

mindful movement

Rossitza Daskalova contemplates the work of Sylvia Safdie





Sylvia Safdie – Opening pages: Installation view and detail of *Be'er Series I*, No. 2 (1993), steel, mirror, height 220 cm, diameter 91.5 cm / Above: Detail of *Keren No. 4* (1999), book, copper, diameter 79 cm / Opposite: *Earth Notes No. 7* (2000), earth, oil on mylar, 239 x 107 cm / Photos by Richard-Max Tremblay, courtesy the artist



The process of ebb and flow, of concealing and revealing, is at the core of Montreal-based artist Sylvia Safdie's practice. Both drawings and three-dimensional works create for the viewer a poetic territory – a place of unity with the self, with the other, with the universe. Though the work is changing and evolving, we see no sign of interruption. Instead Safdie draws invisible links between the cultural and the natural – a vital and continuous thread brings together works from different periods as well as those within each exhibition.

"Other Territories," Safdie's current solo exhibition presented at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, assembles sculpture and drawings produced since 1993. These works are indicative of Safdie's approach to making art – she shapes the intangible into the tangible and vice versa. Such an interplay has been present from the very beginning of Safdie's practice, in works such as: *Bone Drawings* (1969–75), *Scenes from a Train* (1975–77), *Goreme, Ouzia and Eidola* (1986–87), the *Be'er* series (1993), the *Keren* series (1994), and the *Sefer* series (1995).

Much of Safdie's work originates from childhood memories of moving from one place to another. Inspired by contemporary travels that reverberate with the past, she finds a home in an unfamiliar land through creation-as-ritual – connecting with the self and with the land. As Martha Townsend so fittingly proposed in her afterword for James Campbell's 1987 Sylvia Safdie exhibition catalogue: *Eidola* is one artist's attempt to find and invent a visual language that describes the place that keeps slipping one's mind, and to acknowledge that home is a place in the palm of one's memory.

When travelling, Safdie gathers samples of earth as well as various seeds, plants, stones, shells and pieces of wood that she finds when visiting forests, deserts, seashores and caves. Integrating these materials into her work, she creates continuity and fluidity.

A stone in the depths of a copper well, a fossil on a glass shelf, branches accumulated in front of a luminous beam, pigments in a bowl: each of these arrangements is the product of incessant pondering. Numerous options have been tried and set aside, and the choice carefully worked through. Marked by the duration of their conception, by the process of experimentation and realization, in an instant, these sculptures impose the strength of their existence upon the world.

André Lamarre, *Sylvia Safdie* (Montreal: 1995)

In this sense, artmaking in Safdie's terms is link-making, bringing to life the bond between fragments. Art becomes the place in which this ultimate fusion is possible, a place of union. Artmaking manifests itself as a thoughtful and intense process of homecoming. As James Campbell put it regarding an earlier exhibition: "Safdie's work has always been about the exact opposite of estrangement. Reunion. Fusion. Her work overcomes all vestiges of alienation."

"Other Territories" includes three series of drawings (two of large drawings, *Earth Marks* and *Earth Notes*, and a series of smaller ones, *Notations*) for which Safdie has employed a simple yet expressive technique: she has mixed oil paint with samples of soil collected from different places during her travels. *Earth Notes* – drawings on several layers of large-format transparent paper – are imbued with memories, dreams and struggles. The figures are subtly textured, with a quality both earthy and ethereal. They do not seem to be held by gravity but linked through the



Sylvia Saldie – *Earth Marks No. 12* (1997), oil, earth on mylar, 239 x 107 cm / Photo by Richard-Max Tremblay, courtesy the artist

energy of philosophical and poetic thought, of inspired consciousness. In each of the drawings from *Earth Marks*, one large human figure occupies the pictorial space. These figures appear to be walking towards us – they move forward and upward, as if emerging from the earth, resurrected, coming to life. Such transgression of the pictorial space is also seen in *Earth Notes*: multiple little human figures, separate and in groups, spread over the drawing surface – climbing upward, falling, striving to exit the confines of the paper, like flocks of migrating birds.

Together, the three series present the human condition as viewed from different perspectives. *Earth Marks* offers the close view, the moment of arrival, the human figure alone and in full power. *Earth Notes* provides a bird's-eye view. Its small figures seem fragile in the midst of attempted escape; they seem to be disappearing, melting away. *Notations* examines the human figure closely and intimately, focusing on detail.

The solitary figures of *Earth Marks* seem to derive their impetus from within, as if driven by their own will. By contrast, the apparently aimless floating movement of the small figures in *Earth Notes* seems directed by an external power. While in *Notations*, the figures have lost their anonymity, they are individualized and, in them, inner and outer movements seem integrated – this synthesis suggesting that it is not the human figure that the artist explores, but the essence of being.

In addition to the drawings, the exhibition includes a number of sculptural installations: *Be'er*, *Lehav*, *Threshold No. 1*, *Conjunctions* Nos. 1–5, *Earth* (a work in progress) and *Keren No. 4*. Among these, *Be'er* (which, in Hebrew, means well) has a particularly striking effect, consisting of two circular mirrors framed by steel bands. One lies on the floor; the other is suspended from the ceiling. The viewer sees her/his own reflection sinking into the depths of the well in an endless spiral. Plunging into this well we are submerged in the ocean of the self and the other.

A copper barrel containing an open book with blank pages constitutes *Keren No. 4*. (*Keren* is Hebrew for light rays.) As the viewer circles the barrel, there is an illusion of pages turning; the book seems to be inflamed by light, to be extinguished and to flare up again. The rhythm of these movements is reminiscent of breathing and heart beat, evoking thoughts of the human passage through life and the cyclical process of birth, death and rebirth.

The space occupied by each of the three sculptures, *Keren No. 4*, *Threshold* and *Lehav* (the eternal flame) spreads beyond its physical parameters. The territory of the artwork is circumscribed by invisible margins that contract and expand within our perception. As we circumnavigate each piece, shifting images created in our mind's eye appear and disappear. One moment the image is complete and clear, the next it has dissipated into memory.

In all of these works, the artist creates movement. At times, this movement sprawls in multiple directions (*Earth Notes*), at others it is controlled (*Be'er* and *Keren No. 4*). Individual images – those on layered translucent paper, as well as the optical effects created by the sculptures – appear and disappear, as if signs along the road of some poetic journey. Images are revealed and obscured in response to the momentum of the viewer's own movement.

It is the viewer's movement, her/his travelling gaze that composes and decomposes the work. This phenomenon awakens one's consciousness. Our physical movement flows into a mental movement and the journey becomes an inner one. The viewer's steps determine the absence or presence of the images; they create and recreate the artwork, and in doing so, bring the notion of transformation to life.



PHOTO: ACE GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

Pentecost, 1999. (Detail.)

Tim Hawkinson

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