

Noli me tangere
Displacements at the AGO

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Displacements at the AGO

Noli me tangere

The theme of *Noli me tangere* was used as inspiration by painters of the Renaissance and Baroque eras. In their works they would depict a moment where, after His crucifixion and resurrection, Christ meets one or two of his apostles, or one of the Marys. The setting is frequently the graveyard, not far from His tomb. The disciple(s) would be portrayed reaching towards the risen Christ, who backs away from the attempted touch. At the moment depicted in these works, Christ was supposedly neither of this physical world nor of the world of spirit. According to the Church teachings of that time, Christ could not be touched at that moment; yet, whether that was because one would physically be unable to or because there would be some dreaded consequence in doing so, was never made clear. The disciples frequently look puzzled in spite of the gentleness with which the risen Christ disallows their overtures. To them, it must have seemed contradictory, considering that Christ's accessibility and His physical healings and miracle performing formed the foundations on which His teachings were based. For the disciples, that which was familiar had become strange.

In viewing the *Displacements* exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), I was reminded of these *Noli me tangere* paintings, and experienced strong feelings of the familiar becoming strange. Jessica Bradley (Curator, Contemporary Art, AGO) brought together work by Mirosław Balka from Poland, Doris Salcedo from Columbia and England's Rachel Whiteread for this exhibition which ran from April 8th through to July 26th, 1998. The exhibit was primarily comprised of sculptural works, but also included a drawing series by Balka. Videos of interviews with the artists, and reference catalogues could be found in an alcove, adjacent to the entrance of the exhibition.

Balka first began exhibiting his works in the late 1980s, concurrent with the end of martial law and with the predominance of the Solidarity movement in Poland. Perhaps, as a response to that time of great social and political upheaval, Balka's work frequently embodies elements which are at once both fragile yet

Virginia MacDonnell

strong. Throughout the exhibition of work one constantly has that which is contradictory or vulnerable, visually reinforced.

The drawings are done on scraps of paper, seemingly ripped out of books. The brittle paper's inherent fragility is emphasized by the artist having burned, charred and ripped the edges. The drawings themselves, done in black and blue ink, are gestural and schematic. The subjects are frequently truncated or hang in an empty, undefined space. The drawings, being fragmentary in substance, reinforce the fractional nature of their content, seeming to be either bits of objects remembered, or flashes from the unconscious. Images of skulls, graves and a sarcophagus depict literally the fears and menacing undercurrents which are hinted at in drawings that depict a boy on a banana skin or a boy with a teddy bear. Even the titularly innocuous instills feelings of dread in the viewer. These drawings, which are bold in their ugliness, frame the sculptural works on view.

In an interview Balka stated that he was "... very emotional in his use of material." The responses that a viewer experiences with Balka's work reinforces this. *203 x 97 x 7* (1997) sits on the floor, its irregular outline resembling a map. The work is bronze, covered with salt. The interaction between the two materials has caused the formerly white salt to change colour — becoming blue, green and brown in different areas. The sculpture looks topographical and appears almost to have defined areas indicating forested and mountainous areas. Along the sides of the work, crystallized, organic growths have occurred. The process and colour changes have transpired naturally and will continue to happen. The sculpture is a subtle evocation of a changing landscape — it could represent the political or social or environmental. Balka appears to indicate through this work that the changes which he has seen and experienced (personally) in Poland, will proceed regardless of any personal interactions with it. The force of change seems greater than the individual's ability to direct it.

Balka's work, like that of Whiteread and Salcedo, references the very personal, but also succeeds in connecting with the



viewer: some kind of recognition occurs when viewing the sculptures, so that the viewer responds on an intuitive versus literal level. *190 x 400 x 70*; *190 x 270 x 70*; *190 x 400 x 70*; *190 x 400 x 70* (1997) is a reconstruction — of sorts — of the kitchen from the artist's family's apartment. Placed along the wall, the work is constructed using rusted steel, terrazzo, rubber, light bulbs and fabric. Balka's choice of materials in this work is very deliberate. Steel and terrazzo are common building materials, but his choice in using them is even more significant than that of evoking an accurate reconstruction. The steel is rusting and flaking, intimating the "weaknesses" inherent in our structures, whether they be those of the family or of society. His grandfather was a worker with terrazzo, a kind of speckled marbled-looking stone. Balka states that he chose to use this stone *unconsciously* — but by doing so he imbues the work with even greater perspicacious power. And like the steel, the stone is imperfect, being cracked and pitted rather than smooth and shiny. While eliciting a sense of a specific place from the structure as a whole, the details which the artist has included give one the sensation of having stumbled down the rabbit's hole, into a topsy-turvy other-world. For example, adjacent to the structures is a half-basketball, embedded in the floor, all potential play or movement in it has been done away with. In one of the sections of the structure a tilted, rusted

