

Reflections by Sylvia Safdie,
November 15 to December 15, 2001
At Peak Gallery, Toronto

Serenity diffuses the exhibition space as one first experiences the recent work of Montréal artist Sylvia Safdie. The open structure of the show, curated by Zack Pospieszynski, inevitably invites a second tour. Dynamic tensions and conflicts in the works are gently layered into a whole. Each piece, whether it is sculpture, drawing or video circumscribes a space-time territory, a zone of reflection by drawing the viewer in and then letting go.

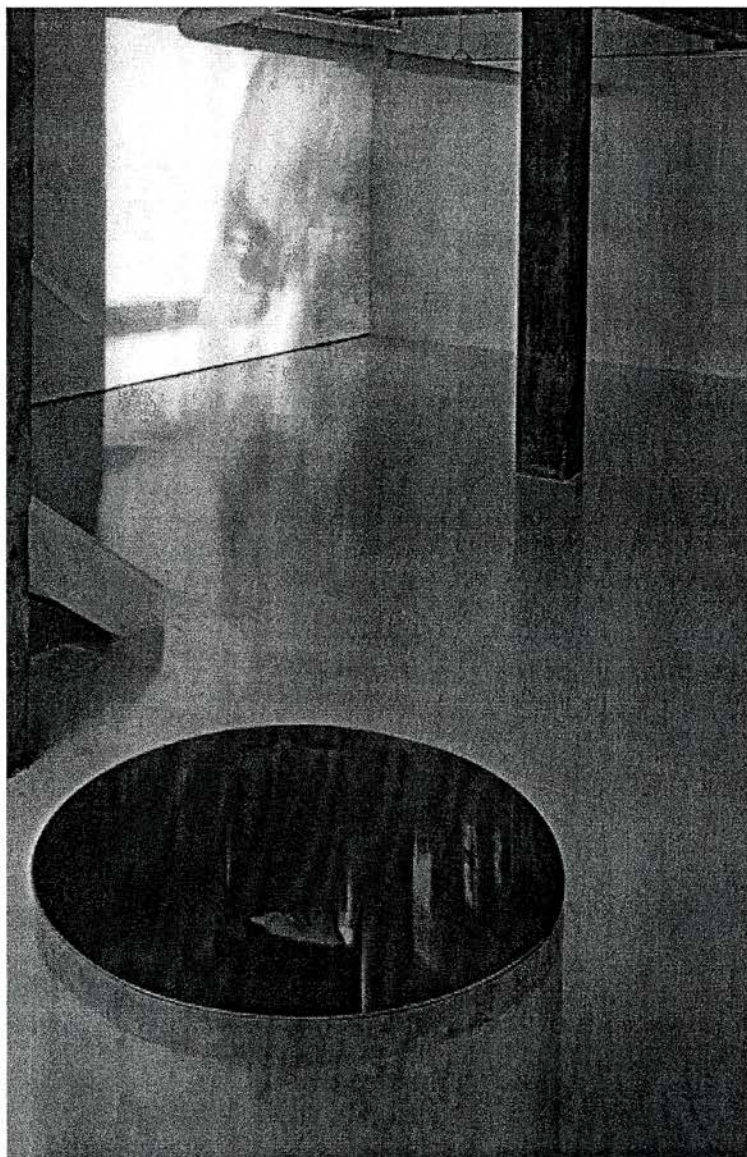
For Safdie, video is a new medium of production and this is her first showing of video installations. A contemplative vision and a free-flowing yet sober approach that is characteristic of the artist is evident. Moreover, the sense of fluidity is even more powerfully pronounced in this liquid medium. The videos are silent, engaged in an invisible loop, their meditative rhythm preserved.

Ben (2001) is projected on a large wall. It shows the shaved head of a man, engaged in a conversation and seen in slow motion. The camera remains still, scrutinising his expressions as they transform the features of his face. The movement is entirely internal, the head levitating and changing its position within the frame. The artist creates the impression of disembodiment and the head appears as if it is viewed under water.

