



Finding The Invisible

BARBARA HUNT • SARAH MALONEY • JANICE WRIGHT CHENEY

STRIDE GALLERY

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## Finding The Invisible

BARBARA HUNT  
SARAH MALONEY  
JANICE WRIGHT CHENEY

Exhibition: April 6 to May 12, 2007  
Reception: Friday, April 6 at 8 PM

## Text by Mireille Perron

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### Public Lectures:

#### Barbara Hunt

Thursday, March 29th at 7pm  
Stanford Perrot Lecture Hall  
Presented by the Stride Art Gallery Association  
and Art and Design Now

#### Janice Wright Cheney

Wednesday, April 4th at 2:00 pm in Rm. 532  
Presented by the Stride Art Gallery Association,  
the ACAD Visiting Artist Committee, and the ACAD  
Fibre Department

#### Sarah Maloney

Thursday, April 5th at 10:00 am in Rm. 532  
Presented by the Stride Art Gallery Association,  
the ACAD Visiting Artist Committee, and the ACAD  
Fibre Department

All Artist Lectures will be held at the Alberta  
College of Art and Design and each are free to  
the public.

### Images

Clockwise from top left:

#### Sarah Maloney

*Botanical Study: Milk Ducts*, detail. 2005.  
Photo credit: Morrow Scot-Brown

#### Janice Wright Cheney

*Labouratoire*, 2006-2007, detail. Indigo tie-dye  
and cotton embroidery on cotton and linen, petri  
dishes, laboratory tables  
Photo credit: Roger Smith

#### Barbara Hunt,

*Camouflage*, detail. 2006-07.  
Image courtesy the artist

## The Art of Camouflage, A Female Touch: Exploring tactility in the work of Janice Wright Cheney, Barb Hunt and Sarah Maloney

Janice Wright Cheney, Barb Hunt and Sarah Maloney share an interest in camouflage and mimicry and an attraction to tactile materials and processes as manifestations and bearers of meaning and content. Their work investigates implications of chronomanuality, the relationship between labour and the consumption time, in domestic textile production.<sup>1</sup> Finding the dialogue between themselves and their works to be fruitful, the three artists have exhibited together in the past and I was delighted to be invited into their ongoing dialogue. I realized that we shared similar interests when Janice sent me information about camouflage and mimicry that included reference to the work of Roger Caillois, a French sociologist.<sup>2</sup>

Wright Cheney's interest echoes Caillois' research in that insects and camouflage fascinate both. In the series of embroidered works titled *Disorderly Creatures* (2001), the artist depicts detailed studies of insects. The work appropriates display techniques associated with natural history museums to investigate various systematic ways – including collection, categorization and fetishization – through which science transforms the natural world into specialized knowledge.

Another work, *Devour* (2003-04), shares with a previous work, *Bodice of Fleas* (2001), a visceral and excessive tendency to approach “too close” to the body, to make one's skin crawl. In *Devour*, the viewer is asked to take the position of a forensic pathologist. On five large silk organza panels, the artist has embroidered the insects and larvae that colonize corpses. Silhouettes of the body are created by the mass of congregating insects. In *Bodice of Fleas*, the artist replicates a French corset from the eighteenth century. The corset is dyed *puce*, a violet-brown colour, and covered with embroidered fleas. *Puce*, the French word for flea, has variations such as *puceau* (virgin man), *pucelle* (virgin woman), *pucelage* (virginity), all of which are familiar words with erotic connotations. These words stress the intimacy fleas share with the human body. Indeed, fleas have cohabited with humans in such numbers as to not only provide diseases but also vocabulary. Both *Devour* and *Bodice of Fleas* activate empathy through tactile repulsion. At the same time, their skillful and labourious craft(wo)manship renders them surprisingly beautiful. Lianne McTavish, in the catalogue for the exhibition, concludes: “By straddling the boundaries between science and art, nature and culture, *Disorderly Creatures* leaves viewers with a disturbing prospect: perhaps insects know us better than we know them.”<sup>3</sup>

Wright Cheney pursues her examination of scientific projects with *Escarlata* (*letting blood*), *Labouratoire*, and *Medusae* (all 2006-2007). In *Escarlata*, the artist investigates the history and production of cochineal dye, a beautiful red dye made by crushing the dried bodies of the female insect *Dactylopius Coccus*, commonly known as cochineal. The artist felts and dyes panels of silk organza and wool. She attaches numerous hand felted black leeches in decorative patterns to the blood red cloth. She places a few leeches on the gallery floor as if the leeches, satiated, have dropped from the cloth.