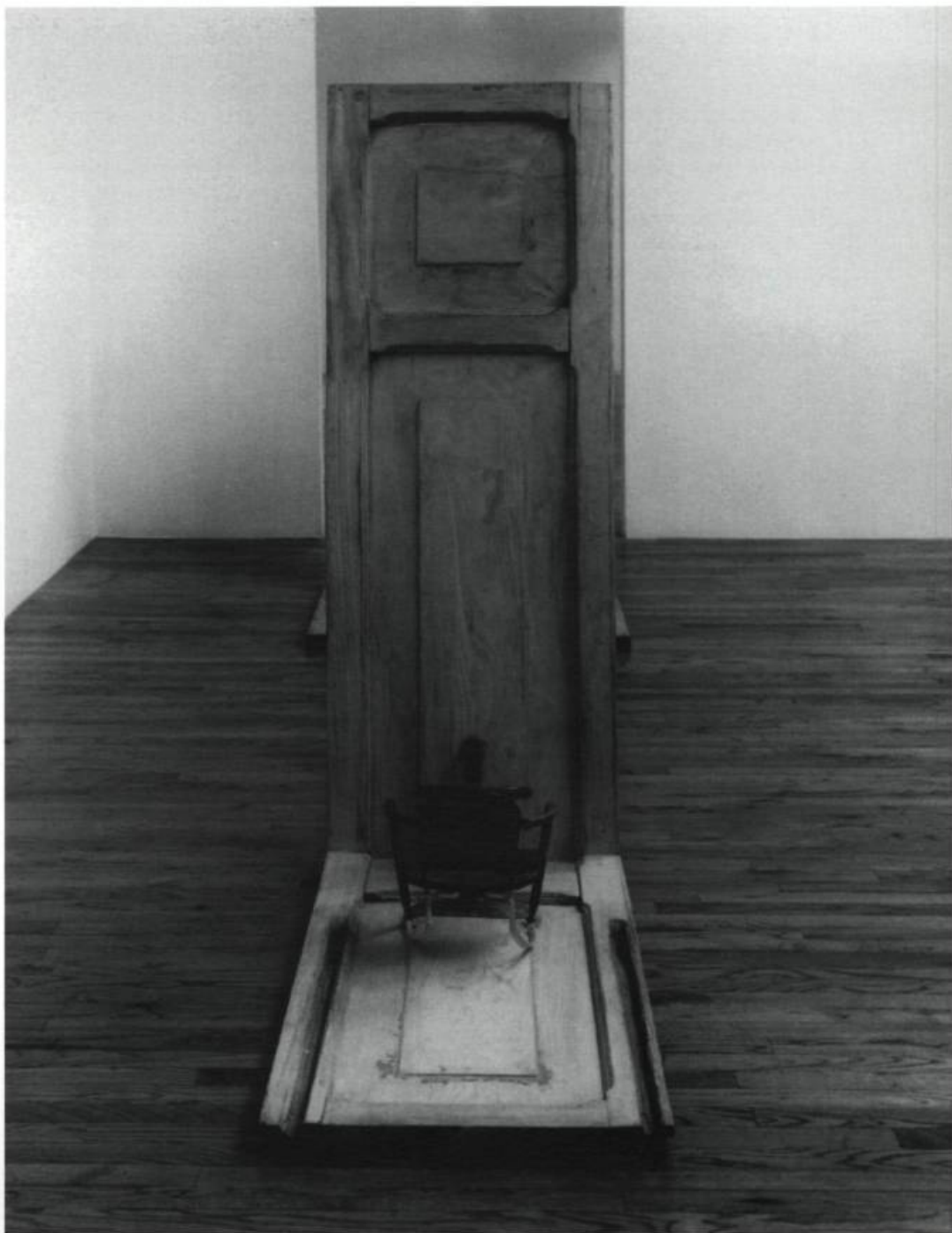
Mirosław Balka, *190 x 400 x 70*; *190 x 270 x 70*; *190 x 400 x 70*; *190 x 400 x 70*, 1997. Three parts: steel, concrete. Dimensions in centimetres, same as title. Collection of the artist, Warsaw, courtesy of London Projects. *Displacements*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1998. Photo: Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario.

