectives, 2000

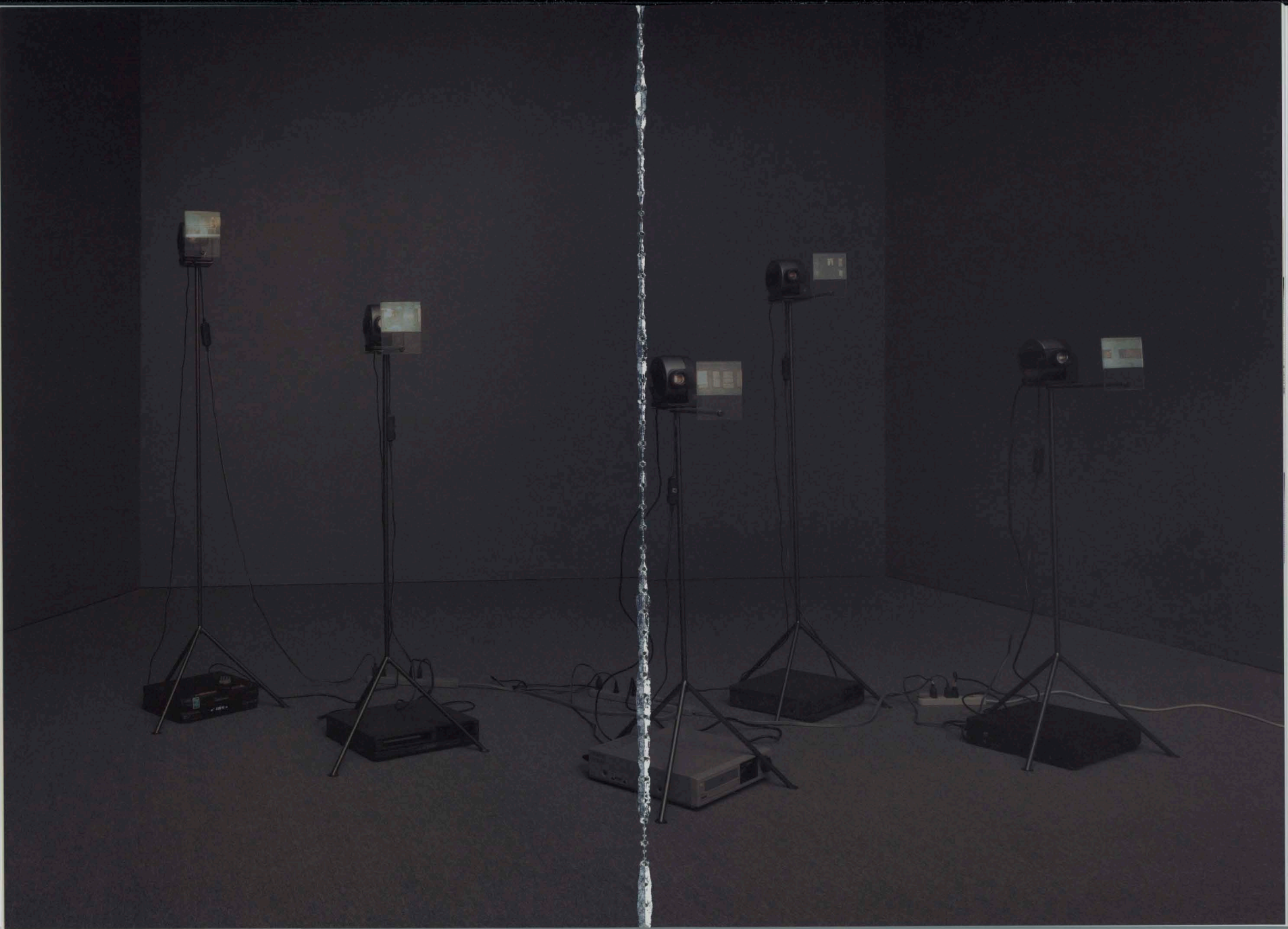


details, Improper Perspectives, 2000

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Improper Perspectives, 2000

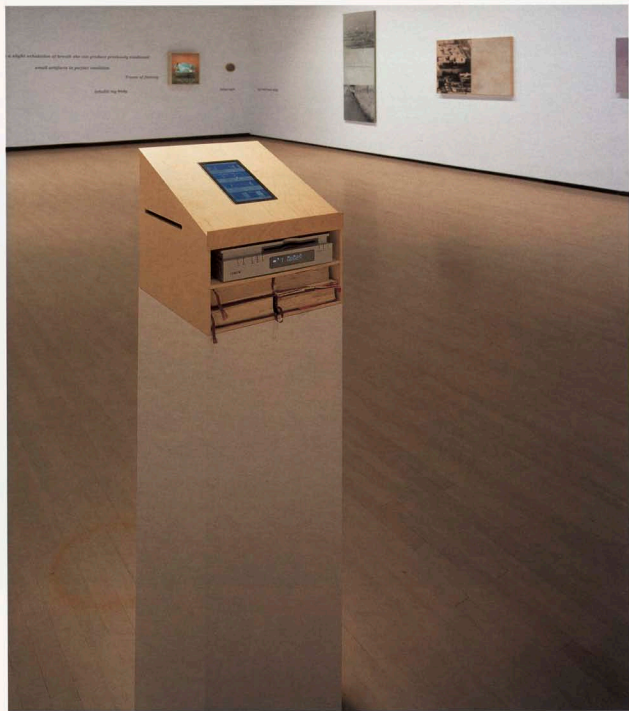
Installation, Presentation House Gallery, 2000





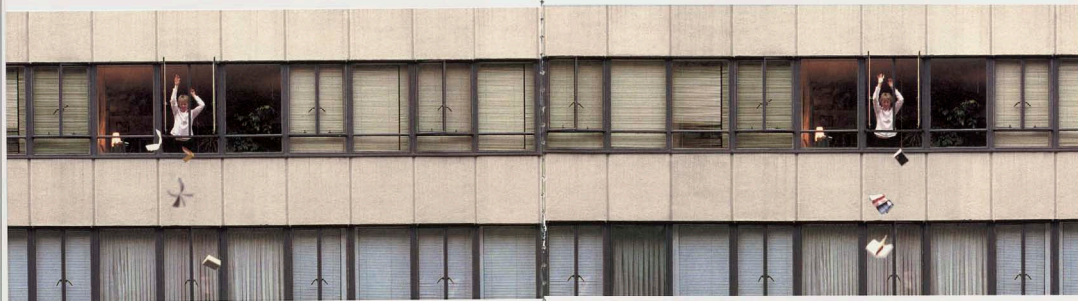
Quiet Enjoyment, 1999-2000

Installation, Walter Phillips Gallery, 2002



Reading Machine, 2002

Installation, Walter Phillips Gallery, 2002



Double Self-Portrait, 2001



from the series Aerologics (working title), 2002

List of Works

Eye to Eye, maquette from *Lure*, 1988
gouache & laser print text on paper, 97cm x 70cm
collection of Howard and Coleen Nemtin

study for *Paintings with Voices #4*, 1989
(...as he spoke about his work...)
watercolour & gouache on paper, 97.3cm x 70cm
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund

study for *Paintings with Voices #3*, 1989
(...those cold arms...)
watercolour, gouache & graphite on paper,
97.7cm x 70cm
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund

Paintings with Voices #4, 1989
(...as he spoke about his work...)
oil on linen, 61cm x 61cm
collection of the artist

Paintings with Voices #3, 1989 (...those cold arms...)
oil on linen, 61cm x 61cm
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund

Paintings with Voices #2, 1989
(...he told me this story...)
oil on linen, 61cm x 61cm