*Labouratoire*, a word play on labour and *laboratoire* (French for laboratory), exhibits Petri dishes on laboratory-style tables; these contain dozens of intricate embroideries depicting scientific images of jellyfish and other marine life forms. *Labouratoire* is inspired by the work of German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), whose elaborate drawings of radial forms illustrated his thesis on symmetry and evolution. By asking the viewer to analyse her domestic embroideries with the same scrutiny as scientific specimens, the artist probes the tradition of dissection and scientific illustration. Domestic work and scientific work are presented as two different but valid types of knowledge. This proposition is echoed in the video *Medusae*. Recorded at the Boston Aquarium, the video depicts jellyfish swimming across the aquarium to the quiet strains of a cello composition. The artist projects these images onto a floating screen of organza seemingly making the glass walls of the aquarium disintegrate to open up the possibility of one world slipping into the other.

In *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, Roger Caillois analyses the function of mimicry in the insect world. He concludes that mimicry/camouflage is always in excess of the survival needs of the insect. He theorizes its function in term of space, offering that mimicry/camouflage, the ability to imitate one's surrounding, to blend in excessively, is not so much a survival function but a marker of the disintegration of the boundaries between body and space. This premise is much in evidence in the work of Wright Cheney.

Caillois compares the phenomenon of mimicry in insects to the psychosis of legendary psychasthenia, a disturbance in the relations between personality and space. The process is summarized in humans as “depersonalization by assimilation to space,” and is seen as “what mimicry achieves morphologically in certain animal species.” Caillois states that from the moment mimicry can no longer be a process of defense, it can be nothing else but a disturbance in the perception of space. In Caillois' argument, camouflage is a corporeal state of intensification that disturbs the sense of space, a spatial embodiment in which what is visible becomes invisible in order to let the other senses take over. This characteristic can easily be transposed to a *Bodice of Fleas* as well as to *Antipersonnel* by Barb Hunt.

Barb Hunt's art practice investigates rituals of death and mourning. One of her landmark series, *Antipersonnel*, started in 1998, consists of an ongoing series of knitted replicas of antipersonnel land mines addressing issues of war and death.<sup>4</sup> Hunt's replication of land mines in pink yarn is detailed and accurate. This attention to detail intensifies the malaise of knitting deadly weapons. War violently evacuates daily life while the act of knitting forcefully reintroduces it. To paraphrase Caillois, it is as if knitting were an excessive attempt at camouflage, a desperate effort to disarm, to make land mines blend into the domestic sphere. However, this only further reminds us that camouflage functions exactly like land mines: both result in the disintegration of the boundaries between body and space. Kirsty Robertson discusses Hunt's work as part of the following feminist tradition and in the context of larger activist knitting circles:

In the tradition of the Guerrilla Girls, this is guerilla warfare of another sort, an insertion of the embodied and domestic into the art world and military--trickery of another sort, a lulling in the small repetitive movements of knitting stitches that allows political gestures to perhaps remain intact in the gallery space and classroom.<sup>5</sup>

It is noteworthy that Hunt also works extensively with actual camouflage cloth. Recent work features the embroidering and cutting of previously worn military clothing. In *incamate* (2001-2004), the artist outlines the camouflage patterns of a military uniform in bright pink embroidery thread. In *folly* (2004), she constructs a large “quilt” or covering using patches of fabric from recycled uniforms. She cuts the fabric out of uniforms and leaves only the seams. When these bundles of seams hang on a wall, they look like corpses. These remnants are used in large-scale installations such as *fodder* (2003-2004) to represent the loss of lives in war. In *ceasefire* (2004), Hunt creates camouflage patterns using delicate lace fabric. She painstakingly pieces together patches of lace fabric to mimic camouflage cloth. She also reproduces maps of the world using the same strategies. Her most recent installation, *the old lie* (2006-2007), also uses seams from cut-up camouflage fatigues. In *the old lie*, Hunt's female touch makes apparent that camouflage, war, and lying are all part of the same proposition. *The old lie* makes reference to a WWI poem by Wilfred Owen, in which Owen quotes a Latin saying, *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (it is sweet and right to die for your country). This quote was widely repeated to and by soldiers in WWI. Hunt's overall practice restates the disintegration of the boundaries between body and space. It activates a female touch by mapping new territories out of remnants of military clothing.

