

REBECCA BELMORE

Making Always War



STRIDE



February 27th – March 28th, 2009

Reception: Friday, February 27th at 8:00PM – midnight

(reception for members and invited guests only)

ARTIST TALKS

- Thursday, February 26th at 7:00PM
Stanford Perrott Lecture Theatre, Alberta College of Art + Design
Presented by The Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Alberta College of Art + Design and The Glenbow Museum
- Friday, February 27th at 9:30AM
The Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary
Presented by the University of Calgary Faculty of Fine Arts

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THE ADDRESS TO BE WRITTEN ON THIS SIDE

Making Always War

Glenn Alteen

“The beauty of ... performance art in general is, it is bodies at risk, it is putting bodies at risk, our bodies, the body, a body and that bodies at risk is a metaphor for our own bodies at risk in history, our historical bodies, our spiritual bodies...”

Warren Arcan, *Indian Acts Conference*, 2002

“Making Always War” is an installation by Rebecca Belmore that uses documentation from her performance with the same title that took place in the spring of 2008. The performance was produced during a residency at the University of British Columbia, and took place in the last few minutes of daylight on March 13, 2008. It had been a clear and cool day, and a small crowd had gathered to watch.

I was there as the performance took place. It began with the artist driving up to the performance site in her truck with companion Daina Warren. Her headlights, the only illumination in the gathering darkness, provided an eerie light that cast long and distorting shadows.

Powwow drummers and singers are loudly playing on the truck's stereo. Belmore and Warren struggle with a large piece of timber in the back of the truck. They lay down a bed of sand in front of a concrete monument base, then wrestle the log out of the truck bed and onto the sand.

I call Warren a companion rather than Assistant because, for the most part, she didn't assist. Once the log was moved to its setting, she stepped back, opened a beer, lit a cigarette and watched the performance leaning against the truck door. Except to get Belmore a beer, she stood watching and drinking, no help at all. Belmore had to do it by herself. Even so, Warren's presence and lack of participation stood over the work. In the end, she does help Belmore again, but for most of the performance, her only role is as a witness.

Belmore lays out six Desert Storm camouflage uniform shirts, three on each side of the wooden beam. One's mind immediately recalls images from the news, of the Canadian military's casket-moving ceremonies in Afghanistan: to six casket bearers, three on each side, woodenly marching as bagpipes blare in the background. We know instantly what this performance is about.

The title of the work, “Making Always War”, was inspired from a John Trudell lyric. It reconfigures the original words into an odd arrangement that makes you want to move the words around: making war always, always making war, war making always, etc. This reconfiguration creates an ambiguity in the work. Is the performance a homage to the soldiers who died, an anti-war statement, a memorial, a cenotaph? It is all of these things. Yet, the title also speaks of the older men (the politicians, the generals) who send young men and women off to die. “Making Always War” implicates them in a system that needs constant war to exist, in spite of the inevitable body count and collateral damage. Belmore's performance speaks to a system more than a particular situation. It looks at the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of a larger military culture of power and conflict.



Artist Biography: Born in Upsala, Ontario, Rebecca Belmore is an artist currently living in Vancouver, British Columbia. She attended the Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto and is internationally recognized for her performance and installation art. Since 1987, her multi-disciplinary work has addressed history, place and identity through the media of sculpture, installation, video and performance. Belmore was Canada's official representative at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Her work has appeared in numerous exhibitions both nationally and internationally including two solo touring exhibitions, *The Named and the Unnamed*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver (2002); and *33 Pieces*, Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga (2001). Her group exhibitions include, *Houseguests*, Art Gallery of Ontario (2001); *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby*, SITE Santa Fe, Santa Fe, New Mexico (1995); *Land, Spirit, Power*, National Gallery of Canada (1992); and *Creation or Death: We Will Win*, at the Havana Biennial, Havana Cuba (1991).