Indeed, another video track is layered over this one: the waters of a river (actually, Montréal's Lachine Canal). At times, waves penetrate the frame, submerge the head and blur the image; at other times, they are dispersed and Ben is seen clearly. Wind and birds interfere at irregular intervals and create subtle disturbances. They ripple and texture the image. In one unforgettable moment, a bird flies in and out of the frame, crossing Ben's head like a passing thought, a touch of inspiration, a sudden enlightenment or a new thrust for life.

The profound reverie of *Ben* is in contrast with *Sam*'s striving for awakening. *Sam* (2001) is portrayed on a tiny, LCD screen, mounted into the opposite wall. The image of the head of a new-born child is superimposed with an image of water, interspersed with raindrops creating many small ripples. Just as in *Ben*, in *Sam* two video tracks run through the whole duration of the piece. Rain showers over the baby's head. This new being struggles to keep his head above water, striving to emerge and confront life.

Ben and *Sam* are a unique personal inquiry into the metaphysical dimensions of video portraiture. The layers of water in both videos create painterly density and depth. An effect of a double screen is created. Face to face, yet unaware of each other's presence, *Ben* and *Sam* are linked through



SYLVIA SAFDIE, INSTALLATION VIEW OF *BEN*, 2001, DVD CONTINUOUS LOOP PROJECTION, AND *KEREN No. 4*, 1991, COPPER, BOOK:
PHOTO: ZACK POSPIESZYNSKI, COURTESY PEAK GALLERY

multiple strings of meanings. The communication between these two pieces conceives the content which defines the perimeter of a reflective zone. It exemplifies the dialogical mode in Safdie's work that is accurately rendered throughout the whole exhibition.

Walking further into the gallery space, the viewer encounters *Keren No. 4* (1999). A book with empty pages is placed at the bottom of a copper barrel. The gaze of the visitor, who is walking around it, illuminates the pages reflected onto the walls of the barrel and fills them with his/her own imaginary world.

In the large drawing *Earth Notes, Series II No. 1* (2000), many small human figures are climb, fly, fall or crawl. In their passage through the visual territory of the work, they are

moving upwards, leaving the lower part of the frame empty and aspiring toward the unknown, beyond the borders of the frame. The figures are drawn with earth mixed with oil and are spread sporadically onto the white mylar surface. Lost in space, their earthy substance counteracts with their disobedience to the laws of gravity.

In *Threshold No.2* (2001) a pile of black soil and a pile of sand are separated by a transparent glass screen. As the viewer observes the work from different angles, the relationship between the elements changes along with their appearance. First, soil and sand fuse together. Then, one is present and the other disappears until we could see them both again, distanced from each other. It is important to point out that the earth and the sand in this work are part of Sylvia Safdie's collection of over 400 earth samples which she has gathered from around the world. The sand originates from Haifa at the Mediterranean Ocean and the black soil from the Eastern Townships in Québec.

A series of drawings of trees, *Notations*, is placed in a separate room. These drawings are suspended in the middle of the frame creating an illusion that the uprooted trees are floating in space. In the centre of the same room is a sculpture, *Tabala No.1* (1999), a black, rectangular metal

box, left ajar and filled with stones. They come out of the box and are scattered around it, lying on the floor. The drawings and the sculpture function as a composition. They are reminiscent of an abandoned graveyard. The trees come to life and play the role of witnesses to a ceremony of unearthing the forgotten past. In fact, in Doina Harap's documentary on Sylvia Safdie's work, called *Earth Marks*, the artist recounts the story of finding an abandoned Jewish cemetery in Tahala (a small village in Morocco) which served as an inspiration to this work.

The cave-like quality of the gallery space lends itself to Safdie's artistic discourse. It elicits elements from the inscrutable pool of meanings within the artist's voyage into the depths of the past, the vestiges of memory and the contemplative present moment. There are no patterns in this work but a flow and an awareness of the cycles in nature, in culture and in human life. The works communicate between each other in many ways establishing diverse paths of experience. The different media constitute a variety of thought forms which become inhabited by Safdie's sensibility, its diverse manifestations and its metamorphoses.

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