



TEDD CHURCH, GAZETTE

Whittome with piece of the installation *Gymnasium: Outfit of the Soul*.

Priestess of feeling

Irene Whittome's works dig deep

HENRY LEHMANN
Special to The Gazette

In her unflagging search for spiritual origins, Irene F. Whittome has become Montreal's primary priestess of feeling. Her installations, those uncanny collages of sacred and profane that she has been doing for years, seem to stand as silent witnesses to self-betrayal. In fact, we might even say that Whittome is the maker of religious art – this at a time when traditional religious art, possibly religion itself, has entered a syrupy dark age that might turn out to be terminal. However, as demonstrated at her new show at the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Whittome's secular version of spirituality and art is anything but saccharin.

This exhibit, curated by Josée Belisle, is a kind of mini-retrospective and contains 10 pieces from the museum's collection and two installations especially created for the show. Though uneven, the show, a fast-forward vista of Whittome's career from 1969 to the present, gives some idea of her evolution as artist, and the scope of her aims is there for all to see.

Fertility as a persistent Whittome theme as is apparent in the earliest works, such as Egg of 1970, a shrine-like box brimming with styrofoam balls recalling somewhat the hermetic miniature universes produced by Joseph Cornell. With fertility, an artist taps into an art theme almost as old as humankind.

Then, in the mid '70s, Whittome comes out of her own shell and starts thinking big, as indicated by the stun-

ning Annexe au Musée Blanc (Altar), with its row of white, faceless totems.

These abstract, pared-down figures are taller than the average person and lean elegantly against a wall. Constructed from long, irregular slivers formed from papier-mâché, these pale projectiles are at once larval and moribund. The wire and masking tape binding each upright element suggests mummification and the rituals of death.

William Blake, who might have appreciated this intertwining of new and old, serves as the verbal pivot for Whittome's show. A quote from Blake's Heaven and Hell is posted prominently on one wall. The phrase, "energy is eternal delight," could not be taken seriously, at least not today, if it hadn't been written by Blake – or borrowed by Whittome. When used in an art column, words such as "energy" and "infinity" are sure signs of desperation.

Whittome's art is anything but wrought up or frantic and has the inner calm of a sphinx. Yet, the work is built on a complex mental spiral of polarities – time vs. stasis, presence vs. absence, start vs. finish, matter vs. thought, thought vs. feeling. In the case of *Emanation=Le Musée Noir*, from the early 1990s, it's hard to tell whether the various components are there waiting to be assembled or are already embalmed and laid to rest. The installation, really a small three-walled chapel, is dominated by a set of objects, including an angular goddess seemingly about to participate in some kind of celebration.

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VISUAL ARTS

Major show worth seeing

WHITTOOME

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The backdrop for this celestial menage is an unlikely assortment of books, shoe-horns, and dried flowers. Framed and on the walls, these "pictures" of banality bear little immediate resemblance to the images Giotto once painted on church walls. However, Whittome's array, with its allusions to Dada, does suggest a world view, one with roots in medieval theology – and perhaps in the human need to name and explain. Like many of Whittome's creations, *Emanation* reflects her fascination with the human urge to collect and classify. One of the framed books in *Emanation*, an ancient tome titled *Le Caractère*, is a yellowing manual of personality.

In this installation, Whittome's art is suspended in a space that is both a gallery and a gymnasium. The artwork is presented as if it were part of a larger, more complex environment.

Of course, what happens when you mix art and fitness? Whittome's concept of classification is challenged by the word "musée" has been replaced by "gymnasium". The titles of Whittome's installations are often puns on the word "museum", produced comprehensively. She has created alternate museums, produced comprehensive installations, and protests against all forms of classification. On Whittome's elusiveness, she says:

If Whittome's tendencies are to be classified, they gradually to increase in size and complexity. Last two reach almost the size of a small tower. One of these installations is a tower titled *Château*, which is a reconstituted rigidity. The tower is a loom, and the mood of luxury is the mood of luxury. Symbolist paintings, the museum walls in the tower only serve to emphasize the transitional impact of the installation.

The other work, titled *The Tower of the Soul*, is breath-taking. It is a melange of items. One of the items is a figure that Whittome herself has created.

and that all the concern over ritual and lifeforce is just a giant coverup. Gymnasium, ensconced in its own special room, is loaded with heavy-duty exercise equipment – scary hurdle bars and ominous rings. But, like the New Age gyms that have opened lately all across North America, this torture chamber is not exclusively a sanctum for the male ego; that Whittome's gym is open to a whole range of sexes is hinted by the tone of the walls, an insistent, flesh pink that doesn't really correspond to any gender stereotype.