metal table balances on one leg, underneath it is an unidentified glob; is it there for balance, or has it been discarded and forgotten? A piece of tattered string hangs down from the frame—attached to nothing, leading to nowhere and also made of rusted metal. Little clasps rest on the top of the structure in two places—but they serve no purpose, there is no reason for them to be there. On the bottom panel of one of the sections, two rusted metal, label-less cans rest on their opened bottoms. They defy gravity and hang in a defiant balance, their contents long since gone. And attached to the wall within an old frame is a photo of a boy, discolouring and molding, gradually falling away like the structure around it. Adeptly, Balka creates a synchronicity between the individual and his/her personal environment. With its open spaces and structural corridor, the viewer is tempted to walk through the sculpture—one wonders if we are in fact supposed to—but nothing in this work is inviting, the viewer is left in a state of indecision and tension. And that was likely the artist's intention.

The work of Doris Salcedo continues

(left) Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Black Bath)*, 1996. Pigmented urethane, urethane filler. 80 x 207 x 110 cm. Private collection. *Displacements*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1998. Photo: Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario.

(right) Doris Salcedo, *La Casa Viuda VI*, 1995. Detail. Wood, metal, bone. 190.2 x 99.1 x 47 cm. Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. *Displacements*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1998. Photo: Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario.



with this contradictory referencing of places of life while creating structures which have strong evocations of death and frustrated potential. Her recurring visual idiom is that of the door. This motif has been heavily used throughout the history of literature—from Shakespeare to Bronte to Huxley—to indicate that a transition or change in a character's state of mind is about to happen. In the work on view, however, Salcedo uses the door to express frustration, lack of movement and stymied progress or possibilities. To begin with, none of the doors lead anywhere. They sit in the gallery space, potentially opening up only to more empty air. In reality none of them are capable of being opened up. They are

stripped down and unfinished, with traces of old paint sticking to the odd section. Many of the doors are broken. None have hinges, handles or knobs. Some are affixed to pieces of immobile furniture. These doors are not for using. They signify instead being trapped and frustrated at being unable to change one's state of being. They also, particularly those used in *La Casa Viuda VI* (1995), look like coffins that would be used to bury the dead in anonymous graves. Clearly, Salcedo is responding to the dire and violent conditions in her native Columbia where, as Bradley states in the accompanying catalogue text "... violence abounds on the scale of civil war and where the denial of commemoration is a

condition of cultural forgetting" (p. 19). And her work reflects the fragmentation of the society which exists in these kinds of conditions.

Casa Viuda III (1994) was placed in a passageway so that one had to walk through its two components. Attached to one wall was a footboard. Attached to the other wall, compressed together as one structure, was the head board, a set of louvered doors, and a yellowing child's dress. One walked where the mattress of the bed should have been—literally there is no where to rest. The aging dress, which peeked out through the slats on the head board, hinted at time gone by—is this a memory of Salcedo's, a dream image of some sort perhaps? Yet, the layering of the elements in this work, the headboard on top of the dress, on top of the doors and everything wedged into the wall, summon up allusions to the aftereffects of a bomb, so in one sense this work might be read as a memorial for all the children who have been displaced as a consequence of Columbia's political situation.

In *La Casa Viuda II* (1993-94) Salcedo gives us the remnants of a room, occupied only by one remaining piece of furniture. The room itself is alluded to through a broken outline of old wood placed along the concrete floor. In what would have been one corner, sits a broken dresser with a door attached to one end of it. As with her other works, this door is rough-looking and completely unusable. The dresser is also unusable. It lacks drawers. The back of it is partially covered by a tartan fabric which is then painted over and eventually blends into wood. In the fabric is a half-opened zipper which reveals only wood underneath. Looking in from the other side one sees only the wooden back, and none of the fabric. Appearances are deceptive and one isn't sure what one is looking at. When examining the work closely one sees other peculiar details. On the top of the dresser is a crack into which are embedded pieces of bone and a mother-of-pearl button, giving it a kind of spinelike appearance. A metal plate is bent and inserted into the dresser and door, where it peeks through on the other side. When viewing the top of the dresser from the underside, one sees that the crack has been repeatedly bolted together, effectively imprisoning the bone pieces. As with Balka's structures, Salcedo also combines elements from a living experience with a specific, but contradictorily, ambiguous environment. And similarly, the viewer is teased by potential offerings (half-opened zippers, doors) of a more interactive experience, but ultimately is

thwarted in any attempts to do so.