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund

Freezzy Challenge, from *Traces of a city in the spaces between some people*, 1990
mixed media on medite, 62cm x 122cm
collection of the Kamloops Art Gallery,
gift of the artist

Vista, from *Traces of a city in the spaces between some people*, 1990
mixed media on medite, 62cm x 122cm
collection of Lucy Hogg

Another Encounter, from *Traces of a city in the spaces between some people*, 1990
mixed media on medite, 62cm x 122cm
collection of the artist

Getaway, from *Traces of a city in the spaces between some people*, 1990
mixed media on medite, 62cm x 122cm
collection of the Kamloops Art Gallery,
gift of the artist

Encouraging Advice, from *Traces of a city in the spaces between some people*, 1990
mixed media on medite, 62cm x 122cm
collection of the Kamloops Art Gallery,
gift of the artist

Retrieval, from *Traces of a city in the spaces between some people*, 1990
mixed media on medite, 62cm x 122cm
collection of David MacWilliam

Twitch, from *Some places in the world a woman could walk*, 1993
acrylic & photo silkscreen on canvas, 62cm x 122cm
collection of the Kenderdine Art Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program

Regina, from *Some places in the world a woman could walk*, 1993
acrylic & photo silkscreen on canvas, 62cm x 122cm
collection of the Kamloops Art Gallery,
gift of the artist

