

# Giant heads, fierce spears: totems of mortality

By GARY MICHAEL DAULT

It is perhaps merely an accident of scheduling that today, Sept. 11 -- a date that tolls like a dark bell in everyone's mind -- is also the opening day of this latest exhibition by Montreal artist Sylvia Safdie, an exhibition that features a suite of gigantic heads, tortured into being with raw earth and linseed oil rubbed into sheets of translucent Mylar. For while Safdie's looming heads, mummy-like and pictographic at the same time, seem as troublingly remote and pitiable as messages from the deep, antique past, they are inescapably about mortality -- everyone's morality and the ongoing fragility of life. And those are heavy thoughts for a day like today. The exhibition, at Toronto's Peak Gallery, is an eloquent mix of Safdie's paintings and her sculpture. In her hands, the genres seem remarkably complementary. Adjacent to the walls of her huge earthbound heads, for example, are three of Safdie's immense spears, mounted one above the other and extending the full length of the gallery. These fierce spears, with their lumpy, primitive grips -- looking like eccentrically shaped pieces of wood or root or clumps of hand-poured bronze -- and their sinister, machine-fabricated points, seem both ancient and, in a certain way, sort of sci-fi futuristic. (They emit, in fact, the fragrance of that far-flung, other-galaxy-far-far-away, Star Wars neo-primitivism that so efficiently, almost fascistically, welds past, present and future into some ongoing reverie of perpetual crisis in the universe.) They do and do not look related in time to the huge, hieratic earthen heads -- heads of giants that once walked the Earth. Much of Safdie's practice as an artist involves finding things and employing them. The earth she grinds into her sheets of translucent Mylar to generate the big, disturbing heads, for example, is earth she has harvested from her travels worldwide. The implication in the making of the heads is that we all spring from the earth and eventually return to it, dust to dust. It's as if Safdie's heads, images as individual as they may first appear to be, are, in fact, the mineralized traces of generalized, composite creatures: homo sapiens at large, the glory, jest and riddle of the world. Safdie's talent for felicitously finding things comes to a climax in the vast untitled work installed in the middle of the gallery: a six-metre-long peeled stick or, more realistically, tree limb which, now suspended by a chain about its middle-point, hangs ominously in the air -- a slithery, serpentine dragon or eel or snake-like entity, lashing through your consciousness like some creature from the bottom of your brain. Or am I getting carried away here? It's a handsome length of limb, after all, chained up and hanging softly in space, servant of gravity and grace. Still, I wouldn't get too close, if I were you, to the end with the jaws.



Sylvia Safdie's heads appear to be like homo sapiens at large.