



Whittome with piece of the installation *Gymnasium: Outfit of the Soul*. TEDD CHURCH, GAZETTE

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

WHITTOME

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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.

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and that all the concern over ritual and life force 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

Globe & Mail 28/6/97

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

BY RAY CONLOGUE
Quebec Arts Correspondent
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 Couville once put it.

But for all the admiration Whittome inspires, the wintry 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 1976) is an old wooden water tower salvaged from a demolished building. Inside it she has placed lights, and a sound-track 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

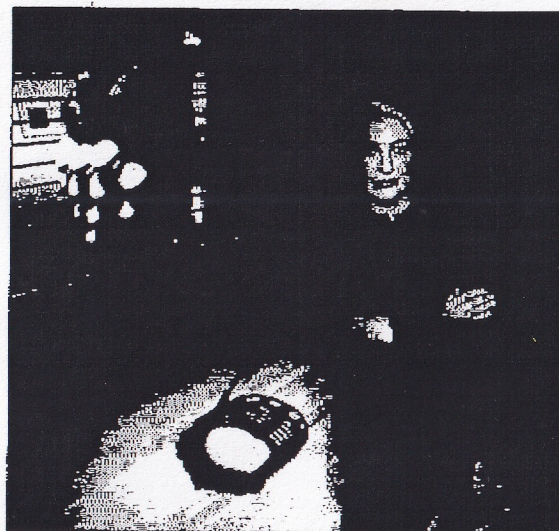
married ("although I have had entanglements"), she has rigorously built her life around her work.

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: On/Off of the Soul* — mathematics married to emotion.

(TOWREN BZAN/77th GAZE 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 egg. It was inspired by a sixteenth-century Middle Eastern statuette of a fertility goddess who wears a sort of belt

made up of three bands of large white eggs. It inspired her 1970 sculpture *Egg*, a jolky 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 on a gum machine, which drops small styrofoam eggs onto a platform.

Nearly 30 years later, the motif reappears in a strangely beautiful work which she created for the current show. Called *Gymnasium: On/Off of the Soul*, it features a suspended metal giraffe (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 giraffe is suspended in the middle of what seems to be a turn-of-the-century gymnasium, with leather pommel 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 faintest 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 valuable 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 denies 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 S. Whittome exhibition is at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal until Oct. 26.

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To: Bill MacDonald	From: Nini Baird
Co.	Co.
Dept. FY Info	Phone # 926 3303

Daring, tough, darkly humorous, the blurb for Elise Gasco's first short-story collection is right. The seven stories that make up *Can You Wave Bye Bye, Baby?* are a head-on, And even if you don't actually like them, you will not be able to easily forget them. You will not escape

DENISE ROIG
Special to The Gazette

Can You Wave Bye Bye, Baby?
By Elise Gasco
McClelland & Stewart, 238 pp., \$21.99

Undoubtedly, it was a stormy liaison, involving both partners in violence, infidelity, reconciliation and chaos. The marriage lasted 22 years, until the Feminine Mystique became an international best-seller, making Friedan rich, famous and often absent from home. Alone, she turned her celebrity and energy to the cause of social change, founding NOW, working for the Equal Rights Amendment, and she struggled to enrich her personal life along revolutionary principles.

She created a series of ad hoc communes where friends and colleagues in



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Friedan: Her Life
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ARCHITECTURE AND VISUAL ARTS

Whittome prints go for kids

Irene Whittome is known for her esoteric sculptural installations, but she returned to printmaking to create a series to donate to a group promoting art programs for children.

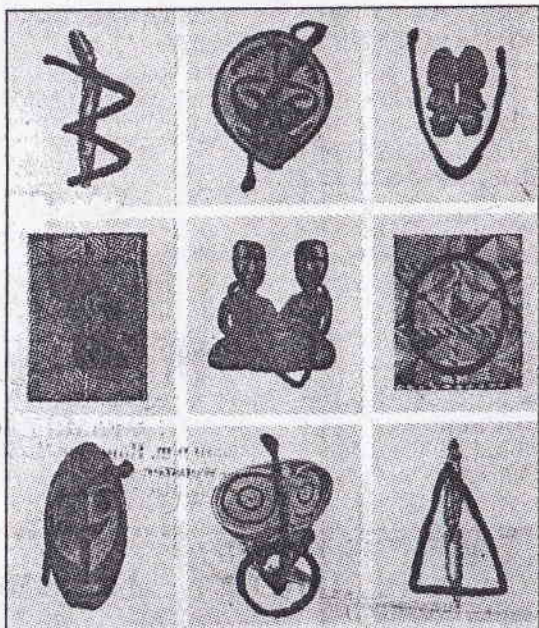
"(Children) must learn to live with grace in an ungraceful environment or we will experience future chaos," artist Jack Shadbolt once said.

The comment was made in connection with his involvement with the Artists for Kids Trust, which was established in the North Vancouver School District in 1990, its mission to provide a wide variety of fine-arts enrichment programs for children.