Danger, from *Some places in the world a woman could walk*, 1993
acrylic & photo silkscreen on canvas,
182.9cm x 76.2cm
collection of McCarthy Tétrault

A Foreign Place, from *Some places in the world a woman could walk*, 1993
acrylic & photo silkscreen on canvas,
62cm x 122cm
collection of Janice Andreae

Voices from the street, from *Some places in the world a woman could walk*, 1995
acrylic & photo silkscreen on canvas, 76cm x 120.3cm
collection of the Kamloops Art Gallery,
gift of the artist

Loci, 1995
3 photocopy, gouache, watercolour & graphite
drawings with text on vellum, 100cm sq. each
City of Burnaby Permanent Art Collection

Private Floating World, 1995-1998
3 tondos (transmounted c prints with aluminum frames), 20" diameter each
collection of the Walter Phillips Gallery
The Banff Centre

Self Portrait Series

Untitled I (my sense of place), 1995-1997
backlit cibachrome, 65cm sq., with vinyl text,
framed lightjet print
collection of the Museum of Contemporary
Canadian Art

Untitled II (previously swallowed objects), 1995-1997
backlit cibachrome, 65cm sq., with vinyl text,
framed lightjet print
Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund

Untitled III (self portrait), 1995-1998
backlit cibachrome, 65cm sq., with framed letterpress
text on arches paper
collection of the Kamloops Art Gallery,
purchased with the support of the Canada Council
for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program

Improper Perspectives Series

Imaginary Standard Distance, 1998-99
installation with work table and video camera,
1hr dv8 video
collection of the artist
courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery

Improper Perspectives, 2000,
5 video projections on sandblasted glass & stands,
dimensions variable
collection of the artist
courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery

A brief moment in time, 2000
17 lightjet prints on aluminum, 7.5cm x 12.5cm
collection of the artist
courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery

Quiet Enjoyment, 1999-2000
12 from series of 20 watercolours on arches paper,
40.5cm x 21cm framed
collection of the artist
courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery

Antigravitational City Series

La La City, 2000-2001
single channel video loop, 90m, colour
collection of the artist
courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery

Double Self-Portrait, 2001
lightjet print on dibond, 53cm x 244cm
collection of the Walter Phillips Gallery
The Banff Centre

Reading Machine, 2002
dvd, lcd screen, books, lectern
collection of the artist
courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery

La La City, 2000-2001
installation, Props Pub,
The Banff Centre, 2002



Artist's Curriculum Vitae

Born 1953 in Vancouver, Canada, where she currently lives and works

Education

Master of Fine Arts,
University of British Columbia, 1983-1985

Bachelor of Fine Arts,
Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1978-1980

Accademia delle Belle Arti, Loyola University of
Chicago, Temple University of Philadelphia: Rome,
Italy, campuses, 1972-1977

Solo Exhibitions (1985-2002)

2002

Walter Phillips Gallery, *Imaginary Standard Distance*,
Banff, Alberta

Mt. Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, *Imaginary
Standard Distance*, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Catriona Jeffries Gallery, *Allyson Clay New Works*,
Vancouver, British Columbia

2000

La La City, video and sound performance,
Vancouver, British Columbia

1999

Catriona Jeffries Gallery, *Quiet Enjoyment*,
Vancouver, British Columbia

1997

Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver,
British Columbia

1994

Edmonton Art Gallery, *Some places in the world a
woman could walk*, Edmonton, Alberta

1993

Costin and Klintworth, Toronto, Ontario
Teck Gallery, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver,
British Columbia

1992

Charles H. Scott Gallery, *Traces of a city in the
spaces between some people*, Vancouver,
British Columbia

1990

Southern Alberta Art Gallery, *Traces of a city in the
spaces between some people*, Lethbridge, Alberta

Costin and Klintworth, *Traces of a city in the
spaces between some people*, Toronto, Ontario

1989

Costin and Klintworth, Toronto, Ontario

1988

Artspeak Gallery, *Lure*, Vancouver, British Columbia

Stride Gallery, *Great Strides*, Calgary, Alberta

1987

YYZ, *Allyson Clay*, Toronto, Ontario

1985

Western Front Gallery, *Hold It*, Vancouver,
British Columbia

Selected Group Exhibitions (1985-2002)

2001

Presentation House Gallery, *Facing History: Portraits
from Vancouver*, North Vancouver, British Columbia

