

Laura Vickerson: *The Between*

Presented at Nickle Galleries, University of Calgary
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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I am interested in the stuff of life. In this installation my intention is to transport viewers to a fictional timeless space. In essence, I aim to transport them to *The Between*, a place that explores different planes of existence and the passage through life to death. There are elements that are delicate, luminous and ethereal, symbolic now that their function as garments have been removed. The carpets stand in apparent contrast, rich artifacts made dense by the embedded histories of past lives. Voices emerge and fade and through them past, present and future co-exist, revealing the complexities of "being".

White is the absence of colour. It is the colour representing death and mourning in many Asian cultures, while in the West it is associated with purity and innocence. In choosing to work with white clothing, both of these meanings are significant. All are born into this world in a state of purity. Upon death, everyone is entitled to reclaim this status. The cloud of clothing is ephemeral, silent and ghostly.

The clothing was collected from second-hand stores, selected because of the intuitive and haptic responses I had to the cloth and the garments. While sewing them together I pondered each item – who wore it and what was the personal story attached to it? How did they come to the Goodwill? Did children simply grow out of their clothes? Had someone died, their clothes donated after the ritual of family members cleaning out closets? What about the pretty white summer dress – brand new for a girl of six with the tags still on – did something happen to her? Clothing speaks about identity and the outward appearance an individual chooses to present. I think of this too when working with these garments. Cloth is an intimate, sensual material that we wear on our bodies next to our skin to keep us warm and, at times, to comfort us. I am mindful of all these associations when handling these individual pieces of clothing: I find a camisole; soft, fragile and lovingly worn out, or a bright white cotton dress reminiscent of freshly laundered sheets. Gravity comes into play when the clothing is hung – a skirt billows out and arms hang down, implying the corporeal.

The Asian carpets that line the walls belong to the collections of Nickle Galleries. In having the privilege to work with these artifacts, my intention was to integrate them into the installation, working in tandem with the clothing piece, not in its service. They are sumptuous artifacts that were also once living objects used in daily life to contribute to the beauty and comfort of the domestic setting. They are robust with vibrant colour and rich patterns. They are the colour of blood pulsing through veins.

They are heavy, dense and grounded, echoing the voices of families who walked and sat upon them. Their decorative patterns reveal cultural narratives. They are sturdy and meant to last and my intention is to utilize the embedded meanings and pay tribute to them both as artifacts while at the same time acknowledging their purpose in past lives.

The collaboration of historical pieces within contemporary art provides a rich conceptual territory to mine. Like the rugs, the clothing is no longer functional and serves as a symbol of lives lived. Many garments are sewn together to create a whole. Similarly, each carpet is recognized as an individual object but also contributes to a whole: moving the reading of the work back and forth from the personal to the collective. There are differences too, between the labour-intensive production of handmade carpets and mass-produced, machined clothing, between the historical and the contemporary. There are also meanings to be explored with regard to cultural and ethnic differences between societies, religions and our lives within these realities. Consequently, I see this installation as a means to coax out of these textile objects what lies enmeshed in their threads.

I have incorporated recorded ambient sounds of people in public outdoor spaces into the work. Voices emerge and then fade out of range. There are children, exuberant and joyful. Bikes ride by and dogs scamper past along side their owners, tags jingling. Groups of people stroll along, speaking different languages – English, Hindi, Arabic, Cantonese, and others. A patient father answers his child's question. These are examples of everyday humanity at its finest. When recorded, it was the present but is now the past, providing small points of focus for the viewer within the installation.

I take great pleasure in being present and observing all facets of humanity. The world is a fascinating place. My pleasure, however, is always matched by a kind of sorrow, the recognition of the ongoing forces at play that may take it all away from us.

Laura Vickerson
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