

Thérèse Chabot

John K. Grande

Number 49, Fall 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9676ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Grande, J. K. (1999). Review of [Thérèse Chabot]. *Espace Sculpture*, (49), 40–41.

is one of a series of works by Perunovich focussing on beds as locations of passion. *Splitting Up*, for example—exhibited in Toronto in 1998—featured an iron bed frame laced with long strips of red cloth instead of bed-springs. Inserted at an angle across the warped matrix, a metal crosscut saw held the strips in place, one between each of its sharp teeth.

Toronto curator Corinna Ghasnavi, writing about Perunovich's sculptures in the Fall/Winter 1998 issue of *Artichoke*, states that all of her work "lays bare the darkest consequence of human interactions—and the startling tenacity with which we pursue them anyway. She celebrates this as something heroic in the face of irrevocable damage."

While the desire to connect with another human is among our most basic urges, it is often a scary venture. We hope and dream, we agonize over the risks, then we go ahead and do it. The aftermath can be sweet or sour. Perunovich's *Long Last Kiss* sculpture is a poignant memento. Here, two fencing masks, installed at right angles to each other at a corner of the gallery, share a stream of shredded red fabric flowing from

their faces. (The stretchy knit fabric Perunovich favours is particularly appropriate in this piece since it "runs" as do tears.)

A more ambiguous aftermath is portrayed in the red cloth "pool" attached to the *Escape* sculpture's long wooden oar. The oar could be read as the thrust of penetration; the red "pool" as a shadow-memory of bruising. But perhaps more than bruised flesh is implied here. There's a sharp metal hand tool protruding from the far end of the flattened cloth sack—and the sack is not simply a cloth bag resembling a puddle. Perunovich has made it from red pantyhose.

The complexity of this piece is compounded by the irony of *Escape*'s title. In Perunovich's construction the oar and its baggage are inextricably joined. A facile reading might be that an oar unable to out-row or shake off its shadow must forever drag the consequences of its actions.

As an active verb, "escape" took on a more sinister meaning in a recent interview with Perunovich. The date was April 7, the 13th day of NATO bombing of her homeland of Yugoslavia. Although she and

her husband moved to Toronto ten years ago, Perunovich admitted she felt emotionally torn apart by the conflict. "My parents are in Belgrade, somewhere in shelters, waiting for death to be delivered to them," she said, worriedly adding that, although she had been able to contact them by telephone, there was nothing she or her husband could do to alleviate their plight.

"I grew up in Belgrade when it was an open, all-nationalities, Western-oriented city, and finished my master's [degree] there in 1987. I wanted to study costume design—I was always in love with fabric—but I didn't get accepted because my drawing was more art than fashion design. So I applied to the Academy of Fine Arts," Perunovich explained. Her decision to leave Yugoslavia came about not from any political motivations, but at the urging of a friend living in Canada. The choice proved to be serendipitous. "It was a good move, because I don't think I would have had a chance to work there," she said.

Perunovich's 1997 *Intimacy and Beyond* and her 1998 *Of Passion and Rage* exhibitions in Toronto established her creden-

tials as a proponent of feminist theories. The bed in *Intimacy and Beyond*, for instance, featured a mattress woven from transparent pantyhose into which she had inserted prickly, dried branches. Earlier this year, she exhibited *Silent Cries* at Hamilton Artists Inc. This work consisted of an upright front door onto whose paint-scarred surface Perunovich had fixed two trumpet-like fire truck horns. Spilling down in two long strands from the mouths of the elongated klaxons are her trademark weighted, red tear-drops.

While it is obvious that Perunovich explores the anxieties and consequences of intimacy from a feminist viewpoint, she emphasizes she is not purposefully focussing on victimization. She said her work is based on her own life experiences—and certainly on meeting the ebullient Perunovich the impression is that she unhesitatingly commits herself to friends and lovers.

Sadly, she notes, "when it comes to violence, we usually respond with violence. That's the easiest response, more violence and more misery." It's a theme that recurs in her sculptures and, unbidden, in our everyday lives. ■

Thérèse Chabot, global view of the two installations, 1999. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

Thérèse CHABOT

JOHN K. GRANDE

Far from the hustle and bustle of Montreal's gallery scene at her home in St-Jean Baptiste near St-Hilaire, Thérèse Chabot has been selecting, planting, and supervising the growth of a variety of flower and plant species: dahlias, delphiniums, roses, lavender, bunny tail, Chinese lanterns, sunflowers etc. She initiates their growth, and nature continues the process. Their colours, shapes, smells, eventually become the *materia media* that go into Chabot's garden installations. They fulfill a social need to integrate with nature so sadly lacking in a world of technobabble and image/object idolatry.

The seeds are initially collected, selected, and planted. After flowering they are harvested, cut and dried on newspapers or pegged to clotheslines in the barn adjacent to her home. Each species is then catalogued and stored in boxes in preparation for eventual use in an installation. The process of cataloguing is similar to that of Surrealist American artist Joseph Cornell, whose magical trinkets, beads, castaways, dolls, and assorted objects were likewise collected and catalogued to eventually be used in his miniature box assemblages. The difference is that Chabot's materials have not yet been transformed into manufactured objects but are nature pure and simple.