2000

Vancouver Art Gallery, *Pictures, positions and
places*, Vancouver, British Columbia

Presentation House Gallery, *Private Investigations:
Merry Alpern, Allyson Clay, Jennifer Bolande*,
North Vancouver, British Columbia

1999

Vancouver Art Gallery, *Recollect*, Vancouver,
British Columbia

Burnaby Art Gallery, *Fingerprints: Digital Culture
and Contemporary Art*, Burnaby, British Columbia

1998

Michael Gibson Gallery, *One Night Stand: Lorna
Brown, Allyson Clay, Judy Radul, Colette Urban,
Kathryn Walter*, London, Ontario

RE, Memoires de Villes, Paris, France

1997

Taipei Fine Arts Museum, *Vancouver Perspectives*,
Taipei, Taiwan

1996

Yokohama Citizen's Gallery, *Vancouver Perspectives*,
Yokohama, Japan

Kamloops Art Gallery, *The Culture of Nature*,
Kamloops, British Columbia

Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia

Presentation House Gallery, *Urban Fictions*, North
Vancouver, British Columbia

1995

Contemporary Art Gallery, *Allyson Clay and
Shonagh Alexander*, Vancouver, British Columbia

YYZ Artists Outlet, *Picture Theory*, Toronto, Ontario

Mendel Art Gallery, *Women and Paint*, Saskatoon,
Saskatchewan

1993

Expo '93 Canadian participation, *Reflecting Paradise*,
Taejon, South Korea

Dunlop Art Gallery, *Visual Evidence*,
Regina, Saskatchewan

Atelier Gallery, *Drawings by Artists, Sculptors and
Architects*, Vancouver, British Columbia

Artspeak Gallery, *Working Documents*, Vancouver,
British Columbia

1991

Snelgrove Art Gallery at University of Saskatchewan,
*Telltale: Restructured Narratives in Contemporary
Canadian Art*, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Latitude 53, *Westcoast Stories*, Edmonton, Alberta
University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Lethbridge,
Alberta

1990

Art Metropole, *Telling Things*, Toronto, Ontario

London Regional Art Gallery, *Memory Works*,
London, Ontario

Glenbow Museum, *Memory Works*,
Calgary, Alberta

1986

Surrey Art Gallery, *Fracture*, Surrey, British Columbia
Sala 1, *Riccochet*, Rome, Italy

Walter Phillips Gallery, *Vancouver Note/Vancouver
86*, Banff, Alberta

1985

(N)on Commercial Gallery, *Urban Circuit*,
Vancouver, British Columbia

Houston-Farris Gallery, *Four Painters*, Vancouver,
British Columbia

Catalogues

Imaginary Standard Distance, Walter Phillips
Gallery, Banff, Alberta, 2002

urban fictions, Presentation House Gallery, North
Vancouver, British Columbia, 1997

Picture Theory, YYZ Artist Outlet, Toronto,
Ontario, 1995

*Women and Paint, Reflections on the Fraughtness
of Painting*, Mendel Art Gallery,
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1995

Reflecting Paradise, Jeffrey Spalding, ed., University
of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta, 1995

Visual Evidence, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina,
Saskatchewan, 1993

Allyson Clay Recent Work, Edmonton Art Gallery,
Edmonton, 1993

Traces of a city in the spaces between some people,
Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver, British
Columbia, 1992

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Allyson Clay's text-filled work explores urban
voyeurism," *Fastforward*, Calgary, Alberta,
May 9-15, 2002, 27.

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Parachute #99, July 2000, 54-55.

Mills, Josephine, "Interview with Allyson Clay and
Susan Schuppli," *Blackflash* Vol. 17, #3, 2000,
4-13.

Gopnik, Blake, "Out and about in Vancouver,"
Globe and Mail, March 21, 2000, R5.

Scott, Michael, "Art of the sneak peek," *Mix in the
Vancouver Sun*, March 11, 2000, E13.

Gopnik, Blake, "Review: A City Worth of Art,"
Globe and Mail, October 26, 1999, C4.

Watson, Petra, "In the Galleries," *National Post*,
October 25, 1999, D7.

O'Brian, Melanie, *Allyson Clay: Quiet Enjoyment*,
Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, BC, 1999.

Mallon, Matthew, "All Girls School," *Western
Living*, Winter, 1998, 14-17, 30.

Laurence, Robin, review, *Georgia Straight*,
May 22-29, 1997, 59.

