

TINA POPLAWSKI *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep* JOAN O'DOHERTY

In the exhibition *Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep*, Tina Poplawski offers the viewer entry into a world so fragile that one embraces a sense of suspension lest finding the security of terra firma would involve an avalanche of human suffering. Location and dislocation are the operative triggers in this evolving visual narrative of exile and refuge at the Virginia MacDonnell Gallery in Toronto.

The placement of the six suites of work is one of several vital components in this exhibition, and offers a continuum while compartmentalizing a process of thought that juxtaposes elements of strength and fragility in a fragmented world of exile. The works are carefully chosen and placed in a sequence to create an evolving narrative of visually interwoven personal histories related to the reverberation of war and dislocation. Poplawski creates a forum for the many voices of those she represents through a visual language not confined to any one medium, but which, in its diversity, opens borderlands to the strength of a collective connectedness. The gallery becomes a site for the rite of passage of those whom she represents. The accompanying titles to the works are extracts from a child's prayer and nursery rhyme and set a haunting, soundless, rhythmic chanting that reminds us of what it is to be human.

The mapping of the passage commences as one enters, a moment outside time where gravity defies reason, and memory becomes a lifeline. Looming precariously from above is the suspension of a tossed

miniature crib, a symbol of rest, security, and trust. The bedding held within is hardened, the only trace of the body imprint is a cognition of terror and loss. Darkened and scarred by memory, the frame and interior reveal an aperture in the smooth azure underbelly. Suspended underneath, a found bird's nest containing a circle of tiny blue beads may serve as a life-raft for mind and body. Both sites reference the fragility and strength of the other.

On the adjoining wall, the sense of disorientation that permeates the show increases as one free-falls into the diptych *When the Wind Blows, When the Bow Breaks*, a static "hourglass" of angular reflected form. An azure blue slash creates a central chasm that couples the opposing canvasses, and moves leaking and flowing from top to bottom, cauterizing a war-ravaged, ruined and tattered landscape. Perspective becomes questionable outside of ordinary experience, as nascent thought is suspended above the charred and broken remnants of memory, torn and tossed like discarded pieces in a game of power and chance.

The real and physical act as anchors, as one encounters two giclée prints. *On the Tree Top* and *Way Up on High* are works that exude a technological smoothness, a mirroring of the real in a darkened void. Both images portray a jewel-like scan of the nest form, removed and untouchable, each suspended in a boundless space beyond attainment. We are held without, longing for a security that seems purely a product of the imagination. The cyber-world of the giclée prints parallels the accompanying and oppositional work titled *I Pray the Lord My Soul to Keep*, a three-dimen-

sional piece evincing the continuum of nature. A pristine shadowbox contains evidence of the struggle for freedom in the encasement of a cracked and separated robin's egg, cushioned and protected in the softness of a silkworm cocoon, azure on white. The sense of longing and desire returns as we are once more caught between — and outside — territories of transgression and protection. Poplawski's subtle references to dichotomy lie within each multi-layered iconic suite of works like tiny explosive mind-mines, secreted within the alchemical potential of her materials, ready to disrupt any possibility of complacency.

One experiences the weightlessness that loss so often offers as burden. In the wall sculpture, *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, seven re-created nests rise against the white void of the gallery wall. Each circular azure interior contains its own anchored metal nucleus from which dangles a streaming and tangled flow of clotting azure beads. Their delicate and ethereal shadows register the flow of generations and create sites of imaginative pro-

jection in the psyche of the exiled. One longs to hold on to those shadows as if, in so doing, one could be transported to a safer place.

Offering a sense of closure, Tina Poplawski distills the transience of living in *I Pray the Lord My Soul to Take*; one searches through the anti-logic of seven small, solid, square canvasses, six of which run erratically across the gallery wall, the seventh remaining solitary and steady. These seven moments contain a physical cloud-scaped density of greying matter against a framed sky. From each of these miniature infinities protrudes a clear tubing that sucks up the beading of life, in gradual, slow increments, until all is gone.

The search for refuge becomes complete. ■

Tina Poplawski
Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep
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TINA POPLAWSKI,
Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, 2000. Doll's bed,
graphite, wood ash,
botanical matter, bird's
nest, beads, acrylic.
25.4 x 25.4 x 45.72 cm.
Photo courtesy of the
artist.