The figure suspended from the ceiling confirms that this is not just another place for working off fat. The humanoid, a piece of armour festooned with many breast-like spheres, is simultaneously warrior and fertility goddess, monstrosity and divine vessel; the form would be very out of place in any fitness program, but ironically he-she is quite at home in the museum.

Irene Whittome's long quest for home

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IN PERSON / A retrospective at Montreal's Museum of Contemporary Art finds this senior local artist in a contemplative mood

BY RAY COMLOGUE
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Montreal

SCULPTOR Irene Whittome says that her current solo show at Montreal's Museum of Contemporary Art is "a shock to me. It's like looking through a rear-view mirror."

The exhibition is a rare in-depth look at an artist who has travelled a lonely road. Her sculptures, often worked with plaster and wax, seem to be traces of ancient civilizations — treating "vast themes" of time and human origins, as Montreal critic Jennifer Couelle once put it.

But for all the admiration Whittome inspires, the wistful intellectuality of her work can be intimidating. It doesn't make things easier that she is often without an agent or regular gallery (she broke with her most recent gallery four years ago), and that she does not play the art-world game of being a public personality.

One of the works completed for the current show (which also contains 9 major pieces from the museum's permanent collection dating back to 1970) is an old wooden water tower salvaged from a demolished building. Inside it she has placed lights, and a soundtrack of almost inaudible music. On a nearby wall are two narwhal tusks.

Her "conceptualizing" turns a 12-foot-tall tower of worn-out lumber into a brooding monolith. She has not cut an opening in it, so it remains opaque and impenetrable. "I wouldn't dream of cutting a hole," she said, aghast at the thought. "It's the outside which is important."

An appropriate declaration from an artist who is also famously reluctant to talk about her personal life. Inspired as a child in Vancouver by the work of Emily Carr, she later trained there with Jack Shadbolt. Then she went to Paris and studied with well-known print maker Stanley Hayter. Never

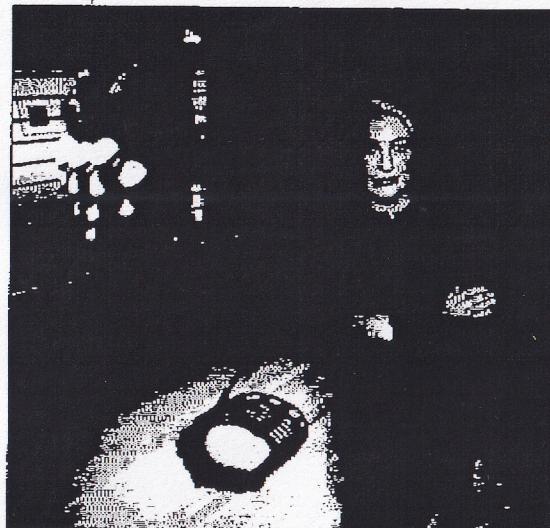
married ("although I have had entanglements"), she has rigorously built her life around her work.

The current show contains both her famous "museum" pieces (White Museum of 1975 and Black Museum of 1991), which display objects that seem to come from ancient tribal cultures, but also an electric fan and a lady's handbag. The oft-repeated notion that she is an artistic "anthropologist" proves to be the key that gets this most reserved of artists to reminisce.

"One of my earliest memories growing up in Vancouver was being taken to the anthropological museum," said Whittome, who sports a distinctive wave of bleach-blond hair that accentuates the fine bone structure of her face. "I'll never forget the Haida longboat; it was my first contact with art." When she learned that Emily Carr's trademark smock was inspired by Haida women's clothing, she made this armour-like apron into a recurring motif in her own art.

The anthropological strain in her work is not an affectation. As a young woman she immersed herself in Joseph Campbell's books about mythology, and only 10 years ago she went on an ascetic "spirit quest" in a remote corner of the Arizona desert. Out of this quest came, among other things, the strange and disturbing tortoise motif (either its shell, or its detached head) which became part of her small vocabulary of repeated symbols.

Returning to Canada after her Paris training, Whittome moved to Montreal in the 1960s and became fluent in French ("I've given up trying to explain that to my friends in Vancouver"), and now teaches art at Concordia University. And in her many years in Montreal, she has travelled only when there was a compelling professional reason, such as



Irene Whittome and her installation *Gymnasium: Outfit of the Soul — Mathematics married to emotion.*
(DREW SCANLON/Globe and Mail)

when she went to see the Documenta contemporary art round-up in Germany in 1972, or a compelling personal reason, such as her Arizona spirit quest.