Hurtig, Annette, "The Culture of Nature," *Art and
its Practices (An Investigation of Contemporary Art)*,
Kamloops Art Gallery, Kamloops, BC, 1996.

Laurence, Robin, "Exploring the Plight of Women
in Urban Settings," *Vancouver Sun, Saturday
Review*, January 27, 1996, D5.

Gustafson, Paula, "Art for the Visually Literate,"
X-tra West #46, May 18, 1995, 21.

Laurence, Robin, "Seeing Everything Twice,"
Vancouver Sun, Saturday Review, June 2, 1995, D5.

Morris, Meaghan, "Intimations of a Counter-
Sublime: Clay, Ayearst," *Toronto: C Magazine* #44,
1995, 37-39.

Mansell, Alice, "Woman as Artist: Papers in Honour
of Marsha Hanen," *Contemporary Art and Critical
Theory in Canada*. Contained within this publication
the work #2 (*Performance for one person in any
interior space*) is noted. Ed. Christine Sutherland
and Beverly Rasporich, University of Calgary Press

Mastai, Judith, "The Postmodern Flaneuse,"
Allyson Clay Recent Work, Edmonton: Edmonton
Art Gallery,

Spalding, Jeffrey, ed., *Reflecting Paradise*, Lethbridge:
University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, 1993.

Laurence, Robin, "Women Challenge Paint's
Patriarchal Past," *Georgia Straight*, June 26-
July 3, 1992.

Rosenberg, Ann, "Pairing excited mind, heart," *Vancouver Sun*, June 20, 1992.

Cheetham, Mark and Linda Hutcheon, *Remembering Postmodernism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 29-34 and *La Memoire Postmoderne: Essai sur l'art canadien contemporain* (French Edition), 60-68.

Salzman, Gregory, "Allyson Clay," *Parachute*, Spring 1991, 40-41.

Watson, Scott, "The Generic City and its Discontents," *Arts Magazine* #62.

Bentley-Mays, John, "A telling brush with text-based art," *Globe and Mail*, June 22, 1990.

Watson, Scott, "Fast Forward," *Canadian Art*, Fall 1990, 45.

Blanchette, Marion, "Vancouver '86: Insertion," *Vancouver Now*, Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, May 15-June 15, 1986

Harris, Mark, "Allyson Clay," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 2 #3, Fall 1985, 92-93.

Johnson, Eve, "Paintings that are More than Pictures," *Vancouver Sun*, May 10, 1985, 87.

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Keziere, Russell, "The Paintings of Allyson Clay," *Vanguard*, Vol. 17, #5 & 6, Summer 1985, 10-13

Wallace, Keith, "What Meaning Is," *Georgia Straight*, May 24-31, 1985, 5.

Young, Jane, "Allyson Clay," *Vanguard*, February 1983, 37-38.

Published Writing and Artist or Web Projects by Allyson Clay

Best Reads: Kananaskis 2002. L Projects Flyer. M. Madison Design. Calgary, Alberta.

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"Improper perspectives," artist project for *A Set of Suspicions*. Vancouver: Artspeak publication. 2001, 56-62.

"A brief moment in time," artist project. *Tessera*. Vol. 28, Summer 2000, 57-58.

"Constant Longing (Work and Travel): Journal Excerpt with Dreams," *So, to Speak*, Jean-Pierre Gilbert, Sylvie Gilbert, and Lesley Johnstone, editors, Montreal: Artexes Editions: Prendre Parole, 2000.

"Not This, but Something Else," artist project, *Blackflash*, Vol. 16, #1, Summer 1998, 12-17.

"Danger," 109; "Some places in the world a woman could walk," 86-89; "Instead," cover illustration, *Tessera* #17, Winter 1995.

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Project #2 from Loci (performance for one person in any interior space), *Front Magazine*, Dec. 89/Jan. 90.

Stories, chapbook to accompany *Paintings with Voices*, Toronto: Costin and Klintworth Gallery, 1989.

Lure, Vancouver: Artspeak Gallery, 1988.

Collections

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario

Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario

Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, British Columbia

Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa, Ontario

Kamloops Art Gallery, Kamloops, British Columbia

Kenderdine Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, Ontario

Pirandello Museum, Agrigento, Italy

University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta

Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia

Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre, Alberta

And private/corporate collections in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Canada; Milano, Italy; and Seattle, U.S.A.