Writer Biography: Glenn Alteen is a Vancouver based curator, writer and director of the grunt gallery. He has worked extensively in performance art and is cofounder of *LIVE* a Vancouver Performance Biennial (1999, 2001, 2003, 2005). His writing on performance was recently published in *Access All Areas* (2008, grunt Vancouver), *Sydney Biennial Catalogue* (2006), *Caught in the Act* (2004, YYZ Books Toronto), *La Dragu* (2002, FADO Toronto), *Ablakela* (2001, grunt Vancouver), *LIVE at the End of the Century* (2000, grunt Vancouver) and *Locus Solus* (1999, Black Dog London). He has curated exhibitions nationally and internationally most recently *Vancouver Video* shown in Italy and Britain (2002, 2003) and *Carel Moiseiwitch* at Nuova Icona Venice (2005). He has also worked extensively in the First Nations contemporary artists communities.



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Belmore gets down to work, unfolding the shirts, ripping them open, buttons flying everywhere. She grabs a hammer and nails from the truck and, steadily over the next half an hour or more, nails the shirts to the beam, completely covering it.

The performance is hard to watch. The cold has moved in with the darkness. Belmore has parked the truck right in front of us, shining the light in our eyes. As she frenetically nails the uniforms to the wooden form, the high-pitched voices in the music become abrasive. Belmore hits her finger with the hammer, and we all wince with her in pain. She does it again. Her fingers must be numb. Eventually she wraps the shirts completely around the timber; folding over the arms and nailing them to the beam, smoothing them out against the wood.

This performance wasn't the first time Belmore used clothing as a stand-in for the human body. Think of plaster dipped shirts for her 2000 work, "The Indian Factory". In that performance, stiffening shirts hung on coat hooks and represented young native men driven to the outskirts of town by Saskatoon police and released into sub-zero temperatures. These "starlight tours" led to the death of Neil Stonechild and the subsequent police inquiry.

Finally, with Warren's help, Belmore raises the large beam onto the concrete pedestal. We watch as the beam transforms from a coffin into a memorial. She and Warren get into the truck and drive up to within inches of the monument. You think the vehicle will topple it, but Belmore holds the moment, then quickly pulls into reverse, turns the red truck around and screeches out of the performance area, letting out a whoop as she departs.

While the performance "Making Always War" did suggest a weariness with the current situations in Afghanistan and Iraq, you couldn't watch it and not think of the young Canadians currently deployed there. The reference was unmistakable. The piece spoke to the inevitable deaths surrounding this and every war, recognizing both a futile waste of life and the important bravery of these young soldiers.

Yet, for all the things this piece spoke to, it was relatively silent. Apart from the powwow soundtrack, Belmore and Warren's interactions were mostly silent, somber, and almost deferential. The resulting document on display at Stride Gallery retains this solemnity. You will see how the light in the video brings the performance to life, while the upright log serves as a cenotaph. In "Making Always War" Belmore questions the human costs that war inevitably brings, but does so in a way that recognizes and respects the huge sacrifices that have been made.

This is only the second time Belmore has used performance documentation within her installation work. The first, "The Named and The Unnamed" (2002), used documentation from the 2002 performance "Vigil" in its realization. However, by projecting the performance video on a screen peppered with light bulbs, she ultimately distanced the installation from the original performance. In contrast, the performance and installation for "Making Always War" work hand-in-hand, reinforcing each other; the documentation setting a tone that carries through the installation. Somehow, the distance between them is lessened and the message more in synch.

Glenn Alteen, January 2009

STRIDE

Director: Hilary Knutson
Assistant Director: Caitlin Thompson

Making Always War was performed Thursday March 13, 2008
 Concourse outside Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery,
 University of British Columbia
 Performance Assistant: Daina Warren

Image courtesy of the artist
 Photo: Oker Chen

STRIDE GALLERY

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www.stride.ab.ca

Gallery Hours: 11 AM - 5 PM, Tuesday - Saturday

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This is a Stride Gallery brochure written by Glenn Alteen who has been chosen by the artist because of his particular interest in the project. These publications provide regular opportunities for diverse writers to publish work that furthers critical discourse about contemporary art.

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