The recipient of the prestigious Turner Prize in 1998, Whiteread made an international name for herself in 1993 with *House*, which consisted of an internal casting of a Victorian Row house in East London. Since 1990 Whiteread's work has focussed on the examination of public and private spaces, and she frequently attempts to disassemble the borders between the two, bringing the private and unseen into the realm of the public and visible. The "negative" space left by an object takes on a primacy formerly occupied by the "positive" space. Her inversions of subject are manifested as a part of her sculptural process. The finished works are frequently unsettling, playing against the viewer's traditional sense of visual order.

Untitled (Black Bed) (1991), is made of fibreglass and rubber and is assembled in two parts. It depicts the underside of a double bed, with holes in each corner where the legs would go. A large fissure in the middle of the bed strongly resembles the labia and vaginal opening. The bed while looking deceptively soft, is anything but inviting. Traces of dust and hair, hollows where bodies have worn it down, patterns from stains, make this work a monument to bodily processes which usually take place at night, and which are then hidden (literally "covered up") during the day. One doesn't want to sit on it and with the fissure running like a fence down the middle one cannot lie on it. It becomes an emblematic monument to discomfort, rejecting entirely any of the traditional associations one might have of "bed".

As with *Black Bed*, *Untitled (Black Bath)* (1996) blithely subverts whatever conventional expectations the viewer might have had. Assembled in four pieces, the work is monolithic. With small gaps between each section, its pitted surface, and lack of any kind of plumbing apparatus, this is clearly not a functional bath. More than anything it resembles an impenetrable and solemn sarcophagus. The only thing missing from it is the body of Marat or Christ.

Untitled (Black Books) (1996-97) presents us with a row of books, the side with the pages presented to the viewer. Great attention has been paid to subtle details in defining the differences in the covers of the books, little bends in the spines from repeated use and other subtleties which define them as specific and individual books, rather than a mass-produced prefabrication. The overall look of the books is very rhythmic but not uniform. And as tempting as it is to take down these books, to examine the contents, read the titles and find out what they contain, the viewer

is thwarted by the artist not once but twice. Firstly, the spines of the books face the wall, bolted in place, thus the titles of the books are unreadable. And despite the fact that every individual page in the book has been defined, the books have been assembled as one sculptural mass, tightly packed together, rigid and immovable. Their contents remain forever out of the viewer's grasp.

In *Displacements* Balka, Salcedo and Whiteread create works and environments which simultaneously compel and distance the viewer. Like the confused disciples in the paintings, the viewers are drawn into these artists' works and respond to the feelings of intimacy and familiarity which have been created. But the viewer is never allowed to truly touch or cross-over fully into the artist-created space. Instead one is jarringly and repeatedly confronted with either physical or symbolic constraints within the works on view. The viewer's realms of experience and expectation have been subverted, displaced by work which embodies conflicting but complementary strengths. As a viewer, one comes through this unsettling wonderland exhibit realizing that the familiar has become strange and vice versa, yet one exits feeling genuinely moved as well. ■

Le thème *Noli me tangere*—utilisé par les peintres de l'époque de la Renaissance et celle du Baroque—renvoie au moment où le Christ à peine ressuscité ne peut, bien que visible, être touché par ses disciples. Ceux-ci se trouvent alors plongés dans un sentiment d'étrangeté face à un être qui leur était familier. Dans l'exposition *Displacements* au Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario, Jessica Bradley a réuni les œuvres de trois artistes induisant chez le spectateur le même sentiment, une sensation tout à la fois d'intimité et de distance face à ce qui les dévisage. Miroslaw Balka, artiste polonais, travaille à l'élaboration d'objets dénotant paradoxalement force et fragilité. Les dessins sont autant de bouts de papier où figurent des objets—crânes, sarcophages, etc.—eux-mêmes fragmentés, restes pour faire jouer le travail de la mémoire, ou de l'inconscient. Les sculptures de Balka poursuivent ce thème du changement s'effectuant par-delà ou en deçà de toute intervention volontaire de l'individu; tout en laissant le spectateur dans un état d'indécision face à l'attitude qui lui revient. Enjeu que l'on retrouve avec le travail de Doris Salcedo. Faisant usage du motif de la porte pour évoquer l'impuissance ou l'indétermination quant à ce qui se présente comme possible, Salcedo produit une installation où la porte mais aussi des pièces de mobilier, rendues dysfonctionnelles, trament un environnement ambigu, paradoxal. Rachel Whiteread, pour sa part, cherche à traduire l'espace privé dans l'espace public. Toujours, comme face aux œuvres des artistes précédents, le spectateur se trouvera confronté à des contraintes physiques ou symboliques déroutant ses attentes.