Represented by

Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

LISA ROBERTSON is a Vancouver poet and essayist. She has produced three books of poetry: *XEclogue* (Tsunami Editions 1993, reissued by New Star, 1999), *Debbie: An Epic* (1997; nominated for the Governor-General's Award for Poetry); and *The Weather* (2001, winner of the Relit Award for Poetry) (both co-published by New Star in Canada and Reality Street in the UK). She frequently writes essays on the representation of space, often conceived as parallel texts in conjunction with the works of visual artists (recently, Elspeth Pratt, Renee van Halm, Liz Magor, Gary Hill). *The Collected Reports of The Office for Soft Architecture* is forthcoming from Clearcut Press, Astoria.

KAREN HENRY is a curator, writer and editor based in Vancouver, BC. She has worked with Video In, Western Front, Burnaby Art Gallery, Walter Phillips Gallery, and Presentation House Gallery, and also with the Public Art Program in Vancouver and as a sessional instructor at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. She has produced catalogues and essays for these institutions as well as in *Video Guide*, *Vanguard*, and *Parachute* magazines, and catalogues for Time Based Arts (Amsterdam), The Banff Centre and others. In 2001 she edited the ECIAD 75th Anniversary publication *Art Is All Over*. Recent exhibitions besides *Imaginary Standard Distance* include *Private Investigations* with Merry Alpern, Jennifer Bolande, and Allyson Clay; *David Rokeby: Watch and Giver of Names*; and *Eno-Liis Semper: Four Works*. She received the Curatorial Fellowship at the Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre, in 2000–2001 and recently produced a video on the life and work of Canadian curator Doris Shadbolt.

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The artist is represented by Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

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Spatial Relations: Architectural Fragments¹

She walks through the city, circumnavigating around buildings and people, through traffic, across park lawns, in and out of the shadows of massive edifices that make up the central core of the business district towards the green space of the outer limits. Her bearing changes as she walks, responding to those around her, fugitive players in rapidly changing scenarios. Downtown she stands tall, reserved, intent, matching the serious greys; in the seedier district she takes on a more humble posture, walks without making eye contact, glancing surreptitiously around to keep track of her perimeter; across the bridge, near a sunny residential park, she exchanges comments on the weather with a woman on the corner.

The buildings in the city define time through the style of the eras in which they were built; they determine territories of corporate privilege and domestic intimacy as well as the domain of the street with its beggars and addicts. They enforce the trajectories through this geography of labour, leisure, and survival. Their materials and textures determine the sensibilities of this space: rough pebbled concrete, the fleshy brilliance of veined marble, stern, impermeable granite, smooth glass, and hard steel. It is the glass that has the most potential. It allows the light to pass through and the view — of the sky, the street, and the traffic moving through these corridors. The windows are fragile, vulnerable. They are where the structure has the potential for breakage.

Heads turn as she walks. She feels defined by her body, its age and shape, the rhythm of her gait. The young men, old men, and other women, turn to look. Scraps of conversations stir her imagination — the group around the phone booth argue about where to meet with someone on the other end of the line, the woman curses at the cab driver who refuses to stop. Hidden cameras rotate on their swivel heads monitoring the scene, following her movements, responding automatically. The image is recorded from many angles as she takes out her paper and brushes. She sits quietly painting, a leisure activity, a potentially subversive act, this idle expenditure of time with its own integral purpose.

Georges Bataille, writing in the dissonant beginnings of the last century, wrote that modern painting, in its break with the academy, transgressed architecture, destabilized it by encouraging individual expression and unsettling authority.² (At the beginning of the twenty-first century destabilizing architecture took on new significance when the World Trade Towers crumbled.)

Evening falls. The daylight begins to dim and throughout the city artificial lights illuminate the interior, private spaces. She paints the little warm rectangles and the bright spaces within, glowing like gems on the surface of the dark sarcophagus of a once great monarch. Sometimes someone inside walks through the light. She imagines their lives according to what she can see, the mid-century lamp, the landscape painting on the wall, the disheveled bathrobe of the man examining his face in the mirror.

Our lust for images is never satisfied. We objectify in order to dissect, compare, experiment, catalogue, fix. This is the opposite of communication which, according to Bataille, is erotic (one loses one's head in the process).

For Bataille, architecture originates in language which gives form to communication. For him the "job" of language is not what it represents, its meaning, but what it induces, its material affects: a reaction that may be independent of its fixed meaning. Communication is the active and agitated force behind the form. The structural inadequacy of language, what it cannot fully articulate, represents, for him, the true "lack" in human experience. In response, Bataille extols the pornographic, the force of desire, the uncertain, uncontained, unresolved, as the space not controlled by architecture's limitations and disciplines. He encourages revolt against the hierarchies of authority with which architecture is complicit. For Bataille, the labyrinth is the only legitimate architecture, complex, disorienting, and complete with the monster.³

Indiscretions: You can get arrested for that.

