

Katherine Harvey - Storefront

February 2 - 24, 2001

Katharine Harvey photographs storefront windows, then uses the images as source material for her paintings. The selection and compilation of these photographs is in itself a rich project, especially in a city like Toronto, in neighborhoods like Little Italy, where the windows are full of cultural and historical information; both religious and secular, authentic and mythical, solemn and humorous. But, Harvey's project is a painting project and she uses a variety of symbols, devices and techniques in order to shift the emphasis from an exercise in documenting typologies, to a meditation on place, longing, authenticity and painting itself.

In the Italian and Portuguese neighborhoods where Harvey finds her subject matter, the sidewalk is a gallery, with storefront windows providing views into the curio cabinets jammed with relics, arts, and crafts, along with the occasional coffeemaker and feather duster. These eclectic shops flourish in extraordinary numbers in Toronto, where diverse communities coexist and provide enough population to support businesses which cater to very specific tastes and needs. Urban critic Jane Jacobs might say that these shops contribute to making Toronto "lively."

The windows themselves are undeniably animated. Most of the "exhibited" objects would not actually qualify as arts or crafts, but as kitsch. These mass produced ready-mades imitate the styles of other eras and places, but the inherent inauthenticity is irrelevant for many collectors, while the ironic objective for others. Ceramic Odalisques, English equestrian sculpture, figurines of bullfighters and "Ming" vases; these objects are novelties and luxuries, since their use value is virtually non-existent. They are souvenirs, but not apprehended in the proper way, which would have been travelling to Spain, witnessing a bullfight and purchasing a thing to function as a trace of that experience. Souvenirs are always incomplete after they are removed from their origin, but acquired from a shop in Toronto, the figurine is doubly lacking. Their prevalence in these shops however, speaks to the demand for ornamental objects steeped with nostalgia about the collective past, and a desire for signifiers of faraway places - the more distant, the better.

On display, these objects subsume some of their own qualities and join together as a part of a collection, framed by the window, organized by shelves and presented by the proprietor. Multiple plaster Madonnas, for example, appear less sacred in a group. The presentation of collections also tends to exaggerate certain dominant features - for some this quality would be garishness, for others beauty.



Harvey captures certain moments in the evolution of these idiosyncratic collections in all of their garishness and beauty. *Storefront* was the first painting in this series and it took many months to complete, because, as Harvey says in her own words, it was "easy to get sucked into the details." Harvey renders the complex layering of space - depth into the darkened store, the objects on the shelves, the glass itself and the tricky reflection of the street, the storefronts on the opposite side of the street, as well as the photographer, in a truly believable way. Her technique is not photo-realistic or impressionist, but somewhere in between, like looking through a soft focus lens. A crisper vision would reveal too much, like the Made in Taiwan sticker on the bottom of a porcelain ballerina, but clear enough to convey the physical "thing-ness" of the many varied "things."

Harvey also paints water. In *Storefront*, another dimension surfaces, a fragment from a completely different reality slips into view. On the underside of a glass shelf appears the vista of a yacht sailing across the ocean. Perhaps it is the projected daydream of a window shopper, inspired by the assortment of "exotic" objects, or the shop owner's secret yearning for somewhere else, made manifest by his selection and arrangement of items. Either way, like a ship in a bottle, some magic has been inserted into the realism.

Underwater Storefront and *Double Window* are two paintings of the same window collection, at different times of day. In the latter, the reflection is intense, and we cannot see through the window in places, and our eye must rest on the surface of the glass. In the former, a blue glaze permeates throughout - it is clear that this window is submerged in water. We must draw our own conclusions from Harvey's repeated inclusion of this brimming symbol. Water as sustenance, water as primordial and timeless, bodies of water as the obstacle between 'here' and 'there'; water as the passageway that can carry us wherever we desire, even home - the relevance to the narratives in the storefronts is real, but not singular and not divulged in an instant. Harvey uses water like a veil, revealing and heightening certain existing narratives in the window collections, obscuring and confusing others.

Katharine Harvey's paintings, of which I only mentioned a few, inspired me to walk in my own neighborhood, look in the windows and think, for the first time, about: objects that seem to long for other places, Atlantis, and a painting project that alludes to both in a meaningful way.



Pamela Meredith lives and works in Toronto. She recently curated featherweight, works on paper, works about paper for the Susan Hobbs Gallery.

Katharine Harvey lives and works in Toronto, ON. She received her MFA in Painting from the University of Victoria, BC in 1996. In 1999, she attended the Pouch Cove Artist's Residency in St. John's Newfoundland and was the recipient of a Toronto Arts Council and Ontario Arts Council grant. Of most recent, Harvey received a Canada Council for the Arts Visual Arts Grant. Her work is represented in corporate collections across the country, including the Royal Bank of Canada and Osler Hoskin and Harcourt.

ISBN: 0-921132-46-8

Image info:

Brochure image 1:
Super Saver
oil on board
36 x 45"
1999

Brochure image 2:
Storefront
oil on board
36 x 45"
1999

Brochure image 3:
Storefront
detail

Brochure image 4:
Storefront
detail