In *The Color of Angels*, cultural historian Constance Classen traces the history of the aesthetics of the senses. She focuses on the relationship between gender and sensory orders in order to understand construct such concepts as “a female touch”. Classen is interested in the artistic representation of multisensoriality and art works aiming at crossing the senses. She comments:

Already in the late-eighteenth century, for example, Horace Walpole had speculated on the possibility of creating a tactile poetry of knotted threads or a poetry of odors (“How charming it would be to smell an ode from the nosegay!”).<sup>6</sup>

The primary critique of touch, she explains, consists in the assumption that tactile exploration is a laborious, time-consuming activity compared to the visual reward of seeing something all at once. The assumption is that manual investigation takes time because it is a discovery done in stages. This assumption leads to the main difference between visual and tactile exploration. In order to see a work of art based on vision, one

needs to distance oneself from it, while in order to experience something by touch, one needs a physical bond, intimacy with an object. In short, intimacy repudiates the Western attitude that favours a detached contemplation of art. These remarks echo Karl Marx's declaration that “the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.”<sup>7</sup> The insistence of both authors is that the aesthetic experience is more than the result of a sensorial experience; it is also an active site of production. The social hierarchy of the senses has a specific embodied history.

Sarah Maloney has been knitting body parts since the mid-nineties: *Brain* (1998-99), *Vertebrae, Sacrum, Coccyx* (1998-99), *Feet* (1998-99) and larger embroidered works such as the *Circulatory System* (1998-99). There is a correspondence between the process of generating innumerable stitches in order to build a whole body part and the numerous cells needed to construct a body. Like a second skin, knitting and embroidering often exist in close proximity to the body. The chronomanuality of Maloney's practice is emphasized in her ongoing work *Skin*. Started in 2002 and made up of tiny glass beads, *Skin* will take years to complete and is exhibited in progress until completion. Again, there is a parallel between the long process of skin (re)generation and the time it will take the artist to complete the work. In this work, taking one's time to make, to share, to feel and experience the work is part of its content: a shared feminist investigation into corporeality including science and medicine.

Maloney most recent work, a series titled *Botanical Study* (2004-2006) explores visual and structural analogies between botanical forms and internal organs. In *Botanical Study: Lungs* and *Botanical Study: Milk Ducts*, the artist has reproduced the forms of the internal organs in bronze and mounted each one on wooden armatures covered in highly decorative patterned fabric. She has also embroidered botanical and anatomical images on patterned fabric. The armatures can be read as stands-ins for female bodies and a reference to the long history of women's decorative botanical and floral embroidery. Reinstating the concept of camouflage, the patterned fabric echoes the shape, form and colour of the bronze sculptures; while the embroidered images engage in a playful back-and-forth visual interchange between figure and ground.

To conclude, if, as stated by Karl Marx, “the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present,” and, as just exemplified in this text, this formation has a long history of repression, Hunt, Maloney and Wright Cheney call to the rescue excessive, laborious, tactile craft processes such as knitting and embroidering for the sake of our collective tactile rehabilitation.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> For more on time invested in making work see Mole Leigh, “Chronomanual Craft: Time Investment as a Value in Contemporary Western Craft,” *Journal of Design History* 15.1 (2002): 33-45.

<sup>2</sup> I explored this topic in a text I wrote for an exhibition by Amy Gogarty, titled “...Swan, & Plenty: Mimicry as an Exercise in Spatial Disturbance,” Truck Gallery, Calgary, Alberta, 1997. A translation of Caillois' text, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, may be found on-line at [generation online.org](http://www.generation-online.org/p/pcaillois.htm), <http://www.generation-online.org/p/pcaillois.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Lianne Mc Tavish, *Disorderly Creatures, Créatures Désordonnées*, catalogue for an exhibition held at Rodman Hall, St.Catharines, Ontario, 24 June-9 Sept. 2001.