The little images that flicker on the glass in Allyson Clay's artwork *Improper Perspectives* represent social transgressions. We are drawn to their illicit nature. We make a silent pact with the quivering hands that hold the camera, revealing their insecurities. In the street we are expected to turn our eyes away when we accidentally come upon private acts in public space. But an artwork gives us license to look.

Michel Foucault, after Bataille in exploring the social function of architecture, identified the current organization of western society as originating in the eighteenth century when the social focus changed from controlling land, the assumed domain of monarchies and fiefdoms, to controlling people in a more democratic structure. This is linked to the rise of capitalism, the middle class, and representational politics, along with the police and the criminal justice system. He points out that, "The 'Enlightenment', which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines."⁴ The architecture that became prominent during this time was based on the grid of city planning and the administration of a disciplinary hierarchy that Foucault dramatically symbolizes by a prison tower, the panopticon that oversees and looks into the "cells" — those "small theatres" in which "each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible."⁵ The tower is metaphorical and perfectly integrated, administered: it is rationality itself, built and constantly reaffirmed by the laws, norms, and practices that establish and maintain

capital. Therefore, though it is hierarchical, it is invisible. "This enables the disciplinary power to be both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert,...and absolutely 'discreet' for it functions permanently and largely in silence." It manages and creates "docile bodies" normalized to the rule of order, morality, science, and spatial relations.⁶

Between the lust of Bataille and the rational structures of Foucault, where do we as individuals live? We accept the rationale that cameras in bank machines, on highways, in stores, public squares, corporate lobbies, are there to protect *us*. The lights are turned up so that the camera 'sees' better. The machines are always on. We live in the eye of the camera, under surveillance, recorded as data, specimens under glass. This makes us feel somehow secure. As rational culture presses the limits, so does morality. Where once there were assumptions of privacy and protection from the state, there is now a kind of amoral curiosity encouraged by "reality" television and a relentless accumulation of information at every level. We have trouble distinguishing the line between inside and outside. Privacy is eroded, under siege, and only what we are able to hide: fugitive.

Le Corbusier, the quintessential modernist architect, treated the home as a device for seeing the world. It was designed around its windows, to facilitate a (masculine) controlled perspective. (Women, like furniture, were included in the domestic space.) Through their windows the structures provided multiple ambient views for interacting with the outside. Everything outside of the home was a part of the image, whether literally, through the window, or figuratively, in photographs consumed through the media.⁸ Likewise the nineteenth century flâneur, secure in his masculine privilege, walked the city consuming images of the social world. (Jonathan Crary relates the mobility of the modern subject to the nature of capital, in making new, redefining culture, producing consumable images and products, keeping things mobile and consumers destabilized and desiring.)¹⁰ But to return to those transparent panes, lenses on the world, windows are also a point of vulnerability where eyes, technical and human, intrude. As the light comes on, the interior image is projected into public space. This has a relationship to those other manifestations of light — photography and film. Roland Barthes said that, "...the age of photography corresponds precisely to the irruption of the private into the public, or rather, to the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly..."¹¹

This tendency is intensified in the late twentieth century by the proliferation of computers and data, a different kind of seeing. Technology facilitates not only immense accumulations of information, financial records, health data, and so on ad infinitum; it also provides a new space for representing ourselves and for imaginative interaction. We are not just innocent victims of this machinery of culture. Beatriz Colomina, who explores Le Corbusier's image of himself, observes the performative aspect offered by windows. Because we are immersed in images, "we have all become 'experts' in our own representation.



installation detail,
Imaginary Standard Distance,
1998-99

In the same way we meticulously construct our family history with snapshots, equally skillfully we represent our domesticity through the picture window.... Modernity then, coincides with the publicity of the private."¹² At the same time, an image can only show so much, no matter how hard we look. It hides as much as it reveals.

As Allyson Clay sits and paints the windows, or searches the surfaces of buildings with her camera for the tiny scenarios they offer up, she is, in a way, seeking private space, seeking banality, an affirmation of the very privacy she transgresses. Privacy is her fantasy. These small watercolour paintings could almost be said to have a sentimental relationship to private space.