Whittome speaks respectfully of her family (her father operated a giant bulldozer for logging excavation, and she thinks of him lately as her work becomes more monumental), but leaves the impression that she was not especially close to them.

"For me, identity couldn't be family. Identity was looking out into the world. Joseph [Campbell] was my father. . . . What I can say about my family is that they didn't hold me back. I left home at the age of 17."

It was as a young artist working in Montreal that she developed the first of her trademark motifs, the eggs. It was inspired by a 19th-century Middle Eastern statuette of a forbidding girdler who wears a sort of belt

made up of three bands of large white eggs. It inspired her 1970 sculpture Egg, a joke work in which the chest buttons of a scrunched-up pair of coveralls suggest nipples, and a tiny opening below has a little chute, as do a gum machine, which drops small styrofoam eggs onto a platform.

Nearly 20 years later, the motif reappears in a strangely beautiful work which she created for the current show. Called *Gymnasium: Outfit of the Soul*, it features a suspended metal girdle (inspired, she says, by a medieval chastity belt) to which are glued a quantity of ostrich eggs. It refers overtly to the ancient statuette, but the girdle is suspended in the middle of what seems to be a turn-of-the-century gymnasium, with leather padded horses and oak-framed weightlifting machines.

"Women are only given a certain

number of eggs," Whittome said with a broad smile that didn't reveal very much. "In the same way, I tend to skip around and reuse objects and themes."

Gymnasium is a powerful work, but, true to her belief that art should be conceptual, she is uncomfortable with the idea that it might be "beautiful." She prefers instead to talk about mathematical balance, about the 19 eggs on the corset and the three ladders loaded with iron weights behind it. "Is that mathematics or emotion? I don't know. The creative process is to keep at something because you know that it will eventually be right."

The obsessional quality of her work has often been noted, as has the fact that a woman who never had children returns again and again to images of the fecund female body. Narcissism? "Yes, I've heard that word," she smiled again, but then frowned. "The thing is, do we ever get out of our bodies?"

The profound control she exerts over her work is especially clear in the two "museum" installations. In

the

earlier one from 1975, tall scroll-like objects of bamboo and paper are wound about with thousands of feet of masking tape, laboriously applied.

The later 1992 installation is an entire room in an imaginary museum, with small objects meticulously framed on one wall, and larger objects — both old and new — displayed on another wall and coated with wax until they look uniformly ancient. Between them are other objects solemnly displayed, ranging from a New Guinean mask, to a tortoise's head, to an electric fan. The juxtapositions are absurd, but the solemn and meticulous organization firmly forbids the viewer from cracking even the tiniest smile.

If these museums may appear morbid to the average observer, for Whittome they are full of personal imagery and associations. "Maybe they represent the home I'm looking for."

For an artist, Whittome is very vulnerable about her work. There were hints throughout the conversation that the objects she makes are part of

a personal spiritual quest, each one leading to the next. Her few repeated motifs — egg, tortoise, painter's smock — seem to have symbolism of a nearly religious intensity. When something unexpected happens, like the lovely shadow cast by the corset in the *Gymnasium* installation, she looks on it as a kind of communication, though she doesn't say from where. "For me, for something like that to happen I have to be punctual; I have to be in my position."

Whittome has used this intense interior journey to build a very considerable artistic reputation. But it has been noted that she is somewhat in the shadow of Betty Goodwin, a fellow Montreal artist whose work has many similarities to hers.

Whittome despises any rivalry with Goodwin, but one gallery owner remembers a quarrel between the two women, with Whittome accusing Goodwin of using a colour of red which she considered to be her own. Another suggests that Whittome has hurt herself by not travelling abroad and promoting her work.

She acknowledges that there is truth in the latter allegation. "You're supposed to travel constantly to replenish your image. But you also have to give time to research and to your own well-being. My choice was to stay in Canada. I've had European exhibitions, but that's not enough. A lot of artists are the work of art themselves; they sell the art with their personalities."

This is part of her dissatisfaction with the market-driven aspect of modern society generally.

"It's hard for people to stop and take the time to become part of someone else's world. Our society wants everything to be digestible, hyped. . . . It's getting harder to keep the private world intact."

She glances with intense satisfaction in the direction of the museum wing devoted to her work. "There's not much hype in this show."

The Irene F. Whittome exhibition is at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal until Oct. 26.

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