Shadbolt, together with Gordon Smith and the late Bill Reid, were the artist teachers initially approached by the organizers of the project, Bill MacDonald and Wing Chow.

"We were looking for ways to help us do special projects



Whittome on the project for over two years, and who calls printmaking "the most democratic of art forms."

Those who purchase Whittome's Oceania series will find works resonating with the echo of ancient civilizations and the call of the future.

Inspired by the cultures of the Pacific Rim and the Indian Ocean, the artist has created a series of nine mask-like, iconic forms, on which she has superimposed a gesture, a dark embossed mark, linking them in an original manner.

"It's the past and the present," Whittome explained. "The past is the mask, the present the gesture, the action. Both worlds are there, the past and the future, and the spacing between, that's me."

The series, which she calls "a personalization of a myth," is bound in a deep blue album, the sequence of images assembled almost at random. They are accompanied by a text written by Laurier Lacroix.

In Thérèse Dion's elegant, minimalist gallery, the prints are also exhibited individually on the walls as well as together, all nine in one large panel.



ANDRÉ PICHETTE, GAZETTE

Whittome's nine masks in a panel. Gallery owner Thérèse Dion stands next to panel.

the Paul-Émile Borduas and the Gershon Iskowitz prizes, Whittome has been living and working in Montreal for many years. She was introduced to the Artists for Kids Trust by Molinari, and instantly agreed to participate.

"It started with one print, and went on to nine," she laughed. "It's a project that has gone on and on, it's now becoming an installation."

"It's the first time we have been given a series of prints," said MacDonald, who has working with

Dion, a contemporary art consultant with a distinct, personal aesthetic, found the works and the cause entirely up her alley.

"You have to believe in what you are presenting," Dion said.

Two years ago, she profiled the work of Japanese-born, New York photographer Kenro Izu, and his mesmerizing images of Angkor, Cambodia.

After visiting that war-ravaged country, Izu established a non-profit organization, Friends Without a Border, and, through the sale of his works, raised funds for the village children maimed by land mines.

It was the issue as well as the photographs that inspired Dion to get involved then, as now.

"There was something worth participating in," she said, referring to the Artists for Kids Trust and the Oceania series. "Also the concept of the past and the present, which is what I believe in—that you cannot neglect the past and just think of the present, just think of contemporary art."

"Arts for Kids is all about partnerships," said MacDonald, who came to Montreal for the launch of Whittome's Oceania portfolio. "Partnerships with teachers and artists and children and the community. And the children are the winners."

✦ **Portfolio Oceania, prints by Irene Whittome, is on until May 29, 372 Ste. Catherine St. W., Room 527. Open Friday to Saturday, noon until 6 p.m., or by appointment. Call (514) 398-9204.**

Impassio ceramis be misse

DOROTA KOZI
Special to The G

An often-used metaphor wh is to say that a light has gone

Milan Lapka, a roaring fi guished with his untimely de

After struggling with cance Lapka, a ceramist and teache Centre in Westmount, died las

Czech-born Lapka was the l department at the centre, wh 1991, together with his wife, Eva.

The couple organized a series of cultural exchanges between Czech and Canadian visual artists, inspired dozens and produced won

DOROTA KOZINSKA

with children despite tough financial times," said MacDonald, an art co-ordinator for the North Vancouver School District.

When the fund was established, Reid donated 300 of his original art prints to the Artists for Kids Trust, using the opportunity to stress the importance of art education and the educators' mission of nurturing the arts as "an essential element of our humanity."

The trust, which also runs an educational art gallery with a collection ("like a snapshot of the National Gallery of Canada"), is financed through the sale of prints donated by Canadian artists, and the list is impressive.

In addition to Reid's, works by David Blackwood, Betty Goodwin, Christopher Pratt, Guido Molinari and Michael Snow have been donated to the organization. Joining the illustrious group is Irene Whittome with her Oceania portfolio, now on display at Thérèse Dion Art Contemporain.

In recent years, Whittome has concentrated on creating a series of deeply personal sculptural installations, which have been shown in such venues as Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal and the Canadian Centre for Architecture. Oceania is a return to printmaking, bringing back memories of her sojourn in Paris at the famous Atelier 17 of Stanley William Hayter.

A Vancouver-born artist and teacher, winner of

certui works of art exhibited in both countries.

Lapka was a painter and sculptor as well as ceramist, but it was in the latter form with Eva that he produced one-of-a-kind pieces that defied categorization.

Fired by boundless passion, the Lapkas signed their son as labours of both love and

They participated in numerous exhibitions, and their pieces vate and public collection Québec's and Lavalin's as w d'Art Contemporain de Mont

Lapka's enthusiasm for h everything he did, infecting with the same positive energy.

"My personal evaluation of ator is an individual who evaluated time, because he is primarily possessed by the need to express forms to his image," he once

Lapka was a versatile artist remembered as a teacher, to v of cards and letters on Eva's d

One boy included a letter, time to do charity, it is the l time to do art, it is the key to