

GLOBE AND MAIL– *Sylvia Safdie at Peak Gallery, November 4, 2006*

By Gary Michael Dault

Sylvia Safdie – Recent Work – Video, Installation, Drawing

If Montreal-based artist Sylvia Safdie gets any more exquisite, she's going to dematerialize. This latest exhibition of three video works, four drawings, and one sculptural installation, is her strongest to date, and it's her strongest to date despite the fact that it's so morphologically ethereal you have to look hard to find it.

The largest, most theatrically imminent work in the exhibition is her *Act /Shadow*, an exquisite dual-screen video projection, as large as a movie screen on the gallery wall. In the video, a violinist -- who is, in fact, the New York-based, New Music violinist-composer Malcolm Goldstein -- performs stunning improvisations, albeit from somewhere below the camera, so that only his bow can be seen, repeatedly thrust up into the picture-plane.

The dual-ness of the dual-screen projection accommodates Safdie's having composed the work as a simultaneous negative-positive projection, so that on the left screen, Goldstein's bow is black against a white ground, while on the right screen, it's a ghostly white bow moving through a shadowy black ground. Seen together, they incarnate all the important dualities: left-right, black-white, day-night, and, most profoundly, what poet William Blake called a being's shadow and "emanation" -- its positive or negative meaning in the world.

Safdie's beautiful little video work called *Reed*, is perhaps less spectacular than *Act/Shadow*, but is no less thoughtful. Here, in this ostensibly simple, extraordinarily clarified, 30-minute video loop, a dark stick rises from the surface of a body of water, lifting from it at about a 45 degree angle from the middle of the screen. Its reflection heads off across the water beneath it, at a 45 degree angle down to the lower right of the screen. So, there are two "lines" that meet at the surface of the water. But because the upper "line" is a solid stick, it doesn't move, and because the lower "line" is only a reflection, it does: it ripples and shimmers in the living water, undergoing the distortions and visual dislocations the solid stick rises above. How simple this is as an arrangement! And how searching and suggestive in the production of meaning! There isn't space here to discuss either Safdie's installation called, simply, *Line* (a ribbon of black granite gravel that stretches along the floor and stops at the foot of a tilted mirror, in the fictive space of which the line "continues"), or her four big graphite and oil drawings on Mylar. Suffice it to say, everything is powerfully understated, brilliantly subtle, and relentlessly memorable.