In *Homo aestheticus: Where art Comes from and Why?* Ellen Dissanayake has built a whole case for the age-old necessity of the aesthetic impulse. As Dissanayake states: "Viewing the species *Homo Sapiens* as it evolves and expresses a behaviour or art is a way of understanding ourselves and the modest *condition humaine*."¹ Dissanayake believes that aesthetics fulfills a biological need, that the making of art has not evolved by chance, and is an essential part of the make up of all human cultures. An aesthetic component brings to social activities, rituals, and ceremonies a cadence that is not only memorable and pleasing but psychologically reassuring for *homo aestheticus*. Our age-old desire not only to create art, but to view things with an aesthetic eye, reaffirms a social need to perceive links with our natural environment. This visual experiencing is part of our cultural, as well as inbuilt psychological makeup. How is it, then, that our civilization comes to create so much art, architecture and civil engineering that is so intensely linear and that glorifies linear and rational space? Thérèse Chabot grapples with these two seemingly oppositional aspects of the creative impulse — the natural form and the man-made structure — by creating beatific gardens of contemplation. Perhaps the overlap can be found in the way nature builds its own forms and structures.

The initial inspiration for Thérèse Chabot's gallery garden installations came during a visit to Europe in 1984 where Chabot witnessed French and Italian Renaissance gardens, those enclosed spaces of contemplation, inner cultivated worlds set off from the natural landscape. Projected on a gallery wall, an image of a Renaissance garden and fountain in Italy reaffirmed that the temporal garden is endlessly revitalized from century to century. Its arrangements may vary from century to century but the plant species remain constant. The same tactile and visual sensations can be experienced by us as they were in other ages. Chabot's installation suggests that nature adapts and survives despite human intervention, yet there are elements in nature we identify with intrinsically. These flowery spaces of contemplation and consolation may be Renaissance-inspired, but Chabot's process is decidedly late 20th century. These miniaturized gardens, transported and transposed, are re-creations made for the gallery spaces they are exhibited in. As such they represent not only a classic garden conception but are equally overlaid with the structure of the visual world of the present. We conceive of nature as something that can be endlessly restructured, manipulated, reconfigured, and this in itself may be a perpetuation of classic tradition. At some point in the future a crisis point may be reached where our manipulation of nature's resources may clash with what the effects of overpopulation and the abuse of resources are doing to the environment, whether we call it natural or synthetic—at which time, our conception of aesthetic beauty may have to be redefined.

During installation, Chabot marks out a plan on the site of the gallery floor, like a diagram using masking tape. When she begins assembling her tableaux, literally a *nature morte*, the plants, herbs and flowers she will use are chosen according to colour, shape, form. She begins from the centre and works outwards to the periphery. The work is a painstaking process art that recalls Tibetan

or Navaho sand paintings that were religious or healing rituals. Because it is initially so intertwined with nature and so artificial afterwards, Chabot's artistic process is less easy to assess than the usual object-based art installation whose language is as plastic, contained and simplistic as the materials that go to make them up. This narrative is not cast in concrete or assembled out of man-made materials. Instead it relies upon ambiguous and complex elements drawn from nature's course through time. Long before her present show, Chabot created an installation out of doors one winter in her own garden, placing flowers in an assemblage reminiscent of Ana Mendieta's landscape interventions, but a northern one, with midwinter snow drifts, and the wind whistling around her. Chabot commented at the time that she sensed nature's ongoing energy underneath winter's white cloak of snow and ice, an awareness that there was life going on beneath, even in the middle of winter. Painting with the colours and forms of nature, Thérèse Chabot has chosen a medium that calms the viewer, creates joyous patches of tranquillity in austere gallery spaces. The gardens come and go, just as the seasons do, but as raw material for Chabot's exhibitions they live on.

During the opening of the show at the Musée d'art de Mont-Saint-Hilaire, eight women, younger and older, came into the gallery carrying wooden backpacks which they ritually placed on successive beds of flowers that had been prepared for them. These backpack gardens, conceived and created by Chabot at Centre Est-Nord-Est, St. Jean-Port Joli, in 1998, were portable, miniaturized embodiments of the larger garden prototype installed in the gallery. Two parallel scales of gardens were thus presented simultaneously, both contained in boxes: the rectilinear box-like gallery space and the minimalist assembled backpack boxes. Of the eight boxes, four contained miniature gardens and four were empty, yet to have elements added to them. Singing also took place at the opening,

as a portent of another narrative, one of unrecorded history and ritual, unencumbered by any object or material associations. Song is a living vernacular tradition whose sounds and forms are like seeds blown by the winds of time that adapt and change, even cross-fertilize. This gesture was about feelings, referenced other moments, other times. The gesture of singing conjured up a sense of the material and of the image simultaneously, but was neither. Art thus came full cycle, from the earth to the gallery and back to earth at the show's opening. The opening ritual and singing fulfilled an aesthetic desire for a kind of beauty that cannot be captured by image or matter, that is ultimately eternal and immaterial. As Thérèse Chabot states: "What I do in the gallery is to be shown in a particular time frame, place and time. When I work outside, I am finally able to extend that creative moment in the gallery where I simply displaced what we are used to seeing . . . What I am doing is not really a question of patience, but Love."²

Thérèse Chabot's art making evokes a sense of the eternal process of which we are a part through the most humble and sincere gestures. Her art is about our ever-present need to feel, to gain a sense of our place in the universe *where we are*. The sensations we feel in witnessing her installations reawaken a sense that there are *other places and other times*. Chabot reawakens a sense of the sacred and beautiful in contemporary life. If Chabot deplores the absence of a place for the heartfelt and sacred in contemporary life, it is because her unusual earth-bound vision has more to do with art making than landscaping. ■

Installations de Thérèse Chabot
Musée d'art de Mont-Saint-Hilaire
April 25 to June 6, 1999

NOTES

1. Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art comes from and Why*. University of Washington Press, 1992.
2. Thérèse Chabot, *Mémoire du Geste* (video, 29 minutes). Production: Richard Harrison, Thérèse Chabot, Concordia University.