In Hitchcock's movie *Rear Window* (1954), James Stewart spends his house-bound time watching the little frames of activity in the apartment building across the courtyard: the beautiful young dancer, the artist, the young married couple, and, of course, that other couple, the ones who drive the plot. His nurse (Thelma Ritter) comments sardonically, "We've become a race of peeping toms," and warns him, "I can see you in court now...." Not everybody has the right to look. An individual with a camera trained on other people's windows is breaking the law, even though those inside offer up their lives to view. Like all of us, these people watch tv, brush their teeth, cook dinner. It is the act of watching for one's own individual, unsanctioned purposes that is the transgression. While Stewart is redeemed in the film by catching the criminal, Clay remains outside the law with her contemplation of windows. As viewers we collude in this. The very banality of the images throws us back on ourselves. They don't provide a narrative that is complete, justified. Rosalind Krauss cites surrealist writing practices in which neither the author nor the reader knows the outcome of the story. She refers to this inherent incompleteness as the "feminization of the narrator," a strategic "structural passivity" that blurs the boundaries between author and reader, artist and viewer, because the artist does not assume authority, does not give narrative satisfaction.¹³ Readers/viewers, therefore, have to look to themselves to complete the picture — we discover ourselves looking, our lust for satisfaction, and our own willingness to collude, to transgress. Like Bataille we understand the pleasures of transgression and its potential to add to our experience.

Objects may be closer than they appear.

Painting 101: Renaissance perspective defined an expansive view that fanned out from a single point to the horizon line (that place of endings and new beginnings). In the city the horizon is obscured by the architecture; the view is interrupted. Buildings block out the sun. From our vantage point on the ground, by the laws of perspective, they should taper towards the top, but we see them in our mind's eye as massively rectangular, looming above us. E.H.Gombrich discussed this illusion of scale and form, the representational conventions that influence perception and automatically keep things "in perspective." He called the tendency to see things according to our previous knowledge of them "imaginary standard distance."¹⁴

As modernization progressed through the nineteenth century, painting moved away from single point perspective, the window facing outward, to a flat surface, a screen onto which the artist projected an image that reflected back at the viewer. Manet's painting *The Fifer* (1866) was one of the first to use a flat colour field background.³⁵ He also used the image of a woman looking out towards the viewer (*Olympia*, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*) to signal the new relationship of the spectator and the artist to painting itself. These paintings also reflected the modern woman's license to break convention, return the gaze, participate in the social, at least as long as she was young, beautiful, voluptuous, and acknowledged her social position. She could enjoy sexual reciprocity but she remained mute.

In her self-portraits, Clay uses contemporary photographic strategies to interrogate modern painting. The glowing light boxes present their smooth plexi-glass surfaces and inner lighting in marked contrast to the textured surfaces of painting. The backgrounds are warm sunrise-orange fields devoid of detail, the brocade settee is reminiscent of *Olympia's* bed (and Freud's couch), and the floral carpet implies an association with the orientalism of Matisse. Their composition refers to the seductions of painting, as does the centrality of the female figure. In this instance, however, the woman — slim, blond, but no longer young, wearing a striped silk robe — has turned her back on the viewer, walks away, or disappears. We cannot, in fact, "see" her. Where Manet's young women face the viewer directly, engaging the view, Clay denies us access. She refuses to look. We are confronted by this denial and by the uncertainty of the relationship. Certain clues are offered, but no definitive answer: books fall in a flash of illumination, a small image in an oval frame shows a hand supporting a superimposed image of a sharp-pointed drawing instrument, another frame portrays a romantic statue of a woman that seems to mirror itself, like narcissus, but it is slightly skewed and topsy-turvy: the reflection is above and looks away from itself. The texts on the wall allude to a convergence of dream life and fantasy with everyday activities of work and planning, revealing an underlying anxiety — "I have the feeling I'm not where I'm supposed to be." The subject is elusive.

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Peggy Phelan asks, "What is the back question for women?" She discusses examples of artwork in which the eyes are turned away or covered. She concludes that it is a strategy to address the limitations of language to express the experience of those who are denied social position, a place from which to speak: who are not "recognized."³⁶ As a middle-aged woman and a woman artist in a field still largely in the grip of a masculine (heroic) perspective, Clay addresses this experience of ingrained invisibility. At the same time, while the subject is not positioned securely in relation to the social, Clay's images, with their bright colours and rich materials, express both an active sensuality and a desire to negotiate with tradition. She does not accept being completely determined by the architecture of loss. By taking it in hand, she creates a space in which to work. The texts affirm fantasy and a unique subjectivity as potentially transformative, operating outside of presumed limitations.



detail, *Untitled I*,
(my sense of place),
1995–1997