<sup>4</sup> *Antipersonnel* was part of *Museopathy*, organized by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, presented also at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, both in 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Kirsty Robertson, “How to Knit an Academic Paper,” (*Public* #31 (digipopo), on-line magazine, March 30, 2006, January 11, 2007), <http://www.digipopo.org/content/how-to-knit-an-academic-paper>.

<sup>6</sup> Constance Classen, *The Color of Angels, Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 110.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Susan Stewart, “Remembering the Senses,” *Empire of the Senses: the Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005), p. 59.

### Artist Biographies:

Barb Hunt studied art at the University of Manitoba, and during the 1980's established herself as a practising artist in Winnipeg. In 1994 she received a Master of Fine Arts degree from Concordia University, Montréal, with a concentration in the area of Fibres. Her recent art practice is based in textiles, with a focus on the rituals of death and mourning, particularly those of Newfoundland. She is currently working with camouflage fabric to address issues of war, as well as continuing a series of knitted antipersonnel land mines. She has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions across Canada, in the United States and the UK, including the site-specific group exhibition, *Museopathy*, organized by Kingston's Agnes Etherington Art Centre and an exhibition, *antipersonnel*, at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2001. She has been the recipient of grants from the Canada Council for the Arts; and the Arts Councils of Ontario, Manitoba, and Quebec. She has carried out research in residencies in Canada, Paris, and Ireland.

Janice Wright Cheney graduated from Mount Allison University with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1983, and recently completed a MEd in Critical Studies at UNB (2003). She is active in the Fredericton arts community and teaches at the New Brunswick College of Craft & Design. Wright Cheney's textile-based practice explores themes pertaining to natural history and domestic labour. Her work has been shown in various exhibitions across North America, including the solo shows *Disorderly Creatures* (2001), *Historia* (1997), and *Women & Fiction* (1995). *Exquisite Entomology*, (a 2-person exhibition with Jennifer Angus), is currently being shown in Raleigh, NC. The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery have purchased her work. Wright Cheney has received numerous grants from the New Brunswick Arts Board and The Canada Council for the Arts, and is the 2004 recipient of the prestigious Strathbutler Award for Excellence in the Arts.

Sarah Maloney is a sculptor whose work has been exhibited in Atlantic Canada, Ontario, Quebec, and the US. Her work recreates parts of the human body using various techniques in fibre. Knitting, crocheting, embroidery, quilting, petit point, and needlepoint are all media she uses to render human anatomy. Her use of these materials and processes allows for an examination of how traditional handwork, so called “women's work” is seen. Her work is held in the collections of the Canada Council Art Bank, the Province of New Brunswick Art Bank, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, and the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. Maloney received her BFA from NSCAD University (1988), and her MFA from the University of Windsor (1994). Her peers have recognized her work as excellent and she has received numerous grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the New Brunswick Arts Board and the Province of Nova Scotia. In 2003 she was awarded the yearlong position of Artist in Residence in the Division of Geriatric Medicine, QEII Health Sciences Centre in Halifax. She spent eight years living in Fredericton, New Brunswick where she held positions as Coordinator at Gallery Connexion, and Executive Director of the New Brunswick Crafts Council. She returned to Halifax in 2001 with her husband and their three daughters, where she teaches part time at NSCAD University.

### Writer Biography:

Mireille Perron was born in Montréal, Québec. Since 1982, her installations have appeared in solo and group exhibitions in Canada, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy. Her work explores the connections between gender, culture, visual arts, science and medicine. She has also written and published critical essays on a variety of subjects related to representation. Recent examples of the range of her work includes, *The Laboratory of Feminist Pataphysics*, The New Gallery, 2007, a series of social experiments that masquerade as works of art and an essay titled *Feminists, Colporteur(r)ses and Pataphysicien(n)es* published in the anthology *Culture of Community*, MAWA, 2004

Mireille Perron lives and works in Calgary, Alberta where she teaches at the Alberta College of Art and Design.

Director: Justin Waddell

Assistant Director: Leah Newman

Intern: Tyler Los-Jones

Design: M.N. Hutchinson

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